



Rojava

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HOUSE ORGAN

Rojava

Reports from and on the Northern Syria portion of Rojava (Western Kurdistan), where most Syrian Kurds live, tell of unthinkable political accomplishments taking place at breathtaking pace (Figure 1). In the middle of a war, people are engaging in direct democracy in virtually all decision-making processes; feminist revolutionaries are promoting and increasingly securing gender egalitarianism in all institutions; all communities are attaining substantive political guarantees and at times subordinating economic policy to environmental concerns. Hitherto inimical forces are being brought together and getting coordinated to build and defend a new, stateless, egalitarian society. This may all appear in the stuff of dreams, especially when many peoples in fossil-fuel-rich southwest Asia have seen their political aspirations crushed, and have so often been massacred by transnational and regional imperialists and colonisers by ways of sponsored dictatorships, intrigue, proxy intervention and military invasion. Yet, in Rojava, three autonomous democratic zones have been created since July 2012 (about a year into the war in Syria), aided by the withdrawal of most of the Syrian Government forces. Moreover, this has been accomplished under the leadership of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD), who are affiliated with the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanî* (PKK).¹ The three zones, Cizîrê (Al-Jazirah), Efrîn (Afrin) and Kobanê (Ayn al-Arab), have been confederated into cantons (Figure 1). The first is the largest and most populated (ca. half a million people). The siege of Kobanê by Da'ish² has induced more than half the inhabitants (ca. 200,000) to flee over the border to Turkey so that, at the time of writing, the number of people in Efrîn and Kobanê combined tends towards 400,000. The cantons are situated about 100 km from each other and together cover roughly 18,300 km, nearly double the

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¹The DYP and PKK are translated respectively into Democratic Union Party and Kurdistan Workers' Party. The PKK, officially founded in 1978 as a communist organisation dedicated to Kurdish national liberation, mainly focused on Kurdish struggles in Turkey. For several decades, due to massive Turkish Government repression, they operated out of Syria until 1998, when the Syrian Government, threatened with war by the Turkish Government, became hostile to the PKK. The PYD formed in 2003 from clandestine remnants of Syrian PKK cells. Illegal to the Syrian Government, the PYD have nevertheless managed to prosper, even setting up their own army and, during the ongoing war in Syria, finding ways of avoiding direct confrontation with Free Syrian and government armies.

²This is the acronym of the rather un-Islamic *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fī al-'Irāq wash-Shām* (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).



Figure 1. Rojava and surrounding areas. Prepared by author.

area of Lebanon. The economic mainstay of Rojava is farming (especially wheat and oils) and petroleum and natural gas in Cizîrê, but because the Al-Assad regime deliberately proscribed the development of such industrial infrastructure as mills and refineries, Rojava inhabitants have had to build them out of scrap. Electricity and telephony are distributed for free but are unreliable because their sources are outside the cantons. The exigency of self-defence and Turkish and Kurdistan Regional Government embargoes undermine economic potential and may eventually imperil the satisfaction of basic needs (Baher 2014; Rojava Report 2014).

Close to a million people are involved in one way or another in building what imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has called democratic confederalism. The *mala gel* (people's house), a sort of communal council, is at the centre of decision-making processes, and as many people's houses as possible are being established in pre-existing administrative neighbourhoods. With the Social Contract Charter,³ drafted by delegates of the General Council of the Joint Interim Administration representing the bulk of Rojava communities, the confederal structure was established by early 2014 and administrations appointed that reflect the social composition of the major local communities (elections have been delayed by the Da'ish attacks).

