Reshaping democracy: Theoretical reflections on the Rojava revolution

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Abstract

This article takes a closer look at the political system established as a result of the Rojava revolution in northern Syria during the Syrian civil war. Rojava’s democratic confederalism has been hailed by many as a model for post-war Syria and the broader Middle East or as the long-awaited alternative for global capitalism. Rojava’s democratic regime is then looked upon as the model to be followed in our quest for ‘true’ democracy. This article puts these claims into perspective by placing Rojava’s democracy into a broader history of the concept by, on the one hand, addressing some of ancient Greek democracy’s specificities and, on the other, taking a closer look at the historical articulation of liberal democracy. It will be shown that democracy’s ultimate defining characteristic is its indeterminacy and that different meanings and ideas can be articulated into the concept depending on the social agents and conditions at work in its production. As a result, one should be cautious presenting Rojava’s democratic confederalism as the solution to all of our problems or as the path to be followed towards a more democratic and egalitarian order. Instead, this article claims that, despite Bookchin’s, Öcalan’s and the PYD’s dismissal of the indeterminacy characteristic of democracy, Rojava’s most important value remains that it shows us that we should not take for granted the ideological terrain set by decades of neoliberalism and the social categories that inform our reality as a result.
Introduction

“In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples’ right to self-determination” (Democratic Union Party, 2014).

This statement was drawn from the preamble of a charter written in the midst of the Syrian civil war. After Assad’s disintegration of effective control over the country, the Kurds took advantage of the vacuum to set up an autonomous region in the north of Syria to promote a new form of government and democracy and to transform society in a radical way. This revolution was called Rojava, after the Kurdish name for the region, and it has been the site of an extraordinary experiment in participatory democracy, communal self-determination, ecological politics and radical feminist social transformation (Clark, 2016; Hosseini, 2016).

Despite the striking novelty these ideas represent in a region that has been the victim of harsh dictatorships and brutish sectarianism, the Rojava revolution has not deserved the attention such distinctive events and developments would usually provoke. Media channels, apart from a few alternative exceptions, have almost solely focused on the armed women of the Women’s Protection Units (Yekineyen Parastina Jin, YPJ), who they are fighting against, viz. the Islamic State (IS), and by what or whom they are being supported in that struggle, viz. airstrikes of the western coalition. Far too little attention has been paid to what they are actually fighting for (Aretaio, 2015; Graeber, 2014). Academically, too, little consideration has gone into the fundamentals of Rojava’s political framework. Hitherto, only Knapp & Jongerden (2014), who focus on how citizenship is experienced in the context of self-government, Akkaya & Jongerden (2012; 2013a; 2013b) and Leezenberg (2016), who discuss the genealogy of Rojava’s democratic confederalism, and Üstündag (2016) and Cemgil (2016), who take Rojava’s peculiar relationship with ‘the state’ as their subject, have published academic articles on Rojava. This article first and foremost aims to contribute to reducing the lack of attention paid to the political dimensions of the struggle in northern Syria.

In doing so, it will take issue with a tendency in the reports on Rojava which envisages its political project not just as a model for post-war Syria and the broader Middle East, but as a beacon of hope from which an alternative world to global capitalism will spring. According to these authors, the Kurds in Syria deserve the most of our solidarity as Rojava ‘asserts itself as the most realistic democratic alternative in the most unexpected of places’ (Saadi, 2014) and might represent the resurgence of a revolutionary politics that will serve as an example for the left around the world (Ali, 2016; Aretaio, 2015; Babacan & Cakir, 2015; Davis, 2017; Eiglad, 2015; Gupta, 2017; Kurban, 2016; Miley & Riha, 2015; Ross, 2015; Van Wilgenburg, 2016). Often this implies that, in Rojava, democracy has returned to its presumed true or essential
meaning. Finding its roots in ancient Hellenic politics, real democracy is then supposed to re-emerge after an interlude of restraint by representative bodies and the nation-state. While at first sight these statements might sound appealing, a more nuanced and cautious approach is called for. Instead, to adequately appreciate the Rojava revolution, this article aims to analyse its political and ideological underpinnings in light of a theoretical approach developed by Laclau & Mouffe (2014) in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* and further elaborated by Chantal Mouffe (2005; 2009; 2013) in later books.

At the heart of the approach is the idea that any social objectivity is constituted through acts of power and acquires meaning only through the relations it holds in its stance with the whole. It consistently rejects the idea that social objectivities or categories have a self-contained, essential or pre-constituted identity and consequently ‘affirms that neither the totality nor the fragments possess any kind of fixed identity, prior to the contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation’ (Mouffe, 2009, p.7). This allows them to emphasize the contingent and hegemonic nature of every social totality and leads them to place conflict and division at the centre of, or as a necessary condition for, our understanding of the political. This is important since, if every social reality is the product of conflict and contestation instead of the outcome of a pre-determined order indeed, we are provided the opportunity to challenge the rationalistic and universalist assumptions characterising Rojava’s coverage and convey a more nuanced picture of the events in northern Syria.

