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The Challenges of a Kurdish Ecofeminist Perspective: Maria Mies, Abdullah Öcalan, and the Praxis of *Jineoloji*

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ABSTRACT

Ecology, along with women's liberation and radical democracy, is one of the major pillars of Democratic Confederalism, a new political paradigm developed by the Kurdish Freedom Movement through the voice of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Scholars attribute the greening of the Kurdish agenda to the impact that the founder of Social Ecology, Murray Bookchin, had on Öcalan's ideology. Without denying the veracity of this argument, the following article analyzes the influence that Maria Mies, a pioneer of socialist ecofeminism, had on the philosophical elaboration of Öcalan. Examining the theses exposed in his prison writings with the most relevant aspects of Mies' thought, this article shows the limits, challenges, and strategic use of the Kurdish ecofeminist perspective. This approach provides an original understanding of the emancipatory horizon opened up by Democratic Confederalism and particularly by *Jineoloji*, the "science of women and life," spearheaded by the Kurdish Women's Movement since 2011.

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Introduction

Published in 2005, the declaration of Democratic Confederalism launched the emancipatory strategy of the Kurdish Freedom Movement developed by Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), and registered in his prison writings. Kurdish militants call this process the "paradigm change," meaning "a radical upheaval in the way the world is conceived and perceived" (Jongerden 2017, 235), and revealing the PKK's transition from a Marxist–Leninist praxis to a libertarian and autonomist one. This new paradigm is based on three pillars: women's liberation, radical democracy, and ecology (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012). Studies have concentrated on its practical implementation since the beginning of

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the 21st century, monitoring the emergence of new grassroots institutions and a system of self-government in all four regions of Kurdistan, where “the empowerment of millions of people, who refuse to allow the state to control their lives” took place (Dirik 2017). Especially while looking at Rojava or other experiences in Kurdistan, scholars focus on the original Democratic Confederalism proposal of a “stateless,” or “radical,” democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011; Grubacic 2019), others on women’s leading role (Al-Ali and Tas 2018b; Jongerden 2017), but only a few have looked at the third pillar of this new paradigm: ecology (Ayboğa 2018; Hunt 2017; saed 2017). The present article aims to fulfill a gap in the analysis of the theory of Democratic Confederalism as it is elaborated in Öcalan’s books, the undisputed source of the Kurdish Freedom Movement’s praxis.

So far, the literature has probed the connection between Murray Bookchin – founder of Social Ecology – and Abdullah Öcalan, showing how the American philosopher influenced the ecological, “communalist” or “municipalist” perspective of the new Kurdish paradigm (Biehl 2012; Gerber and Brincat 2018; Hunt 2017). However, without denying this influence, the article intends to make a dialogue between his texts and those by Maria Mies in order to flesh out the ecofeminist trend present in the Kurdish leader’s thought.

As several authors reveal, as of 1999 and during his first years of incarceration, Öcalan could read at least two Maria Mies’ books – she was one of the few ecofeminist authors translated into Turkish at that time – while elaborating the founding theory of Democratic Confederalism (Bookchin 2018; Jongerden 2017; Şimşek and Jongerden 2018). Although no in-depth research exists on the relation between these two authors, Öcalan’s use of the German sociologist’s words in his *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* (Öcalan 2017, 73) and the repeated references he makes to the concept of “housewifization” originally developed by Mies, evidences the influence she had on the Kurdish leader’s thought as regards the analysis of the connection between patriarchy and capitalism.

Addressing this influence and retracing the multiplicity of common points between Mies’ and Öcalan’s writings is the main objective here, since it allows us to emphasize the ecofeminist perspective of Democratic Confederalism, i.e. the inextricable link between gender liberation and ecological revolution present in the movement’s theory since the paradigm shift up to its most recent developments. Moreover, recognizing the fundamental contribution of the Kurdish Women’s Movement to the new paradigm, the article reflects on the recent proposal of *Jineoloji* as a result of Kurdish women’s subjectivation process as well as a turning point in the ecofeminist perspective of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Composed by the word “loji” (“science”) and “jin,” which means “woman” but is also the root of “jiyan” (“life” in Kurdish), this “science of women and life” was first

presented by the Kurdish leader in 2008 as a revolutionary perspective in social sciences as well as the founding knowledge of Democratic Confederationalism (Al-Ali and Käser 2020). Currently, *Jineoloji* constitutes an original epistemology and methodology which works on the recovery of Kurdish ancestral history, on matrilineal societies, on the major role of women in self- and land defense, and ecological economy. Furthermore, beyond the theoretical work, *Jineoloji* is also inspiring the “ecofeminist practice” of Rojava (Aguilar Silva 2018; Shahvisi 2018), such as Jinwar, the women’s eco-village, and the women’s economic cooperatives (Aguilar Silva 2019).

