



Kurdish liberty

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Abstract

Most politically minded Kurds agree that their people need liberty. Moreover, they agree they need liberation from the domination they suffer from the four states that divide them: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. What is less certain is the precise nature of this liberty. A key debate that characterizes Kurdish political discourse is over whether the liberty they seek requires the existence of an independent Kurdish nation-state. Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed intellectual leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has argued that Kurdish liberty can only be achieved through liberation from the nation-state model itself. Instead of founding an independent Kurdistan, Öcalan proposes regional autonomy for the Kurds through a strictly egalitarian and directly democratic confederalism reminiscent of Murray Bookchin's anarchist-inspired libertarian municipalism. We argue, in response to Öcalan's approach, that employing an anarchist rejection of the state is largely mistaken. We diagnose certain historical and conceptual problems with the anarchist understanding of the state and develop the admission made in passing by certain anarchists, including Öcalan, that anarchist liberty could only be achieved after a long period of statist existence. Mostly counter to the anarchist model of non-domination, we propose a republican model of liberty and liberation, also as non-domination, that necessitates the formation of an independent state, at least in this historical period, for Kurds and hence any dominated people to count as truly free. We conclude by attempting to combine certain elements of the anarchist and republican conceptions and offer a synthetic communitarian view that could serve as a better foundation for Kurdish aspirations for liberty.

Keywords

Kurds, liberty, anarchism, republicanism, democratic confederalism, the state

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Introduction

Many peoples in the world suffer domination. The overcoming of domination is liberation. The enjoyment of non-domination is liberty. While it may be obvious that liberty must entail some form of non-domination, what exactly characterizes liberty as non-domination is up for debate. This article is an attempt to develop a conception of liberty as non-domination that, we think, is most applicable to a particular people who suffer domination today: the Kurds. The two main views which treat liberty as non-domination are anarchism and republicanism. Some Kurds have already offered a conception of their liberation in anarchist terms. In what follows, we aim to show that the republican criticisms of anarchism are apt and that a possible compromise between anarchist and republican conceptions of liberty, founded on a kind of shared communitarianism, might be the best option for the Kurds. Thus, methodologically speaking, what we engage in, in this article, is a comparative conceptual analysis in the service of a people's liberation struggle, that is, we compare conceptions of liberty for the sake of discovering which conception might be the most useful to a dominated people for providing clarity concerning their goal of liberation.

Before we establish the historical facts of the domination of the Kurds and then analyze the particulars of certain Kurdish conceptions of liberty, it seems important to first speak in broader terms about the two approaches we discuss in this article, anarchism and republicanism. There is much that anarchism and republicanism share, and one could argue that the former is a historical development of the latter. The key term about which they seem to share the most agreement concerning its meaning is domination. Domination has something to do with uncontrolled, unlimited, impositional, unconstrained, or unrestrained power. It is a phenomenon most often characterized by overwhelming force, an intensity of strength that can express itself both in acts, and structural conditions and relationships composed of such acts, and the dispositions to perform such acts. It thus involves a severe imbalance, asymmetry, or disequilibrium in the distribution of power (McCammon 2018).

If anarchism and republicanism have a rough agreement about the meaning of domination, the key question that emerges for both of them is how domination is supposed to be overcome. This became ultimately a question about the role and significance of power in the aim of achieving liberation. Albeit a touch caricaturizing, one could say while anarchism aims to overcome domination by abolishing power from human relations, republicanism does so by aiming to balance power. This will be important for the discussion below as we will compare and contrast these aims with respect to the conflicting interpretations anarchism and republicanism offer of the role of the state in the project of overcoming domination. If liberty entails the abolition of power, then it must also entail the abolition of the state, the main agent and center of power in contemporary society, for anarchism. Republicanism disagrees and views the state as the chief, if not only, means for achieving true non-domination today and so can balance power in such a way that a people can live self-determinatively enough that they avoid domination by other peoples, which is precisely the problem the Kurdish people face and which Kurdish liberty is meant to be the solution. Let us begin then by summarizing the

experiences of the Kurds in the present and over the past couple centuries before we then address an anarchist conception of liberty developed by certain Kurdish forces, then see how republicanism would respond to this anarchist proposal, and then finally see if a kind of compromise could be struck that might constitute the preferable form of a conception of Kurdish liberty.

The domination of the Kurds

Consider the Kurdish people. At around 45 million, they are the largest stateless nation in the world. In broader historical terms, the Kurds have been colonized and divided-and-ruled by Turks, Arabs, and Persians for roughly the past few centuries, going back at least to the coordinated manipulations by the Ottoman and Safavid Empires up to the contemporary Turkish and Iranian suppression of Kurdish efforts at any degree of political self-expression. Also, until quite recently, Western colonial powers and then the Arab Ba'athist parties in Syria and Iraq were equally as excessive in denying the Kurds the most rudimentary of a political existence. Geographically, Kurdistan is presently divided by four nation-states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The territories occupied by these states correspond to the four regions of Kurdistan: Bakûr (Northern Kurdistan), Rojava (Western Kurdistan), Başûr (Southern Kurdistan), and Rojhilat (Eastern Kurdistan), respectively.

In each of the four regions of Kurdistan, the Kurds have been rendered unfree to varying degrees. Ranging from genocide to ethnic cleansing to forced displacement to mass disappearance to torture, execution, and imprisonment to less violent means like the banning of the Kurdish language, there has been no technique of interference and domination that has not been used against the Kurds. They have been employed for the sake of preventing the Kurds from existing in a politically real way, as a positively free and self-determining people. The desire to exist in a politically real sense on the part of the Kurds has been enough for Western colonial powers, Turks, Arabs, and Persians to dominate them with the explicit goal of preventing their emergence as a free and independent people. For roughly the past one hundred years, the domination of the Kurds can be understood as various attempts to eliminate Kurdish identity mostly through the Turkification, Arabization, and Persianization processes perpetrated by Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

In Bakûr (Northern Kurdistan, Southeast Turkey), during the Ottoman period, one could argue the Kurds lived as mostly benignly neglected colonized subjects. While enjoying something like regional autonomy in the mid- to late-Ottoman empire, the Kurds were still a dependent people upon an imperial system of rule that set them against each other and used them as pawns in border conflicts with various Persian dynasties, instantiating an intrapersonal form of interference that still afflicts Kurds to this day. Just as with other peoples colonized by the Ottoman empire, the Kurds were not allowed anything like genuine self-determination or political independence. With the emergence of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Kurdish domination went from being a matter of colonial dependence to becoming one of direct subjugation. The Republic of Turkey was founded upon an ideology of indivisible Turkish nationalism (Arai 1992). To achieve such an

indivisible identification of nation with state, the Turkish state has, from its beginning, had to engage in an indefinite ethnic cleansing campaign against the Kurds. The Turkification process imposed upon the Kurds has been thorough and stark, leaving them without the means for obtaining true political liberty.