After sketching a short history of the Kurds in Syria, we move on to trace the origins of Rojava’s political philosophy, viz. democratic confederalism, and discuss how it has come to influence the Kurdish struggle for liberation. Secondly, and this will be the main part of the article, Rojava’s reshaping of democracy will be understood in light of a broader history of the concept by, on the one hand, addressing some of ancient Greek democracy’s specificities and, on the other, taking a closer look at the historical articulation of liberal democracy. As a result, this article aims to affirm the view that democracy’s ultimate defining characteristic is its indeterminacy and that it is impossible to pinpoint its significance and meaning without considering the underlying historical conditions and the social forces at work in its production. Finally, we will judge some of Rojava’s central theoretical features and implications on the ground against the basic tenets of Laclau & Mouffe’s framework, to determine to what extent this indeterminacy is acknowledged.

**Three decades of neoliberalism and the Kurds of Syria**

The Rojava revolution didn’t just drop out of the blue, but has to be understood as part of the historical struggle of the Kurds for liberation throughout the Middle East. For decades, the Kurdish peoples have attempted to gain a degree of autonomy in their respective countries on
the one hand and to establish a nation-state, Kurdistan, on the other. Geopolitical forces, divergent objectives of territorially dispersed Kurdish political actors and the specific political history of the hosting nation-states Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey have split the Kurds between these seemingly opposing objectives (Hassanpour, 1994). In the case of Syria, the democratic uprisings and the ensuing civil war have now left the Syrian Kurds a window of opportunity to gain meaningful autonomy and to undo the injustices inflicted on them throughout the years.

After Hafez al-Assad seized power in a coup in 1970, Syria was characterised by stability and continuity. This was achieved by ‘broadening the ‘popular’ base of the regime through corporatist institutions and an Arab nationalist identity, and by the severe suppression of opposition’ (Allsopp, 2015, p.22). In 1973, Arabism was enshrined in the constitution and under the Ba’th Party Syria became a one-party state. The institutions that now defined the Syrian identity, viz. the constitution and the political system, had the effect of oppressing the Kurds in the country. They were denied basic social, cultural and political rights, stemming from the Syrian government’s refusal to grant citizenship, and the state also defined them as a threat to national unity and sovereignty. This enabled it to pursue policies of assimilation and Arabisation which restricted the use of the Kurdish language, changed the demography of the Kurdish area in favour of Arabs and generally led the Kurds to suffer from discrimination and repression up until the uprisings in 2011 (Allsopp, 2015; Lowe, 2006; Montgomery, 2005; Ziadeh, 2009).

The cultural oppression of the Kurds in Syria was accompanied by an economic marginalisation. This was, as Allsopp (2015) argues, reflected in the lack of access to employment, financial services and substantial property rights and in the urban migration patterns that were caused by the region’s underdeveloped agricultural status. Matin (2014) places these findings in a broader context and claims that the social fabric of Kurdish society was strongly transformed due to the rapid processes of capitalist development which find their roots in Hafez al-Assad’s abandonment of the radical social policies that constituted the Ba’th Party’s political outlook after the coup in 1963. This way, Hafez turned Syria into a state-capitalist dictatorship. During the 1980’s, however, the Syrian regime adopted measures of deregulation to open up its centralized economy and especially after Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, neoliberal reforms were accelerated and Syria was effectively transformed into a crony capitalist state (Daher, 2014; Erlich, 2014; Rafizadeh, 2013). According to Cemgil & Hoffman (2016), none of these transformations created the conditions for Kurdish emancipation at the time. Nevertheless, in line with how Achar (2013), Bogaert (2013) and Hanieh (2013) contextualize the Arab Revolts, we should not underestimate the revolutionary potential created by the unwillingness of Bashar al-Assad to accompany his economic liberalism with political reforms.
From Bookchin to Öcalan: Communalism and the Kurds

The Rojava revolution owes much of its political and intellectual inspiration to the American thinker and activist Murray Bookchin. Although a dedicated thinker on the left for much of his life, Bookchin quickly became disillusioned with the economic orthodoxy of Marxism and its legacy of authoritarianism. He claimed that Marxism could not address the complexity of 20th century capitalism and belonged to an era in which the concept of the proletariat as a revolutionary force was still considered self-evident. As a result, Bookchin started to advocate for an alternative anarchist politics and introduced the concept of ecology as a political category for the New Left (Stanchev, 2016). *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982), in which he examines the historical and anthropological roots of hierarchy and domination and their implications for our relationship with nature, should be understood as the ultimate expression of this period. By the end of the 1990’s, however, Bookchin started to disengage from anarchism as well. He could not cope with the philosophies’ highly individualistic outlook and criticised its dodging of questions about mass action, collective power, social institutions and political strategy. What these observations add up to is that Bookchin (2015, p.11) claims that both Marxism and anarchism ‘have a fallacious understanding of politics, which should be conceived as the civic arena and the institutions by which people democratically and directly manage their community affairs’. According to him, the left has repeatedly conflated politics with statecraft. Instead, he says, we have to understand that the two are not only radically different but exist in opposition to each other. While the state is the bureaucratic apparatus in which power is institutionalized and policymaking professionalized, the political is the realm where all free citizens can engage in the handling of their municipal affairs. The left’s failure to go beyond a politics limited by the status quo, i.e. a politics limited by the state and the market, has prevented them from moving towards a project of radical democracy (Bookchin, 2015). Like Laclau and Mouffe (2014), who consistently dismiss what they call an essentialist apriorism, one of the principal steps for Bookchin in his strategy towards radical democracy is to challenge the naturality of institutions like the state, class and party and to abandon the categories that limit us from thinking and formulating genuine alternatives.

