

Kurdistan?

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“There are times in which we can do nothing except not lose our head.” Louis Mercier-Vega, from *La Chevauchée anonyme*¹

When workers are forced to take in hand their own affairs in order to survive, they open the *possibility* of social change.

Some Kurds have been forced to act in the conditions that they find and attempt to create, in the midst of an internationalized war unfavourable to emancipation.

We are not here to “judge” them.

Nor to lose our heads.

Self (defence)

In various parts of the world, proletarians are led to *self-defence* through self-organization:

A vast cloud of “movements” — armed and unarmed, and oscillating between social banditry and organized guerrilla activity — act in the most wretched zones of the global capitalist junkyard, presenting traits similar to those of the current PKK. In one way or another, they attempt to resist the destruction of already marginal subsistence economies, the plundering of natural resources or local mining, or the imposition of capitalist landed property that limits or prevents access and/or use. [...] [W]e can randomly cite cases of piracy in the seas of Somalia, MEND in Nigeria, the Naxalites in India, the Mapuche in Chile. [...] It is essential to grasp the content they have in common: *self-defence*. [O]ne always *self-organizes* on the basis of what one is

¹ Translator’s note: “Born Charles Cortvint in Brussels in 1914, Louis Mercier Vega was an anarchist journalist who was very active in the French labor movement. After fighting with the Durruti Column in the Spanish Civil War, Mercier returned to France, where in 1938 he joined (as Charles Ridel) a group of young anarchists called Révision, which demanded a process of radical ideological and strategic rethinking. During World War II Vega lived in Latin America, a continent he later analyzed in some of his works. In the late 1950s Mercier became co-editor of *Volontà*, an Italian newspaper of the anti-organizational current in anarchism that defended creative spontaneity and free experimentation in spheres such as education, culture, and aesthetics. In 1958, he created with Helmut Rüdiger the Commission Internationale de Liaison Ouvrière (CILO), a network around a bulletin of the same name published in Paris until 1965, which aimed to redefine the role of libertarian syndicalism in new contexts of production. His last endeavor was *Interrogations*, a quarterly review founded in 1974 and written in French, English, Italian, and Spanish, updating key concepts of anarchist political thought, especially the role of the state and the ruling class. The publication lasted until 1979, two years after Mercier committed suicide.” From: (http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405184649_yr2010_chunk_g9781405184649173)

within the capitalist mode of production (workers of this or that company, inhabitant of this or that district etc.), while the abandonment of the defensive terrain (“demands”) coincides with the fact that all these subjects interpenetrate each other, and that as the capital/wage-labour relation that structures them starts to disintegrate, the distinctions cease to exist.²

In Rojava, has self-organization led (or could it lead) from the necessity of survival to an upheaval of social relations?

It is unnecessary to repeat here the history of the powerful Kurdish independence movement in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. The Kurds have been torn apart for decades through the rivalry between these countries and the repression that they suffer there. After the explosion of Iraq into three entities (Sunni, Shiite and Kurd), the Syrian civil war has liberated a territory in Syria where Kurdish autonomy has taken a new form. A popular union (that is to say cross-class) was established to manage this territory and defend it against a military threat. The Islamic State (IS) has served as the agent of this break. The resistance mixes old community ties and new movements, in particular women, through a de facto alliance between proletarians and the middle classes, with “the Nation” [acting] as cement. “The transformation taking place in Rojava rests to some extent on a radical Kurdish identity and on [a] substantial middle class [...] contingent who, despite radical rhetoric, always have some interest in the continuity of capital and the state.”³

Democratic revolution?

In politics there is much in the words. When Rojava elaborated its constitution and called it *Social Contract*, it was echoing the 18th century Enlightenment. Lenin and Mao forgotten, the current Kurdish leaders read Rousseau, not Bakunin.

The *Social Contract* [of Rojava] proclaims the “*mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society*” and recognizes “*Syria’s territorial integrity*”. It is what all democratic constitutions say, and there is no reason to expect praise for the class struggle, nor the demand for the abolition of borders, thus of states.⁴

It is the discourse of a democratic revolution. In the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the right of “*resistance to oppression*” explicitly provided

² Il Lato Cattivo, ‘The “Kurdish Question”, ISIS, USA, Etc.’

