Chapter 7

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AS A KURDISH SPRING: THE PKK AND THE QUEST FOR RADICAL DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

The word, gentlemen, is a public concern of the first importance." This opening sentence here was the closing sentence of a speech delivered by Hugo Ball at the first public Dadaist soiree held at his Cabaret Voltaire, in Zurich, Switzerland on the 14th of July, 1916.[1] The word *is*, indeed, a public concern and of great importance, as is also shown by the journalist Cengiz Çandar. In his book *Mezopotamya Ekspresi*, Çandar reminds us how the Turkish government's "Kurdish Opening" became the "Brotherhood and National Unity Project," and how, with this change of words, hope turned into disillusionment.[2] Çandar perceptively points out the way in which the ruling party, after the promise of that initial opening, started to conceal the Kurdish issue once again, and government policies became based (once more) on the simple imperative of fighting terrorism, and law-enforcement (so-called) came to attest to efforts to undermine the functioning of pro-Kurdish politics and the Kurdish party-run municipalities. Moreover, in 2011 and 2012 the prime-minister of Turkey several times stated that had he been in

[1] For the full text, see http://asitoughttobe.com/2009/10/27/hugo-ball/. Date of access, December 12, 2012.

[2] Cengiz Çandar. *Mezopotamya Ekspres, Iletişm Yayınları, Istanbul* (2012).

power at the time Öcalan was sentenced to death, he would not have abolished the capital penalty but would have allowed the PKK leader to be executed, and called for a return of the death-penalty.[3]

The Kurdish opening had been announced by the prime-minister and leader of the religious-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), Tayyip Erdoğan, following a statement by the president and previous AKP prime minister, Abdullah Gül, who declared the Kurdish issue to be the most prominent problem in the country. Recognizing that there is a Kurdish issue, and that this Kurdish issue is the result of the process of nation-state building as it took place in the republic, and, by inference, that a solution requires altering the very conditions that continue to reproduce the issue would have been an enormous step forward. Yet the opening was not followed by a coherent package or a road-map to a peaceful settlement. Even today, the real nature and precise intent of the Kurdish Opening remains unclear. Interestingly, it came together, in December 2009, with a court ban of the pro-Kurdish party Democratic Society Party (DTP, *Demokratik Toplum Partisi*), which had scored a landslide victory in the Kurdistan region in Turkey earlier in the year, winning the popular vote at the local elections in March. Indeed, the DTP turned out to be the only party which was able to improve its performance over previous elections in respect of the AKP. Then, the closure of the party went hand-in-hand with waves of arrests, starting in 2009 and continuing in the years to follow, taking a total of almost 10,000 people into custody, among them mayors, local party leaders, deputies, cadres and activists. [4]

In this article, we will move away from government policies, and openings that turned into closures, and the way in which words are used to conceal issues instead of reveal them, and turn

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[3] See e.g. http://www.gazete5.com/haber/basbakan-erdogan-ocalan-idam-aciklamasi-9-haziran-2011-115858.htm; and http://www.zaman.com.tr/politika/erdogandan-aclik-grevlerine-rest-ocalana-ev-hapsi-yok-halk-idami-geri-istiyor/2011102.html. Date of access, December 12, 2012.

[4] See Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden and Nic Walker, "Fruitless Attempts? The Kurdish Initiative and Containment of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 44 (2011). Also Marlies Casier, Joost Jongerden and Nic Walker, this volume.

instead to more grounded initiatives for a re-framing and re-doing of politics, democracy and the Kurdish issue in Turkey. As such, we are interested in the way that new forms of politics and a rethinking of the concept of democracy is taking place in the context of organizations which are usually associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK (*Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan*).[5] We will try to unpack the PKK's project of radical democracy, focusing on democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism as forms of government that go beyond the market and beyond the state. In so doing, we look at the PKK as a political organization, and get away from rhetoric of "terrorism" with which it has been labeled: that is, we politicize a debate which has been securitized.[6]

First, at the outset, we have to clarify what we understand by the PKK. When the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* was established as a political party in 1978, it had a classical communist party type organizational structure, with a General Secretary as the leading party official and an Executive Committee responsible for direct operations. The highest executive institution was the Central Committee, and the Party Congress was the party's highest decision-making body. Over the years, however, the PKK grew more diverse, and what we refer to as the PKK today is actually a party-complex, a formation of parties and organizations comprising several parties (including the PKK as a party), a co-party which separately organizes women,[7] sister parties in

[5] Therefore this new way of doing politics is not confined to the Kurds in Turkey alone. The most explicit example is the politics of the PYD, the Kurdish party in Syria, which we will discuss in the following pages.

[6] Umit Cizre, "The Emergence of the 'Government's Perspective' on the Kurdish Issue," *Insight Turkey* 11:2 (2009): 3.

[7] Women's organizations in the PKK have a long history. The first Union of Women guerrillas was formed in 1995, followed by the first women's party in 1999. The name of the women's party has changed several times – it currently operates under the name of *Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistan*, the PAJK (Party of Free Women in Kurdistan). The PAJK functions as the ideological centre for women's groups organized autonomously, with *Koma Jinen Bilind*, KJB (the Community of Assertive Women) as front organization and YJA-STAR (the Free Women Units) as the organization of women guerrillas.

