Moving towards a world without frontiers: How Rojava and the ideas of Murray Bookchin propose a democratic and sustainable alternative to the Nation-State

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Introduction and present context of Rojava within Syria

Rojava is a region in Northern Syria, which, after its abandonment by the Syrian government in 2011 following the outbreak of the Civil War, has undergone a profound social and political transformation carried out by its Kurdish population, who are a majority in the region. The aim of this article is to analyse to what extent these transformations constitute a true social revolution which have shifted the focus towards gender equality, direct democracy, diversity and sustainability. This is done not only by looking at the scholarly work surrounding Rojava, which allows us to understand the project more thoroughly and critically than through media coverage and self-representation; but also, by analysing the works of the two most influential thinkers of the movement: Murray Bookchin and Abdullah Öcalan. Simultaneously. The article also analyses some of the limits of the project in Rojava and some of the negative comments it has received from recent scholarly work.

The project in Rojava is mostly inspired by the ideas of the American anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin. This article analyses the main ideas of two of Bookchin's works, *The Ecology of Freedom* and *Urbanisation without cities*, and explains how these have influenced the revolution in Rojava. The ideas of Murray Bookchin were picked up by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the PKK. The PKK was a political organisation aimed at the national liberation of the Kurdish people. In the 1980s and the 1990s it waged a war against the Turkish state, which concluded with the defeat of the organisation and the imprisonment of its

leader. While in prison, Abdullah Ocalan encountered Bookchin's ideas. In his own writing Ocalan emphasized the need for women's liberation as well as the need for democratic confederalism as opposed to the creation of a Kurdish nation-state. In 2011, taking advantage of the power vacuum left in Syria with the outbreak of the civil war, the Kurdish population started to implement Ocalan's political program. The four main tenets that Rojava has attempted to implement throughout the civil war are gender equality (1), direct democracy (2), ethnic diversity (3), as well as an economy focused on cooperation and sustainability (4). Rojava however, has not been free of criticism, mainly due to the PKK's Marxist-Leninist past, which, as some scholars argue, still acts with a top-down, authoritarian approach and has imposed a personality cult for its leader Abdullah Ocalan in Rojava. Other criticisms of Rojava have been the militarisation of society, violation of human rights and the suppression of political dissidents.

With the withdrawal of US troops announced by Donald Trump in December of 2018, the Democratic Confederation of Northern Syria, commonly known as Rojava, runs the risk of suffering an attack from Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian Turkey with the collaboration of allied Syrian rebel fighters. This attack not only threatens to frustrate any revolutionary achievements made by the inhabitants of Rojava, but also risks the lives of the millions of people who live there.[1] In consequence, the Kurdish and Arab militias of Rojava have been forced to enter an uneasy alliance with the Al-Assad regime in order to avoid a

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[1] Hall R. (2018) "'We used to trust the US': Syrian Kurds fear Turkish attack after Trump's troop withdrawal" Independent Accessed on the 28th of December 2018

Turkish aggression.[2] Within Western media, the images of Kurdish female fighters have been used to portray the struggle of the Kurds as a struggle to adopt liberal and feminist western values as opposed to oriental backward and sexist values. This discourse thus silences the real discourse of non-statist democracy that goes far beyond western liberal values.[3] A clear example of this can be found in a recent Guardian article on the consequences of withdrawal of US troops from Syria,[4] which describes the Kurdish forces as pro-Western and as the closest allies of the US and Europe, without a single mention to the political project taking place within Syria. The creation of such discourses and the threat of Turkish aggression pose a menace to both Rojava's legacy and existence. This makes it necessary to shed light on the real nature of the project taking place in Northern Syria and its ideological inspirations.

The article is divided into three sections; the first of which gives a general overview of Bookchin's thought and its influence on Abdullah Öcalan following his imprisonment. The second part describes and analyses the revolutionary process in Rojava and its inspiration on Bookchin's and Öcalan's works based on the premises of gender equality, direct democracy, ethnic diversity and an economy shifted towards cooperation and sustainability. Finally, the third section gives a brief outline of some of the criticisms made towards Rojava; and concludes with a summary of the main topics discussed along with a reflection on Rojava's relevance as an alternative to the political, economic and social status quo.

