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Kurdish Politics in Turkey: Ideology, Identity and Transformations

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REVIEW ESSAY

Kurdish Politics in Turkey: Ideology, Identity and Transformations

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Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan

Ali Kemal Özcan

Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, 310 pp., ISBN 0 415 36687 9 (hbk), £90

The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilisation and Identity

David Romano

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 290 pp., ISBN 10: 0 521 85041 X (hbk), £48.00, ISBN 10: 0 521 68426 9 (pbk), £18.99

Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers? The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey

Paul White

London, Zed Books, 2000, 272 pp., ISBN 1 85649 821 2 (hbk), £55, ISBN 1 85649 822 0 (pbk), £19.99

The rise of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey since the 1960s and the conflict between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK in its Kurdish acronyms) and the Turkish state in the past 25 years placed the 'Kurdish Question' at the centre of Turkish politics. The success the PKK had in mobilizing large numbers of Kurds in its struggle against the Turkish state, as well as the political challenge formulated by the wider Kurdish national movement in Turkey, raises interesting questions on the rise of the Kurdish national movement since the 1960s, its ideological evolution and the nature of contemporary Kurdish political identity that it has fostered.

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The books under review here are up-to-date additions to this burgeoning literature. Between them they offer a diverse approach to the Kurdish movement. Özcan's study deploys theories of 'collective behaviour' and 'social movements' to understand the PKK as a movement and analyse the impact it had on Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. His is one of the few existing studies that analyse the extensive political literature published by the PKK. Romano's book includes sections on the Kurdish national movements in Iraq and Iran, but his main attention is on the Kurdish movement in Turkey. He offers a theory-driven account that uses resource mobilization and rational choice theories to understand how 'people are mobilised into ethnic nationalist organisations' (p. 2). White's book can best be characterized as a political history account of the Kurdish movement in Turkey that provides an analysis of Kurdish society from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. He draws upon Max Weber's discussion of 'charismatic authority' and Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of 'primitive rebels' to understand and analyse the process of political modernization that the Kurdish nationalist movement has been undergoing. In this review, I assess the books' contribution to our understanding of the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey since the 1960s. In particular, I focus on the role that the authors attribute to socio-political and economic factors in the re-emergence of Kurdish nationalism during the 1960s and on their discussion of the ideological evolution of Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish identity it fostered.

The Re-emergence of Kurdish Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s

In this section, I analyse the explanations provided for the rise of the Kurdish national movement in Turkey. I start by looking at the social, political and economic changes that have been highlighted in the literature. Then I examine the relationship of Kurdish activists to the socialist movement in Turkey in greater detail.

Socio-political and Economic Factors

Various political and economic factors are highlighted as being significant in the rise of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey since the 1960s. Economic backwardness and underdevelopment of the Kurdish region is analysed in significant detail by White in his chapter on 'the Political Economy of Turkish Kurdistan', which alludes to a connection between the economic backwardness and the radicalization of the Kurds: 'The inhabitants of Turkey's Kurdish region have become the worst casualties of Turkey's problematic attempts at economic reform' (p. 124). Romano's explanation of the re-emergence of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey examines the 'structural conditions' and the 'political opportunity structures'. In particular, he highlights the importance of: the democratic opening of 1960, economic development, and the urban to rural migration of the Kurds. These factors, in Romano's account, combined to create a 'non-traditional Kurdish nationalist elite' that became the spearhead of the Kurdish movement in Turkey during the 1960s and 1970s (p. 41). Through education the Kurds were exposed to the ideas of nationalism and socialism, and they participated in the left-wing movement in Turkey because it offered them a platform to express their opposition to the Turkish state (p. 143). Romano also states that the lack of economic opportunities played a significant role in the Kurds' radicalization and taking up the cause of Kurdish liberation. This is because the growing numbers of educated Kurds were unable to find the means to 'better their plight' (p. 42).

