

# The ideological transformation of the PKK regarding the political economy of the Kurdish region in Turkey

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## Abstract

When founded in 1978, the PKK defined itself as a socialist movement aiming to create a classless society through the formation of a new state-power. In the 1990s, the ideology of the PKK began to change and this transformation became apparent in the 2000s. The PKK has since completely abandoned its statist Marxist-Leninist national liberationist ideology, and has instead proposed to build “democratic modernity” through the creation of an anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist, women emancipatory and ecologist “democratic confederalism” framework. This project defines the ecologist-rural communes grounded on food sovereignty as its basic economic units. This article argues that the transformation of the PKK’s goals on the political economy of the Kurdish region is shaped by, on the one hand, the world systemic and internal restraints acting upon the PKK, and on the other hand, the ideological responses of the PKK to those restraints.

**Keywords:** The PKK; Abdullah Öcalan; democratic modernity; democratic confederalism; anti-capitalist movements.

## Guherîna îdeolojîk di PKKyê de û aboriya siyasî ya herêma kurdî li Tirkîyeyê

Gava di sala 1978an de hate damezrandin, PKKyê xwe wek hereteketeke sosyalîst pênas kiribû û armanca xwe wisa danibû ku civakeke bêçîn durîst bike bi rêya avakirina desthilata dewleteke nû. Di salên 1990an de îdeolojiya PKKyê dest bi guherînê kir û di salên 2000an de ev guherîn pir aşkera bû. Ji hingê ve, PKKyê bi temamî dest ji îdeolojiya xwe ya Marksî-Lenînî ya azadiya neteweyî kêşaye, li batî wê, ragihandiyê ku dixwaze “modernîteya demokratîk” ava bike bi rêya durîstkirina çarçoveyêke “konfederalîya demokratîk” a dij-sermayedarî, dij-endûstrîgerî, jin-rizgarkerane û ekolojîk. Di vê projeyê de yekeyên aborî yên esasî ew komûnên ekolojîst-gundî ne ku li ser serbixweyiya xwe ya xurekî pêk hatine (anku ji bo bidestxistina xureka xwe ne muhtacê derve ne). Ev gotar diyar dike ku guherîna di armanca PKKyê yê li ser aboriya siyasî ya herêma kurdî, ji aliyekê ve, ji ber wan zext û berbest û mehdûdîyetên sîstemî yên global û navxweyî pêk hatine ku kar di PKKyê dikin, ji aliyê di ve, ji ber bersivên îdeolojîk ên PKKyê ne bo wan berbest û mehdûdîyetan.

## نالۆگۆری نایدیۆلۆژیکى پ.ک.ک. سەبارەت بە نابووری سیاسیی هەریمی کوردی لە تورکیە

کاتی ئەم 1197 دامەزرێ، پ.ک.ک. خۆی وەک جوولانەوێیەکى سۆشیالیستى پێناسە کرد که نامانجى بریتى بوو لە پێکهێنانى کۆمەڵگەییەکی بێ چینی لە رینگای چێکرنى دەسەلات-دەولەتێکى نوێوە. لە 1990 ماکاندا، نایدیۆلۆجى پ.ک.ک. دەستى بە گۆران کرد و ئەم نالۆگۆرە لە ساڵەکانى 2000 دەركوت. لەو کاتەوه، پ.ک.ک. بە یەکلجاری نایدیۆلۆجى رزگارێى نەئەوێى مارکسیستى لێنێنى دەولەتێى وەلا ناوه، و لە باتى ئەوه، پێشنياری کردووه که “مۆدێرن نێنێیەکی دیموکراتیک” بنیات بنێت لە رینگای دروستکردنێ جوارچێوێیەکی “کۆنقیدرالی دیموکراتیک”ى دژە-کاپیالیست، دژ-مێنێداسترالیست، ژن رزگارکەرانه و نیکۆلوجیست (ژینگەپارێزەرانه). ئەم پرۆژەیه جەختى ژینگەپارێزى-دیهاتى (دەرۆه شارى) پێناسە دەکات که لە سەر سەرپهخۆی خۆاردەمانى، وەک وو ساکارترین بەکەمى رامیارى. ئەم وتاره گەر مەکه بیهەلمێنێ که گۆرانی نامانجەکانى پ.ک.ک. لە ناستى نابووری سیاسى ناوچەى کوردان، لە لایەکەوه، دروستکراوى ئەم بەرپهسته سېستەمیکە جیهانى و ناخۆبیانەن که کار دەکەنە سەر پ.ک.ک. و، لە لایەکی ترهوه، چێکراوى کاردانەوه نایدیۆلۆجیەکانى پ.ک.ک. بە نە ناست ئەم بەرپهست و بەرپهستە.

