

The Kurdish Question, Then and Now

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The political chaos that dominated the scene in the Middle East is expressed among other ways by the violent rise of the Kurdish question. How can we analyse, in these new conditions, the scope of the claim of the Kurds (autonomy? independence? unity?)? And can we deduce from analysis that this claim must be supported by all democratic and progressive forces, in the region and in the world?

Debates on the subject entertain great confusion. The reason is, in my opinion, the rallying of most contemporary actors and observers around a non-historical vision of this issue as well as others. The right of peoples to self-determination was made into an absolute right, which one would like to be upheld for all people at all present and future times, and even past times.

This right is considered one of the most fundamental collective rights, which is often given greater prominence than other collective rights of social scope (the right to work, to education, to health, political participation etc.). Besides, the subjects of this absolute right are not defined in a precise manner; the subject of this right may then be any “community”, majority or minority within the boundaries of a state or a province; this community defining itself as “special” due to language or religion, for example; and claiming, rightly or wrongly, itself to be a victim of discrimination or oppression. My analyses and positions act as a counterpoint of this transhistorical vision of social issues and “rights” through which to social movements of the past and present express their demands. In particular I attribute paramount importance to the divide which separates the thriving of the modern capitalist world from past worlds.

The political organisation of those previous worlds has taken incredibly diverse forms, from the construction of power exercised over vast areas, thus qualified as “Empires” to that of smaller more or less centralised monarchies, not excluding the extreme fragmentation of powers barely exceeding the village horizon in certain circumstances. The review of this patchwork of political forms preceding capitalist modernity is obviously not the subject of this article. I will refer here to only a few of the regions imperial constructions: the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the Arab-Persian Caliphate, the Ottoman Empire.

The common qualification of these constructions – Empires – is more misleading than helpful, although they all share two characteristics: (i) they collect necessarily by their geographic scope, peoples and different communities by language, religion and modes of production and social life; (ii) the logics that control the reproduction of social and economic life are not those of capitalism, but within what I called a family of tributary modes of production (commonly called “feudal”). For this reason I consider as absurd the assimilation of all these former Empires (those considered here for the region and others, such as China) on the one hand and on the other empires built by the major capitalist powers, whether they

be the colonial empires like those of Britain and France or modern empires without formal colonies such as the Empire of the USA, to be a unique form called an Empire. Paul Kennedy's well-known thesis on the "fall of empires"* belongs to the realm of such transhistoric speculative philosophies.



The Ottoman Empire around 1900

I return to the Empire that directly concerns our subject: the Ottoman Empire, built when Europe began its break with its past and entered into capitalist modernity. The Ottoman Empire was itself, pre-capitalist. Its qualification as a Turkish Empire is in itself inaccurate and misleading. Probably the wars of conquest of the Turkoman semi-nomadic tribes from Central Asia had been instrumental in the double destruction of the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate of Baghdad, and the most part of the settlement of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace. But the power of the Sultan of the Empire extended well beyond the territories of Armenians, Kurds, Arabs, Greeks and Balkan Slavs. To qualify this Empire as multinational leads to an incorrect projection of a future reality onto the past, as Balkan and Arab (anti-Ottoman) nationalisms are in their modern form products of the penetration of capitalism into the Empire.

All the peoples of the Empire – Turks and others – were exploited and oppressed in the same way; in the sense that peasant majorities were all subject to the same principle of a heavy tax levy. They were all also oppressed by the same autocratic power. Certainly Christians were additionally subject to specific discriminations. But we should not see here forms of "national" oppression, not against Christian people, nor against non-Turkish Muslims (the Kurds and Arabs). The ruling class associated with the Sultans power had in its ranks civilian, military and religious notables from all parts of the empire, including the embryo of comprador bourgeoisies, in particular Greek and Armenian, produced by capitalist penetration.

