Wild and Distant:
Revolt And Revolution In Rojava

Abstract

A revolution is taking place in the Kurdish region of northern Syria, in a place called Rojava. This revolution has instituted the destruction of patriarchy and the construction of a non-state egalitarian democracy as its foremost goals. This essay is a critical examination of the revolutionary self-government of Rojava; an analysis of the social and political factors that gave rise to the revolution and also imperil it; and a critical reading of the theoretical works of Abdullah Öcalan—the philosophical guide of the revolution who writes from solitary confinement in an island prison in the Sea of Marmara, where he is guarded by one thousand armed guards. After contextualizing Rojava, I explore the political and economic structure of the self-government. I then examine the issues surrounding women's rights in Rojava in a section called “Killing the Dominant Male”; and I explore Abdullah Öcalan’s wide-ranging critique of the state. The essay follows Öcalan’s theory from the birth of state power in the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia to our current dystopian entanglement with capitalist modernity, and brings in other theories of state power as well in order to engage critically with this anti-statist philosophy and praxis. I analyze the Rojavan conception of self-defense, which faces inwards as well as outwards, seeking to defend against the concentration of power within the revolution while simultaneously battling ISIS and other armed forces. Finally, I examine some current events surrounding Rojava—claims that it is a counter-revolutionary force that interferes with a united anti-Assad front; and issues surrounding the declaration of an autonomous federated system in northern Syria this past March. The question that lies at the heart of this essay involves the tension between revolt as Julia Kristeva conceives it on one hand, and political revolution on the other. In the end I seek to connect the lessons from Rojava to a way that we can pursue a meaningful life within our own context.
Something has emerged in the rural plains of northern Syria, along the Turkish border, in a region called Rojava. Seemingly out of nowhere the Kurds of Syria have seized territory and are, against all odds, cobbling together a novel autonomy. A coalition of Kurdish political groups exploited the chaos of Syria’s civil war to gain control of a sizable region, and is now the de facto authority there. They are attempting to institute a radical, feminist, self-government of confederated, communal cantons, working together in a pluralistic system of democratic autonomy. Where did this come from and what might it mean?

In some sense, this utopian society has emerged from a complete lack—an abyss. Geographically Rojava is in a rather desolate position, culturally and economically cut off from the world by embargo, war, and Ba’athist chauvinism. For the better part of a century Syrian Kurds have been marginalized, stripped of rights, and culturally cleansed. Now they are restructuring from scratch, overseen by another lack—the mustachioed grin of Abdullah Öcalan’s ubiquitous image. Öcalan—leader of the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or Kurdistan Workers Party, which has waged a 30 year guerrilla war against the Turkish state)—lives in another abyss himself, hundreds of miles away from Rojava, in a solitary island prison on an island in the Sea of Marmara.

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1 René Char, *Furor and Mystery & Other Writings*, Boston: Black Widow Press, 2010
administered by the Turkish government and supposedly staffed with 1000 guards.

The revolutionary movement in Rojava is instituting Öcalan’s philosophy of democratic confederalism; a social system that he developed in prison after realizing the failure of Marxist-Leninism and Maoist national liberation. In his own words:

Democratic confederalism of Kurdistan is not a state system, but a democratic system of the people without a state...[It] is based on the principle of the recognition and preservation of all cultural identities as well as the promotion of the right to freedom of expression...It is opposed to all forms of sexual oppression and aims to overcome it through the liberation struggle of the women.³

It should be noted that even though Öcalan’s ideas are extremely influential, the actual revolution and the evolution of egalitarian social relations happen in a time and space far from the prison where the original philosophy was written. The constant flux of revolt is uncontrollable from Öcalan’s current position.

With a revolution in progress, based on these ideas, in a remote and highly precarious warzone, the amount of objective information about its real world enactment is minimal. There are, of course, various ideological factions using Rojava for their own propagandistic purposes, from anarchists to Turkish shills to supporters of the Free Syrian Army. In this paper I will provide a critical analysis of what I’ve found in the available literature regarding Rojava. More specifically I will argue that, while there have been reports of authoritarian actions taken by the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or Democratic Union Party,

³ Abdullah Öcalan: “Call to support Democratic Confederalism” collected in A Small Key Can Open a Large Door. Pp.82-83
the most powerful political party, who are allied with PKK and leading the
revolution), it must be noted that democratization, autonomy, and revolution lie
on a continuum—they are not absolute events—and as such need solidarity and
space to survive and develop in a hostile environment. It should be made clear
though, that authoritarian unilateralism by the PYD does threaten the entire
experiment. Still, I argue that direct democracy is a messy process, and creating a
new society takes time, and trial and error. As Simon Critchley says:
“democratization consists in the manifestations of dissensus, in demonstration as
demos-stration, manifesting the presence of those who do not count.” In other
words it is a tumult of individual desires and wills working in concert. This does
not mean that everything is acceptable, and any contradictions or ethical
problems should be addressed in order to understand the real shortcomings of
the experiment. Following Nazan Üstün dağı’s excellent article on self-defense in
Rojava, I posit that such a social experiment necessitates a Janus-faced system of
self-defense. One side defending against violent incursion by state and non-
state actors, such as the Assad regime, Turkey, and Daesh; and the other—
perhaps more important, or at least more often overlooked—side acting as a
form of internal self defense, constantly recreating the process of collective
becoming in order to combat the rise of hierarchical forms of domination,
patriarchy, and state-like structures within the revolution and Rojavan society at
large. I will explore the concept of “stateless democracy” and how abolishing the

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4 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*. Pp.130
5 Nazan Üstün dağı, 2016
6 AKA ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State.
state may be a massive process that needs to extend beyond the revolutionary social rupture.

A few more questions to start: how did this arise? Out of what context were the conditions for this revolution created? What does the implementation of democratic autonomy imply? What contradictions and omissions should we be wary of? Are there lessons from Rojava that are applicable to other contexts? How has the West attempted to co-opt and commodify the Rojava revolution? In what ways can non-state systems of democratic autonomy defend themselves from concentration of power and the rise of authoritarian structures? Would a non-state federation be relevant in the globalized system? In this essay I will seek to answer these questions. I will explore the possibilities and limits of the creation of an autonomous, non-state entity in northern Syria, and the implications of such an experiment for the global state-based status quo.

I am approaching this subject from a methodologically difficult position—in addition to the facts that I am geographically distant from my topic and I don’t speak Kurmanji, and thus have few ways to prove the information I encounter with empirical data—I am approaching the subject already from a stance of solidarity with the intentions of the revolution. I endeavor to be up-front with any potential bias, and to remain critical throughout my inquiry. I will seed this paper with reminders of my subjectivity, such as opening sections with epigraphs sourced from literary works, in order to create dissonance with the idea of some objective anthropological or sociological study that I don’t desire or claim to write.

In real life terms, aspects of the Rojava project—especially the abolition of patriarchy and the nation-state—are so alien to modern capitalist society that
they are obscured, almost invisible from afar. Pierre Bourdieu reminded us that “one of the major powers of the state is to produce and impose…categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things of the social world—including the state itself.” One of the ways that people in the west are trying to fit this anomalous social experiment into their familiar paradigm is by imposing a normative civilizational narrative onto it, in which Kurds are the “good” guys, fighting “evil” Islamist terrorists; but in which the Kurds still conjure orientalist images of backwards, violent warriors who could only possibly develop a revolutionary critique through the guidance of westerners like Bookchin or Wallerstein. This is the classic colonial discourse of civilization vs. barbarism, and of course reality is far more complex. In most western media, the issue of gender equality in Rojava is reduced to slick images of attractive women with guns—an attempt by the spectacle to capture and commodify it—and the anti-statist aspect of Öcalan’s philosophy is largely ignored. My hope is that I can shed light on these and other hidden political possibilities in a manner that encourages thinking outside of the “categories of thought” produced and imposed by the state, and which undermines the colonial orientalist discourse. I want to be very clear that I do not intend to “speak for” the Kurds or the revolutionaries; I simply seek to explore the ideas that they are explicit about, and theorize their implications. One last note before venturing on: I think it is

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8 While Öcalan is influenced by western theorists, the undue amount of attention this gets as the sole means to legitimate his theories is absurd.
important to keep in mind that one precondition for this experiment in autonomy has been a brutal war with an unbelievable human cost. As easy as it is to get carried away with the theoretical implications of autonomy, the corporeal effect of this war on countless bodies in Syria is an impossibly high price to pay.

**Some Brief Context**

*I am bored with being
in your margins,
in your notebooks,
in your traces,
before your doors.
Where
are the wide spans of your heavens?*

-Maram Al-Masri

Kurds are a—largely Sunni Muslim—minority ethnic group inhabiting a region lying in contiguous parts of Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Kurdish ethnic identity and languages have been suppressed in all four of these nations, as Kurdish identity poses a perceived threat to Arab (and Turkish or Persian) unity. Many Kurdish people have longed for an independent Kurdistan—which would mean sections of these nations seceding, not something that is likely to happen without a fight. The Kurds are by no means a homogenous population, living in diaspora (known as *gurbet*) and in bigger cities as well as the traditional Kurdish regions; and they are politically diverse—ranging from anarchists to jihadis to neoliberal capitalists. There is also quite a bit of conflict between different Kurdish factions,

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with different regional groups allying with different powers to pursue their respective goals. Kurdish nationalists have been used as proxies by world powers many times over, with false promises of independence dangled over their heads to incite them to action and then often abandoned to the slaughter of multiple genocides.\footnote{See Derek Gregory The Colonial Present pp. 155 on the Halabja gas attack, for one example.} This has informed the way that Kurds in Rojava are carefully walking the tightrope of accepting necessary help from US and Russia in the current war, without explicitly allying themselves with either side.

