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Article (Accepted Version)

Shahvisi, Arianne (2018) Beyond orientalism: exploring the distinctive feminism of democratic confederalism in Rojava. *Geopolitics*. ISSN 1465-0045

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# **Beyond orientalism: exploring the distinctive feminism of democratic confederalism in Rojava**

## **Abstract**

Women have been central to the revolution in Rojava, leading to widespread interest in the Kurdish women's movement across Western contexts. Yet Western mass media representations of women combatants tend to be objectifying and superficial, glossing over the unique variety of feminism, known as "jineology," that is core to the political system of Rojava, which operates according to the ideology of "democratic confederalism." This paper is intended as a corrective to the inadequate representation of the theory and praxis of the women's movement in Rojava. It approaches this task by: (a) critiquing the popular representation of women in Rojava, and (b) providing an overview of the features of the distinctive feminism that are in operation, with a focus on intersectionality, autonomous spaces, and combatting masculinity.

**Keywords:** Rojava, Kurdistan, Syria, women, feminism.

**Word count:** 10336

## **Introduction**

The withdrawal of Syrian state institutions within Western Kurdistan in 2011 allowed the Democratic Union Party—the *Partiya Yekîtiaya Demokrat* (PYD)—to assume control of the region through the efforts of militants within the People's Protection Units— "Yekîneyên Parastina Gel" (YPG), and the Women's Protection Units— "Yekîneyên Parastina Jin" (YPJ). Since then, the autonomous region has been governed according to the ideology of "democratic confederalism," whose theoretical foundations were described by Abdullah Öcalan, the long-imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*) (PKK) in Turkey. Democratic confederalism calls for an autonomous yet anti-statist form of governance, based on participatory, rather than representational, democracy, and with feminism and environmentalism as key guiding values.

Democratic confederalism in Rojava denounces nationalism, instead consisting of the collaboration and interdependence of multiple poly-ethnic, self-organised groups, whose democracy is fulfilled by citizens' direct engagement in "people's assemblies." Within Rojava, the base unit of political organisation is the "commune," which consists of an entire small village, or several streets within a city. At the second level, "neighbourhood people's councils" gather together a collection of communes within the same geographical vicinity. At the third level, "district people's councils"

encompass entire cities or collections of rural neighbourhoods. Finally, at the fourth level, the “People’s Council of West Kurdistan” is made up of representatives of each district people’s council (Knapp et al. 2016). One People’s Council represents each of the four cantons of Rojava: Afrin, Jazira, Kobane, and Shaba, with regular interchange across cantons. Quotas are enforced at all levels to ensure the representation of women in all decision-making, with 40% of governance positions at all levels to be held by democratically-elected women, 40% by democratically-elected men, and the remaining 20% for anyone receiving the largest share of the remaining votes. As such, the political representation of women is maintained between 40% and 60%.

Much is made of the fact that within Rojava, women are represented at all levels of political governance; still more is made of their role as front-line combatants within dedicated military units. Whilst these are notable advances towards gender justice by any standards, the most distinctive feature of Rojava is the underlying values that drive these realities: a unique political ideology that not only accommodates feminist values, but defiantly centres them. It is important to note that while Öcalan’s influential writings have undoubtedly been pivotal in prioritising women’s rights, women have for many decades played a prominent leadership role in the PKK, and have struggled for their place within the movement.<sup>1</sup> As Al-Ali and Tas point out, feminist considerations have “clearly come about through the long-term political struggle of the Kurdish women’s movement that has challenged the male political leadership consistently over the past decades” (2017, 6).

The objective of this article is to undertake a tentative analysis of the feminism that is practiced in Rojava, drawing on journalism and the nascent academic literature. Given the region’s relatively recent establishment, the pace at which on-the-ground realities shift, and the context of war, this study consists of a philosophical analysis which draws on the academic literature and journalism relating to Rojava, rather than fieldwork. While it is widely assumed that the political transformation is in some sense feminist, there is a paucity of analysis as to the particular features of the feminism that is enacted in Rojava. Instead, there is a glut of mass media coverage which focusses on women’s military action and avoids engagement with the underlying ideology. My paper therefore has two aims: to show that women’s role in Rojava is often simplified or misrepresented in Western media representations, and to address these lacunae by describing the feminism enacted in Rojava, particularly in its contrast to dominant forms of Western feminism.

This paper will proceed as follows. In the next section, I describe the way in which Western media have typically represented women in Rojava, and argue that the politics of the movement have been overlooked, leaving the most unique and edifying features of the revolution under-explored. I take up this corrective in the subsequent section, and analyse the way in which elements of feminist theory play out in Rojava, focussing on intersectionality, autonomous spaces, and combatting masculinity.

Whilst at times, I will speak of Kurdish women as a whole, and will use examples from the four states (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey) across which Kurdistan is divided in order to make aspects of transnational Kurdish culture and experience vivid, this

article relates only to West Kurdistan (Rojava). I make almost no reference to Kurdistan of Iran (Rojhilat), where resistance is suppressed to the point of invisibility, and little reference to the socially traditional and economically neoliberal Kurdish Region in Iraq (Bashur), whose ideology differs radically from Rojava. There are close and important ideological parallels between Rojava and Kurdistan of Turkey (Bakur),<sup>3</sup> but the extent of state repression in the latter renders the contemporary practical realities quite distinct.

### **Western Kurdistan in the Western imagination**

Rehearsing Western perspectives on Rojava might seem an unusual and problematic point of departure, but the purpose of this paper is to reconcile representations and realities of feminism in Rojava, and given the hegemony of Western media,<sup>4</sup> it is likely that prevailing representations originate there. In this section I describe the nature and motivations for the depoliticised representation of the women's movement in Rojava, in order to prepare the ground for the *re-politicising* which is undertaken in the remainder of the paper.

