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Reverse Discourse, Queering of Self-Determination, and Sexual Ruptures: Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdistan Workers Party, and the Problem of the Nation-State

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ABSTRACT

The idea of self-determination through independent state formation served as a crucial political principle for groups and organisations resisting colonial domination and the capitalist world system during the post-World War II era. Kurdish political movements and parties were no exception. They embraced the idea that, as a nation, they were entitled to a state that exercised exclusive territorial control. One of these parties was the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which emerged in the context of Turkey's Kurdish issue and developed into one of the most important political actors in Kurdistan of the last 40 years. In the 2000s, the PKK started to question whether or not self-determination ought to be conceptualised and practiced through state construction. As a result, self-determination became redefined in terms of societal self-organisation, an idea beyond that of the centralised nation-state. This article shows how the PKK has shifted the concept of self-determination away from the idea of the state and towards the self-organising and self-administering capabilities of all people. This queering of self-determination has enabled a radically new understanding of resistance: the building of a post-capitalist, post-state, and post-patriarchal society.

Introduction

In the decades following the Second World War, the idea of self-determination through independent state formation served as a crucial political principle for resistance against colonial domination and the capitalist world system. The resistance was primarily formulated within a Marxist-Leninist narrative, the dominant approach to anticolonial as well as anti-capitalist struggles in the 1950s to 1970s. This applied also to Kurdish political movements and parties, which tended to adopt Marxist-Leninist thought in their liberation narratives.

The Kurdish struggle for the right to self-determination involved not only a separation – of the occupied territories from the post-imperial (Ottoman and Safavid), post-WWI colonising states (Turkey and Iran and the Anglo-French

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mandates that became Iraq and Syria) – but also a unification of these parts into one, namely, Kurdistan. This article focuses on the Kurdish resistance in Turkey and its claim to a state. There, following a critique and self-critique on the character of national liberation struggles, one of the most prominent political movements claiming to speak for Kurds and Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), started to question whether resistance and the anticolonial liberation struggle ought *not* to be conceptualised and practiced through state construction.¹ This questioning centred around the idea of the state and, relatedly, the concept of self-determination. The party de-linked self-determination from the state and developed an understanding of it in terms of the development of self-governing capacities outside or beyond the state. The main objective became societal empowerment through the proliferation of a network of assemblies or councils, through which people organise themselves and administer their own affairs. This ideological reorientation, which is referred to by the PKK as a paradigm change² to indicate the profoundness of the reorientation, came with a questioning of deeply held political axioms and an organisational change in which the party itself transitioned into a network-like organisation under the umbrella of the Association of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK). In the process of this major shift in direction, the PKK lost a substantial number of long-time activists and cadres. At times it looked as if the movement might fall apart, yet the result was a transformation that gave it a new impetus. This article takes the redefinition of self-determination as the lens to understand the PKK's new understanding of liberation struggle.

This article explains how, first, the discourse of self-determination in Turkey was used by the state and by the left to deny Kurds the right to self-determination; and how, second, this was then reversed by Kurds turning themselves from objects of nation- or class-building into subjects; and then how, third, in a further step, the Kurdish movement referred to here as the PKK started to queer the concept of self-determination, bending it away from its definition in terms of state-building and towards the development of forms of organisation that go against and beyond the state. Queering here thus refers to the instability and re-interpretability of concepts and how this makes new forms of political action possible (Halberstam 1998, 159). In this contribution, I argue that the PKK queered the concept of self-determination by bending it away from its embedment in the idea of the state (Jagose 1997), in which its meaning had become fixed (Ophir 2005), and giving it a new sense related to democratic self-organisation (Matin 2021). Methodologically, this article is the product of a wider approach (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011; Jongerden and Akkaya 2011; Akkaya 2016, Jongerden 2016a; Gunes and Gürer 2018; Gunes 2019; Knapp 2019; Matin, 2021) that seeks to understand changes within the PKK in the context of its re-establishment (PKK 2005) and defence texts of

Abdullah Öcalan³ which have provided ideological and political direction. The PKK's production of knowledge about itself (Akkaya 2005; Karasu 2009), through interviews with senior leaders and publications, as well as the defence text of Abdullah Öcalan, have been key sources of data.

“Reversing” Self-Determination

The Kurdish issue in Turkey emerged as a response to the disintegration and breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and the simultaneous nationalisation of territory under a central polity (Natali 2004; Özoğlu 2004). In this new state order, the Kurds became an outside population, the state's other, which needed to be subjected and assimilated, the Kurdish identity erased before it could qualify for rights. Established from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, the State of the Republic of Turkey fostered identity politics in which a Turkish cultural identity was developed and tied to the territory and the people living there. This nation-building process included the incorporation of Kurds as “Muslim elements” in a Turkish polity, which meant that to qualify as citizens, Kurds had to self-define as Turks and become competent in the political vocabulary of the Kemalist elite (Barkey and Fuller 1998; Yegen 2009). Identities other than the Turkish one became defined as an existential threat to the state as they negated the necessary cultural congruence between state, geography, and people. In the official state discourse, the Kurdish issue would take care of itself over time, as backward Kurds would “naturally” evolve into civilised Turks through the process of modernisation.

