New Perspectives on Turkey (2025), 1–21
doi:10.1017/npt.2025.10063

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Beyond rupture and integration: decolonial recognition in the Kurdish struggle

Bülent Küçük and Ceren Özselçuk

Department of Sociology, Boğaziçi University, İstanbul, Turkey
Corresponding author: Bülent Küçük; Email: bulent.kucuk@bogazici.edu.tr

Abstract

The Kurdish movement in Turkey illustrates a complex struggle for political recognition and decolonization. The article examines this dual strategic orientation, focusing on the peace process initiated in October 2024 between the Turkish state and Kurdish representatives. Through a detailed and symptomatic reading of the two texts by Abdullah Öcalan, February Call and *Perspektif*, the article aims to demonstrate that the movement both interacts with the state to secure democratic prerequisites for political participation and continues to promote a radical critique of capitalist modernity and nation-state structures. Drawing upon Axel Honneth's recognition theory and Étienne Balibar's concept of "equaliberty," the struggle for recognition is no longer seen just to result in a depoliticization through governmental control, but is rethought as building the capacity to stage an ongoing, performative process that manages the constitutive tension between equality and autonomy within Kurdish decolonial practice. This approach raises questions about how the movement navigates state structures while promoting alternative social institutions and epistemic spaces, including the problematic site of communes as a form of democratic autonomous experimentation.

Keywords: Kurdish movement; recognition; equaliberty; autonomy; decolonial praxis; communes; peace process; Turkey

Introduction

Since the peace negotiation process was launched in October 2024, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan; PKK) declared its decision to disarm, announced its dissolution, and set forth its intention to pursue democratic and legal politics within an authoritarian regime that crosses ever-new thresholds in Turkey and a rapidly shifting political conjuncture in the Middle East. The article aims to analyze these developments as part of a broader project centered on a dual pursuit of decolonial recognition and democratic autonomy.

We examine two main texts, written during the ongoing peace negotiations by Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK, held on İmralı Island since 1999. The first text, delivered on February 27, 2025, hereafter referred to as the February Call (Öcalan 2025b), is a brief yet symbolically and politically significant statement

enunciating the disarmament and the dissolution of the PKK. It is expressed in a diplomatic tone related to negotiations with the state and widely circulated in national and international media. The second document, hereafter referred to as *Perspektif* (Öcalan 2025a), is a much longer manuscript, originally twenty-five handwritten pages, that presents, with sweeping generalizations, a gendered materialist philosophy of history and renewed social vision for the movement. Unlike the first text, *Perspektif* was initially shared internally with the organization's congress held on May 7–9, 2025, and sparked limited debate among Kurdish and socialist intellectuals after its dissemination on social media in early May. Overall, this process generated a "cautiously optimistic" atmosphere within the Kurdish public after fifty years of armed conflict and a "cautiously pessimistic" one, expecting a Sisyphus-like repetition of the same. It has also triggered a certain "beyond effect," hystericizing the stifled public sphere and elicited diverse reactions – from shock and disappointment to unwavering support for the leadership within different segments of the Kurdish community, and suspicion among the broader public and political opposition. Due to widespread mistrust of the regime, the lack of transparency in the process, and, more critically, the ongoing investment in structural racism, questions about the "real deal" behind closed doors have arisen, leading to multiple fantasies and interpretations that continue to evolve.[1]

Given the foundational role of leadership (as a persona and collective function) within the Kurdish movement, we find it essential to analyze these two texts – both independently and in relation to one another – to anticipate the movement's evolving conceptual framework and political strategies. We read these texts not only in terms of their manifest content but also through their implicit connotative layers, attending to the tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes that emerge both within and between them. By examining not only what is written but also what remains unspoken, we treat language as the constitutive contested arena, equivocal with associations and open to multiple interpretations across diverse contexts and viewpoints (Barthes 1977; Hall 2001).

Simultaneously, these two texts are composed within and address an intertextual space: they engage in a dialogical relationship, not only with state discourses but also with ongoing Kurdish debates concerning demands for recognition and autonomy. In fact, it is through acknowledging the dialogical character of the texts that we want to reframe the debate on recognition and introduce the concept of decolonial recognition. While partially accepting the bifurcation of recognition politics along the lines of governmental integration and emancipation, our objective is to underscore the transformative role of recognition in decolonial struggles.

Recognition and decolonial theories, while insightful, fail to fully grasp the specific dynamics of the Kurdish movement. Critiques of multicultural recognition argue that the latter, by focusing on legal inclusion and fictive equality, individualizes and depoliticizes insurgent struggles (Brown 1993; Žižek 2008). Decolonial thought

[1] The use of socio-psychoanalytical terms in the article is to highlight an affective charge, an extra of enjoyment that circulates with and mobilizes discourse. We come across such an affective investment in the conspiratorial question of "whether Kurdish parties are siding with the regime" that is posed again and again, even when Kurdish citizens have consistently sided with the opposition block and voted against the regime, while disproportionately suffering from the consequences.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emphasizes epistemic refusal of integration and rupture for self-governance (Coulthard 2014; McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2016; Simpson 2017). Both perspectives share the risk of underestimating how marginalized groups leverage legal and historical recognition to create political space in an increasingly authoritarian and late-colonial environment. By proposing the term decolonial recognition, we aim to elucidate the Kurdish movement's dual strategy of seeking formal recognition while simultaneously pushing for transformative social change and challenge the simple binary between integration and rupture, revealing a complex process of political positioning.

After summarizing a sequence of ideological shifts that characterize Kurdish decolonial history, we outline the theoretical reasons of the study by engaging with debates on the politics of recognition and decolonial premises. Then, we provide a critical assessment of the positions within the "decolonial turn" in Kurdish studies, further fleshing out our position of decolonial recognition. In the final sections, we provide a close reading of Öcalan's February Call and *Perspektif* texts, developing an interpretive analysis that integrates these insights to enhance the article's theoretical contributions.

Metamorphic becoming of the Kurdish movement

The PKK, founded in 1978 and led by Öcalan, along with its associated political institutions and branches, does not represent the entire Kurdish movement in Turkey. Nor does the modern Kurdish political awakening originate solely from this organization. Starting in the 1960s, Molla Mustafa Barzani, a prominent Peshmerga leader in Iraqi Kurdistan, inspired Kurds in Turkey through guerrilla activism. During this period, the establishment of Turkey's first explicitly pro-Kurdish party, the Turkish Kurdistan Democratic Party, in 1965 as the Turkish branch of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party, was a significant development. Meanwhile, as part of the rise of student movements in 1968, Kurdish students organized politically through the Workers' Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi; TİP) and the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (Devrimci Doğu Dernekleri Ocağı; DDKO). Often overlooked, these legacies played a crucial role in shaping the overall Kurdish insurgency. The broader leftist tradition and the legacy of the DDKO influenced the ideological foundations of the PKK's creation, highlighting its differences from earlier Kurdish regional insurgencies in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods (Küçük et al. 2023). These historical references are essential for understanding the later division of Kurdish politics, mainly into two traditions. The rivalry between the Barzani movement, which upholds a more traditional anti-colonial stance rooted in Iraq, and the Öcalan movement, which advocates a socialist anti-colonial ideal rooted in Turkey and Syria, dates to this period. While paying heed to these complex legacies, in this article, when we use the term Kurdish movement, we refer to the movement based in Turkey.

