

Dilar Dirik: Building Democracy without the State

This article was originally published in [ROAR Magazine](#).



“When people first came to our house a few years ago to ask if our family would like to participate in the communes, I threw stones at them to keep them away,” laughs Bushra, a young woman from Tirbespiye, Rojava. The mother of two belongs to an ultra-conservative religious sect. Before, she had never been allowed to leave her home and used to cover her entire body except her eyes.

“Now I actively shape my own community,” she says with a proud and radiant smile. “People come to me to seek help in solving social issues. But at the time, if you had asked me, I wouldn’t even have known what ‘council’ meant or what people do in assemblies.”

Today, around the world, people resort to alternative forms of autonomous organization to give their existence meaning again, to reflect human creativity’s desire to express itself as freedom. These collectives, communes, cooperatives and grassroots movements can be characterized as the people’s self-defense mechanisms against the encroachment of capitalism, patriarchy and the state.

At the same time, many indigenous peoples, cultures and communities that faced exclusion and marginalization have protected their communalist ways of living until this day. It is striking that communities that protected their existence against the evolving world order around them are often described in negative terms, as “lacking” something—notably, a state.

The positivist and determinist tendencies that dominate today's historiography render such communities unusual, uncivilized, backward. Statehood is assumed to be an inevitable consequence of civilization and modernity; a natural step in history's linear progress.

There are undoubtedly some genealogical and ontological differences between, for lack of a better word, "modern" revolutionary communes, and natural, organic communities. The former are developing primarily among radical circles in capitalist societies as uprisings against the dominant system, while the latter pose a threat to the hegemonic powers by nature of their very survival. But still, we cannot say that these organic communes are non-political, as opposed to the metropolitan communes with their intentional, goal-oriented politics.

Centuries, perhaps millennia of resistance against the capitalist world order are in fact very radical acts of defiance. For such communities, relatively untouched by global currents due to their characteristic features, natural geography or active resistance, communal politics is simply a natural part of the world. That is why many people in Rojava, for instance, where a radical social transformation is currently underway, refer to their revolution "a return to our nature" or "the regaining of our social ethics."

Throughout history, the Kurds suffered all sorts of denial, oppression, destruction, genocide and assimilation. They were excluded from the statist order on two fronts: not only were they denied their own state, they were simultaneously excluded from the mechanisms of the state structures around them. Yet the experience of statelessness also helped protect many societal ethics and values, as well as a sense of community—especially in the rural and mountainous villages far from the cities.

To this day, Alevi-Kurdish villages in particular are characterized by processes of common solution-finding and reconciliation rituals for social disputes based on ethics and forgiveness to the benefit of the community. But while this form of life is quite prevalent in Kurdistan, there is also a conscious new effort to establish a political system centered around communal values—the system of Democratic Confederalism, built through democratic autonomy with the commune at its heart.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM IN ROJAVA

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), like many national liberation movements, initially thought that the creation of an independent state would be the solution to violence and oppression. However, with the changing world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the movement began to develop a fundamental self-criticism as well as a criticism of the dominant socialist politics of the time, which was still very much focused on seizing state power. Towards the end of the 1990s the PKK, under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan,

began to articulate an alternative to the nation state and state socialism.

Upon studying the history of Kurdistan and the Middle East, as well as the nature of power, the current economic system and ecological issues, Öcalan came to the conclusion that the reason for humanity's "freedom problem" was not statelessness but the emergence of the state. In an attempt to subvert the domination of the system that institutionalized itself across the globe over the span of 5,000 years as a synthesis of patriarchy, capitalism and the nation state, this alternative paradigm is based on the very opposite—women's liberation, ecology and grassroots democracy.

Democratic Confederalism is a social, political, and economic model of self-administration of different peoples, pioneered by women and the youth. It attempts to practically express the people's will by viewing democracy as a method rather than an aim alone. It is democracy without the state.

