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Making the revolution intelligible, rendering political imaginations unthinkable: A postcolonial reading of British and American media representations of Rojava

Cihan Erdost Akin[1]

Abstract

Although the gendered media portrayal of female Kurdish fighters has drawn academic attention, the representation of the socio-political model of Rojava by the British and American media is often neglected. This paper surveys the British and American media to understand the kinds of opinions found in the media, the discursive means that make the Rojava model intelligible, and what is rendered either commonsensical or unimaginable. The Rojava project is framed as "a separatist rebellion", "an experiment", and "a genuine social revolution". By excluding the anti-capitalist and ecological principles of Rojava, and either dismissing or romanticising its achievements, these discourses render an alternative to capitalism and the nation-state unthinkable, and reproduce Orientalist images of the region, thus serving capitalist and imperialist interests. This study suggests that we should pay more attention to socio-political imaginations and representations of non-state paradigms in order to understand the hegemony of the state.

Keywords: Rojava; socio-political imaginations; critical discourse analysis; postcolonialism; representation

Abstract in Kurmanji

Fehmbarkirina şoreşê, pêşkêşkirina nemumkiniya tesewira polîtîk: Xwendineke postkolonyal a temsîlên Rojava di medyaya Brîtanya û Amerîkayê de

Li hember teswîra zayendî ya şervanên kurd ên jin ku gelek bala akademiyê kişandiye, temsîla modela sosyo-polîtîk a Rojava ji teref medyaya brîtanyayî û emerîkî ve pirî caran hate paşguhkirin. Ev nivîs li medyaya brîtanyayî û emerîkî dinêre da ku cureyên fikrên di medyayê de, amûrên vegotinê yên ku modela Rojavayê fehmbar dikin vebikole û fehm bike ka çi û çiqas beraqil an jî nexeyalbar tê pêşkêşkirin. Projeya Rojava, weke "serhildaneke cudaxwaz", "ceribandek" û "şoreşeke civakî ya resen" tê resmkirin. Bi derkirina prensîbên dij-kapîtalîst û ekolojîk yên Rojava û bi paşguhkirin an jî romantîzekirina destkeftên wê, ev dîskûr nemumkiniya alternatîfa kapîtalîzmê û netewe-dewletê îfade dikin û wêneyekî Oryantalîst ya herêmê diafirînin ku xizmeta berjewendiyên kapîtalîst û emperyalîst

[1] Cihan Erdost Akin, Central European University, Department of International Relations, Nador u. 9, Budapest, 1051, Hungary. E-mail: cerdostakin@gmail.com.

dike. Ev xebat pêşniyar dike ku divê em bêtir bala xwe bidin tesewirên sosyo-polîtîk û temsîlên paradîgmaya ne-dewlet ji bo fehmkirina hegemonyaya dewletê.

Abstract in Sorani

Be têgeyandin kirdnî şorrş, bê mana kirdnî endêşe syasîyekan: Xwêndneweyekî postkolonyalaney wênakirdnî mîdyay berîtanî û emrîkî bo rojawa

Egerçî wêne mîdyayye cênderekanî jne şervanekanî kurd sernicî ekadîmîyekanî rakêşawe, zorcar wênakirdnî modêlî syasî-cvakî rojava lelayen mîdyay berîtanî û emrîkayewe feramoşkrawe. Bo têgeyîştin lew bîruboçunaney le mîdyakanda bedî dekrêt, em babete rumallêkî mîdyay berîtanî û emrîkî dekat, amraze gutarîyekan ke modêlî rojava bê mana deken û yan wek ştêkî asayî yan xeyallî dexrête rû . Projey rojava xrawete çwarçîwey "yaxîbunêkî cudaxwazî", "ezmunêk" we "şorşêkî rasteqîney komellayetî". Be wedernanî bnema dje-sermayedarî û îkolojîyekanî rojava, we yan be nadîdekirdin û romantîkirdnî deskewtekan, em gutarane bedîlêk bo sermayedarî û dewllet-netewe dexate derewey bîrkirdnewe. Em twêjîneweye pêşnyar dekat ke bo ewey le hejmûnî dewllet têbgeyn, pêwîste bayexî zyatir be endêşey syasî-cvakî û nwênerayetîkrinî paradaymî nadewlletî bdeyn.

Abstract in Zazaki

Şoreşî dayîşfehmkerdiş, fikranê sîyasîyan nêdayîşfikirîyayîş: Medyaya Brîtanya û Amerîka de temsîlê Rojawanî ser o wendişêko postkolonîyalîst

Herçiqas ke nawitişê medyaya cinsîyetperwere de rolê şêrvananê cinîkanê kurdan bala akademîkan ante, modelê komel û sîyasetê Rojawanî zafê reyan hetê medyaya Brîtanya û Amerîka ra peygoş bî. Na meqale qayîtê medyaya Brîtanya û Amerîka kena ke wina tede qeneatê ci yê cîya-cîyayî, usûlê munaqeşeyî yê îzahkerdişê modelê Rojawanî û çîyê bimantiqkerde yan zî nefikrbarî fehm bibê. Projeyê Rojawanî sey "serewedaritişo cîyaker", "ceribnayîş" û "şoreşê komelî yo raştikên" name beno. Bi îhmalkerdişê prensîpanê Rojawanî yê antîkapîtalîst û ekolojîkan û bi redkerdiş yan zî romantîzekerdişê serkewtişanê ci, nê munaqeşeyî alternatîfê kapîtalîzm û dewleta netewe nêdanê fikirîyayene. Wina herêm ra resimo oryantalîst yeno xêzkerdene ke menfeatanê kapîtalîst û emperyalîstan rê fayde dano. No cigêrayîş pêşnîyaz keno ke ma hîna zaf bala xo bidîme fikranê komelkî û sîyasîyan û estbîyayîşê paradîgmayanê nedewlete ser ke bandura dewlete fehm bikerîme.