Media attention grants increased visibility to Kurdish women in the public domain, producing the opportunity for solidarity from external parties, and for greater awareness of injustices committed against Kurds in general. Unsurprisingly, Western coverage of the women of Rojava follows Orientalising narratives.<sup>5</sup> In the Western public imaginary, West Asian<sup>6</sup> men are readily characterised as violent, while West Asian women are stereotyped as meek, submissive, and downtrodden (Khalid 2011; Abu-Loghod 2001; Yegenoglu 1998). These representations have facilitated different pragmatic ends at different historical moments, most notably colonialism and military intervention (Nayak 2006; Tickner 2001). In Rojava, these stereotypes infect coverage of women's role in combat, with some notable variations on a theme. For example, the tone of astonishment in newspaper articles when reporting on women soldiers in Rojava derives not merely from the difficulty in accepting the idea of women as soldiers, or soldiers as women, it also reflects astonishment at West Asian women acting autonomously i.e. brown women saving *themselves* from brown men, thereby flouting Spivak's (1994) famous dictum, and disrupting the stereotype.

Despite making up more than a third of combatants within Rojava, women militias *are* generally surprising regardless of the context, and there needn't be anything condescending in pointing that out. What is problematic is the way in which the interest in women soldiers belligerently centres their identities as *women*, in the most superficial and essentialist sense of the category, rather than addressing the more important questions relating to the details of their military incursions or the motivations for their action: elements which would acknowledge the agency underwriting the decision to risk one's life. This is a familiar trope for women operating outside of gender stereotypes: that they are *women* doing x is frequently elevated above the details of x.<sup>7</sup> By analogy, consider that women politicians, writers, and sportspeople are frequently interviewed about stereotypical aspects of being women, rather than the work for which they are famed, or are described in the media in ways that focus primarily on their appearance, regardless of its relevance to that work.

Given the above, it was perhaps unsurprising that in 2014, Kurdish women's visibility in the public sphere had been commodified into something suitably feminine: multinational fashion retailer H&M marketed a jumpsuit which mimicked the YPJ uniform (Ismail 2014). Further, objectification seems to be too great a temptation for many journalists, who brazenly comment on the physical appearance of women fighters (Gol 2016), bringing their representation under the Orientalizing "male gaze" (Mulvey 1989) by portraying them as exotic novelties for the visual consumption of a Western audience,<sup>8</sup> who are supposed to consume the article as a curious example of the exotic behaving exotically. Reports are invariably accompanied by images of women in military regalia, as though to pre-empt the reader's incredulity.

Examples of the objectification of Kurdish women soldiers in mass media abound, and I describe just a few examples here. The women of Rojava are referred to as "Öcalan's angels" in the subtitle of one article (Tavakolian 2016), referring to the US television show, *Charlie's angels*, in which a man—Charlie—remotely directs the crime-fighting efforts of his attractive women employees: an obviously trivialising comparison. Elsewhere, a Kurdish soldier is described as a "petite woman wearing a black pantsuit, white sweater and no makeup" and another as an "attractive 21-year-old dressed in fatigues" (Rubin 2016). In a UK newspaper, an entire report focusses on Kurdish women soldiers wearing lipstick on the frontline (Webb 2016), while a piece within another UK newspaper with the second-largest circulation claims that Kurdish soldiers "refuse to go without makeup while gunning down ISIS fighters" (Brown 2016). One article opens with the baffling detail that "Beritan, 30, likes to wear her hair in a bun with blue pins to hold her tight black curls. Lilav, 19, prefers an elaborate braid that starts from the top of her head. The much older Berfin opts for a softer, lower one" (Argentieri 2015). The author goes on to claim that "To further demonstrate their femininity, many YPJ soldiers tie colorful scarves around their necks or waists. Each of them has their own style of dressing. Beyond paying attention to their looks, they take their fight very seriously" (Argentieri 2015).<sup>9</sup> Consider the wording of that final sentence, which positions Kurdish women's interest in their appearance as *prior* to their interest in their struggle. While this kind of objectification is common in the media, as described above, it is particularly illuminative in relation to women fighters. It seems to respond to an unspoken challenge: surely these women soldiers are not "real" women? The authors seem eager to reassure us that while a major gender stereotype has been breached, in every other sense these women are reassuringly gender-stereotypical. Specifically, they are characterised as trivial and superficial in ways that are consistent with more general portrayals of women in the public eye.

Objectification is in itself morally troubling, but in the case of women of the YPJ, this objectification leads to further moral issues by threatening to portray women fighters as fungible and one-dimensional; as indistinguishable from one another and defined only through the spectacle of being women soldiers. This detracts from the real vulnerabilities of being combatants in a brutal, long-term conflict; fighting also means being kidnapped, assaulted, injured, and killed. In the same way that Black women have long been portrayed through the harmful "Strong Black Woman"

stereotype, which constructs invulnerability and facilitates dehumanisation (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009), so too might these media representations cast Kurdish women as “superwomen,” whose bravery is one facet of their mystifying Otherness or lack of sensibility, and to whom support and protection need not be extended. Further, combat is not the only threat to the safety and wellbeing of the women of Rojava—they fight against the backdrop of a society with robust and limiting peacetime patriarchal norms. Prior to the establishment of the new governance structures in Rojava, polygamy, forced marriage, child marriage, honour killings, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination were common, and were resistant to legislation as these matters were generally managed through religious courts (Gupta, 2016a). I return to this topic in the next section.