Since its founding, the PKK has presented an ontology of metamorphosis. We invoke this metaphor not to portray the movement as opportunistic, or to romanticize it, but rather to foreground its existential (discursive and organizational) capacity to recalibrate strategies, rearticulate its own conditions of possibility, and negotiate adaptive reconfigurations within contingent socio-historical contexts. Internal conflicts and ideological differences – such as civil–democratic initiatives

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existing alongside military units – are not anomalies but vital to its resilience. This diverse organizational structure of semi-autonomous units is held together by what the movement refers to as leadership (centered on the name and persona of Öcalan), which acts both as the master who issues the key signifiers and as the part that attracts the other parts of the movement into a semblance of a collective, embodying shared memories, ideals, and ideological alignment. Öcalan's writings are more than ideological statements; they serve as maps of resubjectivation – inciting desires, guiding and framing how it redefines itself in response to changing historical and political contexts.

Following its rapid growth after 1984, the date marking the start of the armed struggle, the movement underwent its first significant ideological shift in the post-Cold War era of the early 1990s (Öcalan 2025a). It shifted focus from building a unified socialist Kurdistan to exploring federative and autonomous solutions within the four separate Kurdish regions. The base moved from rural areas to the outskirts of major cities due to low-intensity warfare and large-scale forced displacement, resulting in a more heterogeneous composition. A second major ideological shift occurred after Öcalan's capture in 1999, marking a fundamental break with traditional Marxism and leading to a lasting transformation to this date that redefined the organization's ideology, structure, and political strategies. The social base shifted toward urban centers, and the movement restructured into multiple semi-autonomous branches, guided by principles of radical democracy, social ecology, gender equality, and self-governance under the banner of democratic modernity (Küçük 2019).

A third metamorphosis emerged after 2010 with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2012. The movement increasingly directed attention to Rojava, the Kurdish-majority region in northern Syria. It established a *de facto* presence by building autonomous institutions across cities and regions, including local and regional assemblies, women's organizations, universities, and schools, thereby gaining a regional character and the opportunity to pursue its vision through self-governance. It was militarily supported by a multi-ethnic and multi-religious coalition of Syrian Democratic Forces, estimated to range between 50,000 and 100,000, and logistically assisted by US and coalition forces. Meanwhile, the Turkish state responded by extending its influence through a series of military operations and establishing state ideological apparatuses beyond its borders, establishing twelve military bases and 113 points in northern Syria to reinforce its sovereignty claims over disputed territories (EUAA 2023, 22).

Before the consolidation of the autonomous structures in Rojava, the Kurdish movement had already been engaging with the Turkish state through intermittent negotiations and low-intensity conflict. Between 2009 and 2015, two separate peace processes were launched. In 2009, the state's citizenship regime underwent a partial transformation with the introduction of the "Kurdish Opening," also known as the Oslo process. This critical policy shift granted "partial recognition" of Kurdish collective rights, such as the establishment of TRT 6 (now TRT Kurdî), a state-funded and controlled Kurdish television channel.[2] The state abruptly stopped the initiative, and thousands of Kurdish politicians were subjected to mass arrests.

[2] We proposed "partial recognition" as a term to highlight the privatization and commodification of social and cultural rights by the regime and acknowledge the ontological impossibility of full recognition (Küçük and Özselçuk 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In 2013, a more comprehensive initiative, designated as the "Resolution Process," was commenced. This phase involved the formation of numerous civic committees and organizations, including the Wise People's Committee (Akil İnsanlar Heyeti), which aimed to facilitate the socialization of the peace process. A significant outcome of this phase was the introduction of Kurdish as an elective language course in public educational institutions. Despite these developments, the peace process ultimately failed due to the electoral strengthening of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi; HDP), resulting in the Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP) loss of parliamentary majority in 2015, and the state's intolerance toward the movement's establishment of self-governance and self-defense structures in Rojava. The collapse of the second peace process marked more than just the end of negotiations. It led to a resurgence of intense urban warfare, involving armed conflict by the organized Kurdish youth and extreme violence by the state, resulting in cruel killings and mass displacement of Kurdish civilians. This triggered a new phase of authoritarian consolidation by the regime, plunging the country into a prolonged political crisis (Küçük 2019).

Nearly a decade later, a third initiative, which was labeled by the state as the "Terror-Free Turkey" process, was launched when Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi; MHP), the AKP's coalition partner since 2015, in a sudden move on October 1, 2024, in the opening day of the parliament, shook hands with members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi; DEM), reigniting debate over a potential new peace process. Soon after, on February 27, 2025, Öcalan sent a message from İmralı prison, delivered by a delegation via live broadcast from a hotel in Taksim, İstanbul, addressing a large contingent of local and international press, whereby he called for the disbandment of the PKK, framing this as a historic opportunity to transition from armed struggle to democratic negotiation. The PKK held a congress in early May, officially endorsing his appeal and announcing its dissolution. At this congress, Öcalan's manuscript, *Perspektif*, was distributed and later shared on social media. Following this, a highly choreographed disarmament ritual took place in Süleymaniye, in the region of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq in July 2025, during which thirty militants, composed of an equal number of men and women, led by a prominent female cadre, publicly burned their weapons in a ceremony invoking a solemn version of Newroz celebrations in the presence of journalists, politicians, and state officials. Open to a rich semiological analysis, this theatrical sequence functioned as a "rite of passage," marking a "liminal moment" of symbolic repositioning for the movement.

As this third process is unfolding, it is accompanied by waves of authoritarian crackdowns on the main opposition party, including the arrest and removal by appointing trustees of numerous Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi; CHP) mayors. Hundreds of politicians, party officials, and municipal officials have been detained on alleged charges of corruption, bribery, and terrorism, and more recently espionage, with İstanbul Mayor and presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu being the most notable, along with journalists and outspoken youth. As competing narratives attempt to decipher the state's ultimate purpose, it remains unclear how the current authoritarian regime will address issues related to the democratic redistribution of political power, and why the Kurdish movement has made such a

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

significant strategic shift, focusing on what appears to be a non-reciprocal commitment to democratic struggle and civilian politics. Rather than trying to decode the state's "ultimate" purpose, our analysis seeks to interpret the movement's reasoning based on Öcalan's texts and statements.

Decolonial recognition

Articulating recognition theories with decolonial critique may seem inconsistent, as they originate from different theoretical traditions rooted in distinct historical and geographical contexts. Recognition theories, from liberal and republican perspectives,[3] gained prominence in Western liberal democracies during the 1990s, sparking a debate about the transformative potential of multicultural citizenship and its limits for substantial democratization. The decolonial theory is based on indigenous resistance to settler colonialism in the Global South, primarily Latin America, calling for the "self-recognition" of indigenous knowledge and institutions, disengagement from, if not a complete rejection of, colonial and sovereign frameworks.[4] By considering the various positions in recognition theories and their critiques, particularly from a decolonial perspective, we aim to set up a field of debate that enables us to pose some key questions: What drives the states to initiate processes of recognition? What are marginalized communities after in these processes? Do these policies reinforce the existing political regime, or do they create new political spaces to empower the marginalized? These questions encircle the contradictory ways in which recognition politics can bifurcate along two paths: its capacity to foster emancipatory change and uphold systems of control.

Scholars from diverse theoretical backgrounds engage in the debate about the most effective methodologies for addressing symbolic inequalities, presenting contrasting viewpoints on the significance of recognition in promoting social justice. Charles Taylor (1994), a leading republican multiculturalist who examines the issue through the framework of citizenship, argues that recognizing cultural differences is essential for upholding individual dignity and ensuring equal participation, and asserts that neglecting these differences constitutes a form of symbolic violence. Engaging with this concern and adopting a Marxist-informed framework, Nancy Fraser (1997) analytically distinguishes between recognition and redistribution, while arguing that genuine social justice necessitates the simultaneous addressing of economic inequalities and cultural misrecognition. Critical theorists such as Slavoj Žižek (2008) and Wendy Brown (1993), attentive to affective and psychic dynamics, argue that recognition politics serve as a domestication of radical and transformative politics through liberal tolerance and governmental incorporation. This leads to the

[3] In its liberal variant, recognition theories attempt to reconcile individual freedoms with affirmative cultural group rights (Kymlicka 1995); in its Republican variant, they highlight the intersubjective relationships between dominant and subordinate groups and position the recognition by the other as elemental for building social justice (Taylor 1994).

[4] Decolonial perspective draws from Fanon's critique of Hegel's concept of intersubjective recognition, questioning its ability to confront the colonial condition. In particular, Fanon (2008) takes issue with Hegel's ontology of being (being for the others) by introducing a concept like "not-being" into the colonial situation of recognition, whereby the recognition of the black man is afflicted by a "double-bind" of being black and being black for the white gaze (Macherey 2012, 14).

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

depoliticization of struggles by framing structural inequalities as cultural differences and portraying collective demands as individualized choice.

While critical theories of recognition offer valuable insights into social and symbolic inequalities, they often fall short in addressing deeply rooted colonial structures and epistemic violence that shape the experiences of colonized communities. Decolonial theory gives a necessary response, highlighting the colonial matrix of "power/knowledge" and calling for a radical break with it. It challenges recognition politics by focusing on self-determination beyond state-sanctioned inclusion. Like the critical theories of recognition, decolonial critique also argues that multicultural inclusion often functions as a form of governmentality, absorbing struggles for autonomy into relations of power that ultimately reproduce colonial hierarchies (Coulthard 2014; Hale 2002; Povinelli 1998). Unlike the governmentality critique of recognition, however, the decolonial perspective revalues local and place-based epistemologies and institutions as a regenerative force, emphasizes the importance of "self-recognition," and offers an alternative vision of self-governance (McGranahan 2016; Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 19; Simpson 2016; Simpson 2017, 179).

Our approach differs from the briefly outlined decolonial perspective for two main reasons. The first relates to the conceptualization of recognition itself. By framing recognition not only as the acknowledgment of cultural difference but also as a demand for equality, we aim to highlight the equality aspect in decolonial contexts to make sense of the fundamental symbolic import of struggling for recognition. In this regard, Axel Honneth's (Honneth and Fraser 2003) reinterpretation of recognition provides a pertinent analytical framework. He moves beyond the distinction between material and symbolic/cultural dimensions of recognition, demonstrating that redistributive struggles are encompassed under the normative social category of recognition itself. The second point of divergence relates to the different strategies political subjects use. Decolonial struggles employ adaptable strategies tailored to various colonial contexts, often involving demands for both legal and symbolic recognition as part of broader political actions. If recognition serves only state interests, why do marginalized groups continue to fight for it? The key issue is not only understanding what the state seeks to gain from recognition, but also how colonized peoples can leverage opportunities for self-expression and political agency that recognition – be it partial or instrumental – can provide.

To examine how these dynamics unfold on the ground, we turn to Kurdish situations, where the tension between refusal and recognition is particularly pronounced. The Kurdish population, roughly forty million across Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, remains one of the largest stateless peoples worldwide. Kurds have experienced diverse situations both temporally and spatially – from enjoying autonomy to the denial of the most basic rights – which influence their unique political actions, demands, and resistance tactics in each country. This diversity underscores the complex and unequal ways stateless and marginalized groups relate to, challenge, or leverage legal recognition. Focusing solely on rupture or epistemic refusal risks overlooking the empirical complexity, strategic variety, and tactical ambiguities in Kurdish decolonial politics. The Kurdish movement illustrates that decolonial struggles do not reject recognition; instead, they navigate its contradictions by resisting its limitations and strategically utilizing the opportunities it presents. The complexity of Kurdish situations requires seeing decolonial recognition

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a broad, historically grounded spectrum, encompassing context-specific strategies across multiple borders. As the foundation for strategic and transformative actions, it encompasses a repertoire of diverse actions and discourses, ranging from demands for legal recognition to calls for self-governance, and from armed struggle to non-violent civil disobedience actions.

Although the Kurdish movement diverges from the traditional focus on rupture, it remains within a decolonial framework, treating recognition as an ongoing, contested process that leverages a long-term, transformative politics. This trial is an inherently uneven and continuous process, involving mutual subjectivation among the parties involved, where each act of recognition contains elements of misrecognition. Reconceived this way, the scope of recognition politics is no longer confined to specific struggles related to class, gender, decoloniality, and so on. Instead, it is reframed as the concrete universal that underpins every struggle for equality and autonomy. From this expanded understanding, decolonial recognition means restoring inter-communal and historical coexistence as *autonomous* and *equal entities* at both the (1) socio-historical and (2) politico-representational register. The former aligns with a demand for epistemic justice to acknowledge Kurdish part in shared history, thereby challenging the teleology of a homogenizing national narrative and fostering democratic historical representation. It also involves restoring mnemonic sovereignty after a long period of dispossession from symbolic infrastructures (e.g. mother tongue), sites (e.g. ancestral burial sites), and rituals of remembrance for collective memory. Last, but not least, it entails internal decolonization; a reconstruction of colonized and devalued social subjectivities and civil institutions to restore the "moral order" of Kurdish society. The second register, on the other hand, entails recognizing Kurds as equal citizens within the Turkish Republic, alongside Turks, and democratizing political representation as a step toward decolonial inclusion. Within this framework of democratization, it also involves recognizing Kurdish self-governance as an expression of ontological pluralism (i.e. institutionalizing decentralization, strengthening local autonomies, and dismantling practices of authoritarian tutelage).

Decolonial turn in Kurdish studies

In recent years, Kurdish studies have undergone a significant epistemological shift, often referred to as a "decolonial turn," particularly among a new generation of Kurdish scholars in the diaspora, whose academic work and presence have expanded substantially over the past twenty years (Açık et al. 2023; Duruiz 2020; Kurt and Özok-Gündoğan 2024; Sunca 2023; Yadırgı 2017).[5] This decolonial turn builds on earlier intellectual currents within the Kurdish community that began to emerge gradually in the early 1960s, overdetermined by anti-colonial liberation struggles in Algeria,

[5] Decolonial Kurdish scholars regularly face the challenge of proving that the Kurdish region has been subjected to colonization. In addition to the nationalist epistemic frameworks shaping Turkey's academic institutions, economic reductionist models ignore the form of domination that goes beyond extracting resources and exploiting labor power, extending to ontological and biopolitical subjugation. Since, in addition to economic dispossession (Bektaş et al. 2025; Yadırgı 2017), Kurdish dispossession involves stripping away linguistic community, historical identity, political representation, and self-governing institutions, it signifies a colonial situation that deprives Kurds of the collective resources necessary for community reproduction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mozambique, Vietnam, and Cuba (Çelik 2020), the insurgency led by Molla Mustafa Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1960s, and Marxist currents inspired by the 1968 youth movements. This conjecture planted the initial seeds of anti-colonial thought among Kurdish students in Turkey's major cities. The widespread adoption of the colonial thesis and its transformation into a mass political framework occurred primarily after the 1980 military coup. Notably, the prison resistance of PKK detainees and their courtroom defenses became pivotal moments in shaping the popular discourse (Aydınkaya 2024, 853).

