

Imaginare Aude! Lessons of the Rojava Revolution

By John Clark, La Terre Institute for Community and Ecology. clark@loyno.edu

Dilar Dirik, David Levi Strauss, Michael Taussig, and Peter Lamborn Wilson, editors. 2016. *To Dare Imagining: Rojava Revolution*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

In recent years, Rojava, or West Kurdistan, has been the site of an extraordinary experiment in participatory democracy, communal self-determination, ecological politics, and radical feminist social transformation. This collection of texts on the Rojava Revolution is essential reading for all those for whom the quest for liberation and solidarity is still a meaningful project, and those who are still inspired by the dream and the reality of revolution. It is a propitious time for such a work to appear, for there seems to be a growing number of such people. A precondition for the actuality of revolutionary transformation is a revolution of hope, the emergence of an ethos of expectation and openness to radical possibility. This book will help foster such an ethos.

Rojava, like few other places in the world, poses in a radical manner the most crucial questions concerning the destiny of the person, the community, and nature. These are questions that for a long time seemed dormant in much of the contemporary world—an ideologically pacified world that has been at the same time seething with social and ecological contradictions. The burning questions that pervade these texts concern the relationship between society and the state, between horizontal and vertical organization, between party and movement, between personal character structure and communal institutions, and between traditional culture and transformative vision. They demonstrate that in Rojava, history is moving toward certain answers, even if they remain at the moment less than definitive ones.

Given the explosive contradictions at the core of the dominant system, the idea born in the Thatcher-Reagan era that “there is no alternative” was not only ideology but absurdity. The question has never been whether there is an alternative, but rather, which alternatives the system would blindly generate through the force of contradiction, and which would emerge in a more conscious, creative, and imaginative manner. As co-editor and contributor David Levi Strauss points out, both the Islamic State and the Rojavan Anti-State are “responses to capitalist modernity and neoliberal globalism,” (12) and thus represent the two poles of this opposition. The system of domination long ago spawned its malignant other in the form of reactionary movements, extreme nationalism and fanatical fundamentalism. For a certain period, the conscious, creative, and imaginative response seemed lost in some virtual space of radical otherness. Revolutionary Rojava, along with the Zapatistas and various indigenous movement around the world, represent the resurgence of that truly radical otherness, the return of the impossible real of revolutionary politics.

Various articles in this collection show the great diversity and complexity of social and political organizations that have emerged in Rojava. They help explain the still often ambiguous interrelationships between the forty-year-old Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, and the proliferation of new organizational forms. The latter constitute an impressive spectrum: the Democratic Union Party (the Rojavan revolutionary party, allied with the PKK); the Movement for a Democratic Society (the governing coalition of the Democratic Union Party and its allies in Rojava); the People’s Protection Units (the Rojavan militia units); the Women’s Protection Units and Star militia (the all-woman militia units); the Union of Communities in Kurdistan; and the

popular assemblies, councils, committees and self-managed worker cooperatives that have been created at various levels of society. The questions of how these diverse social formations are interrelated and how effectively they can function is not answered definitively in current reports on Rojava. This is the case, in part, because much more careful, detailed and probing research is still needed, but also because these forms and their role in the larger society are still in the process of being worked out in practice. What this book makes clear, however, is that Rojava has already made extraordinary advances in the development of a radically libertarian, radically communitarian, and radically feminist revolutionary politics.

One of the most encouraging things that we learn about Rojava is the degree to which it has actually put into practice in certain spheres many of its anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical ideals. There is much evidence of a concerted attempt to establish participatory, base democracy in the local communities, something that has so often been relegated to some post-revolutionary limbo, or dismissed as unrealistic in view of the pressures of war, the strength of counterrevolutionary forces, or the dangers of “encirclement” (and Rojava is nothing if not “encircled”). In his contribution, entitled “Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria”, David Graeber explains that “popular assemblies have been created as the ultimate decision-making bodies,” and “councils selected with careful ethnic balance.” (21) Even though Rojava is in the midst of a region noted for brutal ethnic and religious strife, and for patriarchal domination, it is mandated that “the top three officers” in these various deliberative bodies “have to include one Kurd, one Arab and one Assyrian or Armenian Christian, and at least one of the three has to be a woman.” (21) There is an understanding that ethnic, religious and gender realities cannot be ignored or bracketed for policy-making and organizational purposes, but rather must be recognized and respected within a context of non-domination and liberatory practice.

