

# The Revolution in Rojava and the International

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## Introduction

This chapter engages with the embeddedness of global politico-social and historical processes in the emergence of revolutions from the perspective of international historical sociology.<sup>1</sup> There are three overall processes in the unfolding of revolutions: revolutionary situations, trajectories and outcomes. Parallel to this, the constitution of revolutionary agency is based on the local conditions and constraints working against naturalized hegemonic structures and semantics on a global level. Thus, a revolution does not take place only against the power holders of a given state; more importantly, it challenges the entirety of the political and social structures that, in one way or another, made the contested regime possible. Following one of the primary premises of this volume – that the actualization of *the global* takes place through particular local acts – I put forward the idea that a revolution is co-constituted by global-level hegemonic structures and the organized resistance to them. This, in other words, means that *the global* unfolds in *the local* through processes of interaction. Ultimately, the ‘envisioned global’, in the case of revolutions, is a combination of hegemonic structures and semantics that are co-constitutive of revolutionary agency. The case of the Rojava revolution is particularly instructive in understanding the unfolding of the global given the statelessness of the Kurds in a world of nation-states and countless Kurdish attempts at emancipatory political/military activities. The chapter draws theoretically on the international historical sociology of hegemony and resistance; empirically, it focuses on the case of Rojava (West Kurdistan, Syria) to illustrate the argument.

On 19 July 2012 regime troops withdrew from the northern and north-eastern regions of Syria and the control was taken over by the People’s Protection Units (YPG – *Yekîniyên Parastina Gel*) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ

– *Yekîniyên Parasitna Jin*), the Kurdish forces being led politically by the Democratic Union Party (PYD – *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*). A region-wide Kurdish national question that had been in existence for at least a century and had shaped, and been shaped by, the historico-social conditions of state formation in the region, thus reached yet another turning point: for the first time, Kurdish forces with a left-leaning ideological position found a practical ground on which to put a radical-democratic social transformation into action. Immediately after the take-over of power, however, the revolution came under attack from the geopolitically backed and socially grounded genocidal masculinity of jihadi Islam. In Kobanê in 2014, as a result of its globally televised resistance to ISIS (also known as *Daesh* or ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham’), the revolution was stabilized and legitimized internationally. Serious geopolitical and geosocial problems, however, still lay ahead.

The Rojava revolution, not, admittedly, a power transition of the customary kind, became a topical issue as much within the study of revolutions and international relations as in mainstream media. The global historical sociological lineages of this revolution, however, were covered in a haphazard way, if not totally ignored. The greater part of the literature focuses on the geopolitical conditions of the revolution (see, for example: Kaya and Whiting 2017; Charountaki 2015; Gunes and Lowe 2015). A considerable proportion of it offers nothing more than popular geopolitics, which is journalism rather than a serious investigation into the causalities (Hevian 2013). There were, nonetheless, a number of authors who handled the Rojava case as a politico-social phenomenon (see, for example: Küçük and Özselçuk 2016). But among them two main currents seem to exist: one integrating the revolution into an internationalist revolutionary discourse to inspire and exemplify emancipatory practices (see, for example: saed 2017; Stanchev 2015); the other, its antagonist, mainly informed by a linear-modernist determinism and naturalized liberal-representative democracy, trying to demonstrate how undemocratic the Rojava experience was by decontextualizing it spatiotemporally (see, for example: Tejel 2014; Paasche 2015). These perspectives deploy either a revolutionary romanticism or hegemonic Eurocentrism. In contrast to this scholarship on Rojava, I shall attempt to give an ‘international historical sociological’ account here, building on the co-constitutive role of global hegemonic structures and the dynamics of resistance in the emergence of revolutions. In this sense, the question guiding the present chapter is how the continuous interaction between global structures and local reactions to them shapes revolutionary agency.

In the following, I illustrate the ways in which the actors – in this case the revolutionaries of Rojava – reacted to their historically evolved global environment in materializing their political project. Instead of attributional – and therefore fixed – categorizations of causality in understanding revolutions, this work carries out processual analyses of the Rojava case since revolutions are assemblages of historically specific processes (for a discussion on attributional versus processual ontology, see Lawson 2016). Based on a theoretical reading of the international historical sociology of revolutions, my analysis of the Rojava event explores three entangled processes in which the revolutionaries engaged with the global: (a) the international historical sociology of state formation in West Asia, which rendered stateless entities defenceless; (b) the ideological and organizational upheaval of the anti-systemic movements, particularly in the post-Soviet era, which conditioned a search for other solutions; (c) the geopolitical constraints of the Syrian war as a result of hegemony-seeking interventions, which victimized those with less geopolitical capacity for bargaining. Needless to say, while these processes can and should be separated for analytical purposes, in practice they are intertwined in many respects.

