

## Rethinking Politics and Democracy in the Middle East

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A few weeks ago I was in Istanbul, and in order to have something to read on my flight back to Amsterdam, I bought the new book by Cengiz Candar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi*. The book is a quick read and rich in detail, and there is one general message that I would like to share as my contribution today. It is that we should call things by their name. To underline this Candar refers to Jose Saramago, winner of the 1998 Nobel prize for literature: “Words”, he says, “were not given to man in order to conceal his thoughts.” For Candar, calling things by their name is not to talk about the Kurdish issue in covert terms, but to call it the Kurdish issue. He also shows rather well how prime-minister Erdogan, after an initial opening in which he called things by their name, started to conceal the issue again: the Kurdish Opening became the Brotherhood and National Unity Project, and hope turned into disillusionment.

Let me explain me briefly how I take this message into my talk for today

Taking as a point of departure the idea that words should not be used to conceal thoughts, but to express them, I will make clear from the outset that I have an interest in the way that new forms of politics and a rethinking of the concept of democracy is taking place in the context of organisations which are usually associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK. I could discuss this without making explicit reference to the PKK, but I too prefer to call things by their name. Furthermore, I think that we should take the PKK seriously as a political organisation, that we should get away from the one-dimensional and one-sided rhetoric of “terrorism” with which the PPK has been labelled, that we should do away with this aspect of America’s post-9-11 discourse that Europe bought into, and that we need instead to politicise a debate which has been securitised: in short, we need to demilitarise politics (Cizre 2009: 3). It was the militarization of politics that brought crisis to the state in the first place, as I will explain.

Today, looking at the Middle East, through and beyond the dust and smoke of war, new forms of politics and democracy are being shaped in social practices and by social experimentation. I am referring to the people’s councils that have been established in various places in the Kurdistan region, such as in Derik (in Syria) and Diyarbakir (in Turkey), 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 have 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 the concepts of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy may sound incomprehensible from the perspective of established political vocabularies. In such vocabularies, autonomy is not defined in terms of the competences (Illich 1977) or practices (Negri 1984) of people, or as the development of commons (Hardt & Negri 2009), but as legal arrangements. Because it is impossible to measure the new initiatives in judicial or statist terms, therefore, we have to be careful not to judge them as inadequate on 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 we 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. To learn from them, in all their complexity and incoherence (Gibson-Graham 2008: 618). The aim of my contribution today, therefore, is to take a closer look at democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy and explore them as possible examples of a new way of doing politics. I will look at these two concepts, or should I say practices, in the context of a wider debate about new forms of democracy, a debate which does take place within academia, and also in wider society.

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 I see there as a crisis of the state. In the much cited definition by Weber (1919), 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. 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 generalised way, it may lose the virtue of its functional competence and thus legitimacy. Then, government becomes the ongoing exercise of power through violence, and violence a condition for the functioning of state institutions (Hardt & Negri 2004: 14, 21). This, in the words of Walter Benjamin (1940), we may refer to as the state of emergency becoming norm, not an exception but the rule. 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 organisations 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 securitisation 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 (Hardt & Negri 2004: 6), the production of a single identity population, the ultimate aim of the nation-state, transformed into a war against the population.

The problem I want to engage with, 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 organisations 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’ (Bookchin 1991: 3). For Bookchin such a social reconstruction had to reach beyond the focus of statecraft and market (Bookchin, 1990: 13; 1991: 7). 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 I 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 we may refer to as 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-valorisation' in autonomist Marxist literature (Cleverly 1992). Democratic confederalism can be characterised as a bottom-up system for self-government. And it is this that I would like to focus upon in the remainder of this contribution.

When I met a local party leader of the Kurdish BDP in Diyarbakir, he told me that the project of democratic-confederalism is developed as an 'alternative to capitalism, which historically found its ideological, organisational 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 focussing on the state, but on 'developing alternative forms of power through self-organisation.'

When the Kurdish PYD-YPG forces ousted the Baath regime in northern Syria, or west Kurdistan, local councils popped up everywhere. Developed under the umbrella of democratic confederalism, these councils had been active already as a parallel structure of government to that of the state, organizing justice and mediating in conflict, but with the collapse of the state, they came out into the open. They started to organise social life, and its defence, and were able to give shape to such basic social services as education and health-care.

It was the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan who initiated debates on democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism among Kurds, and he did so on the basis of Murray Bookchin's word. Bookchin differentiates between two ideas of politics, the Hellenic model and the Roman model, 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, and the second, the Roman model, for a centralist and statist form (White 2008: 159). The Roman model, the argument goes, has become the dominant form in modern society, informing the American and French constitutionalists of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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, centralised Roman model has a herd of subjects (Kropotkin 1897), but the Hellenic model an active citizenship (Bookchin, 1990: 11).

Bookchin projects his political imaginary for the recovery of humans as citizens onto the idea of confederalism, defined as 'a network of administrative councils whose members are elected from popular face-to-face democratic alliances, in the various villages, towns, and even neighbourhoods of large cities.' According to Bookchin (1990), 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' (ibid: 11). In this model, the economy is placed in the custody of the confederal councils, and thus 'neither

collectivized nor privatized, it is common' (ibid: 10). As such, confederalism and autonomy are key-notions in Bookchin's 'radically new configuration of society' (ibid: 4), and they are also key-notions in the Kurdish movement today.

Influenced by these ideas, Öcalan developed a similar understanding of confederalism. In parallel to his historical analysis of civilisation 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. Thus, since 2005, the PKK and all affiliated organisations have been restructured on the basis of this project under the name of the KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, the Association of Communities in Kurdistan), a societal organisation presented as an alternative to the nation-state. Aiming to organise itself from the bottom up in the form of assemblies, the KCK defined itself as 'a movement which struggles to establish its own democracy, neither grounded on the existing nation-states nor seeing them as the obstacle' (PKK, 2005: 175). In its founding text, the 'KCK Contract', its main aim is defined in terms of a struggle for the expansion of a radical democracy that is based upon peoples' democratic organisations and decision-making power.

In Diyarbakir I 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 the poorest neighbourhoods in the city, 'is to face the problems in our lives, in our neighbourhood, 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 practising self-organisation as well as learning to understand what it is by doing it'. This is democracy in action. This 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 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 years. Even though the actions are by no means criminal, they have been labelled as 'terrorist'. Contrary to that, they could very well fit Turkish 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 (Akman 2009). And clearly, not on 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 knee-jerk determines the reaction of the state. This, I would say, is a missed opportunity for a political solution to the conflict.

Though there is still much to say, I shall finish now. The account of democratic-confederalism, and the possibility that it may embody a paradigm shift in politics may sound utopian. And it is! Democracy in any form is indeed an ideal, toward which to strive. As Eduardo Galeano put it, 'Utopia is on the horizon: when I walk two steps, it takes two steps back... I walk ten steps, and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking.'

We need to walk. Walking can take us out of the entrenched positions, which have caused so much bloodshed already.

Thank you for listening.

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