Romano seems, however, to generalize the significance that the lack of economic opportunities had in mobilizing the Kurdish elite into left-wing and Kurdish political activities. The leading Kurdish activists of the 1960s and 1970s, who Romano singles out as playing an important role in the rise of the Kurdish national movement, were either established professionals or students from well-off backgrounds; for example, among the leading Kurdish activists during the 1960s, Naci Kutlay was a doctor, Musa Anter was a prominent intellectual, businessman and journalist, Sait Elçi was an accountant, and there were many law, medical or economics students from Turkey's leading universities who could and did establish themselves in important public and private positions, including MPs, Senators, and even Ministers. Also, the activities that this new Kurdish elite undertook, such as publishing magazines and books, required considerable financial resources to establish and sustain without the expectation of obtaining large monies from it in the future. In fact, by taking part in Kurdish nationalist activities they would have jeopardized their professional positions and status, as engagement in such activities is generally seen as a barrier for advancement in Turkish society. All of this suggests that lack of economic opportunities *did not* play a significant role in mobilizing these leading activists.

White's analysis of the political activism of the 1960s focuses on the political events and processes that led to the reawakening of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, such as the publication of magazines by Kurdish activists and the publication of anti-Kurdish articles in various Turkish nationalist magazines, which generated popular resentment among the Kurds (pp. 132–133). Although such a causal explanation is important, it can be significantly strengthened. For example, an analysis of content of the magazines in which Kurdish activists problematized the backwardness of the Kurdish region and disseminated their interpretation of the Kurds' oppression, if done, will offer valuable information on the specific political and economic demands the Kurdish activists raised during the 1960s.

Kurdish Activists in the Turkish Left

During the 1960s many Kurdish activists took part in the activities of Turkish left-wing groups and seemed committed to a common socialist programme; however, during the mid-1970s the Kurds withdrew their support from the Turkish left and began to establish specifically Kurdish revolutionary groups and parties. To explain the separation process, Romano analyses the 'ripening' of the 'political opportunity structures' and the closed nature of the political system *vis-à-vis* the Kurdish demands during the 1970s (pp. 46–48). The emergence of so many Kurdish political organizations is explained through 'political opportunity structures' and he argues that by the mid-1970s it had become obvious to many Kurds that it was impossible to pursue Kurdish nationalist aspirations within the institutionalized system (p. 48). Although he rightly highlights the Turkish left's rejection of the demands raised by the Kurds or its unwillingness to incorporate separate or specifically Kurdish demands as important in influencing the Kurds' decision to establish their separate organizations, he does not provide much detail on the specific demands that the Kurdish activists raised or discuss the Kurds' stated reasons for advocating their separate organizations. The demands Kurdish socialists raised, which became increasingly radical throughout the 1970s, played a significant role in the Kurds' separation from the Turkish left because they could not have been incorporated in the programme of Turkey's socialist movement.

Furthermore, Romano neither explains how the position of Kurdish socialists differed from that of the Turkish socialists nor provides any discussion of the debates that were taking place during the 1960s and the 1970s within Turkey's socialist movement, which would reveal the numerous ideological and theoretical differences.

Despite reserving a significant amount of space and entitling a chapter 'The Kurdish National Movement and the Turkish Left: 1965–99', White also does not offer any discussion of why the Kurds left the common struggle for socialism in Turkey and sought a separate trajectory. Such a discussion would be important in understanding the claims and demands raised by the Kurdish nationalist movement in its early years, which found a strong resonance among the Kurdish masses. Özcan offers a brief discussion of Turkey's socialist movement and the Kurds (pp. 86–92), but does not engage with the issue of separation from the Turkish left. Hence, the various ideological and theoretical debates that took place during the 1970s between the Kurdish socialists and their Turkish counterparts concerning the 'nationalities issue' could have been explored to offer a fuller account of the emergence and individuation of the Kurdish socialist 'national liberation discourse', but has not been done so in the books under review here.

The Ideology of Kurdish National Movement and Kurdish Identity

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the national liberation discourse has been the hegemonic discourse articulating the Kurdish identity in Turkey. This section will assess the above books' accounts of the ideology of the Kurdish movement, including its evolution and the conception of Kurdish identity that emerges from it. Since the early 1980s the PKK has been the hegemonic force in Kurdish resistance, and consequently all of these books reserve considerable space for it.

