

# **Prison as Site for Political Education: Educational experiences from prison narrated by members and sympathisers of the PKK**

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## **Abstract**

*This article is based on a qualitative interview study among former political prisoners in Turkey sentenced to years of imprisonment due to their links to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). In the aftermath of the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the Turkish left was prosecuted*

## **Introduction**

The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) was founded in 1978 as a reaction to Turkish oppression of Kurds in Turkey and the continuous military interference in the Kurdish regions in the southeast part of the country. The organisation waged war against Turkey between 1984 and 1999. The war had disastrous consequences[1] for the Kurdish population. One of them was the huge number of political prisoners accused of having links to the PKK.

A political prisoner is someone who is held in captivity or detention because his or her ideas and activities are perceived as threatening by the government because they challenge the authority of the state. In his anthology of prison writings, Bould (1991/2005) states that those in authority often argue that any injustice done to the individual is a necessary service to the state. Those who suffer injustice, however, see it differently. They regard it as a misuse of the overwhelming power of the state (2005, p. xvii). In order to damage the moral of the prisoners it is often regarded as crucial for the state to create a feeling of solitude through isolation. The IRA (Irish Republican Army) activist and later MP, Bobby Sands, who died in prison at the age of 27, after 66 days of hunger strike, writes that in order to demoralise the prisoners, they were told that they had no popular support (Sands 1998, p. xx). A parallel can be drawn to the ANC (African National Congress) politician 'Mac' Maharaj (1978), who

spent twelve years on Robben Island in the company of Nelson Mandela. One aim of the State, he says, was to isolate political prisoners in order to keep them silent. Hopefully, this strategy would hinder profiled political leaders to nourish the people with ideas that could threaten the interests of the state (1978, p. 179-80). Persons like Mandela became political symbols of the struggle by providing knowledge and ideas to their followers. According to Mandela (2003) there were strong educational aspects to most activities carried out in prison:

In the struggle, Robben Island was known as 'the University'. This was not because of what we learned from books [...]. Robben Island was known as 'the University' because of what we learned from each other. We became our own faculty, with our own professors, our own curriculum, and our own courses (Mandela 2003, p. 556).

Younger political prisoners lacked historical knowledge, and educated ANC members started to teach them in what Mandela terms a 'Socratic style'. The prisoners gathered in groups around a leader, ideas and theories were explained, discussed and negotiated (ibid, p. 454). This model seems quite similar to what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972) terms *cultural circles*[2], a tool required not only to unveil societal structures of domination, but also in order for people to acquire literacy skills, gain self-consciousness and take charge of the future development.

The PKK has three main sites for their political education: The Mountain, the prisons and Kurdish communities in Turkey and Diaspora. If the struggle should develop into a strong political and social movement, these sites had to be regarded as one body. To the PKK, prison seems to have been significant for the development of the broader movement. In order to understand the context wherein the PKK education took place in prison, an investigation of the educative aspects of prison conditions, as experienced by the prisoners, is needed.

### **Prisons in Turkey**

Oppression, torture, killings and imprisonment have followed Kurds through history (McDowell, 2000; Romano, 2006). Under oppressive governments, Bould (2005) argues, groups of people or even an entire people [as in the case of the Kurds], can suffer under the use of state-legitimised violence. In a totalitarian regime the entire nation is imprisoned as the individual lives in constant fear (ibid, p. xvii). From a

historical point of view, Turkey has a heavy legacy of widespread violence and torture dating back to the military coup on 12. September 1980[3], that brought on a more stringent regime in Kurdistan. The PKK was hit particularly hard by the military repression (White 2000, p.148). During a wave of mass detentions, nearly 1790 suspected PKK members were captured, including members of the PKK central committee. This was substantially more than from any other single Kurdish group (Mc Dowell, 2003, p.420). Prison conditions were so harsh at the time that many political prisoners staged prolonged hunger strikes or committed suicide (Kutschera 1994). Former political prisoners describe in detail the torture and horror they had to undergo for years (Zana 1997). In Diyarbakir[4] prison alone 32 prisoners were officially acknowledged to have died between 1981 and 1984, while unofficial sources estimated many times this number (McDowell, 2000, p. 425). Certain forms of resistance organised by the PKK at Diyarbakir prison following the military takeover, differed from the rest of the Turkish and Kurdish opposition among others by the phenomenon of self-immolation[5] (Ozcan, 2006, p. 195-96).

There are many narratives of martyrdom in the PKK history. One early example is that of Mazlum Dogan[6] who hanged himself in his cell in 1982. A few weeks later four other prisoners ('The Four') immolated themselves hand-in-hand. When their comrades tried to put out the flames, they refused, insisting that it was a 'freedom fire' (Kutschera, 1994, p. 13). Many imprisoned PKK cadres chose to commit suicide in prison rather than to make a televised confession (Romano, 2006, p. 72) and these first martyrs became examples to many other PKK followers.

The political education of the PKK presupposes a strong commitment to the organisation. As mentioned above, many young members of the PKK have died during the years in order to show their devotion; on the battlefield and some by their own hand as a protest against inhumane or unjust political conditions. Being in prison, accused of having links to the PKK often strengthened rather than reduced the prisoners' political conviction. A large number of prisoners had poor rural or working class backgrounds. Even if the prison condition were extremely harsh, many of them simultaneously got the opportunity to learn and experienced to be taken seriously, maybe for the first time in their lives. Many released political prisoners later went to the mountains (Westrheim, 2008, in press) or they became loyal members working in

Kurdish communities. Commitment, devotion and a strong sense of identification are crucial elements in all political movements. One of my informants said that when he met fellow prisoners showing a particularly strong emotional devotion for the PKK, he tried to talk to them about it. In his opinion, it would not gain the organisation if its sympathisers were unable to balance between emotions and critical reflection:

One of my student prisoners was very devoted to the organisation. After his release he went straight to the mountains. Later he was martyred. I felt a tremendous responsibility to work actively and committedly and to be aware of the persons I had in front of me (Informant I).

