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Thoughts on Rojava: an interview with Janet Biehl

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January 13 2016

Full of admiration, but not without critique: Janet Biehl shares some of her ideas on the Rojava revolution after her recent visits to the region.

In this interview, independent filmmaker and journalist Zanyar Omrani talks to Janet Biehl about her late companion Murray Bookchin, her trips to Rojava and the important question of how to build bottom-up power structures without risking the reversal of the process over time.

Janet Biehl has traveled to Rojava twice in the past year and has written extensively about her experiences and observations while visiting the autonomous cantons in northern Syria. She is the author of the book *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin*.

Zanyar Omrani has visited Rojava several times, where he documented life behind the front-lines of the struggle against ISIS. His documentary, *Inside Kobane: Keeping Islamic State at Bay*, was screened by the BBC.

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<https://roarmag.org/essays/janet-biehl-interview/>

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Zanyar Omrani: Can you tell us about your first encounter with the Kurdish issue, and explain why it caught your attention?

Janet Biehl: After Bookchin died in 2006, several people sent me the PKK's stunning tribute to him, which said it would "undertake to make Bookchin live in our struggle" and create "the first society which establishes a tangible democratic confederalism."

Then in 2011 the Kurdish eco-activist Ercan Ayboga invited me to participate in the Mesopotamian Social Forum in Diyarbakir, which he was organizing. He thought the movement and I might have things to say to each other. He was right.

At the MSF I found a full-fledged social and political movement underway, brimming over with activism and ideas about ecology and gender equality and much more. I saw older patriarchal-looking men sitting and listening intently to 20-year-old women speaking on panels about honor killings. I thought, something is going on here.

Since then I've helped translate two books on the topic from German to English: *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, written by a group of German-Kurdish solidarity activists who traveled around Bakur [North Kurdistan] to research the institutions of Democratic Autonomy that were being created; and *Revolution in Rojava*, co-authored by Ercan Ayboga, who invited me to the conference in the first place. This book will be published by Pluto Press sometime in 2016.

In December 2014 I was able to travel to Rojava myself as part of an academic delegation. We were there for about ten days.

Tell us more about your first trip to Rojava. Did the reality live up to your expectations?

I had been translating the German reports, so I was fairly well informed in advance. But nothing could prepare me for the sight of young 1.65m women in uniforms casually holding Kalashnikovs—our ubiquitous escorts. And nothing could have

prepared me for actually witnessing a revolution. For the first time I saw how the concentrated power of the collective human will can transform a social order in just a short time. And here the many images of Öcalan were out in the open, unlike in the tent in Diyarbakir—they were on the walls of nearly every room.

I met people who had been imprisoned and tortured by the regime yet continued with the work nonetheless till they carried this project to fruition. My delegations talked to organizers of Tev-Dem and Yekîtiya Star; the revolutionaries had done so much to build the councils and other institutions. While Murray was alive, I had studied revolutionary history and helped him write books about it. But to see such a thing before my eyes—it was extraordinary.

Communes, Tev-Dem, 22 ministries of cantons, municipalities, courts—all these institutions are putting into practice ideas that previously only existed on paper. To what extent was what you saw in Rojava in line with Bookchin's thought?

With the two delegations (the second was in October 2015), the total time I spent in Rojava is about 13 days, and the people who talked to us were members of the political class. So everything I have to say, you must know, is based on what I was told, by people who knew that in talking to our group of visiting outsiders, they were talking to the world.

Nearly everyone mentioned that the Rojava project has no state and is opposed to the state. The Assad regime had kept the area economically undeveloped, so while capitalism was present, it did not shape the society, and the political class is committed to creating a cooperative economy. Farmlands abandoned by the regime had been turned into agricultural cooperatives. Moreover the society of the three cantons is communalistic, people explained, both in practice and in ideology, rather than individualistic like the United States.

Specifically to Bookchin, the institutions of democratic self-government that they described corresponded to much of what he had envisioned (under the name libertarian municipalism). At the base of democratic confederalism is the citizens' assembly (in Bookchin) or commune (in Rojava). The commune sends delegates to the confederal council at the neighborhood level, and the neighborhood council sends delegates to the district, and the district to the canton. In this multi-tiered structure, as Bookchin described it, power is to flow from the bottom up.

Has the vision become real? In December 2014, I witnessed a commune meeting in Qamislo. In October 2015, my delegation went to Amude, seat of the cantonal tier of the democratic self-government, where we met Hakam Khello, the head of the legislative council. I asked him how many communes there are. He told me there were 4,000 in the liberated areas, including Arab villages and all other ethnicities.

