Democratic innovations in Mexico and Kurdistan

The revival of assemblies and councils as traditional democratic institutions

Hanifi Barış[1]

Abstract

This article offers a comparative analysis of the origins, political concepts, and institutions of three autonomous administrations in Mexico and Kurdistan: the town of Cherán, the Zapatista region, and Rojava. These autonomous administrations are based on popular assemblies and delegatory councils. The article is inspired by Hannah Arendt's council system and categorizes them as council autonomies, i.e., non-state variations of council democracy. Drawing on qualitative data and recent scholarship, the article argues that council autonomies innovate democracy through renovating and reinventing Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian traditions of democracy. The article urges scholars of democratic theory to engage non-Western origins, traditions, and versions of democracy.

Keywords: *Cherán, Zapatistas, Rojava, council democracy, representative democracy, Hannah Arendt*

Abstract in Kurmanji

Nûjeniyên demokratîk li Meksîka û Kurdistanê: Vejîna civat û konseyan wekî saziyên kevneşopî yên demokratîk

Ev gotar analîzeke berawirdî ya rayek, têgehên siyasî û saziyên sê rêveberiyên xweser ên li Meksîka û Kurdistanê dike: bajarê Cherán, herêma Zapatista, û Rojava. Ev rêveberiyên xweser xwe dispêrin civatên gel û konseyên delegeyan. Gotar ji pergala konseyan ya Hannah Arendt îlham digire û van rêveberiyan wekî xweseriyên konseyî, ango guhertoyên demokrasiya konseyan yên ne-dewletî binavdike. Gotar ji daneyên kalîteyî û lêkolînên dawîn birêdikeve û amaje dike ku xweseriyên konseyî bi nûvekirin û vejandina kevneşopiyên demokrasiyê yên Mezoamerîkî û Mezopotamya demokrasiyê nûjen dikin. Gotar teoriya demokratîk dazirîne ku rayek, kevneşopî û cûreyên demokrasiyê yên li derveyî Roavayê jî tevlî bike.

Abstract in Sorani

تازەگەریه دیموکراسیەکان له مەکسیک و کوردستان: بوژانەوەی دەسته و ئەنجومەنەکان وەک نەریتی دامەزراوەی دیموکراسی

ئەم توێژینەوەیه لێکۆڵینەوەكی بەراوردکاری بۆ سەرچاوه و چەمکه سیاسییەکان و دامەزراوەکانی سێ ئیدارەی سەربەخۆ له مەکسیک و کوردستان پێشکەش دەکات: له شاڕۆچکەی چێران، هەرێمی زاپاتیستا و ڕۆژاڤا دا. ئەم دامودەزگا سەربەخۆیانه لەسەر بنەمای دەستەی جەماوەری و ئەنجومەنی نوێنەرایەتی دامەزراون. بەپشتبەستن به سیستەمی ئەنجومەنی هانا ئارێنت، ئەم توێژینەوەیه، ئەو ناوچانه وەک ئەنجومەنی ئۆتۆنۆمی پۆڵێن دەکات، واته جۆرەکانی ئەنجومەنی نادەوڵەتی دیموکراسی. به پشتبەستن به داتای چۆنایەتی و زانستی نوێ، توێژینەوەکه دەیسەلمێنێت که ئەنجومەنه ئۆتۆنۆمییەکان له ڕێگەی تازەگەری و بوژاندنەوەی نەریتی دیموکراسی میزۆئەمریکی

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و میزۆپۆتامیادا، گۆرانكاری له نەریتی دیموكراسی دا دەكەن. تویژینەوەكه داوادەكات كه تیۆری دیموكراسی
بەشداری لەگەڵ بنەچه و نەریت و وجۆرەكانی دیموكراسی نا رۆژئاواییدا بكات.

Abstract in Zazaki

***Meksîka û Kurdîstan de înovasyonê demokratîkî: Neweraganîkerdişê konsey û kongreyan ê
sey sazgehanê tradîsyonelanê demokratîkan***

*Na meqale analîzêkê têveronayîşî yê ristim, konseptanê sîyasîyan û sazgehan yê hîrê îdareyanê Meksîka û Kurdîstanî
yê otonoman, şaristanê Cheránî, herêma Zapatîsta û Rojawanî pêşkêş kena. Bingeyê nê îdareyanê otonoman kongreyê
şarî û konseyê delegeyan ê. Bi îlhamê sîstemê konseyan ê Hannah Arendte, meqale nê îdareyan sey konseyanê otonoman
kategorîze kena, yanî sey varyantanê demokrasîya konseyanê neresmîyan. Pê dayeyanê kalîtatîfan û cigêrayîşê peyênî,
meqale musnena ke konseyê otonomî bi rayîrê newekerdiş û neweraîcadkerdişê urf û adetanê demokrasîya Mezoamerîka
û Mezopotamya ra demokrasîye bi xo newe ra virazenê. Meqale han kena ke teorîya demokrasîye bireso ristim, tradîsyon
û şekîlanê demokrasîye ke teberê rojawanê dinya de qewimîyayî.*

Introduction

This article is an exercise in engaging non-Western traditions of democracy in democratic theory. It presents a discussion on innovations initiated by democratic experiments in Mexico and Kurdistan. [2] The article engages in a comparative analysis of three autonomous administrations that managed to establish the only council democracies since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956: the Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (*Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas*) in Chiapas, Mexico; the Communal Government of Cherán (*Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri*) in Michoacán, Mexico; and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, *Rêveberiya Xweser ya Bakûr û Rojhilatê Sûriyê*), aka *Rojava,* in Syria.

In January 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*), based in the Indigenous communities of the Lacandón Forest (*Selva Lacandona*) located in Chiapas, Mexico, launched an armed rebellion with the overall aim of revolution in Mexico and autonomy for Indigenous communities.[3] The EZLN declared autonomy in five zones in 2003. They maintain a *de facto* self-rule.

In April 2011, led by women, the P'urhépecha people of Cherán, a town in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, drove organised crime, the police and political parties out of the town.[4] They decided to elect public officers through the P'urhépecha tradition of decision-making. A council of twelve people, comprised of three delegates elected by each of the four neighbourhood assemblies, took over the administration of the town. They then initiated a process of litigation. The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN, *La Suprema Corte Justicia de la Nación*) ruled in their favour in 2014.[5] Public offices are now run by The Major Council of Communal Government (*Consejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal*) and eight other

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[2] All forms of government are experiments. See John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), xxii.

[3] Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*, Second Ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 121.

[4] Felipe Orlando Aragón Andrade, *El Derecho En Insurrección. Hacia Una Antropología Jurídica Militante Desde La Experiencia de Cherán, México* (Morelia: Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores Unidad Morelia, 2019).

[5] Alejandra González Hernández and Víctor Alfonzo Zertuche Cobos, "Cherán: Cinco Años de Un Gobierno Autónomo," in *México En Movimientos: Resistencias y Alternativas*, ed. Geoffrey Pleyers and Manuel Garza Zepeda (CDMX: Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, 2017), 34.

councils, which include a Women Council (*Consejo de Las Mujeres*) and a Youth Council (*Consejo de Jóvenes*).

In July 2012, the Syrian regime withdrew from Western (Syrian) Kurdistan. Kurdish political organisations controlled by or affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD, *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) took over public offices and declared an autonomous administration. They have managed to maintain self-rule in a territory that has expanded beyond Kurdish-majority areas to include one third of Syria and four to five million people.[6]

There are significant overlaps between the cases, even though there had not been, to my knowledge, any direct communication between the three autonomous administrations or the movements prior to proclamations of autonomy. The first direct communication between the Kurdish and Zapatista women combatants took place in 2021 in France during the Zapatistas' *The Journey for Life* activities in Europe, although messages of support and solidarity had been issued by both sides on various platforms.[7] The political movements that established them originate in the 1968 generation's Marxist-Leninist and Maoist revolutionary politics. They pursued a politics of revolution and/or national liberation, seeking the capture of political power until the late 1980s. Influenced by post-Marxist, decolonial, and anarchist literature and re-directed by input from communities, they began seeing claims to sovereignty as the will to domination and started promoting the concept of autonomy as the foundation of the political community. By the same token, defying the monistic definition of the nation as a single, *unified* sovereign subject, they pluralised the political subject as *peoples* and/or *communities*. They have been building autonomy *from below,* institutionalising popular assemblies and councils as potent organs of self-government. They have been establishing political institutions that enable direct-democratic participation and setting up regional political institutions through which power flows the other way too.

Nevertheless, the context in each case is different, and so are the administrations' approaches to national identity, symbols, and constitutions. The cases in Mexico operate within the constitution, for the Mexican constitution internalizes the United Nations (UN) treaties on human and indigenous rights and autonomy (with exception of Article 27, which legalised the partition and sale of community lands), although they supersede the state-centric UN treaty framework in their direct democratic aspirations and practices. While both the Zapatistas and Chéran challenge the notions of monistic national identity, other components of Mexican nationalism are comparatively less problematized.[8] Also, the federal state in Mexico appears more "tolerant" to the autonomous administrations there, particularly so in the case of Cherán. That is because indigenous claims are more 'manageable' than national claims. The vessel tailored by the UN treaties for indigenous peoples to voice their claims to autonomy is not the principle of "self-determination" (which is reserved for previously independent peoples colonized during the era of imperialist expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) but the category of "indigenous rights," which conceptually does not pose the same

[6] Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines: The Building of the Democratic System in North and East Syria" (Qamişlo, 2019), 13, https://rojavainformationcenter.com/background/political-sys- tem-documents.

[7] Daliri Oropeza, "Zapatistas, Women, and Gender Dissidents: On the Encounter in Notre Dame Des Landes," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 9-9-2021. Online at http://www.cnsjournal.org/zapatistas-women-and-gender-dissidents-on-the-encounter-in-notre-dame-des-landes/ (last accessed 18-10-2022).

[8] Lynn Stephen, *Zapata Lives! Histories and Cultural Politics in Southern Mexico* (London: University of California Press, 2002).

threat as a claim to national sovereignty or self-determination.[9] Thus, it is relatively 'harmless' for indigenous peoples to claim autonomy because the assumption is that their autonomy won't shake the foundations of the national order. Claims to autonomy made by national minorities like the Kurds, on the other hand, are perceived as a genuine and immanent threat by the four national states they live in, namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria. Hence, Rojava operates outside the Syrian *Arab* Republic's constitution. Accordingly, while the cases in Mexico are relatively friendly to contemporary Mexican national symbols, identity, and borders, the same would be unthinkable for the Kurds because it would mean the erasure of Kurdishness.

