

REVIEW OF  
*NEW WORLD  
 ACADEMY  
 READER #5:  
 STATELESS  
 DEMOCRACY*  
**EDITED BY  
 RENÉE IN  
 DER MAUR  
 AND JONAS  
 STAAL,**  
 IN DIA-  
 LOGUE WITH  
 DILAR DIRIK  
 AND THE  
 KURDISH

WOMEN'S  
 MOVEMENT  
 (BAK—  
 BASIS VOOR  
 ACTUELE  
 KUNST, 2015)

Sardar Saadi

According to recent classification  
 Kurds belong to the species of birds  
 Look at them. Here they are! On the slowly  
 disappearing and torn pages of history  
 They are the migrants that are only recognized  
 over the long distances their caravans travel.<sup>1</sup>  
 (249)

A tiny region of the Middle East has come to fascinate the world; it is called Rojava (meaning “west” in Kurdish, as in the West of Kurdistan), located north and northeast of Syria alongside the Turkish border. This fascination comes from a “genuine revolution,” as David Graeber<sup>2</sup> calls it, that has been unfolding there since July 2012, amid war and turmoil in Syria and the wider Middle East region. However, it was only during the outstanding resistance of the people of Kobane that the world heard of this revolution. Rojava’s alternative of democratic self-rule with a strong emphasis on gender liberation seems like it could have only existed in the imagination, considering the chaotic situation of the ongoing civil war in Syria, as well as the historical context of centuries of harsh authoritarian and patriarchal rule in the region. But Rojava’s revolution exhibited a different politics that rejects oppressive rituals by providing a working pattern

of coexistence for the ethnic and religious groups of the area. Indeed, it proposes an alternative of radical democracy and emancipatory politics against the dominating global system of power and capital.

Since Kobane's resistance against the Islamic State's brutal attacks, many journalists, scholars, and activists have talked and written about Rojava and the Kurdish movement; yet, the true voices of these revolutionaries were not much reflected. *Stateless Democracy* provides a space for these voices to be heard. It is an edited volume that consists of firsthand activist accounts of the revolution, with a focus on the Kurdish women's movement, along with some key texts to give an inside reading of the foundations of the Rojava revolution. The book is structured to show the many sides of the turn in the Kurdish movement toward "direct democracy, gender equality, and sustainable ecology" (12), which rejects seizing the state power and rather aims to establish a "stateless democracy" with a particular focus on the political, historical, and aesthetic dimensions of the Kurdish women's struggle. Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal emphasize in their introduction that "[s]tateless democracy proposes a concrete aesthetic and ethical engagement that does not await the promise of a better future, but claims autonomy through practice in the here and now. It does not outsource its demand to a future that might never come, but dedicates our shared present to the creation of a new world." (23–24)

The first chapter provides an overall political and historical background of the Kurdish movement. In the first chapter, "Living without Approval," Staal interviews Dilar Dirik, a Kurdish activist and PhD student at the University of Cambridge who has been an outspoken and important voice for the Kurdish women's movement and Rojava revolution in the West, especially during Kobane's resistance. This interview revolves around the Kurdish women's movement and also offers a critical reading of the historical and socio-political roots of the current stage of both the Kurdish freedom movement and the overall living conditions of Kurds in the countries they have been divided into. In

the interview, readers can grasp an elaborate understanding of the social and political system of Rojava, especially with regards to women's participation in the revolution.

The next three chapters offer three close accounts of the Kurdish women's movement from the perspective of three Kurdish women activists. These activists have long been part of the women's struggle, and the ways in which they portray their movement provide a rich and insightful account of it. First, Havin Güneşer contextualizes the rise of the Kurdish women's movement within the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) through a historical review of the fight against patriarchy and sexism while being part of a liberation struggle. Next, Zilan Diyar, a Kurdish woman guerilla fighter, takes a critical look on the ways in which the Kurdish women's movement has been portrayed by the Western mainstream media. As well as an in-depth critique, Diyar's article is also an emotionally moving piece from someone belonging to a movement with a forty-year history that has only now been noticed: "I wonder how they came to be so late in hearing the voices of the many valiant women who expanded the borders of courage, belief, patience, hope, and beauty. I do not want to complain too much. Perhaps our eras just did not match." (75) And Gönül Kaya's piece investigates new theoretical endeavours in the Kurdish women's movement, such as "jineology," a Kurdish term coined for what Kaya calls the "science of women." Jineology is grounded in decades of ideological discussion and practical experience of the Kurdish women's struggle. She calls it an attempt in the "creation of a women's paradigm, [...] a necessary strategy towards overcoming the prevailing, dominant system of the field of science and constructing an alternative system of science liberated from sexism." (86)

