

Obstacles to Insurrection: Militarised Border Crossings Hindering the Rojava Liberation Struggle

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to broaden our understanding of multidimensional socio-spatial relations as they apply to anti-systemic insurrectionary movements. As an illustrative case I discuss the Rojava insurrectionary movement, particularly the difficulties it faces in maintaining its solvency as a free territory due to multiple mechanisms of state power and capital accumulation in the world-system. I discuss where anarchist theory in the social sciences has been adequate and where it has come up short in understanding the potentialities of anarchist insurrectionary movements. I do this by paying particular attention to the sociohistorical and sociospatial realities in Rojava as it applies to territory, place, scale, and networks. In conclusion I call for a synthesis of anarchist theorisation with the world-systems perspective.

Keywords: *Anarchism, anti-systemic movements, blockade, insurrection, Rojava, world-systems*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary anarchist theorisation in the social sciences and critical geography has in recent years taken a turn toward place-based scholarship focused on mutual aid, affinity, and micro-level social relations. This scholarship often shares epistemological roots with post-structuralist theorisation.¹ Though this work is undoubtedly valuable to our understanding of anarchism and its potential as a processual sociospatial formation it tends to lack a systemic critique of the international system. While I agree that local autonomous and counter-hegemonic

formations provide pathways toward liberation, I also believe a larger systemic critique is necessary. As analysts of micro-level processes anarchist intellectuals have been encouraged to theorise alternative local sociospatial arrangements and neglect the social, historical, and systemic analysis that Marxism has provided.² This paper will theorise sociospatial relations using the multidimensional territory, place, scale, and network methodology recommended by Jessop, Brenner, and Jones (2008)³ to argue that an anarchist critique focused on state violence needs to account for world-systemic forces and multiple scales of authority and domination when analysing the potentials for anarchist movements. The insurrectionary movement in Rojava is used as an illustrative case study to show the importance of territorial, scalar, and network dimensions of statist domination when studying place-based anarchist insurrectionary movements.

In the following sections, I first give a brief historical introduction of Kurdistan and the insurrection in Rojava. After this I put forth an anarchist critique of both protectionist and neoliberal globalisation politics to show why a conception of territory is important for an analysis of trans-zonal anti-systemic insurrectionary movements. After a discussion of anarchism and globalisation politics I discuss the economic structure and internal colonisation of Rojava by the centralised Ba'ath regime in Syria prior to the insurrection. Then I focus specifically on the inversion of military and neoliberal logistics via the militarisation of the border and trade embargos enacted by Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) – both governments that support neoliberal policies within their own boundaries. These militarised border crossings create obstacles for economic and insurrectionary sustainability in Rojava. I argue in particular that the process, in which an alliance of neighbouring nation-states systematically cut off supply lines to an insurrectionary project, shows how state violence and border imperialism⁴ are used to slow autonomous development and social revolution. The later two sections make clear why a scalar analysis of statist domination is important for understanding anti-systemic insurrectionary movements.

Anarchist theorisation focused on the prefigurative politics of the local is undoubtedly of great use to potential social revolution. However, without a full analysis of geopolitics and geoculture we are left wanting in both the possibilities of trans-zonal anti-systemic movements as well as the structural constraints placed on the autonomous development of social life within an anarchist social formation.⁵ For this reason I conclude my article by urging dialogue with the Marxist-inspired world-systems perspective. A synthesis of these two anti-capitalist traditions is long overdue: polarisation is unproductive at a time when the left has lost so much ground and right wing ultra nationalism is on the rise. The movement in Rojava

is a real revolution with real lives at stake. It is our responsibility to reach into our theoretical tool kits to gain a greater understanding of the obstacles these insurrectionary movements face and how they might be sustained.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF KURDISTAN AND THE INSURRECTION IN ROJAVA

