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Gender equality and radical democracy: Contractions and conflicts in relation to the "new paradigm" within the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

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Introduction

In its 1978 manifesto, the PKK declared the establishment of an independent state to be the only correct political goal of a national liberation movement. Around the turn of the millennium, following a critique and self-critique on the character of national liberation struggles and "real existing socialism", the party started to question whether independence really ought to be conceptualized and practiced in the form of state construction (Jongerden 2016). Taking the concept of state-construction from the principle of self-determination, the PKK started to develop an ideological architecture on the basis of the idea of self-government as a stateless society and thence to address socioeconomic and sociocultural injustices (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Nilsson 2008).

In the PKK's "new paradigm", as it was named, the construction of gender hierarchies and the state are considered to have been historically at the foundation of both economic and cultural injustices. Turning the thesis of Marie Mies and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen (1988) on its head, Abdullah Öcalan (2013) argued that social inequalities and cultural injustices started with the emergence of gender-hierarchies and the identification of women with the domestic sphere ("housewifization") in the Neolithic era, referring to women as "the first colony" or "the oldest from of slavery' related to a process of state formation. This article looks at the paradigm change as it emerged in the 2000s, taking the idea of stateless democracy and gender-equality as two key dimensions of this.

It is the PKK that refers to this change as a paradigm change rather than (just) an ideological change. While ideology can be defined as a set of ideas that explains and lends justification or legitimacy to an actor's actions

and convictions, a paradigm change refers to the principles informing this ideology. As such, a paradigm change can be defined as a radical upheaval in the way the world is conceived and perceived. In the case of the PKK, this radical upheaval is rooted in the idea of a distinction between state civilisation and democratic civilisation. While the old PKK ideology was rooted in a conception of the former, the new ideology is rooted in an idea of the latter. Since the ideological change is based on a change in the principles on which the ideology is developed, it is referred to as a paradigm change.

Starting with a brief discussion of the formation of the PKK, I argue that its establishment, development and the related "paradigm change" is a learning from defeat. I distinguish three moments of defeat in the history of the PKK. The first was the defeat of the revolutionary left in Turkey at the beginning of the 1970s, which shaped the process of group formation leading to the establishment of the PKK in 1978. The second was the military setbacks the PKK was confronted with from the beginning of the 1990s, which came together with and eventually resulted in the institutionalization of a women's movement. The third was the capture and imprisonement of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. It was the second and third "defeats" that resulted in the recreation of the party's "paradigm change". This took place in the broader context of an evaluation of another failure, that of real existing socialism and national liberation movements. This article discusses the "paradigm change", how the related change in ideology and practices was received in the party and how these were challenged and contested before becoming fixed at (as) its core.

The formation of the PKK

Though formally established on November 26-27, 1978, the name "PKK" (*Partîya Karkêren Kurdistan*) was only given to the organization a few months later, in April 1979 (Akkaya 2005: Part 8). A process of group formation had started years before, as early as 1972-1973, and by the time these "Kurdistan Revolutionaries", as they referred to themselves, established a party, they already had a committed cadre with strong convictions and a growing support base. The party's cadre not only had a background in the revolutionary left, but was also crucially informed by its discourse (Casier & Grojean 2012; Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). The militants considered themselves Marxists engaged in making a revolution with Kurdistan as their focal area (Jongerden

and Akkaya 2012). Thus, during this foundation period, linkages with traditional or nationalist Kurdish parties hardly existed at all.

The PKK emerged against the immediate background of the 1971 military coup in Turkey, which not only came with a crackdown on the revolutionary left in 1972 and 1973, but also with a suppression of the forces of civil society and general disorientation among progressive forces (Ahmed 2014). In the years before, a revolutionary youth movement had given birth to three militant organizations. These were the People's Liberation Army of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu*, THKO), founded in 1969, the People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Parti-Cephesi*, THKP-C), founded in 1970, and the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi/Marksist-Leninist*, TKP/ML), founded in 1972. Following the coup, the main leaders of the THKO were detained, condemned, and sentenced to death, with the penalty (hanging) carried out on May 6, 1972. The THKP-C leadership and cadre, together with the THKO cadre, were killed in a shoot-out with the army in Kızıldere, which took place on March 30, 1972, following a joint action to liberate the THKO leaders from prison and save them from the death penalty. The leader of the TKP/ML-TIKKO, Ibrahim Kaypakkaya, was taken prisoner on January 24, 1973, and, after months of torture, killed on May 19, 1973 in the prison at Diyarbakır (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011).

Though the 1971 military coup pushed politics away from public space, they re-emerged in private spaces, such as homes and dormitories, where people gathered in the form of friends' groups. Many of these groups moved into the public sphere when the military loosened its control. There was, however, one group which, after the experience of the 1971 coup and the repressive measures unleashed, decided not to rush into public political activities when these were allowed again. These youngsters, most of them students from a modest background, continued to come together in apartments located in the poorer Kurdish and Alevi neighborhoods of Ankara, such as Dikimevi, Anıttepe, and Tuzluçayır, a shanty-town neighborhood with a large proportion of (Turkish) Alevi and Kurdish inhabitants and a strong presence of the (revolutionary) left (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014; Cemil Bayik, personal communication, October 30, 2014).

