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The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the ideology of democratic autonomy, as developed by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from the libertarian and anarchist writings of Murray Bookchin, as an alternative to the authoritarian and centralist nation state, not only in the Kurdish-inhabited provinces, but in Turkey at large. It explores, first, the ideological underpinnings and second, the practical implementation of democratic autonomy both in south-eastern Turkey and in north-eastern Syria, or Rojava. Divergences between the two, I will argue, are not merely the result of contradictions between ideology and practice, or of the PKK's enduring Leninist vanguardism, but also arise because the ideology itself remains ambiguous or implicit on the questions of party organization and the legitimacy of armed resistance. These ambiguities help to account for the apparent tension between grassroots anarchism and Leninist centralism in democratic autonomy, not only in practice but also in theory.

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1. Introduction

In the spring and summer of 2016, and especially in the wake of the failed coup attempt on July 15, Turkey has been moving at an accelerated pace towards an authoritarian and autocratic regime by president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*). The military, the judiciary and other state institutions have witnessed massive purges, which aimed at eradicating all alternatives of social power and silencing all oppositional voices. At first blush, this development seems to mark the undoing of many of the AKP's earlier policies. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the AKP government had carried out a number of successful and at least seemingly democratic reforms: the economy was stabilized, civil politics was strengthened vis-à-vis the military, accession talks with the European Union were reinvigorated, and unprecedented initiatives to solve the Kurdish question were undertaken.¹ From around 2010, however, the country has gradually moved away from this course. It has been suggested that president Erdoğan's increasingly autocratic rule and his creation of what has been called a 'competitive authoritarianism'

also challenge a number of long-cherished convictions in political science, among others Przeworski and Limongi's influential hypothesis that relative affluence protects democracies from becoming dictatorial.²

Here, however, I will not address such broader questions; rather, I will focus on one major domestic challenge to this new conservative authoritarianism: the Kurdish movement. In parliamentary politics, this movement booked an unprecedented success when the HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or Peoples' Democratic Party), passed the 10% electoral threshold in the June 2015 national elections. But extra-parliamentary opposition against the AKP regime also gathered pace. In August 2015, Kurdish insurgents in south-eastern Turkey erected barricades and declared autonomy in various urban centres, in a move apparently inspired by the successes of the Kurdish PYD in north-eastern Syria, Rojava or 'West[ern Kurdistan]', as it has come to be known. Both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary Kurdish groups call for 'democratic autonomy' or 'democratic confederalism'; a political doctrine they see as not only containing the solution for Turkey's Kurdish question, but as a recipe for a democratic Turkey at large.

Democratic autonomy guides or inspires both the legal and the extralegal hegemonic (pro-) Kurdish groups in Turkey. Thus, with this doctrine, the HDP presents itself as a progressive and secular alternative to Erdoğan's conservative and authoritarian Islamism. Democratic autonomy is also intended to mark a departure from classical Marxist–Leninist concepts and practices. Given that the notion was first developed by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and given the high degree of organizational and ideological centralization in that party, it is worthwhile exploring the original formulation of these ideas in some detail. Hence, below, I will first discuss its ideological underpinnings and backgrounds, and second, I will discuss whether and to what extent the practices of the Kurdish movement in south-eastern Turkey and north-eastern Syria, or Rojava, live up to this ideology. I will argue that Öcalan's ambivalence towards armed resistance and his silence concerning party organization help in accounting for some of the apparent divergences between anarchist theory and Leninist practice. The second part can aspire at no more than a preliminary and tentative analysis: given the war conditions in Syria and south-eastern Turkey, detailed fieldwork is virtually impossible to conduct. Hence, the present paper is based on, on the one hand, a close reading of Öcalan's recent writings, and, on the other, published reports and interviews conducted by the author.

2. Turkey, the PKK and Öcalan: a brief ideological history

In the late Ottoman Empire, a debate raged between proponents of a centralist state under Turkish domination and defenders of a decentralized and more pluralist polity (Hanioglu 2001, esp. ch. 5, 10). In its successor, the Republic of Turkey, the balance has tilted solidly in favour of centralist and Turkish nationalist views. Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a highly centralized republic – labelled 'Jacobin' by numerous observers, including Öcalan himself – was created, which involved a state apparatus that imposed, by force if necessary, those features of modernity it considered desirable. A number of uprisings were brutally crushed, and only after the Second World War did a multi-party system emerge. Although the rise of Islamism in Turkey has been characterized as a revolt of the Anatolian periphery against the Western Turkish, and Kemalist centre (Zubaida 1996), Erdoğan's recent (or recently visible) shift towards an increasingly authoritarian and indeed autocratic style

of government may be seen as a reassertion of this Jacobinism, with which it displays significant similarities and, indeed, continuities.

Next to the Islamism that started developing from the 1960s on, notably by the future Refah Party leader Necmettin Erbakan, a very different challenge to the Kemalist vision of a centralized Turkish nation state was, of course, the armed insurgency conducted by the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*) during much of the 1980s and 1990s. Although state authorities had themselves tacitly encouraged the Islamization of Turkish society since at least the 1974 Cyprus invasion, and accelerated this process after the 1980 coup, they had always dealt harshly with any manifestation of Kurdish identity – which helps to explain in part the violence of the guerrilla campaign initiated by the PKK in 1984.

At first blush, both the ideology and the practice of the PKK seem radically at odds with both Kemalist and Islamist styles of governing Turkey. But on closer inspection, it appears to share a number of centralist or Jacobin tenets with both, most visibly in its early phase. Founded in the 1970s on Marxist–Leninist principles, it started an armed struggle for national liberation. Although its 1978 manifesto explicitly called for the creation of an independent Kurdish state, the party generally articulated this nationalist struggle in non-nationalist Marxist terms of class struggle, revolutionary consciousness and the like. The start of a full-fledged and violent guerrilla campaign in 1984 marked a new phase; it was accompanied by a number of radical changes in the party's internal structure.³ Next to the Leninist organizational principle of a vanguard party and to its systematic use of revolutionary violence as a means of provoking increased state repression and thus raising, or creating, national and revolutionary consciousness among the Kurdish masses, the party developed a Stalinist personality cult around its leader Öcalan. Some of the first-hour members were unhappy at this development, but were not in a position to change its course. Over the years, dissidents and opponents were successfully sidelined, or, in some cases, eliminated.⁴

