Rojava: Reality & Rhetoric

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Pode tirar dúvidas sobre algumas passagens e ser referência para a tradução de vários termos

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When people take matters into their own hands in order to survive, they open up the possibility of social change.

What has been going on in Rojava since 2012 is an attempt at social change, notably because of a different role for women.

The Kurds are forced to make their own history in conditions that they can only act upon in the maelstrom of an internationalised civil war – a less than ideal situation for emancipation.

From statelessness to nation-building

The narrative of the Kurdish independence movement is well documented: its geography that overlaps four countries (Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran), its division between rival parties, the propensity of these parties to play off one neighbouring country against another, sometimes one super-power against another, the dire consequences of these shifting alliances, its reliance on a large diaspora in Europe, its resilience to repression and internecine conflict, its ability to survive the ups and downs of international politics equalled by its incapacity to create a national State. Sometimes there is a thin line between survival and suicidal tendencies.

Until 2003.

Then three major events changed the deal for the Kurds, and among other effects remodelled the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey.

First, after 2003, the break-up of Iraq into three disjointed parts : Sunni, Shiite and in the north the Kurdistan Regional Government, ruled by the PDK led by the Barzani clan, more like a Western protectorate, actually.

Secondly, the Syrian State, entangled in civil strife and sectarian division, lost control over much of the country, including Kurdish areas.

Thirdly, Sunni jihadists captured a large swathe of Syrian territory and threatened the survival of the Kurdish population. So it was the rise of ISIS/Daesh that finally propelled the Kurds into the foreground. (ISIS is the English acronym for Islamic State in Iraq & Syria, Daesh the Arabic acronym for Islamic State in Iraq & the Levant.)

If ISIS was only a danger for the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, the West would not be doing more than it has done since 2011 to stop the Assad regime from butchering its own population. As it happens, ISIS is a threat to the regional political balance and to vested oil interests, so the West is doing its best to prevent ISIS from taking over the area and its oil wells. The dictator Assad now appears as a lesser evil than uncontrollable jihadists. The implicit US support of a regime that the US was thinking of bombing into submission a couple of years ago is nothing of a surprise: since 1970, American policy toward Syria has shifted more than half a dozen times, and none of these reversals had anything to do with the Damascus rulers killing and torturing more or less. For the dominant powers, the spill-over effects of regional chaos have to be contained, by supporting Assad if need be, even by consolidating a Kurdish homeland.

In Kurdish areas in the north of Syria, an implicit popular (i.e. trans-class) alliance was first formed after 2011 to self-manage a territory deserted by the Syrian authorities, and then in 2014 to defend it against the deadly threat from ISIS. The resistance combines former traditional ties and new movements, women's particularly, in a working community of proletarians and middle class elements, cemented by an emphasis on a common Kurdish nation.

An autonomous hinterland has been established: Rojava (*west* in Kurdish), made up of three non-contiguous cantons (Afrin, Kobane and Cizire) in northern Syria, along the Turkish border. It is about 18.300 square km big, with a population estimated at 4,6 million in 2014. (By comparison, Wales is 20.700 square km, with over 3 million inhabitants.) After the official Syrian military left, some fighting occurred between the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds, who repelled them. There is now "a sort of unwritten

agreement whereby the Syrian regime leaves the Rojava some autonomy in exchange for Syrian Kurdish neutrality in the on-going civil war" (Lato Cattivo: bibliography at the end of the text)

In those areas, a Kurdish majority coexists with various other "ethnic" groups, all repressed in the past by the Iraqi State. The disintegration of official law and order in the region created a power vacuum in northern Syria and has given birth to a grassroots people's organisation, coordinated under the name Tev-Dem (Movement of the Democratic Society).

The action of the common people has broken political and social stalemates. From there, what ?

Self-defence

"A vast cloud of "movements" — armed and unarmed, and oscillating between social banditry and organized guerrilla activity — act in the most wretched zones of the global capitalist junkyard, presenting traits similar to those of the current PKK. In one way or another, they attempt to resist the destruction of already marginal subsistence economies, the plundering of natural resources or local mining, or the imposition of capitalist landed property that limits or prevents access and/or use. (..) we can randomly cite cases of piracy in the seas of Somalia, MEND in Nigeria, the Naxalites in India, the Mapuche in Chile. (..) it is essential to grasp the content they have in common: *self-defence*. A self-defence that may also be considered vital, but which does not *differ in its nature* from what is expressed in any industrial action aimed at protecting the wages or working conditions of those who animate it. Just as it would be a sleight of hand to pass off a wage struggle, even if extremely fierce and broad-based, as a "revolutionary movement", it is equally fallacious to overload this type of self-defence practiced by exhausted populations with an inherently revolutionary meaning." (Lato Cattivo)

Self-defence implies self-organisation. What we have in Rojava is :

"(..) a real movement against state plunder and coercion, fighting militarily on its boarders and inwardly through the diffusion of power within them. The limits of the struggles in Rojava in this sense are those of struggles everywhere where the relation between labour power and capital has become a matter of repression and struggles that take that repression as a starting point. These struggles take place far from the

strongholds of capital's reproduction and are not directed at overturning relations of exploitation." (Becky)

The whole question is whether self-defence in Rojava has been - or could become - the way to an overturning of production relationships. But first, a little on nationalism.

