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When Öcalan met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Political Theory of Democratic Confederation

Damian Gerber^a and Shannon Brincat^b

^aUniversity of the Sunshine Coast, Faculty of Arts and Business, School of Social Science, Maroochydore, Australia; ^bGriffith University, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

The transformation of the Kurdish Freedom Movement towards Democratic Confederation has promised a new horizon for emancipatory political organisation. This article examines the relationship between Bookchin's political theory of communalism and Öcalan's democratic confederalism informed by various lived practices of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. After situating this movement in the geopolitics of the contemporary Middle East and international relations, the article explores the social and historical framework of Bookchin's theory and its specific rejection of hierarchy that has been taken up conceptually and politically by Öcalan. We trace this in the dissolution of the PKK and the adoption of the new paradigm of democratic confederalism. The second part examines this organisational basis of the Kurdish Freedom Movement's in its support for local, autonomous, and federated, forms of direct democracy and the complementarities between Bookchin's and Öcalan's theorisation of communalism and confederalism. Finally, we look at the regional and international organisational and political implications of the transformation of the Kurdish Freedom Movement in its shift away from Marxist-Leninism, nationalism, and statism, towards communalism and examine both the challenges and opportunities facing this revolutionary process.

Introduction

Since the Arab Spring, there has been a surge in scholarly interest across International Relations (IR), security studies and geopolitics, in the social movements of the Middle East. While outcomes have been starkly different with changes still ongoing in some Arab states, of these struggles the Kurdish Freedom Movement¹ has come to be regarded by many across the political spectrum as progressive, secular and democratic (see Zizek 2015). Viewed with increasing optimism, this movement is seen as a sign of hope for the political transformation towards autonomy in Syria that can resist the onslaught of Islamic State (ISIS), compel the democratic rejuvenation of Turkey, and even possibly the region (Gambetti 2009, 73). How the

Kurdistan Regional Government was able to carve itself out of the chaos of post-war Iraq, and how the growing tensions in Iranian Kurdistan have also been reported with similar hopes for progressive change (Rajavi 2015) demonstrate the emergent symbolic power of the Kurds across four states in a troubled region. Moreover, as the literal frontline against global terrorism and seemingly the only effective Western ally against ISIS – proven by the successful defence of Kobanê, protection of the Yazidi people on Mt Sinjar, and attacks on Raqqa supported by US forces – understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the Kurdish Freedom Movement is of acute practical significance for security policy makers and IR theorists alike. The brutal attacks of Turkey in its conquest of Afrin make this study even more urgent.

Yet analysis in IR on the Kurdish ‘question’ or ‘problem’ has been caught between an over-emphasis on traditional geopolitical concepts and the often hidden assumptions of human agency within mainstream approaches to IR. These conspire to obscure the changing nature of the Kurdish Freedom Movement itself. That is, the Western-centrism and modernist assumptions that lend agential subjectivity (the capacity to be ‘free’) to Western peoples at the expense of the East, meets with privileging the agency of intervening powers and external force *over* local context and the agency of the people trying to affect their own self-determination. Indeed, the fact that many continue to use the misnomer of the Kurdish ‘question’ typifies the urgent need for new analytical categories in IR and geopolitics to understand the transformation of the movement. As Olson (1998, 3) expressed it, the Kurdish peoples will ‘live when their existence is no longer defined as a ‘question’ or a ‘problem’.

So despite some growing support by the US military for Kurdish resistance to ISIS and signs of a cultural shift sympathetic to the Kurdish cause in the global civil society, the dominance of geopolitical intrigues and orientalism continue to constrain scholarly analysis.² This plays out in otherwise useful accounts like Al (2015, 689) who emphasise (rightly) the importance of ‘image’ of diversity and pluralism in gaining international support for the Kurdish Freedom Movement, yet neglect the geopolitical realities and state repressions that deliberately obstruct this image from emerging in the global public sphere. On the other hand, there are those that render the Kurds dependent on the ‘power politics’ of various ‘world blocs’ without countenancing the active role played by the Kurdish peoples themselves in this struggle (see Mehrdad Izady 1992, 201). Yet as critical geopolitical theorists like Ó Tuathail and Dalby (2002), Routledge (1996), and Dodds and Sidaway (1994) have consistently shown, the struggle for space and power – the strategic practices of social movements – are imbued with symbolic and conceptual significance. Social movements, like that of the Kurds, compel us to decenter geopolitical analysis from the myopic focus on state power and

to challenge allied notions of hegemony and traditional forms of political community that are no longer helpful in understanding the realities on the ground in Kurdistan (Routledge in Ó Tuathail and Dalby 2002, 241). At the same time, this pushes us to have a greater understanding of how the theoretical and ideological structures of these movements are central to the creation and articulation of the alternatives of ‘the political’ they pursue (and how these interplay with complex global processes beyond the remit of traditional geopolitical analysis). As argued by Routledge (in Ó Tuathail and Dalby 2002, 241, 256), our task ‘is to locate critical geopolitics within and between the discursive and embodied terrains of resistance’. This article is intended to fill one of these ‘terrains’ by helping to understand the theoretical basis of ‘democratic confederalism’ of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and its conceptual development in the thought of Abdullah Öcalan and Murray Bookchin.

As is well known, diverse forms of ‘communalism’ or ‘democratic confederalism’³ have developed throughout parts of Kurdistan. These self-managed forms of socio-political life are a direct expression of the Kurdish peoples and their regional circumstances. Yet they are also, in part, traceable to the visionary ideas of Öcalan – a key figure in the PKK and now the Kurdish Freedom Movement – and, in turn, one of his deepest influences, Murray Bookchin. Bookchin was a libertarian socialist and political theorist who developed the theory of Social Ecology in the 1960s as a response to what he perceived as the failures of the revolutionary projects of both Marxism and contemporary anarchism. Central to social ecology is the insistence that ecological crises arise from social pathologies, in particular, the consolidation and, eventually, colonisation of political life by hierarchies, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and the nation-state. As an outgrowth of Bookchin’s anthropological research into the relationship between ecological crisis and systems of hierarchy, ‘communalism’ was proposed as a realisable political goal that involved decentralised social organisation through direct democratic and ecological principles (see Clark 1990; Morris 2009). Öcalan, especially after his imprisonment in 1999, has adopted key aspects of Bookchin’s thought within his own political model of ‘democratic confederalism’. This is not to conflate Bookchin with Öcalan, nor to suggest their models mirror each other. Nor is this to over-state Bookchin’s influence on the Kurdish Freedom Movement which has any number of unique internal (cultural and historic) and external (particularly geostrategic) influences irreducible to the purely theoretical. Clearly, both Öcalan and Bookchin’s influence must be mediated when analysing the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Nevertheless, during their brief correspondence in 2004 Öcalan stated that his ‘world view’ stands close to Bookchin’s, especially in regards to the theory and practice of municipalities. Moreover, he admitted that alongside Immanuel Wallerstein, Bookchin was the writer with which he was most

‘currently engaged’, emphasising that his own work was not an academic exercise but ‘of someone searching for practical ways out of the crisis the Middle East and the Kurds are in’.⁴ The connection between Bookchin and Öcalan therefore runs far more deeply than their shared theoretical and normative ideas and goes to the very core of the transformation of the Kurdish freedom movement towards the practice of ‘democratic confederalism’.

It is important to first briefly trace the major shifts in both Öcalan’s thought and his political program overtime. One of the most striking aspects of Öcalan is his ability to be reflective, to alter not just his own views, but the strategies, theoretical basis, and ideological framework of the entire Kurdish movement. Whereas most leaders and social movements become wedded to a specific ideological form that captures their self-identification, stifling positive transformation and miring practices to ways that may no longer be effective, Öcalan has continually shifted his thought, evolving his praxis significantly, and thus dramatically changing both the aims and practices of the Kurdish Freedom Movement as a whole. Initially, Öcalan formed the PKK in 1978 to fight for Kurdish independence in the form of a state. This period was marked by violence, peaking in 1984, for which the PKK was widely deemed a terrorist organisation internationally – costing the movement significantly in terms of geopolitical relations and public support. Öcalan fled Turkey in 1979, was expelled from Syria in 1998, and captured in 1999 by Turkish forces assisted by the CIA, and it is this rupture between his political activities and his imprisonment in which we can observe the dramatic shift in his thought and politics. At this juncture, he came to believe that the period of armed conflict was ended and that a *political solution* inside existing borders must become the aim of the movement. The goal was to ‘build a democratic union between Turks and Kurds’ (Editors 2006). This was affirmed in the *Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan* and creation of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in 2005 that called for a borderless confederation between, and implementation of, democratic confederalism across *all* four Kurdish regions. This was extended in Rojava in 2016 when its three cantons became the Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria. The *Declaration* of 2005 marked the formal and practical shift from Marxist-Leninism towards the implementation of Bookchin’s social ecology. In theoretical terms, this shift is most clearly articulated in the second volume of Öcalan’s *Prison Writings* (2011b) that outlined many of his justifications for these fundamental shifts in ideology – claims that were elaborated further in terms of their political content in *Democratic Confederalism* (Öcalan 2011a). Öcalan’s political aims have since evolved to become more global in their aspirations (see esp. Öcalan 2015), something that has been coupled with his increased historical reflections focusing on civilisation generally and Kurdish history specifically. It is

impossible to document all of the subtle and dramatic shifts in Öcalan's thought across his 40 books. Yet what has become most pronounced within the last two decades is the clarification of the ideological content of the Kurdish Freedom Movement to explicitly address social issues through both the particular situation of the Kurdish people, and, the principles of Bookchin's social ecology. An exemplar is Öcalan's articulation of so-called Jineology – now a governing principle of the Democratic Federation of Rojava that has taken Bookchin's identification of the problem of hierarchy as central to the problem of gender. This form of female emancipation is intended to supplant 'honor', religious, and tribal forms of traditional Kurdish society that oppress women. In terms that deliberately echo Bookchin, Öcalan has stated that the level of women's freedom determines the level of freedom in society at large (see Öcalan 2013).

This growing influence of Bookchin's thought in the evolution of Öcalan's theoretical, ideological, and political framework – especially in the practices of communalism within the Kurdish Freedom Movement – has been noted by many scholars, including well-known theorists like Žižek (2015) and Graeber (2014), and Kurdish specialists like Jongerden and Akkaya (2011). However, despite this clear linkage, no-one has yet undertaken a systematic analysis of how the ideas of Bookchin have been taken up in the thought of Öcalan's and the Kurdish movement generally, nor the areas in which these ideas have been modified – even rejected – in favour of local conditions, geopolitical shifts, and necessities of the Kurdish struggle. This suggests that a deeper engagement with the theoretical foundations of the Kurdish movement is timely for both understanding the contemporary form of this struggle and its broader relation to geopolitics and IR. As such, this article provides a theoretical analysis of Öcalan's adoption of Bookchin's idea of communalism in the form of democratic confederalism, and the tensions and obstacles facing this process both conceptually and in practice.⁵ It is intended to contribute to the shift away from the narrow political approach of traditional geopolitics towards one that incorporates mobilising structures, cultural framing and ideological sentiments, as equally important to understanding resistance. For as Gambetti (2009, 46) has shown, it is these social networks – the ties of 'face-to-face interaction, personal and group allegiances, organisational resources... spaces of assembly...[and] inter-organisational links' – in which individual members and the communities of the movement are embedded, that is the facet of struggle usually overlooked in traditional geopolitical analysis.

The first part of the paper explores the social and historical framework developed by Öcalan and its relation to Bookchin's thought. Here, we engage with the key texts from both theorists that have informed the geopolitical and strategic outlook of Kurdish democratic confederalism. Specifically, we look to Bookchin's critique of hierarchy as informing the

shift in the Kurdish freedom movement away from nationalism, tribalism and capitalism, to a social ecology premised on gender equality, direct participation, and semi-autonomous confederation. In the second part, we examine the spatial dimensions of democratic confederalism by analyzing Öcalan's critique of nationalism and concept of democratic civil society. In particular, we look at how Öcalan's concept of political space draws on Aristotle's understanding of humanly scaled communities, and how Kurdish democratic confederalism reimagines political life as *ethical space* in which the development of civic education is provided with the degree of institutional support necessary for the flourishing of ethical self-governance. In the final part, we examine the geopolitical implications of this theoretical shift in the Kurdish Freedom Movement. We argue that despite the challenges facing the movement, its respect of traditions of autonomy and traditional cultures of anti-statism may prove to be a sustainable model of praxis and even a prefiguration of the vision of a secular and non-hierarchical Middle-Eastern democratic confederacy.

The Theoretical Foundations of Democratic Confederalism

There are two key limits in the literature on the Kurdish struggle that have stifled analysis on democratic confederalism: the dominance of specific historical structures in most indigenous narratives and the dominance of statism or over-emphasis on foreign powers in geopolitical accounts. Regarding the former, many indigenous accounts focus on the distinct historico-cultural foundations of the Kurdish struggle, emphasising nationalist political aims or providing sociological accounts premised largely around the Asiret (tribal structure). For example, Özcan's 'theoretical analysis' of Öcalan and the PKK does not explore Bookchin at all. Instead the account emphasises the Asiret as the constant and overriding aspect of the Kurdish ethne, persisting in the dominant anthropological interpretation in which Kurdish autonomy is said to be '*arrested in tribalism*' (Özcan 2008, 2005). In such accounts, the tribe is portrayed as of 'changeless character' that purportedly explains the lack of national unity and self-rule of the Kurds. Another example is the work of Ünver (2016) who, in exploring the emergent possibilities of a 'transnational Kurdish awakening', examines how this has been rendered possible by the specific circumstances of the Kurds' geopolitical history. His account, like many others before him, emphasises the Taurus and Zagros mountains as site for Kurdish resilience and hindrance to their unification. While he adds in demography, tribalism, Islam and socialism, as variables in his big-data approach to expand his account of Kurdish geopolitics, without understanding the relatively new theories of communalism and democratic confederalism, the kind of political and

ideational shifts underlying the ‘transnational Kurdish awakening’ remain opaque.

Conversely, in mainstream geopolitics, the Kurdish struggle is mostly read through the world-historical perspective of the Westphalian order in which statist accounts largely exclude, or cannot countenance, alternative (non-statist) concepts of political space like democratic confederalism. As shown by Ince and de la Torre (2016), there is a ‘silent statism’ that ‘naturalises sovereign, coercive and hierarchical relationships’ within geopolitics that limits not only geographical imaginations but – we would add – socio-political options. Reflecting specifically on the ethnography of the Kurds, Culcasi (2006, 687) observes how the territorial exclusion of Kurdish identity through the ideology of statism constitutes a deliberate geopolitical project to ‘define and legitimate the existence of nations by placing borders around imagined communities’. In this way, statism becomes ‘an active constituent of unequal social relations’ (Ince and de la Torre 2016, 19). Sagnic (2010) has further examined how this spatial imagination has been applied to suppress Kurdish self-determination under the Turkish state through Turkish attempts to re-label Kurds as ‘mountain Turks’ within the broader geopolitical framework of statist ideology. By contrast, scholars such as Gambetti (2009) have sought to discover how collective action by the Zapatistas and the Kurds have led to the development of alternative understandings of ‘space’ rooted in concepts such as internationalist solidarity, rather than the strictly geographic ‘places’ which form the boundaries of state sovereignty. This radical re-imagining of political geography is crucial to the Kurdish freedom movement’s dialectical vision of Rojava as *both* geographically-delimited ‘place’ and political, internationalist ‘space’.

This has not been able to translate easily into the dominant categories of geopolitical thought. Western scholarly prescriptions, at least up until the mid-2000s, presented a statist bias calling either for Turkish reforms to meet the ‘democratic’ standards of the West (and thus entry into the EU) or the pursuit of a separate state by the PKK. Even those observers who have risen above these Western-centric concerns, such as Phillips (2015), while offering keen insights into the changing geopolitical context of the Kurdish struggle have made little connection to Bookchin’s influence in this shift. Even McDowell’s (2004) vast history of the Kurds, or Yesiltas’s (2015) recent account of the PKK’s transition to a ‘Democratic Discourse’, lacks any engagement with the theoretical and ideological basis of contemporary democratic confederalism which, via Öcalan’s influence, has altered the course of the Kurdish Movement. Instead, much of the contemporary foreign analyses concentrates on the strategic role of Turkey in NATO, the threat of ISIS, and the interventions of the Great Powers – especially the US and now Russia – in which the Kurds are typically reduced to pawns (see Enzinna 2015). This merely continues the narratives of Kurdish exploitation by

foreign powers for strategic ends, or, for access to the natural and labour resources of Kurdistan with questions of active self-determination excluded.

This is not to say the connection with the radical turn in the Kurdish movement and its relation to Bookchin's thought has not been made. Graeber (2014) has alluded to the anarchist dimensions of the movement in his comments on Rojava, as has Zizek (2015) in his depiction of the Kurdish Freedom Movement as most progressive and secular, enlightened and modern. Some have dismissed Bookchin as a 'marginal figure' in this transition in the Kurdish Freedom Movement (Taucher and Vogl 2015, 95); yet others like Akkaya and Jongerden (2012) whose important work has offered some of the most substantial engagements on democratic autonomy, clearly show how Bookchin's ideas have been used to help construct aspects of this confederalist movement. Similarly, Ross' recent reports on travels in Kurdistan (Ross 2015) have begun to shed more light on the connection between Bookchin and the practical application of his ideas by the Kurdish peoples themselves. In this part, we build upon these studies to delve further into the historical and social framework of Bookchin's ideas and how these have been taken up conceptually by Öcalan and the practices of democratic confederalism.

In 2002, the PKK dissolved itself, transcending its aim of statehood under a new paradigm: democratic confederalism (Öcalan 2011a). This 'democratic system of a people without a State' aimed for the 'construction of a democratic, ecological and gender-liberated society' throughout Kurdistan within the KCK system (*Koma Civakên Kurdistananê*, The Union of Kurdistan Communities).⁶ In July 2011 Democratic Autonomy was announced by the DTK (the Democratic Society Congress structure within the borders of Turkey and the umbrella organisation of the Kurdish movement involving all groups and individuals in civil society) proclaiming communal powers, democratic participation, self-determination, and self-organisation *within* the borders of Turkey (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 209–211).⁷ The shift was fundamental. This transition marked a revolution *within* the revolution. The PKK of the 1970s and 1980s had maintained a classical communist-party organisational structure while seeking national liberation through a separate nation-state for the Kurds, and fought a war with Turkey to this end. The goal had been the realisation of the core principle of international society that was the mainstay of decolonisation – self-determination – in a struggle buttressed by justifications of national liberation and the overthrow of imperialism. Yet, after his capture in 1999, Öcalan was compelled to be critically self-reflective of the previous failures of the movement and its aims, turning openly towards the thought of Murray Bookchin, amongst others. So decisive was Bookchin's influence that Öcalan directed the PKK to move away from its Leninist focus on the capture of a nation-state towards Bookchin's outline of *communalism* (also termed 'democratic municipalism')

broadly defined through the creation of semi-autonomous, direct-democratic, and regional cantons, united by a confederal structure, administered by popular and revocable delegates, and policed by citizens' militias and army. While the movement has not yet achieved strict autonomy outside the state or world capitalism (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 16), both the organisational form and the political aims of the movement have nevertheless been utterly transformed in this shift. Rather than a Kurdish state, the movement now aims for 'autonomy, feminism, ecological stewardship, cooperative economics, and ethnic, linguistic, and religious pluralism' *within* existing borders – thus changing the very basis of the previous geopolitical struggle. This shift in aims has corresponded to a shift in organisational form away from political parties to a social movement involving the direct self-management of communal life by the villages and neighbourhoods, confederated in a voluntary association with each other. Rather than a seizure or creation of state power, only the right of self-defence is deemed consistent with the emancipatory political goals of this new democratic confederation that is premised to co-exist *within* present territorial demarcations (Öcalan 2011a, 28–29).

Democratic confederalism (or 'democratic autonomy,' a term that is often used interchangeably by Öcalan) is said to promise the 'rebirth' or 'renaissance' of the Kurds – and potentially the entire Middle East (Happel in Öcalan 2011b, x). Like Bookchin, Öcalan defends the potential in Enlightenment thought for the supersession of barbaric practices through democratic decision-making based in the social life and cultural values of Kurdish society (see Öcalan 2012a; Bookchin 1989, 18; 2015, 194). History is Janus-faced rather than teleological however, holding prospects for a common humanity *and* barbarities (Bookchin 1989, 180). It is in creating the social conditions for such common humanity to emerge – what Bookchin describes as the 'general human interest' that 'cuts across the particularistic interests of class, nationality, ethnicity, and gender' (Bookchin 1989, 166–169) – that the movement strives for by overcoming all hierarchical and parochial forms, whether located in the folk, tribe, or nation. This shift towards universal democratic values in the Kurdish movement corresponds to a wider movement in the language of the revolutionary Left since the 1970s, away from 'national liberation' towards a universal human rights paradigm (Piccini 2015). For Öcalan, this shift has led to two *new* potentialities in the Kurdish movement. On the one hand, there is the potential for the autonomy of minorities by the acceptance of different cultural identities within a given territory that can revivify democratic processes within the existing borders of Turkey (and by implication also Iraq, Iran, and Syria) (Öcalan 2011b, 152). On the other hand, this 'new political manifesto' or 'third way' that ties political, cultural and economic development to direct democratisation promises a new emancipatory horizon for the region as a

whole (Öcalan 2011b, 52) – it could ‘ignite sparks’ everywhere (Öcalan 2011b, xviii). This shift has been expressed in the changes to the 2000 Programme, away from a ‘*Federation of*’ to the ‘*Democratic Union of the Middle East*’ (See Programme 2000) in which democratic unity of the Kurds with all neighbours is to be based on confederal structures and multilateral agreements (Yesiltas 2015, 288). This programmatic shift expands confederalism from a national and regional form to one operating on an interstate level (Öcalan 2011b, 62). Hence the concept of ‘space’ in Rojava as a transcendental and basically transnational concept rather than delimited by geographic ‘places’ (Gambetti 2009).

Öcalan’s *The Roots of Civilization* (2007) marked this radical reconceptualisation of space by tracing the ethical agency and developmental impetus of the Kurds as representative of a wider, transnational emancipatory interest. This was at odds with the typical historical representation of the Kurds as either collaborationists or victims of foreign oppression – both phenomena of a divided society in Öcalan’s estimation – that served to confine the movement between conspiracy and liberation (Öcalan 2011b, 98, 100). The importance of Öcalan’s alternative historicism was that it has provided critical reflection on the nature and potentials of the movement within concrete conditions that could account for both the exploitation and co-optation of the Kurdish people but also the dialectic of resistance and transformation rooted in language, culture and place. It is these older socio-cultural structures that bridge the modern democratic ‘turn’ with local practices largely handed down from the Neolithic, which uniquely positions the Kurdish Freedom Movement as the product of a continuous struggle for emancipation from local elites and imperial powers over time (Öcalan 2011b, 28; 2012b, 8–25). For Öcalan, despite capitalism and the state, despite pre-feudal and feudal structures, and despite tribal and aristocratic privileges, ‘the population has preserved its instinctive understanding of freedom, equality and fraternity’ – a ‘will for freedom’ (Öcalan 2011b, 49). This is both a strength and challenge: these older social forms provide a robust social basis of cohesion and resilience, and yet some traditional practices challenge the necessity of developing institutions of civil society for the freedom of *all* humanity, regardless of class, gender or ethnicity. As Lenin (1916) protested, there can be no expectation of ‘a “pure” social revolution’. That is, these historically inherited forms of hierarchy – in gender relations, tribal structures, and privileges of chiefdom in Kurdish society – constitute the particular conditions in which the project of democratic confederalism must contest and emerge.

These particular historical obstacles for democratic confederalism are not merely temporal. For Bookchin and Öcalan, the problem is *hierarchy* regardless of its institutional form or source of legitimacy. In this conception, hierarchy is a *social* term that takes on various institutionalised forms (all

of which are unique to human society) (Bookchin 1989, 62), and hierarchical differences have been established through systems of status long before classes or the state emerged (Bookchin 1989, 61). Tribal structures in Kurdistan have been caught in this contradiction in that they embody localised institutions of organisation and forms of social recognition, but some of which are also parochial, limited, and unequal. Nevertheless, this potential in traditional forms of society has long been deemed an important bastion against capital and colonialism. For example, Marx saw the communal forms in India, Algeria, Latin America and Russia as possessing vitality and resistance.⁸ Similarly, Federici (2015, 184) has extolled the communal property relations and cooperatives, for as she claims: ‘*it is not where capitalist development is the highest but where communal bonds are the strongest that capitalist expansion is put on halt and even forced to recede*’. What Bookchin similarly emphasises is that the institutionalised practices in older societies – specifically, socialisation, the ‘irreducible minimum’, complementarity, and usufruct – all tend to *curtail* hierarchy.⁹ At the same time, this does not romanticise the potential in the Asiret by overlooking its practices of vendetta, petty tyrannies and patriarchal customs. As Öcalan (2011b, 28) determines, the tribal structures in Kurdistan have tended to ossify elite rule, hindering intellectual and cultural renewal. Quite simply, they are no longer adequate to express the social freedom of the Kurdish people. The *value* of historical social entities (like clans and stateless nations) can be reclaimed as ‘component entities’ of developed nations if democratised (Öcalan 2014). Similarly, communitarian social formations that have at times yielded nurturing, ecological, and liberatory values, are seen as part of a legacy of a socialism that is in need of ‘completion’ through a renewed democratic direction (Öcalan 2014).

Öcalan and Bookchin argue that the problems of hierarchy are exacerbated by nationalism – the acknowledgement of which caused a dramatic shift in the political aims of the movement. For Öcalan, bourgeois nationalism is as incapable of expressing the type of freedom sought by the population just as older forms of political community that were equally anachronistic, elitist, and hierarchical (Öcalan 2012b, 28; Özcan 2005, 5). So too was the dogmatism of ‘real-socialism’ that Öcalan has since compared to the Sumerian hieratic society characterised by ‘the negation of equal rights and freedom’ (2011b, 51).¹⁰ Those movements that had held onto such political solutions fixated on authoritarian ends – reifying or forgetting these as institutions of hierarchy – rather than pursuing a lived, social freedom that transcends the spatial and ideological limitations of the nation-state. For Öcalan, hierarchies are merely the protections of particular interests preserved through power (Gunter 1998, 82; Öcalan 2012b, 35; 2011b, 34–35). For Bookchin, similarly, the impetus of any hierarchical form is to *contain* the body-politic, to control and rule it, rather than

express its will. So while there may be no uniform ruling class, the state is nevertheless a professional system of coercion that administrates through its monopoly of violence (Bookchin 1989, 66–67). Such coercive administration is ‘inorganic,’ an ‘excrescence of society that has no real roots in it, no responsiveness to it...’ (Bookchin 1987, 243). But this relation of hierarchy to society is then mystified: divisions are seen as personal, not social. That is, real social conflicts are concealed by appeals to a fictional social harmony in which hierarchy goes on largely misdiagnosed, even mollified (Bookchin 1989, 72–73).

Yet, at the same time, Öcalan appreciated that such elements of society could not simply be wiped away (Öcalan 1995; cited in Özcan 2005, 161). The task has been to dissolve them organically through new institutional forms permeating civil society - changing the roots of ‘daily life’ by removing hierarchy and re-socialisation. For Öcalan, each of these older social forms must be ‘pressed’ to ‘join the democratic change’ while remaining rooted in society (Öcalan 2011b, 41). In this way, the tyrannies of custom may be willingly abandoned and replaced by the community in new forms of solidarity. For Bookchin, this ‘general human interest’ that cuts across ‘class, nationality, ethnicity and gender’ can be ‘embodied’ in the nonhierarchical demands of women, minorities, and all oppressed groups, for the recognition of their differences within a *substantive* ‘equality of unequals’ (Bookchin 1989, 65). Grounded in a social demand for the recognition of difference, a wider possibility emerges for a ‘sweeping social movement’ to emerge from the bottom up that has become the guiding principle of Democratic Autonomy (Öcalan 2011b, 169). Ross (2015) reports, for example, how Kurds have been enthused about the virtues of participatory, non-hierarchical self-government because it has been able to produce the social stability woven from the bottom up rather than imposed from the top down. The key, as explained by Öcalan (2011b, 34), lies in freeing the Kurdish movement from even ‘*thinking* in hierarchical structures.’

From this basis of Bookchin’s critique of hierarchy, the decisive shifts made by Öcalan in the reorientation of the Kurdish movement away from nationalism, the state, and tribalism, become readily understandable. Nationalism is exposed by Öcalan as ‘serving’, amongst other things, the ‘colonialist divide-and-rule strategy,’ regional fragmentation, and the maintenance of a specific ruling class (Öcalan 2011b, 18, 73). For Öcalan, the solution was not a denial of ethnicity, the social significance of place, nor state-secession on the grounds of an ethnic or civic nationalism, but democracy, grounded in a wider, confederalist notion of space. The ‘essential objective’ of the movement became the democratisation of the Turkish Republic as ‘a voluntary association’, in which all minorities are to be recognised as free and equal citizens (Öcalan 2011b, 18, 79–80, 91, 150) .

This notion has clear implications not only for the geopolitics of Syria and Turkey but for the Middle-East.

The Spatial Dimensions of Political Community and Democratic Confederation

A key influence in Democratic Confederalism has been the influence of classical social life. Models of direct democracy and the ethical substance of Hellenic life have provided both Bookchin and Öcalan with a fertile contrast to the geopolitical imagination of statism and capitalist modernity. A key example of these values is Aristotle's concept of 'human scale' actively taken up by Bookchin and evident within the organisational frame of democratic confederalism regarding its insistence on creating assemblies at the local level and coordinating them horizontally through confederations (Biehl 2011b). The Programme of 2000 affirmed this shift (Özcan 2005, 117–118) – a clear move towards what Bookchin would have called 'fully integrated communities' (Bookchin 1989, 119–124) or what Kropotkin called the '*communitas communitatum*' (the union of the communities into community). For both Bookchin and Öcalan, the re-organisation of community along direct-democratic lines revolves around the creation of *ethical space* – a space of face-to-face communities, in which people remain on familiar terms and responsible for one another's livelihoods through deliberation and administration functions. As Aristotle (2001) made abundantly clear in his ethical and political works, such a notion of the political community (*polis*) was a far cry from the institutional nexus of the centralised nation-state of modern times. As described by Macintyre, the Hellenic democratic polis reflected a social 'context' in which 'moral judgments were understood as governed by impersonal standards justified by a shared conception of the human good' (Macintyre 2007 [1981], ix) and pave the way for a moral economy shaped by the needs of the community rather than a market economy shaped by commodification.

Aristotle's remarks in the *Politics* on the advantages of democratic ethical spaces run directly through Bookchin and Öcalan, something central to democratic confederalism. Of particular importance is how the humanly scaled public space of the community is to lead to the virtue of the 'multitude,' a reciprocity of good character in which social members are assured that 'their character is as good as his [sic]' (Aristotle 2001, bk. 3). This mutuality is a product not merely of consensus or popularity but produced by the rhetorical reasoning, heated debate and relational characteristics of the Athenian *polis*. Through election by lottery and through assembly debate in particular the social body becomes distinct as an agent of deliberative reasoning, not the highly manipulated 'preferences' or ephemeral 'opinions' that inform representative government. Furthermore, rotational powers,

delegation rather than representation, and the election of executive and administrative positions mitigates moneyed special interests and corruption. The importance of delegation, in the form of representatives that are immediately recallable and serve only administrative functions, has been a key feature of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) that Öcalan has described as a ‘project for the democratic organisation of society’ (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 27). All policy-making decisions are reserved for the local community at the neighbourhood and town levels and the DTK meets as a General Assembly with 40% elected officials and the remaining from grassroots organisations elected in public general meetings from their locales (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 33). This coincides with Bookchin’s outline of confederated communities whose delegates are responsible to their assemblies for coordination and administration. What results from this local control is described as an ‘authentic mutualism’ based on ‘shared resources, production and policy making’ (Bookchin 2015, 74–75) that are then linked together in this ‘community of communities’ or ‘confederation’ (Bookchin 2015, 88–89). In this way, communalism is a dialectic of place and space: a synthesis of localised places (such as neighbourhood assemblies) necessary for human scale, integrated into a wider network (confederation) of delegated power, functioning as a spatial totality. Most notably, whereas this is discussed only as experimental and theoretical in Bookchin’s communalism (see Bookchin 1989, 95–126), it has now been concretely developed within the practices of the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

Communalism’s vision of a revolutionised municipality, taken up in such diverse ways throughout Kurdistan, is grounded in a belief in the value of democratic amateurism as a superior means of social organisation than bureaucratic specialisation. This accords to Bookchin’s favour of the polis in which the citizen could play their part in *all* of its many activities in accordance with *arête*: wholeness of life or the ‘all-round excellent and an all-round activity’ of a person (Kittio in Bookchin 1971, 39). While the capacity for civic life in the *polis* is now too distant to be a regulative ethic, Bookchin believed that it could be reinvigorated through a distinct form of social education, a rupture in thought away from hierarchy, to one in which all individuals were made capable of self-management and the mutual recognition of this capacity with, and between, all social members (Bookchin 1987, 250–251). As Bookchin affirmed, ‘Every revolutionary project is, above all, an *educational* one’ (Bookchin 1989, 197). Such revolutionary change requires altering social ‘interactions’ by formulating a ‘general interest’ that outweighs the particularised interests of hierarchy, class, gender, ethnic backgrounds, and the state (Bookchin 1989, 191). Bookchin links this active-civic mindset to *Paideia*, the character-building process of socially based education for the formation of personality, responsibility, and capacity of the individual. Whereas patriotism connotes an obedient citizen, *Paideia* builds a sense of

commitment through connection to community on a reciprocal basis of self-formation. In this sense, *Paideia* is the educative form for creating a rational and active citizenship for a participatory democracy like democratic confederalism (and a key means for democratising traditional social bonds discussed previously) (Bookchin 2015, 77).

Öcalan's shares this emphasis on education as the lodestone of ethical space. For example, his reliance on the Aristotelian notion that 'education of mind without the heart is no education at all' and 'virtue-ethics' in the pursuit of truth, firmness and flexibility, innovation, analysis and sagacity, in the *Education Programme* and *Traits of the Party Militant* (Özcan 2005, 164 ff., 171–172) bare close resemblance to Bookchin's emphasis on *Paideia*. More deeply however, this emphasis on education is related to the rejection of 'mentalities and relations of subservience' for it is only through such civic awareness that democratic confederalism can be actively supported (Öcalan 2011b, x–xi). Accordingly, 13 academies have developed from Amed and Wan, to Izmir and Merson, some focusing on general education, others for women, others still on religion (i.e. Alevis and Islam) (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 170). Studies across history, globalisation, and the state, are combined with intense self-criticism on overcoming Eurocentrism and the colonial mindset, of uncovering local and Middle Eastern knowledge, and speculating on the question of what type of society should be built (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 172–181). Reclaiming the cultural basis of education rooted in language has been central to this part of the movement that has recognised that a language that is not allowed to be taught cannot develop. In the Programme of 1995 (1995, 75–76), the establishment of national institutions for education and culture were tabled and since then many educational institutions supportive of local culture have developed. For example, the Mesopotamian Culture Centre seeks to protect the diversity of Kurdish culture, language, dance, and song, and actively supports Arab, Assyrian, Turkmens, and Armenian languages and the cultural diversity of other minorities.

This emphasis on civic education, diversity, and protection of languages has been at odds with the assimilationist policy of Turkey that has repressed the expression of Kurdish cultural identity (see Enzinna 2015; Öcalan 2011b, 10). Against this denial of identity, the significance of *Paideia* is more than capacity building of the individual for self-management, as crucial as this is, but a necessity for the longevity and robustness of the movement itself. As stated by Jongerden and Akkaya (2011), democratic autonomy and confederalism is not a mere formal, legal arrangement but premised on the competences and practices of the people themselves. Öcalan has been keenly aware of the necessity for supporting such educative processes as a form of *phronesis* for the success of democratic autonomy as a whole. As Öcalan describes it, the goal of education is 'to enable the people willingly to accept even difficult duties' (2011b, 124), part of which means bearing through

geopolitical conflict, whether of ISIS or Turkish forces. The crisis period of mass arrests, exile and executions throughout Turkey – that have only intensified since the general election of June 2015, the Ankara peace bombings, repression of Academics for peace, and most recently following the failed 2016 coup – has revealed the strategic importance of this educative process. As explained by Ergil, '[f]or the first time a Kurdish movement has come from below. And the difficulty of its repression stems from this. Ordinary people are joining a 'cause' that transcends themselves' (cited in Özcan 2005, 194). For Bookchin, it was crucial that a municipal movement foster such a 'new psychological ambience' that he described as 'a sense of civil loyalty and responsibility that would make each citizen feel committed to the success of a moral economy' (Bookchin 1987, 275).

The possibility of institutionalising a 'common interest' and building a capacity for popular amateurism through educative means is a unique aspect of Bookchin's communalism. Not only does it promote self management as seen above, it also aims to arrive at a liberated society through the creative potentials within individuals and communities in which transclass phenomena such as women's liberation and moral economism are but two examples of a reinvigorated democratic public sphere in Kurdistan. Turning to the first example, building upon Bookchin's communalism and the radical feminist movement, Öcalan shares the view that along with domination of the young by the old, the most originary historical manifestation of the logic of hierarchy begins with patriarchal domination. Women's liberation is deemed even 'more significant' than that of classes or nations to revolution – 'The fight against statist and hierarchical structures,' Öcalan remarks, 'means creating such structures that are not state-oriented but lead to a democratic and ecological society where the sexes will be free' (Öcalan 2010). The political experiences of the Kurds in recent years have proven to be most opportune for the creation of such liberatory structures. One example, made much of by Western media, has been how the Kurdish cantons have organised military resistance to ISIS through all-female militias (O'Connor 2015). But such radical participation also occurs throughout the autonomous movement most formally in the gender rule of organisation that ensures 40% gender representation and the co-chairing of village-meetings as mandatory (Öcalan 2011b, 40–47; Ross 2015). There is also the emphasis placed on women's cooperatives for participation, skill-development, work and education, within specific academies (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 111–119).

The other key to a reinvigorated democratic public sphere refers to Bookchin's idea of the 'moral economy' that contrasts sharply with the capitalist market. The moral economy refers to a 'productive community' in which producers are 'networked and interlocked... in a responsible support system,' something in sharp contrast to the competitive market governed by the chaos of self-interest. Exchange is not merely equitable but

something that is actively *supportive* of each social member. As Bookchin explains, '[l]ike all real communities, they form a family that provides for the welfare of its participants as a collective responsibility, not simply a personal responsibility' (Bookchin 1988, 91). Developing this further in his theory of communalism, Bookchin posits that property would be municipalised in ways that he describes as a usufruct system¹¹ based on one's needs as citizens of a community rather than a nationalised or collectivised economy. Decisions on how resources are acquired, produced, allocated and distributed, are placed in the 'custody of the community,' that is, it is the free assemblies of the communities themselves that decide (Bookchin 2015, 91). Of course, this was premised for Bookchin (2015, 184–185) on the necessity of achieving 'postscarcity' as a precondition for a communalist society to emerge – something that can emerge *only* if humanity is 'free to reject the bourgeois notion of abundance and make this abundance available to all' (Bookchin 1989, 170). Öcalan, in his own nomenclature, refers to such moral economy through the 'just distribution of resources and the satisfaction of natural needs' (Öcalan 2011b, 43). The economic systems that have developed throughout Kurdistan, especially the communes, cooperatives and villages, are frequently described through phrases like 'mutual aid' or 'self-management' as verbs for the development of the collectivity (TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 84, 89, 131). These are described by their participants as forms of '[p]opular self-organisation of the economy [that have] the goal of laying the groundwork for a comprehensive change in prevailing social relations'(TATORT Kurdistan 2013, 92). The connection to the importance of *Paideia* for such self-organisation is self-evident. What is less evident is that such projects have a strong orientation towards breaking with all forms of dependency – inclusive of microfinancing and state-based programs that are hierarchical – to instead emphasise subsistence and cooperation in which the self-determination (particularly of women and their families) is made through their active participation (TATORT Kurdistan, 124). Nonetheless, strong geopolitical challenges remain in place, particularly through the closure of Turkey's borders and the geographic isolation of the Kurdish cantons in Syria. The spatial and economic organisation of the democratic confederation thus remains somewhat fragmented, united by a concept of collective struggle and ethical space but riven by the geopolitical obstacles of the Syrian Civil War.

The Future of Kurdish Communalism: Tensions, Challenges, Opportunities

One of the greatest political challenges of the struggle for democratic confederalism lies within the political geography of the movement and relations to its neighbours. The consolidation and expansion of the movement will bring it beyond the familiar horizons of the cantons, leading

inevitably to the question of how to extend democratic autonomy to non-Kurdish cultural communities that do not necessarily share enthusiasm for the secularism, women's liberation and non-statist forms of political administration of this 'new' Republic (Öcalan 2011b, 30, 152). For example, the opening up of new administrative areas as a result of recent military victories, such as Sinjar province, bring with them the prospect of integration into a wider democratic confederation and the winding back of traditional hierarchies that would deter persecuted ethnic and social groups from full democratic participation. On the other hand, the subsequent loss of Afrin shows how these gains can be violently reversed. The political geography of the Middle East, as elsewhere, has been prefigured on religious and nationalist hierarchies that pervade the state, the village and the patriarchal family. One of the greatest dangers to the democratic confederalist movement, therefore, is the prospect of a dualistic mentality emerging out of a nationalistic privileging of Kurdish cultural identity, a development already foreshadowed in the governing body of Kurdish Iraq (see Enzinna 2015). In other words, a nationalistic focus upon Kurdish identity could culminate in a political division between Kurdish and non-Kurdish areas that may even be reflected in future military and administrative distinctions. Such distinctions would quickly lead to new forms of hierarchy and statism rather than embracing the potentials of ethical space envisioned by democratic confederalism.

This geopolitical conflict of ideologies is already at a juncture. On the one hand, the pursuit of military *imposition* of democratic communities – including the forced municipalisation of private property, the dissolution of local hierarchies and even possibly a mandatory integration into a Kurdish federation – and on the other, the pursuit of a necessary level of respect for local and traditional communal autonomy, in which the inclusion of new areas within a democratic confederation strictly confined to voluntary agreements between cantons. The former may undermine the integrity of the democratic confederalist project; the latter would risk fracturing the movement and regional infighting. A most pressing factor that may drive this dialectic into a more militaristic resolution is the presence of undercover ISIS terrorists and sympathisers in many villages and townships newly occupied by the Kurdish militias (see Collard 2014; Enzinna 2015). Similarly, in Afrin, the most pressing concern is the looting, forced displacement, and resettlement of this township. The tension, then, between a forced integration into a wider confederal structure and a voluntarist emphasis upon communal 'autonomy' is of enormous significance for Kurdish communalism, and forms a substantial bridge between communalist theory and praxis. We raise these as speculative points for which the movement must necessarily deal, rather than as some prognosticative tool for how these will be resolved.

It is noteworthy that for Bookchin, voluntarism and local autonomy are couched in basically negative terms: as reactionary sequelae of lingering parochialisms that would imperil the development of a broader democratic confederation. ‘The danger that democratised municipalities in a decentralised society would result in economic and cultural parochialism,’ he observes, ‘is very real, and it can only be precluded by a vigorous confederation of municipalities based on their material interdependence’ (Bookchin 2015, 137). Similarly, for Bookchin, anything less than the municipalisation of property – including direct municipal control over economic policies – would favour the nationalisation, collectivisation or privatisation of property, thus reinforcing either the material foundations of a nation-state or of a competitive market economy (Bookchin 2015, 137; see also Price 2012, 225–226). This might imply the need for Kurdish militias to forcefully municipalise the economies of newly-won provinces, should they meet with any local resistance in forms of established hierarchies. Indeed, overcoming the gross inequalities found in the Middle East in which several oil monarchies control 70% of wealth has recently been argued to be a lynchpin to defeat ISIS and terrorism in general (Picketty 2015). And despite Bookchin’s uncertain stance on whether the *coercion* of non-democratic, autonomous, or avowedly hostile polities into a municipal confederation is ethically permissible, his late writings leave no doubt about the need to seize power to create new institutions. As he wrote, ‘power cannot be abolished: it is always a feature of social and political life. Power that is not in the hands of the masses must inevitably fall into the hands of their oppressors’ (Bookchin 2015, 143). These insights indicate the need to take seriously Bookchin’s stress upon *Paideia*, or education for civic virtue, as the ideal ethical *process* of transforming hierarchical and autarchic municipalities into non-hierarchical and confederated ones.

In spite of these aforementioned challenges, Kurdish communalism has begun to find its own innovative solutions. From praxis has emerged significant qualifications upon theory. We offer one example regarding the integration of new communities or townships into a democratic confederation that has so-far emphasised the importance of respecting traditional, local attitudes which might favour decentralisation and local autonomy, rather than the coercive overcoming of these potentially incompatible political geographies. Öcalan has stressed that military force should be employed only upon the basis of the self-defence of democratic civil society against the incursions of surrounding states, but not in the pursuit of broader aspirations of regional hegemony. As he affirms, ‘They will become cross-border confederations’ if or when these ‘societies concerned so desire’ (Öcalan 2011a, 32). For Öcalan, democratic confederalism lives and dies by virtue of its demonstration or ‘proof’ of its capacity for solving the most pressing civilisational problems, such as inequality, suffering, and domination (Öcalan 2011a, 32). This helps to clarify why, for Öcalan and the Kurdish Freedom Movement, traditions of local autonomy and anti-statism are viewed as a vital cultural reservoir in building popular *support* for a wider democratic federation, rather than as limitations to be

swept away coercively (see Biehl 2011a). What is viewed as decisive is not the potential ‘backwardness’ of the precapitalist villages or autonomous townships, but rather the *potentialities* of their long-lived traditions of resistance to the hierarchical and centralising structure of nationalism and statism. In this respect, the Kurdish Freedom Movement takes a long-term view on the integration of communities into a wider, federated structure of power on a voluntary basis – with a view to the gaining of *cultural* support for *voluntary* communalist transformations – rather than pursuing the short-term gains of a coercive subjugation of existing power structures. In these ways, the KFM is distinguished by its prefigurative sociality – its institutions and practices are to be established cooperatively so that in the course of actually achieving its aims, its activities realise the standards or ‘way of being’ that they are contributing towards (see Macintyre 2007 [1981], 175). This Kurdish praxis is a vital addendum to Bookchin’s thought that should continue to qualify communalist political theory in the future.

In this context, the promise of a Kurdish ‘transconstitutionalism’ are greatest (see Neves 2013). Transconstitutionalism could instil formalised relations under core principles and basic content accorded to *all* members of the confederation as the *minimum requirements* for freedom to emerge. This is a view that Öcalan (2011b, 78, 156–157) seems to tend towards, coupling human rights, social participation and material necessities, as the minimum content of democratic confederalism. There is evidence of such developments in the *Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan* and the formation of the KCK that aim to merge no less than three different systems of law: EU, Kurdish and the state law of each region. This is not some ‘superlegal code’ over local forms of democratic governance therefore, but a question of social organisation with local differentiations that are to be democratically debated through respectful dialogue within the confederated polities. This has been reflected in aspects of *The Social Contract of the Cantons of Rojava* (2015) or just *The Social Contract* (2014, 132–155), as a form of decentralised federalism that builds upon the *de jure* Syrian Constitution to hold it to account as a ‘free, sovereign and democratic state.’ For Öcalan (2011b, 60–61), there is no reason why people of different gender, faith, or origin, could not be citizens under one ‘common administrative roof.’ Should the Kurdish freedom movement prove successful militarily and socially, it could achieve an ‘ecological community [that] would municipalise its economy and join with other municipalities in integrating its resources into a regional confederal system’ (Bookchin 1989, 4–195). But discussing the potentials and problems of transconstitutionalism leads beyond the boundaries of Bookchin’s thought and into another suite of questions.

Conclusion

Öcalan’s engagement with Bookchin’s writings during his solitary imprisonment in Turkey, as well as his position of influence within the Kurdish Freedom

Movement, have facilitated a radical and innovative model of political praxis that offers a profound, alternate future for the Middle East. The courage, human solidarity and universalistic principle of hope emanating from the emerging democratic confederation of Kurdistan demonstrate that this is no longer a purely theoretical question, but a lived practice within a unique constellation of political geography. This is perhaps the greatest achievement of the relation between Bookchin's and Öcalan's visions of communalism and democratic confederalism. In moving beyond the influential, yet flawed, 20th century leftist ideologies of anarchism and Marxism, both have sought out the historical and social potentialities for a democratic civilisation, free from the enduring burdens of domination and hierarchy and their destructive pathologies. Moreover, democratic confederalism's project for the creation of ethical spaces in which *paidaea* and human scale can be practised and realised, as distinct from the ideology of state sovereignty and its fixation upon the delimitation of geographic place, has galvanised a wider bastion of international support for the Kurdish Freedom Movement that looks beyond the traditional support networks of tribalism, ethnicity, or nationalism. Despite the tensions between localised autonomy and confederal governance, the potentials of transconstitutionalism raise the prospect of bringing into being a secular, democratic, humanist and ecological constellation of political communities from within the unique political geography and social nexus of Kurdish history.

Notes

1. By 'Kurdish Freedom Movement' we refer principally to the vision of 'Rojava'. At the time of writing, this was known formally as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria an area comprising 3 'cantons' in Northern Syria which, gained de-facto autonomy in 2012 during the ongoing Syrian Civil War conflict and formally declared themselves as autonomous in 2014. As of 6 September 2018 these liberated areas are now referred to as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria'. This region is supported by the People's and women's defense units, also known (respectively) as the YPG and YPJ militias of the Syrian Kurds, and to some extent, the Kurds of Turkey as well, despite increasingly dire state repression. This movement, while not without sympathisers in the Kurdish areas of Iraq and Iran, is ideologically distinct from forms of political power concentrated in Iraqi Kurdistan.
2. Here, we refer to geopolitical intrigues and geopolitical realities in a critical sense. We believe it is important to approach any account that would seek to sweep Kurdish civil society under the rug of the theodicy of the World-Spirit with a mood of suspicion, and direct our understanding of geopolitics against the influence of hegemonic narratives in conventional history, emphasising, above all else, the dynamism of Kurdish civil society and its resistance to conventional strictures of hierarchical power. Above all, we understand geopolitics as a dialectical and porous field of study that captures the ambivalent nature of political power and its mediation through various strata of civil society, situated within a concrete place and space.
3. Other names include 'libertarian municipalism', and 'democratic autonomy.' We adopt democratic confederalism as the umbrella term for the forms of self-management and

direct democracy in the Kurdish Freedom Movement. We are indebted to the work of TATORT for their reports on these autonomous projects (2013).

4. Private correspondence between Bookchin and Öcalan, dated 11 April 2004 and 5 May 2004, courtesy of Debbie Bookchin. Representatives of Öcalan contacted Bookchin in April 2004 to organise a dialogue which involved a number of written correspondence.
5. Our emphasis is on tracing the influence of Bookchin on Öcalan's published political theory and working through the tensions that manifest in this exchange. We discuss examples of the actual practices of democratic confederalism in Kurdistan for illustrative purposes only, a full analysis of which would require systemic, book-length treatment. For a more detailed account of the political practices in Kurdistan as related to democratic confederalism see esp. TATORT (2013).
6. This is the umbrella and grassroots organisation that combines all forms of communities, councils, and collectives implementing democratic confederalism covering the Kurds of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.
7. TATORT is a German Kurdish organisation concerned with preserving the rights and historical lineage of the Kurds, particularly through research and activist work. As of the time of writing, the organisation maintains a website at the following link: <http://tatortkurdistan.blogspot.de/> .
8. Marx's 1881 drafts and 1879 notes on Sewell and Kovalevsky as discussed by Anderson (2010, 233ff).
9. The irreducible minimum refers to the needs material needs of the individual as satisfied by the community (Bookchin 1989, 64).
10. Hieratic society refers to early societies in which hieroglyphs were the dominant form of written communication and which were characterised by systems of power around such knowledge and its control by a priestly elite. These systems typically adhered to structure of privilege affirmed by the early religious tradition that served to negate freedoms of the lower strata.
11. In jurisprudence, a limited real right to use or enjoy a thing possessed directly and without altering it.

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Notes on contributors

Damian Gerber is an independent academic. Alongside articles published in *Antipode* and *Thesis Eleven*, his book *The Distortion of Nature's Image: Reification, the Ecological Crisis and the Recovery of a Dialectical Naturalism* will be published in 2019 with SUNY: damian.gerber@gmx.com

Shannon Brincat is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. His most recent manuscript, *The Spiral World*, has traced dialectical thinking in the Axial Age. He has been the editor of a number of collections, most recently *From International Relations to World Civilizations: The contributions of Robert W. Cox* and *Dialectics and World Politics*: sbrincat@usc.edu.au

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