

EHMEDÊ XANÎ'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN *MEM Û ZÎN*

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Introduction

Ehmedê Xanî's (1650–1707) *Mem û Zîn* has rightly been called “the national epic of the Kurds.”¹ A work whose significance exceeds its literary attainments, *Mem û Zîn*'s prominent status within Kurdish classical literature continues to generate controversy. This is due not only to the fact that the text stands at the intersection of literature and politics, but also to the work's place as a recurrent touchstone for Kurdish intellectuals interested in articulating a national narrative. *Mem û Zîn*'s rediscovery in the post-First World War era of ethnic or national “revivals” is no coincidence. Like their contemporaries, the late-Ottoman-era Kurdish elites were interested in the ideas of self-determination and nationhood and deployed a national movement of their own to retrieve, imagine, and construct a collective identity for their people.

To the dubious relationship between historiography and nation-building, the Kurds provide no exception.² Nations require origins, traditions, historical depth—and nationalists have not been shy about inventing them.³ A range of scholars⁴ have traced the shifting perceptions and reception of *Mem û Zîn* as a piece of literature and shown how it came to occupy such a central place in Kurdish consciousness over the course of the past century. In doing so, the scholarship has been vigilant against nationalists' attempts to conscript Xanî as an instrument of nation-building. This salutary caution has, however, meant that Xanî's ideas (as opposed to their literary expression) have yet to receive serious attention and engagement. In this chapter, I engage with Xanî's ideas as expressions of political theory and highlight his political philosophy as an early modern thinker.

Xanî's Novelty

Xanî's towering status within Kurdish literature is universally recognized. Xanî completed *Mem û Zîn* in 1695 at the age of forty-four. He was able to engage in

such literary-intellectual production because his was an era of relative political stability in the Kurdish lands due to a recent peace accord, the Treaty of Zuhab or Qasr-e Shirin (1639), between the Ottomans and the Safavids. At the same time, the aftereffects of the prolonged conflict between the two empires—which had devastated Kurdish social, economic, and cultural life—still lingered.⁵ The subjugated Kurdish principalities were always fragile and precarious political entities. The landscape was calm enough to allow Xanî to think, but brimming with memories still raw enough to pose radical questions.

Xanî was, by all accounts, a frontier figure. Like all Kurdish *littérateurs* of the classical era, he emerged out of the *medrese* tradition and had strong Sufi affinities. Yet with him a whole range of novelties enters the Kurdish imagination. To describe the novelty of his literary materials he used the language of (religious) deviance, *bid'a*, which implies innovation both in the sense of new beginnings and in the sense of departure from convention.⁶

*Xanî ji kemalê bêkematî
Meydanê kemalê dtî xanî*

*Ye'nî ne ji qabil û xebîrî
Belkî bi te'essub û 'eşîrî*

*Hasil ji 'înad eger ji bêdad
Ev bid'ete kir xilafê mu'tad*

Xanî, though lacking in perfection,
You found unoccupied the arena of excellence

And stepped forward not because of skill or
knowledge

But rather out of loyalty and noble love for the people.

In short – call it stubbornness or impudence –

He enacted this novelty, contravening convention

His literary output was a work of deliberate design, not just an aesthetic outgrowth of his life. He did not simply produce literature. Very much like a contemporary anthropologist who reflects on her own subjectivity as she pursues her work, Xanî explained why and how he engaged in such literary “engineering” (his word of choice would have been *alchemy*). He was not the first to write in Kurdish but, as far as we know, everything he wrote, he wrote in Kurdish at a time when men of letters were expected to show off their accomplishment in Persian, Arabic, or Turkish. Arguably, Melayê Jizîrî is the greater poet; Xanî’s uniqueness lies in his cultural politics and his vision for the Kurdish people.

*Safî şemirand vexwari durdî
Manendê durrê lîsanê Kurdî*

*Înaye nîzam û întîzamê
Kêşaye cefa ji boyi 'amê*

He refused to drink the fine wine and chose, instead,
the cloudy one

That is, he preferred the pearl-like Kurdish language
over others

He gave order and regularity to this language

He suffered, laboring for the benefit of the people

A common assumption in the scholarly literature is that Xanî wrote for the court and educated elite only. That this is not, in fact, the case is made clear by Xanî’s own words: in both *Mem û Zîn* and *Nûbihara Bicûkan* he explicitly states that he has engaged in his projects for the benefit of the people (*ji boyi amê*). Xanî’s

“populism” (if not patriotism) is an obvious and direct result of the interest in vernacularization that underlies all his works. Here are the opening lines of *Nûbihara Bicûkan* (1683):

<i>Ev çend kelime ne, ji luxatan</i>	Here are a few words from lexicons.
<i>Vêk êxistin Ehmedê Xanî</i>	Ehmedê Xanî put them together
<i>Navê “Nûbihara Biçûkan” lê danî</i>	And named it <i>Nûbihara Biçûkan</i>
<i>Ne ji bo sahib rewacan</i>	Not for the elite ones,
<i>Belkî ji bo biçûkên Kurmancan</i>	But rather for the Kurds' little ones

A similar move can be seen in the lines where he explains his motivation for writing *Mem û Zîn*:

<i>De xelq-i nebêjtin ku Ekrad</i>	So that people do not say that the Kurds
<i>Bê me'rifet in, bê esl û bunyad</i>	Lack education, origin, and foundations
<i>Enwaên milel xudan kitêb in</i>	Various nations have their classics
<i>Kurmanc-i tenê di bê hisêb in</i>	Only the Kurds lack them

Xanî is a vernacularizer not only in language, but also in theology. He authored the first Kurdish dictionary, *Nûbihara Bicûkan*, and the first Kurdish-language text laying out the basics of Islamic belief, *Aqîdeya Îmanê*. The ideas and claims with respect to Kurdish identity that appear in *Mem û Zîn*—claims that, encountered there, might strike the reader as exceptional—are reiterated in his other works. His poetry, theology, and political philosophy all seem to converge.

Let us consider an example for our immediate purposes. Below is a poem from Xanî's *Diwan*,⁷ also published in *Jin* magazine's twelfth issue in 1918:

Zahidê xelwetnişîn pabendê kirdarê xwe ye
Tacirê rihletguzîn dîlnarê dînarê xwe ye
Aşîqe dîlberhebîn dildarê dîdarê xwe ye
Da bizanî her kesek bê şubhe xemxwarê xwe ye

Bê amel tu j'kes meke hêvî ata û himmetê
Bê xerez nakêşitin qet kes ji bo kes zehmetê
Kes nehin qet hilgiritin barê te ew bê ucetê
Gerçi Îsa bit ewî vêk rakirê barê xwe ye

Hoşiyar bî, da nekî umrê xwe bê hasil telef
Ku nedaye faîde mal, genc û ewlad û xelef
Macerayê Xidr û dîwarê yetimî bû selef
Vî zemanî her kesek mî'marê dîwarê xwe ye

If I were to summarize the poem, it goes something like this: From the ascetic hermit who focuses on his prayers to the traveling merchant who pursues his

profits to the lover who is eager to see the face of his beloved, everyone is worried about themselves and busy with their own affairs. Those who do not work hard have no right to expect help from others. No one helps anyone for no reason. Nobody carries another's burden for nothing. Even if you were Jesus, all you could do would be to carry your own burden. Wake up, O Xanî, so you do not waste your time in this world. Know that family, children, and posterity are of no use unless you work. The wall of the orphans mentioned in the story of Khidr now belongs to the past. *In this age, everyone is the architect of their own wall.*

Here, Xanî makes two, by and large modern, moves. He stresses secularity and human subjectivity and autonomy. He transcends religious excuses and emphasizes human agency. The most striking part is neither his disburdening Jesus of his responsibilities nor his pointing out the expiration date on the wonders worked by Khidr, the Qur'anic companion of Moses. Rather it is the line: "In this age, everyone is the architect of their own wall." I must admit, when I first heard this poem as an audio recording. I was under the impression that it was a poem written by Cegerxwîn, the twentieth-century Kurdish poet who was reading it on the recording. So modern-sounding was it that I was quite startled to learn that the lines belonged to Ehmedê Xanî.