³ Becky, ‘A revolution in daily life’

⁴ The Social Contract (of Rojava)

went hand in hand with that of property as well. Freedom was full but defined and limited by the *law*. It is the same in Rojava — “private property” is a right under the law. Although opting for the descriptive term “*autonomous region*“, the Social Contract provides for administration, police, prisons, taxes (thus a central power raising *money*).

But we are at the beginning of the 21st century: the reference to “*Almighty God*” stands alongside “*sustainable development*“, quasi-parity (40% of women), and “*gender equality*” (although linked to the “*family*“).

Add the separation of powers, that of the church and state, an independent judiciary, an economic system to ensure “*general well-being*“, a guarantee of workers’ rights (including the right to strike), and the limitation of the number of political offices, etc. — a left-wing, republican program.

If some people in Europe and the US see in such goals the announcement of social revolution, fault lies without doubt in “cultural relativism”. In Paris, this program would only provoke mockery among the radical milieu, but “over there, it is already not bad...”.

Those who draw a parallel between Rojava and the Spanish revolution should compare this *Social Contract* with the program adopted by the CNT in May 1936 (and with the way in which it was concretely translated two months later).

New nationalism

Like any political movement, a national liberation movement provides itself [with] ideologies, means, and allies that it is able to, and changes when it is convenient. If the ideology is new it’s because it reflects a change in time.

“One cannot understand the present turn of the Kurdish question, nor the trajectory of its political expressions — the PKK in the first place — without taking into account the end of the golden age of a socialist or “progressive” “Nationalism from below” in the periphery and semi-periphery of the capitalist system, and its causes.”⁵

The PKK has not given up the usual goal of national liberation movements. Even if it now avoids a word that sounds too authoritarian, the aim of the PKK is still today as it was yesterday, the creation of a central apparatus of management and of political rule over a territory — and there is no better word than *State* to describe this thing. The difference, apart from its administrative designation, is that it would be so very democratic, so much more in the hands of its citizens that it would no longer deserve the name of State. Here is ideology.

⁵ Il Lato Cattivo, op. cit.

In Syria, the Kurdish national movement (under the influence of PKK) has replaced the demand for a state of law by a more modest and more “basic” [*basiste* — from the base, lit. ‘base-ist’] program: autonomy, democratic federalism, the rights of men and women, etc. What is put forward, instead of the ideology of socialism led by a single workers and peasants party developing heavy industry, or references to “class” and “Marxists”, is self-management, the cooperative, the commune, ecology, anti-productivism and, as a bonus, gender.

The goal of a strong internal autonomy with a democratic life at its base is not absolutely utopian. For instance various parts of the Pacific live thus, the governments leaving a wide margin of self-government to populations that do not interest anyone (except when mining interests are at stake — then the army is sent). In Africa, Somaliland has the attributes of a State (police, currency, economy) except that it is not recognized by anyone. In Chiapas (which many compare to Rojava) people survive in a regional semi-autonomy [that] protects their culture and their values without bothering the world outside. Incidentally the Zapatista uprising, the first of the anti-globalization era, did not seek independence or the transformation of society, but [rather] the preservation of a traditional way of life.

The Kurds live in the heart of a coveted oil region torn by endless conflict and dominated by dictatorships. This leaves little margin for Rojava... but maybe a small place though. Although its economic viability is low, it is not non-existent thanks to a little oil windfall. Black gold has already created puppet states like Kuwait, and allows the survival of the Iraqi Kurdish mini-state. Suffice to say that the future of Rojava depends less on the mobilization of its people than the interplay of the dominant powers.

If the abandonment of the nation-state project by the PKK is real, we must ask what a federation of three or four autonomous areas would be [like] — crossing borders in at least three countries — as the coexistence of several autonomous zones would not abolish the central political structure that brings them together. In Europe, cross-border regions (e.g. around the Oder-Neisse) do not diminish State power.

Another everyday life

Sometimes, such as in this case, solidarity against an enemy has caused the *temporary* effacement of social differences: the management of villages by collectives, links between combatants (men and women) and the population; dissemination of medical knowledge (the beginning of the overcoming of specialized powers); the free sharing of some food-stuffs during the worst moments ([of] fighting); innovative treatment of mental disorders; the collective life of male and female students;

justice rendered by joint committees (elected by each village) arbitrating disputes, deciding punishments, [and] seeking to reintegrate and rehabilitate; [the] integration of ethnic minorities in the region; the self-organisation of women outside the home.⁶

Is this “a democracy without the State”? Our intention is not to oppose a list of the negatives to a list of the positives drawn up by supporters. It is necessary to see from where this self-administration comes and how it can evolve, because we have never yet seen a State dissolve itself in local democracy.

An unchanged social structure

No one argues that it is only the “Kurds” who have the privilege of being the only people in the world who have always lived in harmony. The Kurds, like all other peoples, are divided into groups of opposing interests, into classes — or if “class” feels too Marxist, divided into rulers and ruled. Now, one sometimes reads that a “revolution” is under way or in preparation in Rojava. Knowing that the ruling classes never willingly cede power, where and how have they been defeated? What intense class struggle has taken place in Kurdistan to trigger this process?

This [talk of “revolution”] tells us nothing. If slogans and headlines speak of revolution, articles affirm that the inhabitants of Rojava fight the IS, patriarchy, the State and capitalism... but, on this last point, no one explains why or how the PYD-PKK could be anti-capitalist... and no one seems to remark on this “absence”.

The so-called Revolution of July 2012 corresponds in fact to the withdrawal of Assad’s troops from Kurdistan. Having disappeared the previous administrative and security power was replaced, and a self-government called revolutionary has taken things in hand. But for what “self” is it acting? [And] of what revolution?

If one speaks willingly of taking power at the base [of society] and of changing the domestic sphere, it is never a question of the transformation of the relations of exchange and exploitation. At best, we describe cooperatives, without the least indication of the beginning of collectivization. The new Kurdish state has reopened the wells and refining centres, and produces electricity — [but] nothing is said about those who work there. Commerce, handicrafts and markets function, money continues to play its role. Zaher Baher, a visitor and admirer of the Kurdish “revolution” [says]: “Before leaving the region, we spoke with shop keepers, businessmen and people in the market. Everyone had a rather positive opinion on the DSA [Democratic Self Administration] and TEV-DEM [‘Movement for a Democratic Society’ — a coalition of organizations of which the PYD is the centre of

⁶ A relative eclipse of social disparities since the richest Kurds avoid participating in the self-government of camps by taking refuge in other countries with more comfortable conditions.

gravity]. They were happy about the existence of peace, security and freedom and running their own business without any interference from any parties or groups.”⁷ Finally a revolution that does not scare the bourgeoisie.

Soldiers

It would be enough to change the names. Much of the praise today addressed to Rojava, including on the question of gender, was, around 1930, addressed to the groups of Zionist pioneers in Palestine. In the first kibbutz, alongside the often progressive and socialist ideology, were the material conditions (precarious and necessary for defence) that obliged them to not deprive themselves of half of the labour force: [thus] women had an obligation to participate in agricultural activities and defence, which implied their liberation from “feminine” tasks, including the collective rearing of children.

No trace of this in Rojava. The arming of women is not everything (as the Israeli Defence Force clearly shows). Z. Baher testifies: “I made one interesting observation: I have not seen a single woman working in a shop, petrol station, market, café or restaurant.” The “self-managed” Refugee camps in Turkey are filled with women caring for the kids while the men look for work.

The subversive nature of a movement or organization cannot be measured by the number of armed women — nor its feminist character either. Since the 1960s, across all continents, most guerrillas have included or include numerous female combatants — for example in Colombia. This is even truer amongst Maoist-inspired guerrillas (Nepal, Peru, Philippines, etc.) using the strategy of “People’s War”: male/female equality should contribute to the tearing down of traditional structures, feudal or tribal (always patriarchal). It is in the Maoist origins of the PKK-PYD that one finds the source of what specialists call “martial feminism”.

But why do armed women pass for a symbol of emancipation? Why do we see here so easily an image of freedom, even going so far as to forget what they are fighting for?

If a woman armed with a rocket launcher can appear on the cover of *Le Parisien-Magazine* or a militant newspaper, it is because it is a classic figure. The monopoly of the use of arms is a traditional male privilege; its overturning must prove the radicality and exceptionality of a particular battle or a war. Hence the pictures of beautiful Spanish militia women. The revolution is at the end of the Kalashnikov...

⁷ Zaher Baher, « Vers l’autogestion au Rojava ? », *Où est la révolution au Rojava ?*, n°1, juillet-novembre 2014 p. 21. English version available as ‘The experiment of West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) has proved that people can make changes’

held by a woman. To this vision is sometimes added a more “feminist” one, of the armed woman vindicated, gunning down the bad guys, the rapists, etc.

Note that the IS and the Damascus regime [i.e. Assad’s regime] have constituted some all-female military units. However, and contrary to YPJ-YPG, they do not criticise gender distinctions, they do not seem to be used in the front lines, and are confined to supporting or police roles.

To arms

During Parisian demonstrations in support of Rojava, the banner of the united anarchist procession demanded “*Arms for the Kurdish resistance*.” Considering that the average proletarian does not have assault rifles and grenades to clandestinely send to Kurdistan, from whom do we demand such weapons? Should we rely on international arms dealers or NATO for weapons deliveries? Such deliveries have cautiously begun, but anarchist banners have nothing to do with them. Apart from the IS, nobody is considering new International Brigades.⁸ So what type of armed support is this? Is it about demanding more Western air strikes with the “collateral damage” that we all know? Obviously not. It is, therefore, an empty formula and this is perhaps the worst of the deal: the so-called revolution is a pretext for demonstrations and slogans which no one seriously expects to be acted upon. We are as right-on in politics as in representation.

We are less surprised that people always ready to denounce the military-industrial complex now issue these calls if we remember that already in 1999, for Kosovo, some anarchists supported the NATO bombing... to prevent a “genocide”.

Anarchist

What is sad, more so than the organisations that have always supported national liberation movements, is that this exaltation reaches a wider milieu, of anarchist comrades, squatters, feminists and autonomists — often friends generally more lucid.

If lesser evil politics penetrates these milieus, it is because their radicalism is spineless (though this doesn’t prevent personal courage or energy).

⁸ Translator’s note: However a small pro-Albanian Stalinist group in Turkey, the ‘Marxist-Leninist Communist Party’ (*Marksist-Leninist Komünist Partisi* in Turkish) has committed to organising International Brigades for Rojava. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist%E2%80%93Leninist_Communist_Party_\(Turkey\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist%E2%80%93Leninist_Communist_Party_(Turkey)).

Today it is much easier to get excited about Kurdistan (as 20 years ago it was for Chiapas) while militants despair over Billancourt.⁹ “Over there”, at least, there are no resigned and drunken proles who vote for the FN [Front Nationale] and dream only of winning the Loto or finding a job. “Over there” there are peasants (even though the majority of Kurds live in cities), the mountain people in struggle, full of dreams and hope.... This rural-natural aspect (thus ecological) is mixed with a desire for change *here and now*. Gone are the days of the great ideologies and promises of the “Grand Soir”¹⁰: we make some things, we “create links”, despite the lack of means, we cultivate a vegetable garden, we realize a small public garden (like the one mentioned by Z. Baher). This echoes the ZAD¹¹: roll-up our sleeves and make something concrete and small scale, in the here and now. This is what they do “over there”, with an AK-47 at the shoulder.