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## Introduction

The twentieth century has witnessed major rural and urban-based uprisings taking place in a large number of late industrialised peripheral<sup>1</sup> regions of the world. Especially until the 1970s, many of such uprisings were organised and led by socialist “national liberation” movements that aimed at, in the first instance, dismantling colonialism and in the long run building a socialist society. Mobilising and building alliances amongst different classes in both urban and rural areas (Walton, 1984; Goodwin, 2001), such movements pursued a two-step strategy where they first sought to obtain state power through a protracted guerrilla war and then bring about widespread sociopolitical and economic transformation (Arrighi et al., 1986; Derlugian, 1998). In the course of the twentieth century, through seizing state power, they transformed the political regimes and economic relations in many countries, including China, Cuba, Mexico, Vietnam, Algeria, and Angola (Goodwin, 2001; Walton, 1984; Bernstein, 2006). Even if they could not acquire state power, many similar movements have profoundly influenced the political regimes of countries such as Colombia, Kenya and the Philippines (Walton, 1984). After gaining formal state power, former national liberation movements and socialist movements in China, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, Mozambique and Nicaragua, started collectivisation of agriculture in different forms. Rural classes and agrarian production were put into the service of industrialisation in cities (Bernstein, 2006: 7–8) and national development projects were implemented. With the aim of eliminating socialism, the capitalist bloc implemented certain economic development projects through the World Bank and other institutions (Woods, 2006; Bello, 2009; McMichael, 2007). All these industrialist policies, which were implemented both in socialist bloc and capitalist bloc, impacted the unfortunate trajectory of the socialist experience and thus, the revolutionary goals of the socialist national liberation movements. In relation to the constraints of the world-system (Wallerstein, 1986: 160-16; Arrighi et al., 1986: 58–59) and other internal dynamics, the socialist bloc as a political system collapsed and by the end of the twentieth century, socialism as an ideology lost its popularity. This decline, coupled with the advent of neoliberal policies, weakened class alliances among the rural and urban classes and labour movements in the early industrialised capitalist and peripheral countries (Kalouche and Mielants, 2008: 135–136).

Following the collapse of actually existing socialism and the advent of neoliberal policies in many parts of the world, when labour organisations were

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<sup>1</sup> According to Immanuel Wallerstein, commodity chains tend to move from the peripheries of the capitalist world-economy to the cores. These commodity chains created unequal and hierarchical division of labor among these regions in terms of production and distribution relations, as well as capital accumulation processes. This has resulted in polarization among core and peripheral regions (Wallerstein, 1983: 30-31). According to this approach, countries similar to the USA, Japan, the United Kingdom or France comprise core regions; countries similar to Nigeria, the Philippines or Uruguay comprise peripheral regions.

losing power in the cities, a new wave of anti-systemic movements, including new autonomist, indigenous and rural movements, emerged in rural parts of different peripheral regions. These new movements developed stronger solidarity organisations than the unions, mostly focusing on wage and working conditions (Petras, 2005; Moyo and Yeros, 2005b). Such movements constitute the second wave rural movements of the twentieth century in the peripheral regions. Unlike the national liberationist guerrilla movements, the second wave movements do not aim at obtaining state power through guerrilla warfare strategy and national ideology. Instead, many address the constitutional cultural rights of indigenous people as well as other minorities and have sought to provide the urban poor and landless peasants with an access to land through the establishment of rural communes, autonomies and land occupations.<sup>2</sup> Today, national liberation movements employing guerrilla warfare strategies still exist in the peripheral parts of the world, such as Colombia, India and Turkey. Yet, in comparison to previous eras, guerrilla warfare has no longer been a pervasive struggle strategy used by social/political movements in the peripheral regions.

Viewed within this historical conjuncture and its associated complexities, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), the main Kurdish national/guerrilla movement established in 1978 and operating in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan, constitutes an integrated version of these two waves of movements. Until the 2000s, the PKK ideologically and practically embodied the multiple features of the first wave movements and since the 2000s, although it has not dismantled its guerrilla forces, its goals and ideology have become similar to those of the second wave movements. The PKK has mobilised thousands of Kurdish peasants, sharecroppers, landless peasants, working classes, students and Kurdish urban poor since its establishment in 1978. Its initial aim was to overthrow the rule of the states controlling Kurdish regions and to build a class alliance between the Kurdish peasants and workers to establish an independent and unified socialist Kurdistan through guerrilla warfare. In 2005, the PKK redefined its primary aim as the constitution of an "Ecological Democratic Confederalist Society" which embodies autonomous radical democracy and an anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist, anti-sexist and ecologist "democratic modernity" within the Kurdish region. Ecologist-rural communes, which would be created by unemployed and landless people living in both urban and rural areas, have been identified as the

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<sup>2</sup> The Zapatistas (EZLN- the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) in Mexico, the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*-Landless Workers' Movement) in Brazil, the UNORKA (National Coordination of Autonomous Local Rural People's Organisations) in the Philippines, the LPM (the Landless People's Movement) in South Africa, the National Liberation War Veterans Association in Zimbabwe, land occupations in India, Ghana, and Malawi (Moyo and Yeros, 2005a: 6), the CONAIE (the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) in Ecuador, the FNC (National Peasant Federation) in Paraguay (Veltmeyer, 2005: 303) and the Via Campesina in Latin America, South Asia and Europe are among the some of the rural and indigenous movements of the late twentieth century and early twenty first century.

basic economic entities. In addition, acquiring constitutional civil rights, creating a democratic autonomy, accomplishing the decentralisation of the Turkish state, and the institutionalisation of the Kurdish movement legally within the municipalities of the Kurdish cities of Turkey have become the other primary political goals of the PKK in Turkey (PKK, 1978; Öcalan, 2010; PKK, 2005). Hence, the above mentioned shift on a world-scale between the two waves of movements is reflected in the PKK's changing practices, strategies and ideology.

In relation to the above mentioned themes and assumptions this article will raise the following questions: How has the PKK's ideology regarding the political economy of the Kurdish region changed? What are the ruptures and continuities within the trajectory of the PKK's ideology regarding the political economy of the Kurdish region in Turkey? The main purpose of this article is to outline and explain the PKK's changing perception of the agrarian classes, industrialisation, developmentalism, food sovereignty and the causes of this transformation. For these purposes, I will predominantly use key PKK documents, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's defense texts submitted to the European Human Rights Courts and the prison notes of Öcalan's meetings with his lawyers. This article will principally address literature on the Kurdish movement and the anti-systemic movements of the peripheral world. This article is composed of four parts. Firstly, I will lay out a brief trajectory of the political economy of the Kurdish region in Turkey. Then I will discuss the rise and fall of the Marxist-Leninist approach within the PKK. In the third section, I will evaluate the "democratic modernity" project of Abdullah Öcalan. Lastly, I will briefly show some attempts to establish an anti-capitalist economy in rural parts of the Kurdish region.

