

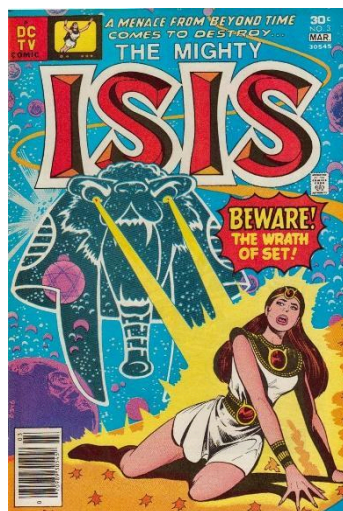
The "Kurdish Question": ISIS, USA, etc.

Il Lato Cattivo

Link: <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/il-lato-cattivo-the-kurdish-question> &
<https://cominsitu.wordpress.com/2014/11/18/the-kurdish-question-isis-usa-etc/#more-725>

Original em italiano:
<http://illatocattivo.blogspot.com/2014/10/questione-curda-stato-islamico-usa-e.html>

[We publish below a translation of ““Questione curda’, Stato Islamico, USA e dintorni” by the Italian collective Il Lato Cattivo. Though there are limitations to the text (for example it largely ignores the Arab Spring) we think it provides an insightful analysis of recent geopolitical conflict in the Middle East. Thanks to Nicole, Marco, Matthew, and the authors for help with the translation.]

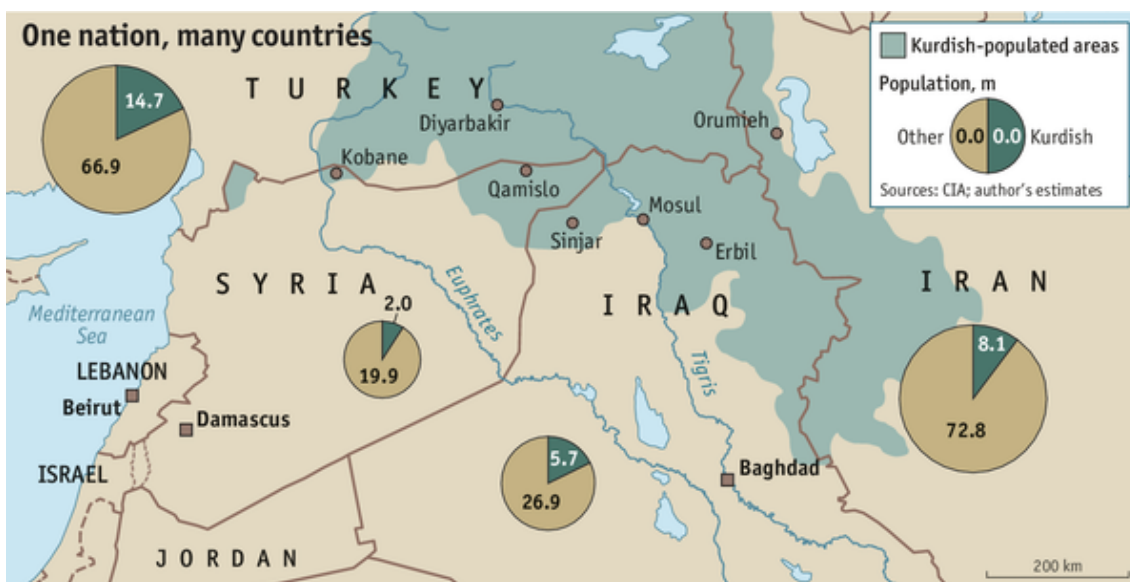


The mighty Isis comic cover: beware the wrath of set

The following text was originally prepared for a public meeting — held in Bologna at the beginning of September 2014 — with Daniele Pepino, author of *Kurdistan. In the Eye of the Cyclone* (in “Nunatak” no. 35, summer 2014). Unable to attend the meeting, we subsequently altered the initial draft; what results can be read either as a series of marginal notes on that article, or as a stand-alone text.

Kurdistan. In the Eye of the Cyclone has the merit of presenting a clear picture of the political forces that act in the Kurdish region; but the article gives rise to a series of questions that we would like to pick up. Beyond a simple valorisation of the intervention of the PKK militias in support of the Yazidi, threatened by the Islamic State (IS), in northern Iraq, the author mobilizes a veritable apologia for this organization and its alleged “libertarian” turn (the so-called democratic confederalism). Moreover, the absence of a description of the social and class forces of which the various organizations are an expression, presents their work as the product of simple subjective choices made by indeterminate individuals. Finally, a number of issues, from the financing of the PKK to the framework of alliances that goes into defining the Middle East, are too perfunctorily dealt with. Of course, one would need to write several books in order to comprehensively address all these points; the following notes are accordingly not any less sketchy. But we can in this way examine in a different light both the recent evolution of the “Kurdish question”, as well as the conflicts that are going on once again in the Middle East. If this can be of any use for us, or for others, it lies in the fact of not posing the question of *autonomy* (whatever that means), but that of *communism*.

THE KURDISH QUESTION: A HISTORICAL DIGRESSION



Source: *The Economist*

The emergence of a specific “Kurdish question”, beginning at the end of the First World War, is inscribed in the chaotic process of the formation of nation-states in the Near and Middle East. Everywhere, the formation of a modern nation-state requires

that the borders of an administrative state match those of a *single* national population. Multinational states are generally problematic or exceptional situations. The nation-state, i.e. the state of capital, is mono-national, because the relationship between the individual and the state cannot tolerate loyalty to intermediate communities—state and nation must coincide. This process is nothing “natural”, it is a process of homogenization that includes every kind of *bricolage*, and can avail itself of forms of soft assimilation as well as the most brutal ethnic cleansing. If it is true that for Western Europe the population *puzzle* has been a less important obstacle than in the Balkans or the Middle East, the reason lies not so much in the greater or lesser complexity or insolubility of the puzzle itself, but in the fact that, in Western Europe the formation of nation-states was realized with the momentum of an endogenous capitalist development, made possible by a precise sequence of previous modes of production, while in the Balkans and the Middle East it followed from a development of capitalism that originated elsewhere, and the inter-capitalist rivalries that emerged as a result. The fragmentation of the Ottoman Empire, or rather its division between the victorious war powers Britain and France, led to the foundation on the one hand of Iraq and Syria under the respective mandates, and on the other that of Turkey, with the rise of the nationalist movement of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). The latter found himself immediately confronted with the multinational character of the future Turkish state (Turks, Kurds and Greeks of Anatolia), although the situation had already been “simplified” by the extermination of the Armenians in 1915–16 at the hands of the “Young Turks” (1.2 million deaths). As for the Kurds, the Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920) had sanctioned the possibility of creating a small independent Kurdistan, provided that this corresponded to the collective will of the Kurdish people and that an Armenian state was also built from some provinces of eastern Anatolia. These conditions were rejected by tribal leaders and sheikhs (landowners), because the territory of the proposed Kurdish state was small relative to the region actually occupied by the Kurdish population, a territory that would have been further reduced by the emergence of an Armenian state. An embryonic Kurdish nationalism then tried to join the Kemalists whose response after consolidating their own position was to crush Kurdish dissent along with the Marxist element at Koçgiri (1921), before imposing through the treaty of Lausanne (1923) a revision of the Sèvres agreements of three years earlier, finally fixing today’s Turkish borders and in doing so leaving Southern Kurdistan to the British Mandate.