No student of Kurdish history can fail to be genuinely amazed at the intensity and novelty of Xanî's ideas. One aspect of his work that resonates particularly for contemporary ears is that he appears to be a harbinger of Kurdish nationalism. Given the imagined or real presence of strong elements of nationalist sentiment in his magnum opus, *Mem û Zîn*, it comes as no surprise that controversy has arisen around his relationship to nationalism. Was he so ahead of his time that he should be called a premodern nationalist, a nationalist *avant la lettre*? Or—his modern-sounding ideas notwithstanding—is this image simply a mirage, because nationalism is a modern phenomenon and Xanî surely belongs to a premodern age?

The sentiment expressed below by one of the doyens of Kurdish Studies, Martin van Bruinessen, represents a common experience, shared by many contemporary academics upon encountering Xanî's political writing in *Mem û Zîn*:

Certain passages in the *dibace* (introduction) of *Mem û Zîn* certainly have a modern ring to them, as if they were spoken by nationalists of the early 20th century instead of three centuries ago. It is as if Xanî was calling for a Kurdish national state. In fact, I myself have for a while suspected that these words were not by Xanî but were inserted into his work by a much later copyist, so modern they sounded to me. But these words also occur in the critical edition by M. A. Rudenko, which is based on nine different manuscripts, the oldest of which was written in 1731–32, i.e. well before the appearance of modern nationalism in the Middle East. So it must have been Ehmedê Xanî himself who wrote them.⁸

If we were to accept that the modern-sounding elements in Xanî's writings were indeed later additions to the text, that would offer a satisfying solution to the problem. So long as we are not able to make such a claim, however, engagement with Xanî's ideas remains an intellectual challenge and a responsibility. Major scholars

in the field have tried to thread their way through this challenge without tripping the landmines of anachronism, without giving way to retrospective nationalism. As a consequence, they chose to downplay Xanî's modernity and assimilate him back to the medieval milieu.⁹ Following a point made by Izzeddin Mustafa Rasul and perpetuated by Farhad Shakely and others, Maria O'Shea, for example, says, "[D]espite claims that Khani was an early advocate of national self-determination, he appears to have been a supporter of a Platonic system of rule by a philosopher King, not necessarily a Kurdish one, but one wise, cultured and benign."¹⁰

For Kurds, who lack a state of their own in this age of nation-states, it is hard to imagine that a seventeenth-century Kurdish thinker espoused nationalism before its appearance in Europe. There is neither consensus on the origins of the Kurds as a people nor an agreed-upon date for the beginnings of Kurdish nationalism in the literature. A claim of premodern nationalism sounds simply unacceptable. It is for this reason that many scholars cling to Anthony Smith's *ethnie* in order to speak of premodern Kurdish existence, even as they overwhelmingly submit to the hegemonic appeal of Anderson or Hobsbawm-style modernism.¹¹

As much as refusing to attribute nationalism to Xanî is the expected course of action for progressive scholars rightly suspicious of nationalism and its historiographic traps, leaving untouched Xanî's modern dimension for fear of seeing nationalism where there is none has not been helpful, either. The question remains: How are we to explain the uncannily modern character of Xanî's political ideas?

The Question of Nationalism

Nationalism, as a political commitment or guiding spirit, is typically superficial, lazy, and selective when it comes to historiography. As such it can easily become a refuge for intellectual flaccidity and an excuse for avoiding critical confrontation. Identity politics should not block, let alone replace, intellectual scrutiny, but intellectual scrutiny, too, should rise above identity politics when it comes to deciding what qualifies as philosophy. I argue that Xanî deserves to be taken seriously as a political philosopher, and the existing literature seems not to have done so. What is the philosophical merit of Xanî?

I ultimately argue that Xanî should be seen as a social contract theorist. His diagnosis of the problem of disunity¹² among the Kurds, though succinct and in poetic form, contains all the parts of a social contract theory. Completed in 1695, roughly half a century after Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651),¹³ Xanî's brief discussion implies a concise yet robust conception of the social contract. Kurds' failure to establish unity and achieve political success is due, according to Xanî, to the fact that they do not want to leave the state of nature and enter a commonwealth. Kurds enjoy a liberty without civility. Fear of being beholden to others leads to the failure of the civilizational project among them. By civilizational project, I mean efforts toward political solidarity, which are not necessarily to be identified with the form of nation. This discussion needs to be

carried out independent of the narrow debate on nationalism. By doing so, we can release Xanî's response to the predicament of Kurdish civility from the confines of nationalist discourse, foregrounding the striking modernity of his approach without risking the anachronistic appropriation of Xanî as a nationalist.

In the prefatory essay to his English translation of *Mem û Zîn*, Salah Saadalla¹⁴ characterizes Xanî in the following way: "The Kurds consider Xanî not only as their greatest poet but also as their unrivalled pioneer of the Kurdish national ideology, who formulated clearly its goals and defined the means to attain them."¹⁵ Kurdish intellectual Nureddin Zaza (1919–1988), in his preface to the story of "Memê Alan," describes Xanî as a thinker of the dialectic and a precursor of Hegel and Marx.¹⁶ As noted by others,¹⁷ a leading figure of Kurdish nationalism, Mîr Celadet Bedirxan, has gone so far as to praise Xanî as the prophet of the Kurds¹⁸ or consecrate his status as the "third teacher"¹⁹—a reference to Farabi who, for his commentary on Aristotle, is famously known as "the second teacher." Similar enthusiasm is found in Faik Bulut's sensational Turkish book, *The Unknown World of the Kurds in Ehmedê Xanî's Writings*, where the desire to depict a simultaneously "exotic" and "progressive" Kurdish culture readily generates anachronisms and exaggerations.²⁰

Given nationalism's tendency to invent tradition and assert the primacy of all things "ours," one has to be very cautious about such nation-building activities. Yet while caution against such overreach is commendable, some of those "excessive interpretations"²¹ contain a grain of truth. Some scholars, whose primary focus is the literary character of Xanî's work, consider it a mistake to devote much attention to *Mem û Zîn*'s political commentary (which occurs largely in a separate, introductory section). They argue that the text should be read primarily as a literary work within the classical *mesnevi* tradition and not as a philosophical text.²² However, treating Xanî as merely a poet who produced literature using existing forms in his native idiom in order to elevate the status of the Kurdish language does not do him justice, either. To argue for the multivalence of Xanî's work is one thing; to depoliticize a fundamentally political text is another thing entirely.

I suggest that approaches that tend to depoliticize Xanî do a disservice to his proper understanding on two accounts. First, the relevant passages are indeed political commentary. That they are introduced in a book of literature or in the form of poetry does not make them less philosophical or unworthy of philosophical attention. Second, if we were to choose to understand one in terms of the other, we would do better to understand the literary main part of the work in light of those introductory comments, for the prior work is what defines and situates the latter. If Xanî himself, with an astounding degree of self-reflexivity, describes his literary venture as a political act, we cannot simply ignore the political character of the enterprise.