The readiness with which Kurdish women have been portrayed as sexualised poster-girls of a global anti-Daesh sentiment seems to have been facilitated by various properties which serve to reduce the threat perceived by Western powers. These are: gender, secularity, phenotype, statelessness, and poverty. As women, combatants of the YPJ are regarded to be non-threatening—their violence (despite its proven fatality) is not represented as intimidating or inevitable. Against the fetishising backdrop described above, Kurdish women’s violent military tactics are even given a baffling free pass—they move under the radar of moral acceptability without comment. Given Western perspectives on non-state violence in other contexts, it is surprising indeed that Western media has steered clear of presenting YPJ soldiers as terrorists, or lamenting their lethal tactics, which have included suicide attacks<sup>10</sup> and the inclusion of under-age soldiers.<sup>11</sup> Second, the YPJ is a secular organisation. To the extent that Islam is viewed as a grave threat to Western security, secularity moves Kurdish violence away from classic “terrorism” as seen through a Western lens.<sup>12</sup> Third, Kurdish people are often pale-skinned and light-eyed in relation to typical regional phenotypes, a fact which journalists have been keen to note. Consider that the most famed Kurdish soldier, machine-gunner Asia Ramazan Antar, who was killed by Daesh in 2016, was repeatedly and effusively compared to white American actor Angelina Jolie (Gol 2016), while an image of a blonde fighter named Rehana, dubbed the “Angel of Kobane” was also widely shared across mainstream media (Rakusen et al. 2014). As such, there may be a tendency, rooted in racist assumptions, to regard Kurds as bearing significant similarities to Europeans, mitigating their status as Other.<sup>13</sup> Next, Kurds have throughout their history lacked a state of their own, and cannot pose the threat which may stem from the powers associated with statehood. Finally, Kurdish populations are burdened with poverty, which, combined with restrictions on basic rights across the four states, limits their political power (Saaïd 2016; Khoshnaw 2013; Tejel 2008; Gorvett 2008). Kurds have therefore been perceived in the West as a vulnerable, disempowered, wretched group whose threat to Western cultures and security is negligible.

These threat-reducing factors have permitted the mass media to report on the women’s struggle within Rojava in ways that are largely affirmative of their endeavour (Leezenberg 2016, pp. 681-682), bucking the trend of vilifying West Asian peoples and armed liberation movements more generally. Indeed, this may be engineered, at least in part, by Kurds themselves. Begikhani *et al.* (2018) reflect that

women of the YPJ may deliberately “mobilise the imaginary of heroic women for internal and external propaganda.” It certainly seems to be the easiest way for Rojava to attract the attention of the world at large. One unspoken condition of this representation has been that the mass media has generally avoided explicating the political ideology which underwrites women’s participation in the emerging political and military apparatus of Rojava. Since democratic confederalism has close genealogical and ideological associations with Marxism, exposition of the political details would not be likely to popularise the Kurdish cause in European or North American contexts, a matter which is complicated by the fact that the US has provided funding to the YPG and YPJ (Hasan 2018).

Yet there is also a gendered dimension. Women are seldom viewed as full political actors, therefore their cause is more easily depoliticised: reduced to merely repelling Daesh, fleeing the clutches of barbaric Kurdish men, or devotedly assisting those same men in war.<sup>14</sup> More often than not, no rationale is posited, or any political nuance loses out to discourses about resisting the horrors of Islamism, and assumes the tone of a “civilizational narrative [...] that divides the world into good (Kurds) versus evil (Islamists)” (Küçük and Özelçuk 2016, p. 185). Frustratingly, the portrayal of women in Rojava rarely pays tribute to the decades-long history of women combatants and political leaders within various Kurdish liberation fronts.<sup>15</sup>

In this issue, Şimşek and Jongerden (2018, 2-3) describe the conditionality of Western reverence for Kurdish women militants. Specifically, positive coverage is conditional on the (false) representation of Kurdish women as being similar to Westerners in significant ways, and fighting for a way of life that is closely allied with Western liberalism. The known commonality—opposition to Daesh—is extrapolated to more significant ideological overlap, which is both inaccurate and instrumentalising.

Of particular concern in this context is the way in which depoliticisation disguises the *feminist* credentials of the movement, and misses an opportunity to witness an attempt at a different set of social relations. Further, if feminism is considered, the assumption that Kurdish women reflect Western values might also lead to the erroneous conclusion that Rojavan feminism reflects dominant forms in the West, i.e. neoliberal feminism. In what follows, I hope to atone for these lacunae in Western media discourses on the women’s movement in Rojava by drawing out some of its most notable instantiations of feminist theory and praxis.

### **Feminism in Rojava**

Behind the scenes of the much-discussed women on the frontline, and underwriting their actions, a bespoke feminist epistemology is in operation in Rojava, known as “jineology”: the science, or study, of women (*jin*). Jineology has been under development since 2011 (Kaya 2014), intending to “fill the gaps that the current social sciences are incapable of doing” (Nurhak 2017) and to resocialise women, providing a set of formalised structures for feminist consciousness-raising. Key to jineology is the idea that gender is never *just* gender, but is rather embedded within a nexus of other oppressive social relations.

Al-Ali and Tas (2018b) have criticised jineology for its assumption of exceptionalism and its failure to engage with the work of other feminist theorists and activists. They suggest that jineology instead seems to “ethnicise the political experiences and struggles of Kurdish women” (2018b, 467), treating their challenges and responses as singular. In their work in Iraq, they found that Kurdish women activists tended to “equate feminism with white western liberal feminism, as opposed to its Marxist, postcolonial or transnational feminist strands” (2018b, 467). While this may seem like a frustrating simplification or distortion, the gloss is justifiable either by ignorance or design: indeed, not all feminism is neoliberal feminism, but the forms that are most prominent within Western contexts undoubtedly *are*, and it is these that are most likely to determine the operative definition and to be exported widely. Further, it is certainly understandable in the case of Kurdish women, who *qua* their Kurdish identities, have been subject to ethnicising oppression, to centre ethnic considerations in developing their feminism.

It is precisely this uniqueness that this section aims to draw out. The effect of media representations of women in Rojava is to define the women’s struggle as a war against Daesh, a simplification that meshes with a rudimentary description of Daesh as anti-feminist. Yet the women of Rojava do not merely seek to deter the patriarchal extremists they encounter on the frontlines. Their struggle is a positive one, which seeks to radically restructure their peacetime society, and to lay the foundations for communities that are robustly free from oppression and inequality.

The form of feminism which has become part of the establishment within Rojava—as described by jineology—is substantively different to the “neoliberal” feminism that has most successfully infiltrated political, economic, and cultural institutions within Western contexts (Rottenberg 2014; Budgeon 2015; Prügl 2015). Neoliberal feminism focusses on the effects of gender inequality on individuals, and introduces measures designed to increase the chance of an individual woman accessing to the social power held by some men. By contrast, jineology “regards itself as both a continuation of the feminist struggle and as an alternative to a branch of feminism which has not broken with capitalism” (Kongreya Star 2016).

*Pace* Al-Ali and Tas’s work in Iraq (2018b), the Kurdish women’s movement in Rojava is rich in its interaction with broader feminist traditions and its implementation of those traditions as praxis. The chief explanation for this convergence is straightforward: Kurdish feminists are closely engaging with extant feminist work (Leezenberg 2016, p.682) and implementing it as they develop jineology, which relates specifically to the experience of Kurdish women. As Graeber has noted:

It never occurs to [those in the West] that people in Kurdistan might be reading Judith Butler too. [...] It just doesn’t seem to occur to them they might be taking these things way further than “Western standards” ever have; that they might genuinely believe in the principles that Western states only profess (Graeber and Ögünç 2014).

Al-Ali and Tas themselves acknowledge that Öcalan cites a range of influences, including “Emma Goldman, Immanuel Wallerstein, V. Gordon Childe, Fernand



Braudel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, the Frankfurt School and the Zapatistas” (Al-Ali and Tas 2018a 13), so that those building on his work are inevitably, if indirectly, absorbing the teachings of other thinkers. This serves as an explanation for the convergence of aspects of democratic confederalism with other feminisms elsewhere, which have their own roots in these texts and others. Further, democratic confederalism shares its conceptual genealogy with many elements of feminist theory which are descended from, or related to, Marxism. There is perhaps also an element of inevitable organic convergence on feminist themes when one attempts to enact a heterogeneous participatory democracy seeking egalitarianism along multiple identities.

The ideology of Rojava centres intersectionality, places value on autonomous spaces, and confronts the challenges posed by masculinity. As such, it is markedly different to the forms of feminism which prevail in mainstream political, economic, and cultural institutions in the West, which are generally focussed on atomistic individual identities. Each of the subsequent three subsections briefly rehearses the way in which praxis in Rojava fulfils or interacts with these elements of feminist theory. This analysis is not intended to be exhaustive, not least because feminist praxis within Rojava is under constant development, and there are currently epistemic challenges due to the geopolitical context. Rather, it aims to be indicative of the important nuances that have been glossed in popular representations.

### ***Intersectionality***

“Intersectionality” was coined by critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to formalise the intersecting effects of racism and sexism experienced by women of colour, which can be obscured by a myopic focus on sexism *or* racism as independent axes of oppression. Conceptually, the notion had long been in use amongst women of colour.<sup>16</sup> Crenshaw noted that intersectionality, understood as the recognition of overlapping marginal identities, also demands that one apprehend the non-predictability of those permutations. One cannot infer the intersection of two identities from their singular incarnations, no matter how sophisticated the calculations; rather, these intersections tend to be generative of unique experiences of their own. When exploring the experiences of those situated at the intersections, one must therefore rely on first-hand experiences rather than suppositions about the outcomes of particular combinations.

Intersectionality is an urgent consideration in Rojava, where manifold marginal identities superimpose in ways that mirror the complex, fragmented history of the region. Kurdish feminists have acknowledged parallels between their struggle and that of Black women in the US, typified by their exclusion, and the exclusion of their concerns, from mainstream feminist movements (Al-Rebholz 2013; Özcan 2011). Both are marginalised groups within states which enact forms of repression best described as “internal colonialism” (c.f. Wolpe 1975). As such, given the substantial contribution that Black feminists have made to feminist theory in the Western canon, one should not be surprised to find that aspects of this theory are apposite in the Kurdish case.

There are various ways in which intersectionality plays out in Rojava, where women in particular are suspended in a complex web of oppressions. Democratic confederalism is premised on the value and expertise of each positionality. The ideology has been described as an attempt at “Mesopotamian multiculturalism” (Leezenberg 2016, p.674) —an apt descriptor for Rojava, which strives towards multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious governance. Direct democracy is enacted via citizen’s assemblies, and this enables the expression of individual positionalities in political governance. Quotas, which necessarily enshrine the value of diverse positionalities, distribute leadership roles along lines of gender and ethnicity in recognition of the differential interests of these identity groups. Posts are rotated regularly to avoid the concentration of power and the neglect of particular considerations.

I will briefly consider four motifs: ethnicity, gender, nationality, and class. These intersecting axes of oppression delimit the social landscape of Rojava, and have accordingly been earmarked for specific interventions as democratic confederalism, in its non-centralised decision-making, creates space for the recognition of multiple identities. I also consider sexuality, as a way of demonstrating a serious failure of intersectionality in Rojava.

*i. Ethnicity*

Kurds have long been the victims of ethnocentrism in each of the nations across which Kurdistan is divided. Saraçoğlu (2010) describes stereotypes of Kurds in Izmir, Turkey, as “ignorant and cultureless,” “benefit scroungers,” and “invaders.” Sezgin and Wall (2005) explore the role of the Turkish media in perpetuating racist stereotypes of this kind, and conclude that Kurds in the media are “mostly associated with terrorism [...] and are portrayed as divisive and as putting forth unreasonable demands. [...] The framework of the coverage is very nationalistic and regards Kurds as enemy others, belittling and discrediting their existence and cultural values” (p. 795). Other forms of ethnocentrism across the four regions include the suppression of Kurdish languages and culture, discrimination in employment, and considerable state violence, including genocide (Mojab 2003) and the destruction of entire Kurdish settlements (Ergil 2000). At various points in the decades prior to the establishment of democratic confederalism in Rojava, many Kurds had their citizenship revoked, the Kurdish language was widely suppressed, references to Kurds were removed from educational materials, and the registration of Kurdish names was refused by state authorities (Tejel 2008).

Around a million (Ammann 2005, p. 1012) Kurds make up the European diaspora, where racism is arguably just as endemic, if less specific. Kurds have lately experienced the sharp end of the rise of racist populism within Europe, aimed largely at those of West Asian appearance. One of the most high-profile cases of racial violence in post-Brexit Britain involved the near-fatal beating of seventeen-year-old Reker Ahmed (Pai 2017), a Kurdish asylum-seeker from Iran, at the hands of a group of thirty British youths. Kurdish infant Alan Kurdi’s inanimate face in the sand of a Bodrum beach, which caused a momentary outpouring of European compassion towards child refugees, was also telling. First, it suggested that whiteness is a

condition for European sympathy—two children have drowned in the Mediterranean every day since Alan’s death in 2015 (UNHCR; UNICEF; IOM 2016), yet the image of his pale lifeless body was so redolent of a European child that it has been unique in the response it has generated (El-Enany 2016). Second, it served as a reminder that Kurds are major casualties of the refugee crisis. Just as Kurdish identity has been forged by the borders drawn between the Zagros and the Taurus, so too do borders elsewhere dictate the fate of Kurdish bodies. Border imperialism across Europe proscribes sanctuary for Kurds fleeing conflict or persecution.

Kurds, then, face racism in their ancestral lands and in the diaspora. In Rojava, where they are the majority ethnic group, ethnicity is a prominent concern. Despite Kurdish ethnicity having underwritten aspects of the traditional nationalism of the Kurdish struggle, contending with ethnocentrism for so long has imparted a vital lesson. The Constitution of Rojava makes an explicit commitment to ensuring the equality of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, with quotas to ensure representation of each ethnic and religious group (Cemgil 2016, p.425), a secular Constitution which enshrines freedom of religion, and a commitment to multi-lingual institutions.

It is interesting to note that while racist state persecution across the four regions has tended to ethnicise Kurds’ political identities, in Rojava it seems that the freedom from state violence may have begun to liberate Kurds from that identity, and made space for the commitment to ensure that other groups are not similarly marginalised.

## *ii. Gender*

Kurdish culture remains highly patriarchal, with honour killings still a widespread practice (e.g. Hague et al. 2013). In the three decades up to 2005, as many as 181 women were killed by their relatives in Urfa, a Turkish city with a substantial Kurdish population (Belge 2008). Honour killings benefit from an exemption from or reduction of penalty in the Syrian penal code (Danish Refugee Council 2007). Forced marriage, polygamy (Al-Ali and Pratt 2011a), and domestic violence are also common, and in some areas, female genital mutilation is practiced (Geraci and Mulders 2016; Yasin et al. 2013).

When interviewed by Al-Ali and Tas (2017, 7) shortly before her assassination in Paris, PKK co-founder Sakine Cansız described the dual oppression of ethnicity and patriarchy:

That is why I went to the mountains to fight against the state. At the same time as I am fighting for Kurdish rights, our fight is against the patriarchal structure of the state. [...] [P]eace should include the rights of different ethnic groups like Kurds, and also the rights of women. Until both of these are achieved, it is not possible to claim that we have peace. And without these, I will continue to fight, whether the state is Turkish or Kurdish.

Whilst the motivation for men fighting within the PKK relates almost exclusively to the desire to seek justice for Kurds in the face of genocide, incarceration, and cultural cleansing, women’s reasons also include the desire to escape the banalities and dangers of patriarchal society (Pope 2013, 130; Tejel 2008, note 34).

In addition to Kurdish patriarchal culture, Kurdish women also contend with state patriarchies, including Islamic rule in Iran, conservative Islamism in Turkey,<sup>17</sup> and feudal patriarchy in Iraq, not to mention the threat posed by the radical patriarchies of Islamist groups within the region. Further, as described in the previous section, Kurdish women are also subject to Western patriarchy, one major effect of which is to obfuscate a productive understanding of their struggle, limiting opportunities for solidarity and community-building.

Challenging patriarchy in the political and personal realms is a priority in Rojava, where democratic confederalism identifies patriarchy as the most fundamental form of subjugation, and its abolition a *sine qua non* in obtaining true democracy (Öcalan, 2013a, p.11). In accordance with this aim, the social contract of Rojava forbids child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, honour killings, and dowry payments, legislates in favour of women's right to political participation, legalises abortion, and establishes gender equality in the law (Barkhoda 2016; Loo 2016). Women are proportionally represented at all political levels as well as having their own autonomous governance structures and military troops.

A particularly notable legislative change is the equality of women and men in the judicial system. In many interpretations of Islam, a women's testimony is equivalent to only half of a man's. This is a flagrant example of institutionalised testimonial injustice, and within parts of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, (Unicef, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c) it is still common for this sexist testimonial weighting to be enacted in courts. In Rojava, the Constitution demands that men and women's testimonies be treated equally (Radpey 2015, p.839). In the canton of Jazira more resolute advances have been made, with the establishment of "women's houses" (*malê jin*) under whose auspices gender-specific issues (e.g. sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, child marriage, and polygamy) are tackled by women (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016, p. 190), who are deemed to hold epistemic privilege on these issues owing to their greater stake in them.

## ii. *Nationality*

The idea of nationhood has long preoccupied Kurdish identity, an inevitability for a people who find themselves "in the very position of a border that the nation-states of the region violently mark in order to unify their identities" (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016, p.187). Until recently, nationhood was the foremost objective of activists and politicians across the four regions. Even in Rojava, where the move towards democratic confederalism entails the rejection of the conventional nation state, the struggle for a homeland as haven of safety, belonging and autonomy, remains a recurring theme in a collective conception of the *raison d'être* of Rojava.

Across their lands, Kurds' relationship to their official nationality has been a troubled one, not unlike that of Palestinians (Kumaraswamy 2006, pp.70-71). State violence over many decades and across many borders has rendered Kurdish people colonised in their own land. This violence, both structural and actual, has been largely unchallenged by other states internationally, whose ambivalence has often served the interests of nations forming alliances with regional entities. As such, Öcalan has argued that it is state structures—with their attendant nationalism, sexism, and

religious morality—that have been the chief source of Kurdish suffering. He therefore argues there is no rationale for replicating such oppressive structures (Öcalan 2013b, pp15-18).

