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TITOLO/TITLE: Kurdish Rojava, Autonomous Administration of North East Syria: propaganda or successful institutional experiment?

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s: DAVIDE GRASSO (INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE – TURIN), ANDREA NOVELLIS (UNIVERSITY OF MILAN)

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Kurdish Rojava, Autonomous Administration of North East Syria: propaganda or successful institutional experiment?

The Syrian conflict is often portrayed by the media as an incomprehensible chaos, completely dependent on the sectarian logic of domestic and international propaganda. The dynamics of violence that affect the country are either explained as state repression against often not better qualified 'rebels', or as a product of ineradicable 'cultural', linguistic or sectarian tensions. As a result, the Syrian crisis is largely deprived of its irreducible political nature. An example of this is an apparently eccentric actor who has been in the media for years: 'the Kurds'. Whereas the notions of 'rebels' or 'Syrian opposition' retain the semblance of even the slightest political appeal, 'the Kurds' would have entered the conflict as a 'people' or 'nation', on the basis of a protagonism implicitly presented as unitary and merely ethnolinguistic.

Academic research has brought much more complexity to light, showing the intersection of identity, political, economic, and international factors interacting in the Syrian conflict and underlying the phenomena of sectarianism (e.g. Phillips, 2015; Hinnebusch, 2020). Especially since 2016, research from academic scholars, activists, and humanitarians confirm this dynamic regarding the specific case of the Kurds. The Syrian Kurdish community is crossed by political divisions as any other: not all the population feels represented by the civil and military institutions promoted since 2012 by groups linked to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and other entities such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and minor Islamist groups are also relevant (Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, 2019). Moreover, the majority of the population living under the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES, created in 2019) is now predominantly Arab, not Kurdish, and includes significant Syriac, Turkmen, Armenian, and Yazidi components. All these ethno-linguistic and religious components seem to take a differentiated, ambivalent or contradictory attitude towards AANES, ranging from enthusiastic adherence to armed hostility (Gurbuz, 2018; Dinc, 2020; Schmidinger, 2020).

Notwithstanding, scholarship on the nature of the AANES political experiment is highly polarized as well. On the one hand, some scholars describe the Autonomous Administration as the only stable and inclusive political entity in Syria (Ayboga, Flach and Knapp, 2016; Knapp and Jongerden, 2016; Duman, 2017; Jongerden, 2019; Burç, 2020; Dirik, 2021). Other observers idealize its characteristics, with inaccurate depictions of the role of the Democratic Union Party, or decontextualizing the political role of women in the Pyd and other structures (as discussed in Cemgil and Hoffmann, 2016; Tank, 2017; Ferreira and Santiago, 2018; Shahvisi, 2021; Şimşek and Jongerden, 2021). On the other hand, some considered the Autonomous Administration as the authoritarian outcome of a violent process of power centralization (De Jong, 2015; Clark, 2016; Khalaf, 2016; Leezenberg, 2016; Kaya and Lowe, 2017; Özçelik, 2019). This approach has sometimes led to forms of demonization of the Syrian Kurdish left and of its allies, partly informed by political perspectives that consider the AANES as an ethnic based dictatorship or as mere proxy of the Syrian regime or of the USA (Savelsberg, 2014; Balanche, 2018; Oktav et al., 2018).

However, such polarized views on the Autonomous Administration shows the phenomenon's complexity. Indeed, rebel groups trying to instate a new government system "enter a complex socio-political field and must compete with the power and authority of existing actors, norms, traditions and structures" (Worrall, 2017; cfr. Rasit, 2021). Likewise, the AANES's institution making process brought about significant changes and conflicts regarding the ordering of local Syrian society and politics. For these reasons, the Panel aims to go beyond one-sided interpretations, idealizations and demonizations of the institutional innovations emerging from the Middle East; and aims at highlighting the political and ideological - rather than merely sectarian - nature of conflicts within them. In line with the recent academic contribution from Middle Eastern and Conflict Studies,

the panel encourages socio-political, juridical and institutional analyses rather than interpretations informed only by military or international relations' perspectives.