Conditioned by Eurocentric narratives of democracy, I had assumed that any experiment of direct democracy would inevitably take the Athenian democracy as *the* point of reference. And indeed, the first Rojava constitution made a direct reference to Athenian democracy.[10] In Mexico, the Spanish colonial administration has been credited with "re-settling" Indigenous communities in towns to impose a version of the Aristotelian utopia – creating political communities of active citizens – through Christianising and "civilising" them.[11] More specifically, the origins of community assemblies and councils that underpin the autonomous administrations in Cherán and Chiapas have been identified in the institution of *ejido*, "a communal form of land tenure" that also "refers to territory, actual land tied to the community"[12] that was introduced after the Mexican revolution of the 1910s.

More importantly, I also observed something that I had not expected: the autonomous administrations invoke communal values and institutions they associate with ancestral and ancient civilisations as the bases of democracy. I collectively refer to those values and institutions as *tradition*, be they invented or inherited. As recent literature suggests, despite widespread ideas about democracy as a European invention, democracy was not born in Athens, and democratic forms of government have been global phenomena. For instance, Keane notes that democracy was born in ancient Mesopotamia at least two millennia before the emergence of Athenian democracy.[13] Graeber and Wengrow, among others, have pointed out that not only democratic popular assemblies and republican governments existed in a variety of forms, but also that neighbourhood assemblies and city councils have been a constant feature of democratic politics throughout history and across the globe.[14]

Thus, the main objective of this paper is engaging *tradition* in democratic theory. Contrary to the Eurocentric narrative of democracy which depicts it as a Western invention, democracy

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[9] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Pekka Hämäläinen, "Can Colonial Nations Truly Recognise the Sovereignty of Indigenous People?," *Aeon Essays*, 2-10-2019. Online at https://aeon.co/essays/can-colonial-nations-truly-recognise-the-sovereignty-of-indigenous-people (last accessed 19-6-2020); Adam J. Barker, "'A Direct Act of Resurgence, a Direct Act of Sovereignty': Reflections on Idle No More, Indigenous Activism, and Canadian Settler Colonialism," *Globalizations* 12, no. 1 (2015): 43–65.

[10] The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, "Charter of the Social Contract," *Peace in Kurdistan*, 29-1-2014. Online at https://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/ (last accessed 19-11-2022).

[11] Bernardino Verástique, *Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[12] Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 9.

[13] Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*.

[14] David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2022); Jean-Paul Gagnon, "Words of Democracy: Rescuing an Abandoned Science," *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 14-6-2021. Online at https://www.abc.net.au/religion/words-of-democracy-an-abandoned-science/13386940?fbclid=IwAR3rOL0md3YhF2X8bqN1fARGvyoB6rNXBHIxB4VrgyPCiZt94FDcAxNCM14 (last accessed 18-11-2022).

emerges and re-emerges as a local phenomenon. Community values and institutions around the world, i.e., *traditions*, have been among the repositories of democratic politics.[15] Although they embrace the legacies of modern democratic and socialist revolutions, the autonomous administrations that this article focuses on break away from Western-centric narratives of democracy by invoking community values and institutions. To underpin this argument, this article examines which political concepts, organisations, processes, and institutions have contributed to the emergence of direct democratic experiments in Mexico and Kurdistan. In a second step, it will then ask what contributions these cases offer to democratic theory. Here I will argue that the cases contribute to democratic consolidation in their communities, regions, countries, and perhaps across the globe, via challenging exclusively modern(ist) and representative foundations of democratic politics. The cases offer a potential to vertically deepen and horizontally spread political participation. This can alleviate political alienation and empower individuals and communities alike in local and regional politics. Exercising political power and experiencing public freedom through assemblies and councils also have the potential to restore dignity to politics and public offices, for politics ceases to be the prerogative of the elites.

Methodology

The paper is based on qualitative data gathered through online interviews on Rojava; fieldwork I conducted in Mexico for more than two months in 2021; and participant observation. I conducted forty-three semi-structured expert and elite interviews with high-ranking and high-profile office holders, political leaders, professionals, volunteers, and organisers. Most research participants were informed enough to comment on theoretical aspects of the political projects and the institutional design of the administrations.

I also used primary sources, e.g., constitutions, laws, statuses, communiqués, founding documents, published interviews, speeches, lectures, self-made videos, public and private events on social media platforms, and secondary sources. I focused on political concepts, organisations, and decision-making mechanisms *qua* council autonomy. I do not provide a detailed critique of the political ideologies and their praxis, but dwell on the democratic innovations introduced by the cases.

There are methodological limitations. I could not conduct fieldwork in Rojava and the Zapatista region due to the Covid-19 restrictions, although I travelled to *Caracol Oventic*, a Zapatista community located about 37 kilometres to the north-west of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. As a *caracole*, Oventic is one of the twelve administrative centres where public offices in the Zapatista zone are located. But the offices were closed, and I was told they would not be open until February or March (I was there in December 2021). I then conducted interviews with scholars and civil society organisers in San Cristóbal de las Casas. I spent a rather short time in the research locations I was able to go to, although a second or even third round of fieldwork would have been ideal.

Also, my personal position as a left-leaning Armenian-Kurdish researcher from North Kurdistan (Southeast Turkey) should be considered as an ingredient. Positionality "is rooted in Feminist scholarship" and urges researchers to acknowledge that "position is partial, locatable, and critical," and that "the personal experiences through which that positionality is

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[15] Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 30, 215, 309–12, 350.

shaped, may influence what researchers bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes."[16]

Positionality is fluid and individuals do not occupy a fixed state of being and of thought, but it was my social and professional background that set me on the research path. As a lawyer with a focus on human rights, I was conditioned, like many others, by the idea of finding a model of minority rights applicable to Kurdish politics in Turkey. After my previous research on Kurdish politics in Turkey, realizing that the Kurdish political movement there has developed a home-grown model of autonomy, I shifted my focus from studying democracy through Eurocentric national and international law to studying democratic initiatives introduced by non-state political communities.

The revival of council democracy

There are several comparative studies on the Zapatista and Kurdish movements. Gambetti compares the politics of constructing places in Diyarbakır and Chiapas, arguing that "appropriation of places" enables them to "acquire significance" within local, national, and global politics.[17] Al-Ali and Tas have noted that the Zapatistas have served as a source of inspiration for the Kurdish movement.[18] Al compares the Kurdish armed movement in Turkey and the Zapatistas within the global justice movements, focusing on the question of why the latter is not as "successful" as the former in harnessing global solidarity.[19] Also, numerous magazine articles have drawn attention to the similarities between the Rojava and Chiapas revolutions. Notably, Stanchev dwells on all major similarities, including but not limited to "self-governance and revolution from below" being the products of "long historical evolutions" of the two movements; a "fusion between Western Marxism and the experience and knowledge of the native" communities; "rejection of vanguardism"; a quest for greater self-determination that is "based on their traditions as well as communal control over land and local resources"; a holistic approach based on ecological sustainability; and "the development of grassroots democracy, communal economic structures and the participation of women."[20] Rebrii and Patchen, on the other hand, have emphasised women's central roles in both revolutions, arguing that they "have shown that the internal transformation of unequal gendered power relations within communities in struggle is of no lesser importance than resistance to external capitalist, colonial, and statist powers."[21]

Building on and expanding this literature, this paper draws on extensive qualitative data to offer a discussion of political concepts, mechanisms, and institutions that catapulted the three

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[16] Mary Q. Foote and Tonya Gau Bartell, "Pathways to Equity in Mathematics Education: How Life Experiences Impact Researcher Positionality," *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 78, no. 1 (2011): 46.

[17] Zeynep Gambetti, "Politics of place/space: The Spatial Dynamics of the Kurdish and Zapatista Movements," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 41 (2009): 43–87.

[18] Nadje Al-Ali and Latif Tas, "Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism: The Kurdish Political Movement in Turkey," *Nations and Nationalism* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 458.

[19] Serhun Al, "Local Armed Uprisings and the Transnational Image of Claim Making : The Kurds of Turkey and the Zapatistas of Mexico in Comparative Perspective," *Globalizations* (2014): 677–94.

[20] Peter Stanchev, "From Chiapas to Rojava: Seas Divide Us, Autonomy Binds Us," *ROAR Magazine,* 17-2-2015. Online at https://roarmag.org/essays/chiapas-rojava-zapatista-kurds/ (last accessed 22-10-2022).

[21] Anna Rebrii and Ariella Patchen, "Celebrating Zapatista and Kurdish Women's Struggles, on International Women's Day ," *The Nation*, 8-3-2022. Online at https://www.thenation.com/article/world/zapatista-rojava-womens-movement/ (last accessed 22-10-2022).

cases to the forefront of the political and theoretical search for alternatives to representative democracy.

Organs of decision-making in the Zapatista region are public assemblies and delegatory councils organised in three layers. The grassroots organs are community assemblies, each comprising about 300 households and are open to the participation of all over twelve years old.[22] The assemblies send delegates to the regional Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committees (CCRI, *Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena*), "organized around the four Zapatista language groups" of the Ch'ol, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, and Tzotzil.[23] Regional committees send delegates to the CCRI-General Command (CCRI-*Comandancia General*). The CCRI-General Command is the highest political authority, although not the supreme authority in the sense of a sovereign parliament in a typical nation-state. The CRIC-General Command primarily functions as a coordinating entity throughout the region.

The administrative units are *Los Caracoles* (snails). They also include three levels of autonomous self-government: the community, the municipality and the Council of Good Government (*Las Juntas de Buen Gobierno*). The first two are based on grassroots assemblies. The Council of Good Government is elected but with the intention to get as many people as possible to participate in the councils over the years through a principle of rotation.

Organs of decision-making in Cherán are public assemblies organised in three layers. *Fogatas*, i.e., two-street intersections open to the participation of all, are the basic deliberative organs, convening whenever the need arises. *Los Barrios*, i.e., neighbourhood assemblies in each of the four neighbourhoods in the town are the principal decision-making organs. They are open to the public and convene every week. They also elect council members for the eight executive councils that administer the town. The third organ is the general assembly of the town that convenes twice a year and is the highest political authority.