Introduction

Since the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD) officially announced the regional autonomy of Rojava in Northern Syria in 2014, the Rojava project has been attracting extensive media and scholarly attention.[2] The British and American media in particular seem to be fascinated by the Kurdish female fighters, the improvement in gender relations in the region,

[2] The situation in Rojava is often referred to as the Rojava revolution, the Rojava project, the Rojava experiment, etc. The Rojava experiment and the Rojava revolution are among the frames that this paper analyses. In order to prevent confusions, and to distance myself from the discourses I analyse, I avoid using "Rojava revolution" as much as possible. Instead, I employ the term "Rojava project" to refer to the social, economic, political, ideological, and administrative structures in Rojava. I use "Rojava revolution" in contexts where the author of a text uses the term revolution. I use "Rojava" alone to refer to the geographical area.

and the exercise of direct democracy. The gendered representation of Kurdish women has been heavily criticised by Kurdish activists, female fighters, and feminist scholars. This portrayal has drawn considerable attention and has been criticised for glorifying women at the expense of their political and ideological goals and motivations (Alkan, 2018; Dean, 2019; Dirik, 2014; Szanto, 2016; Toivanen & Baser, 2016). Yet the representation of the Rojava project, specifically its social, political and economic model, and its ideological underpinnings, remains unexamined. Despite its flaws, Rojava's model of stateless self-governance, and ecological and anti-capitalist economy stands as an alternative to the hegemony of the nation-state. Furthermore, the ideological pillars of the Rojava project are rooted in Mesopotamian culture and history. Therefore, an analysis of British and American media representation contributes to the understanding of how socio-political imaginations of the state and capitalism are reproduced or challenged, as well as how they are made intelligible to a non-Western audience.

While the representation of the Rojava model in British and American media is understudied, there is a considerable amount of studies focusing on various aspects of the Rojava project. Empirically, scholarly attention has focused on the conditions that made the revolution possible (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016), the administrative system and model of governance of Rojava (Cemgil, 2016; Knapp & Jongerden, 2014; Knapp, Ayboga, & Flach, 2016), and the role of women and their agency (Bengio, 2016; Dirik, 2018; Isik, 2016; Knapp, Ayboga, & Flach, 2016; Szanto, 2016). These studies both introduce the Rojava project and the Kurdish political movement in Turkey to a Western audience and celebrate the project for breaking away from the nation-state structure, exercising direct democracy through a system of local assemblies, and empowering women. Others criticise Western academia for celebrating the ideas of stateless governance and radical democracy without a critical eye (Leezenberg, 2016). Although the more critical voices do not dismiss the Rojava model altogether, they are cautious regarding the signs of nationalism, the emergence of state structures, and the strong cult of personality around Abdullah Öcalan, the founder and ideological leader of the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) (Leezenberg, 2016; Moberg, 2016).

On the theoretical level, Öcalan's writings have been conceptually examined and compared with Murray Bookchin (Barkhoda, 2016; Krajeski, 2015; Leezenberg, 2016). Inconsistencies in Öcalan's principles have also been highlighted (Leezenberg, 2016). Particularly the administrative model of Rojava has been under theoretical scrutiny, and this has led to rethinking certain concepts, such as democracy and the political subject (Dirik, 2018; Hosseini, 2016; Knapp & Jongerden, 2014). The stateless, decentralised, and

self-governing democratic model of Rojava is lauded by many commentators for standing as an alternative model to capitalist modernity and the nation-state (B., 2016; Cemgil, 2016; Dirik, 2018; Hosseini, 2016), and for creating a conscious political subject or active citizen (Dirik, 2018; Hosseini, 2016; Knapp & Jongerden, 2014). Despite efforts to conceptualise alternative, growth-based economies, capitalism and the nation-state continue to be widely considered commonsensical and inevitable in today's world. This hegemonic nature of capitalism and the nation-state prevents socio-political imaginations of an alternative model from flourishing. Against this background, "Rojava as an alternative model" is an important concept that requires further scrutiny.

This paper studies journalistic coverage and opinion pieces that are given space in the British and American media, examines how the Rojava project is understood and represented and analyses the texts' ideological and political underpinnings and implications. Specific attention is given to what is included and excluded in the discourse, how the model of Rojava is rendered intelligible, and how this relates to imaginations of the nation-state and capitalism and their alternatives. In that sense, this paper is more concerned with knowledge production than journalistic media representation. The public's access to knowledge on Rojava relies more on mass media than academic sources. As Norman Fairclough (1989) argues, mass media has power over knowledge production, deciding what to include or exclude, and how exactly events are framed and represented. Therefore, media has a crucial role in the regulation of what is thinkable, imaginable, viable, or legitimate. In order to analyse how the Rojava project is framed, what is included and excluded, and how it is made intelligible, I employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1989; 1993; 1995). A postcolonial lens accompanies CDA to make sense of the discourses.

There are three distinct themes that frame the Rojava project: "Rojava as a separatist rebellion", "Rojava as an experiment", and "Rojava as a genuine social revolution". The Rojava project is often made intelligible by references to Western experiences and knowledge or by putting it in binary contrast to Orientalist and stereotypical imaginations of a despotic and barbaric Middle East. Achievements of the project are also either dismissed or romanticised; therefore, a nuanced understanding of the Rojava project is lacking in many cases.[3] Furthermore, while the stateless governing structures and improvements in gender relations are celebrated, the economic and ecological principles are often excluded. In short, these discourses contribute to rendering alternatives to growth-based capitalism unimaginable, while reproducing a certain social imaginary of the Middle East. The main

[3] Articles published in 2019 after the Turkish invasion seem to be more balanced and critical.

motivation and contribution of this paper is empirical, yet the analysis of the data suggests that we need to pay more attention to the imagination and representation of non-state and non-capitalist paradigms in order to understand how ideas of the state and capitalism as natural and inevitable are reproduced.

Socio-political imaginations and intelligibility

What I mean by socio-political imaginations and intelligibility in this paper needs further clarification since I use these terms in a particular way. To begin with, although Benedict Anderson's (1983) formulation of the nation as an "imagined community" stems from a canonical text that cannot be ignored, the main focus of this paper is the nation-state and economic models rather than the nation. The state is often taken for granted as an object of political analysis while what the state *is* remains unclear (Abrams, 1988). The state is also conceptualised as a fantasy (Navaro-Yashin, 2002) or a mask that hides class power and legitimises an illusion (Abrams, 1988). Such conceptualisations have led scholars to study how the state is imagined and how these imaginations are constantly reproduced through textual and everyday practices. Although an extensive theory of the state lies outside of the purposes of this paper, I agree with Philip Abrams' (1988) argument that scholars need to demystify the state by "attending to senses in which the state does not exist" (p. 82). One way to do so, which is not discussed by Abrams, is by paying attention to how the idea of the state is imagined, understood, and represented as something commonsensical and inevitable. Another way to understand the reproduction of the idea of the state and to demystify it is by concentrating on imaginations and representations of non-state paradigms.

