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David Graeber

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2017

Challenging Capitalist Modernity III: Uncovering Democratic Modernity – Resistance, Rebellion and Building the New (published by Network for an Alternative Quest, 2020), Section 3.2, pp. 113-119

PDF available online at ocalanbooks.com. Original video with transcript available at kontext-tv.de.

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Smashing Bureaucracies and Classes

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I will be talking about bureaucracy and class, and dangers threatening the revolution in Rojava. I think this is very, very important, because if we're talking about beacons of historical hope, the revolution in Rojava is probably the most important thing that's happened on this planet since Spain in the 1930's. This is a magnificent opportunity, and in fact the revolution in Rojava has now lasted longer than the Spanish revolution; it's managed to maintain itself. I think that as the embargo is lifted, certain problems are going to occur that have to be dealt with, and I think people are thinking about this, but I think it's really important for us to understand exactly what the danger that we're facing is, or its most insidious forms.

My own experience with the Global Justice Movement and then Occupy Wall Street was marked by a gradual realization that both of these things were movements against bureaucracy; that capitalism itself has increasingly taken on more and more bureaucratic forms. We first began to realize this with the protests against what was then called "globalization." The so-called "anti-globalization movement" was, of course, not an anti-globalization movement; we

called ourselves the “globalization movement.” We saw ourselves as calling for a real effacement of borders, and human solidarity against a system which masked itself as globalization, but was actually creating stronger and stronger borders against the movement of people and ideas, so as to allow capital to flow freely and exploit those borders.

Over time we realized that, in fact, what we were really dealing with was the first global administrative bureaucracy. That is to say, there are all these institutions that most people, in America at least, don’t even know actually exist, things like the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank, and furthermore, that there is a sort of seamless web between them; transnational corporations, international finance, including NGOs. Essentially, for the first time in human history, there was a planetary administrative bureaucracy, which was completely lacking in democratic accountability. What we were trying to do was expose the workings of that system. That’s why we had those giant festivals against capitalism every time the IMF met, or the World Bank met; it was partly just to point to the existence of the people who were really administering the world. And we tried to fight that by creating our own model of what genuine bottom-up democracy could be like.

When we fast-forward 10 years to Occupy Wall Street, in fact in away it was kind of the same thing. And once again we didn’t really think of it that way when we first began the movement, but over time it became increasingly clear that we were fighting something very, very similar; the idea of the 1%. Basically, the 1% were both that group of people who had reaped all of the profits from economic growth; it all went to 1% of the population. But they were also the people who made all of the political contributions; something like 99% of the political contributions came from 1% of the population. Essentially these people had bought the political system. The American political system in particular is just a system of institutionalized bribery. These people had managed to turn their wealth into power, and their power back into wealth. They were

continually creating situations where they could use the government as an apparatus to extract wealth, so that capitalism itself was operating differently. The profits from the major Wall Street corporations were less and less derived from commerce, let alone production, and more and more simply from finance, but what 'finance' means is other people's debts. And debts had to be created through policy, very intentional policies; so essentially bureaucracy was being used as the mode for extracting capitalist surplus. So you have this global system which creates and maintains debt, and other means of extracting resources, and it's completely outside any kind of democratic accountability.

It struck me that this is all very important when I visited Rojava 2 years ago, because there are similar bureaucracies there working. Essentially, it rapidly became clear to me that there's a kind of a game that one plays in this region, and this game is mediated by corporate bureaucracies; it's mediated by military bureaucracies, and it's also mediated by humanitarian bureaucracies, which are part of that same web. Essentially the game is that you create images of both terror and human suffering, so there's this sort of marketing of images, scary images and heart-breaking images, that are then circulated. And you exploit them to essentially get weapons, patronage, money, and control resources, mainly oil. So the entire thing was a series of top-down redistributive hierarchies. The entire game is very, very clear if you go to Başûr in Iraq — Daesh was playing it, the various governments were playing it in different ways — they're all playing to the media. It's very clear for example that people in Daesh have seen a lot of Hollywood movies; they were going off and trying to create the image that westerners have in their mind of what the most evil people possible look like. But it was all part of a game of manipulation of images, and what really struck me when I talked to people in the Kurdish freedom movement was that their basic question was "how do we create a different game? How do we break out of these constraints?"