These youngsters, mostly students, lived as close friends' groups in the various apartments, sharing the meager possessions they had, reading, and discussing politics. They came from various parts of Turkey, such as Kemal Pir, a Turk born in a small village in the Black Sea coastal region and studying at the Faculty of Language, History, and Geography at Ankara University, Haki Karer, also a Turk from the Black Sea coastal region, who studied at the

Faculty of Science, also at Ankara University and Mustafa Karasu, a Turk from Sivas studying at the Political Sciences Faculty at Ankara University; others included Mazlum Doğan, Ali Haydar Kaytan, and Cemil Bayık, Kurds studying, respectively, Economics (at Haceteppe University), Political Sciences and Language and History and Geography (at Ankara University).[1]

Although they referred to themselves as the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, others knew the group as *Apocular*, followers of Apo, the nickname for their key figure, Abdullah Ocalan. After concerning themselves mainly with an internal process of group formation, referred to in Turkish as *yogunlaşmak*, intensive reading and group discussions (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011), in 1978, the group established a political party, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan*, PKK). In the course of the 1980s the PKK would develop into the only Kurdish political party of significance in Turkey, attracting many who before had been members of or sympathetic to rival political parties. Most of the other Kurdish political parties active in the 1970s did not survive the military coup in Turkey of 1980. Actually, even though the coup and the severe repression unleashed by the military takeover of power were of decisive influence, most of these parties were anyway already weakened by a process of internal disintegration (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011).

Learning from defeat

Initially without a formal structure or program, what was to become the PKK started off as a grouping of dedicated people in search of a new perspective after the 1971 coup and crackdown on the revolutionary left. The group did not engage in a sectarian battle over the right path to follow, that of Russia, China, or Albania. The Kurdish Revolutionaries did not bother much about who represented the true form of socialism and were more concerned with understanding the socialist struggle under the conditions in which they lived (Cemil Bayik, personal communication, October 30, 2014; Riza Altun, personal communication, October 30, 2014), which implied the development of their understanding of the reality in Turkey and Kurdistan. They discussed how the left wing movement had been eradicated with such apparent ease, and, since public space was securitized, they build a party from a network of private spaces, aiming to stay under the radar.

1. For detials see (Akkaya 2016: 125-146).

At the time of their group formation, roughly between 1973 and 1978, a key debate developed on the status of Kurdistan and, relatedly, whether or not the focus of the political struggle should be on the basis of class identity or suppressed cultural or national identity. Most political groupings on the left rejected the thesis that Kurdistan was a colony (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012). In a rigid kind of Marxist-Leninist reasoning, the left argued that colonialism was a historical stage of imperialism, a relationship between a capitalist country and a dependent country; since Turkey was not a capitalist country and was itself in a semi-colonial relationship with the West, its relationship with Kurdistan could not be one of colonizer and colonized. The nature of the political struggle, therefore, could not be specified in terms of an anti-colonial struggle (ibid).

The dominant and determining contradiction in this analysis was defined by the position of Turkey in the capitalist world system, and this meant that political struggle had to be defined in terms of class-struggle. The united workers of Turkey would bring liberation to the exploited and oppressed, it was argued, Kurds and Turks alike (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). A struggle for Kurdish rights would divide the working class and become counterproductive. The Kurdistan Revolutionaries, however, rejected the submission of the struggle for Kurdish rights to class struggle as chauvinist and denialist and rejected the view that there was only Turkey, no Kurdistan, and only a (Turkish) working class, no Kurds. They argued that the submission of Kurdistan and the Kurds was military, cultural, and economic and that the challenge was to develop not only a post-capitalist but also a post-colonial humanity.

From here we can draw two important conclusions regarding the character of the PKK. First, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries were not orthodox, when we understand orthodoxy in terms of the "economic determinism" (Balibar 2014: 88) or "the dogmas found in Soviet booklets or in the "structuralist" and "antihumanist" interpretations that emerged (…) in the mid-1960s" (Löwy 1997). As Akkaya also argues (2016), Öcalan's speeches devoted to socialism (most delivered on the occasion of May 1) argued that the development of a "bureaucratic state" under "real existing socialism" had resulted in alienation and subjugation (Öcalan 1999: 13-14), and by the 1980s and early 1990s he was already proposing a "new socialism", which was not based on an expansion of the state or reconciliation of state and market, but on a societal transformation coming from below:

> *The first strong critique on real existing socialism was made at a meeting of the central committee in 1984. (…) He [Öcalan] argued that real existing socialism did not have much to do with socialism. The state was supposed to disappear, but instead became more powerful. (Cemil Bayik, personal communication, October 30, 2014)*

Öcalan would return to this critique and develop a new political vision following his imprisonment in 1999.

The second conclusion that we can draw about the PKK from this history (above) is that it took defeat as a learning process. Marx had argued in "The Poverty of Philosophy" that "[i]t is the bad side that produces the movement which makes history" (Balibar, 2014: 98). The "bad side" through which the PKK had developed was the defeat of the revolutionary left in Turkey at the beginning of the 1970s and, to some extent also, the defeat of Barzani in Iraq in 1975. The defeat of the left in Turkey was evaluated by Öcalan as a valuable lesson from which to consider regrouping and rethink strategy (Sayin 1997: 71-83). Learning from bad experiences is what the anti-slavery liberal Charles Eliot Norton had called "the advantage of defeat" (Seymour 2016: 18; Norton 1861). After a lost battle by the Union Army against the Confederate Army in 1861, Norton had written:

> *It is now plain that our defeat (…) was in no true sense a disaster; that we not only deserved it, but needed it; that its ultimate consequences are better than those of a victory would have been. Far from being disheartened by it, it should give us new confidence in our cause, in our strength, in our final success. (Norton 1861)*

The defeat of the revolutionary left shortly after the Kurdistan Revolutionaries' formation in the beginning of the 1970s had a profound impact on the development of the group. Öcalan argued that the main reason for this defeat of the revolutionary left in Turkey was that they had entered into a direct confrontation with the state while they were still weak. With this insight, the group around Öcalan decided to organize itself thoroughly before entering into such a confrontation again (Sayin 1997: 71-83; Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). The second defeat for the PKK, the military setbacks with which it was confronted from the beginning of the 1990s came when it shifted towards positional warfare, even as the Turkish military started to use guerilla-tactics, and resulted in heavy losses for the PKK. At this time, many people were joining the PKK, a considerable number of them women, who were often sent back by the male commanders after a month of training to work on the political front, upon which they would be arrested.

> *What we experienced in 1991, 1992, 1993, the big rise in women joining the revolution, was at the same time a period when there was a big chaos within the organization. What came out from this chaos? This came out: for example, there was this, Amed's commander Şemdin Sakık. He said, "There will be no women left in the army, I am sending them all away. They can go to the cities, nobody can turn the women into candidates for the guerrilla. "Because women spoil men," he said. "and war is a man's business. (Fatma, personal communication, July 27, 2016)*

Against the backgrounds of these defeats, Abdullah Öcalan starts to problematize male domination and praise the dedication and perseverance of women fighters, symbolized by actions of Beritan (Gülnaz Karataş), linked to the formation of a women's army (*ordulaşma*), and Zilan (Zeynep Kınacı) and Sema Yüce, related to the formation of a women's party (*partileşme*).[2]

The third defeat for the PKK, the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and his imprisonment in Turkey, was a major shock for the party but ultimately eventuated in a recreation of the party's ideology and organization. This recreation took place against the much broader background of the dissolution of "real existing socialism" and what Paul Virilio refer to as a failure of a type of social experimentation (Conley 2012: 93). Indeed, "[t]he PKK has shown a strong ability to transform and return after its virtual defeat" (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011).

The first paradigm change: killing the dominant male

When the PKK was established as a political party, women were already present. Though other liberation movements mobilized women too, the PKK started to take gender relations as a key issue in its analyses, challenging patriarchal relations, both in society generally as well as within the party itself. Gender inequalities were not seen as a side issue to the revolution, but as a key challenge (Tax 2016). In the course of the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, the theme of gender-inequality started to become a main ideological theme in Öcalan's work. This may be referred to as the first paradigm change within the movement. The history of civilization was represented as a history of the enslavement of women, analyzed as an ideological or cultural slavery, political slavery, and economic slavery. This history of

2. Beritan was the commander of a PKK unit. When her unit was about to be surrounded by enemy forces, she kept their fighters at a distance so her unit could escape,and when she ran out of ammunition, she threw herself from a mountain rock, preferring death to captured. Her determination and self-sacrifice is celebrated in the PKK.
Zilan commited a suicide attack on the military in Tunceli, in 1996. In her farewell letter, she said that she unertook the action because she loved life and people so much. In 1998, Sema Yüce poured eau-de-cologne over herself and set herself on fire in protest against Turkey's attitude towards the Kurds.

the enslavement of women was also the history of the "dominant male" and regarded as the foundation of state-formation and economic exploitation. A struggle for equality, freedom, democracy and socialism, therefore, required a thorough analysis of the ways in which gender hierarchies have been created and institutionalized in the spheres of culture, politics, and economics (Öcalan 2013: 9-11).

Öcalan argued that the position of women before the rise of a state civilization was very different from today. The turning point occurred somewhere in the Neolithic period, 5 000-12 000 years ago, when a communal social order woven around a cult of mother-goddesses, referred to by Öcalan as an era of "primitive socialism", evolved into a state of male domination:

> *Far from being equal to the gods, she cannot make her voice heard or reveal her face. Slowly, she is wrapped in veils, becomes a captive within the harem of the strong man. (Öcalan 2013, 13-15)*

A key development in the creation of the enslaved woman and the dominant male was the emergence of religion around the idea of a strong man, a process Öcalan (ibid: 20) referred to as the birth of patriarchy. Patriarchy intensified, Öcalan argues, through monotheistic religions, when a multitude of gods with limited powers evolved into an "omnipotent, universal god". This came together with the incorporation of the Sumerian myth into monotheistic religions that woman was created from man's rib, turning women from creator into the created, a derivative from man. Moreover, through their sexuality, women become symbolized as figures of disgrace, sin, and seduction (ibid: 31).

Öcalan's narrative seems to distinguish between three forms of power that emerged in the Neolithic era: the power of the priest (based on his ascribed ability to give meaning and interpret), the political power in the institution of the family (the miniature state of everyman), and a socio-economic process (of housewifization). Based on this analysis, Öcalan (2013: 52) argued that

> *[T]o kill the dominant man is the fundamental principle of socialism. This is what killing power means: to kill the one-sided domination, the inequality, and intolerance. Moreover, it is to kill fascism, dictatorship, and despotism. We should broaden this concept to include all these aspects. Liberating life is impossible without a radical women's revolution.*

Since we live today in a "society of the spectacle" (ibid: 46), the struggle for equality, freedom, democracy, and socialism requires above all a cultural or ideological struggle in which a break is created from a five thousand-year-old culture of male domination, referred to as a "total divorce" (ibid 51). Because

the struggle against male domination is central for a liberation struggle, women should organize themselves separately:

> *[T]he struggle for women's freedom must be waged through the establishment of their own political parties, attaining a popular women's movement, building their own non-governmental organizations and structures of democratic politics. (ibid: 60)*

Parallel to this analysis of gender-inequality as historically foundational for the production of other inequalities, a process of institutionalization of women's organizations took place. In 1987, the Patriotic Women Union of Kurdistan (*Yekitiya Jinên Welatperezên Kurdistan*, YJWK) was established in Germany, the first organization in which female PKK sympathizers organized themselves separately, which was followed by the establishment first of women's units within the guerrilla, with the Women's Freedom Union of Kurdistan (*Yekitiya Azadiya Jinên Kurdistan*, YAJK), in 1995, and then, in 1999, a women's political party, the Women's Workers Party of Kurdistan (*Partiya Jinên Kerkaran Kurdistan*, PJKK), which, following several name changes and reorganizations, has gone by the name of the Party of Free Women in Kurdistan (Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistan, PAJK) since 2004.

While the PAJK functions as an ideological institution, it is organized with the armed Free Women Units (Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star, YJA-STAR), the political front Union of Free Women (*Yekitiya Jinên Azad*, YJA), and the Women's Youth Organization (*Komalen Jinên Ciwan*). This takes the form of a confederal structure under the heading of the Association of Kurdistan Women (*Komalên Jinên Kurdistan*, KJK) (Akademisi 2015: 198-205). The separate organization of women was supposed to contribute to a profound cultural and political transformation, both of the PKK itself and of society more broadly.

The second paradigm change: abolishing the state

In *Liberating Life*, Öcalan (2013: 55) writes that the struggle "entails creating political formations aiming to achieve a society that is democratic, gender equal, eco-friendly and *where state is not the pivotal element*" (emphasis added). A theory of the emergence and role of the state is central to the second paradigm change within the PKK. At the time of the formation of the PKK in the 1970s, the PKK took revolutionary struggles elsewhere as a relevant horizon for its own orientation. The October Revolution in Russia, the revolution in China, the resistances in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique,

Eritrea, and other countries and regions around the world were all looked upon as part of a common heritage of the oppressed. Yet, the socialist and liberation movements did not fulfill their promise, and, towards the end of the 1980s, the self-declared socialist alternative, the Soviet Union, collapsed. For the PKK, the collapse of the Soviet Union, to paraphrase Paul Virilio (Conley 2012: 93), did not so much symbolize the triumph of capitalist modernity as the failure of an approach to liberate life from chains of oppression and exploitation. This defeat formed an important background for a re-examination of the idea of socialism and liberation struggle, eventually resulting in a state-critique.

> *[The PKK] examined all the national liberation struggles. They liberated, waged big battles, millions were martyred, and eventually they won, but the gains were minimal. They reached their targets but could not realize their principles. . . . Adding to that the collapse of socialism, they positioned themselves as alternative. The Soviets had believed that they would only come to an end when the world came to an end, and this affected their mentality. We started a re-examination. When we were established, we took our inspiration more from struggles elsewhere than from the resistance movements in recent Kurdish history, which had all ended into a defeat, thus affecting PKK thinking. I mean, we took them [the national liberation movements] as examples, we were affected by these movements when we started our struggle, but these struggles did not bring what they should have brought. In fact, they went backwards and accepted what they had previously refused. So you see, there had to be something wrong. This demanded a re-examination. The emergence of a new paradigm [within the PKK] is very much influenced by this. (Duran Kalkan, personal communication, October 28, 2014)*

This resulted in a critique on the state, referred to by Nietzsche as "the coldest of cold monsters" (Merrifield 2006: 157) and by Öcalan as the institution that does not stand for democracy, freedom, and human rights, but their denial (Öcalan 2010: 193). Thus, Öcalan began to reject state formation as an objective of political struggle that aims at liberation, and proposed a new model (Jongerden 2016). Öcalan (2014: 32) argues thus:

> *The people are to be directly involved in the decision finding process of the society. This projects relies on the self-government of local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. Citizens are the agents of this kind of self-government instead of state-based institutions. The principle of federative self-government has no limitations. It can even be continued across borders in order to create multinational democratic structures. Democratic confederalism prefers flat hierarchies where decision finding and decision making processes take place within local communities. . . . It provides a framework within which minorities, religious communities, cultural groups, gender-specific groups and other societal groups, can organize themselves autonomously.*

This is what Öcalan, following Murray Bookchin (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013; Jongerden and Akkaya 2013), refers to with such terms as "democratic autonomy", referring to the decision-making responsibilities of people themselves, and "democratic confederalism", the inter-connective context in which this takes place. This is not autonomy or confederalism, which could be reduced to a choice between individualism or totality, but a relational understanding focusing on what is referred to as that which exists between people, acknowledging humans as social beings (Balibar 2014: 32, 122).

Bookchin suggests the principle of confederalism, comprising a network of local democratic assemblies, as a principle of social organization aimed at "democratizing the interdependence without surrendering the principle of local control"; the establishment of "direct-democratic popular assemblies at the municipal, town, and neighborhood levels" in their confederated form thus becomes an alternative to the nation-state (Bookhin 1991). In *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (1986; republished as *Urbanization Without Cities* [1992] and *From Urbanization to Cities* [1995]), Bookchin

> *narrates a history of civic self-management, face-to-face democracy, and confederalism in the Western democratic tradition, beginning in ancient Greece and proceeding through medieval European towns and to the popular institutions in several revolutions, particularly the American and French. The book culminates in a chapter-long exposition of libertarian municipalism, which is the name Bookchin gave to his political project. Libertarian municipalism is a politics that seeks to recreate a vital local political or civic sphere in order to establish direct-democratic popular assemblies at the municipal, town, and neighborhood levels. Over larger regions these assemblies would confederate and, as they gained strength, challenge the centralized nation-state. He argued for a municipalization (rather than a Marxian nationalization) of the economy, as a way of opposing the present corporate capitalist system of ownership and management. (Simkin, 2014)*

Bookchin's approach may be considered Eurocentric, but Öcalan brings in a history from the east, with a particular focus, as indicated, on the Neolithic era. As a side-note, we may add, such a re-discovery of history is part of the revolutionary struggle, as Marx (1852) had argued: "The awakening of the dead in (…) revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again." This re-assessment of history implies a new imagination and perspective for action—one that empowered Kurds, who had, after all, been subject to a process of ethnocide (Bruinessen 1994: 8).

