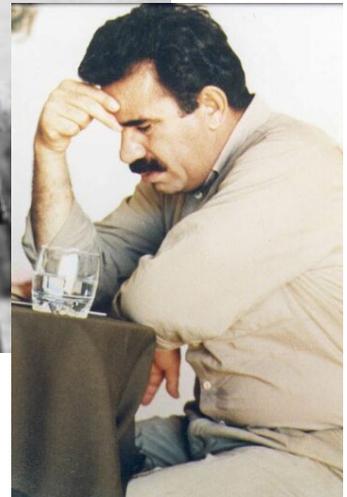
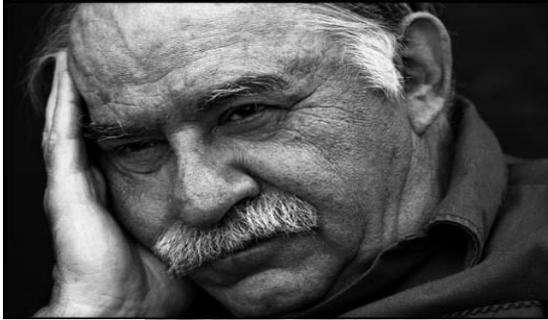


# De Koerdische kwestie



**Autonomie of Nationalisme? Vrijheid door een eigen staat of vrijheid van de staat?**

*De Koerdische bevrijdingsbeweging op zoek naar een nieuw paradigma*

# Noot vooraf

Anarchisten hebben altijd een moeilijke en wat dubieuze relatie gehad met het onderwerp “nationale bevrijding”. Enerzijds was er sympathie voor de bewegingen die zich verzetten tegen koloniale overheersing, onderdrukking, uitbuiting en racisme, maar anderzijds ook achterdocht voor de verborgen agenda van veel “nationale bevrijders”. Wie heeft er wat gewonnen als het buitenlands juk door een inheems juk vervangen wordt?

Hoewel het kolonialisme – anders dan andere vormen van onderdrukking zoals kapitalisme, patriërchaat, imperialisme – soms een zaak van het verleden lijkt, blijven ook nu volkeren aanspraak maken op autonomie, zich verzettend tegen een of meerdere “vreemde bezetters”. Zo ook in het onbestaande Koerdistan, dat zich geografisch uitstrekt over delen van Turkije, Syrië en Irak.

De Koerden voeren reeds decennia lang een strijd tegen brutale onderdrukking en miskening van hun cultuur. Deze strijd voor autonomie lijkt enigszins ontsierd door de militaire structuur van de PKK, de bijna verering van hun leider Öcalan en een aantal moeilijk van op afstand te beoordelen incidenten. Net als bij andere nationale bevrijdingsbewegingen, kan je als anarchist ook bij nieuws over de Koerdische beweging ambigue gevoelens hebben. Het vellen van een oordeel voor of tegen wordt nog bemoeilijkt door de vaak zeer gekleurde berichtgeving van de media. Om de recente evoluties van de Koerdische bevrijdingsbeweging – weg van een statelijk discours – beter te begrijpen, moeten we eerst een belangrijke 20ste eeuwse anarchist duiden die hen sterk beïnvloed lijkt te hebben.

Murray Bookchin is zonder twijfel één van de belangrijkste vernieuwers van het anarchistische gedachtegoed geweest. Aan het eind van zijn leven hebben aanslepende conflicten zijn relatie met de anarchistische beweging echter sterk vertroebeld. Het ging zelfs zo ver, dat hij zich, samen met zijn medestanders ('volgelingen' zouden kwatongen durven beweren), uiteindelijk van de beweging verwijderd heeft. Niettemin blijven zijn ideeën zeer relevant voor sociaal-anarchisten in de 21ste eeuw.

Misschien heeft Brian Morris, een anarchistische antropoloog, het nog het beste verwoord toen hij terugblikte op de indrukwekkende erfenis die Bookchin naliet:

“Authentic anarchism is not then the life-style (or 'new') anarchism – as Bookchin contended in his last years – but the class struggle anarchism embraced by Reclus, Kropotkin, Goldman, Berkman, Flores Magon, Galleani, Malatesta, Landauer and by scores of contemporary anarchists and radical activists (...). Bookchin, in spite of his rhetoric, and in spite of misleadingly equating anarchism with ultraindividualism, always essentially belonged to this libertarian socialist tradition – anarchism. Bookchin's true legacy, it seems to me, was in re-affirming and creatively developing this tradition, not in advocating libertarian municipalism, with its rather reformist implications.” (Brian Morris)

Hoewel veel anarchisten zich vandaag enigszins hebben afgekeerd van Bookchin, omwille van zijn

polemische stijl en de ontwikkeling van een eigen, van het anarchisme onderscheiden, ideologie van het communalisme, blijft zijn bijdrage essentieel bij het zoeken naar een relevant sociaal-anarchisme voor de 21ste eeuw. Wat is nu dat communalisme en hoe onderscheidt het zich van het anarchisme?