An enduring challenge to efforts at radical democratization has been the determination of a viable scale for truly participatory democratic units at the base. In Rojava, the local assemblies do not consist of the thousands or tens of thousands of nominal members that have been contemplated in some versions of municipalism, but rather of a few hundred potential participants. Thus, they approximate the ideal established for general assemblies in the Mondragon cooperative system, and are roughly comparable in size to the local assemblies in indigenous communities in Bolivia (in both of these cases, based on a long history of practical experience). Active political participation is also manifested through local councils and committees. Paul Z. Simons, in his “Dispatches from Rojava,” reports on a local council meeting at which he was told that “with the recent influx of immigrants into the city they were expecting the commune to expand, and that if it grows larger than 100 families it may be too unwieldy to be responsive” so “possible geographic divisions were discussed.” (89) He explains that the local council must be of a scale that facilitates real engagement in the community, since it addresses everything from mundane matters such as “dealing with marital issues” and “helping get gas and rides to and from clinics” to life and death issues. Thus, in periods of open conflict it “kept the commune fed and clothed,” “helped with YPG [People’s Protection Units] intelligence gathering,” and “issued Kalashnikovs” so that the community could fight alongside the militia. (89)

Crucial questions for Rojava as a radically libertarian experiment is the role of state power and the relationship between forms of popular self-organization and agencies of force and coercion. Graeber alludes to the ways in which Rojava has undertaken the project of creating what some

have called a “non-state state,” and Michael Taussig, in his very rich and philosophically provocative exploration of “Kobane: the Mastery of Non-Mastery”, specifically points out “the paradox” that the Kurdish cantons “perform as if there is a state even if there is not and even though they are against the idea of state.” (116) Graeber remarks on the extraordinary nature of “a dual power situation where the same political forces created both sides,” which he identifies as a “democratic self-administration,” that has “all the form and trappings of a state” and the Movement for a Democratic Society, which is “driven bottom up directly by democratic institutions.” (27) If these two sides are actually in accord on the nature and exercise of power, then we do not, in fact, have a case of what has traditionally been labeled “dual power,” but rather a kind of politically benign unity-in-duality. But the important issue remains of the potential for the benignly *state-like* to become the dangerously *statist*.

As several articles in the collection show, there has been a concerted effort to guard against this danger by destroying the monopoly on coercive power that has traditionally defined the state. Graeber describes a visit a police academy where he is told that “everyone had to take courses in non-violent conflict resolution and feminist theory before they were allowed to touch a gun.” (27) The goal is to train all the citizens in community self-defense, so that the police as a force separate from the people can be eliminated completely. Graeber was struck by the extraordinary fact that the Rojava movement, “faced with dire war conditions” would “immediately abolish capital punishment, dissolve the secret police and democratize the army.” (27) Indeed, Rojava has moved in a direction that is diametrical opposite to the typical leftist response to the attainment of power (the catastrophe of “actual existence”), which is to abandon democratization and communization of institutions under the pressure of internal and external threats, or even the illusion of such threats.

The process of radical democratization has also been applied to the military, an area in which hierarchical relations might seem most difficult to root out. Simons found that in the People’s Defense Units there are no traditional officers but rather “Team/Suite/Block/Company Leaders” who are chosen either by majority vote or by consensus. He reports that even this leadership is dissolved when there are no military operations, so that there remain only regional commanders, who are also chosen by vote or consensus and can serve only one single, six-month term. (92) Evren Kocabiçak notes that there is a recognition of some degree of hierarchical organization in these militias. She observes that there must of necessity be “a chain of command within a fighting guerrilla unit” because “its absence would simply cause the annihilation of the unit in a short span of time.” (66) She explains that consequently the growth of hierarchy is kept in check by the existence of “really strong mechanisms to monitor and criticize the command structure,” so that, for example, fighters “can even discharge their commander using their common will,” and “every action, education or meeting is collectively evaluated.” (66)

Such analysis is reminiscent of political anthropologist Pierre Clastres’ classic study of the phenomenon of state formation. He points to the emergence of prophetic voices in Amerindian indigenous society that warned of the growing ascendancy within the society of a “One” that is on the side of death and that would destroy the “Not-One” that is on the side of life and wholeness (as opposed to mere unity). The indigenous prophets warned of something destructive that was evolving out of the previously benign power of the leader as the servant of the community. This prophecy is echoed in the conscious struggles of Rojava against authoritarian and domineering

tendencies (which is notably led by, as Luce Irigaray phrased it, “the sex that is not one”). As Rojava seems to have learned, it is necessary to recognize the hierarchical and state-like aspects of anarchic formations, and of the character-structures that inhabit those structures. This is true for two reasons: first, because they are there, and if they are ignored, this can only result in ideological bad faith; and second, because if they are denied and disavowed, they will tend to grow beyond any legitimate, containable levels, and this will ultimately signal the death of the free community.