According to the Charter, decisions are to be made through people's houses, which in many towns had been introduced already a good eight–nine years earlier, usually consisting of 15–30 people who deliberate and, as much as possible, use consensus to resolve issues of energy, food distribution, social problems (e.g., sexual violence, family conflicts) and the like. Crucially, at least 40% of decision-making

³The Charter can be viewed at <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/rojava/charter-of-the-social-contract/>. See Saadi (2014) for a comparison with the Zapatista constitutional framework.

participants, at all administrative levels, have to be women. *Mala gel* committees are set up to address both social and ecological/health issues and all people's houses have a parallel *mala jinan* (women's house), which has jurisdiction especially over cases of violence against women. Aiming at women's empowerment, economic independence and safety in a largely patriarchal system, this structure is reproduced in the PYD's military branches, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG, People's Protection Units) and their parallel *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê* (YPJ, Women's Protection Units), mirroring PKK organising. While the military are predominantly Kurdish, the Asayiş, or security force, are ethnically diverse and also include an all-women division. Their main tasks are similar to community-based public security organs with the additional duty of serving as rearguard for the YPG and YPJ (Ayboğa 2014; Biehl 2014).

People's houses are represented and coordinated at different council levels, from district and city to the Rojava cantons administration. Worker-managed cooperatives are privileged as production units; women-centred self-administered academies have been founded for feminist consciousness-raising; and justice is meted out through justice councils (accountable to people's houses and not necessarily composed of people with law degrees) and higher level judicial organs. Cases are often resolved through a mix of rehabilitative and transformative principles, whereby the sentenced is treated as someone needing education, and the entire community is sometimes involved in working to change the conditions that lead to the culpable person's misdeed. The death penalty has been abolished and maximum sentencing is twenty years (for murder, including honour killings—a major breakthrough). As part of promoting women's status, polygamy, female circumcision and marriage under eighteen years of age have been abolished, and post-divorce alimony provision has been introduced. Preventing careerism and power concentration, people performing administrative functions tend to be remunerated in kind instead of salaries (Baher 2014; Kolokotronis 2014).

Though not coincidental, the PKK communalist direction is not reducible to faithful adherence to the will of a charismatic leader. Öcalan may remain highly influential in spite of his status as honorary president, but PKK practices and theories come out of relations outside prison confines. In other words, major shifts in practices and theories in the PKK have been provoked by and cohere with exigencies in an even more highly unfavourable conjuncture than in the past. This understanding seems missing in both praises and critiques of the PKK's democratic confederalism, leading to unwarranted expectations (Baher 2014; Biehl 2014; Kolokotronis 2014), facile critique or dismissiveness (Anarchist Federation 2014; K. B. 2014; Dağ 2014; Il Lato Cattivo 2014) and false analogies to the past elsewhere, like 1930s Spain (Graeber 2014) or 1942–1943 Stalingrad (*The Economist* 2014).

The PKK Transformed

This is not to suggest that novel, revolutionary practices in Rojava have nothing to do with major changes within the PKK or with the more recent writings of their principal and co-founding leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Though some changes were antecedent, it has been especially since Öcalan's 1999 capture and imprisonment on İmralı Island (Figure 1)⁴ that the PKK have allegedly undergone a major ideological turn away from a Marxist–Leninist approach, infused with Maoist strategy, centred on national liberation and the attainment of an independent Kurdish state. They instead currently advocate for:

radical local grass-roots self-governance, gender equality, and ecology ... It rejects the institution of the state as inherently oppressive and hegemonic and discards nationalism as a primitive, backward concept. (Dirik 2014b)

This is more or less evident in such concepts as democratic confederalism and the theory of sexual rupture (see below). The change has occurred through the PKK's reassessment of their main objectives and strategies—reassessment ironically abetted by Öcalan's relative isolation and access to books covering social theory, history and much else. Some of the theorists who have influenced Öcalan include Bookchin, Braudel, Foucault, Mies, Nietzsche and Sub-Comandante Marcos, combined with long-standing influences from feminist comrades, active in the PKK since their founding in 1978. This includes the work of co-founder Sakine Cansız, assassinated in Paris in January 2013 alongside activists Fidan Doğan and Leyla Söylemez.

Democratic Confederalism and Sexual Ruptures

Öcalan has been explicit about his rejection of the national state as a pillar of capitalism, which “enforces the centralization of the state” (Öcalan 2011, 24), and as a source of social alienation (Öcalan 2011, 12). National states are intrinsically military structures, and fascism is their “purest form” (Öcalan 2011, 28). Consequently, social confederacies should be developed as a network for self-defence against national states. This poses a possible contradiction in that the task entails a form of militarisation. This is supposedly avoided by having both (unspecified) political institutions and “confederated groupings” involved in dictating the “composition of the military leadership” (Öcalan 2011, 29).