The geopolitical and imperial obsession with Kurdistan can be traced back to the early years of the Ottoman Empire. Its rugged geographical features identified by the Zagros and Taurus Mountains situated the Kurdish people between the feuding Ottoman and Safavid Empires. Terrestrial barriers prevented a united and centralised Kurdish nation, and parts of Kurdistan were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire and used as an autonomous buffer zone between the Turkish and Persian populations.⁶ However, due to the decentralisation of Kurdistan as well as the mountainous nature of the Kurdish region the communities living in those mountains were often disconnected from the two empires and developed a local politics with ecological and egalitarian structures.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) split the Kurdish homeland between Britain and France as part of their 'spheres of influence' before being split among modern day Turkey (Bakur),⁷ Iraq (Başur), Iran (Rojhilat), and Syria (Rojava).⁸ The treaty of Lausanne (1923) in which Turkey gave up its claims to the remaining pieces of the Ottoman Empire failed to mention Kurdistan, resulting in a lack of formal recognition within the nation-state system. The disarticulation of Kurdistan was institutionalised by the Middle East Treaty Organisation (1955), which reinforced the borders drawn after World War I therefore subverting Kurdish transnational efforts directed at establishing a homeland.⁹

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) fragmented across four sovereign states, Kurdish civil society and economy also became disarticulated. The separate populations developed specific mechanisms to cope with the varying nature of the internal political economy of their occupying state and its relationship with the global economy at large. The Kurds were not able to produce physical space autonomously: the networks and flows created by logistics infrastructure such as roadways, canals, railroads, airports and seaports as well as networks created by financial institutions such as commercial and financial flows are the causal factors of modern state formation;¹⁰ for Kurdistan these factors were shaped by the occupying states, not Kurdish civil society. The lack of self-determination in turn left Kurds subject to racialised labour practices and resource expropriation by each of the occupying states.¹¹

The KRG in Başur has been self-governing since the Persian Gulf War in 1991¹² and made further strides toward self-determination during the recent US invasion

and subsequent occupation of Iraq in 2003. Başur was backed by the US in realising its partial 'autonomy' because of its openness to Western investment and the export of its raw materials and natural resources. This type of compliance with core capitalist nations made Başur an ally to Europe and the US. Under the leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Party and president Masoud Barzani the KRG became a tentative ally of Turkey – a country with a long history of Kurdish repression. A transnational oil pipeline connects Turkey to the Kurdish statelet.¹³

The project of Kurdish democratic autonomy in Rojava – set in motion in 2011 by the outbreak Syrian Civil War – is much more recent than that of their ethnic comrades, or hevals to use a Kurdish word,¹⁴ in Başur. The organisation that has taken up the project – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – came into existence in 2003, but Rojava only gained *de facto* autonomy in 2012 after activists there negotiated Ba'ath regime bureaucrats out of office. This autonomy was further entrenched in 2014 when the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) of Rojava led military victories against 'Islamic' State (IS) forces.

The goals of the Rojava autonomous project of *democratic autonomy*¹⁵ bear no relation to the political and economic goals of the Başur independence project. The political ambitions of Rojava go far beyond neatly defined borders and recognised statehood. The PYD espouses the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan – leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Bakur. Öcalan is a former Marxist-Leninist who became disillusioned by state centralism in the early 1990s when he encountered writings by other radicals, above all the social ecology of anarchist intellectual Murray Bookchin.¹⁶

At their 1995 congress the PKK leadership abandoned statist elements of their liberation movement and adopted Öcalan's new theory of democratic confederalism.¹⁷ The movement in Rojava is not a struggle for statehood; it recognises that 'all borders are acts of state violence inscribed in landscape'.¹⁸

Borders, bounded space, and nation-state stem from either hegemonic or coercive spatial configurations. Thus, a given population is confined while excluding the *other* because of legitimised spatial zones and the subsequent militarisation of those spatial zones. The rejection of statist spatial configurations is therefore pertinent to radical liberation. Coupled with anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal liberation and efforts to stop environmental degradation, this understanding of space is at the core of the liberation movement in Rojava. The underlying theme of its insurrectionary praxis is the abolition of unjust hierarchy – a central component of anarchist theory.

The porous pre-Syrian Civil War border between Rojava and Bakur made these two statelets of the larger Kurdish landmass susceptible to one another's ideas. In fact,

through the 1980s and 1990s Abdullah Öcalan found refuge from Turkey in Syria¹⁹ – possibly planting the seeds for what is happening in Rojava today. The Rojava insurrectionary project of democratic autonomy is based on principles of communal production, redistribution, and mutual aid.²⁰ The PYD sees the modern financialised capitalist economy as a ‘mechanism for financial, intellectual and cultural looting’.²¹ The revolutionaries in Rojava see their struggle for autonomy as a model for the rest of Syria, the region and as an inspiration for social revolution around the world.