Eirik Eiglad, een hedendaags communist, omschrijft communalisme als volgt:

“Communalism, and its politics of libertarian municipalism, can bring radicals out of the reformist cul-de-sac of *Realpolitik* and futile communitarian efforts. We cannot *change* society by throwing illegal street parties, sending petitions to politicians, or holding large protest rallies. We must build a new political organization, guided by a clear set of principles and by laws, which seek to collectively provide the spearhead of larger radical movements for democracy and social change.”

(bron: <http://new-compass.net/articles/communalism-alternative>)

De voorstanders van communalisme lijken zich dus verder in te schrijven in de kritiek op het 'lifestyle anarchisme' van Bookchin, maar even goed tegen reformistische symbolische acties. Wie dieper in het communalisme graaft, vindt er echter suggesties die wel lijken aan te sturen op een reformistische politiek, zij het met min of meer revolutionaire doelstellingen. Deze tekst is echter niet bedoeld als evaluatie van de waarde van het communalisme, het volstaat om vast te stellen dat het communalisme nog steeds sterk beïnvloed is door sociaal-anarchistische ideeën, maar er tegelijk een kritische reactie op is.

Het is dit communalisme dat de voorbije jaren in toenemende mate indrukt lijkt te maken op de Koerdische bevrijdingsbeweging, die in navolging van de leider van het PKK, Öcalan, het werk van Bookchin ontdekt hebben. De schijnbare breuk, door Bookchin en zijn onmiddellijke entourage geïnitieerd, tussen de communisten en anarchisten belet niet dat sommige communisten nog steeds uitgesproken anarchist zijn. Omgekeerd blijven sociaal-anarchisten nog steeds voortbouwen op Bookchin. Voorbeelden in beide richtingen zien we ook bij de Koerden.

Maar wat is nu de betekenis van de ideologische verschuiving die we bij de Koerden zien? En waar komt ze vandaan? Dat is nog steeds niet helemaal uitgeklaard, maar feit is dat Öcalan, sinds zijn gevangenneming, zijn politiek sterk heeft bijgeschaafd. In een recente bijdrage van Janet Biehl, weduwe van Bookchin, klinkt het zo:

By 2004-5, then, Öcalan had either given up on or shifted focus from his effort to persuade the state to reform itself by democratizing from the top down. “The idea of a democratization of the state,” he wrote in 2005, “is out of place.” He had concluded that the state was a mechanism of oppression—“the organizational form of the ruling class” and as such “one of the most dangerous phenomena in history.” It is toxic to the democratic project, a “disease,” and while it is around, “we will not be able to create a democratic system.” So Kurds and their sympathizers “must never focus our efforts on the state” or on becoming a state, because that would mean losing the democracy, and playing “into the hands of the capitalist system.” (Janet Biehl, 2013)

Dit roept heel wat vragen op voor anarchisten. Hoe essentieel is de invloed van Bookchin op Öcalan en bij uitbreiding op de PKK? En nog belangrijker: hoe representatief zijn zij voor de Koerdische bevrijdingsbeweging? Zelf als die vragen positief kunnen beantwoord worden, blijven we enigszins onbevredigd achter. Want hoeveel heil kunnen we verwachten van een bevrijdingsbeweging die nog

steeds zo sterk opkijkt naar één man – die bovendien als jaren in de gevangenis zit en dus nog weinig voeling heeft met de realiteit van de gewone Koerd? En in welke mate heeft het late werk van Bookchin, geschreven onder de noemer “communalisme”, enig bevrijdingspotentieel indien we het los zien van zijn eerdere, meer expliciet anarchistische werk?

Toch kunnen we het belang van de recente evoluties in Koerdistan beter niet onderschatten. Als het klopt – en dat is nog een open vraag – dat een grote gemeenschap in strijd met een vijandige staat streeft naar meer autonomie, gekoppeld aan een staatsloze structuur, dan is dit een zeer relevant voorbeeld voor anarchisten wereldwijd. En vooral: een strijd die we niet alleen moeten opvolgen, maar ook in de mate van het mogelijke moeten ondersteunen.

De interesse van op zijn minst een deel van de Koerdische beweging in het anarchisme is een “hot item”, dat zelfs op de internationale anarchistische ontmoeting in Saint-Imier (zomer 2012) ter sprake kwam. Ook daar niet zonder enige controverse. De (Engelstalige) teksten in deze bijdrage zijn in dit opzicht verzameld: om de discussie ten gronde aan te wakkeren. Wat is de waarde van PKK in de strijd tegen de onderdrukking van de Koerden door de Turkse staat? Waarom lijken de ideeën van Bookchin de Koerden te inspireren? Hoe verklaren we het relatieve succes van de Koerden in hun streven naar autonomie? Maar de belangrijkste vraag lijkt uiteindelijk deze: wat kunnen de Koerden leren van het anarchisme en wat kunnen de anarchisten leren van de Koerdische bevrijdingsbeweging?