The specific characters of the Ottoman system mentioned here are not unique to this Eastern Empire. One finds similar expressions in other ancient empires, as in the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. Or even in the Ethiopia of Menelik and Haile Selassie. The King of Kings' power was not associated with an Amhara domination; Amhara peasants were not treated better than the others; the ruling class was recruited from all regions of the Empire (it included for example a good number of native Eritreans!).

There has been nothing like it in modern imperialist systems. The colonial empires (of Great Britain and France) like the informal US Empire were built systematically on the basis of the sharp distinction between the people of the metropolis and those of the colonies and dependencies, which were denied the basic rights granted to the first. Therefore the struggle of peoples dominated by imperialist capitalism became a struggle for national liberation, necessarily anti-imperialist by nature. We must not confuse this modern nationalism that is anti-imperialist- and therefore progressive – with all other expressions of non anti-imperialist nationalist movements, whether it be nationalism inspired by the ruling classes of the imperialist nations or non anti-imperialist nationalist movements – such as those of the Balkan peoples to which I will return later. To assimilate the structures of ancient empires and those specific to the imperialist capitalist empires, to confuse them in a general pseudo-concept of "Empire" is counterpoint to the basic requirements of a scientific analysis of historical societies.



The Austro-Hungarian Empire with its provinces, 1911

The emergence of ideologies of nationalism was subsequent to that. They were formed only in the nineteenth century, in the Balkans, Syria, among the Armenians, and later among the Rumelia Turks in reaction to others. There is not then the slightest hint of emergence of a Kurdish nationalism. The emergence of these nationalisms is closely associated with the new urbanisation and modernisation of administrations. The peasants themselves could continue to talk in their language, and ignore that of the Ottoman administration which appeared on the countryside only to collect taxes and to recruit soldiers. But in the new cities, and particularly in the new educated middle classes, mastery of a written language became a daily necessity. And it is from these new classes that the first generation of nationalists in the modern sense would be recruited. The rural character of the Kurdish populated areas, such as the Turkish Central Anatolia, explains the late formation of Turkish (Kemalist) nationalism and the even later formation of Kurdish nationalism.

A parallel with the Austro-Hungarian Empire will help to explain the nature of the process that will eventually destroy these two Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was formed before the emergence of European capitalism; but it was its closest neighbour, and some of its regions (Austria, Bohemia) were rebuilt on the new foundations of capitalism. The new national issue thus emerged here in the nineteenth century. We owe to the Austro-Marxists (Otto Bauer and others) a good analysis of this dimension of the socialist challenge, and policy proposals that I consider to have been the most progressive possible under the conditions of the time: safeguarding the benefits of the great State but accelerating its transformation by socialist (radical or even social-democratic) advances, creating an internationalism of peoples based on a rigorous policy of fair treatment for all, combined with a genuine policy of cultural autonomy. The sequence of events has not allowed the success of the project, for the benefit of a mediocre bourgeois nationalism.

Balkan and Syrian-Arab nationalisms, which appeared later in mediocre forms associated with peripheral capitalism in the regions, triumphed and helped remove the Ottoman Empire. But the weaknesses specific to these nationalisms have constrained their promoters to seek the support of outside powers – Great Britain and / or Russia in particular – against Ottoman rule. They paid the price: the new states created by them remained in the lap of the dominant imperialist powers, Britain and France for the Arabs, Britain and Germany for the Balkans.

In Armenia national renewal (since Armenia had experienced a beautiful independent civilization before being incorporated into the Ottoman Empire) was defeated by the 1915 genocide. It was a nationalism torn between that of the new Armenian emigrant bourgeoisie in the cities of Rumelia (Constantinople, Smyrna and others), who held positions of choice in the new business and financial world and that of the notables and peasants of Armenian lands. Incorporating a small part of these lands into the Russian Empire (the territory of the Soviet and independent Armenia) further complicated things because it could cause fear of manipulation from Saint Petersburg, especially during the First World War. The Ottoman authorities then chose the route of genocide. I note here that the Kurds behaved here as agents of the massacre and the main beneficiaries: they more than doubled the size of their territory by seizing the destroyed Armenian villages.