The so-called Arab Spring hit Syria in March of 2011 and was met with swift and brutal violence by Bashar al-Assad’s regime, effectively smothering any hope for positive change under an infernal blizzard of sarin gas and barrel bombs. To minimize the possibility of Kurdish resistance joining the uprising, Assad offered hundreds of thousands of stateless Syrian Kurds citizenship—these being Kurds and their families who were stripped of citizenship in 1962—and the Kurdish regions largely stayed quiet, waiting to see what would happen, until early 2012.\footnote{The numbers of Kurds offered citizenship vary, the editors of A Small Key Can Open a Large Door say 200,000; Eyal Zisser says 100,000 in the Cizire region alone (“The Kurds in Syria” pp.208 in Kurdish Awakening ed. Ofra Bengio.) I averaged the number because it’s largely irrelevant at this point.} By this time the regime had lost significant territory to opposition groups and pulled most of its forces out of the Kurdish regions.\footnote{There are various reasons for the regime’s abandonment of Rojava—one is that the regime was just spread too thin and needed to focus on more volatile fronts, but Emile Hokayem proposes, in Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant, that it was partially a strategy to keep Turkey in check and rile up Ankara’s own Kurdish problem.}

Kurdish political parties, especially the PYD, exploited this situation to take control. There was (and is) tension between parties aligned with the Iraqi
Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and those aligned with the PKK—mainly the PYD—, which almost tipped over into armed conflict. Inter-party violence was, however, largely avoided and a new coalition called the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC or DBK) was formed with members from both the PYD and the KRG sponsored Kurdish National Council (KNC). The PYD still partakes in the KSC, but the creation of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which also began to incorporate non-Kurdish groups, has become more influential in Rojava. TEV-DEM is a quasi-state structure that currently coordinates the three self-governed cantons of Rojava (Afrin, Kobani, and Cizire), but it is unanimously acknowledged that the PYD wields a vast amount of power—largely because it commands the YPG and YPJ militias and has significant resources from its close relationship to the PKK. The PYD has been accused by some sources of strong-arming its political competitors, even threatening and kidnapping its opponents\textsuperscript{14}, along with other authoritarian abuses\textsuperscript{15}. These claims are in dispute, and there are convincing responses debunking a specific Amnesty International report, but at least some of the reports are likely based in fact;\textsuperscript{16} if they are true, these tactics imperil the pluralistic basis of democratic confederalism. It should be mentioned—though not as an excuse for authoritarian abuse—that Rojava is under regular attack by

\textsuperscript{14}“Under Kurdish Rule” report by Human Rights Watch, pp. 34-36
\textsuperscript{15}The worst accusation of abuse I’ve come across was on June 27 2013, when the YPG opened fire at an anti-PYD rally in ‘Amuda, killing eight, and then enacted extreme repression to suppress the response. See Eva Savelsberg “The Syrian-Kurdish Movements”, in Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East, pp. 100. Another troubling accusation is that the PYD burnt a radio station in a crackdown on free-speech, see: https://www.facebook.com/artaradio/posts/610729792414030/ (April 2016)
the Turkish military, Daesh (AKA ISIS), various rebel groups, and occasionally the Assad regime. The YPG and YPJ (along with occasional US and Russian airstrikes) are the region’s main defense, investing them with a high level of indispensability and respect.

In many ways the revolution in Rojava is the polar opposite of Daesh. The differences go beyond centralized power under a caliph versus decentralized self-rule, or sectarianism versus pluralism. One of the most striking oppositions between the two is played out by the role of gender. Where Daesh institutes sex slavery, rape as weapon, stoning and amputation for adultery or dress code violations; the revolutionaries in Rojava are constructing institutions to empower women to take control of society. It has been said that Daesh fighters killed by women are denied entrance to paradise, and there are myths of a YPJ fighter named Rehana who has single-handedly killed 100 Daesh fighters. Daesh sees women as machines to reproduce fighters; while the perception of women in Rojava is that they are the oppressed stewards of an egalitarian utopia crushed by capitalist modernity. The war between the two, both physically and ideologically, rages on.

**Killing The Dominant Male**

*The mother of the babe came down from the father’s house  
Two young gazelles behind her,  
The mother of the babe, how wild and distant from home, from men she has Become.*

Yezidi song of mourning: Hizreta Heso

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17 Collected in Christine Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan* pp. 277 —I prefer to read this as the mother having gone wild and “become man” while
The revolution in Rojava (like the entire Syrian civil war) is a hive swarming with competing stories, interpretations, and ideological investments by numerous factions. Whichever particles this essay succeeds in capturing and putting to use will necessarily fail to convey the complexity of the situation. Nevertheless, it is instructive and inspiring to try to understand what is happening. As far as I can tell—all issues aside—Rojava is currently the best option for a decent society in Syria. In principle it is a communal model for a horizontal, democratic society that gives equal voice to all. Not only is it an alternative to the brutality of Daesh and the extreme violent repression of the Assad regime, it is a social experiment that calls into question many of the most entrenched social hierarchies.

Arguably the most radical aspect of this experiment in social reconstruction is the attempt to destroy patriarchy. The struggle for women in Rojava doesn’t simply seek to acquire equal rights for both genders, it seeks the abolition of any hierarchical difference between genders in all social relations—from the home to the government to, of course, the battlefields. The empowerment of women, as conceived in the Rojava revolution, is not just one step in the process of creating equality; it is a cornerstone of the revolutionary philosophy. Patriarchy is seen as central to the development of all forms of domination, and as such is a primary target for beginning the process of social transformation. As Öcalan says in his pamphlet Liberating Life: Women’s Revolution, “The depth of woman’s enslavement and the intentional masking of simultaneously becoming distant from domestically dominant “man”, but I understand that’s a stretched interpretation.
this fact is…closely linked to the rise within a society of hierarchical and statist power.”

In practice, all communes and councils are composed of at least 40 percent women, and there are also parallel women’s councils that make decisions regarding domestic violence and any issues affecting women. These women’s councils retain the right to veto any decisions made by the general councils that are perceived as negatively impacting women’s rights. The women’s councils come together at the *mala jinan*—women’s house—to make decisions impacting a wider administrative region. This is enacted in law; Articles 27 and 28 of the social contract—effectively Rojava’s constitution—explicitly state the inviolable right of women to participate in all aspects of life on a basis completely equal to men,¹⁹ something that is conspicuously absent from the United States constitution. ²⁰ The political structure encompassing the women’s councils, as well as the women’s division of the Asayis—local security forces—and the YPJ (Women’s Protection Units), is designed to defend women’s rights, safety, and economic independence.

The idea that women are the first colonized people is built into the political philosophy in Rojava, and one major step in decolonizing women has been the creation of a new social science, called *jineology*. *Jin* being Kurdish for “woman” and *logy* derived from *logos*, or knowledge. According to Gönül Kaya, “rulers and power holders establish their systems first in thought,” so the

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movement in Rojava proposes “jineology as a necessary strategy towards overcoming the prevailing...system [in] the field of science and constructing an alternative system of science liberated from sexism.” Dilar Dirik shows that jineology even tries to push the boundaries of feminism when she claims that

While defining itself as a women’s science or women’s quest for knowledge itself, an objection that jineology poses to feminism is that it often occupies itself with analyzing social issues merely through gender lenses. While deconstructing gender roles and patriarchy has immensely contributed to our understanding of sexism and other forms of violence and oppression, this has not always successfully proposed what kind of alternative we can collectively create instead. If concepts such as man and woman, no matter how socially constructed they may be, look like they will persist in the minds of people for a while, should we perhaps try to set new terms of existence, provide them with a liberationist essence in the attempt to overcome them?

As mentioned above, the women’s movement in Rojava transcends equal rights. Öcalan sees the subjection of women as having happened through “two turning points between the sexes,” or “sexual ruptures”—the first being the male’s violent takeover of familial power and control of the domestic economy, the second being the rise of monotheistic religions—and he hypothesizes a third sexual rupture which will undo this subjection. The third sexual rupture requires “killing the dominant male,” and is to be beneficial for everyone, male and female (and hopefully those outside of the binary as well), because it entails liberating all people from their roles in the cycle of domination. As Öcalan says, “capitalism and the nation-state represent the dominant male in its most

23 Abdullah Öcalan, Liberating Life, 2013, 43
institutionalized form.” Therefore this rupture is meant to signify the destruction of the most hegemonic hierarchical relations in general.24 Havin Güneşer, speaking about the PKK and specifically Öcalan’s shift in the mid ‘90s towards “killing the dominant male,” explains the early stage of this third sexual rupture:

> From thereon, the women’s freedom struggle became more radicalized. It began discussing how to mentally, psychologically, and culturally break away from dominant notions of modernity. Parallel to this effort, the movement also sought a project of transforming the male mentality. To this end, women bestowed education upon men.25

So the sexual rupture isn’t just a shift in relations to increase women’s role in the status quo, it is a social revolution that *restructures the entire idea of maleness*. It is not just the liberation of women from men; it is also the liberation of men from the limitations of their own patriarchal mentalities. It is revolutionary in that it aims to demolish the entire status quo and build a completely new order of how men and women relate—what Michael Taussig brilliantly termed “the mastery of non-mastery.”26 There is a strange irony here in the fact that these ideas emanate from the very masculine, paternal figure of Abdullah Öcalan—and are received with an almost worshipful reverence, like revelations from an angel bestowed in a dank cave. But does that even matter? He is hailed as the people’s philosopher, the guiding light of Kurdish liberation, and ultimately he serves more as a floating signifier—a constant reminder of *the idea*—than as a leader. By publicizing these ideas he is ultimately urging women to take their own initiative rather than paternalistically suggesting a vanguard do it for them (and also

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24 All of this comes from Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life*, 2013, 43
25 Havin Güneşer, “Feminicide” collected in *Stateless Democracy* 2015, 62
26 Michael Taussig “The Mastery of Non-Mastery” *Public Seminar*, August 2015
preemptively stopping male chauvinists from attempting to deny them agency in this task). Indeed he concludes Liberating Life by imploring

> The struggle for women’s freedom must be waged through the establishment of their own political parties, attaining a popular women’s movement, building their own non-governmental organizations and structures of democratic politics.  

Whatever authority he wields from his island prison is auto-subverted by declaring the death of the male and equal rights for all. Despite his ever-present cult of personality, his message serves to decentralize power and empower individuals to take control of their own lives.

One criticism of Öcalan’s writing on patriarchy, which appeared in an article simply titled “Rojava” in the journal Capitalism Nature Socialism, claims:

> In subordinating evidence and theory to contemporary political necessities, there may be contradictory repercussions resulting from Öcalan’s approach. Patriarchal systems are treated in such homogenous fashion as to make it impossible to distinguish them historically or geographically and hence to devise effective political strategies to undermine those not specific to the particular historical geographic juncture.

