Do-It-Yourself Development

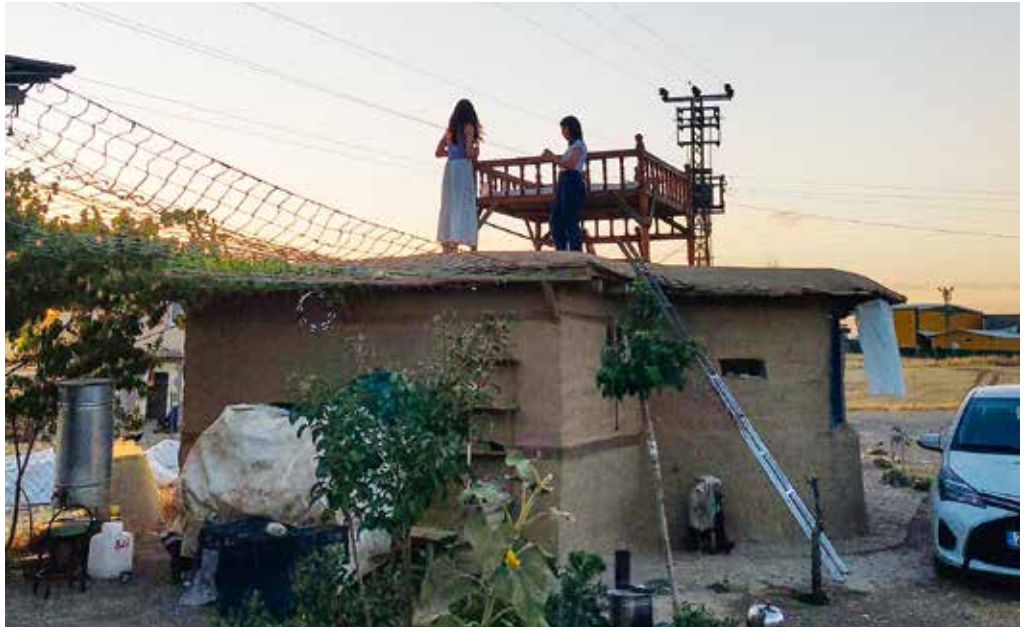
Years ago, on a sunny day in Spring 2005, I drove down a bumpy road with no signage to a village in the mountains of Kurdistan. It was the last leg of a long journey. Yet, the bumpy village road was not the most difficult part of the journey. These were the numerous military checkpoints on the highway into the region at that time. For a "tourist," the common designation for a foreigner in the area, getting past the checkpoints was a challenge.

Some 100 kilometers previously, in the city of Diyarbakir, I had become acquainted with a few of the inhabitants of this village. In teahouses in the city, we had had long conversations about the evacuation of their villages and the struggle they were waging to be able to return. They told me they had cleared the roads in and around the village, established their own shuttle service, and, after a short period of sleeping in tents, some had begun to build new houses where piles of stones marked their old homes.

It was a mountain village with a composite character. There were clusters of houses on the slopes where people used to earn an income growing vegetables and tending animals, mostly sheep. The village had been evacuated in 1994 by the Turkish Armed Forces and paramilitary in their struggle against the armed insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK. It was just one of the approximately 3,000 villages evacuated and burned by the military as they believed that the PKK drew membership, logistical support, and intelligence from the rural population.

Although the forced migration of Kurdish villagers had become a subject of study, most of the research done focused on the city and the various forms of social exclusion with which the displaced villagers were confronted. In the cities in the western part of Turkey, the forced migrants were regarded as a "threatening other," politically and culturally polluting the urban environment.

My own interest was in the struggle of these forced migrants for the right of "the right to return" and the way they practiced this right with their feet. They refused to sign-up to the fantasy "return" projects of the state, which aimed at a redesign of the countryside by developing a new settlement structure to facilitate outside control, and never got beyond the stage of planning and the construction of a handful of model projects. They did not sign the documents that would bargain permission to go back to their villages in return for exoneration of the state responsibility for burning down their houses by blaming "terrorism", instead. Facing a variety of obstacles – ranging from intimidation by the (para)military through the absence of previously available public services, such as education, healthcare, and water and electricity supplies to the neoliberal turn in agricultural policies – a steady trickle of people began to return.



