7. Criticism of "Colonial Modernity" through Kurdish Decolonial Approaches

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Abstract

Western modernity with its colonial application has created an identity trauma and patriarchal domination of the memory of colonized and oppressed peoples. Critiques from colonized territories encourage us to reread the colonial epistemes of modernity, whether or not centered on the West. The Kurdish political movement thus defines a new interpretation of modernity based on the critique of colonialism and global capitalism: "democratic modernity." This chapter problematizes the relations between modernity, the nation state, the destruction of ecology, social confinement, the relationship of the forces of these relations, but above all the modalities by which it becomes possible to act on them to break the "stalemate" of the modernity of thought in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Kurdish space; Kurdish modernity; subaltern modernity; democratic modernity; decoloniality; stateless society

This article aims to question the complex reading of modernity in the Kurdish space and its critical decolonial approaches to the power and "knowledge"[1] of "colonial modernity" in the Middle East, but especially in Turkey. The colonially-constructed entity known as Kurdistan involves a certain intellectual contradiction among the dominant societies in the Middle East (Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) which contributes to the practice of coloniality (Vali 2011, introd. and 1–25, and Hawzhen Rashadaddin,

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1   See Wane and Todd 2018.

2015). The intellectual thought of colonial modernity in the Middle East in regard to the Kurdish region follows and has one thing in common with the thought of colonial practice: an act of concealment and ignorance of Kurdish existence. Jacobin intellectuals of the dominant society regard the Kurds as a part of those dominant societies (Beşikçi 2013a; Eagleton 1963; Bozarslan 2001b; Henning 2018; Yeğen 2014 and 1999). In this approach, the reflection of dominant and colonial modernity lies in the political and cultural authoritarianism which marks racial relations and the balance of power over the Kurds and their territory. Indeed, using the terms "subaltern modernity" and "decoloniality" calls into question this expression of colonialism. That is to say, this questioning gives us another possibility by encompassing the past and present of a colonial racial power system in the Middle East based on a political-cultural denial and an epistemic interiorization of the "Other society" and its knowledge (the knowledge of aboriginal people). The multiple forms of this attempt at this domination by colonial thought (by its modernity, see for coloniality, alienation and freedom of the colonized Fanon, 2018) have effectively generated an abundant literature of all kinds on the denial of Kurdish existence (especially in Turkey and with the establishment of Kemalist rule,[2] above all through the ways knowledge is developed; Alakom 1992; Beşikçi 2013c; Anter 1999 ; Gürgoz, 1997).[3] But it is worth adding, "Like the Ottoman intelligentsia, a significant part of the Kurdish intelligentsia was Westernist," as Hamit Bozarslan said towards the end of the Ottoman Empire (2003, 55–56). We could also speak of the exiled experience of the Kurds in Western public space which gave them an opportunity to engender their decolonial study.[4] We believe that because of colonial denial, the Kurds had to go into exile for more than a century. This experience of exile in the European era gave the actors of the Kurdish resistance and the intellectuals an opportunity to question colonial modernity. The Kurds organized their first political activities in the diaspora during the post-1947 period.[5] The first cultural, linguistic and intellectual activities of the Kurdish intelligentsia flourished in exile (Halkawt 1992; Sustam 2013; Bois 1965). All Kurdish resistance

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2   See Ahmad 1993, 52–102; and in Iran establishment from the time of the Shah to the Iranian revolution of Khomeini, see Vali 2011.

3   See articles by Bozarslan 2001b, pp. 53–60; 2001a; 2003; and 1994.

4   See the analysis on the "decolonial" concept, Mignolo and Walsh 2018, and Mignolo, Walter D. 2021. The Politics of Decolonial Investigations. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

5   See articles by Adnan Celik. 'Soğuk Savaş'ın İlk Yıllarında Avrupa'daki Kürt Aktivizmi: Kürt Gençlerinin Enternasyonal Öğrenci Ağlarına Katılımı ve Yeni Bir Kurtuluş Ufku Olarak Sovyet Komünizmi' online : http://kurdarastirmalari.com/yazi-detay-oku-148

movements and social movements have transformed exile into a place of revolt and creation. Exile can mean colonial history and memory in the memory of the Kurdish oppressed (Babakhan, 1994). Kurdish exile created the possibility of a policy of emancipation against the domination of colonial modernity which had blocked Kurdish visibility in its territory (Tejel Gorgas 2007 and 2017). Indeed, the exile of contemporary Kurdish literature and art gave birth to linguistic, pedagogical and artistic criticism to erase the traces of colonial modernity in the Kurdish memory (Sustam 2021). This reflection relieves the aggression of this dominant modernity which had destroyed at one time the geographical memory of the Kurdish space. It is a matter of grasping that the diaspora and exile are at the same time the places of the creation of Kurdish subaltern modernity. Contrary to the domination of Turkish, Iranian or Arab modernity (from Iraq and Syria), the Kurds had a decolonial perception in exile in the face of the overwhelming macro-nationalism of the Middle East. The Kurds have thus experienced the resistance of the African peoples and their anti-colonial approach. This connection with other subaltern modernities brings out new themes in the face of modernist domination in the Middle East. The decolonial criticism of the micro-narrative of the Kurdish space supports the affirmation of a political, territorial identity in emancipation. Abbas Vali adds that nationalism is the basis of this approach (2011, xv): "The modernity of the nation and national identity is the defining feature of all constructivist approaches to the origins of nationalism." As for the methodological point of view of "colonial modernity" (Barlow 1997; Shin and Robinson 1999), we analyze an image of modernity which distorts minor identities under its cultural and political domination.[6] Let us add that among the Kurds, this discussion does not take place simply as the criticism of modernity (Appadurai,1996), but criticism of the perception of modernity that rejects or denies the Kurdish identity. The historical connection between modernity and colonialism, and between dominant national, modern political institutions – including the nation state – and the character of the Ottoman Empire, participates in this "colonial modernity" as it is re-read in the decolonial Kurdish space. Colonial modernity conceived by the Kurds as an ideology of social Darwinism indeed includes a thought of progress and implies a nationalist aim of the colonial identity according to which the dominant societies (Turkish, Arab, Persian) would evolve rationally from the dominant identity nationalism in in response to other dominated minor identities (Chatterjee, 1986). If we also