### **A brief trajectory of the political economy of the Kurdish region in Turkey until the 1980s**

Military conquest, denial of the Kurds as an ethno-political community, assimilation, forced settlement, elimination of Kurds' right to self-determination, centralisation and foundation of colonial governorship were the main policies used by the Turkish state to control the Kurdish region. The Turkish state ruled the Kurdish region as a colony (Beşikçi, 1990; Bozarslan, 2004). When the Republic of Turkey was founded, capitalist social relations were almost absent and feudal social relations were prevalent in the Kurdish region. Production for the market was very limited, most of the Kurds were living in rural areas as members of different tribes, as tribal chiefs, sheiks (religious leaders), landless peasants, sharecroppers, poor or middle peasants (Beşikçi, 1970; Sönmez, 1992). Land in the Kurdish region was distributed unequally (van Bruinessen, 2003).<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s most of Kurdish landlords

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Diyarbakır and Urfa had the most unequally distributed lands in the Kurdish region. More than 50 per cent of families constituted landless peasants in these regions. Alt-

started integrating into the Turkish political economy through patronage mechanisms and concessions provided by the state, such as provision of tractors, agricultural credits, fertilisers, better quality seeds and building electricity infrastructure, roads or in some cases even mosques. Moreover, in the 1950s various Kurdish landlords, at the expense of denying their Kurdish identity, became deputies in the Turkish parliament and most of the Kurdish peasants and sharecroppers who were subservient to these landlords voted for them in the general elections. The landlords used their relationship with the peasants and sharecroppers as a tool to integrate into the ruling establishment (McDowall, 2007: 399-401).

The 1950s was also the time when the reciprocity and interdependency among the Kurdish landlords and peasants started to deteriorate. Capitalist expansion, mechanisation of agriculture and land displacement of peasants and sharecroppers by their landlords were the main reasons for this deterioration. The availability of tractors provided by the USA through Marshall Aid to the Kurdish region in the 1950s resulted in the displacement and dispossession of many Kurdish peasants and sharecroppers (McDowall, 2007: 401). As a consequence of these developments, hundreds of thousands of Kurds left their land and migrated to other regions of western Turkey (McDowall, 2007: 403) where they became seasonal migrant workers, street vendors, construction workers, factory workers or part of the reserve army of industrial labour (Sönmez, 1992, 166; van Bruinessen, 2003: 32). However, this migration does not denote that all Kurds were urbanised during this period. Although displaced peasants migrated to other places, many landlords, poor peasants, middle peasants and sharecroppers continued to remain in the Kurdish region until the 1990s.

Due to the colonial domination and the malintegration of Kurds into the Turkish national regime, the political demands of Kurds have never vanished; yet, class characteristics of the Kurdish insurgencies and leaders of the rebellions have profoundly changed. While Kurdish landlords were integrating into the Turkish national regime and forsaking their national demands, Kurdish political mobilisation started mostly among Kurdish students and intellectuals in parallel with the rise of the Turkish left in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> During the 1970s, employing a Marxist-Leninist discourse, Kurdish political actors started to develop a thesis of colonialism and rights of nations for self-determination for the case of the Kurds and, as discussed by Ercan, this had an enormous impact on the claim-making tools of the Kurdish parties. Dismantling Turkish colonialism and realising self-determination for Kurds became the new goals

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though it was debated in the Turkish parliament many times, an efficient land reform has never been implemented in Turkey's history (Sönmez, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Most of the Kurdish insurgencies occurring during the early republican era were led by sheiks, landlords and elites, who had a chance to study in Europe, or by Kurdish military officers who left Turkey's army before or soon after the foundation of the republic (Bozarslan, 2005: 49; Jwadieh, 1999; Alakom, 2011).

of the Kurdish movements including the Kurdistan Socialist Party of Turkey (TSKP), Rizgarî, Kawa, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (TKDP) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Ercan, 2010).

The PKK was founded on 27 November, 1978 in Turkey by Abdullah Öcalan, the son of a poor Kurdish peasant family, with his university student friends, most of whose parents were also peasants. Many of the founders of the PKK were formerly members of Turkish socialist parties. On 15 August 1984, the PKK launched its first major armed attack against the Turkish military headquarters in Siirt (Çelik, 2000). This historic attack commenced 29 years of prolonged war between the Turkish state and the PKK, a conflict in which almost 40,000 people lost their lives. The Oslo peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK officials began secretly in October 2008 and continued until 2011. These negotiations restarted in 2013 when both the Turkish state and the PKK, publicly announced that it was time for peace and reconciliation (*Akşam*, 2013; Casier et al., 2013).

### **The rise and fall of the Marxist Leninist approach within the PKK**

The PKK initially identified itself as a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement (Manafy, 2005: 108) having a classical communist party organisation with a general secretary, Abdullah Öcalan, as the leader, and an executive committee directing the operations of the guerrilla army (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013: 165). From the mid-1980s Öcalan increased his power within the PKK and the PKK became a movement idealising and canonising the existence and leadership of Öcalan (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011: 151).

