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Learning from defeat: Development and contestation of the “new paradigm” within Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) | Joost Jongerden [±]

Abstract

The ideological reorientation and political reorganisation of the PKK has been a subject of debate. While some authors recognise that significant changes occurred within the PKK, others have dismissed the PKK’s transformation as a communication strategy and window-dressing. Based on interviews with key informants, this article reconstructs debates and developments within the party at the beginning of the 2000s. A main conclusion is that the transformation of the PKK was more than a reorientation involving organisational adjustment; it was no less than the development of a new mindset, one that involved the questioning of historically entrenched gender hierarchies and deeply held political axioms. In the process of this major change, the PKK lost a substantial number of long-time activists and cadres. Although at times it looked as if the movement might fall apart, the result was a transformation that gave the PKK a new impetus.

Keywords: PKK; Kurdistan; politics; ideological change; reorganisation; internal struggle.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJI

Fêrbûna ji têkçûnê: Pêşketin û dijberiya "paradîgmaya nû" di nava Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê ya Tirkîyeyê (PKK) de

Guherîna îdeolojîk û jinûve rêxistina siyasî ya PKKyê gelek bûye babeta nîqaşan. Hindek lêkoler qebûl dikin ku guherînên girîng çêbûn di nava PKKyê de, lê hindek lêkolerên din girîngiyêke wisa nedane veguherîna PKKyê û ew bêtir wek stratejiyêke ragihandinê û rûberêkê ditîne. Li ser bingeha hevpeyvînan bi agahîderên xwedan rol û girîngî re, ev gotar nîqaş û geşedanên di nava partiye de yê li serê salên 2000an digihîne hev û vesaz dike. Encameke serekî ku gotar digihê ew e ku veguherîna PKKyê gelek zêdetir bûye ji guherîneke arasteyê û lêanînê rêxistinî; berevajî vê yekê, pêşketina zihniyeteke nû bû, zihniyeteke ku hiyerarşiyên dirokî yê cinsiyetan û bingehên siyasî yê kûr dixistinê jêr pirsyan. Di pêvajoya vê guherîna bingehî de, PKKyê hejmareke girîng a çalakvan û berpîrsên xwe yê kevn ji dest dan. Herçend carinan wisa xuya bûbe ku tevger dibe ku ji hev bikeve, encam bû veguherînek ku lez û dînamîzmeke nû da PKKyê.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Fêrbûn le şikist: Geşekirdin û rikaberîkirdinê "paradaymî nwê" lenaw Partî Krêkaranî Kurdistanî Turkiya (PKK)

Arastekirdinewey aydiyolojî û rêxistinewey siyasîyê PKK buwete babetî miştumirr. Lekatêkda hendêk nûser dan beweda denên ke gorrankarîyê gewre lenaw PKKda rûydawe, hendêkî tîr werçerxanî PKK ret

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dekenewe û be corêk le stratîjîyê rageyandin û perdepoşî dadenên. Le ser binemay çawpêkewtin legell hewallgîre serekîyekanda, em babetê miştumîr û allugorîyekanî naw PKK le sallanî 2000ekanda daderrêjêtewe. Encamgîrîyê serekî eweyê werçerxanî PKK le arayîşdanewey peywest be hemwarkirdinî rêkxiraweyî ziyatîre, le geşekirdinî çihanbîneyekî tazeş kemtîr nebû, wek ewey ke peyweste be xistine jêr pîrsyarî heremeyî cênderî ke cêkewteyekî mêjuyîyê heye legell bellge newîste siyasîye rîşe dakutawekan. Le prosey em allugorre serekîyeda, PKK jîmareyekî berçawî çalakwan û kadîre dêrînekani ledest da. Herçende hendêk kat wa derdekewt ke ew cullaneweye renge heres bînet, derencam werçerxanêk bû ke gurr u tîni tazey daye PKK.

ABSTRACT IN ZAZAKI

Mexlûbîyet ra dersegirewtîş: averşîyayîş û werenayîşê “paradîgmaya newîye” ya zereyê Partîya Karkeran a Kurdîstanî ya Tirkîya (PKK) de

Newe ra oryantasyonê îdeolojîk û rêxistinbîyayîşê PKK bîyî babetê munaqeseyan. Herçîqas ke tayê nuştoxî qebul kenê ke zereyê PKK de vurîyayîşê girîngî qewimîyayî, tayê bîni nê vurîyayîşî sey stratejîya komunikasyonî û xoxemilnayîşêkê zurayîni nişan danê. Pê roportajanê ke bi melumatdaranê sermîyanan ameyê kerdene, na meqale munaqesê û averşîyayîşê ke zereyê serranê 2000an de ca girewtê, înan reyna ana ra çîman ver. Yew netîceyo bîngewên o yo ke vurîyayîşê PKK tena qandê başêkerdîşê rêxistine oryantasyonê newe ney, la bi xo averşîyayîşê hişmendîyêka newîye bi. Na hişmendî hiyerarşîyê cînsîyetan ê tradîsyonelî û rastîyê şîyasîyê xorîni fiştî ra gumanî ver. Prosesê nê vurîyayîşê gîrsî de PKK hûmarêka girînge ya çalakîker û kadroyanê kanan kerde vîndî. Herçîqas wextêk ge-gane wîna asayêne ke tevger do parçê bibo, netîce de no vurîyayîş seba PKK bibî teşwîqêko teze.