6   See for the discussion on the concept of "colonial modernity," Lee and Cho 2012; Mahadevan 2002; and Chrétien 2010.

add, the decolonial approach among the Kurds carries an archival memory of "orientalist knowledge" (Bruinessen 2017, 11 and see Said, 1997), and begins after the 2000s following the sociopolitical change of the Kurdish question (Sustam 2016), then the term "colonial modernity" makes it possible to refer to literatures on territorial sovereignty, the identity of which it constitutes (especially the Turkishness in Turkey; see Zeydanlioglu 2008, 155–74), and to others so heavily informed by nationalist ideology (Bozarslan 2009, Vali, 2003 and 2020). This "colonial modernity" in Turkey had planned to "civilize" the Kurdish region through engineering interventions (the construction of dams, roads, etc.) based on the thinking of Turkish republican elitism (Göle 2008; Aktar 2018).[7] This intervention of the engineering elites in Kurdish territoriality shows us how Turkish modernity excludes other identities (Keyman 2012) with its colonial perspective. It is precisely this connection of sovereignty between modernity and colonization that we propose to analyze in this article from the reading of the Kurdish question (Bozarslan, 1997, Jmor, 1994 and Chaliand, 1981). It is also pointed out that the micro-nationalist perspective of Kurdish resistance during the previous century dominated the critique of the modernity of the dominant society (Yilmaz 2013; Burkay 2001; Öcalan 1993; and PKK 1984).[8]

The Subaltern Approach of the Stateless Society

It is clear that the criticism and discussion of modernity in the European space designates two entirely different approaches: nature and progress (humans and non-human; Latour 2006 and 2012). The triumph of modernity since the eighteenth century after the Enlightenment is thus analyzed as the mark of the supremacy of Western thought and of the dominant colonial culture which continues to colonize the knowledge of minor cultures. It is rather a question of underlining a difference of approach to modernity in the Kurdish space with the analyses, the dynamics and the stakes which lead to the point of the discussion. So many different experiences of the Kurdish space in modernity narration, so many dissonant visions of revolutionary emancipation (democracy, autonomy, women, gender and ecology) – but how to include this sociopolitical diversity in our study? Indeed, returning to a

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7   See the critical article of Harris 2008, 1703.
8   See the chapters of Hawzhen Rashadaddin Ahmed's thesis, "Representations of Occidentalist Constructions and Racialising the Other" and "Portraying Modernity's Ambivalences, Nationalist Dualism and Ethnic Rejection," in Ahmed 2015, 40–68 and 70–103.

geopolitics of decolonial knowledge whose transformation of the Kurdish space in recent years has been marked by Kurdish emancipation and by its decolonial approach, this chapter underlines the scope of this transformation and the instrument and political language at the heart of the Kurdish identity struggle against the practice of colonial modernity of authoritarian states in the Middle East (see, 'the Kurdish question' in state discourse, Yeğen, 1999; Bozarslan, 2017). To better understand, it's about emphasizing the Kurdish resistance which creates this decolonial contribution around "Kurdishness" (see 'the memory of kurdology' Bayrak, 1994). Before questioning modernity, we will recall the question of modernity among the Kurds, both as an "subaltern" approach and an approach of differentiation from the dominant culture which denies the Kurdishness of the stateless society. It's about questioning the "Kurdish subaltern modernity" (like the "uncounted society," "the inconsiderables" and "the ineffables"; Sustam 2016, 161). "Subaltern modernity" (or "decolonial modernity") marks an ontological transcription of a minor epistemology on the basis of the contributions of the Kurds in resistance to colonial domination. It is necessary to broaden the conception of modernity in which the approach to progress is defined in relation to the dominant society of coloniality. The concept of "subaltern modernity" is a tool to visualize the Kurdish collective utterance. This political view of "subaltern" takes shape in denial and exclusion, which sometimes emphasizes the need for recognition of the minor culture. It is a question of analyzing, on the one hand, the colonized body politic; on the other, the ignorant position (history from below) of this "Kurdish subalternity" which is in a state of becoming through minority resistance. "Subaltern" is also a prefix which implies an idea of passage and motion in a continuum of the struggle for emancipation, a temporality and a heterotopic countercultural space.[9] Outside of our conceptualization, let us add that this article questions another captivating notion: that of "democratic modernity" underlined by Abdullah Öcalan (Kurdish politician, an issue discussed below; see Öcalan 2010, 2011 and 2013). These different approaches to modernity in the Kurdish context highlight a dissensus policy which disfigures the devices of colonial power and forms a collective enunciation of the sensibility of micro-societies. It is a political narration of the emancipatory struggle which identifies the crisis of colonial modernity and shows a real odyssey of the balance of power of the exclusion implemented by the despotic apparatus of coloniality in Turkey, Iran, Iraq (until 1991, the autonomy of Southern-Başûr) and Syria

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9   It is quite interesting to compare Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of the term "subaltern" (1988) and Spivak's book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999).