In each of these processes, I argue, the revolutionaries of Rojava mobilized the dynamics of resistance to the perceived or actually existing hegemonic structures. In other words, both the hegemonic structures and resistance practices emerged through a historical interaction and were informed by their global lineages. In this sense, I argue that the emergence of the revolution in Rojava was international all the way down, through the interactions that were constitutive of its agency. Again, this analysis can helpfully draw on the distinction between the historical, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions: the historical dimension pertains to the formulation of resistance dynamics based on a historical understanding of regional power relations; the ideological dimension to a radical-democratic reassessment of the ideological and organizational structures hegemonic in national-liberationist pathways; and the geopolitical dimension to an instrumentalization of the geopolitical vacuum emerging as a result of hegemonic confrontations.

Whereas international historical sociology serves as the theoretical framework, I rely on interviews with and public statements from relevant actors to illustrate the international lineages of the Rojava revolution.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I first undertake a brief theoretical domiciliation of revolutions in *the international*. In this, I attempt to include the dynamics of hegemony and resistance in the nexus of revolutions and world politics. I then go into the details of the

three analytical categories of the Rojava revolution's international lineages in order to illustrate the dynamics of hegemony and resistance in concrete historical and contemporary processes.

## Revolutions and the international

One structuralist definition of a revolution would be that it is a world historical event: Theda Skocpol (1979) argues that it is a power shift as a result of social transformations that come after structurally entangled processes. Alternatively, with Fred Halliday (1999: 21), revolutions could be seen as 'major political and social transformations in the context of a contradictory modernity involving mass participation and aspiration to establish a radically different society'. In the former definition, the revolution *comes*, it is not *made*, whereas in the latter agency is in play. A reconciliation between these two definitions can probably be achieved by referring to Marx, who features prominently in both Skocpol's and Halliday's work: 'Man makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself, but out of such as he finds close at hand' (Marx 2008 [1852]: 1). Despite the structuralist determinism of broader Marxian scholarship, this well-known quotation from Marx clearly points to its constructivist dimension involving the agential will or power of those who can work towards making a revolution, whether successfully or not. This contention forms the basis upon which revolutionary agency can be related to the international.

The meaning of the international can vary in different schools of International Relations (IR). The present chapter, however, engages with historical sociological premises beyond the narrow (neo-)realist and (neo-)liberal conceptualizations. The question at hand is about politico-social phenomena that can be understood only through their spatiotemporal embeddedness, without caging them in states or dehistoricizing the unfolding of their constitutive events. Accordingly, one can conceive of the international as hegemonic power relations (Cox 1987), a systemic totality (Frank and Gills 1993; Wallerstein 2004), a communication-based social whole (Albert 2016), a combined totality of unevenness (Rosenberg 2006), or as one world constituted by many worlds (Blaney and Tickner 2017; Law 2011). Regardless of their motivational contention, in each of these explanations the external (of any political formation) is constitutive of, and constituted by, the internal. More precisely, the international is integral to any social phenomenon. What is at stake here, ac-

cordingly, is a particular presence of the international pertaining to agency formation in political processes. If the desire behind a revolution is for a radically different life and hence a transformation, then the existing hegemonic structures, against which a revolution is mobilized, are also constitutive of agency. So, without any exclusion of different conceptions of the international, one can contend that the spatiotemporally grown hegemonic structures and the interactive dynamics of resistance are constitutive of it.

The embeddedness of the international in the revolutionary processes has long been a matter of debate. But the fourth-generation theory of the study of revolution has taken a firm step in incorporating the international into revolutionary situations, revolutionary trajectories and revolutionary outcomes (Lawson 2016, 2019). The international matters as much when there is a social or political upheaval as when it is relatively calmer (Halliday 1999: 7). However, if the processual interaction between the agents of revolutionary change and their global environment is constitutive of a revolutionary situation, then this accumulation and gradual radicalization of revolutionary claims happens well before the situation comes to be. In other words, hegemonic structures are resisted both in an organized and unorganized fashion, until resistance melts into a revolutionary moment. The terms and structures of this resistance also emerge from within a global ideological context; it learns from, and speaks back to, the global environment of anti-systemic movements. International historical and sociological accumulation, in combination with the processual transformation of ideology, then, determines the revolutionary agency within the immediate geopolitics of revolutionary trajectories. These interactions ultimately shape the ways and processes whereby the global unfolds in the local.

The Kurdish experience of joining the world of nation-states as a stateless nation conditioned the Kurdish interaction with global processes from below. This experience of modernity was formed through an understanding of resistance built on three dimensions of the interaction between the global and the local: the historical-sociological, ideological-organizational and geopolitical.