Iraq (PÇDK), Iran (PJAK) and Syria (PYD)[8], and guerrilla forces[9] related to these parties. Next to this cluster of parties, the PKK established institutions through which integration and coordination of political practices place. Today, the most important is the Association of Communities in Kurdistan KCK[10] (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*), which basically is a network of village, city and regional councils, whose assembly is called the Kurdistan People's Congress KONGRA-GEL[11]. The other is the National Congress of Kurdistan KNK[12], a pan-Kurdistan congress, which includes representatives from various political parties in Kurdi-

[8] Iraq: *Partiya Çareseriya Demokratik a Kurdistan*, the PÇDK, (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party), formed in 2002; Syria: *Partiya Yekitiya Demokratik*, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) formed in 2004; Iran: *Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan*, the PJAK (Free Life Party of Kurdistan), established in April, 2004.

[9] The guerrilla forces are organized mainly into three bodies: *Hêzên Parastina Gel*, the HPG (People's Defense Forces), which constitutes the military organization of the party-movement; *Hezi Rojhelati Kurdistan*, the HRK (the force of Eastern Kurdistan), which is working parallel to the political goals of the PJAK; and YJA-Star (the Free Women's Units), the organization of women guerrillas.

[10] *Koma Komalan Kurdistan*, the KKK (the Association of Associations in Kurdistan), later renamed *Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, the KCK (Association of Communities in Kurdistan), is both a concept embodying the idea of Democratic Confederalism as developed by Öcalan, and a societal organization presented as an alternative to the nation-state and which Öcalan sees as a model for the resolution of the problems of the Middle East. In the PKK party complex, the KCK can be considered the executive body, with all parties and organizations coordinated through it. See PKK , op. cit., 175–243.

[11] *Kongra-Gel* is the people's front within the PKK complex, to some extent taking over the functions of the ERNK, which was abolished in 2000. It can be considered the legislative body, as is evident from its name, which means People's Congress. PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan PKK Yeniden Inşa Kongre Belgeleri* (Istanbul: Çetin Yayinlari, 2005): 97.

[12] *Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan*, the KNK (National Congress of Kurdistan) is a Pan-Kurdistan umbrella organization comprising representatives from the Kurdish diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, North America, Australia and Asia, as well as representatives of political parties from all parts of Kurdistan, religious and cultural institutions, independent political entities and intellectuals, and non-Kurdish ethnic groups.

stan as well as representatives from the Kurdish diaspora and ethnic and religious minorities in Kurdistan. It is difficult to represent the organization with a traditional organizational flowchart. As the members and sympathizers of the PKK refer to Abdullah Öcalan, as the sun (*güneş*), we may develop this analogy and compare the organization of the party-complex to a planetary system: the sun is Abdullah Öcalan and the planets are the parties, armies and institutions, which are in orbit around a sun.

Area of Interest

Today, looking at the Middle East, through and beyond the dust and smoke of war, it is apparent that new forms of politics and democracy are being shaped in social practices and by social experimentation. We are referring to the people's councils that have been established in various places in the Kurdistan region, and through which people are taking greater responsibility for and control of their daily lives and the places where they live. Those involved refer to these councils in the context of "democratic autonomy" and "democratic confederalism," which indicates that they are not simply to be considered as just local initiatives, but also contribute to a larger project or idea and way of thinking about and doing politics. We may not fully comprehend this form of politics, yet this should challenge academics and those interested in developing new forms of democracy to take a closer look.

Outside of the Kurdish movement, the concepts of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy are mostly ignored or just unknown. Within the movement itself, the concepts are not unquestioned. It is true that "democratic confederalism" and "democratic autonomy" may sound incomprehensible from the perspective of established political vocabularies, in which autonomy is not defined in terms of the competences or practices of people, or as the development of commons, but as legal arrangements.[13] Because it is impossible to measure the new initia-

[13] On competences, see Ivan Illich, Irving Kenneth Zola, John McKnight, Jonathan Caplan and Harley Shaiken *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977); on practices Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx, Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Bergen and Garvey, 1984); and on the development of commons see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

tives in judicial or statist terms, we have to be careful not to judge them as inadequate on the basis of old vocabularies. The challenge therefore is not to prejudge and dismiss experiments as unviable because they sound strange and unfamiliar, or flat reject them because they are formulated by an actor one may not like or may not want to be associated with, but to try to understand the way these new thoughts are being developed and new forms practiced. As such, this article takes its place in concerted attempts and a body of work that aims, so to say, at making sense of this movement.[14]

Most of the academic literature on the PKK does not attempt to understand the movement, but to show it as an expression of something else. Not surprisingly, a significant part of the academic literature on the PKK is typically written from the perspective of criminology,[15] or of terrorism and counter-insurgency,[16] or both. Moreover, the PKK is often treated as

[14] See also Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity through Breaks?" in Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, eds., *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 143-162 ; Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 14 (2012); Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "Born from the Left: The Making of the PKK," in Casier and Jongerden, eds., *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey*, pp. 123-142; and Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the Revolutionary Movement in Turkey through the PKK's Memorial Text on Haki Karer," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012).

