

**Struggling for Democratic Autonomy in Kurdistan**

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### The Rojava Experience: Possibilities and Challenges of Building a Democratic Life

#### In the Name of Humanity

**T**he destiny of Kurds seems to be changing. As the world's largest stateless people, dispersed across four nation-states, Kurds emerge as an empowered actor in the midst of the dramatic social and political upheavals that reconfigure the Middle East and transform the region into a political battlefield of local, regional, and global forces. This development coincides with a noticeable change in the representation of Kurds in the West. After the heroic defense of Kobanê in the autumn of 2014, carried out by the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units against the invasive and cruel attacks of the Islamic State, this small town located on the Syrian-Turkish border has expanded into a metaphor for liberation (especially, women's liberation).<sup>1</sup> The word *Kurd* has begun to no longer invoke, or to no longer *only* invoke, those familiar notions that oscillate between "victim" and "criminal." Rather, it increasingly signifies something much more prestigious. Despite the fact that Kurds have been struggling for emancipation for more than thirty years, it seems that their struggles have never before been so widely recognized.

Perhaps we need to be a little cautious about the eagerness underlying the changing representation of Kurds. For when framed within the geopolitical discourse of the sovereign states system, we observe that this elated recog-

nition can quickly revert to a position in which Kurds are placed into the narrow role of a military and humanitarian force that defends the multicultural and secular democracy in the “desert of the Middle East.” What cannot be completely ignored in this interpellation is a certain phantasmal projection of a civilizational narrative upon the struggle in Kobanê that divides the world into good (Kurds) versus evil (Islamists). One might also suspect here the desire for a certain “savior function” that the Kurdish resistance is called to serve, one that would enable the West to displace into another context the highly pressing and conflictual problems shaping the global and postcolonial environment it confronts and fails to adequately address (such as the rampant racism that finds expression in the “Muslim immigrant problem”).

Nevertheless, self-presentations of members of the Kurdish resistance in Rojava, whom we and others have talked to and interviewed,<sup>2</sup> also share elements with this gesture of emphasizing the world-reconfiguring aspect of the resistance (though not in these exact ideological terms). Members of the Kurdish resistance, for instance, persevere in their insistence that the meaning of the resistance and revolution in Rojava goes beyond a successful military fight against the Islamic State and that its significance is for all humanity. What they are doing in Rojava, Kurdish people persistently assert, is not reducible to a local struggle for establishing another nation-state but, rather, should be conceived as a global struggle taking place between two opposing worlds, which they identify as the struggle of humanity against barbarism or, alternatively, as the struggle of the blessing of life against the brutal politics of death (of human beings, but also of animals, plants, and regional and local cultures). Besides, they make these claims with a repeated reference to the *hakikat* (truth) of the struggle, as Michael Taussig (2015) perceptively remarks.

“Humanity” and “life” are loaded ideals in whose name many questionable acts have been performed. For this reason, we think that these ideals, as well as the ethico-political horizon of the resistance in Rojava, advanced and put into action under the general name of *democratic autonomy*, need to be carefully and continuously examined, debated, and unpacked into their guiding and contradictory elements. Demonstrating the possibilities that these ideas open up, as well as the challenges and limitations that beset them, is necessary in order to distance their unique potential for transformation from the grip of the spontaneous and simplifying appeal of civilizational narratives. We elaborate below in more detail some crucial aspects of democratic autonomy that also raise important questions for those of us who are interested in providing conditions of support for this vision. Here, we want to briefly interpret the two dimensions that Kurdish guerrillas attribute to

their resistance in Rojava and that might help clarify and concretize the great meanings of humanity and life.