Nation has a newface

21st century national liberation movements greatly differ from what they used to be when colonialism was coming to an end and the USA-USSR Cold War erupted in local wars by proxy, with a rich array of shifting alliances and millions of deaths. The Kurdish people paid the price for it even more so as the Kurds are torn between four countries. Yet the deep change in the nationalist agenda is not due to humanitarian considerations, a commitment to non-violence or a reading of authentic critical theory. More matter-of-factly, its former plank had become obsolete.

In a nutshell, once in power, a typical national front programme was to cut off ties with the dominant power (in the Middle East, Britain until the 1940's, the US later), to seek assistance from its rival (the USSR) and to develop a State-run indigenous growth based on collectivised agriculture and heavy industry. At least that was the plan. Wherever there was no adequate bourgeoisie, or a feeble one, national liberation opted for a bureaucratic instead of a bourgeois capitalism, looked for recipes in Marx and Mao, not Adam Smith and Keynes, and installed a dictatorial regime led by a supposedly worker or people's party. It achieved more dictatorship than development, but that is another story. Anyway, with the demise of the USSR and the advent of globalisation, this became impractical. So, after advocating Marxism-Leninism, Guevarism and Third-Worldism, national liberation embraced its own version of alter-globalism. The discredit of socialist nationalism led to ethnic nationalism which in the PKK's case morphed into a call for a multi-ethnic nation. Logically, this new line was also endorsed by the PKK's branch in Syria, the PYD.

Like any political movement, national liberation gives itself the ideology, the allies and the targets it can aim at, and modifies them when it suits its interests. In 1903, at its 6th congress, known as the "Uganda congress", Zionism was still debating whether a Jewish homeland could be found in Africa. In 1914, Pilsudski did not choose between Right and Wrong: he supported what he thought best for Polish independence, and changed sides with the fortunes of war. The loyalty of a nationalist is not to a class or

creed, simply to what he regards as “his people” and his own role as this people’s leader. Allegiances fluctuate and doctrines too.

Never judge a book or national liberation from its cover. On the ground, PKK cadres will support a landowner or a boss because he has influence in the area. They will also defend strikes or organise protests if it helps them rally the local people. Here they will side with rigid forms of religion, and there with tolerance. Today they will appear as traditionalists, tomorrow as modernists. This is politics: the PKK upholds what increases its power base. In the days when it claimed to be part of world socialism, it had no time for heretics like Pannekoek or Mattick, and went for successful Marxism-Leninism. When it espouses libertarianism, it does not take after Makhno, and prefers an acceptable version, probably the most moderate of all today, the Bookchin doctrine, that spices 19th century municipal socialism with self-administration and ecology.

Quite a sensible choice. The PKK has had to scale down its ambitions and *confederal municipalism* is the only political ideology available to a party that has to make do with States and borders because it cannot hope to create its own State with its own borders, which would mean forcefully redrawing the boundaries of at least two neighbouring countries. Making a virtue of necessity, the PKK has ditched “class” and “party” references, and promotes self-management, co-operation, communalism (not communism), anti-productivism and gender. David Graeber was rejoicing over the fact that in Kurdistan people might now be reading Judith Butler. A spot-on remark. Deconstruction of the political subject (i.e. of the proletariat as an historical agent), prioritisation of identities, class replaced by gender… the PKK has doubtlessly swapped Marxism for postmodernism.

Speaking of a “non-State” is playing on words. The PKK has not given up the objective of every national liberation movement. Though it takes great care to avoid using a word that sounds too authoritarian, it is still aiming at creating a centralised decision-making political apparatus on Kurdish territory, and what better word for this but *State* ? With the rider that this State would be so democratic under its citizens’ control, that it would no longer deserve the name of State. So much for ideology.

In the real world, the objective of a strong internal autonomy coupled with grassroots democratic life is not utterly unrealistic. This is the condition of a number of regions in the Pacific : central government does not mind the locals keeping their customary rural society, self-administering themselves to a large extent, living off a

subsistence-based economy or falling into poverty, as long as they do not trouble anyone. As soon as ore or oil is at stake, everything changes and if need be, the army is called in, as happened in Papua New Guinea. Somaliland has quite a few attributes of a State (its own police, currency and economy), except no other State recognises it. In the Chiapas (whose situation is often compared to that of Rojava), the Zapatistas have been surviving for twenty years in a regional semi-autonomy where they safeguard their culture and customs without bothering the Mexican federal State, providing they stay where they are. The Zapatista uprising was perhaps the first of the alter-globalisation era, as it did not aim at securing independence or transforming the whole country, but at preserving a traditional way of life.

As for the Kurds, they do not live peacefully on an island, many of them are city-dwellers, they (un)fortunately sit on a lot of oil which raises world and money matters far beyond their command, and the region happens to be torn apart by endless conflicts and ruled by dictators. That leaves little margin for Rojava… or a very small *and dependent* place: its economic viability is low, but not inexistent, thanks to possible future oil revenue. Black gold has already created puppet countries like Kuwait, a rentier State disbursing patronage from underground wealth, and the Kurdish micro-State in Iraq owes its existence solely to its oil wells. In other words, the fate of Rojava depends less on the mobilisation of its people than on the interplay of big business and dominant powers.

If the PKK no longer demands its *own* State (it can't have it), it wants self-ruled Kurdish regions federated within several States, Syria for a start (whose "territorial integrity" Rojava's *Social Contract* recognises). It remains to be seen what a confederation of three or four autonomous trans-border zones extended over at least three countries would involve for the population. Coexisting autonomies do not do away with the central political structure that unites them. Nowhere have trans-border zones, like the one on the Oder-Neisse line in Europe, ever diminished statist power. Central "law and order" apparatus delegates some of its duties to local authorities. This is how a modern State rules.

"Construction of a democratic nation"

Though words are not everything, in politics a lot is in the words. The writers of Rojava's *Social Contract* wished to avoid the term *constitution* which reminded them of statist revolutions, but the wording they chose echoes 18th century Enlightenment. In

their search for the roots of antiauthoritarian thought, they bypassed Bakunin and met Rousseau. Their *Social Contract* reads like a modernised version of past bourgeois revolutionary declarations of intent.

The date is 2014, so its Preamble takes into account "equality and environmental stability", and wants "a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs". This last point contradicts article 86, which says members of the Legislative Assembly will take their Oath of Office "in the name of Almighty God". Before passing judgement, let's remember that in the British House of Commons, until 1888, MPs had to take an oath that excluded Protestant dissenters, Catholics and atheists.

Now for the heart of the matter. Rojava will be based upon the "mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society". Strands, strata, social groups, classes… The French translation says *layers* ("couches"). Obviously we are not to understand that Rojava is devoid of social division. It simply means that as long as they are citizens of Rojava, all its inhabitants can *and must* live together in peace. There is no room for a recognition of class struggle in what amounts to nothing more than a democratic constitution.

Rojava gives us the same speech as a bourgeois revolution. In the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the right of "resistance to oppression" was explicit, but went with the right to property. Freedom was complete… within the limits of the Law. The same in Rajova: article 41 provides for the "right to the use and enjoyment of private property" except "for reasons of public utility or social interest". What *property* means socially is not that any person is entitled to the possession and use of his or her own clothes, room or bike. It means that those who happen to own the means of production can hire the labour of those who own only their clothes, room or bike. This is what class is about. Once that social frame is established, as it was in France, 1789, and as it is in Rojava, 2014, nearly everything else can be granted or promised : "separation of powers", "independence of the judiciary", "ecology balance", "freedom of speech", women's "inviolable right to participate in political, social, economic and cultural life", "the elimination of gender discrimination", the "right to peaceful assembly" and "peaceful protest, demonstration and strike", "national resources " as "public wealth" and "extractive processes (..) regulated by law", "all building and land public property", at least 40% women in "all governing bodies, institutions and committees", no death penalty, no child labour, the right to "political

asylum", the assurance that "No civilian shall stand trial before any military court or special or an ad hoc tribunals" and that no house search will take place with a proper warrant, an education system with no "racist and chauvinistic principles", the "separation of religion and State" (though the Oath…). If, in an emergency, "Martial law may be invoked and revoked by a qualified majority of 2/3 of the Executive Council", "The decision must then be presented to and unanimously adopted by the Legislative Assembly." One of the 22 Executive Council Bodies specialises in "Family & Gender Equality".

As a safeguard against Kurdish domination over Arab, Assyrian, Armenian and Chechen minorities, Rojava pledges to encourage a multi-ethnic "Unity in diversity". Here again, this resonates as a distant echo of democratic revolution: *E pluribus unum* ("one out of many") had been on the US seal since 1782, and was the de facto motto of the USA, until Congress adopted "In God we trust" in 1956. Could Rojava be more "secular" than contemporary America ?

Politically correct modern governance could not ask for more (only animal rights are missing). No oversight as far as conscription is concerned, though: every Rojava citizen can be called to military service. This is one of the traditional prerogatives of a State, which expects those under its protection or rule to serve in its army. Actually, it is not an army, it's "The People's Protection Units (YPG)" which only acts as a "self-defence" force "against both internal and external threats": as we know, any political power makes extensive use of the notion of *internal* threat.