August Wagener

Februari/Maart 2013



# Report from The Mesopotamian Social Forum

By

[Janet Biehl](#)

05.10.2011



Since around 2004, I'd been hearing that Kurds in southeastern Turkey were interested in social ecology and communalism. The news was surprising and intriguing and potentially an important development for social ecology. But for some reason, I could not bring myself to focus on the subject. Why? Perhaps the problem was the language barrier—but no, important documents had been translated into English, so I can't blame that for my long hesitation.

No, the real reason, I admit, was the problem of Abdullah Öcalan (the surname is pronounced *OH-jah-lahn*). Back in the 1970s, this Kurdish nationalist founded the PKK (the Kurdish Workers Party), a Marxist-Leninist organization, to achieve a separate Kurdish state. Starting in 1984, the PKK waged a guerrilla war with the Turkish army, a war that has ebbed and flowed, has at times been very bloody, costing 30,000 lives—it continues to this day. He personally ordered executions (as he later admitted). But in 1999, after a long manhunt, the Turkish state arrested and tried Öcalan and condemned him to death. Then in 2002 Turkey, which wanted to join the EU, ended capital punishment and so commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.

Incarcerated on a one-person prison on an island in the Sea of Marmara, in solitary confinement apart from his lawyers, Öcalan became reflective, a reader and writer and thinker. He abandoned Marxism and the goal of a separate Kurdish state and turned instead to a relatively peaceful [solution](#): “not separation but a democratic union with the republic.” The Kurds seek, in their current phrase, “democratic autonomy” within Turkey.

And it was in prison that Öcalan read Murray Bookchin's work—*The Ecology of Freedom* and *The Rise of Urbanization* had recently been translated into Turkish. In reading those pages, Öcalan recognized the importance of assembly democracy and confederalism; he embraced the critique of hierarchy, the necessity of gender equality, and the urgent reality of the ecology crisis.

Through his lawyers, Öcalan sent out the word that Kurds should read Bookchin. And thereafter untold numbers of Kurds did so and to some uncalculable degree accepted social ecology.

Bookchin's ideas percolated through Kurdistan while he himself was at the end of his life and could

them offer no advice. After his death in 2006, I started to hear from people associated with the Kurdish cause. But whenever I mentioned Öcalan's name to my American friends (those who had heard of him), they told me that he was a terrorist thug, a blood-stained Marxist-Leninist, a would-be dictator. The PKK, no gentle Gandhians, funded their guerrilla war via drug trafficking. The PKK was (and still is) on the U.S. State Department's [list of terrorist organizations](#).

Just what the social ecology world needs, I thought: association with an internationally vilified brute. So while I was friendly to my Kurdish contacts, I put my energy into other projects.

In the past year or so, more Kurds got in touch with me—and they all seemed like fine people, justifiably desiring autonomy from a Turkish state that persecuted them, did not acknowledge the existence of their ethnicity, barred them even from using their language publicly. They seemed eager for international contacts, like a Kurdish anti-dam activist, Ercan (pronounced *AIR-john*) Ayboga, who was the international coordinator for resistance to a big hydroelectric dam project on the Tigris River. The resistance was valiant, high-minded, and persistent.

A few months ago Ercan invited me, to participate in the Mesopotamian Social Forum (MSF), to be held in September in Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city in Turkey. The MSF's slogan would be "freedom will prevail." I worked out a way to go. Finally I confront the issue.

### **The Mesopotamian Social Forum, September 20-25, 2011**

About 3,000 people arrived at Diyarbakir's Sumer Park to attend and participate in this second MSF (the first took place two years ago). They were, it seems, mainly Kurds, from not only Turkey but Iran and Iraq. Many non-Kurdish people from other parts of the Middle East were there, as well as international sympathizers, all working on social justice, peace, and freedom; ecology and human rights; women and LGBT; refugees and migration; and the range of issues typical of a Social Forum: "Another Mesopotamia is possible!" They rejected "packaged futures" and practiced mutual respect. Many were older people, surely veterans of the struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, but also younger Kurds who must have entered the movement after Öcalan's transformation. And like any Social Forum, the MSF offered far more panels and workshops and events, running simultaneously, than any one person could take in.

For me, it was total immersion in Kurdish affairs. Ecology was an important theme, with panels on energy, the right to water, and irrigation policy. I heard about a fight to preserve a Jordanian forest and struggles against thirty hydroelectric plans under way near Van, "perpetrating both social and ecological destruction," as the presenter put it.

Dam building seems tragically ubiquitous in the Middle East, as states scramble to harness streams for hydropower. The Iranian state is building hundreds of dams, explained Esmail Kahrom, the onetime director of Tehran's Bureau of Wildlife, with terrible ecological consequences. He described how dam construction has lowered the water level of Lake Urmia, the largest lake in the Middle East, by 60 percent. The water is so saline, flamingoes and other waterfowl can no longer live there, or rest on its rocky outcroppings. "Nature can provide for the need of people, not the greed of people," Kahrom quoted Gandhi. Meanwhile Banu Öztürk, who fights thermal and nuclear plants in the Trabzon area, on the Black Sea coast, pointed out: "What 's happening is not the production of energy. The real issue here is the commodification of water and air."