Along with denying there is such a thing as a Kurdish question, the Turkish state denied there even were Kurds in Turkey until the early 1990s, labeling Kurds “mountain Turks.” Continuing a policy began in the late Ottoman period, the Kurds have been forcibly removed from their territory by the Turkish state and required to integrate into cities and towns throughout Western Turkey. The prohibition of the use of the Kurdish language, especially in schools, has been a weapon in the Turkish arsenal used in its aim to eliminate the Kurds as an independent people and fully assimilate them into an “indivisible Turkishness.” The coercion of the Kurds by the Turkish state did not stop at forced removal from their lands or the attempted elimination of their language and culture. It also involved the suppression of a series of Kurdish revolts in response to Turkey’s renegeing on promises of relative autonomy under the new regime. Between the early 1920s and late 1930s a series of Kurdish revolts were crushed—including the Koçgiri (1921), Beytüşşebap (1923), Sheikh Said (1925), Ararat (1930), and Dersim (1937–1938) Rebellions—leaving well over 100,000 Kurds dead and many more displaced. With the Eastern Reform Plan of 1925, the southeast of Turkey was placed under indefinite martial law. The Kurdish provinces of Turkey have been in some state of exception or emergency since the Republic’s foundation. The domination of the Kurds by Turkey stretches right into the present with the intermittent ferocity of its counterinsurgency campaign against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the near-constant arbitrary removal and imprisonment of elected Kurdish mayors and other political leaders (Bokani 2016).

Moving down to Northeast Syria, the Kurds of Rojava have similarly suffered domination from the predominantly Arab nationalist Ba’athist regime of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Kurds have been victim to one of the most elaborate Arabization campaigns in the modern Middle East. The problem of nascent Kurdish self-assertion in Rojava came to represent both a political and economic threat to Syria as Kurdish areas were predominant in grain, cotton, and oil production. There was emphasis on the Jazira region in particular as needing to be Arabized. Lieutenant Muhammad Talab Hilal, the former head of internal security for al-Hasaka, a population center in the Jazira, summarized the approach the regime took toward the Kurds from the latter half of the 20th century onward, leading up to the Syrian Civil War starting in 2011. Hilal claimed,

the bells of Jazira sound the alarm and call on the Arab conscience to save this region, to purify it of all its scum, the dregs of history until, as befits its geographical situation, it can offer up its revenues and riches, along with those of the other provinces of this Arab territory...The Kurdish question, now that the Kurds are organizing themselves, is simply a malignant tumour which has developed and been developed in a part of the body of the Arab nation. The only remedy which we can properly apply thereto is excision.” (Quoted in McDowall 2004, 474–475)

Hilal then offered a 12 point plan to excise the Kurdish “tumour” by disrupting and destroying the coherence of the emerging Kurdish community in Rojava, a list of measures which all go to constitute a near-total loss of liberty:

(i) displacement of the Kurds from their lands; (ii) denial of education; (iii) return of ‘wanted’ Kurds to Turkey; (iv) denial of employment opportunities; (v) an anti-Kurdish propaganda campaign; (vi) replacement of local Kurdish ‘*ulama* [religious clerics] with Arab ones; (vii) ‘divide and rule’ policy within the Kurdish community; (viii) Arab settlement of Kurdish areas; (ix) establishment of an Arab *cordon sanitaire* along the border with Turkey; (x) the establishment of collective farms for Arab settlers; (xi) the denial of the right to vote or hold office to anyone lacking Arabic; (xii) denial of Syrian citizenship to non-Arabs wishing to live in the area. (McDowall 2004, 475)

Many aspects of this plan were implemented, including the stripping of citizenship from over 120,000 Kurds. This plan can only be understood as an attempt to dominate a people by actually interfering with them, encouraging them to interfere with each other, disallowing them to realize their political potential, and rendering them dependent upon the arbitrary will of another.

In Başûr, or Iraqi Kurdistan, many of the same Arabizing and Turkifying techniques were combined in a lethal mix. Following the defeat of the Ottomans at the end of World War I, the British assumed colonial control of Iraq, where they at once encouraged and suppressed Kurdish attempts to achieve some form of autonomy or independence. Under the leadership of the Barzani clan, the Kurds fought a variety of revolts to a draw against a number of military leaders following the downfall of the Hashemite monarchy. With the Ba’athist coup of 1968 and the eventual ascension of Saddam Hussein, Arab-Kurdish relations started down a path that would lead to the most severe expression of domination found in Kurdish history. The Ba’athists engaged in an Arabization campaign that fully implemented Hilal’s 12 measures and then some. Throughout Saddam’s reign, thousands of Kurdish and Yazidi villages were razed to the ground, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Many were deported and sent to other parts of Iraq while formerly Kurdish areas were populated with Arabs. Mass dispossession and displacement was only an aspect of the Iraqi Arab domination of the Kurds. Amidst the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Kurds faced what can only be described as a campaign of genocidal annihilation. Taking ethnic cleansing and forced disappearance to a heightened level, Saddam unleashed his cousin, “Chemical” Ali Hassan al-Majid, upon the Kurds in the aim of exterminating any resistance to the Iraqi regime. Through eight separate military operations from 1986 to 1989, the Al-Anfal campaign led to the mass murder of over 182,000 Kurds. From ground assaults, aerial bombing campaigns, the total destruction of settlements, mass deportation and disappearance, to the abduction and enslavement of women and girls, firing squads used to kill as many men and boys of fighting age as possible, and indiscriminate chemical warfare, the Kurds were systematically subject to the most violent kind of domination for the primary reason of trying to assert their own political existence.

While there were a number of small Kurdish kingdoms in Rojhilat from the 10th to the 12th centuries, a successive line of Persian dynasties up to the present Iranian Islamic Republic have suppressed any attempts at self-rule by the Kurds. Without major events of mass death like the Dersim massacre or the Al-Anfal campaign, the Kurds of Rojhilat have been subject to a persistent effort to prevent their nascent peoplehood through the crushing of recurring revolts for autonomy. Starting as early as the 16th century, when they were not outright massacred, rebellious Kurds defeated by Safavid, Afshar, and Qajar kings were often deported and relocated around the Iranian plateau. By the 20th century, Rojhilati Kurds continued to revolt against Iranian domination, with such domination now including many of the measures adopted in the Turkification and Arabization processes utilized in neighboring states. The Pahlavi kings and then the Islamic Republic continued the policies of seizing land and executing or deporting leaders of Kurdish revolts. They would also rotate Turkish Azeri groups into Kurdish areas emptied of its Kurds. There was a rare moment of success in the formation of the Mahabad Republic in 1946, but after the Soviet Union removed its support, the Iranian regime crushed the experiment and executed its leader, Qazi Muhammad. Following the Islamic revolution of 1979, the Kurds have continued to resist both political and cultural domination. The Islamic regime has been especially severe in its crushing of Kurdish attempts at self-expression, combining Turkish-style measures of denying Kurdish existence with counterinsurgency efforts that include new techniques like mass deforestation, in order to leave guerrillas with nowhere to hide, and the persistent torture and execution of many those who are caught showing even the slightest sign of political resistance. The Kurds of Rojhilat enjoy the least amount of autonomy of all of the dominated Kurdish groups.

At the moment of writing, Turkey is in the midst of offensive operations against the Kurds in Bakûr, Rojava, and Başûr. In Rojhilat, Iran continues to violently suppress Kurdish attempts at cultural and political self-expression, recently imprisoning over one hundred activists. In Rojava and Başûr, through its various proxies, Iran also consistently confronts Kurdish efforts at economic and political autonomy. The Kurds of each of their regions live in a condition of dependence upon the arbitrary interferences of each of the four states that dominate them. We can now see that the treatment of the Kurdish people over the past few centuries up to the present amounts to a near-total loss of liberty. The Kurds represent a paradigm case of a dominated people. They count as unfree, or as lacking political liberty, on most conceptions of liberty. To back up this claim, we can look to Quentin Skinner's (2002) genealogy of modern liberty as a framework through which to show the various ways Kurds lack liberty. Skinner discusses four main conceptions of liberty. Correspondingly, he discusses four ways one could be without liberty. These four conceptions can be applied to individuals or collectives. The Kurds, regarded collectively, suffer interference from both the interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives that concern most liberals. Following from these forms of interference, the Kurds are also unable to exercise positive liberty in the sense of actualizing collective self-determination and realizing their political potential. Finally, not only do the Kurds suffer from actual interference and self-alienation, they are victim to the arbitrary interference that makes a people dependent or dominated. It is domination in this sense that is targeted by anarchist and republican traditions as the chief political problem liberty is meant to solve. If Skinner

is right that there are roughly four ways of being politically unfree—as suffering interpersonal interference, intrapersonal interference, non-self-realization, and dependence or domination—then the Kurds are unfree in each of these four senses.

Anarchist liberty

The question is, then, how have the Kurds sought to overcome their domination and achieve liberty? One theory of Kurdish liberty comes from a leading source of resistance to Kurdish domination over the past half-century, Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed intellectual leader and founding member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Öcalan's conception of Kurdish liberty has changed over the course of his life, starting more in line with the predominant paradigm of national liberation struggles of the mid-20th century, but gradually coming to regard the struggle for national independence to count not so much as liberation as the mere exchanging of one form of domination for another (Akkaya 2016; 2020). Instead of aiming to achieve national independence in the form of a separate Kurdish nation-state, Öcalan argues that the only true or worthwhile form of liberation for the Kurds would be one that entailed freedom from the nation-state model itself. Öcalan went from recognizing the political necessity of an independent nation-state for the sake of obtaining Kurdish liberty to offering an anarchist denial of both the necessity and desirability of an independent Kurdish state if Kurds were to realize their freedom.

The PKK was founded with the express intention of combining Kurdish nationalism with Marxism-Leninism in order to demand an independent, unified Kurdistan. This goal of fighting for an independent Kurdistan was the motivating principle of the PKK for its first 20 years, from roughly the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Yet, Öcalan's thinking changed drastically over the years. By the early 2000s, and following his imprisonment, he gave up on his earlier Marxism-Leninism and his belief in the necessity of a Kurdish state (Lenin 1972; Stalin 1953). Under the influence of the American anarchist, Murray Bookchin, he began to see the nation-state form and even civilization itself as the genuine threat to Kurdish freedom. This has been quite succinctly and forcefully expressed in his recent pamphlet, *Democratic Confederalism* (Öcalan 2017). In this text and others, Öcalan traces the sources of Kurdish domination back through the nation-state model and what he labels "capitalist modernity" to the predominant use of hierarchical power in all civilizations. As for most anarchists, Öcalan views power as an almost entirely negative phenomenon, as meaning "power over" and rarely "power to." Power is usually command and compulsion, a scarce resource monopolized by a small number of oppressive, vicious, and cruel members of society, usually military men or duplicitous priests, and unleashed upon people who are then mere victims of this overwhelming dynamic. Power and domination appear to be almost synonyms for Öcalan, and for anarchism more generally (Fiala 2018). What is worse about power is that it tends, through a sort of natural propensity or teleology, to intensify and concentrate in certain social configurations over the course of human history in a smaller number of hands, at least proportionally speaking. Starting with earlier civilizations, roughly 5000 years ago, power began to concentrate in the hands of fewer men as a result of the advent of private property and the more general reality of sedentary lifestyles brought on by the emergence of agriculture

and urbanism, with its corresponding demographic explosions, and the end of more nomadic and hunter-gather modes of social living.

By the early modern period, this tendency of civilizations to organize society in top-down, hierarchical, and monopolistic terms reached a kind of apotheosis in the birth of the nation-state. For Öcalan, “the nation-state must be thought as the maximum form of power” (Öcalan 2017, 12). In a political theological mode of reflection, Öcalan makes the point that nation-states were mostly conceived in terms of the properties of the Abrahamic monotheistic God, like that of omnipotence, sovereignty, supremacy, and provision of ultimate law and order: “The nation-state is a centralized state with quasi-divine attributes that has completely disarmed society and monopolizes the use of force” (Öcalan 2017, 14). With the nation-state, the tendency of society to be organized around the monopolization of power reaches its perfection. At times, it is hard to tell what precisely Öcalan means by “monopolization,” but it seems to mostly entail the concentration of domineering power in fewer and fewer hands, to such an extent that the state form itself intrinsically involves a fascistic or totalitarian kind of domination of all human social life: “The fascist exercise of power is the nature of the nation-state. Fascism is the purest form of the nation-state” (Öcalan 2017, 26). The state leaves nothing unscathed and dominates all of society: “The nation-state in its original form aimed at the monopolization of all social processes” (Öcalan 2017, 14).