"Without exaggeration, it is the most democratic constitution that people of this region ever had." (Sardar Saadi) Quite true. Rojava's *Social Contract* defines a society of **equals before the law**: each man or woman only interconnects with his or her peers. Social division is left out, there are no more rich or poor, bourgeois or labourer, only citizens with equal rights: "a bourgeois democratic system that is called democratic confederation" (Zafer Onat). Democracy is the most adequate political form that reunites a socially divided people.

Change

"Areas of self-management" cannot be created by law. What is the state of play in the field ?

All across the political spectrum, observers and visitors have reported deep daily life changes. First a dispersal of power, with a host of locally-managed initiatives and

the administration of villages by collectives. Also an effort to collect and disseminate local knowledge (in regards to medicine for instance) and to relink people to nature, exams replaced by interactive education, mutualism in schools to bridge the teacher/taught gap, communal (men and women) living in the university, elected commanders in the militia, a new approach to health care with an emphasis on preventative and more holistic methods that treat mind and body at the same time (on the principle that stress reduction can cause other diseases to decrease), and justice rendered in each village via an elected woman-man committee which mediates conflicts, decides upon the sentence and tries to reintegrate and rehabilitate the offender. In other words, an endeavour to abolish *separations*. A lot of what Western reformers and radicals try to implement in Europe is being experimented in Rojava.

Maybe the most noted transformation concerns the relations between sexes. Co-ed schools are the norm. Women no longer stay indoors all day. Meetings are held with at least 40% woman attendance. All bodies have two heads, feminine and masculine. Encouragement is given to a women's world-view and even to a new field of knowledge, *jinology* ("science of women"). Though feminism has been strong in the Kurdish liberation movement for a long time, these changes are no small innovation in the Middle East, and in some respects sex equality seems more advanced in Rojava than in Europe.

On the economic ground, Rojava is trying to achieve optimal self-development. Under Syrian rule, the area had oil but no refinery, and wheat but no flour mill. The emphasis is now on self-reliance.

Appearances are deceptive. Like all seasoned professionals, PKK and PYD master the art of projecting the positive image of themselves that outsiders wish to see. It is also only natural that the locals should try to impress visitors by stressing the most successful side of their movement. But not all of it is window-dressing. Self-organisation *does* improve the everyday life of a previously neglected and repressed population.

Common assemblies regularly meet with an attendance of several hundred people, not just sitting but taking an active part, with a widespread concern (at least partly put into practice) for the lower echelons to keep control over the top ones.

Bottom and top… This brings us nearer to the crux of the matter. What is being debated ? Do the people's councils reach decisions over minor or major issues ?

The answer is in the question. Rojava's council system is parallel to a transitional (transitions can be endless) government that runs a war, negotiates with foreign countries, reorganises tax collection, plans oil production, etc., like any central political institution ruling over a territory. In plain English, a State. And nobody has ever seen a State dissolve in local direct democracy.

A classless people ?

As often the case in similar situations, the imperative of self-defence against a mortal danger (ISIS, in this case) has led the Kurds to form a common front, in the usual sense of joint action as well as in the 20th century political sense of a *popular front*. Solidarity has created a temporary suspension of social differences, but not their obliteration.

Nobody argues that the population known as "the Kurds" are fortunate enough to be the only people in the world living in serene harmony. Like all other peoples, the Kurds are divided in groups with conflicting interests, in classes, or if *class* smells too much of Marxism, divided between dominant and dominated, between rulers and ruled. Therefore, if a major social upheaval is under way in Rojava, when and how was the ruling class overthrown ? Dominant groups are known to resort to all available means, armed struggle included, to stay in power. What intense class struggle toppled them in Kurdistan and initiated the change ?

Though such an exceptional event is unlikely to have passed unnoticed, those who believe in a Rojava "revolution" do not suggest any answer. The question is brushed out of the picture. Well, nearly. In fact, they have an explanation, summed up by David Graeber: "(..) the Rojavans have it quite easy in class terms because the real bourgeoisie, such as it was in a mostly very agricultural region, took off with the collapse of the Baath regime. They will have a long-term problem if they don't work on the educational system to ensure a developmentalist technocrat stratum doesn't eventually try to take power, but in the meantime, it's understandable they are focusing more immediately on gender issues."

D. Graeber has the great merit of encapsulating the mind-set of a large swathe of radical opinion. What we are told here is that, though class and gender both generally matter, today's priority in Rojava is gender because the class issue has been (at least temporarily) solved by the departure of the ruling class. What remains is the common

people, simply *the people*. The Rojavans may be in dire straits but they have achieved what Western radical reformers vainly aim at: bringing 99% of the population together.