Only a few years before Turkey became established as a nation-state, President Wilson (Wilson 1918) had heralded “[n]ational aspirations” as something that “must be respected” since “peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent”; indeed, “[s]elf-determination’ is not a mere phrase,” he stated, but “an imperative principle of actions”. Referring to the political principle Wilson had introduced into the world, Kurdish elites made a claim to their right to statehood. References to the Treaty of Sèvres, which had developed the possibility of a separate state of Kurdistan, were to no avail as this agreement became void following the Cairo Conference in 1921, at which it was decided that Southern Kurdistan (Mosul province) would be included in the new state of Iraq, and the Lausanne Treaty in 1923 (Ibrahim 1995), which formalised the division of Ottoman Kurdistan between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.⁴ Coming from a devastating war, Britain and France had no intentions to stand up against the assertive new regime in Turkey. Thus, a new state system was born in the Middle East, and spheres of influence agreed. Next to the new political realities on the ground, it is important to bear in mind that the Wilsonian principle excluded at large non-Western populations, as they did not meet the standards of civilisation and therefore were not fit for self-determination (Getachew 2019).

Kurdish claims for self-determination and the right to a state did find recognition when the right to self-determination was propelled into international politics again through the anticolonial liberation struggle after the Second World War. Adopted on December 14, 1960, UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) declared that “the subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination, and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations, and is an impediment to the promotion of world peace and cooperation”.⁵ However, the principle and practices in this post-World War declaration were mainly directed towards the freeing of territories occupied by the Powers, primarily the dismantling of the British and French Empires and decolonisation of the “Third World”. Kurdistan, of course, did not fall into this category. Although delegations of Kurds raised their case at the UN at various times in the 1960s and 70s, it was without effect (Edmonds 1971).

Both the Wilson and United Nations’ principles of self-determination were exclusive or restricted in scope and had only a limited appeal to Kurds. However, there was an alternative narrative on self-determination that offered opportunities for state-claiming. Preceding Wilson and the UN, the Bolsheviks had provided a definition of self-determination that “has had great importance to the Kurdish movement” (Bruinessen 1994). Stalin, the expert on the national question among the Bolsheviks and whose text on the subject became seminal among communists worldwide, had argued in Chapter 7 of *Marxism and the National Question* that “the right of self-determination is an essential element in the solution of the national question” (Stalin 1913) – while Lenin (Lenin 1914) had specified in the opening chapter of *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* that this right meant “the political separation of these nations from alien national bodies and the formation of an independent national state”.

The Bolshevik definition of self-determination did not apply geopolitical limitations, on principle. Self-determination and thus the right to a state could be claimed as part of a revolutionary struggle by any “stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture” (Stalin 1913). Moreover, while the emphasis of the UN definition was on ending alien rule, conceiving self-determination in the context of bilateral relations between coloniser and colonised, the Bolshevik approach to self-determination came with a radical re-imagining of a world free of domination. Lenin (1916) had argued that “Just as mankind can achieve the abolition of classes only by passing through the transition period of the dictatorship of the oppressed class, so mankind can achieve the inevitable merging of nations only by passing through the transition period of complete liberation of all the oppressed nations, i.e., their freedom to secede”.

Most Kurdish national liberation and resistance movements emerging after the Second World War were to claim the Bolshevik terminology of self-determination.⁶ Their revolutionary discourse provided a double legitimization of the struggle, first, by applying the principle of national self-determination to the Kurdish case and second, by making the Kurdish case part of an international revolutionary struggle. Thus, in the 1970s Kurdish liberation movements and political parties linked their particular situation to universalising principles (Bozarslan 2008). This helped the Kurds to imagine an inversion of their position, from that of the object of state-building by the states in which they found themselves to that of the subject or agent of state-building and thence as part of a movement to change the international order.

In a similar vein to many of its contemporaries, such as KAWA, KUK, Rizgari, and Ala Rizgari, the PKK had declared the need to carve out an independent state and unite Kurds across the existent territorial borders.⁷ Thus, the party's 1978 manifesto regarded independent statehood as the only correct political goal, contextualised as part of a global struggle for the liberation of oppressed nations:

Given today's conditions, an independent state is the only true and correct way and, therefore, the only revolutionary thesis; other theses and roadmaps are reformist because they do not touch state borders, and because they are reformist, they are reactionary. Aiming to create a politically, economically, and in other ways, independent country, the Kurdistan Liberation Movement, first in relation with the neighboring peoples, then peoples in the region and the world, will work in the interest of a world proletarian revolution. (PKK 1978a, 128)

Through the speech act of self-determination and national liberation – mobilising the vocabulary of modern polity in the 1970s – the PKK claimed both i) the status of a people for the Kurds and ii) their right to a state. In so doing, it developed a powerful narrative against the constitution of the Kurdish issue in Turkish official discourse as an expression of reactionary religious politics, tribal resistance, and regional backwardness (Yeğen 1997). When claiming the status of people and a state, the Kurdish political movement established the Kurds as subjects in a struggle for self-determination instead of being objects of Turkish nationalism. Previously defined by negation and opposition as everything the modern Turk was not, Kurds were thereby now enabled to claim the identity of a people. This is a “reversal” (Halperin 2008) in the sense that it changes the object (other) position assigned in the Turkish nationalist discourse by assuming the position of subject (agent): Kurds started to speak for themselves as Kurds.

Reverse Discourse: Making Claims to a State

The PKK's redefinition of self-determination can be understood from the perspective of a “reverse” discourse. It is a “reverse” discourse in the sense that it involves the appropriation of a concept previously used to disqualify

and suppress claims to self-determination and cites it in such a way as to express a voice of authority. This builds upon Foucault's definition of a reverse discourse as one in which those who have become the object of a narrative start to speak through or with that narrative themselves. From an object of state-building by colonial powers, Kurdish movements thus began to claim a state for the Kurds as a means to liberation. This claim to a state was made through the principle of self-determination. Next, I will argue that the concept of self-determination was re-interpreted and redefined in such a way that the realisation of its principle is no longer tight to that of the state. This will be referred to as *queering*, the bending and re-interpretability of a concept or practice and creative construction of different understandings and doings (Halberstam 1998, 159). The PKK's queering of the concept of self-determination took place by bending the concept away from its connection to the state idea and giving it a new meaning related to democratic self-organisation.

At the start of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (Foucault 1978, 1) makes a brief yet crucial reference to the concept of "reverse" discourse in which he argues that homosexuality, previously an object of social control, now began to speak on its own behalf" and demand that its legitimacy be acknowledged. Foucault (1978) spoke of "reverse", placing the term between inverted commas to indicate that the discourse was not an anti- or counter-discourse but rather a claiming of terminology, one in which the object of the discourse adopts the language and starts to speak for itself. The reversing entails a change in position: the object of social control and power-knowledge turns becomes a subject (Spargo 1999, 22). The object-subject reversal is done, Foucault argues, "in the same vocabulary, using the same categories" – meaning those by which a social group had previously been objectified and disqualified as being a people (Foucault 1978, 1).⁸

The speaking for "itself" took place in relation to two dominant discourses, through which the borders of identity were carefully demarcated. The first of these was the hegemonic Kemalist state discourse, which defined the Kurds as a premodern, backward people who would become Turks through a process of modernisation. In the state discourse on modern Turkey, there were no Kurds.⁹ The second dominant discourse was the class analysis of the left, which tended to dismiss the colonial status of Kurdistan and hence a Kurdish struggle for self-determination as divisive of the working class. In the leftist discourse on class, workers needed to unite. Thus, for the state, the only identity recognised was Turkish, while for the left, it was class. Against this, the Kurdish movements that emerged in Turkey from the 1960s made claims to the status of Kurds as a people, who thus had the right to a state. Engaging the left, they entered into a debate centred around the question of the colonial status of Kurdistan, and as Kurdish political actors asserted the colonial claim in the 1970s, Kurds began to speak for themselves as a subaltern in ways beyond that of a class identity. One

of these parties was the PKK, formed against the background of a military coup in Turkey in 1971 and later, following the 1980 coup, surviving another crack-down on the revolutionarily left.

Though the PKK had articulated its aims as the establishment of an independent state (Kurdistan) and an end to relations of exploitation in a Marxist-Leninist discourse that assumed the peasants and workers of Kurdistan as the principle revolutionary agents, the PKK did not follow the axioms of most of its revolutionary contemporaries in Turkey, such as Devrimci Yol (Revolutionary Path). Broadly, the Turkish left argued that the dominant and determining contradiction was defined by the position of Turkey in the capitalist world system, defining Turkey as a semi-colony. As itself a semi-colony, Turkey could not at the same time be a colonial power. Hence, only the united workers of Turkey, in collaboration with democratic segments in society, would bring liberation to the exploited and oppressed (Jongerden and Akkaya 2011, 2012). Parts of the left argued that the Kurds, as a “community of people”, were not united by “economic life”, a critical dimension of Stalin’s definition of a people and condition that could rightfully claim a state.¹⁰ Moreover, among the left, the idea was widespread that a Kurdish struggle would play into the hands of English or American imperialism.¹¹ The Kurdistan Revolutionaries, a group that formed around Abdullah Öcalan and was later renamed the PKK, rejected this reduction and submission of the fight for Kurdish rights to the Turkish class struggle (PKK 1978). They argued that the denial of Kurdistan and the Kurds were chauvinist, the oppression military and cultural as well as economic, and that the challenge was to develop not only a postcapitalist but also postcolonial humanity (Jongerden 2016).

In its attempt to claim a subject position as Kurds in a revolutionary movement inspired by Marxism-Leninism, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries and then PKK tried to strike a balance between closeness to and distance from the leftist discourse of the time. They committed to the understanding of Marxism-Leninism on the national question and the question of colony (Akkaya 2016, 178) yet did not identify with the revolutionary model that strategically declared the October Revolution in Russia, the revolution in China, and the resistances in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Eritrea, and other countries and regions around the world in the 1960s and 70s as part of a common heritage of the oppressed. The minutes of the establishing congress in 1978 record Öcalan as stating that “we do not copy” (ibid 169). The PKK did not look for models but analogies.

From the litany of revolutions and resistances, it was the struggles in Angola and Eritrea against Portugal and Ethiopia, respectively, that received particular interest among the Kurdistan Revolutionaries/PKK, as these advanced the argument that there can be sub-colonies (colonies of semi-colonies) (Akkaya 2016, 99). In other words, through the ideological discussions about the status

of Turkey as a (semi-)colony and the orientation towards revolutionary struggles elsewhere, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries/PKK made their claim to the status of a people and right to self-determination, thus positioning themselves as both revolutionaries and Kurds. In other words, in the first period of their existence, during the 1970s and 80s, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries/PKK reversed the discourse of self-determination, turning the Kurds from objects of a state-building project by others into the subjects of their own state-building.

In the 1990s and 2000s, however, the movement started to question the very idea of a state-building project. This developed through what might be referred to as a queering of self-determination, that is, by significantly changing the meaning of the term, specifically, by detaching the idea of self-determination from that of state-building. In fact, this queering had a long history. An important background for the re-examination of the idea of self-determination is found in Öcalan's speeches devoted to socialism in the 1980s (Akkaya 2016), in which he argued that the development of a bureaucratic state under socialism as it actually was (rather than as imagined or idealised) had resulted in alienation and subjugation.

Queering Self-Determination

The writings of Abdullah Öcalan, which have generally and in this case directed the PKK or provided it with an orientation, are key for an understanding of the queering of self-determination. Ironically, moreover, Öcalan's imprisonment on the high-security prison island of Imrali in the Turkish waters of the Marmara Sea following his abduction from Kenya in 1999 facilitated the political reorientation of the PKK through the queering of the self-determination concept. As a defendant on trial for treason, he had the legal right to conduct his own defence and access to the necessary resources for this. The result was an extensive reading of political and social theory, philosophy, and history, and Öcalan's presentation not of a legalistic defence but a political one in which state critique became a focal point. This enabled a radical reorientation of the PKK's objectives and political practice.

Öcalan's defence texts are mostly grouped into two bodies of texts (Akkaya 2016). The first comprises those texts submitted to the Turkish courts, in which he developed the idea of a new "truly" democratic republic. Though he was quickly accused of selling out, Öcalan had indicated that he was not retreating from the struggle for liberation but seeking its re-establishment. The second are those texts submitted to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg and to a court in Athens in a case concerning his expulsion from Greece. In these texts, Öcalan elaborated on his critique of the state, including the socialist experiments, arguing that liberation cannot be achieved by means of state-building but rather requires a deepening of democracy. When preparing this defence, Öcalan was impressed by the

work of Murray Bookchin, to whom he referred as his teacher, where he found the ideas through which he could develop a positive systematic to his state critique (Jongerden 2019) and provide a new orientation to the PKK (Jongerden and Gunes 2021)

The reorientation can be seen as having its historical roots in the original distancing of the Kurdistan Revolutionaries/PKK from the Turkish left and any “standard” Marxist-Leninist line and then developing with Öcalan’s speeches through the 1980s with their important focus on socialism and criticism of the Soviet Union (e.g., Öcalan, 1993, 61). As Akkaya (2016, 310) argues:

This was the first time that the PKK [had] openly criticized the Soviet Union and its understanding of socialism, although the PKK [had] never been considered as a classical pro-Soviet organization. In those [critiques], Öcalan states that the socialism as realized in the Soviet Union has serious historical problems and they cannot be solved through dogmatic approaches which are mainly based on a vulgar materialist understanding. However, he advocates neither returning to a more dogmatic version [as] in [the] Albanian case nor to a version of ‘market socialism’. Alternatively, Öcalan proposes a ‘new socialism’ [that is] not based on the state policies but rather [on] a radical transformation coming from the bottom, which he was to elaborate almost two decades later.

In his prison writings, Öcalan disconnected the idea of self-determination from the state idea and conceptualised self-determination instead as the right and capacities of people to administer themselves, which Öcalan expressed through Murray Bookchin’s concepts of *democratic autonomy* and *democratic confederalism*. These came to stand for an approach to administration beyond the state on the basis of both group rights and individual participation in the administration of one’s own affairs¹² (Akkaya and Jongerden 2013; Gunes 2019; Matin 2021).

Öcalan took a historical approach to his state critique. This allowed him to move beyond evolutionary understandings, in which the modern state is seen as a higher form of organisation, and instrumental understandings, in which the state is reduced to a mere tool. Investigating its genealogy, Öcalan came to see the state as i) a political imaginary and practice that has been in conflict throughout history with participatory and communal practices and ii) not only the product but also the medium through which exploitation and subjugation are produced. He came to distinguish two civilisations, one centred around the state idea, the other around communal forms of organisation linked to the Neolithic era (c. 10,000–4,000 BCE).

Like Gordon Childe, the archaeologist who coined the term “Neolithic” (Verhoeven 2011), and Ferdinand Braudel, the historian who considered the Neolithic the fundamental break in human history (Harris 2004, 171), Öcalan (Öcalan 2015, 72) took this as a key period in human history, marked by the beginnings of agriculture, crafts, arts, transport, housing, administration, and

religion – developments that were to shape the modern era. For most of this period, life was communal, surplus not produced, and (relatedly) private ownership non-existent. This was the era of primitive communism (Öcalan 2013, 30, 14–15). With the transition from the Neolithic era to the Sumerian, a patriarchal state civilisation and class division came into being (Öcalan 2017b, 144). However, this societal formation based on state, class division, and gender inequality did not replace communal forms of organisation but rather dominated it. History, therefore, is to be understood as the product of a struggle between two “civilizations” that co-exist: on the one hand, the state as the institutionalisation of patriarchy, which produces relations of domination and exploitation, and on the other, a communal order of sharing and caring, which has its roots in the Neolithic. A struggle for self-determination that orients itself towards statehood is then doomed to fail as the state is itself both the product and medium of class and gender divisions.