Introduction

In its 1978 manifesto, the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) declared the establishment of an independent state to be the only correct political goal of a national liberation movement. Around the turn of the millennium, following a critique and self-critique on the character of national liberation struggles and “real existing socialism”,¹ the party started to question whether independence really ought to be conceptualised and practiced in the form of nation-state construction (Jongerden, 2016). Taking the concept of state-construction from the principle of national self-determination, the PKK developed an ideological and political architecture on the basis of the idea of self-government as a stateless society. The PKK refers to this development of a new “alternative institutional framework to the current state system in the Middle East” (Güneş, 2012) as a paradigm change. While some authors recognise that significant changes occurred within the PKK (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; Güneş, 2012; Güneş and Zeydanlıoğlu, 2013; Yeğen, 2016), in many texts on the subject the PKK's transformation has rather been downplayed and disqualified. By emphasising so-called authoritarian continuities, the shift in the PKK position has been presented merely as a communication strategy undertaken in response to its listing as a terrorist

¹ A catch phrase to refer to the Soviet Union-style of state-bureaucratic planning, which was regarded as one of the stages towards communism.

organisation and hence as superficial or in contradiction to its alleged and essentialised being. Savelsberg (2014: 103; 2016: 227) depicts the practise of collective self-administration from below as window-dressing for authoritarianism. Leezenberg (2016: 15) sees Leninist continuities in a direction that “contradicts the anarchist element in Bookchin’s and Öcalan’s theoretical writings.” In a similar vein, Muhammad (2018: 799) suggests that Bookchin as the “theorist of choice may not be an entirely suitable one”, since “the PKK has been unable to chart a non-nationalist course”, and argues, moreover, that “[s]cholars of the Kurdish question have so far let Bookchin’s seeming unsuitability go unnoticed,” mainly because his ideas are not well known. De Jong (2016) furthermore suggests that the embrace of Bookchin and the new paradigm was not the result of a collective process of deliberation, but one imposed by the leadership of the PKK on the basis of directives by Öcalan. This article contests such views. It shows that the paradigm change indeed came with profound discussions, reorientation and reorganisation and almost resulted in the crumbling and collapse of the party.

Methodologically, this article is the product of an approach that seeks to understand the PKK’s outlook and actions and in particular how these make sense for those involved (Jongerden, 2016b). By listening to what those people active in the organisation have to say for themselves, by engaging with how they explain the ideological and political changes within their organisation and what they themselves refer to as the process towards a “paradigm change”, it becomes clear that the changes have been experienced as disruptive and that the organisation did indeed undergo a radical transformation in the mid-2000s. Unfortunately, the intensity of the debates and changes has been overlooked in most of the literature on the subject, a redress of which is the primary aim here. This article will mainly deal with the internal discussions and contestation, therefore, focusing on the profound and destabilising impact that the paradigm change had on the party, eventually resulting in a re-establishment (PKK, 2005). Data to sustain this argument has been collected by means of interviews with people who have been involved in or witnessed the discussions within the PKK and the turmoil the party experienced in the beginning of the 2000s.²

Learning from defeat

Initially without a formal structure or program, what was to become the PKK in 1978 started off as a grouping of dedicated people in search of a new perspective after the 1971 coup and crackdown on the revolutionary left in

² Unless otherwise stated, all interviews and translations in this article were carried out by the author.

Turkey.³ The group did not engage in a sectarian battle over the right path to follow, that of Russia, China, or Albania. The *Kürdistan Devrimcileri* (Kurdistan Revolutionaries), the name of the group before it turned into the PKK, did not bother much about who represented the true form of socialism and were more concerned with understanding the socialist struggle under the conditions in which they lived, which implied the development of their understanding of the reality in Turkey and Kurdistan (Cemil Bayık, personal communication, October 30, 2014; Rıza Altun, personal communication, October 30, 2014). This history of the PKK and the related paradigm change can be written from various perspectives, one of them is to consider the history as a process of “learning from defeat”. In this article, I distinguish three defeats. The first defeat the Kurdistan Revolutionaries learned from was the defeat of the revolutionary left in Turkey after the 1971 coup. At the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the revolutionary left and Kurdish organisations in Turkey had gained momentum, getting morale and inspiration from revolutionary struggles elsewhere in the world: from Cuba to Vietnam, Laos to Angola, Mozambique to Guinea, and Algeria to Palestine. Against the background of the growth of an assertive left and emerging Kurdish political sphere, the military presented a memorandum to Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel on March 12, 1971 in which the general staff demanded a strong government that would put an end to what they referred to as social unrest and carry out reforms in a Kemalist spirit (Zürcher, 2004: 257). This coup was followed by a crackdown on the left and Kurdish organisations. In the three years following the 1971 coup, the military empowered the state against civil society and installed special courts to deal with dissent quickly and ruthlessly, among others. A ban on meetings and gatherings and criminalisation of strikes and lockouts, along with the closure of organisations and the arrest and killing of its leaders, resulted in a collapse of the organised left (Ahmad, 1993: 156; Jongerden, 2017). This particular defeat had a profound impact on the establishment and development of the Kurdistan revolutionaries. Öcalan argued that the main reason for this defeat was that the revolutionaries had entered into a direct confrontation with the state while they were still too weak. Following this insight, the group around Öcalan decided to organise itself thoroughly before entering into such a confrontation again (Sayın, 1997: 71-83; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011). The second defeat for the PKK, namely the military setbacks it suffered from the beginning of the 1990s, came when it shifted towards positional warfare at a time the Turkish military started to use guerilla-tactics. This resulted in heavy losses for the PKK. In this period, many young people were joining the PKK, including a considerable number of women. The commanders, mostly men, considered the