I use the term socio-political imagination to expand the object of imagination from either the state, nation, or culture to a more holistic understanding. While the nation is understood as an imagined community and the state as a fantasy in the existing literature, "social imaginary" is often equated to "culture" (Taylor, 2002). This can be problematic because it suggests the social imaginary to be, like "culture", homogenous and fixed (Strauss, 2006). Still, social imaginaries and culture are linked, even if not synonymous. Culture shapes social imaginaries while simultaneously being shaped by social imaginaries. However, as Cornelius Castoriadis (1998) notes, imagination has radical values; imaginations can bring new possibilities and horizons. Therefore, social imaginaries do not necessarily have to be as homogenous and static as Taylor assumes. "Creation of new meaning in language", for instance, "can serve as a heuristic model for understanding how social imaginary significations arise and rupture the existing social

code to disclose a new horizon of meaning, a new order of things, a new world" (Gaonkar, 2002: 8).

Considering the political economy of media, "imagination is given unprecedented chances of influencing social life and political landscapes"; representation, on the other hand, is "one of the most crucial ways in which the struggle for people's imagination takes place" (Bottici & Challand, 2012: 4-12). Representation and imagination are inextricably intertwined. The methodological implication of this is that we can study representations to have a better idea of imaginations. I therefore use socio-political imaginations to refer to social, political, and economic models, systems, and structures that are rendered available to us. At the same time, socio-political imaginations also create new horizons (Crapanzano, 2003).

Second, a common understanding of *intelligibility* is the text's capacity to be understood by the audience. Here, I prefer to put emphasis on the text and the author of the text as the active subject rather than the audience. Poststructuralist accounts suggest that particular subjects and objects are linked to one another through opposition, identity, and similarity.[4] As Roxanne Doty (1993) argues, subjects and objects in a text "can be thought of as positions within particular discourses, intelligible only with reference to a specific set of categories, concepts and practices" (p. 303). Particularly when a concept travels across geopolitical realms to audiences not familiar with the term, it matters significantly how the narrator makes the concept intelligible to the audience. This is usually done by using metaphors (Laclau, 2014) and referring to a set of concepts and practices that the audience can relate to.

Putting the emphasis on the author and the text rather than the audience implies that what is rendered imaginable and intelligible in the text is embedded in power relations. The problem occurs when a subjugated subject's (subaltern) knowledge is disregarded or silenced due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices (Spivak, 1994). Such set of experiences and knowledge become "subjugated knowledge", what Foucault (1980) calls "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 81-82). Knowledge coming from outside the West is often treated as subjugated knowledge for not satisfying Western standards and

[4] It is important to note that there is not a single branch or account of poststructuralism. For instance, Roland Barthes (1977) argues that the author is not the prime source of a piece's semantic content, a position known as "the death of the author". I do not deny that texts have multiple meanings. However, semantics also means that we have grammatical and vocabular options to produce meanings. Putting the emphasis on the text and the author means that the analysis is focused on how meaning is produced more than how it is interpreted. This allows the analysis to better examine power relations, including those the author is subject to. Such an approach is also more in line with Critical Discourse Analysis (see methodology section).

values. Spivak (1994) takes this argument further with the concept of epistemic violence which claims that knowledge production in the West serves imperial and capitalist interests. This framework is helpful to make sense of the political implications of knowledge production and representation.

Methodology

The reason behind the decision to focus on mass media in order to analyse socio-political imaginations is the media's significant role in knowledge production due to its rate of consumption. Mass media has a societal function of "providing the consuming public with options for deciding what matters" (Lăzăroiu, 2012). The significance of mass media also rests on its rights over production and decisions as to what to include or exclude, as well as on its capacity to decide how exactly to frame and represent events (Fairclough, 1989). One might question the relevance and importance of mass media in the age of social media. While news consumption has changed, with almost half of all newspapers having moved to digital platforms, people still grant more credibility to news coming from established news sources. Most news circulating on social media still come from established mass media sources. Many traditional newspapers have more readers today via digital means than they had of hard-copy editions in the past. In short, mass media still plays a crucial role in the regulation of the thinkable and imaginable, and in the (re)production or silencing of socio-political imaginations.

In this paper, I have studied more than 50 articles in 7 different British and American newspapers published between 2014 and 2019: *The Guardian*, *Independent*, *Daily Mail*, *BBC, Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times,* and *Fox News*.[5] Although the Rojava revolution is discussed in leftist, socialist, and anarchist blogs and journals, I limited the scope to the mainstream British and American media as they hold a significant role in knowledge production and shaping what is intelligible and imaginable by reaching a wider audience. I have selected these newspapers because first, they are widely read, and second, they occupy different positions on the so-called left-right spectrum. Most of the articles are opinion pieces rather than journalistic coverage. This is due to the fact that the focus of this study is limited by the coverage of the socio-political model of Rojava, and it is mostly opinion

[5] The number of articles is then reduced to 20, which constitutes the core sample and is analyzed in detail. The core sample consists of articles that address the socio-political model of Rojava. Only the articles that are referred to in the text are cited in the references.

pieces that talk about the Rojava model while journalistic coverage tends to report on military updates in the region.[6]

Within British and American media representations, I specifically look at how the Rojava project is understood, how the socio-political model is made intelligible, and what is included and excluded, thus what is rendered (in)visible and (un)imaginable. There are methodological challenges to analyse what is excluded since it is difficult to know what is "really" going on in Rojava. One way to overcome this challenge is to look at the Social Contract of Rojava (the constitution), and Öcalan's writings, which have been highly influential for the Rojava model. However, we need to acknowledge that there are discrepancies between Öcalan's principles and practice in Rojava, and that not everyone feels represented in Rojava. Therefore, whether these discrepancies and the complexity of Rojava are addressed in the narratives is taken into consideration while analysing the data. This also means that there is more focus on (mis)representations of the PYD's ideology than on the "realities" of Rojava.

