

## **Introduction: Beyond Anarchy and Capital? The Geopolitics of the Rojava Revolution in Syria**

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The drylands of the Middle East have been long seen not only as unfavourable to life, but also and relatedly, socio-politically fragile. Fraught with myths of eternal ‘ethnic’, ‘sectarian’, or ‘resource conflict’, the chronic political instability of the Middle East from Afghanistan and Yemen to Iraq and Syria has been often seen as intrinsic to a scarce ‘nature’, a scorched earth, tendentially collapsing into brute violence which in its spectacular extreme has been exercised by the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (IS).

However, two decades into the new millennium, the crisis-ridden ‘nature’ of the Middle East is arguably now globalised. What we are facing now is a threefold planetary crisis in the human political world order, the non-human ecosystem, and crucially in the relationship between the two. A financialised and increasingly automatised and post-human high-tech world economy still depends overwhelmingly on extractivism and the sourcing, processing, and the excessive release of heat from the burning of hydrocarbons. This environmental crisis, is, paradoxically, bound up with infinite financialised growth. The constant increase of capital, led by central banks, simultaneously fuels, and compels a political economy of debt. Automatised ‘just in time’ production accelerates the circulation of capital and matter to a pace where its consequences cannot be captured by the ‘national’ developmental ambitions of a given society anymore. The unintended, yet not entirely unpredictable socio-ecological contradictions, thus, combine with geopolitical crises, far beyond the Middle East, around the globe, while ‘green growth’ and conservation capitalism offer merely shallow fig leaves to the impending crisis. Simultaneously, the liberal political legitimacy in the Western heartland is challenged by the rise of various forms of populist movements and authoritarian neoliberal regimes.

This complex of multiple and interrelated crises, or, as Marx put it, the ‘metabolic rift’ in the form of catastrophic climatic change has been subjected to numerous debates. And yet, few studies have investigated it this within concrete local settings. Even fewer have done so with a view to the potential or actual alternatives. And certainly, no such a study has been conducted in relation to the Middle East.

This special issue addresses this gap through a series of critical engagements with the ongoing revolutionary practice of the non-statist and non-capitalist project of ‘democratic confederalism’ in the territory controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), more

commonly known as ‘Rojava’.<sup>1</sup> The so-called ‘Rojava Revolution’ punctures the dystopian narrative of a world and the Middle East ‘in crisis’ surrounded by an ecological and socio-political ‘wasteland’. It reveals, as contributions to this volume document in some detail, how despite all adversities ‘real’ everyday social life remains the key site of resistance to and innovative and imaginative praxis beyond the historical contours of capitalist sociality and interstate anarchy. The ‘Rojava Revolution’ is doubly remarkable and worthy of scholarly study since it has emerged in the most inhospitable (geo-)political and developmental environment, civil war Syria, which, at the same time, constitutes its very condition of possibility.

Especially since the 2014 failed siege of Kobane by IS has catapulted ‘Rojava’ into the international limelight. Various journalistic, activist and academic accounts have pointed to the significance of the political experiment in northern Syria, drawing parallels with the Paris Commune (Knapp and Jongerden 2014), the October Revolution (Saed 2017) or the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico (Hosseini 2016). These have either provided comprehensive overviews (Cemgil and Hoffmann 2016; Colsanti et al. 2018; Jain 2016; Knapp, Ayboga, and Flach 2016; Schmidinger 2018; Sunca 2021; Yegen 2016) or focussed on specific dimensions of the revolution and their wider significance for global social struggles, such as its cooperative economy (Sullivan 2018), social ecology (Hunt 2017), (eco)feminism (Piccardi 2021; Tank 2017), anarchism (Rasit and Kolokotronis 2020), and its republican philosophical underpinnings (Cemgil 2016). While revealing important aspects of the transformation in Northern Syria, few of these have included a systematic reflection on the wider geopolitical conditions within which these political experiments take place and even fewer have done so through a critical lens (Galvan-Alvarez 2020, Küçük and Özselçuk 2016; Leezenberg 2016). This Special Issue enhances this expanding and increasingly reflective literature on ‘Rojava’. First, by complementing the empirical accounts, but more importantly by adding critical and theoretically informed analyses that situate the core dimensions of the Rojava revolution in its specific geopolitical setting, critically reflecting on its world political significance. In doing so, the current contributions offer a wider understanding of the formation, evolution, and contradictions of AANES and the challenges it faces.

Damian Gerber and Shannon Brincat (2018) explore the theoretical underpinnings of ‘Democratic Confederalism’ in the work of Murray Bookchin’s political theory. They suggest that Bookchin’s idea of the co-constitution of political and gender hierarchies and their over-determination of the domination of human over non-human nature inspired Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to develop the idea of Democratic Confederalism. This represents a sharp socialist libertarian departure from Kurdish nationalism’s age-old goal of an independent Kurdish state. Öcalan’s rejection of statist nationalism and advocacy of direct democracy, political decentralisation,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Rojava’ means word ‘the west’ in Kurdish since predominantly Kurdish inhabited areas of Syrian form the westernmost part of Kurdistan.

gender equality, and a communal ecological economy poses an entirely new challenge to the nature of the regional political order and geopolitical contestation and offers a possible way out of the current crisis of capitalist modernity.

