Governance Under Localism

A Dream Come True in North and East Syria

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Contents

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the anarchist concepts of a balanced community, a face-to-face democracy, a humanistic technology, and a decentralized society—these rich libertarian concepts are not only desirable but necessary. Not only do they belong to the great visions of man's future; they now constitute the preconditions for human survival.

—Murray Bookchin, 1964

A core idea of the 'new paradigm' is the idea that Kurds should not seek to establish a state of their own, but should instead fight for a political system which embraces the cultural and political rights of all people. This approach aims to avoid the danger of reproducing the oppression of one people by another through the system of the nation-state. The shared values and principles of a society are seen as more important than the ethnicity of the people living in it.

—Rojava Information Center, 2019

If one had told almost anyone who wasn't part of the Kurdish movement in 2010 that by 2015 there would be an armed feminist uprising demanding direct democracy across a significant swath of the Middle East, they would probably thought you were insane. Yet there is.

—David Graeber, 2016

In 2006, Abdullah Öcalan was living on an island off the coast of Turkey, where he had been held prisoner — at that time, its only prisoner — since 1999. Öcalan was a founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978. Born in southeast Turkey and educated at university in Ankara, Öcalan started as a Marxist-Leninist guerilla leader in classic Che Guevara mode, but by the late 1990s had undergone a transformation: "He had concluded that Marxism was authoritarian and dogmatic and unable to creatively approach current problems," wrote author & artist Janet Biehl. The PKK, Öcalan said, "must give up its goal of achieving a separate Kurdish state and adopt a democratic program for Turkey as a whole." Ironically, just as Öcalan began this less militaristic shift, Turkey, which controls the water supply to Syria, began to close in, threatening a water shutoff and armed action against Syria if Öcalan and the PKK were not turned in. Syria started to break up the PKK camps, and so began an international flight for freedom which ended in Öcalan being apprehended in Kenya 1999, reportedly with the help of Israelei and U.S security. Sentenced to death, his sentence was only commuted because of the precondition of death penalty abolition for Turkey's admission to the EU.

In 2002, while imprisoned, Öcalan had begun reading the work of Murray Bookchin. A child of Jewish Russian immigrants who had been active in the revolution, from an early age Bookchin was immersed in the Communist youth movement, but by the late 1930s became disillusioned by Stalin and was expelled from the party after the Stalin-Hitler pact of September 1939 for "Trotskyist-anarchist deviations." Working as a foundryman, he became involved with unions and strikes, but after the war his outlook changed, as the massive workers' revolts Trotsky had predicted failed to materialize, and GM workers in 1948 accepted a contract forbidding them from going on strike[1]. Bookchin realized "once and for all that [the working-class] was not revolutionary… Having been a Marxist since the age of nine, the realisation came as a shock… Bookchin's

[1] Trotsky (assassinated in Mexico in 1940) had predicted that the Second World War would end in massive workers' revolts, but if it failed to do so, said that leftists would have to regroup and reassess.

community collapsed around him. The party had failed him; his grandmother died; the Cross-Bronx Expressway, built by the city planner Robert Moses, ripped through East Tremont, displacing five thousand people."

However, while the specific prediction under Marxism about a working class revolution did not materialize, the underlying Marxist premise about disruptive capitalist forces — forces leading to disharmony and eventual collapse & revolution — remained valid. At its base, Marx and Engels saw that the internal contradictions of capitalism would result in pressures that would ultimately destroy capitalism itself. Formulating their theories in the booming industrial age of the mid-1800s, Marx & Engels logically saw these processes culminating in revolts by oppressed proletariat workers; one hundred years later it would be only natural for capitalism's internal contradictions to manifest in a way that Marx & Engels could not have anticipated. Where others resigned from the movement after the war, Bookchin remained, convinced that capitalism was inherently flawed and self-destructive, exploring how these internal contradictions might play out. He eventually realized that capitalist forces would manifest their harm most on the natural environment; capitalism…

…industrialized agriculture, tainting crops and by extension people with toxic chemicals; it inflated cities to unbearably large, megalopolitan size, cut off from nature, that turned people into automatons and damaged both their bodies and their psyches. It pressured them through advertising to spend their money on useless commodities, whose production further harmed the environment. The crisis of capitalism, then, would result not from the exploitation of the working class but from the intolerable dehumanization of people and the destruction of nature.