The ideological break with these constructs in Rojava offers opportunities for new forms of flourishing for women, multiple ethnicities, and multiple religions, an ambition which has not been sought within the neighbouring Kurdistan Region in Iraq, whose identity is founded on nationalism.

### iii. *Class*

Class has a prominent role in Kurdish identity (Yörük and Özsoy 2013). Largely as a result of long-term state repression and marginalisation, Kurds across the four states are more likely to experience deprivation, with high rates of unemployment, relatively low levels of education, and little social and cultural capital due to widespread racism and cultural genocide (Tejel 2008; Hassanpour et al. 1996). This is despite Kurdistan being mineral-rich, and boasting one of the largest oil reserves in the world.

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq, its booming oil economy notwithstanding, has high levels of poverty and unemployment, with widespread corruption and wealth concentration (Al-Ali and Pratt 2011b; Iddon 2017)). Democratic confederalism in Rojava favours a more proactive approach to social equality through political intervention. Economic redistribution is a core value, and is typified in the reassignment of land to the poorest citizens, while concentration of wealth is circumvented by minimal markets and price caps on tradeable commodities (Yegin 2015). Most importantly, participatory democracy ensures that marginal voices may be heard. As such, and particularly in combination with factors such as gender and ethnicity, the social contract of Rojava promises to minimise the effect of class on social, political, and material flourishing.

### v. *Sexuality*

One axis whose absence is conspicuous in the growing literature on gender in Rojava is sexuality in any of its guises: in relation to the sexual lives of women, in relation to sex and gender fluidity, and in relation to non-normative sexualities (Gupta 2016b). Discourses around sexual and reproductive justice are sophisticated, if still peripheral, across West Asia<sup>18</sup> even in (increasingly) hostile social contexts, yet in Rojava, where gender equality seems to have made such tangible strides, considerations of sexuality are lagging. In this vein, Ghazzawi (2017) describes the discrimination faced by LGBTQ people in Rojava, and suggests that local struggles have been overshadowed by the broader political movement in Rojava, within which they have not been offered a place at the table. Al-Ali and Tas (2018a, 11) describe the enforced celibacy of men and women fighters, which reflects the moral value placed on resisting sexual desire. There appears to be an assumption that gender-egalitarianism requires the rejection of the sexual in all its forms, which may be seen as a concession to “conservative patriarchal gender norms” (Al-Ali and Tas 2018b, 468). On this matter, proponents of jineology appear to have a long road ahead.

Tackling the axes of oppression described in this section—ethnicity, gender, nationality, class, and sexuality—is facilitated by access to appropriate spaces for consciousness-raising and organizing. In the next section, I explore the importance of women-only spaces to feminism in Rojava.

### *Autonomous spaces*

Autonomous spaces, also known as “safe spaces,” have been the subject of much controversy in Western contexts, where they are often misunderstood to be unjustifiably divisive, or tantamount to echo chambers within which insiders can avoid discomfort, shun opposition, and stymie debate (Shahvisi 2018). Of course, their exclusivity is precisely their point, and is easily justified. Autonomous spaces are intentional sites of political conversation and organisation within which marginalised groups who experience epistemic injustice (c.f. Fricker 2007) in the mainstream knowledge economy discuss their marginalisation without the distraction, interrogation, fear, or self-consciousness they may experience in the presence of those positioned outside those identities.

Women-only spaces are now rare in Western contexts, and are generally unpopular where they are proposed or enacted. This is despite women-only educational and political spaces having been common in the 1970s and 1980s (Leathwood 2004). While there was never a clear consensus, separatism was at that time often seen as “fundamental to the survival and sanity of feminists, both as individuals and as a movement. We needed to create ‘safe’ spaces where we could grow and learn and experiment” (Hartsock 1983). There is a curious presumption that liberal societies have moved beyond such necessities and a widespread misunderstanding evident in the contention that they produce new injustices by “excluding” men. Within Rojava, the moral worth of autonomous spaces in the present day appears to be self-evident. At all levels of governance, women-only working committees operate alongside quota-driven co-chaired committees in order to resist the re-enactment of patriarchal norms (c.f. Cemgil and Hoffman 2016). This includes women-only commissions and women-only judicial committees. Unlike other mixed military organisations, where women combatants fight alongside men, in Rojava the YPJ has independent battalions, led by women commanders, and empowered to influence the culture and ethos of the protection units as a whole. It is deemed that “even the presence of men in the same organisation with women may hinder the uncovering of the full potential of women” (Cemgil and Hoffman 2016, 66). This indicates an overt commitment to the merit of autonomous spaces.

Women-only spaces may be seen as a natural extension of the decentralising of governance within Rojava in accordance with democratic confederalism. As well as decentralising *geographically* to constituent communes which cater to geographically-differential needs, the decentralisation extends also *conceptually* to accommodate socially differential needs. Thus, even though quotas for women are in effect at all levels of governance, women-only spaces exist as parallel institutions. This pays due regard to the difficulties posed by expecting a marginalised group to identify, articulate, and address its needs effectively in the presence of those to whom

it has been historically subjugated. There is a recognition that women are best placed to determine the solutions to problems that affect them chiefly or uniquely. In the theoretical literature, Frye (1993) has called for separatism as a necessary condition for women's liberation, on the basis that it disrupts men's expectation of, or entitlement to, access to women. Similarly, Öcalan recognises men's dependence on women—echoing Frye's description of “male parasitism”—and suggests that women's liberation can only be achieved if the “enslaving emotions, needs and desires of husband, father, lover, brother, friend and son can all be removed” (2013a, 52).

It is important to note the provenance of these women-only battalions, which arose from women's difficulties in being taken seriously while fighting alongside men in mixed units in the 1980s (Dirik and Staal 2015). In light of this, one wonders whether these autonomous spaces are likely to be producing or entrenching customs of gender segregation that will ultimately be intransigent to future revision. Gender-segregated spaces are not uncommon within the countries across which Kurdistan is divided, in accordance with cultural norms and/or religious direction or law, or women's attempts to avoid sexual harassment. Accordingly, in Kurdish society, informal gender-segregation is not unusual. This is likely to play some role in producing the acceptability of autonomous spaces within Rojava.