Explaining Xanî as an Anomaly

While, as we have seen, Xanî ought not to be hijacked by the nationalist narrative, his anomalous status as a thinker cannot be ignored, either. I believe Xanî can be compared philosophically to Niccolò Machiavelli on the question of

politics and to Hobbes on the question of social contract. He can be compared to Enlightenment thinkers in terms of the secularity of his analysis and his rational theology. Xanî is anomalous because he is modern in a premodern age. Of course, Xanî sounds anachronistic, because we see him in relation to a destitute Kurdish society and the absent modernity of the so-called Muslim world. We assume that what seems unlikely for a society at a given time must be unlikely for individuals within it, as well. But if we think of Xanî as a coeval of Enlightenment thought and early modern Europe, he no longer appears so anomalous. It becomes palatable, even, to consider Xanî in many ways a unique figure in history, a man ahead of his time. We should not deny the philosophical respect we show for Anaximander's fragments in the Ancient Greek tradition to the political and philosophical fragments of Xanî in the Introduction of *Mem û Zin*. If we had no part of *Mem û Zin* but the *dibace*, Xanî would still be as important intellectually.

The early modern period is seen as a time when philosophical thought has one foot in the middle ages and one foot in modernity. Science, reason, natural law, and human agency are in the ascendant, while belief in God still dominates, religious dogmas are being questioned, and aristocratic culture is still prevalent. It is an era of transitions and vernacularizations of various kinds. It is worth remembering, though, that before the concept of popular sovereignty burst into the open with mass movements like the French Revolution, it already permeated the literate classes. And as sovereignty gained traction as a concept, it underwent a transition from divine and royal to secular and popular.

Is it possible that a particular—and unusual—spatio-temporal conjuncture generated a unique combination of stimuli (comparable to, say, the English Civil War) and that that stimulus interacted with Xanî's native genius to produce a set of untimely ideas? If we were to entertain this possibility, then we could begin to ask at least two questions: First, what was the historical context that bequeathed Xanî his political consciousness? Second, if not nationalism, what would be a more legitimate explanatory framework for expressing Xanî's location in history and his intellectual contribution?

In what follows, I will first answer these two questions by visiting the historical context of Xanî's political ideas and situating him in the early modern framework. Then I will bring to light his political philosophy as it is expressed in sections 5–6 of *Mem û Zin*. I hope to present Xanî's political philosophy and make it visible with resort to three interrelated concepts: peoplehood, sovereignty, and social contract.

Historical Context of His Political Consciousness

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that shaped Ehmedê Xanî were characterized by the rise and fall of Kurdish emirates during a time of inter-imperial competition. The geographic character of the lands where the Kurds lived seems to have always conditioned the politics and prospects of the Kurds. One popular expression of this fact is the famous mantra, "Kurds have no friends but the mountains." Much as they are celebrated, the mountains have been a mixed blessing for the Kurds:

they allowed the Kurds to escape the control of the empires surrounding them but also made it difficult for them to create a central authority of their own.

With the rise of the Safavid dynasty, the Kurds became sandwiched between two of the three Muslim empires²³ of the day. Kurdish lands became an arena of “evolving identities, competing loyalties, and shifting boundaries,” as the subtitle of a book²⁴ nicely captures. Kurdistan acted as a buffer zone between the Ottomans and the Safavids. It turned into a space of conflict and battleground for recurrent wars. Caught in a centuries-long crossfire of two empires, the Kurds always found themselves “awash in blood,” as Xanî writes:

*Bif'kir ji 'ereb heta ve gurcan
Kirmanc ci bûye şubhê burcan*

*Ev rûm û 'ecem bi wan hisar in
Kirmanc hemî li çar kinar in*

*Herdu terefan qebilê kirmanc.
Bo tîrê qeda kirine amanc*

*Goya ko li serhedan kilid in
Her ta'ife seddek in sedid in*

*Ev qulzimê rûm û behrê tacik
Hindî ko bikin xurûc û tehrîk*

*Kirmanc dibin bi xwin mulettex
Wan jêk ve dikin misalê berzex*

Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians
Kurds have become like fortresses

Turks and Persians are shielded by them
It is all Kurds on all sides

Both parties have turned the Kurdish clans
Into targets for their fatal arrows

Assumed to be locks at the frontier
Each community is a solid barrier

The ocean-like Turks and Tajiks
Whenever they rise and move

The Kurds become awash in blood
As, like a buffer, they keep the two sides apart

The Ottoman-Safavid struggle was “the central international conflict in the Muslim world”²⁵ and Kurdish participation in those conflicts—on one side or both—was the price to be paid for living on the frontiers of these two empires. From the Battle of Chaldiran²⁶ in 1514 to the Qasr-e Shirin treaty in 1639, the two states, according to Sabri Ateş, “fought over the borderlands extending from the Persian Gulf to Mount Ararat and the transformation of this indeterminate borderland into a clearly defined and increasingly monitored border took almost four centuries.”²⁷

What gave some unity to the residual identity of these borderland inhabitants was not only local religious and kinship networks but also a shared “frontier ethos.”²⁸ Kurds came to see themselves in contradistinction to the powers that surrounded them. It is important to remember “that the external classification of the Kurds” played an important role in Kurds’ own self-perception.²⁹ This residual character of Kurdish identity can be seen as something emerging out of an inter-imperial space, a product of subjection to integration. If nothing else succeeded in giving a relative coherence to Kurdishness, the double limits placed on them by these two empires did.

And that is why “Kurdistan’s peripherality”³⁰ or its “borderland”³¹ status is key to its political and intellectual development. Frontier ethos, borderland experience, and peripheral precariousness all contributed to the formation of Kurdish identity as articulated in both *Sharafnama* (1597) and *Mem û Zîn* (1695). Kurdish liminality and the tectonic friction between the Ottoman and Safavid military-

cultural powerhouses resulted in an intensified "border" experience among the Kurds, especially their intellectuals. This heightened condition of liminality forced a heightened consciousness of the self by generating frequent reminders of otherness. Dwelling on shifting borders, between contending armies, the Kurds (or, at least, their scholars) were ironically forced into a premature "modernity" marked by intensified self-awareness and a critical spirit, due to multiple, forced comparisons (*mahkum*) and consciousness of relative deprivations (*mahrum*). Xanî flourished on the fertile post-volcanic ashland of the Ottoman-Safavid conflict that had flowed over the Kurdish lands. Kurdistan gained a modern territorial meaning first and foremost by becoming the main theater of Ottoman-Persian rivalry. This rivalry gave local Kurdish rulers some leverage but at the same time kept them in an uncertain, precarious position. Kurds' status with respect to the confrontation of two empires was, in Xanî's own terms, one of *berzah* (a passage, a buffer zone between the two powers, a limbo).

From Evliya Çelebi to Sharaf Khan and Ehmedê Xanî, all contemporary literary and political writings perceived the Kurdish principalities as strategic spots or "solid barriers" scattered across a region of "incessant power struggle."³² This continuous scramble between the Ottomans and the Safavids sharpened the political sensibilities of the Kurdish dynasties with respect to rulership, diplomacy, kingship, and sovereignty. Divided and oscillating between the Ottomans and the Safavids, the elites of the prominent Kurdish principalities were sharply aware of the need for administrative expertise (as in the case of Sharaf Khan) and of the importance of political legitimacy and courtly space for literary production (as in the case of Ehmedê Xanî).

Kurdish Identity and Territoriality

Evliya Çelebi's map of Kurdistan more or less corresponds to our contemporary understanding of the Kurdish lands. Similarly, Xanî's own reference to the plight of the Kurds in the lands stretching "from Arabs to Georgians" (*bifikir ji Ereb heta va Gurcan*) implies an emergent conception of territoriality and peoplehood.