Much to my astonishment, at a panel on "Autonomous Communities and Ecological City," a brilliant young woman called Duygu Canan Öztürk gave a pitch-perfect exposition of Murray Bookchin's social ecology. Later, when I asked her about it, she told me matter-of-factly that she'd been studying Bookchin for years. She seemed surprised by my surprise. She told me Bookchin's

ideas were much discussed and analyzed in Turkey—many books, articles, Ph.D. dissertations, have been written on them.

After that, I heard snippets of social ecology elsewhere. A middle-aged man from KESK (the Confederation of Civil Servants' Unions) sounded like he'd just read *Our Synthetic Environment*. "Big cities are like big ovens," he said—"the roads and houses just get hotter. On city streets, people become psychologically disturbed. That gives rise to family conflicts at home. And it's all so capitalism can rule society more easily. It says, 'You have to live for my profit.'" *Anti-capitalism*: like so many at the MSF, the word fell easily from his lips—it was axiomatic for the conference as a whole. "Capitalism is a trap against us," the KESK man said (I didn't catch his name)—"no capitalist society can survive." KESK builds new housing, he said, where families can grow food using solar power.

I heard about many experiments in "alternative life." A member of the [Ax u Av](#) collective told us about a new village, on a plain in Urfa, near Viransehir. They have built houses from soil and water. The collective is run democratically, with gender equality, as a farming cooperative.

The level of feminist consciousness was extremely high. Women spoke on every panel, and some were dedicated to women's issues, like one on the "slaughter of women" in the Middle East: honor killings. If a woman is accused of having been "dishonored" (which can mean anything from having extramarital sex to being accused of same, or merely dressing in an "unacceptable" manner), her brothers are expected to kill her. Lin Kayyaht, a Jordanian attorney, explained that women cover themselves in black burqas to avoid being accused of tempting men; their families consider daughters "honor burdens" and marry them off young, before their "honor" can be challenged—so child brides are on the increase.

One Iraqi Kurdish woman pointed out that she and her peers fight for themselves as women as well as for their country—and it's in men's interest that they do. "If woman has rights, then society will be stronger," she said. "Women make up half the society."

As the women talked, I looked across elderly men with craggy faces, battle-scarred veterans of decades of Kurdish struggle, sitting near me, listening gravely. Öcalan had told them that they must treat women equally—and they seemed to be complying. I saw much, much encouragement of women's voices.

But the most fascinating part of the MSF for me was the Kurds' achievements in assembly democracy. As Ercan Ayboga explains in the accompanying interview, they are creating assemblies at the local level (villages, neighborhoods, cities) and coordinating them horizontally in confederations. Instead of using the name communalism, they call it [democratic confederalism](#).

Democracy, as Engen Demesh of the BDP Politics Academy explained, is among the "common values of humanity." It doesn't simply mean voting—democracy "can't be built on individualism." It means taking your destiny into your own hands: "When people decide to organize together, they make history."

In the 1980s and 1990s, when Murray spoke on communalism, to American and European audiences, he encouraged them to heighten the tension between the municipality and the nation-state. They exist in a state of latent conflict, he argued, and the way to make a municipal revolution was to exacerbate it. To build up the base of the confederation into a dual power that could challenge the nation-state. Dual power? I wondered. How about a state of war?

My new Kurdish friends were eager to hear from me about communalist experiences in other parts

of the world, but I feared disappointing them. No one in the social ecology world I knew had produced anything close to the Kurdish achievement. I dared not recycle once again Murray's well-worn historical examples. But the question was answered by others, for example by Cetin Güner, in a fascinating presentation on models of self-governance with de facto or legal autonomy. In Chiapas, in the years since the Zapatista uprising, village assemblies, with city councils, and forces of self-defense, have been to meet the needs of local people. They "don't demand self-government," Güner said—"they've already built it. They demand recognition of their right to self-government." The Zapatistas, I was told, are an inspiring model for many radical Kurds.

But they've made assembly democracy their own. Kurdish activist Ayse Gökhan of Nusaybin municipality (in Mardin Province, near the Syrian border) said the end of the nation state was in sight, because it cannot address the needs of societies today. The struggle for confederalism—ecological and democratic—is the solution to the Kurdish problem, in all four parts of Kurdistan, and it offers a new vision to Middle Eastern countries undergoing the Arab Spring.

This yeasty left-political mix could not be without its anarchists, and I was curious to see how they related to it. At a panel on "New Liberation Spaces," Kürsad Kiziltug argued that the historical enmity between anarchism and socialism belonged in the past. Socialism and anarchism come from the same nineteenth-century roots. Proudhon and Bakunin were both socialists—the split was over strategic preferences. The new anticapitalist movement (dating from 1994 Zapatista movement and 1999 Seattle) abandons the strategy of taking hold of the state apparatus. The new anticapitalist movements are intertwined horizontally.

Politics with themes like decentralization "is no longer called anarchist, which is good," he said. Some Turkish socialists refuse to let go of the "Jacobin paradigm" and call the Kurdish movement is "too anarchist." But "the grammar of politics has changed." The Kurdish liberation movement "has evolved from a traditional separatist movement to an anticapitalist, direct democracy movement." In Kurdistan, feminists, libertarian socialists, LGBTs, diverse movements support the pro-Kurdish parliamentary party, the BDP (see the accompanying interview).