The last fifteen years before his death in 2006 Bookchin spent writing a comprehensive four-volume study of revolutionary history, *The Third Revolution* (1996-2005). In these texts, Bookchin tries to account for the failure of revolutionary movements to effect lasting social change. The insights produced would, he hoped, lead to a way out of the deadlock between the Marxist and anarchist traditions, transcend these older ideologies and potentially bring society into opposition to an ever-changing capitalist system. He called this body of thought and action, which would lead us from resistance towards effective social transformation, social ecology (Bookchin, 2015). This coherent vision, though at times factually unsubstantiated (White, 2008), aims to reconstruct human-nature relations and erase hierarchy from society altogether.
Bookchin (2015) argued that Communalism would be the most suitable political framework to engender these societal shifts. Communalism seeks to advance the development of the city or municipality in such a way as to restore popular assemblies as the principal domain for citizens to deal with community affairs, engage in policy-making and exert control over their lives. Direct-democratic popular assemblies have indeed been a central feature throughout revolutionary history, from the neighbourhood sections of the French Revolution and the *quartiers* during the Paris Commune of 1871 to the workers’ soviets of 1917 Russia and the general assemblies of contemporary square occupations (Eiglad, 2016). What Bookchin thus aims to achieve is the creation of a new form of democracy, embedded in the community, by abandoning the idea of a Jacobin and centralized nation-state. Well aware of the potential degradation of this profound decentralisation into a parochial localism, he emphasizes the need to link the municipal assemblies into a confederal structure as a way to perpetuate the interdependence that should exist among communities and regions (Bookchin, 2007; 2015). The ideas outlined above came to have a significant influence on Kurdish politics in Turkey and its transformation throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s.

Bookchin had always sympathized with the plight of the Kurds, but he saw Abdullah Öcalan as yet another Marxist guerrilla leader, ‘a latter-day Stalinist’ (Biehl, 2015, p.31). This was particularly due to the Marxist-Leninist character of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), founded by Öcalan in 1978, and the personality cult which surrounded his figure. The PKK’s objectives where very similar to other national-liberation movements at the time and, although the movement tried to develop its own understanding of socialism, distinguishing it from Soviet-Union and Maosist communism, its conceptual framework was nonetheless largely confined to conventional leftist categories like the state, class and party (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2013a; Guneser, 2016). These notions strongly informed the party’s guerrilla struggle in the mountains against the Turkish state and effectively politicised and mobilised the Kurdish population during the 1980’s. With the end of the Cold War and Öcalan’s imprisonment in 1999, the PKK suffered from an ideological and organisational crisis. Therefore, it had to re-examine its foundations and undertake a transformation from what has been called the process of rebellion towards the process of construction (Djagalov, 2015). This transformation was shaped by a series of texts written by Öcalan who, himself, had undergone profound ideological shifts before and while in prison (Üstündag, 2016). Inspired by Bookchin’s work, he started to reject the classic nationalist line and instead began to develop an idea of politics and democracy beyond the nation and the state. By distributing Öcalan’s texts among Kurdish militants, these ideas were being spread over the region and eventually lead the Kurdish movement in Turkey to embrace a whole new paradigm, referred to as democratic confederalism (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2013a).
The practical implications of the paradigm shift that Kurdish politics in Turkey underwent are reflected by the reorganisation of the PKK and the establishment of the Democratic Society Congress (Demokratik Toplum Kongresi, DTK). While hierarchically structured at its formation, the PKK currently has grown into a diverse complex of affiliated parties, organisations and guerrilla forces which constitute the party from the bottom-up. The same principle applies to the organizational structure of the DTK, which was established in 2007 to act as an umbrella organisation and overarching assembly for the local councils that materialized as a result of the changed political paradigm (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2013a; Egret & Anderson, 2016). Over the years, the Kurds thus have developed an extensive self-ruling body in the south-east of Turkey, a process described by Gambetti (2009) as the appropriation of a Kurdish public space within the Turkish nation-state. Of central concern here is the extent to which the emergence of these local councils and the adoption of radical democratic ideas by the Kurdish population carry the potential to substantially alter the political-administrative structure of the Turkish Republic. The situation described surely fits the way Bookchin envisaged the implementation of his Communalist political program. He hoped that an ever-growing number of municipalities would be radically democratized and assemble into confederal councils so that they would pose a countervailing or dual power against the nation-state. Although he expected such a development to begin very slowly, since existing local institutions would have to be turned into direct-democratic entities, he supposed that the growing tension created by this dual power situation would ultimately render the nation-state obsolete (Bookchin, 2015). In this respect, Bookchin’s understanding of political and social change partly corresponds to Mouffe’s ideas on political transformation as both thinkers envisage a radicalization of democracy through existing institutions, not by abandoning them. While Bookchin aims to engender tangible shifts at the local level in order to render institutions at the national level obsolete, Mouffe conversely intends to preserve them and to transform them at a discursive level, that is to establish a different hegemony.