One dimension refers to the empowerment of women, embodied in the brave and smiling young Kurdish female guerrillas, who defend life against enslavement by the jihadist invaders. What is defended by women, or meant by *life*, here is not only the procurement of those necessities that activate the potential for building and making the social from scratch. What is defended is also the political life, since women's resistance for liberation in Rojava is at the same time voiced and defended as a struggle for equality. The fact that the women's struggle in Rojava acknowledges the different modalities of traditional and modern gender inequalities, and in so doing recognizes the (unequal) organization of gender difference as a structural element that determines the fabric of every social formation, and, furthermore, the fact that this struggle by women is waged in the form of armed self-defense (thus not only subverting the typical associations of manhood, nationhood, and war but also demonstrating a powerful belief in a different life for which it is worth giving up one's life), all these, we think, contribute to the sense in Rojava of realizing a general (human) cause.

The second dimension pertains to the struggle's strong critique of the nation-state and its declared effort to create conditions of equality between different groups in Rojava, in particular, and the Middle East, in general. This was publicly stated in January 2014, in Rojava's Charter of Social Contract,<sup>3</sup> in the principle for building mechanisms for a democratic coexistence of cultural and religious diversities that would defend the region against the assaults of authoritarian uniformity. While such a commitment is especially relevant in the Middle East, where in many places the post-national violence of the civil war has become a normal aspect of everyday life, it responds to a general crisis of the nation-state form. Hence, it is not surprising that the critique of the nation-state in Rojava finds broader significance in the world and even resonates with the prevalent discourse of multiculturalism, which encompasses the admission that the current nation-state is no longer compatible with the realities of our global world. This is especially true when many individuals and groups experience the symbolic borders drawn between majority and minority nationals, as well as the normative criteria that are used to classify particular identities into categories with differential rights, as being increasingly arbitrary and unjust.

It is, at least in part, through this two-pronged critique of patriarchy and the nation-state that the Kurdish struggle in Rojava calls to humanity and simultaneously maintains desire for resistance under what are other-

wise devastatingly brutal conditions of war. By making claims not only for Kurds but also for all peoples in the region, and by insisting on changing the hierarchically instituted social relations that lead to the constitution of oppressive and privileged communities (e.g., communities of men and monist nations), the resistance can sustain its particular position by way of a claim for universality. One might understand democratic autonomy, then, as a framework that situates these critical perspectives within a broader communitarian critique of capitalist modernity. It does this by strongly arguing that the transformation of the modern forms of patriarchy and nation-state is dependent on the transformation of the conditions of capitalist exploitation and expansion that colonize cultures, ecologies, and women's bodies, and vice versa.

### **Democratic Autonomy: A New Methodology for Decolonization**

Immediately after the uprisings in Syria in 2012, Rojava became a laboratory of democratic autonomy. Promulgated and studied by Abdullah Öcalan and continuously debated and elaborated by Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK; Kurdistan Workers' Party) from the early 1990s on, democratic autonomy can be understood to provide a new political methodology of decolonization, specifying a changed orientation and purpose as well as appropriate technologies of conduct. Before we discuss this new methodology, however, we need to stress the significance of the term *colony*, or what some designate as the *international colony* (Beşikçi 2004), which Kurds have referred to in order to give sense to their situation, not only as a nation that is divided and oppressed by multiple borders—North Kurdistan/*Bakur* within the borders of Turkey, South Kurdistan/*Başûr* within the borders of Iraq, East Kurdistan/*Rojhilat* within the borders of Iran, and West Kurdistan/*Rojava* within the borders of Syria—but also as a nation that finds itself in the very position of a border that the nation-states of the region violently mark in order to unify their identities.

This analysis, which underlines that the various forms of brutal suppression that Kurdish identity was subjected to in all four nation-states mimicked the conditions of colonial domination (e.g., being subjected to modes of exploitation and super-exploitation, mechanisms of extraction, dispossession and destruction, and deployments of cultural oppression and state violence), gained prominence and provided a conceptual frame for Kurdish groups of resistance, and especially for the insurrection in North Kurdistan in the late 1970s. It was also in reference to this colonial

situation that the Kurdish liberation movement distinguished its strategy of violence from state violence and justified it as an ideological intensification, a therapeutic instrument necessary for the subjectification and emancipation of a people who were, to use a version of Jacques Rancière's (2004) terms, long deprived of the rights they have.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1990s, the movement's position shifted away from using armed struggle to "expel the foreign occupation of the state" toward deploying political means for decomposing, transforming, and withdrawing from the state while also empowering society by way of democratization in all four parts of Kurdistan (Gürer 2015; Küçük and Özselçuk 2015).<sup>5</sup> The leadership calls this shift in the political logic of the movement the necessity to move from insurgence (*isyan*) to building (*inşa*) (see Öcalan 2013). Using different terminology, one might understand it as a transformation from an imposition of recognition, which used anti-institutional violence to demonstrate that "Kurds exist," to a politics of constitution that revolves around the ethical and political question of what kind of a society we want to build. It is this question that democratic autonomy foregrounds.

Nazan Üstündağ (this issue) succinctly situates this shift in relation to the lessons learned from the movement's war with the Turkish state. Another factor contributing to the shift is the dissolution of the Soviet model, which, we think, provided an important impetus for the leadership and the movement to reevaluate the positivist premises of socialism and Marxism and reformulate a new communal perspective. This reevaluation involved, on the one hand, the questioning of the modern approach to history as a progressive sequence of stages, as this approach brushed aside the values and relevance of traditional relations and placed communism at the end of a historical process that dictated going through the destructive evolution of capitalism. It involved, on the other hand, a refusal of socialist productivism, which disregarded the destructive consequences of industrialization, devalued the rural, and completely left out an ecological perspective.<sup>6</sup>

We have engaged in this brief and incomplete history to make space for the argument that the struggle for liberation waged by the Kurdish movement in Turkey since the mid-1970s, and its more recent labors of formulating democratic autonomy, have deeply influenced the political imaginary of the resistance in Rojava, just as the current practices of democratic autonomy in Rojava inspire politically and affectively the Kurdish movement in Turkey. We also need to stress that the border between North Kurdistan and Rojava, unlike the other borders tearing apart the lands in which Kurds live, has historically been extremely porous and arbitrary: in most districts it is

drawn through villages and towns, literally separating families and tribes and dividing their landed property. In this sense, the Turkish-Syrian border has been a space of daily circulation and dissemination of not only bodies, goods, and commodities but also ideological commitments, memories, moral principles, and political strategies (generally through undocumented and informal means).

### Why Autonomy? Why Democracy?

Let us finally return to the issue of elucidating the transformative potential of democratic autonomy. For this, we begin by distinguishing the significance that the terms *autonomy* and *democracy* occupy within the discourse of the movement from their more standard connotations and uses. Autonomy, in a manner that goes beyond the demand for decentralized administrative governance, proceeds from the ontological premise that there is not only a diversity of peoples but also differences within groups of people, in every locality, and it raises the question of how each group should govern itself in relation to such diversity. Similarly, democracy goes beyond common associations with a particular political regime and involves the question of the transformation of the conditions of (material and symbolic) social inequalities and distinctions that inscribe internal and external borders within practices of local autonomy.

The analytical distinction between autonomy and democracy should not occlude the fact that these two ideas overlap, in that they provide the conditions for one another and call each other into question. For example, autonomy predicates democratic participation on the recognition of the political will of diverse communes, or societies (*komün*, or *topluluk*), definable in terms of a multitude of identifications and issues. In this sense, autonomy, by bringing into existence, and usually forcing into acceptance, the fabric of the social body as a multitude (Hardt and Negri 2004), establishes a legitimate symbolic field for the conduct of democratic processes. Because when political will and sovereignty, by way of autonomy, are not shared in a nation-state, as is often the case, democratic practices that are claimed and put into action by many groups—who find themselves in the threshold between partial recognition and straight denial of their rights by sovereign structures—are subjected to the constant persecution of state apparatuses that treat them as divisive enemies, resulting in their criminalization, debilitation, and punishment. On the other hand, although autonomy is a necessary condition for democracy, this, of course, does not mean that every autonomous structure

is democratic. In fact, an autonomous organization that does not actively create, and re-create, democratic procedures can easily conform to become a kind of sub-state on a local or regional scale.