Murray Bookchin's work and influence on Abdullah Öcalan

[2] Ensor J. (2018) 'Syrian Kurds request help from Assad regime after US abandons them' The Telegraph Accessed on the 28th of December 2018

[3] Şimşek B. & Jongerden J. (2018): 'Gender Revolution in Rojava: The Voices beyond Tabloid Geopolitics', Geopolitics pp.1-22

[4] Tisdall S. (2018) 'Trump's Syria move pleases dictators and hands initiative to ISIS' The Guardian Accessed on 2nd of January 2019

Murray Bookchin was an influential scholar whose ideas have contributed to the development of both ecological and revolutionary theory. He also became the main source of inspiration for the transformed Kurdish struggle for independence. In *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982) Bookchin started by highlighting the need for the complete dissolution of any type of hierarchy, including any system of "obedience and command" within interpersonal relations, that has to go along with traditional struggles against political repression and economic exploitation.[5] One of the clearest cases of hierarchy in interpersonal relations, which also reveals how these are inherent to greater political coercive structures, is that of the domination of men over women. Bookchin argued that it is one of the sources of power within the state: the institutionalisation of patriarchy assures the dominance of men over women and place "her ability to reproduce the species" in subordination to man's acquired state power. This constant need for subordinating women's roles causes an "antagonistic relationship [that] generates a hostile ambience in society".[6] Bookchin also claimed that the will to dominate nature and exploit it goes all too often accompanied by the domination and exploitation of human beings by other human beings. He insisted that preliterate societies saw themselves as part of nature and not separate to it, and this in turn caused them to have a "high sense of internal unity" and an "egalitarian outlook" in their social relations.[7] However, the idea that human *logos* (reason) had to dominate over the realm of nature, gradually developed alongside the rise of "the old to supremacy over the young, men to supremacy over women, the shaman and later the priestly corporation to supremacy over lay society, one class to supremacy over another, and State formations to supremacy over society in general".[8] Bookchin in contrast, desired to reconciliate the human and rational world with the natural world, and

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[5] Bookchin M. (1982) The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy 2nd edn, Black Rose Books, Montreal, Quebec, pp.3-4

[6] Ibid pp. 121-123

[7] Ibid p.5

[8] Ibid p. 7

therefore insisted throughout the book that "ecological issues be understood primarily as social issues".[9]

In *Urbanization without Cities* (1992) Bookchin argued that the city must be revendicated as a space that encourages notions of freedom, equality and diversity to "[corrode] the parochial bonds of blood ties, gender distinctions, age status group, and ethnic exclusivity".[10] He highlighted the positive (albeit not ignoring the negative) characteristics of the Ancient Greek concept of citizenship: well-rounded and highly educated people who can be active participants in a directly democratic process. He called for a recovery of these positive aspects of Greek citizenship in modern urban centres, which would lead towards a more democratic, open and cohesive society.[11] Bookchin saw the main source of revolution in the municipality and sets the basis for a municipalist and democratic revolt against the nation-state.[12] Bookchin laid out a variety of historical examples in which citizens' calls for local democracy and greater independence have been in direct confrontation with a highly centralised state power. This can be seen for example in the conflict between the Flemish city dwellers, who aimed at establishing a league of independent towns, and the powerful territorial lords who aimed at a more centralised rule following the lines of the French monarchy.[13] It can be also seen in the desire for direct-democracy of the Parisian *sans-culottes*: they were in conflict with the French Republicans who were pursuing a highly centralised nation-state during the Revolution of 1789.[14] Finally, Bookchin defined Democratic Confederalism as a "democratic and truly communitarian [form] of independence" that must

[9] Tokar B. (2008) 'On Bookchin's Social Ecology and its Contributions to Social Movements', Capitalism Nature Socialism, 19:1, 51-66, p.53

[10] Bookchin, M. (1992) Urbanisation without cities Black Rose Books Montreal, Quebec, pp. 16-17

[11] Ibid, p.18

[12] Biehl J. (2012) 'Bookchin, Öcalan and the Dialectics of Democracy' New Compass Press 16th of February Accessed 26th December 2018

[13] Bookchin M. 1992, p. 112

[14] Ibid, pp. 115-117

come along with the creation of self-sufficient and decentralised communities.[15] Thus, Democratic Confederalism stands in direct contrast with the bureaucratised and highly specialised capitalist nation-state which leads to great levels of expenditure and exploitation of nature for the profits of multinational corporations.[16]