The author continues to contrast the use of female nudity to deter state forces in Nigeria with Femen’s tactics in Europe, which often have the opposite result. This is a valid critique, and one that is well worth considering—especially before trying to apply Öcalan’s ideas outside of Rojava. However it seems to be asking a bit much to expect Öcalan to universalize the particulars of his argument when there is an actual revolution underway in his specific context. His call for women to form their own movements, political groups, and “structures of democratic

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27 Abdullah Öcalan, Liberating Life, 2013, 60
28 S A Engel-Di Mauro. “Rojava” Capitalism Nature Socialism 26:1, 5
“politics” would suggest that it is up to women to take the lead in fighting patriarchy in their “historical geographical juncture,” using the tactics that they see fit; and it is the job of males to join them in struggle and show solidarity, not to theorize their liberation for them.

It should be clarified that this critique of patriarchy and the call to kill the dominant male is universal; despite whatever tactical blindspots it may have in various geographical contexts. It applies to the west just as much as to the Middle East. Öcalan’s theory claims that civilization itself spawned the problem—and so any imposition of a ‘civilized and permissive West versus barbaric and misogynistic East’ discourse is absurd; patriarchy also thrives in the west. Thus democratic confederalism is not in line with the imperialist feminist trope of Islam’s supposed oppression of women as an excuse for Islamophobia and military intervention.²⁹ In fact, I would interpret the use of militarism as a way to “liberate” women as another facet of patriarchal masculinity.

The Social Communal Economy

_In the cage there is food._
_Not much, but there is food._
_Outside are only great stretches of freedom._

-Nicanor Parra³⁰

How is Rojavan society organized and how does it function in practice? The political structure that is being built in Rojava functions on a multitier democracy. The base of the social structure is the commune (Kumin), which is the smallest and most-used unit of society. Communes collectively administer small

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²⁹ For more on this, see Deepa Kumar in [https://www.opendemocracy.net/deepa-kumar/imperialist-feminism-and-liberalism/](https://www.opendemocracy.net/deepa-kumar/imperialist-feminism-and-liberalism/) (November 2014)

geographical areas; in Qamishlo, Rojava’s biggest city, there are around 97 communes, each with about 350 families taking part. Each commune has six committees dealing with social issues, youth, women’s issues, peace, self-defense, and economic issues. Communes are co-managed by one male and one female, who are elected by direct vote of all members, and governance is shared by members across sectarian (Christian, Shi’a, Sunni, Alevite), ethnic (Kurd, Arab, Assyrian, Syriac, Chaldean, Turkmen, Armenian, Chechen), and political lines. Multiple communes in a region meet together in the Peoples House (Mala Gel), where bigger decisions are made. Peoples Houses send delegates to city assemblies, which then send delegates to the cantonal bodies. The three cantons in Rojava—Afrin, Kobani, and Cizire—each have their own self-government and constitution based on the social contract, and adhering to the principles of democratic confederalism. Generally speaking, the communes undertake small, local projects, while larger infrastructural projects, like road building, are executed by the cantons in cooperation with the communes. The broadest unifying body, which encompasses the three cantons, is TEV-DEM. TEV-DEM acts in place of a state, even though it is vocal about its opposition to the idea of a state, and—due to the mindset internalized by many during colonization, occupation, and the previous regime—people occasionally treat it like a bureaucratic state system. Some people also misunderstand the communes,

32 Ali B. “Eroding the State in Rojava” Theory & Event 19:1. 2016. This article calls the ethnic and religious diversity in Rojava an “on the ground reality.” This list of ethnicities also comes out of Rojava’s Charter of the Social Contract.
33 Same source as footnote #31
thinking of them as charities for the poor. Changing this misconception and encouraging broad participation in the communal system is a main goal of the social revolution, which “is more intellectual than material.” To this end education is free, and there are schools and academies that teach history, sociology, and law using a radical pedagogy based on self-reflexivity.

This political structure is promising in theory, especially the reliance on communal direct democracy, but as it moves up the chain of assemblies it runs the risk of becoming a sort of representative democracy, which—while far better than the previous situation of no representation at all—doesn’t stretch the possibilities of revolution very far; the problem of representation remains, and with it the looming specter of domination. Hannah Arendt reminds us that “The traditional alternative between representation as a mere substitute for direct action of the people and representation as a popularly controlled rule of the people’s representatives over the people constitutes one of those dilemmas which permit no solution.” On the scale of the commune this is not an issue—perhaps the commune is even the elusive solution—but as decision-making processes move up the representative ladder, it can be assumed that authority will eventually consolidate at the top. Or almost the top, as there will probably still be an image of Öcalan’s disembodied face gazing down upon everything. Later in this essay I will address the ways in which the Rojavan concept of self-

defense, as well as a Kristevan reading of “revolt” might be able to combat this issue.

The economic principles at play in Rojava are a little harder to pin down. With the ideological move away from dogmatic Marxist-Leninism, and the “shift in the revolutionary subject from worker to woman,” there is not a clear economic path already set forth. Öcalan wrote about three “courses” of economic development—capitalism, Soviet communism, and post-communist neoliberalism—and proposes a fourth course, a social communal economy. In practice it is yet to be seen what this means, but it’s worth examining a few of the conditions in which it is coming into being.

Under authoritarian Ba’athist rule, the Syrian state controlled resource production in specific ways to manipulate populations and increase reliance on the centralized state. Ali B. provides a couple pointed examples in his article “Eroding the State in Rojava”:

(A)lthough eastern Rojava, mostly around the city of Derik, has most of the petroleum deposits in Syria (about half of all the wells), it has no large-scale refineries. Prior to the Syrian War, the petroleum was transported to Baniyas and Homs…A similar situation concerns the agricultural system of the region…Rojava was conceived of as Syria’s breadbasket with a heavy emphasis on solely growing wheat…This centralized division of the economy where monocultures undercut self-sufficiency is one of the ways which state patronage was facilitated during the Assad regime.

This indicates that the economy will have to be built from scratch in order to diversify production and pursue self-sufficiency. In an interview in 2014, Dr. Ahmet Yusuf, president of the Committee on Economy and Trade of the Afrin

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37 Ali B. “Eroding the State in Rojava”
Joshua Pollock

Autonomous Canton, explained that the committee was “meeting with people from all social backgrounds” to hear their demands and wishes, and develop projects accordingly.\(^{38}\) He says that the process will begin with agricultural production and animal husbandry, and then move towards small-scale industrialization to process olive products. This is all to be done on the cooperative model, although there are privately owned companies—such as local oil companies—which have to be in agreement with the self-government. It has not been specified how private oil companies can be prevented from instituting class-based capitalist structures, this is obviously problematic. Regardless, reports show that there are fully functioning agricultural cooperatives, and there are plans to increase the number of cooperatives.\(^{39}\) TEV-DEM recently released a statement claiming that eighteen agricultural cooperatives have been established in Cizire canton—twelve general coops and six women’s coops—which have planted on 328,270 acres and begun raising livestock.\(^{40}\) Dr. Ahmet Yusuf mentions developing trade relations with neighbors, including Turkey, which is an absurd proposition at this point. Other than the Turkish border, hostile forces such as Daesh or the Iraqi KRG—which enforces Turkey’s embargo—control alternate trade routes.

As it stands currently, Rojava is being suffocated under the embargo and the economy is operating on a level of bare survival—especially considering the needs of the many thousands of refugees that have settled in the region. There is

\(^{38}\) “Rojava’s Economic Model is a Communal Model”. *A Small Key…* 2015

This statement is also interesting because it lays out all of the plans, rules and principles of the cooperatives.
a minimal amount of income from small-scale oil and diesel production, but it
doesn’t even approach the amounts needed to rebuild. This is indicative of a
central paradox of democratic autonomy, or any revolution: the tension between
an ideological system based around non-state self-sufficiency and the harsh
reality of scarce amenities (like electricity and clean water), the constant
economic drain of fighting a war, and a lack of financial means for the
community cooperatives to develop the resources they have. To manage this
problem would require either the incursion of foreign capital (thus
compromising autonomy), or some sort of transnational solidarity meant to help
ease the current situation until self-sufficiency can be achieved.

Rojava, a society that has little experience with self-government, is facing
massive threats to its stability. A lot of western voices on the left are dismissive
of Rojava because it doesn’t meet their dogmatic criteria of an ideal society, but
social reconstruction is a long process, especially during a war. International
solidarity will be essential to the survival of the experiment, because if basic
needs aren’t met the social revolution won’t develop, and that will be a loss for
all of us.

**Democracy Without a State?**

*It is said that the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class
struggle. It might be said, with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of
peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the State.*

- Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*41

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Öcalan refers to his system as “democracy without a state”\(^{42}\), but others have called the PYD’s administration in Rojava “a state without a state.”\(^{43}\) The backbone of *Democratic Confederalism* (the text) is a critique of the nation-state as “the maximum form of power...[which] domesticates the society in the name of capitalism... The nation-state in its original form aimed at the monopolization of all social processes...an approach that led to assimilation and genocide.”\(^{44}\) And the revolution in Rojava has been clear that it has absolutely no aspiration to build a nation-state. The idea is to retain autonomy and democracy through a federation of self-governed cantons within the borders of Syria (whatever Syria will look like after the war). As Simon Critchley would put it: “at a distance from the state” but still “within the state” at what might be called “an interstitial distance.” Critchley claims that “the task of radical political articulations is the creation of interstitial distance within the state territory.”\(^{45}\) Whether or not one agrees that the task of radical political articulations should include the continuation of the state at all, this creation of interstitial distance—a fissure in capitalist modernity—is essentially what is occurring in Rojava. It is true that simply smashing the state to bits in one go and then figuring out what to do next seems unrealistic, but how sustainable is an autonomous self-government—this space carved out for oneself—when it is situated in the precarious territory of a hostile state? Especially when the nation-state “monopolizes all social processes, leading to assimilation and genocide”?