Through a recent process of change, prisons in Turkey have developed from partly self-organising wards during the 1990ies, to isolated cells with limited chances for educational activities after 2000. In this regard Green (2002) reports that previously, many wards were populated by people convicted of membership of one or another illegally armed political group, even if they knew what was going on, prison staff was normally not present within the wards. Groups of prisoners organised the daily life, which included sessions of political discussion and education. The ward facilitated communication between prisoners, organisation and a sense of close community particularly for those who were members of political organisations (2002, p. 98). Encountering the community one informant report to have sensed a particular atmosphere, different from that outside of the walls:

In my ward there were up to 180 prisoners at the most. During my stay in that prison, I experienced thousands of prisoners coming and going. In spite of this it was striking how friendly and respectful the atmosphere was among the prisoners (Informant I).

Turkish authorities feared that the open prison wards would foster the growth of terrorist and criminal organisations, and become centres for terrorist education (Green, 2002, p. 98). The apparently self-organised prisons therefore underwent a radical change in 2000 when Turkey started to isolate political prisoners in so-called K-type prisons in order to 'rehabilitate' political prisoners[7]. Small-group isolation is a regime whereby political prisoners remain in their cells, shared with a few inmates, for lengthy periods of time with little or no possibility for activities, proper exercise, or educational programs. This limits the possibility of community and solidarity and increases the risk of unobserved violence[8]. One informant describes how inmates

wrote notes and secretly sent them from cell to cell. The staff did what they could to hinder communication between prisoners and thereby also any kind of educational activities.

### **Previous research**

Considerable work regarding persecution, imprisonment and prison condition in Turkey from the seventies to the present, has been carried out by political scientists, lawyers, historians and anthropologists (see McDowell, 2000; Romano, 2006; White, 2000; Ozcan, 2006; Gunter, 1990; Green, 2002). Torture and mistreatment of political prisoners during the 1980ies is described in detail by among others the former mayor and politician Mehdi Zana (Zana, 1997). The former imprisoned parliamentarian Leyla Zana (1999) shows how her personal development as a political prisoner became virtually synonymous with the development of the Kurdish liberation struggle. Also Human Rights organisations; Amnesty International (2001), Human Rights Watch (2000) and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (2007) have contributed to the description of conditions in Turkish prisons. As the larger part of this literature is in either Turkish or Kurdish, it has not reached a larger audience. The PKK leader Abdulla Ocalan has written a large amount of papers, books and notes; many of them are published in Turkish and Kurdish. His recent works has also been published in German and English (Ocalan, 2003; 2007). The theme of this article: PKK political education in prison is subsequently a field that seems to have been neglected by scholars on Kurdish issues. The reason might be that this kind of research can be problematic to conduct and the field difficult to approach (Westrheim & Lillejord, 2007). Also, former prisoners may hesitate to talk about their experiences in captivity. This study has to be regarded as a contribution to a broader understanding of the educational aspects of the PKK movement.

### **Approaching the field**

The main question underlying this article is as follows: *How was political education carried out in prison, and in which way did it influence personal development and the overall struggle of the PKK movement?*

The research question and the basic theoretical perspectives warrant a qualitative methodological approach which provides the tools necessary for the informants' interpretation and an in-depth understanding of the way the PKK education was carried out in prison and how education in captivity was related to the outside struggle. This article is based on an interview study with four adults, three male and one female, who have been imprisoned from 1-8 years due to their relations with the PKK. Even though their opinions to a large extent were in line with the official views of the PKK, the informants were talking freely and did not seem to have difficulties using their own words. The interview data contains interesting reflections on the informants' personal development and collective gains. The interviews were recorded in Europe between January and May 2007. In order to better understand why the informants chose to support the PKK, a brief description of their background is needed.

### ***Informant I***

The informant was born in a large city in North Kurdistan (Turkey). He has a Master degree and worked as a teacher when he was detained in 1991, accused of having provided shelter to PKK cadres in his family's house. In 1991, during the first year of imprisonment, the informant was moved from one prison to another. Later he stayed nearly two years in one prison before he finally was transferred to the prison in his home city. In 1993, during the most intensive period of war, his father was killed, and several family members were imprisoned accused of having relations to the PKK. This had a huge impact on him. After his release in 1995, he started to work for a pro-Kurdish party on a full time basis.

### ***Informant II***

This informant comes from a working class family in North Kurdistan. He characterises his family as patriotic, and supportive of the PKK. Due to harsh oppression in this region his family moved to the city when he was 12 years old. At the beginning of the 1990ies, he participated in demonstrations and other activities for the PKK. As a high school student he worked part-time in a pharmacy from where he secretly provided medicine to the PKK. He went to the mountains for the first time in 1993 and stayed there for two years, primarily to provide medical support to injured

cadres. Then he went to Istanbul for one year to do political work. In 1996, when he was on his way to the mountains, he was arrested and later imprisoned for eight years. He was released in 2004.

### ***Informant III***

The informant comes from a working class family in Ankara as the youngest of 6 children. He was detained in 1997 for supporting the PKK, and later sentenced to 1 year in prison. He describes the stay in prison as horrible, but admits that it gave him the opportunity to reflect on his life and the struggle. This motivated him to write his first novel. When he was released in 1998, he decided to join the PKK guerrilla. Three brothers were already in the mountains as he went there with his younger brother, who was killed only a few months later. The informant stayed in the mountains for five years. He is currently asylum seeker.

### ***Informant IV***

The informant comes from a city in North Kurdistan. She is one of 8 children in a very patriotic family that was continuously harassed by the police. When she was in high school, she and some fellow students insisted on speaking Kurdish. The police visited the school several times. They were questioned and sometime beaten by the police. In 1996, just after her graduation, she was arrested accused of being a member of the PKK. She was sentenced to 2 years in prison. The imprisonment altered her perspectives. After being released in 1998 she went to the mountains for 6 years. In 2004 she decided to go to Europe where she currently works as a cleaner when waiting for the answer to her asylum application.