## **The historical sociology of the revolution in Rojava**

The Rojava revolution was the outcome of the face-off between a century-long status quo and a great upheaval in the region. Inter-social turmoil forms the ground for an international political upheaval which eventually renders certain political formations (in our case, states) vulnerable to bottom-up pro-

cesses (Lawson 2019: 74ff.). One century later we seem to be going through such a period of destructive turmoil in the region (Bozarslan 2011). Global historical processes and resultant power constellations reconfigured the region in such a way that doomed-to-fail nation-states were formed arbitrarily in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The historical origins of the Rojava revolution nest in the resistance to the hegemonic state system in the region that continuously conditioned Kurdish deprivation. More precisely, Kurdish political agency in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was transformed through interaction with the hegemonic nation-states system, the intergroup dynamics in Syria, and the windows of opportunity resulting from inter-state contradictions. The processual unfolding of these interactions shaped the historicity of the Rojava revolution.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a historical moment of inter-social reconfiguration for West Asia and North Africa: empires were either replaced by nation-states as a result of successful nationalist mobilizations, or weakened by eventually unsuccessful ones. The regional state system had been consolidated by the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottoman Empire, which had once expanded territorially over three continents, faced nationalist uprisings by different ethnic and religious groups in the territories under its domination. A weakening economy and transforming power relations under the impact of the French and English revolutions, combined with French and English imperialism, forced the empire to take some pre-emptive measures which eventually embodied its centralization policies. Parallel to this, two broadly defined power constellations were trying to control the Ottoman state: Westernizers led by the Young Turks movement and the *ancien régime* (Bozarslan 2013: 305ff.).

The regional state system and the characters of these states stabilized as a result of the fatal damage inflicted on central mechanisms of the empire by the First World War. The intense conflict by quickly shifting geopolitics among different ethnic groups, imperialist forces and the power constellations in the empire forged the new power relations in the region. The centralized, hegemonic and homogenizing nation-state model was alien to the historical conditions of coexistence and inter-social relations in the region where it was applied in the absence of a 'nation' (Bozarslan 1997: 61ff.; Halliday 2005: 88ff.). This process is central to the historical domination over the Kurds in the form of assimilation, the division of Kurdish-inhabited land, and conflicts lasting decades. With such an understanding of the historical relations of hegemonic structures and resistance dynamics, the PYD co-leader Saleh Muslim stated

that 'with the development of the nation-state in Europe the Arabs began to see things differently' adding, with the emphasis on the hegemonic nation-states, 'the land of the Kurds was divided into four parts and there was repression and massacres took place' (Ekurd Daily 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Like the other ethnic groups living under the Ottoman rule, the Kurds were also seeking some kind of emancipation. Yet the Kurdish political forces could not manage to unite and mobilize Kurdish nationalism, mainly due to the interest-based divisions of the co-opted Kurdish elites. The divisions were manifold, on a spectrum from the Kurdish notables who were aware of the nationalist turn in the world history and pursued a Kurdish nationalist agenda to the traditional elites who insisted on staying part of the unity of the *Ummah* under the Ottoman roof. Exacerbated by the struggles for local tribal interests, this incompatibility in imagining a future Kurdistan radically shaped the mutually nullifying relations between, on the one hand, Kurdish tribalism/Ottomanism, and, on the other, Kurdish nationalism/modernism (cf. Hitchins 2000; Özoğlu 2001). Different forms of the same dynamic are in place even today.

Kurdish political actors were either collaborating with or fighting three forces: the Ottoman Empire (and later republican Turkey), the British Empire and the French Empire. The confrontation within this triangle was caused by the division of the Ottoman territory in Iraq, the Levant and South-East Anatolia into zones of influence for France and Britain. With Turkey's war of independence, its borders were more or less drawn. The Kurds in Turkey, for various reasons, largely supported the independence war. From the 1920s onwards, the Kurds sought the help of Britain in Iraqi Kurdistan, but British imperial rule did not recognize the Kurdish endeavour for independence for strategic geopolitical reasons (McDowall 1996: 121ff.). The French, on the other hand, signed the Ankara agreement defining the Turkey–Syria border, to avoid further loss of territory in Anatolia (ibid.: 139f.). In this way the Kurdish-inhabited land fell under the control of four different states. Although the political and social dynamics of Kurdish resistance to oppression differed in each country, the very presence of oppression originates from the homogenizing enforcement of the nation-state model (Bozarslan 1997: 61ff.; Vali 1998). The resistance-to-oppression dynamics in Syria diverge from other Kurdish experiences in some geopolitical details, although originating from the same core.