Modern Turkish nationalism is even more recent. It was formed first with those of relatively educated military backgrounds and the Ottoman administration of the cities of Rumelia (Constantinople, Smyrna, Thessaloniki) in response to Balkan and Syrian-Arab nationalisms, and found no real echo in Turkish (and Kurdish) peasants of Central and Eastern Anatolia. Its options, which would become those of Kemalism, are known: Europeanisation, hostility towards Ottomanism, affirmation of the Turkish character of the new state and its secularising style. I mean secularising and not secular because the new Turkish citizen is defined by his social belonging to Islam (the few Armenians who survived the massacre, the Greeks of Constantinople and Smyrna are not admitted); nevertheless the Islam in question is reduced to the status of public institution dominated and manipulated by the new government in Ankara.

The wars led by the Kemalists from 1919 to 1922 against the imperialist powers allowed the Turkish (and Kurdish) peasant masses of Anatolia to rally with the new Turkish nationalism. The Kurds were not distinguished from the Turks: they fought together in the Kemalist armed forces. Kemalist Turkish nationalism became anti-imperialist by force of circumstance. It understands that Ottomanism and the Caliphate did not protect the Empire's peoples (Turks, Kurds and Arabs); on the contrary, they facilitated the penetration of Western imperialism and the reduction of the Empire to the status of capitalist peripheralized dominated region. Which neither Balkan nor Arab nationalism had understood at the time: they openly called for the support of the imperialist powers against the power of the Sublime Porte. Anti-imperialist Kemalist nationalism then gave the final blow to Ottomanism.



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The anti-imperialist character of the original Kemalist system had nevertheless rapidly weakened. The original option in favour of a state capitalism with an independent self-centred vocation was losing momentum while a mode of dependent peripheral capitalist development was progressing. Turkey paid the price for the illusion of its bourgeois nationalism, of its original confusion. Kemalism thought it could build a Turkish capitalist nation in the image of those of advanced Europe; it did not understand that the realization of this project was doomed to failure, in Turkey and elsewhere in all regions of peripheral capitalism. Its hostility to socialism, compounded by the fear of the Soviet Union, led Ankara to seek support from the US: Turkey's Kemalist generals – like Greece's Colonels – immediately joined NATO, and became Washington's client states. The acceleration of the process of development of peripheral capitalism was reflected in the emergence of a new capitalist agriculture in Anatolia, to the benefit of a class of rich peasants, and the establishment of subcontracting industries.

These social changes eroded the legitimacy of Kemalism. The multi-party elections starting from 1950, strongly suggested by Washington, strengthened the political power of the new peasant and comprador classes, issued from the traditional Anatolian countryside and stranger to the secularism of the Roumelian Kemalist political class. The emergence of Turkish political Islam and the electoral success of the AKP were the result. These developments have not favoured the democratisation of society, but on the contrary confirmed the aspirations of the dictatorship of President Erdogan and the resurgence of instrumentalised Ottomanism, like his ancestor, by the major imperialist powers, namely the USA today.

Simultaneously these developments are driving the emergence in Turkey of the Kurdish question. The urbanisation of Eastern Anatolia, the mass emigration of its ruined peasants towards the western cities fuelled the emergence of the new issue of Turkey's Kurds, aware that they were not "Turks of the mountains" but distinguished by the use of another language for which they demanded official recognition. A solution of the issue by the favouring of a genuine cultural autonomy of Turkish Kurdistan would have been possible if the new ruling class itself had evolved in a democratic direction. But that was not the case, and is still not. The Kurds were then constrained, in these circumstances, to respond to the repression worsened by their claims with armed force. It is interesting to note here that the PKK behind this struggle lays claim to a radical socialist tradition as its name suggests (Kurdish Workers' Party!), probably associated with recruitment of the new proletariat of Turkish towns. You would imagine that they chose a line of internationalist conduct, and attempts to associate the Kurdish and Turkish proletarians in the same fight for both socialism, democracy and the recognition of the binational state. They did not do that.