D. Graeber mistakes a class for the persons it is composed of. Of course class is flesh and blood, but it is a lot more, it is made of social relations. The bourgeoisie does not vanish from an area which bourgeois individuals have fled. At the time of the Paris Commune, the ruling class left the city but its power structure was perpetuated during those two months: in the vaults of the Banque de France and their millions of francs the communards made no attempt to confiscate, and fundamentally in the continuation of the money economy and of wage-labour. In Rojava, there is no sign that the lower classes have done away with the market economy and the wage system.

Rojava enthusiasts talk a lot about empowerment and changes in the domestic sphere: they never mention a transformation of exploitation relationships. At best, we are given examples of agriculture, textile, trade and construction co-ops (which we hear compete with private business), but we never read about an experiment in collectivisation. Oil wells are operational again, a refinery has been improvised, but we know nothing about the people who work there.

Governing bodies are organising a transition from mono-cropping to food self-reliance: formerly State-owned land is being distributed to agricultural co-ops: the products are sold to the administration, or on the market with price control. Bread is subsidised. "Smuggling is huge", reports Becky. That is confirmed by other visitors, and to be expected : in regions devoid of fixed frontiers, and ravaged by want and war, smugglers are illegal trans-border tradesmen. The extent of smuggling shows the resilience of a commodity economy, with its businessmen hiring poorly paid labour to do the job. Where things are bought and sold, human beings - labour power – are being bought and sold too. No equality there, and certainly little gender critique.

As Janet Biehl, a defender of Rojava's "revolution", writes: "Some Rojavans have wages, but many work on a voluntary basis; still others just make a living, say, from a cow." Meanwhile, people pay little or no income tax, and government revenue comes from oil. In other words, some Rojavans are paid a wage, some live on money earned elsewhere, some live in a subsistence economy, and the non-State State sells oil. One way or another, money suffuses every sphere of Rojavan society.

By and large, markets are open for shoppers at normal hours, commerce and crafts are functioning, which is an immense improvement over the situation before.

Zaher Bader visited Cizire in May 2014 and believes a revolution is taking place in Syrian Kurdistan:

"Before we left the region we decided to speak to shopkeepers, businessmen, stall holders and people on the market to hear their views which were very important to us. Everyone seemed to have a very positive view and opinion of the DSA and Tev-Dam. They were happy about the existence of peace, security and freedom and running their own business without any interference from any parties or sides."

At last we've found a revolution that does not scare the bourgeois.

Or maybe it all depends on what the bourgeois class is. If D. Graeber reserves the notion for the top tier of the ruling elite, then he is right: there probably are very few high frequency traders and merchant bankers now residing in the three Rojava cantons. Thus, for Graber, there is no class to speak of, only a people.

However, a man running a transport company with a 5-lorry fleet and employing a 15-strong labour force is a bourgeois. Rojava is a class society.

The "social revolution" thesis is wearing thin, but its upholders hardly make up facts: their own reports provide enough evidence to refute their claim. The flaw is in the failure to ask the proper question :

"The situation also has something in common with the trajectory of struggles around the world in the past few years. The state, now an agent of global capital, is seen as the guilty party by movements composed of middle as well as proletarian classes. Meanwhile, the nation is seen as the force to oppose it. Struggles rally under the ideology of citizenship (and the race and gender hierarchies this presupposes). The transformation taking place in Rojava rests to some extent on a radical Kurdish identity and on substantial middle classes contingent who, despite radical rhetoric, always have some interest in the continuity of capital and the state." (Becky)

Power to the people ?

Daily life is determined by production relations: as we have just seen, Rojavan self-managed communes and grassroots bodies are under the sway of business big and small.

"When the Gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers", Oscar Wilde wrote. Rojava fulfils the dream of the step-by-step popular empowerment theorists. J. Holloway's *Change the world without taking power* seems to materialise in Syrian Kurdistan. Society is supposed to be transformed from the bottom by a variety of

gradual changes which will render the top helpless and harmless until it falls off or disappears. Therefore Rojavan police is not police, it can only be a non-police, an anti-police. Writes D. Graeber :

"Ultimately - and this is key - the security forces are answerable to the bottom-up structures and not to the top-down ones. One of the first places we visited was a police academy (..). Everyone had to take courses in non-violent conflict resolution and feminist theory before they were allowed to touch a gun. The co-directors explained to us their ultimate aim was to give everyone in the country six weeks of police training, so that ultimately, they could eliminate police."

The point is not to make fun of such sheer naivety, but to realise what it is built on : the belief that there is nothing to fear from former or new repression forces in Rojava, because real power lies with the people at grassroots level, in the communes and the local committees, so whatever government officials may do, whatever political manoeuvring wannabe leaders might engage in, *we are the police*.

There is no denying the materiality of (sometimes multi-ethnic) neighbourhood and village networks, of woman collectives, that deal with a lot of issues, trivial (disputes) or big (school, health care, local trade), as well as with the necessities of war. That would be an indispensable component of a social revolution. But in the present circumstances, this community rule runs in parallel with a central structure that functions as the political head of the country. Who decides what ? Who calls the shots ? That is the question. The vaunted autonomy of the commune is secure as long as it is not exercised, as long as it does not compete with government. Administrating is one thing, big decision-taking is another. Nothing shows that the local councils have any real say in policy making. Calling this regime "Democratic Self-Rule Administration" hardly changes anything but words. As for the plan to have free elections as soon as possible, it is as good as parliamentary democracy can be.

Women with guns

Suppose we change names and dates… A lot of the praise showered on Rojava today, particularly on what is seen as its radical critique of gender, could have been penned in the 1930's by observers of fraternal and equalitarian pioneer life in small Zionist communities in Palestine. In those days also, visitors and supporters were struck by an utterly new role for women.

In the early kibbutzim, sex equality did not just result from progressive and socialist ideas. Material necessities (farming and self-defence) required not depriving a hard-pressed community from half its potential labour and armed force. For women to take their share of agricultural and military activities, they had to be liberated from "feminine" duties, so children were brought up collectively, a novelty for many and a shock for some.

There is no evidence of this in Rojava. Having woman soldiers does not cause the end of masculine domination (if it did, Israel would be one of the most sex-equal countries in the world). Z. Baher, a champion of the Rojavan "revolution" cause, first writes that "There is total equality between women and men", then adds half a page later: "I have not seen a single woman working in a shop, petrol station, market, café or restaurant." In "self-managed" refugee camps across the border, in Turkey, Kurdish women take care of the kids while the men go looking for odd jobs.

The subversive character of a movement or organisation is not to be measured by the yardstick of the proportion of women in arms. Neither is its feminist character. Since the 1960's, most guerrillas have used or still use a large number of woman fighters, in Columbia for instance. 25% of Sandinista troops were women, which did not bring about women's lib : abortion is totally illegal today in Nicaragua. Women's presence is a typical feature of the Maoist guerrilla. In Nepal, Peru and the Philippines, *protracted people's war* strategy calls for man-woman equality as a means to pull down traditional (family, feudal or tribal) ties which are always patriarchal. The aim is not to emancipate women, but to replace the domination of the village elders by the rule of party cadres. The important role of women in the PKK-PYD owes less to feminist influence than to the Maoist origins of the party.

Why is the woman in arms so easily taken as a symbol of liberation, even to the point of disregarding *what* she is fighting for ?

If the picture of a woman with a rocket-launcher can make front-page news in Western tabloids and in radical mags, it is because she disrupts the (much-declined) myth of the female inborn peaceful or passive nature. The right to use weapons (even hunting ones) has long been a male privilege, so reversing the tradition is viewed as proof of the exceptionality and radicalism of a movement. The stereotyped macho hero carries an unpleasant image, the romanticised woman freedom fighter a positive one. Anti-militarists do not mind civil war so much when women go to the front. The woman fighter is the redeemer of armed struggle: revolution grows out of the barrel of a

Kalashnikov in the hands of a woman. Not to mention the fantasy of the female Avenger, wielding a gun for a good cause, shooting sexists and rapists: vigilantism is also redeemed when taken into women's hands, as in Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45*, a 1981 rape vengeance film.

How Western-centric this all is. In many parts of the world, woman soldiers were and still are fairly common, sometimes in combat roles and shock troops. A Russian woman battalion guarded the Winter Palace in October 1917. In WW II, the Red Army had female tank drivers, snipers, etc. Women with guns are only an oddity for the Western mind.

Let's add that Assad's army and ISIS also have a few woman-only fighting units. But as, unlike the Kurds, they ignore gender critique, they do not use women in front-line combat, only in police and support tasks.

A call to arms

It is small wonder some individuals and groups always prone to denouncing the military-industrial complex should now call for arming Rojava against ISIS, if we remember that in 1999, at the time of the Kosovo war, a few anarchists supported NATO bombings on Serbia… to prevent genocide.

Where and who are these weapons to come from ? The average proletarian has no spare assault rifle or grenade to secretly smuggle to Kurdistan. Should he or she get in touch with international arm dealers ? Or shall we expect the Western powers to supply Rojava with adequate weaponry ? Deliveries have started on a modest scale. Should we pressure the US, France and Britain to do more ? With what means ? Libertarian demos do not resonate as far as the White House. And at what political price for the askers ? Nobody contemplates organising new International Brigades, though ISIS already have theirs.

So, when voices call for military support to help Rojava face the jihadist onslaught, what exactly are they talking about ? Either it is empty talk, or it can only mean asking for more Western air strikes. How and where ? Bombs and missiles will rarely fall on a column of jihadist vehicles in the desert, and more often on a neighbourhood held by the jihadists, with inevitable "collateral damage". There is no such thing as *clean* surgical strikes. According to the Pentagon, coalition strikes killed 6.000 ISIS fighters between September 2014 and January 2015. Some day we will know how many Kurdish civilians died at the same time.

Mass slaughter is obviously not what those who call for “Arms for the Kurdish resistance” really want. So it is empty talk. An attitude. That’s perhaps the worst part of the story: that in the Middle East an effort at self-organisation and self-defence, genuine but unable to transcend itself because of hostile circumstances, should serve in Europe and north America as a pretext for mobilisations and slogans that nobody seriously expects to be acted upon.

Besides, would-be realists overlook one eminent factor. Surely military defeat dooms a revolution: the Paris Commune was crushed by the bourgeois army. But winning a war is no solution to an unsolved social conundrum: the Bolshevik victory in the civil war established the domination of a new exploitative class. Supposing ISIS troops were pinned down by US, French, British, Jordanian, etc. bombs and missiles, and supposing the dysfunctional Syrian State let Rojava survive, what revolution could stay revolutionary if it relied on the assistance of imperialists and dictators ?

Mainstream radicalism

We are not amazed by the stand taken by some libertarian groups who have always endorsed national liberation. What troubles us more is the often uncritical behaviour of a larger circle of anarchist comrades, squatters, feminists, libertarian communists, even friends whom we know to have been more discerning.

That milieu is capable of personal energy and initiative, but there is something mentally spineless about what one might call its “mainstream radicalism”. Negatively, this could be characterised by a rejection of institutions and mediations that stand as obstacles on the way to emancipation: States, parties, unions, parliaments, bureaucracy, also a “transition period” intermediate between capitalism and communism, even *class* in so far as classes perpetuate themselves within an endless class struggle. Positively, it focuses on empowerment, self-organisation, direct democracy and a revolution of daily life, which extends to all forms of domination, notably gender.

As a result, the perfectly justified mistrust of promised future Brand New Worlds morphs into a tendency to believe that Tomorrow Is Today, providing people are already changing their lives here and now, and appear to be self-governing. At the same time, a suspicion of politics from the top develops into a search for concrete measures from the bottom, even on a small scale, provided that they enable people to rebuild social links.

Quite a few texts on Kurdistan only consider Rojava from the point of view of local accomplishments, of what Rojavans manage to undertake in the street, the commune school, the district clinic or the little park mentioned by Z. Bader (all of which would be necessary components of a social revolution), without bothering much about the leadership of the PKK and PYD, because for these analysts local accomplishments matter more than political leaders and indeed determine Rojava's policy. Their priority is the bottom-up dynamics, but they implicitly interpret Rojava as if the bottom *commanded* the top. What could we understand of 1977 Italy if the events were only seen from the angle of general assemblies, wild-catting, rioting and revolutionary statements, with a near dismissal of the unions, the CP, political bargaining and State forces ? Rojava is at present an attempt at nation-building: radicals misread it as community-building.

In bygone days, Marxism and far-leftism focused on production and work: taking over the factories, managing the economy, etc. Revolution is now more and more conceived of as a behavioural issue : self-affirmation, self-organisation, an emphasis on gender, ecology, multi-culture, reconnecting, meeting, debating… Revolution is thought of in *societal* rather than *social* terms: the word has been expanded and its meaning restricted. *Societal* became fashionable with the fading of radical hopes. Societal is when you can't transform social structures. Social change is putting an end to masculine domination: societal change is sex parity.

What critique of the State ?

If what embarrasses radicals in national liberation is that it aims at creating a nation-State, the moment a national movement proclaims to be non- or anti-statist, and has enough appearance to that effect, radicals no longer object to national liberation. Then the only need for radicals is to consider that the nation – providing it remains Stateless – is after all nothing else than the people, and who could be against the people ? The people is us, all of us minus 1%, the people is 99%.

Here libertarian thought finds itself one sandwich short of a picnic.

Outright opposition to the State is one of the fundamentals of anarchy, and its invaluable merit.

The snag is, unconditional hostility to State is compatible with a non-revolutionary perspective, i.e. with a vision of possible broad evolutionary change. Of the three 19th century- born main anarchist figures, Proudhon, Kropotkin and

Bakunin, only the latter always maintained the necessity of a cut-off moment that would rupture the historical continuum, of a destructive/constructive break from the past. Proudhon was consistently hostile to revolution. Kropotkin came to the idea in 1899 that "(..) the resistance which the movement will meet in the privileged classes will hardly have the character of obtuse obstinacy which made the revolutions of times past so violent." His later views were fairly ambivalent on that issue. Though he mentioned a "revolutionary period", it is unclear in his writings whether "constructive agencies of mutual aid" could - or could not - grow within capitalism and reach a critical mass that would enable them to quasi naturally replace the capitalist system by a communist one. (Needless to say, Marxist thinking has developed a similar thesis of capitalism socialising itself to the point of inevitably turning into socialism.)