The analysis of media representations is conducted through thematic analysis and CDA. Thematic analysis helps us to identify the themes or frames in the qualitative data; yet, unlike grounded theory, it is not theoretically bound. Therefore, it is compatible with discourse analysis which is used to deconstruct the identified frames. In CDA, "the term discourse is primarily concerned with language use in social context, particularly with the dialectical relationship between language and society" (Abdullah, 2014: 4). In this paper, discourse refers to contextualised linguistic text through which we express ourselves, as well as experience, know, and make sense of the world. Considering the meaning-making and interpreting functions of language, linguistic forms also have social and ideological functions that (re)produce knowledge and systemic power relations (Fairclough, 1998). By combining a more syntactic-leaning analysis that examines signifiers making up a text (choice of words, grammar, etc.) with the analysis of socio-political and historical context, CDA provides tools to understand, reveal, and problematise power relations and hegemony in texts.

Democratic confederalism and the socio-political model of Rojava

The social contract of Rojava begins by denouncing the nation-state and offering a democratic federal system as the optimal solution. The contract sets out a stateless, communal, and self-autonomous democratic system,

[6] Opinion pieces play a significant role in knowledge production since they are given a space in the newspaper, without necessarily representing the ideology nor editorial policies of the newspaper. Therefore, I avoided giving the names of the newspaper outlets in the body of the text.

ecological balance, and women's freedom as its main guiding principles. It embraces the principles of a "democratic nation" and "democratic confederalism". This section briefly discusses the socio-political model of Rojava and unpacks Öcalan's conceptualisation of democratic confederalism as its ideological underpinning. This is not to imply that everyone in Rojava endorses Öcalan's ideologies, yet the influence of Öcalan especially on the political model is too significant to ignore. Particular attention is given to stateless governance, the ecological and anti-capitalist stance, and women's emancipation. This section concludes that the Rojava model has the potential to be an alternative to the hegemonic political system of nation-states and growth-based capitalist economy; thus, it has a significant role in challenging the existing hegemonic structures, and imagining an alternative to it. However, the Rojava project has theoretical and practical challenges that might reproduce some of the hierarchical structures it criticises.

To begin with, the principles of democratic confederalism that the social contract endorses are rooted in Öcalan's ideologies and his dissatisfaction with the nation-state. Öcalan (2013a) conceptualises the nation-state as having the ultimate monopoly on trade, finance and production, security, ideology, and social processes. He argues that the state is concerned with its own existence; thus, with its hegemonic policies it seeks to accumulate power and capital, and it regulates redistribution as the sole legitimate actor. Öcalan (2013a; 2013b) strongly believes that all kinds of oppression start with the subjugation of women. Building on the premise that women are closer to nature because of their maternal nurturing and caring instincts, Öcalan sees women as better agents for an ecological society where the surplus product is distributed in an egalitarian way. The accumulation of surplus by the institutionalised male and the relegation of domestic labour to the devalorised private sphere make class hierarchy possible. Therefore, total emancipation is not possible without addressing women's slavery.

Öcalan (2013a) argues that private ownership (thus questions of inheritance) led to the demise of the Neolithic primitive socialism that he idealises, and it strengthened anti-democratic institutions like the family, dynasty, and the state. The nation-state needed the bourgeoisie to replace the feudal order. Institutionalisation of this power weaved nation-state and capitalism together. As capitalism is embedded in the nation-state, "exploitation is not only sanctioned by the state but even encouraged and facilitated" (Öcalan, 2013a: 12). Therefore, Öcalan advocates a new model that is outside of the paradigms of the nation-state, sexism, capitalism, and domination over nature.

Against this background, the concept of "democratic confederalism" should be regarded as an attempt to address the aforementioned need for a new model. Democratic confederalism refers to a non-state social paradigm of

self-governance. It is defined in contrast to the nation-state and seeks to provide an alternative to it. The idea is to deconstruct the centralist and linear accumulation and distribution of power that is exemplified in the formation of the nation-state. Instead, it is necessary to advocate for governance through fragmentation rather than administration. The stress is on organising at the local, grassroots level, and on the autonomous nature of the grassroots organisations. Öcalan (2013a) believes that this kind of stateless self-governance can best be achieved through clusters of councils that are multi-structured and strive for unity in diversity.

The rest of this section discusses the socio-political model of Rojava in which Öcalan's influence is observable. It also highlights both practical and theoretical challenges to the Rojava model, as well as Öcalan's ideologies. Firstly, self-governance is implemented by bottom-up organisations of councils, assemblies, and forums starting from the level of neighbourhoods. The base level of the bottom-up organisation is the commune which comprises 30 to 500 households, then the communes constitute the neighbourhood councils. The third level is the district where the communes and neighbourhood councils are represented. Finally, all the district councils constitute the People's Council of West Kurdistan (Demir, 2015; Knapp, Ayboga & Flach, 2016). The higher levels are responsible for coordination rather than "governing". The legitimate authority on decision making resides in lower levels. Each level has eight areas in which commissions function and self-governance takes place; these areas are women, defence, economics, politics, civil society, free society, justice, and ideology. All the residents are encouraged to attend the council meetings as they have the authority to make decisions.

The Rojava model seeks to avoid creating another system that resembles the state by decentralising the decision-making on issues of governance and breaking the state's role in defence and justice. Simultaneously, it seeks to challenge nationalism and exclusion through incorporating diverse groups in decision-making and coordinating bodies. However, despite the laudable efforts of decentralisation, the internal structure of the PKK and PYD, and party pluralism within the ruling coalition in the cantons, undermine the level of democracy that the social contract seeks to promote. Scholars have drawn attention to Jacobin tenets, the strong cult of personality of Öcalan, party vanguardism, and the hegemonic role of the PYD as challenges to the imagined democratic model (Leezenberg, 2016; Moberg, 2016).

Secondly, as the central authority of the state is sought to be avoided by people's assemblies, the monopoly on economy and finance is also challenged by fragmentation and communalisation. Rojava's economic model is often called a need-based, democratised, socialised, or communalised economy (Cemgil, 2016; Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016; Knapp,

Ayboga & Flach, 2016). As these labels indicate, economy, national resources, and land are not nationalised like in "real socialism" but rather socialised through expanding the council/assembly system to the economy. There are numerous cooperatives in various areas of production, from textiles to agriculture. The cooperatives are connected to the council system by law to prevent them from becoming free enterprises. Production is determined based on need, and the needs are defined by the communes (Demir, 2015). The state's control over natural resources is considered despotic; therefore, the belief that guides the economy is that natural resources, like water, land, and energy, belong to the people (Knapp, Ayboga & Flach, 2016).