In the early 1990s, the PKK insurgency showed signs of turning into a genuine popular revolt; as a corollary of this, its discourse changed markedly, in particular by becoming less openly anti-religious. At the same time, Öcalan showed pan-Kurdish aspirations, among others by encouraging a local franchise, the PAK (*Partiya Azadiya Kurdistan*) to emerge in Iraqi Kurdistan as a rival of local parties; but this was a short-lived and unsuccessful attempt. By the late 1990s, it had become clear that the popular uprising in Turkey had failed, due in large part to the merciless repression by Turkish state forces. The PKK had long operated in and from Syria with the full support of Hafez al-Assad's regime; but by 1998, this support had dwindled. Turkish security forces assumed, largely correctly, that, given the PKK's pyramidal hierarchy, the Kurdish armed struggle might well collapse if its leadership were captured or eliminated. And indeed, the capture and subsequent trial and imprisonment of PKK leader Öcalan in 1999 led to a number of dramatic changes in PKK ideology and action. On the military front, guerrilla warfare was brought to an effective halt. The most important ideological post-1999 change was the PKK's move away from national independence to a form of autonomy within Turkey. Clearly, this shift implied a recognition of existing territorial borders and of the legitimacy of the existing Turkish state; or, at the very least, it could easily be construed as doing so by those who wished to. Kurdish critics and rivals dismissed these changes as transparent attempts by Öcalan to save his own skin; but some hints at them antedated his capture. For example, by the late 1990s, the PKK had already been moving from a Kurdish nationalist agenda to a

discourse of Mesopotamian multiculturalism, partly in reaction to charges of atheism mounted from Turkish state circles, partly in an attempt to co-opt or mobilize ethnic and sectarian groups like the (Kurdish) Alevi and the Christians in the region. After 1999, however, such ideas acquired an entirely new meaning. PKK personnel seemed to be trying to project the appearance of a Northern Ireland style peace process, even though these alleged negotiations were led by an imprisoned leader. Astonishingly perhaps, despite Öcalan's imprisonment, no serious challenges to his leadership were mounted. He was duly re-elected as party leader, and even those PKK members who now became de facto independent decision makers (most importantly, Cemil Bayık, the movement's military commander lodged in the Qandil mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan) rarely, if ever, openly challenged Öcalan's position or decisions.⁵

But the early twenty-first century not only saw dramatic shifts in the PKK's ideology, tactics, and organization; it also witnessed equally dramatic political changes in Turkey, the main arena of PKK struggle. In particular, the meteoric rise to power of the AKP headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan from 2002 and the renewed EU accession talks in the early twenty-first century initiated a decade of unprecedented – if ultimately precarious – progress on human rights and on the Kurdish question. In a number of measures, culminating in 2009 with the government announcing a 'Kurdish opening' (*Kürt açılımı*), long-standing Kemalist taboos were broken. In 2006, a Kurdish-language channel of Turkish state television, TRT6, was opened, and it became possible to study Kurdish and other Mesopotamian 'living languages' at several universities in the region.⁶ At the same time, the majority-Kurdish region flourished economically, albeit still less than Western Turkey, thanks to the effective end of guerrilla insurgency in 1999 and the lifting of martial law in 2004.

PKK sources claimed credit for these developments, arguing that they were the fruits of the years-long armed struggle; but they were in at least equal measure due to government policies and EU pressure. One should not overstate the extent of these reforms, however. Kurdish-language education in state schools remained out of bounds, and few if any concrete steps towards a political settlement were taken. Likewise, Kurdish activities were only partly decriminalized, and were penalized by an appeal to the country's wide-ranging anti-terror laws (notoriously, including the use of the letters *q*, *w* and *x*, which occur in the Kurdish but not in the Turkish alphabet).

The most important economic transformation in Western Turkey as in the Kurdish region was a massive neoliberal restructuring, headed by a construction boom and accompanied by the creation of new patronage networks. A political development that was at least as significant, though rather less visible, was the entrance of pro-Kurdish parties in local civilian politics.⁷ But also in the national arena, the Kurdish movement booked unprecedented successes. Earlier pro-Kurdish parties had mobilized primarily in the traditional Kurdish-inhabited regions, and had hardly managed to mobilize even among Kurdish migrants in the cities of Western provinces; but the HDP made a concerted effort to reach out to the non-Kurdish electorate in Western Turkey. This strategy certainly paid off: in the June 2015 elections, it gained 13.1% of the vote, and landed 80 seats in parliament. It was the first time a pro-Kurdish party passed the 10% election threshold. Thus, although parties like the MHP and CHP had garnered more votes nationally, the HDP became the biggest ideological challenge to Erdoğan in the Turkish parliament.

Öcalan, who has been kept in solitary confinement since 1999, can have developed only a limited knowledge of these developments. Yet, he continued to dominate the Kurdish

movement not only politically but also ideologically. Thus, PKK supporters in Turkey and elsewhere have reproduced his critique of nationalism as an outdated, bourgeois, statist and/or ‘Jacobin’ doctrine, targeting not only Turkish nationalist elites, but also Kurdish rivals, in particular Iraqi Kurdish leader Massud Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), who have increasingly come to be seen as the PKK’s main rival in the Pan-Kurdish arena. The PKK’s actions are guided by the writings of its leader to a far greater extent than those of rivaling parties. But, as I will argue below, despite this relatively close link between ideology and practice, there is a strange tension between the current PKK discourse of democracy, autonomy and bottom-up grass-roots self-organization and the consistently hierarchical, centralistic and top-down organization that the PKK has maintained in practice.

3. The ideological roots of democratic autonomy: Bookchin and Öcalan

The political impetus behind Öcalan’s post-1999 shift may well have been his imprisonment; but the intellectual inspiration to move beyond a state-centred ideology came from a relatively unknown American anarchist thinker. Apparently, it was only after his imprisonment that Öcalan became familiar with the ideas of Bronx-born Murray Bookchin (1921–2006). Early in the 2000s, he read some of his works that had appeared in Turkish translation, and in 2004, contact between the two men was established through the intermediary of Öcalan’s lawyers.⁸ Despite paying lip service to classical Marxism, Öcalan’s post-1999 writings also display a significant shift to a particular kind of *longue-durée* civilizational history of the Middle East. This shift, too may be due in part to Bookchin’s influence.

Bookchin’s own intellectual and activist trajectory is worth describing in more detail. In a 2001 interview, Bookchin relates how in the 1930s, despite early misgivings, he had embraced orthodox Marxism, and specifically Stalinism, by joining the local branch of the communist party and by siding with the communists in the Spanish civil war. After the Second World War, he left the communist party for good. From the 1950s, he shifted towards a more libertarian form of socialism, and increasingly focused on environmental concerns. Even after his break with Marxism–Leninism, however, he maintained his belief in Hegelian dialectics as the thought of the progressive Left, though he disagreed with Hegel’s emphasis on teleology and necessity (Vanek 2001). Beyond the economism he finds in Marx and the individualism he finds in the nineteenth-century anarchists, Bookchin focuses on power and domination (in particular as institutionalized in the state), and emphasizes the fundamental importance of collectivist or communalist organization. Thus, in ‘What is communalism?’, he rejects individualist anarchism, as ‘lack of structure and institutions leads to chaos’. Instead, he propagates the organization of local or municipal communities. These are subsequently to join in a loose federation or, as he calls it, a ‘commune of communes’ (Bookchin 1994). Thus, organization is paramount for Bookchin; but, as far as I am aware, it is not related in detail to, let alone contrasted with, Leninist ideas of party organization.