The pioneering sociological contributions of İsmail Beşikçi significantly shaped the reverberation of the decolonial debate within the scholarly field. He presents two interconnected claims to explain the Kurdish colonial experience, which he sees as distinct from traditional coloniality. First, he describes it as a "beyond colony" experience: unlike indigenous groups in settler colonies, who often receive symbolic recognition despite political subjugation, Kurds face epistemic erasure, with their language denied. Second, he considers Kurdistan an "international colony," divided among four states, where Kurdish identity is continuously erased (Beşikci 2004). His contribution not only redefines the Kurdish issue within the framework of the "coloniality of [state] power" (Quijano 2000) but also lays an important foundation for future scholars to challenge the symbolic violence in mainstream academic narratives.

However, the advent of decolonial methodologies in recent years has introduced both diversity and polarization within this scholarly realm. Generally, two principal epistemic dispositions can be identified. The first orientation engages with the ideological transformations within the Kurdish movement since the early 2000s: a shift from a traditional anti-colonial struggle based on rupture to an innovative decolonial vision, culminating in the ambitious concept of "democratic autonomy." This approach understands coloniality not just as external domination but also as an internal and intersectional system of control embedded in social hierarchies, knowledge systems, and gender relations (Açık et al. 2023; Üstündağ 2023). It emphasizes the creation of alternative political and knowledge institutions that transcend the nation-state framework and redefine sovereignty, belonging, and equality by prioritizing the agency of those implicated (Göner 2023).

The second perspective relies on a more traditional anti-colonial approach, inspired by Beşikçi's idea of Kurdistan as an "international (beyond) colony." From this standpoint, decolonization involves either gaining self-governance through regional autonomy within a federal system or creating an independent, eventual unified Kurdistan (Yarkın 2019). From this perspective, the democratic autonomy project is often viewed as unclear, abstract, and overly idealistic in comparison to efforts to establish an independent Kurdish state or a state-like federal system (Aydınkaya 2024). Overall, these contrasting perspectives reveal two competing imaginaries of decolonization: one envisions a radical transformation that challenges the modern nation-state, patriarchy, and capitalism, while the other seeks to reconfigure sovereignty within the boundaries of the existing interstate system.[6]

[6] The Kurdish political landscape illustrates these contrasting orientations in two models that provide a conceptual framework for distinction, namely, the *de jure* federal autonomy of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) and the *de facto* democratic autonomy in Rojava in Syria (Sunca 2023). While the formation in

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From our decolonial standpoint, the anti-colonial orthodoxy reveals significant limitations by prioritizing territorial sovereignty while overlooking the deeper social, feminist, and decolonial dimensions of democratic autonomy. In contrast, the universalist democratic autonomy perspective tends to downplay the affective structures and anticipations arising from the Kurdish desire to remain distinct as a national community, leaving the administrative and regional scope of autonomy within the state-based international system ambiguous. In this context, the Kurdish will to secure a proper place in the world – as the largest stateless nation – can be seen not just as a form of nationalist resentment but as an expression of an injured identity's demand for equality.

Building on and critically engaging with both views, we propose a theoretical framework that navigates their differences. We suggest that the ideological divide originates from an inherent tension between democracy/equality and autonomy/liberty, creating an ongoing contradiction. Autonomy alone cannot fully achieve societal decolonization, just as democracy alone cannot guarantee external decolonization of Kurdish territories. To address both internal–social and external–political decolonization, we propose a dual-parameter approach inspired by Étienne Balibar's (2014) concept of "equaliberty," where equality is a prerequisite for liberty, and liberty requires equality. This perspective enables us to view the Kurdish case as a space where autonomy and democracy are in a mutually supportive yet inherently tense relation, providing a nuanced understanding of social transformation and political self-determination. Without autonomy, democracy risks becoming centralized, bureaucratic and homogenizing; without democratic equality, autonomy might become exclusionary or arbitrary. The movement is compelled to keep a balance between these principles to pursue a political project that is both locally rooted and universally resonant.

In the following section, we query how the dual-axis decolonial approach is articulated in Öcalan's recent two texts. If we interpret these texts as a strategic blueprint for the movement's forthcoming phase, then the question arises as to whether and to what extent this emerging vision aligns with, redefines, or even broadens the decolonial vision we proposed above.

February call: navigating between integration and decolonial recognition

> Throughout a history spanning over 1,000 years, Turks and Kurds have been compelled to maintain an alliance – based mainly on voluntary cooperation – to preserve their existence and withstand hegemonic powers. Over the past two centuries, capitalist modernity has sought to undermine this alliance . . . this process was especially hastened through the uniformity-imposing

Rojava envisions a transformative alternative to the capital-nation-state model, its lack of official recognition makes it vulnerable to marginalization and potential external recolonization. Precisely because it lacks formal recognition, its viability depends less on institutional guarantees than on the shifting moral influence of global public opinion and the volatile balance of imperial desires in the Middle East. Although the KRI's formal recognition as an autonomous region offers relative stability to its political system and presents itself as a model of formal decolonization, it remains vulnerable to social and economic recolonization.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> (*tek tipçi*) interpretations by the Republic. The fundamental task today is to reorganize this historic relationship, which has become fragile under current conditions, in a spirit of fraternity, without neglecting one's beliefs (Öcalan 2025b, hereafter translation ours).

The excerpt above is from the February Call that defines the boundaries of acceptable discourse, which can be read in two different ways and at two levels of historical and political narrative. In a first reading and viewed as a historical narrative, the text addresses Turkish nationalism by referencing the shared history of Turks and Kurds and the mythical idea of a lasting alliance. It describes a "voluntary cooperation" spanning over 1,000 years (implied are the Battle of Malazgirt of 1071 and the joint forces of Turks and Kurds during the Turkish War of Independence as key events shaping the Turkish nationalist narrative). The symptom in this fantasy of an enduring relation of "fraternity" is linked to "capitalist modernity," imagined as an alien ideological force that weakened the bonds between Kurds and Turks. This tactical framing invokes the anti-imperialist rhetoric shared by both the socialist left and the nationalist Islamist state regime, which finds its populist currency in "domestic and national" (*yerli ve milli*). The emphasis in the text, then, on promoting "voluntary cooperation" risks mirroring the trope employed by Turkish nationalism to oppose Kurdish claims for equality and autonomy: that "Kurds and Turks are like flesh and nails; they bore common burdens in the founding of the Republic and, without discrimination, attained all positions in the state." Indeed, the similarity in both rhetorics has sparked debate within the Kurdish community about the compromising tone of the text and the dangers of ideological assimilation that it slides into.