However promising the Rojava social revolution may seem, there are many possible threats to its success. For starters, the economy of Rojava was severely underdeveloped by the centralised Ba’ath regime prior to the insurrection; ‘Assad tried everything to keep its status down to that of an internal colony. Its only purpose was to be exploited for raw materials’.²² Though a good deal of Syria’s petroleum extraction sites are in Rojava the refineries and processing centres are located in southern Syria. Also, due to the Ba’ath regimes control over production in Rojava crop diversification was very limited. Rojava mostly grew wheat and rye with limited capacity in agriculture processing due to a lack of mills.²³

Second, Turkey and the KRG enacted blockades on Rojava as soon as the PYD ‘rose to power’. This makes it difficult to access critical inputs for the development of Rojava’s economy and humanitarian supplies necessary to sustain the population during wartime. The communal economics of the insurrectionary effort, which redistributes production instead of profiteering from the surpluses created by it, does not attract foreign capital investment. The blockade adds to an already difficult situation by limiting entry of critical economic resources into Rojava. The effect on the social economy being built in Rojava is suffocating. And because Rojava is at war, militarised border crossings make it difficult to maintain munitions at the front lines and block PKK militants from leaving Bakur and Başur to join their hevals in the fight against the IS.

In the next section I use an anarchist lens to analyse the debate between neoliberal globalisation and protectionism and argue that this is a false dichotomy. The discussion then shifts to the world-systemic positionality of Rojava prior to the insurrection. Following a discussion of the structural position of Rojava I offer an analysis of the logistical disruptions the insurrection faces along with the possibilities for trans-zonal anti-systemic movements.

AN ANARCHIST CRITIQUE OF BINARY GLOBALISATION POLITICS

As Long as the worker ties up his interest with those of the bourgeoisie of his country instead of with those of his class, he must logically also take in his

stride all the results of that relationship. He must stand ready to fight the wars of the possessing classes for the retention and extension of their markets, and to defend any injustice they may perpetuate on other peoples.

Rudolph Rocker (2004 [1938])²⁴

In the modern capitalist-representative-democratic political sphere, spatial debates on accumulative processes are often reduced to the binary oppositions of protectionism on the one hand and neoliberal globalisation on the other.²⁵ The modern social democratic left and the extremist right in core capitalist society as well as advocates for the reversal of dependency in the periphery via import substitution industrialisation often side with protectionist policies and autarkic strategies in a reaction to the degradation of the living standards of working people caused by global capitalism in its neoliberal form.²⁶ This puts a good deal of those on the left in both the global north and south on a side with their political enemies on the extremist right. That is, a side opposed to transnationalism that reifies hegemonic spatial constructs of borders and citizenship. According to Bollens (2013), 'State governance is based on a particular regime of spatial conceptualisation that partitions the whole into parts and thus defines what is considered in or out, visible or invisible, and central or peripheral'.²⁷ This concept of bounding space as a sovereign entity or a nation-state in order to contain social relations is termed territoriality.²⁸ Consciousness shaped by a territoriality connected to a hierarchal governing body is inherently statist and contributes to value gaps in what otherwise could be humanistic interpretations of space. False consciousness shaped by territory creates nationalist ideology because the bounding of territory has a symbolic importance for the political construction and maintenance of national identity.²⁹ This process is antithetical to the universalism Elisée Reclus advocated in his writings on anarchist geography.³⁰ I do not here propose a monolithic universal as a means of combating capitalism and statism. History has shown that the ramifications of a hierarchical and Eurocentric universalism have been genocidal. Rather I propose a diverse universal³¹ that does not privilege certain cultural forms over others, but is universal in the sense that we share a human habitat.

According to Wallerstein (2004), national identities are crucial for maintaining the whole world economy and interstate system because they cement the structure of nation-states.³² Since these political units in the world economy come to be accepted as given, class struggle is often oriented to the nation-state level. The contradiction in the global economy arises from the disjuncture of the political and economic basis of class formation and struggle. In other words the bounding of space often confines class struggle within a nation-state thus limiting the poten-

tial for trans-zonal anti-systemic movements. In core nations this often leads to political battles aimed at compromise between capital and labour at the expense of workers outside of the domestic sphere. Coupled with national identity the disjuncture can also create intraclass rivalries among workers that result in antagonisms between fellow workers about job losses resulting from capital relocations from one bounded spaces to another in the global production network.³³