#### Local Autonomy and the Socialization of Politics

The *socialization of politics* is another way to make sense of autonomy. This term, used by the movement, refers to the patient and continual process of decomposing state power and its bureaucratic centralization by way of instituting diverse and discontinuous organizations of self-governance from the bottom up, thus, redistributing sovereignty to local formations. In this deconstructive sense, autonomy relies on a refusal of an anti-state politics grounded on the wholesale destruction and replacement of the state. In the more constructive sense, autonomy is the acknowledgment that there are multiple and different needs, values, and concerns, that these needs, values, and concerns can only be properly recognized when localization guides the focus of social relations, and that they can only be adequately supported and cultivated through place-based mechanisms of self-governance.

Ethnicity, culture, religion, intellectual movement, economy, and other factors can become organizing concerns for autonomy. In Rojava, women's issues, justice, health, education, and self-defense stand out as the prioritized fields, unevenly combining political commitment with the urgency to provide for necessities. For instance, in the Jazira region, the largest and most resource rich of the three cantons of Rojava, autonomous organizations include women's houses (*malê jin*) where the resolution of issues related to women, such as harassment, rape, early marriage, and polygamy, are addressed by women. "Peace committees" are another autonomous organization where the resolution of almost all cases is decided by consent of the "defendant" and the "plaintiff" and in accordance with general principles agreed upon in Rojava's charter, thereby rendering state courts nonfunctional. Certainly, we need to regard these autonomous organizations not as consummate bodies that function without contradiction, but rather as experiments in becoming that are undertaken with a view toward a sustained process of reconstruction.

While autonomy prioritizes the local (through the village and neighborhood communes, conceived as the smallest organizing units, along with their associated institutions of councils and cooperatives), it also proposes a scaling-up of self-governance structures from the local level to the city,

region, nation, and confederation (Jongerden and Akkaya 2013). Among these, however, the frequent reference to *region* needs to be noted, which is perhaps because region carries an overdetermined symbolic density as well as political relevance. *Region* denotes the real and the imaginary bonds of the Kurdish people that traverse the nation-state borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria and finds its emotionally charged embodiment in the name *Kurdistan*. In addition to implying this (post-) colonial unity of Kurdish people, the term *region* also offers a spatial imaginary for the coexistence of differences that might prove more resourceful and open-ended when compared with the terms *locality*, *globality*, and *the nation*. The seventh article of Rojava's charter might be considered as one instantiation of this open-ended spatial imaginary. By stating that "All cities and regions in Syria that accede to this Social Contract have the right to join the cantons in the Democratic Autonomous Government," the charter allows for the possibility for other regions outside the three cantons to join with the autonomous structures in Rojava on their own accord, with the condition that they agree to the democratic principles of the constitution.

Yet, it is precisely here that we want to draw attention to an important dilemma the article tacitly raises by defining democratic autonomy's relation to other peoples not currently part of the social contract for various reasons. Insofar as democracy is a process that is "collectively created and recreated," and not a model that one can "possess," and, therefore, "bring," or "confer" to others (Balibar 2008: 526), it cannot also be something that others can simply *agree to*. This, then, brings up not only the difficult problem of translating this experience to others but also the uncertain question of desire to be part of this collective process. That said, it is not hard to see that the conditions in Syria make it particularly straining for such a collective process to emerge. This is in part because the resistance in Rojava—not having gone through a similar history of political mobilization and organization that the movement in Turkey went through in its struggle with the state—has not quite developed the (symbolic and strategic) capacity to build transformative relations with other struggles and social movements. It is also because the forces for democratization in Syria, stranded between the history of repression by the Assad regime and the recent colonization of public spaces by the Islamic State, have been forced to remain marginal.<sup>7</sup>