Paper proposals may include research on the institutional and political nature of the Autonomous Administration, its social, cultural, economic and educational policies, its diplomatic strategy, the internal organization and activities of its political parties and institutions, and the role of the other actors in the area (such as, but not limited to, the Kurdish National Council KNC, the Arab and Assyrian or Armenian tribes, the Syrian regime, and the other state and non-state actors involved). Proposals presenting findings based on field research, primary sources and academic literature will be especially welcome.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Abstracts:

1) Ingroup, outgroup, or ally? An inquiry on the identity content of the People's Protection Units (YPG) supporters on social media (Arda Bilgen)

Since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, the YPG) has been one of the most notable groups in Syria. The group has become increasingly known especially after playing a significant role in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and, later on, declaring autonomy in northern Syria in 2014. While various political, economic, and social dimensions of the Rojava struggle and of the YPG have been examined within a wide array of fields, the group and its identity have not been adequately examined through a social-psychological lens thus far. In this study, we seek to fill this gap by examining how YPG supporters represent, understand, and express the identity and behaviour of their own group and their adversaries on social media, particularly on Twitter. In light of social identity theory, we explore YPG supporters' (1) ingroup representations (both ingroup members and allies), (2) ingroup social norms, (3) outgroup representations, and (4) outgroup social norms. Thus, we not only present the first empirical study in this regard, but also discuss the meanings of identity content and social norms in relation to the processes of mobilization and solidarity among YPG supporters.

2) 'Rojava': Evolving Public Discourse of Kurdish Identity and Governance (Thomas McGee)

The Syrian conflict has contributed to major debates in media, culture and politics around transitions linked to borders, ethnicity and identity. Against this backdrop, this paper explores use of the keyword 'Rojava' to refer to Kurdish-majority areas in the country. It examines the term's changing meanings and usage against the evolving backdrop of the governance project led by Kurds since the post-2011 power vacuum in North(eastern) Syria. The paper identifies how the term has been both operationalized and later abandoned and replaced by other nomenclature, while highlighting the implications of these changes on public and political discourse. The term 'Rojava' traces its origins to the context of (pan-)Kurdish nationalism, with its literal meaning of 'western' (Kurdistan) implying a notion of trans-border Kurdish identity. From this point of departure, the author considers how it has been popularized in anarchist/western solidarity circles as well as through international media in expressions such as the 'Rojava experiment' and 'Rojava Revolution'. The paper unpacks how it has become shorthand in western media for an ideology of women's liberation and leftist grassroots governance, as well as considering the term's less favorable reception in the Arab press where the word 'Rojava' itself is treated as a foreign - sometimes threatening - concept.

Finally, the paper presents how from 2016 the Kurdish-led authorities in this region of Syria sought to formally distance themselves from the term they had introduced due to *realpolitik* imperatives to re-brand their governance project under the 'Syrian Democratic' banner when incorporating non-Kurdish-majority territories (Raqqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Menbij). In the context of its official abandonment, the term has nonetheless retained currency in media as well as popular every-day contexts among Kurds on street-level

3) The geopolitics of Turkey's Kurdish question (Can Cemgil)

As the Turkish state once again took the militarised path in dealing with its longstanding Kurdish question, discussions arose as to whether this indicated a geopolitical turn. In response to these debates, the present chapter argues that Turkey's Kurdish question has always been geopolitical, both in the conventional geopolitical sense, but more so when geopolitics is broadly construed as the dialectic of spatialisation strategies of a multiplicity of social actors. The paper further contextualizes the current geopolitics of Turkey's Kurdish question in the broader strategies of reproduction of the Erdoğan administration whose political survival became dependent on a power-sharing coalition with the ultranationalists resulting in a more assertive anti-Kurdish position domestically and abroad. It concludes that the international or the geopolitical dimension of Turkey's Kurdish question is not simply a matter of context, but a constitutive element of the matter itself.