The history of the Kurdish movement is divided into two major periods: the first, from 1919 to 1990, with a sharp break in 1946 (Republic of Mahabad), is the period of nationalism as such; the second, from 1990 to the present day, is what we, following Hamit Bozarslan, shall call the “crisis of nationalism”. Albeit more weakly than the rest of the Middle East, these large historical turns follow the succession, within the Kurdish space, of three different fractions of the bourgeoisie at the head of the society: the landed bourgeoisie, the intellectual petty bourgeoisie and the oil bourgeoisie. The first period — marked by the hegemony of the landed bourgeoisie — was characterized by a series of violent riots. In Iranian Kurdistan the tribal confederation of Shikak — first supported and then opposed by the Kemalists — led the uprising from 1919 to 1930. In Iraq, Sheikh Mahmoud Barzandji — the self-proclaimed King of Kurdistan — was the first to take the head of the movement, followed by the Barzani family. In Turkey, there were 18 uprisings in less than fifteen years (1927–1930 in Ararat, 1936–1938 in Dersim). The Syrian Kurds took part in most of these revolts. The last important event of the period was the proclamation, on January 22, 1946, of an autonomous republic in Iran, in the space opened by the Soviet occupation of part of the country. Unable to mobilize the whole of the Iranian Kurds (even though many Kurds of Turkey and Iraq did rush to its defence), torn by inter-tribal conflicts, the Republic of Mahabad was dissolved on December 15, 1946 by the Iranian army, with the execution of its President Muhammed. The *peshmerga* of Mustafa Barzani’s KDP, which had rushed from Iraq in support of the Republic, found refuge in the USSR, where it remained until 1958.

These uprisings were accused everywhere of conspiring with foreign powers, often across borders, and were crushed in concert by the countries involved:

None of them [the nascent national bourgeoisies of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq] had the slightest hesitation to fully carry out their dirty work. The first to distinguish itself by its fierce repression of the Kurds was the “progressive” Turkish bourgeoisie led by Kemal Ataturk, about whom the Third International had once perhaps [sic !] held fond illusions. [...] Through pacification campaigns in which the Turkish government (especially in ‘25) had the effective help of France, it reduced the Kurds to “Mountain Turks” and Kurdistan to the eastern region of Turkey. For its part, the Arab-Iraqi bourgeoisie, which had implemented and continues to implement the forced Arabization of the Kurdish oil-rich area of Kirkuk, first with Britain’s help (‘43–’45) then later with the military support if nothing

else of the USSR ('61-'75), crushed a guerrilla war of ample proportions. The Iranian bourgeoisie, which, even with the fake revolutionary Dr. Mossadeq never recognized the existence of a Kurdish national question in Iran, was distinguished not only by an uninterrupted repression and in some places implementation of a "final solution" against Iranian Kurdistan, but also through an active partnership in the repression of the uprisings of the Turkish Kurds (in 1930), as well as the filthy cynicism with which, together with the CIA and Kissinger, it acted in "support" of Iraqi Kurds in '75. The Syrian bourgeoisie, finally, the most progressive of all ... (as Palestinians in the refugee camps of Damascus know), despite not having a real internal "Kurdish danger", nevertheless expelled 140,000 poor Kurdish peasants from their original territory, replacing them with an Arab population, and against the Kurds has routinely used administrative arbitrariness, police raids, retaliatory layoffs and every other invention of ... progress¹.

The period from 1946 to '58 is known as "the era of silence." Except for a few isolated local riots and the electoral success of the local PDK (80% of votes) in Mossadeq's Iran, the Kurdish movement seemed knocked out. Nevertheless, the strength of repression alone is not sufficient to explain why. In fact, the 1950s marked the beginning of a mass exodus from the countryside, particularly in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan, where the cities of Diyarbakir, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah crossed the threshold of 100,000 inhabitants. Through the intensification of transport networks and education in Turkish Kurdistan — in turn related to the development of Turkish industry — there emerged a petty bourgeoisie composed mainly of teachers and members of the liberal professions, but also of self-taught craftsmen. Many young people from poor backgrounds were able to go to university. This small educated middle class — formed in western Turkey, in Istanbul and Ankara, the only university cities of the country in the '50s — would reactivate Kurdish nationalism in the 60s and 70s — from the first coup d'état in Turkey (1960) onwards — giving the movement a more distinctly national-popular character:

¹ *With the Proletariat and Revolutionary Workers of Kurdistan*, Supplement to "Quaderni marxisti," no. 3, 1984.

The patriots of the left reached to mobilize the masses. Their success was tied to their ability to 'take advantage of certain economic difficulties' and to highlight certain inequalities (the underdevelopment of the East, the inadequacy of the funds allocated by the five-year plans). It was also due to their ability to make common cause with the people affected by the expropriation of peasant lands for the benefit of the oil industry in the region of Batman. They also rose in defense of the workers and peasants of this region who demanded to be employed in extracting oil. They became advocates of landless peasants and the mostly rural populations, victims of violence of the special units of the army².

This was the so-called "Generation of '49".

The Turkish coup of March 12, 1971, provoked a violent reaction, also motivated by the economic situation. These were "the years of ungovernability" which saw a succession of governments unable to take control of the situation, until the new military coup of 1980. In this phase, the illegal Kurdish organizations multiplied. Their social composition was nearly the same as the immediately preceding period: students and professionals. However, the average age of the participants was lower and the political affiliation veered towards Marxism-Leninism, then much in vogue among European intellectuals. Following the general amnesty of April 26, 1974, the Kurds arrested for political offenses following the coup of '71, were released and those who had fled abroad were able to return. Formations then arose such as the PSKT (Socialist Party of Turkish Kurdistan, which aims at a Autonomous Kurdistan within the framework of a socialist Turkey) and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, separatist). Kurdish organizations born in this period would clash harshly with one another and none except the PKK and (to a lesser extent) the PSKT, would survive yet another coup d'état in 1980.

Initially, the PKK was little more than a cult of very young students, informed by the faintest Marxism and above all by the personality of Abdullah Öcalan (one of the "Generation of '49"). The class character that the organization's name implied remained purely verbal, or limited to an aspiration. A proto-party structure already existed from 1974, but the party was formed officially only in 1978. It claimed to seek the liberation

² Özcan Yilmaz, *La formation de la nation kurde en Turquie*, PUF, Paris, 2013, p. 114.

of Kurdistan from a Turkish colonialism “supported by imperialism externally and by feudal *compradors* from within.” Traditional chiefs and “feudal” Kurds (i.e. the landed bourgeoisie) were designated as “the most important social reason Kurdish national development is prevented.”³ The PKK followed the pattern of the similarly oriented organizations (marxist-leninist, guevarist, third-worldist etc.) that for better or worse had proliferated in Latin America, Asia and Africa up to that point, but it arrived a little late on the scene, when their trajectory was already falling, particularly in the Near and Middle East: “The crushing defeat of the Arab armies in the face of Israel [is] undoubtedly the main event that finally [broke] the succession of successes of revolutionary Arab nationalism, and anti-imperialist unity, of which Nasser’s Egypt [state era] was the vanguard after the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956.”⁴ Although the significance of this delay would make itself felt in the long-term, it was not immediately obvious. Starting in 1978 the organization was strong enough to launch the “Revolutionary War against Feudalism.” At this stage its actions consist mainly of murder (attempted or successful) of tribal leaders, but did not exclude participation in municipal elections (the first supporter of the PKK was elected in 1979 in Batman). At the same time, the “revolutionary war” was also waged against rival organizations: clashes between PKK and KUK (National Saviors of Kurdistan) in the areas of Mardin and Hakkari were among the most bloody, with dozens and dozens of deaths. Following the coup of 1980, the majority of PKK members who failed to leave Turkey were arrested (official documents speak of about 1,800 arrests, but the military prison in Diyarbakir alone hosted approximately 5000 Kurds accused of participation in the PKK). Dozens of inmates die during the hunger strikes.

To all intents and purposes the reorganisation of the PKK abroad began in 1981, but from the point of view of the international situation, 1979 was the decisive year: Sadat of Egypt recognized Israel (Camp David), thus sanctioning the bankruptcy of pan-Arab socialism; the Iranian revolution, which began in factories and neighborhoods, brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power; the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan. In this gloomy landscape, in which the coherence of what could still pretend to be a relatively unified anti-imperialist front melted like snow in the sun (to the full profit of Islam), the Kurdish question evolved within the conflicts between the states that share the Kurdish space; from tensions between Syria and Turkey to the

³ See *Kurdistan Devriminin Yolu*, political manifesto of the organization.

⁴ Georges Corm, *Le Proche-Orient éclaté 1956-2010*, Gallimard, Paris 2010.

Iran-Iraq war. The ayatollahs responded without much subtlety to the demands for autonomy and anti-Islamic orientation of Iranian Kurds (45,000 deaths, according to some estimates); leading to the merger of the Iranian PDK⁵ and Komala in Iraq. On the other side of the border, the Iraqi Kurds — at the mercy of the arabisation of the Kirkuk region ordered by Saddam Hussein in order to “preserve the Arab nation” — accepted the support of Iran. Starting from 1988 (the last stages of the Iran-Iraq war), the Iraqi regime embarked on systematic extermination by means of chemical weapons (180,000 deaths). Anti-Kurdish persecution was condemned by Western powers without real sanctions until the First Gulf War. On another front, in 1979, the severance of diplomatic relations with Iraq, tensions with Turkey and the need to consolidate Alawite hegemony and marginalize the Shiites, pushed Hafez al-Assad⁶ to present himself as the protector of Kurds in the region. The leadership of the PKK, co-opted as part of this strategy, fled to Syria to escape the repression of the Turkish state during the same year. Recruitment was authorized by the regime and the PKK showed itself a valuable tool for control of Syrian Kurdistan. In Lebanon, where the civil war was just beginning (1975-1990), the PKK, thanks of course to the protection of Damascus, obtained bases in the Bekaa valley, where it founded its first military academy. In July 1983, to discourage Turkey from cooperating with Iraq, the Iraqi KDP signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the PKK, allowing it to organize guerrillas near the Turkish border. On August 15, 1984 the PKK, resumed the armed struggle by attacking two Turkish military posts. At this point the social base of the organization was changing:

The PKK guerrilla campaign quickly attracted the attention of young Kurds, who would swell its ranks. It recruited heavily in the countryside, but also in the Kurdish cities, as well as Kurdish workers and youth from the big Turkish cities, certain European countries, Syria and Libya. The PKK thus acquired a predominantly rural character⁷.

On this point it is also interesting to examine Paul White’s interview with Abdullah Öcalan, dating from 1992:

⁵ Iranian-Kurdish political organization (see below).

⁶ Member of the Alawite religious group, party secretary Baa’th Arab-Socialist (nationalist) and President of the Syria from 1971 to 2000; father of the current President Bashar al-Assad.

⁷ Özcan Yilmaz, op. cit., p. 144.

Öcalan: The people who work support the PKK, the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, the urban bourgeoisie. The patriotic poor and the middle class support the PKK.

White: But what is the most substantial group? You mentioned different social groups. I think the main group, the most significant are poor peasants, right?

Öcalan: Well, yes, they are the main supporters of the fight. Especially at this time, they are the ones who most strongly support the fight. Before 15 August [1984], before the 80s, when it all began, it was rather the young people of the city, intellectuals, the urban middle class⁸.

In 1985, the Turkish government began to systematically organize the counterinsurgency, starting with the creation of village militias or tribes who were armed against the PKK. These measures did not prevent the PKK from operating, from 1987 onwards, throughout the mountainous areas of Turkish Kurdistan. In 1987 the Turkish government declared a state of emergency in the Kurdish cities. The PKK responded, in spring 1989, with a series of appeals for mass action. The response of the “Masses” was favorable: in 1989, in Silopi, on the occasion of the funeral of a PKK guerrilla, the procession turned into a protest. A few months later, the event was repeated in nearby cities. In March 1990, in Nusayib, another funeral of a guerrilla led to revolt. The participants in this wave of unrest numbered in the thousands, and many were killed during the demonstrations. On March 20, 1990, tens of thousands of people gathered in protest against the repression by Nusayib police. At the end of 1990, none of the “South-East” was untouched by mass demonstrations. In 1991, the movement had extended to almost all Kurdish towns and many Turkish cities (Ankara, Istanbul, Adana, Izmir, Denizli). Throughout the period in question, in parallel with the riots in the streets, a real Kurdish diaspora spread across Europe; the main destinations being France, West Germany and Sweden.

Thus in the 1990s — despite the repression in Turkey and the exacerbation of the sub-national conflict between the PKK and the Iraqi Kurds (PDK) — the guerrillas grew beyond any reasonable expectation, on the basis of the claim of an independent Kurdish state. In 1995 a Kurdish parliament in exile was created (based in Europe), and

⁸ Paul White, *Primitive rebels or revolutionary modernizers? The Kurdish national movement in Turkey* (Zed Books, 2000), p. 156.

although the goal of creating a local government was not reached, the PKK did come to perform a variety of state functions such as taxation and administration of justice. The same period also saw the emergence of the “Kurdish legalists”, the expression of a middle class (62.5% have a high school diploma) divided between the guerrillas and a desire for dialogue with the government and Turkish “civil society”. The existence of a legalist current whose influence was not negligible (even if not directly conflicting with the guerrilla perspective), together with the negative outcome of the military offensive, which maintained the mobilization but did not lead to any significant “victories”, pushed the PKK to search for other roads (to be discussed at greater length below). But at the end of the ‘90s came the cold shower of the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan. After this event, the period between 1999 and 2005 was relatively calm. The prospect of Turkey’s integration into the European Union put the PKK in a delicate position: it, of course, had no interest in impeding the integration process, by virtue of the real or alleged advantages that the Kurds of Turkey would get in terms of recognition. The PKK then proclaimed a unilateral “cease-fire”, which also sought to avoid the execution of Öcalan. The “long truce” was a phase of relaxation for the Kurdish civilian population, but also of discontent for many PKK militants, and of internal conflicts in the organization, which were resolved by coercion. The Turkish government, however, did not relent in its military offensive, which in the long run could only lead to the resumption of armed actions by the PKK. After 2005 there was hardly any interruption in clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK. Some PKK actions also hit civilians (Diyarbakir, January 3, 2008: 5 killed, 68 wounded). The Turkish government’s pressure on the USA finally allowed Turkey to carry out military operations in Iraq, in order to eradicate the PKK bases in the Kandil mountains. On December 1, 2007 the first air attack took place; on February 22, 2008, it was the turn of ground troops. “Operation Sun” ended with the killing of 240 “terrorists”, but also of 28 Turkish soldiers. The United States then had second thoughts and withdrew its consent, which added to the battle honours of the PKK. In May 2009, Yasar Buyukanit — recently retired as Turkish Chief of Staff — told the media that Turkey would not be able to expel the PKK from its bases in the Kandil even if it sent in the entire Turkish army.

To date, the condition of the inhabitants of Turkish Kurdistan remains characterized, in most cases, by poverty: at the end of 1990 Turkish prime minister Ecevit promised an “onslaught of investment,” but such statements have remained largely a dead letter. Despite Turkey’s economic rise, the area inhabited by the Kurds is

still the poorest in the country: “We must emphasize that the disparity between the Kurdish regions of Turkey and the rest remains very great, although there has been some change. The conflict between the guerrillas of the PKK and the Turkish army, which destroyed the economic activity in the Kurdish countryside and farming in particular, has further aggravated the situation. [...] Currently, the population of the south-east (Turkish Kurdistan) has a poor population of between 85% and 90%, and the unemployment rate (18%) is far higher than that of the rest of the Turkey (11.8%). In 2006, the Kurdish regions have received only 8% of the funds allocated to stimulate investment. In June 2010, only 5% of the companies of the Association of Industrial and Turkish Businessmen (TUSIAD), which represents 65% of Turkish industrial production, were located in the Kurdish regions.”⁹ Internal migration has led a large number of Kurds to seek work in the great centers of western Turkey. Although definite information in this regard is unavailable, it is reasonable to assume that the wages of Kurdish workers are generally lower than those of Turkish workers. In recent years (in particular in 2010), especially on the occasion of clashes between the PKK and the Turkish army, there were anti-Kurdish pogroms in the big cities of Turkey, which is probably not unrelated — if our assumption is correct — to the pressure put on wages by the existence of this low-cost labor.