So whilst Western liberal arguments opposing autonomous spaces are usually misguided, the cultural and historical context in Rojava presents an entirely different challenge, which may not go so far as to diminish the undoubtedly vital role that autonomous spaces currently play within Rojava, but must certainly give reason for caution as its young institutions take root. Returning briefly to the remarks on sexuality at the end of the previous subsection, it is not clear to what extent the conservatism that demands celibacy is also responsible for the norm of autonomous spaces.

### ***Combatting masculinity***

It is hard to imagine a polemical feminist text in a Western context having any serious influence on policy, even less so if one of its chapter headings was “Killing the dominant male.” Öcalan's pamphlet “Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution” (Öcalan 2013a) is dedicated to achieving gender equality through the transformation of masculinity and the elimination of norms of male dominance, and has strongly informed considerations of gender in the new political structures within Rojava.

Feminism in Western contexts has been vilified along many dimensions, but perhaps none so damning as the idea that it is “anti-men” or sets out solely or chiefly to rob men of their masculinity. No matter how sensible some version of this objective may be, as a rule feminists have strategically avoided centring masculinity in their interactions with establishment politics, instead focussing on pursuing positive gains for women.

In the aforementioned provocatively-titled chapter, Öcalan describes his views as follows: “it is important to place on the agenda the problem of man, which is far more serious than the issue of woman. It is probably more difficult to analyse the concepts

of domination and power, concepts related to man. It is not woman but man that is unwilling to transform” (2013a, 50). In Rojava, where women have so visibly begun to erode gender stereotypes, it would be easy to declare the bulk of the work done or the course set. Yet for Öcalan, and those whose praxis draws on his writing, masculinity is bound up with all forms of oppression and misuses of power, including class and state, as well as gender, so that undoing or destabilising masculinity is critical to undoing oppression and obtaining social justice.

Unlike neoliberal feminism, Rojavan feminism does not see the solution to women’s oppression as merely the creation of opportunities or the removal of barriers. Rather, the reformation of masculinity is seen as critical to social change. A report of the confederation of women’s organizations describes the way in which men have “lost the freedom of emotional expression, as this is not considered masculine. They have not been taught how to do housework, or how to take care of themselves, of the children, of the elderly or the ill” (Kongreya Star 2016). Accordingly, men undertake training which intends to “rehabilitate” them by disabusing them of gender stereotypical and oppressive attitudes, generally by undertaking an education in history of oppression and the origins of modern inequality (Cartier 2017).

Autonomous spaces, as discussed in the previous subsection, are critical to the task of combatting masculinity, and derive from the same key principle: women will not be free while men hold on to power; spaces will not be liberating while men dominate rather than share them. This principle has been key to the speed and efficacy with which Rojava has managed to overthrow so many deeply-ingrained gender roles.

Media representations of women fighters miss this arguably more radical and far-reaching side of Rojava entirely. As one YPJ combatant said:

When you look at YPJ from the outside you assume that they are only warriors and that is the only change that has happened for women – that they are now allowed to join the military. This is not true, it has changed gender roles in society as a whole, changed the mind-set of women and men. The family structure has really changed, it is not same as before when men decided everything, and men cannot dominate women anymore. Men have changed their behaviour completely, which we are very glad about (quote cited in Ghotbi 2016, 33).

## **Conclusion**

In Rojava, the prevailing ideology may be inferred from both the Constitution and from observed practices. Those structures reject nationhood, and attempt to undermine power dynamics in relation to ethnicity, gender, class, and the environment. I have discussed all but the last in this paper, which deserves separate attention. I will simply say here that it is important to note the commonalities between the environmentalism of Rojava and the features of ecofeminism, a branch of feminism which extends the critique of patriarchy to the natural world (see e.g. Gaard 2011; Biehl 1998).

The ideology that is enacted in Rojava derives from a steadfast commitment to democratic confederalism and jineology. Its features have been glossed in popular



Western representations of Rojava, which is a considerable loss, since they form an important and instructive model of feminism operating in stark contrast to the neoliberal variants common in Western contexts.

Theory has played a key role in Rojava, and will surely demarcate its future if its current moral and political credentials are to be maintained. Without theory, practice can easily become myopic; without practice, theory cannot be tested or refined. While theory provides heuristics and ambitions which direct the process of political transition and keep it to course, as Cemgil and Hoffman (2016) note, “much is determined by the reality on the ground.” Those at the forefront of movements must constantly reflect on the gap between the two.

One example of a clear role for theory in Rojava is the aforementioned lacuna with respect to considerations of sexuality. Without incorporating sexual and reproductive justice into the agenda, women and people of non-normative sexualities will not be adequately served or protected by Rojavan ideology or legislation. Activists in Rojava might reasonably find themselves turning to networks elsewhere in the region, as well as reflecting on the way in which the theoretical foundations of Rojava—specifically, the undermining of patriarchy—seem to commit social justice advocates to ensuring that sexual and reproductive justice sit high on the agenda.

I have not addressed the question of the sustainability of the political structures in Rojava, which have arisen in the vacuum created by the suspension of routine state structures during the Syrian revolution. This naturally leads to the question as to the generalisability of the feminist politics seen in Rojava. If the weakening of the state is a prerequisite in the overhauling of social institutions, it seems that Rojava may for the foreseeable future remain a political novelty, rather than a model or even an ideal.<sup>19</sup>

There is need for caution if the gains made in Rojava are to outlast whatever post-conflict settlements are made in Syria. The early signs look promising; as Bengio (2016) notes, unlike in Egypt and Yemen, where leading women revolutionaries were quickly side-lined by new regimes, in Rojava women endure and thrive at the core of the movement, even six years into the revolution. Even so, while the nascent political institutions within Rojava appear to be robust, and enjoy association with Öcalan’s widely-favoured philosophy, it seems unlikely that the time-honoured patriarchal culture described in the previous section has been substantively reformed over such a short timescale, and much more likely that enthusiasm for a functioning autonomous West Kurdistan at an inimitable moment in history has encouraged people to set aside any collective concept of normalcy or convention in the face of tremendous hope. As Dirik (2014b) notes:

Wartime, uprisings, social unrest often provide women with space to assert themselves and to demand representation in ways that normal, civilian life would not permit. [...] However, once the crisis situation is over, [...] a return to previous antebellum normalcy and conservatism is often deemed necessary to reestablish civil life. This often constitutes the rearticulation of traditional gender roles, which are in turn detrimental to the newly gained status of women.