Such conjectural and philosophical difficulties pertaining to democracy suggest that the viability of the Rojava experiment in large part lies not only in fostering local organizations of autonomy and advancing and publi-

cizing its democratic principles (which could easily fuel resentment if the Kurdish people in Rojava begin to be increasingly seen as the privileged agent that “delivers” democracy to other people in the region) but also in supporting those institutions and spaces that enable the *encounter* of different individuals and groups of people, where multiple demands can find a space for expression, disagreement, and negotiation toward the purpose of building democratic autonomous livelihoods in the broader region of Syria.<sup>8</sup>

### Democratic Universality and the Politicization of the Social

For such encounters to take place, however, it is necessary to transform the structural (symbolic and material) dynamics that reproduce relations of inequality and domination and thus deprive people of the capacity to speak and act. These structural dynamics involve both the unequal organization of social differences, such as gender, race, age, labor, and so on, as well as the hierarchical separation of practices, spaces, and dimensions of life, such as the separation of governing from laboring, home from university, or economy from ecology. *Politicization of the social*, another phrase also frequently used by the movement, can be said to refer to those strategies, arrangements, and practices for generating equal capacities. That is, by the very move of developing individual and collective capacities, they aim at enacting the transformation of these hierarchies and undoing their effect of presenting social differences and distinctions as if these were somehow “natural” or “technical” outcomes. Below, we highlight some of the practices and institutional arrangements that, we think, contribute to the democratic transformation of two modern social sites: bureaucracy and economy.

*Bureaucracy.* There is considerable effort directed toward transforming the hierarchical distinction between the governing and the governed as a key dynamic that reproduces the state form. In addition to some determined attempts at alternating between superior and subordinate leadership positions—through shuffling the segments of the intermediate staff across ranks and locations, instituting equal participation of women at every level of self-governance—there is also the more general “equalizing effect” that social mobilization brings about through setting off the constant production of new political actors and the multiplication of organizing bodies (i.e., the leadership, assemblies, parties, congresses, and so on). Rotation and expansion of participation in these ways also serve a pedagogical function of facilitating the transfer of knowledge and experience across social classes and distinctions and enabling people to develop new capacities for political

agency. We need to highlight here the significant role women's academies<sup>9</sup> play in the redistribution of positions. They do this not only by challenging the spatial and intellectual separation of the university from other social sites (hence, the intentional choice of *academy* as a name), but also by diminishing generational hierarchies through providing conditions for women from different ages and backgrounds to be part of a collective process of knowledge production insofar as "this adds to a shared experience of liberation" (Akif 2015).

*Economy.* Cooperatives, mostly in the areas of agriculture and small-scale manufacturing, are conceived as the core local institutions that would secure conditions of social equality by procuring necessities and defending the locally produced value by placing limitations on the private appropriation of monopoly capital. Dispatching material and immaterial sources to support the cooperative economy is a significant challenge, however, given the debilitating conditions of war (i.e., closed borders, constant threat of dislocation, scarcity of labor power, and an urgency to allocate resources to self-defense). In the Jazira canton, constrained sources include lands seized from the Syrian state and (mostly in-kind) distributions from oil production controlled by the canton government. Because the democratic autonomous government does not want to replicate the structure of centralized state by enforcing taxes or placing penalizing constraints on private property, it currently relies mostly on voluntary acts of giving. Indeed, there is a widespread gift economy of non-commodified exchanges and voluntary labor. An important question here is whether, given the limited scale of the cooperative economy and the challenging conditions of war, the voluntary withdrawal from the capitalist economy is sustainable and can address the regional and class inequalities without planned coordination of the redistribution of resources or placing limits on the conduct of private property. It would not be hard to imagine this question gaining even more significance in postwar conditions, where class antagonisms become much more pronounced, as Yahya Madra (this issue) attentively signals in reference to North Kurdistan.

