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The Kurdish Movement and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria: An Alternative to the (Nation-)State Model?

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ABSTRACT

Is the Rojava model really deconstructing the model of a state or is it potentially a new state form? Does the 'democratic confederalism' model that the Kurdish movement claims to be implementing in Northern Syria draw on/reproduce different modes of identity/belonging than that of the nation and the state? This paper argues that the shift from a nationalist movement towards a project that offers a stateless solution seems to be incomplete and needs to be further questioned. The first section begins with a brief discussion of the notion of statelessness and the historical background and ideological transformation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its 'paradigm-shift'. The second section shows that despite positive aspects towards a post-national stateless model, the narratives of the representatives of the Kurdish political movement in Rojava display nationalist elements by prioritizing the Kurds and their cultural identity and a political power at the top of which Öcalan's personality cult stands; and engages with the concept of the multitude, proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri whose work on radical democracy is theoretically relevant to the Rojava model.

The Kurds, who are often considered to be the largest stateless nation, are integrating and interacting in a Middle-East-wide political space[1] that mainly includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.[2] At the time of writing this article, the Kurds in Turkey who follow the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan's political ideas are viewed as supporters of a terrorist group; and the members and representatives of the main 'legal'[3] parties that are often described as pro-Kurdish[4]—including the co-chairs, several deputies, and mayors—of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the Democratic Regions' Party (DBP), are currently in prison. The Kurds who support the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KSZK), the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), and Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in neighbouring Iran continue to struggle against oppression, through demonstrations and heavy clashes with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran. The stateless Kurds offer two different models of self-governance in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held a referendum for an independent Kurdish state in September 2017, though without much regional or international backing. And in Northern Syria, a region the Kurds refer to as Rojava (Western Kurdistan), a non-statist/stateless form of autonomy called the

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Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) continues to be practiced under the Social Contract of Rojava[5] since January 2014, where the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and allied groups declared autonomous administrations, applying 'democratic confederalism' model of the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. However, like the KRG in Iraq, the DFNS also lacks regional and international backing.[6] Although People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) have successfully fought against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) with the support of western powers like the United States and France, this was a military support rather than a political one. As a result, the DFNS and the model it is applying in Northern Syria has been, and still is, a fragile model that has no international recognition. Furthermore, as Matin rightly underlines, Rojava is a product of a 'complex international conjuncture' with the interference of global powers (e.g., the USA, Russia) and regional players (e.g., Turkey,[7] Iran, Israel) and remains as an ongoing warzone where both the Rojava experience and people are in an existential struggle.[8]

Regardless of its fragility, part of the existing literature on the Rojava cantons, either academic or journalistic, reflects almost a romantic view of the whole Rojava experience, describing it as 'a safe haven in Syria's brutal war'[9] or 'a dream of secular utopia in ISIS's backyard'.[10] David Graeber writes: 'There are still people thinking like that: This is just the PKK front, they're really a Stalinist authoritarian organization that's just pretending to have adopted radical democracy. No. They're totally for real. This is a genuine revolution'.[11] Nazan Üstündağ suggests that as the armed forces in Rojava, such as the YPG, the YPJ and the *Asayiş* [public security forces in Rojava working in solidarity with the YPG/YPJ] will 'take an increasingly international and humanitarian role in protecting the oppressed from colonial, capitalist, and destructive military attacks, [and] will become responsible for internal problems such as violence against women, tribal conflicts, and drug abuse'.[12] Akkaya and Jongerden point out that this is a 'democracy in action' project where 'accounts of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism, and the possibility of this constituting a paradigm shift in politics may sound utopian. And they are!' but that democracy is 'an ideal' to be strived for.[13]

Öcalan describes this model as 'a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state,'[14] which claims to be offering an alternative to the (nation-)state model. The administrators in the DFNS, repeatedly highlight that Rojava is not a Kurdish state nor a Kurdish administration' and that it wants to remain in a democratic Syria.[15] Some, like Schmidinger, define the DFNS as a 'precarious autonomy' and the 'Kurdish para-state in Rojava'.[16] Küçük and Özselçuk suggest that the democratic autonomy model 'places itself in a relation of *deconstructing* rather than *destroying* the state and thus, does not rule out the possibility of coexistence with a state form, even a Kurdish state form'.[17] So is the Rojava model really deconstructing the model of a state or is it potentially a new Kurdish state form? Does the 'democratic confederalism' model that the Kurdish movement[18] claims to be implementing in Northern Syria draw on/reproduce different modes of identity/belonging than that of the nation and the state?

This paper argues that the shift from a nationalist movement towards a project that offers a stateless solution seems to be incomplete and needs to be further questioned. It begins with a brief discussion of the notion of statelessness and discusses the historical background and ideological transformation of the PKK and the 'paradigm-shift' within

the PKK from Marxism-Leninism to nationalism, and from nationalism to the idea of democratic confederalism—inspired by Murray Bookchin–which is applied in the DFNS. The second section shows that despite its aspects towards a post-national stateless model, the narratives of the representatives of the Kurdish political movement on the Rojava experience display nationalist elements by prioritizing the Kurds and their cultural identity and a political power at the top of which Öcalan's personality cult stands; and engages with the concept of *the multitude*, proposed by political philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri whose work is theoretically relevant to the Rojava model, along with the ideas of Bookchin,[19] to question the extent the Rojava model follows 'multitude as some kind of alternative to the state'.[20]

From statelessness to a stateless solution

The concept of statelessness is a complicated one. There are *de jure* and *de facto* forms of statelessness, where the former refers to 'lack of a nationality[21] by any State' and the latter refers to 'those who still had a nationality in name, but for whom that nationality was not effective' (i.e., refugees).[22] Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, uses the metaphor of 'a living corpse',[23] arguing they are 'deprived, not of the right to freedom, but the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of right to opinion'.[24] Stateless people lack civil and political rights or an internationally recognized national legal identity, which marks them as 'the historical other of modernity'.[25] Yet there is also a form of statelessness where individuals can be 'internally stateless without leaving the place they belong to',[26] regarded and treated as 'marked citizens' or 'pseudo-citizens' by the states that grant this 'citizenship'.[27] One danger of this modern political condition, according to Arendt, is that stateless groups may believe that the sole reliable protection of their rights in a world of nation-states is to have a nation-state of their own. This then may cause 'a fierce, violent group consciousness' that would feed national identities, a form of 'tribal nationalism' that draws upon its 'mere differentiation'.[28]

The idea behind the Rojava model is arguably to overcome this tribal nationalism. Cemgil argues that this model aims to overcome the contemporary states' failure to apply the Athenian principle, that is an 'effective application of the principle of freedom as non-domination' through active/direct participation in self-government.[29] The Social Contract defines the Democratic Autonomous Regions (and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria) as a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, […] Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and various other creeds and sects' that pursuits 'freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability,' that protects 'fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples' right to self-determination,' that unites its people 'in the spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation so that all may express themselves freely in public life,' that enforces gender equality, and in fact, feminism.[30] Graeber summarizes the Rojava experience as 'a radical feminist experiment in direct democracy'.[31] This project is arguably an outcome of the ideological transformation within the PKK, proposed by Abdullah Öcalan from the 1990s onwards.