Bookchin’s is a sweeping approach to world history shaped by a ‘process-oriented dialectic’ that eschews academic, or as he calls it, ‘analytical’ studies (1982, 13). Yet, his writings are visibly shaped by the academic literature of the 1950s and 1960s, including philosophers like Adorno, Bloch and Arendt, and such classical but nowadays outdated works on Mesopotamian history as Samuel Noah Kramer’s *The Sumerians* and Henri Frankfort’s *Before Philosophy*. These works also inform Öcalan’s writings on the civilizations emerging from Mesopotamia. It may well be that Öcalan was attracted primarily to Bookchin’s ideas

on early Mesopotamian forms of democratic communal organization and the communitarian concept of freedom (*amargi*) they involved; but we cannot know for sure. Moreover, Bookchin's writings betray a communitarian belief in the existence of pre-historical and pre-political 'organic societies' that are characterized by a 'deeply imbedded [*sic*] cooperative spirit' (1982, 13), by a feeling of unity between individual and community, and hence by a feeling of unity between the community and environment (1982, 44–6). With the development of urban civilization in Mesopotamia, Bookchin continues, these egalitarian communities gradually gave way to increasingly hierarchical societies. In Öcalan's writings, as we shall see, this communitarian strain becomes more pronounced.

Personal if indirect written contacts between Bookchin and Öcalan were established in 2004. Their letters from this year express an immediate mutual respect and sympathy.⁹ Öcalan called himself 'a good student of yours', while Bookchin wrote that the Kurds were 'fortunate indeed' to have a leader like Öcalan. After an initial exchange of polite phrases, a more theoretical discussion developed, in which Öcalan stated, with characteristic self-confidence, his belief that some of the ideas he had been developing while in prison 'could offer some answers to theoretical and practical predicaments Marxist theory has been unable to come to terms with over the past 150 years', though he added that 'his was not and could not be the work of an academic'. He also emphatically invited Bookchin to criticize his ideas.¹⁰

Although the exchange was cut short by Bookchin's death in 2006, Öcalan's subsequent writings unmistakably bear Bookchin's imprint. Conversely, Bookchin's longtime ally, Janet Biehl, became one of the most vocal and enthusiastic advocates of the PKK and of the Rojava experiment.¹¹ Let us therefore have a closer look at Öcalan's post-2005 writings, selections of which have appeared in English as *Prison Writings*, in a clear allusion to Gramsci.¹² As the editors of the English translation note, these works were written under a regime of solitary confinement, with access to books severely limited, and access to newspapers – let alone the internet – denied altogether. Hence, one should demand neither analytical sophistication nor descriptive precision from them. In such circumstances, it would obviously be difficult to make a detailed study on the contemporary articulations of capitalism or governance, like globalization, the European monetary unification, or the financialization of capital. But political–economical analyses never figured very prominently in Öcalan's writings anyway. Even in writings predating his 1999 capture, we find no detailed discussions of the neoliberal reconfigurations of the economy in Turkey, the Middle East or the world at large, let alone of the concomitant changes in class structure, governmentality and subjectivity that these have brought about.

More surprisingly, we find only a limited critical self-reflection in Öcalan's writings concerning the party's Marxist–Leninist past, or concerning the post-1989 convulsions in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and 'real existing socialism'. Instead, these works aim at placing the Kurdish, and more specifically the PKK's, struggle in a grand civilizational and world historical scheme. Thus, they amount to a history of the *longue durée* of sorts. Öcalan even interprets his own personal trajectory in such civilizational terms: he views his failure to be granted political asylum in Europe as a failure of European law and as a 'measure of the state of a civilization'. This disappointment by European states, he claims, has forced him to find a 'distinct antithesis to European civilization', which should be developed on the basis of 'historical foundations specific to the Middle East' (2007, ix).¹³

Thus, the Middle East, and more specifically Mesopotamia, looms even larger in Öcalan's doctrines than in Bookchin's writings. For him, Sumer, in particular, figures as both the historical origin of, and a trans-historical model for, a civilization claimed to be specifically Middle Eastern. No other ideology, he argues, has had as profound an impact on human thought as Sumerian mythology. Here, he continues, we also find mythological expressions of gender conflict, the development of class society, gender inequality, urbanization and even empire and colonialism (*sömürgecilik*). Thus, he claims that 'subsequent imperialist and colonial endeavours amounted to little more than enhanced applications of the Sargonic model' (2012, 7). Likewise, he describes capitalism as a 'system of civilization' rather than a historically specific mode of production (2007, 219).

Such comments clearly show Öcalan's tendency to dehistoricize the historical and dialectical materialism of Marxism: he turns from a historical materialist critique of political economy to a generic – and in large part idealist – discussion of domination and freedom, focusing on the state and on male–female relations (2007, 13–17). In a more analytical mode, one could construe these remarks as suggesting that Öcalan rejects modern forms of governmentality in both its capitalist and its communist guises concentrated on the state and sovereignty; but he nowhere hints at a familiarity with such genealogical critiques. Instead, he poses a sweeping opposition between what he calls 'eurocentric social sciences' and the 'Middle East's leading cultural values over the last fifteen thousand years [*sic*]'. It is in the latter that he thinks a solution for the Kurdish question is to be sought, rather than in a 'five hundred-year-old vulgar materialist culture' that is alien to the Middle and Far East (Öcalan 2012, 24, 25). Even if one disregards the orientalist opposition between a materialist West and an essentially different, and essentially unchanging, spiritual or religious Eastern civilization, Öcalan's rejection of a 'eurocentric ideological hegemony' in favour of a Middle Eastern religious and moral civilization appears to reject both liberal Western theorizing and classical Marxist doctrine, albeit largely implicitly. Although he abstains from openly criticizing Marxist doctrines, the communitarian, often idealist and decidedly non-dialectical character of his own writings suggests a fundamental disagreement with, or departure from, the modernist and secularist assumptions underlying his earlier, more dialectical thinking.