Beyond the borders of Turkey, in Iran, after the era of Khatami, who had raised great hopes (and many disappointments) about obtaining an autonomous status, the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, had already sparked riots in several cities in Iranian Kurdistan, accompanied by some armed actions of the PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, founded in 2003 by some former militants of Iran’s PDK). In 2008, the general strike declared in memory of a militant killed in 1989, aroused great participation in the main Kurdish cities; in 2009, there were massive protests against re-election of Ahmadinejad, and in 2010, four Kurdish activists were prosecuted and executed. The election in 2013 of the moderate Hassan Rohani has mitigated the radicalism of the Ahmadinejad era, both with respect to anti-Americanism on the geopolitical level, particularly deleterious for Iran’s economy, and with respect to the “iron fist” exercised against the Kurdish minority.

In Syria, Öcalan’s expulsion from the country in 1998, ordered by Hafez al-Assad, marked the end of the Syrian-Kurdish idyll, and the death of the same al-Assad (the elder) in 2000 made it irreversible. From this moment the discontent and

⁹ Özcan Yilmaz, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

the desire for “democratization” (as well as the pro-American sympathies) of Syrian Kurds would show itself on several occasions, until the events of 2011 and the outbreak of the civil war the following year, when the Kurdish opposition would maintain a rather backseat role (the reasons for which we will examine). In 2004, for example, during a football match between the local team of Qamichli (the largest Kurdish city in Syria) and Der-ez-Zor, police intervention after little more than a verbal altercation between Arab and Kurdish fans caused 7 deaths, prompting a wave of rioting that affected the cities of Qamichli, Afrin, Aleppo and Damascus; the rioters burned the images of al-Assad father and son, waving Kurdish *and American* flags shouting in unison: “Free Kurdistan.”

In Iraq, the glory days of the guerrilla autonomy of Mustafa Barzani’s KPD are farther away than ever: “[...] the Gulf War of 1991 radically changed the configuration of the Kurdish question. It resulted in the creation of a protected zone in which Iraqi Kurds could build institutions they manage themselves. [...] Finally, the war in Iraq in 2003, which dethroned Saddam Hussein, recomposed Iraq and the regional space, confirmed the Kurds of Iraq in their role as strategic allies of the United States. The Iraqi Kurds have been able to gain influence over Kurds of Turkey, Syria and Iran. The experience of the Kurds of Iraq also influences the Turkish authorities, who can no longer ignore the new political and economic position of the Iraqi Kurds with respect to their border.¹⁰” At the end of the 1991 war, the Iraqi government’s loss of control of its territory allowed the PKK, as well as supplies of weapons and ammunition, a large margin of maneuver in Iraq. But the current rise of the PDK of Masud Barzani (the ally both of Ankara, and of the USA), and with it that of a bourgeoisie tied to oil revenues, has made life very difficult for the PKK; not only because of the inter-Kurdish conflict that it has generated, but also through the periodic re-emergence of a “Liquidationist” fraction within the PKK (we will come back to this).

So much for the past. At present, the Kurdish question is back on the front pages of newspapers, especially since the infamous Islamic State (IS) has begun to gain ground. The international press celebrates the rescue intervention of the “Kurds” in favor of the Yazidis in northern Iraq. That the press failed to mention that the Kurds in question were the so-called “terrorists” of the PKK or PYD, and not Masud Barzani’s KDP peshmerga, which, instead, took to its heels, does not change the order of the

¹⁰ Sabri Cigerli et Didier Le Saout, *Ocalan et le PKK*, Maisonneuve Larose, Paris 2005, p. 385-386.

discourse, which is that of a banal anti-IS frontism. Can we take this discourse as our own? The answer is no. Let's see why.

CAPITAL RESTRUCTURING AND DE-NATIONALIZATION OF THE STATE

One can not understand the present turn of the Kurdish question, nor the trajectory of its political expressions — the PKK in the first place — without taking into account the end of the golden age of a socialist or “progressive” “Nationalism from below” in the periphery and semi-periphery of the capitalist system, and its causes. Such a socio-political perspective found its *raison d'être* in the structure of the world capitalist system between the end of Second World War and the crisis of 1973. Founded on the division into a “center” and “periphery” — and especially on *rigid relationships, imposed at the national level, between the one and the other* — this structure allocated to the first the honor and the burden of driving accumulation with intensive industrial development, and to the latter the subordinate role of supplier of low cost raw materials. The “socialist bloc,” with all its internal conflict (USSR vs. China etc.), was a closed area of accumulation, excluded from the world market, serving as a pole of attraction for all the attempts by peripheries to “disconnect” (Samir Amin) from the role assigned to them. This diversification at the level of social formation acquired a sense — as happens in every era of the capitalist mode of production — only in reciprocal relations within the international division of labor (the “world-economy”), whose overall consistency did not prevent the possibility of internal conflict: “The coexistence of these variants was allowed by the international monetary system, leaving national regulatory models some independence. Indeed, the still modest share of GDP comprised by foreign trade, the low degree of financial integration due to the control of international capital movements and the ability to devalue in a system of fixed but adjustable exchange rates gave a certain degree of freedom to economic policy.¹¹” Both in the capitalist centres and, although in an opposite and symmetrical way, in the peripheries “the deployment of mediating institutions had therefore a national color, and allowed them to develop national modulations of the Fordist growth regime [or underdevelopment].¹²”

The crisis of the 1970s, which was inaugurated by the first oil shock, also marked the crisis of this structure; with the relative de-industrialization of Europe and the United States, the end of the “socialist bloc” and the decomposition of the Third

¹¹ Michel Aglietta, Afterword to *Régulation et crises du capitalisme*, Odile Jacob 1997, p. 434.

¹² Ibid.

World into “submerged” (Fourth and Fifth Worlds) and “saved” (the emerging markets: Brazil, China, India, Turkey, etc.) it arrived at a new configuration that in no sense abolished or mitigated the center/periphery polarization (or so-called unequal development) but nevertheless made it more complex and *de-nationalized*. A different tripartite, hierarchically structured zoning imposed itself: at the top, hyper-capitalist centers related to finance and hi-tech; in the middle, an intermediate area divided between logistics and commercial distribution on the one hand and assembly operations, often outsourced, on the other; at the bottom zones of crisis and “social landfill”, characterised by the proliferation of all kinds of the informal economy. This tripartite division is reproduced in a fractal manner, at every scale, from the world to the neighborhood¹³. Financial capital, as a sort of new world “ideal collective capitalist”, becomes the main vector of this reconfiguration, and its expansion (duly moderated by the explosion of the various “bubbles”) is the price to pay for a new cycle of accumulation that needs to be able to squeeze, transfer and re-invest surplus value wherever and wherever more prospect of profit arises:

Big capital now places itself above the nation-state, towards which it tends to take an instrumental and conflicting attitude — “instrumental” because it seeks to bend the state to its own interests, both through the direct action of lobbies and the discipline of “markets”; “conflicting” because the shift of its interests into a global space generates difficulties in national economies, especially advanced ones, which threaten the function of “national collective capitalist” previously played by States¹⁴.

However that may be, the decline of “national socialism” in the periphery and semi-periphery and the restructuring of capital are identical, to the extent that globalization — from hyper-centers to dumping zones, from the creation of the European Union to the proliferation of “Balkanized” zones — poses itself as a process of *de-nationalization of the state*. However, this should not be conceived in a teleological manner because it is not the definitive overcoming of the nation-state by “globalization”, nor is this the final attainment of the true highest stage of capitalism; for the nation-state has become a functional element of a system that transcends it:

¹³ See Théorie Communiste and Alcuni fautori della comunizzazione, [A fair amount of killing](#), 2004.

¹⁴ Ernesto Screpanti, *Global imperialism and the Great Crisis*, Monthly Review Press, 2014, p. 9-10.

In fact, the goal of Bretton Woods was effectively to protect nation-states against excessive fluctuations in the international system. The goal of the current global era is totally different: global systems and functional models must be introduced into nation-states, whatever the risks to which this exposes their economies. Moreover, this dynamic also shows how nation-states have had to participate in this process: the insertion of global systems and modes of operation in a context of strongly institutionalized nation-states is not an easy task¹⁵.

The de-nationalization of the state constitutes a coherent system that over-determines the political formalization of class struggle: that is how the uprising of certain proletarianised populations of Central and South America can identify ideologically with indigenism; in Palestine, it is impossible not to see the connection between the second Intifada and the rise of Hamas; in general, in the Middle East area, political Islam finds its social base in the poorer strata of society and, in contrast to the golden age of Arab nationalism, goes so far as to feed off their struggles; in Europe, the safeguarding of the national against the global clearly emerges whenever there are companies that close or companies that go where labor is cheaper, the “immigration problem” and the “European problem” push the ‘native’ fractions of the working class to abstention or towards a more or less right-populism¹⁶.

All this has nothing to do with an alleged decomposition of the capitalist mode of production, which left to itself, would supposedly lead us to “barbarism.” The Islamic State is not an archaic revival, the fruit of social relations in decomposition, but a political entity adequate to the time and the environment that produces it: it is *the flesh-and-blood de-nationalized state*, which in the Middle East, for the same reasons that led to the decline of pan-Arab nationalism, can only mean, literally, Islamic State. From the ideological point of view, the restoration of the Caliphate and the recapture of Jerusalem is presented as a credible answer, in every way a worthy successor to the “Arab nation” as a social and geo-political actor. More importantly still, this is not something that happens out of nowhere: even everyday class struggle, inasmuch (and

¹⁵ See Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights. From the Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton University Press 2006. Translators note (TN): We have been unable to locate the passage quoted in the Italian version of this text.

¹⁶ See *Why the working class goes to heaven (and to the right)*, "Il Giornale", 25/4/2012; *Grillo: the working class in heaven along with the self employed*, "La Stampa", 30/01/2013.

for as long) as it remains confined to *relations of distribution*, finds its natural political extension in the demand for redistribution of income, which in the Middle East can only mean appropriation and redistribution of *rent*. The existence of the proletariat within the categories of the capitalist mode of production always finds some form of political “translation” in a given context, but *there is no compelling reason* why this should necessarily result in a clearly recognizable working-class (and secular) reformism, as was the case in the Western context (mass social-democratic and Stalinist parties). The *sphere of distribution* is that rowdy place where the economic demands of proletarians can depending on the circumstances and context, be split in two: on one hand the political demand for total democracy (the “true Eden of the rights of man” ... and of the citizen, in opposition to actually existing democracy), and on the other the demand for *afair and just order*, free of corruption *because based on Divine law*. Moreover, that the political formalization of the class struggle would flow into religion — as already one saw in the Poland of Solidarność (1980) — is not a specificity of the Arab world. Sure, “religion is the opium of the people”, but only insofar as it validates the struggle of the proletariat within fetishism (the relations of production converted into relations of distribution). The fact remains that, religion, within fetishism, can also be “the yearning of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world.” The fact that all this is to the detriment of women, proletarian women most of all, is inseparable from the way class struggle (whenever it calls on women to participate as wives or directly as workers) poses the question of women’s (re)assignment to domestic space, or more precisely to the role of reproducing the labour force. It should also be said in passing that this is not unrelated to the “leading role” of women in the military wing of the PKK: the guerrilla organisation does not suppress gender antagonism but moves it to another terrain, often allowing women more room for manoeuvre.

As for the Islamic State, it is no exception to the above: “In Syria, IS looks like an effective armed group, which pays its fighters, give them something to eat and *ensures a local redistribution to the starving and destitute. It is particularly interested in the reconstruction of an educational system for more young people.* It accumulates important resources (taxes, smuggling, ransoms, oil).¹⁷” Even Valeria Poletti — an independent researcher who recently published a study on the contemporary Middle East, very detailed but pervaded by pan-Arab nostalgia, tracing

¹⁷ *Comment faire la guerre à l'Etat Islamique?*, from the site of “Le Monde”, 21/09/2014, the italics are ours.

the reasons for the rise of political Islam to an alleged American strategy aimed at unleashing sectarian divisions within the “Arab nation” — fails to avoid some slips of the tongue:

the Islamists of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria, a direct offshoot of the ISI Iraqi, claim to fight against the army of al-Assad, but their purpose is, in fact, to establish a short-term surrogate for the caliphate in the areas conquered by their militias. Therefore they use terror on civilians and take up arms against lay or jihadist fighters who do not belong to their faction, the revolutionary front. [...] while embracing the international vision of Al-Qaeda and sharing its extremist vision of absolute dominion and full implementation of sharia, [ISIS] does not get the approval of the parent [Al Qaeda] not only because of its declared intention of establishing a caliphate state in the regions falling under its rule, but also because of ideological differences. Furthermore, the terroristic methods of its system for the management of power (kidnappings, torture, beheadings, sectarian killings against Shiites), which cause a deep popular hostility, are deprecated even by the leaders of al-Qa'ida. Despite this, ISIS, precisely because it's not only a movement of jihadist fighters but actually handles the administration and guarantees the functioning of social structures, has gained the support of a part of the population.¹⁸

At the geopolitical level, the de-nationalization of the state is reflected in the end of the system of rigid alliances typical of the post-1945 bipartite world, which is replaced with a system of flexible alliances of the kind seen at work today in the Middle East.

Since its appearance in April, ISIS has changed the course of the war in Syria. It forced the Syrian opposition to fight strongly on two fronts. It has obstructed the entry of aid into Syria, as well as the output of news. And with each conquest it has forced the government of the United States and its European allies to rethink their strategy of intermittent support for the moderate opposition and rhetoric calling for the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad. [...] Meanwhile, some

¹⁸ Valeria Poletti, *The fire in the Middle East, the unexpected connections*, 2014, available on the web, pp. 113-114, the italics are ours.

*intelligence agencies, including Germany, have re-established relations with the Syrian government. You can imagine further rehabilitation of the al-Assad regime as the al-Qa'ida threat grows*¹⁹.

In such an entanglement shifting alliances and changes of side are the rule, and therefore caution is required. But about the PYD, the PKK's Syrian ally, the author of *Kurdistan: Eye of the Cyclone* writes: "Here, in the uprising against the Syrian regime, [the PYD] lined up neither with the regime of al-Assad nor with the 'Syrian rebels', practicing a 'third way': the liberation, defence and administration of their territory, together with other parties and institutions of civil society — not exclusively Kurdish ones — in a sort of Cantonal democracy from below." What the author fails to mention is that this alleged "third way" turns out to be no such thing, given its approval by the al-Assad himself under a sort of unwritten agreement whereby the Syrian regime leaves the Rojava some autonomy in exchange for Syrian Kurdish neutrality in the on-going civil war. Sure, it can be argued — as the merry band of Wu Ming do in *The ISIS war; the role of the PKK and the autonomous zone of the Rojava* — that the autonomy of Kurds in Rojava tends towards the democratic confederalism called for by the PKK, but it seems to us to tend more in the direction of building proto-state structures that, in special circumstances, could in the future form the basis of an independent Kurdish state. Apart from that, supposing that the PKK, the PYD and their militias are entirely self-financed (taxes, remittances, migrants etc.)²⁰, there remains the problem of who sells them weapons, through what channels etc. For example: is it possible that the corridors through which the weapons come into the areas controlled by the PKK and its allies can remain open without the more or less discreet protection of at least one of the large states of the area? Some argue that the PKK and PYD obtain their supplies on the black market in Syria from Syrian army defectors; this may perhaps be true, but will such weapons alone suffice for Kurdish militias to hold their own against the Islamic State, which now has a real state structure, controls oil wells and more importantly has appropriated a large quantity of weapons in the rout of the Iraqi army? Meanwhile, the latest news (as of today 07/10/2014) are of the flags of the Islamic State waving over the rooftops of Kobane, Syria, and the PYD has formally requested that

¹⁹ Valeria Poletti, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

²⁰ TN: An [ICG report](#) indicates as of early this year this was not at all the case. The PYD cantons were reliant on the Syrian state for financial support, while the PKK had received intermittent material support from Iran.

reinforcements arrive from Turkish Kurdistan. “The mobilization in Kobane is not enough, the international community must intervene”, warned Redur Xelil, the spokesman of YPG (the military wing of PYD), on Thursday on Twitter, “otherwise there will be another genocide like in Sinjar, but in Kobane”, referring to the mass flight of tens of thousands of Yazidi from the region of Sinjar, in neighboring Iraq.²¹ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