The main determinants of Kurdish policy in Syria emerge from inter-group dynamics and their interaction with the central state institutions. The

representative of the PYD (Democratic Union Party) in France made their understanding of historical hegemonic structures clear:

the current organization and borders went back to the period of the French mandate which, after having envisaged it, had finally given up granting autonomy to minorities, like the Alawites or the Druze, to favour the construction of a centralized state, [an] over-centralized [state] which could only hold by force. (Groupe France-Syrie 2016; author's translation)

Within this context, there were probably two main determinants of Syrian policy towards the Kurds, especially after full independence from France: (a) the exclusion of the Kurds and deprivation of their fundamental rights; (b) the implementation of an Arabization policy under the geopolitical premises of pan-Arabism and hence the assimilation of the Kurds. The regime did not accept one third of the Kurds as 'true Syrians' after the 1962 census (Tejel 2009: 51f.). The 1962 census laid the foundations for a more coercive policy by the Syrian state against the Kurds as an *alien group*. This brought about the repression of Kurdish political mobilization by the regime to the extent that any political demand for greater Kurdish rights or demonstrations in any form faced relentless punishment.

Kurdish political resistance in Syria has historically been dependent on the Kurdish movements in neighbouring states. Kurdish parties with relative social support among the Syrian Kurds have almost exclusively been offshoots of the Kurdish parties in Turkey or Iraq. A central (geo-)political reason for this is to be found in the dynamics of early nation-state formation: as part of its regional policy for dealing with more powerful neighbours, the Syrian regime provided sanctuary to Kurdish movements fighting against a neighbouring country. This made the Syrian regime's hand stronger in other issues such as the dispute over water with Turkey. This was the case with the *Xoybûn*, a region-wide Kurdish nationalist organization with its political base in Damascus in the late 1920s; the Iraqi Kurdish leaders, most notably Jalal Talabani, in the 1970s; and the PKK from the 1980s onwards (Tejel 2009): 'Whenever the [Kurdish] parties had difficulties' said a YPG commander 'they ended up in Rojava, and the Rojavans have always fought in other parts of Kurdistan.' (YPG commander, interview, 22 September 2019; author's translation).

Because of the convergence of interests between the PKK and the regime of Hafez al-Assad – the PKK used Syrian soil and the Beqaa Valley from 1979 to 1998 as a space for political and military training while the regime benefitted

from the regional impacts of the PKK's presence in Syria – it did not target the Syrian state.

Taner Akçam, (the leader of DEV-YOL [Revolutionary Path], the largest left-ist political organization before the 1980 coup in Turkey) told Öcalan that al-Mukhabarat (the Syrian secret service) will use you and throw you away. In response Öcalan said “Yes, I know. But when they want to throw me away it will be too late”. That was precisely how it was. (Former YPG fighter, interview, 21 July 2019; author's translation).

Besides making use of safe camps there for military and political training for the fight in Turkey, the PKK always lived among the Rojava Kurds, recruited cadres, trained and organized people, and eventually managed to strike root in the region (Akkaya 2015). It was these recruits that would lead the politico-social transformation in Rojava from 2012 on.

In the early 2000s, the regional impact of the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan and Öcalan's being handed over to Turkey by the US were the main sources of increased involvement by the PKK-led Kurdish movement<sup>4</sup> in anti-Ba'ath mobilization. The US intervention in 2003 in Iraq, which led to the independence-like-autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan, pushed the other Kurdish political actors to become more proactive. Under this regional impact, the Kurdish organizations in Syria intensified their demonstrations and protests. Encouraged by the US, Turkey forced the Syrian regime to expel Öcalan and the US-administration eventually delivered him to Turkey (Yetkin 2004). This ended the PKK's tacit deal with the Syrian regime. As a result, the PKK-led movement reshaped its policies against the Syrian regime. In 2004, an uprising erupted after a game of football in Qamishlo, which was followed by a series of demonstrations throughout Rojava that were eventually violently extinguished by the regime, leaving 50 dead, many injured and around 2000 imprisoned. Liberated from its geopolitically constraining ties with the regime, the PYD-led movement also mobilized the Kurdish population in its strongholds. Despite its high cost, this revolt in Qamishlo and the spreading of demonstrations across the northern regions further raised a consciousness in Rojava of the area as a separate political entity (Gauthier 2005; Tejel 2017). Since then the Kurdish parties have been active to further mobilize the people for their eventual emancipation.

The arbitrary formation of nation-states in the post-Ottoman era left the Kurds to undergo assimilation policies in four states and a constant resistance-to-oppression dynamic. This also locked the states in a constant strug-

gle, firstly against some sections of their own population and secondly against each other as a result of historical social, economic and (geo-)political dynamics. While Kurdish resistance was generated by the former dynamic in the first place, the later inter-state dynamic facilitated its continuity. The Rojava revolution is primarily an outcome of, and a response to, a particular configuration of the global transition from empires to nation-states. The historicity of the revolutionary agency, in this respect, lies at the intersection of the historical and social dynamics of regional state formation and various engagements between the Kurds and these hegemonic structures.