(until 2012, the autonomous region of Western-Rojava). This amounts to an attempt to identify the question of the subject whose determined form of negation is criticized and this logocentric cultural hypothesis of modernity resulting from the colonial context.

The position of the decolonial politics of the Kurdish spcae vis-à-vis Marxist modernity (from the dominant culture and framed between 1960 and 1995 for the Kurdish movements) and "capitalist modernity" (defined by Öcalan 2011) becomes more and more evident as we move from criticisms of Marx-Fanon to Foucault, Wallerstein, then to Bookchin in the face of the nationalist impasse of twentieth-century modernity (Öcalan's analysis, 2010). This stage of modernity corresponds also to the emergence of the modern patriarchal subjectivity of colonial practice.

From Colonial to Decolonial Modernity

The term "modernity" encompasses a multitude of concepts that are multifaceted (from reason to the arts). By the end of the 1970s, Lyotard (*La condition postmoderne*, 1979) had criticized the metanarratives of modernity associated with the reading of post-structuralism, that of the postmodern condition (Harvey, 1991. post-industrial society). And Foucault's critiques of Western modernity had also given a new approach to the episteme of the nineteenth and the twentieth century (Foucault 1994, 562). Modernity conceived as an ideology of Enlightenment thought that involves a teleological view of history that human societies would evolve rationally without criticizing colonialism (Mbembe 2015) and developments that destroy nature and ecology (Bookchin 1982). It should however be noted that the modernity which appears today on the horizon of our concerns, our theory, our systems, is more than a philosophical perception; modernity itself, in Western experience, has a colonial history, and it is impossible to ignore this fatal interweaving of the time of colonial history. Homi Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak are among those whose postcolonial study becomes a focal point for reflections on the decolonial in our work.[10]

Western modernity and its colonial contexts, as the extension of a state's sovereignty, created a trauma of identity and patriarchal domination in the memory of "oppressed peoples." In this sense, the criticisms of colonized territories – oppressed in previous centuries – encourage us to reread the colonial epistemes of modernity, whether or not focused on the West.

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10   Bhabha 1994; see also Dirlik 1994; Appiah 1995.

In particular, intellectuals such as Césaire, Fanon, Said, Spivak, Bhabha, Chakrabarty and Mbembe also shifted the concepts of "rupture" and "difference" (with the reading of Derrida) to a reading focused on Europe or Western regions as that of Habermas's modernity (Habermas, Jürgen. 2011, and see, a critical theory vis-à-vis Jürgen Habermas, Rosa 2015). This is the alternative decoding of modernity in the system of deterritorialized global capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari 2009). It would be useful to problematize a transnational reading for the episteme of colonized or oppressed peoples and a new temporality on a world scale. In this context, critics who come from the ancient territories of colonialism and from an alternative reading in the face of modernity are also important to us and give us a varied interpretation of micro-sociological criticism. The environment of the territoriality colonized will have new concepts and principles of decolonial action in the face of modernist destruction. The illegitimate appropriation through "biopiracy" of the resources and products of "indigenous peoples" can serve as an example of the colonization of territorial culture (Merson 2000). Likewise, developing substitutes for the biodiversity resources of indigenous peoples as a means of colonial nationalism also shows the illegitimate use of the micro-cultural locality, harvesting the traditional organic construction of indigenous knowledge from the pulp of domination in the name of science. Moreover, colonial modernity is a cartographic practice of territoriality. The cartographic racism and the cultural plunder it made possible in Mesopotamia and Anatolia with its "imperial" ambitions since the Ottoman Empire, the Turkification of the local knowledge of the colonized peoples, can be read with this experience of biopiracy. Indeed, biopiracy for us is a reference of colonial modernity in the ecological question of oppressed peoples (and also of plants, animals, microorganisms in nature or the life of other living beings) that their traditional knowledge of biodiversity is appropriated in particular through the patents of this colonial modernity.[11] We see the conceptual apparatus which introduces to the episteme of others and which creates an "archeology of knowledge" of colonial power (from the nineteenth to the twentieth century; Foucault 1966).[12] The definition of today's modernity is subject to many approaches and requires a different approach beyond the erroneous definition of the West and the East, that of a modernity that transcends the borders of the

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11   See the analysis of Krinke and Prat 2017.

12   We propose here to read the Foucauldian analysis on the progressist thought of the Enlightenment; Michel Foucault, "Sur l'archéologie des sciences: réponse au cercle d'épistémologie," in Foucault 1994, 696–731.

West and of the nation state. The great goal of modernity that has obsessed the twentieth century has been this history of development and progress which threatens nature. Questions of topicality and philosophical novelty should make it possible to better define the critique of modernity which still arises with colonized and patriarchal thought. Therefore, in the first part we will rethink the criticism of the Kurdish space. To better measure the place of modernity in the Kurdish space in the questioning of colonial heritage, we will have to analyze the perception of resistance which creates in this context a new approach to modernity. Second, we will recall the Kurdish question, both as an explanatory cause for a differentiated approach and as a mark of a political transcription of the decolonial epistemology of Kurdish opposition to modernist coloniality.