On the basis of this history and the co-existence of the two “civilizations”, Öcalan identified three failures in revolutionary thought, which, in turn, influenced his thinking on self-determination and became important in his bending or queering of the concept. These failures were i) the understanding of capitalism as a progressive force, wherein societies need to transit to more equal and just forms of living together, and the role of the state in this process, ii) the dominance of a materialist approach over cultural approaches, and iii) a blindness to gender as key for understanding oppression and thus liberation.

The first failure is related to the Marxian idea of capitalism as a progressive force. In his critique of the political economy, Marx had shown how exploitation and the production of inequality are intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production; however, he also considered capitalism a progressive force in the history of mankind. Capitalism had broken the chains of feudalism and revolutionised the forces of production in such a way that it would eventually make itself redundant, when the expropriators would be expropriated (Marx 1990, 929) – which would inaugurate the era of communism. Although Öcalan (2017), too, considered capitalism as the next level in a sequence of history, he saw it not as a progressive but a regressive force.

Following Braudel’s (Braudel 1983, 230) depiction of capitalism as “anti-market”, Öcalan (2017, 130) referred to it as a space of monopolies and predators.¹³ Thus, against the admiration for the development of the forces of production under capitalism that had prompted the early Soviet leaders to implement similar production methods under state control (Blom 1985), Öcalan argued against the notion of a struggle against capitalism by employing its means. The great disappointment of the twentieth century for him was that the Soviet Union and China, instead of realising socialism, became reinforcing agents of capitalism (Öcalan 2017, 316). This he problematised through a state lens, arguing thus:

The principal problem in the formation of the PKK is its ambiguity regarding the nation-statist ideology. In this respect, J. Stalin's thesis on the national question has been of particular influence. Stalin approached the national problem as that of establishing a state. This approach affected all socialist systems and national liberation movements. Lenin also accepted this right of nations to self-determination and its reduction to state formation, and this is the main cause for the ideological ambiguity of communist and socialist parties. The basic idea for the solution of the Kurdish issue when the PKK was established was the model of state formation developed by Stalin and approved by Lenin. Most of the liberation movements that peaked in that period (1950–1970) aimed at the establishment of a state and considered this the only model. A separate state became the sacred principle of the socialist credo. To be a socialist and to give support for the establishment of a state by oppressed and colonized nations were considered one and the same. If you thought differently, you were not a socialist. In fact, the principle of the right to self-determination was put forward by American President Wilson after the First World War and became related to the developing US hegemony. Lenin, who did not want to stay in the shadow of Wilson and wanted to gain the support of the colonial nations for the Soviet Union, further radicalized the principle and reduced it to the establishment of an independent state. A competition between the two systems thus began. The most obvious example was the support both tried to give to the national resistance initiated in Anatolia. (Öcalan 2012, 271-2)

Yet, where states were established, particularly in their nation-state form, they tended to become centres of assimilation and homogenisation, putting people and borders under surveillance (Öcalan 2010, 195). Öcalan thus began to treat the idea of self-determination through state-formation as a problematic one, which he discussed on several occasions.

Second, Öcalan started to reject the materialist approach underlying Marxist historiography. This materialist underpinning of historiography can be considered the second failure in revolutionary thought and freedom and independence movements. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (Marx and Engels 1974) had argued that the material circumstances in which people live shape their consciousness and determine their belief systems and political institutions. These circumstances contained internal contradictions that would eventually result in their own disintegration and replacement (by a superior mode of production). The main epochs distinguished in this analysis were those of primitive socialism, slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. Engels (Engels 1890) termed the dialectical relationship between material circumstances and the consciousness producing particular historical epochs “historical materialism”. Referring to quantum mechanics and the idea that the “constituents of light and matter are wave-like and particle-like at the same time”, Öcalan (2017, 201) argued that capitalism is the product of both an economic system and a mentality system (Öcalan 2017, 130). Therefore, the struggle for change had to be delivered at the level of consciousness, too.

The third failure was to insufficiently and incorrectly appreciate and conceptualise sexual division as foundational for capitalist modernity and, therefore, for liberation struggles (Öcalan 2013, 2015, 2017). Analysing the history of state formation as the emergence of the “dominant male”, Öcalan (2013) inverted the thesis on “women, the last colony” (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Werlhof 1988). Rather, he argued, social inequalities and cultural injustices *started* with the emergence of gender hierarchies and the identification of women with the domestic sphere (“housewifization”) in the Neolithic era; thus, he referred to women as “the first colony”. The establishment of the dominant male, Öcalan argued, was constitutive of the process of state formation. Consequently, gender inequalities were no longer treated as a side issue to the revolution but as a key challenge (Tax 2016), and a stateless democracy and gender equality became key dimensions in the PKK’s new paradigm (Gunes 2012, 141–3). Öcalan (2013, 25) expressed the matter thus:

Without an analysis of women’s status in the hierarchical system and the conditions under which she was enslaved, neither the state nor the classed system that it rests upon can be understood. (...) Without a thorough analysis of women’s enslavement and establishing the conditions for overcoming it, no other slavery can be analyzed or overcome. Without these analyses, fundamental mistakes cannot be avoided.