The relevance in exploring the ways how Mies’ thought resonates in and inspired Öcalan does not rely on the idea that it is possible to reduce the complexity of his thought to the influence of individual authors, especially Westerners. The undisputed root of his elaboration, and that of *Jineoloji*, is the praxis of the movement itself together with the constant dialectic characterizing PKK’s history, especially regarding gender (Al-Ali and Tas 2018b). Rather than this, the article shows the specific declination of the nexus between women’s and nature’s liberation present in Öcalan thought, its limits, and challenges up to the recent development opened by *Jineoloji*.

“Capitalist Patriarchy” as the Source of Women’s and Nature’s Oppression

Maria Mies, an author of German origin, who published the books *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1994), and *Women: The Last Colony*, together with Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Claudia Von Werlhof (1988), brought a fundamental contribution to then-nascent socialist ecofeminism. Among the different currents that have been composing ecofeminism since its birth (see Gaard 2011), the socialist one considers the environmental crisis a gendered crisis and holds the modern hegemonic science, technology, and economy – while structurally interlinked with patriarchy – responsible for the contemporary exhaustion of natural resources. Therefore, its advocates look at the historical and spatial transformations in the relationship between production, reproduction, and ecology (Merchant 2010). They show how the “backgrounding” of the reproductive sphere, historically associated with and carried out by women, has determined the oppression and exploitation of both women and natural world under capitalism (Mellor 1997; Plumwood 1993). Coming from a Marxist tradition, Mies’ ecofeminism can be considered a pivotal reference of this current. Indeed, since the 1980s, and particularly through her fieldwork with women in Andhra Pradesh, she has been analyzing the international division of labor established by the recent process of neoliberal and capitalist accumulation in the Global South, focusing specifically on the destructive effects of development on women’s subsistence economies. Looking at this

scenario, she criticizes the Marxist and the ecologist ideas of her times for not seeing through to the interconnected dependency of capitalism on the oppression and exploitation of women, nature, and the colonies in the so-called Third World. She maintains, instead, that all three are submitted to a regime of “colonization,” that is, of exclusion and naturalization, instrumental for the development of the Western industrialized countries and to their hegemonic model of growth (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Von Werlhof 1988). “Women, the earth, water, other ‘natural resources,’ and also the native peoples, the land and the people in the colonies” are reduced to an economicist concept of “nature” as “everything that was to be free of costs, that is free for unrestricted appropriation” (8).

This systemic view, which goes far beyond the restricted analysis of the waged labor system in the industrialized countries of the North, brought Maria Mies to describe the present world system as “capitalist patriarchy” (Mies 1994). Patriarchy is not comprehended as a form of superstructural oppression – an expression of the backwardness of pre-modern societies – but as the hidden condition of the possibility of capitalism, which structurally determined capital/labor, humans/non-humans, and gender relations throughout history.

Many ecofeminist authors have analyzed how this same process of patriarchal and capitalist accumulation has been exacerbated by the implementation of neoliberal policies and structural adjustment plans, particularly in the Global South in the last 40 years (see Federici [2012]). Kurdistan is among the regions affected by this. In particular, since the 1980s, and notably in the 1990s, the Kurdish area of southeastern Turkey has been the terrain of neoliberal policies adopted by the Turkish State (Akıncı et al. 2020). These policies – which resulted in the construction of mega extractive projects and the forced evacuation of 3000 Kurdish villages (Kurban 2012) – were used by the Turkish state as counterinsurgency tools in the face of the growing Kurdish armed liberation movement led by the PKK (Jongerden 2007).

Begikhani, Hamelink and Weiss show how Kurdish women’s activism, particularly in Turkey, has developed between 1993 and 2003 “in direct relation to the waves of violent conflict in the country” (Begikhani, Hamelink, and Weiss 2018, 14). During this “transition period” (Güneşer 2015), together with increased colonialist violence on Kurdish people and lands, and the political repression enacted by the Turkish State against the Kurdish movement, a massive political involvement of women in the national liberation struggle also took place. As Al-Ali and Tas (2018a) explain, this process permitted a gradual transformation of the ideological discourse of the Kurdish movement about the relation between gender liberation and national liberation struggle. They affirm that “the Kurdish political movement was initially replicating a global revolutionary tradition that

viewed women and gender-related equality as secondary to its wider aims” (2018b, 460). However, the rise of an autonomous Kurdish women’s organization shed light on the specific patriarchal oppression suffered by women within the political movement, Kurdish communities, and the larger context of the imperialist–capitalist system (Acik 2013; Çaha 2011). According to Al-Ali and Tas, it is women’s self-determination and self-consciousness that has paved the way to Democratic Confederalism, and the struggle against patriarchy become pivotal pillars for the general Kurdish emancipatory praxis (2018b).

