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“No. This is a Genuine Revolution”

David Graeber and Pinar Ögünç

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Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics, activist, anarchist David Graeber had written an article for the Guardian in October, in the first weeks of the ISIS attacks to Kobane (North Syria), and asked why the world was ignoring the revolutionary Syrian Kurds.

Mentioning his father who volunteered to fight in the International Brigades in defence of the Spanish Republic in 1937, he asked: “If there is a parallel today to Franco’s superficially devout, murderous Falangists, who would it be but ISIS? If there is a parallel to the Mujeres Libres of Spain, who could it be but the courageous women defending the barricades in Kobane? Is the world — and this time most scandalously of all, the international left — really going to be complicit in letting history repeat itself?”

According to Graeber, the autonomous region of Rojava declared with a “social contract” in 2011 as three anti-state, anti-capitalist cantons, was also a remarkable democratic experiment of this era.

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In early December, with a group of eight people, students, activists, academics from different parts of Europe and the US, he spent ten days in Cizire -one of the three cantons of Rojava. He had the chance to observe the practice of “democratic autonomy” on the spot, and to ask dozens of questions.

Now he tells his impressions of this trip with bigger questions and answers why this “experiment” of the Syrian Kurds is ignored by the whole world.

In your article for the Guardian you had asked why the whole world was ignoring the “democratic experiment” of the Syrian Kurds. After experiencing it for ten days, do you have a new question or maybe an answer to this?

Well, if anyone had any doubt in their minds about whether this was really a revolution, or just some kind of window-dressing, I’d say the visit put that permanently to rest. There are still people talking like that: This is just a PKK (The Kurdistan Workers’ Party) front, they’re really a Stalinist authoritarian organization that’s just pretending to have adopted radical democracy. No. They’re totally for real. This is a genuine revolution. But in a way that’s exactly the problem. The major powers have committed themselves to an ideology that says real revolutions can no longer happen. Meanwhile, many on the left, even the radical left, seem to have tacitly adopted a politics which assumes the same, even though they still make superficially revolutionary noises. They take a kind of puritanical “anti-imperialist” framework that assumes the significant players are governments and capitalists and that’s the only game worth talking about. The game where you wage war, create mythical villains, seize oil and other resources, set up patronage networks; that’s the only game in town. The people in Rojava are saying: We don’t want to play that game. We want to create a new game. A lot of people find that confusing and disturbing so they choose to believe it isn’t really happening, or such people are deluded or dishonest or naive.

everyone has lost the ability to imagine anything else. Well, I think it's pretty obvious that in 50 years, capitalism in any form we'd recognise, and probably in any form at all, will be gone. Something else will have replaced it. That something might not be better. It might be even worse. It seems to me for that very reason it's our responsibility, as intellectuals, or just as thoughtful human beings, to try to at least think about what something better might look like. And if there are people actually trying to create that better thing, it's our responsibility to help them out.

Since October we see a rising solidarity from different political movements from all over the world. There has been a huge and some quite enthusiastic coverage of Kobane resistance by the mainstream medias of the world. Political stance regarding Rojava has changed in the West to some degree. These are all significant signs but still do you think democratic autonomy and what's been experimented in the cantons of Rojava are discussed enough? How much does the general perception of "Some brave people fighting against the evil of this era, ISIS" dominate this approval and the fascination?

I find it remarkable how so many people in West see these armed feminist cadres, for example, and don't even think on the ideas that must lie behind them. They just figured it happened somehow. "I guess it's a Kurdish tradition." To some degree it's orientalism of course, or to put simple racism. It never occurs to them that people in Kurdistan might be reading Judith Butler too. At best they think "Oh, they're trying to come up to Western standards of democracy and women's rights. I wonder if it's for real or just for foreign consumption." It just doesn't seem to occur to them they might be taking these things way further than "Western standards" ever have; that they might genuinely believe in the principles that Western states only profess.

You mentioned the approach of the left towards Rojava. How is it received in the international anarchist communities?

The reaction in the international anarchist communities has been decidedly mixed. I find it somewhat difficult to understand. There's a very substantial group of anarchists — usually the more sectarian elements — who insist that the PKK is still a "Stalinist" authoritarian nationalist group which has adopted Bookchin and other left libertarian ideas to court the anti-authoritarian left in Europe and America. It's always struck me that this is one of the silliest and most narcissistic ideas I've ever heard. Even if the premise were correct, and a Marxist-Leninist group decided to fake an

ideology to win foreign support, why on earth would they choose anarchist ideas developed by Murray Bookchin? That would be the stupidest gambit ever. Obviously they'd pretend to be Islamists or Liberals, those are the guys who get the guns and material support. Anyway I think a lot of people on the international left, and the anarchist left included, basically don't really want to win. They can't imagine a revolution would really happen and secretly they don't even want it, since it would mean sharing their cool club with ordinary people; they wouldn't be special any more. So in that way it's rather useful in culling the real revolutionaries from the poseurs. But the real revolutionaries have been solid.