The PKK's Ideology and Discourse

Özcan states that the PKK's early political objective was the creation of an independent socialist Kurdistan through revolutionary activity, and internally it was organized around the principle of democratic centralism. Its membership involved full-time commitment to the cause and required its cadres to forego their 'private life' or 'individual initiative' (p. 156). The PKK directed its educational efforts and ideological resources to overcoming the Kurds' deep-rooted disunity, which in the PKK's diagnosis was the cause of the 'degeneration of the Kurds' (p. 154). Starting from the early 1980s, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan began to develop and exert his 'charismatic authority' with more force, which according to Özcan was 'an effective source of motivation both within the party organisation and among the Kurdish masses' (p. 180).

Özcan reserves a lengthy chapter for the PKK's discourse and ideology. He does not, however, indicate what the key concepts of 'discourse' and 'ideology' refer to. This lack of clarity creates difficulties for him, as his account of the PKK's discourse and ideology contains various simplifications and confusions. For example, Özcan states that the PKK's programme 'is a "Kurdicized" copy of those customary communist parties that undertake a nation's "national" liberation as an "initial stage" of the ultimate socialist revolution' (p. 20). In addition, when discussing the ideological similarities between the PKK and other Kurdish parties that were active in the 1970s, Özcan states, '[t]he striking point is that the views, diagnoses, proposals, aims and objectives outlined so far are simply

a copy of all the other fellow political initiatives' programmes claiming to undertake Kurdish national and social emancipation' (p. 101).

This characterization of the PKK's national liberation discourse as a *copy* of Communist and other Kurdish parties' programme simply ignores the process that led first to the individuation of the national liberation discourse during the early 1970s and, second, its articulation by the PKK from the late 1970s onwards. Even if there were *significant* similarities in the key texts published by the Kurdish parties (this is not surprising because the discourse of national liberation was hegemonic and most Kurdish parties were committed, in varying degrees, to the Kurdish struggle and socialism), significant differences remained over strategy and practice, and there was a vibrant debate during the late 1970s between the Kurdish organizations concerning such issues. Hence, the main limitation of Özcan's study is that his discussion of the PKK's discourses provides only a review of the key PKK publications and Öcalan's numerous books, to show *how* its aims and objectives evolved since its establishment. The subsequent discussion is *not* targeted towards understanding the specificity of Kurdish national demands articulated by the PKK or the conception of Kurdish identity that emerges from it. Furthermore, his account does not offer any discussion of the conception of the Kurdish nation in the PKK's discourse, including the construction of the *Newroz* as a 'myth of origin', which enabled the PKK to conceptualize and 'imagine' the unity of the Kurdish nation.

In terms of the ideology and the discourses of the PKK, White's study also suffers from similar limitations and simplifications. Without making any attempt to understand the ideological complexity of the PKK and the key claims that it has been articulating over the years, he argues: '[t]he PKK claims to be Marxist and Leninist, but its ideology, strategy and tactics are a mixture of Stalinism and nationalism' (p. 136). Furthermore, in his discussion of the PKK's strategy and tactics, he characterizes the PKK as Stalinist (p. 142):

In theory, the PKK remains formally wedded to a Stalinistic two-stage theory of revolutionary strategy, in which the first stage is the achievement of a united democratic and independent Kurdistan (including the current Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria), via a 'national democratic revolution'.

This is a serious simplification of the PKK's discourse and does not seek to understand the specific claims and demands articulated by it.

Romano provides a more sophisticated approach to ideology and discourse. In his study the ideology and discourses of the PKK are dealt within his discussion of 'Kurdish identities and cultural tool kits in Turkey' and constitutes an important part of his study. He defines the concept of cultural tool kits as 'generalised attitudes and ideas within a given population' and directs his focus on 'cultural frames that have become prevalent within the population over time, and not through conscious strategic efforts of the organised groups we are examining' (p. 101). Romano states that in order to mobilize the Kurds against the Turkish state and politicize Kurdish identity, the PKK used the oppression the Kurds suffered in its framing strategy (p. 131). Additionally, the PKK used 'national Kurdish myths of common ancestry and past differentiated from that of other groups in the area' to enhance its nationalist claims (p. 131).