An ideological transformation?

Activists and academics alike often point out to a candid 'paradigm-shift' within the PKK, signalling a shift from Marxism-Leninism[32] to nationalism in the 1980s–1990s and to democratic confederalism from the 2000s onwards. The roots of the PKK go back to the early 1970s, to a group of leftists[33] known as *Apocular* (1974–78). The PKK was established in 1978 and it began its urban warfare against Turkey to establish an independent Kurdish state six years later, in 1984. Right before the 1980 military coup in Turkey, Öcalan escaped to Syria and remained there until he was exiled in 1998 and captured in Kenya in 1999 to be returned to Turkey. His trial began on 31 May 1999, and ended on 29 June 1999, with Öcalan being sentenced to death for treason against the Turkish state. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government removed the death sentence from the Turkish Penal code—due to then ongoing efforts to become a member of the European Union—on 3 September 2002. Öcalan remains incarcerated in İmralı Island in the Sea of Marmara in Turkey.

In 1993, 1995, and 1998, the PKK has declared three unilateral ceasefires 'to initiate dialogue and discussion' with the Turkish state.[34] In his defence statement in 1999, Öcalan not only referred to rightful entitlement to the protection of the Kurds' identity and culture against the acts of the Turkish state, but also pointed to the need to turn the PKK into a democratic organization. He stressed the 'need to transform the structure of the PKK, its narrow and strict ideological approach—a remnant of the fiery 1970s—and its political structure in the light of the developments in the world and in Turkey in the 1990s'.[35] In the conclusion of his defence, Öcalan said that the aim for Turks and Kurds should be the achievement of a 'democratic union on the basis of free individuals and free society'.[36]

Beginning from the 2000s 'the PKK went through major ideological and organisational transformation'.[37] This was, in Güneş's words, a 'strategic shift' towards a democratic discourse and creation of federal and con-federal entities in the Middle East.[38] In 2005, Öcalan wrote extensively on the past, present, and the future of the Kurdish issue, arguing that 'democratizing Kurdish people means democratizing Turkish, Arab, Persian, Assyrian, Armenian, Rum, Chechen, Abaza, Turkmen, Jewish people. A democratizing Kurdistan is democratizing Middle East'.[39] In 2011, he wrote that there was an 'overemphasis of the nation in the Middle East' that could be overcome through a non-statist form called democratic autonomy.[40] Starting from the mid-2000s, the Kurdish movement loosened its emphasis on the right to self-determination through the formation of an independent Kurdish state and started underscoring concepts such as self-government, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. This was a clear shift from the aim of establishing an independent Kurdish state for the PKK towards a model called 'democratic confederalism' which Öcalan describes as 'the solution not only to the problems of Turkey's Kurds but also a larger blueprint for a democratic Middle East, a region rife with conflict, suffering, oppression and poverty'.[41] Democratic confederalism still protects people's rights to self-determination, through principles like pluralism, democratic participation, in a decentralized, federal system.[42] He borrows the idea of democratic confederalism from the writings of the late eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin, who Öcalan considers himself as a student of.[43]

Bookchin argues for a 'genuinely new' system that moves away from the nation-state model that is built on both physical and institutional decentralization of power by primarily focusing on two concepts: libertarian municipalism and confederation.[44] He defines libertarian municipalism as 'the struggle to achieve a rational and ecological society, a struggle that depends on education and organization,' and confederation as 'the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens' assemblies and whose sole functions are coordinative and administrative'.[45] Leezenberg notes that Bookchin rejects individual anarchism, emphasizing the importance of institutions as he believes that 'lack of structure and institutions leads to chaos'.[46] Instead, Bookchin suggests that libertarian municipalism is a 'process' in the era of nation-states, and it 'contests the legitimacy of the existing *state* power', which can later be evolved into an 'outright institutional power to replace the state'.[47]

Janet Biehl, who has worked together with Bookchin for twenty years to develop and defend the idea of social ecology,[48] underlines that Öcalan's ideas were 'unequivocal, and certainly in accord with Bookchin's revolutionary project'.[49] She writes that Öcalan began reading Bookchin intensively while in prison in the early 2000s, and soon after 'began recommending [Bookchin's] *Urbanization without Cities* to all mayors in Turkish Kurdistan and *Ecology of Freedom* to all militants'; Bookchin's 'organic society' was similar to what Öcalan renamed as 'natural society', as both Bookchin and Öcalan argued that 'people once lived in communal solidarity' which could be accomplished again.[50] Drawing on Bookchin's idea that capitalism was 'in conflict with the natural environment, destructive both of nature and of human health', Öcalan called for a 'democratic-ecological society'.[51] Criticizing statist and patriarchal 'capitalist modernity', Öcalan proposed 'democratic modernity' that relies on 'democratic confederalism' as a 'fundamental political paradigm'.[52] With this model, Öcalan proposes ethnic, cultural, and political diversity through a method that is not 'ideological but scientific, and not nation-statist but based on the concept of democratic nation and democratic communalism'.[53] This was a non-state social paradigm, which would liberate, diversify and democratize people as opposed to 'the nation-state model that oppresses, homogenizes, and distances society from democracy'.[54]

The idea of democratic confederalism was put into practice in Syria under the Democratic Union Party (PYD) leadership back in 2011. The PYD took part in the establishment of the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCC) in September 2011. The PYD had later established the People's Council of West Kurdistan, and starting from 2012, cities and villages across Rojava were taken from the Syrian regime. In January 2014, Cezîre (Jazirah), Kobanî (Ain Al-Arab), and Efrîn (Afrin) cantons officially declared democratic autonomy via a provisional constitution. The Rojava cantons received international attention and credit for their struggle against the ISIS, especially in defending Kobanî and the Yezidis who were subject to genocide by the ISIS. Rojava model presented a 'third way' to rupture the broad dominance of the Assad regime and the chauvinist-Islamist forces'.[55] Other areas were also taken from the ISIS and other armed groups affiliated with the so-called Free Syrian Army in the coming years, with multi ethnic and multi religious alliances such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), eventually resulting in the establishment of the Federal System of Rojava/Northern Syria in 2016.

One of the clearest expositions of the initial structure of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy in the Rojava Cantons can be found in *Revolution in Rojava* (Figure 1) where Knapp et. al. contend that the Democratic-Autonomous
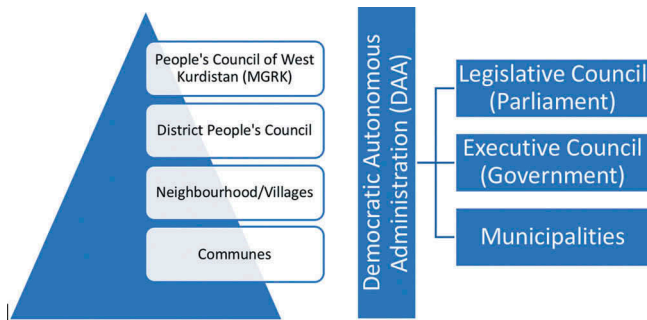
Figure 1. Structure of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy in the Rojava Cantons.

Source: [Knapp, Michael, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga. 2016. *Revolution in Rojava: democratic autonomy and women's liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press, 92].