\(^{42}\) Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, 2011, 21
\(^{44}\) ibid 10-12
\(^{45}\) Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 2007, 113
Despite Öcalan’s reassurance that “states only administrate while democracies govern,” I have trouble seeing how democracy as a form of government—rather than as a political process—ends up being something other than an unrecognized state. Indeed, after visiting Kobani, Michael Taussig mentions how his traveling companion noted “‘the paradox’ in all three Syrian Kurdish cantons is that they perform as if there is a state even if there is not and even if they are against the idea of a state.”46 Non-state but state-like organizations are a good example of the type of contradiction existing in the space between the philosophy and enactment of democratic confederalism. There will inevitably be some contradiction, and this can be okay because it means that it has not yet calcified into dogma. It provides an opening for critical discussion of what the philosophy means, which would hopefully create new ideas allowing the revolution to evolve, ideally towards the communal and away from the state. It has been suggested that the Rojavan form of self-government is a “differently governed space that is [deriving] its legitimacy not [from] being a state or receiving the recognition of other states, but from its capacity to organize and provide those public services and goods that a state is supposed to deliver.”47 This view severs governance—or at least a method of providing people with necessities—from the state, which is essential to thinking about Rojava. But it doesn’t suggest how such governance—which would still hold control of surplus

46 Michael Taussig, “the Mastery of Non-Mastery”
47 This quote is from a paper by Juan Camilo Pantoja Garcia called “Communitarianism and Law Without the State,” accessed at: https://www.academia.edu/10578618/Communitarianism_and_Law_without_the_State_The_Autonomous_Region_of_Rojava_Western_Kurdistan_in_Northern_Syria_as_a_non-state_form_of_social_organization/ (Written December 2014). I altered it slightly to fix a few typos.
goods and services—can function without turning into a state. As long as the “differently governed space,” and the philosophy of democratic confederalism don’t become as static and rigid as all those frozen pictures of Apo (as Öcalan is lovingly called) then there is still a chance that democracy can be a process rather than a monolith.

Wendy Brown worries that “perhaps democracy, like liberation, could only ever materialize as protest and, especially today, ought to be formally demoted from a form of governance to a politics of resistance.”48 I think this politics of resistance is more fruitful than an fixed form of governance for Rojava.

Besides the obvious threat of a takeover by Daesh or other hostile forces, or destruction by Turkey, the Rojava revolution’s biggest enemies are internal: stagnation and regression—that is, falling back into capitalist, patriarchal, state formations. If Rojava petrifies into a quasi petro-state under the rule of PYD “democracy,” if patriarchy and ethnic strife persist, then the struggle for autonomy will have largely been a failure. Dilar Dirik says that,

The idea of a nation-state perpetuates the dominant oppressive hegemonic system. Rather than subscribing to these concepts, liberation should be seen as a never-ending struggle, a quest to build an ethical society, solidarity between communities, and social justice.49

Thus the never-ending struggle isn’t just the process—it’s the goal—and this ongoing quest, this vigilance, is essential to preventing new hierarchies from forming within the revolution, essential if the revolution is to continue. This

48 Wendy Brown, “We Are All Democrats Now...” from Democracy in What State, 2011, 115
49 Dilar Dirik, “The Women’s Revolution in Rojava”, A Small Key, 2015, 61
continual critique, this constant becoming, is at the heart of what Julia Kristeva refers to with the word revolt. She pointedly warns us:

The events of the Twentieth Century... have shown us that political “revolts”—Revolutions—ultimately betrayed revolt, especially the psychic sense of the term. Why? Because revolt, as I understand it—psychic revolt, analytic revolt, artistic revolt—refers to a permanent questioning, of transformation, change, and endless probing of appearances. The history of political revolts shows that the process of questioning has ceased.  

And of course Kristeva’s warning is a real concern—that political revolution will quash psychic revolt. I will return to this concern later when I discuss self-defense.

**The Rise of the Ziggurat**

When you bury an epoch  
You do not sing psalms at the tomb.  
Soon, nettles and thistles  
Will be in bloom.

-Anna Akhmatova*

As we have established, the revolutionary experiment in Rojava is heavily inspired by the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan, yet because he writes from solitary confinement he is unable to respond to the immediate circumstances of the revolution. He instead embodies a kind of impetus to question the very building blocks of civilization—such as the nuclear family—and his theory can be seen as a sort of supporting structure used by the revolution. There are a few reasons that the revolution in Rojava has embraced Öcalan’s theories and used them to construct its political system. I won’t get into Kurdish history here, there

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are many books on the subject, and due to lack of space I also have to gloss over the brutal conditions that have prepared the foundation for a Kurdish rejection of the nation-state. But the founding of the PKK and its subsequent ideological introspection and change of trajectory are important. Öcalan, as a primary co-founder of the PKK, has long played the role of Kurdish national hero. He has been both exalted for his struggle and resented for the difficulties presented by the Turkish state’s collective punishment of civilians. The PKK began as a Marxist-Leninist national liberation guerrilla army that has been fighting an extended war with Turkey. The PKK was the central organ struggling for Kurdish liberation, and is the precursor to (and provides much manpower, funds, and military experience for) the Rojava revolution. But, as S. A. Engel-Di Mauro reminds us in the article called “Rojava,” the PKK was a highly authoritarian military structure that carried out attacks on civilians and may have even assassinated former members.\footnote{S A Engel-Di Mauro, “Rojava” Capitalism, Nature, Socialism. 2015}

Öcalan recalls this long period of the PKK with regretful justification, claiming that in the political environment of the Cold War they wanted to be “in the real-socialist camp,” and had undeveloped ideas.\footnote{Abdullah Öcalan, Prison Writings III—The Road Map to Negotiations. Cologne:International Initiative. 2012.} By the 1990s, some in the PKK—including Öcalan—began to reassess the organization’s political ideology and tactical path. Öcalan became critical of Marxist dogma, eventually admitting that “Marxists failed to see that the proletariat consisted of re-conquered slaves.”\footnote{Abdullah Öcalan, Manifesto for a Democratic Society. 2015, 40} He recalls, “The real transformation in PKK occurred when it
abandoned its goal to establish a state, and its state-centered approach in general, and adopted the course toward democratic political formations.”

This is when the pluralistic, anti-patriarchal, democratic project began. The ethnic majority Kurds in Rojava and Bakur (Northern Kurdistan, in Turkey) aligned themselves with the PKK and its ideological transition, and Öcalan spent many years living in Rojava, creating connections within local communities and cultivating local legitimacy. When the Assad regime pulled out and the possibility for autonomy appeared, Öcalan’s political philosophy was presumably the most relatable and culturally appropriate point of departure. Of course, as previously mentioned, the influence of these theories doesn’t translate into strict adherence; due to circumstance Öcalan does not—can not—communicate regularly with anyone in Rojava.

As implied by the Öcalan quote above, and restated continually in this essay, democratic confederalism maintains a clear opposition to the idea of building a state and in fact hinges on a deep critique of the nation-state structure in general. Due to the absolute ideological hegemony that the nation-state paradigm holds in the current world system, and the relative rarity of non-state social organization of this scale, this aspect of Rojava’s self-government can seem unbelievable or unrealistic at times. In this section I will undertake to examine this critique of the nation-state and explore some of the difficulties involved in trying to enact what Öcalan has called a “contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people.”

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56 S A Engel-Di Mauro, “Rojava” 2015
57 Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, 2011, 33
committees that have replaced state courts, I think that it applies to this intention
to build a non-state society, and indeed applies to the entire revolution, when
Küçük and Özselçuk assert that

(W)e 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.58

This view keeps the project grounded in the quest mentioned earlier by Dirik, the struggle for constant reinvention—a dynamic democracy—and in Kristeva’s revolt rather than assuming that the state must be replaced with a comparable but ideologically different apparatus. This is especially important when talking about the PYD, TEV-DEM, and other pockets where it seems possible that state-like structures may concretize.

Öcalan is explicit in his tract Democratic Confederatism that the kind of self-government being proposed “can be called a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state.”59 The idea of severing democracy from the state is essential to the revolutionary project in Rojava, but the phantom-like “state” remains ambiguously defined. Indeed, the state as a structure of organization and political analysis has become so hegemonic that it is often—when thought of as a constructed object at all—taken for granted as either necessary or an amorphous enemy to be smashed. After at least a century of debate it remains contentious and unclear what the state actually is.60 Therefore it is important to

59 Öcalan, Democratic Confederatism. 2011, 21
60 For an interesting discussion of this, see Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State” in The Anthropology of the State, eds: Sharma & Gupta. Malden:
look at Öcalan’s writings on the state in order to better understand the theoretical foundations of the Rojava revolution.

In contrast to the Eurocentric narrative of the state, Öcalan traces the roots of the modern state to ancient Mesopotamia, and the rise of Sumerian civilization in particular. He claims that “the Taurus-Zagros Arc—the so called Fertile Crescent—was the main gathering and dispersion point for humans as they exited Africa through the East African Rift.” Here people transitioned from nomadic life to settled life, and the “Era of Farming” began. Öcalan’s account differs slightly in his early and later works, but he generally hews to the theory that once human labor produced a surplus—due to technological advances in irrigation and agricultural techniques that arose in the Fertile Crescent—an administrative class based around the early religious priesthood emerged to appropriate and administer the surplus and “the dimension of servitude is introduced into human relations, and with it the notion of property.” He is also very clear throughout his work that a major cause of societal transition from an idyllic, matriarchal civilization to Sumerian priesthood civilization was the male usurpation of domestic power and the imposition of the family unit. Stemming from this new set of relations, temples—or ziggurats—were built as centers of social governance and to coordinate labor. These ziggurats were “conceived as earthly representations of the celestial order,” and as such provided the priests with a

Blackwell. 2006. Abrams proceeds in this essay by suggesting that the state is “a reification which in itself seriously obstructs the effective study of...political power.”

63 Ibid. 72
64 Öcalan, Prison Writings, 2007. 6
“firm hegemony over the minds of the people and became the main source of political authority.” Thus, the Mesopotamian ziggurat “was the womb of state institutions.” The system revolving around the ziggurat further entrenched the subjugation of women when it created the role of woman as love-object. A specific section of the ziggurat was used to train women and marry them off to distinguished males; this brought the temple money and spread its ideology—through trained women—into new tribes. In brief, the priests, as ideologues, created the conditions for the transition to a divinely ordained dynastic kingship, under which individuals were deprived of agency by necessity of their subservience to the supposed celestial order and women became objectified. The growth of the Sumerian (and also Egyptian) civilization and its economic success fostered the idea of superiority, which then justified imperial/cultural expansion. As land was conquered and populations grew, the slave-holding state arose to deal with excess population and to create excess wealth. To quote Öcalan at length,

Despite the modernist’s cherished opinion that the state is a rational expression of human reason, we might do better to take it as a theological, dogmatic expression of the human mind. I suggest that civilization, and the state as its most essential feature, are tantamount to a theological manifestation of the dogmatic mode of comprehension predominant at the primitive stage of the formation of classes, where rational thinking had not yet evolved. In that respect the state might be the most outdated tool we use today.