To emphasize the gendered aspect of this monopoly, and to make a Marxist point about the historical parallel between the emergence of the nation-state and capitalism, Öcalan also writes that “capitalism and the nation-state are the monopolism of the despotic and exploitative male” (Öcalan 2017, 15). For Öcalan, all that can be summarily said about the state is that “it is certainly the cage of natural society” (Öcalan 2017, 14). One thing that certainly cannot be said about the state is that it could either be identifiable with the people or even be said to be on the side of the people: “the nation-state is not with the common people—it is an enemy of the people” (Öcalan 2017, 15). Öcalan intimates as well that while “the right to self-determination of the people includes the right to a state of their own,” it would be unwise for a people to exercise that right, as exercising it leads inevitably to only greater domination through the formation of a nation-state (Öcalan 2017, 30). Thus, it makes sense that Öcalan would change his mind about the necessity of founding an independent Kurdish nation-state as a means for achieving the liberation of the Kurds. All a state would provide is merely another form of domination. It would be to exchange one kind of domination for another. To be free, the Kurds, and indeed any people, would need to confront and overcome not only the state form, but the entire social context of capitalist modernity and, one can assume, the fundamentally hierarchical and negatively empowered nature of civilization itself. Öcalan offers his final judgment regarding the prospect of the creation of a Kurdish nation-state:

Hence it does not make sense to replace the old chains with new ones or even enhance the repression. This is what the foundation of a nation-state would mean in the context of capitalist modernity. Without opposition against capitalist modernity there will be no place for the liberation of peoples. This is why the founding of a Kurdish nation-state is not an option for me. (Öcalan 2017, 19)

Instead of the nation-state, Öcalan has a different proposal for how the Kurds, and all oppressed peoples, could organize themselves without falling into the hierarchical and dominating trap of the state. Following again Bookchin's proposal for what he calls "libertarian municipalism," Öcalan offers "democratic confederalism." According to him, democracy in its truer and more direct forms stands opposed to the nation-state model as "states only administrate, while democracies govern" (Öcalan 2017, 21). On the one hand, opposing administration to government may seem bizarre, but it appears all Öcalan means by this opposition is that states are organized in a more top-down and hierarchical manner, while democracies are organized in a more bottom-up and egalitarian manner. Democratic confederalism involves a completely egalitarian form of popular self-governance where power is never allowed to be monopolized by any one individual or group and where techniques of direct democracy are used to perpetually ward off the ever-present threat of emerging hierarchies. These techniques consist in the expected forms of local self-governance found in those rare moments in history where direct democracy flourished like Ancient Athens. Öcalan writes, "In contrast to the nation-state's centralist, linear, and bureaucratic understanding of administration and the exercise of power, democratic confederalism poses a type of political formation where society governs itself and where all societal groups and cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions, and councils" (Öcalan 2017, 24).

Insofar as it is a positive proposal for structuring politics and society, it is hard to tell whether democratic confederalism would count as a properly anarchist form of governance and thus a means for achieving anarchist liberty. Clearly, an anarchist would regard a political system based on direct democracy, strict egalitarianism, and near-total dispersal of power as much preferable to other, more statist, forms of political order. But we need to abstract out at this point to see just what it is an anarchist would say counts as domination and thus non-domination. We need to do so in order to contrast anarchism with another theory of liberty as non-domination, namely republicanism, and its contrary relationship with the concept of the state. This is important because the goal here is to try to determine which view of liberty as non-domination, anarchism, or republicanism, might actually provide Kurds with the conditions of possibility for the liberty they actively seek. So, for anarchism, what then is liberty? Ironically, when one looks deeper into the history of anarchism, especially through earlier figures like Proudhon and even Bakunin, one finds evidence of anarchism's roots in republicanism (Kinna and Pritchard 2019; Pritchard 2019). However, this relationship was more one of anarchism being an off-shoot than a development of republicanism. The key difference between republicanism and anarchism was found not so much in how they diagnosed and understood domination, but in how they hoped to achieve non-domination.

As we have seen with Öcalan, anarchists regard *any* kind of inequality in the distribution of power or resources as an expression of domination, regardless of its degree of intensity. At times, it seems that for anarchists the real culprit of the inequality that leads to and constitutes domination is hierarchy itself (Davis 2014, 219; Williams 2012, 10). Hierarchies are formed through inequalities that go to constitute domination as embedded patterns of social relations. And, again, a hierarchy is any system of command and obedience, any social relationship based on an asymmetry of power, that can function

only through the inequalities that constitute domination. To be in a hierarchy at all is to be dominated. To have power wielded over one without having recourse to return the favor is to be a subject of domination. As Proudhon famously intimated, to be governed at all is basically to be dominated (Proudhon 1969, 294). So far, this much seems explicable in terms of the account of domination developed above, but now applied to any unequal relationship regardless of degree of intensity. The various social kinds of domination (economic, legal, sexual, filial, political, and so on) are all so many distinct hierarchies based on inequalities in the distribution of power and resources.

What is distinct about anarchism is how it understands the liberty that is meant to remedy domination. Just as anarchists seem to mostly have a negative conception of power, they too seem to have mostly a negative conception of liberty. Liberty, for anarchists, mostly means freedom from domination, and not so much freedom to realize one's political nature (Pritchard 2019, 78). Anarchists seem suspicious of large portions of what is usually understood as civilized human activity. Of course, anarchism is not unified enough an ideological movement for this to capture the views of freedom of all individual anarchists, but one gets the sense that for most anarchists freedom is freedom from domination, that is, freedom from inequality, hierarchy, and thus ultimately freedom from political power, from humans commanding other humans in any sense whatsoever. One could argue, this negative view of liberty takes anarchists in a more individualist and libertarian direction.

On the other hand, this is not to deny that certain anarchists do offer a more positive and collective notion of liberty. For example, John P. Clark (2013) has offered a communitarian anarchism based on Hegel's conception of liberty as mutual recognition and mutual self-determination. Clark offers "a concept of freedom based on communal individuality, social self-realization, self-determination, strong agency, and recognition" (Clark 2013, 61). And this is meant to be achieved without giving up on the negative notion of non-domination as freedom from the actual and arbitrary interferences that come from all forms of hierarchy, inequality, and power. Clark's conception sounds like a kind of liberty that must involve people doing things together, making decisions, realizing preferences, closing off certain options, enduring trade-offs, developing habits and customs, organizing and governing their lives, and so on, all things that certain other anarchists apparently find troubling. The deeper question that confronts anarchists at this point is, can the positive side of anarchist non-domination be achieved and preserved without losing whatever kinds of negative liberty that have been gained through overcoming hierarchies and inequalities and thus eliminating political power from human social relations? This question takes the form of aiming to determine just how far can anarchist non-domination be institutionalized, legalized, codified, and thus protected in law. For an anarchist like Uri Gordon, anarchist non-domination cannot be institutionalized at all without being lost. For him, anarchy cannot be institutionalized, liberty cannot be legalized, without thereby losing it (Gordon 2008, 47–78). As Pritchard nicely puts it, "Gordon defines institutionalization as the adoption of binding and formal rules, which insofar as they are binding make them un-anarchist, and if they are not binding, then they are not institutionalized" (Pritchard 2019, 82).