The territoriality and identity of the Kurdish lands emerged out of the in-between-ness of the Kurds vis-à-vis the two empires. It was not an internally bounded territory but an externally demarcated one. Although political elites could limit their concerns to their immediate locality and their relationship to the imperial centers, Kurdish *ulama*, who were more widely traveled and less tied to a local political unit, were in a better position to imagine the larger populace and broader experience of borderlands. The equilibrium between the two empires created a relative stability in Kurdistan's history, paving the way for the flourishing of art and culture. "It is not surprising that the literary use of Kurdish coincides with the rise of Kurdish political power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries."³³

One might wonder, at this point, if it is not anachronistic to use the word *Kurd* to describe the people of the land at that time. The use of the word *Kurd* is justified since Xanî himself spoke in terms of peoples when he referred to others and

conceived of the "people" as his unit of analysis. He appears to use *Kurd*, *akrad*, and *Kurmanji* interchangeably. Whenever he says *me* (us) as in *derdê me* (our plight), he seems to mean all the Kurdish populace. When he addresses the elite he says so. Otherwise, there is reason to believe that by "us" or "Kurds" he means the people and not just the courtly class. He blames the elite for their failures in leadership; when he speaks of suffering, he typically has ordinary people (including poets like himself) in mind.

Tebi'yyetê wan eger ci 'ar e
Ew 'are li xelqê namidar e

Namus e li hakim û emîran
Tawan ci ye şai'r û feqîran

If subordination to them be shameful
The disgrace of it falls to the elite

It is a matter of honor for the rulers and princes
What are the poet and the poor to do?

He does not mention dynastic names (Ottomans or Safavids) or imperial titles (sultans and shahs) or countries but instead identifies the dominant ethno-political category (Turk, Ajam) or neighboring ethnic categories (Rom/Turk, Ajam/Tajik, Arabs, Georgians). Moreover, in an extremely fragmented tribal society, he does not mention Botis, Rojikis, etc. but calls his own people either *Kurmanj* or *Kurd*. I think we can safely assume that Xanî is referring to the people rather than the ruling class exclusively when he says Kurds.

Having established the existence of Kurdishness, at least as a residual and liminal category, we move on to the second component: is there any reason to think that Xanî was intellectually on par with early modern European thought? Here a slightly unexpected fact about the state of Kurdish scholarship in the seventeenth century comes into play.

According to Khaled El-Rouayheb, the works of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Persian and Kurdish scholars were suffused with the call for *tahqiq* (the verification of truth). While elsewhere there might have been an eclipse of the philosophical sciences, Kurdish scholars were a notable exception; they played a major role in the "reinvigoration of the rational sciences" in the Muslim world.³⁴ The seventeenth-century Kurdish scholars in Istanbul and Damascus were simultaneously introducing the rational sciences to Ottoman scholarly circles. Historian, geographer, and encyclopedist Katip Çelebi (d.1657) notes, for example, that after the eclipse of the philosophical sciences (*felsefiyat*) in the Ottoman capital it was only thanks to "the novices of scholars ... in the lands of the Kurds [who] came to Rum" and taught rational sciences that seventeenth-century intellectual life was revitalized in Istanbul and elsewhere (quoted in El-Rouayheb³⁵). Mulla Mahmud Kurdî (d. 1663), according to the seventeenth-century Damascene historian Muhammad Amin al-Muhibbî (d.1699), "was the first to teach the books of the Persians" in Damascus and he "opened the gate of verification [*tahqiq*] in that city. Similarly Mulla Chelebi Amidi (d. 1656), according to al-Muhibbi, counted as his students almost all prominent Ottoman scholars active in the last quarter of the seventeenth century."³⁶

The scholarly climate out of which Xanî emerged was intellectually sophisticated and rationalist in orientation. It provides us with a strong ground for conceiving of Xanî as an early modern thinker at the intersection of medieval (Muslim) civilization and emerging (European) modernity.

Xanî's Early Modernity

The Ottoman defeat of the Safavids with the help of the Kurdish emirates allowed for both political autonomy and cultural growth in Kurdish lands. Ottoman domination also triggered a linguistic shift and opened room for a comparative assessment of the merit and status of languages. The relative weakening of Persianate literary hegemony had consequences both in the Kurdish princely courts and Kurdish scholarly institutions. Turkish became the dominant language of translation and communication in the Kurdish princely courts, while Kurdish became an aspiring language of literature and education in Kurdish *medreses*.³⁷ Both *Sharafnama* and *Mem û Zîn* are products of this intensified political experience. If *Sharafnama* reflects the moment of "the flourishing of the system of principalities in the late sixteenth century," *Mem û Zîn* is an elegy over the ruins of that system.

Could it be that Xanî's political awakening and his futuristic ideas were simply the result of a historical accident? Whatever conditions generated political modernity in Europe (and elsewhere) might have made an earlier appearance in the life and times of Xanî. Two cases that come to mind here as potentially comparable are Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli, both of them scholars who served as court secretaries. One was premodern and witnessed in his journeys the rise and fall of many states; the other was an early modern courtier, in whose day Italy was a patchwork of principalities harried by the French and the Habsburgs. Such a concatenation of events cannot be simply dismissed; it stands as a challenge for historians and philosophers to find structural reasons for Xanî's untimely modernity.

My own explanation is that the inter-imperial fault line³⁸ on which the Kurds found themselves created a zone of tectonic shifts that invited an intellect like Xanî to make sense of the "plight" of the Kurds. This in-between zone opened up a space of reflection and posed a rare demand for self-reflexivity, encouraging a genius like Xanî to see and think, so to say, beyond his time. Here I am employing a structural-historical explanation in the manner of Montesquieu. Montesquieu believed in the social genesis of ideas and drew attention to both social and physical factors. For example, his classification of societies (republic, monarchy, despotism) was based on the size and population density of the society. Large empires were likely to be despotic, while very small city-states were likely to become republics. What sort of political structure would a buffer zone like Kurdistan generate? Whether we call the Kurdish emirates or mini-states feudal or anarchic, they always remained fragmentary and always lacked the conditions of kingship. Their distance from the Ottoman capital created local autonomy and confederative potential at the horizontal level. Yet, as Xanî notes, the stiff-necked

independence among the Kurdish people prevented them from forming a union or a civil compact.

It is helpful to think of Xanî as a frontier figure of his Muslim scholarly milieu. He represents a peak moment of Muslim thought as it was appropriated and circulated within the Kurdish cultural domain, even as it had already gone into decline elsewhere. In other words, Xanî can be seen as a fruit of Kurdish *hikmah* (philosophy or learned tradition) at its most mature moment, before the Kurds, too, began to participate in the broader decline of Islamic civilization. Hence he was a late fruit of the Islamic intellectual tradition, protected by geographic-cultural factors and left to ripen in the final days before Muslim civilization decisively passed the torch of intellectual leadership to Western civilization. Though he casts it in narrow Marxist terms, Amir Hassanpour makes a similar argument when he writes, "[I]f European Renaissance was the budding of the capitalist era, the 'renaissance' of seventeenth century Kurdistan was the climax of its feudal order."³⁹ To summarize, what is new/pioneering in the West overlaps intellectually with what was old/disappearing in the Muslim world. We can understand early modernity, as a milieu, as the transition between the end of Muslim civilization and the rise of Western civilization.