I hold that it is probably this historical conjuncture that brought Öcalan, after his imprisonment in 1999, to develop a political thought closer to ecofeminism. In fact, it is at that time that Mies’ words appear quoted in his writings and that he develops the idea of patriarchy as the source of capitalist and colonial oppression over nature and people. Indeed, inverting the title of Maria Mies’ book *Women: The Last Colony*, he identifies women as the “first colony,” the colony inside the colony of Kurdistan (Jongerden 2017). He writes:

The male monopoly that has been maintained over the life and world of woman throughout history, is not unlike the monopoly chain that capital monopolies maintain over society. More importantly, it is the oldest powerful monopoly ... It may be more accurate to call women the oldest colonized people who have never become a nation. (Öcalan 2013, 35)

Therefore, he starts to address the Kurdish national question as a women’s question: the enslavement of women having progressively paved the way to the other forms of oppression and exploitation. This does not mean that he abandons the national issue which, as Çağlayan (2019) shows, has always been pivotal throughout the history of the movement. Rather, this argument shows his progressive distancing from the previous classical Marxist–Leninist vision and the redefinition of the class and anticolonial struggle under a critical discourse of the Nation State and Capitalist Modernity as the historical forms assumed by what he calls the power of “the dominant man” over women and colonized people’s cultures and ecologies (Öcalan 2019).

This original approach has been developed within the volumes that constitute the *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* (2020, 2019, 2017) where Öcalan reconstructs the history of a hierarchical civilization which has much deeper roots than the 500 years of the “capitalist civilization of Europe” (in Çağlayan 2012, 18): it arose around 5000 years ago with the first patriarchal and state societies and established itself, among other tools, through the capitalist appropriation of women’s work (Öcalan 2017). The latter point, namely the way Öcalan reflects on the relationship between the political economy/ecology of capitalism and women’s work, is where we can find the strongest connection between Maria Mies’ thought and the emergence of a Kurdish ecofeminist perspective.

Back to the Neolithic: The Matricentric Societies

Mies' claim of women being the oldest colony as well as the last to be liberated resides in the idea that patriarchy is the first colonial phenomenon which similarly oppresses and exploits nature and women. Therefore, her research about the social origins of gender-unequal division of labor is also research about the origins of the humans/nature dichotomy under capitalism. As Thomsen writes in *Women: The Last Colony*, it is about deconstructing the "myths of the origins" produced by a culture for which "a male god-father or culture hero is the origin of all things" and which today constitutes "the 'sources' of European civilization, including its modern industrial phase, of colonialism, capitalism and the nuclear family" (Bennholdt-Thomsen in Mies 1988). As a foundational issue of his thought, Öcalan also searches for the roots of capitalist patriarchy.

Considering the notion that patriarchy is a historical social form, both Mies and Öcalan wonder which kind of society was in place before, and how the first forms of andro- and anthropocentric domination were established. They return to the Neolithic era and the agricultural revolution that took place between 6000 and 4000 BC in Mesopotamia (Öcalan 2017). What has been called, until now, "prehistory," is reconsidered as the long history of hunting and gathering societies, which Öcalan calls "natural," "communal," or "matricentric" societies (Öcalan 2020), allowing us to re-date the beginning of human history to much earlier than the birth of the first State forms and of private property.

In the hegemonic narrative, as Mies shows, there is no place for women (Mies 1994, 52). History is understood as the process of appropriation of nature by men, and women as reproducers of the species, not as historical subjects that have a specific interaction with nature. Therefore, as a Marxist sociologist, she formulates "materialist, historical, non-biologic concepts of men and women and their relations to nature and history" (48) and develops a reading of the forms of productivity prior to the sexual division of labor. Criticizing Marx and Engels' interpretation of "productivity," based on an andro-centric notion of work (as "social" work, distinct from the "natural" activity of women) or a capitalist one (as productive of surplus value), Mies defines productivity as "the specific capacity of human beings to produce and reproduce life in an historic process" (78), and therefore mainly based on women's work. Analyzing the forms of production typical of the Neolithic age, she states:

... female productivity consisted, above all, in the ability to provide the daily subsistence, the guarantee of survival, for the members of the clan or band. Women necessarily had to secure the "daily bread," not only for themselves and their children, but also for the men if they had no luck on their hunting expeditions, because hunting is an "economy of risk." (58)

Therefore, she counters the myth of “man-the-hunter” at the foundation of modern evolutionist thinking, with the idea of “female productivity”: the main life-productive force which, in matrilineal societies, shaped community self-government and self-subsistence practices, in a relation of cooperation and interdependency with the other species.