To explain why the PKK's cultural framing was successful, Romano focuses on the effectiveness of strategies, tactics and resource mobilization that the PKK deployed. By using the already existing networks and exploiting the conflicts between the landlords

and peasants, the PKK's early cadres ('the political entrepreneurs') enhanced the movement's base and operations and managed to win the sympathy of the peasants (pp. 72–74). Additionally, the PKK's attacks on the Turkish state showed the limits of the state's control that enhanced further its credibility. The focus on mobilization process analyses the PKK's strategy in isolation by separating it from its ideology. The PKK's involvement in the peasant–landlord disputes that Romano mentions not only strengthened the peasants' relative position within the dispute, but also transformed its nature by conferring a *new* meaning on to it, that is, the peasants fighting against feudal oppression, which was an aspect of Kurdistan's national problem.

Changes in the PKK's Discourse

Özcan examines how the PKK changed its policies regarding Kurdish rights and demands by stressing the shift in emphasis from 'Independent, United and Democratic Kurdistan' to a much more elusive term 'Free Kurdistan', and argues 'the united-independent Kurdistan almost withered away towards the late 1980s' (p. 104). He also traces the mutation of the Marxist element in the PKK's discourse and how gradually the ideas of the PKK's leader Öcalan replaced Marxism as the emphasis was shifting towards concepts such as 'humanization', 'socialization', 'human emancipation' and 'freed personality'. Based on an analysis of Öcalan's speeches, he sketches how the PKK totally retreated from socialism and Marxism, which after the collapse of Soviet Union and the Eastern Block became an ideological guide as opposed to an all-encompassing ideology (p. 121). This mutation, he argues, took a new turn with Öcalan's legal defences, which proclaimed the new strategy and which turned into the PKK's new political programme. In its current discourse the emphasis is on concepts such as 'Democratic Republic', 'Free Togetherness' and 'Democratic Solution' (p. 124). A democratic solution to the Kurdish issue within the current borders of Turkey is proposed.

Özcan's discussion of the causes behind such significant changes in the PKK's discourse is rather elusive. He states: '[a]s the struggle progresses, transformations, alterations, modifications and metamorphoses occur due to the simultaneous rise of mass participation and confrontations' (p. 121). To explain the changes in the PKK's discourse from 1993 onwards, Romano focuses on the *changes in the political opportunity structures*, especially the emergence of an elite in Turkey (President Ozal) who was willing to find a solution to the problem, and the PKK's need to 'improve its image and reach out to more allies'. Increasingly, the PKK framed Kurdish grievances within the human rights discourse and the Kurdish demands as demands for democracy and minority rights, and intensified its attempts to shed its 'terrorist image' (p. 145). Romano's classification of the changes that the PKK has been undergoing as changes from one strategy to another seems problematic because the changes in PKK strategy are much more comprehensive and redefined the aims and objectives of Kurdish national movement and the political project that it had undertaken. Romano's account also does not offer the underlying reasons for such profound changes, but focuses only on the intentions and the interests that the PKK might have had in formulating its strategy.

Kurdish Identity

Romano's account of Kurdish identity politics is designed to explicate both why 'Kurdish ethnic nationalist dissent arose in Turkey, as well as the values, aims, and objectives of

Kurds in the country'. His characterization of Kurdish identity in Turkey, however, is unclear. Throughout the study he interchangeably uses 'ethnic nationalist', 'nationalist', 'ethnic' and 'politicised ethnicity' to describe Kurdish identity (p. 99). He highlights the existence of a higher form of Kurdish identity (politicized ethnicity) and argues that this existed among Kurds for the past few centuries despite the various religious, tribal and linguistic divisions (p. 101). He also acknowledges the difficulties that these various divisions created for Kurdish nationalism in extending its appeal to all Kurds, especially during the 1920s and 1930s when despite numerous attempts Kurdish nationalists failed to generate a sense of 'politicised ethnic identity' (pp. 102–108). These divisions, he argues, have been superseded with the rise of the PKK, as its challenge to the Turkish state brought a higher-level, politicized Kurdish identity to the forefront of many people's consciousness (p. 172). However, Romano focuses only on the mobilization process and does not discuss how the PKK and Kurdish nationalists in the past sought to overcome these deep divisions by representing the image of a homogenous Kurdish nation, including the myth of origin and common ancestry that he mentions.