[15] Thomas Kubera, "The Kurdistan Workers Party PKK." *Kriminalistik* 53.1 (1999): 27–31; Michel P. Roth and Murat Sever, "The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) as Criminal Syndicate: Funding Terrorism through Organized Crime, A Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30.10 (2007): 901–920; D. Walter and G. Fricke, "Execution Threatens the Opponents—The Kurdiche Arbeirerpartei (PKK) and Their Criminal Activities in the Federal Republic of Germany," *Kriminalistik* 7 (1988): 406-409.

[16] C. K. Demir, "The PKK in the Context of Terrorist Organizations and Learning Organizations," *Uluslararasi Iliskiler—International Relations* 5.19 (2008): 57–88; Vera Eccarius-Kelly, "Surreptitious Lifelines: A Structural Analysis of the FARC and the PKK," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24.2 (2012): 235–258; M. P. Roth and M. Sever, "Kurdish Workers Party"; Mustafa Cosar Ünal, *Counterterrorism in*

somewhat exceptional in the wider framework of Kurdish politics.[17] Indeed, the PKK is sometimes referred to as a party without a history,[18] meaning a party without roots in or linkages to Kurdish society – in short, an anomaly. Yet, when something seems bizarre, unintelligible or incomprehensible, this says no more than that we simply do not understand it, and that we should, therefore, try to look for the sense it makes, at least for those involved,[19] and to open our imaginative space for understanding these experiments.[20] In this article, we will attempt to make sense of the PKK in terms of its vision of and relation to the project of radical democracy, or more specifically, democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy, and explore these as possible examples of a new way of doing politics.

There are many reasons to take a closer look at new forms of politics and democracy. The explosion of violence in the Middle East is a symptom of what we see there as a crisis of the state. In the much cited definition by Weber, the state is to be considered an entity, an institution, or a system of institutions, that successfully claims the monopoly or legitimate use of violence in a specific territory.[21] Although this monopoly of legitimate violence may define the state, however, systematic application of this potentially undermines it. When a state needs to turn to repertoires of violence in a generalized way, it may lose the virtue of its functional competence and thus legitimacy. Then, government becomes the on-going exercise of power though violence, and violence a condition for the functioning of state institutions.[22] This, as Walter Benjamin explains, we may refer to as the state

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Turkey: Policy Choices and Policy Effects towards the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (London: Routledge, 2012).

[17] Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, *PKK Üzerine Yazılar* (Istanbul: Vate Yayınları, 2013).

[18] Ibrahim Güclü, personal communication, June 19, 2008.

[19] Howard S. Becker, *Tricks of the Trade: How To Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*
(Chicago & London: The University Press of Chicago, 1998): 28.

[20] J.K. Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for `Other Worlds,'" *Progress in Human Geography* 32:5 (2008): 613-32.

[21] Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (München und Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1919).

[22] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004): 14, 21.

of emergency becoming norm, not an exception but the rule.[23] This rule has been tormenting the Kurdistan region—in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran—for decades.

In Turkey, repressive measures continue to be employed in response to what is still regarded as an existential threat to the republic: the expression of Kurdish identity and the quest for civil rights and citizenship. While the bases of the PKK are being attacked from the air and on the ground, otherwise legal organizations engaged in a struggle for "the right to have rights" for Kurds are being hampered, restricted and closed down, their members investigated, detained and imprisoned. All this is an expression of the problem of the securitization of politics, and actually an inversion of the proposition of Von Clausewitz: politics has become the continuation of war. War is no longer the limited state of exception, but has become the rule.[24] The production of a single identity population, the ultimate aim of the nation-state, is transformed into a war against the population. Yet the primary activity of nation-states, the production of a homogenous social category called 'the people' marked by a particular cultural identity is in itself also a violent process, and associated with assimilation, cleansing and expulsion, processes we have been witnessing on a large scale over the last century.

Radical Democracy

The problem we want to engage with here, however, is not the problem of the state but the problem of how to think of government beyond the state. In 1991, the libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin wrote that "Perhaps 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."[25] For Bookchin such a social reconstruction had to reach beyond the focus of statecraft and mar-

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[23] Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History (Theses on the Philosophy of History)*, 1940.
[24] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 6.
[25] Murray Bookchin, "Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview," *Green Perspectives*, Issue 24 (1991): 3.

ket.[26] In a similar way, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, argues that we should not leave history to the nation-state and capitalism, but should rather think of modes of ordering beyond the nation-state and capitalism.[27] Today, in the Kurdish movement, interestingly, but barely observed, social reconstruction is indeed one of the principle issues discussed.

This idea of social reconstruction is currently being considered within the various circles of the Kurdish movement as a project of radical democracy. It is radical in the sense that it tries to develop the concept of democracy beyond nation and state, and tries to do so in three projects: one for the democratic republic, one for democratic-confederalism and one for democratic-autonomy. As we understand it, the idea of a democratic republic refers to citizenship rights, and as such is still linked to the idea of the state, but the concepts of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism link to what may be referred to as the autonomous capacities of people, a more direct, less representative form of political structure.

