

Rojava — Revolution Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Andrew Flood

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Revolutions are seldom made in favourable circumstances. Russia 1917 emerged from the mass slaughter of WWI and the disintegration of an economy under the pressure of the supply demands of that war. Spain 1936 emerged from a well planned and executed fascist coup amongst a powerful military backed and armed by international fascism. Schemas for revolution that depend on quiet times and plenty may well be doomed from the start.

That said it's hard to imagine more impossible conditions for revolution than that of Rojava. A brutal civil war, 3 small areas of territory that were kept in a state of low development by the previous regime and are not even linked to each other. A fanatic army of barbaric religious extremists armed with captured looted US heavy weaponry attacking from one side, a hostile state quietly backing that army and closing its borders to the good guys on another and waiting in the wings the old regime and its long history of brutal counter insurgency. And above all this the tactical and strategic intervention of an imperialist power whose manipulations have devastated the land to the South East over a period of almost three decades.

In addition the main ideological force behind the revolution, the PKK, which got on comparatively well with the Assad regime on both a traditional 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' basis, but more relevant to this discussion because the geographic isolation of the Kurdish population in the three cantons of a very much larger Syria meant they might be better off moving to Northern Kurdistan. In 'The Kurdish Awakening' Ofra Bengio even credits Ocalan in that period with saying that the Kurds had originated in Kurdistan and needed to return there. (Source: Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland, p207)

Yet it was here one night in 2012 at a small town on the route of the old Berlin to Baghdad railway that a revolution of sorts began. In the words of Mako Qocgiri *"It's the night of July 18-19. People in the city of Kobanê are stealing into a mosque to participate in a people's assembly there. They reach a decision: the revolution must proceed!"*

Their armed defense committees, take control of the main access roads to and from Kobanê, while civilians, in an organized action, lay siege to regime institutions and the Assad army's military strong points. A short negotiation is enough to convince those in charge of the barracks that they have nothing left but to lay down their arms." (Source)

The revolution quickly spread to the 3 cantons of Northern Syria / Western Kurdistan that have a majority Kurdish population. All three are landlocked, separated from each other and pushed up against the hostile border maintained by the Turkish state. From west to East they are Afrin, Kobane and Jazira and in 2014 perhaps 4.5 million people populated the cantons which lie west of the Tigris and east of the Mediterranean. Not all the people are Kurds, in fact ethnically there are Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and Turkmen and there are also the religious groups of Muslim, Christian, and Yazidi.

This was a divided population whose divisions were exploited & deepened by the Ba'athist regime through programs that repressed and displaced Kurds and a settlement program that moved additional Arabs from the Syrian interior to create an 'Arab belt' on what had often been Kurdish land. The Assad regime also sought to keep the region economically undeveloped, banning the construction of large buildings like factories, it's said that at the time of the revolution Rojava was without industrial grain mills. It's major product was wheat, for transport & refining elsewhere in Syria.

Rojava does however have the mixed blessing of containing 60% of Syrian oil extraction, a valuable resource for sure but one that attracts the armed intervention of both hostile states and

mercenary armies. And Rojava without refineries and surrounded by hostile borders with no sea access can receive only limited income from the oil wealth through smuggling operations.

Understanding this context is an essential start to understanding what we can expect from the Rojava revolution. For ideological reasons some sections of the left are very hostile to even the idea a revolution is underway and often express this by putting forward demands for a full communist economy that are beyond the possibilities of 'socialism in one country' never mind 'communism in 3 disconnected cantons.'

Here too we need to recognise the limitations in developing an anarchist approach to the revolution, it is certainly not made at a time and in a place of our choosing but in the most impossible of circumstances. So as with the Zapatistas in 1994 the questions are limited to: Is what is happening worth defending? What are the contradictions within the revolution? And what can we learn from it?

Is what is happening worth defending?

On one level this is a very easy question to answer Yes to. After all Rojava came to most of our attention in the first place when ISIS (using captured US heavy weaponry and armour) suddenly overran most of Kobane canton except for the north western half of Kobane city itself. A hundred day plus mini Stalingrad was fought out at considerable cost to the YPG/J defenders before ISIS were driven back. The regime ISIS would seek to impose and the methods they would use would mean almost anything would be worth defending as an alternative.

But the revolution on the ground in Rojava is of a sort that would be worth defending anywhere. In what are the worst of circumstances the defenders are claiming to be pushing through a profound social revolution that aims at the development of a democratic, ecological and gender liberated society. If there are any reasonable grounds for believing this is really the intention then there should be no question about defending the revolution itself.