### **The ideological reconstitution of revolutionary agency in Rojava**

One of the main insights resulting from the study of failed uprisings is that while these uprisings are often successful in ousting a regime, this often happens at the expense of having a plan ready for what happens after (see Lawson 2019: 222). How to reconstruct society after a revolution is a matter of having a vision for the aftertime that is directly connected to the ideology of the revolutionaries. The particular challenge to the Rojava revolutionaries was not to take down the existing power holders, but to make good on their claim to reconstruct and maintain social relations based on non-exclusionary, non-hierarchical and gender-libertarian principles. The ideological vision in question was present among the revolutionaries of Rojava, yet had not come into existence out of a void. This vision can be detected in the PKK's problematization and gradual transformation of the hegemonic national liberation ideology and organizational structure throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The processual-interactive relationship between the ideological-organizational line hegemonic within global anti-systemic movements and its problematization by the revolutionaries of Rojava shaped their revolutionary agency. In the analytical tradition of world-system theory, the term 'anti-systemic movements' refers to globally interconnected mobilizations against structural exploitation and domination by the capitalist world-system, as in class- or national-liberation-based movements, feminist or ecologist movements and so on (Wallerstein 2014). Anti-systemic movements join global processes from a standpoint of challenging them; yet, they also create the hegemonic ideology and structures of this challenge. The ideological lineages of the Rojava revolution are embedded in the locally based problematization of the hegemonic national liberation ideology.

What was strikingly different in the Rojava revolution compared to the other movements in 2011 in West Asia and North Africa was its radical reimagining of power relations. I do not intend to give a detailed account of this radical process here, but rather want to focus on the international historical and sociological process of its unfolding. It is important, however, to mention that the transformation was made from an independence-seeking national liberation movement to a radical politico-social assemblage by means of three interdependent struggles: (1) a struggle for direct and radical democracy, formulated as *democratic autonomy*, serving as a way of solving the problems in the locality concerned; (2) a struggle for the transformation of the state into a *democratic republic*, in order to render it permissive to the rights and demands of dissident political groups and different identities, including its Kurdish population; (3) a struggle to connect different social and political formations that were separated by nation-state borders by means of *democratic confederalism* as opposed to the idea of forming an independent Kurdistan (Öcalan 2013a, 2013b). Playing a central role in the Rojava revolution, this re-imagination of revolutionary transformation was profoundly related to the confrontation between the hegemonic ideological and organizational structures in anti-systemic movements and the historical patterns of West Asian dynamics of resistance.

The PKK was one of the leftist organizations in Turkey in the second half of the 1970s that rapidly grew in the 1980s. The contemporaneous movements in Turkey, in line with the global 68 movement and national liberation movements (e.g. in Vietnam, Cuba and Angola), shared certain characteristics such as, most notably, a Leninist party model, a national-liberation ideology and (as an aim) a guerrilla campaign (Akkaya 2013). Two factors were determinant throughout the emergence of the PKK. On the one hand, they established non-hierarchical relations with the local Kurds.<sup>5</sup> On the other, they made strategic use of violence against the state, tribal structures, and other Kurdish organizations.<sup>6</sup> The guerrilla warfare from 1984 onwards followed the example of other guerrilla struggles for national liberation (Gunes 2013; Tezcür 2015) and continued until the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup> However, the collapse of the Soviet Union would compel the PKK to engage with its organizational structure and ideological positioning.

In the early 1990s, the PKK was under heavy pressure to transform itself ideologically and structurally for three central reasons: (a) the transformations in the anti-systemic movements, (b) the structural need to transcend orthodox Marxism and the Leninist party model, and (c) the post-Cold-War

social and (geo-)political conditions in West Asia. The world system theorists' problematization of socialist states, social democracy and national liberation movements is illustrative of the PKK's understanding of the ideological crisis that the left was going through:

Have social democrats achieved anything more than some redistribution to middle strata? Have communist parties achieved anything more than some economic development? And even so, has this not been primarily to benefit the so-called new class of bureaucratic elite? Have nationalist movements achieved anything more than allowing the so-called comprador class a slightly larger slice of the world pie? (Arrighi et al. 1989: 34; author's translation)

Although asynchronously, these questions underlay the ideological-political determinants of a globally observable crisis.<sup>8</sup> The PKK was engaging with the orthodox national liberationist path and real socialism in order to trigger a transformation. Two decades later, in his assessments of the early 1990s, Öcalan (2013b: 287ff.) said that they were trying to build a Kurdistan without knowing what socialism and nation-statism really were and how these ideologies were impacting on personalities: 'We managed to be in authority [in the 1990s]. But we either did not know what to achieve with authority or many of us started to think we were "special"' (ibid.: 290).<sup>9</sup> This diagnosis of the degeneration of the PKK cadre conditioned an ideological intervention in the party's organizational structures by Öcalan. He aimed at addressing the combined effect of nation-statism and real socialism on the one hand and the historically developed tribal/religious and sexist personality/mentality structures on the other. A Kurdish activist remarked that the transformation of the PKK

had been condensing from the 1990s onwards [...] This transformation not only meant a transformation [of the ideological goal] from an independent Kurdistan to democratic confederalism but the transformation of mentality structures. It was not simply a political transformation. (Kurdish Activist, interview, 14 July 2019)

The transformation, which would be sealed as democratic confederalism in the 2000s, was developing through the interaction of the organizational needs and ideological interventions throughout the 1990s.