In a second reading, though, one might argue that the text reframes the Kurds alongside the Turks as equal participants in the nation-building process, challenging the Turkish ethnocentric historical narrative. From the Seljuk period through the Republic, the official narrative – reconstructed and invented anachronistically by imputing an essentialist origin and telos to Turkishness and erasing the history of diversely populated imperial and national formations that prevailed in the region – portrays Turks as the sole political actors, erasing the constitutive roles of other communities and ethnicities. By including Kurds as equal contributors alongside Turks, the text pluralizes the traditionally exclusive history, overturning Turkish ethnocentrism and placing both communities on equal footing, highlighting their continuous historical agency, and demanding equal symbolic and political representation. This brings into relief the plurality of inherited histories and ancestral legacies that ethnocentric denialism has suppressed. In doing so, Kurds assert their agency not only by positioning themselves as equals with Turks in national formation but also by rejecting the status of a minority.

This articulation reflects a deep-seated frustration with the systematic denial of Kurdish existence, particularly following the 1923 Lausanne Treaty and the 1924 Constitution,[7] which institutionalized a homogenizing nationalist framework. For the

[7] The Treaty of Lausanne (1923), the 1921 and 1924 Constitutions, and Mustafa Kemal's early statements (1920 and 1923) serve as key reference points for understanding both the historical background of Turkish–Kurdish relations and the ideological basis of current political demands.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kurds, such erasure constitutes not only a historical injustice but also an exclusion from the very political community to which they contributed during its foundational struggle. Importantly, this discourse derives its moral authority from the sacrifices and shared struggles of previous generations, especially during the War of Independence. By invoking the memory of collective sacrifice and the promise of "fraternity," the Kurdish movement situates its claims within a narrative of broken commitments, arguing that republican elites failed to uphold the promises of equality and autonomy made during the founding period. Rather than representing a withdrawal from the national framework, this constitutes a strategic act of presence – a refusal of marginalization, coupled with a pursuit of transforming the regime from within. When read as a dialogical engagement with the dominant ideology, it may be that the call for recognition based on universal law is supplemented by "fraternity" as a familial ethical code, functioning as a root paradigm aiming at creating an affective resonance that would open a space for repairing Kurdish–Turkish relations and at the same time "enable these to be transformed" (Mardin 1992, 5; Sirman 2014).

So, the February Call can be read in at least two different ways. The emphasis on "shared history" and "fraternity" appears to align with the Turkish nationalist and Islamist discourse, adapting to and accommodating the state's dominant ideological framework. It can also be interpreted as a strategy of refusal, and a deliberate engagement with the "one nation, one state" dispositive, seeking to challenge it from within, unsettle its historical assumptions, and redefine its terms. It advocates for transforming the citizenship regime to embrace pluralism – albeit a limited and an exclusionary one that erases the histories of other Muslim and non-Muslim ethnic and religious communities such as Alevis, Armenians, Greeks, and the Jews – and constructing a shared constitutional framework in which Kurds and Turks engage on equal terms.

> The solutions of establishing a separate nation-state, federation, administrative autonomy, and culturalism, which stem from the rise of extreme nationalism, cannot address the sociological realities of historical societies. Respect for identities, their freedom to express themselves and organize democratically, and the socio-economic and political structures that each segment of society grounds itself in are only possible with the existence of a democratic society and political sphere (Öcalan 2025b).

Viewed as a political narrative, a first reading would situate the message within the boundaries of the Turkish state's discourse, which delivers Kurdish political agency to integrationist, if not assimilationist, motivations of "peace with the Kurds." Indeed, at the descriptive level, the text dismisses all current forms of self-governance without providing any alternatives. It is as if the text abandons the decolonial aspirations regarding the recognition of collective rights and self-governance demands of the Kurdish movement and collapses back on the liberal model of legal rights, with its emphasis on the recognition of identity differences and individual property-based freedom of thought. It depoliticizes the Kurdish struggle for autonomy and equality. If this is more than just a tactical move in negotiations, one might wonder what keeps the Kurdish movement rooted in decolonial principles. How are collective Kurdish rights, the history of dispossession, and self-determination ambitions addressed when

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

all possible models of self-determination are dismissed? As discussed before, in the early 2000s, the Kurdish movement adopted democratic autonomy/confederalism, a paradigm rooted in grassroots participation, communal autonomy, and horizontal, community-based structures. Within this framework, autonomy has never been purely administrative; it has always been seen as a decolonial practice – reshaping subjectivities, creating alternative epistemic institutions, and imagining politics beyond state-imposed categories. The February Call, however, seems to abandon this vision by delaying systemic change to an undefined "democratic society," reducing decolonial resistance to a conciliatory narrative: epistemic pluralization is given up, leaving decolonization suspended rather than enacted.

However, there can be a second, associative reading that redefines and reframes the "acceptable boundaries" from a democratic autonomy perspective. Indeed, this reading, while remaining on the margins, is being elaborated and transmitted by sections of the movement's cadre, especially by those directly involved in the peace negotiation process (Çiçek 2025). In its brief and universalizing style that puts democratization at the forefront, the text can be interpreted as formulating the minimum (and at the same time, the maximalist) conditions to create the political (battle)ground for the negotiation of the peace process. If we regard the "respect for identities" in the text not within the boundaries of liberal vein of recognition, but rather in its broadened definition, including the demand for equality, which we associated with decolonial recognition; and if we read the "freedom of expression" in the text not as a property of the individual but rather as a public good for establishing the "political sphere," then the text can be interpreted as a crucial intervention to revitalize the political increasingly deadened and pulverized by the authoritarian regime.

The new era and the new *Perspektif*

Perspektif, organized into seven thematic sections, covers many issues not addressed in the February call and therefore warrants a more extensive discussion than we can provide here. It revisits and highlights key points that link Öcalan's autobiographical account and conceptual innovations with the theoretical and ideological shifts and reformulations of the movement since the early 2000s. While a comprehensive analysis of Öcalan's intellectual development is beyond this article's scope, it is sufficient here to note his transition from an earlier anti-colonial Marxist stance to a post-Marxist framework that incorporates anarcho-federalist, eco-communalist, and feminist ideas. Indeed, he engages in a double critique in this text, pointing to the dead ends of the state (Soviet Union) and market socialist (China) models, as well as the anti-colonial orthodoxy. By replicating the nation-state-capital alignment and failing to address and develop institutional capacity to deal with the ecological destruction caused by industrialization and patriarchal domination, these experiments have ultimately served to fuel capitalist modernity. In this sense, he proposes democratic modernity as the only substantial and universalizing horizon that captures the complexity and difficulty of social transformation and decolonization.

On one hand, the references to Bakunin and Kropotkin in the third section, titled "The Binary of State and the Commune in Historical Society," indicate his shift from a totalizing and essentialist view of historical materialism, where revolutionary agency

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is preconceived, to a conjunctural analysis, where it is constructed through concrete practices in a complex field of forces and counter forces.[8] He displaces class and introduces the commune as the entry point. He replaces class- and state-based narratives with civilizational narratives that emphasize symbolic and reproduction (feminine)-oriented transitions – rather than purely economic and techno-productionist ones – as drivers of history.

On the other hand, Öcalan's framework, centered on the commune and gender dynamics, neither explicitly engages with the categories of race and racialization of the division of labor, nor directly initiates a critical discussion with the decolonial canon on the complex of coloniality and capitalist modernity. Nevertheless, the text makes important contributions to decolonial critique. In the fifth section, titled "Kurd and Kurdistan Reality," he invokes the colonial condition of the Kurds and connects the entering of the modern Republic to the historical stage with the erasure and denial of the existence of Kurds. However, by distinguishing the Kurdish situation from other colonial situations and by referencing "Judenratization,"[9] he claims to go beyond the dominant assumptions of the decolonial critique. He suggests that while anti-colonial movements often successfully oppose external rule, they tend to replicate the social hierarchies, violence, and nation-state centralization of capitalist modernity that were inherited from colonial powers. Öcalan claims to revise his previous stance and go beyond the explanatory framework of coloniality as he aims to shift the focus of decolonial critique from one that centers on external colonial domination to that of the dynamics of internal colonization within.