Summarising, what started with a state critique became a more encompassing ideological critique in which the failures of the traditional leftist (Marxist-Leninist) thesis on self-determination were conceptualised in the context of i) the identification of capitalism with progress, which rendered invisible or irrelevant counter-currents resisting against and presenting alternatives to capitalist modernity, ii) not considering mentality change as an effect of material change, and hence to take a mental change (consciousness) as constitutive for a societal reconstruction, and iii) the lack of recognition of male domination and thus women’s struggles as foundational.

Sexual Ruptures

Although the PKK, like other liberation movements (Bernal 2000; Kesby 1996; Sajjad 2004; Shayne 1999), mobilised women and had women among the founding members, from the end of the 1980s, it started to take gender relations as a key issue in its analyses for understanding social injustices (Caglayan 2012; Gökalp 2010; Kaser 2019; Şimşek 2018; Tank 2017). An institutionalisation of women’s organisations had started as early as 1987 when the Patriotic Women Union of Kurdistan (*Yekitiya Jinên Welatperezên Kurdistan*, YJWK) was established in Germany. This was the first organisation in which women PKK sympathisers organised themselves separately; it was followed by the establishment first, of women’s units within the guerrilla, with the Women’s Freedom Union of Kurdistan (*Yekitiya Azadiya Jinên Kurdistan*,

YAJK), in 1995, and then, in 1999, with a political party, the Women's Workers Party of Kurdistan (*Partiya Jinên Kerkaran Kurdistan*, PJKK) – which, following several name changes and reorganisations, has since 2004 gone by the name of the Party of Free Women in Kurdistan (*Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistan*, PAJK). The PAJK functions as an ideological institution. It works with the armed Free Women Units (*Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star*, YJA-STAR), the political front Union of Free Women (*Yekitiya Jinên Azad*, YJA), and the Women's Youth Organisation (*Komalen Jinên Ciwan*). The Association of Kurdistan Women (*Komalên Jinên Kurdistan*, KJK) forms the confederal super-structure of the women's movement, which creates cohesion in action through exchange and the dissemination of texts, calls, and ideas (Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 198–205).

The PKK resistance came with a new discourse constructed around the concept of a Neolithic “primitiveness” and gender. While the concept of primitiveness had been mobilised in Turkish nationalism to disqualify the Kurds, denying them the status of a people and thus any claim for a state, the PKK now reversed this in its reconsideration of the concept of self-determination and the state. Primitiveness, so-called, became articulated to a range of positive traits, such as egalitarianism and communalism, and modernity became equated with hierarchies and exploitation. Distinguishing between a state-civilisation built upon gender inequality, from which political, social, and economic subordination and exploitation emerge, and a democratic civilisation, with its egalitarian and communal roots in Neolithic society characterised as pre-patriarchal, Öcalan and the PKK appropriated the concept of “primitiveness”. The revaluing of “primitiveness” came with a rejection of the state idea as the apex of self-determination and its reconception as the political expression of oppression and submission. Disconnected from the state idea and articulated in terms of self-organisation and self-administration, the meaning of self-determination was thus bent towards the capabilities of all to make community and self-govern. The concept of self-determination, in other words, was queered.

The Neolithic turn and the bending of self-determination away from state-formation and towards the strengthening of society against and beyond the state had an important gender dimension. Öcalan (Öcalan 2013) started to consider the origins of state formation and exploitation in terms of the emergence of the dominant male. This he explained through the concept of “sexual ruptures”.

The first such rupture came with the emergence of the “dominant male” or “strong man”. This was the hunter, who took control of the family-clan, usurping the wife, children, and kin, a takeover that constituted “the first serious organization of violence” (Öcalan 2013, 18). Together with the changing material conditions, society became religionised around the strong man in the form of the priest:

[M]an is exalted to the point that he is deified as the creator of heaven and earth. While woman's divinity and sacredness is first demeaned and then erased, the idea of man as ruler and absolute power is imprinted on society. Thus, through an enormous network of mythological narrative, every aspect of culture is cloaked in the relationship of ruler and ruled, creator and created. (Öcalan 2013, 18)

In the first hierarchy, from which emerged the state and a group of (divine) rulers who were separated from the ruled, came the subjugation of women. In this transformation, occurring in the Sumerian era, Öcalan (Öcalan 2015: 99) referred to the priest as a primary driver, the social engineer of a new order, and the expression of the emergence of the dominant male:

This change concerning woman's value within the Middle Eastern culture, we can call the first major sexual rupture or counter-revolution. I call it a counter-revolution because it has contributed nothing to the positive development of society. On the contrary, it has led to an extraordinary poverty of life by bringing about patriarchy's stiff domination of society and the exclusion of women. (Öcalan 2013, 22)

The second sexual rupture was the "intensification of the patriarchy", imposed on the first rupture through monotheistic religions (Öcalan 2013, 30). Multitudes of gods were reduced into one omnipotent, universal God, a superior male, while women were treated as inferior, illustrated among others in the relationships between Moses and Maria; Abraham and the women Sarah and Hagah; represented by the veiling of women; and the establishment of the harem, the "privatized brothel for the sole use of the privileged individual" (Öcalan 2013, 33). The strongest symbolic example of the societal devaluation of women was that of the Mother Mary. Although she was the mother of the son of God, no trace was left of the status such a figure would have in ancient cultures. She was merely a tool, impregnated by God to deliver a son (Öcalan 2013, 32).