Combined with the lessons learned in the guerrilla war with the Turkish army (Karayılan 2014), the pressure for change resulted in important transfor-

mations in the party's organizational structure. For instance, the creation of a separate organization of women fighters and the first ceasefires in pursuit of a negotiated settlement were remarkable developments that would shed light on the processes to come.

One of the distinguishing properties of the PKK was the independent organization of the women from the men [...] This was not only a theorization but also the [practical] materialization of the women's army and women's organization through the will of the women. (Veteran Kurdish politician, interview, 17 May 2019)

The transformation of the PKK's organizational structure and ideology was happening through the feminization of the Kurdish politics around a well-known motto: 'becoming liberated by fighting, becoming beautiful by liberating oneself, and being loved by becoming beautiful' (Stêrk 2018). Yet, due probably to the intensity of the conflict, the scope of transformation did not reach to the degree of the current framework.<sup>10</sup>

As detailed so far, the transformation was already happening in practice but its acceptance by the organization as a coherent political and ideological project would wait until after Öcalan was delivered to Turkey in 1999. Combined with the organizational turmoil after his imprisonment, the post-Soviet development of radical political thought further pushed Öcalan to end the hesitation between the hegemonic ideology of national liberation and a strong need for a change to ensure the continuity of the PKK (Öcalan 2003: 30).<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, he sought an ideologically acceptable and politically realistic solution for historically deep-rooted problems emerging from the regional experience of capitalist modernity.

This attempt at transforming the organization, in combination with the growing splinter groups after Öcalan's imprisonment, triggered a life-or-death moment for the PKK. The period between 1999 and 2004 was 'the most difficult period [...], a period of painful transformation, and this period [was] happening in the absence of the leader who formed the party, gave it perspective and in practice led it' (Veteran Kurdish politician, interview, 17 May 2019). But eventually from 2004 onwards, Öcalan's leadership was reinstated at the expense of losing around one fifth of the party's members. The unburdened PKK started to experiment with a new organizational structure beyond the Leninist party model in the light of prefigurative and proactive radical-revolutionary politics (Akkaya and Jongerden 2010). Although the problems associated with the Leninist party model persisted to some extent,

the PKK-led Kurdish movement transformed into a web of social, political, military/self-defence, and economic organizations, a number of which had already been formed and were active in Rojava well before the civil war in Syria.

The transformations of the global anti-systemic movements, national liberation movements in particular, and the particular ways in which they interacted with locally based party structures and resistance dynamics were constitutive of the revolutionary agency in Rojava. When the geopolitics allowed a power shift, the PYD as a political organization and the YPG-YPJ, the military/self-defence units, were the most prepared and best structured organizations to assume power not only because of the historical development of the Kurdish movement in Syria (as explained above) but also through having an ideological vision of what came next. Everything associated with the Rojava revolution – for instance, the extra-systemic reconstruction of social relations, peaceful co-existence between different ethnic, sectarian and religious groups, gender-libertarian social relations, structurally connected co-operatives, communes, assemblies that organize self-rule – is the outcome of the ways in which the PKK-led Kurdish movement addressed globally present ideological and structural challenges within its ranks.

## The geopolitics of the revolution in Rojava

Unsuccessful nation-formation practices, societies forcibly controlled by authoritarian regimes or dictatorships, continuing imperialist interventions, and the continuous deprivation of minority groups were forming the roots of permanent conflicts, and hence social fatigue in the broader region (Bozarslan 2013). Combined with the immediate shock of the neoliberal dismantling of state-led developmentalism, this social fatigue took the form of what was called the Arab Spring. This upheaval unleashed a number of developments which made the Rojava revolution possible. The complex international engagement, however, was also forming the immediate geopolitical *threats to*, as well as *opportunities for*, the survival of the revolution. The geopolitical threats were coming from the politico-social hierarchies in the region while opportunities were arising from the contradictions between different power constellations. In combination with the historical-sociological and ideological lineages explained above, revolutionary agency was constituted by a locally based processual engagement with these geopolitical threats and opportunities. Ac-

cordingly, a geopolitical strategy formulated as the Kurdish third way made the revolution possible and continued to form its essence.