Göksun Yazici, an anarchist fan of the Zapatistas, told of a long search for "a new politics." She supports the BDP, she said, but it's not simply about giving an endorsement—it's about becoming part of the process. The BDP doesn't just reproduce bourgeois democracy—it takes a stab at the heart of the bourgeois state. Anarchists need "to rethink ways of organizing," she said.

Emine Ayna, a BDP parliamentarian, sat on the panel with the (post-)anarchists and observed that Kurdish political institutions are places where "all Kurds to come together over their concerns. Anarchists are being recognized—Öcalan's *Defense* has a chapter on anarchism. "The door is open. We're trying to find a common points with anarchism, points of struggle against the system. Because ideologically we have a lot in common."

What about the "cult of the leader," an audience member asked, referring to Öcalan. Isn't that authoritarianism? Ayna responded that Öcalan has been leading the struggle for thirty years. "We oppose domination, Our organizing models are people's assemblies, neighborhood assemblies. We're trying to create a new system in a participatory way. But how can we organize without a leader? Öcalan endorsed women's liberation—and it would not be happening without him." Ayna continued, "There's no other struggle like ours. We're trying to break the system, make a strategic transformation. We make no concessions. We want it to sweep over the rest of Turkey."

Back in 1991, Murray Bookchin wrote an article called "The Left That Was," in which he listed the qualities that he considered valuable about the left he'd known: it was anticapitalist and socialist; internationalist, antimilitarist (but not pacifist), gender equal, anti-hierarchical, against domination,

democratic, and confederalist. He considered these features the ones worth preserving, for a future new left. I found all these qualities at the MSF.

And it was all happening in the ominous shadow of severe repression by the Turkish state. As Rehsan Bataray Saman, of the Human Rights Association (IHD), explained, the state is using a new strategy against Kurdish activists: arrests and incarceration. Thousands of people have been arrested on vague charges of involvement in an organization that supports terrorism. They get long sentences, even torture, for a tiny episode of participation. A person can receive 10-12 years just for attending a political demonstration, she said. Mass graves have been found.

For geostrategic reasons, Turkey keeps a tight lid on information about its repression of the Kurds. It's unseemly for a modernized nation, after all, to be understood as persecuting an ethnic group. It reminded me of the "grand camouflage," as Burnett Bolloten called the Stalinists' suppression of information about the Spanish Revolution in 1936-37. Then too, the reasons were geostrategic. Then too, the institutions at stake were libertarian ones.

But the Kurds have no intention of allowing another Franco to eliminate their assembly democracy. Repression only seems to make them more defiant. For them, democratic confederalism is a way of taking the future into their own hands. For them, it is through democratic confederalism that "freedom will prevail."

## Kurdish Autonomy and Social Ecology

By

[Ahmet Sezer](#)

While their leader Abdullah Öcalan is kept in solitary confinement on the Imrali Island, the radical Kurdish movement progresses with its demands for human rights, cultural recognition, and a radical form of democracy. In this interview Ahmet Sezer looks at the relationship between the demands for Kurdish democratic autonomy and the ideas of social ecology.

*Qijika Reş: You are an intellectual with in-depth knowledge on the Bookchin literature. From this perspective, what do you think about the recent attention to Bookchin's ideas, and how do you situate it within the new social movements and their role in the revival of communalist tendency in the anarchist tradition?*

Ahmet Sezer: I would like to start with the second part of your question, the one about the communalist tendency. But before I can answer this I must begin by saying that direct democracy is, above all, the major axis of Bookchin's ideas. By direct democracy we mean a humanly scaled community constituted by a reasonable amount of people taking its decisions directly, face-to-face and enforcing the decisions taken without the requirement of appealing to any other authority. This process takes place in people's assembly of the community. Still, if the issue is of interest to other, neighboring communities too, decisions will be made in such a way that each and every community would be represented in a higher confederation of popular assemblies. These community delegates who participate in the "higher" levels have no independent political decision-making authority and can be recalled by their community at any time. The joint decision negotiated in the confederation will be enforced and binding with the approval of people's assembly of each and every community. If we substitute our notions of a humanly scaled community with the *commune* and confederation

with “the commune of communes,” this communalist tendency have deep roots in our history—long before the political concepts of socialism, Marxism, and anarchism emerged. A comprehensive and in-depth discovery and renewal of this communalist tendency has become an urgent need for today’s radical politics. In a time when the parliamentary regimes are in obvious crises of representation, this communalist tendency could very well be the most powerful challenge an alternative politics could offer.

But we face even greater social problems today, and, if the social and ecological crises that stems from these social problems can only be really resolved through the establishment of an egalitarian and emancipated world where classes and hierarchies are abolished and our human potentialities fully realized—as social ecology suggests—the key to this process is direct democracy. This is indeed the essence of Bookchin’s ideas, as these ideas have been developed under the concepts of Social Ecology and communalism. Without this focus on direct democracy it is possible that the ecological problems of our planet might be “resolved” by an “ecological” dictatorship dictating its “solutions” from above. In other words, by creating a dictatorial and authoritarian society it may be possible to resolve the ecological crises “technically,” without solving its underlying social crises. Nevertheless, such a society would not be any more “ecological” than the “actually existed socialism” crested in Stalinism was in fact a “socialist” society.