The Kurdish struggle for national liberation is deeply defined by the struggle of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which at its inception in the 1970s was a Marxist-Leninist organisation that aimed at the creation of a Kurdish nation-state and the development of class struggle. To accomplish such objectives, the PKK started a guerrilla campaign against Turkey in 1984. This campaign led in the 1990s to popular uprisings in the Kurdish-majority areas in Turkey. These were put down by the end of the decade through repression by the Turkish state forces and concluded in 1999 with the imprisonment of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan.[17] In his defence speech, Öcalan admits abandoning Marxist premises and defends a representative democratic approach that can "acknowledge the existence of the Kurdish people and their rights to language and culture".[18]

However, whilst in jail, Öcalan encountered Bookchin's work, which significantly changed his approach and made him believe Bookchin's ideas could offer a new starting point for the Kurdish struggle. It is possible that Öcalan was first attracted by Bookchin's thoughts on the Mesopotamian form of "democratic communal organisation" which preceded political hierarchy and were based on a unity between the individual, the community and nature.[19] In addition, Bookchin recalls that the first known word for freedom, the

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[15] Ibid, p. 296

[16] Ibid, pp. 290-291

[17] Leezenberg M. (2016) The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 16:4, 671-690, p.673

[18] Biehl J. 2012

[19] Leezenburg M. 2016, pp. 675-676

Mesopotamian *amargi,* means 'return to the mother'. It can be interpreted as a return to pre-political organic society or "to nature perceived as a bountiful mother" rather than nature being something that must be dominated and controlled.[20] Öcalan reflects these ideas in *Roots of Civilization* (2001), where he compares the Ziggurat temples to precursors of the modern institutions of the state, with their centralised political and economic power. In contrast to centralised power represented in the Ziggurat, Öcalan believes that an opposing idea, an antithesis, can be found in local democratic institutions that can resolve long-lasting political problems such as the Kurdish question.[21] In another work of his, *Democratic Confederalism* (2011), Öcalan makes a devastating critique of the nation-state, which he describes as an all-encompassing institution that enforces a single national culture and identity through assimilation and genocide, and subsequently aims "at the monopolization of all social processes" to mould citizenship to the capitalist market by providing a homogenised and docile labour force.[22] Öcalan claims that the power of the nation-state resides particularly in the repression and exploitation of women, who are treated as sexual objects or as commodities, they are used as a valuable reservoir of cheap and even free labour and as a producer of offspring. Öcalan concludes that the solution to the Kurdish question is not the creation of a nation-state that would further the repression of society and of women, but the promotion of a new form of democratic confederalism based on Bookchin's communalist ideas and the liberation of women. These two premises he argues, provide a solution not only to the Kurdish question but to the Middle-East in general.

The establishment of the Rojava Revolution

Through his lawyers, Öcalan recommended Bookchin's works to PKK militants,[23] who shifted the party's ideology from that of a Marxist-Leninist national liberation perspective towards one of a non-statist democracy, reflected

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[20] Bookchin M. 1982, p.168

[21] Biehl J. 2012

[22] Ocalan A. (2011) Democratic Confederalism 1st edition International Initiative, Cologne, p.12

[23] Biehl J. 2012

in a series of congresses between the 1990s and 2000s. However, it was not the PKK in Turkey, where the Turkish state has a solid grip on all its territories, but the PYD, an affiliate party of the PKK in Syria, that was capable of implementing to their full potential Bookchin's and Öcalan's ideas in Northern Syria following the power vacuum left by the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.[24] The Rojava revolution started off in three confederated cantons formed in the regions of Cizire, Efrin and Kobane, with a population of almost one million. The four main principles that the Rojava Revolution has attempted to establish are gender equality, direct democracy, ethnic diversity and an economy focused on cooperation and sustainability; as can be observed in Article 2 of the Constitution of Rojava: "The democratic federal system of Northern Syria shall embrace ecology, democracy and the freedom of women."[25]