Some things were not as in Bookchin's thought. Most notably, Bookchin did not prioritize women the way Öcalan has done. Bookchin was opposed to all hierarchy, but Öcalan gives singular importance to the oppression of women, and he assigns a distinctive or even vanguard role to women. Bookchin did not assign such a role to women, or call for 40 percent gender quotas, or dual leadership.

To know for sure whether power flows from the bottom up, I would need to witness a decision made at a commune meeting, then follow it to the neighborhood council, and then the district council, and the cantonal level. Unfortunately, lacking the languages, I don't have that access, so I will have to depend on other researchers for such information.

In your opinion, can the legislative and executive institutions in Rojava act beyond the hegemony of the Democratic Union Party?

My October 2015 delegation also met with Cizire canton's prime minister, the lawyer Akram Hesso. I asked him whether power in the system flowed from the bottom up or from the

military importance as ground fighters. That give them leverage with both sides, with both the USA and Russia, and they should use it.

In your opinion, if Mr. Bookchin were alive, how would he think about the experience of people in Rojava?

I think he would be traveling to Rojava whenever possible and participating and offering advice and inspiration and assistance. He would be trying to help to make the democracy work. He would be traveling around the Middle East, trying to spread the revolution beyond the Kurdish areas, throughout the region. And he would be talking about it to the outside world, to whoever would listen. That is what all of us who have visited there have a moral obligation to do.

war, and as the YPG and YPJ achieve victories, support must surely grow. Those victories justify the democracy and perhaps ensure its future.

But in every society, as I mentioned, people react differently to a ruling ideology. Some are very enthusiastic about the prevailing system, some go along with it passively, some have no opinion, and some will just rebel because it is in their nature to rebel, and some will point out real problems with the way things are.

Bookchin used to say that in any political group or system, there will always be a left, a right, and a center—even utopia will have this spectrum. There's no point in trying to get around it by denying other parts of the political spectrum or trying to eradicate them. There will always be people who disagree with the prevailing consensus, or there should be, and the question is what does the society do about them. I think every society must allow for the whole political spectrum, and those who hold points of view have to be able to defend their positions.

I find it all paradoxical, because ideology is necessary to educate and motivate people to make a revolution, but it must also not become oppressive and enforce conformity. In the twentieth century the world had a lot of experience with societies built on ideology. One thing we all learned is that dissent is vital to a healthy political order. Rojava will need to be able to handle individual differences, including political differences.

British and German planes have reached Syrian skies. This proxy war is worsening day by day. Do you think that the officials in Rojava can keep to the third path that they claim?

Originally the third path was: “neither Assad nor the Free Syrian Army/Al-Nusra-IS.” Now that Russia has entered the Syrian war, we have another the third path—“Neither the United States/Britain nor Russia.” I think it's wise, especially since the Kurds have demonstrated repeatedly their enormous

top down. “We take the ideas and needs that people at the base give us,” he said through an interpreter, “and we study these opinions to see if it is possible to agree it into a law, to translate ideas of people into practical laws and decisions.” I couldn't help but notice that that's not quite the same thing as executing the policy decisions of the base.

So I asked, how do you obtain the ideas of the people? “We have small communes in the neighborhoods,” he said. “Local institutions, parliament, executive council. People express their needs step by step, upward, in a pyramid.”

Will elections be held soon? I continued. “We had elections in municipalities this year,” he said, “but elections for parliament are postponed because of the attacks by ISIS in Kobane and everywhere else.”

Will the elections be held according to the Duhok agreement of late 2014? I asked, referring to the agreement by which the PYD-aligned parties and the ENKS-aligned parties agreed to share equal seats in the parliament. “The Duhok agreement is related just to the Kurdish parties. We support the agreement, we have no problem with it.”

Does this executive council of which you are head also contain non-PYD parties? I asked.

“The Kurdish people have twelve parties in the self-government. The democratic self-administration is open to all the parties. I am a member of ENKS.”

I had not known that and paused a moment to register surprise. Later I found this description of how Hesso got to be prime minister: eight months ago, he explained to an IPS reporter, “We had several meetings until a committee of 98 members representing the different communities was set up. They were responsible for electing the 25 of us that make up the government today.” How that community of 98 was chosen is unclear. But let's go back to Amude.

To follow up, I asked, “People say the PYD is dominant, oppressive. What is your opinion?” He answered: “The PYD is a

Kurdish party like any party here. It has seats in parliament, it is very popular, but it does not dominate.”

“Why is there no picture of Öcalan on the walls here?” one my fellow delegates asked, referring to the cantonal government building.

“In the democratic self-government we represent all the people,” Hesso said, “all the schools and leaders, many schools, not images. The democratic self-government respects the ideas of all, including the ENKS. People can have photos of Öcalan in their homes, but not in government.”

The next day, when Hesso addressed the New World Summit in Derik, he spoke with full commitment to the revolution: “Our revolution is one of sacrifice and resistance. Here we have women’s equality, in the democratic self-government and in women’s commissions. Our revolution is for all humanity. We have commissions on human rights and religion. A new society is being built on the blood of our martyrs. The democratic self-government depends on the YPG, YPJ, Sotoro, Asayis—all protect Rojava.”

What strategies do you have in order to reduce such power? In other words, what democratic guarantees can prevent the injection of top-down decisions?

People in Rojava seemed very aware of the danger that a bottom-up system can turn into a top-down system. That’s what happened, after all, in Russia. In 1917, the multi-tiered system of soviets, or councils, all over Russia, was originally supposed to carry power from the base to the summit. But once the Bolsheviks came to power, they were able to use those very institutions as conduits for top-down power, indeed for totalitarian domination.

You ask for guarantees—my friend, we are talking about human societies, not the laws of physics. There are no guarantees. There is no mathematical formula that says, if these conditions are met, then the democracy is guaranteed to continue in all its purity.

to fight and perhaps die for it. That’s especially true of a society without sophisticated military technology, like Rojava, one that relies on soldiers-at-arms rather than drones or fighter jets. Think of ancient Athens—the hoplites, the army fighters, were also the citizens in the assembly, the *ekklesia*. And as military rowers were needed for the navy, for the triremes, democratic participation was extended to the lower classes.

So societies at war, paradoxically, concede or expand democratic features. It’s a kind of social contract. The fact that the society of the three cantons must mobilize its people to fight the war against IS is actually a force pulling in favor of democracy. The people must consent to the war, participate in it, fight it, and be willing to sacrifice their lives and those of their family members for it.

So regardless of whether the PKK is or is not making military and other decisions behind the scenes, it must be a people’s war, and the people must fight it through their self-government. And “the people” of course includes Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Turkmen, and all the other groups. If nothing else for the sake of mobilization, the democracy must have some reality.

When I was reading the reports of your last trip, I noticed in your writing that you expressed some fears or concern about some of things you saw in Rojava. I’d be glad if you could explicitly say what makes you so worried.

You must be referring to my article “The Paradoxes of a Liberatory Ideology.” Ideology, I wrote, is a powerful force in Rojava, and I think a commitment to Öcalan’s ideology was a major force in creating the society and that it continues to hold it together, and at the same time the society reinforces it.

Rojava is a small society, cut off from the rest of the world by the embargo, by Turkish hostility, and is besieged by war. The degree of communal solidarity is high, and people seem to share the same aspirations. People do support and fight the

The American professor of Kurdish studies Michael Gunter, in his book *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, says he thinks the bottom-up system is unworkable and that the PKK really runs everything in Rojava behind the scenes. “In reality, the PKK leadership in the Qandil Mountains and Abdullah Öcalan in Imrali are the ones who really rule through various PKK/PYD commanders responsible for different areas.” What is his evidence for such a statement? “As of September 2013, Shahin Cello from Kobane is reported to be the commander-in-chief of all military units of the PYD/YPG in Syria. Formerly he was a member of the PKK central committee and a leading operative in Europe.”

Yes, the presence of former PKK military people is suggestive. But the YPG and YPJ are part of the Rojava system; they are accountable to the democratic self-government, and they are run democratically—their commanders are elected by the rank-and-file.

Still, for the sake of argument, let’s suppose it’s true that the PKK runs the show. That would be a problem, because history tells us that war can make a society more authoritarian, through a command structure, even a society committed to radical democracy. Military decisions are surely being made every day. And the upper levels of the Cizire administration have many resourceful and experienced people, like co-governors Hadiya Yousef and Sheikh Humeydi Denham, and the prime minister Hesso and council president Khello, and more—the upper strata seem quite populous, doubtless because of the war. Are we to imagine that they obey the bottom-up wishes of the citizens without exercising their own judgment? Why then have talented, resourceful people at the top?

But there is nothing wrong with leadership, by experienced people, as long as those leaders are accountable to the base. If the base keeps re-electing them, then that is democracy too.