The analysis of interview data is based on some generative themes (Freire, 1972; Kincheloe, 2005) emerging from the narratives of the informants. A generative theme is a cultural or political topic which seems to be of great importance – to the researcher and the informants. Such themes are often challenged by a counterpart, with whom they are in constant interaction (Freire, 1972, p. 77). In the interview situation, the interviewer and the informants may act as counterparts in order to illuminate the topic under investigation. For the Kurds in conflict, the counterpart may also be regarded as the conflicting context wherein the informants live. The themes

can therefore be seen as a form of counteraction to an experienced oppressive context. On an analytic level, transcribed interviews were analysed step by step by combining qualitative procedures as they are described by Kvale (1997, p 121) and political analysis following the procedures from Hatch (2002). Finally, my analysis was discussed with another researcher (a colleague) who challenged it with comments and questions.

### **Validity in critical research**

Validity, in general, is about maintaining a critical stance towards one's own work throughout the research process, from the planning of the study to the question of finding the most suitable forum for a dialogue on the validity of the results (Kvale, 1996, p. 165). A validating process implies seeking clarity on how empirical data and analysis are related to the research question. Since this study has been conducted within a highly politicised context, and since all research is political in one way or another (Hatch, 2002; Carr, 1995) it was important for me to clarify my position previous to the fieldwork - also to the informants[9]. In this study, a draft version of the article has been read by one informant, and discussed with a second informant. This is close to what Silverman (2001, p. 233) calls respondent validation.

Qualitative research is a continuous reflection on ethical implications and dilemmas, based on the principle of respecting the informant throughout the research process (Kvale, 1996). This has been particularly important in this study due to the vulnerability of the informants and the sensitive information that are shared. Critical researchers intend to use the knowledge produced through research in the best interest of the people who are being researched. Falla (1994) argues that it is impossible for a researcher on political violence to be 'objective' in the sense of being 'neutral' in the research process (in Koivunen 2002). It has been a continuous dilemma throughout the research process to balance the between closeness and distance. This is a constant dilemma. The validity test of critical qualitative research is whether findings are reasonable and trustworthy. Kincheloe (2003) argues that in its most basic sense, validity involves questioning and theorising. Theoretical assumptions are implicit in all research processes leading to the construction of data or information. With this insight at the forefront, critical researchers do not seek to validate certain knowledge but work with a concept better expressed by the phrase 'compelling knowledge



claims'. The 'valid truth', according to Kincheloe (2003) is replaced by the 'quality of researcher accomplishment' (2003, pp. 177-178), meaning that the researcher has to keep a critical and trustworthy stance throughout the research process also in the presentation of findings to the reader.

### **Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci: a theoretical framework**

Theoretically, this article is based on ideas from Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci. Both have had substantial influence on the field of education and particularly on progressive adult education and political literacy aiming at social, cultural and personal transformation. Freire and Gramsci stand out as major thinkers for critical educators, due to the link they established between politics and education and how they underlined critical self-awareness, and critical social awareness. According to Freire and Gramsci profound social changes in society presupposed *transformative action*. The power underpinning transformative processes is, according to Freire (2004), *hope*. Hope must be rooted in praxis, in action, in the concrete struggle. If not there is inaction, hopelessness and despair, and it is impossible to make changes happen.

A fact that makes their theoretical perspectives particularly relevant to this study is that they both experienced persecution which led to a yearlong exile for Freire, a period that shaped much of his emancipatory view on education. Both also emphasised how learning not only takes place in formal institutions but also at informal social sites. Gramsci was imprisoned for political reasons between 1926 and 1936 when he was released due to severe health problems. During this period he managed to organise educational activities in prisons and even a prison school (*scuola dei confinati*) on the remote island of Ustica (Borg & Mayo, 2002, p. 93). Freire's and Gramsci's ideas about education and political practice are based on Marxist theory of consciousness. Education, according to both, takes place in a variety of contexts; most of which have the potential to be transformed and eventually revolutionised (Allman, 2001, p. 85). This is in line with the PKK Marxist view on political education as a collective enterprise focusing on transformation of knowledge and the individual personality.

Through educational projects, the PKK seeks to establish a foundation for political action which rests on the ability of the different actors in the organisation to pull in the same direction. Gramsci and Freire both emphasise the significance of a conscious and moral leadership giving *direction* to these processes and that people show a *will* to make social and political changes happen (Freire, 1972; Gramsci, 2005; Allman, 1999).

A crucial point in Gramsci's thoughts on political education, argues Giroux, is that students have to develop a critical understanding of how the past informs the present in order to liberate themselves from the ideologies and common sense assumptions of the dominant discourses in society (Giroux 2002, p. 49). According to Hoare & Smith (2005, p. xxiii) political action is the means by which the single consciousness is brought into contact with the social and natural world in all its forms, and in line with Gadotti (1996), a praxis that leads to transformative action (1996, p. xvii). We are a product of these relationships. Man's relations to nature is further a result of his actions and these historical acts can, according to Gramsci, only be performed by the '*collective man*' (SPN, 2005, p. 349)[10]. Gramsci shares with Marx and Freire the notion that what we are as human beings – our human nature – does not exist prior to our relationships with other people and our natural and social circumstances. Man's relation to nature is always imparted through social relations and technology. That is why Gramsci claim that human beings are the sum or the totality of their social and cultural relations. There exists no abstract human nature. What we refer to as our individuality is the product of social relations that constantly change through praxis and new social constellations. The PKK party or movement can be regarded as the *collective man* as long as its members act as parts of a collective body.

In line with this, the content of the informants' stories is highly political. The question of defining and analysing political stories cannot be detached from its *political context* (Shenhav, 2005) or, as in this article, the political scenario in Turkey giving raise to the PKK movement from the 1970s and onwards. According to Allman (2001) we can become conscious of the historically specific nature of our current relations and can actively, in association with other people, create new relations within which we can realise our human potential (2001, pp. 110-111; SPN, pp. 355). The informants' stories can therefore not be separated from *the self*, whether individual or collective,

and the political actions in which the individual or group is engaged. Support for this can be found in Gramsci's (1980) term the *collective subject* (Casey, 1996, p. 222), which is what the individual can become when it associates itself and acts together with other individuals who want the same changes (SPN, p. 353) whether it is within a specific class or a party. In this article, however, it refers to members and supporters of the PKK.

