

**Rojava's Democratic Confederalism**  
A Radical Ecological Democracy in Practice?

**Annalena Rommel**

University of Kassel

Master of Arts - Global Political Economy and Development

Winter Semester 2018/2019

Seminar: Post-Development and Alternatives to Development

Lecturer: Prof. Aram Ziai

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## 1. Introduction

*'We are determined to shatter the terror corridor east of the Euphrates, no matter how the negotiations with the U.S. to establish a safe zone along the Syrian borders concludes.'*

These were the words of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the president of Turkey, on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2019 at the provincial headquarters meetings of his party (Hürriyet Daily News 2019). The place he calls '*terror corridor*' is in fact the territory of the *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)*, commonly known as *Rojava*, where since 2011 – shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War – people have built up a radical democracy following the model of democratic confederalism. More precisely by talking about '*east of Euphrates*' Erdoğan refers to the Euphrates and Cizîrê regions, which together with the Afrîn region, that is already occupied by Turkish forces since March 2018 (Osborne 2018), make up the AANES. The territory has been under regular attack by military forces of Syria and Turkey and the terrorist group Islamic State (IS). Through the successful defence of Kobanî against the IS in 2014/2015, the people of Rojava gained worldwide attention, their democratic project however has been widely ignored in mass media. Quite the contrary the focus mostly rather lies on the alleged terrorist nature of the Kurdish liberation movement and the attacks carried out by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Rojava is located in the middle of a war zone, whose conflicts involve dozens of actors be it state, military or private ones, which is in parts also apparent from the introductory quote concerning the involvement of Turkey and the United State. Thereby a case study of Rojava touches upon many different topics and has to consider the changing dynamics that arise in all spheres, which is why the following analysis is by no means exhaustive. This essay rather gives a brief overview of the basic structures and principles of Rojava while using the framework of Ashish Kothari, founder of the Kalpavriksh Action Group in India and an avowed Post-Development theorist, who has come up with the alternative vision of a radical ecological democracy (2009). To be able to illustrate the project of Rojava despite its changing dynamics different sources need to be taken into account, which is why this analysis does not only draw on academic sources but also on blogs, news channels and non-academic books. In so doing it will be evaluated if Rojava's democratic confederalism corresponds the model of a radical ecological democracy and if it can further be characterised as an alternative to development within the post-development discourse. Hence, the following chapter first introduces the concept of radical ecological democracy along its principles and four pillars, which will then be applied to the specific case of Rojava. These findings then serve as a basis for the consideration, if Rojava can be classified as an alternative to development.

## 2. Radical Ecological Democracy

This paper analyses the case of Rojava through the lens of radical ecological democracy, a concept introduced by Ashish Kothari, that fundamentally questions the current model of 'development' (2009). Building on the emerging framework of alternative pathways trailblazed by grassroots initiatives, movements for social transformation and struggles of resistance, he conceptualizes a vision, that respects the ecological limits and other species while also seeking social equity and justice. His illustrated alternative vision of a radical ecological democracy is mostly discussed in the context of Indian indigenous communities and their lived alternatives to the development paradigm and liberal democratic systems of the Global North. However, the concept is not restricted to this region, but should serve as a visionary model for communities and peoples all over the world. In the following the basic principles of a radical ecological democracy are presented along with the pillars, which constitute the framework of the concept.

### 2.1. Principles of Radical Ecological Democracy

Kothari identifies two fundamental principles for his alternative vision. The first one, *ecological sustainability*, gives importance to the continuing integrity of ecosystems and the maintenance of biological diversity as the basis of life (Kothari 2009, p.403). Secondly, *human equity* encompasses 'equality of opportunity, full access to decision-making forums for all, equity in the distribution and enjoyment of the benefits of human endeavour [...], and cultural security' (ibid., p.404) while drawing on several basic values, which are required for alternative visions. This set of values comprises diversity and pluralism, dignity of labour, rights with responsibilities, respect to subsistence, simple living and the qualitative pursuit of happiness, cooperation and commons, customs and social norms, non-violence and participation (ibid., pp.404f.; Kothari 2011, pp.200f.). The precept on the website (Radical Ecological Democracy 2019) and the *People's Sustainability Treaty on Radical Ecological Democracy* (Radical Ecological Democracy 2012) however show a different conceptual framework with ten principles (see figure 1). This can be attributed to the idea that these principles are not final and can continuously be adjusted to new circumstances. Central to Kothari's alternative vision is moreover the empowerment of every person to take part in decision-making, which is why he moves away from the governance by states and corporations and instead sees collectives and communities at the centre of governance and the economy (Kothari 2014, p.37). Further, he builds his vision of a radical ecological democracy on political, economic, socio-cultural and ecological pillars, which are illustrated in the following to later use them as an analytical framework for the case of Rojava.