In particular, Öcalan's appraisal of religion and traditional morality is a far cry from the modernist view of religion as an outdated form of morality belonging to a pre-modern social order, both in the positivist view of the development from a theological to a metaphysical and finally scientific stage of society and in the Marxist view of religion as the 'opium of the people'. Instead, for Öcalan, the real ideological enemy is neither Turkish nationalism nor Islamism, nor even liberal capitalism, but what he calls 'Jacobinism', by which he means not just the state-led centralism of the early Turkish republic; rather, in his redefinition, Jacobinism becomes a 'universal of modernity', reflecting the power of the bourgeoisie against a 'theocratic tradition that had left its mark on 5000 years of civilization' (2012, 41). Thus, redefined, Jacobinism comes to stand for a much broader phenomenon, namely bourgeois rule through a (nation) state. This broader category includes, next to Turkey's Kemalists, also liberals and bolsheviks; the latter, Öcalan claims, in apparent ignorance of early Soviet nationality policies, 'constituted themselves as a nation state' – a state form which, he adds, is 'the fundamental state regime of capitalism' (2012, 43).

Following Bookchin, Öcalan presents autonomous bottom-up communal self-organization as an alternative to the state-oriented doctrines of both liberal capitalism and bolshevik communism. But in the process, he turns Bookchin's (post-) anarchist notion of commune

into a quasi-communitarian notion of a 'natural society'. Where Bookchin propagates local self-organization as forms of contemporary political action, Öcalan tends to view Middle Eastern moral or religious communities as reflecting an age-old, if not virtually timeless, Mesopotamian civilization. At some points, he even appears to see communities as pre-political or supra-historical givens, witness his claim that the nation state 'alienates the community from its natural foundations' (2012, 12). It is hard to see how such an essentially ahistorical and pre- or apolitical category of 'community' can be reconciled with anything like historical materialism, especially as it naturalizes, and thereby legitimizes, communal organization as a natural process. This naturalization becomes particularly problematic when dealing with party organization, as we shall see below.

Concerning organization and other matters, Öcalan's writings thus turn out to display a number of silences and ambiguities. In particular, the role of a revolutionary vanguard party is nowhere thematized. More generally, Öcalan does not appear to address questions of party organization, party pluralism or the role of the vanguard party in any detail anywhere in his more recent writings. Superficially, it might seem that his Bookchin-inspired view of communal self-organization has overcome the need for party organization; but in practice, as we will see, this absence of a theoretical critique of party vanguardism has amounted to a tacit legitimation, and a not-so-tacit reaffirmation, of PKK hegemony at all levels of organization, which in the case of the Rojava laboratory has resulted in something very much resembling a Leninist one-party statelet, as will be argued below. Likewise, in Öcalan's abstracting away from the state, one can detect an ambivalence between a 'quietist' and a 'revolutionary' reading, neither of which is explicitly ruled out. On the former, the existing state (in particular, the Republic of Turkey) may be either ignored, or engaged with in electoral politics; on the latter, the state may be contested and eventually overcome by more violent revolutionary means.

Another ambiguous term in Öcalan's writings on democratic confederalism is that of 'legitimate self-defence'. In his own words, this self-defence involves democratization, political awareness and the preservation of one's identity at least as much as a military capacity; but it proved tempting for some followers to focus on the armed dimension. Those who wished to could read democratic autonomy as a goal to be reached through peaceful, and in particular electoral, means and this appears to be the reading followed by HDP politicians. But one could equally well read the concept of self-defence it involves as legitimizing armed insurgency. This ambivalence was to have fateful consequences.

4. Democratic autonomy in practice: Turkey, 2005–2015

Öcalan first publicly employed Bookchin's ideas in his May 2005 'declaration of democratic confederation', in which he rejected the nation state as an outdated model for social organization, and instead recommended a bottom-up autonomous self-organization by local communes or communities. The emphasis on democratic self-organization as opposed to the dominance inherent in the nation state reappears in his 2011 'Road Map', which presents less a concrete set of policy proposals and confidence-building measures than a generic statement of principles backed by a civilizational history in outline (Öcalan 2012). Yet, immediately, from 2005, PKK cadres started setting up a number of organizations and institutions based on these principles; the implicit irony being, of course, that it was a highly hierarchical party apparatus leading this self-proclaimed bottom-up

self-organization.¹⁴ First, already in 2005, a number of ‘Free citizen councils’ were organized. Second, a Democratic Society Congress (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, DTK) was founded in 2007, which acted as a kind of shadow parliament, albeit holding its first congress only in 2011. Third, various local councils were established to arbitrate in domestic cases, including blood feuds, divorces, domestic violence and honour killings.¹⁵ Fourth, a number of schools or ‘academies’ were opened. These institutions appear to aim less at providing general education and teaching critical thinking, and more at instilling PKK orthodoxy, in particular the various ideas and values surrounding democratic autonomy or confederalism. Thus, a representative of the Alevi General Political Academy in Diyarbakır declared that ‘Abdullah Öcalan’s ideas about Islam are the underpinnings’ of their teaching (Kurdistan 2016, 171). Such remarks suggest that, somewhat in contradiction to the espoused ideals of bottom-up ideology production and decision-making, Abdullah Öcalan is virtually the only living Kurdish individual whose ideas and proposals circulate by name in PKK circles. Not even powerful figures like Cemil Bayık and Murat Karayılan openly propose tactics or policies that differ from, let alone contradict, those of the party’s leader, or formulate rival ideas or ideologies.

At a higher level of organization, there is the ‘Union of Committees in Kurdistan’ (*Koma Cevakên Kurdistan*, or KCK), which acts as the umbrella for all the other self-organizations – that is, all organizations under PKK sway. The KCK appears to be the local realization of what Bookchin calls a ‘commune of communes’, and as such is to play an essential role in a democratic solution for the Kurdish question in Turkey. In his Road Map, Öcalan even *identifies* the democratic solution with the KCK, which he sees as an umbrella organization geared at democratizing civil society, and compares to the European Union (2012, 93–9). Needless to say, the Turkish state took a rather different view: it perceived the KCK as an extension of the PKK, and saw it as an attempt to set up a parallel state structure. Accordingly, it conducted several massive waves of arrests in 2009 and 2010, in which several thousands of KCK members and sympathizers were arrested.¹⁶

These extra-parliamentary and partly or wholly clandestine groups have a complex inter-relationship with legitimate organizations operating within Turkish mainstream politics both at the national and at the local level, in particular the HDP, established in 2012. HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş has repeatedly and emphatically denied any organic links between the HDP and the PKK. Nevertheless, it is clear that ideologically, there is considerable overlap between the HDP’s and the PKK’s present-day aims, and that a large proportion of HDP voters have sympathies for the PKK (Ilkehaber 2016). In local politics, the HDP tries to achieve its goals of democratic autonomy also through economic measures, like small-scale land redistribution and microcredits (Leezenberg, *forthcoming*).