Paradigm change and contestation within the PKK

The paradigm change within the PKK did not come overnight and neither was it a smooth process. Gender- and non-state democracy evolved as "ideas in action" over the years, involving i) cautious exploration of the new formulated ideas, ii) a reception with discord, and iii) experimentation and contestation that almost resulted in a collapse of the party. Abdullah Öcalan had argued for the need for a democratic politics for women, which was translated into autonomous structures and decision-making, meaning that these organizations did not need approval from the PKK leadership. This independent capacity was contested in the beginning of the 2000s, however, allegedly by a group around Osman Öcalan, the younger brother of Abdullah.

Following the arrest and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan, his status in the PKK had become an issue. Should he remain the political leader of the party, with effective competences over the organization and giving direction to the movement as a whole, or should he be considered a symbolic leader, without the practical power to influence the party's tactical and strategic politics? Discussions on the subject became entwined with the position of the women's organizations. Against Öcalan's argument for the need for women to build their own structures of democratic politics, attempts were made to bring the PKK-affiliated women's movement under control of the party leadership. Thus, the intended rollback of an independent institutionalization came together with an ideological challenge to the gender-analysis developed by Abdullah Öcalan.

With the move to centralize decision-making powers and subordinate the women's movement to the presidential council of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan was being turned into a symbolic leader. This was countered by fierce opposition from women in the organization, though, who successfully defended their independence and autonomous decision-making powers. A member of the KJK, Malatyali Dilan, explains what occurred thus:

> *A tendency emerged saying "The leadership is imprisoned in Imrali and the women's movement is now left to our mercy, so from now on you have to get our approval for all decisions you take." Of course, the women's movement did not accept this. There was an uprising. We made a now famous uprising. Whatever happens, no way will men make decisions about us. Our uprising was about this. All the women cut their hair. (…) It was a way to show that we did not accept [what was happening]. It created a shock: "What's happening within the PKK movement?" This was the beginning of an insurgency. If the women do this today, other things may happen tomorrow. Everywhere we have hundreds of women fighters and we are orga-*

> *nized. (…) Because of these actions, our male friends had to give up on what they had insisted on. (…) These actions took place in the process towards the 7th Congress, in 2000. (Malatyali Dilan, personal communication, October 29, 2014)*

By turning Abdullah Öcalan into a symbolic leader, and taking his mandate, a move had been made to centralize decision making powers, and to subordinate the women movement to the presidential council of the PKK. The women's movement disputed the validity of the decision to turn Öcalan into a "honorary leader" not having the responsibility to give direction to the movement, and by doing that successfully defended their independence and autonomous decision making powers.

This was not the first time the women had contested decisions within the party. Earlier, in the beginning of the 1990s, for example, when the number of women in the guerilla was on the rise, women had successfully resisted the order by Osman Öcalan, then leader of the military wing, to cover their hair because in line with the conservative values of people. Yet instead of "closing" themselves—the veiling of one's hair is referred to in Turkish as "*kapanmak*", meaning "closure"—they created a new opening, the process towards what would become a women's party.

After his imprisonment on an island jail (Imrali) following an operation to abduct Öcalan from Kenya, on February 15, 1999, and facing court proceedings on multiple charges, primarily of treason against the state (of Turkey), Abdullah Öcalan started preparations for his legal defense. The right to organize his own defense gave him access to literature, and resulted in an extensive reading of political and social theory, philosophy, and history (see the Annex for a list). This study resulted not in a legalistic defense, but a political one, but yet not the one expected by party militants and the Kurdish population. Instead of making a case claiming the right for the Kurdish people to an independent state, he proposed a new, "truly" democratic Turkish republic. In the years that followed he committed to a thorough rethinking of the history of socialism and the PKK and the development of a new political project (Akkaya 2016). This new political project, referred to as "democratic confederalism", "democratic autonomy" and the "democratic nation", he positioned within the historical context of non-state civilization. The Neolithic era becomes a key reference point, associated with matriarchal order and "primitive socialism", as opposed to the later development of religified culture, urbanization, private ownership and commodification, resulting in the "birth of the hierarchical state" (Öcalan 2013a: 23).

Although Öcalan was in contact with his lawyers, he spend most of his time in isolation, reading, developing his ideas, and writing. Even within

the restrictions he faced, however, Öcalan desired some kind of intellectual exchange. According to Oliver Kontny, one of the people working with the legal defense team, he was looking for i) people he could engage with in order to test and further develop his ideas, and ii) information about other movements in the world working with similar agendas:

> *He was basically alone in his prison cell and turning upside down half of his believe system and more than half of the belief system of his followers. (…) And of course, one can start to doubt and think "Maybe I'm just losing it." So he needed some kind of feedback from somebody who was not his follower, not his supporter, from people who might be involved in their own struggles, or in their own process of thinking. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, November 29, 2015)*

One of the attempts to engage in discussion with intellectuals and activists outside the movement took place in the context of a translation of what would later be published in English as *Prison Writings, The Roots of Civilization* (Öcalan 2007). The London-based publishing house Pluto Press was interested in the manuscript, since it was placed in a radical socialist frame and dealt with critical perspectives on capitalism and colonialism:

> *As a publisher, I was always interested in the books of people who are struggling to resist what they felt was some form of domination. (…) Ocalan obviously was a major leader of the Kurdish resistance (...) but we were not involved in the dynamics or the politics. (Roger van Zwanenberg, personal communication June 27, 2016)*

The manuscript was send out for review, to Susan Pollack, an archaeologist interested in political economy and feminist approaches to the study of pre- and early historic Mesopotamian societies, and Reinhard Bernbeck, who had an interest in the economic organization of ancient societies and ancient imperialism in relation to its manifestations today. Pollock (1999) had published on Ancient Mesopotamia, and together, Pollock and Bernbeck (2004) had edited a publication on social life in Neolithic village (Starzmann, Pollock, and (eds.) 2008). Pollock and Bernbeck had parts of the translation of the manuscript, reading through it and giving comments in a back and forth exchange with Oliver Kontny, who was working on the translation:

> *When reading the text I was really impressed by the sort of detail [and] knowledge (…) Overall I found it very interesting. It [was] a kind of appropriate analysis made by someone with limited access to a library. (Reinhard Bernbeck, personal communication, June 22, 2016)*

Against the idea of Ancient Mesopotamia as a wonderful civilization from where we can see a history of progress, Öcalan made an argument about

the existence of "primitive socialism" in the Neolithic era, emphasizing the emergence of gender hierarchies, class division, and social exploitation:

> *I did not fully understand his analysis of the Neolithic revolution, and what he said of the pre-urban period and the comparison to the Enlightenment. Is capitalism the Enlightenment derailed, or was the Enlightenment already the first step in the wrong direction? Was the Neolithic revolution derailed, or was it such a first step in the wrong direction? There were other things, but then I have to look closely back, I don't remember, since it is probably something between a dozen and 15 years ago we had these discussions (…) One can probably pinpoint the first production of surplus more precisely in time and space than he [Öcalan] does, but obviously, why should he? It's somewhere there. He is not wrong by putting it between the early Neolithic and urban society and state emergence in Mesopotamia. (Reinhard Bernbeck, personal communication, June 22, 2016)*

On basis of his exchange with the reviewers, Oliver Kontny contacted Öcalan to discuss the content of his book:

> *I wrote this very long letter. His lawyers didn't want to give this letter to him, because they thought it was rude. After some months, I pushed them into giving it, and I received a response by fax. Ocalan obviously sat down to write a hand-written letter, and he had the prison authorities fax it to his lawyers. (…) He was saying, "Yes, I am not an academic, I am not claiming to be one, so please correct whatever you think is wrong, but let's discuss this, let's think this through for what it can mean for humanity, because if you also agree that it's something new than let's develop this together." (…) People were thinking it was improper, they were actually trying to stop me from writing again, and they effectively stopped me from implementing what he said in his letter. Because in his letter to me he said, "Look, I want you to form a group of people and to update my book so it will be on par with the level of discussion in Europe, and if there is any mistake, factual mistakes, just tacitly correct them (…) But what is important is that you don't dilute my ideas, my political and philosophical ideas. I'm confident you understand them and be very careful not to alter them, but all the rest just feel free, make it a good text in an editorial way". This is what he was saying in a letter with his own signature to a translator and a publisher. If I was a PKK person, this would be sacred, right? This was Ocalan's.... It was his will, his written, expressed will, and they stopped us. It didn't happen. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, November 29, 2015).*

As this exchange around the manuscript came to an end, a parallel process of contact with intellectuals emerged, the most important being Murray Bookchin, who was contacted by Reimar Heider and Uta Schneiderbangerstating of the International Initiative/Peace in Kurdistan. Born in New York to Russian Jewish immigrants, Murray Bookchin (1921-2007) was active in the youth movement of the communist party in

the USA in his teens but broke with it at the end of the 1930s. Initially he aligned himself with the Trotskyites and the Socialist Workers Party, but he had considerable difficulties with their hierarchical and centralist outlook and started to consider himself a libertarian socialist from the 1950s onwards (Jongerden and Akkaya 2013). Ocalan had emphasized the value of Bookchin's ideas, and referred to him as his teacher and himself his pupil. (Reimar Heider, personal communication, December 24, 2015)

In his writings, Öcalan recommends Bookchin on several occasions. "The world view for which I stand," Öcalan explained in a meeting with his lawyers on December 1, 2004, "is close to that of Bookchin," and he advised his supporters to read Bookchin's work:

> *On this subject, you can make use of the books, Urbanization without Cities and Remaking Society. Read these two books. My worldview is close to those ideas [of] Wallerstein and Bookchin*[3].

Earlier that year, on October 27, he had done the same:

> *We will solve the Kurdish issue through local authorities. [...] For the municipalities, I suggested that Bookchin must be read and his ideas are practiced*[4].

On December 11, 2004, Murray Bookchin's companion and author Janet Biehl, wrote, "It is thrilling to learn that Murray Bookchin's remarks were read to the second general assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress last summer, and it is gratifying to know that many Kurdish people now view his ideas favorably."[5]. Biehl was writing in response to a letter from Reimar Heider and Uta Schneiderbangerstating, which had stated "We would like to inform your that your kind letter with your positive remarks about Mr. Ocalan has meanwhile been read at the 2nd general assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress[6], which took place in the Kurdish mountains this summer, and has been much applauded."[7] But the reading of the letter had been a close call and the reference to applause belies a much more complex, not to say fraught political process.

The second General Assembly of the Kurdistan People's Congress (*Kongra-Gel Kurdistan*) was held between May 16 and May 26, 2004, in Kandil,

3. Abdullah Öcalan, "Prison Notes," (December 1, 2004).
4. Abdullah Öcalan, "Prison Notes," (October 27, 2004).
5. Letter by Janet Biehl to Uta Schneiderbanger and Reimar Heider, dd. December 11, 2004.
6. Kongra-Gel Kurdistan.
7. Letter to Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin, dated October 12, 2004 ; the letter is not signed, but apparently was written by Schneiderbanger and Heider.

the rugged and mountainous area in the eastern part of Kurdistan where the PKK had bases. Oliver Kontny recounts the details:

> *I was in a hotel in Jordan on my way to Kandil and checked my emails and then there was this response from Bookchin. The letter was like an encouraging address really. So I printed it out and kept it in my pocket. When I arrived in Kandil (…) I told the people, "Look we have this brand new message from Bookchin, it just arrived by email yesterday. Do you want to read it out at the conference tomorrow?" What happened then was quite interesting. (…) The chair, Abdullah Hijab, a Kurdish liberal nationalist, said, "Look, we have much more powerful friends in the USA. Sorry, but who cares about some marginal anarchist with 50 followers?" So he was basically mocking this thing. He was saying it was not going to happen. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, November 29, 2015)*

In fact, Abdullah Hijab was not the chair(man) but the co-chair(person), since the Congress, like the movement as a whole had introduced a co-chairing system whereby the chair was shared between a man and a women—as Kontny noted:

> *But at that time they already had the system of co-chairing, and the co-chair, Asya Deniz, she was saying, "Look, sorry, but you know Bookchin is quite important for our leader, and if we get a message from him we should read it and I'm going to do it." She took my letter and she made a translation. She then read it out herself at the conference, and they could not stop her. So, that was quite a great moment, because people were standing up, there was this standing ovation, and people were really excited about this. So you could see a lot of delegates in the room who actually thought this was very, very important, historic. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, November 29, 2015)*

Clearly, this was a key moment, not just at the Congress, but for the future direction of the movement as a whole, the shape the future struggle would take:

> *At the time there wasn't really space for intellectual discussion. There was this split in the leadership. Osman Öcalan and Nizamettin Taş, who were top-commanders, had broken away. They disagreed with the new emerging paradigm. They just said, "No, we need a national state, we want to have an independent Kurdistan, this is the time to do it and we want to realize this together with the USA." Since they were quite high ranking, they could assert their agenda on behalf of the movement. But a critical portion of the rank and file and some of the leadership fiercely opposed them and wanted them ousted (…) The situation was quite tense. And of course, what do people with a background in Marxism and military leadership do? They were saying this is not a time to discuss. Some younger people were much more open to this whole alternative anarchist, feminist, ecological thinking, and they felt they were being marginalized in the process.*

> *The leadership of the party had very different concerns at the time, but all these contributed more to a closure than an opening of a discussion about the ideas of Öcalan. Murat Karayılan was basically interested in keeping the movement together. Duran Kalkan had an open attitude, but as a convinced Marxist he had his own reservations about anarchism and they weren't all wrong. For Cemil Bayık, the main thing was to create an atmosphere that was not polarizing, and would include the right wing or nationalist opposition as well. Not to antagonize them, that was his main thing. Yes, democratization, that's good, but democratization should not mean we go for more radical leftist thought, but do something which will include people who were nationalist, liberals, since we need national unity at this time, that was his position. (Oliver Kontny, personal communication, November 29, 2015).*

Yet in this period, there was a back and forth between accommodating the group around Osman Öcalan and Nizamettin Taş and ostracizing them. Some thought they should stay part of the movement, thinking that things could be worse if they would leave and work against the party, while others thought that their stay within the party would further obstruct the transformation process. In Augustus 2004, two months after the second General Assembly, Osman Öcalan, as member of the Presidential Council of the PKK, announced the establishment of a new political party, the Patriotic Democratic Party (*Partiya Welatparez Demokratîk*, PWD). He was joined by Nizamettin Taş, another member of the Presidential Council, along with other PKK cadre, such as the former representative of the PKK in Europe, Kani Yilmaz, and a large number of fighters. The PWD rejected the new paradigm, holding to the establishment of an independent state as the ultimate aim of the struggle. It considered the American intervention in Iraq an opportunity to create an independent Kurdistan and seek for a close collaboration with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Barzani.

The PWD did not manage to become much more than a name and a website, and the party passed into history shortly after is establishment, but the split was a sign of the huge turmoil the paradigm change created within the party and among its militants. It is estimated that between 2003 and 2005—when the confrontations between those who wanted to adhere to the statist paradigm and a classical political party with its leadership in command and those who wanted to move with Abdullah Öcalan towards a post-statist and post-patriarchal (beyond the state and dominant male) understanding of politics were at their height—about 1,500 militants left the organization. Fearing a collapse, Abdullah Öcalan initiated a further reorganization of the PKK.

First, he called for the formation of a "Preparatory Rebuilding Committee", concerned with the re-founding of the PKK as an ideological power grouping (PKK 2005). This was to be mainly concerned with the education of cadres

to give direction to the movement, not through "order-words" demanding obedience and docility (Conley 2012: 102), but by internalizing an ideological orientation (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011). Of course, theory without practice is sterile, and the ideological reorientation had to be enacted, so that the party was not the apex from which everything trickled down but part of a broader network of organizationally independent structures. Further to the women's party, organizational differentiation was advanced with the establishment of separate civil and military structures, political parties and self-defense forces, for the organization of the struggle in Iraq, in Iran and in Syria:

> *It was a brilliant move of Ocalan to start this differentiation, like the people in Rojava need their own political party, and the people in East Kurdistan need their own political party. At the time people did not understand that. They said, "What the hell, we want our PKK!" In the long term, you see how important this was. To have specializations for some things, better knowledge, for example, people started to pull out the knowledge about Iranian history. The general movement did not know so much about Iranian history. They would not know that much about Syrian history. They would know something about the Kurdish history and the history of Turkey. So this differentiation turned out to be pretty important. (Reimar Heider, personal communication, December 24, 2015)*

Indeed, the first attempts to implement the new ideas did create problems. The decentralization and dissolution of hierarchies resulted in a fragmentation and loss of coherence:

> *In 2005 everything fell apart; they barely kept the stuff together. Like, in retrospective you can say, ok, a lot of controversy was reduced by the right wing leaving the party, or what I would call the right wing. (…) That really helped to reunify thinking and practice. And then you had the thing with people saying, "Yes, well isn't this all about decentralization and empowerment of the base?" And then they set up dozens of committees for all kinds of work in the movement and later they said, well, "It doesn't work. Everyone is just doing their own thing and there's no... well, we said something about collaboration and coordination and there is no coordination anymore. Everybody is just doing their own thing and that doesn't work (…) And then luckily stuff worked in Rojava. (…) It was trial and error. (Reimar Heider, personal communication, December 24, 2015)*

Thus, the re-founding of the PKK as an ideological party was to usher in a new coordination mechanism, provided by the Association of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK).[8] With the congress, Kongra-Gel,

8. The KCK was actually a continuation of the Association of Associations in Kurdistan (*Koma Komalan Kurdistan*, KKK), established at the 2005 congress and renamed in 2007.

as its assembly, the KCK comprised a network of village, city, and regional councils, functioning as an organization to provide an ideological orientation for structures and institutions that were oriented to the idea of democracy, ecology, and gender-equality. The dialectic between an organization giving ideological orientation and autonomous institutions taking their own decisions did not work well from the beginning, however, and it was not until further developments, south of the Turkish-Syrian border, in Rojava, that the difficult process of reinvention started to bear fruit.

Conclusions

In this article, I have presented the PKK as an organization that has been able to reinvent itself after—or rather through—defeat. By looking at failures, at the "bad side", the PKK was able to (continue to) develop itself as a movement that makes history. Of importance was in this history i) the early defeat of the revolutionary left in Turkey in the 1970s, which shaped the process of group formation, leading to the 1978 establishment of the PKK; ii) the military setbacks that confronted the PKK in the beginning of the 1990s, when it shifted towards positional warfare just as the Turkish military started to use guerilla tactics, leading to the institutionalization of a women's movement; iii) and the capture and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, which, in the context of an evaluation of the failure of real existing socialism and national liberation movements, led to a recreation of the party's ideology and organization.

The profound ideological reorientation and political reorganization of the PKK, here referred to as a "paradigm change", from a political party oriented towards the construction of a state towards a network aiming at the development of self-government, was an extended and uneven process. The transformation was more than a reorientation involving organization change; it was no less than the development of a new mind-set, which involved the questioning of historically entrenched gender-hierarchies and deeply held political axioms. In the process, the PKK lost a substantial number of long-time activists and cadres. However, although at times it looked like the movement might fall apart, the result was a reinvention that gave the PKK a new impetus, enabling it to not only to survive and move with the times but also, one may claim, spearhead the new development and political realization of democracy in the Middle East.

This transformation of the PKK involved a critique of state developed alongside an analysis of gender inequalities as foundational for a struggle for a life lived in freedom. It was Öcalan who mobilized Kurdish women, yet in the struggle against what was called "the dominant male", the women in the PKK also mobilized Öcalan, in order to defend their independence. It is, of course, not without irony that his undisputed leadership makes him a dominant male, and that through his iconic status he seems at the same time to surpass it. Although the party has always been positioned as an ideological formation—including now, following its re-establishment in 2005—the main ideologue is undoubtedly Abdullah Öcalan, the person who initiated and pushed for the transformation—just as it was he who originally rose to prominence among the leftists and Kurds in Ankara in the 1970s.

Within the PKK network, as it may be characterized, education and making analysis one's own are given prominence. One could say that this is an approach based on the idea that a view can change the world, which is rooted in the romantic period (Morton 2007: 15); the PKK, however, relates this strongly to the idea of struggle, which is not only a struggle for societal change but also a personal change. Closely related to the rallying cry of second wave feminism, therefore, that "the personal is political", struggle is seen in terms of the self in relation to others, or a social ecology.

In the writing of Murray Bookchin, Öcalan found the ideas through which he could give a positive systematic to his critique of the way socialist and national liberation movement had tried to develop their alternatives. He must have recognized his own preferences in the approach of Bookchin, who does not limit himself to critical analysis and deconstruction, but tried to come up with political perspectives for a radical societal transformation, or revolution, if that word may be reclaimed, its marginalization denied, and the sense of urgency, of doing profound things now, be emphasized. According to Bookchin (1991: 3), "[p]erhaps the greatest single failing of movements for social reconstruction"—referring in particular to the left and organizations that claim to speak for the oppressed—"is their lack of a politics that will carry people beyond the limits established by the status quo." Öcalan's main drive is precisely to go beyond the status quo and deal with socio-economic and socio-cultural injustices. His analyses are made in the service of just such a transformation.

The transformation has been a cautious process. First, the PKK tried to keep the party together, and failed. Again, however, this split enabled success, since the split also made it possible to move on and create an internal ideological consistency. Internal divide about the question of the state and

the position of the women movement had created a turmoil that resulted not so much in ambiguity as paralysis. The history of the paradigm change also shows that changes do not occur in a linear way, and also that they are not irreversible. There are a variety of different possibilities of becoming, with those that prevail in the future being the outcome of the struggles taking place today.

List of interviews

Riza Altun, part of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 30, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

Cemil Bayik, part of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 30, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

Reinhard Bernbeck, personal communication, June 22, 2016. The interview took place through skype.

Malatyali Dilan, part of the leadership of the PKK related women movement, date of interview: October 29, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

Reimar Heider, personal communication, December 24, 2015. The interview took place at Wageningen University.

Duran Kalkan, part of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 28, 2014.

Oliver Kontny, date of interview, November 29, 2015. The interview took place through skype.

Fatma, member of the Congress of Free Women KJA, a civil society organization, date of interview: July 27, 2016. The interview took place at the office of KJA in Diyarbakir.

Roger van Zwanenberg, publisher at Pluto Press between 1987 and 2011, date of interview: June 27, 2016. The interview took place through skype.

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