³ The PKK was formally established on 26-27 November 1978, yet assumed its name in April 1979 and announced its existence in July 1979 with an attack on the leader of the Kurdish Bucak clan, considered to be a symbol of an oppressive landlord and collaborator with the state (Akkaya, 2016).

women unfit for military duties and sent them back to work on the political front in Turkey after a month of training. Many of the women would be arrested upon their return. Fatma, a member of KJA (*Kongreya Jinen Azad*), an umbrella organisation for women in the Kurdistan Region in Turkey, inspired by the teachings of Öcalan, says:

What we experienced in 1991, 1992, 1993, the big rise in women joining the revolution, was at the same time a period when there was a big chaos within the organisation. What came out of this chaos? This came out: for example, there was this, Amed's [Diyarbakır] commander Şemdin Sakık. He said, "There will be no women left in the army, I am sending them all away. They can go to the cities, nobody can turn the women into candidates for the guerrilla. Because women spoil men, he said, and war is a man's business. (Fatma, personal communication, 27 July, 2016).

Against this background, Abdullah Öcalan started to problematise domination by men as a negative side of the movement and praise the dedication and perseverance of women fighters, symbolised by the actions of Berîtan (Gülnaz Karataş), linked to the formation of a women's army (*ordulaşma*), and Zilan (Zeynep Kınacı) and Sema Yüce, related to the formation of a women's party (*partileşme*).⁴ Though other liberation movements mobilised women too, the PKK began to regard gender relations as a key issue in its analyses, challenging patriarchal relations, both in society generally as well as within the party itself. Gender inequalities were not seen as a side issue to the revolution, but as a key challenge (Tax, 2016). Analysing the history of state formation as a history of the emergence of the "dominant male", Öcalan turned the thesis of Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Werlhof 1988) of "women, the last colony" on its head. Öcalan (2013) argued that social inequalities and cultural injustices started with the emergence of gender hierarchies and the identification of women with the domestic sphere ("housewifisation") in the Neolithic era.⁵ He referred to

⁴ Berîtan was the commander of a PKK unit. In 1992 Turkish forces, supported by the *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP) peshmerga, started a military offensive against the PKK in the Kurdistan region in Iraq. When Berîtan's unit was about to be surrounded by KDP forces, she kept them at a distance so her unit could escape. When she ran out of ammunition, she threw herself from a mountain rock, preferring death to captivity. Zilan used her body as a weapon in an attack on the Turkish military in Dersim (Tunceli), in 1996. In 1998, Sema Yüce poured eau-de-cologne over herself and set herself on fire in protest against Turkey's policies towards the Kurds.

⁵ Marie Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia von Werlhof make a distinction between external colonies and internal colonies. External colonies are colonised peoples and land elsewhere, while the internal colony is a process of housewifisation at home. Locating the process of housewifisation in the era of capitalist modernity, they argue that housewifisation is a process of extension of exploitation to the domestic sphere (see also Mies, 1986: 110). Öcalan argues the other way around, saying that the nation-state and capitalism are contingent on the institutionalisation of the dominant male. This institutionalisation of the dominant male takes place around two "sexual ruptures". The first rupture was that of "religionisation" around the idea of

women as “the first colony”. The “dominant male”, Öcalan argues, was constitutive for a process of state formation. Consequently, stateless democracy and gender equality became key dimensions of the PKK’s new paradigm (Güneş, 2012: 141-3).

The third defeat for the PKK, the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and his imprisonment in Turkey, was a major shock for the party but ultimately eventuated in a recreation of the party’s ideology and organisation. This recreation took place against the much broader background of the dissolution of state socialism and what Paul Virilio refers to as a failure of a type of social experimentation (Conley, 2012: 93), which gave way to the idea of a non-statist democracy. It is in the context of this third defeat that I will discuss the paradigm change within the PKK.

Paradigm change

On 16 February, 1999, then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit announced that PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan had been captured in Kenya and brought to Turkey a day before. Across the world, PKK militants and sympathisers reacted furiously with demonstrations, riots and occupations. The shock of his arrest was quickly followed by another shock. In his defense, Öcalan did not take the assumed position expected by his followers and Kurdish communities. Rejecting claims for an independent state, Öcalan instead proposed a new, “truly” democratic republic, and a project he referred to as democratic confederalism, democratic autonomy, and democratic nation. He was quickly accused of selling out, yet in his defense Öcalan indicated that he did not retreat from the struggle, but searched for a re-establishment of the liberation struggle. “In my defense”, he argued, “I did not revert to either a classical Kurdish nationalist line or a leftist interpretation of a similar tendency. Developments went beyond [both tendencies]” (Öcalan, 1999b: 10). Öcalan started to elaborate on an earlier formulated critique of the state, including the socialist experiments, arguing that liberation cannot be achieved by means of nation-state building, but rather by the deepening of self-organisation. This was referred to as radical democracy, radical in the sense that it tries to develop the concept of democracy beyond nation and state (Karasu, 2009).