The violent intervention of the Assad regime in initially peaceful protests and the involvement of regional and international forces both for and against the regime set the initial configuration of the Syrian war. From the very first days, Russia supported the Syrian regime. The US first supported the moderate opposition, then turned to help Kurdish-led forces after the supplanting of the opposition by jihadi forces. Regionally, Turkey was – increasingly – supportive of the jihadi forces against the Kurds and the Syrian regime, while Iran backed the regime in pursuit of creating a regional alliance stretching from Iran, via Iraqi Shi'as to the Syrian Alawite regime. This background after the start of Syrian war resulted in two interrelated constraints geopolitically surrounding the Rojava revolution. The first (internal) one was formed through the confrontation between the mainstream opposition and the regime. The second (external) one developed alongside the confrontations between the US and Russia in Syria.

First, internally, the regime wanted to instrumentalize the Kurds against Turkey and the jihadists, while the opposition had no views on the Kurdish question. The regime had had a very violent history with the Kurds throughout the past decade and did not recognize their fundamental rights, despite many promises after the Qamishlo revolt (Gauthier 2005). However, given the country-wide uprising, the regime withdrew from Rojava for three reasons largely informed by the experience of previous Syrian regimes in dealing with popular unrest: (a) focusing on the fight in other regions, Aleppo and Damascus in particular, to contain the uprising first and then return to Kurdistan once the fight with the Syrian Arab opposition had been won; (b) leaving the Turkish AKP government to face the 'PKK-linked Kurds', thereby punishing the AKP for its support of the – increasingly jihadi – opposition; and finally (c) making two of its enemies, the Kurds and the jihadists, fight and weaken each other (Gunes and Lowe 2015; ICG 2014; Spyer 2013). The PYD-led Kurds assumed power after the withdrawal of the regime troops. Developments afterwards unfolded in the way the regime imagined that they would. However, particularly their remarkable resistance to ISIS during the battle of Kobanê in 2014, and globally mobilized solidarity actions on their behalf with a massive media coverage, pushed the Obama administration to support the Kurds. The US backing of the Kurdish-led forces became a geopolitical game-changer.

The mainstream Sunni-Arab opposition in Syria, on the other hand, did not have and did not propose any solution to the Kurdish question in Syria for

a time after the regime had been ousted (Spyer 2013). Riad Assad, the nominal head of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), rejected the possibility of federalism in an interview in August 2012, saying ‘in Syria, there are no Kurdish or Sunni regions. It is all Syrian land’ (Khoshnaw 2012). Riad al-Shaqfa, the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brothers, one of the strongest groups, was blunter, stating in September 2012: ‘We clearly oppose the ambitions of establishing a Kurdish entity in Syria’ (quoted in Caves 2012: 3). It was clear that the mainstream Syrian opposition had no plan for the Kurds, instead asking the Kurds to come under the commandship of FSA without any preconditions which was impossible in view of Kurdish aspirations (Barfi 2013). The Rojava administration did not have a capacity comparable to that of the regime and the state/sub-state actors supportive of the regime (such as Iran, or the Iraqi Shia). Nor did it have support comparable to that of Syrian opposition from regional (e.g. Turkish) or international forces (such as the US during the early years of uprising). On the contrary, this geopolitical setting was further driving the Rojava revolution into a corner, for it was leaving the Kurds with no friends.

The second geopolitical constraint had to do with the attempts of international forces, the US and Russia in particular, to reorder the region through the global geopolitical contradictions centred on Syria (Unver 2016). Even though the core states are central to these hegemonic relations, they are dependent on converging interests with regional actors, which are conducted by means of continuous negotiations. While all actors try to self-position according to this hierarchical framework, Turkey and the Kurds in particular have benefited from the room to manoeuvre left between Russia and the US. Both of the former have some kind of relationship with both of the latter, unlike, for instance, the Assad regime which has long been cut off from the US. However, the Kurds did not have any leverage against Western states apart from their ability to fight. The implications of Jihadi-Wahhabi Islam and the Kurdish resistance to their attempts at genocide drew the attention of international mass media, which then pushed Western support for the Kurds in their fight against ISIS. Although this support *prima facie* instrumentalized the Kurdish movement, it ultimately also added to its international legitimacy.

The revolutionaries of Rojava engaged with these geopolitical constraints by formulating a third-way policy. Asya Abdullah, co-leader of the PYD, stated in the early days of the Rojava Revolution in 2013, that ‘despite the opposition of the regional and international forces, we continued our struggle by opting for a third way and we took big steps towards the construction of demo-

cratic autonomy' (Yeni Özgür Politika 2013). Accordingly, the Kurdish third way was conceptualized as an autonomous political strategy of the PKK-led Kurdish movement, beyond the historically confrontational hegemonic power structures of secularist nationalism (i.e. the Assad regime) and Islamist nationalism (i.e. the mainstream opposition) with their varying degrees of international backing. It is asserted to be a political strategy on the path to democratic confederalism, but not the ultimate goal in and of itself.