There's nothing revelatory about this to us in 2021, but recall that this was the 1950s, several decades before Earth Day and even before Rachel Carson's Silent Spring.In fact, Bookchin's 1962 book about the dangerous re-purposing of wartime chemicals, Our Synthetic Environment, preceded publication of Silent Spring by 6 months, but was dismissed by critics ("No one is going to stop the world so that someone who would like to get off will be able to," a New York Times reviewer said). Nobody captures the essence of these ideas better than Bookchin's companion and collaborator Janet Biehl:

To create an ecological society, cities would have to be decentralized, so people could live at a smaller scale and govern themselves and grow food locally and use renewable energy. The new society would be guided, not by the dictates of the market, or by the imperatives of a state authority, but by people's decisions. Their decisions would be guided by ethics, on a communal scale.

Both the revolutionary organization and the institutions for the new society would have to be truly liberatory, so they would not lead to a new Stalin, to yet another tyranny in the name of socialism. Yet they would have to be strong enough to suppress capitalism.

Those institutions… could only be democratic assemblies. The present nation-state would have to be eliminated and its powers devolve to citizens in assemblies. They, rather than the masters of industry, could make decisions, for example about the environment. And since assemblies only worked in a locality, in order to function at a broader geographical area, they would have to band together—to confederate.

Bookchin called this program libertarian municipalism, later using the word communalism; at its heart was the human need for individualism — not in the selfish sense, but in the sense of freedom to realize one's potential, an individualism driven by its connection to community (rather than by alienation to society, as exemplified in the "rugged individualist") — and localism, as opposed to globalism, similar to that envisioned by Helena Norberg-Hodge in the previous es-

say in this series. Its mechanisms were citizens' assemblies, such as those found in Mesopotamia, classical Greece, revolutionary France and America, and New England — and confederation, so that the different citizens' assemblies could "speak" to one another.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, following several decades of armed struggle for a Kurdish state, Öcalan and others[2] were arriving at a similar place; as mentioned above, Öcalan now believed that democracy was the key, and that rather than pushing for Kurdish statehood, this democracy needed to happen within the extant Turkish state apparatus; the Turks couldn't call themselves a democracy without the Kurds, he said. The conditions of his confinement didn't prevent him from getting in touch with Murray Bookchin through intermediaries, but by this time, 2004, Bookchin was 83 years old and in poor health. "I beg you to understand," Bookchin wrote to Öcalan, "that I am … very frail. I can no longer sit before a word processor for hours and write articles or even letters … I am obliged to spend much of my time in bed. As such, I am not in a position to carry on an extensive theoretical dialogue…"

But Öcalan stayed in communication with the ailing Bookchin and refined his vision of an inclusive democracy, advocating for the ground-up approach of Bookchin instead of so-called representative democracy. In a 1987 book titled The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship, Bookchin had found a model for the society he envisioned in the traditional inland communities of New England. Separated from the acquisitive capitalism that emerged from port cities like Boston or Providence, New England villages, over several hundreds of years, developed what Bookchin called an adherence to "yeoman values," a community-oriented culture, a "moral economy and society" that prioritized "essentials over frivolities, fairness and mutuality in relationships, egalitarianism in status, self-sufficiency in the development of needs and their satisfaction." The authentic unit of political life, Bookchin stressed, was the village, the municipality — humanly scaled — or "its various subdivisions, notably the neighborhood." When it came to governance, the ethos of New England's nonhierarchical Congregationalist church informed the direct democracy of the New England town meeting; rather than municipal assemblies having a bureaucratic professional class of mayors & councilmen, the New England town meeting was a direct democracy. Theoretically, any assembly system in any location could similarly be composed of rotatable & recallable & accountable delegates; it was a "'referendum' form of politics… based on a social contract to share decision making with the population at large and abide by the rule of the majority…" Even cities could be governed in such a way; "no city, in fact, is so large that it cannot be networked for political purposes," Bookchin wrote.

Crucial in adapting the platform for modern use was the concept of dual power — sometimes considered a transitional space in revolutionary theory — wherein grassroots efforts by local assemblies and their outputs ultimately make the need for the state obsolete. In the context of Rojava, Öcalan and other Kurds saw that there was room for both remnants of the state ("The YPG/J could easily take over the airport. But what would be the point?") and governance via something like Bookchin's local citizens' assembly. The confederal democracy's congresses should solve problems "that the state cannot solve single-handedly…" A limited state could coexist with the democracy, "in parallel," Öcalan said. It is easy to see dual power as the logical extension of the mutual aid extolled by anarchists of the 19th century — that is, a voluntary recip-

[2] David Graeber has said that debates about the changes in the notion of a Kurdish state were in place before Öcalan was imprisoned (Knapp et al., p. XV).

rocal exchange of services among consenting individuals, made necessary because of the failures of traditional government (the state) in the first place.

And so was to begin the effort in what was first Rojava, now extended and called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES; changed to DAANES in 2023), in the northern region of Kurdistan Syria, to create on-the-ground governance based on the writings of a Vermont-based Jewish anarchist senior citizen. But it was not to occur without the intervention of serious external obstacles, which, as has often happened, simultaneously & paradoxically created the vacuum of opportunity that allowed such an anarchist-informed system to unfold.

Civil War in Syria

With the arrival of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, large-scale civil war took place in Syria, with the Kurds making up a "third force" in the conflict. In 2012 the YPJ/YPG (women and men's forces of the Kurdish People's Protection Units) took control of Kobani, the centrally-located city of the three cantons of Rojava; soon, Derik and Afrin were liberated. Syrian regime troops were not captured or detained, but offered the option of simply returning home, and buildings that had belonged to the state became people's houses or cultural centers. But by 2013 ISIS arose in the region, taking advantage of the disorder created by civil war and capturing large cities like Mosul and Raqqa; in 2014, they attacked Kobani, with the goal of taking over all of Kurdish northern Syria. Surrounded by ISIS on three sides, the YPJ/YPG asked the international community only for a corridor for safe passage of food and medications, but Turkey refused to provide it. "To many, IS [ISIS] seemed unstoppable… the Erodogan government predicted that Kobani would fall, as did the US Secretary of State John Kerry." While the Syrian civil war was prominent news with images of the ruins of Aleppo pervasive in the media, the democratic revolution taking place within in the war went by largely unnoticed, even by leftists; all of that changed in 2015 when the YPJ/YPG expelled ISIS from Kobani in northern Syria, beginning the decline of ISIS in the region and in a 6-month siege and liberation finally noted by the press (and as written about recently by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon in the book Daughters of Kobani).

The Importance of Women

> "We've learned from the failed revolutions in the past. They always said, 'let's carry the revolution to success, and then we'll give women their rights'. But after the revolution, of course it didn't happen. We're not repeating that old story in our revolution."

In his studies of the rise of ancient civilisation, Öcalan became convinced that the rise from simple communalism to the repressive patriarchal nation state was accompanied everywhere by the subjugation of women; thus, he said, women needed to be at the center of the revolution, even as Kurdish men were arrested and detained en mass during the 1990s and the revolution became dependent upon the work of women. Underage marriages, forced marriages, spousal abuse, and patriarchal control of women, heretofore all contained in varying degrees in various parts of the regional ethos, were now forbidden, while women's education and community participation were encouraged; over time (although not without challenges) these changes manifested themselves into acceptability as a cultural shift. Dual leadership — both women and men as heads of

committees and organizations — and 40% membership by women was required of all administrative and organizational bodies; prior to the Turkish invasion and as of 2016 in Afrin, membership in such bodies was 65% women.

The Basis: People's Councils

Upon the Syrian uprising in 2011, the first revolutionary effort was to implement people's councils (citizens' assemblies), the types of direct-democratic assemblies that Bookchin wrote about; the goal was to create, in dual-power form, structures parallel to the state. Knapp et al. in Revolution in Rojava indicate that as early as August 2011 over half of Rojava's Kurds were organized into councils. Where initial neighborhood councils might be too large and inexperienced to deal with the initial surge of local problems in the absence of the state, so local communes arose at the level of the street. What ultimately materialized was a bottom-up council system:

- The commune — essentially, a street, or perhaps a small village; the smallest unit and the basis for democratic autonomy; these are analogous to the "pods" currently described in the US in the contexts of home-schooling and Covid19 mutual-aid groups. Each commune has a "people's house" open 24 hours a day for meetings and concerns. Most communes also have a women's house as a focal point for women's self governance. A commune has a coordinating board of two co-chairs (one woman and one man) who are subject to recall if they don't meet the needs of the council. In late 2015 there were up to 500 communes in the city of Quamislo (population ~184,000).
- The neighborhood — in towns, comprising 7-to-30 communes, in the countryside, perhaps 7-to-10 villages; the neighborhood council is made up of the coordinator co-chairs mentioned above, whose responsibility is directly back to their commune. Neighborhood commissions (see below) and co-chairs are created.
- The Subdistrict and District — essentially the suburbs and/or the city, made up of representatives from all of Neighborhood councils and commissions. This is where parties, such as the PYD (Party of Democratic Unity) enter the system and can have membership. Knapp et al. say that there are usually 100–200 activists in the District People's Council, and that this group too forms commissions and elects accountable co-chiefs.
- The Canton (subregions), formerly just Afrin, Kobane, and Cizîrê (pronounce Jazeera), now including the new Arab cantons that joined in 2017;
- The Region (now seven all together); finally,
- The Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) coordinates among all the regions.

While the AANES (established in 2018) coordinates among the seven regions, another organizational body, the TEV-DEM (established in 2011) is an "umbrella body for civil society, supporting, coordinating and ensuring that the voice of civil society is fed into the political and administrative aspects of the system. It acts as a kind of 'counter-power' to the Autonomous Administration." Finally, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) is where political parties enter the

system, is made up of all the ethnicities of the region, "represents all the components of North and East Syria" and coordinates activities with the rest of northeastern Syrian society outside of the Autonomous system. The SDC thus works toward democratic confederalism within Syria outside of the AANES and internationally, with offices in Washington, Vienna, in other parts of the world, and even met with US congressmen in 2019 following the Turkish invasion. Undergirding everything is a Social Contract, analogous to a constitution; it affirms basic rights and gender equality.

The Rojava Information Center's own document refers to the AANES, TEV-DEM, and SDC as "higher levels," but I think this is a misnomer, since the crucial distinction about this non-representative system is that it is direct; the commune of citizens is arguably the "highest level" of administration, the other levels being composed of delegates obligated to the decisions of the commune and its committees. At the commune level there are a possible nine committees: defense, education, reconciliation and justice, the women's committee, youth and sports, health, families of the martyrs, arts and culture, and the economy committee. Women's committees have a special status, and men are not part of their decisions; members visit local women in their homes and facilitate their engagement in local work. For the defense committee, three people are elected as representatives for each commune (think of your street block in Columbia MO); if a neighborhood or district (city) is attacked, the local defense committee is the first line of defense, even before the YPJ/YPG or the Asayish (AANES security/police forces). The economics committee makes sure that "all adults have a livelihood and can support themselves and their dependents" and is concerned with commodities and food supply. Other commissions function in their respectively-named roles, sometimes in overlap with each other; not all communes have all nine committees

As indicated above, by 2016, the project had grown from 3 to 7 regions to include Arab-majority regions and Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor to the south and east, and the name for the confederation was changed from Rojava to AANES; "it is no longer an exclusively Kurdish project," says the 2019 Rojava Information Center report, adding that in every region, councils and co-chairs include representation from not only Arabs but other ethnic groups: "the shift from organizing under the name 'Rojava' to 'Northern Syria' and subsequently 'North and East Syria' also indicates a vision which goes far beyond ethnic identity." In early 2018 the westernmost canton of Afrin was invaded by Turkish forces and Turkish-backed Syrian forces; at first putting up a capable defense on the ground, the city of Afrin ultimately capitulated and evacuated after shelling and aerial bombardment. Turkey has been accused of changing Afrin's Kurdish population from 85% to 20%, displacing them with some 2 million Sunni Arabs. Further east and near the Turkish border, Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye were taken by Turkey by late 2019.

Has it worked, and is governance under democratic confederalism simple & easy? As they say in the self-help books, simple, yes; easy, no. At the large scale, the whole of northern Syria continues to be a place of conflict among many parties and alliances, including Turkey, Syria, the Soviet Union, ISIS, and the SDF (Syrian Defense Forces). A village exclusively for women and children near Dirbesiye, "where women alone develop the culture, economy, daily life and governance" and physically built the village, had to be evacuated due to nearby shelling during the Turkish invasion of 2019. At the level of the region, there can be cultural difficulties. While the Syrian government allows polygyny, the confederations' Women's Law of 2014 prohibits it; when the Arab region of Deir-ez-Zor was added to the confederation, the AANES had to use a "diplomatic approach," in the words of the Rojava Information Center's report, in working with some Arab

tribes on the issue. At the level of the commune, direct democracy works better in some places than others; the 2019 Rojava Information Center document is frank, mentioning problems with "lack of education" and lack of understanding about the nature of the commune system stemming from a "lingering state mentality" and a long-standing culture of authoritarianism: "people are not used to seeing themselves as part of a political process; they are used to working within a system in which one person has power and others don't." Citizens will often view the co-chairs as new authorities who should provide services, instead of seeing them as mere co-ordinators for their own citizen initiatives. Citizenship is time consuming and the average involved citizen in an AANES commune might spend several nights a week in meetings; anyone in Columbia MO who participated in the months-long protests around the George Floyd incident can recall how many evenings of the week your life was taken up by nightly protests, meetings, and related events. On the opposite side of overwork, as activists everywhere have experienced, is the problem of non-participation from many citizens:

Currently, not enough people actively participate in the commune system for it to fulfill its function in terms of feeding democratic decisions up through the confederal system. Although the current cross-regional initiative to provide more education about the commune system will work towards addressing this, much more education and institutional support is needed.

There are also historical tensions between Arabs, Kurds, and other nationalities, and as mentioned, areas and situations in which rights for women are difficult to achieve.

On the positive side, however: the system is broadly established and becoming accepted; standards of living have improved; bread and diesel fuel have been provided for average citizens at the level of the commune; salaries have increased; students are now able to attend schools in multi-lingual education or their original language; electricity and water are available, and according to the Rojava Information Center's 2019 report, access to basic goods in the autonomous zone is better than in nearly all other areas of Syria; and throughout the autonomous zone, the culture of violence and its attendant torture, disappearances and summary executions have been forbidden.

Can something like this be achieved in the US? Many might wonder, why bother, if things are working well enough for most people as is right now. Another criticism might be that something like democratic confederalism sounds great, but people in the US are too complacent to put something like this into place; the necessity just isn't there. To the first criticism, I would say that for a county like my county, Boone County Missouri, population 180,000, to record monthly visits at the food bank in the 5 figures — that is, at least $1/10^{th}$ of the population — indicates that there is more daily need out there than the educated majority of our college town is largely aware. A 2021 report for my city of Columbia, Missouri, indicates a child poverty rate of 35%; the city has failed over decades to provide permanent shelter for the homeless population (although recent initiatives show promise), and problems remain with racial bias in traffic stops and housing, as well as ongoing disputes between rival groups that result in numerous deaths of young people every year. The second objection about complacency is something our community defense club, with its mission for creating alternative structures and building strong communities, has encountered frequently, but which became real during the Covid19 lockdown of 2020 when the ability of government at all levels failed to address community needs. It is our strong view that as negative repercussions from globalism, such as climate change, disease pandemics, economic suffering, and the rise of authoritarianism, continue to be aggravated, that the environment for truly local

solutions — localism — in cities like Columbia will open something in which a block-by-block model of something like a democratic confederalism could thrive.

Questions remain: how could something like Democratic Confederalism be applied in a city of ~120,000, like Columbia Missouri? Under what social conditions could something like democratic confederalism be administered and what would be some obstacles to its implementation? Is a council of delegates from neighborhood councils, themselves delegates from councils at the level of the neighborhood block, really different from the system of elected city councilpeople and citizen review boards we have now, and if so, how? What about policing, security, and, as elemental racist forces in the United States continue to rise, community defense?

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