⁴Expelled from Syria under Turkish pressures in 1998, he fled to and was quickly banished from Moscow and then Rome. Turkish secret service agents eventually captured him in Nairobi, in collusion with Italian and Kenyan governments aided by the CIA and Mossad (Ansaldo 2002). Narrowly escaping execution thanks to Turkish Government's EU-membership ambitions, which entailed the end of the death penalty, he remains incarcerated under maximum security conditions.

Yet to achieve democratic confederalism, the “dominant male” (meaning “one-sided domination, the inequality and intolerance”) must be killed (Öcalan n.d.). The phenomenon of the dominant male spans millennia; it “gained power with the rise of classed society” (Öcalan n.d.). In fact, “Gender revolution is ... about the five thousand years old civilisation of classed society which has left man worse off than woman. Thus, this gender revolution would simultaneously mean man’s liberation” (Öcalan n.d.). He posits that two “sexual ruptures” occurred in the history of humanity: first with the male takeover of the domestic economy and, thousands of years later, with the rise of monotheistic religions which intensified the subordination of women. He therefore sees that the “role the working class once played must now be taken over by the sisterhood of women” (Öcalan n.d.), through which a third rupture will occur that restores matriarchal relations but at a higher order (Öcalan 2013).

Certain strategies and methods need to be accordingly rethought or rejected and new ones devised. Since “democratic confederalism leadership institutions do not need ideological legitimization,” struggles for hegemony are superfluous and must be resisted (Öcalan 2013, 30). However, while people at all administrative levels must be free to participate, decisions must be local, but they “need to be in line with global issues” (Öcalan 2013, 27). Furthermore, this type of society must welcome political pluralism and be “flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented,” with “Ecology and feminism” its central pillars (Öcalan 2013, 21).

Finally, five principles of democratic confederalism are proposed to guide its formation: the right to self-determination, non-statist democracy, grassroots participation, limiting “higher levels” to coordinating and implementing decisions made from below and anti-nationalism. The last two of the principles of democratic confederalism, however, conflate general objectives with the specificities of the “Middle East” context, where it is deemed that grassroots democracy is “the only approach that can cope with diverse [ethnic] groups, religions, and class differences” (Öcalan 2011, 34). In Öcalan’s view, national identity is a product of capitalist processes and can be a source of progress if capitalist relations are turned into democratic and communal ones. His version of anti-nationalism, accordingly, does not deny nationhood, but attempts to sever it from statism.

Doing away with dominant maleness and setting up democratic confederalism are certainly laudable objectives. Yet, in subordinating evidence and theory to contemporary political necessities, there may be contradictory repercussions resulting from Öcalan’s approach. Patriarchal systems are treated in such homogenous fashion as to make it impossible to distinguish them historically or geographically and hence to devise effective political strategies to undermine those not specific to the particular historical geographical juncture. The use of female nudity in parts of Nigeria, for example, can successfully deter if not instil fear in mostly male militaries, but the effects of Femen’s similar strategy in Europe and parts of North Africa are rather mixed, if not sometimes counterproductive. The regionally parochial historical analysis

of patriarchal relations also leaves much to be desired. Southwest Asian histories spanning more than five millennia are assumed to represent historical developments worldwide. Goddess worship is treated as if it were coextensive with egalitarianism, something that ought to be proven. Ambiguities in archaeological evidence are swept aside in the quest to demonstrate the existence of Neolithic matriarchy.⁵

Relative to democratic confederalism, it is unclear, among other things, how global and local issues will be aligned and how local decision-making processes will be guaranteed to consider global issues. Öcalan's inchoate proposal is the formation of a global "confederate assembly" as a counter to the United Nations, which, for him, is led by superpowers. This appears to miss the very capitalist forces behind the UN that Öcalan identifies as equally foundational viz. national states. The oversight becomes even more alarming when Öcalan asserts that "under certain circumstances peaceful coexistence is possible [with national states] as long as the nation-state does not interfere with central matters of self-administration" (Öcalan 2011, 32). This is justified by the reasoning that "The overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process" (Öcalan 2011, 32). In a capitalist system that is globally interlinked to an unprecedented degree, including with respect to mass extraction of raw materials from one area of the world to serve often just the whims of consumers in far-away markets, this view of the national state is perplexing.