In the end, one may wonder, if Gordon is right about anarchist liberty, just how much of a *political* theory of liberty it actually amounts to considering it is hard to imagine any recognizable notion of the political not including at least the making of collectively binding decisions. If anarchist liberty is not a properly *political* conception, then it will, by definition, not provide the liberation from domination that is sought by the Kurds insofar as what the Kurds suffer is, as we saw, explicitly political domination, a domination that denies their existence as an independent people. However, and we will return to this in the final section, there may be a way to preserve much anarchist non-domination while permitting a significant form of its institutionalization and it is found in mostly undeveloped form in Clark's work. This proposal also has much in common with Öcalan's own democratic confederalism, which means his view, as we will claim, is already more a positive account of liberty than someone like Gordon's. With respect to Clark, this will make sense considering he has one of the most positive views of anarchist non-domination available. For now, let us see what it is about the republican notion of non-domination that makes it so distinct from the anarchist one because in order for us to salvage a positive notion of anarchist liberty it will have to be combined with another, more clearly political notion of liberty as non-domination, which is what we find in the republican tradition.

Republican liberty¹

The republican would likely see the anarchist as making roughly four mistakes: first, the anarchist misses the historical and political necessity of the state; second, the anarchist denies the function of the state as the main way a people can obtain liberty; third, the anarchist confuses one conception of the state for the concept of the state itself; and fourth, the anarchist ignores the importance of status and recognition in relation to the state. To start with the first point, republicans view the state as either a natural or inevitable institution that emerges through the interplay of human dispositions and a social order based on the features of civilization mentioned above (sedentarism, increased population, agriculture, urbanism, literacy, and so on). For a leading republican like Philip Pettit, the state is a piece of "historical and political necessity. [It is] like having to live in the presence of gravity, it is a product of the existing world order, not the result of a dominating presence in your life" (Pettit 2012, 162). By "historical necessity," Pettit means to emphasize the inertial force history has on the political present and near-future. Over the course of the thousands of years that led to civilization and the hundreds of years, and likely hundreds more (if not thousands) that have followed from the advent of the nation-state, the state has solidified into *the* only accepted form of political order. There is not much any individual or group could purposively do about this in the present or near-future. Historical change is like evolutionary, demographic, or climatic change: something that happens usually very slowly and over the course of timespans that humans have little capacity with which to plan in accordance or intentionally alter. For Pettit, at the moment and for the foreseeable future, "the earth is a state-bound planet" (Pettit 2012, 161).²

With respect to the second point, republicans not only find states to be embedded within historical and political necessities, they also find them to be desirable institutions on their own terms. They view states as the chief means by which a people can overcome their domination in the first place. This is so much the case that any overcoming of individual domination could only occur within the context of the overcoming of collective domination. In other words, for a person to be free, a people needs to first be free. Skinner has shown the historical and conceptual basis for this claim, in particular in the re-emergence of republicanism through the Italian Renaissance and early modern British, American, and French revolutionary contexts. Skinner talks about the “two slogans” of republican political theory (Skinner 2010). It is the second of these two slogans which enjoys metaphysical priority. While the first slogan says that “*it is possible to act freely if and only if you are a freeman,*” it is the second one that makes being a free person, and thus acting freely since only free persons can act freely, possible at all. This slogan says “*it is possible to live and act as a freeman if and only if you live in a free state*” (Skinner 2010, 99). Liberty as non-domination is thus achievable only through a free state. Therefore, to deny this, as the anarchist seems to, is to deny the main, and indeed only, way a people can obtain their liberty. Skinner nicely summarizes how political liberty entails a people acting according to its own will and not dependent upon the arbitrary or constraining will of another. He makes this point by establishing political liberty, republican non-domination, as both collective independence or self-determination and democratic self-government. He draws the necessary connection between the external and internal political liberty of a people thusly:

Just as individual human bodies are free...if and only if they are able to act or forbear from acting at will, so the bodies of nations and states are likewise free if and only if they are similarly unconstrained from using their powers according to their own wills in pursuit of their desired ends. Free states, like free persons, are thus defined by their capacity for self-government. A free state is a community in which the actions of the body politic are determined by the will of the members as a whole. (Skinner 1998, 25–26)

At this point, it might be useful to take a step back and ask what it is the anarchist and republican are actually disagreeing about with respect to the state because it is hard to believe the anarchist would have much of a problem with the idea of collective independence per se. This brings us to the third mistake the republican sees the anarchist making. The anarchist appears to be mistaking a certain conception of the state for the concept of the state itself. Concepts, their conceptions, and what they are concepts of can all be distinguished (Ezcurdia 1998). While the concept of the state can be understood in roughly Weberian terms as “that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory” (Weber 2000, 310–311), a conception of the state will be of the *kind of entity* a state can be. Of course, actually existing states need to instantiate the basic properties of the concept of the state in order to count as states, but what exactly states are can differ depending upon their conception. Here the work of Skinner becomes helpful once again (Skinner 2009). For Skinner, modern political thought is in many ways the history of the various conceptions

of the kind of entity the state is supposed to be. Skinner distinguishes conceptions of the state in terms of three basic entities with which states have been most often identified. The state has been identified with the *head* of a body of a people, the *body* of the people itself (without reference to a head), and with the *fictional* person a people become through being represented by the artificial person of a sovereign. Skinner calls the conception of the state that identifies it with the head of a body of people, the “absolutist theory” (Skinner 2009, 329). If the state is nothing but the personal status or standing of the natural person or persons who holds that monopoly which instantiates the basic features of the concept of the state, then the state itself is coequal with the head of a body of people and the people themselves are mere subjects and can correctly be said to be dominated insofar as they do not exist in any other way than as dependent upon the arbitrary will of this “head of state.” This conception of the state captures everything the anarchist hates about the state. It renders the state an entity of pure top-down hierarchical command and gross inequality. The problem is that the anarchist conflates this conception of the state with the concept of the state itself.

By contrast, Skinner calls the conception of the state which identifies it with the body of the people the “populist conception” (Skinner 2009, 332). It is this populist conception that is the republican conception of the free state, the state as the non-dominated independence of a self-determining and self-governing people. Interestingly, the most common usage of the term “state” through the early modern period identified it with just this phrase, “free state.” To be a state, originally, was to be a free state, a republic. The point here, on the part of republicans, was to distinguish states from monarchies, which ultimately they thought should be regarded not as *res publica*, as public things, but as private things, mere property or dominion of the head of state in the absolutist conception (Skinner 2009, 337–340). Here, the anarchist and republican very much agree that the absolutist conception is rooted in a symbiosis of private property and excessively concentrated political power. The populist theory of the state conceived of the kind of entity the state was supposed to be as simply the people themselves in their activities as a self-determining and self-governing unity. Liberty, in this context, meant nothing but this popularly sovereign power of a people to determine and govern themselves through the laws and institutions of their choosing, without the arbitrary interference of other peoples or states. Only in this way could a people exist and be free from the domination imposed upon them by another people. Also, it was the only means to avoid an internal slippage toward absolutism by sustaining as democratically as possible a means by which to make internally collectively binding decisions. Obviously, historically speaking, just how democratic these means were greatly changed. The point is that it was only through this populist conception of the state that this democratization process could occur in the first place. As a conception of the state, the populist conception admits that the state must involve the monopolization of the power to make collectively binding decisions over certain people in a certain territory, ultimately decisions about violence and who gets to use it, but this monopolization is not viewed as threat to political liberty because it is in this conception only that it is the people themselves who hold this monopoly. In this way, such concentration of power still remains dispersed enough that a people do not drift into being the mere subjects, the private property, of a monarch or oligarchs.

