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Revolution and war in Western Kurdistan's Rojava

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ABSTRACT

The two books under review describe the contemporary Syrian civil war and the related social revolution in the region of Western Kurdistan known as Rojava. The complex history of the modern Middle East, the Syrian state, and inter-Kurdish relations have influenced not only the civil war resulting from 2011's Arab Spring, but also the founding of a popular revolution and commune in Rojava, led by radical principles of democratic autonomy. The feminist-influenced, federated structure of the commune was initiated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has ties to the Marxist-Leninist Kurdish Workers Party of Turkey. Both books adopt a sympathetic approach to the struggles of the Kurdish people in Rojava, but differ in their assessment of the PYD's actual democratic nature and the substantive gains the commune has purportedly made. The commune has presented a challenge to both Kurdish and Arab communities, regarding how to transform Syrian society. As an ethnically-rich region, Rojavans have struggled to not only build the socio-organizational institutions relevant for Kurdish autonomy, but also to incorporate and empower other ethnic populations, too, so as to not also subjugate non-Kurds. Residents – whether aligned with the commune or not – have found themselves subject to attack on all sides, from the Syrian regime's repression and Islamists like the Islamic State who slaughter any perceived heretics, to the invasion-prone Turkish army and unstable global partnerships (as with the US). The pressure-cooker of civil war has led to creative experiments such as the commune.

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Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, by Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, London, Pluto Press, 2016, xxxi + 285 pp., \$23.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7453-3659-6

Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds, by Thomas Schmidinger, London, Pluto Press, 2018, \$23.95 (paperback), xii + 298 pp., ISBN 978-0-7453-3772-2

In October 2019, US President Trump and Turkish President Erdoğan shared a phone call in which Trump promised to stand down the US's military presence in northern Syria. The US was present in Syria to support the Kurds of Rojava who had been fighting the Islamic State (IS). Trump's move was widely condemned across the US political spectrum and seen as another ignorant move made at the behest of a flattering, but wily, opponent with ulterior motives. The US's stand-down implicitly approved a Turkish invasion of Rojava – also known as Western Kurdistan. When the Turkish invasion

came, it further destabilized an already volatile region, one that had been experiencing a rather stunning social revolution during the previous half-decade. The Turkish invasion led to an arrangement between the Kurds and their erstwhile adversaries in the Syrian government to repel Turkey. The Turkish military brought with it Islamist fighters and the invasion also led to the escape and release of captured IS fighters. The Rojava experiment is seriously threatened by these political and military developments.

The closest possible comparison – to the experiment of Rojava and the threats to it – may be Spain during the late-1930s, when fascist forces provoked a civil war that led to popular insurrection and enough liberated territory for radicals to begin constructing a society based on their wildest, utopian dreams. The Spanish revolutionaries were abandoned by much of the world. The anarchist-led Spanish revolution found itself under attack from on all sides (including from fellow ‘socialists’ in the Stalinist International Brigades) and losing a social and military war of attrition via arrest, harassment, subterfuge, and elimination of allies, until the forces of order and tradition re-established their dominance in Spain. History never repeats itself, of course, but Rojava’s situation has echoes of Spain’s story. It’s hard to know what currently remains of what some call the Rojava Commune now. It’s also unknown if the revolution will evolve, migrate, or disappear.

The two books under review here – both translated into English from their original German for the first time – are part of a growing canon of studies focused on interpreting this complicated region and time period, making sense of an impressive and bewildering situation, and committed to extracting lessons for future social movement struggles. The first, *Revolution, War and the Future of Syria’s Kurds* (Schmidinger) deals with the broader history of Syria and the Kurds, the intricate and conflicting relationships between Kurdish organizations and parties, and the region’s military situation. The second, *Revolution in Rojava* (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga) characterizes Rojava as a revolutionary situation, catalogues its precipitating forces and values, and analyzes the revolution in progress. Given these overlapping, but distinct foci and purposes, I’ll abbreviate the former as *War* and the latter as *Revolution*.

Schmidinger’s *War* describes the multitude of ethnic groups that live in Syria, and Rojava specifically: Assyrians, Arabs, Êzîdî, and Kurds, but also Turkmens, Alevi, and Armenians, among which there are Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Since the Arab Spring helped spark the Syrian Civil War in 2011, various political groups have found themselves at odds with each other: the Syrian regime (led by the dictatorial Ba’ath Party), opposition rebels (including the Free Syrian Army), the Islamic State, the Syrian Defense Forces (which prominently includes the Syrian fighting units People’s Protection Units [YPG] and Women’s Protection Units [YPJ]), as well as Turkey, Russia, and the US. The non-Syrian state actors have found local allies: Russia with the Ba’ath regime, Turkey with the IS (and other Islamists, like the Al Nusra Front), and the US with the Syrian Democratic Forces (at least until 2019). This level of social complexity illustrates the difficulty in determining what exactly is occurring on the ground in Syria and Rojava – just as one would expect during a civil war. The shifting affiliations, sometimes based on ethnic, ideological, or strategic differences, have created challenges and opportunities for social movements and other actors interested in social change. Problematically, at a more meso-level, there has been an ever-changing configuration of who is battling whom and via what coalition – and this chaos includes a plethora of Kurdish organizations, too.

These organizations and coalitions, which have formed and ruptured due to internal and external conflicts, are the central agents in both books.

Syrian Kurds are impacted by and influenced from all sides. Some of these forces include their Arab neighbors who were encouraged decades ago by the Ba'ath regime to settle in Rojava, thus diluting the Kurdish majority population in the region. Islamists from Syria and beyond have taken over villages and brutalized non-Muslim residents. Turks frequently invade and attack Rojavan territory within Syria. Kurds are divided, too, including the Democratic Union Party (PYD), who Schmidinger claims is influenced by the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); the Iraqi Kurds of 'Southern Kurdistan' who are rich with oil-wealth and dominated by the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and its founder Massoud Barzanî; and the Brussels-based Kurdish National Congress (KNC) who resists cooperating with the PYD (and its YPG/YPJ militias) who they view as not appropriately Syrian. In other words, Rojava's current and future existence is greatly impacted by a complex array of agents and external forces that attempt to lay claim to its residents' people and territory.

An important feature of *War* is its inclusion of transcripts from over 40 interviews, including words from a wide array of Syrian and Kurdish political and cultural figures. The interviews contain much material that is supportive of the picture painted by Schmidinger's book. However, readers will note some sharply conflicting conclusions and interpretations within these interviews; a certain degree of acrimonious dispute, no doubt the result of living through a long period of trying conflict.

The focus of *Revolution's* three authors (Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga) is in describing and making sense of the social revolution in Rojava, particularly that initiated by the PYD and its confederated council system. This system, they write, is deeply indebted to the influence of PKK co-founder Abdullah Öcalan and American radical Murray Bookchin's 'libertarian municipalism' work, as well as innumerable other critical strains of Left theory, especially feminism. Rojava's decentralized commune system is built from the ground up across hundreds of villages, expanding to increasingly larger scales of aggregation. The local-level base communities constitute the commune, followed by neighborhood/village councils, then district people's councils, and finally the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) which governs across Rojava. The commune also includes an additional eight commissions that operate independent of geography and emphasize important social concerns, including women, defense, economics, politics, civil society, free society, justice, ideology, and health. Each of these commissions receive a detailed chapter in *Revolution*. The authors explore how the commune helped to create worker cooperatives, new justice courts, and has tried to grapple with problems such as severe water shortages. *Revolution's* vivid sketch of the socio-organizational mechanics of the Rojavan commune provide details that show the links between PKK-derived values to the practicalities of everyday life.

In order to survive, the Rojava experiment has also had to cope with the impacts of the colonialist and neoliberal policies of the Ba'athists, violent IS gangs, and hostile foreign powers. The latter forces include the Turkish government and even the Iraqi Kurdish government of the KDP who have pressured Rojava: closing the border to trade and migrants, demanded fealty to the KDP and its capitalist-patriarchal ideological orientation, worked to alienate supporters of the MGRK, and to limit press freedom. International trade and even humanitarian aid is tightly controlled by foreign powers

and frequently withheld, often for political reasons. Despite these hardships – or maybe in part due to the unusual circumstances created by those hardships requiring so much creative solidarity and experimentation – Rojava’s revolution has flourished. The most notable development is the expansion of feminist ideals, practices, and egalitarian outcomes. Although *War* does briefly describe and praise these feminist gains, *Revolution* excels by describing in detail how Rojava has pursued and partially achieved them. Feminist victories have been won through the council system (and most other organizational structures spun-off by the council system) that mandates a shared bi-gender leadership, women-only military units (the YPJ), and women’s commissions and courts that are given wide latitude to address domestic violence and other gendered problems and disputes.

Both defensive and creative forces are at work within the revolution. The Kurdish-led self-protection units of the YPG and YPJ, which also include members of many other Rojavan ethnicities, both defend territory against the various invading forces – whether the Syrian army, the oppositional forces, IS and other Islamist militias, and Turkish militias – and also attempt (often successfully) to reclaim captured territory, particularly from IS. Alongside these defensive actions is creative, experimental work aimed at radically transforming social relations. Importantly, new educational institutions have been built, including language schools that instruct in the Kurdish language (Schmidinger notes that other schools have also been built for Êzidî and Assyrian speakers, too), as well as medical training schools. Rearguard efforts to prevent further loss of territory or autonomy seems dialectically linked to Rojavan Commune’s desire to keep pushing their revolution forward, despite conditions of war.

It’s noteworthy that Schmidinger’s complicated narrative in *War* of the ever-evolving military and political situation within Rojava includes a specific critique of *Revolution in Rojava*. He alleges *Revolution* idealizes the Kurdish struggle and simplifies conditions by focusing on only some actors (especially the PYD, YPG/YPJ, and others in the MGRK orbit). Schmidinger suspects that the *Revolution* inappropriately idealizes the successful functioning of the PYD-led revolution and ignores an authoritarianism inherited from its PKK-roots. Yet while the PKK was originally a Marxist party – which involved all the centralization and sectarianism to be expected from such organizations – it appears to have undergone a considerable, and official, ideological shift. *War* argues that nevertheless there is a definitive personnel inheritance between the PKK and PYD, thus carrying PKK politics across the Turkey-Syria border to the PYD – an assumption that *Revolution* categorically rejects. Schmidinger emphasizes the critiques of anti-PYD Kurds who lambasted it for making peace with the Syrian regime, as opposed to prioritizing the fight against it. *Revolution*, meanwhile, argues that the MGRK commune seeks revolutionary autonomy *within* Syrian society rather than spend its time simply fighting Assad’s regime. Despite their differences, both titles are clear that the future of Kurdistan ought to be under the control of Kurds – and that residents in Rojava seek to realize that goal.

Notes on contributor

Dana Williams is an associate professor of sociology at California State University, Chico, with specialties in social inequalities (class, gender, and race), social movements, and socio-political trust. Williams has published research in *Social Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Critical*

Sociology, and *Journal of Political Ideologies*, among others, and is the author of *Black Flags and Social Movements: A Sociological Analysis of Movement Anarchism* (Manchester University Press, 2017) and co-author of *Anarchy and Society: Reflections on Anarchist-Sociology* (Brill, 2013).