The strive for gender equality seems to be where the Rojava Revolution has been the most successful. The emancipation of women in Rojava has partly been inspired by Öcalan's discourse on Jinology (the science of women), which, as outlined in *Democratic Confederalism* (2011), argues that the development of the nation-state and the market economy has had its basis in the enslavement of women.[26] However, Öcalan's Jinology has its roots in the success of feminism within the PKK promoted by female members, and by changes in gender discourse in Kurdish society at large.[27] As it has been previously observed, the Rojava Constitution recognises the liberation of women as one of its top priorities. This has been carried out through a varied range of policies and the creation of new democratic institutions which allow women to participate in public life free from traditional patriarchal ties. As a point of departure, "polygamy, female circumsicion and marriage under eighteen years of age have been abolished".[28] In terms of political decision making, at least 40% of

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[24] Cemgil C. and Hoffman C. (2016) 'The 'Rojava Revolution' in Syrian Kurdistan: A Model of Development for the Middle East?' Institute of Development Studies Vol 47, No 3 pp. 53-77, p.55

[25] Syrian Democratic Council (2016) Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria Rojava

[26] Simsek B. and Jongerden S. 2018, p.17

[27] Engel Di Mauro, S. (2015) 'Rojava', Capitalism Nature Socialism, 26:1, 1-15, p.10

[28] Ibid, p.3

participants at every administrative level must be women,[29] and at every one of these administrative levels, parallel all-female institutions have been created to provide women with political organs to administer their own affairs and counter the patriarchal traditions immanent in society.[30] The same dynamics apply to the economy, were cooperatives are either mixed gender or all-women;[31] in the police force, or Ayasis, where an all women division is included [32] and in the military, where the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) has been set up as a separate division to the YPG (People's Protection Units).[33] In addition to this, feminist consciousness is promoted in all-women self-administered academies.[34]

The promotion in Rojava as a non-statist democracy is seen as an essential tool for the recognition of all ethnicities and religions. This stands in direct contrast to the homogenised nation-state which is described and criticised in the works of Bookchin and Öcalan. Proof of this is the recognition within the Constitution of Rojava of the right of all cultural, ethnic and religious groups to appoint their own administrators and form their own democratic organisations.[35] The Commune is the essential political institution, it is based on a process of direct democracy and participates in all stages of decision-making.[36] Local democratic forms of governance that ran parallel to and assumed many of the roles of the Syrian state's administration had existed long before the start of the civil war, but only in 2011 with the outbreak of the latter have these forms of governance become effective.[37] The Communes are followed by councils or 'people's houses' which are established around previous neighbourhood administrations.

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[29] Ibid

[30] Cemgil C. and Hoffman C. 2016, p. 64

[31] Lebsky M. (2016) 'The economy of Rojava' Cooperation in Mesopotamia, accessed on the 27th of December 2018

[32] Di Mauro S. 2015, p.3

[33] Cemgil C. and Hoffman C. 2016, p.66

[34] Di Mauro S. 2015, p.3

[35] Syrian Democratic Council, Article 33

[36] Ibid, Article 48

[37] Lebsky M. 2016

Councils are normally comprised of members who must reflect the social composition of neighbourhoods. They deal with issues such as energy, food distribution and social relations [38] and exist at every level of administration, from the village to the district.[39] The councils at the wider regional level are accountable to councils at the local level, therefore decision making is always maintained bottom-up.[40] Council representatives and military officers rotate as often as possible in order to avoid the formation of any kind of political or military elites.[41] The role of council representatives is only "to convey the policy decisions" made by the communes. They can be recalled by these same communes if they fail in their task.[42] In terms of the judicial system, legal disputes are dealt with and resolved by more traditional courts. The Asayis, or internal security members, respond directly to the communes, and thus as a police force, they are not subject to the decisions of any representative. In each area there is a clear attempt to 'socialise governance', that is, giving responsibility of all forms of administration to society as opposed to a bureaucratised and professionalised nation-state.[43]

The economy is another area where socialised forms of administration have been attempted, along with a focus on sustainability and respect for the environment. However, this is also the area where the least progress has been achieved, both due to the restrictions that war has imposed on Rojava and on the willingness to avoid ethnic and social conflict. The Assad regime had deliberately been maintaining the Kurdish majority regions of Syria impoverished by limiting the number of crops that could be grown and by evicting Kurdish people off their lands to stimulate the settlement of Arabic tribes in these areas.[44] The existence of a wealthier Arab population in the region means that a redistribution of wealth could be a source of ethnic conflict,

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[38] Di Mauro S. 2015, p. 2

[39] Syrian Democratic Council, Article 49

[40] Lebsky M. 2016

[41] Cemgil C. and Hoffman C. 2016, p. 64

[42] Biehl J. 2012

[43] Cemgil C. and Hoffman C. 2016, pp. 64-65

[44] Lebsky M. 2016

sparking the pre-existing tensions developed throughout years of Baathist rule. However, there has been considerable progress, particularly in land ownership. Around 50% of Rojava's land is collectively owned, something that was achieved without need of forceful expropriations, as most privatised land was owned by people from Assad's regime who fled the region at the start of the Civil War.[45] Local administration encourages cooperatives, they are being privileged over traditional enterprises.[46] The cooperatives' property is collective and profits are split into three: 30% is spent on planned production and future projects, 50% is split among the workers and 20% on the needs of the community such as healthcare, education, electricity and water. The existence of a private market is accepted and tolerated, but economic production and profit must exist in accordance with the common good of the community.[47] The construction of an ecological society is recognised by the Rojava Constitution as one of the main priorities of the revolution and goes along the lines of Bookchin's views presented in *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982). However, in practice this is probably one of the areas where the Rojava revolution has achieved the least progress. Attempts to rebuild Kobane amongst ecological lines have been made and agricultural cooperatives are promoting the use of organic fertilizers and the diversification of crops in order to achieve sustainability.[48] It is important to have in mind that Rojava is a society at war, and that 70% of its expenditures are on defence and security[49], which makes projects for sustainability very complicated, in addition to the fact that Rojava is also heavily dependent on oil for energy, as the region of Cizire has large reserves of oil.[50]

Criticism of Rojava and Conclusion

[45] System D media (2015) Rojava: An economic system in progress Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_dchuli8cs Accessed on the 28th of December 2018

[46] Di Mauro S. 2015, p.3

[47] Lebsky M. 2016

[48] Hunt S.E. (2017): Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology, Capitalism Nature Socialism pp. 1-20, pp. 12-13

[49] System D media 2015

[50] Lebsky M. 2016

Despite the many outstanding social and political achievements in Rojava, the revolution has had its limitations and there still is a large space for criticism. One of the main criticisms is based on the PKK's Marxist-Leninist past, and the fact that this has influenced to a great extent the revolutionary process in Rojava. Leezenburg [51] argues that the system of councils and communes had been established by PKK cadres in 2005, rather than being spontaneously set up by the local population. He also thinks that the educational system, rather than providing education and critical thinking, is a propaganda tool aimed at "instilling PKK orthodoxy".[52] There are also accusations of a leadership cult around the image of Öcalan.[53] Another problem with the Rojava Revolution is that the elimination of hierarchies and the preservation of the democratic institutions have come along with a profound militarisation of society.[54] With the imminent threat of ISIS conscription to the YPG and YPJ has become compulsory in 2014.[55]In addition, there have been accusations of human rights violations and suppression of dissident groups on the part of the PYD. These are particularly common in regions with an Arab majority, where the PYD has a more centralised control and local level governance seems to have less influence, and has often attempted to ensure that only loyal representatives are able to govern.[56] This last issue is particularly concerning, as it seems that ethnic conflicts have not been completely resolved and that the PYD and the Rojava project is giving the Kurds greater influence in the region at the expense of the Arab population. These issues must be handled with if the revolution in Rojava is to remain a truly democratic and multi-ethnic project.

The Rojava revolution has been a project based on grassroots democracy, ethnic diversity and ecological sustainability. Its inspiration from the American scholar Murray Bookchin has led a great part of Northern Syria to a radically

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[51] Leezenburg M. 2016

[52] Ibid p. 679

[53] De Jong A. (2016) 'The New-Old PKK' Jacobin Accessed on the 29th of December 2018

[54] Cemgil C. and Hoffman C. 2016 p.70

[55] Ibid

[56] Khalaf R. (2016) Governing Rojava: Layers of legitimacy in Syria Chatham House

democratic experiment diametrically opposed to deeply centralised nation-states such as Syria and Turkey. It has provided the Kurdish liberation struggle with an alternative to national independence. Despite its limitations – particularly in the incapacity of Rojava to follow a truly ecologically sustainable project, accusations of the top-down role of the PKK, the militarisation of society and human rights abuses – Rojava remains an interesting and profoundly democratic alternative to the nation-state.

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