While it proposes new normative structures to establish a conscious political system, Democratic Confederalism also draws upon millennia-old forms of social organization that are still in existence across communities in Kurdistan and beyond. This model may seem far-fetched to our contemporary imagination, but it actually resonates well with the strong desire for emancipation among the different peoples in the region. Although the system has been implemented in Bakur (North Kurdistan) for years, within the limits of Turkish state repression, it was in Rojava (West Kurdistan) that a historic opportunity emerged to put Democratic Confederalism into practice.

The system places "democratic autonomy" at its heart: people organize themselves directly in the form of communes and create councils. In Rojava, this process is facilitated by Tev-Dem, the Movement for a Democratic Society. The commune is made up of a consciously self-organized neighborhood and constitutes the most essential and radical aspect of the democratic practice. It has committees working on different issues like peace and justice, economy, safety, education, women, youth and social services.

The communes send elected delegates to the councils. Village councils send delegates to the towns, town councils send delegates to the cities, and so on. Each of the communes is autonomous, but they are linked to one another through a confederal structure for the purposes of coordination and the safeguarding of common principles. Only when issues cannot be resolved at the base, or when issues transcend the concerns of the lower-level councils, are they delegated to the next level. The "higher" instances are accountable to the "lower" levels and report on their actions and decisions.

While the communes are the areas for problem solving and organizing everyday life, the councils create action plans and policies for cohesion and coordination. At the start of the

revolution and in the newly liberated areas, assemblies had to erect people's councils first and only later began to develop the more decentralized grassroots organizational structures in the form of communes.

The communes work towards a "moral-political" society made up of conscious individuals who understand how to resolve social issues and who take care of everyday self-governance as a common responsibility, rather than submitting to bureaucratic elites. All of this relies on the voluntary and free participation of the people, as opposed to coercion and the rule of law.

It is of course difficult to raise society's consciousness in a short span of time, especially where war conditions, embargoes, internalized mentalities and ancient despotic structures have been deeply institutionalized and can lead to power abuses and apolitical mindsets. An alternative education system, organized through academies, aims to promote a healthy social mentality, while self-organization practically reproduces a conscious society by mobilizing it in all spheres of life.

The women and youth organize autonomously and embody the social dynamics that are naturally inclined towards more democracy and less hierarchy. They position themselves "to the left" of the democratic autonomy model and formulate new forms of knowledge production and reproduction.

Today, the Kurdish freedom movement splits power equally between one woman and one man, from Qandil to Qamishlo to Paris. The idea behind the co-chair principle is both symbolic and practical—it decentralizes power and promotes consensus finding while symbolizing the harmony between women and men. Only women have the right to elect the female co-chair while the male co-chair is elected by everyone. Women organize their own, stronger, more ideologically conscious structures towards a women's confederation, starting with autonomous women's communes.

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE DEMOCRATIC NATION

Another important principle articulated by Öcalan is the "democratic nation". Unlike the nation state's monist doctrine, which justifies itself through a chauvinistic myth, this concept envisions a society based on a common social contract and fundamental ethical principles such as gender equality. Thus, all individuals and groups, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, intellectual identities and tendencies can express themselves freely and add diversity to this expansive, ethics-based nation in order to secure its democratization. The more diverse the nation, the stronger its democracy. The different groups and sections are also in charge of democratizing themselves from within.

In Rojava, Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Christians, Armenians, Turkmen and Chechens try to create a new life together. The same logic underlies the project of the People's Democratic Party, or HDP, across the border in Turkey. The HDP united all communities of Mesopotamia and Anatolia under the umbrella of "free togetherness" in the democratic nation.

Among its MPs it counts Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Assyrians, Muslims, Alevis, Christians and Yazidis—a greater diversity than any other party in the Turkish Parliament. Contrasted with the monopolism of the nation-state ideology, the concept of the democratic nation serves as an ideological self-defense mechanism of diverse peoples.

Although many different communities actively participate in the Rojava revolution, long-standing resentments prevail. Entire tribal confederations of Arabs unilaterally expressed their support for the administration, but in some parts, Arabs remain suspicious. Secret service documents reveal that already in the early 1960s, Syria's Baath party made highly sophisticated plans to pitch different communities against one another, especially in Cizire. On top of the pre-existing tensions, external forces additionally fuel and instrumentalize conflict between different communities to further their own agendas. The establishment of unity between the different ethnic and religious groups of Syria, and in the Middle East more generally, would make it more difficult to divide and rule the region. One Arab member of the Rojava administration explained why this democratic model counts on so little support from the established as well as newly formed political groups in the region and beyond:

The democratic autonomy system in our three cantons shakes and upsets the whole world because the capitalist system does not want freedom and democracy for the Middle East, despite all its pretensions. That is why everyone attacks Rojava. The different forms of state exemplified by the Syrian Arab Republic under Assad and the Islamic State are two sides of the same coin as they deny and destroy the diversity mosaic of our region. But more and more Arabs from the rest of Syria come to Rojava to learn about democratic autonomy because they see a perspective for freedom here.

AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL VISION

The effective system of self-organization, combined to some extent with the embargo, which necessitated self-reliance and thereby fueled creativity, spared Rojava from economic corruption through internal capitalist mindsets or external exploitation. Yet in order to defend revolutionary values beyond the war, a calibrated economic vision is needed for a socially just, ecological, feminist economy that can sustain an impoverished, traumatized and brutalized population.

How to engage wealthy people, who do not care for cooperatives, and avoid being charged with authoritarianism? How to arrange emancipatory and liberationist principles in the urgency of war and a survival economy? How to decentralize the economy while securing justice and revolutionary cohesion? For the people in Rojava, the answer lies in education.

“What does ecology mean to you?” a woman at the Ishtar women’s academy in Rimelan asks her peers in a room decorated with photos of women like Sakine Cansiz and Rosa Luxemburg. An older woman with traditional tattoos on her hands and face responds: “To me, being a mother means to be ecological. To live in harmony with the community and nature. Mothers know best how to maintain and organize this harmony.” Perhaps it is the ecological question that most clearly illustrates Rojava’s dilemma of having great principles and intentions and the willingness to sacrifice, while often lacking the conditions to implement these ideals. For obvious reasons, survival often has priority over environmentalism.

For the moment, at least, it is possible to speak of a transitional dual system in which the democratic self-administration of Rojava lays out revolutionary and ecological principles, carefully maneuvering them in war and real politics, while the grassroots movement organizes the population from below. At the cantonal level, especially with regards to foreign policy-related issues, centralist or at least non-revolutionary practices are to some extent inevitable, especially because Rojava is politically and economically between a rock and a hard place. It is the democratic autonomy system arising from the base that people generally refer to when they speak of the “Rojava revolution”.

The decentralizing dynamics of the grassroots organization, most notably in the communes, even serve as an internal opposition to the cantons and facilitate the democratization of the latter, which, due to their complicated political geography—further limited by non-revolutionary parties and groups within—can tend towards a concentration of power (though the cantons, as they currently are, are still far more decentralized and democratic than ordinary states).

Far more important than the exact mechanisms through which the popular will is expressed,

is the meaning and impact of democratic autonomy on the people themselves. If I were to describe “radical democracy”, I would think especially of the working class people, the sometimes illiterate women in neighborhoods who decided to organize themselves in communes and who now make politics come to life. Children’s laughter and games, cackling chicken, scooting plastic chairs compose the melody for the stage in which decisions on electricity hours and neighborhood disputes are made. One should also note that the structures function better in rural areas and small neighborhoods than in big and complex cities, where more effort is needed to engage people. Here, power belongs to people who never had anything and who now write their own history.

“Do you want to see our vegetables?” Qadifa, an older Yazidi woman asks me in a center of Yekîtiya Star, the women’s movement. She appears to have little interest in explaining the new system, but she is keen to show its fruits instead. We continue our conversation on the transformations of everyday life in Rojava while eating the delicious tomatoes of a women’s cooperative in the backyard.

Self-determination in Rojava is being lived in the here and now, in everyday practice. Thousands of women like Qadifa, women previously completely marginalized, invisible and voiceless, now assume leadership positions and shape society. Today, in the mornings, they can for the first time harvest their own tomatoes from the land that was colonized by the state for decades, while acting as judges in people’s courts in the afternoon.

Many families dedicate themselves fully to the revolution now; especially those who lost loved ones. Many family homes slowly start to function like the people’s houses (“*mala gel*”) that coordinate the population’s needs: people walk into each other’s houses with their children to criticize or discuss or suggest ideas on how to improve their new lives. Dinner table topics have changed. Social issues literally become social, by becoming everyone’s responsibility. Every member of the community becomes a leader.

The slow transition of social decision-making from assigned buildings to the areas of everyday life is a fruit of the efforts to build a new moral-political society. For people from advanced capitalist countries this direct way of being in charge of one’s life can seem scary sometimes, especially when important things like justice, education and security are now in the hands of people like oneself, rather than being surrendered to anonymous state apparatuses.

THE COMMUNE’S LEGACY OF RESISTANCE

One night I am sitting near Tell Mozan, once home to Urkesh, the 6,000-year-old ancient capital of the Hurrians. Nearby is the border between Syria and Turkey, less than a century old. While drinking tea with Meryem, a female commander of Kobane, we watch the lights of

the town of Mardin in North Kurdistan, on the other side of the border.

“We fight on behalf of the community, the oppressed, of all women, for the unwritten pages of history,” she says. Meryem is one of the many women who met Abdullah Öcalan in her youth, when he arrived in Rojava back in the 1980s. Like thousands of women, in a quest for justice beyond her own life, one day she decided to become a freedom fighter in this region that is at the same time home to thousands of honor killings and thousands of goddesses, worshiped in all shapes and sizes.

What attracted anti-systemic movements around the world to the historic resistance in Kobane were perhaps the many ways in which the town’s defense mirrored a millennia-old current of human struggle; the ways in which it carried universal traits that resonated with collective imaginaries of a different world. Many comparisons were made with the Paris Commune, the Battle of Stalingrad, the Spanish Civil War, and other almost mythical instances of popular resistance.

In the *ziggurats* of Sumer, massive temple complexes in ancient Mesopotamia, many hierarchical mechanisms began to be institutionalized for the first time: patriarchy, the state, slavery, the standing army and private property—the beginning of the formalized class society. This era brought about a far-reaching social rupture characterized by the loss of women’s social status and the rise of the dominant male, especially the male priest, who seized the monopoly on knowledge. But this is also where *amargi*, the first word for the concept of freedom, literally “the return to mother”, emerged around 2,300 B.C.

Öcalan proposes the idea of two civilizations: he claims that towards the end of the Neolithic Age with the rise of hierarchical structures in ancient Sumer a civilization developed based on hierarchy, violence, subjugation and monopolism—the “mainstream” or “dominant civilization”. By contrast, what he calls “democratic civilization” represents the historic struggles of the marginalized, the oppressed, the poor and the excluded, especially women. Democratic Confederalism is therefore a political product and manifestation of this age-old democratic civilization.

The democratic autonomy model it has given rise to, in turn, is not only a promising perspective for a peaceful and just solution to the traumatic conflicts of the region; in many ways, the emergence of the Rojava revolution illustrates how democratic autonomy may actually be the only way to survive. In this sense, the revolutionary commune is a historical heritage, a source of collective memory for the forces of democracy around the globe, and a conscious mechanism of self-defense against the state system. It carries a millennia-old legacy and manifests itself in novel ways today.

What unites historic moments of human resistance and the desire for another world, from

the first freedom fighters of history to the Paris commune to the uprising of the Zapatistas on to the freedom squares in Rojava, is the unbreakable power to dare to imagine. It is the courage to believe that oppression is not fate. It is the expression of humanity's ancient desire to set itself free.

Bijî komunên me! Vive la commune!

Dilar Dirik is a Kurdish activist and a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department of the University of Cambridge. Her work examines the role of the women's struggle in articulating and building freedom in Kurdistan. She regularly writes on the Kurdish freedom movement for several international media.