If we set these two trends side by side, Xanî might appear too modern for the Muslim tradition and too Muslim for our sense of modernity as a novel Western phenomenon. There are, however, a number of compelling reasons to see Xanî as an early modern thinker. I argue that Xanî is not only early modern but also *an* early modern, for at least eight reasons:

1. The secularity of his ideas. In this regard, Xanî shows similarities to Ibn Khaldun, whose analysis of *umran* gave autonomy to causal/scientific explanations, as opposed to fate or divine predestination. There are abundant mystical tales and supernatural stories about Jizîrî and Feqîyê Teyran, but none about Xanî.⁴⁰ Similarly, *Mem û Zîn* has no room for fairies and supernatural beings. Xanî's world is relatively secular, purged of spirits and jinn.
2. His understanding of state and power is based on "realism," not theology. Xanî demystifies political power and explains statehood in terms of seizing power with determination. In this he bears a strong similarity to Machiavelli.
3. In his search for an answer to the puzzle of Kurdish misfortune, Xanî takes his audiences through a step-by-step divestment or gradual transition from the supernatural forces of fate to the agency of human beings (and not of the elites only).
4. In locating sovereignty, we see a gradual shift in his discourse from the authority of kingship (divine or otherwise) to the people as actors of history. Xanî rejects the *corpus mysticum* of kingship.
5. Xanî is a vernacularizer par excellence. Vernacularization of language (an early modern phenomenon) represents the demand, needs, and growing power of publics—the necessity of disseminating knowledge among the people. For Xanî such empowerment is a burning issue.

6. In Xanî's universe, we discover modern subjectivity. Every individual has to take responsibility for him-/herself. This is not only found in *Mem û Zîn* but also in his poetry, the *Diwan*, as well: *vi zemani her kesek mi'marê diwarê xwe ye* (In this age, everybody is the architect of their own wall).
7. An important distinction that has gone unnoticed or been lost in most English translations and interpretations of the text is the fact that Xanî often juxtaposes—while carefully distinguishing between—*mîr* (princes) and *mêr* (people). This distinction prefigures the emergence of people as autonomous political actors.
8. Xanî's self-reflexivity. As an author he has a plan; he has engineered a literary text with a very modern political agenda. When it comes to self-reflexivity, he is more like an anthropologist.

Xanî's Political Philosophy: Sovereignty, Peoplehood, Social Contract

We can now turn our attention to some of the conceptual strands Xanî weaves together in his political philosophy. My discussion here is limited to three concepts that are particularly relevant for our present purposes: sovereignty, peoplehood, and social contract.

Sovereignty

According to Xanî, the *production of poetry* and the *exercise of sovereignty* are twin processes. The aesthetic and the political domains are symbolized by verse and coin. He sees literature as dependent on sovereignty for its validation. Here literature or poetry stands for "value" in general. He conveys the notion of value without validity through the image of coins that, although real, cannot be used in the marketplace. Recognition of value is possible only through the validation provided by sovereignty. One of the central points of Xanî's political writing is that the validity of a given society's literature is dependent on the recognition garnered by the sovereignty of its people. The image of the king in Xanî is entirely instrumental. To the extent that a king may be the form and vessel of sovereignty, kingship is desirable to him. But should such a figure prove unavailable to the Kurds, he is prepared to move on to other means in pursuit of his goal. It is the very absence of a king among the Kurds that pushes Xanî's thinking beyond the classical and into an early modern possibility: sovereignty without a king. This is precisely why Xanî's conception of sovereignty, as it moves from princely sovereignty toward the sovereignty of the people—albeit a virtue made of necessity—is truly modern.

In this, Xanî's heirs are contemporary Kurdish militant and political parties like the PKK, PYD, and HDP. Eschewing the goal of a Kurdish state, they have turned toward the postmodern ecological-anarcho-libertarian-municipal imagination of post-Marxist leftist thinkers. PKK's imprisoned leader's almost religious adherence to the ideas of Murray Bookchin, a relatively obscure American thinker, is an

obvious case in point. It could be understood as a mere intellectual vagary, were it not that Bookchin-inspired ecological communitarian ideas have been put into practice, to the dismay of some Kurdish people and the delight of metropolitan Marxist intellectuals, in Rojava (Western Kurdistan or Northern Syria).

Returning to Xani's political ideas, we should note that he does not merely raise them in passing in the preface. It is my contention that as much as *Mem û Zîn* is a literary project, it is a political project. More specifically, if Xani's own self-presentation is taken seriously, *Mem û Zîn* appears to have been devised as a political tool, if not an outright subaltern weapon.

Consider the flow of the *Dibace* (Introduction). After a few segments laying out the plight of the Kurds (despair, current reality, and hope for change), it soon offers a remedy: a king appears. The king represents sovereignty; our currency becomes minted coinage, as Xani puts it, no longer doubtful and worthless exchange. If we had a king our fortune would have brightened.

*Qet mumkin e ev ji çerxê lewleb
Tali' bibitin ji bo me kewkeb*

*Bexte me ji bo me ra bibit yar
Carek bibitin ji xwabê hisyar*

*Rabit ji me ji cihanpenahek
Peyda bibitin me padişahek*

*Ştrê hunera me bête danîn
Qedrê qelema me bêta zanîn*

*Derdê me bibînitin ilacê
İlmê me bibînitin rewacê*

*Ger dê hebuya me serfirazek
Sahipkeremek, suxennewazek*

*Neqde me dibû bi sikke meşkûk
Ned'ma wehe bêrewac û meşkûk*

*Herçend ko xalis û temiz in
Neqdên bi sikkeyê 'eziz in*

*Ger dê hebuya me padişahek
Layiq bidiya Xwedê kulahek*

*Te'yn bibuwa ji bo wî tacek
Elbette dibû me ji rewacek.*

*Xemxwarî dikir li me yetîman
Tinane dere ji dest leitman*

*Xalib nedibu li ser me ev Rom
Nedbûna xerabe ê di dest bûm*

Is it possible that the wheel of fortune favor us
That a star shine over us

That our luck become amicable to us
That it awaken once from slumber

That a world refuge emerge for us
And a king appear

That the power of our art be established
The value of our pen acknowledged

Our plight remedied
Our learning sought after

If we had a proud leader
Generous and a patron of literature

Our currency would be minted coinage
Not such doubtful and worthless exchange

Even when pure and distinct
Coins gain their value when stamped at a mint

If we had a king
If God had deemed him worthy of a crown

And a throne had been established for him
Our fortune would have brightened

He would have cared for us compassionately
He would have saved us from the accursed ones

Rum would not be victorious over us
We would not be the ruins where the owl
perches

Xani starts his disquisition on the plight of the Kurds by asking a cupbearer to pour wine so the glass (in a species of fortune-telling) can reveal the situation. At

this stage, the source of history is fate (Fortuna) and a king merely appears. The king has no prior justification; he is simply dispensed by destiny. Responsibility lies with *felek*, which is at once the sky (and by extension, the zodiac) and destiny. Here Xanî fantasizes about what such a king could do. His king is the ideal-type of a sovereign who looks after the orphans and defends them from the attacks of the Turks and Persians. While emphasizing the role of the sovereign in pulling the Kurds out of their misery, Xanî realizes that this is simply wishful thinking. For a moment, he plunges back into despair. In what will prove to be a transitional gesture, the poet resigns himself to the divine decree.

*Emma ji ezel Xwedê wisa kir
Ev Rum u 'Ecem li ser me rakir*

But God from eternity so willed that
These Turks and Persians be unleashed against us

Then he begins to assign responsibility for the Kurds' plight, turning first to the elite:

*Tebî'yyetê wan eger ci 'ar e
Ew 'are li xelqê namidar e*

If subordination to them be shameful
The disgrace of it falls to the elite

*Namus e li hakim û emiran
Tawan ci ye şai'r û feqîran*

It is a matter of honor for the rulers and
princes
What are the poet and the poor to do?