65 Ibid
66 Ibid
67 Öcalan, 2015. 103-104
68 Öcalan, 2007. 22
This quick rundown of the origins of the state is a vastly simplified account of Öcalan’s work, however it retains the suggestion of something that the Marxist account of the state often overlooks or transmutes into its own class-based dogma—the importance of a divine claim to power as the precursor to ideological authority. Öcalan continues to stress the theological underpinnings of the state throughout his writing, emphasizing the danger of political power presenting itself as divine in nature. He uses this early account of the state and the critique of divinely inviolable politics to further distance himself from his former Marxist ideology in passages like the following:

The slave-holding state is far too complex a phenomenon to be exhaustively penetrated by means of a vintage Marxian class analysis. Its constitution, covered with the ferment of ideology and permeated by violence, is the basic constitution of all states to the present day. I would not exempt real socialist states from this verdict. The espousal of secularism alone is not good enough to vanquish this reality: the class character of the state now entered the realm of the political as a sacrosanct claim.⁶⁹

It is informative to look at Öcalan’s ideas about the genealogy of the state (albeit we’re not actually much closer to a definition of what the state is) in order to track the roots of his philosophy and rejection of Marxist-Leninism; however as capitalism and globalization have developed, the nature of the state has likewise changed. This critique of the state is incisive, and historicizing it is important, but by focusing too heavily on the state’s distant roots one may run the risk of overlooking the oblique yet ubiquitous aspects of modern state power that are much harder to analyze, and thus much harder to subvert.

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⁶⁹ Ibid. 103
Öcalan is well aware of what happens when the state is simply taken over or a new state is built in place of the old—he states it explicitly in the conclusion to *Democratic Confederalism*—but he also says that “the state will be overcome when democratic confederalism has proved its problem-solving capacities with a view to social issues.”\(^{70}\) Despite Öcalan’s respectful yet unforgiving takedown of Marxism, this type of prediction falls right back on a faulty trope of the same Marxist dogma—that as the social revolution progresses, the state will simply wither away. There have been ample historical examples that refute this theory.

Mohammed Bamyeh puts it plainly when he states that “Because it is not in the nature of the beast to kill itself once its work is done, a state of this nature will not wither away when no one needs it—certainly not of its own volition.”\(^{71}\) Bamyeh justifies his anthropomorphizing the state by introducing the *raison d’état*, or state reason. He claims that “the state develops a self-referencing logic…and then proceeds to co-opt a hitherto autonomous civil society.”\(^{72}\) And adds that

> Since at its roots state reason has to do with maintaining the state itself as a distinct institution of power over society, the basic elements of state reason do not vary…Under all circumstances, a constant principle of state reason is that the state has only itself as reference point for its own logic.\(^ {73}\)

I think there are convincing arguments that show that the state is not actually a “distinct institution of power over society,” but Bamyeh’s point that the state’s top priority is to perpetuate itself, especially by co-opting popular forms of

\(^{70}\) Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*. 2011, 32
\(^{71}\) Mohammed A. Bamyeh. *Anarchy as Order*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. 2009. 42
\(^{72}\) Ibid. 71
\(^{73}\) Ibid. 73
organization, is quite important (Öcalan will later point out that capitalist modernity is equally if not more adept at this assimilation of subversion). Following this logic, it would seem to be only a matter of time before latent state power left over in Rojava begins absorbing aspects of the democratic system.

That said, it has also been suggested that TEV-DEM, the closest thing to a state institution in Rojava, has been eroding its own power through land redistribution. Ali B. reports that idle land is distributed first to poor families and families of martyrs. Decisions about whether or not to use other lands for cooperatives are decided in meetings of communal delegates. In September 2015 it was stated that more than 35,000 acres of land previously belonging to the regime had been redistributed. The same account continues,

During the first year, about a third of this land was cultivated under wartime conditions, with a considerable amount of the revenue also contributing to that effort. The following year, land was distributed to 2,020 families. That year TEV-DEM took 30 percent of the revenue and the following year reduced it to 20 percent. At the meeting I attended, the vote was in favor of starting a cooperative and therefore using the profits for the collective needs of the communes. Upon making this decision TEV-DEM’s share was reduced to 10 percent.

TEV-DEM’s continued reduction of its landholding stake and revenue is inconsistent with Bamyeh’s state reason. Whether this means that TEV-DEM is not a state power or that Bamyeh (along with many other theorists) was wrong and the state can wither away doesn’t really matter—they are both desirable propositions in this circumstance.

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74 Guy Debord more or less argues the same in Society of the Spectacle as well.
75 This information comes from Ali B. “Eroding the State in Rojava”
76 Ibid.
77 I’m not convinced of the latter.
While this reduction in “state” power is clearly promising, it would be imprudent to ignore Foucault’s exhortations about the ambiguous and diffuse mechanisms of power, or to imagine that para-state institutions (like banks, oil companies, etc.) don’t exert a significant amount of power—which is often intertwined with or indistinguishable from state power—across the globe (although perhaps less so in Rojava due to the embargo). As mentioned above, the ziggurat may well be the ancestor to the state apparatus, but it only advances a theory of the modern state so far. The two are hardly identical today, and state power is no longer located in a central location outside of the everyday (if it ever was). In his search for a different approach to “the question of the state and its relationship to society and economy,” Timothy Mitchell proposes that

We should address the state as an effect of mundane processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, supervision and surveillance, and representation that create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society or state and economy. The essence of modern politics is not policies formed on one side of this division being applied to or shaped by the other, but the producing and reproducing of these lines of difference.78

He continues to say that the perceived distinctions created by these lines of difference, “on which most political theorizing is built, are themselves partly constructed in those mundane social processes we recognize and name as the state.”79 This returns us to Bourdieu’s warning about state produced and imposed thought, and illustrates the insidious ways that state power has infiltrated most aspects of life.

78 Timothy Mitchell, “Society, Economy, and the State Effect” The Anthropology of the State. 2006. 185
79 Ibid
One obvious implication here, if you agree with Mitchell’s proposition that state, society, and economy are all one hand, is that the idea of social revolution is indispensable if the state power apparatus is to be disassembled. Society, just like conceptions of the dominant male, will have to be killed, and a new sociality will have to be built. In a place liked Kobani, “spatial organization” has already been reset to square one, but “a permanent state of questioning” will have to exist in order to root out the state elsewhere. Recognizing that social relations are not separate from the state and reorganizing them into an egalitarian structure, will, by necessity, reorganize the state as well. If it can be eradicated is impossible to know, but by continuing to struggle for the social revolution through the spirit of Kristeva’s revolt, it can perhaps be kept at bay. The economy is a more distant problem at this point—and one that I’m not sure how to approach—but I do believe that the fact that social revolution is at the forefront of the Rojava revolution is a more potent tactic than any armed force could ever be.

Beyond the Existence-Vacuum Duality

To speak as such, does one solely strike aim at a comet? Or does one transcendentally seek refuge in the powers which infuse anonymous hurricanes and tsunamis?

-Will Alexander

In his more recent writing, Öcalan has expanded his focus from the state form to “capitalist modernity.” Capitalist modernity is the pervasive system of thought—

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80 Julia Kristeva, Revolt, She Said. 2002.
Joshua Pollock

built upon the nation-state, capitalism, and patriarchy—that serves as the basis for our current civilization. To this end he has written a wide-ranging critique of the “regimes of truth” that enable capitalist modernity, and which forcibly orient beliefs and discourses around their assumptions. In the introduction to his text *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization: Volume 1*—the first book of a proposed five volume work—he states, “The real power of capitalist modernity is not its money or its weapons; its real power lies in its ability to suffocate all utopias—including the socialist utopia…with its liberalism.”82 The rise of liberal capitalist modernity parallels that of the rise of the state, from the religious method of interpreting the world to the enlightenment, when the scientific method became prominent. The scientific method was meant to be a new way to find “truth” in the universe, and through this methodology arose Roger and Francis Bacon’s concept of objectivity. Öcalan sees the concept of objectivity as an essential key to “capitalism’s exploitation and domination of nature and society.”83 The conception of nature and society as objects to be severed from and used by the individual has “torn apart the whole—right down to its smallest unit. Hence, the integrity of social life and its indivisibility with time and location were lost to us.”84

This regime of truth and capitalist modernity—its progeny—has dominated everything, leaving us with a life devoid of meaning. Modernity, according to Öcalan, has produced “death camps, atomic bombs, wars of ethnic cleansing, destruction of the environment, and increased cancer and AIDS,”

82 Öcalan, 2015. 23
83 Ibid. 36
84 Ibid. 38
which necessitates “an urgent counter-quest for truth.”

This truth comes about through the pursuit of a free life founded in love. Öcalan insists that in order to create a new world “one of our practical responsibilities today is to see the materialization of our utopias of freedom and equality by building these ideals into social structures.” In other words, meaning and truth have to be pursued collectively and proactively, built into our daily lives. Truth and meaning are created through sociality—something Öcalan must be painfully aware of in his isolation.

In an attempt to explain the conditions in which elements converge to form a social entity—parts becoming a whole—Öcalan expands his theory wildly into a speculative biological and physical theory of life, evolution, and the universe. He begins with an assessment of the human being as a living alignment of atomic particles, the brain being the unity of matter, energy and thought. He asks if the unity realized in a human being could be a characteristic of the universe as well. In Öcalan’s view, all matter has the potential to come alive, just as it may be lifeless—this potential aliveness is interpreted through the fact that every action causes a reaction. He wonders if the universe might be composed of just the dual antagonism of a humongous black hole and matter. Is matter non-matter that makes itself visible? He suggests that there is no existence without a vacuum, or vacuum without existence, but if we are able to stretch our minds we can surpass these boundaries and they would thus disappear. What would be left then? Maybe something exists beyond the existence-vacuum duality, something “more meaningful” than “God”—perhaps the meaning of life. Is the

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85 Ibid. 43
86 Ibid. 43-44
universe—this antagonism between black hole and the radiation of energy—a giant living being? “Can love and hate, good and bad, beauty and ugliness, right and wrong all be reflections of this universe?” This is all so beautiful and wonderful and absurd. To break out of modern logic or state thought, perhaps you have to twist your brain in strange and new ways. According to Öcalan, “those who are looking for justice have the duty to look for the how and why of life,” and he undertakes a dizzying effort to do so.