Eco-village in Diyarbakir, photo by Joost Jongerden

At the time, I referred to this as a "counter-track" in "return" to village. A "track" because it involved self-organized resource mobilization and distinct movements of people back to the old rural settlements and to contrast this messy process with the administrative organization and coordination that characterizes an officially sanctioned return scheme. A "counter" track since it ran against the reconstruction approach of the state and its plans to develop a compact and concentrated settlement structure. Interestingly, the "return" evolved into a multifaceted process in which people part returned, or rather developed a living pattern in which rural and urban living intermeshed. They became both villagers and urbanite, both working the land and running businesses in the city. The "return" turned out not to be about migrating from the city to the village but about developing a relationship between the two (Jongerden 2007).

After the early 2000s, the years in which I did my Ph.D. research, I studied further situations and practices in Kurdistan in which people were striving to take their fate and future into their own hands. I developed a research interest in individual and collective practices through which people, as Marshall Berman once described it, "change the world that is changing them." Among others, this "them" referred to the complex or multiple identity of the villager-city dwellers as outsider peasants and Kurds. And it was a combination of the market and state's identity politics that made "peasants" and "Kurds" vulnerable identities. The world that was changing them as *peasants* involved the implementation of neoliberal policies in the early 2000s by the government of Turkey, facilitated and enforced by international organizations like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and European Union. This included a major state withdrawal from its previous support of agriculture that resulted in a squeeze on the smallholder ("family farm") population. Price liberalization resulted not only in lower returns and increased income insecurity, the policy established the "the peasantry" as the "other" of modern agriculture– like the poor urban migrant was the "urban other" and the Kurd the "cultural other" – identities to be dissolved.

Against expectation and received wisdom, however, the new neoliberal economics did not result in a major reduction of the number of small farms. Instead, by developing counter-trajectories, strategic evading the requirements of the neoliberal policies, families have managed to hold on to their land and continue farming. They did this by diversifying income generation strategies – among others through an increased engagement in labour relations outside the farm – in the local town, nearest or distant city. This diversification of income sources contributed to a living structure in which the rural and urban intermeshed.