Administration (DAA) in Rojava is the main body of democratic confederalism, which is composed of a legislative council (also called parliament), an executive council (also called government, with ministries called *deste* in Kurdish which can be translated into English as 'board'), and municipalities (local authorities, now known as 'people's municipalities').[56] Democratic autonomy, whereby people would determine their own future through democratic confederalism, refers to practicing self-determination from a bottom-up council system.[57] These radical/direct democratic structures in Rojava were called the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK).[58] The commune (an assembly that consists of households) made up the base of this bottom-up model, which was followed by neighbourhoods/villages (composed of communes), district people's councils (the city, coordinated by Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM) composed of political parties, social movements and civil organizations). MGRK was made up of all cities, villages, and communes. In all these four levels, there are eight commissions for women, defence, economics, politics, civil society, free society, justice, ideology, and health (which was not a direct part of MGRK). Today, there are two councils, which are the Northern Syria Democratic Confederation Council (Executive Council) and TEV-DEM.

Jongerden addresses two alternative routes of applying the radical democracy idea in Rojava: exodus and engagement.[59] The radical left often defends the former option, which is getting rid of existing institutions as they cannot be transformed into something new. The latter option is engaging with existing institutions by reforming and transforming them, often defended by the reformist left. Jongerden rightly argues that the current model applied in Rojava by the Kurdish movement is a mixture of these two options, or strategies, as 'the PKK seems not to make a choice between the retreat or engagement: it creates its own alternatives (the councils) while engaging with existing institutions (the municipality)'.[60] Knapp et. al. underline that the administrative system in Rojava is yet evolving and open to changes.[61]

Questions on the application of the democratic autonomy model in Rojava put aside, there is still not a generally accepted organizational chart of the PKK. The existing academic literature predominantly refers to the PKK and the PYD as sister parties.[62] Some argue that the PKK 'established institutions through which the integration and coordination of political practices is facilitated', citing KCK (Association of Communities

in Kurdistan), of which TEV-DEM is a part of, and also KONGRA-GEL (Kurdistan People's Congress) that is composed of village, city, and regional councils.[63] Ali B. argues that the PKK has sent its cadres to Rojava, for not only fighting with the YPG and YPJ but also as participants and advisees in the municipalities, universities and committees that are described as 'social battlefield of Rojava'.[64] Others, including those administrators and leaders of these institutions (i.e., PYD, YPG, YPJ) frequently reject any organic ties with the PKK, but accept ideological links. For example, YPG's spokesperson Rêdûr Xelîl says that 'the YPG is not the army of a political party', which is also stated in the Social Contract, answering a question whether YPG was the armed wing of the PYD.[65] However, in another interview, Xelîl says that the YPG is not an independent political movement, and that it would 'do as the political leadership says', where he does not specify what he means by the political leadership.[66] Likewise, former co-president of the PYD Salih Muslim says that the PYD has 'no organizational relations with the PKK'.[67] Muslim says in another interview that the PYD has good relations with other 'Kurdistani parties' such as the KDP [Democratic Party of Kurdistan], the PUK [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan], the HDP [People's Democratic Party], and the BDP [Peace and Democracy Party], as well as Islamic parties in the KRG [Kurdistan Regional Government] and the PJAK [Kurdistan Free Life Party] across Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria.[68]

What we often see is that at the very top of this movement, there is not an institution but Abdullah Öcalan himself, and that the PKK itself becomes a party within this new structural organization. In fact, Öcalan is often referred to as if he is an institution, 'the Leadership' (Önderlik). The PKK is indeed a mass movement with a strong emphasis on the personality cult of Öcalan. Some argue that the armed forces in Rojava and the security forces (Asayiş) are trained in the ideology of the PKK and swear an oath to Öcalan.[69] Significant use of the PKK icons and flags along with Öcalan's portaits arguably 'reproduce the PKK's personality cult, and which, ironically, are as pervasive as the obligatory Assad images were under Baathist rule'.[70] The education system in Rojava—a multilingual one, including Kurdish, Arabic, Assyrian and other languages—is criticized for teaching 'Öcalan philosophy' in schools.[71] Despite Öcalan's promotion of 'Jineology' (the science of women) and calling for 'woman's freedom, equality and democracy'[72] through killing the patriarchal/masculine domination structures and culture, the role of the 'family unit' and the role of mothers is still much emphasized in Rojava that is criticized for implying a 'relationship of identity [that] is forged between the female body and the homeland'[73] which is inherent in nationalism. In addition to this, the progressive aspects of the Rojava model such as the co-chair system in the organizational structure of the Kurdish movement and in the all-female military organization called Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Rojava is a 'progressive but disciplined, policed and essentialised marker of the aspired "non-state nation"'.[74]

Akkaya and Jongerden suggest that Öcalan and the PKK proposed the idea of democratic confederalism as an 'organizational restructuring' at a time of regional and international crisis in the Middle East (e.g., US invasion of Iraq, weakening of electoral support for pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey), and in doing so they have demonstrated 'the most powerful signals of future Kurdish identity politics'.[75] Furthermore, the Democratic Society Congress held in Diyarbakir in 2007 defined democratic autonomy as 'a project for *Kurdish* people in Turkey', but also suggested this autonomy was based on 'regional and local structures which allow for the expression of cultural differences'.[76]

But does the self-government in Rojava help overcome 'the dilemmas of vanguards, leadership and representation that plagued previous revolutions' as Jongerden and Akkaya argue?[77] How do we assess the criticisms towards the Rojava experience in terms of its ideology remaining 'highly centralized around Öcalan' and his personality cult, or human rights organization reports[78] on the movement's use of violence as an instrument for the realization of Öcalan's political programme of radical democracy?[79]

Kurds as *primi inter pares*

In the writings of Öcalan[80] and the interviews given by the administrators and leaders of the armed and/or political parties in media outlets and documentaries[81] between 2013 and 2017, it is possible to see quite progressive statements. In an interview she gave to ANF in 2013, co-chair of the KCK, Besê Hozat, addresses the need for 'a new political structure [...] which would be the foundation of a new, innovative and democratic system' in the Middle East.[82] Îlham Ehmed, a member of the Executive Committee of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) tells *Özgür Gündem* in 2015 that the principle of their project was 'to bring together all ethnicities, peoples and cultures'.[83] The spokesperson and commander of the YPJ, Nesrin Abdullah, says in a local meeting in Paris that the canton model in Rojava was 'against all kinds of single-model and repressive mindsets, emerged as an alternative model in which different peoples, religions, women and anyone who wants freedom can live together with their own identity'.[84] In an interview YPG spokesperson and commander Rêdûr Xelîl (who is now the spokesperson of the Syrian Democratic Forces) gave to *Özgür Gündem*, he says that the YPG took part in a conference of Syrian opposition groups 'in the name of the Administration of Democratic Autonomy [where they made it clear] that as a military force [they] also have a political will and that will is for democratic autonomy'.[85]