Some anarchist texts only evoke Rojava in terms of local achievements and neighbourhood assemblies, almost never speaking of the PYD and the PKK, etc., as if they were only spontaneous actions. It would be a little like if, in order to analyse a general strike, we only spoke of the self-management of strikers and of strike pickets, without considering the local unions, or the manoeuvring of the union management, or their negotiations with the State and the bosses...

The revolution is increasingly seen as a question of behaviour: self-organization, interest in gender, ecology, creating links, discussion, affects. If we add here disinterest or carelessness regarding State and political power, it is logical to see well and truly a revolution — and why not “*a revolution of women*” in Rojava. Since we speak less and less of classes, of class struggle, does it matter that this is also absent from the discourse of the PKK-PYD?

⁹ Translator’s note: I think this is a reference to the old centre of industrial working class radicalism in Paris. From Wikipedia: ‘Boulogne-Billancourt is a suburb in the western suburbs of Paris, France. [...] Formerly an important industrial site, it has [been] reconverted into a business services centre and is now home to major communication companies headquartered in the Val de Seine business district.’ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boulogne-Billancourt>

¹⁰ Translator’s note: The ‘Grand Soir’ is a term common in the French far-left, anarchist, socialist and communist, stretching back at least to the 19th century (though some have noted older, Christian origins). The ‘Great Night’ is in essence the night of the Revolution, the night of the reversal of the social order, the night of the final reckoning. According to Maurice Tournier it has more recently been recuperated by sections of the far right. See (in French): Maurice Tournier, « Le Grand Soir », un mythe de fin de siècle.

¹¹ Translator’s note: ZAD or ‘Zone À Défendre’ (Area to Defend). A name given by protestors to the area they wish to protect from the proposed ‘Aéroport du Grand Ouest Project’, i.e. the planned airport north of the city of Nantes. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A%C3%A9roport_du_Grand_Ouest.

What criticism of the state?

What bothers radical thought in national liberation struggles is the goal of creating a State. It suffices for it to renounce this and consider that at its base, the nation (provided it is stateless) is the people — and how can we be against the people? [In it] is a little bit of us all, almost 99%. No?

Anarchism has the characteristic of (and to its merit) a principled hostility to the State. Given this, and this is something, its great weakness is to consider it primarily as an instrument of coercion — which it certainly is — without wondering why and how it plays this role. Therefore, it is sufficient to wipe out the most visible forms of the State for some anarchists (not all) to conclude that its disappearance has happened or is near.

For this reason, the anarchist is disarmed before what looks too much like their own program, having always been against the State but for democracy, though naturally they favour *democratic federalism* and *social self-determination*. The anarchist ideal is to replace the State by thousands of federated communes (and work collectives).

On this basis, it is possible to be internationalist and support a national movement, so long as it practices generalized self-management, social and political, now called “appropriation of the common”. When the PKK no longer claims to want power, but a system where everyone will share power, it is easy for the anarchist to recognise themselves there.

Perspectives

The attempt at democratic revolution in Rojava, and the social transformations that accompany it, have only been possible because of exceptional conditions: the breaking up of the Iraqi and Syrian states and the jihadist invasion of the region — a threat which had the effect of promoting radicalisation.

With Western military support it now seems probable that Rojava can (in the image of Iraqi Kurdistan) exist as an autonomous entity held at a distance on the margin of a persisting Syrian chaos. In which case, this small state, however democratic it wants to be, by normalising [its relations] will not leave intact social conquests or advancements. At best there will remain some local self-government, progressive education, a free press (on the condition of avoiding blasphemy), a tolerant Islam and, of course, gender-parity. No more. But still enough for those who want to believe in a social revolution to continue believing in one — needless to say by wishing for this democracy to become even more democratic.

As for the hope of a conflict between the self-organization at the base and the structures that oversee them, this is to imagine that there exists in Rojava a situation of “dual power”. This is to forget that the power of the PYD-PKK itself has driven this self-government, and retains the real power, both political and military.

To return to the comparison with Spain, in 1936 it was the “beginning” of revolution that was then devoured by war. In Rojava there was first the war and, unfortunately, there is still no sign that a “social” revolution is about to be born.

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