After his imprisonment on an island jail (İmralı) and facing court proceedings on multiple charges, primarily of treason against the state of Turkey, Abdullah Öcalan started preparations for his legal defence. The right to organise his own

the strong man in the Neolithic era, dated at some 4,000 years ago. This institutionalised a single voiced masculine social culture and a silencing and “housewifisation” of women. The second “sexual rupture” is referred to as the intensification of patriarchy through monotheistic religions. In the previous world of multiple gods, women were attributed creative powers, but in the narrative of the monotheistic religions, the position of women shifted from the creator to the created, symbolised in the claim that woman was created from a man’s rib (Öcalan, 2017).

defence gave him access to literature, and resulted in an extensive reading of political and social theory, philosophy, and history. This study resulted not in a legalistic defence, but a political one. Over the years, Öcalan committed himself to a thorough rethinking of the history of socialism, the PKK and the development of a new political project (Akkaya, 2016). This new political project, referred to as “democratic confederalism”, “democratic autonomy” and the “democratic nation”, is positioned by Öcalan within the historical context of non-state civilisation. In *Liberating Life*, a compilation of translations from several of his books, Öcalan (2013: 55) writes that the struggle “entails creating political formations aiming to achieve a society that is democratic, gender equal, eco-friendly and *where state is not the pivotal element*” (emphasis added). A theory of the emergence and role of the state is central to the second paradigm change within the PKK.

At the time of the formation of the PKK in the 1970s, the PKK took revolutionary struggles elsewhere as a relevant horizon for its own orientation. The October Revolution in Russia, the revolution in China, the resistances in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Eritrea, and other countries and regions around the world were all looked upon as part of a common heritage of the oppressed. Yet the socialist and liberation movements did not fulfill their promise and, towards the end of the 1980s, the self-declared socialist alternative, the Soviet Union, collapsed. This formed an important background for a re-examination of the idea of socialism and liberation struggle, eventually resulting in a critique of the state:

[The PKK] examined all the national liberation struggles. They liberated, waged big battles, millions were martyred, and eventually they won, but the gains were minimal. They reached their targets but could not realise their principles... Adding to the collapse of socialism, they [the Soviets] positioned themselves as alternative. The Soviets had believed that they would only come to an end when the world came to an end, and this affected their mentality. We started a re-examination. When we were established, we took our inspiration more from struggles elsewhere than from the resistance movements in recent Kurdish history, which had all ended in defeat, thus affecting PKK thinking. I mean, we took them [the national liberation movements] as examples, we were affected by these movements when we started our struggle, but these struggles did not bring what they should have brought. In fact, they went backwards and accepted what they had previously refused. So you see, there had to be something wrong. This demanded a re-examination. The emergence of a new paradigm [within the PKK] is very much influenced by this. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, 28 October, 2014)

This critical re-examination of liberation struggles resulted in a critique of the state, referred to by Nietzsche as “the coldest of cold monsters” (Merrifield, 2006: 157) and by Öcalan as the institution that does not stand for democracy, freedom, and human rights, but their denial (Öcalan, 2010: 193). Thus, Öcalan began to reject state formation as an objective of political struggle that aims at liberation, and proposed a new model (Jongerden, 2016).

The beginning of this rethinking of politics started in the mid-1980s.

The first strong critique on real existing socialism was made at a meeting of the central committee in 1984. [...] He [Öcalan] argued that real existing socialism did not have much to do with socialism. The state was supposed to disappear, but instead became more powerful. (Cemil Bayık, personal communication, 30 October, 2014)

According to Akkaya (2016), this critique of real existing socialism can also be traced back to Öcalan’s speeches devoted to socialism (most delivered on the occasion of May 1) in the 1980s, in which Öcalan argued that the development of a “bureaucratic state” under “real existing socialism” had resulted in alienation and subjugation (Öcalan, 1999a: 13-14). Furthermore, Akkaya argues, notably referring to the PKK’s 1993 congress (Öcalan, 1993), that Öcalan’s critique of the Soviet Union did not come with a turn to dogmatism or liberalism, but with a search for a new form of socialism (Akkaya, 2016: 311). The rethinking of socialism through a state critique became a recurrent theme. At the 5th congress too, Öcalan voiced his critique of the contradictory relation between state and socialism (Öcalan, 1995). By the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, Öcalan was already proposing a “new socialism” based on a societal transformation coming from below. Öcalan would return to this critique and develop a new political vision following his imprisonment in 1999.

Development and contestation of the paradigm change

Although Öcalan was in contact with his lawyers, he spent most of his time in isolation, reading, developing his ideas, and writing. Within the restrictions he faced, however, Öcalan desired some kind of intellectual exchange. His legal team played an important role in this exchange. According to Oliver Kontny, one of the people working with the legal defence team, Öcalan was looking for i) people he could engage with in order to test and further develop his ideas, and ii) information about other movements in the world working with similar agendas:

He was basically alone in his prison cell and turning upside down half of his belief system and more than half of the belief system of his followers. [...] And of course, one can start to doubt and think, “may be I’m just losing it.” So he needed some kind of feedback from somebody who was not his follower, not his supporter, from people

who might be involved in their own struggles, or in their own process of thinking. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, 29 November, 2015)

One of the attempts to engage in discussion with intellectuals and activists outside the movement took place in the context of a translation of what would later be published in English as *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation* (Öcalan, 2007). The London-based publishing house Pluto Press was interested in the manuscript, since it was placed in a radical socialist frame and dealt with critical perspectives on capitalism and colonialism:

As a publisher, I was always interested in the books of people who are struggling to resist what they felt was some form of domination. [...] Öcalan obviously was a major leader of the Kurdish resistance [...] but we were not involved in the dynamics or the politics. (Roger van Zwanenberg, personal communication 27 June, 2016)