There are, however, inconsistencies. As the examples below will show, elements that involve an implicit, if not explicit, emphasis on the Kurds, their prehistoric ties, or determining role for the Rojava movement, which can be described as a will for Kurds to be *primi inter pares* in the democratic confederal system of Rojava cantons can be found in these sources. One example of this can be seen in Abdullah Öcalan's *Prison Writings*. Öcalan, who addresses nationalism and nation-states as the source of the problems in the Middle East in *Democratic Confederalism* in 2010 wrote: 'Many of the qualities and characteristics attributed to the Kurds and their society today can already be seen in the Neolithic communities of the cis-Caucasian region, the Tauros-Zagros mountain ranges—the area that we call Kurdistan'.[86] Although this quote does not overrule Öcalan's changing emphasis from state building to a stateless solution, it still highlights the 'existence of a transhistorical Kurdish identity,'[87] in Kurdish lands since the Neolithic, communal, pre-state period. Gerber and Brincat address 'the importance of Öcalan's alternative historicism'[88] through which he positions the Kurds as a population that 'has preserved its instinctive understanding of freedom, equality and fraternity'.[89] In this sense, Öcalan's writings still involve a dose of implicit nativism and ethno-symbolist nationalism where 'pre-existing ethnic components [are taken] into account'.[90]

Former co-chair of the PYD, Salih Muslum Mohammed (who is now TEV-DEM's International Diplomacy Committee member) emphasizes in an interview he gave to Carnegie Middle East Centre in February 2014 that PYD does not consist of separatists

who are trying to establish Greater Kurdistan, adding that what they are 'trying to do is implement democracy in our lands—it could be a radical democracy for the people'.[91] However, in another interview he gave to *Kurdish Question* in March 2015, Muslum answers to the question of if the PYD has any agreements or contracts with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq regarding the border gate saying, 'We [the PYD] want to build unity even with the KDP [Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq]. We want to make the dream of Kurds come true. We have no other but our Kurdish people, if we cannot serve our people and our nation we would be ashamed.'[92] This statement shows that there is an emphasis on the Kurdish people as a nation with a single dream.[93]

In August 2017, the co-chair of the KCK Cemil Bayık gave an interview to ANF news, where he says:

> There will be the *Kurdish autonomous zones* now called cantons. The Kurds will govern themselves in these places with their own identity and culture. The Syriacs will again have influence where they live. The Arabs will live their own autonomy based on local democracy in their regions, and will govern themselves. Undoubtedly this self-governance will not be just Arabs or Kurds having power in one place, it will be all the peoples governing themselves. In the councils, communes and administrations in the cantons, *the Kurds will be in majority*. But this majority is not a relationship of hegemony, all will still be equal and free there.[94]

Bayık's statement is composed of, on the one hand, parts that refer to the people of Rojava (their different ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic identities) who will govern themselves or have influence where they live, and that they will be equal and free under a democratic rule; on the other hand, he calls these autonomous zones 'Kurdish' and that the Kurds will be in majority in the councils, communes and administration.

A similar emphasis on the Kurds can be seen in the statements of prime ministers of Rojava cantons. Akram Hesso, former prime minister of the Jazeera Canton tells Al-Monitor in March 2016:

> All the people of Rojava, including Arabs and Assyrians, are represented by the joint democratic autonomous administration *under Kurdish leadership*. So, this is the current situation on the ground in Rojava, *Kurdistan*. [...] This federal state should be founded on the historical and geographical facts of these people, *especially the Kurds*. [...] [O]ur relationship with Europe and the international coalition is based on mutual interests in establishing a democratic rule in Syria, defeating IS and finally establishing a new order in a new Middle East so that all the people in Syria claim their rights, *especially the Kurdish people*.[95]

Once again, despite an emphasis on a joint democratic administration, we see a latent reference to Kurdish leadership, an idea of Kurdistan, and that it will be 'especially the Kurds' that the federal state will be built upon and whose interests will be prioritized.

Flagging the cantons

Documentaries on the Rojava experience are not different from the interviews in terms of their content. More often than not, they show the emancipatory aspects of the Rojava experience, in terms of women's participation and rights, multilingualism, city councils where everybody has a say in decisions, and the ongoing military struggle to realize an ideal canton model in Rojava. However, it is also possible to observe what can be defined,

borrowing from Billig, a 'flagging' of the cantons in these documentaries.[96] Whether in city councils, public events, or in the interviews with armed forces, there is almost a constant reference to Abdullah Öcalan—supporting his personality cult—different flags that symbolize different parties/institutions of the Kurdish movement, and Kurdistan (Figures 2, 3, and 4).

Although the Rojava movement is often framed as a non-nationalist, non-statist model, it is possible to see a constant reminder of the Kurdish movement (i.e., Kurdish leader, Kurdish flags, Kurdish territories/homeland) through Öcalan's portraits, different flags with the national colours of the Kurds (yellow-green-red) along with their symbols and a reference to larger Kurdistan. Rump looks 'beneath the framing' through fieldwork and in-depth interviews, and finds that the use of party flags and Öcalan's pictures are at times criticized by people who are not affiliated with the PYD.[97] One of her respondents says: '[T]he Asayish all of them carry flags of the PYD,[98] the symbol and the flag for the PYD. So, if the Asayish is not controlled by the PYD, why do they carry the PYD flag?

Figure 2. D. Meseguer& O. Gracià. (2013). The Silent Revolution. Syria: Nezvanova Films [https://vimeo.com/84120859].

Figure 3. BBC Our World. (2014). Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKhjJfH0ra4].

Figure 4. K. Cebe. (2016). Roza: The Country of Two Rivers. Rojava/Syria: Rojava Film Commune. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fipJAwje68].

Why do all the centres and offices here in Nap have the flag of the PYD and the picture of Öcalan?'.[99] This shows a contradiction of what is articulated as reality at the discursive level and what is being done on the ground. In his comprehensive book on the Rojava experience, Duman also addresses to the common use of yellow, red, and green which are 'historically known as the colours of Kurds' national flag', addressing the decision TEV-DEM took on 1 April 2015, regarding the removal of 'martyr posters and Kurdish symbols in vehicles'.[100] However, Duman also notes that it is difficult to predict if the society will follow this decision since the Kurds have 'strong aspiration to expressing itself with its own colours'.[101]

Towards *the multitude*

In 'Communal Democracy: The Social Contract and Confederalism in Rojava,' Knapp and Jongerden write that the Rojava model 'emphasizes the concept of organizing the cohabitant *singularities of the multitude* in line with the models of self-representation and self-organization [...] wherein the institutions of self-organization are not confined to cultural and ethnic categories of identity, which are composed by monistic national states, but open also to the constitution of new entities of identity.[102] In *Revolution in Rojava*, Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga repeat that the democratic autonomy model in Rojava 'embrace[s] the social role of women, that solve(s) social conflicts through compromise, and that further [strengthens] the coexistence of diverse social *singularities*'.[103] The emphasis on 'singularities' is particularly important here, as it relates to Hardt and Negri's discussions of radical democracy and its meaning for the Kurdish project and its perception of 'representation and sovereignty' Akkaya and Jongerden, op. cit., p. 4.