However, Rojava's economic model is not free from problems. The pre-eminence of security threats and war conditions have a significant impact on the economy. Defence expenditure challenges the economic capacity of Rojava, and the relationship between the accumulation of weapons and vehicles, and capitalism goes unchallenged. Imminent security threats and geopolitical challenges obfuscate debates on challenges to Rojava's economy, such as the existence of parallel structures like capitalist cooperative production, dangers of the oil economy, and what communalised trade would look like if the embargoes lifted (Cemgil, 2016; Demir, 2015). Rojava was producing 15,000 barrels of oil a day in 2015; today the oil trade remains the primary source of economic revenue, but the exact numbers are not disclosed (Enzinna, 2015). Much of the oil trade is conducted with the Assad regime due to the embargo; thus, how a non-capitalist oil trade would look like is unknown. Moreover, the social contract of Rojava allows private property and foreign investment. The compatibility of private property and foreign investments with anti-capitalist and communalised economy remains unaddressed.

Thirdly, the principle of social ecology is taken seriously in Rojava. The social contract highlights the importance of "ecological balance", "ecological society", and "ecological industry". Following the idea that capitalism alienates people from the land and promotes humans' domination over nature, the principle of social ecology and the economic model of Rojava go hand in hand. However, Rojava also faces many environmental challenges. Most of these challenges can be traced back to the policies of the Ba'ath regime as well as Turkey's antagonistic policies. For instance, the Syrian regime left the region impoverished, which led to an increase in burning wood, thus an increase in deforestation. Heavy use of pesticides and monocultures of wheat production for decades have damaged the soil.

Turkey plays a significant role in the limited access to clean water (Knapp, Ayboga & Flach, 2016). Not surprisingly, war conditions have been highly detrimental to the environment. Ecological campaigns have been launched

in Rojava under ecology committees that seek to increase ecological awareness, limit fossil fuel usage, and regulate waste management and reforesting (Neef, 2018). Agricultural cooperatives work closely with ecological committees to pursue ecological and sustainable agricultural production. However, in addition to the legacies of the Ba'ath regime and Turkey, Rojava also faces some ecological challenges due to war conditions and limited capabilities, including for waste disposal, as well as air pollution due to the heavy use of diesel and oil trade and production (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016; Knapp, Ayboga & Flach, 2016).

Lastly, the emancipation and empowerment of women is a key element of the project, and the active role of women can be observed in every aspect of the socio-political model. There is a 40% gender quota in each council and assembly, meaning that in some assemblies, women constitute 60% of the decision-making body (McKernan, 2016). Every decision-making body has to have two chairs: one male, one female. All-female brigades are independent units, yet they can command male brigades. They are formed in line with the principles of self-defence and gender equality. Anyone who wants to join the security forces, or any decision-making body, must take part in training in feminist ideology. Women also have an active and secure role in the economy through women's cooperatives and their participation in communes that define economic needs (Knapp, Ayboga & Flach, 2016).

The Rojava model has a significant role in increased participation of women at every level of self-governance, a decrease in domestic and sexual violence against women, and the recognition of women in the public sphere in a traditionally patriarchal society. The main problem with the feminist elements of the Rojava model resides more in Öcalan's ideologies than the actual practice in Rojava. Öcalan (2013b) operates on the assumption that women are closer to nature, and they represent the power of the organic, natural, and egalitarian society. He highlights women's maternal nurturing and caring "instincts", and their capacity for biological and cultural reproduction. By directly associating women with maternity and natural instincts, he discursively constructs women as an essentialised, rigid ontological unit. The positive connotations he associates with women come from an idealised mother-woman. In this way, women's identities are reduced to motherhood, and a woman's value is tied to their embrace of motherhood. Last but not least, the binary depiction of men and women, and their roles in social and biological reproduction does not accommodate queer and non-binary bodies and subjectivities and suffers from a heteronormative bias.

Framings of the Rojava Project in British and American media

Rojava as a separatist rebellion

One of the dominant discourses in opinion pieces and journalistic coverage of Rojava frames Rojava as a separatist rebellion (Abdulrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016; Abdulrahim, 2017; Nordland, 2018; McKay, 2017; Sinjab, 2016), and the PYD and *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (People's Protection Units, YPG) as the main actors of the rebellion and as terrorist groups.[7] While these pieces raise legitimate concerns about the human rights issues and representation of certain groups in Rojava, they reduce the political goals of the project to territorial expansion and reinforce political organisation based on ethnic lines as the sole and legitimate option. This discursive framing constructs the Rojava model as a security threat, depoliticises the Rojava project and reproduces the idea of the nation-state as the only viable, thinkable, and legitimate option.

To begin with, the declaration and implementation of self-governance are imagined and represented as security threats. Declarations of self-governing administrations are interpreted as attempts of territorial expansion (Abdulrahim, 2017; Abdulrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016; Sinjab, 2016). Some of the policies implemented in Rojava, such as teaching Kurdish in schools, are portrayed as harmful because the country functions in Arabic. Teaching Kurdish is interpreted as a sign that proves that "Kurds are carving out a home" (i.e. a nation-state) within Syria (Abdulrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016). In their opinion piece, Abdulrahim and Nissenbaum (2016) construct this narrative by quoting local dissident voices who argue that "because the regime does it one way, they do it another way just to prove they are a country."