A central educative aim of the PKK was to transform the hegemonic perceptions of history and knowledge that was enforced upon the Kurds by the Turkish school system. Through processes of assimilation, the Kurds are alienated from what they perceive as their historical and cultural background. As already mentioned, Gramsci emphasised on the formation of an active historical subject capable of transforming society. This, however, requires a public educational system that transforms students of subordinate groups into young men and women who are critical, conscious and disciplined (Fontana, 2002, p. 33). In Gramsci's view the traditional intellectual had failed in changing the society to the better. In order for the oppressed classes to liberate themselves, people had to develop their own 'organic' intellectuals rooted in the historical experience and everyday life of the people. The intellectuals would be at the forefront in such processes in order to make the people aware of its own function – in particular in the social and political fields (Gramsci 1971, in Poppe 1995, p. 45). Gramsci regarded discipline (or self-discipline) as a presupposition for the creation of organic intellectuals. To Gramsci, mass consciousness was essential in order for people to collectively change their lives. The role of the intellectual was crucial in this regard. If students from working class or peasant backgrounds should develop into organic intellectuals, Gramsci (SPN, p. 45) claimed, they had to learn how to study and how to acquire physical self-discipline and self-control in order to catch up with students from upper classes, who had numerous advantages regarding their family environment (Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002, p. 11). These perspectives are, according to my informants, integral in the PKK education.

As a result of the assimilation politics in Turkish schools, the PKK regards it as crucial for the success of the movement to establish informal educational sites; in the communities, in the mountains and in prisons. Over the years, the PKK movement, through its political education, has contributed to producing its own organic

intellectuals who are active as journalists, writers, artists, politicians and educators on different levels. They work for the transformation of the Kurdish society in communities and in Diaspora.

In order to understand how political education in prison influenced profoundly each prisoner's life, it is important to understand how education was organised and carried out.

### **Political education in prison**

One similarity in the informants' narratives is that at the time of arrest, three of four informants claim to have supported the PKK in different ways, but not as active members. However, the stay in prison seems to have strengthened their decision to work for the PKK. After their release, two of them joined the guerrilla in the mountains. As one of them says:

Of course, 90 % of the people who were imprisoned were sympathisers, not militants. They had several problems and were dealing with all these problems at the same time, but education provided perspectives and helped them to deal with the problems and focus on bigger issues. But what I can say is that the stay in prison brought most of us closer to the PKK (Informant II).

Political education and the development of a critical and reflexive stance towards the situation of the Kurds in Turkey, is stated as the main reason for the decision to engage actively in the PKK movement (Westrheim, 2008, in press). Education also became a major everyday activity during the years of imprisonment and according to the informants; they underwent crucial changes with regards to personal development.

If education in prison should be of any use to the PKK movement, it had to be structured and coordinated. No matter how impossible it may have seemed due to the circumstances, the PKK managed to form a central committee for all prisons in Turkey and Kurdistan, which worked out an educational program. A local education committee adjusted the overall program to the conditions in the particular prison and to the special needs of the prisoners. If there were illiterates among the prisoners, an educated prisoner was appointed to teach them reading and writing. Or it could be a specific course in political education and ideology for prisoners who were selected to carry out political work for the organisation. Because all books provided by the prison

staff were in Turkish, Kurdish literature and documents from the organisation were smuggled into prison. Many of the Kurdish prisoners had never learnt to speak Kurdish, so both Turkish and Kurdish speaking groups had to be established. As they were not allowed to have books or lectures in Kurdish, these activities had to be carried out in secrecy when the staff was absent. According to the informants, educational activities occupied most of the day. This quote from one of the interviews may serve as examples on how education was organised between 1995 and 2000:

The education program was divided into three parts: In the *morning session* we concentrated on texts by our leader Abdullah Ocalan. Usually a group of three prisoners read the texts and took notes, while the rest of us read the notes and prepared questions. Then followed a joint discussion based on the subject and the answers to the questions. Texts and theories were illustrated by showing examples from our lives outside and inside prison. During the *afternoon session* prisoners were organised in groups of 7 to 8 persons. Each group focused on a subject that could be socialism, Kurdish history, PKK history, imperialism, Marxism and so forth. Next, each theme was divided into sub themes - one for each prisoner's self-study. Finally, the groups discussed the themes in light of theory and examples from practice. A brochure based on the group work was prepared, hopefully approved by the education committee, and, if so, handed out to other prisoners and sometimes also to outside supporters (Informant II).

Between the afternoon- and evening session, the prisoners had a break, usually containing a meal and sports. Some prisons had a library. For the evening session each prisoner chose from their own reading list. Some prisoners, however, received a prepared reading list from the education committee. The reason for this could be that the prisoner had limited reading skills, or needed in-depth studies on specific issues. Usually the prisoners had a few months to work through the reading list. During this period texts were discussed, and some prisoners voluntarily wrote articles to the internal magazines or wall papers. In this way, reflections and thoughts on the selected writings were collectively shared.

All these activities: critical text studies, discussions, reflections, writing and evaluation, served the purpose of challenging and transforming knowledge. The educational ethos was to turn given truths internalised through the Kemalist school system to new forms of knowledge based on historical facts from a Kurdish perspective, critical reflections and political actions. For the PKK, transformation of

knowledge is also closely linked to the transformation of personality, a crucial part of political education.

In order to transform the knowledge that we had from the Kemalist schools, we had to change our way of thinking, behaving and acting. We had to change our personality. For this we had platforms where one by one stepped forward in order to evaluate his or her personality (Informant 1V).