I remember a conversation with Nilüfer Koç of the KNK, and she was talking about oil. There's a lot of oil in Rojava, and at the moment they can't export it because there's an embargo. Ms. Koç was saying "well, we could sell the oil, we could get into the networks that everyone else is practicing, but maybe there's some way to do something else with oil; could we just give it as a gift?" And that kind of creativity that's trying to break out of the terms of the game is essentially what the revolution is all about. It allowed me to see what was happening in Rojava in a different way, because oddly enough, there are a lot of people there who felt that in a way the blockade, while it's terrible in terms of humanitarian effects, is also in certain ways an advantage.

So in thinking about this, I realized that in a way this is one of the greatest problems that revolutionary movements face, and it allowed me to rethink my own experience, and re-evaluate it in this light. Essentially, how to integrate with these larger bureaucratic institutions, which are based on course of force, and are essentially the life-blood or very fabric of capitalism at this point. You have to integrate with them to get resources, but at the same time you have to create structures which ensure that their logic doesn't capture you and take you over. I realized that that's exactly what they were trying to do.

In Rojava, you had essentially two structures of power: you had the self-administration, which looks just like a government; it's got a parliament, it's got ministers, it's sort of all the formal apparatus of government, and then you have the bottom-up structures; the various structures of democratic confederalism, with 3 different layers of delegation, from lower-level councils to higher. At first a lot of us, when we looked at the constitution, we did not think it looked particularly anti-state; it looks just like a state, and a lot of people were very critical of it. But when you got there, you realize there's two structures, and that top structure is essentially necessary to deal with outsiders. At the same time, people would insist this is not a state project, and the reason why it was not a state

people of less elite backgrounds much more uncomfortable and ultimately leaving the meetings. This is a constant danger in any social movement unless you're very deeply self-conscious about it. Paradoxically, I think in Rojava the embargo has allowed a new type of society to emerge, but the real challenges, I think, are going to be faced as things open up, and they have to figure out a way to maintain the beautiful bottom-up energy without creeping bureaucracy taking over. So I just wanted to throw that out as a problem that I think is very important to think about.

said to us “Offer us some criticisms; what can we do better, what should we watch out for?” We conferred on this and we came up with a list. First, the danger of the emergence of politicians; when you have a system of delegates, it’s very time-consuming, and not everyone can do it, so how do you guarantee that certain people don’t become basically political specialists and emerge as a political class? That was one question.

Another one was what I discussed above; how do you create a membrane between the bottom-up structures and the top-down structures to ensure that this kind of very well-meaning but very dangerous creeping bureaucratization doesn’t enter in? And finally, the question of social class. Now, with the people we talked to in Rojava, when you mention class, a lot of the reaction was like, “Oh no, not that again. I don’t really want to have another argument about whether peasants are actually proletarians,” or, essentially that these old Marxist debates are very tired and irrelevant, and I agree on that. But, if you drop the question of social class entirely, I think that’s equally dangerous, because if you take, for instance, the approach of someone like Pierre Bordieu, there’s different forms of capital; there’s economic capital, which you can very much monitor. But there’s also social and cultural capital; there are certain people who have international connections and also know how to deal with certain types of situations and people, who will, for the best of reasons, end up re-creating hierarchies through their relations with the outside world. I think that one of the most important things is to figure out how to prevent that from happening.

We had exactly the same problem in both the movements I was talking about, in the Global Justice Movement and in Occupy Wall Street. There was a tendency for internal bureaucratization; people started treating processes and principles as if they were rules and you had to go by the rule-book. And the more that happened, we noticed, the more people of relatively upper-middle class professional backgrounds started feeling much more comfortable, and

project is because anybody with a gun, anybody who’s actually got course of force, is answerable to the bottom-up structures and not to the top-down ones.