On the one hand, the referent object of security (the object that is threatened) in such narratives is the unity of Syria (Abuldrahim, 2017; Abdulrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016; Sinjab, 2016). Raja Abdulrahim (2017), for instance, accuses the Kurds of using "the campaign against ISIS to carve out their own semi-autonomous region across northern Syria, in the process exacerbating ethnic tensions." In narratives such as this, authors raise their concerns about the "acceleration of Syria's fragmentation" (Abdulrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016) and the "creation of a Kurdish state and splitting the country" (Sinjab, 2016). In other narratives, on the other hand, the referent object is the American order that is threatened by Rojava's alleged Marxist ideology. For example, in an op-ed article, Kyle Orton (2018) links the YPG with the "PKK, a Marxist-leaning Kurdish nationalist organisation," and argues that it was an error to arm the Syrian Kurds. Similarly, journalist Dion Nissenbaum (2015) writes that "Americans expecting a good-versus-evil battle find

[7] This theme seems to have been fading away since the Turkish invasion in October 2019. The post-invasion media coverage focuses on the Kurdish population more than the Rojava project, and frames them as a "betrayed group". Since discussions of the socio-political model of Rojava are absent in these discourses, they lie outside the scope of this paper.

themselves fighting alongside Marxist-inspired guerrillas with close ties to militants Washington calls terrorists" and quotes an American veteran who says: "Don't go! You're not going to fight ISIS. You're fighting for the revolution of Rojava."

The Copenhagen School (CS) of security considers security a speech act. Scholars in this tradition argue that security threats are not pregiven, but rather actors discursively construct an issue as a security threat, i.e. actors securitise an issue (Buzan et al., 1998). When an issue is securitised, it no longer resides in the realm of "normal politics," wherein the issue is regarded and debated as a political problem (Weaver, 1995). The realm of security constrains the room available for political debate and enables extra-ordinary measures to be taken. In short, securitisation is also a process of depoliticisation. Therefore, taking the unity of the nation-state and capitalism as referent objects that need to be protected against the Rojava threat obfuscates the socio-political goals of Rojava, as explained by the Social Contract. Additionally, it renders stateless governance not only a non-thinkable and non-viable option but something threatening.

Secondly, the secessionist theme discursively frames the PYD, YPG and *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (Women's Protection Units, YPJ) as totalitarian and terrorist organisations by frequently referencing their links with the PKK. One implication of this discourse is that it contributes to securitisation, thus undermining the political agenda of the PYD and militarising the issue. What is underlined is that the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey and its Western allies (Abdulrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016; Abdulrahim, 2017; Bradley & Parkinson, 2015; Nissenbaum, 2015; Nordland, 2018). These narratives do not offer an argument as to why the PKK is a terrorist organisation, which is a contested conceptualisation; it seems to be enough that Turkey lists the PKK as a terrorist organisation. At the same time, Turkey is constantly referred to as "an important NATO partner" (Orton, 2017), and "a critical US ally" (Abuldrahim & Nissenbaum, 2016). In this way, the view that Western powers, like the US and NATO, are essentially legitimate sources of knowledge is being reinforced.

Thirdly, the separatist theme also raises questions about the general will of the people of Rojava and its representation. As noted in the previous section, the political model of Rojava shows signs of the increasing hegemony of the PYD and Öcalan's cult of personality. Therefore, the problems regarding political representations should not be dismissed. However, the separatist theme imagines Rojava as an ethnically Kurdish separatist project that seeks to build a Kurdish nation-state (Abuldrahim, 2017; Abdulrahim &

Nissenbaum, 2016; Sinjab, 2016).[8] A Kurdish ethno-state, thus accused, cannot represent the will of the Arab population.

The social contract of Rojava and the co-chairs of the PYD consistently reject the idea of the nation-state and advocate for self-governance without secession. These views, however, are excluded from the discourse of "the separatist theme". Exclusion of these views contributes to rendering any options but the nation-state unimaginable. One positive outcome of this discursive theme is that it gives space to dissident voices who do not feel represented in the Rojava model. On the other hand, it seems like the dissident voices are selectively heard to serve the narrative of the PYD trying to split the country. For instance, quoting an opposition Kurdish journalist, in a journalistic piece, Lina Sinjab (2016) writes: "he still believes it is hard for them (PYD) to create a Kurdish state and to split the country…The PYD cannot rule one area from Kobani to Ifrin with many Arab towns and villages in the middle". In this instance, an opposition Kurdish journalist's narrative is shown as proof of the PYD's goal to establish a Kurdish state while the voices that deny the goal of the nation-state are excluded.

Rojava as an experiment

The Rojava project is frequently framed as an "experiment"; however, unlike the separatist rebellion frame that seeks to delegitimise the project, this theme tends to celebrate it (Enzinna, 2015; Graeber, 2014; Graeber, 2018; Jones, 2015; Jones, 2018; Malik, 2019; McKernan, 2016; Ross, 2015). Within these narratives, the terms "Rojava experiment" and "Rojava revolution" are usually employed interchangeably. In all but one (McKernan, 2016) of the articles that work within this frame, an adjective is attached to the noun "experiment", such as "democratic experiment" (Graeber, 2014; Graeber, 2018; Jones, 2015; Ross, 2015), "remarkable experiment" (Graeber, 2014; Jones, 2018) and "unique experiment" (Enzinna, 2015; Mohamad, 2018; McKernan, 2016). The employment of the word experiment, as well as the adjectives attached to it, are not value-free and therefore require further scrutiny. Analysis of this frame demonstrates that a revolution is understood as a temporally bound phenomenon. Additionally, regardless of their motivations, this discourse can have effects that strip the Rojava project of its historical roots and reproduce stereotypes about the Middle East, which can feed colonial fantasies.

Experiment refers to a procedure of testing in order to learn something, to check if a hypothesis is true, *or* testing a new way of doing something. In this

[8] The constitution of Rojava seeks to include non-Kurdish communities as active subjects of Rojava. The first line of the social contract is "We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter".

case, experiment is a polyvalent signifier that has multiple meanings and functions and thus can be interpreted in different ways. Employing experiment in the sense of testing to check if a hypothesis is true has implications for how the concept of revolution is imagined and understood. In this imagination, the Rojava project is an experiment rather than a revolution because it is an ongoing process whose functionality and durability is not known yet. This suggests that a revolution is a revolution only when it is successful or temporally bound. In an opinion piece by Wes Enzinna (2015), for example, he reports on his visit to Rojava as motivated by wanting to see "this strange political experiment" for himself. He further argues that "*if Rojava succeeds*, it will be the second partial homeland for the Kurds" (italics in original). In the same piece, Enzinna also writes: "*Should* this experiment succeed, some of these 18-to-29-year-olds would become the future intellectual leaders of Rojava" (italics added). The word "experiment" is used in articles published between 2014 and 2019. The problem with this kind of framing is that the authors never make clear what conditions would turn an experiment into a successful revolution.