Öcalan’s argument is close to that of Mies. Looking at the ancient societies’ material culture, he strongly emphasizes the role of women as the first producers of life, the pioneers of agriculture and related knowledge (Öcalan 2019). The Kurdish leader describes the first sedentary agricultural groups or clans as the oldest creators of the economic practice as “true human economy” or “home economy”: the management of the house, with women playing a central role (Öcalan 2017). The economy, on Öcalan’s reading, was not based on accumulation toward profit but on production and exchange in the form of gift or barter, with the aim of satisfying social needs. He writes: “when the economy stopped being a social fabric, it marked the beginning of a terrible break with nature,” a rupture that coincided with “the most unsettling dichotomy in the history of thought,” that between spirit and inanimate matter, which has “destroyed ecology and free life”¹ (Öcalan 2019, 146). In Neolithic societies, economic values and moral values were not separate, but constituted what Öcalan calls the “mother woman culture”: a form of social organization, not an attribute of women’s biology,² reflected in the numerous female divinities of the ancient animist religions (Öcalan 2019), and characterized by the communalization of life, needs, and goods (Öcalan 2013, 13–19).

Housewifization: The Deepest Historical Rupture

As both Mies and Öcalan conclude, this non-patriarchal relation between women and nature has been progressively destroyed throughout the course of civilization. This perspective brought them to no longer perceive history as an evolutionary sequence of progressive stages and capitalism as the result of the dialectic between productive forces and means of production. Rather, capitalism appears as the modern expression of what Mies calls a “predatory mode of appropriation” originally created through “the male monopoly over means of coercion,” the control of women’s bodies and their productive capacity (Mies 1994, 65). Through this original act of dispossession, the surplus produced by the State and class society has become materially and historically dependent on the plundering of female productivities, from the origins up to the present day.

¹This and other translations from non-English sources by the author unless otherwise noted.

²“I do not say that there are no psychological aspects linked to paternity or motherhood, but let us not forget that, in their essence, paternity and motherhood are sociological concepts, phenomena, perceptions” (Öcalan 2019, 190). “The true reason for the longevity of the mother-concept is ... not due to an abstract ability to give birth” (Öcalan 2013, 14).

Öcalan interprets this process as a cyclical series of “gender ruptures” coinciding with both the degradation of women’s role and the separation between humans and nature (2013), where “housewifization” – a concept adapted from Mies – is the most effective and violent form of domination established over women (2019).

Beginning with the witch-hunt in Europe, the colonization of the Third World and the proletarianization of the male working class, housewifization is, for Mies, the result of the hierarchical separation between production and reproduction, and the naturalization of women’s work into the hidden place of the reproduction both of life and of capitalist development. With the expropriation of their productivity, women have been confined within the domestic sphere and reduced to subjects dependent on the waged labor of the male breadwinner (Mies 1994). In this sense, Öcalan argues that “the family became ... the fountainhead of slaves, serfs, laborers, soldiers, and providers of all other services needed by the ruling and capitalist rings” (2013, 37). As a small state, the family reproduces its hierarchy under the command and ownership of men, and, through the marriage contract, sanctions the definitive removal of women from each and every field of life. It is within this scenario that Öcalan describes “capitalist civilization” as the most violent system that has ousted women from the economy, has left them “unemployed,” considering housework, although “the most difficult work,” as “valueless” and as “a mere trouble” (47). He directly quotes Maria Mies:

Housewifization means the externalization, or ex-territorialization of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalists. This means women’s labor is considered a natural resource, freely available like air and water ... As the housewife is linked to the wage-earning breadwinner, to the “free” proletarian as a non-free worker, the “freedom” of the proletarian to sell his labor power is based on the non-freedom of the housewife. Proletarianization of men is based on the housewifization of women. (Mies in Öcalan 2017, 73)

As it emerges from this quote, housewifization does not concern only women’s work but also the proletarianization of men. For Öcalan, it is an “intrinsically social process” that has paved the way “for society to become enslaved” (2019, 134), and, for Mies, a systemic “housewife ideology,” which continues even when women enter the labor market, affecting gender, race, and class relationships (1994, 118).

Even if some scholars have recognized Öcalan’s use of Mies’ concept of housewifization (Şimşek and Jongerden 2018), none of them emphasizes its relation to the political ecology of capitalism. Through housewifization, for Mies, not only the work of women and subsistence producers, but also non-human nature is reduced to a freely available resource. Federici would describe this phenomenon as an “attack against the reproduction” proper of every phase of primitive accumulation of capital, which involves the

devaluation of women's reproductive work, the control by the State of their bodies, sexuality and reproductive capacities, but at the same time the enclosure of the lands and the privatization of the commons historically managed by women (2012, 86).

Öcalan's analysis of gender power relations also seems to be closely linked to that of political economy, "environmental deprivation" (Jongerden 2007) and national oppression. He affirms that "after eliminating women the system mercilessly demolished the agrarian and village society" (Öcalan 2013, 44). The Kurdish leader emphasizes how the process of women's housewifization has led to the subalternization of Kurdish people and, through urbanization and cultural assimilation, to the progressive destruction of the rural communitarian societies, breaking any form of social reproduction that was not perpetuating the logic of the capitalist market and State power.

