

Looking Objectively at Rebels: The Political Economy of
Violence, Kurdish Nationalism, and the PKK

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Review of *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers?: the Kurdish National Movement in Turkey*, by Paul White (London: Zed Books, 2000). Pp. 258, index. \$25.00. ISBN 1-85649-822-0

In 1974, a handful of Turkish-Kurdish leftist militants founded a renegade Marxist-Leninist group called the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). By 1990, the movement's capacity for violence and political mobilization reached such levels that it organized a failed *serîhildan*, a popular uprising against the Turkish government in parts of the country's southeast. Why and how did the PKK, or Kadek, as it calls itself nowadays, amass such strength? ¹ Given that since then the PKK has decayed militarily while succeeding in its efforts to politicize and internationalize the Kurdish question, and in light of the present uncertainties in Iraq, how can this conflict evolve in the future? Can the PKK or its affiliate organizations ever play a constructive or reconciliatory role in this process?

These are immensely important questions for Turkey, the EU and the US, and the Middle East. Their answering requires a dispassionate examination of Kurdish nationalism in general and of the PKK in particular. From a political economy perspective, the PKK is an ethnic-nationalist collective action movement. What distinguishes it from other ethnic-nationalist movements is its ideology and methods. Its formative ideological claims and methods can be summarized as follows.

- 1) Co-ethnic (Turkish-Kurdish) movements cannot meet Kurds' specific ethnic needs. (The PKK was established by breakaway members of leftist movements with mixed Turkish-Kurdish membership).
- 2) The ideology of class struggle is instrumental to Kurdish-nationalist goals.
- 3) Armed struggle or the threat thereof is necessary to obtain Kurdish rights.
- 3a) Even the achievement of Kurdish cultural-linguistic rights needs the backing of guns.
- 4) In accordance with (1) through (3a), "moderate" representatives of Kurdish issues need to be crushed.

I think that a dispassionate analysis of the PKK requires a detailed examination of the causes and consequences (intended and unintended) of these characteristics. Despite its flaws and weaknesses, Paul White's book is a valuable scholarly contribution to this goal. Theoretically, it attempts at examining the PKK-movement from a political economy perspective, and offers a useful review of the research on the subject. It also entails a fair assessment of the cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity of Turkish Kurds, which often gets concealed by the discourse of Kurdish nation-building. Empirically, it presents some first-hand interviews with Öcalan, the PKK's leader, and other members of the Kurdish nationalist movement. From a policy perspective, it poses important questions regarding the way socio-economic backwardness has affected the diverse visions of Kurdish identities and the different Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey. In this last regard, it raises the important question of how Turkey's economic liberalization policies during the 1980s and 1990s influenced the Kurdish conflict. The

¹ For terminological simplicity, I will use the term PKK throughout this essay.

extent to which Turkey's economic restructuring and crises have affected its state capacity to resolve the Kurdish issue through developmental means is another very important question that needs to receive more attention from research.

White draws on Eric Hobsbawm's conceptualization of a specific type of primitive rebels, "social bandits...who specialize in banditry for at least partially social and/or political motives."² The term captures a wide range of phenomena from the mafia in Southern Italy to some Balkan nationalists. White is asking whether Kurdish nationalist movements in general and the PKK in particular were social bandits, and to what extent they have been transformed into nationalist movements with modernizing goals and capacity. His answers to these questions, which are insufficiently substantiated in my opinion, are the following. He maintains that early Kurdish rebel movements in the 1920s and 1930s fit the description of social bandits. He argues that this resulted from the socio-economic backwardness of Turkey's Kurdish regions. In fact, he maintains that the "Achilles' heel" of the Istanbul-based Kurdish national movement around the turn of the century was their "sophistication": an important reason for their failure was that they were too disconnected from the "semi-feudal" reality of Southeastern Anatolia where most ethnic Kurds lived.³ Then, Turkey's modernization experience during the republican era is discussed in order to argue that the social potential for a modernizing Kurdish-nationalist movement was present by the 1980s. Modernization entailed urban industrialization and agricultural mechanization, which created a large surplus of labor in the country. White duly emphasizes the importance of the resulting migration of the Kurdish rural poor to urban centers. The urban mixing of ethnic Turks and Kurds and the creation of an urban proletariat fed the emergence of a "Kurdish reawakening" from the 1960s on. Here, I think that White could have put more emphasis on how the social and educational mobility of Kurds affected their development of new nationalist ideas during the 1970s and 1980s. Many members of the Kurdish movements in this era came from among college students who experimented with conservative and leftist ideologies first, including Turkish nationalism.⁴