Figure 1: Key Principles of Radical Ecological Democracy

Principle 1: Ecological integrity	Principle 6: Collective commons and solidarity
Principle 2: Deep equity and justice	Principle 7: Rights of nature
Principle 3: Right to meaningful participation	Principle 8: Resilience and adaptability
Principle 4: Responsibility	Principle 9: Subsidiarity and ecoregionalism
Principle 5: Diversity	Principle 10: Interconnectedness

Sources: Radical Ecological Democracy 2012; 2019

## 2.2. The four pillars

The *political pillar* refers to a direct democracy on grassroots level in which key decisions are taken by consensus in village or city assemblies. Elected representatives serve as the connection to larger institutions of governance, which however should not become power centres. This can be achieved through policies such as the right to recall or a rotation of office-holders (Kothari 2014, pp.37f.). According to Kothari, governance should start at the smallest unit to ensure that everyone is able to participate in decision-making and that decisions about local issues can be taken by the concerned people. These structures then emanate into bigger clusters of villages and eventually create the linkage to the existing administrative and political institutions of districts and states (Kothari 2011, pp.208ff.). The role of the state apparatus is then reduced to ensuring the welfare of the poor, guaranteeing fundamental rights and acting as a representative in global relations with other peoples and nations (ibid., pp.213f.). It would further generate financial resources for public services, enforce environmental regulations and ensure personal and collective security (Kothari 2014, p.38).

The *economic pillar* represents the challenging of growth and globalisation in our contemporary decision-making. Kothari calls for a radical democratisation of the workplace, which entails worker-led production processes without hierarchical relations and direct producer-consumer linkages. Localisation needs to be fostered opposed to globalisation, what is linked to a decentralized production and localised consumption. This demand is based on the idea that those living in greatest proximity to the resource would receive the greatest stake and often know best how to manage it, although this is not always the case, since many communities have lost such knowledge due to dominant oppressive policies (Kothari 2013, p.21). Kothari's vision goes however even further, since he demands a new theoretical framework for economic thinking that allows for new indicators and measures (Kothari 2014, p.40).

The *socio-cultural pillar* problematises the erosion of values and the creation of hierarchies through the juxtaposition of modern and traditional attitudes, which leads to the loss of cultural diversity. It also refers to the relationship between the individual and society, which according to Kothari should be balanced and mutually reinforcing (ibid., p.40f.).

Finally, the *ecological pillar* highlights the importance of a change in the society-nature relationship towards a higher recognition of the ecological limits and a restoration of degraded landscapes. Without conservation of our ecosystems to secure the basic environmental conditions for life, the other three pillars are obsolete, which is why, as mentioned earlier, ecological sustainability is also one of the two fulcrums of radical ecological democracy (ibid., p.41).

### **3. The case of Rojava**

Rojava is the Kurdish word for 'West' and thus refers to the western, Syrian part of Kurdistan, the area of settlement of the Kurdish people, which stretches over parts of Syria, Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), Iraq (Southern Kurdistan) and Iran (Eastern Kurdistan). Kurds are the world's largest stateless people and have been facing oppression as minorities in the countries they live in. The Rojava movement originates from the Kurdish liberation movement, whose core features are women's liberation, ecology and radical democracy complemented by a rejection of a centralist regime and the nation-state and the equality of all population groups (Constituent Assembly of the DFNS 2016). The following chapters will give a brief overview over the history of Rojava and then elaborate on different features of the democratic project of Rojava according to the four pillars of Kothari.