Democracy

At the base of the Rojava revolution is a system of direct grassroots democracy based in the community. As it has been described each neighbourhood has an assembly which anyone living there can attend. These send delegates to district meetings and in turn those district meetings send delegates to a city meeting. For instance the city of Qamişlo has 6 districts and each of these districts has 18 neighbourhood communes of 300 households. Qamişlo is the largest city in the Cizîre canton which has 12 cities in total, a council of delegates from all the 12 cities form a canton wide council. (Source)

Gender Liberation

A lot of the imagery coming out of Rojava has focused on the too common wall poster fetish of the western left, conventionally beautiful women with guns. In a piece for Al Jazeera Dilar Dirik, a Kurdish activist and PhD student researching the Kurdish women's movement, described how media coverage tends to "*sensationalise the ways in which these women defy preconceived notions*

of eastern women as oppressed victims, these mainstream characterizations erroneously present Kurdish women fighters as a novel phenomenon. They cheapen a legitimate struggle by projecting their bizarre orientalist fantasies on it — and oversimplify the reasons motivating Kurdish women to join the fight. Nowadays, it seems to be appealing to portray women as sympathetic enemies of ISIL without raising questions about their ideologies and political aims.”

The reality is that from the start the Rojava revolution has a strong active aim of gender liberation. The delegate councils described above are required to have at least a 40% representation of women. A co-chair system is in place where there has to be a male & female representative in every position. Women’s houses were opened in every city and a Ministry of Women staffed only by women set up which the Cizîre Canton Minister of Women Hiva Erabu says *“started projects in areas of interest to women: economy, politics, child-rearing, development, violence against women, culture, law.”*

In their report on this work Rojda Serhat-Şevin Şervan-Cahide Harputlu say *“The Ministry gathered a range of previously unavailable statistics on women through research in Cizîre Canton. In addition to the total population of women, the statistics also recorded numbers of women who have experienced violence, polygyny, child marriage; who are in economic distress; who have divorced; and who are disabled. According to the research, there were 2,250 instances of violence against women in 2004 alone.”*

Minister Hiva Erabu says *“as a result we started solidarity projects and women’s shelters. Women in danger of death live here. We also have projects to help solve the economic problems of women living in shelters.”* There has also been the *“development of a law that takes measures against a range of forms of violence against women, from child marriage, polygyny, disinheritance of women and bride exchange to domestic violence.”* (Source)

This is the context the armed women’s militia of the YPG should be understood in. Meryem Kobanê a YPJ commander at Kobane says *“Women are pushed into prostitution as if they have no other option. Women are being stoned when they themselves are victims of rape. We are saying there is another way to live. And the solution isn’t just weapons”*

The gender liberation struggle fundamentally underlies the struggle for class politics in Rojava as the oppression of women is essential to the maintenance of the tribal-feudal structures of traditional Kurdish society which obstruct class interests by dividing people along tribal loyalties. Unlike in Western Europe where tribalism was mostly suppressed by the feudal class system long before the transition to capitalism, in Kurdistan tribalism also needs to be defeated as it remains fundamental to the reproduction of exploitation.

What are the contradictions?

The sort of revolutionary changes described above didn’t fall from the moon but have clearly been driven by the influence of thought and experimentation across the border in Turkey. The revolution in Rojava is being pushed by a separate organisation, the PYD but it’s very clear that it is at least deeply influenced by its strong connections with the PKK. The successful defence of Kobane was greatly bolstered by PKK fighters crossing the border, perhaps more dependant on that then it was on US airpower or weapon drops.

The PKK is the Kurdistan Workers’ Party which fought an often brutal armed struggle against the Turkish state from 1984 to 2013. It’s political origins in the late 1970s fused Kurdish nation-

alism with the Marxist Leninism of the New Left coming out of the 1960s in the fight for an independent Kurdish state. It's armed struggle which included many bombings and armed conflict with other Kurdish forces as well as the Turkish state inevitably has left many of the Turkish left in particular deeply suspicious of it.

As recently as 2012 541 people died in the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state, the current peace process across the border in Turkey is fragile. Prolonged military conflicts brutalise even the most political of activists and unchecked tend to see 'hard men' rise to positions of control. Those who strongly dislike Rojava because of the PKK influence have proven hard to debate as for the most part all they do is cite the history of bad things that were done in order to insist both that change is impossible and that any change reported has to therefore be a trick.

From an anarchist perspective the additional fact that the PKK has been led since its inception by Abdullah Öcalan and that a personality cult surrounds him raises problems. Anarchists have not been immune to the tendency to raise particular fighters to cult status, the Spanish anarchist Durruti being one example. But Öcalan whose face dominates most mobilisations is still alive and presented as directing at least the ideological development that influences Rojava from his prison cell in Turkey.

However the mindset that sees Öcalan as an all powerful puppet master should be challenged. Like other movements the PKK contains other voices and like other movements existing in conditions of intense conflict sometimes this isn't so visible to outsiders due to the need both organisational loyalist and the need to maintain discipline in the face of an enemy eager to exploit weaknesses. But it's an open enough secret that a push for change also came from the base, and in particular from women demanding a distinct womens military command,

It's significant that the first women's organisation had to be founded in exile in Germany in 1987. The official history of the women's movement is perhaps required to give credit to Öcalan but even it suggests a struggle from below in talking of how "the impact of feudal society created difficulties in women's organization due to lack of self-confidence.