With this summary in mind, the following questions arise: how does the text engage with and expand upon the decolonial dual strategy that we argue operates along two axes of recognition and transformation? How do the commune and gender entry points that we find in the text provide a horizon of decolonial liberation from capitalist modernity?

Problematic: internal and external decolonization

For Öcalan, coloniality of the Kurds is the "dark" underside of modernity. In the case of the Republic, it enabled the formation of an ethno-nationalist unity, while leading to "the erasure and destruction of the concept and reality of Kurds and Kurdistan" (Öcalan 2025a). We interpret conceptual/epistemic erasure as a form of symbolic violence that disavows the Kurdish presence by rendering it absent from language, history, territorial control, and the political imaginary. His analysis so far resonates with the perspective of decolonial scholars, who unveil the persistence of "colonial logic" in Western modernity (see, for instance, Mignolo 2007). At the same time, Öcalan perhaps does not engage with this scholarship as closely as expected because he reclaims the situation of Kurdish coloniality as a unique historical experience – key, here, are the breakdown of symbolic institutions, the impossibility of mourning

[8] This echoes Grubacic and Graeber's (2004) description of anarchist traditions: instead of developing overarching theories, anarchists focus on creating alternative practices and organizational forms in the here and now.

[9] We created this English word to translate the Turkish "Judenratlaşma," which in German, "Judenrat" refers to Jewish councils established by the Nazi regime to carry out orders. Metaphorically, it signifies the extreme violence of an oppressive regime in destroying the moral fabric of the oppressed.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the death of ancestors, and more significantly, the prohibitive repression of Kurdish in public and as an educational language, thus rendering Kurds silent and symbolically precarious by way of impairing their right to free speech, right to memory, and right to community.

> The Kurds are a cultural remnant in Dersim, Bingöl, and the Zagros. Their tribes have disbanded, their language is now ineffective, and sectarian conflicts and tribal family feuds persist. What is happening goes beyond colonialism – it is more like a dump. A society turned into a landfill, a cemetery. Even now, bones still linger in Dersim's valleys, caves, and streams (Öcalan 2025a).

To interpret the text, the unique situation of Kurds as an exception stems from a breakdown in the moral economy of the Kurdish community. This is why we think he describes this situation as "beyond colonization," aiming to highlight the internal effects of external colonization. Yes, colonial power operates externally, coercing the transformation of native institutions into ideological apparatuses of an expanded state. However, this external colonization, marked by primitive state violence, imposes a particular economy of oppression in the Kurdish case. It results not only in a loss of autonomy but also in "a tragic condition" where Kurdish existence is reduced to that of "the living dead." Destroying moral fabric and the social foundations of Kurdish civil society, such as family, tribes, and religious orders – all parts of the commune – it leads to the degeneration of mentalities and bodies, hindering their ability to flourish, identify, and resist as a (trans)regional community. Öcalan uses "Judenratization" to describe a disintegrative social condition inherent in internal colonization, which divides the civil organs of the Kurdish community into isolated factions, pits one against another, and incorporates some parts as extensions and guards of the state apparatus.[10]

Subjectivation: recognition of political capacity

The primary objective of the Kurdish struggle, including armed struggle, has historically been liberation from external occupation, albeit always accompanied by internal/social decolonization, which is an indispensable precondition for the former. This struggle, to cite a previous statement by Öcalan, while "not won," is also "not lost" (Öcalan 2025a). As an enigmatic sentence with double negation, it requires interpretation, which we find clues for in *Perspektif*. First, he clearly emphasizes that the issue of emancipation remains a deeply rooted and unsolved problem. However, what is achieved through struggle is that Kurds have awakened from a state of living death, the conditions for a lasting decolonial struggle have been established, and a renewed political subjectivity and symbolic order have been built from the wreckage of Kurdish society. Indeed, for him, this process of resubjectivation is the most significant achievement of the Kurdish movement, which led to the transformation of the Kurdish people into an "undeniable political subject," having asserted itself

[10] Öcalan's description of Kurdish society using the term "Judenratization" has generated controversy, as it is perceived as a derogatory remark and an insult to prominent Kurdish political leaders.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through the resilience of a fifty-year struggle. The movement has gained enough collective confidence to negotiate with the state from a position of strength. One might say that Öcalan is presenting an argument here to alleviate the anxiety and criticisms around surrendering to the state, voiced by the Kurdish public. Another interpretation, however, is that it prompts the shifting of the question from the object to the subject of recognition: what is recognized here is not a specific right, a status, a partial gain of recognition, measured by legal victories, but the very political capacity to be recognized as such. This is a subjective power that forces the state to acknowledge it. From this decolonial perspective, the struggle for recognition, rather than leading to governmental depoliticization, emerges as a prerequisite for social transformation and even for moving beyond a politics of recognition.

If this perspective is taken, engagement with the state can also be seen not as a contradiction, concession, or assimilation, but as a strategic and dialogical necessity. Similarly, peace can be understood not only as the cessation of violence, but also as an ongoing and incomplete process of political reconstruction of coexistence, exposed to reversals, partial satisfaction of demands, and the formidable risk of reverting to violent encounters in different forms. It can pave the way for the repositioning of the former utmost enemies (e.g. Devlet Bahçeli), shifting their direction into being active participants in the construction of peace negotiations. Recognition, when understood as the recognition of a political capacity, emerges as the constitutive lever that conditions the reciprocal strategies between the movement and the state, rather than a unilateral give-away by each party.

The commune: the social bond of democratic modernity

> Historical materialism has to replace its foundational focus on class struggle with the concept of the "commune" (Öcalan 2025a).

> Marx starts history with classes. However, the beginning of the problematic does not begin with classes but develops around women's sociality (Öcalan 2025a).

The section on "The Binary of State and the Commune in Historical Society" is essential for redefining the movement's political and social vision. Öcalan proposes the concepts of the commune and women's liberation as dual entry points for historical materialism to critically challenge both the Marxist orthodoxy – represented by Soviet central planning – and the anti-colonial orthodoxy (exemplified, for instance, by the case of the Algerian independence movement). These paradigms are critiqued for their exclusive focus on class divisions, uncritical acceptance of industrialism, reproduction of the nation-state model, and a lack of consciousness about patriarchy. In a wholesale revision of historical materialism, spanning from the Neolithic era to the present, he contends that social and historical transformation is primarily driven not by class struggle but by the ongoing contradiction between state power and communal life worlds, as well as between male-dominated and female-led societies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We want to make two points here. First, given that it is not uncommon for anti-colonial struggles to draw on and invent the ancient civilizations of their ancestors – to heal the shame of colonized bodies and valorize their heritage by reinventing it (Césaire 2000, 92) – the reference to the Neolithic era is not that archaic, or a sign of negligence of historical knowledge. Just as Black people revalorize earlier African civilizations, it seems that Öcalan returns to Mesopotamian civilization and invents a historical narrative based on the region's multiculturalism and its gynocentric social order, to build a vision of the future grounded in this legacy and distinguished from anti-colonial and ethno-nationalism.

Second, considering the analysis of "Judenratization" – the devastation of traditional Kurdish social institutions such as family, tribe, and religious orders under colonial conditions – the emphasis on the commune can be understood not only as an alternative to constructing an independent nation-state but also as a key institutional mechanism to rebuild social bonds amid the symbolic and moral disintegration and fragmentation of Kurdish communal life. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether he considers the commune a democratic substitute for these older institutions or a complementary structure that acts as the fundamental unit of social and moral life. Compared with the lengthy sections on other topics, he devotes little space to the concept of the commune. It can be argued that the Kurdish movement is already familiar with the idea of the commune, given Öcalan's rich body of texts on the subject and the movement's engagement with it. Discussions about the commune and its presentation, which is capable at a local scale of addressing issues related to autonomy, direct democracy, social ecology, feminism (Jineology), multiculturalism, self-defense, self-governance, libertarian municipalities, and elements of a cooperative economy (Öcalan 2017), have been ongoing within the movement for at least twenty years. The federation of the communes is viewed as the only feasible institution for establishing a democratic regional governance (i.e. confederation) with the capacity for substantial internal decolonization and conflict de-escalation – this is seen as accurate not only for the Kurdish region as a whole but also for the Middle East, Israel-Palestine, Arab states, and even Turkic countries.

Concluding remarks and the question of the commune

In this article, we examined the evolving strategies of the Kurdish movement mainly within the context of Turkey's recent peace process. We performed a close reading of two key texts by Abdullah Öcalan: February Call and *Perspektif*. In conducting a double reading of both texts, we argued that the Kurdish movement displays a dual strategic orientation. On one side, it engages with the state through negotiations aimed at securing the necessary preconditions for the peace process, which are democratic conditions to reactivate the political sphere that has been withering away under the authoritarian regime. On the other side, it promotes an ambitious project that challenges capitalist modernity, envisioning a radically transformed social and political order under the name of democratic modernity. We asserted that this dual strategy, practiced under decolonial and authoritarian conditions, not only broadens the scope of recognition politics beyond the liberal, republican, and governmental veins but also offers a unique perspective to decolonial praxis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Studying the strategies of the Kurdish movement enables a critical reevaluation of the concept of recognition – one that is neither reducible to mere acknowledgment of cultural differences nor confined to depoliticizing governmental integration. The struggle for recognition is primarily about the political capacity to exist as an equal and autonomous member of a political community. Recognizing Kurdish self-governance as a form of ontological pluralism not only affirms local autonomies but also seeks to dismantle centralized authoritarian practices. It also contributes to restoring inter-communal coexistence by acknowledging Kurdish contributions to shared history. Linked to processes of resubjectivation and internal decolonization, it entails reconstructing nodal points for social identifications and civil institutions to repair and reinforce the moral foundations of Kurdish society.

The entry point of recognition – viewed as the capacity to stage the principle of equal and autonomous subjectivity – provides us with a roadmap, the guiding concept for critically engaging with the decolonial literature. The rupture-oriented tendencies within certain strands of decolonial theory, which view recognition politics as a form of governmental multiculturalism, are insufficient to explain the Kurdish movement's dual political strategy, which cannot be reduced to a complete break from or total integration into the existing regime. The movement negotiates with the state while engaging in an immanent critique and constructing alternative social institutions and epistemic spaces that envision a social order beyond the modern/colonial framework. The February Call exemplifies the first axis of this dual strategy more explicitly (while still maintaining the second strategy) by expanding Kurdish political legitimacy and striving to establish democratic guarantees within state structures for the peace process. *Perspektif*, on the other hand, adopts the second strategy more explicitly, presenting a detailed analysis of the democratic autonomy vision rooted in ecological care, gender equality, and self-governance through the commune.

As concluding remarks, we would like to revisit the proposal for the commune, its potential for a decolonial and communalist reworking of social relations, and the obstacles to its realization. The commune, both as an object of analysis and as a social experiment, lies at the intersection of decolonial/indigenous, anarchist, and Marxist theories, prompting challenging questions for social and political transformation. Within those veins of Marxist tradition that take a distance from the evolutionist tendencies of historical materialism, which treats the commune as a relic of the past, the commune is linked to a spontaneously organized place for the event of insurrection, a site for the revolutionary surge of political subjectivity that repeatedly reemerges in history, reactivating the traces of previous experiences (Badiou 2022). Such analyses of the commune highlight two unique principles of this local form of self-governance that can be gleaned from its historical actualizations. First, it establishes communal property against private property, and communal appropriation against private appropriation, provided that communal property is not conceived in narrowly materialist and economistic terms, but rather encompasses the realms of speech, expression, and identification as a dialogical and reciprocal exchange that generates a sense of communal belonging and participation (Amariglio 2010; Madra and Özselçuk 2010). Second, it establishes the right to coexistence of a pluriversal community against the homogenizing logic of a national community, where the pluriverse refers to the multitude of languages, ethnic and national identities, and religious orders that comprise the commune (Ross 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In fact, the commune is reactivated (from Paris to the Spanish canton, from the Soviets to the communes in Rojava) not only against private property and the colonial logic of the nation-state, but also against the authoritarian ossification of the Party-state. As long as the risks of mimicking the state also apply to the institutions of the local communes and confederalist formations, and as long as the irreducible social antagonisms (between genders, classes, sexualities, ethnicities, between development needs and ecological care) continue to press upon these democratic autonomous structures, the idea of the commune can serve as a guiding principle for the decolonial praxis of democratic autonomy.

However, reflecting on the practical application of this transformative communal imaginary begs cautious pessimism. First, there is the issue of the desire for, egalitarian organization and resilience of the commune: in the context of Turkey, where grassroots demand for the commune may not be spontaneously forthcoming, where capitalist urban growth has been undermining the traditional communal livelihood practices, where expropriation (*kayyım*) of local governance by the state has been ongoing in full force in municipalities recognized by the legal procedure of election,[11] where there is increasing diversification of class positions, urban–rural tensions, and other symbolic disparities within the Kurdish community, and where the PKK, having declared to dissolve itself, has worked as the central pedagogical and disciplinary apparatus to raise awareness, what would be the initiating force for awakening and channeling the desire for the establishment of the communes? What would be the internal organization, institutions, locations, and scale of the commune (local or regional)? What would secure their reproduction in the face of tendencies of internal and external colonization?

Second, assuming that the vision of scale is one of confederation, a new international of "the commune of communes" (Bookchin and van Outryve 2019), what would enable this formation to gain legitimacy on par with the nation-state model? This problem becomes even more glaring when the question is posed in relation to the sustainability of the commune form in the current conjuncture of the interstate system crumbling under the influence of rogue nation-states that introduce new thresholds of repression and violence to the international scene and in the context of the lack of *de jure* recognition of the network of communes in such a system (as in the case of Rojava communes).

Although the commune is proposed as a long-term imaginary for constructing democratic autonomy, the potential inability of Kurdish society to sustain itself as a national community underscores the persistent tensions of the communalist approach. The list of vexed questions we posed brings us to the formative role of struggling for recognition in decolonial struggles. At the same time, these questions point to the necessity of building solidarity and community economies that provide conditions of existence for the commune.

Acknowledgments. We thank Evren Özselçuk, Bermal Küçük, Peter J. Bumke, Martin Greve, Sandra Pollex, Sinan Erensü, Erdoğan Aydın, Kenan Erçel, the anonymous reviewers, and the editors for their insightful comments on the development of this article.