#### **3.1. Brief history of Rojava**

In March 2011 the people of Syria took to the streets to protest against the Assad regime, what was followed by violent state repressions and resulted into the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Thereupon, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish party in Syria and the sister party of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, took the decision to implement the model of democratic confederalism, which traces back to Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK. He describes his concept as being '*open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars. In the frame of this kind of self-administration an alternative economy will become necessary*' (Öcalan 2011, p.21).

In July 2012 the armies of Rojava, the People's Protection Units (YPG), took over control of cities in the Northern part of Syria starting with Kobanî (Sabio 2015, p.411). Due to the prior withdrawal of military and government officials of the Syrian state, no major clashes occurred during the seizure of the cities. Subsequently the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), a coalition of Kurdish parties, non-Kurdish groups and organisations, created an interim administration for the Rojava region. In January 2014 the three Rojavan cantons Afrîn, Kobanî and Cizîrê were declared autonomous from the Syrian government and the Charter of the Social Contract was adopted (The Executive Council Bodies 2014). Almost two years later, in December 2015 the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was established as the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which were founded in October 2015 and later declared as the official defence force of the autonomous region. Both SDC and SDF are made up of both Kurdish factions and other ethnic groups. In March 2016 another declaration followed, when the Constituent Assembly proclaimed the Rojava-Northern Syria Democratic Federal System in its final declaration (Constituent Assembly 2016), which was accompanied some months later by the renewed social contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Constituent Assembly of the DFNS 2016). Throughout the last years what once started as the revolutionary Rojava movement being mainly Kurdish has grown larger and taken on different forms of organisation as well as different names, which is why a description of the system remains complicated. After adopting the name *Democratic Federation of Northern Syria* (DFNS) in 2016, it was changed again in September 2018 to *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (AANES) (Hawar News 2019). These changes are a sign of the increasingly multi-ethnic composition of the people and a move away from Kurdish designations like 'Rojava'. This is mainly due to the territorial changes in the past years resulting from the ongoing conflicts between the democratic forces and other parties, of which the IS presented the biggest threat. The fight against the Islamist terrorist group claimed many victims and has used a lot of the already scarce resources. Besides the Turkish and Syrian state have also been attacking the region in the last years, which is why military groups like the YPG and the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) are indispensable for the Rojava region. A detailed overview of the current situation in Syria is presented in the map (see figure 2).

Building on this brief overview the following chapters describe the attempt to classify the different aspects and activities of the people of Rojava according to Kothari's framework of radical ecological democracy. However, some features cut across more than one of the pillars, which is why it does not present a definite classification.

Figure 2: Map of Syrian Civil War



Source: Chughtai 2019

### 3.2. Political pillar: Democratic confederalism

According to Öcalan's maxim '*states only administrate, while democracies govern*' (2017, p.39) Rojava maintains a system of self-organisation far from state structures called democratic confederalism that constitutes the antithesis to statism and liberal democracy by strengthening the civil society. This is linked to the long-term objective to overcome the state apparatus and to instead transfer all structures and services provided by the state into the self-administration. It also entails an anti-national position and the rejection of territorial borders substituted by the appreciation of social diversity (Flach et al. 2015, p.102). This also results in the policy that regions liberated by the Rojava forces from terrorist organisations can choose to become part of the democratic confederation (Öcalan 2011, p.32; Constituent Assembly of the DFNS 2016). The aim of the stateless Kurdish people is therefore not build up a separate nation-state, since according to Öcalan (2011, p.19) this would lead to a continuation of the repression by dominant powers in times of a capitalist modernity, whose components are nation-states, capitalism, and patriarchy (Üstündağ 2016, p.198). For him a nation-state only represents the interests of the upper class and not the interests of the people, wherefore he calls for a '*democracy without a state*' (Öcalan 2011, p.21). In practice this involves the implementation of a decentralised, grassroots democratic approach in form of a council democracy, which puts