The geopolitical causality of the Rojava revolution lies in the processual interaction between the contradictions of different political constellations and the Kurdish engagement in this geopolitical setting with a third way policy. Given these two geopolitical constraints, the revolution has been a case of proving its social, economic and most importantly military capacity to sustain and push the regional and international forces to accept the revolution, if not officially recognize it. The unfolding of geopolitics, particularly after the Turkish invasion of Afrin in 2016, further confined the revolution. However, given the focus of this chapter on the constitutive elements of the revolution, an elaboration on these developments is beyond its scope.

## Conclusion

I have argued that *the international* was integral to the Rojava revolution all the way down. Building on a historical sociological conception of the international based on the structures of hegemony and dynamics of resistance, I have reflected on how the three particular processes involved in the interaction between *the global* and *the local* shaped revolutionary agency in Rojava: the historical sociology of regional state-formation; the ideological reconstitution in reaction to the upheaval of anti-systemic movements; and the geopolitics of the Syrian war. Accordingly, the historical sociology of state formation after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which locked state and non-state polities in a lasting impasse, is the causal precedent of Kurdish deprivation. The various experiences of the Kurds in endeavouring to escape from this impasse against the homogenizing states' repression form the historicity of the revolutionary agency in Rojava.

Conceiving itself as part of anti-systemic movements, the PKK has inter-actively engaged with the debate within these movements. This engagement has changed along with the transformation in world politics. The strongest impact was brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union, after which the

PKK-led movement reconsidered the ideological and organizational premises of the hegemonic path to national liberation. This process is central to the ideological reconstitution of revolutionary agency in Rojava.

Finally, obvious constraining conditions pertain to global geopolitics centred on the Syrian war. The constitution of world politics required renewed intervention by the hegemony-seeking powers in the region when regional hierarchies were renegotiated in the post-Arab Spring era. Given the historico-social dynamics, this has reshaped the relations between the states, different identity groups and non-state entities. The involvement of the revolutionaries of Rojava in this constellation with their semantic/ideological and spatiotemporal arsenal is constitutive of the geopolitical constitution of the revolutionary agency.

## Notes

- 1 I thank George Lawson for his detailed comments on the very first draft of this chapter.
- 2 I do not name my interviewees for obvious security concerns. I have used 7 of the interviews that I conducted as part of my doctoral research.
- 3 Sources including newspapers and interviews, on which this work is based, are only available in Kurdish, Turkish and French. Thus, all following translations of these sources are provided by the author.
- 4 I use the term 'PKK-led Kurdish movement' for the network of autonomous movements, parties, civil society organizations, armed groups and so on in four countries (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) and elsewhere. It refers to the Kurdish political bodies that are inspired by the ideological line of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, but have different organizational structures and, more importantly, carry on autonomous politics according to the (geo)political context of the country they operate in. This, however, should not be interpreted as if political decisions were exclusively made by the PKK leadership and imposed in a top-down fashion. The term covers this organizational complexity and takes the separation between the shared ideology and the autonomous decision-making processes fully into account.
- 5 On the PKK's relations with local Kurds: "The family backgrounds of members of other organizations are in the petty bourgeoisie or state bureaucracy. They did not want to shake hands with the people for

- whom they were struggling, hesitated to sit in the same place with the ordinary Kurds [...] The PKK, on the other hand, was forcing them to shake hands with the ordinary Kurds and in this way the PKK members won the ordinary people's hearts' (journalist/former activist, interviews, 18 May 2019).
- 6 On the PKK's use of violence: A number of interviewees mentioned that the PKK's strategically oriented use of violence mainly aimed at opening a space for mobilization in the Kurdish cities and towns, against other contemporary organizations and tribes which were already well-established.
  - 7 A founding member of the PKK defines the importance of the first guerrilla attack on Turkish military bases as 'it was an important step to successfully implementing guerrilla warfare theory in accordance with the character of the period and met the needs of the time' (Karayılan 2014: 62).
  - 8 According to world system scholars, these questions were asked in the West, from the late 60s on, which eventually led to the new social movements against the hegemonic reductionist politics based on identity or class (Wallerstein 2014: 164f.). A similar debate was to take place in Turkey, but only after the second half of 1980s as a result of attempts to understand the ideological roots of the leftist turmoil in the country. For instance, a feminist activist of Turkish background stated that 'we managed to organize a women's march for the first time in 1986. For me this was the end of turmoil caused by the defeat in 1980. This march was decisive.' (Activist, interview, 15 May 2019)
  - 9 In this context, by 'authority' he means senior ranks in the military chain of command.
  - 10 Particularly two books based on talks given by Öcalan (n.d., 1995) published in the early 1990s show the ways in which the interventions in party structure were carried out.
  - 11 Öcalan's analysis of nation-statism 'pushed him [towards transformation]. [...] He reaches radical democracy as a result of analysing power structures and institutions. [Thus,] his main analyses are those of mentality and power. He builds his analysis through the observation of the kind of structures that result from this mentality' (Kurdish activist, interview, 14 May 2019; author's translation).