According to Coben (1998) Freire describes the term conscientization as the development of the awakening of critical awareness or consciousness, which grows out of a critical educational effort based on favourable historical conditions. It is a process involving passages through different levels of consciousness where the first passage involves breaking the culture of silence (ibid, p. 72), a process which can be achieved only through dialogue and critical reflections. If critical consciousness is the aim of the education process Coben (1998) argues, then Freire's concept of praxis and dialogue are interrelated principles on which the consciousness process rests. By praxis Freire means the action and reflection of people upon their world in order to transform it (ibid, p. 76). Critical consciousness is at the core of the educational aspirations of the PKK. The informants describe how they, by engaging in group discussions and individual and collective reflections gradually developed a more critical stance towards knowledge that was previously taken for granted. Without this kind of critically questioning of the world, there will be no transformation of or changes in society.

The informants emphasise that self-evaluation and evaluation by others were means that were consciously used in order for each individual to adapt to a collective mind-set. The fellow prisoners responded by giving positive and negative comments to the self-evaluations. The individuals on the platform sometimes rejected the critics, but they usually admitted that they were aware of the weaknesses, and would work on them in order to become better persons.

It may seem strange to an outsider, but it was mainly about practicing self-control. The state system has pulled our history, our dignity, our identity apart, and working on personality was mainly about putting the pieces together again. For this you need to develop a conscious personality (Informant II).

Political education in prison is aimed at establishing a balance between education and discipline. When I visited a PKK camp in March 2006, one of the leaders emphasised

that an organisation without discipline is a dead organisation. In the PKK the members seek to develop inner discipline based on the ideology of the organisation. Discipline, as it is regarded here, is not implemented through force but through education, self-evaluation and praxis. The individual member has, however, to be loyal to the hierarchical structure of the PKK. One informant states that at the end, education, evaluation and self-discipline had an effect on the personality. It was, like he said, a 24 hours process. Everything that was done or said by individuals was subject to evaluation – by yourself and by others and this of course affected the individual personality. Freire (1972) has emphasised that people under oppression, who join the struggle for social and political transformation, will have to understand the necessity for the continuous critical examination of personal intentions. This is especially important when structural or transformative changes have not yet occurred (Allman, 1999, p. 104). But not all evaluations had constructive impact on the individual on the platform:

You may think it is authoritarian, and there were some bad cases where the evaluation took the form of negative criticism and insult. The system was not perfect, and could be harmful to that particular person, but we also learned a lot from these bad examples (Informant II).

Even if the informants in general emphasise the good experiences they had with the platforms, the cited informant is critical to a practice that might politically and psychologically harm the individual. The female informant (IV) said that there were many positive things to be said about the platforms, but the practice could sometimes be misused. If one or more of those who were supposed to give comments had a conflict or a complicated relationship to the person on the platform, it might be tempting to take revenge when this person was subject to evaluation. In this way the platform became a means to damage the person. Another critical factor was the limited academic background of many prisoners. Words and concepts used in the evaluations could be hard to understand, both to the individual on the platform, but also to some of them who used them, and therefore of limited use. The informants show to examples where the individuals who became subject to harsh and unreasonable critics developed problems. In this regard the platform became the opposite of what it was supposed to be. Instead of human growth, the person was at risk of being psychologically harmed. As Freire (1972) claims, it is never quite clear

where 'the oppressor' is in this kind of social relations. In the examples referred to above, the oppressed became the oppressor. This is why Freire emphasise the necessity for the oppressed to constantly question his or her intentions. The historical role of the oppressed is, according to Freire (1972) and Fanon (2005) to liberate both himself and the oppressor and not to 'win' the battle and take the position of the oppressor.

In addition to educational activities which seem to have covered most of the day prisoners organised sports and cultural events. All these activities also helped them to concentrate on bigger political issues:

When I realised this, I decided to devote all my life to the struggle – to become a professional activist in the PKK movement. I found that my previous problems were losing their importance. Education in prison also helped us to forget the outside war and the problems that followed it. Education gave us an opportunity to do something constructive (Informant III).

During the 1990ies the PKK had managed to establish education groups in different areas and on different levels in the Kurdish societies, in Turkey and in Diaspora. It seems that never before had informal education for Kurds been so systematically offered to so many, and prison education made a huge contribution in that regard. The PKK obviously regarded education both as a means to raise the level of knowledge and consciousness among the prisoners in general, but also as a means to educate potential members to carry out different tasks in the organisation: in community work, in the guerrilla and to carry out political, cultural and practical work in the mountain camps:

It was not only to pass our time. The organisation's goal was first to educate militants for itself, secondly to raise the general level of literacy and knowledge among the people. They wanted to educate a people who would be able to stand on their own feet. Other political organisations, within the Turkish left, had no structured education like we had. It was more based on cultural activities and individual intellectualism. They did not succeed in building up an education for all, as the PKK did. In order to develop a consciously collective education movement, you need clear objectives and forces that pull in the same direction (Informant II).

On the importance of having direction and objectives for educational activities in political movements, Gramsci (1925/1994) shows to the numerous failing educational



initiatives within the Italian workers' movement. In his view a political education with no 'party colours' was deemed to fail. Without clear political objectives it is difficult to get beyond the limited group of followers, and educational sites become rhetorical academies lacking inner principles of cohesion and unity. According to Gramsci there has to be a link between the planned 'schools', in this regard in prison, and an actual objective movement (1925/1994, pp. 265-266). The obvious strength in the PKK's educational program seems to be, first, the coordination of the educational endeavours inside all prisons in Turkey and outside the wall, second that the objectives supported the aims of the organisation and that they were clearly articulated. Education in prison had its weaknesses, problems and dilemmas that were constantly discussed. One of them was how political education in prison could benefit the broader struggle of the PKK. The perhaps most important choice made by the PKK regarding education was probably to anchor educational activities in the broader transnational movement.

### **Generative themes**

In the following I will present two themes that run thorough the informants' stories. The first theme deals with the question of whether political education had an impact on the overall struggle of the PKK – outside the brick wall. The second theme the informants are talking about is the significance of political education for the individual prisoner, and how it gained the prisoners as a collective group.