Democratic autonomy refers to practices in which people produce and reproduce the necessary and desired conditions for living through direct engagement and collaboration with one another. This is referred to as 'self-valorization' in autonomist Marxist literature.[28] According to Cleaver, the concept of self-

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[26] Murray Bookchin, "The Meaning of Confederalism," *Green Perspectives*, Issue 20 (1990): 13; Murray Bookchin, (1991), "Libertarian Municipalism,": 7.

[27] Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations* (Cologne: International Initiative Freedom for Öcalan—Peace in Kurdistan, 2012): 83–9.

[28] Harry Cleaver, "Kropotkin, Self-Valorisation, and the Crisis of Marxism," in *Anarchist Studies*, ed. Thomas V. Cahill (Lancaster: Lancaster University, United Department of Politics, 1993). The concept of self-valorisation has been developed in Toni Negri's reading of Marx beyond Marx. In his "Lessons on the Grundrisse," Negri presents an alternative reading of Marx, not one which grants primacy to capital, but to labor. This inversion of perspective, so typical of the autonomous Marxist approach, brought the idea of "practices of autonomy" and "working class self-activity" to the center of political debates and analyses. Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx, Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York: Bergen and Garvey, 1991). On perspective inversion, see Mario Tronti, "Lenin in England," in *Red Notes* (1979): 1-6;

valorization "provides a useful concept to draw our attention to struggles that go beyond resistance to various kinds of positive, socially constitutive self-activity." Expressed differently, it is in the context of dependency, exclusion, and deprivation, it aims at the "improved livelihoods; it allows for further improvements and the enlargement of the resource base and, finally, it allows for the maintenance of, if not the enlargement of, autonomy."[29] Democratic confederalism can be characterized as a bottom-up system for self-government. And it is this that we would like to focus upon in the remainder of this contribution.

When we met a local party leader of the Kurdish BDP in Diyarbakir, he told us that the project of democratic-confederalism is developed as an "alternative to capitalism, which historically found its ideological, organizational and political expression in the nation-state," and also as a replacement for the collapsed model of what used to be "real existing socialism," which had "failed to develop political alternatives." As a paradigm, the local party leader told us, democratic-confederalism is not oriented towards the taking over of state-power, or even focusing on the state, but on "developing alternative forms of power through self-organization." And when the Kurdish PYD[30] forces ousted the Baath regime in northern Syria, or West Kurdistan, local

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and Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," in "Italy: Autonomia Post-Political Politics," *Semiotext(e)* (1980): 28-35

[29] Jan Douve van der Ploeg, "The Peasant Mode of Production Revisited," 2007. See:
http://www.jandouwevanderploeg.com/EN/publications/articles/the-peasant-mode-of-production-revisited/

[30] The PYD (*Parti Yekiti Demokratik*, Democratic Union Party) is part of the Syrian National Coordinating Body for Democratic Change (NCB) that rejects foreign military intervention. The NCB supports the establishment of a democratic Syria and constitutional pluralism. The PYD rejects the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was formed in Turkey and is backed by Western powers like France, the UK and the US, and conservative Arab countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The PYD accuses the SNC of having a vision and ideology that is not much different from the Ba'ath party: "The political discourse of this council is tainted by sectarianism, intolerance and chauvinism, and authoritarianism, as is the case with the Baath party."
http://supportkurds.org/reports/democratic-union-party-pyd-information-file/.

councils popped up verywhere.[31] Developed under the umbrella of democratic confederalism, these councils had been active already as a parallel structure of government to that of the state since 2007, organizing justice and mediating in conflict;[32] with the collapse of the state, they came out into the open. Since the summer of 2011, the de facto elections for those councils have been held in different cities and towns of the West-Kurdistan and Syrian areas in which the Kurds live.[33] For example, in Aleppo, the largest city in Syria, Kurds voted for their de facto representatives in 35 electoral boxes in different districts.

These councils assumed the responsibility of organizing social life, and were able to give shape to the provision of basic social services in the context of uprising and war in Syria, which they managed to do quite successfully. Throughout the region of West Kurdistan, self-defense committees were established, providing security in the wake of the collapse of the Ba'ath regime in the region. The committees were able to oust Ba'athist forces, and also keep the Free Syrian Army and armed gangs at a distance. But they did more than that. The PYD claims that the first school teaching the Kurdish language, the Martyr Osman

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[31] During the recent period when the "Arab Spring" has stormed through the Middle East, it was initially assumed that the Kurds would not become part of this process. The mass protests held in Sulaimaniya, Iraqi Kurdistan for two months between February and April 2011 which called for reform also failed to change this assumption, but the Kurds did, in fact, make their entrance into the Syrian uprising.

[32] Salih Muslum, oral presentation at the EUTCC Conference, European Parliament, Brussels December 5–6, 2012. A recording of the presentation is in possession of the authors.