The ambiguity of self-defence in Öcalan’s writings becomes particularly clear in the case of another, more radical pro-PKK group, founded in 2013, the YDG-H (*Yurtsever Devrimci Gençlik Hareketi*, or Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement), which is particularly strong in the Cizre–Silopi area near the Turkish–Syrian border.¹⁷ The organizational structure of this movement, and the precise character of its links to the PKK, are unknown: it is sympathetic to the PKK and its aims, but it does not necessarily stand under its effective command. Most probably, this group represents a new, and more radical, generation of pro-PKK activists, who see the official party line of a negotiated peace within the existing Turkish state as too soft and compromise-oriented. Apparently, it was members of these groups who in the summer of 2015 took the initiative of barricading urban quarters and proclaiming autonomy

in among others, Diyarbakır, Cizre and Silopi. Significantly, in doing so, they referred to the PKK concept of democratic autonomy primarily in the sense of armed self-defence.¹⁸

Tracing the relationship between legal and illegal, or parliamentary and extra-parliamentary groups, would spring the confines of our discussion. The main point here is that jointly, these groups reflect a clear desire on the PKK's part to dominate or monopolize all organized and institutionalized structures, perhaps comparable to attempts by groups like the IRA in Northern Ireland to control not only politics but social life and the economy at large. Few if any non-PKK-affiliated societal groups or political parties are known to have been included in these efforts, although the situation may have been different in the West of Turkey. Indeed, representatives of non-PKK-affiliated cultural and social organizations and political parties in the south-east have repeatedly complained of being sidelined, and of having their initiatives thwarted by PKK activists.¹⁹ PKK organizations attempt to dominate local politics not only practically but also symbolically, by organizing highly visible actions of propagandistic rather than practical value, like the widely publicized 'peace delegation' that crossed into Turkey from Iraq in October 2009; after a short detention, the members of the delegation received a heroes' welcome in Diyarbakır. Another attempt at symbolic domination of public space have been the various initiatives to erect statues for PKK martyrs. At both a practical organizational and a symbolic level, then, pro-PKK forces display a continuing desire to monopolize and channel the Kurdish movement in Turkey. This desire, which one may safely label 'Leninist', is strikingly at odds with the ideals of democracy and bottom-up organization as proclaimed by Bookchin, or so one would think.

If PKK sources are to be believed, ideas of democratic autonomy also informed the several round of negotiations between PKK and representatives of the Turkish state. A first round of secret peace talks appears to have taken place between 2009 and 2011; it was also in the context of these talks that Öcalan presented his 'Road Map' (2012). According to the introduction to the English translation, Turkish state representatives gave positive signals concerning these proposals, and even hinted that then Prime Minister Erdoğan also agreed with much of them. After the June 2011 national elections, however, in which the AKP gained 49.8% of the vote and 327 seats in parliament, the talks were discontinued.

Another round of peace talks, first hinted at by Erdoğan in December 2012, was openly announced in March 2013, when a letter by Öcalan stating the need for a negotiated solution was read out at a Newroz gathering in Diyarbakır (NTV 2012). For a while, hopes for a political settlement were raised; but no concrete steps were ever announced. In retrospect, it seems that the main flaw of these talks was the fact that their contents were never made public. Turkish state representatives preferred negotiating with an imprisoned guerrilla leader to talking with elected officials, let alone consulting the Kurdish population at large, apparently assuming that a top-down approach would lead to a durable solution imposed from above. In the process, they not only implicitly recognized the PKK as a legitimate negotiating partner, in a move at odds with the continuing propaganda brandishing it a terrorist organization; they also acknowledged, reproduced and possibly reinforced the movement's hierarchical structure.

The secrecy and the top-down character of the peace talks made it much more difficult for outsiders to assess whether any progress was being made; and eventually may have helped to obstruct achieving any lasting progress. The talks were already put under a severe strain in the autumn of 2014, when violence erupted in various Kurdish-majority cities in south-eastern Turkey, in protest against the Turkish Government's perceived siding with

the Islamic State (IS, or *Da'esh* in Arabic) in its siege of Kobanê on the Syrian–Turkish border. In the wake of the June 2015 elections, the talks came to a de facto end and violence erupted on a scale not seen since the 1990s. Some local observers allege that Erdoğan had affectively abandoned the peace talks already during an October 2014 meeting with the army leadership and with the then prime minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, in the wake of the urban protests (Dersim Haber 2016). What little is known about these talks hardly suggests that democratic autonomy was ever considered a serious option by the Turkish authorities.

5. The Rojava laboratory, 2012-present

The Kurdish question in Turkey took an unexpected turn in the summer of 2012, when the PYD (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*, or Democratic Union Party), a pro-PKK Syrian–Kurdish party, and its armed wing, the YPG (*Yekitiyên Parastina Gel* or Popular Protection Units), gained control over three disconnected majority-Kurdish areas along the Syrian–Kurdish border without a shot being fired. In January, 2014, democratic autonomy was formally declared in Cizîrê (Jazirah) canton.²⁰ Overnight, these developments turned north-eastern Syria, or Rojava, into a laboratory for Öcalan's democratic autonomy, especially in its more militant, revolutionary guise. The rise of the PYD in Northern Syria should not, of course, be seen as a bolt out of the blue: it has its roots not only in the internal dynamics of the Syrian conflict, but also in the long-term history of the Kurds, and in particular the PKK, in both Turkey and Syria. Traditionally, Syria's – highly fragmented – Kurdish political landscape had been oriented towards the Iraqi Kurdish KDP; but during the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK could operate freely in the Kurdish-majority areas of Hafez al-Assad's Syria as long as they mobilized local Kurds against the Turkish rather than the Syrian regime. Hence, it was seen by substantial parts of the local Kurdish population as little more than an extension of the Baathist state apparatus.²¹

Likewise, the peaceful transition and the continuing presence of Syrian security forces in PYD-held Qamishlo strongly suggest that some deal was indeed reached between the Syrian regime and the PYD, or possibly the PKK headquarters in Qandîl in the Iraqi Kurdish mountains. The PYD may simply have profited from a tactical retreat by the regime. Some local observers claim that there was in fact an agreement, which included the airlifting of PKK guerrillas to Syria from their Qandîl base by Iranian aircraft. Other Syrian opposition figures report that the regime had stipulated that the PYD not use the term 'Kurdistan' for the regions, or as they call them, 'cantons', under its control, that it not sport a Kurdish flag, and that it not allow other Kurdish parties to participate.²² And indeed, in the three Rojava cantons of Cizîrê, Kobanê and Efrîn, the PYD has effectively established, and successfully maintained, one-party rule. Moreover, it has shown itself to be at best ambivalent towards the Assad regime, and at worst dependent on its continuing support. In particular in Qamishlo, a clear division of territory and labor has been achieved: regime personnel control the city centre, the airport and the border crossing with Turkey, while PYD forces have control over the remaining quarters; reportedly, the former also stay in control of local intelligence, whereas the latter have taken over other sections of the municipal bureaucracy.²³