Competing interests. The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

[11] In *Perspektif* Öcalan mentions municipality as an administrative form of the commune.

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Açık N, Kutlay-Sarıkaya B, Ghaderi F and Kılıçaslan G (2023) Contextualizing Kurdish gender studies: decolonial feminist knowledge production and the genesis of the Kurdish Gender Studies Network. *Kurdish Studies Journal* **1**, 255–283.

Amariglio J (2010) Subjectivity, class, and Marx's "forms of the commune". *Rethinking Marxism* **22**(3), 329–344.

Aydınkaya F (2024) The return of the oppressed: notes on Kurdish anti-colonialism. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* **123**(4), 848–861.

Badiou A (2022) The Paris commune: Marx, Mao, tomorrow. *The Jus Semper Global Alliance*. Available at https://jussemper.org/Resources/Democracy%20Best%20Practices/Resources/AlainBadiou-TheParisCommune.pdf (accessed 6 November 2025).

Balibar É (2014) *Equaliberty*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Barthes R (1977) *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Bektaş AH, Bektaş B and Uçar G (2025) *Koçgiri Tarihi. 16.-19. yy Osmanlı Arşiv Belgeleriyle*. Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları.

Beşikci İ (2004) *International Colony: Kurdistan*. İstanbul: Doz.

Bookchin D and van Outryve S (2019) The confederation as the commune of communes. *ROAR Magazine* (9). Available at https://theanarchistlibrary.org/mirror/d/db/debbie-bookchin-sixtine-van-outryve-the-confederation-as-the-commune-of-communes.c6.pdf (accessed 6 November 2025).

Brown W (1993) Wounded attachments. *Political Theory* **21**(3), 391–410.

Césaire A (2000) *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Coulthard GS (2014) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Çelik A (2020) 1960'larda Kürdistan Özgürlük Mücadelesi ve Anti-Sömürgeci Gramerin Oluşumu. *Kürd Araştırmaları*. Available at https://kurdarastirmalari.com/yazi-detay-oku-48 (accessed 6 November 2025).

Çiçek C (2025) Forum: Barış İçin Ne Öneriyoruz? Birlikte Ne Yapabiliriz. *19.Karaburun Bilim Kongresi*, 4–6 Eylül.

Duruiz D (2020) Tracing the conceptual genealogy of Kurdistan as international colony. *Middle East Report* (295). Available at https://www.merip.org/2020/08/tracing-the-conceptual-genealogy-of-kurdistan-as-international-colony/ (accessed 6 November 2025).

EUAA (2023) *Syria Security Situation Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Fanon F (2008 [1952]) *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. R Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Fraser N (1997) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*. London: Routledge.

Göner Ö (2023) Rightful recognition of Kurdistan as a colony and de-colonizing knowledge production. *The Commentaries* **3**(1), 165–196.

Grubacic A and Graeber D (2004) Anarchism, or the revolutionary movement of the twenty-first century. *The Anarchist Library*. Available at https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andrej-grubacic-david-graeber-anarchism-or-the-revolutionary-movement-of-the-twenty-first-centu (accessed 6 November 2025).

Hale CR (2002) Does multiculturalism menace? Governance, cultural rights, and the politics of identity in Guatemala. *Journal of Latin American Studies* **34**(3), 485–524.

Hall S (2001) Encoding/decoding. In Durham MG and Kellner DM (eds), *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Oxford: Blackwell, 166–177.

Honneth A and Fraser N (2003) *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political–Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso.

Kurt M and Özok-Gündoğan N (2024) The decolonial turn in Kurdish Studies: an introduction. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* **123**(4), 655–664.

Küçük B (2019) The burden of Sisyphus: a sociological inventory of the Kurdish question in Turkey. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* **46**(5), 752–766.

Küçük B and Özselçuk C (2015) The question of democratic citizenship in Turkey: two social imaginaries. In Cianelli A and Ferrara B (eds), *Postcolonial Matters: Tra gesti politici e scritture poetiche*. Napoli: University Press, 57–76.

Küçük Z, Küçük B and Yılmaz DÇ (2023) Oath to death: an analysis of Sait Kırmızıtoprak's contested memory. In Şen E, Sandal Önal E, Uysal MS and Acar YG (eds), *The Political Psychology of Kurds in*

https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Turkey: Critical Perspectives on Identity, Narratives, and Resistance. London and New York: Routledge, 77–102.

Kymlicka W (1995) *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Macherey P (2012) Figures of interpellation in Althusser and Fanon. *Radical Philosophy* **173**(May/June), 9–20.

Madra YM and Özselçuk C (2010) Jouissance and antagonism in the forms of the commune: a critique of biopolitical subjectivity. *Rethinking Marxism* **22**(3), 481–497.

Mardin Ş (1992) *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi Olayı: Modern Türkiye'de Din ve Toplumsal Değişim*. İstanbul: İletişim.

McGranahan C (2016) Theorizing refusal: an introduction. *Cultural Anthropology* **31**(3), 319–325.

Mignolo WD (2007) DELINKING. *Cultural Studies* **21**(2), 449–514.

Mignolo WD and Walsh CE (eds) (2018) *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Öcalan A (2017) *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan: Kurdistan, Women's Liberation and Democratic Revolution*. London: Pluto Press.

Öcalan A (2025a) Abdullah Öcalan'nın "Perspektif" metni. *Bianet*. Available at https://bianet.org/haber/abdullah-ocalanin-perspektif-metni-308385 (accessed 6 November 2025).

Öcalan A (2025b) Barış ve Demokratik Toplum Çağrısı. *DEM Parti*. Available at https://www.demparti.org.tr/tr/baris-ve-demokratik-toplum-cagrisi/20769/ (accessed 6 November 2025).

Povinelli EA (1998) The state of shame: Australian multiculturalism and the crisis of indigenous citizenship. *Critical Inquiry* **24**(2), 577–610.

Quijano A (2000) Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla* **1**(3), 533–580.

Ross K (2015) *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London and New York: Verso.

Simpson A (2016) Whither settler colonialism. *Settler Colonial Studies* **6**(4), 438–445.

Simpson LB (2017) *As We Have Always Done: The Continuing Presence of Indigenous Nationhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sirman N (2014) Contextualizing honour. *European Journal of Turkish Studies* **18**, 1–6.

Sunca Y (2023) Colonial continuities in the Kurdish liberation. *The Commentaries* **3**(1), 71–89.

Taylor C (1994) The politics of recognition. In Gutmann A (ed.), *Multiculturalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 25–75.

Üstündağ N (2023) *The Mother, The Politician, and the Guerrilla: Women's Political Imagination in the Kurdish Movement*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Yadırgı V (2017) *The Political Economy of the Kurds in Turkey: From the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yarkın G (2019) İnkâr Edilen Hakikat: Sömürge Kuzey Kürdistan. *Kürd Araştırmaları*. Available at https://www.kurdarastirmalari.com/yazi-detay-nk-r-edilen-hakikat-s-m-rge-kuzey-k-rdistan-26 (accessed 6 November 2025).

Žižek S (2008) Tolerance as an ideological category. *Critical Inquiry* **34**, 660–682.

Cite this article: Küçük, Bülent and Özselçuk, Ceren (2025). Beyond rupture and integration: decolonial recognition in the Kurdish struggle. *New Perspectives on Turkey* 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.10063