[33] For examples of news about those elections, see http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=369:gele-helebe-ji-bo-meclisen-gelbi-biryar-e&catid=34:nuce-&Itemid=53 ; http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=417:qamilo-16-endamen-encumana-gel-hilbijartin&catid=34:nuce-&Itemid=53; http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=418:derika-hemko-29-endamen-encumana-gel-hilbijartin&catid=34:nuce-&Itemid=53; and http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=429:efrine-30-endame-encumana-xwe-hilbijart&catid=34:nuce-&Itemid=53. Accessed January 17, 2013.

School[34], was opened on the 26th of September 2011, in Kobanî, a town on the border between Turkey and Syria (in Arabic, 'Ayn al-'Arab), to which hundreds of students enrolled in just a few months. Other schools in both Kobanî and other cities soon followed. In other cities in the area under Kurdish control, the councils intervened in the distribution of bread. After the withdrawal of the Ba'ath regime, bread became subject to speculation and its sale to bribery, so an administrative committee was established to oversee the sale of bread on conditions that would prevent the urban poor from going without. In the city of Derik, the council intervened in favor of an equal distribution of gasoline.[35] The council movement, if we may name it thus, is organized under a larger umbrella. Salih Muslum, leader of the PYD formulates it as follows:

> We call it the Western Kurdistan People's Council. It is organized everywhere and it includes the Self-Defense Committees, also in the villages, and they are guarding the people. I mean the people themselves have organized the People Defense Units. They are armed groups and protecting the society. For daily demands and daily work, in the municipalities and towns, we have committees, so we don't need the central authorities or the main government. Everywhere and in every place we have a kind of self-rule, self-government, and till now it is very successful. I think if we could have done it for whole Syria, the situation in Syria would have been different.[36]

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[34] The name refers to Osman Silêman, a former member of the Syrian Parliament and member of the PYD. Silêman was elected to parliament from the Kobanî district in the 1990 election together with five other pro-PKK Kurds. Detained in November 2007, he died on February 18, 2008, just a few days after his February 5 release from the al-Maslamieh prison in Aleppo, where he had been held incommunicado throughout his internment, Osman Silêman, a teacher by profession, had been detained by the regime also in 1995, 2002, 2005 and 2006. The November 2007 arrest was related to his alleged involvement in organizing a demonstration against the military interventions of the Turkish army in Iraqi-Kurdistan.
http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119127.htm.

[35] KNK Briefing, December 5, 2012.

[36] On June 30, 2012, the NCB accepted the project of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism as a possible model for Syria.

The PYD program has officially announced its aim of realizing democratic autonomy,[37] which its charter reaffirms, adding that it sees the project of democratic confederalism as the general mechanism not only for uniting the Kurds in the Middle East,[38] but also as a model for living together and as such an alternative to ethnic and religious sectarianism and fragmentation.[39]

It was the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan who initiated debates on democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism among the Kurds, following the work of Murray Bookchin. 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 had considerable difficulties with their hierarchical and centralist outlook, and started to consider himself a libertarian socialist from the 1950s onwards.

According to Biehl, a close associate of Bookchin, Öcalan went through a similar process.[40] In his 1986 *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*,[41] Bookchin narrates "a history of civic self-management and confederalism," and it is from this that Bookchin formulates his political project of "libertarian municipalism." In his "prison notes," summaries of his talks with his lawyers, Öcalan referred to Bookchin on several occasions. As early as 2002, the prison notes read:

However, until now the model has only been implemented in West Kurdistan.

[37]http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=25&Itemid=74.

[38]http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=24&Itemid=73.

[39] See also the speech of Salih Muslim at the EUTCC conference in Brussels, December 5-6, 2012.

[40] Janet Biehl, "Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy," paper presented at the conference "Challenging Capitalist Modernity: Alternative Concepts and the Kurdish Quest," February 3-5, 2012: 3.

[41] Murray Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco. Sierra Club/Random House, 1987). Republished as *Urbanization Without Cities* (1992) and *From Urbanization to Cities* (1995).

> [Showing the book- Ecology of Freedom- which he brought with himself]…I recommend this book for the municipalities. It can be conceptualized as "Free Municipalism". This can be the axis for the municipalities. This book and similar ones can be examined and those who read and understand them well, can take part in the municipalities.[42]

In his writings from the period 2004–2006, Öcalan refers on several occasions to Bookchin. "The world view for which I stand," Öcalan says in a meeting with his lawyers on December 1, 2004, "is close to that of Bookchin," and he recommends that his supporters 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 by Wallerstein and Bookchin.[43]

Earlier that year, he had done the same. His 'prison notes' for October 27, 2004, read:

> We will solve the Kurdish issue through local authorities. [...] For the municipalities, I suggested that Bookchin must be read and his ideas are practiced.[44]

In 2004, Öcalan contacted Murray Bookchin through his lawyers, sent Öcalan one of his manuscripts, and asked him to enter into a dialogue. Bookchin, 83 years old, was too sick to accept the invitation, but sent Öcalan his regards and the hope that the Kurdish people would be able to establish a free society.[45] When Bookchin died in 2006, the PKK assembly saluted "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century."[46]

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[42] Abdullah Öcalan, "Prison Notes," (August 28, 2002). All translations by the authors.
[43] Abdullah Öcalan, "Prison Notes," (December 1, 2004).
[44] Abdullah Öcalan, "Prison Notes," (October 27, 2004).
[45] Janet Biehl*, op. cit*., 6; Abdullah Öcalan, "Prison Notes" (May 19, 2004).
[46] Janet Biehl, *op. cit*., 10. In the prison notes dated June 18, 2008, two years after Bookchin had died, Öcalan said that he would have wanted to send a copy of his new book to Bookchin had he still been alive.

Bookchin's work differentiates between two ideas of politics, the Hellenic model and the Roman, which gave rise to two different imaginaries of politics and understandings of government. The first, the Hellenic model, stands for a participatory-democratic form of politics, to which Bookchin finds himself close, and the second, the Roman model, for a centralist and statist form, which he rejects.[47] The Roman model, the argument goes, has become the dominant form in modern society, informing the American and French constitutionalists of the 18th century, while the Athens model exists as a counter- and underground current, finding expression in the Paris Commune of 1871, the councils (soviets) in the spring-time of the revolution in Russia in 1917, and the Spanish Revolution in 1936. The statist, centralized Roman model has a herd of subjects,[48] but the Hellenic model an active citizenship.[49]

Bookchin projects his political imaginary for the recovery of humans as citizens onto the idea of confederalism, defined as "the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens' assemblies," regarded by Bookchin as an "alternative to the nation-state".[50] Elsewhere, Bookchin defines confederalism as "a network of administrative councils whose members are elected from popular face-to-face democratic alliances, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities."[51] These administrative councils are just that, bodies that administrate. They are closely controlled and do not make policy, with power remaining in the hands of the community itself:

> The members of these councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves. Their function is thus a purely administrative and practical one,

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[47] Damian F. White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal* (London: Pluto Press, 2008): 159.
[48] Peter Kropotkin, *The State: It's Historical Role*, 1897. http://www.panarchy.org.
[49] Murray Bookchin, (1991), *op. cit*., 11.
[50] *Ibid*., 7.
[51] Murray Bookchin (1990), *op. cit*., 9.

> not a policy making one like the function of representatives in republican systems of government.[52]

According to Bookchin, confederalism reaches its fullest development in relation to a project of autonomy, "when placing local farms, factories, and other enterprises in local municipal hands," or, "when a community . . . begins to manage its own economic resources in an interlinked way with other communities".[53] In this model, the economy is placed in the custody of the confederal councils, and thus "neither collectivized nor privatized, it is common."[54] As such, confederalism and autonomy are keynotions in Bookchin's "radically new configuration of society."[55] In these projects of confederalism and autonomy, the means—defined as a network model of localized small-scale self-organization and self-administration—and the ends, defined as community controlled economies—conflate. In combination, they can be considered an alternative politics for or going beyond those of the nation-state.

Influenced by these ideas, Öcalan developed a similar understanding of confederalism. In parallel with his historical analysis of civilization based on the critique of the state, Öcalan condemned the failure of real socialism and national liberation movements, which were considered to be trapped in the ideas of the state and state-making. "[T]he PKK, under the influence of real socialism, was for a long time unable to transcend the nation-statist paradigm".[56] Instead, Öcalan developed a project of radical democracy, based upon the self-governing capabilities of people themselves, and referred to the transformation of the PKK from a party that aims at state-building into a movement that aims at a democratic society as a rebirth.[57]

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[52] *Ibid*., 10. There is, therefore, no rationalist fiction of a "social contract," wherein the many supposedly consent to be ruled by the few in the interests of the many. This conception from the Enlightenment, it would be argued, essentially operated as a justification for the capital-based extension of power, from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie.
[53] *Ibid*., 11.
[54] *Ibid*., 10.
[55] *Ibid*., 4.
[56] Abdullah Öcalan (2012), *op. cit*., 89.
[57] *Ibid*., 90.

Since 2005, the PKK and all-affiliated organizations have been restructured on the basis of this project under the name of KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, the Association of Communities in Kurdistan), a societal organization presented as an alternative to the nation-state. Aiming to organize itself from the bottom up in the form of assemblies, the KCK is "a movement which struggles to establish its own democracy, neither grounded on the existing nation-states nor seeing them as the obstacle".[58] In its founding text, the *KCK Contract*, its main aim is defined in terms of a struggle for the expansion of a radical democracy which is based upon peoples' democratic organizations and decision-making power.[59] The KCK Contract sets forth a new mechanism of social relations which transcends the statist mentality. In this sense, democratic-confederalism, as the main organizing idea of the KCK, is valid everywhere that Kurds live, even in Iraq, where Kurds have constitutional rights that include self-governance of their region in a federal state structure. In this project, there are two determining factors: the notion of democracy as people's power in society (rather than as a form of government), and the exclusion of the state from this notion.

> [D]emocratic confederalism as a form of political and social system beyond the state is a project for a free life. It has nothing to do with recognition by states. Even though states do not recognize it, the Kurdish people will construct it. If they recognized it, for example within a project of democratic autonomy, it would be easier to construct a democratic confederal system which would be in the end the product of [the] Kurds' own struggle.[60]

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[58] PKK, *op. cit*., 175.

[59] http://www.ygk-info.com/Onderlik/sozlesme/index.html.
The Introduction—comprising Öcalan's 2005 *Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan*—is available in English at http://www.freemedialibrary.com. The English translation "contract" (Kurdish: *Peyman*, Turkish: *sözleşme*) may be understood as indicating its position as an alternative to Rousseau's "*contract social*" (above, note 52).

[60] Mustafa Karasu, *Radikal Demokrasi* (Neuss: Mezopotamya Yayınları, 2009): 216-7. The issue of state recognition invites the question of other possible state responses, including that which is, in fact, currently being followed, that of suppression. See below.

Accordingly, the new Kurdish project gave birth to another form of organization, the DTK (*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, the Democratic Society Congress), founded on the basis of the following argument:

> Today we have some district and town councils, though local and inadequate. Since they are not well-founded, the Kurdish people still bring their demands to the political party and reflect them through it to the state. […] If the Kurdish people assembles under the roof of *this congress*, they would become the interlocutor for a solution. And the state, which comes to an agreement with this body, relinquishes its old structure.[61] (Emphasis added.)

The congress referred to is the assembly of local councils, the confederate form of direct democracy Bookchin refers to in his work on "libertarian municipalism," and what Öcalan refers to as "democracy without the state." As such, the DTK is not simply another organization, but part of the attempt to forge a new political paradigm, defined by the direct and continual exercise of people's power through village, town, and city councils. Some 600 delegates attended the first (foundational) meeting of the Congress in October 2007, in which the project for democratic-autonomy became a key issue. Successive congresses have been held since then – the fourth in August 2010 and the fifth in July 2011 – and the DTK now has a permanent chamber of 101 persons, elected biannually from 850 delegates.[62]

The DTK is organized at the levels of village (*köy*), urban neighborhood (*mahalle*), district (*ilçe*), city (*kent*), and the region (*bölge*), which is referred to as "Northern Kurdistan." The congress does has a *divan* (executive committee), composed of five persons among whom one acts as a spokes(wo)man (see Box). Instrumental to this development has been a parallel process in the realm of conventional politics, with the pro-Kurdish party voicing democratic-autonomy as its political project. It was the predecessor to the BDP, the DTP (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*,

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[61] *Kürt Sorununda Çözüme Doğru Demokratik Özerklik* (Weşanên Serxwebûn, 2009): 95.

[62] http://www.firatnews.com/index.php?rupel=nuce&nuceID=31059; and http://www.firatnews.com/index.php?rupel=nuce&nuceID=47433.

Democratic Society Party) that had organized the DTK, and at its second congress, a document by the name of *Democratic Solution to the Kurdish Question – Democratic Autonomy Project* was officially recognized. This document consists of three parts, discussing "reform [of] Turkey's political-administrative structure," "proposals for [a] solution to economic and social problems of the region" and a "plan of action for the termination of clashes."[63] The congress report also called for radical reforms in Turkey's political and administrative structure in order to ensure for democratization and to develop problem-solving approaches involving a strengthening of the local level. Instead of autonomy based on "ethnicity" or "territory," it suggested regional and local structures which would allow for the expression of cultural differences. At the same congress and in relation to that, the DTP had emphasized the importance of establishing assemblies at each level in society. In line with the idea of self-organization and autonomy, DTP municipalities initiated a "multilingual municipality service," sparking heated debate.[64] Municipality signs were erected in Kurdish and Turkish, and local shopkeepers followed suit.

General organizational structure of the DTK

General Assembly (850 delegates)
From the 850 delegates, 500 are elected from the population, 300 delegates are elected political representatives – MPs, mayors and members of provincial councils from the principal Kurdish political party, the BDP (*Barış ve De-*

[63] http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/english/552.html.

[64] In 2007, the mayor of the Sur municipality in Diyarbakir, Abdullah Demirbas, promoted municipal services in Kurdish, Armenian, and Syriac, in addition to Turkish, especially at municipality reception desks and through phone lines. The municipality also published a children's magazine in all of those languages and prepared story books for children in Kurdish. Because of this multilingual project, the municipal council was dissolved, and Demirbas removed from office and charged with abuse of position and breaking the Turkish Alphabet Law. Nevertheless, he was subsequently re-elected with an increased vote. Korkut, http://www.bianet.org/english/minorities/114727;
and http://www.bianet.org/english/minorities/102799.

mokrasi Partisi, the Peace and Democracy Party), and others who have been elected in conventional political forums – and 50 are reserved for representatives of religious minorities, academics or others with a particular expertise. For the 2011 election of the 500 'popular' delegates, elections were organised in 43 districts.
Permanent Chamber 101 delegates
Coordination Council 13 delegates (including two co-chairs, one man and one woman)
Executive Committee 5 delegates.
This structure is further enlarged with the regional assemblies (at least 75 delegates), the city assemblies (at least 25 delegates), the district (Town) assemblies (at least 15 delegates), and the village and neighbourhood assemblies (at least 7 delegates).
There are also several *committees/commissions* in the DTK, namely: Status and Law Commission, Ecology and Local Governments Commission, Economy and Employment Commission, Language and Education Commission, Social Policies Commission, Male-Female Equality Commission, Women Commission, Youth Commission, Culture-Art, and Science Commission, Faith Commission, Diplomacy Commission, and Organization Commission.