The most visible aspect of PYD success in Northern Syria was the autumn 2014 siege of PYD-held Kobanê by the forces of the Islamic State. The siege, successfully resisted by Kurdish YPG troops, marked a turning point in the ongoing Syrian conflict, in particular by destroying IS's aura of invincibility. It also gave the PYD – and, by extension, the PKK –

an unprecedentedly positive media presence in Europe and America. In particular the stark and dramatic opposition between female PYD guerrillas and bearded male IS warriors created considerable sympathy abroad, and mobilized substantial numbers of foreign activists to come to the region in support of the Rojava revolution.²⁴ Observations by non-PKK opposition sources and reports by human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group tell a rather different story.²⁵

On the regional level, the PYD's dominance rests in large part on the party's tightly organized party structure, the military presence of the YPG forces and the coercive power of its *Asayish*, or security service. The evidence concerning grassroots participation at the local level is more ambiguous. According to local observers, there does appear to be substantial room for individual participation and bottom-up decision-making on the level of day-to-day life.²⁶ The same observers also, and consistently, suggest a carefully maintained and militarily backed party hierarchy: although on paper, the PYD is led by Kobanê-born Salih Muslim, effective control appears to have remained solidly in the hands of PKK military leader Cemil Bayık. Decisions concerning military matters and local security are taken by senior PYD staff. Thus, notoriously, members and sympathizers of other parties as well as independent journalists have on various occasions been arrested, maltreated or even disappeared.²⁷

It is difficult if not impossible to acquire reliable information (let alone accurate quantitative data) concerning the regional economy; but needless to say, the agricultural sector has been seriously affected by the insecurity created by war, in particular in the areas near the various front lines. Elsewhere, the economy has been hit hard by Turkey (and, at times, the Iraqi Kurds) closing the border and imposing a trade embargo.²⁸ There are signs of substantial economic restructuring under PYD rule, but in the present circumstances, it is impossible to state on what scale this has happened, let alone to predict whether they will survive in any post-conflict constellation. Apart from a turn or return to subsistence farming by smaller farmers, there are reports about land redistribution and the establishment of a number of agricultural cooperatives. It is difficult to say exactly how the oil production of the Cizîrê region is divided between the warring parties; but the smuggling of petrol products has long been a crucial aspect of the regional civil war economy in the wider region, including not only neighbouring Iraq but also Turkey and Iran. Some of Syria's main oil-producing centres are currently in PYD hands. Reportedly, oil products are sold to government-held Syria, and – via Iraqi Kurdistan – also to Turkey. The government in Damascus has continued to pay salaries in PYD-held territory as well as in IS-controlled areas; but given the rampant inflation and scarcity, these hardly even begin to cover living expenses. Local sources say the PYD has introduced price controls and a centralized distribution of foodstuffs in order to counter hoarding and war profiteering.²⁹

PYD representatives also take pride in having reformed local education. In a serious effort to overturn decades of Arabization policies by the Syrian Baath regime, a number of Kurdish-language schools have opened. In regions with a large Christian presence, however, Arabic has remained the primary language of instruction and administration. A significant exception is the centres where the PYD cadre are trained. Reportedly, trainees read and discuss not only Marxist classics, but also contemporary authors like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, primarily in Turkish translations. Intriguingly, Bookchin's ideas appear to be studied through Öcalan's summaries and discussions rather than through translations of his own works. Even more intriguingly, reports from foreign sympathizers in Rojava suggest

that the main language of instruction in these classes is Turkish rather than Kurdish or Arabic.³⁰ This suggests not only that the formulation and communication of PYD ideology are as highly centralized around Öcalan as among PKK sympathizers in Turkey; it also suggests that a substantial part of the PYD cadre and YPG troops originate from Turkey rather than Syria. It is impossible, however, to give a reliable estimate of their numbers. The PYD has also introduced clearly recognizable PKK icons, including flags and portraits of Öcalan that reproduce the PKK's personality cult, and which, ironically, are as pervasive as the obligatory Assad images were under Baathist rule.

Thus, the Rojava experiment, for all its proclaimed anarchism and grass-roots mobilization, reproduces both the PKK's Leninist party vanguardism, and its Stalinist personality cult. Other Kurdish political parties are either not allowed to run in local elections or otherwise severely curtailed in their actions and movements. Thus, for all the – justifiable – sympathy it draws from local and foreign leftist activists, the PYD discourse of democratic autonomy, of gender equality and of secular resistance against Islamist forces marks a rather less radical rupture with the Leninist past than might appear at first sight (de Jong 2016). This heavily militarized and highly hierarchical character of regional one-party rule is strongly at odds not only with the PYD's own propaganda, but also with the enthusiastic and virtually entirely uncritical reports about its alleged efforts at creating a 'stateless democracy', or 'grassroots self-organization', that may be found among both liberal commentators and leftist activists in the West. Most of those reports ignore, or whitewash, the striking discrepancy between the ideal, ideology or discourse, of stateless democracy and autonomous self-organization and the practical realities of a Leninist vanguard party with a strictly hierarchical organization.

Regardless of such considerations, the PYD has become the strongest force on the ground in the international war against IS. On both the military and diplomatic front, PYD policies have proved highly successful. An official American representative, Brett McGurk visited the region, and reportedly, by 2016, two American military air bases had been established in PYD-held territory, implying – to Turkey's dismay – a tacit American recognition of the PYD and by extension the PKK as a legitimate regional actor rather than a terrorist organization. These considerable gains, however, are less the result of the PYD's strength than of the weakness and division among local rivals and of the international mobilization against IS. Moreover, they are predicated on the continuing toleration, if not the active support, by the Assad regime and its main backers, Russia and Iran.³¹ For Kurds in Turkey, too, the Rojava experience has been a big boost, in particular for the more radical proponents of revolutionary democratic autonomy, as we shall see.

6. Turkey since summer 2015: resurgence of armed revolt

The battle for Kobanê on the Turkish–Syrian border became a rallying call for secular progressives in Europe and America; but its main effects have been visible in Turkey. Here, the PYD's military successes presented a proudly progressive and defiantly secular alternative not only to the militant IS presence in Syria and Iraq, but also to civilian AKP Islamist rule in Turkey. As a result, it appears, the military victory at Kobanê has, directly or indirectly, encouraged the most militant PKK sympathizers to start a similar urban guerrilla in the majority-Kurdish cities in Turkey, in a major tactical shift that would soon appear to have disastrous results. Tensions in south-eastern Turkey were already rapidly rising in the run-up

to the June 2015 national elections, which had brought the HDP in parliament, much to Erdoğan's displeasure, as the HDP vocally opposed the latter's bid for a presidential system. They exploded in the wake of the July 2015 bombing in Suruç on the Turkish side of the border with Syria, followed by the assassination of two Turkish police officers in Ceylanpınar claimed by the PKK, and by the Turkish shelling, not of IS positions but of PKK strongholds.