I think this is the key to the Rojava Revolution, and this might be unique in history; it’s essentially a dual-power situation, where the same people have set up both parts. It came home to me most of all when I was in Qamişlo, because in Qamişlo one part is still controlled by the government, and there’s a street with a post office, which I think was their centre, but principally they controlled the airstrip. I wondered about this for a while, and I realized “that makes perfect sense,” because what are you going to do with an airport if you’ve only got one? If there’s two airports, you can fly back and forth between them, but if you’ve only got one airport, you can’t fly anywhere, because if you want to fly some place, you have to sign on to all these international agreements; you have to have security agreements, you have to have safety agreements, you have commercial agreements of various kinds, but you can’t actually do that unless you’re a state. So it shows how these sort of bureaucratic mechanisms, which on surface are very benevolent and necessary — for instance, you don’t want your airplane to crash, and people in Rojava have definite security concerns; if they were flying planes people would try to blow them up — but nonetheless, all those international agreements assume a certain form, they assume that you’re a state, and they won’t deal with you unless you do actually assume that form.

So basically you have to create a membrane, some sort of structure between all the organizational forms that can integrate with international institutions, which will impose a state form on you, and the bottom-up directly-democratic experiment, which is the very life-blood of what makes Rojava so brilliant and historically hopeful. Most of the quarrels that I saw, when I looked for points of tension, or what were people arguing about, always had to do with that. I’ll just mention two that very much struck me at the time. One was when we went to talk to the economic minister, or

the people who were coordinating economic affairs, and they were talking about the terrible effects of the embargo; the need to get access to technology, the desire to create various relationships internationally, and so on. They all made perfect sense, saying, “We’re in a very desperate economic situation.” But afterwards, Nazan, a member of our delegation who had been there a year earlier and talked to similar people, said “wow, that’s a completely different line than what we heard last time, because last time we were here, people were saying ‘in a way, the embargo is a blessing in disguise, because it allows us to create autonomous institutions who become self-sufficient.’” And realize that this is a point of tension; there are people, very well-educated, sophisticated people that had been around the world, who saw Rojava as sort of inside a network of social relations of different types of economic, political and social relations with the outside world. They made a case that there’s things that were desperately needed, for instance the infrastructure was going to fall apart unless they got replacement parts for certain things. At the same time, however, there were other groups who were saying, “That’s a reasonable price to pay for having the freedom to create an autonomous experiment.”

The second point where I saw people really arguing about something was during one of the assemblies we went to. And you could tell these assemblies were the real thing, and not staged democracy, because often people got very angry and started shouting at each other. The thing which people got most excited about was about the Asayış, the roughly-translated “police,” or the internal security of Rojava. There was one case where they had to call them in — I can’t remember what the problem was, I think it was somebody who was thought to be hoarding sugar — and they wanted to bring some people to look in someone’s house. According to the local security committee of the local directly-democratic assembly, when the member of the Asayış showed up, the first thing he said was, “Okay, I can’t do that unless I check with my commanding officer for authorization,” and they became very upset; they said,

“What? No! What are you talking about? That’s top-down hierarchy. You’re answerable to us, we’re the local group.” And they were debating “what do we do?” Maybe we should make up a hat, or a badge or something; maybe that will impress them, to remind them that we’re actually the actual authority they’re supposed to be answering to.

So there’s already a deep awareness of the danger of the sort of top-down logic, and something like the state would happen unless you’re constantly vigilant about making sure that doesn’t occur. I thought that was extremely important, because it shows what’s really at stake here. There is intense pressure from above to integrate into larger systems; you have to have international relations, but at the same time they’re going to constantly encourage a sort of logic, which is going to assume that things go top-down rather than bottom-up.

Another thing. When I left, I was looking over human rights reports in Rojava, and I noticed that Human Rights Watch wrote a fairly critical report, but one of the things they complained about was that, “The system in Rojava doesn’t meet the world standards of trials.” And I thought that was very telling, because in fact they are trying to create a radically different, bottom-up type of justice system, which is based on consensus principles, restorative justice, and eliminating the notion of revenge and retribution. This is all very beautiful and it’s an incredibly important historical experiment, but again, from world standards, that’s a human rights abuse, because what human rights organizations are doing is trying to create safe-guards against state power, but those safe-guards against state power assume the existence of state power. So not having state power at all, from their point of view, is just as much a human rights abuse as untrammelled direct state power.

So I think it shows, as in the case of the economic ministers, that extremely well-meaning people can be complicit in allowing a state-logic to re-enter and endanger the entire project. So at the end of the delegation, after we had been there for only 10 days, they