Jumping Off the Bandwagon: Towards a Local Epistemology of Kurdish Politics
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Since the beginning of the Islamic State’s siege on Kobanê in 2014, international attention to Kurds and Kurdistan has been on the rise—and so has the number of think pieces and books published on Kurdish politics and history. Many of these publications, academic and popular, assert that the Kurds have “awakened,” that they are “new political actors” in the Middle East, that Kurds have finally earned the nation-state that they have struggled so long to attain. These decidedly liberal claims have unlikely supporters that include Republican members of the US Congress as well as Benjamin Netanyahu, who declared the Kurds to be “a nation of fighters [who] have proved political commitment and are worthy of independence.”

This paper problematizes such easy clichés about Kurdish struggle in favor of analysis that foregrounds autochthonous political worldings. In particular, I review both popular and academic books published on Kurdish politics in order to understand the epistemic presumptions they share: most notably, the doxic, untroubled nation-state imaginary. By asserting the nation-state to be the logical culmination of Kurdish struggles, these texts align themselves with global structures of political and economic oppression; more significantly, they foreclose the radical possibilities inherent in both the theory and practice of Kurdish politics.

Consequently, I bring these texts into conversation with writing and theorizing from within the Kurdish freedom movement, such as Abdullah Öcalan’s prison writings and the publications of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). These writings recognize that the kinds of violence experienced by the Kurds are structurally endemic to the nation-state. Through such disavowals, Kurdish political theorists gesture toward a political community that does not “rethink” the nation-state but “unthinks” it. Ultimately, I conclude that these writers call for radically new epistemologies compel us to reckon with the finitude of our historical and political imaginations.