Criticizing the elite or nobility for their failure to effectively lead the Kurds, he goes on as if to imply that there is no magic to the job. It is significant to note that nowhere in *Mem û Zîn* does Xanî mention *farr*, the royal glory customarily invoked in texts praising kings.⁴¹ When he writes about the *mîrs* (princes)—again going against convention—Xanî subjects them to criticism.⁴² He warns against bad rulers and the harm they cause. Even so, some interpreters describe him as having written *Mem û Zîn* to please the *mîr* of Botan (O'Shea and Leezenberg) or even seeking "a royalty" (*telif ücreti*).⁴³ Yet this tendency to reduce Xanî's diagnosis of social ills to a play for princely patronage goes against the spirit of the text. The misunderstanding is driven, of course, by Xanî's invocation of a king. But what many commentators have failed to appreciate is that both kingship and currency are symbols of the sovereignty of a people, which gives validity to its literary currency.

*Her çi bire şîrî destê hîmmet
Zebt kir ji bo xwe bi mêrî dewlet*

Anyone who raised the sword resolutely
Would seize the state for himself with
virility

*Lewra ku cihan wekî 'erûs e
Wê hukmî di destê şîrê rus e*

That is why the world is like a bride
Falling to the hand that draws the sword

*Lê 'eqd û sîdaq û mehr û kabîn
Lutf û kerem û 'eta û bexşîn*

The bride's contract and dowry
Are kindness and generosity

*Pirsî ji dinê min ev bi hikmet
Mehra te ci? Gote min ku hîmmet*

With wisdom I asked the world
What is your dowry? She answered:
determination

*Hasil ku dinê bi şîr û îhsan
Têsxîri dibit ji boyî însan*

Thus by sword and benevolence the world
Surrenders to such a man

Here kingship is demystified and the state-founding act is explained in terms of power. It almost implies that anybody could do the job of becoming the sovereign. Readers familiar with Machiavelli should immediately recognize that Xanî's Prince here is almost identical to Machiavelli's. A quote from *The Prince* will refresh our memory:

I conclude, therefore, that since Fortuna changes and men remain set in their ways, they will prosper as long as the two are in accord with one another, but they will not prosper, when the two are not in accord. I certainly think this: that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortuna is a woman and it is necessary, in order to keep her under, to beat and knock her about. And one sees that she lets herself be conquered by men of this sort more than by those who proceed coldly. And therefore, like a woman, she is always the friend of the young, because they are less cautious, fiercer, and master her with more audacity.⁴⁴

The similarities are many. Both have a vision of political rule that is free from moralizing influences. Both of them rely on the notion of virility (*virtù* in Machiavelli and *mêrîni* in Xanî). A ruler should be someone who can be resolute in the application of power (by the sword) but should also be capable of employing kindness. Machiavelli agrees with Xanî, though in a slightly pessimistic register: "a ruler who wants to remain in power should not always be good." The two share a conception of Fortuna as a woman (Machiavelli) and a bride (Xanî)—though Xanî's approach is more sharia-compliant—who ultimately demands to be mastered and gives herself only to those men who court her with determination. Like Machiavelli, Xanî was an early modern thinker whose ideas included elements of both the medieval (traditional) and modern (innovative) worlds. Both were well aware of the novelty of their ideas. And like Xanî, Machiavelli too was a transitional figure.⁴⁵ The pair are caught between two cosmologies, in an encounter between fate (*fortuna*) and will (*virtù*).

Peoplehood

Xanî's analysis is not romantic nationalism but a prescient philosophical perspective on sovereignty and the liberation of a people. If not for nationalism, then certainly for modernity, Xanî was a prophet whose audience was the future. Of course Xanî did not have an industrial, mass society that would fulfill the conditions of modern nationalism. But we should keep in mind that incipient nationalism was always an elite phenomenon. Elites first contrived and then invited the masses into a

newly fashioned identity and a vernacular body politic. That is precisely what Xanî does. Scholars of nationalism are vigilant about its retrospective attribution, but they might do well to devote more attention to the forward-thinking character of national movements. From Xanî to Koyî to Nursî, most Kurdish intellectuals have complained about the lack of receptivity on the part of their contemporaries and chosen, instead, to speak to the future.⁴⁶ Whether the Kurds of Xanî's time saw themselves as Kurds is much less the question than whether Xanî saw them as such. The poet is not only reporting to us about the existence of Kurdish identity, he is an author and performer of it.

According to neo-perennialist scholars of nationalism like Steven Grosby, a certain form of premodern national community emerged in the past on the basis of "the native land" versus "the foreigner." In the case of Japanese society, collective national consciousness was encapsulated in two samurai slogans: "revere the emperor" and "expel the barbarian."⁴⁷ From this perspective, Kurds are, for Xanî, a people caught between the two empires and stretching from the land of the Arabs to that of the Georgians. The people that enter Xanî's imagination as Kurds are constituted not by some essential quality or even self-conscious choice, but by external forces. Even when an in-group lacks solidarity, it may be forced into it by an out-group. As Hobbes puts it, "[T]he multitude sufficient to confide in for our security is not determined by any number but by comparison with the enemy we fear."⁴⁸ Besides, John Lie, who uses the notion of peoplehood as a supra-notion that captures ethnicity, nation, and race all at once, defines it as "a self-reflexive identity."⁴⁹ Peoplehood, defined accordingly, becomes possible when what was once restricted to the elite becomes an attribute of the populace.

At the next turning point in the *dibace*, Xanî begins to question the divine wisdom in the condition of his people:

*Ez mame di hîkmeta Xwedê da
Kurmanc-i di dewleta dinê da
Aya bi çi wechtî mane mehrûm
Bilcumle ji bo çi bûne mehkûm*

I wonder at the wisdom of the Lord
With regard to a temporal state
Why is it that the Kurds remain deprived?
For what reason are they all condemned?

Here Xanî turns his face away from the heavens and down to earth, looking to the people themselves as the source of needed agency. There, however, he sees their miserable condition and describes it as a paradox to be resolved. They are generous and brave but occupy an unfortunate position between the two empires. Their liminality and victimhood leave them in chaos, relegated to object status. Xanî appeals to their "honor" as a mode of motivation and speaks of their bravery. At this point the shift of focus from the elite (*mîrs*, princes) to the people (*mêrs*, men) is made visible by pairing them. The transition from *mîr* to *mêr* functions as a transfer of agency:

*Her mîreke wan bi bezlê Hatem
Her mîreke wan bi rezme Rustem*

Each *prince* of them is generous like Hatem
Every *man* of them is brave like Rustem

In the absence of a king and having called into question the power of fate, the new task for Xanî is to encourage people to pull themselves out of their current condition. Here we reach the point where the very absence of a king pulls Xanî's imagination toward a modern conception of sovereignty, one that demands a popular body politic. After discussing how Kurds are victimized at the hands of the Turkish and Persian empires, Xanî tries to awaken his people by praising them:

*Cuwamêri û hîmmet û sexawet
Mêrtîni û xîret û celadet
Ew xetm e jîbo qebîlê ekrad
Wan dane bi şîrê hîmmetê dad*

Resolution, bravery and generosity
Courage, princeliness and endurance
That is the mettle of the Kurds
Who gain their rights with the sword of zeal

Once Xanî conceives of the possibility of people as autonomous actors in the making of history, he has to come up with mechanisms for coordinating their collective behavior. That is precisely where the question of a commonwealth arises. And that question assumes urgency in places where there is chaos or civil war.