communes, the smallest unit of the system, at the centre and allows them to act autonomously. Through the possibility to express oneself and to directly influence decision-making politics become an integral part of social life again (Öcalan 2017). The communes consist of either a village or several streets in a city making up 30 to 150 households. By 2014 there were different levels of council structures between the communes and the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK). The communes sent their elected representatives to district councils or councils that united several villages, who in turn sent their representatives to regional councils that brought together towns and their surroundings. These regional councils came together in the MGRK (Flach et al. 2015, p.138). By 2014 Rojava was still subdivided into three cantons, Afrîn, Kobanî and Cizîrê, of which the latter acted as a main coordinator in foreign policy matters, while all of them enjoyed broad autonomy. The councils were further complemented by commissions including a women's council and thematic councils working on defence, economy, politics, civil society, free society, justice and ideology (ibid., pp.139f.). In the meantime, the structure of the councils and with it their names changed several times alongside a restructuring of the cantons. The AANES is now subdivided in regions which encompass a much larger area than some years ago - at least concerning the Cizîrê region and the Euphrates region (which comprises the former Kobanî canton). The Afrîn canton on the other hand is occupied by Turkish forces. This shows that the structures of the AANES are subject to highly dynamic conditions due to territorial changes in the context of war resulting into a permanent change of council structures, especially at the higher levels, which however only serve as coordinators. They execute the will of the communes, which remain a constant element of the bottom-up, direct democratic approach and grant every individual of all cultural identities the right to political participation in discussion, decision-making and even implementation of projects (Öcalan 2011, p.33; Constituent Assembly of the DFNS 2016). Particularly these councils at the grassroots level already existed before the Syrian revolution despite the fact that members of the councils were persecuted by Syrian authorities. With the achievement of de facto autonomy these structures became the official basis of decision-making in Rojava (Lebsky 2017). The cooperation and networking between different councils present what is called democratic confederalism. The dynamic structures moreover show the flexibility of the system and the will to continuously adjust it to new circumstances and desires of the people, what stands in contrast to the rigid political structures in the Global North.

### **3.3. Economic pillar: A People's Economy**

Since Rojava is not internationally recognized, there is no foreign investment in the region. Even more, neighbouring countries have imposed an embargo on Rojava, which is why international trade became an absolute impossibility. This means that on the one hand the people of Rojava are forced to be self-sufficient and produce everything they need within their communities, and on the other hand, they cannot export any goods to other countries. This is particularly significant for the agricultural and oil sector, which in the past made up the highest export revenues. Now oil that is drilled in Rojava can only be sold to the people of Rojava and not be refined. This is due to a lack of industry, which is one outcome of a decade-long policy by the Syrian government to locate industries and factories outside Rojava in the Arab dominated regions to pursue a policy of underdevelopment in Northern Syria (Azeez 2017). Due to the land's suitability for agriculture Rojava was the granary of Syria by producing 50 % of the country's wheat and 25 % of the olives produced for export (Flach *et al.* 2015, p.246), the government hardly invested into infrastructure, education and health in the region. The export-oriented agriculture went so far that the people of Rojava were not even allowed to engage in subsistence farming (ICR 2018, p.66).

These developments call for a substantial restructuring of the economic sector in Rojava, that is strictly anti-capitalist and follows the objective to bring capitalist modernity to an end and build up an alternative economy (ibid., p.21). In order to democratise all sectors of society, the people of Rojava thus do not only transform their political decision-making processes, but also exercise democratic practices in the economic sector by establishing cooperatives and abolishing monopolism. To that effect they came up with an economic plan called the '*People's Economy*' that is based on '*commons, private property based on use and worker-administered businesses*' (Strangers in a tangled wilderness 2015, p.25). Thereafter they aim at a socialisation of the economy that is based on the management of resources through the communes themselves and therefore opposed to the models of socialisation, which involve state planning and centralisation (Tadros et al. 2016, p.66). In so doing an economic autonomy can be achieved that entails an ecological industry and communal economy (Öcalan 2017). The embargo therefore fosters the development of economic communalism with a local, sustainable production, even though it certainly also causes major constraints for the economy and the supply of certain goods. Moreover, the ongoing war has costed a lot of resources for the self-defence of the region and thus halted economic activities (Tadros et al. 2016, pp.66f.).