In Kurdish circles, the Turkish retaliation was perceived as an act of provocation; if such it was, it was definitely successful. In reaction to these developments, groups of Kurdish youths put up road blocks and declared autonomy in the poorer quarters of various Kurdish cities, in particular Diyarbakır, Cizre and Silopi. It was probably no coincidence that the entrenchments were concentrated in Kurdish-majority cities relatively close to the border with Syria, and in particular, to cities close to Kobanê. At the time, these entrenchments were presented as spontaneous acts of resistance, but their timing and vocabulary of autonomy suggest a high degree of coordination. Although the insurgency's precise organization and chain of command are unclear, there are indications that in particular YDG-H forces are behind it. It is very well possible, but not proven, that Rojava veterans were involved as well.

The armed insurgency put the HDP in an almost impossible position: on the one hand, it could not afford to lose the vote of the young and radical pro-PKK electorate; on the other, it could not side with it too openly, at the risk of being banned like its predecessors and having its members prosecuted by the Turkish judiciary. Autonomy is indeed part of the HDP program, but the program nowhere suggests that such autonomy should be pursued by violent means. This dilemma became particularly clear at the December 2015 DTK gathering, where those HDP representatives present at the meeting, including Demirtaş, decided – with some apparent reluctance – to accept the congress's vote for autonomy, and for 14-point road map to a peaceful resolution of the ongoing conflict.³²

The merciless crushing of the urban insurgency by the Turkish army and the failure of the popular revolt to gain in strength and momentum reflect not only a number of important social and political-economic developments among Turkey's Kurdish population, but also the radical differences between war-torn Syria and the relatively uncontested institutions of civil and military power in Turkey.³³ In Syria, both the central government and the rivalling insurgent groups were either too weak to dislodge the PYD, or unwilling to risk a military confrontation. In Turkey, by contrast, as was to be expected, neither the civilian nor the military branches of the state apparatus accepted this open challenge. And indeed, the military were given free reign to enter the cities and crush the insurgency. It imposed curfews in various cities, and reduced entire neighbourhoods to rubble. A year after the outbreak of violence, International Crisis Group estimated that some 1,700 people had been killed, both among the insurgents and among the remaining civilian population (International Crisis Group 2016). An unknown number of security forces also perished in the operations: there are numerous indications and bits of information that suggest the hardened guerrilla fighters put up fierce resistance in various places, and caused many casualties on the side of the state troops.

Among the Kurdish population, there is, of course, outrage at the security forces that wrought this destruction on their cities, and at the government, which appears set on a course to stop or even revert all the achievements of the preceding years; but there is also widespread – if rather less openly voiced – criticism of PKK actions. In particular, the decision to take urban guerrilla warfare, apparently inspired by the Kobanê experience, to the cities in south-eastern Turkey is seen by many as a major tactical error. Journalist

Bozarslan (2016) has suggested that the leading PKK figures had been led to believe that the bulk of the population would join in these urban uprisings; instead, the vast majority of the civilian population fled the entrenched quarters before the curfews were imposed.³⁴ A survey conducted in late 2015 found that 43% of the respondents believed the PKK strategy of entrenchment in the cities should be given up (Yanmis 2016, 37, 38). The differences between Rojava and south-eastern Turkey suggest that the militant reading of the democratic autonomy model cannot simply be exported from the power vacuum in the Rojava laboratory to a rather more solidly entrenched, and largely uncontested, Turkish state.

7. Conclusions

Democratic autonomy may be seen as an attempt to come to grips both with the durability of the Turkish state and with the PKK's own Leninist and Stalinist heritage. Ideologically, it marks a shift away from state-centred and modernist thinking, both in a liberal and in a dialectical guise, in favour of a communitarian and trans-historical vision. Organizationally, however, it displays considerable continuities with the PKK's Leninist past, and accordingly it implicitly contradicts the anarchist element in Bookchin's and Öcalan's theoretical writings. In practice, both in south-east Turkey and in Rojava, pro-PKK organizations dominate politics. Especially in Rojava, these policies amount to a form of one-party rule that gives little if any room to rival Kurdish parties. Thus, the PYD constitutes a Leninist vanguard based on a strictly organized party structure and backed by a strong military wing and security apparatus. It has also reproduced the PKK's Stalinist personality cult around Öcalan. These organizational features seem at odds with Bookchin's anarchist emphasis on grass-roots organization. But this is neither necessarily to say that democratic autonomy or confederalism is merely a propagandistic tool, nor that grand theorizing inevitably changes when turned into micro-level practical application. Instead, one might argue that the ambiguities and silences in the democratic autonomy ideology itself, in particular concerning party organization, armed self-defence and the legitimacy of existing states, leave ample room for both an anarchist and a Leninist reading, and for both peaceful and militant readings.

The effect of democratic autonomy on the Turkish electorate at large appears to have been marginal. Thus, there are reasons to be skeptical about the prospect of democratic autonomy becoming a viable alternative for Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule in Turkey as a whole. The number of HDP voters outside the Kurdish provinces, though significant, was quite small, and it is unclear whether they had voted out of conviction rather than merely tactically. Thus, there are few if any indications that democratic autonomy has gained a foothold in any of the non-Kurdish regions of Turkey.

This is not to deny that in practice, democratic autonomy as realized in PKK and PYD actions has had real emancipatory effects, most importantly, involving the empowerment of women; an achievement that seems difficult to revert in any future circumstances. It is more difficult to say with any confidence that attempts at creating a collectivized agricultural sector will be as enduring. Yet, one cannot help noting a performative paradox of sorts between the proud – and, for many, undoubtedly sincere – assertion of anarchist ideals of bottom-up democracy and equality, and their implementation by the hierarchical top-down means familiar from Leninism and Stalinism. Particularly worrying in this respect are the PYD's ways of dealing with individual dissent, let alone organized opposition. In practice, its anarchist ideals turn out to reproduce PKK one-party rule. Thus, it marks a rather less radical

rupture with classical Marxist–Leninist doctrine than the anarchist rhetoric suggests. As noted above, one particularly ambivalent feature in the doctrine of democratic autonomy is that of self-defence. Absent in Bookchin, this notion has allowed for the militarization of the entire project, and for a return to revolutionary violence that had almost disappeared from the PKK discourse and practice since 1999. The most dramatic, not to say fateful, consequence of this has been the shift of guerrilla activities from the mountains to the Kurdish-majority cities. A tactic inspired by the recent success of urban guerrilla warfare in Kobanê, it has brought unprecedented destruction to the Kurdish urban landscape in south-eastern Turkey.