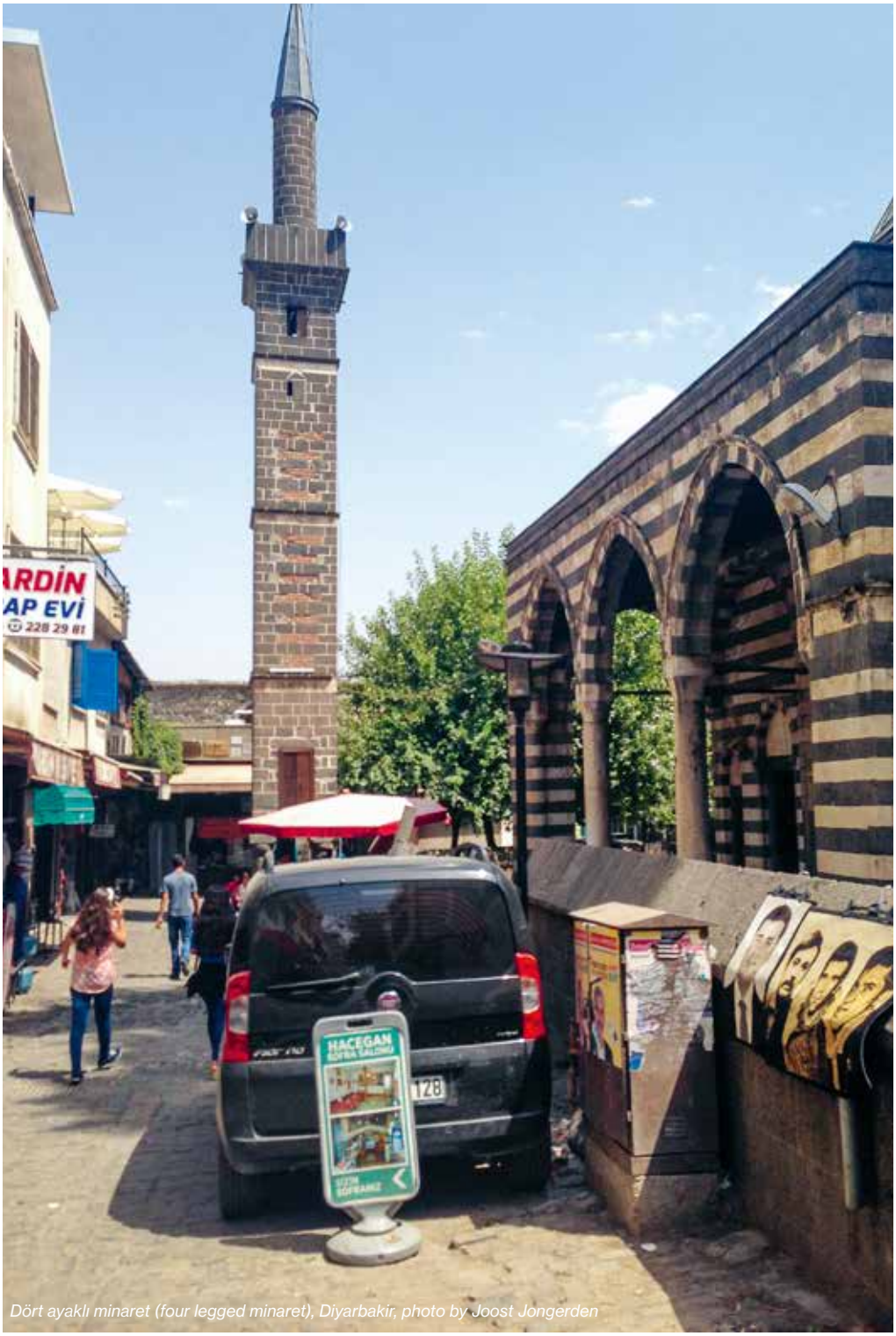
The world that was changing this "them" as *Kurds* was related to a politics of cultural dispossession. Among others, a modernization of agriculture had been employed for the production of a Turkish administrative and cultural imprint on the population in the region. Large infrastructure programs, such as the dam and irrigation projects executed by the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP), served as a vehicle for the extension of state control in rural areas and conversion of Kurdish peasants into Turkish farmers. Under the protection of a state of emergency, this modernization policy had developed a colonial economic system in which the role of the region in the country became that of a supplier of resources.

In the 2010s, as part of a Kurdish movement that brimmed of self-confidence, several initiatives flourished in the wider region that aimed to interrupt the state's identity politics, the political economy of resource extraction, and demographic engineering through a strengthening of community economies, diversification of production, the development of nested markets and ideas of fair price. This occurred in a context of lively debates about new forms of politics that centered around the idea of active citizenship and a politics beyond the (nation-)state.

Do-It-Yourself Development thus emerged as a concept through which I was able to understand all these initiatives and debates as creative ways to develop alternatives "for the world that is changing them". Just as the idea of "counter-tracks" had helped me to make visible the messy process of self-organized return - one that was more significant than the official return projects of the state, which were bombastic in design, yet did not have much meaning in the life of people – *Do-It-Yourself Development* enabled me to identify and group an alternative approach to development and the ideas that guide its manifold expressions.

Theoretically, Do-It-Yourself Development provides for an analysis that allows me to move beyond the imagination constraints of the dominant, homogenizing political economy, that requires us to conceive the world we live in from the perspective of capital and state and the dependence and submission they produce. Do-It-Yourself Development creates a crucial inversion: by adopting the viewpoint of daily life and social struggle, vigorous forms of self-organization, self-creation, and self-administration become visible, not just as reactive responses but as innovative and inspiring initiatives – as future making. This makes *Do-It-Yourself Development* a sociology of possibilities, an approach to the study how "the other" claims and reclaims better worlds in the here and now.

Jongerden, J. (2007). The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An analysis of spatial policies, modernity and war. Leiden & Boston, Brill.



Dört ayaklı minaret (four legged minaret), Diyarbakir, photo by Joost Jongerden