Social Contract

While examples of Xanî's 'people'ism abound, a particularly early one is *Mem û Zîn's* dedication (section 5). In the dedication, which by *mesnevi* convention is typically addressed to a ruler, Xanî's addressee is not an individual person, but the Kurdish communities—that is, the Kurds as a people:⁵⁰

*Îş'ara medîheta tewafê di Kurdan e
bi şecdet û xîretê
îzhara bedbextî û bêtalî'ya wan e
digel hinde semahet û hemîyyetê*

In praise of the brave and eager
Kurdish peoples [communities]
To demonstrate how unlucky and
unfortunate they are
Despite their generosity and devotion

Kurds' lack of solidarity, problematized so emphatically in Xanî, has long been echoed by various Kurdish figures, from sixteenth-century Sharaf Khan to twentieth-century Said Nursi. Nursi's famous tripartite diagnosis of late-Ottoman malaise was originally conceived in a specifically Kurdish context (only later was it detached from its Kurdish origins and applied to Turkish society). He believed that there were three major problems in Kurdish society: ignorance, poverty, and disunity. Against these three enemies, his weapons of choice were education, industry, and union. The question of Kurdish disunity is a problem that persists to this day and includes the "organizational rivalries" of contemporary Kurdish political groups.⁵¹

Xanî continues with the observation that the Kurds seem not to want to leave the state of nature and enter the commonwealth. In the natural state they are brave and generous but their pride and aversion to indebtedness prevent them from entering the civil state.

*Hindî ji şecaetê xeyûr in
Ew çend ji minnetê nefûr in*

*Ev xîret û ev uluwwe hîmmet
Bû maniê hemlê barê minnet*

*Lew pêkve hemîşe bêtifaq in
Daîm bi temerrud û şîqaq in*

Great as is their zeal for deeds of bravery
Even so is their aversion to indebtedness

This courage and high-mindedness
Became a hindrance to their carrying the
burden of obligation

That is why they are always disunited
They are always rebellious and divided

Rather than surrender to a social contract, they prefer the liberty enjoyed in the state of nature. Xanî depicts the Kurds as anarchically democratic and fond of "autonomy," a form of liberty without civility. If commonwealth or civil state (notice, it is no longer a king but some form of "establishment") is created, their subordination will end. It is due to the failure of the Kurds to pursue the greater common good that they remain subordinate.

*Ger dê hebûya me ittifaqek
Vêk ra bikira me inqiyadek*

*Rum û 'Ereb û 'Ecem temami
Hemiyan ji me ra dikir xulamî*

*Tekmîl dikir me dîn û dewlet
Tehsil dikir me 'ilm û hikmet*

*Temyîz dibûn ji hev meqalat
Mumtaz dibûn xwedankemalat*

If we could form a union by agreement
And to that union we all submitted

It would force the Turks, Arabs and Persians
all together
To show deference to us

Then we would perfect religion and State
We would be able to cultivate knowledge and
wisdom

Then the hodgepodge would be sorted
Those with excellence would become
distinguished

If only we were to have unity among us, Xanî writes, and submit or bind ourselves to one another, then all of the Ottomans and Arabs and Persians would recognize and respect us, we would reach excellence in religion and state, and we would become producers of knowledge and wisdom.

Submission to the common good seems to be the key to the legitimacy of a commonwealth. It thus makes sense to compare the greater good with an entity above the individual and below God. In section 17 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes thus of the agreement by which commonwealth is created:

[A] real unity of them all in one and the same person, made with the covenant of every man with every man, in such a manner as if every man should say to every man: I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition; that thou give up thy right to his,

and authorize all his actions in like manner. This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a Commonwealth; in Latin, *Civitas*. This is the generation of that great Leviathan, or rather, to speak more reverently, of that mortal god to which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defense.⁵²

In the figure of Xanî, Kurdish intellectual liminality generated consciousness not only in the domain of politics but also in the domain of language. The power of Farsi as a literary language encouraged competition among its linguistic neighbors and a desire for promoting one's own language.⁵³ Political liminality and linguistic liminality opened up a space in which proving the capaciousness and precision of the Kurdish language became an imperative.

*Xanî ji kemalê bêkemaî
Meydanê kemalê dîti xalî*

*Yênî ne ji qabil û xebirî
Belkî bi te'essub û 'esîrî*

*Hasil ji 'înad eger ji bêdad
Ev bid'ete kir xilafê mu'tad*

*De xelq-i nebêjîtî ku Ekrad
Bê me'rîfet in, bê 'esl û bunyad*

*Enwa'ên milel xudan kitêb in
Kurmanc-i tenê di bê hisêb in*

Xanî, though lacking in perfection
You found unoccupied the arena of excellence

And stepped forward not because of skill or
knowledge
But rather out of loyalty and noble love for the
people

In short- call it stubbornness or impudence-
He enacted this novelty, contravening convention

So that people do not say that the Kurds
Lack education, origin, and foundations

Various nations have their classics
Only the Kurds lack them

In this section, Xanî explains his project and notes its "unusual novelty." He wants to refine and raise up Kurdish as a language of art and literature. The Kurds, Xanî believes, do ultimately have the potential as a people; what they lack is leadership.

I believe there is something more to the emphasis on Kurdish as a language in Xanî's project. He is not simply using language, he is fashioning it as a member of a pair: Word and Coin, Literature and Sovereignty. His insistent pairing of the two implies that he has in mind something beyond the mere use of the Kurdish language for literary purposes. For him, literature, too, is a gesture of sovereignty. The role of speech in the process of liberation has been noted by scholars of subordinate groups: movement from object (mass) status to subject status (peoplehood) involves a stage where the deployment of "speech" functions both as a weapon and a means of restoring humanity to the subject/ed.⁵⁴ Speech (in this case, the composition of literature) makes visible that which is invisible and gives validity to the humanity of the subject. Xanî's aesthetics can thus be seen as politics by other means. The sovereignty of a people is conceived in Xanî's self-presentation as having both literary and political dimensions.

This becomes clear when, in the absence of sovereign Kurdish power to mint coins—a symbol of authority—Xanî describes *himself* as minting coins. In a section where he explicates his purpose in writing this book *in Kurdish*, he claims

that in his poetry he is minting pure coins and draws attention to the relationship between sovereignty, legitimacy, and recognition.

*Ev pol gerçi bêbeha ne
Yekrû ne û saf û bêbaha ne
Bêhîle û xurde û temam in
Meqbûle mu'amela 'awam in
Kirmancî ye sirf e, beguman e
Zêr nîne bibîn sipîderman e*

These coins may be worthless
Yet they are refined, pure and priceless
With no defect, small and quite perfect
As general tender they are valid
Pure Kurdish, not suspect
Not gold, perhaps, but not tinsel

Xanî's modernity and his location in relation to nationalism can be understood with close attention to the nexus of sovereignty, peoplehood, and social contract in his methodological reflections in the Introduction to *Mem û Zîn*.

Already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, many thinkers were concerned with developing new principles for understanding society. "The aim," as Sofia Nasstrom has observed,

was to separate the rule of society from both the sacred authority of God and its representative on earth, the king. The state of nature was an important device in this break from the theological-political logic. By commencing from a state of nature it was possible to hold a place between past and future, to circumvent the authority of the existing regime and to begin anew.⁵⁵

The social contract theorists Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau shared this common concern. Breaking with the past was important. Yet even in their day, contract theory had not completely decapitated the king. For example, Hobbes's *Leviathan* imagined the sovereign who would rule over the people to be either "one man" or an "assembly of men to bear their person." Thus the people's contract with either their representative (a king) or with each other (a form of union) becomes the basis for the constitution of a new society. A government is constructed out of a multitude of free, more or less equal, and conflicting wills. In a commonwealth obedience to the government is understood as the equivalent of obedience to one's self. Locke, unlike Hobbes, is not happy with a person as sovereign and seeks to rely instead on the consent of the majority.