### **3.4. Socio-cultural pillar: Diversity, gender liberation and alternative knowledge**

Concerning socio-cultural aspects of the AANES this chapter focuses on the ethnic diversity, gender liberation and education. As already mentioned the democratic project of Rojava doesn't include the existence of a classical nation-state, but encourages people from different backgrounds to live together in a nation of common cultures (Flach et al. 2015, p.20). Therefore is it not only making claims for Kurds, but for all the peoples living in the region, which according to the Social Contract comprise Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, Muslims, Christians and Yezidis (Constituent Assembly of the DFNS 2016). This further implies that liberated regions can become part of the AANES, if they desire, no matter which ethnic composition their population has.

Moreover, gender liberation constitutes one of the basic principles of democratic confederalism. Rojavan feminism is based on a feminist epistemology called 'jineology', which translates to *'the science, or study, of women'* (Shahvisi 2018, p.7). The idea of jineology is that gender is always *'embedded within a nexus of other oppressive social relations'* (ibid.). Öcalan argues that gender discrimination lead to enslavement and that therefore all forms of slavery are based on the housewifisation of women. Hence women's freedom is of utmost importance to achieve a free society and guarantee freedoms for everyone. (Öcalan 2017, p.69). The feminist focus of the Rojavan project is also visible in the political structures, since all councils must have at least 40% representation of women, except of the women's councils that only consists of women, and ministries mostly have co-ministers with one man and one woman (Strangers in a tangled wilderness 2015, p.20). Further in the military context the YPJ constitutes an exclusively female army, which was of major significance in the struggle against the IS.

Concerning the education sector the Rojavan revolution has brought about many changes as well. Adult education is given greater importance, since it is crucial to establishing a revolutionary society that is politically active. Moreover, the Kurdish language found its way back into schools after having been banned under the Assad regime as well as other languages. Local knowledge is given higher appreciation by making sociology and particularly history core subjects including a critique of positivist science and the pursuit of alternative science and knowledge in the context of Öcalan's sociology of freedom (Biehl 2015; Öcalan and Guner 2015). Besides the Western understanding of knowledge is questioned by putting life experience before academic skills. Moreover, the Internationalist Commune of Rojava is currently establishing an internationalist academy that lays a focus on reviving ecological knowledge including sustainable farming methods and also serves to introduce foreigners to the Rojavan democratic project (ICR 2018, p.13).

### **3.5. Ecological pillar: Social ecology and restoration**

As mentioned earlier ecological sustainability constitutes one of the core features of the democratic autonomy in Rojava. Its theoretical foundation can be found in the writings of Murray Bookchin (2005) who writes about '*organic societies*' which live in harmony with their natural environment based on the theory of social ecology. Inspired by his ideas Öcalan included Bookchin's thoughts into his model of the democratic autonomy (ICR 2018, pp.42ff.). Endeavours towards a change in the society-nature relationship in Rojava are particularly visible in the campaign *Make Rojava Green Again*, which was initiated by the Internationalist Commune of Rojava (ICR). It reacts to decades of centralisation of agriculture, that was closely interconnected with the expropriation of land and the subsequent migration to cities. This led to the alienation of people from nature with the subsequent loss of knowledge of ecological processes and farming methods (ibid., p.37). The ecological repercussions of the oppressive Assad regime are far-reaching. The systematic deforestation for the sake of monocultures along with the extensive use of chemicals and irresponsible waste disposal have destroyed fertile grounds and polluted soil, air and water. Although efforts have been made to recover the farming land, the policy of the Turkish state has not been conducive as they have constructed dams resulting into a severe extraction of groundwater (ibid., pp.66f.). To face these ecological challenges Rojava's people have taken several measures including the orientation toward local consumption, the promotion of agroforestry to fight erosion, urban agriculture to enhance food sovereignty and the creation of nature reserves (ibid., pp.73ff.). Moreover models for a more sustainable water management, cleaner electricity production and environmentally-friendly waste disposal are being developed, although they cannot be fully implemented yet due to financial constraints (ibid., pp.77–87). Efforts towards an ecological society in Rojava are thus far from the current worldwide trend of green capitalism, but instead draw the connection between '*market economy, exploitation, destruction of nature, war and migration*' (ibid., p.63) and consequentially see a system change as the only solution. Such a change implies a system of local self-sufficiency, which allows production in compliance with people's needs along with a communalisation of all resources and the recovery of collective knowledge.