At the same time, White rightly highlights the unequal nature of Turkey's socio-economic development whereby the Southeast's oppressive and backward structure remained largely intact. In fact, agricultural mechanization left most of the region's poor worse-off, landless and unneeded even as sharecroppers. Hence, the PKK drew on this "under-underdevelopment" as White calls it, whereby poor peasants initially constituted its main support base. While standing "on the shoulders of both previous Kurdish rebellions and the 1960s' Turkish left," it emerged as "a group of 'primitive rebels' with both millenarian tendencies and some 'modern' political features."⁵

As for the PKK's transformation, White argues that during the 1990s it underwent an incomplete process of modernization. This implies that a complete transformation of the PKK from a primitive rebellion movement to a modernizing-nationalist movement would have been possible under different circumstances. White argues that the PKK's political leadership was qualitatively different from its historical antecedents, aiming at the modernization of the Kurdish nationalization movement. Accordingly, Öcalan's intentions before his capture in 1998 by

² p. 2.

³ p. 85.

⁴ Andrew Mango, "Turks and Kurds," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.30, No.4 (October 1994), pp. 975-997; Martin van Bruinessen, "Shifting National and Ethnic Identities: the Kurds in Turkey and Europe," in Günay Göksu Özdoğan & Gül Tokay (eds.), *Redefining the Nation, State and Citizen* (Istanbul: Eren, 2000).

⁵ p. 206.

Turkish authorities are supposed to have included replacing his charismatic leadership with stable-rational institutions, disowning terrorism, facilitating internal debate within the organization, and substituting the goal of autonomy within Turkey for the goal of independence. However, “fate has been particularly unkind to Öcalan’s political project. Instead of...the attainment of an acceptable political settlement, Öcalan has been prematurely removed, leading to the bloody disruption of the institutionalization process.” Thus, the organization might revert to social banditry, he argues.⁶

The assumption that the PKK could have successfully modernized is a very important one, not the least because many Kurdish nationalists believe in it. If such a transformation had been complete, they would argue, the organization could play the role of a democratic interlocutor between Turkey and Kurdish nationalists, or that of a democratic political party in the business of identity politics. I wonder whether this assumption is realistic or theoretically sound. White’s book would have been more important if he had confronted this assumption and its implications head-on, for example by citing similar movements that have been successfully transformed. In order to understand why the PKK’s potential for modernization was dubious, one has to examine the intended and unintended consequences of the PKK as a collective action movement.

Most importantly, the PKK’s political strategy included the violent oppression of any competitor for the articulation of Kurdish interests. Accordingly, White aptly observes: “the PKK was apparently initially more intent on physically eliminating or driving out rival Kurdish nationalist and Turkish leftist groups than on confronting the Turkish state.”⁷ The downside of this strategy from the viewpoint of modernization is that it drives out the moderate Kurdish actors from the political realm. Thus, the movement is deprived of any political-intellectual competition from outside that could have served its ideological development, and the apparent lack of moderate Kurdish views in the public-political space facilitates the legitimization of hard-line state policies against Kurdish interests.

Second, in order to maintain its internal cohesion and military discipline, White explains that the PKK used “charismatic leadership” based on a personality cult, hierarchical discipline and ruthless oppression of internal critics, and coercive or voluntary adoption by its members of a new “Kurdish personality.” In regard to the last, White argues that “the organization’s ability to remold its recruits’ personas should not be underestimated. PKK members are expected to make a series of pledges, write regular reports on their own weaknesses, and to submit to regular, frequent ‘criticism and self-criticism’ sessions.” White correctly observes that these are effective means of social control.⁸ Indeed, to differing degrees many other groups make use of such methods in order to maintain group cohesion by making it difficult for their members to “exit.”⁹ The downside of this strategy for modernization is that it makes the members’ return to “civilian life” very difficult. By building on Weber’s concept of charismatic leadership, White also offers a good discussion of how the organization’s leadership style is linked to its difficulties of renewing its leadership in the aftermath of Öcalan’s capture.

Finally, the PKK’s use of violence as a political weapon against its internal and external rivals has constrained its potential for modernization. Like other social bandits, the PKK initially used violence to pacify its rivals and to undermine state authority. It then offered its means of violence

⁶ pp. 217-218.

⁷ p. 148.

⁸ p. 141.

⁹ Laurence Iannaccone, “Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 100 (1992), pp. 271-91.

to protect people--its potential "clients"--against threats that are partially of its own creation.¹⁰ The unintended consequence of this strategy is, first, that it depletes political debate on the Kurdish conflict inside and outside the organization, as argued. Second, it undermines the organization's ability to act as a legitimate representative of Kurdish interests. Indeed, it continues to be a politically very risky strategy, if not political suicide, for mainstream Turkish political actors to cooperate with the PKK or with any other political organization that is perceived to be linked with it.

¹⁰ Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).