Step-by-step progressive approaches are not inconsistent with anarchism. So it is not improper for a gradualist like D. Graeber to label himself an "anarchist". For him, cross-border communities can develop so much that borders become meaningless, and cause "the gradual dissolution of the bureaucratic nation-state". The most important word here is *bureaucratic*: when anything (work, money, war, business…) is run *democratically*, its nature changes altogether.

The weakness of anarchism is to regard the State above all as a coercive instrument - which it certainly is - without asking why and how it plays that role. A State is an administrative and security-guaranteeing apparatus maintaining the cohesion of divergent interests. For anarchists, though, the State is identified first and foremost with imposed vertical authority. Once these visible forms of constraint recede, it is enough for some anarchists (not all of them, far from it) to conclude that the end of the State has come or is under way. A genuine communal "horizontal" police force, for instance, will not be regarded as police any more.

The libertarian is defenceless against what looks so much like his programme: as he has always opposed the State and supported democracy, *democratic confederalism* and *social self-determination* have a lot to please him. The anarchist ideal is indeed to replace the State by thousands of federated communes and work collectives.

On that basis, it becomes feasible for an internationalist to support a national movement, if it implements political, social and cultural self-management, or "re-appropriation of the common" in 21st century parlance. When the PKK insists it does not want to seize power, but to contribute to a system where power will be

dispersed so that everybody shares power, it is relatively easy for the anarchist to identify with this claim.

Prospects

The attempt at a democratic revolution in Rojava, and the social transformations that go with it, have only been possible because of exceptional circumstances: the break-up of the Iraqi and Syrian States, plus the jihadist invasion, a deadly threat which accelerated radicalisation.

As things stand today, one possibility is that ISIS takes over the whole area, which would cause Rojava's dissolution as a proto-State: Kurdish autonomy would revert to strips of shrinking land, pockets of guerrilla, which was its situation in all countries of the region before 2003.

The second and *now* most probable option is that Rojava holds the fort with Western military backing, and the Rojavan republic lives on with enough international patronage to navigate the stormy waters of a crisis-ridden Middle East (among other challenges, having the Syrian civil war the other side of the border: paradoxically, as long as the Assad regime holds out, it could act as a reluctant and unreliable ally of Rojava, adding another streak of uncertainty). Such a new-born country would be no more independent than the present Kurdish micro-State in northern Iraq under Western protection: like the Kurdistan Regional Government, Rojava would survive only if it played the game of the great powers and big business.

Oil would be both an asset and a constraint. For a small fragile country, geographically split into three parts, oil and mineral wealth is nothing without powerful buyers and allies. At the time of writing, there is only one airport in Cizire, under Syrian government control.

This would be the worst/best scenario. However democraticRojava wishes to be, and even in spite of strong grassroots pressure, the consolidation and normalisation of the country would only promote what is compatible with bourgeois democracy, i.e. what does not conflict with capital hiring labour, circulating and accumulating money, doing business with foreign capital, etc. Russian "socialism in one country" was impossible : so is Kurdish *democratic confederalism*, whatever that means. A stop will be put to all social conquests with any subversive potential. At best (which is probably asking too much), there will be relatively free elections, little corruption, some respect for human rights, local self-administration for *local* matters, a better public health system than in neighbouring countries, moderately repressive police, a progressive education, a free

press (providing it stays clear of blasphemy), a tolerant Islam, and of course sex parity, perhaps with a woman vice-president. No more. Probably enough for those who want to believe in a Rojavan revolution to go on believing. Devotees are never discouraged by reality. When their theory is disproved by facts, they dismiss the facts. “Be more dialectical !”, they say: “Disregard the present : everything that looks bad today was worse yesterday, and will be getting better tomorrow…”

As for the prospect of a conflict between self-organised bodies and the apparatus that oversees them under the PKK’s watchful eye, this brings us back to the question: “Who holds the real reins of power?” There is no “duality of power” in Kurdistan, no proletarian control from below competing for command with a political structure above. PKK supervision accepts communal self-governing collectives which leave it in charge of major decisions and which only self-manage daily life : the involvement of the local population does not alter the real balance of power. In Spain, 1936, the beginnings of a revolution were devoured by war. In Rojava, war prevails, and in spite of genuine efforts of Kurdish proletarians to take their matters into their own hands, nothing so far heralds the advent of a revolution.

G.D. & T.L., February 2015

This is a much enlarged version of *Kurdistan?*, published in French on the **ddt21.noblogs.org** blog.

For further reading

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