Critique of Colonial Modernity through the Kurdish Question

The Kurdish question in the Middle East is always expressed in a political puzzle of identity and territory.[13] This chapter examines this question and proposes an ontological case study which consists of theorizing a change of political values in Kurdish-space life. It's about the political emancipation that happens at the center of the Kurdish region in the Middle East. Scattered over four countries (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria), Kurdish society regularly occupies the forefront of international news because of their emancipatory desire and their resistance to the colonized identity (Beşikçi 2013a; Bruinessen 1991, ; Chaliand 1992; Yeğen 2014). Kurdish nationalism (Vali, Viii, 2020, see especially Kurdish nationalism 'in the post-revolutionary era' in Iran) since the start of the twentieth century (but especially since the 1960s) is based on the anti-colonial perception that the cultural, linguistic and literary visibility of the Kurdish space took on until the 2000s. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Kurds have persisted in their existence across four dominant modernities: from Kemalism in Turkey to the Baathist movement in Iraq (Barzani, 2005) and Syria and to the Shah's regime and the esoteric Shiite movement after the revolution in Iran (Bozarslan 1997 and 2000, 16–18). This seems to us to imply that the failure of territorial separation among the Kurds somehow recognizes the political criticism of modernity within Kurdish political movements (from the 60s to today; White 2000 and Günes 2012). The Kurdish anti-colonial approach is based on the historico-cultural

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13   For two parties in Kurdistan, see analysis of Bozarslan 1999, and 2014. Ahmadzadeh and Stansfield 2010.

singularity of the Kurdish collective memory (Beşikçi 2013a; Bozarslan 1997, 2009). It creates relationships that are both fusional and chaotic which drive the history of separate territories and which epistemic facts bear witness to. This reflection is located in the sociopolitical performativity of the separate territories where each part of the Kurdish space expresses its own dominant modernity code (Turkish, Arab and Persian modernities, see, Vali, 2020: 1-11). It is quite clear that a caveat is in order here. It is arguably excellent to study the political psychology of "separated" Kurds around modernity according to the territorial context. After the founding of the Turkish Republic (1923), which was based on pan-Turkism and nationalist intervention, the post-Ottoman territory became Turkish territory. In the Turkish constitution, the Jacobins and pre-Kemalists of the time defined the territory as "a land of the Turks." This definition completely excluded the Kurds (like the Armenians after the genocide 1915; Kévorkian, 2006, see Dorin, 2005 and Cigerli, 1999) and the other ethnicities out of the quest to establish the identity of the Turkish Republic (Clayer et al. 2018; Bozarslan 2013). We could consult the same colonialist intervention in the Iranian state from Pahlavi absolutism to Imam Khomeini (from Western secularism to the Islamic modernity of the Iranian Revolution). As Abbas Vali said before the Shiite revolution after reading on the capitalist interconnection of the Islamic revolution, urbanity and rural space (especially in Kurdistan of Iran; Vali 2011, 4): "The Constitution specified Persian as the official language of the nation, [...] Persian thus became the language of the sovereign, of politics and power, the means of access to knowledge, and an instrument of modernity and progress."

This experience of modernity is based on the Darwinist social naturalism of "the ideology of Turkishness" ("Turcité" or the Turkish national ethos in "pan-Turkism", see Gökalp,1968 and Beşikçi, 2013b) gradually applied to a double reality: the modernization of Turkish society on the one hand and its corresponding use of the arts and sciences, and thus the denial of the Armenian genocide (Kévorkian 2006; Akçam 2004) and Kurdish identity (Bozarslan 1997, 2009, 2013). The Kurdish question and Kurdish visibility criticize the practice of science related to colonialism, the racism and the social-Darwinist spirit in the approach of republican modernity in Turkey (Beşikçi, 2013a; Ekinci, 2004 and Burkay, 1978). This criticism elaborated by the Kurds has come to constitute the anti-colonial approach of decolonized Kurdish modernity. Turkish colonial modernity remains on the track of excluding "others" by conceptualizing republicanism (with and without the legacy of the Ottoman Empire), nationalism (against Armenians, Kurds, Greeks and Westerners), etatism, secularism (laicism facing the Islamic

religion), and today Pan-Islamism in Turkishness (Göle 1997, 2008; Bozarslan, 2013 and Zeydanlioglu 2008). It must also be taken into account that modern Kurdish history (Bender, 2017) is part of a period characterized by the rise of Pan-Turkism after the founding of the Turkish Republic, but also of a "history of resistance" between the colonized and the colonizer as David McDowall has said (2007, 159, 295). At the origin of this colonial history, we find the Committee of Union and Progress, the political structure of a Jacobin and nationalist movement very popular in the ranks of the officers of Pan-Turkism (called "the Young Turk movement"; see Bora and Gültekingil 2007). The Young Turks movement, with its social sciences of modern Turkey and its colonial modernity, is based on the Armenian genocide and the rejection of Kurdish identity in its Darwinist social vision under the influence of the French Revolution (Bozarslan 2013).[14] Consequently, Kurdish nationalism is in an antagonistic relationship with the dominant nationalisms of Turks, Persians and Arabs where Kurdish modernity takes an anti-colonial position of resistance to generate an identity perception of emancipation with the political vision of national self-determination in the Kurdish space (Romano 2006; Günes 2012).