The second meaning of experiment is testing a new way of doing something, as in "experimenting with something". Democratic confederalism has never been put into practice on such a large scale as it currently is in Rojava; therefore, the Rojava project is indeed doing things in a new way. However, we still need to pay attention to the political implications this discourse might have, and what it enables. Enzinna, who went to Rojava to see "this strange political experiment", had another motivation to go to Rojava. In his own words: "Rojava's youth does not have experience with free speech. Maybe I could teach them" (Enzinna, 2015). The experiment frame carries the risk of reproducing the stereotype of uneducated, patriarchal, and undemocratic ethnic groups of the Middle East who need to be taught by the free, democratic, and enlightened Western subject.

While the adjectives attached to the word experiment might have positive connotations, as Gayatri Spivak (1994) warns us, no knowledge is innocent. First, it is easier to make sense of celebratory adjectives such as "great" and "remarkable" when we keep in mind the temporal and conditional meaning that the word "experiment" implies. It is *not yet* a revolution, or at least not a successful one. Still, in these articles the experiment itself is presented as worthy of appreciation. What is more problematic is when the "experiment" is framed as "unique" or "like no other". For instance, Bethan McKernan (2015) writes that "the Rojava experiment is unlike any other" because multi-ethnic populations have created a small society that governs itself. It is difficult to deny that Rojava has many unique aspects. However, on smaller scales, self-governance of multi-ethnic populations has been present in Turkey's Kurdistan since 2004, and other authors have drawn parallels with

"the Rojava Revolution and Spanish Revolution of 1936" (Graeber, 2014). Therefore, emphasis on uniqueness indicates a sensationalist tone while adopting an ahistorical approach, thus neglecting the historical development of the Rojava project and the experiences of people involved in it.

Rojava as a genuine social revolution

Another theme that appears in the data is framing the Rojava project as a "social revolution" (Graeber, 2014; Jones, 2018). This discourse draws attention to the changes in social life, such as local mechanisms of self-governance, communal economy, and most importantly women's rights and liberties. It celebrates "the Rojava revolution" as a genuine social revolution. Graeber (2014) lists the achievements of the Rojava project as the following: "councils, assemblies and popular militias have been formed and regime property has been turned over to worker-managed co-operatives". He claims that "the results meet any definition of a social revolution". The traditional definition of a social revolution is a transformation in the dominant structure of society, myth, values, culture, and philosophy rather than a simple change in political systems (Fang, 1997; Huntington, 1968; Skocpol, 1979). Therefore, Graeber seems to be right in his conclusion. Considering that the local assemblies function at a micro level, require the attendance of the residents, and unprecedentedly give authority to the individuals, "the Rojava revolution" is as social as political. Similarly, the communal, co-operative, and needs-based economy is a transformation in social life. Moreover, the economy that is guided by ecological principles demonstrates the transformation in values and philosophy. Women's role in social life might be the most noticeable and acknowledged social change the revolution has brought, and it is extensively highlighted within this frame (Graeber, 2014; Jones, 2015).

The Rojava revolution is not only represented as a social revolution but also a genuine one. The narrative of genuineness is built against accusations that Rojava is using women's rights and other social projects for PR purposes or as "window dressing". A closer look at why the Rojava revolution is represented as genuine reveals how revolution is imagined in this discourse and what aspects of the Rojava model are celebrated. In addition to the transformations in societal and ideological structures, Graeber (2014) sees the spatial aspects of the "revolution" as justification for its genuineness. He argues that "what has happened in Rojava, where the Syrian revolution gave Kurdish radicals the chance to carry out such experiments in a large, contiguous territory, suggests this is anything but window dressing". This narrative stands in contrast to the "Rojava as a separatist rebellion" frame, which regards large and contiguous territory as a security threat and not a

viable option because of the presence of Arab towns in these territories (Sinjab, 2016). In that sense, Graeber's narrative challenges the idea that governance must be organised on ethnic terms, and it enables more room for imaginations of multi-ethnic, stateless governance. However, it simultaneously binds a revolutionary project to spatial conditions, implying that it must take place in a large and contiguous territory for it to be genuine.

The Rojava project is celebrated as a genuine social revolution within this frame also by extensive references to improved gender relations. Owen Jones (2018), for instance, quotes Paula Lamont, a white, middle-class British woman working on the Kurdistan Solidarity Campaign, who claims that "Rojava is a huge social revolution. Attitudes to gay rights and women's rights have been totally changed in a matter of years". This narrative does not offer a profound argument like Graeber's on why the project is a genuine social revolution. Instead, it reduces the "revolution" only to its gender components. These components come to represent the revolutionary character of the whole social structure, and attach a fixed meaning to social revolution (McConnell-Ginet, 2014). However, particularly the transformation of attitudes to gay rights is challenged by counter-narratives of queer individuals from Rojava who argue that "the situation is more complicated than it is portrayed" (Miller, 2017; Ghazzawi, 2017). Öcalan's heteronormative and binary views on gender relations also remain unquestioned.

A major problem with the representation and celebration of the gendered components of the Rojava project, such as women's active role in society, is sensationalist language that exoticises and romanticises "the revolution" and women. For instance, Jones' (2018) celebration of women-in-arms demonstrates the trend to glorify Kurdish women at the expense of their political subjectivities. David Graeber's choice of who (which groups / organisations) to represent while drawing parallels with the Spanish Revolution exemplifies a discourse fascinated by the "exotic" nature of the region. This misrepresents the regional realities in order to create an exotic reality. Graeber (2014) states: "in a remarkable echo of the armed Mujeres Libres (Free Women) of Spain, a feminist army, the "YJA Star" militia (the "Union of Free Women", the star here referring to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar)". The YJA Star (*Yekîneyên Jinên Azad ên Star*; Free Women's Units), however, is the all-female armed branch of the PKK that mainly operates in Turkey. When the conflict intensified in Kobane, Manbij, and Raqqa, the YJA Star guerillas took part in the conflict in Rojava. However, "the feminist army" of Rojava that Graeber thinks of is the YPJ, an organisation built and run by women of Rojava (Knapp, Ayboga & Flach, 2016). The YPJ refers to the Women's Protection Units, and therefore does not have the sensationalist and exotic sound of a Mesopotamian goddess. It

is important to understand Rojava on its own terms, yet making the Rojava model intelligible and celebrating it can and should be done without resorting to exoticisation.