The anarchist will likely not be moved by much of Skinner's genealogical analysis of the state. For the anarchist, the concept of the state is intrinsically absolutist and so would regard the populist and fictionalist conceptions as obscuring this basic point. The anarchist views the state as essentially incapable of being anything other than a means of absolutist domination. In response, the republican might claim the anarchist is confused here insofar as he is mistaking the absolutist conception of the state for the concept of the state itself. The republican sees the anarchist as conflating statehood as such, the concept of the state, with just one historically contingent conception of the state, the absolutist one. For the republican, the concept of the state allows for a popular conception that does not leave the state as only a vehicle for domination, but rather as the chief means for achieving political liberation and so enjoying liberty as non-domination amongst a people, a people willing to independently govern themselves. The anarchist does not seem to think the populist conception of the state is either coherent or feasible or desirable. The anarchist would say not only do all actually existing states exemplify the absolutist conception, a point with which the republican could readily agree if tempered and contextualized, but it is by the very fact that any actually existing state must instantiate the chief property of the concept of the state as the holding of a *monopoly* of power that there is thereby something deeply objectionable about the nature of the state as such. For the anarchist, holding a monopoly of power at all, anywhere, at any time is a sign of domination. This is because it seems the anarchist finds power and collective bindingness as in themselves objectionable, as we have seen. Therefore, any actually existing state, because it must be an example of the concept of the state, necessarily involves domination because it necessarily involves monopolization, and monopolization is intrinsically objectionable because it necessarily involves command, obedience, inequality, hierarchy, and political power, and all those features are signs of domination. For the anarchist, in the end, there is really no difference between the concept of the state, the absolutist conception of the state, and all actually existing states.

The republican, at this point, might reply that such a reading is excessive, one-sided, obtuse with respect to conceptual history, and again conflating statehood as such with its absolutist conception. "Monopoly" and "monopolization" are neither intrinsically problematic nor examples of domination if it is the people themselves who hold that monopoly. Power is not dominating if it is properly popular. The populist conception of the state allows for actually existing states to instantiate the basic properties of the concept of the state without being a source of domination, but rather as being the source and site of a people's liberation insofar as obtaining statehood allows a people to live independently of the arbitrary will of another people. The republican has no problem admitting that most actually existing states, in the past and present, do resemble the absolutist (and, in legal terms, the fictionalist) conceptions more often than the populist one, but that is not necessarily true of more democratic states today (Democracy Index 2020), and it is certainly not true that the state is somehow conceptually or empirically required to be an agent of domination. Obviously, this is not to say these contemporary, more democratic states are perfectly free or sufficiently directly democratic, but it is to say that how liberating a state is, is ultimately up to the will of the people who constitute that state. It is not the state form itself which is dominating, as the anarchist claims, but the kind of entity

a people will their state to become that determines the degree of domination or non-domination it provides. And since, as Pettit claims, there is no escaping the historical and political necessity of political entities having to be modern nation-states in the present and for the foreseeable future if they want to exist or be free at all, it would be best to view the state through a populist conception to render it the potential source and site of political liberation and liberty it certainly can be rather than as the source and site of domination the anarchist rightly sees the state as mostly historically being. Therefore, the republican's disagreement with the anarchist concerns the latter's denial of the state, through a confused conceiving of the concept of the state as being necessarily absolutist, as a potential means for achieving non-domination. Indeed, at present, there is no other political entity that would enable a people to overcome their domination. As just one example, there is no people who have a state who have been the victims of a genocide. One would expect such a fact to be highly relevant for a people like the Kurds. For the republican, the anarchist has eliminated the only chance a dominated people have to truly become a people, to exist as a people and free of their domination, to become a truly political entity, independent of the arbitrary will of others and so obtain the status of a free people.

There is one final point in favor of the republican or populist conception of the state. It has to do with the notion of "status" just mentioned. According to Pettit, the republican views freedom not as the property of an action, but as the *status* of a person or body of persons. The republican agrees with the anarchist that there is something undesirable about uncontrolled power. The main difference between them on this point, and which constitutes the anarchist's fourth mistake, is that while this is enough for the anarchist to regard eliminating political power as the solution to this problem, the republican thinks the better solution would be to transform uncontrolled power into controlled power. This is achieved by granting a certain standing or status to a victim of uncontrolled power, of domination, that renders them an independent member of a society, whether it be a member of a local society or a society of states. Such granting may be at first done by the victims themselves, but then it will need recognition from others. For the republican, to not be dominated is to hold this granted status as a free being. As Pettit writes, "to enjoy the relevant freedom of non-domination is to be someone who commands a certain standing amongst your fellows" (Pettit 2012, 91). To be able to command such standing is to be able to command recognition of one's standing or status as free and independent. But this is precisely what the word "state" means in the first place. The "state" was first and foremost the "state of" someone or something. To be a state is to be in the state of commanding recognition of one's status as free. To be a state is for a people to have the status of a free, liberated, and hence non-dominated entity. The state of a free people is their condition, their status, their standing as a free and independent people, and their recognition as such. The anarchist seems to ignore this quality of the state.

Now, based on the four points above, the republican conceptions of liberty and statehood might thus be the preferable means by which the Kurds could aim to overcome their domination. But, on the other hand, there remains much that is appealing about Öcalan's anarchist approach. Perhaps a compromise could be struck? Perhaps we could

synthesize the reconcilable elements of the anarchist and republican conceptions of liberty and the state? Let us conclude by attempting such a synthesis.

Kurdish liberty

We think there is conceptual space for a partial reconciliation of anarchist and republican views of liberty and the state. Such a reconciliation is rooted in comments made by anarchists themselves, especially in remarks about the importance of recognition just mentioned in a figure like Clark. Before that, it is helpful to start by pointing out how Öcalan himself showed signs of admitting that the total rejection of the state and any institutionalization of liberty was probably too extreme. In true republican and, moreover, Machiavellian fashion, Öcalan intimates an awareness of the tendencies of many humans toward not being entirely egalitarian. Indeed, there seems to be recognition on Öcalan's part that a sizeable portion of any human population is driven by a *libido dominandi*, a lust to dominate. While most humans desire merely not to be dominated, there is a certain section of any human grouping that has an insatiable desire to dominate the rest. The key to any successful and peaceful polity is the checking and harmless discharging of this lust. For Öcalan, he knows certain compromises will have to be made with people with these impulses and that any political order must include not merely horizontal or directly democratic modes of organization: "The contradictory composition of society necessitates political groups with both vertical and horizontal formations" (Öcalan 2017, 21).