### **Education beyond the prison ward**

Since its foundation in 1978 the PKK has recruited thousands of young people from Kurdistan, Turkey, and Diaspora. The vast majority, however, was recruited from the peasantry and rural working class; many of them had limited school background or were illiterate. According to the informants, a central aim of the PKK was to recruit and educate as many members as possible, whether they were militants or conducted other kinds of work. Without this human resource it would most probably have been impossible for the PKK to become a transnational social and political movement. The literacy politics of the PKK was important also in prison because education has a spiraling effect. Educated prisoners became the teachers of new groups of prisoners, and so it continued. Released prisoners devoted to the organisation became the teachers of the people. Since the situation outside the walls was extremely chaotic

during the 1990ies, released educated prisoners were capable of structuring and organising the struggle outside the walls:

Since the PKK started emphasising education in prison, released prisoners were regarded as the educators of the people outside. Through education in prison you were constantly working on yourself to gain self-control and to be prepared to educate others (Informant I).

According to the informants, the prisoners became *knowledge seeking* persons, who would encourage others to seek knowledge and also to assist them in the process. In addition, the prisoners worked hard to change their personality, a process which included self-control and discipline. This was important for an organisation that was totally dependent on its members' ability to pull in the same direction. Prisoners who decided to work as loyal members after being released had, as the informants say, to believe in the cause and become examples or models, especially to the younger generation outside the walls. By their knowledge and 'ideal' behavior they encouraged others to follow their examples (Westrheim & Lillejord, 2007; Westrheim, 2008, in press).

The prisoners worked intensively to educate themselves and their fellow prisoners. Illegal books and documents were smuggled into prison, but a substantial amount of documents and manuscripts was also smuggled out of prison and became a source of motivation for the outside struggle. These writings were also, according to the informants, distributed in Europe. Some prisoners were selected for political and ideological education, aiming at preparing them for special tasks. The educative expectations were even higher for this group while, according to Gramsci, a leadership can work either by domination or direction (SPN, pp. 57-59) and the progress or future success of the organisation and the struggle might depend on one of these alternative styles of leadership. Gramsci uses the term hegemony, or moral ethical leadership to describe the means by which consent in a group is achieved. It is worth mentioning that Gramsci, and almost all Freire's writings on political education for transformation, deals with the role of revolutionary or social moral leadership and how the leaders must work and learn *with* the people. On this background, education and political leadership have to be regarded as inseparable units (Allman, 2001, p. 87).

Political prisoners, who spent years in prison, developed a profound theoretical political knowledge base. Prisoners who became members of the PKK were expected to carry out educational work in cities and communities. Faced with the reality outside prison, however, many of them lacked practical experience, and were not updated on recent development in the movement or in the society during the years of imprisonment. Before the prisoners could teach anyone outside the prison walls, they had to learn how to adjust to everyday life

The committees outside told us that we were capable of seeing things from a theoretical point of view, but that we had no experience with people and how to apply theory on praxis. We had to learn. It became a dilemma to me how to balance theory and praxis (Informant IV).

Even though the previous prisoners had to adjust to the outside life, they brought with them experiences, knowledge and teaching methods that later were applied as education models in the communities, also on Diaspora.

### **Individual and collective gains**

The informants claim that structured education in prison helped them shift their focus from the political chaos in war ridden environments, and concentrate on bigger political issues such as the future of the Kurds. This seems to explain why the PKK managed to develop the organisation from a small group of loyal followers in the 1970ies to a transnational movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The informants emphasise that the core of the educational process in prison was transformation of personality in which each individual member had to take an active part. Personality work is an extremely self-disciplining and challenging process. In order to develop new perspectives on yourself, on other people and on the context wherein you are situated, you have to question former conceptions and comprehension of the world and everything that you previously have believed in. In order to reach such insight the informants had to be in dialogue with other inmate learners. According to Gramsci and Freire, transformation of personality can only take place in relation to other people and in a collective educative context (Allman 2001, p. 86). The aim of the PKK education is therefore, in line with Freire (1972), to encourage people to question reality by seeing the reality as a problem, in order to challenge and transform it. This is a painful process where you either liberate yourself collectively or accept

the 'common sense' situation. The informants claim that even if it was hard work, they also felt empowered and developed a strong sense of confidence both on a collective and an individual level. One informant told me that when he was imprisoned, he lacked confidence and was terrified by having to stand up on the platform in front of more than hundred prisoners to talk about himself and various political issues. But the atmosphere in prison was different than outside and the self-evaluation less personally threatening. The prisoners shared everything, food, clothes, fear, sorrow and joy. If a prisoner received any goods from family or friends outside, it was most certainly shared with others.

I would not say that I learned many new theoretical perspectives from education – after two or three months I had a sufficient theoretical foundation, and the next three years I shared with others what I had learnt (Informant I).

Not only material goods were shared. Aronowitz (2000, p. 21) claims that sharing also consists of a will to share the power over knowledge, and thereby the share power to shape the future. Prisoners, who were educated, felt a responsibility to contribute to other prisoners' learning process. A fundamental principle in the educational thinking of the PKK is, however, that it is not always those with formal academic knowledge who are the best teachers. For the PKK, knowledge is more than academic or theoretical knowledge or skills.

Another informant had this to say regarding the sharing of knowledge:

It was not only positive for me; it became useful to my people as well. I was an ordinary teacher outside the walls; in prison I gained a stronger identity and confidence through the relations to my students. They learned from me, I learnt from them – we were learning together. Today, I am a powerful spokesperson for the organisation. I gained a lot from education in prison, and I am always ready to give it back to the people (Informant I).

The informants claim that having followed the educational activities in prison, they see themselves as more complete person:

I have participated in the organisation since I was 15 years old. I found my personality in the PKK. Even though I still have weaknesses in my personality, I managed to change and become a better person by following the education in prison. I gained a new philosophy by looking at, participate in and reflect on life. I learned how to analyse personalities and to know the person in front of you. But best of all, I learned to love reading (Informant II).

