

Book Review: *Revolution in Rojava*

Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, 2016, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press (320 pp., paperback, £15.00)

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Pluto Press has done a wonderful service in publishing a “Revolution in Rojava”, a first-hand account of the alternative social project being implemented at this very moment in the area called, in Kurdish, Rojava, or West -three cantons in the north of Syria with a sizeable Kurdish population, but which is home also to Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens. As the world has shown images of armed Kurdish guerrillas, the YPG, and as their female counterparts, the YPJ, have made it to the front news, while leading the struggle against the Islamic State (IS). As the world looked in horror at the spread of IS which seemed for some time unstoppable, this group of determined fighters not only held them back, but inflicted them their first massive defeat in the defence of the city of Kobane –with it, their aura of invincibility was irreparably damaged.

But little has been told, beyond comments in passing, about the social vision inspiring these fighters, who were not just defending their lives, but also the new society they have been patiently building for years in the northern part of the Syrian state. It is to this new society that this book has turned its eyes to. This is the first detailed, comprehensive, first-hand account of the social construction taking place in the area known as Rojava. While the Kurds have been welcomed as the backbone of the fight against IS, their political expression has been ignored, dismissed, blocked from participating in peace negotiations, and their communities have been kept in the cold with an enforced embargo by all its neighbours: Turkey, the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq (or Southern Kurdistan, depending on your point of view), and of course IS to the south. As the book aptly puts it: ‘[e]ven as the US-led coalition supports the YPG/YPJ in its fight against IS, the economic embargo against Rojava remains in place (...) The troops of Rojava may be used to counter IS, it seems, but their social and political model is to be starved to death’ (p.207). Why does the Rojava social project causes so much opposition among varied sources such as the US, Turkey, IS, the KRG and the Syrian state? Because of its transformative potential in a region where everyone is intending to direct limited change in their own particular benefit.

Since the emergence of the nation-states in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the post-WWI context, the Kurdish have been discriminated against in a systematic and structural fashion. Divided in four countries (Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran) across the Cold

War divide, they did not raise much sympathy neither East nor West. One Kurdish man once joked saying that suppressing the Kurds was the only agreement between these four states. For the most part, the Kurdish have been suppressed as an identity and their very right to existence has been questioned. Yet the generalised chaos reigning upon the Middle East after the project of creating a New Middle East failed miserably, after the military adventures turned into a nightmare for millions, and after the Arab Spring turned into a reactionary winter, has created a space for them to step forward and attempt to create a new social order. This experience challenges widely held notions of intrinsic Middle Eastern authoritarianism, patriarchy and religious fanaticism. The fact that in the midst of this chaos, without any of the objective or subjective circumstances in their favour, and adversity surrounding them, they have managed to create a system based on direct democracy, gender liberation and secular coexistence is a remarkable achievement in its own right.

Many of Rojava's achievements go well beyond what has been achieved in terms of social and gender rights by the Western democracies. While the Syrian state has been fighting a mostly Islamist opposition in a terrible war of mutual extermination –with the kind sponsorship of Russia and Iran, on the one hand, and of the US, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies on the other- the Kurdish have managed to create a system they call democratic autonomy, in which gender liberation is more than young women holding Kalashnikovs –as trivialised by some mainstream media- but where not only quotas for women exist in every institution, but where the system of co-chairing means that all positions of responsibility are shared between a man and a woman, as well as providing their own independent, all-female, organisations where necessary. The system of council and 'democratic autonomous administrations', based in direct and participatory democracy, is, in the face of the deep crisis experienced by representative democracy all over the world –from Argentina, to Egypt, to Spain, to the US-, a most valuable contribution to start thinking of methods to create an active and engaged citizenship.

It is on this deeply democratic foundation that a remarkable secular coexistence has been made possible in the Middle Eastern mosaic, where unspeakable passions have led one group, ethnic or confessional, to strive towards the extermination of others. This diversity is at odds with the attempts to force artificial homogeneity intrinsic to every single nation-state, and the fact that the Kurdish think of their own political project as beyond the realms of state-making allows them to think anew of creative ways in which to create a Middle East where there is room for everyone. This is what they call 'Democratic Confederalism' which they view based on federalist principles and in their understanding of autonomy as the basis of social contract between these widely diverse groups. Inspired by this larger project, they have been increasingly successful in attracting Arabs, Syrians and others into this shared vision –the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Democratic Council of Syria and the project of creating a Federation of Rojava/Northern Syria (which received a surprising wink from Russia) are witnesses to that.

But eventually this system based in direct democracy needs to confront the dominant capitalist system, because political democracy is nothing but incomplete without a thorough democracy in the economic system, that gives communities control and a say over it. The democratic deficit of our society is entrenched in deep social inequalities and the widening gap between those with power and wealth and those with none. A participatory system requires time to engage as an active citizen on a regular basis and a fair element of control over society. It is mainly on this point that the project of Rojava is still looking for a third path of its own, and in one way or

another the flourishing of cooperatives is creating the foundation for a new economy based in the needs of society and whose spirit is based on solidarity.

This is a contradictory process, of course, and nothing is set in stone. Inasmuch as power has been devolved to communities through a tightly-knitted fabric of bottom-up institutions, the direction the process takes depends on them. But, even if guided by democratic and egalitarian principles, they are operating under enormous constraints and some of their solutions are bound to upset followers of various orthodoxies. For instance, in order to make concessions to more conservative elements in society, to include other groups that were underrepresented in direct-democratic institutions, a social contract was created at the start of 2014 which led to the establishment of democratic autonomous administrations. This is a compromise resembling more traditional representative administration, with its parliament, parties and ministers. This was also important to be able to have a dialogue from the three cantons with the outside world, which is (still) organised along the lines of conventional nation-states. This system, which has been described as “transitional”, runs in parallel to council network which has been the living expression of this direct democratic system. What way does the transition go, if towards the restitution of the central state authority in one way or another, or to the creation of a bottom up social order, is yet to be seen.

Of course the whole experience on Rojava depends not only on their capacity to resist and create a bottom-up order in the induced chaos reigning in the Middle East. There is also enormous pressures coming from the civil war as such and the calculations of outside powers, both global and regional, in the resolution of this carnage. What order will emerge for the whole of Syria out of this civil war is crucial for the survival of Rojava, and hence their effort to reach out to others and explain that their alternative requires the emergence of a more democratic framework for mutual coexistence for all. While the YPG/YPJ emerged as a self-defence organisation to protect the Kurdish, together with their allies in the SDF, they have not attempted to topple the Assad government, nor look for independence. They have never denied though the importance of democratising the country and to this effect, they have been leading with example. This is why solidarity –the tenderness of the people, as Che Guevara famously said once- is so vital, because it is the only hope that whatever order emerges out of this chaos may negotiate with the people of Rojava a new relationship.

Although this is mostly a descriptive book, without much emphasis in theoretical debates, there is in it a wealth of thought-provoking ideas that have universal value. That this experience is relevant beyond the borders of Syria is proved by the extraordinary reception to this book. Pluto Press is already thinking of the second edition and recently, Ercan Ayboga, one of the co-authors, had a tour in Ireland, North and South, to launch the book; this brought him from Cork to Belfast, with stops in Dublin, Cavan and Dungannon. In all places, the people engaged and felt that Rojava had something very important to tell them. With the political crisis and increased alienation from politics at both sides of the border, to hear about the social experiment in Rojava seems like a breath of fresh air. Also, the increasingly successful –but daunting nonetheless- attempts to cross sectarian boundaries in a land fragmented in multiple religious and ethnical identities certainly stroke a chord with Irish participants, particularly north of the border. What ultimately Rojava seems to be shouting at the world is that it is possible for all of us to share the world together, but that this coexistence depends on the ability to respect and value one another, to live as equals. With a world submerged into multiple conflicts, wars and mounting social,

political, environmental, economic crises that seem never ending, it may not be exaggerated to state that our future depends on our capacity to heed this message.

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