Analyzing the diversity of the world, Öcalan wrests science from rationalism. The plant and animal kingdom provide living examples of the importance of evolution and mutation, self-defense and preservation of previous forms of existence. Öcalan builds to a reintroduction or reclamation of metaphysics—out of which morality emerges. It is a socially constructed metaphysics that will replace modernity’s positivism and approach “the ideal of good, beautiful, free and true.” Because “a meaningful life within society is only possible when lived according to this art of a virtuous life.” Politics and self-governance will be metaphysical, says Öcalan, because politics based solely on physical rules results in “robot-like” fascism. Humans are too dynamic for that, we want freedom and choice, meaning that politics will have to be built upon ideals that can’t be physically handled—like ethics.

Öcalan is relentless in his quest to open doors to new possibilities and to shift the frame of reference in an attempt to rethink the world anew. He crafts a utopian political program, but he is not so deluded as to assume that it is

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87 Ibid. 47, for most of this page.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid. 59. Italics in original.
complete or that he has all of the answers. He openly acknowledges that “more important than denouncing a particular method or searching for an alternative is investigating the possible interpretations of the concept of free life.” In other words, revolt over revolution. How can one devise a method to achieve something that they don’t fully understand? In this sense Öcalan’s theories are more valuable for liberating the life of Kurds—and everyone else—than the armed revolution.  

Henri Lefebvre, trying to break theory out of dogma, and sever the impetus to be realistic, once said:

> In political thought and political theory, the category (concept) of the “real” should not be permitted to obscure that of the possible. Rather, it is the possible that should serve as the theoretical instrument for exploring the real.

This is exactly the framework from which Öcalan writes. “The possible” is his method and his goal, a theoretical instrument meant to spawn new potentialities that span distant history to unknown futures. His texts are hand-written in one go—with no opportunity to revise—from inhumane conditions of solitary confinement. The “real” is both so far removed from and so suffocatingly close to the vacuum in which he is forced to exist that the possible becomes the only thing that is bearable, the only way to live. He writes about the past as a method to achieve a future because the present is a black hole. From his jail cell he sprinkles nostalgic personal memories through his political writing, pleading

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90 Ibid. 38
91 Of course, in a situation like Rojava, this type of reflection can’t be undertaken without simultaneously engaging in armed self-defense.
93 See Editors Note in Öcalan, Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, 2015.
that everyone reconsider their relationship with their mother “after having shattered modernity in their own minds.”\footnote{Abdullah Öcalan, \textit{Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization}. 2015, 92} It is striking that after everything, when Öcalan writes very personally of his main regrets, he laments the violence with which he once killed birds while hunting as a boy, his inability to mourn his father’s death, that he internalized modernity and didn’t fully appreciate life in the village. He comes across as painfully human. I don’t mean to suggest that he is some sort of saint, but it is heartrending and inspiring to think that all the years of torture and solitary confinement haven’t dehumanized Apo, rather they have inspired him to consider the beautiful complexity of the universe. From his isolation Öcalan writes the undoing of capitalist modernity in order to unleash the world anew—while the revolutionaries in Rojava collectively enact new socio-political possibilities from the ruins of the Syrian inferno, attempting to overcome the existence-vacuum duality.

\textit{On Self-Defense}

\textit{Are you prepared? What are you doing to counter profusion?} \footnote{Henri Michaux, \textit{Tent Posts}, Copenhagen: Green Integer, 1997, 43.} \textit{-Henri Michaux}\footnote{Öcalan, \textit{Democratic Confederalism}. 2011, 34}

Creating an autonomous region within the chaos of Syria is one thing, maybe legally comparable to the microstate that the KRG is already building in Iraq, but declaring Kurdish autonomy in Turkey or Iran is an entirely different, and more difficult, project. Nevertheless, it continues to be a clearly stated goal.\footnote{Öcalan, \textit{Democratic Confederalism}. 2011, 34} Both states are already shelling Rojava and the Kurdish strongholds in the Qandil
Mountains, respectively; and neither wants to grant any concessions to Kurds. It is perhaps for this reason—not to be attacked immediately by militaries with vastly superior weaponry—that democratic confederalism proposes “peaceful coexistence” within state territory, a sort of dual power structure. It has been argued that dual power can only produce a new centralized power structure, but it seems possible that it could succeed in dispersing power if instituted along the lines of a constantly becoming democratic confederalism. This type of dual power is, or at least arises out of, the same interstitial distance that was mentioned earlier in this essay—the acknowledgement that because the state is too complex and far-reaching to simply destroy, new sociopolitical formations have to be created within the autonomous spaces that emerge and become visible through revolutionary social rupture. In this case Rojava. Öcalan directly acknowledges this line of thought when he writes:

Democratic confederalism can be described as a kind of self-administration in contrast to the administration by the nation-state. However, under certain circumstances peaceful coexistence is possible as long as the nation-state does not interfere with central matters of self-administration. All such interventions would call for the self-defence of the civil society... Democratic confederalism is not at war with any nation-state but it will not stand idly by at assimilation efforts ... Neither total rejection nor complete recognition of the state is useful for the democratic efforts of the civil society. The overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process.

It does seem unlikely, though, that anyone would really expect a state like Turkey or Iran (or Assad’s Syria for that matter) to tolerate an autonomous

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97 Lawrence Jarach, ”Anarcho-Communists, Platformism, and Dual Power: Innovation or Travesty?” in AJODA 54, vol 20:2 2, Winter 2002-2003. This article reads like its main concern is settling some score with a specific anarchist group for supposedly being too influenced by Lenin or Trotsky.

98 Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism, 2011, 32
democratic region within its borders. I imagine that this is why the self-defense clause is explicit. The (sort of irresolute) idea seems to be to reassure a few militarily superior states that they have nothing to fear from Rojava, while providing for the inevitability that they will have to fight for it. Self-defense against an aggressive power is easily justifiable, of course one fights back when being attacked by a military, but when does self-defense turn into war? The concept of self-defense in the Kurdish and Rojavan sense extends far beyond this rhetorical safeguard, and beyond armed conflict; it is a concept that is built into the very logic of the revolt. What might self-defense refer to other than waging war against the state? Öcalan, speaking of the militarized nature of nation-states, writes,

This militarization can only be pushed back with the help of self-defence. Societies without any mechanism of self-defence lose their identities, their capability of democratic decision-making, and their political nature. Therefore, the self-defence of a society is not limited to the military dimension alone. It also presupposes the preservation of its identity, its own political awareness, and a process of democratization. Only then can we talk about self-defence. Against this background democratic confederalism can be called a system of self-defence of the society.99

So it is made explicit that self-defense as we discuss it in this context moves well beyond the realm of military action. Dr Ahmet Yusuf, the Economic Minister of Afrin Canton—who was also quoted above—proclaimed that “what we mean by defense is not defense in a military sense, but the self-defense against the exploitation and oppression which society now faces.”100 He continues to explain that the obstacles against which society must defend itself

99 Ibid. 28
100 https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/01/02/journalist-and-researcher-ozgur-amed-on-understanding-events-in-rojava/ (January 2015)
are systems that use capitalist structures as their reference points, and thus obstruct progress in social and economic spheres. The assertion here is that the revolution itself, and—as is clearly stated in Öcalan’s quote—even the political philosophy of democratic confederalism, are also forms of self-defense. When facing genocidal, assimilationist nation-states, or attempting to construct a society outside of a capitalist system that exploits everything and everyone, it makes sense that the creation of any exterior autonomy—any interstitial distance—functions as a form of defending one’s sense of self. But it continues beyond the creation of an exterior. The preservation of identity, the process of democratization, and the protection of women’s rights are conceived of as self-defense against interior aggressions—particularly the concentration of power, assimilation or subjugation of certain populations, and the rise of patriarchal and state-like structures.

Nazan Üstündağ explains this idea of self-defense quite well in her essay "New Wars and Autonomous Self-Defense in Kurdistan,”

The concept of self-defense as used by Kurds has different genealogies. First, it refers to the defense of Kurds against state violence...Second, self-defense is a question of how oppressed people in general will protect their life-worlds against centralization, ecological destruction, patriarchal relations and capitalism. Finally, it also addresses how societies will produce and reproduce themselves peacefully in the face of new and hybrid wars fought by global powers, states, genocidal organizations and multi-nationals using violent and non-violent means.101

She continues to point out that, along with the practice of arming local communities and networking with other Kurds and oppressed groups in Turkey

and elsewhere, “they [the self-administration in Rojava] have started creating institutions that develop means of self-governance,” including healthcare, education, communal decision-making, and other institutions created by women.\textsuperscript{102} This, in turn, has transformed life in Rojava. The empowering formations of democracy, equality, and self-rule aren’t therefore conceived as just a political or ethical goal, they are essentially the means for survival. Self-defense refers to the internal checks and balances meant to uphold freedom and equality more than it does to the YPG/YPJ. The formation of communes, 	extit{Mala Gel}, and TEV-DEM don’t simply constitute a representative system, they represent an in-built defense against top-down organization. The aim of the assemblies and communes is not to achieve representation by the state, but to assure that all of society has an equal voice and to gradually assume the power and functions normally claimed by the state, rendering a state redundant.\textsuperscript{103} This familiar sounding idea of self-defense rendering the state redundant is exciting, but it also circles right back to the problems previously discussed regarding the withering away of the state. In order to ensure that power stays decentralized, self-defense—like democracy and revolt—will have to be an ever-becoming process. The revolt—that infinite remaking of democratic ideals and the endless probing of appearances and relations—will need to defend itself against the institution of a political revolution that, like all revolutions before, ceases to

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid. 84
\textsuperscript{103} This comes from Nazan Üstündağ, “Self-Defense as a Revolutionary Practice in Rojava” 	extit{South Atlantic Quarterly} 115;1, January 2016
question its own values.\textsuperscript{104} Self-defense will have to be internal, the revolution defending itself from itself.