It seems important to us to see modernity explained by the Kurdish intelligentsia (Lescot &Bedir Khan,1991). It is indeed this first perception that is questionable in the Kurdish study. The Kurdish intelligentsia is building its political line in the diaspora (from Istanbul to Paris, from Damascus to Stockholm, etc.).[15] The Kurdish intelligentsia has greatly influenced the question of coloniality among Kurdish national movements since the beginning of the twentieth century (Wahlbeck 1999). It is the standard-bearer for the linguistic and cultural creation of the Kurdish space, and of an idea of the discipline of Enlightenment thought for a colonized Kurdish society (Atsiz 2018, 2020). While post-Ottoman societies (like the Turks) were under the influence of a nationalism stemming from the thought of the French Revolution, the discourse on modernity has been received by the Kurdish intelligentsia as a means of generating political consciousness for Kurdish society by effectively paralleling science and the thought of progress. In this key, one of the most important players is the Bedirxan family (also transcribed Bedirkhan Bey, Bedir Khan, Emirate of Botan). The Bedirxan family is considered a major player in the history of Kurdish society and the first to have established a perception of an independent Kurdish state under the rubric of a secular society and Western modernity (Henning 2018, 75–147; Bedir Khan, 1992

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14   Bozarslan, 1989.
15   See Tejel Gorgas 2006 and Bozarslan 2018.

-1933: Bedir Khan family is one of the first elites of Kurdish modernity based on independence discourses under the influence of European modernity.). As Bozarslan says (1994, 6), the Kurdish intelligentsia plays an important role in Kurdish nationalism under the influence of "Enlightenment thought" (civilization, auto-governance, Nation State) and of thought with the right to resist oppression (and thus "the right of peoples to self-determination," or "the right to self-determination"): "Indeed, the Kurdish, nationalist, 'civilizationist' intelligentsia constitutes, demographically and socially, only a tiny minority of society." 'Kurdish nationalism' (Vali, 2020 :27-71, especially with regard to the experience of Iranian Kurds) is at the heart of the critique of colonial modernity and its domination for the Kurdish intelligentsia under the influence of European modernity (and self-determination theory of oppressed nations) at the beginning of the twentieth century. By drawing on a reading of "decolonial modernity" (or "subaltern modernity") between national liberation and the struggle of the oppressed people in the twentieth century, the Kurdish intelligentsia has invented a dynamic of "Westernization" of Kurdish culture and language following the aim of legitimizing the source of Kurdish culture as a branch of this European culture (Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray 2006). We suddenly see a paradox in the modernist point of view which affirms both the immanence and the transcendence of Kurdish society. This reflection had already been generated by the "Young Turks" and their successor Kemalists in Turkish colonial nationalism and Turkish society (Insel 2009).

Colonialism was not only the occupation of land, but also the imposition of modernity in terms of the Western idea of a nation state (Fanon 2002, 2006; Mbembe 2015). However, just because few studies use such terminology in regard to Kurdish modernity, this does not mean that the point made by this reflection on modernity has no reality. In the book *Kürdistan Devriminin yolu* (The path of the Kurdistan revolution: a manifesto), Öcalan questions colonialism and its ethnocentrism, and thus feels the need for armed struggle (Öcalan 1993, 31–45). We could consult the perception vis-à-vis Turkish, Arab and Persian colonialism (Bruinessen 1991, 2000; Vali 2011; Bozarslan 2013). This anti-colonial perception attacked colonial customs in the post-coup years in Turkey (before in the 70s and after September 12, 1980) and transformed the understandings of resistance that arose during the period of the launch of the armed struggle (the launch of the armed struggle since 1984 in Turkey). Therefore, the analyses of colonialism within the struggle allows us to rethink the critique of modernity in the colonial context with regard to dominant countries. The Kurdish movements since the 1970s have effectively kept the approach of anti-colonial criticism and questioned first of all the effects colonial imposition and its modernity in Kurdish society

(White 2000). Especially after the 1970s, the Kurdish uprising ("*Serhildan*") took place against the backdrop of colonialism and its heritage, poverty, identity discrimination, racism and exploitation. After the 1980 *coup d'état* in Turkey and four years of clandestine armed organization in exile (on Syrian soil), the Kurdish political movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party of Turkey (PKK 1984; see Günes, 2012), reached a consensus on anti-colonial criticism since 1978 by questioning the scientific approach taken by colonial modernity (see PKK 1984: Kemalism, Baathism and analyses of Turkish, Arab and Persian colonialism, of nationalism in the Middle East), which denies Kurdish society. An element of pro-racist ideology like that of the *Turancilik* (Pan-Turkism) is introduced, which refutes Western modernity (with the authoritarian reference of Kemalism; see Casier and Jongerden 2011), and creates its nationalist modernity based on a further colonialist intervention. The Armenian genocide thus formed a new stage of Turkish racism that emerged from the imaginary idea of empire (Atsız 2018, 2020). Turkish nationalism during the beginning of the twentieth century and in the Republican foundation is important enough to impose a re-reading of the birth of Turkish modernity. For example, one of the founders of Kemalist ideology, Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, one of the most important theorists of nationalism, especially in his writings on Kemalist modernity and rejection of Western modernism, may help us understand the sources of Turkish colonial modernity (Bozkurt 2015, 2006).

However, it should be noted that in this discussion, the phenomenon of a Kurdish space (also *Kurdiyetî*, Kurdishness) is more important in capturing the perception of modernity among the Kurds (Bozarslan 2018, 15–19).[16] It becomes quite clear that there must be a time when the decolonized modernity of the Kurdish space is identified with a pathography, with a legitimation of a micro-identity in the making, with a critique of the excessive ambitions of some types of social science in the face of different types of colonial modernity. We are not just talking about the nation-state crisis of these dominant modernities. It is a question of retracing the effects of colonial modernity in the neoliberal crisis seen on a world scale.