The manuscript was sent out for review to Susan Pollock, an archaeologist interested in political economy and feminist approaches to the study of pre- and early historic Mesopotamian societies, and Reinhard Bernbeck, who had an interest in the economic organisation of ancient societies and ancient imperialism in relation to its manifestations today. Pollock had published on ancient Mesopotamia (Pollock, 1999) and together, Pollock and Bernbeck had co-edited a work discussing, among others, social life in Neolithic villages (Pollock and Bernbeck, 2004; Starzmann, Pollock, and Bernbeck, 2008). Pollock and Bernbeck both had received parts of the translation of the manuscript, had read through it and had given comments in a back and forth exchange with Oliver Kontny, the translator of the manuscript:

When reading the text, I was really impressed by the sort of detail [and] knowledge. [...] Overall I found it very interesting. It [was] a kind of appropriate analysis made by someone with limited access to a library. (Reinhard Bernbeck, personal communication, 22 June, 2016)

Against the idea of ancient Mesopotamia as a wonderful civilisation from where we can see a history of progress, Öcalan made an argument about the existence of “primitive socialism” in the Neolithic era, emphasizing the emergence of gender hierarchies, class division, and social exploitation:

I did not fully understand his analysis of the Neolithic revolution, and what he said of the pre-urban period and the comparison to the Enlightenment. Is capitalism the Enlightenment derailed, or was the Enlightenment already the first step in the wrong direction? Was the Neolithic revolution derailed, or was it such a first step in the wrong direction? There were other things, but then I have to look closely back, I don't remember, since it is probably something between a dozen and

15 years ago we had these discussions. [...] One can probably pinpoint the first production of surplus more precisely in time and space than he [Öcalan] does, but obviously, why should he? It's somewhere there. He is not wrong by putting it between the early Neolithic and urban society and state emergence in Mesopotamia. (Reinhard Bernbeck, personal communication, 22 June, 2016)

On the basis of his exchange with the reviewers of the manuscript, Oliver Kontny wrote to Öcalan:

I wrote this very long letter. His lawyers didn't want to give this letter to him, because they thought it was rude. After some months, I pushed them into giving it, and I received a response by fax. Öcalan obviously sat down to write a hand-written letter, and he had the prison authorities fax it to his lawyers. [...] He was saying, "Yes, I am not an academic, I am not claiming to be one, so please correct whatever you think is wrong, but let's discuss this, let's think this through for what it can mean for humanity, because if you also agree that it's something new then let's develop this together." [...] People were thinking it was improper, they were actually trying to stop me from writing again, and they effectively stopped me from implementing what he said in his letter. Because in his letter to me he said, "Look, I want you to form a group of people and to update my book so it will be on par with the level of discussion in Europe, and if there are any mistakes, factual mistakes, just tacitly correct them [...] But what is important is that you don't dilute my ideas, my political and philosophical ideas. I'm confident you understand them and be very careful not to alter them, but all the rest just feel free, make it a good text in an editorial way." This is what he was saying in a letter with his own signature to a translator and a publisher. If I was a PKK person, this would be sacred, right? This was Öcalan's.... It was his will, his written, expressed will, and they stopped us. It didn't happen. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, 29 November, 2015)

As this exchange around the manuscript came to an end, a parallel process of contact with intellectuals emerged, the most important being Murray Bookchin, who was contacted by Reimar Heider and Uta Schneiderbanger of the International Initiative/Peace in Kurdistan. Born in New York to Russian Jewish immigrants, Murray Bookchin (1921–2006) was active in the youth movement of the communist party in the USA in his teens but broke with it at the end of the 1930s. Initially he aligned himself with the Trotskyites and the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), but he had considerable difficulties with their hierarchical and centralist outlook and started to consider himself a libertarian

socialist from the 1950s onwards (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013). Öcalan had emphasised the value of Bookchin's ideas, and referred to him as his teacher and himself his pupil (Reimar Heider, personal communication, 24 December, 2015).⁶

In his writings, Öcalan recommends Bookchin on several occasions. "The world view for which I stand", Öcalan explained in a meeting with his lawyers on December 1, 2004, "is close to that of Bookchin", and he advised his supporters to read Bookchin's work:

On this subject, you can make use of the books, *Urbanisation without Cities* and *Remaking Society*. Read these two books. My worldview is close to those ideas [of] Wallerstein and Bookchin. (Öcalan, 2004)

Earlier that year, on October 27, he had done the same:

We will solve the Kurdish issue through local authorities. [...] For the municipalities, I suggested that Bookchin must be read and his ideas are practiced. (Öcalan, 2004)

On December 11, 2004, Murray Bookchin's companion and author Janet Biehl, wrote:

It is thrilling to learn that Murray Bookchin's remarks were read to the second general assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress last summer, and it is gratifying to know that many Kurdish people now view his ideas favorably. (Letter by Janet Biehl to Uta Schneiderbanger and Reimar Heider, 11 December, 2004)

Biehl was writing in response to a letter from Reimar Heider and Uta Schneiderbanger, which had stated:

We would like to inform you that your kind letter with your positive remarks about Mr. Öcalan has meanwhile been read at the second General Assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress,⁷ which took place in the Kurdish mountains this summer, and has been much

⁶ Following the work of Murray Bookchin, Abdullah Öcalan had initiated debates on democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. This followed a critique of the state and the relation between self-determination and state formation. "Stalin approached the national problem as that of establishing a state. This approach affected all socialist systems and national liberation movements. Lenin also accepted this right of nations to self-determination and its reduction to state formation", Öcalan had argued. "A separate state became the sacred principle of the socialist credo. To be a socialist and to give support for the establishment of a state by oppressed and colonised nations were considered one and the same. If you thought differently, you were not a socialist" (Öcalan, 2012: 271-2). Öcalan became convinced that state formation must not be mistaken for independence and self-determination. On the contrary, statecraft had corroded the political domain and had resulted in civic degradation, a vision Öcalan shared with Bookchin.