What was the most impressive thing you witnessed in Rojava in terms of this democratic autonomy practice?

There were so many impressive things. I don't think I've ever heard of anywhere else in the world where there's been a dual power situation where the same political forces created both sides. There's the "democratic self-administration," which has all the form and trappings of a state — Parliament, Ministries, and so on — but it was created to be carefully separated from the means of coercive power. Then you have the TEV-DEM (The Democratic Society Movement), driven bottom up directly democratic institutions. Ultimately — and this is key — the security forces are answerable to the bottom-up structures and not to the top-down ones. One of the first places we visited was a police academy (Asayış). Everyone had to take courses in non-violent conflict resolution and feminist theory before they were allowed to touch a gun. The co-directors explained to us their ultimate aim was to give everyone in the country six weeks of police training, so that ultimately, they could eliminate police.

What would you say to various criticisms regarding Rojava? For example: "They wouldn't have done this in peace. It is because of the state of war"...

"Well, we feel the best approach to public health is preventative, most disease is made possible by stress. We feel if we reduce stress, levels of heart disease, diabetes, even cancer will decline. So our ultimate plan is to reorganize the cities to be 70% green space..." There are all these mad, brilliant schemes. But then you go to the next doctor and they explain how because of the Turkish embargo, they can't even get basic medicine or equipment, all the dialysis patients they couldn't smuggle out have died... That disjuncture between their ambitions and their incredibly straightened circumstances. And... The woman who was effectively our guide was a deputy foreign minister named Amina. At one point, we apologize we weren't able to bring better gifts and help to the Rojavans, who were suffering so under the embargo. And she said: "In the end, that isn't very important. We have the one thing no one can ever give you. We have our freedom. You don't. We only wish there was some way we could give that to you."

You are sometimes criticized for being too optimistic and enthusiastic about what's happening in Rojava. Are you? Or do they miss something?

I am by temperament an optimist, I seek out situations which bear some promise. I don't think there's any guarantee this one will work out in the end, that it won't be crushed, but it certainly won't if everyone decides in advance that no revolution is possible and refuse to give active support, or even, devote their efforts to attacking it or increasing its isolation, which many do. If there's something I'm aware of, that others aren't, perhaps it's the fact that history isn't over. Capitalists have made a mighty effort these past 30 or 40 years to convince people that current economic arrangements — not even capitalism, but the peculiar, financialized, semi-feudal form of capitalism we happen to have today — is the only possible economic system. They've put more effort into that than they have into actually creating a viable global capitalist system. As a result the system is breaking down all around us at just the moment

two struggles for an anti-capitalist society -or for a minimised capitalism as they describe?

I think the Kurdish struggle is quite explicitly anti-capitalist in both countries. It's their starting point. They're managed to come up with a kind of formula: One can't get rid of capitalism without eliminating the state, one can't get rid of the state without getting rid of patriarchy. However, the Rojavans have it quite easy in class terms because the real bourgeoisie, such as it was in a mostly very agricultural region, took off with the collapse of the Baath regime. They will have a long-term problem if they don't work on the educational system to ensure a developmentalist technocrat stratum doesn't eventually try to take power, but in the meantime, it's understandable they are focusing more immediately on gender issues. In Turkey, well, I don't know nearly as much, but I do have the sense things are much more complicated.

During the days that the peoples of the world can't breathe for obvious reasons, did your trip to Rojava inspired you about the future? What do you think is the "medicine" for the people to breathe?

It was remarkable. I've spent my life thinking about how we might be able to do things like this in some remote time in the future and most people think I'm crazy to imagine it will ever be. These people are doing it now. If they prove that it can be done, that a genuinely egalitarian and democratic society is possible, it will completely transform people's sense of human possibility. Myself, I feel ten years younger just having spent 10 days there.

With which scene are you going to remember your trip to Cizire?

There were so many striking images, so many ideas. I really liked the disparity between the way people looked, often, and the things they said. You meet some guy, a doctor, he looks like a slightly scary Syrian military type in a leather jacket and stern austere expression. Then you talk to him and he explains:

Well, I think most movements, faced with dire war conditions, would not nonetheless immediately abolish capital punishment, dissolve the secret police and democratize the army. Military units for instance elect their officers.