In his review of Bookchin’s The Next Revolution Pauli (2015) exposes the irony of the significance that the idea of dual power has had in the realisation of the Rojava revolution. As previously mentioned, Bookchin’s communalist program was not conceived of in traditional revolutionary terms, in the sense that it would suddenly alter actual political power structures, but instead ‘was geared towards finding revolutionary potential within existing institutions at the local level and working—in a gradual, piecemeal fashion—to develop that potential as far as possible’ (Pauli, 2015, p.x). Consequently, it is remarkable that Bookchin’s ideas have found their most elaborate manifestation in the context of the Syrian civil war, where the anticipated situation of dual power was dissolved when Kurdish troops ousted Assad’s regime from Kurdish areas. Although, as Akkaya & Jongerden (2013b) note, the Kurds had been setting up parallel structures to the Syrian regime as of 2007, these could only come out into the open after
Assad lost control over the region. The power vacuum left by the regime thus provided the Democratic Union Party (Parti Yekiti Demokratik, PYD) with an opportunity to put Öcalan’s theory of democratic confederalism into practice and apply a form of bottom-up self-management in most sectors of society. People’s councils popped up at the level of city quarters, cities and cantons, social organizations established institutions such as schools and prisons distinct from the state system, and the PYD erected checkpoints to implement a form of protection through civil defense (Allsopp, 2015). Important to note is that there has been an outspoken desire by the people involved to shape these developments along radical democratic lines, meaning that particular attention is being paid to principles like equality and popular sovereignty and that citizens are expected to actively participate in decision-making.

**Democracy’s indeterminacy**

The following two paragraphs will study Rojava’s political framework in the context of both ancient Greek democracy as well as capitalist liberal democracy to illustrate that democracy has no pre-given or essential meaning but becomes articulated and constituted through a range of different agents and realities. Therefore, according to Lefort (1988), what is real or ultimately defining about democracy is its indeterminacy, its indefiniteness. It’s a regime without a constitutive power and is thus referred to as an ‘empty place’ (Devisch & Parker, 2014). There is no such thing as a substantive common good or a universal point of view from which to judge democracy’s specificities. Instead, Mouffe (2005) argues, we have to recognize the multiple forms in which the democratic project can be reformulated. Rojava’s democratic confederalism being one among many.

By anchoring the above-mentioned principles, viz. equality, popular sovereignty and active citizenship, in the Charter of the Social Contract, a declaration developed by the people of Rojava and adopted on 29 January 2014 (Democratic Union Party, 2014), the Rojava revolution embeds itself into a philosophical tradition going back to ancient Greece. Without seeking to draw an all too idealized picture of this society, given its ultimately exclusionary character, it is instructive to point out, as E.W. Wood (2016) has done, some of the peculiarities of ancient Greece’s political economy to better grasp the notion of political and economic equality in pre-capitalist vis-à-vis capitalist societies and to better appreciate how these notions inform Rojava’s political project. As democracy was still mainly understood as government by the people or, as its etymology tells us, ‘rule by the demos’, Athenian democracy had a pronounced participatory and egalitarian character, at least for those who were included in the demos. Despite its ultimately exclusionary character, given the inferior position of women, freed slaves and foreigners and the exploitation of slaves, in practice this meant that citizens’ assemblies were held in which those gathered would decide on laws, public finance, the election of magistrates and military leaders, war and peace, religious questions and everything else they
chose to bring into their authority (Sitrin & Azzellini, 2014; Tridimas, 2011). Since all male adults could fully participate in the political process, peasants were able to modify socio-economic inequality and limit their economic exploitation, which at the time was still connected to the use of ‘extra-economic’ force, viz. the superior political, juridical or military power of the peasant’s state, lord or ruler (Wood, 2016). Wood (2016, p.205) accordingly argues that the active participation of Athens’ male citizens, and the inclusive conception of citizenship this entailed, ‘had the effect of breaking down the age-old opposition between rulers and producers’.

Bookchin (2015), too, envisaged an inclusive and active type of citizenship when he conceived his libertarian municipalist philosophy. Distinguishing between two models of politics, the Hellenic and the Roman, he claimed that in a truly democratic society politics should be something done by the people themselves, instead of something that would be done to them. Strongly influenced by the participatory character of the Hellenic model, he moreover considered character building and moral education as indispensable to the forging of these rational and active citizens. According to Biehl (2015), such dynamics are actually taking place in Rojava, as a network of academies has been established to educate the population on a variety of topics ranging from history and ecology to gender-liberation and self-emancipation. In this respect, Knapp & Jongerden (2014) argue that education in Rojava involves changing the notion of citizenship since, under the regimes in Syria and Turkey, many kinds of self-organization had been criminalized and people were used to being cared for by the state. Therefore, by disseminating new conceptions of citizenship among the population of Rojava, what is attained is a ‘new form of identification around which to organize the forces struggling for a radicalization of democracy’ (Mouffe, 2005, p.60).