⁷ The Kurdistan People's Congress or *Kongra-Gel Kurdistan* was the name the PKK assumed in the period 2003-2005.

applauded. (Letter to Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin, dated 12 October, 2004)⁸

The second General Assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress (*Kongra-Gel Kurdistan*) was held between May 16 and May 26, 2004, in Qandil, the rugged and mountainous area in the eastern part of Kurdistan where the PKK has bases. But the reading of the letter had been a close call and the reference to applause belies a complex political process. Oliver Kontny recounts the details:

I was in a hotel in Jordan on my way to Qandil and checked my emails and then there was this response from Bookchin. The letter was like an encouraging address really. So I printed it out and kept it in my pocket. When I arrived in Qandil [...] I told the people, "Look we have this brand new message from Bookchin, it just arrived by email yesterday. Do you want to read it out at the conference tomorrow?" What happened then was quite interesting. [...] The chair, Abdullah Hijab, a Kurdish liberal nationalist, said, "Look, we have much more powerful friends in the USA. Sorry, but who cares about some marginal anarchist with 50 followers?" So he was basically mocking this thing. He was saying it was not going to happen. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, 29 November, 2015)

The congress, however, was co-chaired by Abdullah Hijab and Asya Deniz, as Kontny noted:

But at that time they already had the system of co-chairing, and the co-chair, Asya Deniz, she was saying, "Look, sorry, but you know Bookchin is quite important for our leader, and if we get a message from him we should read it and I'm going to do it." She took my letter and she made a translation. She then read it out herself at the conference, and they could not stop her. So, that was quite a great moment, because people were standing up, there was this standing ovation, and people were really excited about this. So you could see a lot of delegates in the room who actually thought this was very, very important, historic. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, 29 November, 2015)

Clearly, this was a key moment, not just at the congress, but for the future direction of the movement as a whole, the shape the future struggle would take:

At the time there wasn't really space for intellectual discussion. There was this split in the leadership. Osman Öcalan and Nizamettin Taş, who were top-commanders, had broken away. They disagreed with the

⁸ The letter is unsigned but was apparently written by Schneiderbanger and Heider.

new emerging paradigm. They just said, “No, we need a national state, we want to have an independent Kurdistan, this is the time to do it and we want to realise this together with the USA.” Since they were quite high-ranking, they could assert their agenda on behalf of the movement. But a critical portion of the rank and file and some of the leadership fiercely opposed them and wanted them ousted. [...] The situation was quite tense. And of course, what do people with a background in Marxism and military leadership do? They were saying this is not a time to discuss. Some younger people were much more open to this whole alternative anarchist, feminist, ecological thinking, and they felt they were being marginalised in the process.

The leadership of the party had very different concerns at the time, but all these contributed more to a closure than an opening of a discussion about the ideas of Öcalan. Murat Karayılan was basically interested in keeping the movement together. Duran Kalkan had an open attitude, but as a convinced Marxist he had his own reservations about anarchism and they weren't all wrong. For Cemil Bayık, the main thing was to create an atmosphere that was not polarising, and would include the right wing or nationalist opposition as well. Not to antagonise them, that was his main thing. Yes, democratisation, that's good, but democratisation should not mean we go for more radical leftist thought, but do something which will include people who were nationalist, liberals, since we need national unity at this time, that was his position. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, 29 November, 2015)

Yet in this period in the beginning of the 2000s, there was a back and forth between accommodating the group around Osman Öcalan and Nizamettin Taş and ostracising them. Some thought they should stay part of the movement, thinking that things could be worse if they would leave and work against the party, while others thought that their stay within the party would further obstruct the transformation process. In August 2004, two months after the second General Assembly, Osman Öcalan, as member of the Presidential Council of the PKK, announced the establishment of a new political party, *Partîya Welatparêzên Demokrat ên Kurdistan* (Patriotic Democratic Party of Kurdistan, PWD). He was joined by Nizamettin Taş, another member of the Presidential Council, along with other PKK cadres, such as the former representative of the PKK in Europe, Kani Yılmaz,⁹ and a large number of fighters. The PWD rejected the new paradigm of non-statist self-organisation,

⁹ Kani Yılmaz and Sabri Tori, who had also defected from the PKK, were killed in a car bomb explosion in Suleymania in 2006. The PKK is widely believed to be responsible, but never claimed responsibility.

holding to the establishment of an independent state as the ultimate aim of the struggle. Abdullah Öcalan disqualified this as “primitive nationalism”.

The conflict that centred around the PKK’s new political outlook had been preceded by another, but somehow related conflict, involving some of the key actors who would later establish the PWD. Following the arrest and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan, his status in the PKK had become an issue. Should Öcalan remain the political leader of the party, with effective competences over the organisation and giving direction to the movement as a whole, or should he be considered a symbolic leader, without the practical power to influence the party’s tactical and strategic politics, as Osman Öcalan and his fellows thought? Discussions on the subject became entwined with the position of women’s organisations. Against Öcalan’s argument for the need for women to build their own structures of democratic politics, attempts were made to bring the PKK-affiliated women’s movement under the control of the (mainly male) party leadership. However, this was countered by fierce opposition from women in the organisation, who successfully defended their independence and autonomous decision-making powers. KJK member Malatyalı Dilan explains what occurred thus:

A tendency emerged saying, “The leadership¹⁰ is imprisoned in İmralı and the women’s movement is now left to our mercy, so from now on you have to get our approval for all decisions you take.” Of course, the women’s movement did not accept this. There was an uprising. We made a now famous uprising. Whatever happens, no way will men make decisions about us. Our uprising was about this. All the women cut their hair. [...] It was a way to show that we did not accept [what was happening]. It created a shock: “What’s happening within the PKK movement?” This was the beginning of an insurgency. If the women do this today, other things may happen tomorrow. Everywhere we have hundreds of women fighters and we are organised. [...] Because of these actions, our male friends had to give up on what they had insisted on. [...] These actions took place in the process towards the 7th Congress, in 2000.” (Malatyalı Dilan, personal communication, 29 October, 2014)

By turning Abdullah Öcalan into a symbolic leader, and taking his mandate, a move had been made to centralise decision-making powers, and to subordinate the women’s movement to the presidential council of the PKK (men). The women’s movement disputed the validity of the decision to turn Öcalan into a

¹⁰ In the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan is also referred to as “the leadership”.

“honorary leader” and by doing so successfully defended their independence and autonomous decision-making powers.

The PWD did not manage to become much more than a name and a website, and the party passed into history shortly after its establishment, but the split was a sign of the huge turmoil the paradigm change had created within the party and among its militants. It is estimated that about 1,500 militants left the organisation between 2003 and 2005, when confrontations were at their height between those who wanted to adhere to the statist paradigm and a classical political party with its leadership in command and those who wanted to move with Abdullah Öcalan towards a post-statist and post-patriarchal (beyond the state and dominant male) understanding of politics. Fearing a collapse, Abdullah Öcalan initiated a further reorganisation of the PKK.

First, he called for the formation of a “Preparatory Committee for a Reconstruction”¹¹ (of the PKK), concerned with the re-founding of the PKK as an ideological power grouping (PKK, 2005). This was to be mainly concerned with the education of cadres to give direction to the movement, not through “order-words” demanding obedience and docility (Conley, 2012: 102), but by internalising an ideological orientation (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011). Of course, theory without practice is sterile, and the ideological reorientation had to be enacted, so that the party was not the apex from which everything trickled down but part of a broader network of organisationally independent structures. Further to the women’s party, organisational differentiation was advanced with the establishment of separate civil and military structures, political parties and self-defence forces, for the organisation of the struggle in Iraq, in Iran and in Syria:

It was a brilliant move of Öcalan to start this differentiation, like the people in Rojava need their own political party, and the people in East Kurdistan need their own political party. At the time people did not understand that. They said, “What the hell, we want our PKK!” In the long term, you see how important this was. To have specialisations for some things, better knowledge, for example, people started to pull out the knowledge about Iranian history. The general movement did not know so much about Iranian history. They would not know that much about Syrian history. They would know something about the Kurdish history and the history of Turkey. So this differentiation turned out to be pretty important. (Reimar Heider, personal communication, 24 December, 2015)

¹¹ In Turkish “Hazarlık Amaçlı Yeniden İnşa Komitesi”.

Indeed, the first attempts to implement the new ideas did create problems. The decentralisation and dissolution of hierarchies resulted in a fragmentation and loss of coherence:

In 2005 everything fell apart, they barely kept the stuff together. Like, in retrospective you can say, ok, a lot of controversy was reduced by the right wing leaving the party, or what I would call the right wing. [...] That really helped to reunify thinking and practice. And then you had the thing with people saying, “Yes, well isn’t this all about decentralisation and empowerment of the base?” And then they set up dozens of committees for all kinds of work in the movement and later they said, well, “It doesn’t work. Everyone is just doing their own thing and there’s no... well, we said something about collaboration and coordination and there is no coordination anymore. Everybody is just doing their own thing and that doesn’t work”. [...] And then luckily stuff worked in Rojava. [...] It was trial and error. (Reimar Heider, personal communication, 24 December, 2015)

Thus, the re-founding of the PKK as an ideological party was to usher in a new coordination mechanism, provided by the Association of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK).¹² With the congress, Kongra-Gel, as its assembly, the KCK comprised a network of village, city, and regional councils, functioning as an organisation to provide an ideological orientation for structures and institutions that were oriented to the idea of democracy, ecology, and gender equality. The dialectic between an organisation giving ideological orientation and autonomous institutions taking their own decisions did not work well from the beginning, however, and it was not until further developments, south of the Turkish-Syrian border, in Rojava, that the difficult process of reinvention started to bear fruit (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga, 2014; Güneş and Lowe, 2015).