Ecofeminist Emancipatory Horizons

The liberation of women from housewifization is, therefore, a fundamental step toward alternative ecological economies as well as democratic forms of organization. The "subsistence perspective" proposed by Mies (Mies and Shiva 2014), as well as Öcalan's "communalism" (2020), are both based on the revaluation of women's productivity. Many socialist ecofeminists would consider this approach as based on the shift from the paradigm of the production to one of reproduction, where "reproductive labour" coincides not only with women's household work but, more generally, with "that of sustaining life in its material and immaterial needs" and which "opposes abstract social labour and all that objectifies and instrumentalizes life towards other ends" (Barca 2020). Ecofeminists conceive of this sphere of life, systematically devalued by the capitalist system, as "the bearer of political agency and subjectivity" (Barca 2017, 6), productive of relational and immanent values and creative "of [a] distinct set of epistemological skills and political attitudes" (Salleh 2010, 214).

Mies' political proposal of a "subsistence perspective" is based on freeing the work of women, nature, and colonized people from the development dogmas that consider it as natural, backward, and pre-capitalist work. She recognizes, instead, that it is a necessary condition of life in all historical ages, because "if the people of the world had had to depend on generalized commodity production and universal waged labor ... they would not have survived until today" (1988). In *Ecofeminism*, co-written with Vandana Shiva, Mies argues that an ecofeminist perspective should consider reproduction not as an isolated phenomenon, but in light of sex-gender relations and of social, economic, and ecological ones. Therefore, she points to the creation of a "new ecology of reproduction" which must be rooted, first of all, in

women's autonomy both "with regard to their sexuality and procreative capacities" (Mies and Shiva 2014, 294) and in the "autonomous control over their subsistence base, their common property resources" (303). In her emancipatory view, men too should "recognize that this life-preserving subsistence work is more important than work for cash," hence the need of creating a type of masculinity responsible for "caring for children, the old, the weak, and for nature" and able "to develop a caring, responsible, erotic relationship to their partners, be they men or women" (295).

A similar perspective can be found also in Öcalan's communalism. The Kurdish communalist proposal, and particularly its ongoing implementation in Rojava, has been analyzed by many authors considering its originality in producing a political alternative "of bottom-up self-administration" (Knapp and Jongerden 2016, 6), and also for its ability in "raising ecological awareness and seeking to formulate policies to implement ecologically sensitive solutions in a solidarity economy" (Hunt 2017, 3). Still, I believe that it is not possible to understand this project without considering the ecofeminist emancipatory strategy at its core.

In order to create an ecological and democratic system, Öcalan (2013) stresses the importance of freeing women from housewifization, of restoring their political, social but chiefly economic role, considering economy as a basic "socio-historical activity" embedded in women's care and reproductive work. He states that "the true owner of the economy, despite all the attempts to invade and colonize it, is still woman," whose work, inside and outside home, has been representing the main condition of the communal society, "nurturing and repairing the body structure, rebuilding it when necessary" (2017, 114). However, he also recognizes the ecological role of the work of many subjects that, together with women, have always "spun the wheel" (135). "Ecology," he writes, "is the fundamental guide to action for the rural areas, agrarian-village communities, all nomads, the unemployed, and women" (2020, 302). From a socialist ecofeminist perspective, these agents constitute "a non-proletarian (that is, unwaged but exploited) working class" (Turner and Brownhill 2006, 89), in other words, the "forces of reproduction" (Barca 2020). They guarantee the survival, care, and reproduction of the ecosystem and, therefore, have "a direct interest in preventing capitalist commodification of communal relationships, the environment and public space" (Turner and Brownhill 2006, 87).

For Öcalan, liberating these forces represents a process of decolonization, of rescuing the communal and matricentric ancestral tradition of Kurdistan, but also of depatriarchalization. Although he does not refer directly to the need of establishing women's sexual and reproductive rights, as Mies does, he nevertheless underlines the importance of democratizing the family, subverting the dominant male role and guaranteeing the possibility of women to build a path of autonomy and self-determination (2013). Indeed, he

stimulates the construction of women's autonomous organizations, in military, political, and socio-economic fields, arguing that "the better women are able to escape the grip of male domination and society, the better they will be able to act and live according to their independent initiative" (60).

Are Women the Natural Bearers of the Ecological Alternative?

This ecofeminist perspective shared by both Mies and Öcalan contains some critical points that should be faced to allow for an understanding of the actual developments introduced by *Jineoloji*. In particular, I am referring to the critique of essentialism that, to different extents, has been repeatedly addressed in regard to both the so-called cultural ecofeminism and to socialist ecofeminism.³ The pain locus of the critique is the notion that ecofeminism stands at risk of producing "notions of nature, women, or certain racially defined groups, that use biological, universalist, ahistorical, or homogenizing ways of definition" (Sturgeon 1997, 5).