It is interesting that the dialectical relationship recognised between capitalism and national identity is not extended to nationhood and statehood. This suggests a parochial reading of the processes of national state and national identity formation. These historical processes are understood in terms specific to the Kurdish situation. That is, Öcalan confines his perspective to the history of a community of more than ten million Kurds that has arguably never been unified along nationalist lines, has always been stateless, and has been subjected to extremely violent measures by existing national states even at the slightest hint of Kurdish organising for national liberation. Given such historical precedents, the currently dire position of the PKK, and the antagonism of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), it makes sense to underline loyalty to existing borders and to abandon nationalism understood as seeking the establishment of a national state. Yet the anti-nationalism advocated by Öcalan is to be attained through the building of federal structures "open to all Kurds," a people regarded by Öcalan as better placed to develop and advance alternatives to capitalism (Öcalan 2011, 41). The self-contradictory aspect of this formulation, where social diversity in Kurdistan is collapsed under Kurdish identity, should be cause for concern, but it also suggests the difficulty of reconciling the current political impasse with a national liberation agenda. Or, perhaps, this nationalist anti-nationalism belies the tension between seeking Öcalan's release from prison (by mollifying with "anti-

⁵This is a tactic similar to masculinist scientists who superimpose current gender divisions of labour on ancient artefacts, such as ascribing bows and arrows to men (supposedly always the hunters) and pottery to women (apparently always the home-makers). It is important to underscore that patriarchies have not always necessarily existed and that they can (and must) be demolished, but not at the cost of reinforcing repression-abetting assumptions.

nationalism” the Turkish factions most stridently opposed to any dialogue with the PKK) and maintaining the PKK’s diffuse support in Kurdish communities, where struggle for national liberation remains popular.

The challenge for an organisation to wage a national liberation struggle while its eminent founder and leader is in enemy hands is formidable and discursive inconsistencies might even be expected. However, Öcalan’s genuflection to Zionists is disconcerting. In explaining the parlous state of the “Arab nation,” divided into many warring national states, Öcalan alleges that Israel, unlike Arab states, has strong “democratic and communal institutions.” If developed in Arab states, these institutions could solve many of the problems of the “Arab nation,” including, in part, a relative “weakness towards Israel” (Öcalan 2011, 36). One may wonder how Palestinian struggles, elided by Öcalan, fit in his grand scheme of democratic confederalism. Israel, on the other hand, which Öcalan conflates with Jews, is merely found wanting in matters of democracy and characterised by “Strict and exclusive national and religious identities” (Öcalan 2011, 42). This overall view is continuous with his prior writings, where Öcalan (2007, 291–292) echoes the Zionist rhetoric of continuity between ancient Israel and modern Jews, of the necessity of a Jewish state owing to the genocide in Europe, and of other such non sequiturs and rationalisations. By treating the State of Israel and Jews—or, the “Jewish nation,” to use Öcalan’s characterisation—as seamless signifiers, Öcalan obfuscates processes of white European colonisation and goes on to assert that “Jews belong to the culture bearers of the Middle East.” In this light he claims that the denial of Jews’ “right to existence is an attack on the Middle East as such” (Öcalan 2007). Granted, and one could say the same about anyone’s right to exist anywhere. The problem (and irony) is that the equation of national state (Israel) with people (Jews) is the sort of logic (common to both Kemalist and Zionist ideologies) underpinning the Turkish state’s genocidal policies the PKK has bitterly fought from their inception. Since the PKK and Palestinian national liberation organisations have tended to be on amicable—if not mutually supportive—terms, the omission of what is by now most of Israeli society’s racist and genocidal treatment of Palestinians and Bedouins is peculiar. It seems to point to matters extraneous to the text, possibly reflecting the political necessities of a beleaguered PKK leader who can ill afford to appear supportive of causes unsettling to existing regional powers and the USA.

Realising Gender-Egalitarian Democratic Confederalism in Rojava

So many oversights and inconsistencies from someone of Öcalan’s stature and experience compel me to conclude that his works point subtly to a subterranean dialogue with forces left undisclosed because openly discussing them could put him and the movement in jeopardy. I am inclined towards this reading because Öcalan languishes in a maximum security prison facing the always potentially violent whims of guards or government officials. There is also the possibility that his writings and communications with the rest of the PKK are heavily refracted through Turkish

authorities' censure. What has been unfolding in Rojava, at the time of this writing, actually demonstrates some crucial departures from Öcalan's ideas and continuities with previous modes of operation. The PKK, arguably by necessity but also in part by design, have been prioritising both class and gender relations, establishing monopoly over military means (a counter-tendency to "radical grassroots democracy"), and mostly ignoring "ecology" by reducing it to avoidance of degradation, rather than the necessity for proactive change (such as shifting away from fossil fuels instead of continuing to rely on them).

To some extent this problem is evident in the Charter, where issues of gender are given greater weight (and an entire governing body is dedicated to gender equality) than the "environmental sustainability" alluded to in the Preamble. The Charter includes "the right to live in a healthy environment, based on ecology balance" (Article 23), "guarantees the protection of the environment and regards the sustainable development of natural ecosystems as a moral and a sacred national duty" (Article 90). Yet the notion of ecological balance is left undefined and there are no specifications as to how it is to be determined, through which criteria (or whose). There is no provision regarding how to reconcile environmental protection with the duty of an undefined "sustainable development." Worse, a society-environment dichotomy is reinforced through the division of various administrative bodies, featuring a separation of energy, agriculture, transport and health, for example, while the environment is strangely placed together with tourism and historical objects. Though consistent with Öcalan's own vagueness on the topic, the Charter sits uneasily with his writings in promoting a dichotomous view of nature that coheres with predominant capitalist understandings. And though a useful precedent may nevertheless be established through the Charter, the prospects of massacres and long-term pollution through warfare and the embargo-induced exigency of fossil fuel extraction for basic energy provision will likely render much of my critique even more meaningless than the Charter.

To grasp why in actual practice the Rojava Revolution departs from Öcalan's approach, the Charter (in some respects), and some activists' depictions, it can be useful to explore enabling and constraining conditions. There are interrelated factors of shorter term openings created by insurrections and multiple overlapping wars, and longer term transformations and diversity within Kurdish communities. The former involve Öcalan's sojourn in Rojava and the popularity he gained there after escaping from Turkey in the 1980s. It also involved the underground regrouping of the PKK in Syria after 1998 through the PYD and its strengthening following Syrian security services' murdering of tens of Kurds in the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Qamişlo (Gauthier 2005; Figure 1). The YPG was subsequently formed and gained increasing legitimacy as a force for self-defence against Syrian authorities in later pre-war protests and riots. The collapse of Syrian state control over northern areas also made for conditions conducive to the formation of autonomous zones and the possibility of democratic confederalism. There are other such shorter term phenomena that

coincided to create opportunities, but they would require going into more detail than necessary here.

The longer term transformations include tendencies for relative convergence resulting from extermination policies and campaigns by national states formed since the 1920s, especially Turkey, post-1960s Syria, 1980s Iraq and intermittently Iran. Historically, these national states have carried out genocidal atrocities and cultural repression not only against Kurds, but also other peoples, such as Armenians and Assyrians. These genocides have been carried out largely with the direct support of Western European and US imperialists and, to a lesser extent, the USSR. Arguably, pan-Kurdish sensibility has thereby intensified and such repeated traumas have accentuated the development of national identity, which was already starting to emerge in the late 1800s. This convergence is contrasted by diffuse, long-standing tensions within and between Kurdish communities that draw together or exclude people through combinations of kinship (“tribe”), religious affiliation, formal political ties, secularism and national identity (Acker 2004; Jwaideh 2006; McDowall 1996). These mechanisms are all predicated on changing reproduction relations, meaning gender norms and divisions of labour through class differentiation in a context of mixed capitalist-worker and lord-peasant/pastoralist relations (pastoralism being of minimal importance presently). Patriarchal arrangements have thereby shifted so that, aside from traditionally having less restrictions than in many nearby communities, women have taken on more prominent roles and have gained more power within households and in formal politics, including in national liberation struggles (Ahmetbeyzade 2007; Diler and Toktaş 2010; Dirik 2014a).

However, these social changes have been brought about through nearly a century of violently coerced proletarianisation (e.g., village destruction and deportation), repression of cultural identity (e.g., banning the Kurdish language in official settings) and survival of multiple genocides. Furthermore, frictions enabled by divisions among Kurdish communities have historically been exploited by all national states controlling parts of Kurdistan to wage proxy wars on one another, supporting and then undermining Kurdish national liberation movements as convenient. So, for example, the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad was supported by the USSR in 1946 and then abandoned the same year, leading to the Republic’s destruction by the Iranian state. The partition of power in Iraq between the KDP⁶ under Barzani in the KRG (Figure 1) and the PUK⁷ with Talabani’s presidency, all now destabilised by the recrudescence of Da’ish, is the result of decades of the US Government and their mainly EU allies’ bombing raids, embargo, invasion and occupation, among other

⁶The Kurdish Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê), founded in 1946 in Mahabad (Iran), has long been dominated by the Barzani lineage and featured from the outset an internal tension between largely landowners and urban professionals.

⁷Through a schism internal to the KDP, the Patriotic Union Party (Yekîtiya Nîştîmanî ya Kurdistanê) was founded in 1975 and since its inception led by Jalal Talabani. It largely represents the interests of more left-leaning nationalists aligned with the Talabani lineage.

violent processes from within Iraq and from other countries (Jabary and Hira 2013; Little 2010; McDowall 1996; Wu Ming 2014).

It is relative to the above and doubtless other related processes that the Rojava Revolution, changes in the PKK, and Öcalan's writings should be understood. Feminist successes within the PKK and changes in gendered expectations in Kurdish society have deeply marked Öcalan's writings and have contributed to the formation of autonomous women's military and political units within the PKK and then the PYD and YPG, the implementation of gender-egalitarian policies in Rojava, and the development of consciousness-raising activities by way of new legal institutions and education, among other activities undermining patriarchy. It is by far not Öcalan who has instigated this change. In fact, one could say that Öcalan is following the lead of the PKK women.

Newly adopted ideology and changing social conditions converge through crucial omissions and self-contradictions. Since the early 1990s, with the loss of potential support in the USSR, the breakdown of European leftist institutions generally, the eventual assassination or incarceration of much of the PKK's founding leadership, the increasing collaborationism among and international interventionism of terrorist NATO states and allies to counter "terrorism," and a dearth of safe havens,⁸ the PKK have had to resort to different organisational, military and communicative strategies, and Rojava has become a primary refuge. The emphases on stateless democracy, Kurdish autonomy within existing borders, peace negotiations and self-defence can be read as necessary ideological turns in the present conjuncture that are partially manifested in the practices put in place in Rojava. Marxist–Leninist principles, for example, have become less overt, but communalism still entails class struggle and this is shown in the setting up of worker-managed factories and the suppression of financial capital.

Öcalan's writings, then, do not completely cohere with the Rojava Revolution and this should not be surprising. The ostensible shift in the revolutionary subject from worker to woman, his insistence on statelessness (through democratic confederalism), his regional parochialism and his selective silences over (especially Palestinian) national self-determination struggles may also signal Öcalan's need to remain credible to Kurdish communities (Casier 2010) while toning down combined class and national liberation armed struggle and omitting certain topics, such as Palestinian self-determination, currying favour from an ascendant faction of the Turkish ruling class less married to Kemalist visions of a homogeneous, secular Turkey, and much more interested in the profitable possibilities of EU accession or a US-promoted Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Öcalan, after all,

⁸The KRG and Turkey have jointly acted to remove PKK from Northern Iraq, while the Iranian Government have since 2004 been actively engaged in battles with the PKK-affiliated Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (PJAK or Party of Free Life of Kurdistan), and the Turkish Government continue repression within its borders.

would like to get out of prison and I presume his desire is shared by most of the rest of the PKK.