Transformation of personality is at the core of the PKK education. To many, transformation of personality has negative connotations as it may be associated with authoritarian or oppressive regimes, brain washing or militant cadre training. Two of my informants show to examples where evaluation has been harmful to individuals. Transformation as it is here understood is not only a psychological term, it has to do with how you perceive life, the social relations you engage in and how the social life you participate in make you a better human being. To Freire, as Kincheloe (2005) argues, transformation for liberation is more than a psychological term, it is a social dynamic that involves working with and engaging people in a powerful processes which is the acts of coming to critical consciousness (2005, p. 73).

In this article the use of the term is of course colored by the informants' narratives on their own transformation process. They all describe transformation as an extremely hard but also positive process. During the stay in prison they had to reflect on their lives, and this reflection process strengthened them personally. The female informant (IV) claims that in prison she grew more aware of her gender. Before the arrest she always wished she was a man. The female community in prison made her realise that women are just as valuable as men and can be even stronger. The knowledge she gained and the solidarity she developed for other women, finally enabled her to love and care for her own gender.

All the informants emphasise that education in prison taught them the love of words, through which a 'new world' was unveiled to them. According to Freire (1972) reading the *word* is reading the *world*, and critical reading develops a better understanding of the context wherein you are situated. The policy of Turkish schools is still to assimilate the Kurds and other minorities into an overall hegemonic Turkish nationalistic worldview with no room for alternative critical reflections. The educational program initiated by the PKK brought along new and liberating educational experiences to the political prisoners. Literacy politics, as it is understood by Freire and Gramsci, not only enables individuals to read and write. Reading the world implies critical questioning of knowledge that has been taken for granted. By acquiring reading and writing skills, individuals get a necessary means to understand and criticize structures that sustain oppressive mechanisms in society. Uncovering the lived reality by cultural and transformative action brings new experiences and

knowledge to the learning process (Conway, 2006, p. 33-34). Freire (1972) always emphasises that the world and people do not exist apart from each other, but exist in constant interaction. This makes literacy not only a matter of reading and writing; it is a political task as well as a process of consciousness building that entails the possibility for change.

## **Discussion**

This article only focuses on certain aspects of prison life. It is important to bear in mind that to most prisoners the stay in prison was a horrible experience which left inmates with incurable wounds, psychologically and physically. Even if the informants describe the relations between the political prisoners in positive terms, one can imagine that there must have been conflicts of interest, disagreement and dissatisfaction among them as well. From a meta-perspective, however, it seems that the political education of the PKK in prison was the glue that held the different aspects of prison life together and made the prisoners focus on issues of joint interest. Ozcan (2006) argues that the success of the PKK in bringing about Kurdish opposition in Turkey is fundamentally related to its organisational diligence, philosophy of recruitment, the organisation-individual linkage and philosophy and intensity of the education (2006, p. 241).

According to the informants, the PKK is both a political and educational movement and within the PKK the two aspects are not separated. According to Shor (2000), Freire argues that the whole activity of education is political in nature. Politics is not one separated aspect of teaching and learning, on the contrary, all forms of education are political (2000, p. 27).

The ambition of the PKK is to raise the general level of literacy and knowledge among its members and the Kurdish people. Due to the large number of political prisoners accused of having links to the PKK, prisons were regarded as potential educational sites. Education in prison was primarily conducted in order to develop knowledge and increase critical consciousness among members of the organisation. According to the informants transformation and critical consciousness developed through joint discussions among the prisoners on relevant themes that occurred from the oppressive political situation and their daily lives. Gradually the prisoners became

aware that they were situated in and influenced by the same oppressive situation. Without transformation of this human resource the organisation would probably not have survived. In this way education becomes a means of constructing counter-hegemony and the PKK education becomes a form of counter-action with regard to the assimilation policy of the Kemalist School in Turkey, and the harsh oppression of Kurds perpetrated by the state forces. Educated and conscious members could better contribute to the struggle because they had the knowledge and skills necessary to educate others.

The educational system in Turkey has systematically tried to break down the students' perceptions of being Kurds. Many did not even dare to reveal their ethnic background. As a counter-strategy, education in prison aimed at piecing together these identity fragments. But education of cadres inside prison was considered as insufficient, education should benefit all Kurds. As a consequence, manuscripts, brochures and sometimes also books were smuggled out of prison and became the foundation of group education or what Freire (1972) terms cultural circles, in many communities outside the walls. As in prison, educational activities in the communities, in the mountain camps and in Diaspora were coordinated by committees, and put into practice locally by released prisoners or educated members. This strategy structured and organised the educational activities and the struggle as such. Even if many prisoners were lacking practical experience and were lagging behind the development after years of imprisonment, released PKK prisoners were treated with respect by the people and many regarded them as models and sources of motivation to others.

Also PKK leaders were imprisoned, some for more than 20 years. Their position in prison and their behaviour was closely followed by the members and supporters. They were expected to behave more exemplary. Freire and Gramsci both emphasise the crucial role of a leadership to guide the struggle for political change. As already mentioned, a leadership can according to Gramsci (SPN, p. 198), work either by domination or direction (i.e. moral leading) and the progress or future success of the struggle might depend on the way they lead. Gramsci conceptualises positive hegemony as a combination of moral-ethical direction and domination – or a unity of consent and force (Allman, 1999, p. 106). At the same time the plight of a moral leadership is to encourage the members to take a critical stance to the same leadership.

Having interviewed PKK cadres, visited one of the mountain camps, and participated in the daily life of the cadres, my overall impression is that the leadership is regarded as examples to the members who expect it to give direction to themselves and the struggle.

Education in prison also serves other purposes. It helped the prisoners to focus on issues beyond their personal situation, to concentrate on what they term 'important issues'. Faced with the experiences of their fellow prisoners, more mundane problems suddenly lost importance. The stay in prison provided educational opportunities that went far beyond their previous experiences and imaginations. It also gave the opportunity to work on the personality, to become more confident and conscious persons. Prison life was structured within an altogether friendly atmosphere where the motivation for learning and development had good conditions. Even though prison life was horrible, it was sometimes regarded as better than a life outside prison impressed of oppression, worries or poverty.