And history teaches us something else about wartime: that it can also expand democracy. A society at war is asking people

Bookchin gave a lot of thought to this problem, and one of his most insistent points was that the society must ensure the separation of policy and administration. Only the citizens in assemblies may make decisions on matters of policy. The role of the confederal councils is solely to administer to execute those decisions. As soon as the councils start making policy decisions, you no longer have a bottom-up flow of power.

Second, delegates to the confederal councils must be mandated and recallable. Their only role is to convey the policy decisions made by the citizen assemblies to the upper tiers. If they fail to do that, the people can recall them. If the delegates are permitted to go beyond their mandate, then we are losing the bottom-up flow of power.

In Amude, as my delegation talked to Hakam Khello, the PYD head of the canton’s legislative council, we considered it from a practical point of view. Suppose the various communes in a neighborhood don’t agree on a certain issue, someone in my group asked, and their various delegates to the neighborhood council reflect that disagreement and clash. How was the issue to be resolved?

The neighborhood council would have to decide, Khello explained, but the final decision could be made also at level of the canton.

What factors to make the decision? we asked.

“The decision has to be in accord with the social contract,” he said, referring to the written constitution by which the society is structured. For example, “freedom of women is a standard principle there,” he said, and so is ecology. “We also refer to international charters for human rights, children’s rights. These organize our life.”

I found that reassuring—to have the society’s basic principles in writing at hand, for reference in decision-making. What other ways do you try to keep bottom-up from becoming top-down? I asked Khello.

“The local communes are concerned only with local issues,” he replied. “The legislative council discusses issues related to all the people in the canton.”

Yes, I’d heard others in Rojava enunciate this principle as well: that decisions on a given issue are made at the most local level competent to address it. If a commune is competent to handle an issue, like where to locate a school or how long to have the power running and at what hours, then it does so, and the upper levels should not interfere. It keeps the institutions close to the people, it keeps people in control of the issues most immediately relevant to them, and it keeps bureaucracy from developing. It’s a way for a democracy to stay responsive to the people. (It reminds me a little of the principle of “subsidiarity” in Catholic social thought.)

But can that local focus really be effective in keeping power bottom-up? I wondered. After all, people meeting in communes should have a say in canton-wide matters as well. Issues of war and peace affect everyone, for example—why should the street and neighborhood meetings not have a voice? I worried that referring all canton-wide matters to the canton-wide councils could concentrate power at the top.

The day after the delegation met with Khello, I gave a speech at the New World Summit about libertarian municipalism or democratic confederalism. And when I was finished, a hand went up in the front row, and it was Khello himself, and he threw my own question back at me and my fellow panelist, Cezire’s remarkable deputy foreign minister Amine Osse: How to keep bottom-up from becoming top-down?

Osse talked about the importance of commitment to the principles of democracy. I agreed, and mentioned that Bookchin had often said: “There is no substitute for consciousness.” People must be committed to the ideas and the process and to making it work, and they must remain vigilant. If people are not committed, if they are neglectful, then by default, in the course of things, power will begin flowing from the top-down.

I would like to mention here another thing that seems crucial for ensuring a bottom-up flow of power, and that is transparency. All records and decisions and voting results must be publicly available, all economic and other information, for use in decision-making. Everything must be transparent. When people start keeping secrets from the people, the people can’t make proper decisions, and if others make decisions behind the scenes, based on secret information, then we no longer have an assembly democracy.

On the same subject my friend Zaher Baher offers yet a crucial point. “The only hope for Rojava is Tev-Dem,” he told me once, referring to the organization representing the various grassroots associations, Zaher says he thinks Tev-Dem is the vehicle for transmitting the wishes of local group to the confederal councils. I think his point is well taken: Rojava has many civil society associations, and much of the strength of democratic society will lie in their strength.

Do I think this system in Rojava is purely as Bookchin envisioned it? Not purely, but perhaps that may lie beyond the abilities of real human beings. But the people are wrestling with problems of implementation that Bookchin, as a theorist, never foresaw, and I think that even the mistakes that people in Rojava might make are relevant to the future importance of these ideas.

Apparently, the legislative and executive organizations have some tasks, and free elections are present in most areas. Don’t you think that there is an extralegal force with a power that can block any decisions that it does not regard compatible with its benefits?

By “extralegal force,” I think you must mean the PKK. Of course, many of the political actors in Rojava spent time in the Qandil Mountains and have roots with the PKK, but they are at pains to deny any present active connection. You seem to be asking me what goes on behind the scenes, and I have no way of knowing for sure.