Much is being made of the influence of the “libertarian municipalism” of Murray Bookchin (Biehl 2012, 2014; Kolokotronis 2014; Whelan 2014), the man allegedly much diminished by his latter-day polemical attacks (White 2008, 67). As many pages of this journal have been dedicated to discussing Bookchin’s works, I limit my comments to a few critical remarks in light of Öcalan’s ideas and actually existing democratic confederalism. Bookchin’s theoretical edifice, far from being dialectical and egalitarian in spirit, obfuscates class relations through static and conflated notions of hierarchy and domination, separates justice (e.g., redistribution) from—and subordinates it to—freedom, and privileges an enlightened few social ecologists in the struggle to end hierarchy once and for all (Clark 2008; Kovel 1997). Fortunately, these tendencies are negated in the PYD’s efforts at actualising democratic confederalism, which should not be expected to cohere with Öcalan’s writing from a maximum security prison. Class relations still figure prominently in Rojava—the revolutionary strategy to undermine, for example, landed class power or the emergence of financial capitalists. Biehl’s pretence that “ideas of hierarchy, power and hegemony” have been rejected in Rojava runs counter to others’ and her very own reporting (e.g., Biehl 2014). It could not be more obvious that there is a hierarchy involved in Öcalan’s being treated as an authority figure, that the PYD keep a monopoly over military affairs, and that the attainment of women’s empowerment through new legal norms and institutions involves achieving feminist hegemony to overcome a largely patriarchal society. Still, mistaking one’s predilections for reality in this instance may be politically useful in drawing liberals to support the PKK struggle.

The Conditions of the Rojava Revolution

The above is not simply a critique of Öcalan or the PKK, but rather an acknowledgement of the major strides, both practical and ideological, made under desperate circumstances, drawing the most from existing social changes and conditions. Self-critique and change in such a highly inimical historical context are remarkable.⁹ At the same time, to consider the set of historical processes resulting in an overhaul of practices and thought can be useful for drawing comparisons and assessing our respective situations relative to revolutionary potential. Based on my analysis, social change along the lines of the Rojava Revolution requires a drastic weakening of the national state (a common enemy in an unpopular regime), decades of capillary work within local communities (Öcalan lived in Rojava for many years and cultivated local legitimacy), the presence of an ethnic majority aligned with a

⁹I write this in part as response to the dismissive, self-satisfied sectarians like Il Lato Cattivo (2014), Internationalist Communist Tendency (2014), the Anarchist Federation (2014) and their ilk, who view organisations like the PKK as either harbingers of capitalist reaction or hopeless Stalinists.

revolutionary group, the formation of a military organ and suppression of other militias and decades of recruitment into a centralised political structure that at one point involved deadly attacks on civilians and may have even included assassinations of former members. These are the background aspects that have enabled the Rojava Revolution, a process less attractive to—and therefore ignored by—our erstwhile champions of Rojava democratic confederalism.

These conclusions may be in error, and in some ways I am hoping they are, but it is worthwhile to grapple with the particulars of revolutionary successes before assuming that strategies or theories developed in one place are universally applicable. One should expect at least some partial contradictions, which can be a useful source for developing appropriate strategies. For instance, libertarian municipalism, zapatismo, ecosocialism and anti-militaristic feminism sit very uneasily with exclusionary militia-building, continuation of private property, military conscription, women warriors, possible executions of Da'ish combatants (BBC 2014) and the establishment of “proto-state institutions” (Il Lato Cattivo 2014). Regionally specific characteristics for movement building and the current Rojava situation arguably demand such horrific tactics. It could be argued that I am producing false dichotomies in that the revolutionary institutions and relations are just being formed. But if the Soviet experience be any guide, what is deemed a transitional authoritarian measure retaining capitalist characteristics can become permanent and systemic. So it is, among other things, a matter of preventing this, as far as possible, by understanding how it is that the temporary endures and the strategic becomes a setback.