Before the Second World War, libertarian socialism, libertarian Marxism, revolutionary trade unionism and social anarchism could reveal this communalist tendency to the extent that they adopted direct democracy. Bookchin called one of his essays, “Communalism: The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism.” Therefore, regardless of their ideological *topos* (anarchism, Marxism or another type of a political body), Bookchin was charting this democratic dimension. Later, after tracing these ideas for some time, he became convinced that communalism was not only the democratic dimension of another political project, but a distinct political ideology in itself. His essay on “The Communalist Project” (published previously in your journal) clearly expresses this ideological break.

Now, I will try to answer the first part of your question. We use the term “the new social movements” to distinguish them from both the state or class-centered movements in which the proletariat—the class predicted to make the revolution—was organized under Leninist parties or trade unions, and the national liberation movements in the Third World, guided by the Old Left ideology, struggling to establish their own state. Based on this definition, it is possible to date these new social movements back to the counter-culture and the movements for citizens’ rights that appeared in the Western World in the 1960s. In the so-called “Third World” (the geographical area we today call the Global South), these are the movements characterized by land occupations of small farmers and peasants and movement for the rights of indigenous peoples. These movements appeared in full in the mid-1990s—in the neo-liberal era after the demise of “actually existing socialism.” While movements like Via Campesina for the most part are composed of small farmers and indigenous peasants, the EZLN (the Zapatistas) is composed of Chiapas’ native people aiming at re-creating and sustaining the communal rights that are denied them by the Mexican state. The Landless Peasants Movement (MST) is, on the other hand, is composed of Brazilians occupying land in rural Brazil in cooperation with marginalized Brazilians in cities. All those rural movements are characterized by their attempt to prevent neo-liberal assaults and ecological destruction. Apart from these movements in the “South,” the most recent movements which could well be described as the continuation of 1960s movements in the Western world today are the anti-capitalist movements started in Seattle in 1999, protesting against the giant hegemony of private companies and capitalism. This movement continues today with the “Occupy Wall Street”-movements and with the movements targeting ecological problems and struggling for Climate Justice. To this list, we also need to add feminism dating back to 1970s, broader environmental movements such as the anti-Nuclear Energy struggle, as well as the ongoing struggle for the recognition of different sexual

orientations. In our globalized age, there is no need to say that all those movements are highly interconnected.

The reason why several of Bookchin's core ideas influenced these social movements was that he had anticipated the problems capitalism and nation-states was creating, and he constructed his theory of social ecology on a foundation of libertarian and utopian thought prior to Marxism—before all these new social movements appeared, and at a time when the Old Left dominated oppositional politics all around the world both in the West and the East.

In the 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, Bookchin stated that negative impact of environmental pollution and the massive urban expansion—far beyond its reasonable dimensions—on human health and psychology could determine the limits of capitalism. This analysis went far beyond the prediction that capitalism would ultimately collapse by a final economic crisis, which never came to be realized, and he advocated a social struggle not only against class divisions but against all kinds of hierarchy (including the one between classes) and Bookchin argued that human beings should end domination, both over one-another as well as its attempts to dominate the natural world. In the years that followed these ideas became ever more precise and concrete, particularly within the new social movements that emerged out of the framework of the later social transformations capitalism imposed.

Finally, I must to highlight the fact that Bookchin, in sharp contrast to other social theorists, did not only made a criticism against the state, capitalism and environmental exploitation, but he also established the framework for *applicable* libertarian social institutions as well as the economic relations that could support them. In other words, he showed how social movements, beyond protesting the existing system, could initiate and constitute a new political dispensation. Whether they are directly influenced by Bookchin or not, the social movements in question gain an authentic quality and broad social support to the extent to which they utilize such forms of organization. We may see this in the transformation of EZLN from a guerilla organization to a long-lasting rural movement after having adopted traditional non-hierarchical decision-making and decentralized government mechanisms of the native peoples of the Chiapas region.

— *Today, we talk about a paradigm-shift in Kurdish political movement. How do you evaluate the movement's evolution from a national liberation line to a communalist line, characterized by positioning itself against state power? How can we interpret the relationship between the actualization of "democratic autonomy" project in Kurdistan as a communalist self-governance policy, the new social movements in the world, and modern political theories?*

— It is not so difficult to explain why Kurdish political movement broke away from the national liberation line. The main cause is that the conjuncture necessary for national liberation movements was dissolved after the collapse of the Soviet Union. If it were not for this large-scale change in overall world politics, the Kurdish political movement could very well have become one of the many Marxist-Leninist or Maoist communist parties we witnessed over one third of the world in the 20th century aiming at seizing state power or establishing their own nation-state. The end of the Cold War coincided with the time when Kurdish guerilla movement started to gain a broader foundation and was socialized in a way, in order to become a more authentic political movement. The reason for this socialization was the massive state repression in the region, the forced evacuations of villages, and terrorization of the region—rather than any direct change in the power or ideology of the guerilla movement itself.

Having a social basis, the guerilla movement was obliged to find a solution within the existing borders of the nation-state and shifted its discourse in line from a "revolutionary" rhetoric to a reformist one based on the recognition of Kurdish identity and expansion of democratic rights. This

new politics was also supported by a new rhetorical basis that highlighted how Turkish and Kurdish people fought together to win the War of Emancipation. It was pointed to the fact that the Kurdish people were granted the rights and the autonomy they now demand back in the original 1921 Constitution, but all those rights were repealed in 1924 Constitution. This discourse was in time even further radicalized and reformulated as “decreased state government on Kurdistan and making them more sensitive to democracy.” We need to acknowledge this shift of politics—although at first it may seem reformist—as a search for cultural rights, democracy or even economic justice by a broad movement that has abandoned the idea of establishing its own state and that has become intensely aware of the immense power of the state and capitalism.

How will it be possible to “decrease the state and raise sensitivity towards democracy?” By no means does the state restrict its own power, so how will it be possible to constitute and sustain—in other words *institutionalize*—a *counter-power* founded on popular government to restrict the power of the state, while the movement has given up on the idea of establishing its own state?

As we all know, the Turkish state was both against the demands based on cultural rights and ignored other demands, especially solutions to the massive influx of people who took refuge in cities after the forced evacuation of villages, and which have struggled against unemployment and infrastructural problems ever since. Despite the rhetoric of “economic development,” which all governments in the region are committed to, it has not yet been concretely realized in the region. After the local elections in 1999, we witnessed a political gap created by the local victories of HADEP (a Kurdish political party at the time) in 38 municipalities, and how such local administrative organs fill this gap. To be sure, the political organization of Kurdish movement is complex, but the municipalities, first considered only as a legal part of this overall movement, unexpectedly provided the political means to “decrease the state.” With the help of these municipalities, cities were gradually transformed (within the bounds of possibility); they were culturally animated and became relatively livable. Importantly, the municipalities provided a legal and politically legitimate counter-balance to the centralized institutions of the state. The relationship between the centralized state and municipal power operates in line with the theory of combined vessels: the power one seizes is transferred from the other. Therefore, if you institutionalize and reinforce the power of local communities, you permanently diminish the powers of the centralized state.

The political suggestions that have been advanced as “democratic autonomy” and “democratic federalism” might stem from different theoretical backgrounds, but they were practically ignited by the *discovery* of the authentic character of local governments. Thus, Pandora’s Box has been opened. Even in disastrous 2011 Van earthquake—an emergency issue which is supposed to be outside the domain of politics as it mostly refers to human emotions—we saw how serious conflicts between the state and the municipality was crystallized, in terms of who should eventually be responsible for the distribution of aid. Such conflicts about who shall hold the ultimate political power may not be nice, but it is certainly *not groundless*.

To put it briefly: First, guerilla movement opened, by force, a space necessary for the establishment of the Kurdish political movement, but later, it was the discovery of local government which opened the political grounds on which direct democracy can be constituted. Here, I would like to emphasize the fact that municipalities—with their current restrictions (in fact, municipalities are only a part of a highly complex Kurdish political network and there is a “low-intensity” war situation throughout the Kurdish region)—do not bring forth the solution of cultural and economic problems by themselves, but they provide the grounds on which such solutions can be constituted.

This evolution from a line pursuing national liberation to a communalist line is indeed striking and surprising. If we take into account the fact that this political proposals developed in the geography

of the Middle East, where the democratic tradition is not that strong, and in a country with a political culture so rigidly orthodox that the leftist tradition hardly took a step beyond a dogmatic and even Stalinist Marxism, these striking and surprising developments possesses an almost surreal character. Therefore, this great opportunity for expanding libertarian politics must be seriously evaluated by each and everyone who calls themselves progressive, radical, and revolutionary. This is an incredible opportunity—we simply cannot afford to waste it.

From this day on, each and every one of us need to assume their responsibility. As an old saying puts it: “A good proposal slips down from the hands of its owner and becomes common property.” This proposal is now put forward. Even in these trying times, of reciprocal violence and all kinds of comprehensive repression, we need to ponder this proposal seriously—and see if we can affirm it, develop it, and even help actualize it.

Once this political transformation was realized, the Kurdish movement started to use a similar language to that of EZLN, MST and Via Campesina, which abstain from a classical Marxist-Leninist discourse, which severely criticize private property and capitalist production relations and which are not aiming at establishing an independent nation-state. The Kurdish political movement was inspired by those other movements, although there is not a direct encounter between the two. The reason for this lack of direct encounter is to a large extent precisely the communal focus the Kurdish political movement acquired after its self-transformation, the parallel experiences and similarities with other social movements and even its institutionalized potential of going beyond them are either not known at all, or very little known outside our geographical region. This can be contrasted with the Zapatista movement, where the communal character of EZLN is well known and widely supported—it is inspired by, and inspires, other movements all around the world. The Kurdish political movement, however, is highly introspective, and its agenda is essentially structured around its conflict with the state, and understandably so. But in that sense, we need to say that the Kurdish movement is not sufficiently politically globalized.