All these activities at the local government level have been rooted in the free municipalism model (*özgür belediyecilik modeli*), adopted by the DTP at a three-day conference in February 2008, which takes the concept of free citizen (*özgür yurttaş*) as its starting point. This concept includes basic civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech and organization, but also freedom of ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic identity, and the freedom to develop a cultural and national identity. The free municipalism model aims to realize a bottom-up, participative administrative body, from local to provincial levels, in which better services would be provided and problems concerning identity resolved.[65] The idea of free municipalism is a theme discussed by

[65] Aktüel Bakış, "DTP'de Hedef 100 Belediye" (online).

Bookchin, too, and gives us a clue as to how democratic confederalism can be translated into democratic autonomy.[66]

Importantly, it was through these activities at the level of local governments that Kurdish politics gained supremacy in appropriating the space regionally, referring to "the potential of social movements to alter power structures in a given polity."[67] This Kurdish-appropriated public space, symbolized in municipalities under control of the pro-Kurdish party, maybe for the first time, combined with nationwide Kurdish politics, including at the Turkish parliament in Ankara, which "marked the opening of differential political and social spaces within the territory of the nation-state."[68] In this sense, the municipalities under the control of the pro-Kurdish party since 1999 have increasingly formed a kind of self-ruling regional body, referred to on the basis of the case of Diyarbakır as engaging in 'decolonization.'[69] Interestingly, in 2010 and 2011, it was around the issue of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy that the Kurdish movement and the left and Green movements in Turkey started to re-assemble. As such, this project of radical democracy carries the promise of a wider political realignment.

In Diyarbakir we have met with several people active in councils, women and men. And they sounded quite self-confident. "Our aim," explained the chair of a council in one of

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[66] A confederalist approach, Bookchin argues, calls for a municipilization of the economy: "It proposes that land and enterprises be placed increasingly in the custody of the community more precisely, the custody of citizens in free assemblies and their deputies in confederal councils. How work should be planned, what technologies should be used, how goods should be distributed are questions that can only be resolved in practice. . . . In such a municipal economy— confederal, interdependent, and rational by ecological, not simply technological, standards—we would expect that the special interests that divide people today into workers, professionals, managers, and the like would be melded into a general interest in which people see themselves as citizens guided strictly by the needs of their community and region.' Bookchin (1991), *op. cit*., 9.

[67] Zeynep Gambetti, "Politics of place/space: The Spatial Dynamics of the Kurdish and Zapatista Movements," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 41 (2009): 44.

[68] *Ibid*., 60.

[69] *Ibid*.

the poorest neighborhoods in the city, "is to face the problems in our lives, in our neighborhood, and solve them by ourselves without being dependent on or in need of the state." Others added, "The state is a hump on the back of the people," and "We try to live without the state." However, they tempered, "the idea of the state is nestled in the minds of people and it is difficult to make people think about politics without making reference to the state, so we are both practicing self-organization as well as learning to understand what it is by doing it." This learning includes issues such as gender equality. It is democracy in action. It is also self-determination in a new form, namely, based on the capacities and capabilities of people themselves.

Did these councils function well? No, they did not. Apart from the series of specific, practical problems, many of those involved have been arrested in the course of the Turkish state's KCK operations over the last few years. Even though their actions are by no means criminal, they have been labeled as "terrorist." In fact, their actions could very well fit initiatives in participatory democracy, such as the Local Agenda 21, or initiatives in participatory budgeting and active citizenship, which have been experimented with in Çanakkale in the west of Turkey.[70] Clearly, the "terrorist" label and arrests are not related to the merits or demerits of the initiatives themselves, which are based on the idea of active citizenship, but because of their association with the PKK, which determines the knee-jerk reaction of the state.

Final Remarks

In this article we have focused on two projects of the PKK movement—the general project of democratic autonomy and more specifically that of democratic confederalism—as two interrelated projects that aim at the development of a form of government beyond the market and beyond the state. The projects, inspired by the work of Murray Bookchin, are referred to as a project of radical democracy, and are very close to debates about a politics based upon and developing the autonomous competences of people. We have discussed these projects as democracy

[70] Hale Evrim Akman, "Participatory Budgeting in Çanakkale, Turkey," in OECD, *Focus on Citizens: Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services*, OECD Publishing, 2009.

in action: learning self-government by doing it, and by taking direct responsibility for one's life and the place in which one lives. Following Gibson-Graham, we might refer to such initiatives as performativity practices for other worlds, or projects in which autonomy is strived for by means of experimentation, and from which we may learn by studying them.[71] Of course, accounts of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism, and the possibility of this constituting a paradigm shift in politics may sound utopian. And they are! Democracy in any form is indeed an ideal, toward which to strive. As Eduardo Galeano put it:

> Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance.[72]

[71] Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies."
[72] Eduardo Galeano, cited from http://sploosh.dk/471-lesson-learned.

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