An anarchist approach to geography calls for an epistemological shift which rejects territoriality informed by the bounded nation-state (and its authoritarian governing body as the hegemonic interpretation of space) and the embrace of spatial reality through the social relations across spaces.³⁴ This conception goes hand-in-hand with both Taylor's (1982) synthesis of world-systems perspective and critical geography which treats the local as the realm of experience, the national as the realm of ideology and the global as the realm of reality.³⁵ It also dovetails with Mac Laughlin's (1986) call for an anarchist social science that connects geography to nationalism.³⁶

In an ideal anti-nationalist³⁷ and nonracialised setting workers around the world would unite in a struggle against global capitalism. Protectionist policies, seeped with racialised underpinnings mitigate these transnational efforts by giving nationalist solutions to transnational problems.³⁸ Not only does protectionism reinforce spatial constructs that reproduce the nation-state system, but protectionist measures can also be used to maintain unequal exchanges within the domestic sphere.³⁹ Anarchism is not the only radical ideology to recognise the harm created by protectionism. Marxist Antonio Gramsci noted that in Italy protectionist policies led to large profit margins for firms and concessions to certain workforces in the north while effectively turning southern Italy into an internal colony.⁴⁰ Thus, not only does protectionism reproduce nationalist consciousness, it also recreates the unequal exchanges that are seen in the transnational economy in the domestic sphere.

Neoliberal globalisation on the other hand decreases spatial limitations on capital giving it a transnational character while reinforcing the same spatial constructs on people.⁴¹ By creating differentiated *citizens* and exploiting spatial constructs that result from nationalist ideologies, firms effectively put downward pressure on wages. Today, this allows capital to roam the globe looking for cheap labour primarily in the global south and amounts to a variation of what Bonacich (1972) called the 'split labor market'.⁴² Yet now the division of the working class is enacted primarily on a transnational scale using hyper-exploitive spatial accumulation techniques rather than dividing workers along ethnic identity within a domestic system. A good illustrative example of hyper-exploitation resulting from

noncitizen status is migrant labour in the United States. Here, borders are not only used to ensure physical separation but also to shape identity formation, which can be used as a mode of social control within a given territory.⁴³

Social science research has given us insight into the process of identity and consciousness formation at the national and transnational level. According to Robinson (2014) '[n]ational borders are mechanisms for controlling global flows of labour, disaggregating the global working class into national contingents, and fragmenting both the political mobilization and subjective consciousness of workers'.⁴⁴ Transnational capitalist class formation and united identity lead elites to become a 'class-for-itself' rather than a 'class-of-itself'.⁴⁵ At the same time, national borders prevent the global working class from being a 'class-for-itself' by shaping nationalist identity and consciousness. Robinson seems to have an ideological bent against anarchism,⁴⁶ but his analysis of identity formation in the nation-state system is an area where Marxist scholarship supports anarchist theorisation and where dialogue and solidarity across the two political camps is fruitful.

In many ways the shift to neoliberalism was a reaction to racial liberation movements in core capitalist countries that ended formally racialised Fordism as well as the anti-colonial liberation movements. Firms prefer split labour markets because multiple labour groups put workers in competition with one another for jobs, giving negotiating power to firms.⁴⁷ Solidarity between multiple ethnicities within a given domestic sphere gives more power to workers in wage negotiations. However, if nationalist consciousness remains strong amongst the working class, workers can easily be set against each other. The birth of neoliberal policies enabled capitalists to have continued access to heavily exploitable racialised labour and permitted firms to continue to use transnational accumulation techniques across space after former colonies had achieved formal independence. According to Bonacich, Alimahomed, and Wilson (2008):

Despite the end of formal colonialism, wealthy, primarily White, Western nations are still in a position to exploit countries in the Global South through the use of subordinate racialized labor forces. Under colonialism, this domination was overt and clear. Now it is obscured by corporate rather than state domination. Global corporate domination hides the underlying continuity with the colonial world order. Meanwhile neoliberal policies have freed companies to search the world for the most rightless and disempowered workers.⁴⁸

Neoliberalism is also particularly problematic because its rhetoric manufactures false consciousness by reconceptualising 'the state in such a way that facilitates

a failure to notice its ongoing deleterious effects. The discourse ... attempts to convince us that neoliberalism represents our liberation as individuals, emancipating us from the chains of what it calls “big government”.⁴⁹ The belief that neoliberal globalisation is a step toward smaller government is flawed not only because it fails to take into account the restrictions on the mobility of people (and therefore reifies the spatial constructs of belonging), but also because it fails to recognise that ‘the state apparatus may interiorize the interests of foreign capital as well as project the interests of national capital abroad’.⁵⁰ This small government rhetoric also fails to mention the increased police presence, militarisation of public space, militarisation of the border, securitisation of racialised poverty, anti-labour legislation, and other aspects of the repressive state apparatus that accompany neoliberalism.⁵¹