Since Maxine Molyneux and Deborah Lynn Steinberg criticize Mies and Shiva's *Ecofeminism*, I will briefly present some of their critiques, aiming to see if they can also be applied to Öcalan's theory; the idea is to open up possible situated interpretations of a kind of strategic use of essentialism in Öcalan's ecofeminist perspective. Molyneux and Steinberg hold that *Ecofeminism's* authors characterize the opposition between Western capitalist, patriarchal and colonialist maldevelopment and "Mother Earth, women and other embodiments of the 'feminine principle'" in an essentialist and romantic way, establishing an "eco-politics which is provided by this identification of women with nature" (Molyneux and Steinberg 1995, 96). The critique revolves around Mies and Shiva's "yearning for what is lost (nature/rootedness authenticity)," and their idea of capitalist development as the cause of the disappearance of "the once-organic 'motherland'" and the complementary "masculinization of state and society" (97). This "idyllic re-invocation of pre-Enlightenment, pre-colonial, and pre-modern cultures," supposedly "woman-centered" and "women-friendly," (99) reduces a complex and diversified history to something universal and homogeneous. Indeed, it produces "a simple inversion of the paradigm of civilization," where men's domination over women and nature opposes an "ideal type" of "'traditional nature-based society', one which is free from male dominance and conflict" and rooted in woman's capacity of nurturing, caring, and producing life (99). In this respect, also Mies' concept of "female productivity" is open to criticism because it ultimately relies on women's procreative capacities or, in other words, on motherhood, risking to reinforce the essentialist equation Woman = Mother (100).

³See the debate on *Capitalism Nature Socialism* about ecofeminism and essentialism: Mellor (1992), Carlassare (1994), and Godfrey (2005).

Similar observations can be made of Öcalan's thinking. His view on the pre-patriarchal Neolithic society of Mesopotamia has been critically addressed by some authors for its "virtually timeless" collocation, for contemplating a "natural foundation" of communal life, alienated by State's civilization from its supposed organic roots (Leezenberg 2016, 8), and for producing a sort of "mythological golden age of Kurds" (Çağlayan 2012, 14). Also, Öcalan's notion of the hunting and gathering societies as matri-centric has been criticized for reinforcing "golden age" fiction more than describing a real past (saed 2015, 6). Within this larger frame, the specific representation that Öcalan gives about women seems the most problematic. In different occasions, he ends up describing "woman" as "the prime component of moral and political society" (Öcalan 2013, 56), someone who essentially embodies an "emotional intelligence ... that created wonders, that was human and committed to nature and life" (22). The generic "woman" appears as the "natural" bearer of the communal, democratic and ecological society: "because hierarchy and statism are not easily compatible with woman's nature, a movement for woman's freedom should strive for anti-hierarchical and non-statist political formations" (54). So, his equation looks like the following: woman = eco-communal life or democratic civilization; dominant man = Capitalist Modernity or state civilization. There are apparently no differences within this homogeneous and universal concept of "woman" conceived as the "anti-thesis of capitalist modernity" (58–59). Through a reified dialectical movement, both capitalism and the natural/woman-based/democratic society seem to remain unchanged throughout history.

From Öcalan's Theory to Women's Subjectivation

Despite recognizing these theoretical limits, I nevertheless agree with many authors who have problematized the anti-essentialist criticism against ecofeminism for its often-destructive charge. Ecofeminism is not only an academic theory, but primarily an "oppositional political discourse and set of practices embedded in particular historical, material, and political contexts," and "a movement within particular political locations" (Sturgeon 1997, 3). On this view, which conceives theory as rooted in the practices of struggle, the use of essentialism is positively revalued as a strategic "form of resistance" (Carlassare 1994, 57).

In particular, for Sturgeon, going beyond the anti-essentialist "deconstruction for the sake of deconstruction," means producing "a critically situated feminist theory that deconstructs any universalistic version of the category of 'women,'" but that is also able to "recognize the need for 'contingent foundations' (i.e., moments of toleration for certain universalisms and essentialisms) if it is to ... [create] a more just society" (1997, 10).

Given that most political struggles use a strategic deployment of political identities in order to build antagonistic forces, the task of a feminist theory is “to analyze the operation of these processes in producing subjectivities” (17) and to consider the ability of participatory movements in “destabilizing the essentialist moments that are perhaps inevitably involved in the construction of a political collectivity” (18).

This approach is quite fruitful as regards the Kurdish ecofeminist perspective. In fact, I believe that the need to move to a radically anti-patriarchal “opposition consciousness” (Sturgeon 1997, 18) within a movement that was hitherto heavily masculinized, can be considered a “contingent foundation” of the Kurdish “essentialist moment.” Moreover, Öcalan’s essentialist ways of looking at history, nature or social groups, must be read as an expression of a larger process of decolonization and re-imagination of the nation, of “womanhood” and “manhood,” that in the Kurdish case has produced something different from classic nationalist narrations.