Hardt and Negri define the multitude as a set of *singularities* by which they mean 'a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different'.[104] Here, Hardt and Negri do not aim to overlook different identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, class) but they suggest a world where identities 'do not determine hierarchies of power'.[105] The concept is actually a challenge to 'the entire tradition of sovereignty' as well as some concepts such as the monarch, state, nation, people or party

that tend to homogenize and rule by forming a 'political body . . . that commands' under the name of that state/nation/people.[106] The multitude, however, is proposed as 'the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone'.[107] In fact, Hardt and Negri underline that the multitude is neither vanguardist nor anarchist, but it aims for an organization 'through the collaboration of singular social subjects'.[108]

According to Hardt and Negri, the multitude has no clear set of directions to be applied as a 'political directive', but it is 'latent and implicit in our social being'.[109] Therefore, they argue that the multitude and democracy are applicable in all societies, given there are political activities that aim to achieve this goal.[110] In fact, they see the multitude as a contribution to the resurrection, reforming, and 'reinventing the Left by naming a form of political organization and a political project'[111] that has 'real potential' but not yet there.[112] Rather, Hardt and Negri see their work as 'conceptual rethinking',[113] stressing on the necessity of using 'new practices, new forms of organization, and new concepts'.[114] Bookchin makes a similar argument saying, 'as radicals our most important need is to stand on two feet—that is, to be as fully human as possible—and to challenge the existing society on behalf of our shared common humanity, *not on the basis of gender, race, age, and the like*'.[115] With the multitude, Hardt and Negri introduce an element of libertarian anarchist ideology into an understanding of citizenry, which the Rojava model tries to apply in Rojava.

Rojava: an alternative to the (nation-)state model?

The Kurdish movement today stands in a position to not only accept but also welcome the ethnic, religious, linguistic singularities and aiming at making them to 'act in common'. The Social Contract of Rojava Cantons begins with the sentence, 'We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Efrîn (Afrin), Cezîre (Jazera) and Kobanî (Ain Al-Arab), a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter'.[116] The final declaration of the Democratic Federal System for Rojava-Northern Syria[117] in March 2016 also makes constant references to 'the people'. Decision number 7 of this declaration states: 'The peoples and communities living in the federal system in Rojava/ Northern Syria can develop their political, economic, social, cultural, and democratic relations with whom they see fit, or share their beliefs and culture with the people and communities on a regional and international level'.[118] In both the preamble and the final declaration, there is also a strong emphasis on women's freedom and gender equality.

But can the outward pluralistic, emancipatory, democratic discourse of the Kurdish movement coexist with their use of existing 'grammar of modern nationalism'[119] or are we still talking about a 'utopia' when we talk about democratic confederalism? This is a challenge of the revolutionary policies that Hardt and Negri address, when they write:

> Revolutionary politics has to start from identity but cannot end there. The point is not to pose a division between identity politics and revolutionary politics but, on the contrary, to follow the parallel revolutionary streams of thought and practice within identity politics, which all, perhaps paradoxically, aim towards an abolition of identity. Revolutionary thought, in other words, should not shun identity politics but instead must work through it and learn from it.[120]

To overcome this challenge, Hardt and Negri identify three tasks in the application of identity politics in a revolution. The first task is to make subordinate and excluded identities become visible, what they say traditional communist discourse refers to as '*expropriation of the expropriators*'.[121] The second task is to halt identity politics, yet Hardt and Negri accept that these movements often cannot make it and often become a 'war machine' as identity politics trigger a distinction between 'us' and 'them'.[122] The third and final task is 'keep the rebellious function of identity moving forward, and carry identity politics toward a revolutionary project: *to strive for its own abolition*'.[123]

Based on this framework, Akkaya and Jongerden argue that the Kurdish movement and its radical democracy project 'envisaged these three different tasks of identity politics.' [endnote Akkaya and Jongerden, p. 5.] Although Akkaya and Jongerden acclaim the Kurdish movement's success in managing 'to assemble Kurdish identity demands into a project of radical democracy,' [endnote Akkaya and Jongerden, p. 11] it is difficult to say the movement is excluding the idea of the Kurdish nation from it.

According to Hardt and Negri, revolution cannot be attributed to modernity, a modern revolution is impossible, and 'all the revolutionary dreams and projects that emerged in the struggles between modernity and antimodernity […] pointed in the end beyond modernity'.[124] However, as Vali points out, the Rojava experience—and the Kurdish movement in general—is not independent from modernity, rather it is an outcome of modernity.[125] As a paradoxical result, Vali writes, 'we have Kurdish nationalists without Kurdish nationalism—a historical anomaly which is nevertheless true'.[126] This relates to Hale and Slaughter's reference to 'muddled musings' in the project of the multitude where they argue that '[t]he greatest danger of this kind of thinking, as demonstrated so often in the purported utopias of the 20th century, is that in the end real decisions get made by the very opposite of the multitude—an "enlightened" revolutionary elite'.[127]

Hardt and Negri highlight that multitude neither involves a resistance against the forces that attack the common ('multitude against') nor it affirms the common as a new terrain ('multititude for').[128] Therefore, if the Rojava movement is somewhat an attempt to realize the multitude on the ground, it should both distance itself from turning into 'multitude against' the groups it struggles against, or 'multitude for' creation of a new—potentially Kurdish—unity. Although the civil war in Syria had local and international results which gave room for the Rojava model to be implemented in Northern Syria, it is still at an early stage in the three phases of identity politics in a revolution that Hardt and Negri refer to. In a war and conflict zone as difficult as the Middle East, it is hard to know how this stateless solution could be secured. Gerber and Brincat suggest that 'a nationalistic focus upon Kurdish identity could culminate in a political division between Kurdish and non-Kurdish areas' which would lead to distinctions and 'new forms of hierarchy and statism rather than embracing the potentials of ethical space envisioned by democratic confederalism'.[129]But as Akkaya and Jongerden rightly point out, the Kurdish movement's willingness to negotiate a solution would require 'a constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity in Turkey'. [Endnote here: Akkaya and Jongerden, p. 12.] Turkey, however, is still very far away from such constitutional recognition as it effectively remilitarizes and securitizes the Kurdish question in Turkey, and views the Rojava model in Northern Syria as an existential threat.

Casting a critical look at the discourses of the Rojava experience, this article argued that on the one hand, there is an initiative to build a new model based on the idea of democratic autonomy, environmental sustainability, and gender equality. On the other hand, the ideological transformation and the paradigm shift of the PKK is still largely linked to Abdullah Öcalan's personality cult and there is underlying emphasis on the Kurdish identity in the DFNS. The interviews given by the armed and/or political party executives in Rojava were composed of sometimes opposing implications about the purposes and priorities of the Rojava model, involving pluralistic, radical democratic elements along with implicit nationalism and an embedded emphasis to Kurds as *primus inter pares*. This assessment, however, does not suggest criticizing the Kurdish political movement for not being in the forefront of a Hardtian-Negrian multitude. The possibility of recasting Kurdish identity as a part of a broader project of emancipation should not be discounted since the Kurdish movement has had to engage in a long struggle for recognition and autonomy as well as to endure repression and extreme adversity. Nonetheless, the nationalist inertia of the movement despite its self-proclaimed aim for a democratic autonomy based on a stateless model that includes all ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups living in the Cantons should not be overlooked as well. The ambiguities inherent in the post-national project of Rojava bear witness to contradictory elements of a movement that tries to navigate through an inimical terrain being constantly under threat if not under actual physical attack.