And there is another criticism, which is quite popular in pro-government circles here in Turkey: "The model the Kurds -in the line of PKK and PYD (The Kurdish Democratic Union Party)- are trying to promote is not actually embraced by all the peoples living there. That multi... structure is only on the surface as symbols"...

Well, the President of Cizire canton is an Arab, head of a major local tribe in fact. I suppose you could argue he was just a figurehead. In a sense the entire government is. But even if you look at the bottom-up structures, it's certainly not just the Kurds who are participating. I was told the only real problem is with some of the "Arab belt" settlements, people who were brought in by the Baathists in the '50s and '60s from other parts of Syria as part of an intentional policy of marginalizing and assimilating Kurds. Some of those communities they said are pretty unfriendly to the revolution. But Arabs whose families had been there for generations, or the Assyrians, Khirgizians, Armenians, Chechens, and so on, are quite enthusiastic. The Assyrians we talked to said, after a long difficult relation with the regime, they felt they finally were being allowed free religious and cultural autonomy. Probably the most intractable problem might be women's liberation. The PYD and TEV-DEM see it as absolutely central to their idea of revolution, but they also have the problem of dealing larger alliances with Arab communities who feel this violates basic religious principles. For instance, while the Syriac-speakers have their own women's union, the Arabs don't, and Arab girls interested in organizing around gender issues or even taking feminist seminars have to hitch on with the Assyrians or even the Kurds.

It doesn't have to be trapped in that "puritanical 'anti-imperialist' framework" you mentioned before, but what would

you say to the comment that the West/ imperialism will one day ask Syrian Kurds to pay for their support. What does the West think exactly about this anti-state, anti-capitalist model? Is it just an experiment that can be ignored during the state of war while the Kurds voluntarily accept to fight an enemy that is by the way actually created by the West?

Oh it is absolutely true that the US and European powers will do what they can to subvert the revolution. That goes without saying. The people I talked to were all well aware of it. But they didn't make a strong differentiation between the leadership of regional powers like Turkey or Iran or Saudi Arabia, and Euro-American powers like, say, France or the US. They assumed they were all capitalist and statist and thus anti-revolutionary, who might at best be convinced to put up with them but were not ultimately on their side. Then there's the even more complicated question of the structure of what's called "the international community," the global system of institutions like the UN or IMF, corporations, NGOs, human rights organisations for that matter, which all presume a statist organisation, a government that can pass laws and has a monopoly of coercive enforcement over those laws. There's only one airport in Cizire and it's still under Syrian government control. They could take it over easily, any time, they say. One reason they don't is because: How would a non-state run an airport anyway? Everything you do in an airport is subject to international regulations which presume a state.

Do you have an answer to why ISIS is so obsessed with Kobane?

Well, they can't be seen to lose. Their entire recruiting strategy is based on the idea that they are an unstoppable juggernaut, and their continual victory is proof that they represent the will of God. To be defeated by a bunch of feminists would be the ultimate humiliation. As long as they're still fighting in Kobane, they can claim that media claims are lies and they are really advancing. Who can prove otherwise? If they pull out they will have admitted defeat.

Well, do you have an answer to what Tayyip Erdogan and his party is trying to do in Syria and the Middle East generally?

I can only guess. It seems he has shifted from an anti-Kurdish, anti-Assad policy to an almost purely anti-Kurdish strategy. Again and again he has been willing to ally with pseudo-religious fascists to attack any PKK-inspired experiments in radical democracy. Clearly, like Daesh (ISIS) themselves, he sees what they are doing as an ideological threat, perhaps the only real viable ideological alternative to right-wing Islamism on the horizon, and he will do anything to stamp it out.

On the one hand there is Iraqi Kurdistan standing on quite a different ideological ground in terms of capitalism and the notion of independence. On the other hand, there is this alternative example of Rojava. And there are the Kurds of Turkey who try to sustain a peace process with the government... How do you personally see the future of Kurdistans in short and long terms?

Who can say? At the moment things look surprisingly good for the revolutionary forces. The KDG even gave up the giant ditch they were building across the Rojava border after the PKK intervened to effectively save Erbil and other cities from IS back in August. One KNK person told me it had a major effect on popular consciousness there; that one month had done 20 years worth of consciousness raising. Young people were particularly struck by the way their own Peshmerga fled the field but PKK women soldiers didn't. But it's hard to imagine how the KRG territory however will be revolutionized any time soon. Neither would the international powers allow it.

Although democratic autonomy doesn't seem to be clearly on the table of negotiation in Turkey, The Kurdish Political Movement has been working on it, especially on the social level. They try to find solutions in legal and economic terms for possible models. When we compare let's say the class structure and the level of capitalism in West Kurdistan (Rojava) and North Kurdistan (Turkey), what would you think about the differences of these