Öcalan, in \textit{Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization}, stretches the idea of self-defense even further, rooting it in the evolutionary nature of the plant and animal kingdoms. He contends that the principle that all living and diverse beings have in common is the will to be alive, “to defend themselves in some way.”\textsuperscript{105} From the rose developing thorns to the animal urges to eat and sexually reproduce, it is all self-defense; it all “springs from the desire to live and the fear of extinction.”\textsuperscript{106} These forms of self-defense didn’t develop to outcompete other living beings, says Öcalan, but to protect the preceding evolutionary phase within a new mutation, to multiply the self through enrichment.\textsuperscript{107} Self-Defense is thus not only the means for survival or the method for achieving a meaningful and just society—it is hardwired into our very existence. It is an essential aspect of all life.

\textit{Revolution or Counter-Revolution?}

\begin{quote}
\textit{Reality & Desire get thrashed / get chopped up}
\textit{They spill out over each other}
\textit{Like they never would in 1 of Cernuda's poems}
\textit{Foam runs from the mouth of the 1 who speaks wonders}
\textit{& it would seem he lived in the clouds}
\textit{& not on the outskirts of this barrio}
\textit{-Mario Santiago Papasquiaro\textsuperscript{108}}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{104} Not a direct quote but this is pulled from Julia Kristeva, \textit{Revolt, She Said}, 2002.
\textsuperscript{105} Abdullah Öcalan, \textit{Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization}, 2015. 48
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. 49
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid. 48
\textsuperscript{108} Mario Santiago Papasquiaro. \textit{Advice From 1 Disciple of Marx To 1 Heidegger Fanatic}, Seattle: Wave Books, 2013. 3
The issue of solidarity with Rojava is at the center of an info-war being waged between different factions who view solidarity as a zero-sum game. As should be obvious from this essay, I personally think that Rojava—while certainly not perfect, and recognizing the authoritarian potential of PYD hegemony—is still the most advanced social revolution we have seen for a long time, it has created communes on an impressive scale, its struggle against patriarchy is massively important, and it deserves international solidarity. For me this does not imply that such solidarity has to come at the expense of having solidarity with additional groups of people fighting oppression. Nonetheless there are a myriad of other strictly held positions that have been vocalized by political commentators and activists. There is the camp of unconditionally supportive anarchist utopians; there are ideologically rigid anarchist purists (along with some rational and cautious skeptics) who don’t see the situation as perfect enough to support; and there are a variety of groups who view Rojava as divisive to a strong anti-Assad front.¹⁰⁹ Due to the current¹¹⁰ debate surrounding conflict between rebel groups, Daesh, and YPG north of Aleppo, I feel the need to discuss the matter, and the latter position, briefly.

This subject is immensely complex, and should take into account a number of recent historical factors, but what follows is a very quick overview. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of YPG and other non-Kurdish militias, have attempted to gain control of a corridor—called the Azaz corridor—along the Turkish border that would link Kobani and Afrin cantons. Daesh, the

¹⁰⁹ There are also Turkish sympathizers who view basically all Kurds as terrorists.
¹¹⁰ May 2016
Assad regime, and various opposition groups control respective parts of the Azaz corridor, and at the time of this campaign Russia was also conducting air raids on rebel groups in the area. Azaz is the main supply route to and from Turkey for both rebel groups and Daesh, and is strategically important for everyone involved. Turkey especially does not want it to fall under Kurdish control, and the US has also voiced concerns. The territory is ethnically diverse, with a high Turkmen and Arab population, and is not part of the Kurdish majority region.

The importance of this highly contested territory has given rise to a number of claims regarding who should rightly win the battle to control it. Supporters of Rojava claim that is an essential lifeline to Afrin canton, and see it as a way to solidify lines of support between the three confederated cantons, as well as a chance to cut off Daesh and other Islamist groups from Turkish supplies. The regime sees it as a way to cut off an essential supply route to rebel groups. Supporters of rebel groups and the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) lay claim to it for obvious existential reasons, as it is the only supply route from Turkey; and see the SDF actions (which, granted, benefit from Russian airstrikes) as backstabbing Assadist counter-revolution. This is necessarily a simplification of the on-the-ground issues, but it is important as a preface to the issue I want to discuss, namely the increasing claims in the west of Rojava as a counter-revolutionary project.

There are two foundational assumptions for this claim—that the PYD collaborates with and supports the Assad regime, and that the FSA, or the broad opposition, are the real revolutionary force. The first claim is complex, and while
I don’t believe that it is totally correct, there has been an uneasy coexistence punctuated by occasional armed conflict between the two. Both sides have claimed that when it comes down to the line, neither will allow control of Rojava by the other. But that said; there are still more or less uncontested elements of the regime holding onto pockets of territory in Rojava—like the airport in Qamishlo for example. The fact that the SDF is assisted by Russian airstrikes in Azaz is deeply troubling as well. Russia has killed many civilians in its attempt to bolster the fascist Assad regime. My take, ultimately, is that Rojava’s embrace of a third position—that is, not totally aligned with the regime or the rebels—suggests a strategy that prioritizes the survival of the revolution in Rojava over Assad and over the creation of a new post-Assad Syrian state. This strategy utilizes whatever short-term tactics best serve the broader goal of autonomy and survival. The third position is often ignored in this conversation, obscured by the misconception that there are only two sides to the war. Whatever position Rojava pursues, it nevertheless does not change the fact that if Azaz is truly run by an autonomous Syrian council system, the SDF has no right to take the territory by force. Nor should the genocidal actions of Assad be tolerated. This would, in effect, be recreating the domination and forced assimilation that the revolution is opposed to.

111 For an in depth and balanced discussion of this see: http://ww4report.com/node/14666/ (February 2016)
113 See http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-administration-of-the-local-council-in-azaz/ (March 2015) for information on this.
The latter claim, that the FSA and rebel groups are the true (even so far as calling them anarchistic) revolution is a little more puzzling. In 2011 through 2013 the Syrian revolution was alive and inspiring, it is important to remember that the war started as a revolution and to honor the memory of revolutionary heroes like Omar Aziz. But the situation has changed by this point, in mid-2016, and other—Islamist, proxy, or authoritarian—forces vastly outnumber the revolutionary elements, many of which were killed or forced out of Syria in the first years of the revolution. It is an uncomfortably convenient coincidence that one of the loudest voices claiming that the SDF is attacking anti-authoritarian, council-based rebel communes—specifically around Azaz—comes from a writer who has explicitly supported Turkey “using heavy artillery” against Rojava. It is unfortunate that these revolutionary forces are in conflict, and since I believe that there may still be some grassroots revolutionary communities organizing in Syria despite the nightmarish conditions in which they exist, I reiterate that the SDF should not be taking democratically run territory by force, and supporters of the Rojava revolution should acknowledge this. Indeed, revolutionary communities that do exist deserve as much support and solidarity as Rojava or anything else.

115 https://itsgoingdown.org/important-thing-two-speaking-tours-syrian-revolution/ (May 2016)
116 https://www.facebook.com/robin.yassinkassab/posts/10208675426381956?hc_location=ufi (Facebook, February 13, 2016)
117 See: https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2016/03/04/the-revolution-continues/ (March 2016) for example.
Despite the history of the Syrian revolution, the proposition that the Free Syrian Army is a force fighting for anything more radical than another authoritarian state seems suspect. The FSA was created by a number of high ranking military defectors including Col. Riad el-Asaad and Lieutenant Col. Hussein Harmoush, who are trained statist authoritarians and who attempted to co-opt the revolution in much the same patronizing manner as SCAF did in Egypt. Furthermore, Aron Lund suggests that the FSA May or may not have been a Turkish intelligence operation. To be clear, there’s no doubting the sincerity of the first batch of fighters, or suggest that they would have acted otherwise without foreign support. But these original FSA commanders were confined to the closely guarded Apaydın camp in Turkey, and kept separate from civilian Syrian refugees. Turkish authorities are known to have screened visitors and journalists before deciding whether they could talk to the officers. While this is not in itself evidence of a Turkish intelligence connection, it does suggest that this original FSA faction could not, how shall we say, operate with full autonomy from its political environment.118

The FSA is now an umbrella term under which many different militias with many different international backers, ideas, and goals operate; and thus it does not represent a coherent revolutionary group. The range of factions operating under the broad label of “opposition” reaches across the board as well; from authoritarian Salafi warlords119 to the revolutionaries discussed by the authors of Burning Country. Unfortunately, Islamists backed by the Gulf States and mafia style armed gangs have much more money and control more resources.120 This

118 http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/ (March 2013)
history makes clear to me that, while the goal of the FSA is very much the fall of Assad, it does not suggest that a communal, egalitarian revolution is the endgame. In fact the idea that this broad opposition would favor the sparse revolutionaries is as far-fetched as a Rojavan utopia. I am not suggesting that all Syrians in resistance are represented by the FSA, and I want to avoid painting the FSA or any Syrian rebel groups in broad strokes as “bad,” rather I seek to problematize black-and-white narratives about revolution / counter-revolution. I am not writing this section to discredit the struggling Syrian revolutionary movement, but because a discussion of Rojava would be incomplete without addressing this debate. Whatever position you take, the only absolute in Syria today is that the last five years have been an unrelenting tragedy for the Syrian people and the region at large.