The most important factor in the beginning of a new era in Kurdish politics was the ideological shift occurring within the Kurdish movement. The PKK went through a major transformation in which the political language of the group began to use the discourse of "radical democracy" and "democratic autonomy," replacing their former Marxist-Leninist discourse. Contributors Ahmet

Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden explain this shift, arguing that "the PKK reinvented itself ideologically through this transformation, and gave shape to new forms of politics on the basis of an exploration of the concept of democracy." (161) According to Akkaya and Jongerden, Abdullah Öcalan,<sup>3</sup> through this ideological shift, began to promote the project of radical democracy in which liberation is not achieved by employing the means of "state-building," but rather through "deepening democracy" and building democratic community organizations.

Three foundational texts are also included in this book in order to understand this shift in the Kurdish freedom movement and Rojava revolution. Murray Bookchin's article "The Meaning of Confederalism" provides the theoretical basis for Öcalan's key text "Democratic Confederalism," a concept elucidated in Öcalan's prison writings and inspired by Bookchin's theory of libertarian communalism and confederalism. Öcalan, in the section where he lists the principles of this concept, asserts that "in the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by the capitalist system and its imperial powers, as these only damage democracy. The propagation of grassroots democracy is fundamental. It is the only approach that can cope with diverse ethnical groups, religions, and class differences. It also goes well together with the traditional confederate structure of society." (107) The third key text of this book is "The Social Contract,"<sup>4</sup> a foundational text of Rojava's autonomous cantons and a historic breakthrough in the region in terms of the democratic principles that guide social and political life. Indeed, Öcalan's project of democratic confederalism in the Middle East has been realized and implemented in Rojava through this charter. An early paragraph of the preamble to the Contract states: "In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity, and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples' right to self-determination." (133)

The later chapters of this book are mainly coming from the perspective of academics and activists who have been involved in solidarity work with Rojava revolution in one way or another. An interview with David Graeber and a chapter by Janet Biehl—both have been vocal voices in their support for Rojava—are among these chapters. Graeber and Biehl were part of a group of academics, students, and activists from Europe and North America who visited Rojava in December 2014. The book is decorated with lively pictures from different spheres of everyday life in Rojava taken by Jonas Staal. These pictures are originally part of a photo series of Staal called *Anatomy of a Revolution – Rojava*.

With the current chaos on the hands of Islamic fundamentalist groups, authoritarian regimes and imperialist interventions in the Middle East region, Rojava's experience has given a glimpse of hope of what a possible future for the people of the region could look like. There is a long and difficult journey ahead. It is important to recognize the resilience and strength of the Kurdish resistance and in particular the Kurdish women's movement in their long history of struggle. As Zilan Diyar says, this struggle's "calendar did not run parallel to the world's calendar" (77), and it awaits our solidarity. *Stateless Democracy*, the fifth edition of the *New World Academy* series by Renée In der Maur and Jonas Staal, has concrete and comprehensive answers for many questions about the Kurdish self-determination movement and the Rojava revolution. Most importantly, it inspires the reader to advance a politics of solidarity with Rojava that is historicized and acknowledges the real voices of the Kurdish women's resistance.

**1** All the quotations in this review are from the book, *Stateless Democracy* (Utrecht: BAK—basis voor actuele kunst, 2015).

**2** David Graeber is a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics.

**3** Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) who has been imprisoned on İmralı Island since 1999.

**4** You can find *The Social Contract* of Rojava cantons in Syria at: [civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons](http://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons).