

Police abolition and other revolutionary lessons from Rojava

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Hundreds of thousands of protesters have taken to the streets across the United States and beyond in response to the police killing of George Floyd. Protesters in Minneapolis, New York, Los Angeles and dozens of other cities demanding justice were met with extreme police violence, leading to more deaths and numerous injuries.

The four cops responsible for the murder of Floyd have since been charged, but only after days of riots and protests forced the justice system to act. Other cops have been fired or suspended in response to their violent and criminal behavior towards peaceful protesters, but again, only after their actions were recorded on camera and caused a major social outcry. Many more cases of police brutality are not recorded, with the vast majority of cops facing no retribution whatsoever for their actions.

A common slogan heard at the protests is “No justice, no peace!,” raising the essential question of how a political system founded on a bloody history of white supremacy, capitalism and colonialism can ever provide true and meaningful justice. Some call for police reforms. Others call for the redistribution of funds. Still others argue that abolishing the police is the best option, but many people — even on the left — find it hard to imagine the viability of such a system.

Protecting the neighborhood

Yet, a system of this kind already exists in Rojava, the autonomous self-administrative region of North Syria. In Rojava, Asayish (Internal Security Forces) and HPC (Civil Defense Forces) forces work together in a symbiotic relationship to provide safety and security to the community.

The Asayish work as traffic controllers, arrest criminals, protect victims of domestic violence, serve as security guards at main governing buildings and control the movement of people and goods from one canton to another. The HPC in contrast, are people trained in basic security who only patrol their own neighborhood. The purpose of both forces is explicitly to protect the people from outside threats such as terrorist forces. It is always the HPC that protects a neighborhood, never the Asayish. The Asayish protects the city while the HPC protects the community. Both organizations have a gender quota of at least 40 percent women, if not more.

Through this alternative method, the possibility of instituting hierarchies of power and authority are considerably reduced. The people are protecting themselves. Security forces protect those who they live with and interact with daily in the neighborhood. This proximity ensures that violations occur only rarely. When they do occur, the neighborhood communes immediately activate community mechanisms of justice, honor and restoration.

The chances of one group establishing a monopoly over this process are further reduced by the encouragement of everyone in the community to participate in a roster system. Anyone can volunteer. This explicitly includes the elderly, who have to take on more responsibility due to the fact that most young men and women are fighting at the front lines in the war against ISIS. Particularly women are active in civil protection. Nothing restores and empowers the soul of a traumatized, war-torn community more than seeing the matriarchs of a neighborhood stand confidently at street corners wielding AK-47 rifles for the people’s protection. These images do not inspire fear and terror; they inspire communal confidence, pride, dignity, self-respect and belonging.

The social ecology of this system is protected by promoting women’s participation, a deep respect for multiculturalism and recognizing the sacredness of nature. It is not enough to create

alternative institutions without significant educational efforts to undo patriarchal, socio-political, economic and cultural hierarchies. This system is established through concerted efforts toward democratization, education and unlearning within society. This is the only way that meaningful, long-term and organic change can occur.

In order to re-educate society, people in Rojava enter academies for one, two or even three months at a time. This is done on a volunteer basis but also involves government institutions. For example, the Ministry of Education rosters groups of up to thirty teachers at a time to enter academies. During this process, workers continue to be paid. Women with children can take their children along and have free childcare as they spend weeks learning about civic duties, democratic rights, gender liberation, ecological sustainability, the history of capitalism and more.

While at the academies, everyone participates in the daily cleaning, cooking and management of the education center. Such communal co-existence is promoted as a conscious effort to re-organize and reformulate society. These people then return to their communities and join the Asayish, the HPC, as well as the communes, cooperatives and local councils.

Against all forms of hierarchy

However, before the establishment of this system was possible, an alternative ideology needed to be developed that provided a blueprint for an ideal, democratic society. Rojava's system is based on democratic confederalism, a theory developed by the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan and inspired by Murray Bookchin's social ecology.

One of the foundational values of democratic confederalism is an anti-hierarchical approach to communal structures and co-existence. Essentially, for this anti-hierarchical system to work, it must be based on the active promotion of equality across ethnic, religious and decision-making processes. This approach starts with the difficult task of promoting women's liberation and participation throughout the public arena. A quota of 40 to 60 percent women's participation exists across all administrative and decision-making structures.

Rojava's co-chair system requires that all leadership positions are held by one male and one female. This system is based on the fundamental recognition that political institutions with high degrees of women's participation tend to be more inclusive and democratic in nature. According to Öcalan:

The extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of women's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society. Thus, democratization of women is decisive for the permanent establishment of democracy and secularism. For a democratic nation, women's freedom is of great importance too, as liberated woman constitutes liberated society. Liberated society in turn constitutes democratic nation.

Rojava's ideology attempts to subvert everything that we know about the state, peace, liberation and co-existence; it is explicitly against hierarchies of all forms. Since the rise of the nation state in the 17th century, divided and colonized minorities have lived under artificial and often authoritarian rule. This exclusionary, violent and hierarchical system teaches that diversity is

the antithesis of patriotism and national unity. Diversity must be sacrificed at the bloody alter of the nation state with its ideology of one language, one flag, one identity and one national myth.

Through this system, the oppressed, dispossessed and stateless peoples have often come to believe that liberation can only be brought about by having their own independent state. This process, however, naturally leads to the oppression of other minorities that fall within the borders of that state. Through the radical grassroots model of democratic confederalism, an alternative blueprint emerges in which primordial hatreds and long-established ethno-religious cleavages can be addressed. In Rojava, democratic confederalism unites a rich mosaic of cultures and religions together into an enriched society that thrives on diversity rather than erasing it.

Many leftists have made the mistake of saying that democratic confederalism implies that all expressions of national identity should be erased — that all Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Yezidi and other “nationalisms” should not be expressed. This is a deeply Orientalist and Eurocentric perspective. Asking a Yezidi to stop being Yezidi or a Kurd to stop being Kurdish would merely serve imperial and genocidal forces established on the erasure of deeply oppressed minorities.

In contrast, in Rojava, democratic confederalism means that all cultures should live freely, expressing the rich beauty of their ancient traditions and colors alongside one another. It means feeling pride in your identity while decentralized mechanisms of co-existence actively dismantle hierarchies of power. It means explicit respect for multiculturalism, not asking colonized and oppressed ethno-religious minorities to form alternative “citizenships” by denying all that they have fought to preserve throughout centuries of enforced assimilation. Rojava asserts that diversity is the backbone of a democratic nation.

In practice, this means that education in Rojava is provided in the region’s three most prevalent languages: Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac. Street signs are trilingual. Minorities such as the Armenians are given extra decision-making capacity and extra seats in councils to ensure that the rule of the majority does not come at the detriment of minorities. Previously destroyed churches are being actively rebuilt and made visible, while multicultural festivals are promoted. Arts, culture, music and literature of different cultures are showcased side by side. Diversity is promoted, supported, encouraged, celebrated rather than erased or feared.

Recreating a communal self

In a democratic confederalist system, people are encouraged to participate in civil society so that people’s interests and needs are expressed through mechanisms other than through ethno-religious positions and preferences. This civic re-orientation only works when people do not feel threatened because of their cultural identities. In this way, colonial alienation, fragmentation and anxieties are avoided while new, interlinked avenues of belonging and political expression are created. Likewise, political and civic participation is encouraged and expected. De-politicization, apathy and non-involvement are seen as the anti-thesis of a democratic society.

This system therefore re-creates the civic body along a psychology of liberation. It dismantles internalized hatred and oppression towards the self and others and disassembles colonial and capitalist practices of Othering. It deconstructs, in the words of Eduardo Galeano, the “nobodies.” Nobodies are less than the Other; they are “nobody’s children, owners of nothing...the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way.”

For any liberation ideology to be successful, it must recreate a Self, a *somebody* from those who have been subject to these forms of erasure.

Has Rojava dismantled all forms of racism or class structures or gender bias or other practices of discrimination? Certainly not. But it *is* actively restructuring society so that it can avoid and eliminate all forms of oppression in the search for a truly democratic society. It is important not to romanticize Rojava, to view it rationally to see how things work and consider what does not work or what amendments are needed. Innovation is as essential to avoiding dogmatism in the achievement of a just and democratic society. In the words of Murray Bookchin, “If we do not do the impossible, we shall be faced with the unthinkable.”

The essential lesson of Rojava is that people are already actively building the alternative world others are still trying to imagine. It is wounded and abandoned, but still breathing. And it does so despite lack of support from the international left, repeated invasions, annexations, colonization, ethnic cleansing and the use of illegal chemical weapons against it by Turkey and its proxy terrorist forces.

The inhumanity and violence experienced by the Black community in the US is deeply shocking and traumatizing to anyone with a conscience and to those who wish to build communities based upon mutual respect, humanity and cooperation. In order for such an alternative society to emerge in places like the United States, the revolutions of people in the Third World must be considered more seriously, as well as actively studied and emulated. Lessons must be learned, questions must be asked, ideas must be exchanged and innovative changes must be implemented that fit the specific socio-political structures of a given society.

The entire social ecology of American society has been disrupted by mass poverty, vast income inequality, mass incarceration, lack of healthcare and housing, ecological destruction and even poisoned drinking water. The arrest and incarceration of police officer Derek M. Chauvin alongside the three other cops responsible for George Floyd’s murder can act only as tokens toward “justice.” Police brutality is interwoven with multiple, intersecting layers of systematic violence, oppression and injustice. Nothing short of upending the entire system founded on anti-Blackness can ever come close to true, lasting and effective justice.

As Kurds living across the Middle East, we watch as Black communities and allies throughout the United States rise up. We cheer their revolutionary courage, their unwavering commitment to justice and their desire for freedom. Their cry for justice echoes in our own hearts which are beating to the drum of freedom denied.

Although our chains may appear different, Kurds and Black Americans ultimately face the same oppressive system that continues to kill us and impose countless forms of violence upon us. With Rojava, we are trying to show that an alternative world is possible. Now, solidarity must become the bridge that unites us.

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