On the one hand, Öcalan appears unsure if his preferred form of governance, democratic confederalism, is identifiable with a democratic or republican regime in contrast to the nation-state model: "the nation-state exists in contrast to democracy and republicanism" (Öcalan 2017, 23). In this line of thought, it seems Öcalan is saying democratic confederalism and republicanism could be understood as roughly synonymous as long as republicanism's populist conception of the state was either dropped or ignored. On the other hand, he seems to also admit democratic confederalism would have to take the form of either a nation-state, republic, or democracy—or more likely, a combination of all three—in order to provide the non-hierarchical and egalitarian benefits which would hopefully result from such a regime, benefits that would characterize it as mostly environmentalist, feminist, and socialist. So, Öcalan does readily allow for a compromise with the state, and this seems a piece of realism on his part because he appears to know it is the only feasible means in the present and near-term to achieve the goal of Kurdish liberty, considering again the historically and politically necessary features of the state. He writes, "Whether nation-state, republic or democracy—democratic confederalism is open to compromises concerning state or governmental traditions. It allows for equal coexistence" (Öcalan 2017, 22). Therefore, Öcalan appears to want to both avoid his preferred democratic confederalism from becoming too statist while also realizing democratic confederalism would need to be organized in at least quasi-statist terms if it was to function or even exist at all. What is most relevant here is that Öcalan couches this quasi-statist approach within a broader strategy based on political prioritizing and temporal sequencing, a sign that Öcalan might be more of a political realist in terms similar to Raymond Geuss's delineation of the view (Geuss 2008, 30–34). Öcalan's ultimate

proposal is for Kurds to work within the state form for now to democratize it as much as possible so that eventually the need for the hierarchical aspects of statehood could wither away and die. In the spirit of St. Augustine, then, Öcalan's proposal seems to be: give me anarchy, but just not yet. He writes, "Neither total rejection nor complete recognition of the state is useful for the democratic efforts of civil society. The overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process" (Öcalan 2017, 28). It is in this "long-term process" where we may find a chance of reconciliation between anarchist and republican conception of liberty and the state.

In the Kurdish context, Öcalan's strategy is to gradually democratize the four states Kurds find themselves dominated within, without thereby establishing a Kurdish nation-state, so that eventually these four states (Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq) would be too democratic, and presumably so egalitarian and anarchistic, for them to persist as traditional nation-states. Instead, what would emerge would be an indefinitely decentralized and dispersed confederalism where most, if not all, collectively binding decisions are made at the smallest feasible and most local level possible. This would occur all the while the Kurds would continue to defend themselves through the traditional rural and urban guerilla tactics of a people's protracted war against the Arab, Persian, and Turkish forces which aim to continue dominating them. So, instead of Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish self-determination, and Kurdish statehood, Öcalan's proposal would supposedly be Kurdish democratization, Kurdish self-defense, and Kurdish confederalism, none of which in the end would have be "Kurdish" in any ethnic sense. This gradual erosion of nation-statehood while simultaneously democratizing existing states appears to be Öcalan's proposal in these lines:

Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is also an anti-nationalist movement. It aims at realizing the right of self-defense of peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation-state. The movement intends to establish federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq that are open to all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan. (Öcalan 2017, 31)

For Öcalan, if this strategy succeeded it could gradually expand to the entire Middle East and perhaps even to the entire world, transforming it from Pettit's state-bound planet into a stateless planet composed of nearly infinite local directly democratic councils: "The emerging entity could become a blueprint for the entire Middle East and expand dynamically into neighboring countries" (Öcalan 2017, 36). Yet, Öcalan does not shy away from the fact that if this were to ever happen it would probably take hundreds or more likely thousands of years to occur, probably just as long as humanity's grindingly slow descent out of hunter-gather forms of life and into the sedentary and hierarchical forms of so-called civilized social order.³

While we may not feel confident enough to predict whether Öcalan's ultimate plan is likely to work, what could be emphasized now is the point that Öcalan's strategy requires accepting and dealing with the historical and political necessity of the state as described by Pettit. Öcalan knows the state cannot be abolished anytime soon. Also, his tendency

toward compromising and working with the state's necessity need not be limited to trying to democratize the four states that dominate Kurds, which are four of the least democratic states in the world at present. One could propose a better, perhaps more feasible approach to dealing with the historical and political necessity of the state—or at least offer a proposal that might slot into an intermediate phase of Öcalan's "long-term process"—which would be for the Kurds to return to the original, Marxist-Leninist goal of the PKK and aim to find a Kurdish state, but a state that entirely aligns with the republican and populist conception of the state and that is formed with the express intention of its gradual and eventual self-destruction, just as the anarchist line of thinking would like. This is because there remains no other political means available at present for the Kurds to overcome their domination in as quickly a manner as possible than by founding a free and independent state of their own. To indulge in fantasies of statelessness thousands of years from now, when genocide and ethnic cleansing are already occurring in Kurdistan and are perpetually directly imminent, seems shortsighted and strategically inept to say the least, and perhaps might even be unsympathetic to the suffering and domination Kurds face *right now*. Of course, this is not to say that no matter how popularly conceived and republican a potential Kurdish state might be, it might not still devolve into another merely hierarchical actually existing state. But at this point one may wonder if the domination suffered at the hands of one's own people might not be as severe as the genocidal domination coming from without? We will set this terrible line of thought aside for now. The point is only that aiming for near-term statehood is something anarchists, in particular the PKK and their allies, could do while they simultaneously work for ultimate statelessness. In fact, this will be our precise proposal: anarchists could build populist, directly democratic, and republican states in the near-term and construct them in such a way they gradually dissolve of their own accord and so become superfluous and unnecessary when the time is right.

There is also evidence for this approach within certain strands of anarchism, where the state is treated as simultaneously presently necessary and eventually in need of total abolition. This anarchist thought can be found all the way back in a founding father of anarchism like Bakunin. He saw that the state was both historically and politically necessary and equally necessarily in need of complete eradication: "I have no hesitation in saying that the State is an evil, albeit a historically necessary evil, as necessary in the past as its utter extinction will sooner or later prove to be, as necessary as were men's primitive brutishness and theological meanderings" (Bakunin 1998, 130). In the Kurdish context, Clark's observations on the "Lessons of the Rojavan Revolution" evince a similar consideration where he appears to claim the Kurds might need to establish a purposively self-destroying state, what could be called again a "quasi-state." Clark begins by reflecting on Öcalan's claim that he rejects as unconstructive an all or nothing approach to the question of whether Kurds should strive for a state or statelessness. Clark says he thinks Öcalan's view is that "for a considerable period of time confederalism must coexist with the state" (Clark 2019, 129–130). Clark sees Öcalan's thinking and the present activities of the self-governing Kurds of Rojava adequately described in comments made by David Graeber where he labels Rojava "a nonstate state" and "a dual power situation where the

same political forces created both sides,” both a “democratic self-administration [with] all the form and trappings of a state,” but “which is driven bottom up directly by democratic institutions” (Graeber 2016, 27). And Clark cites Michael Taussig’s claim that Rojava is characterized by the paradox of “perform [ing] as if there is a state even if there is not and even though they are against the state” (Taussig 2016, 116). Clark emphasizes that Rojava, and thus the entire balancing act between the PKK’s ideology and its activities embodied in the Rojava experiment, involves an attempt to combine and balance the “benignly state-like” with as much direct democracy as possible without the entire enterprise drifting into the “dangerously statist” (Clark 2019, 130).