The kind of active citizenship practiced in ancient Greece, envisioned by Bookchin in his libertarian municipalist philosophy and currently realized in Rojava, takes as its premise that individuals do not have rights prior to the political community but only in and through it. For that reason, Rossides (2016) notes, ‘ancient Athenians would never have understood liberalism’s belief that individuals have rights against government’ [emphasis added]. Nevertheless, these notions of the natural rights of man and of the sovereign individual have come to inform the kind of citizenship typical of liberal democracies. The doctrine of natural rights holds that all persons by nature possess certain fundamental rights, such as the right to life, security and happiness, and that these rights are not to be infringed upon by the state. Hence the liberal tradition’s emphasis on individual liberty, human rights and the limited state (Bobbio, 2005; Mouffe, 2005). So while in radical democracies as ancient Athens or Rojava freedom can be obtained through the active participation in the polis or the political community, freedom in liberal democracies resides in the passive enjoyment of individual rights and private independence. This passivity finds its ultimate embodiment in the establishment of representative forms of democracy which, as Wood (2016, p.216) claims, is ‘not the exercise
of political power but its *relinquishment*, its *transfer* to others, its *alienation*’ [italics in original]. Therefore, something previously considered as the opposite of democratic government now became its pivotal element. As a consequence, the concept of democracy shifted from having a strong ethical and substantial meaning, through its focus on equality and participation, towards being understood as a procedure or method of politics. This development was characterized by Öcalan as ‘treason to Democracy’ (quoted in Knapp & Jongerden, 2014, p.92) and already illustrates his inclination towards a naturalistic or essentialist conception of society.

While no one would deny the importance of universal suffrage, equality before the law and freedom of assembly, religion and speech, political rights associated with liberal democracies, we need to be aware of the long and hard social struggles that produced them. These days, however, we are told that they are an inherent and fundamental part of democracy, if not its essence (Sitris & Azzellini, 2014). Mouffe (2009, p.3) for example says that ‘the dominant tendency today consists in envisaging democracy in such a way that it is almost exclusively identified with the Rechtsstaat and the defense of human rights, leaving aside the element of popular sovereignty’. This means the question arises of how the meaning of democracy changed from being considered as an end in itself and grounded in egalitarian and participatory principles, towards being perceived as a means of social organization through which citizens can only passively enjoy their political rights. Although their interpretations differ to some extent, Bobbio, Mouffe and Wood believe the answer lies in the liberal re-articulation of democracy by the ‘Founding Fathers’ of the U.S. Bobbio (2005) for example argues that the authors of *The Federalist* preferred representation over direct democracy because of the scale and complexity of American society by the end of the 18th century, an argument often voiced to dismiss direct democratic participation. Mouffe (2009), on the other hand, while not specifically mentioning the American context, understands the advent of liberal democracy not as an inevitable and necessary development but rather as a contingent historical articulation in a specific cultural context, an articulation between two distinct philosophical traditions, viz. the democratic and liberal. In the same vein, MacPherson (1977) suggests that at the time of the American Revolution liberalism was democratized and democracy liberalized. Wood (2016), finally, goes one step further and, using a political economy perspective, intends to identify the conditions that paved the way for this articulation to come about.

In *Democracy against Capitalism* (2016) she aptly demonstrates how capitalism enabled the ‘Founding Fathers’ to redefine democracy and preserve a division between mass and elite in the context of an increasingly politically active population. The American struggle for independence had put into motion a dynamic towards mass democracy and generated a politically committed population. As a result, it was no longer possible to maintain an exclusive body of citizens which, like in feudal societies, would be composed of men of property. Instead,
citizenship was redefined in an inclusive way, although again based on the exclusion of women and slaves, and a range of associated political rights was endorsed. The consequent political equality did, however, not significantly modify socio-economic inequality as it had done in ancient Greece. As mentioned above, in pre-capitalist societies economic exploitation, or the relationship between the labouring mass and an appropriating elite, was sustained by ‘extra-economic’ means such as the political, military or juridical powers of certain privileged people or classes. The expansion of political rights among the entire population would then automatically result in a changed distribution of wealth and power. With the rise of capitalism, however, societal matters like the allocation of labour and resources, the distribution of wealth and power and the organization of production were no longer determined by means of communal deliberation, political direction or religious obligation, but rather through economic compulsions, the mechanisms of commodity exchange and the impersonal dictates of the markets (Decreus, 2013; New Socialist, 1996; Wood, 2016).

What Wood (2016) thus aims to clarify is that, with capitalism, an economic sphere separated from the political sphere came into being, a sphere sealed off from political power and democratic accountability. It is in the context of this separation of the political and the economic, she argues, that liberal democracy and capitalism are linked. Neither another extension of suffrage nor conferring more political rights upon the population would negate the constitutive principles of capitalism (Wood, 2015). What is needed, Wood (1981, p.181) claims, is ‘not merely a quantitative change, …, but a qualitative leap to new forms of democracy with no successful historical precedent’. Crucial for her in this respect is the extension of democracy into the economic realm in order to make the organisation of labour and production subject to popular demands with a view on reducing economic inequality and relations of domination and exploitation. In two of her books, The Return of the Political (2005) and Agonistics (2013), Mouffe similarly advocates for an expansion of democracy into an increasing number of social relations. Although at times she mentions that we have to imagine new forms of democracy, she does not want to place herself outside of the liberal democratic tradition and dispose of the institutions that we obtained as a result. Instead, assuming that liberal democracy is an articulation between liberalism and democracy indeed, she claims that different strategies can be pursued within the liberal democratic tradition so that a new hegemony can be established. This hegemony, she says, should be shaped along radical democratic and egalitarian lines and therefore ‘requires a multiplication of democratic practices’ and ‘the articulation of the greatest possible number of democratic struggles’ (Mouffe, 2005, p.18).
Power to the people: Re-articulating democracy in Rojava

The question that poses itself is how one goes about re-articulating and redirecting the ‘common sense’ into a radical democratic and egalitarian imaginary. Laclau & Mouffe (2014) propose to establish a chain of equivalents in order to construct the necessary links between different struggles against domination. As posited above, Mouffe (2005) speaks of the common articulation of democratic demands found in a variety of movements such as LGBTQ, ecological, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-authoritarianism and anti-capitalism. In what follows we will discuss the central principles of Rojava’s political philosophy to illustrate how the demands of different groups have been articulated into a common project for radical democracy.