At the centre of Hardt and Negri's strategy for constituting a democracy of the multitude stands a rather abstract notion: 'Love',[130] and 'laughter'[131] of joy. 'The primary decision made by the multitude,' say Hardt and Negri, 'is really the decision to create a new race or, rather, a new humanity'.[132] Despite vital challenges, the Rojava experience seems to have inspired political movements around the world 'to re-imagine the world differently' by changing the mentality in various areas including politics, economy, culture, and society.[133] We still need to investigate how emancipatory policies are implemented and how this aimed 'mental revolution'[134] is practiced through extensive fieldwork in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria; scrutinize the discourses and practices of the Rojava experience; and address not only who is speaking and who she is speaking to (e.g., to which audience, to which media outlet, in which regional and international political context that is rapidly changing). It is especially difficult given the mentality of the nation-states in the region that have a long history of hostility and discrimination against the Kurds and the Kurdish movement.

Notes

[1] H. Bozarslan, 'Between integration, autonomization and radicalization. Hamit Bozarslan on the Kurdish movement and the Turkish left', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, 2012, electronic version.

[2] In addition to approximately 40 million Kurds living in the Greater Kurdistan region, there is a large Kurdish population across the Middle East as well as in Europe. For a more detailed background on the history, society, and politics of the Kurds, see, for example, C. Gunes, *The Kurds in a New Middle East, The Changing Geopolitics of a Regional Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan: Cham (Switzerland), 2019; D. Romano and M. Gurses, *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan US: New York, NY, 2014; M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, Scarecrow, Lanham, MD, 2004;

D. McDowall, *The Kurds*, 7th ed., Minority Rights Group Report, Minority Rights Group, London, 1996.

[3] I use 'legal' in inverted commas here to stress the fact that the HDP and DBP have largely been criminalized since the end of the peace process in June 2015; its members including co-chairs and deputies have been imprisoned, and openly blamed for being 'terrorists' by the President of the Turkish Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

[4] The HDP describes itself as a pro-peace, pro-labour, pro-selfgovernment, pro-gender equality, and a green party of freedom, equality, peace and justice. 'People's democratic party, who are we?' https://www.hdp.org.tr/en/who-we-are/peoples-democratic-party/8760 (accessed 28 December 2018).

[5] Charter of the Social Contract in Rojava, https://ypginternational.blackblogs.org/2016/07/01/charter-of-the-social-contract-in-rojava/ (accessed 25 July 2018). The Social Contract of Rojava was later replaced by the Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, http://frankfurt-kobane.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Social-Contract-of-the-Democratic-Federation-of-Northern-Syria.pdf (accessed 2 January 2019).

[6] Leezenberg argues that there seems to be a deal and/or agreement between the Bashar al-Assad regime and the PYD, given that in Qamishlo, for example, the regime and the PYD security forces coexist rather peacefully. See M. Leezenberg, 'The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16(4), 2016, p. 681. However, there have also been cases of small-scale conflicts between the regime forces and the YPG and local police forces (Asayish) in several locations including Qamishlo. At times, the YPG has called the Syrian army to protect areas like Afrin and Manbij from the Turkish army.

[7] 'Syria's Kurds are not the PKK', https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/15/syrias-kurds-are-not-the-pkk-erdogan-pyd-ypg/ (accessed 1 January 2019). See also 'Why is Turkey targeting Afrin?' *Red Pepper*, https://www.redpepper.org.uk/why-is-turkey-targeting-afrin/ (accessed 1 January 2019).

[8] K. Matin, 'Democratic confederalism and the international: a sympathetic critique of Abdullah Öcalan's state theory', *Geopolitics*, 2018, (forthcoming).

[9] 'Rojava: a safe haven in the middle of Syria's brutal war', https://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/30/opinions/rojava-kurds-syria-democracy/index.html (accessed 1 January 2019).

[10] 'A dream of secular utopia in ISIS's backyard', *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html (accessed 1 January 2019).

[11] 'No. This is a genuine revolution', https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/no-this-is-a-genuine-revolution/ (accessed 24 July 2018). See also 'Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?' *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis (accessed 24 July 2018).

[12] N. Üstündağ, 'Self-defense as a revolutionary practice in Rojava, or how to unmake the state', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115(1), 2016, p. 205.

[13] J. Jongerden and A. H. Akkaya, 'Democratic confederalism as a Kurdish spring: the PKK and the quest for radical democracy', in M. M. A. Ahmed and M. M. Gunter (eds), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, CA, 2013, p. 185.

[14] A. Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, Transmedia Publishing and Cologne: International Initiative Edition, London, 2011, p. 21.

[15] See, for example, 'The Rojava revolution' *Open Democracy*, https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution (accessed 1 January 2019).

[16] T. Schmidinger, *Revolution, War, and the Future of Syria's Kurds*, Pluto Press, London, 2018, pp. 129–144. Although it was written before the Rojava model was implemented in Northern Syria, in 2011, Casier criticised Öcalan's democratic autonomy model, saying it could be regarded 'as a proto-state locally being developed'. See M. Casier, 'Beyond Kurdistan? The Mesopotamia Social Forum and the appropriation and re-imagination of Mesopotamia by the Kurdish movement', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 12(4), 2011, p. 432.

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[17] B. Kucuk and C. Ozselcuk, 'The Rojava experience: possibilities and challenges of building a democratic life', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115(1), 2016, p. 194.

[18] In this article, I use Kurdish movement to refer to all groups that are influenced by Öcalan's ideas, e.g., the PKK, the PYD, and the YPG/YPJ.

[19] M. Casier and J. Jongerden, 'Understanding today's Kurdish movement: leftist heritage, martyrdom, democracy and gender', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, 2012, electronic version.

[20] 'Hardt & Negri's "multitude": the worst of both worlds', https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-vision_reflections/marx_2549.jsp (accessed 25 July 2018).

[21] Citizenship and nationality are interchangeably used in the International Law. Here, having nationality means being entitled to citizenship, which Arendt describes as having 'the rights to have rights'. See UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Nationality and Statelessness: Handbook for Parliamentarians N° 11*, 2005, https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Nationality%20and%20Statelessness.pdf (accessed 3 December 2018).

[22] C. A. Batchelor, 'Statelessness and the problem of resolving nationality status', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 10(1/2), 1998, pp. 171–172.

[23] R. T. Tsao, 'Arendt and the modern state: variations on Hegel in the origins of totalitarianism', *The Review of Politics*, 66(1), 2004, p. 127. Here Tsao adds a footnote that says the 'living corpse' expression was used in a later, German-language version of Arendt's book. See H. Arendt, *Elemente und Urspriinge totaler Herrschaft*, Deutsche Rechte Europaische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt, 1955, p. 443.

[24] H. Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1951, p. 294.

[25] A. Vali, 'The Kurds and their "others": fragmented identity and fragmented politics', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18(2), 1998, p. 87.