4) Le rapport de force entre le mouvement des femmes kurdes au Rojava et son leader masculin charismatique (Somayeh Rostampour)

L'idéologie reste une dimension clé pour la compréhension de l'espace politique kurde de Rojava qui est « le laboratoire des théories du PKK », comme le précise l'un de nos interviewés. L'impact d'Abdolah Öcalan, l'idéologue et le leader politique emblématique et charismatique kurde sur l'ensemble du mouvement du PYD au Rojava et dans la détermination de son idéologie et de ses objectifs a été souligné par la plupart des chercheurs qui se sont penchés sur ce point. Nous retrouvons sa photo dans toutes les rues publiques, les bureaux officiels et administratifs, même quelques petits et grands magasins, écoles et établissements d'enseignement, et presque partout où il y a un contrôle du parti au pouvoir. Les livres pour enfants regorgent de phrases et de pensées d'Öcalan. Les idées d'Öcalan sont également devenues l'agenda pratique du mouvement des femmes qui les a matérialisées autour de la Jineolojî, et ont contribué à la transformation des rapports de genre au Rojava. Dans la faculté des Sciences Sociales au Rojava, une des disciplines des études est la Jineolojî dont le contenu est principalement composé des livres d'Öcalan qui sont étudiés comme source majeure. Après 1999, tous les écrits d'Öcalan parlent constamment de la libération des femmes. Il annonce que « les solutions à tous les problèmes sociaux au Moyen-Orient devraient être axées sur la position de la femme » et que « le niveau de liberté et d'égalité de la femme détermine la liberté et l'égalité de toutes les couches de la société ». Ces déclarations ont été théorisées et ont ouvert la voie à des transformations importantes dans le mouvement et au-delà.

En ce sens, nous ne pouvons échapper à l'appréciation du fait que c'est un leader masculin qui invite les femmes à participer, à se libérer et à construire des organisations autonomes féminines non-mixtes et une pensée propre. Nous pouvons donc nous poser la question du « positionnement » et celle de la « légitimité » : que dire de l'homme qui se présente comme un « porte-parole neutre démasculinisé » des femmes d'un mouvement politico-social et armé ? À quel genre de limite peut-on être confronté quand un homme veut être le théoricien de la question des femmes ou le leader de leur mouvement ? Qu'en est-il alors des recherches féministes dans le travail d'Öcalan et dans la Jineolojî ? Quel type d'appropriation de la pensée d'Öcalan les membres poursuivent-elles au Rojava ? Quelles formes de rapports sociaux de sexe et d'interactions hiérarchiques sont impliquées dans ce processus en produisant la Jineolojî considérée comme un savoir propre-locale des femmes ?

Ainsi, d'un côté il s'agit d'un « émetteur » masculin (Öcalan) qui émet le discours et de l'autre côté des récepteurs qui construisent leurs subjectivités en appliquant cette idéologie et en lisant les textes de l'émetteur dans leur propre expérience. Bien qu'il y ait à la fois « continuité » et « discontinuité » avec ses pensées dans la « pratique » des femmes au Rojava, la nécessité de se concentrer sur son discours dominant au niveau théorique en considérant son statut charismatique, nous semble pertinent afin de pouvoir comprendre les rapports sociaux de force dans lesquels s'inscrivent les productions théoriques et pratiques des femmes kurdes. Ainsi, à partir d'une approche féministe critique, nous essayerons de mettre en lumière la façon dont peut se déployer le charisme intellectuel et symbolique d'Öcalan, dans ses aspects parfois contradictoires. Nous nous focaliserons tout particulièrement sur les rapports sociaux de sexe impliqués dans cette construction du leadership premièrement produit en Kurdistan de la Turquie, transmit ensuite au Rojava. Pour atteindre un tel objectif, il est essentiel d'aborder à la fois les idées principales d'Öcalan, mais aussi d'analyser l'impact de sa position dominante au sein du mouvement kurde – les deux étant difficilement séparables dans notre cas - sur

les rapports sociaux de sexe dans la pratique militante et sur le discours du mouvement des femmes kurdes au Rojava.