Aiming to mobilise Kurdish workers, peasants and students against “Turkish colonialism” and oppressive Kurdish feudal landlords, the PKK employed an anti-feudal, anti-capitalist, Marxist-Leninist national liberation discourse and primarily mobilised the poor rural Kurdish populations (Çelik, 2000: 53; van Bruinessen, 2003). In 1992, Öcalan stated that peasants supported the struggle most (White, 2000: 156). In 2008, during an interview with a Turkish journalist, the Chief of the General Staff of Turkey, İlker Başbuğ identified the PKK as a “peasant movement” (Çandar, 2012: 40). Although it has mobilised different segments of the Kurdish population such as workers and shopkeepers, as Başbuğ acknowledged, its guerrilla forces were mainly recruited from the Kurdish peasants and sharecroppers, especially during the 1980s and the 1990s.

The class composition of the PKK in the 1980s and the 1990s, before the urbanisation of Kurds due to the rural displacement policies of the Turkish state, was very similar to the class composition of the national liberation movements of the early 20th century. More than 100 formerly colonised regions became sovereign states in the twentieth century. These processes increased after the Second World War and reached their peak in 1960 when

African colonies became sovereign states (Strang, 1991: 10). The percentage of rural and small town populations in East Asia, South Asia, Latin America and Africa was around 70% in 1960 (United Nations, 1969: 25). In these regions, most of the national liberation movements organised in the form of a political party and a guerrilla army, and predominantly mobilised rural classes by converting them into armed guerrillas with a national liberationist anti-colonial ideology (Walton, 1984; Wolf 1969; Goodwin, 2001). However, despite the dominance of rural people within these national liberation movements, the interaction and alliance among rural and urban populations made the revolutions possible in China, Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba and in many other countries (Walton, 1984: 15).

The PKK constitutes an interconnected part of a totality represented by the world's anti-systemic movements, national liberation movements and socialist states existing in the same period. When founded in 1978, similar to the ideologies of other national liberationist guerrilla movements, the PKK defined itself as a socialist movement aiming to create a classless society through a two-step strategy: first create a new state power then establish a classless society. The PKK:

...aims to establish a Democratic People's Dictatorship in an Independent and Unified Kurdistan and eventually to create a classless society. The Kurdistan National Liberation Struggle, which is conducted by the PKK, is an inseparable segment of the world socialist revolution strengthened by the socialist countries, national liberation movements and working class movements (PKK, 1978).<sup>5</sup>

In one of his writings, Öcalan, stated at the outset that Stalin's and Lenin's ideas on the national question influenced the ideology of the PKK. In the 1970s the PKK's founding cadres scrutinised people's wars of that period; especially the Vietnamese and African experiences. One of the inferences they drew from these experiences was that since Kurdistan was a colony, the PKK should follow the national liberation war model that gained success in many different places (Öcalan, 2013: 222-248). The following were some of the prominent theoreticians and political actors Öcalan referred to in his books until the 2000s: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Viladimir Ilyich Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Georgi Dimitrov, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Che Guevera. In relation to these readings and their analyses, both in the PKK's Foundation Declaration and in Abdullah Öcalan's book titled *The Path of Kurdistan Revolution*, processes of circulation, distribution, consumption and production in the Kurdish region of Turkey were analysed from a Marxist perspective with Marxist notions, such as dialectical materialism, labour, proletariat, bourgeoisie, petty-bourgeoisie etc. Employing the concepts of class politics and anti-imperialist discourse, the PKK reproduced the political language of socialist

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

national liberation movements of the world for the particular context of the Kurdish region and populations. The proletariat was defined as the “most revolutionary class” and the pioneer of the Kurdistan revolution, and the “poor peasants” were perceived as the “tenacious ally of the proletariat”. The role of the PKK was to establish a solidarity bloc among workers, peasants, intellectuals and youths (*Serxwebûn*, 1981: 9).

The PKK’s first manifesto described the Kurdish feudal landlords as the “comprador” class and harshly criticised them by claiming that they collaborated with the Turkish exploiters and American imperialists. Turkish capitalism created an extensive market and bound the Kurdish feudal-comprador classes to itself by preventing the growth of Kurdish capital. With the introduction of use of machines in soil, feudal exploitation and capitalist exploitation became united and this unification invoked the dispossession, poverty and semi-proletarianisation of the Kurdish peasants (PKK, 1978). Besides, all state owned enterprises, e.g. Sümerbank, Etibank, Turkish Electric Institution, the Turkish Tobacco and Alcoholic Beverages Company (the TEKEL), the Turkish Grain Board and all state owned banks were defined as “colonial state enterprises” (Öcalan, 1978).

Similar to ideologies of the other national liberation movements, “the basic contradiction” was defined as the “national contradiction”. It was denoted that the PKK’s revolution will fight against all national and class oppressions through an alliance between workers and peasants (Öcalan, 1978; PKK, 1978). With the aim of accomplishing these goals, the PKK organised countless armed attacks in Turkey beginning in 1984 when the capitalist bloc, the socialist bloc and Turkey were facing a massive economic and social crisis. While the PKK was gaining strength in Turkey’s Kurdish region in the 1980s, the politicisation of working classes, alliances among urban and rural classes and their revolutionary consciousness were deteriorating in the countries controlled by governments defining themselves as communist or socialist (Wallerstein, 1986: 160–161; Borrás et al., 2008). The collapse of the socialist bloc demonstrated that socialist parties, which had formerly gained state power, could not accomplish the second step of abolishing capitalism and constructing communism (Wallerstein, 2002: 33). In the 1990s, most of the late industrialised peripheral countries integrated into the global market economy and implemented neoliberal policies. While new movements were emerging in different parts of the world in the neoliberal period, the PKK, unlike other national liberation movements, could not achieve the first part of the two-step strategy, seizing state power.

After the collapse of the state centric socialist regimes, the ideology of the PKK began to change in the 1990s and this transformation became apparent in the 2000s. In 1993, Öcalan proclaimed that their aim was not to secede from Turkey and that they demanded a political negotiation with the Turkish state for the democratic civil rights of the Kurdish people (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011; Öcalan, 1998). Renunciation of secession and divergence



from the ideology of the Marxist-Leninist national liberation also happened simultaneously. In the fifth congress of the PKK in 1995, the symbol of the hammer and sickle symbolising the alliance between workers and peasants, was replaced with an emblem of a torch on their party flag. Within the new program prepared after this congress, the Soviet Union was also criticised for being dogmatic, vulgar materialist, chauvinist and being too centralist (PKK, 1995).

Different studies employing diverse perspectives have highlighted a variety of dynamics in explaining the transformation of the PKK's discourse on the political future of the Kurdish region. While some studies primarily focused on internal dynamics, others referred to the vitality of external processes. Scholars analysing this transformation highlighted the following as important factors in the PKK's political shift: power dissipation of the PKK within the internal war, decline of peasant support in the rural areas (McDowall, 2007; Gunes, 2012), the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and the transformation of international political context (Manafy, 2005; Özcan, 2006; Gunes, 2012), collapse of the USSR (Özcan, 2006; Gunes, 2012), as well as some internal political dynamics emerging in Turkey such as Prime Minister Turgut Özal's positive approach acknowledging "the Kurdish reality" in the 1990s (White, 2000), the military loses of the PKK, and the possibility of a civil war in Turkey due to the rise of Turkish nationalism within the Turkish community (Gunes, 2012). All these abovementioned developments have deeply influenced the transformation of the PKK's political goals.

### **The “democratic modernity” project of Abdullah Öcalan**

Transformation of the PKK's ideology accelerated after the capture of Abdullah Öcalan by the US, Israeli and Turkish agents in 1999 and his subsequent imprisonment on İmralı Island in Turkey (Romano, 2006: 179).<sup>6</sup> Following the capture of Abdullah Öcalan the PKK "...made a pronounced turn towards a project of radical democracy, rejecting not only what he called the 'classical Kurdish nationalist line', but also 'a leftist interpretation of a similar tendency'" (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2014: 186). According to Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein, there are some restraints limiting sovereign states, such as de facto power of outside forces interfering in that state's internal affairs or trans-state property rights. Thus, once each revolutionary party came to power, they immediately discovered that even though state apparatus provided them with political power, its extent was less than they had expected to achieve. Therefore, each party comprehended the limits of the state sovereignty (Wallerstein, 1986: 160-161). Throughout its struggle, similar to other national liberationist movements and sovereign states, the PKK encountered some world systemic limitations that curtailed its power. For instance, Öcalan stated that "the manifestation

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<sup>6</sup> Öcalan is serving a life sentence for treason since the Turkish state abolished the death penalty in 2002.

of the crisis of scientific socialism during the internal dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Great Gladio Conspiracy<sup>7</sup> of 1998 forced the PKK into a radical transformation” (Öcalan, 2013: 307). In the 1990s, political opportunities for the emergence of socialist nation states have disappeared in the world as well as in the Middle East. In 1999, when Abdullah Öcalan was caught by international agents and handed over to the Turkish state, it became obvious that it is impossible for the PKK to create an independent nation state within the capitalist world which still identifies it as a terrorist organisation. However, on the other hand, the Turkish legal political domain has partially and gradually opened to the Kurds in the 2000s. These changing political restraints and opportunities have created the possibility to produce different ideologies, projects and organisational mechanisms.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to world systemic and internal restraints acting upon the PKK, Öcalan’s absolute power on the movement despite his capture and imprisonment by the Turkish state and the ideological inferences he has drawn from the books that he has read while in prison have played prominent roles in transforming the PKK’s ideology on the political economy of the Kurdish region. In developing new projects and goals for the PKK, Öcalan used and referred to the works of the following authors: Murray Bookchin, Immanuel Wallerstein, Fernand Braudel, Andre Gunder Frank, Michel Foucault, Theodor W. Adorno and Friedrich Nietzsche. These books have provided Öcalan with information about struggles emerging in different parts of the world, others’ understandings of the post-real socialist world and new perspectives on constructing a non-capitalist/communist world. Parallel to the theoretical inductions of these writers, Öcalan’s defense texts given to the Turkish courts and the European Court of Human Rights included criticism of nation-states, capitalist modernity, industrialisation and positivism. Among these writers, Murray Bookchin’s ideas in particular have had a deep impact on Öcalan’s perception of the world and his new projects. He has combined Murray Bookchin’s categories of “ecological society” and “confederalism” as the main themes of the PKK’s new projects which involve the establishment of com-

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<sup>7</sup> Öcalan identifies his capture by the international agents in 1999 as “Great Gladio Conspiracy” because his capture was planned and organised by the NATO forces.

<sup>8</sup> Besides, as the years have passed, the PKK has become a more complex and diverse party organisation. Its guerrilla forces were organised into different organisations and parties including a women’s guerrilla army, and as part of its affiliated parties in Iraq (the PÇDK-formed in 2002), Iran (the PJAK-formed in 2004) and Syria (the PYD-formed in 2004). The PKK has established various institutions such as the Association of Communities in Kurdistan - the KCK, which constitutes a network of village, city and regional councils whose assembly is called the Kurdistan People’s Congress-KONRA-GEL. The other institution of the PKK is named as the National Congress of Kurdistan-KNK which includes representatives from various political parties in Kurdistan, Kurdish diaspora and ethnic-religious minorities in Kurdistan (Jongerden and Akkaya 2013: 165). Here, it should be underlined that with the foundation of the KCK, the PKK was formally abolished (Gunes, 2012). Nevertheless, this only signifies a “formal” abolishment since the concept of “the PKK” is still broadly used to indicate a comprehensive party organisation.

munes in cities and villages and social entities organised as municipalities and assemblies (Öcalan, 2009b; Öcalan, 2011). Therefore, the Kurdish movement's goals on the political economy of the Kurdish region are shaped on the one hand by world systemic and national limitations acting upon the PKK and on the other hand the ideological, political and strategic responses of Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK that adjusted to those limitations.

In 2005, the PKK was re-established as an organisation in its ninth congress, which also redefined the movement's aims, in accordance with the defense texts of Öcalan, as the realisation of "gender liberationist democratic ecological society", the establishment of democratic communities to eliminate all remnants of feudalism, the realisation of "the self-determination and national unity of the Kurdish nation", the development of "a democracy based on ecology and liberation of women", and democratic confederalism. The new manifesto criticised the PKK's previous goal of seizure of state power and argued for the need to go beyond it. Accordingly, it put forward a solution to Kurdish question based on democratic confederalism that rejects the state system and gets its power from "communal values". Its primary goals are establishing communes in villages, factories and neighbourhoods:

Democratic Confederalism is the democratic order of the Kurdish people who accomplished a democratic revolution. It is an order that allows people to elicit their strength in all levels. It is an order that recreates the communal democratic values of our people existing in our people's history in a modern form. In order to establish such a social order, starting from today, our people have to establish a free-democratic life through creating their communes in villages, neighbourhoods and factories (PKK, 2005).

By establishing communes, assemblies and municipalities, democratic confederalism would reduce the dominance of states' power in Kurdistan and make the states more sensitive to democracy (PKK, 2005). Jongerden and Akkaya have argued that the PKK has not given up its goal of creating a united Kurdistan. Instead of the goal of state-building, the PKK currently follows the method of society-building (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2011: 144-156).

According to Öcalan, the reason of the failure of socialist experiences lies in the fact that they could not create an alternative modernity perspective to that of capitalist modernity (Öcalan, 2009a: 151–152). As a result, today those proclaiming "another world is possible" have to answer the question of "which modernity?" As an alternative to "capitalist industrialist modernity", Öcalan suggested "democratic modernity", which he described as the economic form of democratic confederalism. According to Öcalan, the basic impulse of the model of "democratic modernity" cannot be profit as it is under capitalism where development goals are based on industrialisation which leads to ecological devastation (Öcalan, 2009a). He further clarified his project in 2011 by suggesting that eliminating pervasive unemployment and eradicating

the goal of realising maximum profit should be the primary aims. Besides, ecological communes and social entities that serve the needs of society rather than aim at making profit have to be established (Öcalan, 2011). “We cannot acknowledge capitalism as an economic system. Maybe we cannot totally abolish it; but we can change and erode it; we can construct our own economic system” (Öcalan, 2010; *Bianet*, 2010).

### **Ecologist rural communes aiming food sovereignty**

Öcalan proposes ecologist rural communes as the basic economic entities of the new project. For instance, the establishment of “Dicle Firat Agriculture-Water Energy commune” is proposed as an alternative to the “individualist system”, which also aims to be an “ecologic-economic” society and raise ecologic consciousness aiming to eliminate capitalism and nation-state. A new agricultural society would be recreated through ecological communes that have communal values and “food sovereignty” as its goal. In addition, overpopulation in the cities would be diminished and cities would be recreated through the establishment of these ecologic communes and village-city settlements (Öcalan, 2010). Accordingly, unemployment in the big cities is inherent to capitalism and this problem cannot be solved through proletarianisation in cities, rather it can be solved through ecologist food production in rural areas.

The ecologist projects summarised above are parallel to the political actions and the ideologies of new anti-capitalist rural movements, especially those of the EZLN (the Zapatistas) in Mexico, the MST in Brazil and the Via Campesina in Latin America and South Asia, which also aim to realise food sovereignty and contest capitalist production relations and private property without trying to gain nation-state power (Vergara Camus, 2009; Moyo and Yeros, 2005b). As mentioned in the introduction, the goals of the second wave movements in the peripheral regions of the world have been varied, ranging from land distribution (land occupation movements, the MST) and national democratic transformation (FARC in Colombia) to constitutional change (the Zapatistas), regional autonomy (the Zapatistas) and food sovereignty (Via Campesina). Indigenous rights, human rights, land rights, food rights and regional autonomy constitute some of the political demands and goals of these movements (Moyo and Yeros, 2005: 6). Land occupations, political campaigns, street demonstrations and social forums are among some of the prominent political tools and strategies of these movements. Most scholars working on the new social movements emerging in the rural areas of peripheral regions have linked the insurgencies of the agrarian and urban classes either to underemployment in the cities (Moyo and Yeros, 2005b; Bernstein 2006; Chauveau and Richards, 2008) or to the advent of neoliberal policies and marketisation taking place in peripheral regions after the 1980s (Vergara-Camus, 2009; Pimple and Sethi, 2005; Edelman, 2005; Borras, 2008; Walker, 2008).

Among these movements, the Via Campesina in particular has fundamentally transformed the assumptions of the classical agrarian question (McMichael, 2008: 208) by viewing the development discourse and the associated policies as the cause of poverty rather than its remedy. Instead of development discourse, these movements exalted “rural-cultural ecology”, and emphasised the political culture of solidarity (McMichael, 2007: 28). Reformulating the agrarian question and linking it to today’s “development exigencies”, McMichael argued that the new peasant movements transcended the previous movements’ politics by criticising the neoliberal project and the development narrative which despises peasantry (McMichael 2008: 207). Similarly, the PKK’s new approach does not perceive capitalism and proletarianisation as the necessary processes to be experienced before communism. As McMichael states, while evaluating the Via Campesina, this perspective symbolises an ontological breakage from the dominant perspective claiming that capitalism must be experienced before socialism. Similar to the Via Campesina, the Kurdish movement has given up the main positivist and developmentalist premises of Orthodox Marxist ideology perceiving proletarianisation as a necessary process which has to be experienced. Similarly to the EZLN, the MST and the Via Campesina, the PKK does not aim to create a new nation state.

Another theme that changed in Öcalan’s and the PKK’s discourse was regarding the subjects of the democratic modernity project which is expected to develop primarily in the rural regions. From the late 1970s to the 2000s, a socialist Kurdish nation-state power was expected to be realised by the workers and peasants. Today, although it is not openly stated, the subjects of the PKK’s new project are peasants, unemployed people and landless people living in both urban and rural areas. Turkey’s Chief of General Staff, İlker Başbuğ, stated that thousands of migrant Kurds, mostly the children of forcefully dispossessed peasants, joined the PKK in the 2000s (Çandar, 2012: 43). This is parallel to the class composition of many rural movements of the contemporary world which are led by marginalised and criminalised urban unemployed people, unsecured temporary workers, peasants and landless people.

The PKK’s renunciation of the positivist developmentalist Orthodox Marxist approach does not denote that the PKK has totally abandoned Marx’s methodology and epistemology. According to Karl Marx, ideas and theoretical categories are “not free-floating analytic devices, innocent of historical content” rather, they are “historical and transitory products” that are strongly related to the historical social relations they aim to depict. Marx conceives categories as transhistorical abstractions of relations which have to be related to the social reality. The concepts aiming to depict social relations should not be perceived as “things” independent from historical social relations and they should not be reified (Sayer, 1987: 126-143). Marx “deals with all categories of his economic and socio historical research in that specific form and in that specific connection in which they appeared in modern bourgeois society. He does not treat them as eternal categories” (Korsch, 1963: 30). Therefore, his-

torical specificity of concepts appears as a prominent element in Marx's methodology. From this respect, the PKK adheres to Marx's methodology by not reifying concepts such as state, modernity, revolution, development, confederalism etc.; Öcalan and the PKK relate all these categories to contemporary social, economic and political relations by constantly deconstructing and reconstructing them.

### **Attempts to establish an anti-capitalist economy under oppressive conditions**

The impact of the war on the Kurdish region in Turkey has been devastating. According to the research conducted in 2010 by KONDA, a survey company, one fifth of Kurds' family members either died or were injured during the war (KONDA, 2011: 96). Many Kurdish peasants migrated to impoverished areas in the cities of western Turkey and the Kurdish region, where the majority of them became part of the marginalised and criminalised urban poor. According to GÖÇ-DER (Migrants' Association for Social Cooperation and Culture) around 3 million Kurds were displaced during the war (Ayata and Yüксеker, 2005: 15; Bozarslan, 2001). In many Turkish cities migrant Kurds have dealt with the problems of adjusting to urban life and have been discriminated against and subjected to racial violence in varying degrees (Kosukoğlu, 2011; Gönen, 2011). During the period of conflict, illegal drug and gun trade multiplied; agricultural production and livestock farming were severely undermined; underemployment and poverty among landless, displaced peasants drastically increased in the Kurdish region. KONDA's research showed that 29% of Kurds are living below the poverty threshold and 23% are living below the hunger threshold (KONDA, 2011: 96).

Today, peace negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish state are still proceeding. Öcalan's imprisonment continues and although there are no military clashes between Turkish soldiers and Kurdish guerrillas, multiple PKK guerrillas are still located in the mountains of the Kurdish region of Turkey and the heads of the guerrilla forces are settled in the Qandil mountains, located in Iraq's Kurdish region near the Iran-Iraq border. Nevertheless, despite the ongoing peace negotiations, in addition to existing military outposts in the Kurdish region, the Turkish state began the construction of 402 high security military outposts in the Kurdish region in 2010 (Kalekol, 2013) and they limit peasants and farmers' use of arable land (*Today's Zaman*, 2013). Further, there are 1,000,000 land mines buried in Turkey, most of them in the Kurdish region (*Vatan*, 2013). 46,113 village guards are still employed by the Turkish state (*Milliyet*, 2013). Additionally, with the aim of eliminating the PKK guerrillas' physical movements in the rural areas the state gave a start to the construction of more than ten "security dams" in the Kurdish region (İHD, 2013). Between 2009 and 2011, 3,895 activists of the Kurdish movement were arrested by the Turkish state (*Bianet*, 2011; Bayir, 2013.) On July 2014, the Ministry of Justice of Turkey reported that 4,912 PKK and KCK

inmates were incarcerated in Turkish prisons (*Yüksekova Haber*, 2014). Additionally, the Turkish state's judicial limitations imposed on the movement of the displaced peasants influences peasants' will to return to the rural areas in the Kurdish region.

Under these oppressive conditions there are currently two significant rural communal projects implemented in the Kurdish region. One of them is the Gever Commune which was established in the mid-2000s, consisting of 24 Kurdish villages (*Yeni Özgür Politika*, 2013) and its assemblies have both male and female peasant participants. The participants of this commune do not use the Turkish state courts or other Turkish institutions to solve their problems. They created particular committees of law, education, culture and finance to solve their daily problems and improve their social lives without the involvement of the Turkish state. Polygamy, domestic violence against women and hunting are forbidden within this commune (*Yüksekova Haber*, 2010). They collectively resolve pasture and water, have created a livestock breeding collective farm and also built houses for those in need (Yeğin, 2011a). With regards to the relations between the Kurdish movement's new paradigm and the Gever commune, in 2013, one of the participants of the commune stated the following: "Communes are indispensable lifestyles of the leadership's<sup>9</sup> paradigm. From now on we will struggle for explaining this to our people, for disseminating it in Kurdistan and for realising unity and cooperation" (*Yeni Özgür Politika*, 2013).