At the same time, American interests in the creation of a camp that might serve as a bulwark against ISIS are very real, and the conspiracy theories of all the aspiring Michael Moores on the support of the USA for the rise of radical Islam and Al-Qaeda²² explain nothing: even leaving aside the question of the control of oil and gas, the Islamic State continues its theatrical executions of Western prisoners in “Guantanamo” overalls, which Obama has not ignored. Of course, the time of September 11 and George Bush Jr. is long gone, but the current degree of disarray in international relations is evidently not enough to prevent the military intervention of a US-led coalition — with a lot of “human rights” to legitimize it. Once it is understood that the main secular forces in the region are the Syrian regime and the “Kurds”, despite their mutual hostility, future scenarios might be surprising²³. Let’s state clearly that what looms is a “Yugoslavia-style” scenario of cruel civil war and a shower of “human rights” falling from the sky. If something like that becomes a reality, the question is what could result: a remodeling of the state borders of the Middle East (with the possible creation of an independent Kurdish state), or the emergence of a growing chaos, with no horizon (at least for now) of a revolutionary way out? The very existence of the PKK and Turkey’s strenuous opposition to the granting of autonomy to the Kurds are said to be the major counter-tendencies to the first of these two possibilities. But is that really so? And if so, why? Once more our answer is negative; we shall explain the reasons in the next section. Any “solution” — be it revolutionary or counter-revolutionary — will in any case be strictly endogenous and geographically restricted to the Middle Eastern context, whereas new and lasting boundaries can only be established in the much more expansive framework of a further restructuring of the capitalist mode of production, of which there are only few vague hints. Yet the other alternative is no less dependent on events elsewhere (we will come back to this). Some

²¹ From the site of the "Financial Times", 18/9/2014.

²² See, for example, *Operation Isis, the target is China*, "Il Manifesto", 16-9-2014.

²³ See *USA with Iran Turkey and the Kurds, the strange alliances against the Caliph*, "La Repubblica", September 2, 2014.

believe that this war, which is just beginning, may last many years. In our view, in continuity with the unstable or gloomy outcomes of the Arab Springs (Egypt, Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Libya), it is going to define a period of *systemic long-term chaos*:

*Giovanni Arrighi's three geo-political projections, laid out in The Long Twentieth Century, were that the flight forward into financialized neo-liberalism would only bring a brief prolongation of American hegemony and would have to yield eventually to either a West-run global empire, an East-inflected world market-society, or long-term systemic chaos. A full-fledged version of the first possibility can probably be ruled out. [...] the emergence of a new hegemonic centre seems equally improbable. [...] The most likely development is a combination of possibilities one and three: a concert of powers to stave off financial meltdowns, but incapable of orchestrating a transition to a new phase of sustainable capitalist development. We are entering into a period of inconclusive struggles between a weakened capitalism and dispersed agencies of opposition, within delegitimated and insolvent political orders*²⁴.

THE “LIBERTARIAN” TURN OF THE PKK

Hamit Bozarslan describes as follows the confusion generated within the milieu of pro-Kurdish militancy over the last ten years by the transformations we sought to describe in previous section:

Everything combines to indicate that the Kurdish conflict is again reaching the end of a historical cycle, marked by its own forms of socialization, of expression, of militancy, and even by its own forms of violence. The phenomenon is not new. In the 1960s, a whole generation of militants and Western-inspired nationalist fighters, some active since the 20s, had given way to a new generation of militants or fighters who identified themselves, in their overwhelming majority, with the left. The failure of the revolt of Mustafa Barzani in Iraq (1961-1975) — as much the scene of rupture as of transmission between generations — had in turn given impetus to new players, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) in Iraq, Komala (Grouping) in Iran and in the forefront of the armed struggle, the PKK in Turkey.

²⁴ Gopal Balakrishnan, *Speculations on the stationary state*, in "New Left Review", no. 59, September-October 2009.

[...] Today, armed with a legitimacy acquired in course of past struggles and now at an end, these old militants still occupy positions of responsibility in Iraqi Kurdistan, but now wear the clothes of male or female politicians, bureaucrats or even of entrepreneurs. [...] Despite the nuances to be introduced according to the situation of each country, all Kurdish militancy of the previous historical cycle remained anchored to the left, unlike other experiences of protest in the Middle East after 1979, which were largely associated with Islamism. Today, the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall are felt in Kurdistan, although with a delay of two decades, creating a strange feeling of emptiness. If the conflict continues to be nourished by a Kurdish nationalism still able to mobilize, through its symbols and its historical or geographical representations, they are no longer able to justify a particularist fight with a discourse and a universal imaginary able to transcend it and give it sense²⁵.

The pivot that occurred within the PKK — i.e. the abandonment of the prospect of obtaining an independent Kurdish State, which clearly falls within the framework outlined by Bozarslan — answers three different orders of needs: 1) the recognition of a state of affairs: the obsolescence of “nationalism from below”; 2) the negative outcome of the guerrilla strategy, symbolized by the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in Nairobi in 1999; 3) the social changes that took place in historic Kurdistan over the past 25 years.

On the first point, the obsolescence of “nationalism from below” can be explained in the light of capitalist restructuring (as suggested above), but more prosaically, it is a fact that with the end of the USSR the main financier of these nationalisms no longer existed. In the post-1945 bipartite world — in a diversified but still coherent way — the longing for independence of the “dominated nations” and attempts to develop a self-centered capitalism in Third World states already formally independent but suffering from “development of underdevelopment” (in which a *comprador* bourgeoisie sells low-cost raw materials to the imperialist powers to finance its consumption, rather than investing in industry and in creating a domestic demand that would support it) could not be put into practice (or even configured) except under the aegis of some Socialist homeland and its long-term loans at very low interest

²⁵ Hamit Bozarslan, *Conflit Kurdish. The brasier oublié du Moyen-Orient*, Ed. Autrement, Paris 2009, p. 22-24.

rates. The misfortune (and also the dynamic) of Kurdish nationalism, is that of finding itself without “saints in heaven,” since the claim of an independent Kurdistan was tantamount to stepping on the toes of the star of Arab anti-imperialism sponsored by the USSR.

On the second point, it is worth remembering how, well before his arrest in 1999, Öcalan was oriented towards the search for a ‘political solution’, which already at that time amounted to a downward revision of the historical claims for independence. In this way he hoped to curry favor with the “imperialists” of the European Union, who rejected his advances and finally allowed his arrest. The outcome of Öcalan’s European “pilgrimage” was recognized by all the Kurdish nationalist movement as a historic defeat and caused, among other things, a substantial loss of militants. One can not avoid adding that the “spiritual” crisis of the PKK is coupled with the co-option of the PDK of Masud Barzani into a pro-American orbit, and there are not a few who hope that such an alliance will finally obtain by diplomatic means what the PKK, through guerrilla force and “Marxism”, never managed to win. The hopes raised by US favour for the Iraqi Kurds are nonetheless far from unjustified. Although the creation of a Kurdish state does not seem to be the order of day, in the context of US Army Strategic Studies there is a whole debate on the prospect of giving the Kurds an independent state (see Appendix).

As for the purely social transformations across the whole of historical Kurdistan, although it is in vogue to present the dynamics of the Kurdish space as if they take place in a sort of exotic mountain microclimate, the context of the 2000s hardly lends itself to a comparison with earlier periods.

Kurdish protest takes place in an area now largely urbanized. The rural landscape with which the Kurds were closely associated, both in their daily reality and in much Orientalist imagination, has virtually disappeared [...]. in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Kurdish villages were destroyed en masse during the 1980s by the regime of Saddam Hussein, three quarters of the population live in the three largest cities, Erbil — the capital — Dohul and Sulaymaniyah. [...] In Syria, the core of Kurdish politics has always pulsed in the city and today more than ever it is the intelligentsia and the youth that occupy the stage. Equally in Iran, even if the power has never applied a policy of deliberate destruction of the Kurdish countryside, the demographic and political weight of rural areas has decreased to the benefit of a

dozen cities, which are among the least developed in economic terms but are characterized by a great vitality. While most Kurdish cities in Iran have between 100,000 and 150,000 inhabitants, Urmia approaches 600,000. We observe the same dynamic in Turkey, where the tribal phenomenon was so palpable in past Kurdish resistance. [...] Another element, infinitely more noticeable than in the past, regards the weight of internal diasporas in each of these countries. If Baghdad has ceased, for obvious reasons, to be a place of Kurdish concentration, other capitals or major cities extend the Kurdish space well beyond historical Kurdistan: Istanbul — home to millions of Kurds — and a half dozen other Turkish cities, Aleppo and Damascus, where there are about 600,000, or again Tehran. [...] Finally, if the presence of more than a million Kurds in Europe is nothing new, this other diaspora, quite distinct from that which existed in the former Soviet Union or in the Arab world, and particularly in Lebanon, has been no less radically reconfigured [...], pop singers or engineers, restaurant owners or unskilled workers maintain a pro-Kurdish loyalty without therefore accepting the grip of a political organization on their everyday lives²⁶.

The gradual success of Turkey as an “emerging” economy on the one hand, and the oil intoxication of the Middle East on the other, create a rift between an urban Kurdistan that is poor but developing and a rural and mountainous Kurdistan in dereliction. Through the 1990s, this led the PKK to become to an increasing extent the expression and the interpreter of the claims of the latter, leaving the former to other forces.

In this light it is clear that the alleged “libertarian” turn of the PKK is not the *finally revealed truth* that every social movement should make its own. Rather, it responds to specific problems, namely: 1) a problem of “historical legitimacy”, linked to the decline of the traditional Marxist-Leninist guerrilla or Third Worldist models; 2) an issue of ‘ideological justification’ in the face of a scorching historic defeat; 3) an issue of ‘cultural adaptation’ with respect to a changed social context. *And so it was that the PKK tried to tag along with the alter-globalisation movement²⁷.* The “movement of

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 20-22.

²⁷ In a recent article entitled [Is Kobane alone?](#), Professor Sandro Mezzadra demonstrates that the residual anti-globalization movement can now find the PKK and YPG useful as it tries to revitalize its own fantasies of capitalism with a human face. This distinguished Bologna University professor explains that we must recognize in the experience of autonomy of Rojava “In Rojava we must recognise the links with

movements”, the “people of Seattle”, provided Öcalan and his companions with all the necessary material to carry out the theoretical and organizational renewal imposed by the situation, not least in terms of articulating a perspective that *was and remains one of national liberation* even as it renounced the prospect of an independent Kurdish state. From its new source of theoretical inspiration, the PKK acquires strengths along with weaknesses. Among the former: the effective mobilizing rhetoric that foregrounds change to be realized here and now, the appeal to ethics, criticism of hierarchies, praise of horizontality, a theoretical eclecticism (ecology, feminism, etc.) that rejects unitary syntheses smelling too much of “Marxism”; among the latter, an insistence on self-government and autonomy that conceals its programmatic emptiness: the most recent of Öcalan’s writings to be translated into English, *Democratic Confederalism* and *War and Peace in Kurdistan*, contains generic appeals for a fairer distribution of wealth, but aside from that you will search in vain for the social measures the PKK intends to adopt when the hypothetical democratic confederation promises to see the light. The type of social base, the context for action and the theoretical reference points increasingly approximate the PKK to a sort of Middle Eastern EZLN. But once again the PKK arrives late on the scene: the turning point of Democratic Confederalism officially took place in 2002; the protests that became revolts at the G8 in Genoa of 2001 already marked the beginning of the slow decline of the alter-globalisation movement. Where to look, then? Whom to turn to? A fringe of the PKK led by Osman Öcalan (brother of Abdullah) had the answer: the United States. For its part, the US saw enough importance in the Kurdish pawn on the Iraqi chessboard to consider opening a channel of communication with the PKK. There was a potentially fruitful quid pro quo for both parties: on the one hand the PKK would join efforts for the “democratization” of the region and would end the inter-Kurdish conflict, while on

our recent history; we must be ready to hear echoes of Seattle, of Genoa, of the Zapatistas. Because those echoes exist. And more than anything we must see the thread that connects and prolongs the 2011 uprisings in the Maghreb and Mashreq, that goes through the Spanish 15M and Occupy, through the Brazilian and Turkish upheavals last year.” It is therefore necessary “to defend this form of Communism, to go down to the streets and side with Kobanê and Rojava — and to reinvent, from this point, in an absolutely tangible way, our opposition to war.” To reinvent opposition to war, of course, but not without regret that the intervention of the international coalition has been “sporadic and totally ineffective.” When will the calls for ground troops come? Because “police action conducted through aerial bombardment is a joke. Police action that will lead to abandonment of the territory and the defenseless people to be protected from criminal gangs, it’s crazy, if not a serious crime.” (Adriano Sofri, *Do not call it war*, “La Repubblica”, 7 May 1999). [TN: Adriano Sofri is a well-known ex-leader of the leftist Italian organization *Lotta Continua*; sentenced to 22 years of prison for the killing of the infamous inspector Luigi Calabresi (1972), he raised much controversy at the end of the 1990’s for his pro-NATO stance during the Balkans war].

the other the United States would undertake to remove all restrictions on international activities of the PKK and press for improved conditions of detention for Abdullah Öcalan. Osman Öcalan confirmed the existence of contacts between the PKK “at a local level” and the USA: “unofficial meetings with some American officials were organized thanks to intermediaries close to our organization. There were some forms of mutual recognition. The Americans want to gain the sympathy of the Kurds; for our part, we wish to find a solution together with the United States. We have not collaborated with the regime of Saddam Hussein and we have never hindered American interests, while the Americans have done evil to the Kurds; we know the role they played in the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan.²⁸” The approach to be taken towards the United States led in 2004 to an outright split: the Osman Öcalan fraction separated and founded the openly pro-American PWD (Patriotic Democratic Party): “The organization does not consider the United States as a colonizing country, but as the country that saved the Kurds. [...] In order to better emphasize its support for the United States, the PWD on November 7, 2004 will send a letter of congratulations to President George W. Bush for his re-election.²⁹” We do not include such anecdotes to support the existence of a grand design or plot that would make the PKK yet another secret ally of the USA. But it is very necessary to highlight: 1) the ambiguity and groping progress that has always characterized the PKK; 2) the fact that if the hypothesis of an independent Kurdistan would eventually materialize, the PKK would be in the awkward position of having to choose whether to unwillingly participate in the operation, or to risk further marginalization and the beginning of another season of bloody inter-Kurdish conflict.

We conclude this section with a *background* reflection. At least since the Baa’th coups in Syria (1966) and Iraq (1968), the subversive side of the Kurdish question lay in its character as a living protest against the imperialist carve-up of the Middle East and at the same time against the pro-Soviet anti-imperialism that claimed to oppose it. What is happening now shows us once again that a full historical cycle has ended and has exhausted all its internal possibilities, including that of “full support for oppressed peoples’ right of self-determination (up to the right of separation and to the defeat of one’s ‘own’ country) *for and with a specifically proletarian purpose and strategy*.³⁰” No socio-historical determination or communitarian premise represents an obstacle to

²⁸ "Courrier International", 23-29 October 2003.

²⁹ Sabri Cigerli & Didier Le Saout, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

³⁰ *With the Proletariat and Revolutionary Workers of Kurdistan, op cit.*

development in itself anymore. The national question persists, but above all as a matter for capital: the communist revolution will resolve it only *on its own basis*. Otherwise, the counter-revolution will do it in its own way, coming finally to meet national demands, or organizing the violent dislocation or extermination of the population in question. “The Kurdish people is largely ‘internationalized’ [...] Millions of Kurdish workers are employed as labor in the factories and in the fields of the Western developed countries. They have fought alongside the Western proletariat and most of them fiercely, since they had nothing to lose. For these millions, who have lived conditions ripe for the proletarian revolution, a return to conditions of the ‘bourgeois national liberation struggle’ would be a giant step backward.³¹” It’s true, and it is true also for the Kurdish proletarians who are not “internationalized,” but only from the point of view of the abolition of classes, i.e. “the movement which abolishes ...”.

“THE MOVEMENT WHICH ABOLISHES ...”: THE LOCAL, THE NATIONAL, THE GLOBAL

A vast cloud of “movements” — armed and unarmed, and oscillating between social banditry and organized guerrilla activity — act in the most wretched zones of the global capitalist junkyard, presenting traits similar to those of the current PKK. In one way or another, they attempt to resist the destruction of already marginal subsistence economies, the plundering of natural resources or local mining, or the imposition of capitalist landed property that limits or prevents access and/or use. By way of example, we can randomly cite cases of piracy in the seas of Somalia, MEND in Nigeria, the Naxalites in India, the Mapuche in Chile. Though the discourses and forms of struggle adopted by these movements are not mere epiphenomena, it is essential to grasp the content they have in common: *self-defense*. A self-defense that may also be considered vital, but which does not *differ in its nature* from what is expressed in any industrial action aimed at protecting the wages or working conditions of those who animate it. Just as it would be a sleight of hand to pass off a wage struggle, even if extremely fierce and broad-based, as a “revolutionary movement”, it is equally fallacious to overload this type of self-defense practiced by exhausted populations with an inherently revolutionary meaning. This sort of conjuring trick can play well, of course, by relying on *morality*, i.e. by opposing “privileged Westerners” on one hand to the “Wretched of the Earth” ready for the revolution on the other. But such secondhand anti-imperialism soon shows

³¹ “Quaderni internazionalisti”, *What revolution for Kurdistan?*, flyer, 1999 available on the web.

itself to be threadbare. Whether we like it or not, we can not forget that these movements are often situated not in a presumed but non-existent space *outside* of the production and circulation of value, but actually *at its margins*, and sometimes in defense of *small ancient worlds* (ancestral customs, etc.) that capitalist social relations are demolishing or have long since remodeled. But one cannot simultaneously be for the communist revolution and for the conservation of small ancient worlds; because if it is true that capitalism destabilizes them, its revolutionary destruction could certainly not do otherwise. At the same time it makes no sense to side with their capitalist destruction: we think that these movements will have to be incorporated and / or reabsorbed (not without conflict) by the practical movement of the destruction of capital, and that this can be done neither by way of political maneuvering (Leninist or democratic alliances) nor by intermediate measures aimed at deepening the same forced proletarianization that capital pursues. However, this process can only emanate from *the heart of the mode of production* (which does not necessarily mean “the West”), and not from its margins. We cannot ignore the *always* global extension of capitalist system and its hierarchy: just as a cashier, a teacher and a factory worker — although all wage workers — do not have the same ability to affect the production of surplus value, in the same way an insurrectional crisis does not have the same scope and the same consequences on the world stage, if it occurs in Kazakhstan or Germany (the question of where is the “weakest link” is still quite present).

The only *local* social crisis that has actually *prefigured* what could be a revolutionary process *in the present day* and *the impossibility of the reproduction of the capitalist relation*, was Argentina 2001: a large country (unlike Greece in 2008), industrialized, relatively “advanced”, which found itself from one day to the next on the brink of collapse as a result of a monetary crisis. There, in the movement that followed the crash, all the self-ologies (self-organization, autonomy, self-management) revealed their purely defensive content, because one always *self-organizes* on the basis of what one is within the capitalist mode of production (workers of this or that company, inhabitant of this or that district etc.), while the abandonment of the defensive terrain (“demands”) coincides with the fact that all these subjects interpenetrate each other, and that as the capital / wage labor relation that structures them starts to disintegrate, the distinctions cease to exist. This is true on all scales, including at a world level: a general social crisis is not a summation of local crises that evolve in parallel without touching. When the insurrectionary or pre-insurrectionary crisis reaches a certain degree of

extension, the insurgents in a given country are forced — by the very necessity of continuing the fight — to seek support beyond national borders, or to move *en masse* (or disperse ...) outside these borders to support the insurgency elsewhere. It is in this way — *materially*, and not on the basis of abstract appeals to internationalism — that the communist revolution destroys separations and unifies humanity. Communism cannot be a “democratic confederation” extended to the entire planet, for the simple reason that the confederation still presupposes the nation as a subject that federates. *Our homeland is the whole world*, of course ... but there a Kurd still remains a Kurd and a southerner still remains a ... redneck. It’s a simple juxtaposition of differences, *and it is still not enough*.

Faced with the bankruptcy of Marxism and of real socialism, it has become unfashionable to celebrate the development of productive forces, while a sort of anti-productivist ideology — its mirror image — has gained the upper hand in the arena of “anti-capitalist critique”. But the celebration of particularist movements expresses a contradiction in terms when one takes into consideration the perspective of the observer who celebrates them, who — generally having gone to catch them on the other side of the world — is, instead, far from particularist. It is the contradiction of the anthropologist who goes to study the Trobriand Islanders and pretends that it is not imperialism that has brought him there.

The historical significance of capital lies not in the development of the productive forces, but in the *interdependent world* it has created. In the famous passage from *The German Ideology* on the “real movement which abolishes the present state of things”, Marx celebrates the advent of *aworld history*, generated by the capitalist mode of production, and adds: “Without this, (1) communism could only exist as a local event; (2) the forces of intercourse themselves could not have developed as *universal* powers, [...] and (3) each extension of trade would abolish local communism. Communism is not conceivable other than as the simultaneous act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’”³². In this sense — unless you think it is possible to make “anarchy in one country” as some once wanted to make socialism in one country — the question of whether the PKK, the EZLN or any other organization is or is not

³² TN: There are some interesting differences in the English version: «Without this, (1) communism could only exist as a local event; (2) the forces of intercourse themselves could not have developed as universal, hence intolerable powers: [...] and (3) each extension of intercourse would abolish local communism. Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples "all at once", translator's note.

“revolutionary”, is a false problem. No organizational continuity between the current struggles and revolution is conceivable, for the simple fact that *the subject who is organized will not be the same*. The question is quite different: it is to understand what contradictory dynamics might be contained in a given social reality and struggle — of which this or that organization can at best be *aformalization* — and what ruptures could possibly result. These are the conditions of the problem. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*

APPENDIX

THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST ACCORDING TO LT. COL. RALPH PETERS

“The most glaring injustice in the notoriously unjust lands between the Balkan Mountains and the Himalayas is the absence of an independent Kurdish state. There are between 27 million and 36 million Kurds living in contiguous regions in the Middle East (the figures are imprecise because no state has ever allowed an honest census). Greater than the population of present-day Iraq, even the lower figure makes the Kurds the world’s largest ethnic group without a state of its own. Worse, Kurds have been oppressed by every government controlling the hills and mountains where they’ve lived since Xenophon’s day.

The U.S. and its coalition partners missed a glorious chance to begin to correct this injustice after Baghdad’s fall. A Frankenstein’s monster of a state sewn together from ill-fitting parts, Iraq should have been divided into three smaller states immediately. We failed from cowardice and lack of vision, bullying Iraq’s Kurds into supporting the new Iraqi government — which they do wistfully as a quid pro quo for our good will. But were a free plebiscite to be held, make no mistake: Nearly 100 percent of Iraq’s Kurds would vote for independence.

As would the long-suffering Kurds of Turkey, who have endured decades of violent military oppression and a decades-long demotion to “mountain Turks” in an effort to eradicate their identity. While the Kurdish plight at Ankara’s hands has eased somewhat over the past decade, the repression recently intensified again and the eastern fifth of Turkey should be viewed as occupied territory. As for the Kurds of Syria and Iran, they, too, would rush to join an independent Kurdistan if they could. The refusal by the world’s legitimate democracies to champion Kurdish independence is a human-rights sin of omission far worse than the clumsy, minor sins of commission that

*routinely excite our media. And by the way: A Free Kurdistan, stretching from Diyarbakir through Tabriz, would be the most pro-Western state between Bulgaria and Japan.*³³”



Countries gaining and losing territory

³³ Esta nota está offline no site.