Anarchist geography ends the binary argument between protectionism and neoliberal globalisation by simultaneously deconstructing borders, citizenship, and property. By deconstructing borders, and accompanying notions of citizenship, nationalist fraternal ideologies can be replaced by mutual aid networks and cooperative relationships in the local, while working class organizing is more likely to extend beyond the national boundary. Huston (1997) argues in his reading of Kropotkin’s work that the sociohistorical process of confederation from one local to another was not in itself responsible for the downfall of the embeddedness of mutual aid in sociospatial relations, but rather it was the abstraction of decision-making to a centralised authority that disembedded the necessity for mutual aid in civil society. Against Harvey (1989) he argues that ‘time-space compression’ does not necessarily lead to Giddens’ (1990) ‘time-space distanciation’. Rather, as Huston (1997) argues, the distanciation of time-space can be avoided if the compression is not abstracted through a system of domination and is instead achieved with an ethic of mutual aid between localities.⁵² It is these types of trans-zonal mutual aid networks that the anti-systemic insurrection in Rojava needs to develop in order to maintain its existence.

This extension of mutual aid networks beyond the locality could help ‘de-split’ the labour market and create broad based coalitions for freedom and egalitarianism. According to Davis and Akers Chacón (2006), ‘A united multiracial, multinational working class is the greatest threat to the hegemony of capital, since workers realize their greatest power to combat exploitation through collective organization is rooted in the workplace and the community’.⁵³ Borders are used to ‘atomize the working class along racial and national lines and to encourage separate planes of consciousness’.⁵⁴ This is precisely what Rudolph Rocker was talking about in the epigraph above: nationalist ideologies are inherently opposed to transnational class struggle and therefore opposed to working class interest in total. Anarchist geog-

raphy produces a transnational consciousness by teaching us lessons of solidarity, whatever our nationality. It teaches us that national rivalries are nourished and maintained by those in the possessing class to pursue their own interest; it helps to create a humanistic rather than a nationalist consciousness; and it helps the working classes in separate nations realize that they have much more in common with fellow workers elsewhere than with the possessing class in their own locality.⁵⁵ The deconstruction of borders and citizenship in this way can be truly transformational for the way labour and political organising is done. Instead of reacting to neoliberal globalisation with anti-globalisation, social actors need to formulate alter-globalisation strategies. Citizenship is normally associated with a nation-state, but democratic and economic potential can be found in a global context, beyond the limited spatial zones of the anachronistic nation-state system.⁵⁶ According to Springer (2011), nationalistic democracy is a phenomenon in which the *demos* is confused with the *ethnos*. This confusion is ‘responsible for some of the worst cases of ethnic cleansing, mass murder, and genocide in human history’.⁵⁷

Another foundational aspect of anarchist geography is the realisation that private property is merely a constructed legitimisation of the ownership of space and capital not in direct use. Thus, private property gives a privileged caste of society legal clout to hierarchal positionality and the right to exploitive accumulation. According to Chase-Dunn and Rubinson (1977), ‘[t]he state backs up by force the juridical relationship between *free* labor and capital as well as the more apparent and direct coercion of slave and serf labor’.⁵⁸ Property rights and thus the state are the very basis of the capitalist system – the mechanisms that allow for endless capital accumulation.⁵⁹ For P.J. Proudhon this was precisely the problem with an archaic political structure: in ‘*property is theft*’.⁶⁰ Proudhon did not conclude that property needed to be collectivised, only that it should not be owned outside of direct use. He distinguished the legitimate possession of property based on use from the exploitive right to private property based on the legality of dominion legitimated by the state.⁶¹ For Proudhon (2017[1840]) to legitimise the right of property outside of use – as is normative in the capitalist economic structure – is to ‘sanction slavery’.⁶²

Adapting Prichard’s (2010) three-pronged analysis of Proudhon’s concept of justice in international, social and economic realms, I suggest that we can use the false dichotomy of globalisation politics as well as anarchist theorisation on statist property rights to understand the creation of nationalist identity in the international; the exclusions based on that identity in the social; and the spatial legitimisation of domination via private property in the economy.⁶³ Following this analysis helps us appreciate the revolutionary implications of the Rojava insurrectionary process.