First of all, and mentioned earlier in this text, equality occupies a crucial space in Rojava both in terms of gender as in terms of ethnicity. Several articles of the charter proclaim equality before the law of all persons and communities and furthermore aim to guarantee the effective realization of these assertions (Democratic Union Party, 2014). In practice, this has led to the introduction of positive discrimination policies which for example include the implementation of a 40% gender quota in all institutions and administrations and the obligation to have women as co-presidents (Miley & Riha, 2015). Likewise, respect for the ethnic diversity of the region manifests itself in the commitment to have representatives of different ethnic groups or religions as vice-president of all institutions. In that sense, the administrative system of Rojava guarantees the role of women and makes it very difficult for one ethnic or religious group to overshadow the others (Aretaios, 2015).

Secondly, a point related to the first one, the people of Rojava are committed to the notion of radical pluralism and therefore its political system is designed to allow for individuals to organize along the lines of ethnicity, religion, gender and/or class (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, 2015). The multi-ethnicity and multi-religiousness of the region is considered as an advantage or, as Salih Muslim, co-president of the PYD, put it in a recent interview, ‘a source of intellectual wealth’ (Rai, 2017). For Mouffe (2005; 2009; 2013) as well, pluralism is deemed a key constitutive element of democracy. The fundamental question is not, she says, how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion, but instead acknowledge that ‘division cannot be overcome; it can only be institutionalized in different ways, some more egalitarian than others’ (Mouffe, 2013, p.xiv). For that reason, the pluralist approach underpinning Rojava’s democratic experiment primarily differs from the extreme sectarianism currently present in parts of the Middle East (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, 2015). On the other hand, it is said, this approach also opposes the ideology of the nation-state since, especially in the Middle East, it is closely bound to ideas of cultural, linguistic and ethnic homogeneity (Isik, 2016). As Gagnon (2006) explains, the idea of a liberal democratic nation-state presupposes a territorially based political homogeneity, often derived from ethnic, cultural and/or linguistic attributes, that
cannot always account for the social heterogeneity ‘on the ground’. The radical pluralism sustaining Rojava’s political imaginary instead aims to institutionalize difference and the social heterogeneity that can be found in the region. The reshaping or re-articulation of what the political space is and should be, in this case away from a territorial based homogeneity towards a non-territorial affirmation of social difference, is crucial to understanding Rojava’s political philosophy.

Lastly, popular sovereignty, the idea that authority resides with and emanates from the people, is taken very literally in the sense that it is indeed the people themselves who are in charge for decision-making, contrary to an authoritarian leader wielding arbitrary power. In Rojava, the political system is designed to enable every citizen to actively participate in political life. Communities at a number of levels, ranging from a street or district of a larger town up to an entire village, assemble in people’s houses (Mala Gel) and discuss a variety of issues (e.g. energy provision, food distribution, social problems, health issues, …) on which they decide, as much as possible, in a consensual way (Cuvelier, 2015). As a result, Rojava’s population is not treated as a group of passive citizens or, as some would have it, consumers in the political marketplace, but is instead expected, though participation is not obligatory, to actively shape its own society and reflect upon how it wants to organize its political and economic life.

This becomes very apparent when taking a closer look at Rojava’s economy. To use a concept developed by Polanyi (2001) in his seminal work The Great Transformation, socially reproductive functions like the allocation of labour and resources are pulled out of the economic sphere and ‘re-embedded’ into society. This means that, in Rojava, issues related to production, redistribution and trade are put under communal deliberation in the councils and are directed by the needs of the population and the planet instead of market imperatives such as accumulation, speculation and competition. Efforts are thus being made, says Knapp (2015), to create an alternative economy ‘independent of both capitalist and feudal relations of exploitation’. Rojava’s social or people’s economy, as it is called in the region, has four central pillars. First of all, traditional private property has been abolished and replaced with an ‘ownership by use’ principle. People still own their homes and businesses but, to prevent capital accumulation and speculation, are not able to sell them on an open market. The ‘ownership by use’ principle is only applicable to infrastructure and land and does not extend to commodities like furniture, automobiles, machines, etc. Private capital and property are thus not completely forbidden but have to adhere to the broader economic principles of the region. Land and infrastructure that is not owned/used by individuals is, furthermore, called the commons and is held in stewardship by the councils. The commons are looked upon as a way of providing a safety net for those lacking resources and as a way of maximising the economic resources of the community. Consequently, deploying Rojava’s resources on behalf of all the people of the region ensures that no taxes have to be collected. Thirdly, cooperatives have been set up so that
workers control the means of production in their workplace. The cooperatives are coordinated by the various economic committees and are accountable to the local councils to assure a smooth flow of goods, supplies and money (Flood, 2016; Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, 2015). According to Flach, Ayboga & Knapp (2015), 30 per cent of agricultural profits go to the assemblies to be put into the service of public matters and 70 per cent remain with the producing cooperatives. Finally, encompassing the first three pillars, is the notion that economic activities have to be approached in a sustainable way and respect the environment at all times (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, 2015). Despite primarily being an economy at war and having to endure isolation due to a de facto embargo maintained by Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Rojava generally aims to create the material conditions for freedom and a classless society and aims to recover the idea that the economy is at the service of society rather than a separate sphere with a life of its own (Eiglad, 2016; Graeber, 2016). In general, instead of having accumulation and competition as its driving forces, Rojava’s economy reflects, as Harvey (2016) suggests, its political values of equality, participation and anti-sectarianism or radical pluralism.

**Essentialising Rojava’s democracy?**

Following the preceding paragraph, one could argue, with Laclau & Mouffe (2014), that one of the driving forces behind the realization of the revolution in Rojava was the PYD’s capacity to act as a hegemonic actor. They were able to politicize a range of issues, construct a chain of equivalence in which the struggles against racism, sexism, authoritarianism and capitalism could be linked and formulate these demands into a commonly articulated project for radical democracy. For these hegemonic practices to become operative though, the affirmation of the incomplete and open character of the social is required. As we have seen, one of Rojava’s central theoretical features, spawned by its affiliation with the PKK and Öcalan’s and Bookchin’s thought, is indeed the attempt to move beyond conceptions of categories like the nation, class and the state. To start putting the project of democratic confederalism into practice, one could say that the PYD thus endorsed some of the basic tenets of Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical framework. The question remains, however, whether or to what extent Rojava’s political outlook effectively departs from the essentialist, universalist and rationalist conceptions dismissed therein. Can we find any clues of an authentic acknowledgment of the ultimately contingent nature of every social reality and consequently of the indeterminacy of its own democratic order? Or are we left with a self-justifying attitude which presents Rojava as the only rational and best alternative liberating the world from the shackles of hierarchy, domination and exploitation? To answer these questions we will first of all return to where we started, viz. Rojava’s genealogy, and secondly take a look at Rojava’s implications on the ground to assess its approach towards antagonism and contestation.
To Bookchin, as we have seen, the primary locus from which to understand and transform our society is the municipality or the city. It is the fundamental social reality for a free and liberated society and, referring to his libertarian municipalist philosophy, ‘a kind of human destiny’ (Bookchin, 2015, p.94). To support his arguments, Bookchin delves into the history of mankind and human civilization and emphasises the ‘rational dialectic that underlies the accumulation of mere events and that reveals an unfolding of human potentiality for universality, rationality, secularity and freedom’ (p.113). This dialectic, he says, is anchored in the emergence of the rational city, which ‘was of the greatest importance in freeing people from mere ethnic ties of solidarity and in bringing reason and secularity, however rudimentarily, into human affairs’ (p.111). In addition, Bookchin repeatedly mentions Hellenic democratic politics for which ‘the city has been the originating and authentic sphere’ (p.111), underlined by ‘the word’s original Greek meaning’ (p.93) – the polis. These statements clearly show that, for Bookchin, through a progressive unfolding of collective reason we will rediscover the municipality as the privileged and sole unit for social transformation and liberation. While he challenges the naturality of the nation-state and, as Clark (1998) notes, he himself, in the context of the traditional bourgeois city, has expressed the risk to treat the city as an autonomous entity apart from the social conditions that produce it, in its place Bookchin puts an equally naturalised and essentialist conception of the municipality or city. Because of this abstract idealism and rigid dogmatism, Clark (1998) claims, Bookchin’s politics remains in the sphere of morality and, as a consequence, Laclau & Mouffe (2014) would argue, is unable to grasp the centrality of conflict, antagonism and contingency in social life.

Similar conclusions could be drawn from an examination of Öcalan’s philosophy. Like Bookchin, Öcalan wrote multiple civilization narratives to discover humanity’s supposed true predispositions toward freedom. In the Roots of Civilization, Biehl (2015) points out, Öcalan traces the origins of domination and hierarchy back to Sumerian society in ancient Mesopotamia and argues that the Ziggurats – temples, administrative centres and production sites – represent ‘the laboratories for the encoding of human mindsets, the first asylums were the submissive creature was created’ (Öcalan, 2007, p.53) and ‘the womb of state institutions’ (p.6). What is more, ‘the history of civilization amounts to nothing else than the configuration of a Sumerian society grown in extension, branched out and diversified, but retaining the same basic configuration’ (p.98). Öcalan claims that, for the original sin of Sumerian society to be overcome, the solution has to be found in the Kurdish question (Biehl, 2015). The Kurds have thus become democracy’s chosen people and achieving liberation for the Kurds means achieving liberation for all people. Once again, to support these claims, he returns to a Neolithic past, preceding Sumerian society, where ‘many traits and characteristics of Kurdish society’ (Öcalan, 2011, p.22) can be found. Especially the ‘mindset and material basis … bear a resemblance to communities from the Neolithic past’ (p.22). Supposedly, this past was shaped
by egalitarianism and the freedom of women and therefore explains why also women take up a central position in Öcalan’s philosophy. True freedom will originate from the liberation of women and the elimination of patriarchy (Öcalan, 2009; 2013). As De Jong (2016) notes, like the proletariat in classic Marxism, women become the universally oppressed subject whose emancipation will elicit universal liberation. What these findings illustrate is that Öcalan’s thinking is strongly essentialist. Universal emancipation is supposed to arise from both the Kurds and women, if only they were allowed to shake off the yoke of hierarchy and domination imposed upon them during Sumerian times. The central categories that inform the struggle in Rojava thus find their roots in an essentialist reading of the history of the Middle East and are furthermore endowed with the capacity to elicit universal freedom.

In addition, observations by Amnesty International (AI), International Crisis Group (ICG) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) shed some light on how the PYD deals with criticism and contestation in the areas under its control. This is crucial since, as Mouffe has stressed in an interview, ‘in a democracy, no limited social actor can attribute to itself the representation of the totality’ (Decreus & Lievens, 2011, p.2). The recognition of this social division, of the impossibility of absolute consensus, is indispensable for the way Mouffe defines democracy. Although the Charter of the Social Contract specifically states that ‘criticism and self-criticism are considered to be important for members to rid themselves of their personal faults and to commit to principles of freedom, intellect and democracy’ (Democratic Union Party, 2014), the context of the war in Syria seems to pose a challenge indeed. A HRW-report from June 2014, for example, calls into question the inertia displayed in the investigations of the killing or disappearance of nine political rivals and furthermore denounces the arbitrary arrests of political opponents by the PYD-dominated Asayish, Rojava’s police force (Human Rights Watch, 2014). According to Amnesty International (2015), the PYD is using a counter-terrorism law, conceived to facilitate the war against the IS, as a pretext to unlawfully detain and try peaceful critics and civilians. International Crisis Group (2017, p.4) finally states that, while the official rhetoric seeks to advance inclusiveness and pluralism, ‘YPG flags and posters of Öcalan adorn streets and town squares (including in majority-Arab areas) in a manner typical of autocratic, single-party rule elsewhere in the region’.

The PYD emerged as the hegemonic political force after Assad’s ouster from the region but, despite its official mantra of radical pluralism, self-criticism and inclusiveness, it has difficulties to allow for dissenting voices in the region. Both on a theoretical as a practical level we can discern efforts to achieve a definitive reconciliation under the ideology of the PYD. The space provided to express legitimate disagreement is rather narrow and difference and division are dealt with in a way that disregards their significance for what, according to Laclau & Mouffe (2014), should be a vibrant and resilient democracy. If one aims to institutionalise difference and take the idea of radical pluralism to its limit, this also means that you acknowledge the
volatility of your own power and the potential transitoriness of the socio-political order constituted as a result. Something evidently missing from Rojava’s democratic project.

**Conclusion**

In many ways, Rojava has accomplished the unthinkable in a region that has long been deemed unfit for any form of democracy or self-governance. First of all, both in terms of gender as in terms of ethnicity and religion, equality and the affirmation of difference have become the central principles according to which the political space and system are conceived. In addition, the materialization of direct-democratic councils at the local level has resulted in a whole new way of doing politics. The idea of popular sovereignty is taken very literally as it is the people themselves who are in charge of decision-making and decisions work their way up from the local level instead of being enforced top-down. This aspect is emphasised by the way the economic sphere is conceived of and organised. Finally, the PYD has managed to achieve a change in terms of how people perceive and understand the world. Education is a central aspect of the revolution and by linking a variety of struggles into a common project for radical democracy it was shown that by imagining the world in a different way, it can be changed.

Some of these realisations have led several commentators to posit Rojava’s political system as a model for post-war Syria and the broader Middle East or as the long-awaited alternative for global capitalism. Rojava’s democratic regime is then looked upon as the model to be followed in the quest for ‘true’ democracy. As if the pieces of the puzzle have naturally fallen into place so that the picture is clear for everyone to see. While Rojava’s efforts to establish a more democratic and egalitarian order deserve the most of our support, claims that present it as the path to be followed or as the final solution to all of our problems should be dealt with caution. There is nothing inevitable or natural about the unfolding of Rojava’s democratic confederalist system. Still less is it the outcome of a deliberate and rational reflection in the search for workable alternatives to the status quo. To overlook the constellation of forces, internal as well as external, at work in the region is to judge Rojava’s democratic project on the sole basis of a rationalistic good vs. bad scale and to bestow it with the potential to serve as a universal model for global emancipation and social transformation. The revolution in northern Syria erupted in the context of very specific conditions and, as Cemgil & Hoffman (2016) note, ‘these social conditions cannot be expected to exist in the same form elsewhere’. Instead, by placing Rojava’s re-articulation of democracy in a broader history of the concept, it was shown that different meanings and ideas can be articulated into the democratic project. Consequently, this not only implies its contingent and hegemonic nature but also the impossibility of establishing a definitive reconciliation, a final agreement on the exact substance and boundaries of what democracy is and should be.
Despite Bookchin’s, Öcalan’s and the PYD’s questionable recognition of the indeterminacy characteristic of democracy, we should appreciate the Rojava revolution for demonstrating that alternative ways of organising our society are not just feasible but that they are conceivable as well. Rojava’s political system has been built on the idea of thinking beyond the status quo. In many ways, it calls into question the ideological terrain set by decades of neoliberalism and, by organising its political system along democratic confederalist lines, it was able to construct a new reality which does not take for granted social realities like the nation and the state. Apart from Rojava’s realisations on the ground, especially in the context of war, isolation and tensions within Kurdish society, the main reason why it remains a space of hope is because it has managed to present people with new ways of doing politics by challenging the naturality of the social categories that inform reality as we know it.


