

The political anatomy of pseudo-left war propaganda

Part two

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Feminism as a justification for war

Tax's underlying argument is that the US war in Syria is "progressive" because the US is aligned with Kurdish nationalist forces that include all-female battalions fighting ISIS. In her frustration against those who oppose the war, she writes, "In all my years as a feminist on the Left, I had never seen an armed liberation struggle with women so clearly in the front" (p. 20).

Tax equates the US-backed rebels to the tens of thousands of female textile workers who struck against the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912 and claims that the Kurds are following in the footsteps of socialist strike leaders like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. She claims that the Kurdish fight against ISIS for control of northern Syria parallels that of the Spanish working class during the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39.

She holds the female Kurdish fighters as a model against the "approach of protesting militarism and imperialism and trying to develop a women's peace movement" (p. 140). Instead of opposing war and imperialism, women must instead prove that they are as violent and war-like as men: "Militarization is central to the ideology of the Kurdish women's movement," she writes (p. 141-142).

As a result of its allegedly feminist policies, the Kurdish-held cantons of northern Syria "are an experiment in motion, a living, breathing entity, constantly evolving, offering a vision of social relations that many of us would have thought impossible" (p. 35). The Kurdish rebels "hope to bring democracy to Syria and Turkey, converting their brothers and sisters who still worship at the shrines of power and consumerism to more humane values" (p. 35).

Tax writes that the Kurdish cantons are guided by the theory of "Jineology," taken from the Kurdish word for women: *Jin*. She quotes a Kurdish activist who says the aim of this theory is to advance the "creation of a women's paradigm."

This paradigm is explicitly anti-Marxist. Tax explains the Kurds base their theory in opposition to "errors that run like a thread through the history of left-wing thought: male repression, exclusion, devaluation, and just not getting the point when it comes to real life issues that concern women. With few important exceptions, left-wing movements have been overwhelmingly led by men and served by women: men making speeches, women making coffee. As a result, the history of the Left is lopsided, reflecting the ideas, history, and experience of only half the species. Its theory does not accurately describe the world, and its practice does not prefigure any future society most of us would want to belong to" (p. 34).

Tax credits the emergence of "Jineology" and the "Kurdish women's movement" to the political reorientation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party

(PKK) and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, over the last several decades.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party and the politics of postmodernism

A central theme of *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* is that the success of the Kurds in northern Syria is due to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Tax credits this to the ideological transformation of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. A student radical won over to guerrilla-based Maoist politics in the early 1970s, Ocalan's PKK launched a terroristic campaign of guerrilla warfare against the Turkish government and the Turkish population in 1984, which provoked ethnic cleansing campaigns by the Turkish state.

Ocalan was captured in 1999 but remains the effective leader of the PKK in prison. Tax explains the transformation of the PKK under his leadership since his imprisonment:

"Kept in almost total isolation after he was captured, Ocalan did a lot of reading. He was particularly influenced by anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin, world systems theorists Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel, and theorist of nationalism Benedict Anderson" (p. 55).

Ocalan's prison reading list includes some of the most foundational postmodernist thinkers in the post-war period: Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Ernesto LaClau are amongst Ocalan's favorites. With these theoreticians as his ideological guides, Ocalan transformed the PKK into a vehicle for the concerns of an increasingly affluent section of the upper-middle class in Kurdistan and the European Kurdish diaspora.

This transformation required first and foremost the explicit abandonment of the working class as a revolutionary social force. In his 2013 book *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution*, Ocalan reiterated what had been a part of the PKK platform for nearly two decades: "The solutions for all social problems in the Middle East should have woman's position as focus ... The role the working class have once played, must now be taken over by the sisterhood of women" (p. 56).

The PKK had adopted the postmodernist political categories employed by privileged layers of the upper-middle-class. Quoting the PKK leader, Tax notes that by the 1990s, "Ocalan had abandoned both the rhetoric of classical Marxism and the ideology of national liberation struggles for 'an idiom peculiar to himself, engaged with more universal and philosophical concepts such as humanization, socialization, human emancipation, analyzing the self, freed personality, pure human being, and so on.'"

In this period, Ocalan was meeting with representatives of the US government who visited him in prison. Tax uncritically notes, "In a 1998 discussion with US diplomat David A. Korn, he said that the PKK was

definitely not striving for the kind of socialism in which ‘the individual is shrunk to its bottom limit but the State is swollen to its top limit’.” There is no further information in Tax’s book about the extent of the relationship between Ocalan and the US government.

False claims of “socialism” in Kurdish-controlled territory

The PKK’s explicit hostility to socialism and to the working class exposes the false claims that the Kurdish cantons in northern Syria represent an egalitarian or democratic alternative to capitalism.

The regimes set up by the Kurdish nationalists in northern Syria are capitalist in character and have nothing to do with socialism. Private ownership of the means of production continues and the working class is excluded from directing the economy. Tax cites as proof of the “community economy” the fact that a war-time management committee decided to “set up two more mills and stop exporting flour” to help with price inflation (p. 175). If moderate reforms are implemented and small agricultural cooperatives are being established, their hyper-local character guarantees their ineffectiveness in the face of international finance capital. Even Tax is forced to admit that “the cantons have not been able to move very quickly towards a democratic, cooperative and ecologically sound form of economic development” on account of the war (p. 175).

She explains that the Kurds are proving “how to build a cooperative economy that was nothing like the centralized command economies of Cold War Eastern Europe, where everything was owned by the state” (p. 175). This formula, steeped in the language of American anti-communism, is supported by a simple fact: if the Kurdish nationalists were proposing socialist policies, they would not be receiving tens of thousands of tons of weapons from American imperialism.