[26] B. Eliassi, 'Statelessness in a world of nation-states: the cases of Kurdish Diasporas in Sweden and the UK', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(9), 2016, p. 1406. There is a large Kurdish population in Syria who are classified as foreigners or stateless since the Arabization policy and the Hasakeh Census in 1962. For a detailed account of the stateless Kurds in Syria, see K. Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

[27] G. Pandey, *Routine Violence. Nations, Fragments, Histories*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2006; M. Yeğen 'Prospective-Turks' or 'pseudo-citizens': Kurds in Turkey', *Middle East Journal*, 63(4), 2009, pp. 597–615. Retrieved from Eliassi, op. cit., p. 1404.

[28] Tsao, op. cit., p. 130.

[29] C. Cemgil, 'The republican ideal of freedom as non-domination and the Rojava experiment: "states as they are" or a new socio-political imagination?', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 42(4–5), 2016, p. 420.

[30] Charter of the Social Contract in Rojava, https://ypginternational.blackblogs.org/2016/07/01/charter-of-the-social-contract-in-rojava/ (accessed 25 July 2018).

[31] 'Manufactured ignorance: the strange case of Juan Cole and the Kurdish freedom movement, and the international liberal intelligentsia', http://www.focaalblog.com/2018/02/16/david-graeber-manufactured-ignorance/ (accessed 12 March 2018).

[32] It should be noted that the PKK aimed for a socialist Kurdistan, which Vali defines as 'a clear nationalist strategy demanding independence for Kurdistan'. See Vali, op. cit., p. 92.

[33] The late 1960s and especially the 1970s can be described as the heyday of leftist politics in Turkey. Multiple organizations, mostly illegal and armed, proliferated in the 1970s splitting from the Idea Clubs Federation (FKF, 1965–69) and the Turkish Revolutionary Youth Federation (DEV-GENÇ, 1969–71). Simultaneously with FKF, the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearts (DDKO) was founded. The DDKO can be described as the 'organisational source that was central to the flourishing of Kurdish political activism in the 1970s' However, Tezcür also highlights that the PKK links itself to what can be described as the Turkish radical left and sees their organization as the Kurdish intelligentsia's involvement in leftist activities.

(See G. M. Tezcür, 'Kurdish nationalism and identity in Turkey: a conceptual reinterpretation', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 10, 2009, electronic version).

[34] C. Gunes, 'Political reconciliation in Turkey: challenges and prospects', in C. Gunes and W. Zeydanlioglu (eds), *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation, and Reconciliation*, Taylor and Francis, New York, 2013, p. 265.

[35] 'Translation of Abdullah Öcalan defence argument in 1999', *Ekurd Daily*, http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/2/turkey3139.htm (accessed 24 July 2018).

[36] Ibid.

[37] Gunes, op. cit., p. 266.

[38] Ibid., p. 267.

[39] A. Öcalan, *Özgur Insan Savunmasi*. Cetin Yayinlari, Istanbul, 2003, p. 41.

[40] Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, op. cit., p. 35.

[41] Ibid.

[42] L. Radpey and G. Rose, 'A new creative Kurdish constitution in the Middle East', *Creativity Studies*, 10(1), 2017, p. 78.

[43] 'Bookchin, Öcalan, and the dialectics of democracy', http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-öcalan-and-dialectics-democracy (accessed 24 July 2018).

[44] 'Libertarian municipalism: an overview', http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview (accessed 24 July 2018).

[45] Ibid., p. 5.

[46] Leezenberg, op. cit., p. 675.

[47] 'Libertarian municipalism: an overview', http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview (accessed 24 July 2018).

[48] Although she later claimed that she returned to her social democrat identity, writing, 'I am not an antistatist—be it anarchist, communalist, or social ecologist; I am a social democrat' and that she volunteered for a Democratic candidate for governor and later defended Obama's Medicare and Medicaid. For details see 'Biehl breaks with social ecology', http://social-ecology.org/wp/2011/04/biehl-breaks-with-social-ecology/ (accessed 24 July 2018).

[49] Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy', http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-öcalan-and-dialectics-democracy (accessed 24 July 2018).

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] A. Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, International Initiative Edition, Mesopotamian Publishers, Cologne, 2017, p. 24.

[53] Ibid., p. 35.

[54] Ibid., p. 25.

[55] M. Knapp, A. Flach, and E. Ayboga. *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, Pluto Press, London, 2016. p. xxv.

[56] Ibid., p. 92.

[57] M. Knapp and J. Jongerden, 'Communal democracy: the social contract and confederalism in Rojava', *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 10(1), 2014, pp. 88–90.

[58] As of 2018, there are two councils called the Northern Syria Democratic Confederation Assembly and TEV-DEM.

[59] 'Radicalising democracy: power, politics, people and the PKK', http://www.kurdishquestion.com/oldarticle.php?aid=radicalising-democracy-power-politics-people-and-the-pkk (accessed 24 July 2018).

[60] Ibid.

[61] Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, p. 87.

[62] See, for example, Akkaya and Jongerden, op. cit., p. 188 and T. Schmidinger, op. cit., p. 104.

[63] Knapp and Jongerden, p. 93.

[64] B. Ali, 'Eroding the state in Rojava', *Theory & Event*, 19(1), 2016, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/610227.

[65] 'Interview: YPG spokesman: Al-Qaeda's strength exaggerated in world media', *Rudaw*, http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10112013 (accessed 24 July 2018).

[66] 'Interview: YPG spokesman: this is the spirit of the time, Kurds United', *Rudaw*, http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/18112014?keyword=rojava (accessed 24 July 2018).

[67] 'Knocking on every door: an interview with Saleh Muslim part II', *Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center*, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54693 (accessed 24 July 2018).

[68] 'Exclusive interview with PYD Co-chair Salih Muslim: Rojava will establish a new civilisation', http://kurdishquestion.com/oldarticle.php?aid=pyd-co-chair-salih-muslim-rojava-will-establish-a-new-civilisation (accessed 24 July 2018).

[69] A. De Jong, 'A commune in Rojava?', *New Politics*, 15(4), 2016, http://newpol.org/content/commune-rojava (accessed 10 December 2018).

[70] Leezenberg, op. cit., p. 683.

[71] 'New PYD curricula in Northern Syria reveal ideological, linguistic fault lines', http://syriadirect.org/news/new-pyd-curriculum-in-northern-syria-reveals-ideological-linguistic-fault-lines/ (accessed 24 July 2018).

[72] A. Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution*, International Initiative Edition, Mesopotamian Publishers, Cologne, 2013, p. 56.

[73] H. Caglayan, 'From Kawa the blacksmith to Ishtar the goddess: gender constructions in ideological-political discourses of the Kurdish movement in post-1980 Turkey', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, 2012, p. 22.

[74] I. Käser, '"Mountain life is difficult but beautiful!" the gendered process of becoming free in the PKK Guerrilla', in A. Çelik and L. Drechslova (eds), *Kurds in Turkey: Ethnographies of Heterogenous Experiences*, Lexington Books, Lenham, forthcoming.

[75] A. H. Akkaya and J. Jongerden, 'Reassembling the political: the PKK and the project of radical democracy', *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14, 2014, electronic version.

[76] Ibid., p. 10. Emphasis is added by the author.

[77] Ibid., p. 4.