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In addition to the Gever commune, another significant project implemented in the Kurdish region is *the Ax û Av Collective* (Soil and Water) in a district called Viranşehir. This project is not only realised by the Kurdish movement itself, but through the management of a Turkish activist, Metin Yeğin, who has participated in many different movements in Latin America. He produced films and books on those movements including the MST in Brazil. Under the management of Yeğin, Kurdish activists and landless Kurdish peasants, some of whom are seasonal agrarian workers, constructed several mud-brick houses and established collective agrarian production units within the land provided by the municipality controlled by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP) (Yeğin, 2011b). Almost all of the participants of this collective are Kurdish peasants forcefully displaced by the Turkish army. Today, there are 7 households, around 50 people, who are living within these mud-brick houses collectively producing organic pepper, organic *şelengo* (a kind of cucumber), organic watermelon, pomegranate and other organic foods (M. Yeğin, personal communication, 2013).

Although these two experiments represent the ecologist and communalist projects, they have not yet been expanded to other parts of the Kurdish re-

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<sup>9</sup> The word "leadership" is used in reference to Abdullah Öcalan by supporters of the Kurdish movement.

gion in Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Some limitations hinder the expansion of the communalist experiences within the borders of Turkey. The existence of landmines, security dams, village guards, the unfinished war and the peace process between the PKK and Turkey, and the incarceration of thousands of Kurdish activists negatively impact the practices of the Kurdish movement with regard to the establishment of an anti-sexist, anti-industrialist, anti-capitalist, communist and ecological democratic modernity. Besides, Öcalan's and the PKK's texts do not elaborate the strategies and tools to be used during the establishment of the democratic modernity. They do not explain how the PKK will constitute ecological communes and on whose land these communes will be established. Additionally, despite their solidarity with Öcalan and the PKK cadres, legal Kurdish parties, especially the deputies and some mayors, are inclined to implement liberal industrialist political solutions, such as the increase of Turkish capital and Turkish state investment in the Kurdish region. These legal parties' official documents and their practices demonstrate that creating rural ecological communes are not their priority (HDP, 2014; BDP, 2011; DPT, 2007; *Para ve Borsa*, 2010; Baydemir, 2011).

## Conclusion

Waging almost 30 years of guerrilla warfare against the Turkish state until 2013, similar to numerous national liberation movements of the early 20th century, the PKK initially organised itself in the form of a party and a guerrilla army; and it has mobilised many Kurds from various classes by converting them into armed guerrillas through a Marxist-Leninist national liberationist anti-colonial ideology. This article argued that the PKK's goals on the political economy of the Kurdish region are shaped by, on the one hand, the world systemic and internal restraints acting upon the PKK, and on the other hand, the ideological responses of the PKK to those restraints. The biggest transformation the PKK's ideology has undergone since 1978 has been the renunciation of the goal of establishing a classless society and a new nation-state through the creation of a class alliance between urban and rural classes. Until the 2000s, the production, distribution, circulation and consumption relations in the Kurdish region were analysed with the method and concepts of classical Marxism such as proletariat, bourgeoisie and labour.

Since the early 2000s, the PKK's ideology regarding the political economy of the Kurdish region has drastically changed. During his imprisonment on İmralı Island, the leader of the movement, Abdullah Öcalan has identified the

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<sup>10</sup> However, economic, social and political activities and developments in the Kurdish region within the Syrian borders which is called Rojava exemplify more progressive experiences derived from the democratic confederalism-democratic modernity project of Abdullah Öcalan. In comparison to the Kurdish region in Turkey, because of different political circumstances and the weakening of the Syrian state power in the region, there is a more systematic struggle is being waged to create an alternative, anti-capitalist system in Rojava.



most important economic problems of the Kurdish region as unemployment, private property, the goal of profit maximisation and monopolisation and argues that these problems can only be solved through the construction of socialism; yet today, practically, it is impossible to abolish capitalism completely. In order to combat the destruction created by capitalism and industrialisation, Öcalan argues that an anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist, women emancipatory and ecologist “democratic confederalism” should be constructed via the establishment of local town councils, municipal administrations and communes in urban and rural areas. The economic form of democratic confederalism is identified as democratic modernity of which the ecologist-rural communes grounded on food sovereignty would be its basic economic units. Criticism of private property, monopolisation, industrialisation, nation-state power, and proposition of construction of ecologist-communes show that the PKK’s ideology regarding the political economy of the Kurdish region is not only anti-capitalist but also communist. However, according to this new ideology, communism will not be realised through the seizure of state power, but rather through the loosening of existing state power in the region by the construction of communes and neighbourhood assemblies. Additionally, the PKK does not perceive capitalism and proletarianisation as the necessary processes to be experienced before communism. However, today, despite its historical and dialectical approach, the PKK has not established its reconstructed goals in the Kurdish region. The creation of ecologist rural communes, realisation of food sovereignty and establishment of ecological village-city settlements in the Kurdish region of Turkey are profoundly related to world systemic and internal restraints acting upon the PKK, the trajectory of the peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state, political activities of the PKK’s cadres, and the transformation of the Turkish military-colonial regime in the Kurdish region.

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