Another one of the most valuable aspects of this collection is the degree to which it reveals the centrality of radical feminism and the critique of patriarchy in the Rojava movement, and the roots of this perspective in PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan’s thought. Öcalan bases his outlook in a vast and sweeping understanding of the history of civilization and domination, in which women and the feminine are central. He sees what Engels famously called “the world historical defeat of the female sex” as the pivotal event in world history—in effect, the historical Fall. In an article on Öcalan, Peter Lamborn Wilson, in an article entitled “Abdullah Öcalan, commends the Kurdish leader for his insights into “the Mesopotamian Neolithic” as “a culture shaped by the feminine principle of life” and his recognition of the manner in which irrigation-based agriculture and bronze-based metallurgy generated surplus wealth that could be appropriated by a ruling class that imposed a patriarchal system of social domination. (38-39) Öcalan shows this to be the beginning of the historical epoch in which we are still living. In part through the influence of this analysis, there is a widespread conviction in Rojava that it must be the place, or one of the places, in which this epoch comes to an end.

Havin Güneşer also points out that one of Öcalan’s major revisions of leftist thought is his view of capitalism as “a continuation of the five-thousand-year-old patriarchal society” (49) She explains that his vision of a thoroughly transformed, post-patriarchal “democratic civilization” is based on the concept (borrowed from Maria Mies) of women as “the first class nation and colony,” in addition to the organizational needs for an ecological mode of production, new participatory forms of self-defense, and the establishment of a communal economy. (51) Bookchin, who influenced Öcalan strongly regarding the need to overcome all forms of domination, held that an original “gerontocracy” preceded patriarchal domination, or what he called “patricentricity.” Öcalan himself, however, takes an unequivocal stand in favor of the primordial nature of patriarchal domination. Furthermore, as the selections from Öcalan show, he is uncompromising in applying his critique of the legacy of patriarchy to all social realms. He says that “the male has become a state and turned this into the dominant culture,” that “class and sexual oppression develop together,” so that “masculinity has generated ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state,” and concludes that “to kill the dominant man is the fundamental principle of socialism.” (72) This analysis cuts to the social psychological core of domination and is equivalent to saying that the appropriating, domineering civilized ego that has been shaped by patriarchy must be killed, and with it all the personal and social institutional ego-extensions.

A commitment to such explicitly anti-patriarchal values has become pervasive in the Rojava movement and there are suggestions that, as a result, a deeply transformed ethos is emerging. This is exemplified by Kocabiçak’s comments on the growing number of Rojavan women fighters who are rejecting meat-eating. She attributes to these women an impressive grasp of the connections between history, culture, values, sensibilities and social practice. She says that as part of “the development of social ecological consciousness” they recognize that meat eating is “not a strict

nutritional necessity for human kind,” but rather something that has historically been “one of the factors that create war and violence.” They realize that industrial meat production under capitalism “has created a horrid massacre” and is “harmful for human health.” The Rojavan alternative is a new ecological sensibility in which animals are seen not “merely as food to be eaten” but “as part of the entirety of nature.” (69) As these observations show, seldom has the concept of “the personal is the political” attained the kind of concrete universality as it has in the theoretically informed practice of these women fighters. (For extensive details on this topic, see Mylène Sauloy’s documentary for the TV channel ARTE on Kurdish women’s militias, available on YouTube.)

Another key aspect of the emerging ethos is “the spirit of sacrifice” and even martyrdom that is pointed out by Dilar Dirik. This spirit contrasts sharply with the dominant values of Western political movements, including (and one might even say, particularly), those of the “post-modern” Left. (104) Taussig notes that the women fighters “spoke of collective suicide when ISIS surrounded them. They spoke of lying down to die on the body of a comrade dying on the battlefield, awaiting death with them; of apologizing on one’s phone when dying while disposing of one’s cell phone, codes, and weapons.” (111) Taussig writes of the traumatic effect of such an attitude, which, he says “struck me as strange and made me anxious, all the more so because the women were so calm and confident.” (112) We see here a sensibility of non-heroic and even anti-heroic being-toward-death that is a part of a larger affirmation of a creative and nurturing being-toward-life and being-toward-birth that is at the heart of the Rojava Revolution. Notably, the chant of Kurdish revolutionary women is “Women, Life, Freedom!”