The “essentialist moment” expressed in Öcalan’s works has played a strategic role in strengthening women’s subjectivation process within the Kurdish Freedom Movement. His ecofeminist theory of capitalist and patriarchal modernity does not reproduce an idea of women “as carriers and transmitters of the authentic essence of Kurdish culture. On the contrary, they are invited to leave their homes and become active participants. In this sense, they are not ‘wives and children’ to be protected by the male members of the nation” (Çağlayan 2012, 22), but subjects of their own liberation. The same can be said regarding Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva’s *Ecofeminism*, since their theoretical analysis has always been rooted in, and retaken from, emancipatory feminist, ecologist, and anticolonial struggles.

Following Phoebe Godfrey’s rejection of the critique of essentialism, claiming that “the ultimate test of a theory is its outcomes” (Godfrey 2005, 37), it must be noted that both Öcalan and Mies, as well as other ecofeminist thinkers, can be counted among the main influences of the recent-founded *Jineoloji*, a methodological and epistemological project at the core of the Kurdish confederalist revolution.

Jineoloji: Ecofeminism Between Theory and Praxis

Jineoloji, the “science of women and life”, was concretely born in 2011, with the constitution of the first *Jineoloji*’s Committee and, from then on, its research work has gone parallel to the opening of women’s education centers, academies, schools, and grassroots projects, mostly in Rojava but also in other Kurdish regions and in Europe. It is presented by the Kurdish Women’s Movement as the result of the 40-year gender dialectic internal to the movement, inspired by the multiple female figures that have paved the way to women’s liberation since the foundation of the

PKK: Sakine Cansiz (Sara), co-founder of the Party, is one of the main inspirations of *Jineoloji* (Kaya 2015).

Based on Öcalan's analysis of the Kurdish history, from matricentric society up to the present, *Jineoloji*, as written in its manifesto, "wants to investigate the relationships between life-woman, nature-woman, social nature-woman, in order to understand the ways in which the culture created by women has been reflected in society in the past" (Jineoloji Committee Europe 2017, 68). The "past" they referred to indicates the pre-patriarchal society of ancient Mesopotamia, as well as its traces embedded in Kurdish oral history, ancient local songs, fairy tales, cults, and daily reproductive practice. Querdaxî writes that "in some villages of Kurdistan ... social values and an understanding of sharing are still deeply rooted in society and come from their connection with matriarchal societies" (2018, 32). Revealing these "social values" and understanding how they have been erased by the specific power structures imposed on the area, or eventually re-articulated by women through resistance practices, is the main focus of *Jineoloji*. However, it is not through a disembodied speculation that women are professing to encourage this process.

While Öcalan has built the philosophical bases of this science, *Jineoloji*'s originality relies in its epistemological and methodological proposal (Deniz 2018; Diyar 2018): a move from Öcalan's universal and even essentialist representation of women to a more situated and embodied perspective from women themselves. In this respect, many feminist and ecofeminist's writings contribute to enrich *Jineoloji*'s approach. In particular, authors like Mary Daly, Heide Göttner-Abendroth, and Maria Mies herself are among the most recurrent references that appear during *Jineoloji*'s seminars and workshops).

Maria Mies' work on ecofeminist methodology actually inspires and informs the perspective of *Jineoloji*'s Committees.⁴ Through her analysis, Mies stresses the link between the modern scientific method and the patriarchal capitalist economy, affirming that the subordination and exploitation of women, nature, and the colonies has been a necessary correlation of positivist science. In fact, Mies says, positivism has been based on the separation between subject and object, observer and observed, practice and theory, justifying an "abstract gain of knowledge" at the cost of "the drastic destruction of vital links between self-sustaining living systems on earth" (2014, 51). Overcoming this paradigm means, therefore, searching "for a new praxis nexus" (1996, 12) able to reconnect science with active participation in movements and struggles for women's liberation, and embracing a "view

⁴In August 2017, I participated to the first Jineoloji International Camp held in Germany. On this occasion, the Jineoloji's Committee of Europe presented us a text by Maria Mies on ecofeminist research methodology as one of their main sources (Mies and Shiva 2014, 36–54).

from below” as well as a “conscious partiality” against alienated and elitist attitudes “towards the ‘research objects’” (2014, 38).