Decolonial Artistic Perception of Modernity

The critique of art in the Kurdish space overlapped with the rise of the criticism of modernity in the 90s, which generated a micropolitical perception

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16   For the analysis on the nationalist movement in Iraq and Iran, see Bruinessen 1992.

with the discussion of declining post-coloniality.[17] This did not happen in theoretical discussion, but in the practice of "uprising/counter"-culture and in works of literature and the arts. In this context, the term "Kurdish subalternity" constitutes a way of perceiving decolonized Kurdish modernity to be included in the struggle for emancipation, for political rights, identity in the decolonized corpus which also emerges from a cultural and artistic reflection (Sustam 2016, 19–78). The work traces a new condition of creation in which Kurdish artistic and cultural activity appears as an archaeology of the social bond (militarism and the symbols of biopower), and projects a multiplication of views on the complexity of colonial modernity, the conflict and the cultural crisis it engenders. The works of certain artists (Hiwa K., Sener Özmen, Ahmet Ögüt, Erkan Özgen, Berat Isik, Cengiz Tekin, Fatos Irwen, M. Ali Boran, Zehra Dogan, Nuveen M. Barwari, Savas Boyraz, Helîn Şahin, Serdar Mutlu, Sherko Abbas, Khadija Baker, etc.) criticize quite clearly the vision of the dominant modernity with its application of coloniality in the Kurdish space through war, occupation, militarization and conflict. Through certain works and productions (Özmen 2000), the arts become counterspaces (artistic ghettos) in the new world era. It is about the emergence and a micropolitics of an oppressed culture without a state that feeds popular culture (mass culture) and Kurdish resistance, which produces transgressive thinking in the modernity of the dominant culture and in its own popular culture, and defends a political position vis-à-vis a security system of colonial power. Thus, the work *Heterotopia – Yok Ülke* (The country that does not exist, 2015) by artist Şener Özmen is based on the critique of coloniality and on the absence of the Kurds on the map of the world. This "other space" in the artist's work stems from a "non-place" that one could speak of as subversive and which simply defines the Kurdish subalternity of a territory, of a people. In a roundabout way, this work calls into question the territorial entity of the world map and its dominant modernity where Kurdistan does not exist and the borders of this invisible country are cut off by colonial modernity (Beşikçi 2013a). The body of the artist's work obviously does not concern the definitions of an artistic reaction as an "avant-garde reaction" in the face of dominant modernity, but broadens the definition of decolonized art to criticize the balance of power of coloniality in Kurdish territory.[18]

17   See Sener Özmen, "All Over again: Is There such a thing as Kurdish Contemporary Art?" in Fabrica-Luciano Benetton Collection 2017, 64–75, and Erkan Özgen, "Kurdish Art in the Third Millennium," in ibid., 54–62.
18   To see the analysis on decolonial art, Modernity/Coloniality Group in Latin America n.d. and the website of the Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial Working Group (under the auspices of the British International Studies Association), https://cpdbisa.wordpress.com/.

This does not mean that the Kurds do not exist in history, memory and place; it is rather a matter of grasping the colonial practice which makes "invisible" and "ignores" ("so-called society") the body of the Kurdish subalternity and its insurgent ontology. It should not be forgotten that the resistance and the struggle for the emancipation of the Kurds are the acts that make the insurgent visibility of the Kurds consistent. It is this whole hierarchy that is implemented by the reasoning of modernity itself on state-less societies. Pierre Clastres speaks anthropologically of another alternative opposition in the temporality of colonial modernity, that of the primitive stateless civilization constituting a modernity without the imposition of a social hierarchy (Clastres 2011). This interweaving of different modernities constitutes what we could very roughly call the hierarchical space of the view of Western civilization. From such a perspective, reading "subaltern modernity" uses irony as a subjective strategy of oppressed sociality in the face of elitist colonial culture. To also use the terms "subaltern" and "decolonial" therefore amounts to showing that the subaltern society is politically aware of a collective enunciation constituted between colonial domination and decolonial resistance.

In this context, as I previously remarked in the book *Art et subalternité Kurde* (Art and Kurdish subalternity): "This is why some accounts from the history below help us understand how dominant societal values identify 'others' as a societal anomaly. This framework allows us to articulate the subalternity, the oppressed, and the 'other' using rhetorical zombies and monstrosity. The fascinating image of the Kurdish subalternity culture translates into discontinuity and subversion, in our opinion, a Gothic motif of 'zombie' in the turn of major society embodying cursed visibility according to the sovereign gaze of colonial culture. He is the actor of normality, one who is mostly 'visible' and invulnerable even if he is mortal, but not cursed either is excluded from the social order" (2016, 57). The identification of zombification with the interpretation of the other also gives us the discursive symbolic character of the analogy of power according to which the excluded always presents itself as an emblematic figure of social abnormality between the victim, visibility, invisibility and the rejection of social law. This is because the language of domination creates a figure of the other through the construction of the body of the excluded and the stereotypes that the zombie in a way expresses to repress the desire for social domination. In this climate, contemporary Kurdish art, for example by canonizing the art of Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi space, rather turns into decolonial and hybrid art in a conceptualization which deconstructs the chapel of dominant modernity. The practice of Kurdish art here makes space for revolt in a line of flight through