The PKK and its supporters’ abandonment of any connection to the class struggle and its adoption of political categories based on gender and identity is bound-up with objective changes in Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi society. While explaining the PKK’s base of support, Tax quotes a Kurdish social scientist, Hamit Bozarslan, who wrote in 2014:

“During the last decades, Kurdish society in Iraq and Turkey has become a predominantly urban society, where thousands of villages were systematically destroyed during the 1980s and 1990s, and in Iran and Syria, where developments gave way to the emergence of a middle class, distinct from the former urban notabilities or craftsmen. The emergence of this class metamorphosed the Kurdish urban landscape and gave birth to a new habitus, new ways of consuming, living, socializing, thinking, and struggling.

“An intellectual ‘class,’ distinct from the politicized intelligentsia of the 1950s and 1960s, also appeared and became the agent of new forms of socialization, political mobilizations, as well as cultural production. In the 1970s and 1980s, but also in the 1990s, being a ‘Kurdish militant’ primarily meant being a member or sympathizer of a political party; in contrast, the intellectuals of the 2010s develop non-partisan forms of being, behaving, and struggling. Both the middle classes and this intellectual stratum are widely integrated across Kurdistan and entertain close relations with the outside world” (p. 162).

Though Tax praises this development for allowing a “new, more flexible approach,” the trends outlined by Bozarslan shed light on social roots of the PKK’s transformation. The underlying shifts in social relations of the post-war period explain how the PKK has become the *cause celebre* of sections of the American upper middle class who are cheerleading for US war in the Middle East.

The PKK speaks for a relatively privileged layer of society that is attempting to make a deal with US imperialism in order to carve out a

broader area of influence within Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran for its own enrichment. Having sufficiently convinced their US imperialist paymasters of their hostility to socialism and to the working class, they are now advocates for US intervention.

The material interests of the Kurdish elite and the upper middle class are directly opposed to those of Kurdish workers and poor peasants. Both the PKK and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq are working with the American military in order to establish a level of stability that will allow it to better exploit Kurdish workers. In 2011, Kurdish police fired on workers and students who were demonstrating against the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq as part of the Arab Spring uprising. In 2015, the Kurdish ruling class repressed a strike of thousands of teachers and government workers to whom the government owed months of back pay. The establishment of a similar Kurdish state in Syria and Turkey would solve none of the problems facing the Kurdish working class.

Tax herself cites a Kurdish anthropologist who wrote in 2015: “The ruling elite and a growing affluent class feeding on capitalist investments and oil revenues lead lives of luxury inconceivable even to their counterparts elsewhere. The gap between the classes is alarming and it is making people furious ... while American and European officials boast of this shining democratic example, which they have been nurturing for decades” (p. 101).

Tax neglects to mention that earlier in *A Road Unforeseen*, she wrote: “the Kurdistan Regional Government, as social scientist Hamit Bozarslan says, ‘represents one of the most dynamic, politically pluralistic, and peaceful spaces in the Middle East’” (pp. 49-50).

The upper middle class and the drive to war

Tax’s book reflects an important trend in US politics that has emerged more clearly over the last several months. In their articles on Syria in particular, the pseudo-left is not merely cheerleading US war efforts, it is actively campaigning for an escalation of imperialist war. It criticizes the Obama administration for its alleged hesitancy to challenge “imperialist Russia” and attributes a progressive character to any group opposing Russia, especially those receiving support from the CIA. They explicitly attack those who oppose US imperialism, and use the categories of gender and race to mobilize the middle class for a “humanitarian” intervention.

Writing about the pro-war hysteria campaign of 1897-98 that preceded the Spanish-American war, historian Richard Hofstadter explained that the squeezed middle-class provided the “humanitarian” justification for war by portraying the embattled Cubans as victims of Spanish monarchism who could be saved by US imperialist intervention:

“When one examines the sectional and political elements that were most enthusiastic about policies that led to war, one finds them ... in the Bryan sections of the country [referring to Populist Party leader and Democratic 1896 nominee William Jennings Bryan], in the Democratic party, among western Republicans, and among the readers of the yellow journals” (*The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, p. 159).

The middle class was threatened with devastation by the economic crisis of 1893. It looked nervously below toward a restive and emerging working class and with a jealous eye at the robber barons of the Gilded Age.

The success of the “humanitarian” campaign for war against Spain, leading to the brutal repression of the Philippine Revolution and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, has been well recorded. Privileged sections of the middle class had succeeded in displacing “feelings of sympathy or social protest generated in domestic affairs,” Hofstadter writes. “These impulses found a safe and satisfactory discharge

in foreign conflict. Spain was portrayed in the press as waging a heartless and inhuman war; the Cubans were portrayed as noble victims of Spanish tyranny, their situation as analogous to that of Americans in 1776” (*ibid.*).

Closely tied to Wall Street but unsatisfied about the present unequal distribution of dividends and payoffs within the top 10 percent, today’s pseudo-left speaks for a revanchist privileged layer which believes it has the most to gain by expanding imperialist war. The upper middle class is again attempting to manipulate the sympathy that tens of millions of Americans have for the citizens of Aleppo—and, for that matter, Mosul—in order to advance their material interests.

Undoubtedly many well-meaning people sympathize with the plight and poverty of Kurdish workers and peasants after decades of betrayal by the Ottomans and Western imperialist powers. Kurdish women certainly have grievances against cruel domestic conditions and threats from religious zealots. But the role of the middle-class pseudo-left groups is to transform and confuse these healthy and democratic sympathies into support for imperialist war, which will only further devastate those the war is supposed to save.



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