Another serious limitation of Romano's study is that he uses *hardly any* primary sources published by the Kurdish activists and political groups during the 1960s and 1970s, or those published by the PKK from the 1980s onwards. This creates serious obstacles for Romano to understand the Kurdish identity as he does not engage at all with the Kurdish movement's discourses on identity. Hence, a range of questions concerning Kurdish identity arise, but remain unanswered. Questions such as: What does Kurdishness, or being Kurdish, mean to the Kurds? What does the Kurdish identity entail? What is the relation between ethnic Kurdish identity and 'politicized' ethnic Kurdish identity? How, amidst all these divisions, did the PKK manage to foster or construct an overarching Kurdish national identity? How is the existence of diverse Kurdish identities accounted for by Kurdish nationalists? What happens to the sub-identities when a politicized Kurdish identity is accepted?

Such questions also remain unexplored in White's discussion of Kurdish identity. His exploration of the PKK does not, for example, show how the PKK conceptualized and constructed the Kurdish national identity, which has been at the centre of its political project. Nor does he ask what practices have been important in stabilizing the meaning of Kurdishness. Instead, White's exploration of Kurdish identity draws attention to the difficulties of achieving 'scholarly unanimity' on 'who the Kurds are' and reviews the academic discussions on the origins of the Kurds and those who seek to *define* them (pp. 14–29). He highlights the linguistic and religious divisions that prevails in the Kurdish society and gives them as evidence that 'there is no single, universally agreed-upon meaning for the term Kurd' (p. 43). Furthermore, he makes some highly controversial claims: 'the so-called "Alevi Kurds" or Kizilbas of Anatolia are arguably no more Kurdish than another minority people in Anatolia to whom they are closely related, the so-called "Zaza Kurds"' (p. 43). He suggests that the 'Alevi Kurds' and 'Zaza Kurds' have 'a common ancestor in the Dailamites' (p. 48) and are not part of the Kurdish nation. Such assertions seem highly problematic and difficult to sustain. This is because, generally speaking, 'Zaza' and 'Alevi' Kurds consider themselves Kurdish, and the great majority of Alevi Kurds, perhaps 70%, speak *Kurmanci*—the mainstream Kurdish language—making them linguistically and culturally closer to the Kurds rather than the 'Dailamites'. Furthermore, without focusing on the Kurdish identity as articulated by the PKK or the wider Kurdish movement, White assumes Kurdishness to be interpreted strictly in religious

and linguistic terms. In fact, the PKK in particular and the Kurdish nationalist movement in general accept the religious and linguistic diversity that exists in the Kurdish society, and have been sensitive to the cultural representation and development of both the Alevi and Zaza Kurds. To this end, Zaza language broadcasts and informative programmes on Alevi beliefs have been regular features in the Kurdish satellite TV broadcasts.

Conclusions and Critical Appraisal

The above studies focus on providing a causal explanation for the rise of Kurdish nationalism and ignore a number of pertinent issues, such as the Kurdish national movement's separation from the Turkish socialist movement during the 1960s and 1970s, and more broadly its ideological evolution. This leads them to evade important questions on the ideology of Kurdish national movement since the 1970s and its re-articulation of Kurdish identity. The Kurds' contestation of their identity came through a process of self-reflection and self-understanding, during which they reinterpreted their position within the Turkish society (including their relation to the left-wing groups) and formulated their challenge to the state. Consequently, the specificity of Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish identity constituted within it is not highlighted or delineated.

Also, the PKK's ideological transformation since the early 1990s occupies an important part of the discussions, but these studies do not focus on the changes that such a transformation brings about to the Kurdish identity, including how the Kurdish national demands are re-articulated. They do *not* provide a convincing account of the reasons behind such comprehensive changes, nor do they offer an account of how Kurdish rights and demands are being articulated within the discourse of democracy. We need to show not only the scale of these changes, but also how they affect Kurdish identity and the political project the Kurdish national movement seeks to build. An important task for future research is to employ sophisticated conceptual understandings of ideology and identity in order to understand better the rise, evolution and contemporary contours of Kurdish identity and ideology.