Like Mies, *Jineoloji* criticizes the set of hierarchical dualisms proper to the positivist science which has resulted in the appropriation of people’s and women’s knowledge for the benefit of the power system (Kaya 2015). Thanks to its collective methodology, women of different nationalities within Democratic Confederalism are starting to question the andro- and anthropocentric as well as Eurocentric paradigm of science (Jineoloji Committee Europe 2017). They are exploring their oppressed identities and collective memories, rescuing the knowledge contained within the defense of “the economy, the body and the intelligence of women” (Queredaxi 2018), as well as of the land and the non-human nature, considering “that reason does not belong to humans only, but to all living creatures” (Jineoloji Committee Europe 2017, 23). In this sense, *Jineoloji* is a possible answer to Mies’ affirmation that “another paradigm of science ... has to come from a different world-view, a different view of the relationship between human beings and our natural environment, of the relationship between woman and man, of the relationship between different people, races, and cultures” (Mies and Shiva 2014, 52).

Moreover, *Jineoloji*’s advocates support a non-extractive science, politically committed with socio-environmental justice, able to strengthen the potential inherent to any living being, “of producing systematic information in collaboration with the community; of meeting the life-sustaining needs” (Jineoloji Committee Europe 2017, 23). In other words, since its founding, *Jineoloji* has been able to answer Mies’ need of a “new praxis nexus,” what for the German sociologist has been lost through the academization of feminist studies. What she calls “ecofeminist action-research” (1996, 22), not just devoted to knowing the world but to changing it, has been actually practiced by *Jineoloji*, following the idea that the measure of an alternative science is its ability to answer women’s, nature’s and society’s needs and to carry on both “mental revolution and social transformation” (Querdaxi 2018). This principle is guiding not just *Jineoloji*’s theoretical research but also its collective practice, organically linked with that of the grassroots institutions of the confederal system.

A project like Jinwar in Rojava is probably the most paradigmatic example of the link between ecofeminist theory and praxis within *Jineoloji*. In this eco-village, women and children organize their self-subsistence practicing agroecology, promoting healthcare through ancestral medicine, using renewable resources, and carrying on educational processes based on the principles and values of *Jineoloji*. Apparently, as an isolated case, Jinwar is becoming a model of self-defense for women in Rojava, and a concrete source of inspiration for the entire network of institutions of the region (Aguilar Silva 2018). In this sense, I believe that, despite the limits that the war scenario

imposes on the autonomous government of North and East of Syria in establishing an ecologically sustainable model (saed 2017), *Jineoloji*, through popular trainings, public campaigns and direct involvement in the local government, is a key strategic praxis for the attempted transition to non-capitalist and non-patriarchal forms of production and reproduction.

Conclusion

During the ten years between 1993 and 2003 that preceded the declaration of Democratic Confederalism, the Turkish colonial war against Kurdistan has been reaching high levels of violence against people, as well as environmental destruction. Meanwhile, thousands of women had been joining the Kurdish Freedom Movement, radically transforming its theory and practice. It is this conjuncture that brought the Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, after his imprisonment in 1999, to champion gender liberation and ecological revolution as fundamental aims of the larger national liberation struggle, and to find inspiration in ecofeminist readings such as Maria Mies' works.

This paper has highlighted the convergences of these two authors regarding their analysis of the rise of patriarchal and capitalist oppression over women, nature, and the colonies. In light of their common statement of patriarchy as the source of every form of hierarchy, and women as the first historical colony, the article retraces the main arguments that Öcalan supposedly takes up from Mies that shows the overlap between gender and ecological questions in the theory of Democratic Confederalism. Indeed, from his analysis of Neolithic matriarchal societies to that about women's housewifization under Nation States and Capitalist Modernity, it is possible to identify a Kurdish ecofeminist perspective at the core of Öcalan's emancipatory proposal that is not without problematic points.

Just as Maria Mies' ecofeminism has been criticized for proposing an essentialist vision both with regard to gender and to an alleged pre-patriarchal past, so the close connection established by Öcalan between women and nature, or matriarchal societies and Kurdish Neolithic past, is critically questioned. However, following the thought of the ecofeminist Noël Sturgeon, this paper has proposed an approach contemplating the positive and historically situated use of essentialism by both Öcalan and Mies, looking at its strategic role in strengthening major processes of women's subjectivation within the Kurdish Movement up to the recently founded *Jineoloji*.

This "science of women and life" is therefore presented as the rearticulation of Öcalan's thought as well as of eco/feminist writings by the Kurdish Women's Movement. Carrying on its own epistemological and methodological process, but also incorporating Maria Mies' ideas about an alternative, ecofeminist, paradigm of science, *Jineoloji* has been able to destabilize the previous "essentialist moment" (Sturgeon 1997, 18) and to turn Öcalan

theoretical approach into a situated ecofeminist praxis. Projects like Jinwar, the women's eco-village in Rojava, are paradigmatic examples to understand the original nexus between theory and practice within *Jineoloji* and its ability to produce concrete prefiguration of the transition to an ecologically sustainable model beyond State, capitalism and patriarchy, for Rojava and elsewhere.

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