Organs of decision-making in Rojava are organised in four layers. The basic organs are communes (*komîn*), each comprising between 100 and 300 households, and neighbourhood assemblies (*tax*). They send delegates to subdistrict (*beldê*), district (*navçe*), cantonal (*kanton*), and regional (*herêm*) delegatory councils.[24] The AANES coordinates governance throughout the region, while The General Council (*Meclîsa Giştî*/*Zagonsaz*) acts as the general legislative, which is the highest political authority but does not function like parliaments, i.e., as *the* supreme authority of the realm, for legislation must ideally be passed with the consensus or at least the consent of the parties that are affected by it.[25]

In all three cases: (i) the main decision-making organs are public assemblies; (ii) delegates and council members are elected and recallable by the assemblies; (iii) decisions are made through consensus as much as possible, but majority vote prevails if no consensus is found;[26] (iv) the overall form of administration is based on small-scale assemblies and councils organised around the logic of community autonomy, which is in direct opposition to the logic of national or monarchic sovereignty. Therefore, I categorise the autonomous administrations as *council*

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[22] Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 198.
[23] Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 131.
[24] Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines," 21.
[25] Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines,"30.
[26] Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 4; Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 116; Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines."

autonomies, for they are variations of *council democracy*, i.e., non-state forms of self-government based on direct democratic and delegatory decision-making organs.

An in-depth discussion on council democracy versus representative democracy is beyond the scope of this paper. I will briefly discuss why I categorise the three autonomous administrations as council autonomies through the literature on council democracy and Hannah Arendt's council system. In Western political theory, council democracy is "a pyramidal structure of voluntary associations organised through workplaces and barracks with a national executive council composed of directly elected and recallable delegates."[27] Councils appear as the organs of working-class interests, primarily aligned with processes of economic production in the literature on the socialist tradition.[28] But for Hannah Arendt, who promoted council democracy more than any of her contemporaries and whom I draw most extensively on in my references to council democracy, councils cannot be limited to being organs of class interest,[29] as they are "the new revolutionary organs of self-government."[30] As the autonomous administrations in this paper are built by movements for self-determination on communal and territorial bases,[31] I refer to council democracy in its Arendtian version in this paper.

Also, there is an institutional convergence between the Arendtian council system and the empirical cases: they provide the citizenry with public venues of exercising freedom, i.e., *constitutio libertatis*. As Arendt writes, "what was actually revolutionary in modern revolutions was the repeatedly failed attempt of a 'constitutio libertatis'—the attempt to establish a political space of public freedom in which people as free and equal citizens would take their common concerns into their own hands."[32] The cases examined here have succeeded where modern revolutions failed: providing political spaces, e.g., potent assemblies and councils, for public freedom to flourish (notwithstanding the level and intensity of citizen participation). I therefore categorise these autonomous administrations as council autonomies.

Categorizing the three autonomous administrations as council autonomies also functions as a marker that helps distinguish them from other modes of minority autonomy based on liberal multiculturalism.[33] Liberal multicultural models of minority autonomy are inspired by nationalism and are nation-states in small-scale or in the making, whose political institutions are modelled on representative democracy and state sovereignty. The cases, however, steer away from nationalist politics and consider the logic of sovereignty as domination. This is also in line with the tradition of council democracy in general and with Arendt's promotion of the council system as an alternative to the party system.

Inspired by the tradition of council democracy, Arendt exposes the inadequacy of minority rights regimes derived from state sovereignty and the risks of depending on the global human rights regime for the protection of minorities. She was keenly aware that minorities with no

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[27] James Muldoon, "Hannah Arendt and Council Democracy" (PhD diss., Monash University & University of Warwick, 2016), 20–21.

[28] James Muldoon, *Council Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen, "Between Constituent Power and Political Form: Toward a Theory of Council Democracy," *Political Theory* 49, no. 1 (2020): 54–82.

[29] Margaret Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Phought," *Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (1978): 5–26.

[30] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]), 247.

[31] Cihad Hammy and Thomas Jeffrey Miley, "Lessons From Rojava for the Paradigm of Social Ecology," *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2022): 1–13.

[32] Albrecht Wellmer, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53, no. 208 (1999): 207.

[33] Sarah Song, "Multiculturalism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 24-9-2010. Online at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/ (last accessed 18-11-2022).

political community of their own have to flee their "home" countries as the nation-state system constantly creates new categories of refugees and stateless peoples. As Arendt put it, "the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them."[34] She noted that minorities and stateless peoples were also aware that the "loss of national rights was identical with loss of human rights, that the former inevitably entailed the latter. The more they were excluded from right in any form, the more they tended to look for a reintegration into a national, into their own national community".[35] The therefore suggested the establishment of potent and autonomous political communities based on small-scale councils within federative structures in Palestine, as an alternative to a Jewish or Arab majority nation-state that would inevitably oppress the other group.[36] This is the kernel of Arendt's argument for the council system. Arendt objected to the dominant idea of creating a Jewish nation-state and proposed an alternative to avoid "the troublesome majority-minority constellation, which is insoluble by definition." Additionally, a federal structure

> would have to rest on Jewish-Arab community councils, which would mean that the Jewish-Arab conflict would be resolved on the lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness. A federated state, finally, could be the natural stepping stone for any later, greater federated structure in the Near East and the Mediterranean area.[37]

At the end of the essay, Arendt lists several recommendations, the fifth of which would reappear in her later works as the council system: "Local self-government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine".[38]

Thus, council democracy à la Arendt detaches politics from nationalism via anchoring political organisations in small-scale communities of space and the concept of autonomy, rather than in national communities and the concept of sovereignty. Federated small-scale councils serve as the bulwark against (total) domination.[39] Domination is the eradication of individual and communal differences, the destruction of plurality that is the basic human condition, and the suppression of human capacities of action and speech. The fundamental value that council democracy cherishes is this "[h]uman plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech."[40] The centralised, hierarchical, and bureaucratic states, with their claims to sovereignty, pose the greatest threat to the human condition of plurality.[41] As such, council democracy is an alternative to the dominating and homogenising effects that the concept and institutions of sovereignty have on political life.

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[34] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1951), 291–92.

[35] Arendt, *The Origins*, 192.

[36] Hannah Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland: There Is Still Time," Commentary Magazine, 1948, 9–10. Online at https://www.commentary.org/articles/mortbarrgmailcom/to-save-the-jewish-homelandthere-is-still-time/ (last accessed 19-11-2022).

[37] Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland".

[38] Arendt, "To Save the Jewish Homeland", 10.

[39] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 439–57.

[40] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1998 2nd ed. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175.

[41] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234–35.

We will see in the sections below that like in the literature on council democracy, a commitment to the concept of autonomy versus the concept of sovereignty as the foundational principle of political organisation, to the plurality of group identities versus the homogenising effects of a single national identity, and to political institutionalisation based on community assemblies and councils rather than centralised parliaments is also reflected in the cases of Chiapas, Cherán, and Rojava. As such, literature on council democracy provides us with a framework to conceptualise and categorise salient political concepts and institutions adopted by the autonomous administrations, which helps us distinguish them from exclusively representative systems. Accordingly, Çiçek[42] and Jongerden[43] have pointed out that there are conceptual and institutional connections between Arendt's council system and the Rojava model. I can draw a conceptual parallel between the council system and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's *Mexico Profundo*,[44] in which the Zapatista notion of *building many worlds within one world* comes to the fore strongly.[45] That being said, literature on and experiments of council democracy part ways when it comes to the origins of the council system. And this is where the cases' contributions to decolonising democratic theory becomes relevant.

Literature on council democracy, to which Hannah Arendt is the most influential contributor, so far conveys mostly a Eurocentric and modernist story,[46] which I intend to complicate. Arendt traces the origins of council democracy back to the French and American revolutions and neither she nor other contributors engage with traditions of democracy outside Europe or before modernity. Modern revolutionary tradition, thus, has shunned *tradition* from democratic theory, as the ideas of the European Enlightenment run supreme.[47]

Recent literature, on the other hand, shows that direct democratic organs of self-government, i.e., councils and assemblies, are ancient and global.[48] Likewise, councils and assemblies emerge as traditional institutions of decision-making in Mexico and Kurdistan. While the cases have one foot in modern revolutions,[49] they also invoke tradition and ancient civilizations-- Indigenous in the case of Mexico, Mesopotamian and Neolithic in the Kurdish case. The

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[42] "The Party of Kurdistan's 'Third Revolution,'" *Komun Academy*, 2-11-2018. Online at https://komun-academy.com/2018/11/02/the-party-of-kurdistans-third-revolution/ (last accessed 18-1-2021).

[43] Joost Jongerden, "Radicalising Democracy: Power, Politics, People and the PKK," *Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey* 4, no. 3 (2015): 64–78.

[44] Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, (Austin, TX: Uniersity of Texas Press, 1996).

[45] Rodrigo Ibarra, "Mexico Profundo: Building a New Way of Doing Politics," *Left Turn - Notes from the Global Intifada*, 1-2-2007. Online at http://leftturn.org/mexico-profundo-building-new-way-doing-politics/ (last accessed 1-8-2022).

[46] James Muldoon, "The Lost Treasure of Arendt's Council System," *Critical Horizons* 12, no. 3 (2011): 396–417; Shmuel Lederman, "Councils and Revolution: Participatory Democracy in Anarchist Thought and the New Social Movements," *Science & Society*, vol. 79, 2015; Shmuel Lederman, "Hannah Arendt, the Council System and Contemporary Political Theory," in *Council Democracy*, ed. James Muldoon (New York: Routledge, 2018), 150–67; James Muldoon, "The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Council System," *History of Political Thought* 37, no. 4 (2016): 761–89; James Muldoon, "Arendt's Revolutionary Constitutionalism: Between Constituent Power and Constitutional Form," *Constellations* 23, no. 4 (December 2016): 596–607; John F. Sitton, "Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy," *Polity* 20, no. 1 (1987): 80–100; Joel Olson, "The Revolutionary Spirit: Hannah Arendt and the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War," *Polity* 29, no. 4 (1997): 461–88; Popp-Madsen, "Between Constituent Power and Political Form"; Roger Berkowitz, "Protest and Democracy: Hannah Arendt and the Foundation of Freedom," *Stasis* 6, no. 1 (2018): 36–55.