However, the faith in freedom, their own strength and self-organization that Kurdish women gained by their practical experiences in the freedom struggle contributed to a quick progress of their ideological, military, political and social organization. Women gained their self-confidence thanks to their successful march into many areas of struggle which traditionally were regarded as "belonging to men". Hereby women have changed the mentality and structures of male domination and thus the mentality of the Kurdish society, life, social organization, liberation and democracy as part of the qualitative change in revolution. This also led to a serious change in the traditional, ruling perception and mentality of men towards women. (Source)

The importance of the question of top down military discipline becomes clearer when you consider the nature of power in Rojava. The council system as described owes much to the work of PYD cadre operating as TEV-DEM. But as well as being essential to the construction of grassroots democracy the PYD also form a more conventional government structure.

The left talks about situations of dual power when you have in existence at the same time the top down government of the state and a bottom up self government of the people. Each of those structures can make very different decisions and this brings them into conflict. The historical development of such conflicts is that the conventional state government comes to control the armed forces and as serious disagreements develops deploys them against the grassroots democracy to 'defend the revolution'. The Russian revolution was destroyed when the Bolsheviks used such state power to suppress the workers councils and soviets. The Spanish revolution was de-

feated by fascism in 1939 but in 1937 the republican government took significant steps to crush the power of the sort of assemblies and co-ops that are developing in Rojava.

Of course this history is also known to the PYD / TEV-DEM cadre and to an extent they address this contradiction as they deliberately holding both sides of the dual power equation to protect the grassroots democratic structures. The councils are constructed so that the state holds a minority of positions and can be easily outvoted by the delegates from below. But the real test of that will only develop if and when the grassroots democracy decides on a different approach to that of the PYD leadership.

The second major contradiction is the military one. In their fight against ISIS the YPG/J were dependent on US air support to destroy the armour and heavy weaponry ISIS had captured off the US supplied Iraqi army. Of course you could suggest that was simply the US cancelling out the effects of its own intervention, an intervention that had also created the conditions from which ISIS arose. But clearly any continued military support would be conditional on the US thinking the Rojava revolution was going to not represent a significant threat to its considerable interests in the region.

As soon as the US have ISIS contained it's likely that not only will support be cut off, but the US will be encouraging Turkey & Barzani in Iraq to destabilise and overthrow the PYD and wipe out TEV-DEM. The PYD have to be aware of that so it's a considerable additional pressure to prevent the grassroots democracy going too far within Rojava or encouraging the spread of its methods into Syria or Iraq. Perhaps the PYD leadership might reason if it stays localised and low key the US might overlook the threat it represents, the threat of a good example.

As I updated the final draft of this article what may be a key event in answering these questions took place. The YPG recaptured the massive La Farge cement plant. This is important not simply because cement is essential for reconstruction but because it was built by a French owned company only 7 years ago and was the second biggest foreign capital investment in Syria. How will Tev-Dem deal with that, seize control of the plant, seek a partnership deal or hand it back. How will that decision be made and much more importantly how and by who? (thanks to Flint for pointing this out)

Some have reacted to these contradictions by refusing to defend the revolution at all and accusing anyone who does as some sort of sell out. This approach is 'safe' if the purpose of your organisation is to seldom take a risk or support movements that turn out to be less than they promised. But such a perspective is a useless one if you want to see a revolutionary transformation of society as that will always involve taking risks and working with real world movements that will always be less perfect than a small ideological group might desire.

What can we learn?

Many of the people on the ground in Rojava would not care much about what some anarchist group in Ireland thinks of them. A moment's curiosity perhaps that some group so far away had produced a commentary. And we are not particularly interested in presenting ourselves as some sort of panel of judges of whether other movements around the world are revolutionary enough. What we are interested in is what lessons can we learn from the difficult experience in Rojava.

1. The first lesson is the unexpected nature of such a profound attempt in such difficult circumstances. Particularly for those of us in the West it's a strong reminder not to fall into

the sort of lazy orientalist thinking that assumes new revolutionary ideas can only emerge from the global cities where the academic left has its strongest roots. As with the Zapatistas, ordinary people in what are viewed by outsiders as isolated backwaters can suddenly leap far ahead not only in theory but also in practise.

2. Solidarity that is limited to a movement identical to your own desires is not real solidarity at all. Real solidarity means recognising and respecting difference, that doesn't require the suspension of critique but it does require an attempt at positive engagement with new ideas and new methods. That is both difficult and risky whereas intellectual denunciation is both easy and safe.
3. The fight for the progressive nation state is over. Here this is visible by the explicit declarations of the PKK that this is no longer their goal but really this is just a particular clear instance (the EZLN being another) of a direction to history imposed perhaps by the rise of globalisation and the end of the USSR but reflecting a deeper reality that developed across the 20th century.
4. Gender liberation is not an add on to the revolutionary process but a central part of creating it in the first place. Movements that reproduce patriarchal divisions of power in their ranks, because they say to oppose the 'natural' influence of outside society would be too difficult or divisive, are movements that are going nowhere in the long term.

For all its contradictions the Rojava revolution is a bright beacon that demands we consider again what our picture of revolution is and how we think such a process might play out. It is a very fragile moment in a very hostile sea, surrounded by the most ruthless enemies. It may not survive, it may degenerate but it demonstrates once more the ability of ordinary men and women to seize the world and try to remake it even in the most difficult of circumstances.

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