the stateless society that plays a critical role in artists' work. We can give, as an example, Mehmet Ali Boran in *My Confession* (2019), a video that criticizes colonial memory, the Armenian genocide and its traumatic traces, and Halil Altindere in *Dance with the Taboos* (1997) and *One Turk Is Worth the World* (1998), a series of images. The images of Kurdish artists in general interweave in a hybrid allegory criticizing the Eastern and Western views and breaking the boundary of cultural and religious allegory with their decolonial gaze. Another example in our analysis is the work *Country for an Old Man*, in 2010 by Fikret Atay. In this case, it should be noted that conceptually, the critique of this image follows the art movements of our time and gives birth to a post-exotic imaginary of "Turkish Orientalism." Let us add that the paradox of an image, a thought and a stigmatized local place today generates this decolonial affection and proposes the critique of a post-Orientalist vision of the Kurds. This means that the tension between otherness and production is sliding towards artistic criticism of the "repressive regime." In the 1990s, artists turned away from the question of "periphery and center" to enter the new artistic cultural period and problematize the positivist idea of modernity (Özmen 2000). They were Kurdish artists who producd an image and concept of decoloniality in the face of the stigma and racial discrimination of colonial modernity. The discussion of "periphery and center" revolving around the perspective of Turkish modernity as a break in memory gave the artists a real break from colonial narratives. It is the projections of artistic and scattered narrativities in present time that shatter the dominant cultural project of colonial modernity. Certain artistic forms clearly help to build up the decolonial sensibilities necessary to face new colonial imaginaries. More precisely, art helps us perceive the colonial memory of this dominant modernity through traces, archives and images. Contemporary Kurdish art is embodied in a bifurcation of decolonial knowledge and the perception of subaltern modernity and brings them back to the present.

Reading "Democratic Modernity" in the Middle East

At the end of the 1990s, the Kurdish political movement abandoned the Marxist-Leninist theories of the liberation of the oppressed people and instead established a critique of the modernity for this present time, based on progress and the recovery of power (proletarian dictatorship).[19] The

19   See, Gambetti 2009; Stefani and Ruge 2018; Sustam and Schaepelynck 2018, 27–36; Bookchin 1982; [Aslan] 2016; Yarkin 2011.

reading of twentieth-century modernity in the Marxist movement, which was the main guardian of the idea of progress and the seizure of power, has been abandoned by Kurdish political movement for a new kind of politics based on libertarian ecology and the emancipation of women. It is possible today to say that criticism of modernity has a rhetoric and an attitude favorable to the priorities of Öcalan (2011). However, the discourse adapted by the Kurdish movement in Turkey and in Syria centers on an alternative political system, an ecological, communal one based on micro-identities in the face of "capitalist modernity" as characterized by Öcalan. The political transformation of the Kurdish political movement has given a critical reading of the Kurdish space in the vicinity of anti-colonial thinking. Öcalan completely transformed the political movement after his incarceration in Turkey (in 1999) to bring out the Marxist-Leninist heritage against the libertarian perception of Bookchin in a reflection on social ecology and female freedom in the face of a patriarchal colonial culture in Kurdistan and the Middle East ("Kurdistan as a colony, women as the oldest colony").[20] Öcalan is quite interesting to see on this point. Echoing the theory of a countermodernity, Öcalan says that "capitalist modernity" has imposed the centralization of the state (2011, 24): "Our project of democratic modernity is meant as an alternative [...] to modernity as we know it. It builds on democratic confederalism as a fundamental political paradigm."

On this point, Paul White's book *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers* is quite captivating to read. It traces the ideological evolution of the PKK towards this concept after the 2000s. This evolution gradually responded to a dual reality in the Kurdish question and "Kurdicity," with the modernization of stateless society and the corresponding reflections of the arts, political movements, new philosophy and literature of the struggle. After Öcalan, modernity in the Kurdish space takes on a kind of criticism of colonial science – an anti-colonial political spirit. Then democratic modernity at some point became identified with a pathography, with a legitimation of devolution, a critique of the excessive ambitions of the social-Darwinist science of colonial thought. Finally, an attack was made on the bureaucratic constraints of colonial thought. Though attempts are made to make social or scientific modernization coincide with the democratic modernity surrounding the women's struggle and social ecology, the break with colonial historicity nevertheless remains the anti-colonial norm of this approach. Even if Öcalan himself does not insist on the 1980s reading of the political movement, where the PKK defined itself as engaging in

20   See "Jineoloji" 2019 and Biehl 2015 and 2014, and Tatort Kurdistan 2013.

an anti-colonial and Fanonian armed struggle, we see such a Fanonian approach in the conceptualization of democratic modernity as a social alternative to war and ethnic conflict in the 2000s. After Öcalan's book *Democratic Nation and Democratic Modernity*, this criticism attempts to reconstitute the trajectory of the political chronicler by taking into account a set of relevant transformations in the Kurdish space in Turkey, Syria and the diaspora: the morphology of the analysis of colonialism and the relative closure of capitalist bureaucracy in the first half of the transformation of the struggle for emancipation from colonial states. The conceptualization of modernity concludes with a critique of Öcalan's biographical analysis to get out of colonial and capitalist modernity which often ratifies a solipsistic vision of military creation and a hermeneuticized conception of philosophical production based on Bookchin's libertarian readings (1982). This reflection is now focused on sociopolitical performativity to capture the sociopolitical, cultural and economic factors linked to the crisis of the nation state and of modernity itself in a conceptualization led by the political milieu of resistance. The term "capitalist modernity" is itself found in his works. This political principle seeks to establish a multi-ethnic self-government which advocates an egalitarian, pluralistic society in the face of patriarchy – also emphasized today as an apparatus of the dominant modernity (Öcalan 2010 and Jineolojî Committee Europe 2018).[21] In this discussion, Öcalan effectively questions masculinity in Kurdistanand gender and its patriarchal relationships under colonial influence within a broader framework of analysis.[22] It is a question of interrogating the memory of the masculinity engendered by colonial modernity. This dissociation of masculinity in Kurdish space is at work in the scientific critique of capitalist modernity. In Öcalan's theory, the colonial question is attached to the interrogation of capitalist modernity (2017). This reading of modernity is to be studied, it is suggested, to replace capitalist modernity with the concepts of "democratic modernity," "democratic nation" or "democratic civilization" in the perspective of the Öcalanian theory of the Kurdish political movement (Öcalan 2016, 12–21). Let us add that the political philosophy of Öcalan and Bookchin were also applied in the Kurdish space in Syria after the social revolution of Rojava (July 19, 2012), which constitutes the crucial importance of this discussion of "democratic modernity." In the Kurdish space, we do not often enough bring the critique of colonialist modernity to the analysis of capitalism and the nation state. Let us add