Such a sensibility is traumatically transformative in that it challenges the patriarchal logic of denial and domination on which civilization is based. Those living at the decaying core of nihilistic capitalist civilization have difficulty comprehending a logic of non-economistic sacrifice and non-speculative expenditure that is familiar to those who still live within a communal ethos. The primordial idea of sacrifice defies civilized, capitalist, and patriarchal definitions of reality based on a logic of accumulation. It teaches that one gains access to creative powers only through a rejection of the empire of power, and that one gains deeper satisfaction through renunciation of the pursuit of self-defeating ego-centered satisfactions. Western leftists, when confronted with the idea of sacrifice, especially when associated with “the feminine” or “the maternal” are likely to associate it one-sidedly with backwardness and the oppression of women. There is seldom any recognition that it might have a core of truth that all human beings, and especially male human beings, might need to rediscover and learn to put into practice.

The word “sacrifice” comes from the root sacer, which denotes that which is sacred. The civilized mind is perplexed by the idea of sacrifice because it cannot comprehend the idea of realities that are more sacred than the ego and various extensions of the ego. Revolution is the intrusion of the sacred (or from a conventional perspective, the “accursed”) real of communal and natural interbeing. It is a rejection of exchange value (along with instrumental use value) in favor of the intrinsic value that is at the basis of gift exchange between human beings and between all beings in the natural world. Thus, Taussig points to the significance in Rojava of “‘pre-capitalist’ ways of the gift,” and of “Bataillian, Bakhtinian-Rabelaisian, and Maussian generosity” and suggests that the revolution “requires” and “promotes” such a “spirit of the gift.” (119) Dirik says that freedom “has a lot to do with love for the community.” (105) Thus, we are taken back to the primordial realities of the gift, love, and the community. It is as if freedom took a five-thousand-

year detour in southwest Asia (a detour called Empire and Patriarchy), and has finally returned home.

Although the Rojava Revolution holds this vast promise, it is, as has been mentioned, not without certain ambiguities. The questions raised by its critics, though not discussed much in this book, can certainly not be ignored. For example, it is claimed that the PKK's anti-statism is motivated less by principle than by a pragmatic recognition of the practical impossibility of establishing a Kurdish state. It is said that the PKK is opportunistic and will side with different interests and adopt different ideological positions based more on strategical goals than deep commitments. According to this criticism, the "non-state" state apparatus is still responsible for the most significant decisions, leaving management of everyday life to the base, and when it can become even more state-like, this apparatus will seize the opportunity. Critics point out that much of the economy is not cooperative, but is rather based on wage labor, trade in smuggled goods, and sale of petroleum, and that this material basis will exact its due. And finally, it is argued that the power and influence of global capitalism and surrounding nation-states will determine the future evolution of the Rojava system.

Some of these criticisms are clearly misguided and ideologically motivated. It is certainly implausible that the sweeping critique of civilization and the state developed by Öcalan is a mere rationalization, as is demonstrated by the excerpts from his works included in this collection. His influence on the Kurds is real and has struck a chord in the Kurdish psyche. Moreover, there are deep-seated dimensions of Kurdish history and culture that both underlie and reinforce his most revolutionary ideas, as, for example, the influence of radical concepts of freedom, justice and equality within the Alevist Islamic tradition. Furthermore, whatever the goals of some leaders may be, the developing grassroots power becomes an increasingly effective material force to the extent that it continues to develop. On the other hand, the cooptative power of regional and global systems of political, and economic power should not be underestimated, and the daunting challenges to the revolutionary problematic should be frankly recognized. This is the only way that Rojava can hope to surmount the enormous obstacles that it faces. In short, the Rojava Revolution is developing within real history, with all the complexities and contradictions of history. Its achievements should be recognized as a struggle within these parameters, and should be neither denied nor exaggerated.

It is impossible to know to what extent the Rojava Revolution will succeed or fail. Its greatest predecessor, the Spanish Revolution, despite its ultimate defeat, still lives on as a great inspiration. The Rojava Revolution itself, in the specific form that it has taken, has only been possible because the living legacy of that earlier revolution was passed on to it (a connection noted by Graeber). Yet, that epoch-making revolution endured for less than three years, and indeed, less than even one before it was substantially undermined by the resurgence of the state, the power of the party, and the influence of reactionary forces. It is worth noting that these are precisely the dangers that critics and critical supporters of Rojava point out today.

The Rojava Revolution, whatever its ultimate fate may be, already constitutes an enormous achievement, as this book testifies. It has given us a living example of a revolutionary movement with a spirit of courage, sacrifice, and hope. It has established an extensive system of participatory democracy. It consciously battles against all forms of domination, and works to put an end to millennia of patriarchy. It is an expression of a historic moment of liberation and recomunization.

For this, it has inestimable value. If you are willing to dare, get this book, scour it for intimations of transformative possibility, and imagine how it might help you enter into this moment.