Discussion and conclusion

Putting the developments at the beginning of the 2000s in a broader context, we may argue that the PKK and the paradigm change emerged from a learning process as a *learning from defeat*. In the history of the PKK, I have distinguished three moments of defeat. The first was the defeat of the revolutionary left in Turkey at the beginning of the 1970s, which shaped the process of group formation leading to the establishment of the PKK in 1978 (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011). The defeat of the revolutionary left shortly after the Kurdistan Revolutionaries’ formation at the beginning of the 1970s had a profound

¹² The KCK was actually a continuation of the Association of Associations in Kurdistan (*Koma Komalên Kurdistan*, KKK), established at the 2005 congress and renamed in 2007.

impact on the development of the group. Öcalan evaluated this defeat of the left as a valuable lesson through which to consider regrouping and rethinking strategy (Sayın, 1997: 71-83), arguing that the main reason for the defeat was that the revolutionary left in Turkey had entered into a direct confrontation with the state while it was still weak. With this insight, the group around Öcalan decided to organise itself thoroughly before entering into such a confrontation again (Sayın, 1997: 71-83; Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011). The second defeat comprised the military setbacks the PKK encountered from the beginning of the 1990s, which coincided with and eventually resulted in the institutionalisation of a women's movement. The third was the capture and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. This capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and his imprisonment in Turkey was a major shock for the party but ultimately resulted in the revision and reorientation leading to the party's present ideology and organisation.

The profound ideological reorientation and political reorganisation of the PKK, here referred to as a paradigm change, from a political party oriented towards the construction of a state to a network aiming at the development of self-government, was an extended and uneven process. The transformation was more than a reorientation involving organisational adjustment; it was no less than the development of a new mindset, one that involved the questioning of historically entrenched gender hierarchies and deeply held political axioms. In the process of this major shift in direction, the PKK lost a substantial number of long-time activists and cadres. However, although at times it looked as if the movement might fall apart, the result was a transformation that gave it a new impetus, enabling the PKK not only to survive and move with the times but also, one may claim, to spearhead a new political development and realisation of democracy in the Middle East. This transformation of the PKK involved a critique of primitive nationalism and the state, which developed in relation to an analysis of gender inequalities.

In the work of Murray Bookchin, Öcalan found the ideas through which he could give a positive systematic to his critique of the way socialist and national liberation movements generally had tried to develop their alternatives. He must have recognised his own preferences in the approach of Bookchin, who did not limit himself to critical analysis and deconstruction but imagined and developed political perspectives for a radical societal transformation. According to Bookchin (1991: 3), “[p]erhaps the greatest single failing of movements for social reconstruction”—referring in particular to the left and organisations that claim to speak for the oppressed—“is their lack of a politics that will carry people beyond the limits established by the status quo.” Öcalan's main drive is precisely to go beyond the status quo and deal with socio-economic and socio-cultural injustice. His thought offers a perspective to imagine liberation, or the project of emancipation, beyond the state, through an empowering of society.

However, Öcalan's thinking does not provide a blueprint of any sort and rather leaves those who feel inspired by his ideas to find out for themselves how to develop their own working practices.

The centrality of Öcalan in this transformation cannot be contested. However, data presented in this research makes three things clear. First, Öcalan's ideas were initially met with confusion and reservation. Confusion arose over the question of the extent to which his ideas implied an abandonment and thus a step back in the struggle for liberation or else a moving beyond the state, giving the struggle for liberation new directions and dynamics. When more and more people within the PKK became convinced the latter was the case, a rethinking of the liberation struggle as concerned with the creation of new political formations beyond the state, then the question of its "workability" came to the fore. Was it viable? This was connected to another issue, namely the balance between self-organisation and coordination. Too much of one could result in fragmentation and a falling apart, a serious risk the PKK faced in the mid-2000s, while too much of the other could lead to the formation of a centralised bureaucracy, which was already one of the prime objects of Öcalan's state critique. Third, there was also the issue of directionality and agency. Who was in charge? Though it was Öcalan who, for example, mobilised militants in the struggle against what was called "the dominant male", it was the women in the PKK who mobilised Öcalan in order to defend their organisational independence. These three issues, i) confusion and reservation within the movement, ii) the question of the relationship between self-organisation and coordination, and iii) the leader who mobilises but also was mobilised against centralising tendencies within the party at the beginning of the 2000s, and the conflicts related to them, show that the paradigm shift was not simply engineered from above nor window-dressing, but an impetuous process of change. To date, the transformation has been a difficult and a cautious process, with the PKK leadership trying and failing to keep the party together. However, it is also the resulting fissure that has enabled success, since it made it possible to move forward and create an internal ideological consistency. Internal divide on the question of the state and the position of the women's movement had created a turmoil that resulted not so much in ambiguity as paralysis. Yet, the PKK has been able to reinvent itself after, or rather through, defeat. By dwelling on setbacks and analysing failures, by looking at the "bad side", the PKK was able to (continue to) develop and organically "reinvent" itself as a movement that makes history. As Marx had argued in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, "[i]t is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history" (Balibar, 2014: 98).

List of interviews

Rıza Altun, member of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 30, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

Cemil Bayık, member of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 30, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

Reinhard Bernbeck, date of interview: June 22, 2016. The interview took place through skype.

Malatyalı Dilan, member of the KJA (Kongreya Jinen Azad), data of interview July 24, 2017. The interview took place in Diyarbakır.

Fatma, member of the KJA (Kongreya Jinen Azad), data of interview July 24, 2017. The interview took place in Diyarbakır.

Reimar Heider, date of interview: December 24, 2015. The interview took place at Wageningen University.

Duran Kalkan, member of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 28, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

Oliver Kontny, date of interview: November 29, 2015. The interview took place through Skype.

Roger van Zwanenberg, publisher at Pluto Press between 1987 and 2011, date of interview: June 27, 2016. The interview took place through Skype.

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