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21   See also the analysis of the term of Öcalan: Network for an Alternative Ouest 2012 and 2015.
22   See gender analysis during the Ottoman Empire, Klein 2001.

that, in contrast to the model of capitalist modernity underlined by Öcalan, there is the model of self-managed cooperatives led by women in Rojava (which applies the theory of democratic confederalism). The Öcalanian conceptualization proposes understanding current reality through a critique of modernity based on the problematic of capitalist society. We simply consider that, in the great vertigo of the modernity-based capitalist approach which affects our present "contemporaneity" (from colonial modernists to neo-colonial *contemporaneists*), coloniality continues to destroy nature and exploit labor, albeit more and more masked by integrated global capitalism (precariousness, debt, unemployment; Graeber 2011, 2018; Lazzarato 2008 and 2014). This "capitalist modernity" is becoming more and more entrenched by exploiting poverty, precariousness, pandemic and control in the societies of the planet. Graeber also speaks about the debt mechanisms of neoliberalism, emphasizing this debt as being poverty, human misery and therefore the destruction of the planet put in place by capitalism (2011, 5).

At this point, it is useful to take a look at Bruno Latour's approach to the modern, nature and ecology (see, 2012). Speaking of the unpredictable effects of life, Latour makes the following recommendation for nature in response to the capitalism of our century. In his book *Face à Gaïa*, Latour suggests we see the problem as concerning not only ecology, but also "civilization." According to him, in the era of global capitalism (the era of the new Leviathan and the iconic "enemy" figure of Carl Schmitt), we will be drowned in binary opposition if we do not act and find faster solutions to ecological problems (2015, 29, 61, 117, 150, 283, 372). The main approach of Latour's book lies in a critique of modernity, the opposition between nature and culture. According to him, modernity is already outdated and the thought of progress as well ("non-modernité," 2006). At a time of transversal temporariness, groundlessness, rootlessness of identity, mistrustfulness of subaltern society, of the violence and of the armed conflict that dominate the Kurdish question and forced political immigration, the Kurdish space transforms the question of modernity its share of this liquid state of "democratic modernity." Öcalan's analysis of the colonialist approach to modernity also comes to the fore in the light of his sociological approach, as a beam of hope to illuminate an optimistic conception of the future. In this sense, the study deals with Öcalan's argument for the diffusion of "democratic modernity" in order to build a "common world" view that includes not only the Kurdish question, but also those of other societies alienated by global capitalism, violence, and colonial power.

Conclusion

Finally, we could point out here a further issue and thus indicate a framework for questioning "subaltern modernity": the vision of this modernity of oppressed society is considered by us as the epistemic reaction against the modernity of the dominant national culture. Our conceptualization of "subaltern modernity" gives rise to the Kurdish context in the making and its collective renunciation of the symbolic domination of coloniality established by sovereign macro-identity. This subversive visibility (of space, of actors, of networks) has allowed us to see a micropolitical reflection of "subaltern modernity" in the making. From this point of view, we have used a toolkit or a constellation of methods that uncovers the bifurcated language of the Kurdish space and the "rupture of reason" of countermodernity. This is why it was important to deploy the symbolization of zombies as a figure of the "other." The Kurdish subalternity like "zombie" and "strange creature" is based on a rebellious micro-identity intended to bypass the history of the political hegemony of the colonial consensus and to rethink the microhistory of oppressed peoples in the process of becoming effective as a line of dissensus. The colonial era that the Kurdish people have lived through, with its own cultural codes and evolutionary theology, was exactly the story of the modernist or universalist ideology of Enlightenment thought in Turkey and in the Middle East. In our reading which broadens the term "subaltern" and no longer persists in the antagonistic reading of modernity, we rather question the complex relationship between the colonized and the colonizers. We use in this way "a black humor" of the decolonial pedagogy of minor cultures and the oppressed against the dominant national state and the discursive regime of biopolitical governmentality which Michel Foucault emphasized (Foucault 2004).

Then "subalternity" attaches to the modernity of the "other" society. And it is in this context of criticism that we try to interpret the term "subaltern modernity" as a process of micro-resistance towards subversive and subaltern visibility in the zone of encounter and conflict in opposition to the victimizing clichés of the oppressed. What it is important to grasp: the Kurdish context decolonizing colonial knowledge and its type of scientific implications. Deconstructing the colonial heritage and the official situation, the Kurdish space proposes to get out of colonial or capitalist modernity (in the sense of Bruno Latour) which devastates our world and nature. Indeed, being homeless (exiled) is not just a metaphor among the Kurds, but rather describes the situation of an entire dynamic of insurgent decoloniality. The Kurds emerged from victimization in this other space and now have the

power to speak of their own bodies as a new subjectivity. Moreover, the Kurdish space and its cultural productions present a counterspace and a counternarrative and question the public space in the Middle East by introducing a change of codes and the disruptive visibility of the minority corpus.

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