[47] Ian Shapiro, "The Burkean Outlook," Yale Courses, 6-4-2011. Online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkDqadw-fJE&list=PL2FD48CE33DFBEA7E&index=19 (last accessed 22-10-2022).

[48] Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, Chapters 8&9; Ronald M. Glassman, *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City- States and Nation-States*, vol. 1 (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

[49] Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*; Denisse Román-Burgos, "'We Are Indigenous of the Purhépecha People' Hegemony, Multiculturalism and Neoliberal Reforms in Mexico," *Dialectical Anthropology* 43 (2019): 259–77; Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14, no. April (2012): 1–16.

seeming contradiction that arises with regard to the genealogy of council democracy necessitates decolonising our understanding of democracy, as Bussu[50] puts it. Engaging tradition while examining democratic self-governments in Mexico and Kurdistan in this way contributes to the efforts of decolonising democratic theory. Democracy is no longer a form of government to which a particular political culture or tradition can lay claim.

Research findings and analysis

This section will discuss research findings on the democratic innovations that are now the pillars of the three council autonomies. These are (i) abandoning the goal of seizing state power or founding a new one and instead building autonomy from below; (ii) women's struggles for freedom, equality and autonomy that helped the concept of autonomy to take precedence over sovereignty; (iii) the practices of self-criticism, consultation, and deliberation that led to the establishment of direct democratic institutions; (iv) innovations in leadership that created pluralistic and horizontal political organisations; and (v) the practices of consensual and reconciliatory decision-making. The discussion will help us understand how certain practices initiated by and emergent within the movements culminated in the establishment of autonomy based on grassroots democracy. I will discuss each innovation in a subsection.

I. Replacing vanguardist revolutionary goals with building council autonomy

The transformation of the liberation movements in Mexico and Kurdistan from vanguard revolutionaries to builders of direct democratic autonomy helps us understand why and how building a bottom-up autonomy replaced the top-down revolutionary goals. Tracking the change in the telos of the movements is important in determining how tradition makes its way into the ultimate outcome that I call council autonomy.

Although autonomy was on their agenda from the beginning,[51] the Zapatistas started focusing on strengthening grassroots autonomy and restructuring their political institutions in 2003. Their efforts to bring about a negotiated reform in Mexico were not reciprocated by the Mexican state. The restructured administration would better coordinate social and political activities within the autonomous zones. "Instead of each autonomous municipality governing itself separately, the pro-Zapatista communities would be grouped into five regional units known as *caracoles* (snails), each with its own *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (Council of Good Government)."[52] In the Kurdish case, the goal of founding a socialist Kurdish nation-state was transformed into defending the society against the state.[53] In Cherán, the leadership gave up on pursuing solutions for their major issues via joining national political parties because parties and factions created divisions and sowed conflict within the town and between the town and neighbouring communities (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021).

Three main factors have brought about this transformation in the three cases. First, the overall revolutionary agenda on national scales and national liberation through the foundation of a

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[50] Sonia Bussu, "Democracy as a Way of Living," *The Loop*, 20-9-2022). Online at https://theloop.ecpr.eu/democracy-as-a-way-of-living/ (last accessed 15-10-2022).

[51] Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 121.

[52] Raúl Benítez Manaut, Andrew Selee, Cynthia J. Arnson, "Frozen Negotiations: The Peace Process in Chiapas," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 22, no. 1 (2006): 151.

[53] Abdullah Öcalan, "My Solution for Turkey, Syria, and the Kurds," *Jacobin*, 8-7-2020. Online at https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/ocalan-turkey-syria-kurds-op-ed (last accessed 18-6-2022).

socialist state had become increasingly beyond reach, due to the withering away of external support in a unipolar world (interview XXXVIZ3).[54] Revolutionary and liberation struggles around the world either had to withdraw from the scene or adopt different strategies following the fall of the Soviet Union. The three movements chose or had to undergo radical transformations in subsequent decades: the Zapatistas in the 1990s, the Kurds and Cherán in the 2000s. Second, national politics and coalition with sympathetic nationwide opposition were not delivering any solutions to the problems on the ground, due to the ineffectiveness of the coalition with allies and the indifference and/or hostility of powerful national political actors.[55] Third, relying on local communities and building autonomy from below emerged as an alternative, thanks to the movements' close contact with communities.[56] This aspect of transformation is well-researched in the cases of Chiapas and Cherán,[57] although studies to date do not put it the way I do here, i.e., as "contact" with communities.

Claiming that the political movements that managed to establish the first council democracies since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 did not have contact with base communities from the outset seems counterintuitive. Nevertheless, this common factor emerged very forcefully during the field work. I shall therefore contextualise this finding for the three cases. Two participants in Chiapas responded to my question of why revolutionaries would leave Mexico City and come to Chiapas to organise a guerrilla movement with the same answer: they were invited to Chiapas (the question of who invited them is a matter of interpretation and I will not dwell on it) (interviews XXXVZ2, 2.12.2021; XXXVIZ3, 6.12.2021). Obviously, there were revolutionaries from Chiapas, but the guerrilla struggle was initiated by a group of Maoists who, as revolutionaries, previously had no contact with Chiapanecas or with the communities in the Selva Lacandona. The impact of this contact on the revolutionaries has been professed on many occasions by Subcomandante Marcos, who refers to the ideological transformation they went through during the decade after the contact as their "first defeat."[58] Here, "defeat" is of course symbolic, as it means that the revolutionaries underwent significant change as they encountered Indigenous communities and opened themselves to input from them. It is telling that one of the latest books published by the Zapatistas was not an exercise in revolutionary prose, but the stories distilled from the encounters of three *Subcomandantes* with *Viejo Antonio* (Old Antonio), who appears in many interviews and essays as a member of

[54] Kumru F. Toktamış, "(Im)Possibility of Negotiating Peace: 2005–2015 Peace/ Reconciliation Talks between the Turkish Government and Kurdish Politicians," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019): 286–303; Román-Burgos, "'We Are Indigenous of the Purhépecha People'"; Neal Harvey, "Globalisation and Resistance in Post-Cold War Mexico: Difference, Citizenship and Biodiversity Conflicts in Chiapas," *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (2001): 1045–61.

[55] Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, "The Kurdistan Workers Party and a New Left in Turkey: Analysis of the Revolutionary Movement in Turkey through the PKK's Memorial Text on Haki Karer," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012): 1–18; Shannan Mattiace, "Social and Indigenous Movements in Mexico's Transition to Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mexican Politics*, ed. Roderic Ai Camp (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012), 1–26; Giovanna Gasparello, "Análisis Del Conflicto y de La Violencia En Cherán, Michoacán," *Relaciones Estudios de Historia y Sociedad* 39, no. 155 (2018): 77; Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 165.

[56] Mariana Mora, "Zapatista Anticapitalist Politics and the 'Other Campaign': Learning from the Struggle for Indigenous Rights and Autonomy," *Latin American Perspectives* 34, no. 2 (2007): 64–77; Mazloum Abdi and Polat Jan, *Practical Projects for Building the Autonomous Administration: Rojava* (Qamishlo: Independently published, 2020 [2011]) Kindle edition; Lorena Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán: El Poder Del Consenso y Las Políticas Comunitarias," *Política Común* 7 (2015).

[57] Antonio García de León, "From Revolution to Transition: The Chiapas Rebellion and the Path to Democracy in Mexico," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 32, no. 3–4 (2005): 508–27; Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán"; Felipe Orlando Aragón Andrade, "¿Por Qué Pensar Desde Las Epistemologías Del Sur La Experiencia Política de Cherán? Un Alegato Por La Igualdad e Interculturalidad Radical En México," *Nueva Antropología* 29, no. 84 (2016): 143–61; Mariana Mora, "The Imagination to Listen: Reflections on a Decade of Zapatista Struggle," *Social Justice* 30, no. 3 (2003): 17.

[58] Subcomandante Marcos and Yvon Le Bot, *El Sueño Zapatista* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janes, 1997).

an Indigenous community in the *Selva Lacandona*, with whom the guerrillas have had profound conversations on politics and life.[59] After this process of transformation, they were no longer the Maoist revolutionaries who set out to realise the mission of carrying out a top-down revolution via "enlightening," organising, and mobilising "the masses" who "lacked" class consciousness. Along with their goals, their perspective also changed, transforming them from vanguard revolutionaries to those who not only "walk with the people," but also those who "follow the people." The Zapatistas' widely cited mantra *mandar obedeciendo* (to lead by following or to rule by obeying) reflects this transformation.

The impact of contact with and input from communities on the transformation of the Kurdish movement does not come to the fore in scholarly literature, as the main attention is paid to the ideological transformation of the leadership after the 2000s. In the interviews, participants have reiterated that the radical transformation of the Kurdish liberation movement in Rojava owes much to their close contact with and input from communities (interviews IIR1, IIR2, VIIIR7). A participant in Mexico who has been doing research on Rojava responded to my question about the most important similarity between the Kurdish and Zapatista movements:

> The Kurdish and Zapatista movements differ from other revolutionary or national liberation movements in their inclination to listen to the people. Both movements are very good in consulting with and listening to the people. The encounter with the people and abandoning [classical] leftist perspectives are decisive for the two movements. Both do this around the same time, in the early 1990s, but the Zapatistas do this earlier. They do not deny people's voices, they listen to them. [There is a] mutual listening and hearing on the part of the movement and the people. *Escucha mutua.* People have their own autonomous forms and mechanisms. Both movements discover this and instead of erasing or dominating this they prefer to adapt themselves to that (interview VIIIR7, 5.3.2021).

In the case of Cherán, participants told me that political activists of all persuasions and professionals in the sectors of law and education who advocated for autonomy for the P'urhépecha communities but lived in the state capital Morelia, Michoacán, poured into Cherán to contribute to the discussions on determining the direction that the community should take in the days following the uprising on 15 April 2011 (interviews XXIC7, 10.11.2021; XXXC16, 20.11.2021). The way forward was determined through debates and deliberations amongst the townspeople with the participation of those arriving from Morelia. The result was that an autonomy based on traditional institutions of decision-making prevailed, thanks to the input from the townspeople.

Thus, in all three cases political activists and core revolutionary cadres became more receptive to input from communities and as a result they revised their vanguard positions. Contact and consultations took place in open and secret community meetings in the forest, in the mountains, in villages and neighbourhoods, and on street corners, but also through door-to-door household visits in the Kurdish case.[60] In Cherán, the community's input was processed

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[59] SCI Marcos, SCI Moises, and SCI Galeano, *Los Relatos Del Viejo Antonio* (Enlace Zapatista, 2020).

[60] Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, *The Daughters of Kobani: The Women Who Took on the Islamic State* (London: Swift Press, 2021); Azize Aslan, "'Casa Por Casa' la autonomía kurda," *Desinformémonos*, 23-11-2021. Online at https://desinformemonos.org/casa-por-casa-la-autonomia-kurda/?fbclid=IwAR281mvPtqw33Otg48m9rVp-weKSNeqadapwlEtP7xEQgHszyJyKVaOjZdo (last accessed 26-11-2021); Abdi and Jan, *Practical Projects*; Nicholas Ross, "Authority, Legitimacy, and Support for Armed Groups: A Case Study of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional," *Civil Wars* 21, no. 3 (2019): 303–28.

through consultations on a daily basis, on every street corner, i.e., *fogatas* (interview XXIVC, 10.11.2021). In the case of the Zapatistas, initial clandestine meetings with communities have been replaced by routine community assemblies and formal *consulta*s.[61]

The Zapatistas are known for their local, regional, national, and global consultation practices.[62] For instance, the decision to commence the armed rebellion of 1994[63] and the rejection of "the Mexican government's first 34-point peace plan" in June 1994[64] were the outcome of such consultations that lasted for months. Local and regional consultations have taken place in community and municipal assemblies for political decision-making purposes. The objectives of national and international Zapatista *consultas* are different:

> Zapatista representatives fanned out across the country visiting 1,299 municipalities and making contact with 64,598,409 Mexicans. Of course, the Zapatista cause had always been strong in Chiapas, neighboring Oaxaca, and among the more progressive elements of large cities such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, which had a considerable student population. The Consulta, however, forced Mexicans in many other places, very much re-moved ethnically, socially, and geopolitically from Chiapas, to think about indigenous rights. [...] The Consulta also provided many Mexicans with their first opportunity of seeing and meeting a Zapatista. As Marcos put it, "The people are going to get to know the Zapatistas, not just through the television or newspapers, but in the flesh." In certain suburbs of certain cities, few had ever met and talked with an indigenous person. Now, people were forced to form an opinion based on fact and in some instances to come to terms with their own prejudices.[65]

As in the case of the Zapatistas, Kurdish political and military leaderships in Rojava have conveyed that they decided to establish self-defence forces and the autonomous administration after a series of consultations throughout the region. A recently published book co-authored by two top military commanders in Rojava lays bare the process through which they introduced their movement to the people in towns and cities and how their political project was shaped through input from communities:

> To draw the executive plan and lay the actual projects for the implementation of the Autonomous Administration, deep discussion took place after conducting a comprehensive tour in all the Kurdish cities and regions in Afrin, Derik, Aleppo, Raqqa, Hasakah. The Theoretical Principals and The Practical Projects were written 2011 and 20.000 copies were distributed throughout Kurdistan and Syria.[66]

In all three cases, input from communities has facilitated a shift from grand revolutionary and state-centric agendas to searching for and offering solutions to immediate socio-political problems. For instance, in Rojava, solutions to salient problems such as the absence of a

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[61] Andrew Flood, "What Is It That Is Different about the Zapatistas?," *The Anarchist Library*, 3-9-2001. Online at https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andrew-flood-what-is-it-that-is-different-about-the-zapatistas (last accessed 18-11-2022); Mora, "The Imagination to Listen"; Víctor Alfonzo Zertuche Cobos, "¡Arriba Pichátaro! Resistencia y Lucha de Una Comunidad Indígena En Michoacán, México," *Revista Mexicana de Estudios de Los Movimientos Sociales* 2, no. 2 (2018): 75–94.
[62] Flood, "What Is It That Is Different about the Zapatistas?"
[63] Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 198.
[64] Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 159.
[65] Nick Henck, *Subcommander Marcos: The Man and the Mask* (Duke University Press, 2007), 330.
[66] Abdi and Jan, *Practical Projects*, 13.

political subject that could represent the Kurds in Syria and the defence of Kurdish communities were formulated after clandestine consultations with grassroots communities,[67] while in Chiapas and Cherán offering solutions to the problems such as internal conflict, exploitation and the extraction of natural resources by multinationals and organised crime became the focus of movements and the autonomous administrations.[68] The cases thus turned away from primarily nationalist and nationwide revolutionary agendas and reliance on external support and national alliances to the objective of building autonomy through self-reliance and a wider mobilisation of their base communities around solving the salient problems faced in and by communities. This does not mean that they stopped being revolutionary, but that they no longer invested primarily in installing a top-down national revolution and started building council autonomy not only as a new form of government, but also as a new revolutionary praxis. This praxis can be defined as removing the gap between the movements and communities, both practically and ideologically, uniting them through humbling the movements.

"Accompanying" the Indigenous peoples in their quest for democracy and social justice, rather than trying to "educate," "civilise," and "liberate" them was reflected in *Liberation Theology*[69] in the 1970s in Chiapas. But the doctrine failed to articulate, in my opinion, that the Church also learned from and was transformed by their encounter with the grassroots communities. In the encounter of the revolutionaries and the communities, however, the leadership of the three cases discussed here openly express that they learn from and are transformed by one another (see the subsection on *Innovations in Leadership* below). The latter is more mutual and reciprocal. We now seldom hear the trope "creating a new subject," that revolutionary movements embraced since Lenin.[70] That is how *tradition* not only made its way to the agenda of national liberation and revolutionary movements but transformed them into the democratic innovators that they are.

I.I Renovating/reinventing Mesopotamian and Mesoamerican traditions of democracy

An important aspect of closer contact with and input from local and cultural communities is reflected in the efforts to study, uncover, and search for alternative narratives, origins, and versions of democratic practices and institutions. As noted above, in Rojava and Chiapas, revolutionaries transformed themselves and their political goals through closer contact with and input from Mayan and Kurdish communities. Subcomandante Marcos refers to this phenomenon in one of his interviews as their "first defeat,"[71] while Jongerden[72] refers to this phenomenon in the Kurdish case as "learning from defeat." The "defeat" was ideological in the case of the Zapatistas, military in the case of the Kurdish movement in Northern Kurdistan, and political in the case of Cherán. The people who directed the movement towards autonomy in Cherán had withdrawn from political parties in the run up to the 2008 municipal elections amidst a violent competition that caused murder and disappearances, as

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[67] Abdi and Jan, *Practical Projects*, 26.
[68] Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán," 2; Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 83.
[69] Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 10–11.
[70] Ryan Chapman, "Socialism: An In-Depth Explanation ," YouTube, 28-8-2022. Online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrBRV3WK2x4 (last accessed 15-9-2022).
[71] Marcos and Le Bot, *El Sueño Zapatista*, 63.
[72] Joost Jongerden, "Learning from Defeat: Development and Contestation of the 'New Paradigm' within Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)," *Kurdish Studies Journal* 7, no. 1 (2019): 72–92.

they became convinced that party politics was not only failing to offer any solutions to the issues of illegal resource extraction and the violence that accompanied it, but also creating, exacerbating, and perpetuating division and conflict within the town.[73]

This should not be interpreted as the elevation of *the folk* to a mythical position in which they possess a superior form of wisdom. Neither should it be interpreted as if the connection of local communities with nature put them in a position where only they could inspire holistic political programs and actions. It should be taken as an account of how political action ceased to be only about abstract ideals, universal goals, and national revolutions once members of the movements realised that they must offer solutions to the problems on the ground and started developing the capacity to do so, but only in ever closer cooperation and collaboration with the wider sections of the society to which they belonged.

The Kurdish movement, for instance, reached back to "their" (be it invented or inherited) Mesopotamian and even Neolithic roots to develop a home-made model of political community.[74] This undertaking reflects the conviction that the Kurdish model is and should be based on a democratic revolution rooted in community values and institutions. "The Rojava revolution," a participant notes, "springs from its own roots" (*kökleri üzerinde yeşeren bir devrim*, interview IIR1, 06.12.2020). The participant noted that the Rojavans have been receptive of the model of Democratic Confederalism because they see its architect, the leader of the Kurdish movement Abdullah Öcalan, not exclusively as a leader but as *one of them*, for he lived there for decades and took the contemporary and historical socio-political structures in Kurdistan into account while developing the model.

Participants in Rojava conveyed their accounts of how communities, especially women, were enthusiastically embracing the Rojava model because they found the promotion of women's emancipation and of decision-making via public assemblies familiar and empowering. Kurdistan and Mesopotamia, according to these accounts, already had practices and institutions of governance through public assemblies and a gender-balanced co-chairpersonship. One participant, a scholar from the Academy of Jineolojî who spent three years in Rojava to do research and partake in academic activities gave three examples to illustrate how the people in Rojava have likened existing or historical social practices and institutions to the newly installed ones. First, the large houses in villages where people used to gather to address social and political issues are deemed as institutions of direct democratic self-rule and are considered the equivalent of *mala gel*, i.e., the institution of the "public house," now open to all in villages and neighbourhoods in Rojava. Second, gathering beneath trees under the guidance of prominent women to address certain issues, I was told, used to be a common practice in Rojava. This practice is deemed as the institution of women's agency and autonomy and the predecessor of autonomous women's organisations. And third, the concepts of *por sipî* and *rû sipî* (Kurdish for community elders, literally white-haired [women] and white-bearded [men]), along with a figurine of a woman and a man unearthed in Tell Halaf (Kurdish Tel Xelef; Arabic تل حلف), an archaeological site in the Al Hasakah region,

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[73] Ojeda Dávila, "Cherán," 9.
[74] Eleonora Gea Piccardi and Stefania Barca, "Jin-Jiyan-Azadi. Matristic Culture and Democratic Confederalism in Rojava," *Sustainability Science* 17 (2022): 1273-1285; Marlies Casier, "Beyond Kurdistan? The Mesopotamia Social Forum and the Appropriation and Re-Imagination of Mesopotamia by the Kurdish Movement," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 13, no. 4 (2011): 417–32; Abdullah Öcalan, *Kapitalist Modernitenin Aşılma Sorunları ve Demokratikleşme* (Unspecified: Sterkaciwana, 2012).

constitute the equivalence of co-chairpersonship of women and men, as evidence of the existence of gender-balanced leadership (interview IIR1, 6.12.2020).

Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria have been actively creating new narratives of Kurdishness and alternative political spaces, with references to Mesopotamian traditions and institutions, to surpass the contemporary configurations of identity and political space established by nation-states.[75] As Hammy and Miley have observed, Öcalan has made great efforts to

> unearth and revive libertarian and communal traditions in the Middle East in general and in Kurdistan in particular […] to revive, and democratize, the legacy of resistance and rebellion of the "elements of democratic civilization," in a democratic confederalist model, opposed to the model of the nation-state, since the nation-state seeks to assimilate and eradicate the ethnic and religious diversity of the region.[76]

The accounts above reflect these attempts initiated by the political leadership. While further research must be done to establish these historical connections more robustly, their political significance lies in the fact that they inform us about how the Rojava model comes to be seen as legitimate on the ground.

Participants in Cherán and Chiapas pointed out, without hesitation, that the direct democratic institutions they set up were traditional mechanisms of decision-making that had been swept away by colonisation. A participant in Chiapas, who had come from Mexico City to assist the Zapatistas in technical issues, reiterated that decision-making through community assemblies has been an Indigenous practice throughout Mexico since time immemorial, and that they either survived despite the continuous threat of erasure posed by institutions and practices of colonial and national politics or are being revived in Chiapas and elsewhere (interview XXXXIZ8, 22.12.2021). Members of the *Consejo Mayor* in Cherán were adamant, upon my specific inquiry into the origins of councils and assemblies there, that the institutions of the autonomous administration were not inspired by colonial or national templates but that the decision-making institutions were excavated from their traditions (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). Another participant conveyed that the *fogatas* are not just public spaces where people gather to light bonfires, consult, and protect the town when the need arises, but that this institution has a special place in the P'urhépecha culture as the fire and the life that is established around it used to be sacred (interview XXIVC10, 10.11.2021). The *fogata* is now renovated as the basic social and political institution through which certain elements of the P'urhépecha culture survive and perhaps flourish. The *fogatas* and neighbourhood assemblies in Cherán and the community assemblies in Chiapas must be seen in this light, as traditional institutions of democratic decision-making of the Indigenous communities.

II. Women's struggles and the emergence of council autonomy

The role of women's struggles for freedom, equality, and justice in the establishment of council autonomies helps us track how the concept and institutions of *autonomy*, the fundamental principles and institutions underpinning council autonomy, replaced those of *sovereignty*. We will see that this is a major transformation that has helped the movements locate

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[75] Piccardi and Barca, "Jin-Jiyan-Azadi"; Casier, "Beyond Kurdistan?"; Hammy and Miley, "Lessons From Rojava"
[76] Hammy and Miley, "Lessons From Rojava," 3.

democratic politics in practices of pluralistic autonomy based on direct democracy rather than the monistic effects of sovereignty based on representative democracy.

The salient common dynamic that enabled the movements to prioritise autonomy over sovereignty is the crucial role women played. In Rojava, there are women-only armed forces and councils, veto rights for women's organizations during legislation, and equal representation of women in public offices and administrative positions. As Gunes and Bayır note, "crimes against women are prosecuted by women, women-only peace committees deal with family issues, gender-based violence, domestic violence and forced marriage," and a women-only police force (*asayîşa jinê*) was established to enforce progressive laws on women rights.[77]

Similar developments are observable in Cherán and Chiapas, although structurally they have not adopted the same institutional framework. There are shortcomings in implementation, though. In Rojava, non-Kurdish communities and communities that are not affiliated with the Kurdish movement may not be receptive to gender equality, but door-to-door visits, academic activities, and consensus building on gender equality are some mechanisms geared to carry out changes on the ground. In Rojava, Cherán, and Chiapas, just as in the rest of the world, patriarchal gender roles still hinder women's participation in certain spheres of life. In Rojava and Cherán, LGBTQI+ and non-binary individuals are still invisible, although "the perception among the legal parties of the [Kurdish] movement has shifted considerably."[78] The Zapatistas have lately been more specific about addressing this invisibility. Their journey to Europe known as *El viaje por la Vida* (The Journey for Life) in the fall of 2021, the 500th anniversary of the colonization of Mexico, started with a group of seven designated as the Zapatista Maritime Delegation/the 421st Squadron travelling from Mexico to Spain and beyond via the sea. The 421st Squadron had a non-binary member, Marijose, who was introduced as "one *other* (*unoa otroa)*" on the Zapatistas' website and would be the first to disembark when their boat *La Montaña* arrived in Spain:

> Thus, our first footstep on European soil (assuming of course they even let us disembark) will not be that of a man, nor that of a woman, but that of an *other* [*otroa*]. In what the late SupMarcos would have called a "slap in the face of the hetero-patriarchal left," it has been decided that the first person to disembark will be Marijose.[79]

In 1994, together with their first declaration, the Zapatistas passed a Women's Revolutionary Law comprised of ten articles, proclaiming that "women have all the rights and obligations set out by the revolutionary laws and regulations."[80]

How does women's struggle factor in democratic innovations? The struggles of women within the movements created a path-dependency towards the primacy of autonomy. This is particularly palpable in the Kurdish case, where women actors and organisations challenged the domination of men throughout decades, risking backlash from their male comrades and

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[77] Cengiz Gunes and Derya Bayır, "Democratic Autonomy in Kurdish Regions of Syria," in *Non-Territorial Autonomy and Decentralization: Ethno-Cultural Diversity Governance*, ed. Tove H. Malloy and Levente Salat, First (London: Routledge, 2020), 127.
[78] Nadje Al-Ali and Isabel Käser, "Beyond Feminism? Jineoloji and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement," *Politics and Gender*, 2020, 24.
[79] SupGaleano, "421st Squadron," *Enlace Zapatista*, 20-4-2021. Online at https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/04/20/421st-squadron/ (last accessed 18-9-2022).
[80] Stephen, *Zapata Lives!*, 156.

even expulsion for pushing agendas of women's emancipation.[81] In time, though, the dominant Kurdish political movements in Northern and Western Kurdistan "started a process of 'double liberation' (national and women's)."[82] This is particularly important for the replacement of centralised institutions of sovereignty with those of autonomy. Although "female combatants state that their participation in armed struggle is in itself an example of their liberation from patriarchal control,"[83] centralised political and military institutions continued to be dominated by men until women started organising themselves autonomously within the institutional structures of the Kurdish movement (interview VR4, 12.2.2021). As Graeber points out rather playfully, thanks to the struggle of the women in their ranks, the Kurdish movement, as an anti-capitalist struggle, has come to the realisation that: "You can't get rid of capitalism without getting rid of the state, and you can't get rid of the state without getting rid of patriarchy. Well, how do you get rid of patriarchy? Well, making sure that all women have access to automatic weapons is one place to start. You really can't push people around when they are armed."[84] This realisation was reached partly due to women's insistence on having their autonomous organisations in military, social, and political spheres.

Graeber and Wengrow's emphasis on "the feminist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock's suggestion that most members of what are called egalitarian societies seem less interested in equality per se than what she calls 'autonomy'" is instructive here: what might matter for women in the communities Leacock drew on was "not so much whether men and women are seen to be of equal status but whether women are, individually or collectively, able to live their lives and make their own decisions without male interference."[85] A similar but more nuanced insight was conveyed in my interview above, where the participant stated that during her stay with the Kurdish guerrillas, she witnessed that with regard to certain aspects of the guerrilla life, women and men were organised separately; because, for a variety of reasons, autonomous organisation of women and men took on a rhythm of its own, indicating that certain analysis of gender relations and roles are done better autonomously by both sides (Interview VR4, 12.2.2021).

Thus, the struggle of women to organise autonomously within the Kurdish movement created a path dependency, which implies that "choices formed when an institution is being formed, or when a policy is being formulated, have a constraining effect into the future."[86] Autonomous women's organisations have thus led to the entrenchment of the principle of autonomy because once it emerged, its practice became norm-setting (see Çağlayan[87] about how discussions within the Kurdish movement were first *about* and then *with* women, until finally women started speaking and acting *as* women). This norm-setting culminated in the institutionalisation of autonomy by the Rojava administration. This policy is now turning into

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[81] Sakine Cansız, *Sara: My Whole Life Was a Struggle* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Aysel Tuğluk, "Where Will You Find That Many Women?," *Middle East Report* 295 (2020).
[82] Nazand Begikhani, Wendelmoet Hamelink, Nerina Weiss, "Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan: A Feminist and Critical Perspective," *Kurdish Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018): 13.
[83] Begikhani, Hamelink, Weiss, "Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan," 10.
[84] David Graeber, "Syria, Anarchism and Visiting Rojava," YouTube, 30-5-2017, 06:00. Online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqfoJvD0Ifg (last accessed 18-4-2022).
[85] Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 139.
[86] Ian Greener, "The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies," *Political Studies* 25, no. 1 (2005): 62.
[87] Handan Çağlayan, *Women in the Kurdish Movement: Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 69-71.

a constitutional principle, replacing the concept and institutions of sovereignty with those of autonomy.[88]

In Cherán, the sense that autonomy of the community is more important than equality in existing institutions also came to the fore in my interviews with women participants. A civil society organiser reflected the common sentiment amongst the participants when she spoke of the pain and suffering they had endured throughout decades because they strived for self-determination (interview XXVIIIC5, 5.11.2021). Physical assaults against and disappearances of the townspeople by organised crime, the security apparatus of the state, and those controlling political institutions, the participant said, were daily atrocities, demonstrating the inability or unwillingness of the pre-2011 political institutions to provide the townspeople with a sense security and dignity. Community self-rule and collective control and use of natural resources were the main concerns for women who spearheaded the mobilisation of 15 April 2011, which led to the formal declaration of autonomy in Cherán. An autonomous women's organisation has not emerged yet, partly because safeguarding and strengthening communal autonomy remains the priority. A participant told me that although they would not necessarily call themselves feminists, there are several women organised with the agenda of discussing gender equality. However, she added that they have not decided to make themselves known publicly yet, and that "gender inequality is always there, palpable in the air during council and assembly meetings, but no one speaks about it" (interview XXXIVC20, 26.11.2021). Also, the members of the Women's Council (*Consejo de las Mujeres*) I interviewed defined their roles as supporting families and providing social care and services to those in need, thus indicating that the Women's Council was not primarily tasked with representing women's interests within the administration. Rather, their responsibility was providing care for the family and the community (Interview XIXC5, 6.11.2021). In an interview with members of the High Council (*Consejo Mayor*), they noted that the number of women in the High Council increased to five in 2021 (the council has twelve members), a considerable rise in comparison to the previous terms during which there were two women in the council (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). Upon the question how gender inequality was viewed and addressed by the administration, they said that there was no proactive approach in that regard, as members of the councils were serving "the community as a whole and in unity and agreement." They stated that women were previously relegated to private spaces, "used to tend to their houses and families" and were not working in public offices; but that as the administration was now more open to the participation of women in public offices, this was changing (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). It is noteworthy that the female member mentioned the existence of *machismo,* after noting that women were much freer in the town compared to before 2011 (interview XXC6, 6.11.2021). Taken together, my interviews with the Women's Council and the High Council indicate that as there was no proactive policy towards addressing gender disparity, women's participation in the administration lagged behind men's. While all councils had women members, the ratios favoured men. Also, public posts involving care and family

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[88] While in the 2014 version of the Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (see footnote 10) the concept of sovereignty was mentioned several times in references to provinces and the Syrian state, in the 2016 version there is no reference to it. Article 3 says that "The democratic federalism of northern Syria draws its legitimacy from the will of peoples and groups through free and democratic elections." It refers to legitimacy only, and not to 'the sovereignty of the nation' or 'of the people'. Article 7 says that "'The Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria' consists of cantons based on democratic self-administrations, which depend on the democratic organizations of ideological, ethnic, feminine, cultural groups, and all social segments." Here, democratic self-administrations refers to the concept and institutions of autonomy, indicating that autonomy now replaces sovereignty in the document. See *Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,* 2014. Online at https://internationalistcommune.com/social-contract/ (last accessed 20.11.2022).

support were predominantly occupied by women. This is unlikely to change unless a proactive approach to gender inequality is adopted.

III. Consultation and self-criticism

I discussed the practices of consultation and deliberation between the movements and communities above. Here, I would like to analyse how hierarchical and militaristic organisations in Chiapas and Rojava managed to establish autonomous administrations based on horizontal and pluralistic institutions of direct decision-making. Direct democratic practices and processes were neither simply imported from other democracies, nor were they exclusively traditional practices and institutions. They were, at least partly, also modelled upon guerrilla practices and institutions.

All three autonomous administrations adopted mechanisms of consultation and self-criticism into institutions of decision-making after proclaiming autonomy.[89] The point here is that direct democratic institutions within the autonomous administrations bear the mark of movement practices and institutions that existed before the proclamations of autonomy. In other words, democratic institutions were not completely installed anew after proclamations, but are, to some extent, adaptations of movement and leadership practices.

The positive effect of this aspect is that it facilitated the transition to democracy. But there are negative effects, too. To what extent participants can feel free about speaking their mind is the first question that needs to be addressed. In representative democracies, there are remedies such as legislative immunity. It remains to be seen what remedies direct democratic institutions within the autonomous administrations will offer to counter the negative effects of peer pressure, expectations of ideological and organisational loyalty, and the domination of the majority opinion. These dynamics do not apply in the same manner to Cherán as they did not have a military organisation prior to the proclamation of autonomy. But peer pressure and the domination of majority opinion are issues to be addressed there too.

IV. Collective leadership and the end/weakening of political party rule

The movements explored here initiated a different understanding of political leadership and organisation that culminated in reducing the role of political parties in autonomous administrations, giving primacy to organs of self-government based on direct democracy. Popular assemblies and delegatory councils started channelling the political will of the citizenry directly into self-government, instead of confining the exercise of political will within representative institutions, political parties, and electoral processes.

When asked "Why do the Zapatistas wear ski masks?" Subcomandante Marcos replied, "We have to be careful that nobody tries to be the main leader. Our leadership is a collective."[90] In Cherán a council of twelve, the *Consejo Mayor de Gobierno*, leads the town. There is no single leader. In Rojava, Öcalan is the spiritual leader, but no one else assumes the role of a permanent leader, and term limits and rotations create a circulation.[91] Collective leadership

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[89] Cihad Hammy, "The First Commune in Kobane: Construction and Challenges," *Open Democracy*, 3-9-2018. Onlie at https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/first-commune-in-kobane-construction-and-challenges/ (last accessed 12-5-2022); Hammy and Miley, "Lessons From Rojava"; Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 75.
[90] Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 6–7.
[91] Ali B., "Eroding the State in Rojava," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 1 (2016): 4.

appears to take precedence over one-leader/one-party rule. Collective leadership might not appear as much of an improvement in democratic politics at first glance, but this form of leadership should be evaluated with the context in mind, where leadership has traditionally been determined by the privileges of birth, wealth, and power, depending on whether the salient form of leadership is *caudillismo*,[92] nobility, or clientelism.[93]

One mechanism designed to stamp out political careerism is non-paid public office. In the case of the Zapatistas, public offices rotate and there is no regular payment as a wage, but those who serve are compensated.[94] In Cherán, members are not paid wages but are compensated for their time and efforts via the distribution of the budget that used to be paid to a single officer amongst all member of the councils. Additionally, council members can be recalled any time if they do not perform their duties well. Indeed, two had been relieved of their duties in previous years (interview XXIVC10, 10.11.2021). In Rojava, with a view to "preventing careerism and power concentration, people performing administrative functions tend to be remunerated in kind instead of salaries."[95] However, paid office has become much more common since 2015 and there is increasing criticism about the risky direction the economy has taken towards reliance on oil revenues.[96] Political regimes that depend on oil revenues for public spending tend to fall into a vicious cycle of authoritarianism, corruption, economic instability and civil wars. This phenomenon is known as the "oil curse" in the literature.[97] Norway and Scotland, the only two oil-rich countries that have not succumbed to the oil curse, arguably owe this to their strong democracy and a diversified economy. In Rojava, where democracy is under construction and the economy is not diversified, dependency on oil revenues would pose a grave risk.

Of the three cases, the Zapatistas, and the town of Cherán have completely ousted political parties. The Zapatistas were not involved in party politics from the onset, while the town of Cherán leadership used to be in party politics until 2008.[98] In Rojava, Allsopp and Wilgenburg note that "the public involvement of the PYD in decision-making itself diminished and, in its place TEV-DEM, the institutions of state and local communes assumed primary decision-making roles."[99] Self-rule is exercised through a variety of institutions and mechanisms made up of three columns and dual mechanisms.[100] The columns are civil society organizations and political parties who participate in decision-making processes from sub-district councils upwards. Delegates are sent directly from communes and neighbourhood assemblies to councils and can be recalled any time. Also, women's councils have the right to veto laws in cantonal and regional legislatures. In other words, political parties have limited power due to quotas, councils with veto privileges, and direct participation of civil society in the decision-

[92] Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 374–454.
[93] Matthieu Cimino, *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State* (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 210.
[94] Flood, "What Is It That Is Different about the Zapatistas?"
[95] Unspecified, "Rojava," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 26, no. 1 (2015): 3.
[96] Hammy and Miley, "Lessons From Rojava for the Paradigm of Social Ecology."
[97] Sarah Peck and Sarah Chayes, *The Oil Curse: A Remedial Role for the Oil Industry* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).
[98] Diana Guillén, "Societies in Movement vs. Institutional Continuities? Insights from the Zapatista Experience," *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 4 (2017): 114–38; Román-Burgos, "'We Are Indigenous of the Purhépecha'"
[99] Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 64.
[100] Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines"

making processes. Nevertheless, studies also document that the PYD is criticised for imposing a one-party rule.[101]

It is important to stress that while political parties are not ruling at all or alone in the three cases, there is state presence in the autonomous regions, like schools, other bureaucratic offices, an airport in the city of Qamishli in Rojava, and political party offices etc. This is due to the paradigm of coexistence with the state, rather than the negation of it (interview VIR5, 2.3.2021). In Cherán and Chiapas, too, the understanding is not that of complete isolation from and negation of the state, but not submission to it. In Cherán several participants felt the need to emphasise that their struggle was not against the state. However, neither the federal nor the state authorities enter Cherán without informing and seeking consent of the town administration, a member of the Council of Procurement, Mediation, Surveillance and Justice (*Consejo de Procuración, Mediación, Vigilancia y Justicia*) told me in an interview. In criminal justice matters, they cooperate with the federal and state governments but do not allow law enforcement from outside the town enter Cherán (interview XXVC11, 12.11.2021).

V. Pluricentralisation, consensus building, and reconciliation

To avoid the emergence of a sovereign entity that might lay claim to being the supreme authority, council autonomies arrange political institutions in a manner to allow three mechanisms of generating authority: bottom-up grassroots organs, layered delegatory organs, and top-down representative organs. Thus, in council autonomies, authority neither *only* flows from bottom to top, nor *only* the other way around, nor is it *only* generated at every layer of the administrative pyramid. Authority is generated at every layer *and* flows from both ends of the administrative pyramid, thus combining the three loci and two directions of generation and flow of political authority.

Council autonomies prioritize consensus while making decisions, rather than enabling certain authorities to assert supremacy. While technical matters can be left to the care of committees of experts and individuals with relevant skills, political issues have been subject to deliberations and consensus-building.[102] Councils and assemblies higher on the chain of political institutions ideally cannot unilaterally impose rules and regulations on grassroots assemblies without their approval, save the cases where human rights, for instance of women and children, are at stake (interview IVR3, 31.3.2021). But consensus here does not imply that decisions are made by unanimous vote, which is the shortcut to the tyranny of one person. Rather, decisions are made through a process of discovering an "overlapping consensus" à la Rawls, which "includes all the opposing philosophical and religious doctrines"[103] in the process of discussion and deliberation. A decision is made nonetheless to move forward with the issue at hand, through finding a common ground.