In terms of the temporal sequencing of this balancing act, Clark points out how the PKK and thus the anarchist in general could regard their early activities involved in trying to actually politically exist—even if the anarchist might bizarrely regard “actual existence” as a “catastrophe” (Clark 2019, 131)—as contributing toward the establishment of what Clark calls a “transitional state” (Clark 2019, 138). Clark had before mentioned the possibility of an anarchist version of the intermediate Marxist phase of a dictatorship of the proletariat understood in terms of “a transitional state” in his *The Impossible Community* (Clark 2013, 86). In that text, Clark developed Gustav Landauer’s communitarian anarchism where he recognizes “the possible role for the state in the transition from the system of domination to a system of free community of communities, under certain historical conditions” (Clark 2019, 131). Landauer’s “historical conditions” appear to be roughly Pettit’s historical and political necessities determining the ubiquity of the state (Clark 2019, 131). Clark cites Landauer as echoing Bakunin’s point about the equally necessary gradual disappearance of this transitional state: “the [transitional] state is left with only one task: to prepare for its own abolition and to make way for the endless ordered multiplicity of federations, organizations, and societies to take its place and the place of economic individualism” (Landauer 2010, 169). Clark reflects on Landauer’s proposal, in terms strikingly reminiscent of the republican notion of the state, by stating that

it points to the need for an anarchist politics of the transitional state. ... The possibility of such a transitional state would depend on socially transformative activity making the state in practice what it has been only in theory, as depicted in some forms of historical materialism: a purely superstructural phenomenon. It would, incidentally, realize precisely what Marx proposed in the ‘Critique of the Gotha Program,’ that is, ‘converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it. (Clark 2019, 138)

Clark concludes by confessing that the very idea of an anarchist transitional state would be highly controversial for certain anarchists and so could never become an ideological article of anarchist faith, but which would need to be seen as a piece of pragmatic adaptation to historical and political necessities that anyone would confront when trying to actually become politically free. And such freedom is our concern here: what is the process by which the Kurds could obtain their liberty? The transitional state, a state so egalitarian and democratic that it would eventually lead to its own dissolution,

could be a way, perhaps even the only way, they could start to overcome their domination while still preserving much of Öcalan's strict anarchism and egalitarianism. Of course, this would require an intolerable degree of institutionalization of liberty for an anarchist figure like Gordon, but that might have to just be chalked up to an irreconcilable difference between Clark's more positive and communitarian approach and Gordon's. An anarchist transitional state might give us exactly what we have been looking for: a way to reconcile Öcalan's anarchism with the actual reality and pressing political need of achieving liberty as non-domination in the only way it is actually possible at the moment, that is, through the formation of an, albeit transitional, free and independent Kurdish state.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the Kurdish people suffer domination. In rough agreement, the anarchist and republican approaches view domination as a problem involving the application of uncontrolled, unlimited, impositional, unconstrained, or unrestrained power. The Kurds are dominated in the sense of being prevented from enjoying liberty by the use of such uncontrolled power by the four states that divide them (Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran). The liberation that is meant to overcome domination is conceived differently by anarchism and republicanism. For the Kurds, Öcalan's anarchist proposal of Kurdish liberty without statehood mostly runs afoul of certain historical and political necessities and desiderata emphasized by the republican tradition. We have tried to strike a compromise, utilizing underdeveloped aspects of Öcalan's own theory, between the anarchist and republican conceptions of liberty in order to offer a third, more communitarian, way of understanding aspirations for Kurdish liberty. While the state, even in a quasi- or transitional form, may be what the anarchist says it is, it remains the only game in town and the only possible means at present for the achievement of Kurdish liberation. Also, the state is open to being structured in such a way that it both minimizes the amount of internal domination anarchists have such a problem with and allows for its own gradual self-dissolution. We hope these concessions are not regarded as too unpalatable to any Kurds of either a more anarchist and republican persuasion, but rather viewed as the gestures needed for the achievement of what all politically minded Kurds desire: Kurdish liberty.

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Notes

1. This section, and much of this essay, can be seen as a response to Can Cemgil's (2016) excellent paper arguing for the superiority of Öcalan's anarchist proposal over the republican alternative.
2. Also, based on the political and historical necessity of the state, consider a possible argument by analogy: not many, neither your average anarchist nor Öcalan himself, seem to seriously propose that the solutions to the environmental crisis, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation would be to abolish the environment, fathers, or markets as such. Environmentalism, feminism, and socialism neither expect to nor could even achieve such destruction. Our suspicion is that this is because these entities are regarded, at least unconsciously, as naturally or historically necessary features of the world. If so, would not the proposal to abolish the state entail missing the parallel historical necessity of the state as well? The solution to domination cannot be to abolish the only entity with which one could overcome it, even if it is often the source of the problem. The state seems to enjoy a degree of necessity comparable to the environment, fathers, and markets. The point, then, would be to render these entities the agents or means for achieving non-domination, not to do the improbable, if not impossible, and abolish them.
3. There is something slightly incoherent about Öcalan's proposal. Öcalan recommends reforming the states Kurds find themselves trapped within. He says Kurds can democratize these states. He also says Kurds should not aim to form a state of their own because the state is irredeemably domineering, an indelible agent of domination, forever incapable of true democracy. But which is it? If states other than a potential Kurdistan can be democratically confederalized, then why could not a potential Kurdistan itself simply employ democratic confederalism? We think the solution to this problem will only emerge from the notion of a transitional Kurdish state developed in what follows. It is important to note as well that Kamran Matin (2019) has recently raised similar objections. For Matin, Öcalan wavers in his explanations of state formation between internalist and interactivist approaches, which leaves a blind spot in his analysis where he misses the key consequence of his anarchism and democratic confederalism, namely, that if it were to work it would have to be a "world-systemic phenomenon" (Matin 2019, 14). What is strange about Öcalan's blind spot on this issue is that he is acutely aware of the spatially and temporally circumscribed nature of state formation (and possible destruction) in many texts. For example, Matin epigrammatically cites these two quotes from Öcalan: "National borders are a datum, a given" (Öcalan 1999, 16) and "Social formations can only be understood in their temporal and physical context – i.e., they are part of their historical and geographical environment" (Öcalan 2007, 185). Pettit would agree with both of these quotes.

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