"Official" map of "Kurdistan"

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Although the Kurdish peoples occupy a continuous territory (Eastern Anatolia, a thin strip along the Syrian border, northeast of Iraq, the western mountains of Iran), the Kurdish question was posed in Iran and Iraq in other words than it was in Turkey.


The Kurdish peoples – the Medes and the Parthians (who gave their name to the Euphrates River) of antiquity – shared neighbouring Indo-European languages with the Persians. It seems that, perhaps because of this, the coexistence of Kurds and Persians had not been a problem in the past. Again the Kurdish question emerged with the recent urbanisation in the region. Moreover Shiism, more official in Iran than ever, is also the source of discomfort suffered by the Sunni majority of Iranian Kurds.

Iraq, within the borders defined by the British Mandate, separated the Kurds in the north of the country from those of Anatolia. But again coexistence between Kurds and Arabs was continuing, thanks in part to the real internationalism of a relatively powerful Communist Party in the cities and in the multinational proletariat. The dictatorship of the Baath – characterised by Arab chauvinism – unfortunately set back the previously made progress.

The new Kurdish question is the product of the recent deployment of US strategy which has given itself the goal of destroying the State and society in Iraq and Syria, while waiting to attack Iran. The demagoguery of Washington (unrelated to the invoked alleged democracy) gave the highest priority to the exercise of the "right of communities." Discourses defending "human rights" that do the same and to which I referred in this article, are thus very relevant. The Iraqi central government was thus destroyed (by *Gauleiter* Bremer in the first year of the occupation of the country) and its attributes vested in four pseudo-states, two of them based on restricted and fanatic interpretations of Shiite and Sunni versions of Islam, the other two being on the alleged particularities of the "Kurdish tribes" of Iraq! The intervention of Gulf countries, supporting – behind the USA – the reactionary political Islam that gave the alleged Caliphate of Daesh contributed to the success of Washington's project. It should be almost amusing to observe that the US supported the Iraqi Kurds in the name of "democracy", but not those of Turkey, an important NATO ally. Double standards,

as usual.

Are the two political parties exercising power over different parcels of Iraqi Kurdistan territory are “democratic”, or is one better than the other? It would be naive to believe this nonsense of the Washington propaganda. It is only a question of cliques of politicians/warlords (those who know how to enrich themselves in this way). Their alleged “nationalism” is not anti-imperialist; because being anti-imperialist is about fighting the US presence in Iraq, and not being part of it for personal gain.

 I will not say more here about the US project of domination in the region, of which I already analysed the real objectives elsewhere.

The proposed analysis will perhaps better explain the nature of the (or those) Kurdish nationalisms at work today, the limits that it (or they) imposes by ignoring the requirements of the anti- imperialist fight in the region, radical social reforms that must accompany this struggle, as the requirements of the construction of the unity of all the peoples concerned (Kurds, Arabs, Iranians) against their common enemy: the US and its local allies (Islamists or others).

I speak of Kurdish nationalism in the plural. For indeed the objectives of (often armed) movements which act today in its name are not defined: a large independent pan-Kurdish state? Two, three, four or five Kurdish States? A dose of autonomy in the states as they are? Are there a few possible reasons for this accompanying fragmentation and blur? Yes, in my opinion. Arabs and Persians carried out a splendid renovation/modernisation of their respective languages in the nineteenth century, the Turks did so later in 1920-1930. The Kurds have not been placed in conditions that required them to do so! So there is not a Kurdish language, there are neighbouring languages but they are certainly distinct and probably not up to the requirements of the modern world. This weakness found its counterpart in linguistic assimilation by the elites, who adopted Persian, Arabic and Turkish, for better or for worse!

Note

[*Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. – Economic change and Military conflict from 1500 to 2000, Unwin Hyman, London, 1988](#)

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