Perhaps the future of Rojava will therefore hinge on its ability to deliver on the hope it has garnered, but if so, that will depend critically on the extent to which regional and international actors tolerate its existence as a peace-time contemporary.

Finally, when reflecting on the paradigm shift required for the present political situation in Rojava to be possible, it is hard not to be reminded of Judith Butler's reflections on the future of the Palestinian struggle, and the role of theory in determining the outcomes of complex political situations.

[W]hat would it mean if we lived in a world in which no one held out for the possibility of substantial political equality, or for a full cessation of colonial practices - if no one held out for those things because they were impossible? [...] [M]aybe one of the jobs of theory or philosophy is to elevate principles that seem impossible, or that have the status of the impossible, to stand by them and will them, even when it looks highly unlikely that they'll ever be realised. [...] What would happen if we lived in a world where there were no people who did that? It would be an impoverished world (2014).

In Rojava, something close to impossible is being realized, as feminists work to generate a liberatory politics tailored to their local context, while applying pressure within a highly patriarchal society to seize and retain the share of power that buys them the space to learn and enact change. In the midst of this century's longest and bloodiest conflict, a stateless people who have long set their sights on a unique set of political ideals have won the opportunity to put them into practice. Remarkably, given its low priority and tokenism in political systems elsewhere in the world, gender equality is a core value of this movement. Whatever the future of Rojava, we can all learn from its people's dogged commitment to combatting a range of injustices with unflagging optimism in the most unlikely of contexts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Çaha (2011, pp 436-7) describes the way in which calls for attention to women's rights were spurned within the PKK in the 1990s, where they were described as a "luxury," stemming from women "exaggerating" about their situations.

<sup>3</sup> Not to mention a porous, arbitrary border, across which there is the regular flow of "bodies, goods, and commodities but also ideological commitments, memories, moral principles, and political strategies" (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016, p.189).

<sup>4</sup> This article only considers mass media in the English language, and does not consider coverage in other European languages. This reflects the author's language limitations, but ought not to significantly limit the generalisability of claims about Western representations, due to the dominance of English-language media.

<sup>5</sup> As described by Said (1978) and addressed from the perspective of women by e.g. Lewis (1996).

<sup>6</sup> I favour this term over the more common Eurocentric colonial descriptor "Middle East," but the referent is the same.

<sup>7</sup> Consider how little has changed since Samuel Johnson's 1763 sexist quip about women preachers "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all" (Boswell 1873).

<sup>8</sup> Another adverse effect of coverage of YPJ women in Western media is its co-optation into right-wing racist discourses of West Asian women fighting just wars while men constitute the majority of those

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arriving in Europe as refugees. One needs only to glance at the comments section underneath mainstream coverage of Kurdish women militants in the British press to see remarks which imply that these women are burdened with combat while their men (ostensibly through cowardice or avarice) seek asylum in Europe.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, a scarf tied around the waist is not considered to be a sign of femininity in Kurdistan—it is part of the traditional dress for men and women.

<sup>10</sup> Though suicide attacks are repudiated within the Kurdish struggle, they are not unknown. In the battle for Kobane, twenty-year old soldier Arin Mirkan strapped grenades to her chest and detonated them while lying under a Daesh tank (Mogelson 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Soldiers under the age of 18 are in violation of international law, and the YPJ and YPG have committed to demobilising these fighters (Human Rights Watch 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Though consider that in Turkey, where the ostensibly secular state is becoming increasingly Islamised, the Kurdish struggle is portrayed as the archetypal terrorist struggle.

<sup>13</sup> Psychologists (Forgiarini et al. 2011) have shown that similarities in skin colour correlate with felt empathy, and the disposition to be compassionate and cooperative.

<sup>14</sup> Trivialising representations of Kurdish women's activism in this way is exacerbated by a broader failure within the media to acknowledge the role of Western states in oppressing Kurds and assisting regional state powers in repression. The UK and the US have lately been keen to be viewed as allies to the People's Protection Units in Rojava, and have provided weapons and funds to the units, yet both states continue to list the PKK—the closest ally of the YPG/J—as a terrorist organisation. Continuing to classify the PKK as a terrorist organisation licenses state violence in Turkey (c.f. Sirinathsingh 2014). The vilification of the PKK in the international imagination is arguably the greatest barrier to justice for Kurdish people.

<sup>15</sup> Bengio (2016) offers an instructive history of Kurdish women leaders.

<sup>16</sup> One of its earliest articulations dating back to Black women's rights activist and abolitionist Sojourner Truth's speech in 1851, in which she famously demanded of those pursuing rights for white women according to a model of womanhood centred on white women's experiences: "ain't I a woman?"

<sup>17</sup> Perceived as a threat to conservative ideals of femininity, the media in Iran and Turkey target the women of Rojava with abusive and trivialising coverage, focussed largely on portraying them as sexually-deviant (Dirik 2014a).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, a recently-founded Beirut-based journal committed to publishing gender and sexuality research from across the Middle East, South West Asia, and North Africa regions.

<sup>19</sup> Leezenberg (2016) describes the way in which the success of Rojava, particularly in the battle for Kobane, emboldened urban guerrilla PKK-sympathisers in South-Eastern Turkey to mount an armed insurgency, which was mercilessly quashed. He interprets this an example of the difficulty of exporting democratic confederalism outside of the "power vacuum in the Rojava laboratory" (p. 685).

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