As part of a revolutionary learning process, one might wish to venture into identifying the place-specific interacting processes that likely affect prospects for revolutionary aims like gender egalitarianism and democratic confederalism. On the basis of what I have heard and read, especially from those who have been generous and brave enough to visit and report on Rojava (including Janet Biehl), it seems that the Revolution is contingent on: (1) the state of power relations resulting from the Revolutionaries' ability to defend the cantons from the various warring factions within Syria and from Da'ish attacks; (2) the extent to and manner in which trading with outside areas, as well as farming and industrial infrastructure, can be maintained and developed to satisfy local needs through minimising reliance on imports and without incurring environmental degradation problems (this is far from placing ecology at the centre); (3) defusing or avoiding tensions among and within Rojava communities over new social norms (e.g., the 40% gender quota, curtailment of money lending) and military matters (e.g., militia formation and control, conscription); (4) relative successes in redistributing reproductive responsibilities and in democratising production relations; and (5) the degree and type of interventions by contending regional and global imperial powers.

These are enormous challenges and pressures that obviously cannot be addressed from within Rojava or even the entirety of Southwest Asia, so actions in many other places are necessary. These can range from protests in front of embassies to collecting

funds for the cause to organising general strikes, to the much more dangerous sabotaging of imperialists' military infrastructure and production systems. From within Rojava, however, there are already signs of dissatisfaction from those who stand to lose, including privileged males and local land owners, but also complaints over alleged Asayiş abuses and mandatory military conscription. Given the intent of the Turkish and US governments on sabotaging the Revolution by allowing Da'ish ample military manoeuvre, the YPG is forced to compromise with the KRG, a willing US-Israeli stooge, and risk KDP infiltration and take-over, especially in oil-rich Cizîrê canton, and thereby subordination to US-Israeli dictates (Beysulen 2014). The pre-existing internal Kurdish diversity conducive to democratic confederalism may thus also act to destroy its very basis. For instance, there are fifteen Syrian Kurdish parties, including the PYD, who have adhered to the Barzani-brokered Kurdish National Congress. Capitalist kinship-based power struggles between the Barzani-led KDP and the Talabani-led PUK resulted in the 1994–1998 war in Iraqi Kurdistan. The often consanguineous basis of Kurdish community differentiation seems at least in part reflected in formal political structures and continues to stymie Kurdish national liberation struggles. But the entire process also raises questions about the PYD's ability to abandon nationalist objectives. Ultimately, the risk is the annihilation of the PKK and/or the absorption of Kurdish national liberation into the US orbit as something like a "Free Kurdistan" (Il Lato Cattivo 2014). In any case, amidst a tangle of proxy and direct conflicts among sub-regional despotic organisations, including the KRG, Da'ish, Al-Nusra and the Syrian state, regional colonising or imperialist powers—especially Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Iran, supported or checked by US and EU (NATO) imperialists—the likelihood of realising democratic confederalism seems slim.

It may very well be that the Rojava Revolution's days are numbered, if not expired entirely, by the time this writing goes to press. Yet, as the Basque musical group Kortatu (1986) aptly put it, "Pero no importa, aunque me digas, que estoy metido en una causa perdida"—"But it doesn't matter, even if you tell me I am involved in a lost cause." Like the Tecumseh Uprising, the Paris Commune, the Ukrainian Makhnovshchina, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the Republic of New Afrika, the Burkinabé Revolution, and many other struggles for egalitarian self-determination and instances of defiance against authoritarian, deadly ruling classes, the Rojava Revolution will outlive itself and reinforce the determination in many to continue rising up, to follow and refine the Rojava comrades' example, and strive to build the worldwide basis for an egalitarian order. In the meantime, the utmost has to be done to support the Rojava Revolutionaries, especially if the Revolution is extinguished.

—Saed

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