However, following the Turkish invasion in October 2019, British and American media have started to give more room for journalistic coverage, opinion pieces, and solidarity statements that celebrate the revolution without losing a critical eye (Burc, 2019; Hall, 2019; Krajeski, 2019; Malik, 2019; "We stand in solidarity", 2019). These narratives highlight the possibility of multi-ethnic stateless governance (Burc, 2019; "We stand in solidarity", 2019), the ecological principles of the model (Krajeski, 2019; "We stand in solidarity", 2019), and warn about the dangers of romanticisation (Krajeski, 2019; Malik, 2019). What marks these narratives as different is that they try to understand the Rojava project on its own terms, draw more attention to the ecological principles, and explicitly talk about the Rojava project's role in new imaginations. To illustrate, Krajeski (2019) argues that:

> to be worthy of protection, Rojava doesn't need to be romanticized or viewed solely through the lens of American goals in the region. It is a uniquely Kurdish experiment, grown out of decades of military and political struggle in every part of a would-be Kurdistan and constantly adapting to the circumstances of war.

A statement of solidarity, on the other hand, warns about the outcomes of the Turkish invasion by claiming that "what is at stake is more than the fight against ISIS: What is at stake is humanity's ability to survive our current civilizational crisis and to imagine new alternatives before it is too late" ("We stand in solidarity", 2019). This discourse within the social revolution frame manages to move beyond the representations of Rojava either as a threat or a utopia. It gives a more balanced and nuanced view on the project while stressing its importance as a new alternative.

Concluding remarks

Although Rojava is framed under three distinct categories, there are shared elements amongst these discourses. First, the Rojava project is rarely understood on its own, and in its own, terms. Second, it is made intelligible by referencing Western knowledge, institutions, and experiences, and by reproducing certain Orientalist imaginations. Third, the anti-capitalist and ecological stance of the Rojava project are often excluded from the discourse.

Regarding socio-political imaginations, there are a few conclusions that we can draw from these discourses in the British and American media. To begin with, these discourses hint at how revolutions are understood. While the experiment frame attaches temporal conditionality, the social revolution

frame represents revolutions as spatially bound. Even though temporal conditions are not entirely met, "the Rojava project" is often referred to as a "revolution". However, "the Rojava revolution" is met with scepticism by many who find the revolution "too good to be true", "idealistic", and "utopian" (Garvey, 2016). In an interview, Dutch artist Jonas Staal tells the author that the Rojava revolution may seem unthinkable "*until* you remember that the modern European continent - from the French to the Russian revolution - also emerged out of a revolutionary situation," (italics added) (McKernan, 2015). These narratives illustrate a common imagination of revolutions as bloody, counter-productive, and undemocratic. Therefore, democratic achievements of a "Kurdish revolution" that takes place in a region "dominated by fundamentalist tyrannies and murderous reactionary terrorists" seem shocking or simply unthinkable (Jones, 2015). It becomes imaginable only when one remembers that in modern Europe, democracy and women's rights emerged from revolutionary situations. In other words, it becomes legitimate when it resembles a Western experience of revolution.

Second, these discourses do not give enough room for imagining an alternative to capitalist modernity, and when alternatives are rendered imaginable, the language that is used faces the risk of romanticisation and exoticisation. In the separatist rebellion frame, stateless governance is not even an option; an imagination that nation-states are inevitable dominates the discourse. Therefore, they represent the motivation of the Rojava project as establishing a nation-state, which is then framed as a security threat. The Rojava as an experiment and Rojava as a social revolution frames challenge the inevitability of the nation-state and give more room for alternative imaginations to flourish. However, more attention needs to be given to how exactly these imaginations are rendered intelligible. Since they can have the function of reproducing Orientalist stereotypes, they can contribute to subjugation of certain knowledge and experiences.

Socio-political imaginations should not be limited by the idea of the state and need to include alternatives to the growth-based capitalist system. In the British and American media, voice is given to those who applaud the democratic mode of governance in Rojava and improvements in gender relations. However, the anti-capitalist and ecological model of Rojava that is inspired by ideas about Mesopotamian Neolithic primitive socialism are often excluded from the discourse. Spivak's (1994) epistemic violence is useful here to make sense of this exclusion. Knowledge production in the West, Spivak argues, serves imperial and capitalist interests, and the subjugation of subaltern knowledges constitutes epistemic violence. Celebration of democratic governance and gender ideology in Rojava can reach a Western audience. When it is done by silencing or ignoring economic

and ecological principles that challenge capitalist imaginations, however, it serves capitalist interests.

Finally, by analysing what opinions are given space and how they are represented in the British and American media, this paper seeks to contribute to the discussions on the state by demonstrating that imaginations and representations of a non-state are also important. In order to theorise about the state, scholars have focused on how the state is reproduced through everyday life (Navaro-Yashin, 2002) or imagined (Abrams, 1988; Anderson, 1983). This study demonstrates that we also need to pay attention to imaginations and representations of non-state paradigms to understand the state. The inevitability of the state and capitalism is established not only by talking about the state but also by imagining a non-state paradigm, either as a security threat or a romanticised utopian fantasy.

Imaginations, intelligibility, and representation are intertwined concepts when it comes to knowledge production. They have "unprecedented chances of influencing social life and political landscapes" (Bottici & Challand, 2012). The Rojava project has its own flaws and challenges, yet it has the potential to open new horizons for thinking about alternative political, economic, social, and ecological models. This study has analytical and critical motivations, and it offers a critical analysis of knowledge in British and American media. Further studies are needed to think normatively, to find ways of creating new meaning in language, and as Gaonkar (2002) suggests, "to disclose a new horizon of meaning, a new order of things, and a new world". Regarding representation, this study shows that voices are given to those who benefit the narrative. While the separatist frame gives voice to Arab residents who do not feel represented in the Rojava model, those who celebrate the revolution romanticise and glorify Kurdish women. In such representations, voices of the subaltern in Rojava, such as an Assyrian unemployed woman who does not fight with the YPJ but attends the councils, or queer individuals who are not in the military, are completely silenced. This highlights the question of the subaltern in Rojava as an area that would benefit from further research.

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