To end the system of domination, Öcalan argued, another, third sexual rupture is needed. Since domination is founded on the single male, the principal challenge for social struggles is to end this. The third sexual rupture is thus based on "killing the dominant male" (Sayin 1997; Öcalan 2013, 51). words, "Without gender equality, no demand for freedom and equality can be meaningful"; thus, "the role the working class has once played, must now be taken over by the sisterhood of women". Öcalan did not see the women's question as a question for women but as a societal question (Beran 1994, 49):

The male has *become* a state and turned this into the dominant culture. Class and sexual oppression develop together; masculinity has generated [the] ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state. When man is analyzed in this context, it is clear that masculinity must be killed. Indeed, to kill the dominant man is the fundamental principle of socialism. This is what killing power means: to kill the one-sided domination, inequality, and intolerance. Moreover, it is to kill fascism, dictatorship, and despotism. We should broaden this concept to include all these aspects. (Öcalan 2013, 51)

With the revolution now regarded as a “women’s revolution” (Öcalan 1994, 11) and the role once played by class now to be played by women (Öcalan 2013), a distinct political, organisational, and ideological process developed. Decision-making and the forming of ideas underlying these decisions in open discussion and exchange, two important features of the political (Arendt 1990), were considered within the PKK. The decision-making process was perceived as dominated by men and thus constituting a fundamental problem in the struggle for liberation, so it was changed. This took the form of a double reorganisation, with the institutionalisation of equal gender representation through the establishment of gender quota and a co-chairing system in mixed-gender organisations, on the one hand, along with a parallel structure of women’s organisations, on the other.

Thus, against the male-dominated state culture, a movement was built in which women’s representation and self-organisation gained a key role. In other words, this queering (Green 2010, 322) of the self-determination idea created the potential for previously unimaginable new political pathways (Namaste 1994). Bended away and then detached from state-building, self-determination became to be equated as a societal project beyond the state and a project in which gender relations figured as central. From a political party oriented towards the construction of a state, the PKK developed into a network aiming at the development of self-government, questioning deeply held political axioms about the pivotal role of the state and historically entrenched gender hierarchies (Jongerden 2019).

Conclusions

This article has considered how the meaning of self-determination for the resistance of PKK against colonial domination has changed over the last decades. When the PKK was established as a political party, one of its main objectives was to change the status of the territory designated Kurdistan from that of an “international colony” (Besikci 2004) and establish instead an independent state. The PKK legitimised its struggle by mobilising the Bolshevik narrative of self-determination that granted to a stable community of people and formed on the basis of culture and economic life the right to a state. The Bolshevik definition of self-determination was more inclusive than the racial definition by Wilson, which had excluded non-Western populations, as they allegedly did not meet the standards of Western civilisation and therefore were not fit for self-determination (Getachew 2019). The United Nation’s approach to self-determination, developed after the Second World War, was mainly developed as a bilateral approach with the aim of dismantling the British

and French Empires and decolonisation of the “Third World”, and although delegations of Kurds raised their case at the UN at various times in the 1960s and 70s, it was without effect (Edmonds 1971).

While Turkey constituted the Kurds as primitive, degenerated Turks or a tool of foreign powers used to divide the nation, which had to melt into the new Turkish nation-state, the PKK, alongside other movements and political parties organised around the Kurdish issue, claimed the Kurds constituted a stable community of people, that Kurdistan had the status of a colony, and the ultimate objective of their resistance was to establish a unified state named Kurdistan. In doing so, the PKK develop a positive self-identity for the Kurds vis-à-vis the denial of Kurdish existence in official discourses (Callis 2009, 224). No longer were the Kurds defined as the negative of everything with which a Turkish identity was identified – modern, civilised, progressive. Through the language of self-determination, they could speak and do “state-building” as Kurds. However, in time, the principle of self-determination was re-interpreted and redefined and longer tight to that of the state, in particular the centralised nation-state, but to societal empowerment through self-administration. The concept of a reverse discourse and queering provide an interesting lens through which to conceive this transition from a struggle for a state towards one in which self-determination is linked to the capacity to govern oneself.

The “reverse” discourse makes clear how the Bolshevik idea of self-determination facilitated the establishment of a Kurdish subject position, facilitating their resistance to (reversal of) their objectification in Turkish nation-building. This constituted an act of “dismantling discursive disciplinary apparatuses” (Lewis 2016, 20) in which the Kurds were established as the backward and the to be modernised – as Turks. When the Kurds began to speak for themselves, they also rejected the left’s objectification of Kurds and Kurdistan in terms of class and started to speak as colonised subjects. Yet, in the course of the 1990s and 2000s, the PKK not only reversed the self-determination discourse but started to bend the idea of self-determination away from that of a state. This queering involved the revaluing of “primitiveness”, with a rejection of the state idea as the apex of self-determination. Through what we may refer to as a “Neolithic Turn”, a new understanding of history was introduced. Instead of looking at history as a progressive sequence of stages, history became conceptualised as a conflict between a state-civilisation, identified with exploitation and subjugation, and a democratic civilisation, identified with communal and participatory politics.