Bien que cette partie de la thèse ne soit en aucun cas une étude exhaustive de tous les travaux d'Öcalan ou de tous les écrits de la Jineolojî, nous synthétisons certaines des tensions et des débats afin d'esquisser une approche de la Jineolojî qui s'occupe de la complexité de la formation du sujet et du pouvoir lorsqu'il s'agit de la question du genre. Dans cette perspective, il nous semble particulièrement utile d'étudier les discours et les pratiques tenant d'une idéalisation de la politique féministe développée par le mouvement kurde d'un côté parallèlement aux contre-discours visant à diaboliser et à discréditer l'expérience théorique et démocratique kurde au nom d'intérêts stratégiques invalides ou d'autoritarisme du leader de manière simpliste de l'autre côté.

D'après cette recherche, loin d'être un simple culte de la personnalité ou un individualisme de pouvoir, la prédominance du leader masculin s'explique par un ensemble complexe de processus sociaux et politiques et un contexte de guerre favorisant une figure paternelle. Or, cette voix dominante peut autant empêcher d'entendre les voix différentes et marginales des femmes kurdes qui ne partagent pas exactement son point de vue sur la question de genre. Dans un contexte de conflit asymétrique, il n'est pas rare de voir émerger des mouvements survalorisant un père charismatique, alors que les nécessités de la lutte armée et de l'organisation de masse qui lui est associée ont tendance à marginaliser certaines pratiques démocratiques, comme celles concernant les luttes des femmes.

Toutefois, c'est important à souligner que selon cette recherche, il n'y a pas que le PKK qui apporte des arguments à la Jineolojî ; cette dernière a également imposé une féminisation et une démocratisation de la théorie générale du mouvement en développant de plus en plus les concepts et pratiques liés à l'égalité des sexes et en faveur des femmes. En effet, il ne faut pas sous-estimer que les expériences de lutte des femmes ont grandement affecté la sphère intellectuelle du ou des leader(s) kurde(s) dont a hérité le mouvement kurde du Rojava depuis 2012 ; les idées d'Öcalan sur les femmes sont fortement nourries par les voix d'une génération combattante de femmes kurdes telles que Sakine Cansiz, cofondatrice du PKK et figure légendaire qui a survécu à des années de torture dans les prisons dans les années 1980. En plus, la reformulation des cadres théoriques du mouvement kurde est surtout basée sur l'expérience des femmes kurdes, leur lutte permanente et leur pratiques égalitaires de genre pendant des décennies au sein de l'organisation de manière parallèle dans la société civile. D'après ces éléments, la Jineolojî comme synthèse du discours sur les femmes, construisant à travers l'interaction entre les différents acteurs, doit être pensée comme l'aboutissement du long processus de maturation au sein du mouvement kurde dans un jeu d'échos et de dialogues entre les montagnes, la prison d'Imrali et la sphère civile kurde.

5) **Self-ownership and the Socio-Cultural "Capital" of Kurdish Women in Rojava (Kaziwa Salih)**

Since 2014, the world has witnessed the active roles of Kurdish women fighters in the armed conflict against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In interviews with the mainstream media, Kurdish women fighters often declare that the structure of their organization was formed in accordance with Kurdish society. In fact, this article argues, not only these warriors, but Kurdish women in Rojava have transformed women's identity from its historical roots in a distinctive manner by creating new horizons for female personification in a globalized society. The paper argues that the dispositions of women in Rojava have engendered a new epistemic social ecology and cultural spaces. They embody self-ownership as a form of freeing themselves from the paternal-patriarchal society of the Middle East, and "the patriarchy of the Western liberalism" (Pateman, 2002). This article demonstrates how they created a new model of democracy and made significant impacts by increasing women's social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991, 1989,1977) within Kurdish society, which should be considered a unique model in the world.

INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:

Chair: Andrea Novellis (University of Milan – andrea.novellis@unimi.it)

Discussant: Davide Grasso (International University College of Turin - dgrasso@iuctorino.it)

Paper presenters :

1) Arda Bilgen (University of Warwick - ardabilgen@gmail.com)

2) Thomas McGee (University of Melbourne - tmcgee@student.unimelb.edu.au)

- 3) Can Cemgil (Bilgi University - can.cemgil@bilgi.edu.tr)
- 4) Somayeh Rostampour (University of Reims - rostampour.soma@gmail.com)
- 5) Kaziwa Salih (Universiy of Oslo & Jagellonian University - kaziwasalih12@gmail.com)