Central to the project of democratic confederalism is women's liberation whose science Öcalan calls 'Jineoloji' or 'womanology'. However, Arianne Shahvisi (2018) points out, much of the conventional representations of the feminist movement in Rojava remain romanticised and distorted. The Rojava revolution's feminist dimension is far more than the orientalist accounts of sexualised Kurdish female fighters confronting the Islamic State suggest. Going beyond this gross misrepresentation of Rojava's feminism, Shahvisi argues, requires more groundwork in the social structures of Rojava and the wider region, which remain highly patriarchal. Shahvisi shows that the work of women-led democratic confederalist structures, especially in the women's councils, is much more laboursome and mundane, but also more sustainable and thoroughgoing in terms of laying the ground for a genuine social transformation towards women's liberation. This is an aspect is conspicuously absent from the Western media representation of the region.

Şimşek, B., and J. Jongerden. (2018) continue the critique of the international medial representation of the women's liberation struggle by what they call "Tabloid Geopolitics". Their detailed analysis of the US-American liberal mainstream press coverage, such as the Washington Post and Newsweek reveals that this heroification of the angle-like female Kurdish fighters undermines, rather than supports the struggle for women's liberation in the Middle East. Specifically, they criticise the decontextualization of the Northern Syrian female fighters' specific, situated struggle which follows a feminist mobilisation intrinsic to the region. The one-dimensional identification of 'Kurdish Fighters' with Western liberal feminism, thus, ignores the local ideological origin of feminism and obscures the geographically and historically specific project of female emancipation and social transformation in traditional Western Orientalist ways.

Can Cemgil (2019) theorises the Democratic Confederalism as an alternative spatialisation strategy. Different socio-political formations have always devised different, socially determined spacialisation strategies. However, AANES is, Cemgil argues, indeed unique in having democratic confederalism at the heart of this strategy. Yet no spatialisation strategy can ever be complete, neither that of the conventional nation-state, nor that of AANES. Democratic Confederalism is also not solely internally conditioned, but like all political communities, it is also subject to the relational outcomes, or dialectics, of multiple spatialisation strategies.

The international dimension of Democratic Confederalism is the angle from which Kamran Matin (2019) conducts his critical engagement with Abdullah Öcalan's historical sociology of the state as the main intellectual basis for a non-statist form of political community. Matin argues that the tension between Öcalan's internalist account of the rise of the first state in Sumer and his interactivist account

of subsequent process of state-formation has problematic implications for his articulation of Democratic Confederation. Matin traces this tension to a singular social ontology implicit in Öcalan's political thought. He therefore shows how Öcalan's omission of the ontological condition of societal multiplicity in his state theory leads to an analytical and strategic underestimation of the (re-) constitutive impact of the international on the Rojava revolution.

A key axis of the interactive development of Rojava is has been its struggle against the Islamic State. Cemil Boyraz (2020) compares Democratic Confederation to the Caliphate proclaimed by the IS as two radical departures from Westphalian sovereignty. Though diametrically opposed in their ideological foundations, they both had to deal with the dual challenges of internal consent, monopolising the means of violence in a situation where 'waging war' determined their core operation.

The intellectual, political and normative questions that the Rojava revolution has generated far exceed the scope of this Special Issue, which has focused on the revolution's theoretical foundations and implications for political praxis and its prospects. Important aspects that remain uncovered in this special issue include substantive engagements with Democratic Confederation's alternative, ecologically sensitive cooperative economy both in its theory and practice. Inspired by Bookchin's ideas on non-hierarchical social reproduction, this idea rests on a decentralised, ecological forms of agriculture, artisan manufacture and intra-municipal trade networks. Under the specific conditions of Northern Syria, this also includes water infrastructure built by the Syrian Arab Republic, which, in turn, is dependent on the upstream control of the Euphrates River by Turkey, making Rojava's water supplies geopolitically vulnerable. The oil infrastructure, trigger of much debate around the US military presence in the region, is formally under the control of the AANES. This reliance on oil and its revenues, whether pragmatically or under fiscal duress, fundamentally contradicts the central tenets of Bookchin's 'social ecology' and the cooperative, organic agriculture. Bookchin singles out hydrocarbons not only as a source of environmental, but also of social decay (Biehl 2015). The success of Democratic Confederation's transformation thus, centrally involves its relatively under-studied 'Geo-Political Ecology', which carries both risks and opportunities.

This latter point indicates another potentially grave danger to the project, namely, a continued militarisation of the new, revolutionary society as the inescapable result of the historic resistance against the Islamic State and other Islamist groups, the Syrian regime, other outside actors, but above all Turkey, its regional ambitions, and its highly developed military. All in all, it remains to be seen whether the geo-political dynamics that formed the condition of possibility leading to the rise of the "Rojava Revolution" and its core project of Democratic Confederation will permit its survival and success as a political project, or whether they will discipline the unruly child to get back into the territorial, hierarchical and capitalist order of the nation-state.

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