I cannot say that I have much knowledge about the relationship between the communalist ideals of self-management prevailing in the Kurdish political movement and modern political theories apart from Bookchin. Indeed, many modern theorists have challenged the dilemmas of state and party-based radical politics. Often they have made poignant and extremely meticulous sociological observations. Nevertheless, I think the main issue is how these communalist-oriented movements may become permanent and create new libertarian institutions to counter the institutions of the centralized state. In other words: in a time of capitalist globalization, what can become our contemporary organizational counterparts to the old factory committees, the workers and soldier councils, the libertarian associations and trade unions, and other institutions for self-management? As far as I know, apart from Murray Bookchin and his communalism, there is no other modern theory capable of answering these questions in a way that provide us with a concrete political praxis.

*— The geographical area largely inhabited by Kurds has a mixed historical heritage. On the one hand its history is based on the existence of autonomous regions governed by tribal confederations, far removed from the central governments. In these villages—which have always retained their organic bonds with nature—a culture of solidarity is common, as is a strong culture of resistance. On the other hand, it is an area where the longing for a state still prevails in popular consciousness, where political actors generally make top-down decisions, where there are strong leadership cults, and where property relations solidify deep class inequalities. What would you consider to be the advantages and the disadvantages of this heritage?*

— A characteristic feature of empires is that the center does not demand from the regions anything other than soldiers and taxes. Except from in extraordinary conditions, the imperial Ottoman

administration left its peripheral regions to their own fate. This attitude was continued in the Republican era except from when exceptional conditions occurred—such as Kurdish rebellions. The Kurdish areas maintained their village and tribe-based political structures since its mountainous territory was located outside the regions that benefited from the governmental efforts to stimulate industrial development after 1950s. Despite all the forced migration to cities in recent decades, this rural political structure is still partly the case: the mountainous character of the region has been decisive in fostering the prevailing culture of resistance.

It is also obvious that the organic structure of this village and tribe-based society, its face-to-face relations and the general culture of solidarity prevailing in Anatolia, shielded the region from the alienating effects of our modern society. Such a supportive social structure makes it easier for you to be an active political subject interested in what goes on around you. The tribal confederations you mention used to debate and make decisions about significant issues in assemblies consisting of representatives from each family and village (in a confederation), and then the tribal leader enforced the decisions taken in these assemblies. Participation in this “confederative system,” however, was based on unanimity, and in practical matters it was very restricted. This helps explain why it was not able not sustain an egalitarian political tradition. The tribes as such also constitute feudal structures by its blood ties and different forms of hierarchies between the young and the old, between women and men, and between landlords and peasants. We know that in villages where these hierarchies were relatively weak, general assemblies functioned as the basic decision-making mechanism.

We must put forward proposals to further the positive aspects of this heritage by advancing a libertarian politics and abandon the negative features of the same heritage. The Kurdish political movement today is partly doing this, for instance, in attempts at revitalizing their popular assemblies to embody direct democracy, and through providing crucial support for the growing presence of women in their political structures. On the other hand, the hierarchical structure of the guerilla movement and the culture of political violence still cloud such efforts and limit their further development.

— *Finally, what is the potential impact of “democratic autonomy” project on the leftist imagination in Turkey, as you see it? And what is the inspiration we can gain from it?*

— This project has shown the Leftists in Turkey (the majority of which continue to adopt the centralist, worker-oriented, and statist organizational ideology of the traditional Left, despite all their rhetorical adjustments) how a radical and revolutionary organization can change itself with the changing conditions. This does not necessarily have to be full break: The important thing is that new steps must be taken, and we need the courage to take these steps. If the Left we are talking about manages to leave its centralist and statist ideological blindness behind—as the rejuvenated Kurdish political movement increasingly influences them—they will discover that a new door is opened. They too can move ahead, to go beyond mere solidarity work and ultimately become a true political support for the Kurdish movement. The Left finds itself in a cul-de-sac, and this door is our exit.

What is equally important as this potential reorientation is the actual emergence of new libertarian movements, outside of the traditional Left, that appears in Turkey today—which are engaged in the struggle against ecologically destructive power plant projects and other environmental disasters, to broaden gender politics, and fight against neo-liberalism, and are involved on a whole range of other political issues. It is crucial that these new popular movements that participates in this social transformation today, become aware of their potential strength.

I would like to finish by saying that the most important factor to emancipate and democratize the social and political structures of Turkey runs directly through the solution of Kurdish problem. I

insist that we cannot afford to miss this historical opportunity.

## **Editorial Comment**

This interview was originally published in *Qijika Reş*, and was translated to English by Öznur Karaka. The article has been edited for publication on the *New Compass* website.

*Qijika Reş* is a Kurdish anarchist periodical (published in Kurdish and Turkish), which has presented articles by Murray Bookchin on libertarian municipalism and left-libertarian politics.