### The Uncertain Future

The future of democratic autonomy primarily depends on sustaining and regenerating itself as a viable alternative to the two main positions that circulate within the broader Kurdish public. While identifying with the resistance in Rojava, these two positions argue for the respective models of the nation-state (nationalist-state position) and federation (realist-liberal position) as the

“solution” to the “Kurdish problem” in the region. From the perspective of these positions, democratic autonomy appears either “too little and conceding” or “too much and inflated.” Both positions contribute productively to the debate on democratic autonomy. However, by pitting democratic autonomy against the model of the state, or that of federation for that matter, they fail to see that democratic autonomy, in its critique of the nation-state, places itself in a relation of *deconstructing*, rather than *destroying* the state and, thus, does not rule out the possibility of coexistence with a state form, even a Kurdish state form. More importantly, these positions also fail to consider something that merits serious attention, namely, the simultaneously transformative and indeterminate effects of democratization on any such “model.” Democratization, we think, is what gives democratic autonomy its universal force and its generative dilemmas by constantly raising the questions of the internal and external borders of autonomy and the communication and translation of its ethico-political principles to other societies. Democratization, however, also points to some real limits of the Rojava experience by directing attention to its crucial dependence on the creation of a collective process in the broader region.

#### Notes

- 1 The resistance in Kobanê lasted 134 days. Some groups under the Free Syrian Army, and, later, *peshmergas* (military forces of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan), fought along, and US-led coalition air forces supported the forces of the People’s Protection Units and the Women’s Protection Units.
- 2 Bülent Küçük conducted part of the interviews with Nazan Üstündağ and Michael Taussig during field research in Kobanê from May 26 to 28, 2015. The authors also carried out several interviews with the elected members of *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party) and *Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk* (Movement for a Democratic Society) both during their participation in a conference on “Rebuilding Kobanê,” which took place in Amed, May 2–3, 2015, and again on June 16, 2015 in Istanbul.
- 3 The charter can be accessed at [peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/](http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/).
- 4 In describing the way in which the Kurdish movement relates to the world as one of “transgression,” in that it is compelled to occupy the vulnerable and contradictory position of being the limit of every norm (of family, nation-state, and science) under vulnerability-inducing conditions of late colony, Nükhet Sirman (forthcoming) argues that “the very assertion of the status of colony itself” was an instance of transgressing the official nationalist discourse that “denied difference to Kurds.”
- 5 This is meant neither to underestimate the strong identification of Kurds with the imaginary nation of Kurdistan nor to disregard their desire for an independent Kurdish nation-state.

- 6 See especially the section on economy in Öcalan 2012. Murray Bookchin's works have been influential in this assessment. See, for instance, Biehl 2012.
- 7 While the history of the debate on democratic autonomy goes back to 1946 in Iran, one might argue that the situation there is not much different from that of Syria, in the sense that the lack of strong forces of democratization leaves politically ungrounded Kurdish demands for democratic autonomy crystallized in the political slogan "Autonomy to Kurdistan, Democratization for Iran." See Abbas Vali (forthcoming) for an analysis of the Kurdish question in Iran. The situation in Iraq, however, is somewhat different because there has been a Kurdistan Regional Government established there since 1992; however, it maintains conflictual relations with the project of democratic autonomy.
- 8 HDP (People's Democratic Party), established in 2012, is a determined attempt to create precisely such a space in Turkey (which also demonstrates the relatively thriving position of the Kurdish movement in Turkey when compared with other parts of Kurdistan). HDP directs the effort of mobilizing all excluded identities (Kurds, feminists, Alevite initiatives, movements for the commons and ecology, workers, youth, socialists, LGBT groups, sections of the left, and so on) toward democratic self-governance and articulates this as the single most important condition for the socialization of peace in Turkey.
- 9 Women's academies are institutions that coexist alongside formal schools. They aim at socializing knowledge and providing a new reading of history in a manner that renders visible epistemological conditions of exclusion and oppression (especially of women), and the ethical-aesthetic constitution of self-determining subjects.

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