The “Neolithic Turn” turn came with a redefinition of the vocabulary of self-determination by disrupting the stable relationship of the concept to statehood and articulating it instead in terms of self-administration. Thus,

the tendency to state-formation was to be resisted; liberation became equated with a social project *against* (Clastres 1989) and *beyond* (Karasu 2009) the state. Moreover, in reversing the discourse on the primitive and connecting the emergence of the state idea and its practice in the Neolithic to that of the dominant male, this analysis identified gender inequality as foundational for its resistance struggle. Overall, the PKK queered the concept of self-determination by bending it away from the idea of state and towards the self-organising and self-administering capabilities of all people – or a bottom-up democracy. The state idea was no longer considered compatible with the idea of self-determination, and this queering of self-determination enabled a radically new understanding of resistance: the building of a post-capitalist, post-state, and post-patriarchal society.

Notes

1. Duran Kalkan, member of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 28, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.
2. Cemil Bayik, member of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 30, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.
3. The first group of texts consists mainly of two defence texts, the main text, submitted to the court in Imrali and an annex, submitted to the Court of Appeals in Ankara in 1999 and to a local court in Urfa in 2001. These first texts were published under the names of Declaration on the Solution of the Kurdish Question, and Urfa: The Symbol of history, divinity and wretched[ness] in the basin of the Tigris-Euphrates. The second group of defence texts, submitted to the ECHR in 2001, to an Athenian court in 2003 and to the Grand Chamber of the ECHR in 2004, consisted of two books which together comprised three volumes. The first book (of two volumes) was published as From Sumerian Clerical State towards People's Republic I-II (2001), while the second book (and third volume) was published as The Defence of Free Man (2003) – known in PKK circles as the “Athens Defence” – and Defending a People (2004). Thirdly, Ocalan submitted another text of defence to the ECHR in Strasbourg concerning his case for the right of fair trial. These defence texts (2009-2010), in which Ocalan problematising capitalist modernity, was published in Turkish in five volumes Akkaya, A. H. and J. Jongerden (2012). “Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the project of Radical Democracy.” *European Journal of Turkish Studies*(12).
4. The inclusion of the oil-rich Southern Kurdistan/Mosul in Iraq would make the new state pay dearly for the costs of its occupation by the British, which itself saw imperial resources drained (Terry 2008).
5. See <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Independence.aspx>
6. See the treatment of this issue by Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou in his (1965) work *Kurdistan and the Kurds, published by the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences,*”
7. The PKK, in the 1970s, became one of the most vocal and organised proponents for independence of the “international colony” Kurdistan, see: Besikci, I. (2004). *International Colony Kurdistan*, Taderon Press. Though other Kurdish political parties and organisation had a similar political outlook, they did not survive beyond the 1970s; see Jongerden, J. and A. H. Akkaya (2019). *The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Kurdish political parties in the 1970s*. M. Gunter. London, Routledge: pp. 270-281.

8. It is this idea of a claim to terminology as constituting a reversal that is now expressed as “reclaiming.”
9. The words of Justice Minister Mahmut Esat (Bozkurt) in 1930, during the early years of nation-building, summarised the status of the Kurds in the official discourse: “It is my firm opinion, and let friend and foe hear it, that the lords of this country are the Turks. Those who are not real Turks have only one right in the Turkish fatherland, and that is the right to be servants and slaves.”
10. Stalin defined the nation as a “historically evolved, stable community of people, which is united by a common language, territory, economic life, and a psychic individuality manifested in a common” (Meissner, B. (1976/1977). “The Soviet Concept of Nation and the Right of National Self-Determination.” *International Journal* 1(1): pp. 56-81. Van Bruinessen argued: “Kurdish nationalists could convincingly claim a common history and a large piece of territory associated with their people, but their opponents in the debates denied the existence of a common economic life” Bruinessen, M. v. (1994). “Kurdish Nationalism and Competing Ethnic Loyalties.” *Utrecht University Repository* <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/20671> pp. 1-35.
11. Here, the (Turkish language) hegemonic characterisation of the post-WWI armed struggle for national foundation as an “Independence War” (*Kurtuluş Şavaşı*) is key; the left were deeply informed by the national psyche of a historic and ongoing threat from without (the Western powers) aimed at dividing the country and weakening the state.
12. In his writings, Öcalan recommends the radical thinker Bookchin on several occasions. “The world view for which I stand”, Öcalan explained in a meeting with his lawyers on December 1, 2004, “is close to that of Bookchin,” and he advised his supporters to read Bookchin’s work. Jongerden, J. (2019). “Learning from Defeat: Development and contestation of the “new paradigm” within Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).” *Kurdish Studies* 7(1): pp. 72-92. Bookchin called for autonomy through the establishment of local democratic structures such as community assemblies and neighbourhood councils. In order to prevent the project of libertarian municipalism from becoming vacuous or being used for highly parochial ends, Bookchin suggests the principle of confederalism, as a “network” of local democratic assemblies. For Bookchin, confederalism as a principle of social organisation was a way of combining local self-administration with interdependence in a democratic way. The establishment of assemblies and councils in their confederate form become an alternative to the nation-state Bookchin, M. (1990). “The meaning of confederalism.” *Green Perspectives*(20), Bookchin, M. (1991). “Libertarian Municipalism: an overview.” *Green Perspectives* (October 1991).
13. If economy is defined in terms of society attaining its material needs, one might further argue that capitalism is anti-economy.

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Author Contribution

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

Duran Kalkan, member of the leadership of the PKK, date of interview: October 28, 2014. The interview took place in Qandil.

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