An Accord Between Polyphonic People

_Clearly nothing is sacred—hard as iron._
_Tested in a raging furnace it melts like snow._
_Let me ask you, where does it go?_  
_When the breakers are high, what kind of moon do you see?_  

-Dōgen

After having been consistently barred from all three peace talks in Geneva—talks which have been referred to as plans for a “second Sykes-Picot”—the PYD,

121 There is also evidence of massive FSA human rights abuses, including a video of an FSA fighter eating an opponent’s heart out of his chest. See _Burning Country_. 86
along with a coalition of various other groups publicly declared a “federation of northern Syria” at a meeting in Rimelan, in March 2016.\(^{124}\) The declaration was agreed upon by “31 parties and 200 delegates representing … Kobane, Afrin and Cizire cantons and the Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Syriac, Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen peoples of Tal Abyad, Shaddadi, Aleppo and Shehba regions.”\(^{125}\) Despite conceding that the federal, democratic system would “take place within a sovereign Syria,”\(^{126}\)—without clarifying what that Syria will look like—it was still a sort of triumph, or at least a marketing triumph for wider recognition of democratic confederalism in Rojava. Masoud Barzani—the president of the Iraqi KRG, which is regularly in conflict with the PYD—approved of the declaration; while Turkey said that it would “not allow” it, and Assad claimed that the Kurds really desire a strong central government.\(^{127}\) Despite the fact that this specific declaration is largely a political move—a bid for international recognition and a dig at the false peace process—it does actualize an important goal of democratic confederalism. Just like the name implies, federation is seen to be the manner in which autonomous, self-governed units will interact based on the social contract. The concept is more akin to Proudhon’s ideas about federalism than, say, the


\(^{126}\) Ibid

current United States or Russian federal systems. Öcalan addresses this in *Democratic Confederalism*:

Terms like federalism or self administration as they can be found in liberal democracies need to be conceived anew. Essentially, they should not be conceived as hierarchical levels of the administration of the nation-state but rather as central tools of social expression and participation. This, in turn, will advance the politicization of the society. We do not need big theories here, what we need is the will to lend expression to the social needs by strengthening the autonomy of the social actors structurally and by creating the conditions for the organization of the society as a whole.\(^{128}\)

Federalism is an ideal form of organization for a decentralized political structure because it allows for society to broken up into small units—or communes—that cooperate with and support each other.\(^{129}\) One of the most common critiques leveled at those who seek a non-hierarchical society is that it may be possible on a small scale, but organizing on a city or society-wide scale necessitates hierarchy. The mutually agreed upon federation of social units, all autonomous in their decision making, but bound together by voluntary respect for the social contract, essentially creates a large scale social body out of small, non-hierarchical units. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote of federalism in the mid 19\(^{th}\) century, claiming that it was

The way to guarantee the true sovereignty of the people, since in the federal republic power would rise up from below, and would rest on the ‘natural groups’ which, by means of a series of delegations, would coalesce in coordinating committees to implement the general will of the people.\(^{130}\)

\(^{128}\) Abdullah Öcalan. *Democratic Confederalism*. 2011. 26

\(^{129}\) This thought comes from Paul Z. Simons at [http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2016/05/19/rojava-democracy-and-commune/](http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2016/05/19/rojava-democracy-and-commune/) (May 2016)

Proudhon takes care to clarify that the coordinating committees would ideally be less an administrative system and more of an organ of coordination between units, in which every unit has equal say regardless of size, and issues would be settled by mutual agreement, contract, and arbitration. Proudhon lays out the classical anarchist theory of the federal concept, but I think Julia Kristeva was more concise and poetic when she described a federation as “an accord between polyphonic people, respectful of their reciprocal foreignness.”\textsuperscript{131} This Kristevan definition is, I think, the goal of a pluralistic, egalitarian society.

The Proudhonian type of federalism has more-or-less been happening between the three cantons in Rojava, so the declaration didn’t necessarily change much on the ground; however it did earn Rojava a little bit of attention from the media about the lack of Kurdish presence at the Geneva talks and it put forth a solid postwar plan. The similar sounding responses\textsuperscript{132} from the regime and from many rebels regarding the declaration stressed that the “Syrians” want to retain the “unity and integrity of the Syrian territory and people.”\textsuperscript{133} This is a ridiculous statement on a number of levels, the primary one being that “the unity and integrity” of Syria fractured into a complex network war waged by innumerable factions years ago; but also because the situation of Syrian Kurds before the war was that of stateless non-citizen, vested with no rights and certainly not treated as an equal part of some united Syria. The history of Kurdish experience would suggest that seizing autonomy and defending it is the only way it will ever happen. Many of the powerful people in the opposition were once part of the

\textsuperscript{131} Julia Kristeva, \textit{Revolt, She Said}, 2002, 64.
\textsuperscript{132} Maybe we could call it “monophonic”?
\textsuperscript{133} \url{http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-kurds-federalism-opposes-160317080412664.html/} (March 2016)
same machinery of the Assad regime that oppressed the Kurds, whether colonels in the Syrian army or ex business magnates-cum-warlords.\textsuperscript{134} It is not a surprise that Rojava pursues the third position. Throwing their lot in with the seething mass of contradictory opposition groups won’t grant them autonomy any more than would allying with the genocidal Assad regime.

That the Geneva talks are set up to marginalize the Kurds is obvious. Some foreign powers, like Russia, want to keep Assad in charge of a central Syrian government; and on the other side, the chief negotiator in Geneva for the opposition is Mohammed Alloush, former political leader of the Islamist militia Jaysh al-Islam—a rebel group that was using chemical weapons and hellfire rockets on Kurdish civilians in Aleppo last month.\textsuperscript{135} Declaring an autonomous federation in Rojava is a path to solidifying the third position, an outcome for northern Syria that excludes Assad as well as any opposition groups that would be unwilling to share power in a horizontal manner. In the ideal federal system, any group would be able to join the federation without forfeiting their autonomy should they desire to do so and agree to the social contract. In reality there will have to be a constant struggle, a vigilant spirit of revolt, within federated Rojava to prevent the PYD from centralizing too much power and twisting the federal system into something similar to what we know in the United States or Russia.

\textsuperscript{134}For example: \url{http://www.juancole.com/2014/03/northern-brigade-matters.html/} (March 2014)
This essay has been but a glimpse at some conditions of an attempt to remake society, to restart on another track. A manifestation fittingly situated in the Fertile Crescent—home of the Sumerians, birthplace of the previous civilization. There is clearly much more to be said about Rojava, and I hope that we hear much more about it. I do feel the need to address one nagging detail though. Rojava, the site of revolt, home base of the federation, is still a contested territory. The smoldering irony implied here is that this utopian project is largely dependent on a protracted—if not permanent—state of war for its existence. This is troublesome because endless war is antithetical to the liberation of society, and to the fulfillment of a free and meaningful life. Öcalan has admitted that “all repressive regimes in history [have] been based on war or aligned their institutions according to the logic of warfare.” It is unlikely that the revolt will survive in an endless war. On the other hand, an end to the conflict between Rojava and its opponents that respects democratic confederalism seems remote; even a federated Syria wouldn’t solve the conflict with Turkey.

The revolutionaries of Rojava have been able to carve their space out of the chaos and hold tight to the territory, but no major power in the region is willing to abide Rojava’s true autonomy. Even the idea of “interstitial distance”

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136 Collected in The Steel Cricket, Tr. Stephen Berg
within the Syrian state seems existentially unstable. If the Assad regime manages to retain power after the entire country is emptied out and reduced to rubble, it will be power resting on the threat of extreme violence. He has already massacred his population in the worst ways; there is no reason to believe that he would simply leave Rojava (and the oil there) to the Kurds and forget about it. I believe that Öcalan’s diagnosis of the nation-state is accurate, but this is problematic because it doesn’t actually allow for democratic confederalism to exist within its borders.

If, on the other hand, Syrian rebels oust the Assad regime, it’s hard to know what might happen with Rojava; maybe there would be mutually respected autonomy, or maybe the war would continue. It is certain that Turkey—the second largest military power in NATO—does not want Rojava to exist, and it has already reignited the conflict with the Kurds who live within its borders. Presumably Iran has similar feelings, and it has long been battling PJAK, the PKK allied party in Persian territory. It will obviously be a horrific nightmare if Daesh manages to conquer Rojava…

Right now, though, despite the irrefutable fact that nothing is, nor ever will be, perfect, and despite the pernicious possibility of a PYD dominated revolution; a revolt is happening in Rojava—a revolt in the Kristevan sense, calling into question deep rooted systems of patriarchy and civilization—and something like this may be more radical than a political revolution, more anomalous and more important. Writer and activist George Katsiaficas writes that, in moments of upheaval or crisis, something he calls ‘the eros effect’ occurs, “fusing individuals and groups together, and their individual imaginations become the basis for a new ‘group feeling’ that is not tribal or national—but a
newly emergent species of self-consciousness.”¹³⁸ This eros effect that Katsiaficas theorizes is the communal feeling that accompanies revolt. It is the aspect of the Rojava revolution that can’t be corrupted even if the revolution is compromised. In that case it will whither away like the state won’t, but the spirit will persist and inform the next manifestation of human will to conquer new horizons of freedom, wherever that may be. What matters is the ecstasy of revolt, the emergence of possibility, what Dilar Dirik calls “the unbreakable power to dare to imagine.”¹³⁹ In the ruined wreckage that was Kobani a revolt rises and sociality is a clean slate for a moment, before capitalist modernity starts bubbling back up from the mess. Traditional leftist political parties generally dislike these moments of revolt, these sites of becoming—where individual autonomy coheres with collective solidarity—because they are uncontrollable, unstable. In the past, established institutions have tried to coopt these moments and take control of the narrative.¹⁴⁰ In a situation like that of Rojava, how can this eruption, this “newly emergent species of self-consciousness” be sustained while simultaneously instituting a structure that ensures it is defensible, utilitarian, and desirable for those who live within it? Can it? Or is it antithetical to structure? Is it sustainable at all? How can this eruption be made contagious? Be made to spill across other borders? Be brought and applied to our own context?

This may all be speculation, but the concrete matter is that the revolution in Rojava—the revolt against our own way of thinking within the paradigm of

¹⁴⁰ See Paris, May ’68, Syriza in Greece, SCAF sending everyone home from Tahrir, the list could go on and on...
capitalist modernity—is unfolding in the most precarious of circumstances, and this is all the more reason to show solidarity, *whether or not it’s a politically perfect situation*. We can respect the revolt without venerating the PYD. Dilar Dirik expresses this sentiment succinctly in an essay where she—among other things—excoriates western leftists for their “ideological purism,” when she writes

Rojava tries systematizing freedom, democratizing identity. Not its perfection, but its realness, its honesty, its courage strikes out. It doesn’t claim flawlessness, but it dares to imagine utopia and creates steps to turn it to life.  

In these times of repression and violence, mass displacement and orgies of annihilation, where the majority is alienated and jaded to the point of thinking there is nothing else—when internment camps re-enter the public debate in the United States and police lynch squads murder with impunity—any alternative, any possibility of *something else* is essential. Who cares about permanence. Nothing turns out right, but if something is emerging, what is there to lose? In the oft-quoted end to his *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino manages the best defense of Rojava—and revolt in general, and any way, anywhere people imagine a new life—that I can think of:

There are two ways to escape suffering ... The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. 

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141 Dilar Dirik, “Rojava: To Dare Imagining”, in *To Dare Imagining: The Rojava Revolution*. New York: Autonomedia. 2016. 105.  
142 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972, 165
And that is exactly what I think needs to be done, *give space* to that which is not inferno. Create distance from the state, whether the size of a community center or Rojava, and tend to it, ward off the flames, be vigilant.
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