One of the informants talks about his identity as a teacher and the relation to his students in prison. He claims that this relationship was reciprocal and had strengthened his identity, not at least by the knowledge he gained by interacting with the students. Democratic teaching is a two-way process. Shor (2000) states that a teacher that criticises inequality and lack of democracy and at the same time teaches in an authoritarian way, compromises his or her credibility (2000, p. 27). This observation might be explained by Freire's (1972) insight that teachers and learners are a unity of opposites. The teacher possesses already existing knowledge and experiences that learners need and vice versa. The idea is to conceive of teaching and learning as two internally related processes within each person. Freire uses the terms *teacher-learners* and *learners-teachers* to express this. Gramsci (SPN, p. 349-350) takes a similar perspective as he argues that the relation between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always also a pupil and every pupil a teacher. This educational relationship, he argues, should not be restricted to the field of scholastic relationship. It exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals (Allman, 1999, p. 116).

In prison the informants learnt the love of words. Many were introduced to the written word for the first time. This opened a new world to them. Literacy, according to



Freire (1972), is the ability to use the printed word to reshape the world. As students become literate, they are empowered to change themselves and to take action in the world. As they read the word and interpret the world, they also read their reality and write their lives. Such reading is, however, useless if not accompanied by transformative action for justice and equality (Kincheloe 2005, p. 74). According to one informant, many released political prisoners later became prominent individuals, or organic intellectuals in Gramsci's words, in different fields of civic society:

There are many examples of political prisoners who had prison education as an informal platform for further studies after their release. Others have become knowledgeable cadres teaching in communities, mountain camps or in Diaspora. There are also well known authors among former prisoners; journalists, artists or political figures (informant IV).

This informant composed two novels after being released from prison. The vast majority of the political prisoners, however, acquired new knowledge and basic literacy skills which profoundly changed their lives.

Political prisoners are in an extremely vulnerable position and therefore susceptible to influence, both from the authoritarian prison system and to forces aiming at convincing them to work for their interests. The threat to the prisoners' integrity increases by the use of small-cell isolation. For those who are at the forefront of the Kurdish struggle, like the PKK, political prisoners represent an important target group. To those who were already members of the organisation or supporters, prison education became a means to personal development and learning. To the informants life in prison became endurable through a directive education which gave them courage and hope for the future. Despite the hard conditions in prison, the PKK managed to structure the educational activities for the prisoners, who taught each other. Freire (2005) emphasises that teaching and learning take place in such a way that those who teach *learn*, because they recognise previously learned knowledge. By observing how the pupil works to comprehend what is taught they uncover uncertainties, right and wrongs (Freire, 2005, p. 31).

Even if the system was not perfect, political education in prison recruited knowledgeable members to the PKK. These individuals later became a crucial force to the overall struggle. Political education in prison gave direction and meaning to what

has become a broad political and social movement in Turkey, Kurdistan, and in Diaspora.

### **Concluding comment**

One could assume that years of imprisonment would create a gap between the past and the present. According to the informants, however, education in prison instead became a bridge between these two time dimensions. They have gained new perspectives on life, the political situation, and their own personality. The female informant regards her imprisonment as a gendered re-birth. All informants regard prison as an important educational site that has had profound influence on their personal development and has contributed substantially to the overall struggle of the PKK. They also emphasise the crucial role political education in prison have had to the Kurdish communities and for Diaspora. This excerpt serves to illuminate this point:

Living and learning with other political prisoners changed my attitude to the world and to my Kurdish people. Being a part of the PKK empowers you, gives you confidence and strength, it makes you brave and willing to take risks. I have experienced many terrible things before I was imprisoned, and also in prison and afterwards. I am no longer afraid of anything (Informant I).

Transformation of knowledge and personality would, however, not have been possible without hope. In the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, hope is the driving force underpinning political transformation, transformative action and critical consciousness. Seen on this background the PKK movement represents a school that truly proclaims pedagogy of hope in a Freirian sense. Hope, according to Freire, is an ontological need that, when anchored in praxis, becomes historical concrete (Freire, 2004; Adams, 2006).

According to Ronald & Roskelly (2001, p. 612), Freire copes with the question on how to find hope in a world without belief, because without it seems impossible to begin the struggle for change. Political prisoners are imprisoned due to their beliefs. Adams (2006) refers to Freire who says: 'Hope, however, does not consist in crossing one's arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait' (2006, p. 71). If the prisoners did not believe in their cause and PKK's struggle for liberation, and if they had no hope for political changes in a better

world, then the stay in prison would have been unbearable. Political education in prison, however, helped the prisoners to maintain hope in a climate of hopelessness.

## Notes

[1] Most scholars estimate that 30,000 people were killed, 4,000 villages were burnt, 3 million people were displaced from their homes and land, and 20,000 people were imprisoned of political reasons.

[2] In Freire's model the classroom is replaced by a cultural circle where the teacher becomes a facilitator in the literacy process.

[3] The Norwegian Helsinki Committee (2007, p. 3).

[4] Diyarbakir, Amed in Kurdish, is regarded as the capital of the Kurds in Turkey.

[5] After the capture of the party leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1999, more than hundred cadres immolated themselves, many burnt to death.

[6] Mazlum Dogan was one of the seven participants at the very first meeting in 1972, resulting in the later foundation of the PKK.

[7] In 1999 the Ministry of Justice began to apply small group isolation (K-type prisons) for those prisoners charged under the Anti-Terror Law (of 1991), many of these were convicted for having links to the PKK. As prisoners were isolated, they lost the opportunity to carry out educational activities. Since the process of replacing dormitories by smaller cells has been initiated there have been major protests and clashes in Turkish prisons resulting in hunger strikes and deaths which caught International attention (Green 2002).

[8] See also Human Rights Watch (2000) and Amnesty International (2001).

[9] From 2002 I have been a board member of the Rafto Foundation ([www.rafto.no](http://www.rafto.no)) which has been engaged in the Kurdish question since 1994. From 2004 I have been the Chair of the EU Turkey Civic Commission ([www.eutcc.org](http://www.eutcc.org))

[10] SPN: *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (Antonio Gramsci), edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (2005)

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