The AKP government's decision to return to military repression, together with the reemergence of armed Kurdish insurgency, and in particular the destructive urban guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency that have erupted since the summer of 2015 seem to have reverted all the political gains that had been made since the early twenty-first century. At the time of writing, the AKP government is making moves to declare the HDP illegal and to strip its parliamentarians of their immunity. It is unclear what the parliamentary, extra-parliamentary, and legal future for the Kurdish movement in Erdoğan's Turkey will be; but for the foreseeable future, opposition of whatever form in Turkey risks being criminalized and accordingly persecuted.

Notes

1. Cf. Yavuz (2010) for a cautiously optimistic picture; in later years, Yavuz has become markedly more critical of the AKP government. Others, such as Bahcheli and Noel (2010), were always more sceptical.
2. Brownlee (2016). Cf. Diamond (2015); both articles refer back to the influential study by Przeworski and Limongi (1997).
3. On the early history of the PKK, see Van Bruinessen (1988) and White (2000).
4. On this development, see in particular the book by Çürükkaya (1996), a PKK veteran turned dissident; cf. also Van Bruinessen (2000).
5. For the later history of the PKK, see White (2015) and Günes (2012).
6. Most importantly perhaps, the 'Institute for Living Languages' at Mardin Artuklu University, headed by professor Kadri Yıldırım, took major initiatives in Kurdish-language instruction, research and academic publication; but it faced increasing harassment and obstruction, and subsequently several waves of purges, from state circles.
7. For an initial overview of recent developments in the Kurdish regional political economy, see Leezenberg (forthcoming). For discussion of the changing governmentalities accompanying the neoliberal transformation of Turkey at large, see Özbay et al. (2015).
8. For a more detailed account of this encounter, see Ahmed (2015).
9. Links to most of the letters the two exchanged are included in Ahmed (2015).
10. Öcalan intermediaries to Bookchin, 10 December 2004, document included in Ahmed (2015). Clearly, Öcalan refers to the Turkish translation of *The Rise of Urbanization*, published as *Kentsiz Kentleşme: Yurttaşlığın Yükselişi ve Çöküşü* (1987 ve 1992), translated by Burak Özyalçın, Ayrıntı Yayınları, 1999.
11. See Biehl (2011) and (2012).
12. A first selection of Öcalan's voluminous post-1999 writings was published as Öcalan (2007). A shorter work that cover much the same ground is Öcalan (2012). A number of translated shorter texts from this period can be found at: http://www.freeocalan.org/?page_id=267 (Accessed 24 September 2016). As already suggested above, Öcalan had developed some of his later ideas already by 2001; notably, volume 1 of the *Prison Writings* nowhere explicitly refers to Bookchin. Thus, one may ask to what extent Öcalan's ideas were actually shaped by Bookchin's, and to what extent he found in the latter's writings a convenient formulation of ideas and policies he was already developing – but I will not discuss this question here.

13. There are a good many academic publications on the new PKK ideology, but most of these are relatively uncritical. See e.g., Akkaya and Jongerden (2014); cf. Jongerden (2015). For a study of PKK ideology that is based in part on a stay in the Bekaa training camp and on several interviews with Öcalan, see Özcan (2010). For a discourse-theoretical account of changing PKK ideology that takes the shift from a 'national-liberation' to a 'democratic' discourse largely at face value, see Günes (2012). Another recent study of the PKK that pays specific attention to the rise of the democratic autonomy ideology after 2000 is White (2015), especially chapter 6.
14. I ignore here the *Teyrebaziyên Azadiya Kurdistan*, or Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a shady and even more radical organization that may or may not have organic links with the PKK.
15. For a fascinating if uncritical discussion of these councils, primarily consisting of interviews with representatives, see Kurdistan (2016, ch. 1).
16. Cf. Amnesty International (2011). On a different level, one may ask whether all these organizational efforts at different levels aimed at – let alone succeeded in – overcoming the (Turkish) state altogether, or instead at the creation of a parallel state under PKK hegemony. But considerations of space preclude a fuller discussion here. One irony of these KCK trials was that they were led by Gülenists who, a few years later, would themselves be accused of trying to set up a parallel state.
17. See e.g., VICE News (2015).
18. On YDG-H and its interpretation of autonomy and self-defence, see Dancı (2016); on the potential for radicalization among Kurdish youths in Turkey, cf. Leezenberg (forthcoming, \$5).
19. Interviews, Hakkari, May, 2011; Iraqi Kurdistan, April, 2012; Bitlis, June, 2015; Diyarbakır, March, 2012, August 2015.
20. For an overview of developments up to 2014, based primarily on foreign-language press reports, see Gunter (2014). A broadly sympathetic but certainly not uncritical report based on personal visits is Schmidinger (2014).
21. Interviews, Qamishlo, Amûde, Derbasiye, November 1992, October 1995.
22. Interviews, independent Syrian Arab and Kurdish opposition figures, Beirut December 2014; Sulaimaniya, November 2014.
23. Interview, foreign PYD sympathizer, Amsterdam, May 2016.
24. Among the best-known and most widely publicized of these foreign sympathizers are the Dutch artist Jonas Slaats and his New World Summit project, and British social anthropologist David Graeber. See Graeber (2014). For a collection of papers by these and other sympathizers, see Van der Maur and Slaats (eds.) (2015).
25. See, among others, Human Rights Watch (2014), Amnesty International (2015) and International Crisis Group (2014). All these reports have been fiercely contested by PYD activists and sympathizers.
26. Personal communication, foreign activists in Rojava, senior Syrian Kurdish opposition figures, March 2016.
27. Cf. the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports referred to above; cf. Schmidinger (2014).
28. Email, senior Syrian Kurdish opposition figure, March 9, 2016; interviews, foreign activists, Amsterdam, March 2016. Cf. Schmidinger (2014).
29. Interviews, local economic specialists, Erbil, May 2016; foreign activists, Amsterdam, March 2016.
30. Interviews, foreign activists, Amsterdam, May 2016. Another foreign reporter suggested that in late 2016, Kurdish was promoted to the main language of instruction, causing acute organizational problems due to the lack of qualified teachers (p.c., September 2016).
31. As these lines are being written, Turkey has mended fences with Russia, and reportedly even with Assad's regime in Syria, and in late August 2016 invaded Northern Syria, in an obvious attempt to counter the local PYD presence. It is impossible to predict what consequences these realignments, if such they are, will have for the PYD presence in Rojava.
32. The general conclusions of the conference can be found at Cumhuriyet (2015).

33. On the transformations in south-eastern Turkey's regional political economy, see Leezenberg (forthcoming), in particular §3.
34. Interview, anonymous Turkish Kurds, Iraqi Kurdistan, May 2016; anonymous foreign observers, Amsterdam, June 2016. Cf. Bozarslan (2016).

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