Consensus building is not confined to the political sphere in Rojava. It permeates the justice system through peace committees and platforms that mediate solutions and seek reconciliations for conflicts. These roles have traditionally been played by community leaders, elders, members of the religious establishment, and other notables in Kurdistan. The first peace committees in Rojava appeared during the 1990s, initially dealing "with cases of theft and violence, accidents and blood feuds," and finally becoming "the 'go-to' places for

[101] Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 74.
[102] Graeber, "Syria, Anarchism and Visiting Rojava."
[103] John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 225.

obtaining justice" after the autonomous administration was established.[104] As part of the administrative structure, the peace committees

> can start a mediation process or make binding decisions on the condition that both parties agree beforehand to bring the case to the committee. The commune and neighbourhood peace committees generally do not issue fines or punishments; they function with the intention of conflict mediation and resolution, within which context financial compensations may be agreed. After a case has been accepted, the committee hears the parties involved, organises a hearing at which both parties are present, listens to any witnesses and examines documents and any other information related to the case before it takes a decision. Decisions made can be appealed by either of the parties.[105]

Analogous to the framework of political reconciliation devised by Özçelik,[106] the justice system in Rojava reflects an inclusive pluralism. Instead of rigidly implementing the standard criminal procedure in a typical legal order that is comprised of investigation by law enforcement, prosecution by state attorneys, and trial in courts, justice is also sought through cultural and traditional mechanisms and procedures.[107] The practice and process bring together political and judicial procedures and mechanisms of decision-making, mediation, and reconciliation. In that sense, the practice meets "the needs of transitioning, conflict-prone, or postconflict societies" via "[r]endering reconciliation meaningful […] through adopting the agonistic view of […] the ever-present reality of pluralism in public life."[108] In other words, by adopting a pluralistic justice procedure to address conflict and crime, Rojava offers "a practicable, creative, problem-oriented approach" to criminal justice that promotes "a new collective 'we' that is inclusive and representative."[109]

Thus, the justice system offers more than implementing the law of the victor and at least in certain matters, a plurality of values and procedures take precedence. This plurality is also reflected in the reports on religious freedom and cultural autonomy, which demonstrate that religious communities are either protected by the armed forces in Rojava, or they are encouraged to defend themselves, as the administration offers to provide them with means of armed self-defence.[110] Exceptions are violations of fundamental human rights and crimes against women (investigated by all-women councils and committees) and children, which are investigated and prosecuted without room for reconciliation otherwise.[111]

Arguments and critiques

My research findings allow me to draw a few generalisations informed by the cases. First, council autonomies have innovated democracy through renovating traditional and communal

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[104] Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, "Peace Committees, Platforms and the Political Ordering of Society: Doing Justice in the Federation of Northern and Eastern Syria (NES)," *Kurdish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 301.
[105] Knapp and Jongerden, "Peace Committees, Platforms", 303–4.
[106] Burcu Özçelik, "What Can a Political Form of Reconciliation Look Like in Divided Societies?: The Deliberative 'Right to Justification' and Agonistic Democracy," *Democratic Theory* 9, no. 1 (2022): 52–72.
[107] Knapp and Jongerden, "Peace Committees, Platforms"; Gunes and Bayır, "Democratic Autonomy."
[108] Özçelik, "What Can a Political Form of Reconciliation Look Like?," 54.
[109] Özçelik, "What Can a Political Form of Reconciliation Look Like?," 55.
[110] Nadine Maenza, "Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria" U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 10-6-2020. Online at https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Nadine Maenza Updated Hearing NE Syria Opening Remarks June 2020_0.pdf (last accessed 18-11-2022).
[111] Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines"; Graeber, "Syria, Anarchism and Visiting Rojava."

mechanisms and institutions of decision-making, thanks to input from local and cultural communities. Arendt's account of the council system and relevant scholarship negates non-Western repositories of democratic politics. This is due to the Western-centric narratives of democracy built on the assumption that the Enlightenment ushered in an era of scientific discovery in which universal and abstract notions of rights and freedoms rendered traditional foundations of political organisation obsolete and irrelevant.[112] Hence, modern and pre-modern contributions of colonised peoples and minorities to democratic theory have largely been absent in scholarship.

However, recent scholarship demonstrates that democracy was not born in ancient Athens, as it emerges in all continents in its direct and representative forms throughout history.[113] Graeber and Wengrow point out that because Western notions of equality and freedom were developed as a response to the "Indigenous critique" of European societies, they have not taken "seriously contributions to social thought that come from outside the European canon, and in particular from those [I]ndigenous peoples whom Western philosophers tend to cast either in the role of history's angels or its devils."[114] Following this contribution to scholarship, the main argument of this paper is that the three cases investigated here bring non-Western origins, concepts, and institutions of democratic politics back to life and to the discussion. As Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian democratic traditions helped build council autonomies, democratic theory must engage non-Western versions of democracy.

Second, council autonomies are based on direct political participation through communes, assemblies, and councils as plural and horizontal political institutions. This is at odds with the principle of parliamentary sovereignty based on a single, monistic supreme authority nationwide and a vertical organisation of hierarchical state bureaucracy. Yet, council autonomies seek reconciliation with Mexican and Syrian political orders. Therefore, the secondary argument of this paper is that council autonomies have the potential to contribute to democratization in their respective regions. For instance, Cherán is not an isolated case – although there are reasons for it becoming the most celebrated one – but a link in a chain that has been in the making by the P'urhépecha communities throughout the state of Michoacán in Mexico. The communities of Nurio and Santa Fe in Michoacán established communal forms of government before Cherán, while more than a dozen P'urhépecha towns, inspired by Cherán, have been striving to establish their forms of communal government since the early 2010s (interview XXXC16, 20.11.2021). Also, cultural revival and solidarity between communities have gained ground. The Rojava and Zapatista autonomies also have served as models and inspirations for direct democratic endeavours since their emergence.[115]

Third, while the project of liberal multiculturalism creates nation-statelets and nation-building enclaves out of permanent minorities through territorial and cultural autonomy, the politics of the Zapatistas and Rojava question the majority-minority divide itself. This is a promising

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[112] Ian Shapiro, "Introductory Lecture," *Yale Courses*, 5-4-2011, 35:40. Online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3-naV8kF2g&list=PL2FD48CE33DFBEA7E&index=2 (last accessed 18-11-2022).

[113] Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy,* X; Glassman, *The Origins of Democracy in Tribes, City- States and Nation-States,* 706-707; Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything,* 30.

[114] Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything,* 19.

[115] Mehmet Altan, "'Ortadoğu'nun Yeni Modeli: Kürtler,'" *İlke Haber,* 24-11-2014. Onlie at http://www.ilkehaber.com/yazi/ortadogunun-yeni-modeli-kurtler-12260.htm (last accessed 18-11-2022); June Nash, "The Fiesta of the Word: The Zapatista Uprising and Radical Democracy in Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 2 (1997): 261–74; Stephen E. Hunt, "Prospects for Kurdish Ecology Initiatives in Syria and Turkey: Democratic Confederalism and Social Ecology," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 30, no. 3 (2019): 7–26.

attempt to alleviate the tensions that arise from competing claims to sovereignty inherent in nationalist projects and identity politics.

Critiques

Problems with direct democratic decision-making have been well-articulated by critics of democracy since Plato's *The Republic*, chief among them being the tyranny of the majority.[116] Notably, James Madison, Alexis De Tocqueville, and Hannah Arendt discuss common issues associated with democratic government in detail.[117] The main issues are that individuals can (i) feel the weight of the prevailing/majority opinion in public deliberations, or worse, (ii) be or feel pressured into submission to the prevailing/majority opinion, (iii) feel that meetings are formalities only and that the decision has already been made, (iv) feel that what they have to say is not going to matter anyway because the supporters will overwhelm opposition by force if necessary, (v) feel overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the supporters of the regime, (vi) feel that some very active individuals take more time and speak more frequently than others, (vii) feel that good speakers/demagogues and charismatic individuals or those commending significant wealth, support, power, and prestige bend the process towards their interests, (viii) the voices of women and youth might be suppressed due to patriarchy and tradition.

Another important issue is that the mechanism of self-criticism in the Kurdish case was designed to ensure conformity with the movement's ideology and loyalty to the leadership(s). The mechanism can weigh heavily on unconvinced individuals and communities due to the risk of peer pressure and ideological inflexibility, and hence might discourage free speech. I was not able to dwell on this issue in my interviews, but I experienced both pressures as a participant observer.

Symptoms of the issues mentioned above can be observed in all cases. In Rojava, issues such as the perception that the communes "forced" participation through the control of "subsidized products such as sugar, fuel and aid", that communes appear to local residents interviewed and surveyed by the authors "as means of social control rather than of liberation", that participants did not believe that they had influence on the outcomes of decision-making processes or that "some people did not feel free to express their opinions" come to the fore in a recent study.[118] Further empirical research will be needed to see how the autonomous administrations will address the issues and criticisms above.

Concluding remarks

The Mayan, the P'urhépecha, and Kurdish autonomous administrations have innovated democracy partly by renovating and reinventing traditional and ancient democratic institutions such as communal and neighbourhood assemblies and delegatory councils, communal care for and use of natural resources, and self-defence. Practices such as self-criticism (primarily in Kurdistan) and public consultation (primarily in Mexico) enabled the political leaderships to adapt to the new geopolitical realities after the end of the Cold War. They strengthened self-reliance through closer contact with and input from grassroots communities thanks to public

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[116] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001[1859]); James Madison, "No. 47," in *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 249–55; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010[1835]), 410–15.

[117] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 239–48.

[118] Allsopp and Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, 145.

gatherings and consultations. On the one hand, closer contact with and input from communities enabled the revolutionary cadres to access traditional repositories of democracy dormant within communal practices and institutions. The by-product of this process was that the liberation movements started to exercise a form of decision-making based on deliberation long before proclaiming autonomy. Thus, democratic decision-making became part of the modus operandi of the movements, rather than being solely the end product of the political struggle for liberation. On the other hand, the emergence of autonomous women's organisations within the liberation movements ushered in a political culture that prioritised autonomy over sovereignty as the foundational political principle. Ultimately, a form of government based on communal autonomy and control over natural resources, self-defence, public freedom, women's emancipation, and direct democracy has taken shape, culminating in the establishment of council autonomies. In the face of these developments, democratic theory must engage non-Western traditions of and experiments with democracy to account for their contributions.

Funding

Acknowledgements

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