[78] There are also human rights organizations' reports on forced displacement of Arab and Turkmen residents and demolition of their houses 'in retaliation for the perceived support' of the Islamic State or other armed groups as well as other violations including arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, disappearances and killings, allowing children under the age of 18 for military functions or training them. For Human Rights Reports on Rojava see 'We had nowhere else to go: forced displacements and demolitions in Northern Syria', *Amnesty International*, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/ (accessed 24 July 2018); 'Under Kurdish rule: abuses in PYD-run enclaves of Syria', *Human Rights Watch*, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria (accessed 24 July 2018). For Democratic Self-Rule Administration's response to the latter report, see 'The democratic self-rule administration's response to the report of human rights', https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/The%20Democratic%20Self-Rule%20Administration's%20Response%20to%20the%20Report%20of%20Human%20Rights%20Watch%20Organization.pdf (accessed 24 July 2018). For a more recent human rights report published by the United Nations see 'Human rights abuses and international humanitarian law violations in the Syrian Arab Republic', http://www.refworld.org/docid/58c80d884.html (accessed 24 July 2018). See also Schmidinger, op. cit., pp. 131–132.

[79] Leezenberg, op. cit., p. 683.

[80] I have read the books authored by Öcalan himself on the idea of democratic confederalism, and a selection of recorded meetings Öcalan had in the Imrali prison in Turkey that were published in a book called *Notes from Imrali* [A. Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa (İmralı Notları)*, Weşanen Mezopotamya, Neuss, 2015].

[81] I have read over 30 interviews given by the former and current leaders of the Kurdish movement and administrators/politicians on the Rojava experience/model between 2013 and 2018, conducted either in Turkish (and later translated into English) or English in media outlets such as *BBC, Al Monitor, ANF, Rudaw, Özgür Gündem* and academic or policy research institutions such as Oxford Union Society or Carnegie Middle East Center. I also watched documentaries about Rojava that involved interviews conducted with the administrators and leaders of the armed and/or political parties in Rojava.

[82] 'Besê Hozat: state must take strategic approach to negotiation', https://rojavareport.word press.com/2013/09/23/pkks-11th-congress-our-project-is-a-democratic-project-for-the-whole-region/ (accessed 24 July 2018).

[83] 'TEV-DEM: 'there can be no democratic Syria without Rojava' https://rojavareport.word press.com/2015/10/27/tev-dem-there-can-be-no-democratic-syria-without-rojava/ (accessed 24 July 2018).

[84] 'Rojava model future of Middle East, Says YPJ commander Nesrin Abdullah', http://kurdishquestion.com/oldarticle.php?aid=rojava-model-future-of-middle-east-says-ypj-commander-nesrin-abdullah (accessed 24 July 2018).

[85] 'Interview with YPG commander Rêdur Xelîl on victory in Til Abyad', https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/06/22/interview-with-ypg-commander-redur-xelil-on-victory-in-til-abyad/ (accessed 24 July 2018).

[86] A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings. The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century*, Pluto Press, London, 2011.

[87] 'The new-old PKK', https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/pkk-ocalan-kurdistan-isis-murray-bookchin/ (accessed 24 July 2018).

[88] D. Gerber and S. Brincat, 'When Öcalan met Bookchin: the Kurdish freedom movement and the political theory of democratic confederalism', *Geopolitics*, 2018, p. 10.

[89] A. Öcalan, *Prison Writings*, op. cit., p. 49 cited in D. Gerber and S. Brincat, op. cit., p. 10.

[90] A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 17.

[91] 'Knocking on every door: an interview with Saleh Muslim part II', *Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center*, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54693 (accessed 24 July 2018).

[92] 'Exclusive interview with PYD co-chair Salih Muslim: Rojava will establish a new civilisation', http://kurdishquestion.com/oldarticle.php?aid=pyd-co-chair-salih-muslim-rojava-will-establish-a-new-civilisation (accessed 24 July 2018).

[93] During the Imrali meeting on 21 July 2013, Öcalan says, 'Salih Muslim should stop making statements on behalf the Kurds all the time, he should talk about the unity [PYD]'. Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa (İmralı Notları)*, op. cit., p. 111.

[94] 'KCK's Bayık: Raqqa will determine the future', https://anfenglish.com/rojava/kck-s-bayik-raqqa-will-determine-the-future-21635 (accessed 24 July 2018), (Emphasis is added by the author).

[95] 'Syrian Kurdish leader calls for federal state', http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/syrian-kurdish-leader-calls-for-federal-state/ (accessed 24 July 2018), (Emphasis is added by the author).

[96] M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage Publications, London, 1995.

[97] H. I. Rump, 'A Kurdish-speaking community of change: how social and political organising takes shape in the PYD-controlled areas in Syria' Unpublished Thesis, Lund University, Lund, 2014, p. 60.

[98] It is likely that here, the respondent refers to the flags of the YPG/YPJ, which have similar symbols and colours with the PYD.

[99] Rump, op. cit., p. 61.

[100] Y. Duman, *Rojava Bir Demokratik Özerklik Deneyimi*, İletişim Yayınları, Istanbul, 2016, p. 203.

[101] Duman, op. cit., p. 204.

[102] Knapp and Jongerden, op. cit., p. 97. Emphasis is added by the author.

[103] Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga, op. cit., p. 41. Emphasis is added by the author.

[104] M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2005, p. 99.

[105] Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, op. cit., p. 101.

[106] Ibid, p. 100.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid., p. 222.

[109] Ibid., p. 220.

[110] Ibid., p. 225.

[111] Ibid., p. 220.

[112] Ibid., p. 221.
[113] Ibid., p. 328.
[114] Ibid., p. 220.
[115] 'Libertarian municipalism: an overview', http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview (accessed 24 July 2018), (Emphasis is added by the author).
[116] https://ypginternational.blackblogs.org/2016/07/01/charter-of-the-social-contract-in-rojava/.
[117] This name was later changed to Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria, dropping 'Rojava' (which means the West, indicating Western Kurdistan). See '"Rojava" no longer exists, "Northern Syria" adopted instead', http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/51940fb9-3aff-4e51-bcf8-b1629af00299/-rojava–no-longer-exists—northern-syria–adopted-instead (accessed 24 July 2018).
[118] Though it should be noted that the article ends with 'provided that this relationship does not interfere with the objectives and interests of the federal democratic system' which begs further analysis, but that is the subject of another paper.
[119] R. Brubaker, 'Religion and nationalism: four approaches', *Nations and Nationalism*, 18(1), 2012, pp. 2–20.
[120] M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Commonwealth*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2009, p. 326.
[121] Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, op. cit., p. 329.
[122] Ibid., p. 330.
[123] Ibid., p. 332. Emphasis is added by the author.
[124] Ibid., p. 344.
[125] Vali, op. cit.
[126] Ibid., p. 86.
[127] 'Hardt & Negri's 'multitude': the worst of both worlds", https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-vision_reflections/marx_2549.jsp (accessed 24 July 2018).
[128] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, op. cit., p. 378.
[129] Gerber and Brincat, op. cit., p. 18.
[130] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, op. cit., p. 351.
[131] Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, op. cit., p. 383.
[132] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, op. cit., p. 356.
[133] 'The Rojava Revolution and the model of democracy without a state', https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/books/9783839439548/9783839439548-032/9783839439548-032.pdf (accessed 24 July 2018), p. 191.
[134] N. Üstündağ, op. cit., p. 205.

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