Xanî in his analysis of sovereignty begins with God and destiny as potential sources of change for the Kurds. Then he moves on to the possibility of a king (the Hobbesian moment) and from there transitions to *mîrs* (princes, elites) and further to *mêrs* (men, people) as respective loci of sovereignty. Finally he arrives at a Lockean moment where he calls the Kurds to unite into a community by entering into a contract with one another (*vêkra me bikira inqiyadek*).

Here it is important to highlight two words with which Xanî reaches bedrock in his search for the source and locus of sovereignty: *ittifaq* (union) and *inqiyad* (to tie oneself to, to make a covenant with). He combines the two in an interesting way; he proposes that the people make *inqiyad* to an *ittifaq*. The impersonal

and abstract sovereign thus emerges as a result of agreement among a stubborn, conflicting, and atomized multitude.

Xanî's body politic is so virtuous, it seems, that it manages to skip the step of regicide and arrive directly at a popular/democratic notion of sovereignty. This, however, is no real virtue, simply a necessity: the Kurds did not have a king to behead. In Europe, the transition from royal to popular sovereignty happened much later, during the age of democratic revolutions (1776–1848). Replacing the personal rule of a king with the impersonal self-rule of a people was not easy. It required the birth of the people as the legitimate foundation of public authority. What others only after much time and struggle could imagine (at least theoretically)—a political body without a head—was for Xanî and the Kurds, whose desire for a king of their own was never fulfilled, not quite so difficult to imagine. Xanî had to imagine a form of unity for a people without a king. The kingless body politic Xanî, *faute de mieux*, imagined for the Kurds generated a modern-seeming theory of social contract.

In short, whether it was the person of Leviathan (Hobbes), the principle of majority rule (Locke), or the general will (Rousseau), all social contract theorists tried to generate a device or mechanism for the exercise of sovereignty by the people. Though Xanî's analysis is by no means as detailed or philosophically presented, it does have all the key components of a social contract theory.

Conclusion

For Anthony Giddens, a key feature of modernity is reflexivity.⁵⁶ Reflexivity, which is an essential part of all human activity, undergoes a radical intensification in modern times. As a seventeenth-century thinker, Ehmedê Xanî appears unexpectedly modern in the way he understands and speaks of politics. In his poetic self-reflections, one can trace the birth of a Kurdish political subjectivity that has not yet acquired the form of "nation"—which requires certain preconditions that were lacking among the Kurds—but approaches the concept of "peoplehood." In Xanî, the lack of a king as sovereign and other factors that keep Kurds in their state of nature open the possibility of conceiving a union (Hobbes's "mortal god"). This form in Xanî's discourse, which has the semblance of nation yet is not, can be accommodated under the broader notion of "peoplehood." Stuck in between a not-yet-nation and a body politic that lacks a head, Xanî's search for a new form of sovereignty took him to the threshold of social contract theory. Notwithstanding their compactness of expression, Xanî's ideas on sovereignty, peoplehood, and commonwealth are rich enough to grant him the status of a not-yet-recognized social contract theorist for the Kurds.

In terms of historical period, Xanî belongs to the early modern era, but intellectually he is ahead of his time: properly modern. That nationalism in the nineteenth-century sense may not, as many others have argued, be attributed to him should not diminish our appreciation of Xanî's contemporary relevance as a thinker.

Notes

- 1 Kurdo (2010).
- 2 Vali (2003).
- 3 Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).
- 4 Bruinessen (2003); Chyet (1991); Leezenberg (2019a); Yildirim (2011).
- 5 Ateş (2019).
- 6 The Kurdish text reproduced here is from Arif Zerevan's transcription published as Xanî (2004). The English translation is mine. In preparing my translation I often consulted the admirable translations into English of Saadalla (2008); Shakely (1992), as well as Yildirim's Turkish rendition (2011). I am grateful to them all.
- 7 Xanî (2019: 237).
- 8 Bruinessen (2003: 3).
- 9 Leezenberg (2019b); O'Shea (2004).
- 10 O'Shea (2004: 174).
- 11 Maxwell and Smith (2015).
- 12 The problem of disunity among the Kurds (whether one construes it in terms of tribes, emirates, or a class of warriors) was around well before Xanî (in the *Sharafnama*) and continued long after him (in Haji Qadir Koyî or Bediuzzaman Said Nursi). About his people, Sharaf Khan, for example, says, "[T]hey do not follow and obey each other and do not have concord" (Hassanpour 2003: 113).
- 13 Hobbes (1996).
- 14 Khani (2008).
- 15 Khani (2008: 11).
- 16 Yildirim (2011: 239); Zaza (1996: 55-6).
- 17 Tek (2018: 417).
- 18 Bruinessen (2003: 10); Shakely (1992: 103).
- 19 Mem (2005).
- 20 Bulut (2011).
- 21 Hassanpour (2003); Shakely (1992).
- 22 Leezenberg (2019a); Tek (2018: 418).
- 23 Dale (2010).
- 24 Özoğlu (2004).
- 25 Eppel (2016: 28).
- 26 Ciwan (2015).
- 27 Ateş (2019: 397).
- 28 Ateş (2013: 4).
- 29 Özoğlu (2004: 31).
- 30 O'Shea (2004, 162).
- 31 Ateş (2013).
- 32 Alsancakli (2017a: 246).
- 33 Hassanpour (2003: 40).
- 34 El-Rouayheb (2015: 14-59).
- 35 Ibid., 57.
- 36 El-Rouayheb (2008: 213).
- 37 Alsancakli (2018: 192).
- 38 Eppel (2016: 27-44); Özoğlu (2004: 47).
- 39 Hassanpour (2003: 128).

- 40 Tek (2018: 419).
- 41 Leezenberg (2019b: 211).
- 42 *Ibid.*, 212.
- 43 Tek, 421.
- 44 Machiavelli (2003: 107).
- 45 Mansfield (1996).
- 46 A prime example of this tendency is posed by Said Nursi in his dialogues with Kurdish tribes on liberty and constitutionalism (in 1911). Nursi employs a certain rhetorical technique to highlight the future-oriented nature of the ideas he is presenting to his otherwise peasant audiences. When they fail to see what he depicts as the benefits of liberty and constitutional government, he says, "If so, I am not talking to you. I am turning this way, speaking to the people of the future: O Suids, Hamzas, Omers ... and others who are hidden behind the high century ... [i.e., people of the twenty-first century] quietly listening to my words and watching me with an invisible gaze! I am addressing you. Raise your heads and affirm by saying 'correct'! Let those contemporaries of mine not listen to me, if they wish. I am speaking to you over the wireless telegraph stretching from the river valleys of the past called history to your elevated future. What can I do? I hurried and came in the winter, but you will come in a paradisaal spring." See Nursi (2006: 119–20).
- 47 Ozkirimli (2010: 68–70).
- 48 Hobbes (1996: 104).
- 49 Lie (2004: 1).
- 50 Yildirim (2011: 50).
- 51 Tezcur (2019b).
- 52 Hobbes (1996: 106).
- 53 Tek (2018: 418).
- 54 Smith (1974: 120).
- 55 Nasstrom (2007: 634).
- 56 Giddens (1990).