## **4. Embedding Rojava in the post-development context**

Having elaborated on the democratic project of Rojava with its features and principles the question remains, if it corresponds with Kothari's model of a radical ecological democracy and – in regard to other authors – if it can be seen as an alternative to development.

#### **4.1. Is the AANES a radical ecological democracy?**

Concerning the political pillar, the concept of radical ecological democracy is very close to the lived reality in North-eastern Syria. Both see the necessity of decision-making at the grassroots level in neighbourhood assemblies and locate the power within such. Active political participation and – as Kothari frames it – the responsibility to make use of one's rights thus constitute the basis of a radical democracy. Furthermore, the system of Rojava has proven to be both adaptable and resilient in recent years, therefore fulfilling another principle of RED. The resilience was however only possible through the self-defence by Rojava's armed militia, what goes contrary to Kothari's value of non-violence. Kothari also assumes the existence of a state, which does not present a power centre but is yet necessary for guaranteeing basic rights. This is maybe also part of the model of democratic confederalism at an early stage, the vision of Öcalan goes however further than this, since he aims at eventually overcoming the nation-state by providing the required structures through the autonomous self-administration.

Likewise, the concept of economic reorganisation by the people in North-eastern Syria based on cooperatives corresponds with the idea of the economic pillar in Kothari's alternative vision in regard to a radical democratisation of the workplace. This also leads to a decentralisation of production and localised consumption, both features of Kothari's vision as well as the transformation of all resources into commons. Consequently, both concepts share the critique of capitalism and pursue new, more people-centred forms of economy.

The socio-cultural pillar touches upon many different topics, which is why a comparison proves difficult. Nevertheless, both concepts agree on the significance of diversity and pluralism, even though Kothari's focus lies more on the appreciation of traditions, whereas in the AANES diversity rather refers to different ethnic backgrounds within the population. Feminism being a cornerstone of democratic confederalism does not appear explicitly in Kothari's vision and can only be imagined as a part of the principle deep equity and justice. Equally education is not mentioned in the principles of radical ecological democracy but will be taken up in the next chapter. It can further be argued that a mutually reinforcing relationship between the individual and the society – as called for by Kothari – is given in the case of Rojava, since the consensus-oriented grassroots approach presents an opportunity to strengthen communication and also solidarity in neighbourhoods.

Lastly, in regard to the ecological pillar both concepts arrive at the same conclusion, that the core of the problems lies at the relationship between society and nature. The alienation of humans from nature has led to the destruction of landscapes, which now need to be restored.

Ecoregionalism and subsistence therefore play a major role in both concepts in order to establish an ecological society. In the end both concepts emphasise the interconnectedness between the political, economic, social and ecological sphere and their mutual dependencies.

#### **4.2. Rojava and post-development**

Escobar characterises the change of the discourse from the conventional Western 'development' discourse to a post-development discourse as

*'a political question that entails the collective practice of social actors and the restructuring of existing political economies of truth. In the case of development, this may require [...] a partial, strategic move away from conventional Western modes of knowing in general in order to make room for other types of knowledge and experience. This transformation demands not only a change in ideas and statements but the formation of nuclei around which new forms of power and knowledge might converge.'* (Escobar 1995, p.216)

If one follows this definition of post-development, it can easily be argued that the democratic confederalism of Rojava qualifies as a post-development approach, since it involves a collective action of all people in a newly established political system that allows for new forms of power. This is further supported by an educational approach that questions Western modes of knowing and enhances local knowledge. Especially the assumption by Escobar that it is *'likely, that radically reconstituted identities might emerge from some of those spaces that are traversed by the most disarticulating forces and tensions'* (ibid., p.215) suits the case of Rojava considering their history in the last decades marked by oppression through the Assad regime and times of war and terrorism. Post-Development is further closely interlinked with postcolonial struggles of countries, that have once been under formal colonial rule (ibid., p.214). The Internationalist Commune of Rojava describes how Rojava was also subjected to a *'colonially dependent relationship with the Syrian Assad regime'* (2018, p.65f.) until 2012, that was marked by maximum resource exploitation and high production rates in the agricultural sector. Escobar also states that post-development implies the critique of dominant scientific discourses and an enhanced interest in local knowledge (Escobar 1995, p.215) – both components of the reformed education system in North-eastern Syria that takes a critical stance towards positivist science and Western modes of knowing. The criterion of a *'novel theorization of the political and its relation to both the cultural and the democratization of social and economic life'* (ibid. p.218) perfectly describes the interconnectedness of the different spheres of life and how a novel form of democratisation as implemented in the AANES can affect all of them positively. Lastly,

Escobar argues that post-development also presupposes the willingness to tackle issues of social justice by constructing new social orders (ibid.) – a criterion that corresponds the feminist policy of Rojava which breaks with old social orders and therefore also refrains from cultural essentialism.

According to Ziai (2004, pp.1056f.) radical democracies fall into the category of sceptical post-development with a focus on relations of oppression in a wide context of not only economy, but also culture, knowledge and the development paradigm. The people of Rojava have developed a growing awareness for these relations of oppression and have therefore developed alternatives for a more democratic, ecological and feminist way of life. Post-development theorists and Öcalan moreover agree not only on the belief that representative democracies are systems that primarily serve the interests of the upper class but also on the solution of decentralisation of power (ibid.; Öcalan 2011). Neusiedl (2019) depicts the Rojava Movement as an example of anarchist post-development, an understanding of post-development that he bases on the shared ideas and strategies of both post-anarchism and post-development. Among its features are a rejection of the modern nation-state and all forms of domination, direct action, a radical openness concerning the future of societies and a strong belief in local autonomy (ibid., p.3).

Tadros et al. designate Rojava as an '*alternative project of development and democracy*' (2016, p.55), although they claim that the 'development' discourse is not entirely questioned. However, Öcalan's assertion that "*democratic modernity*" is meant as an *alternative draft to modernity*' (Öcalan 2011, p.24) while referring to democratic confederalism as the democratic modernity, suggests the assumption that he rejects the established modernity paradigm, which is closely interlinked with the 'development' paradigm. However, a differentiation between the theoretical concept and the lived reality has to be made, since it cannot be guaranteed that all people of Rojava reject the 'development' paradigm.

## **5. Conclusion**

As already mentioned earlier doing research on Rojava and particularly its structures and forms of organisations is not an easy task, since, many changes occur on an irregular basis due to the highly dynamic circumstances this democratic project finds itself in. However, the desire to fully understand a political system is maybe also unjustified, since its changing dynamics and the concomitant adaptability are in fact its strong points. It allows for a continuous enhancement

of democratic processes to guarantee the participation of every individual. The radical democratisation of a society therefore represents a learning process carried out by the society itself in a direct democratic manner. Ideas from other concepts and projects can be added at later points in time if the society deems them significant and worthy of support and principles like those of the radical ecological democracy can be extended. This would be particularly interesting concerning the Rojavan approaches to feminism – a topic that is so far missing within the framework of radical ecological democracies.

Adding to the point made before it would moreover be naïve to think that understanding the political system of a country automatically comes along with a thorough understanding of its politics. Here I refer to the case of liberal market-democracies in the Global North, since their political outcome is highly influenced by non-democratic processes based on economic interests, which often do not represent the interests of the people. Moreover, the lived radical democracy in Northeastern Syria calls into question the 'democratisation' efforts by the countries in the Global North. The export of their democratic model seems fraudulent when comparing it with what has been established in Rojava in recent years, since its direct democratic approach allows for more participation by the people than the Western model of democracy.

Conclusively, I would argue that the concept of democratic confederalism can be classified as both an example of a radical ecological democracy, since the analysis has shown many similarities between the two. Further it also qualifies as a post-development approach, even though further developments have to be awaited concerning its practical implementation in North-eastern Syria. The current situation is still an exceptional one due to the ongoing war and the embargo by Turkey, which is why it remains to be seen, if the localisation efforts continue when international trade becomes a viable alternative again. Campaigns like Make Rojava Green Again definitely present a step into the right direction by building up alternatives to dominant Western models in political, educational and ecological spheres. The People's Economy with its focus on commons and cooperatives also sounds promising but is yet to be fully implemented. If the model of democratic confederalism as laid out by Öcalan with all its immanent critique of development and capitalist modernity is eventually fully realised, the people can indeed master a genuine social and ecological transformation and a promising project of an alternative to development.



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