To return to the case study, the principles of anarchist geography help us understand the radical democracy being realised in the local and the workplace in Rojava. The PYD does not see Rojava as a separate nation-state entity. Instead, it considers itself to be constructing a road map to a new Syria and possibly a new world.⁶⁴ Concurrently, the insurrectionary movement does not believe in exploitive capital accumulation through legal claims on private property. By subscribing to this sociospatial praxis Rojava is subscribing to an ethic of anarchism. However, Rojava is reliant on neighbouring groups following their example to build coalitions and mutual aid networks from locality to locality beyond the formalised borders of Syria. However, the blockades and border imperialism of statist formations on Rojava's *boundaries* make the full deconstruction of borders impossible without concurrent insurrections by other groups in the region or a change of heart by oppositional states. We should not hold our breath for the latter.

UNEQUAL EXCHANGES AND THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF ROJAVA PRE-INSURRECTION

At the birth of its *de facto* autonomy Rojava was split into three cantons – Cizîrê in the northeast of Syria, Afrîn in the northwest, and Kobanî in between the two. At that time all three cantons were disconnected, but logistics routes were later established connecting Cizîrê and Kobanî. Afrîn has remained isolated and now is under siege by Turkey's Erdoğan regime.

Cizîrê is the wealthiest of the cantons in terms of natural resources. It has fertile soil and is known as the breadbasket of Syria.⁶⁵ Cizîrê also is distinguished from the other two cantons by its large reserves of oil. In the 1960s Shell began pumping from the region and by 2010, 90,000 barrels were being produced per day.⁶⁶ In one estimate Cizîrê was responsible for fifty/sixty per cent of Syrian oil production.⁶⁷ Oil production did not translate into Kurdish wealth: centralised decision making in the Syrian economy systematically peripheralised the north-eastern canton of Rojava turning it into an internal colony. The Ba'ath regime only built refineries and processing centres in the southern part of Syria – where the oil would be processed and exported to the west. This created a dependent relationship between Cizîrê and the cities of southern Syria. Post-insurrection, the Rojava economy has been able to develop two refineries to create primarily diesel fuel for generators.⁶⁸ However because the refining methods are not technologically advanced the oil often causes environmental degradation and damage to generators and motors. Getting parts to fix these damaged goods is made difficult by the blockades.⁶⁹

Both Kobanî and Afrîn are mainly agricultural economies. Due to the centralised Ba'ath regimes economic structure within the larger world capitalist system limited crops have been grown and neither area had the means to process them.⁷⁰ These types of unequal exchanges can explain why the Kurds in Rojava are largely an impoverished people despite Rojava accounting for fifty/fifty-five per cent of the GNP ratio within Syria.⁷¹ The aim of the insurrection is to reverse this trend and '[k]eep surpluses within local communities, maintaining the long-term ecological sustainability of production and democratized access to resources over short-term exhaustion of resources and investor profit'.⁷²

The Assad regime did everything in its power to keep Rojava effectively peripheralised, exploiting the resource-rich region and using the Kurds as a readily exploitable racialised labour source by encouraging migration from Rojava to Syrian cities in the south.⁷³ Kurds were ascribed immigrant status in southern Syria (despite Rojava formally being located within the Syrian borders) and the denial of basic citizenship rights subjected them to excessively harsh working conditions. 'Higher levels of surplus can be extracted from these racialized workers, who have limited recourse for defending themselves'.⁷⁴ The identity formations and unequal exchanges set up by the Ba'ath regime created a dependent relationship for Rojava which amounted to a form of urbicidal violence: dominant cities act as economic parasites preying on other geographical zones and localities by appropriating resources and exploiting migrant labour.⁷⁵ Moreover, the Ba'ath regime implemented a form of settler colonialism in the form of the Arabisation policies. These granted Syrians land in Rojava⁷⁶ creating a form of systemic racialised inequality.

Because of the relationship between Rojava and the rest of Syria at the time of insurrection – when the social wealth of natural resources was collectivised – the economy of Rojava was structurally underdeveloped. Thus, the Rojava insurrection has had difficulties in seamlessly moving into their democratic autonomous project. However, Rojava's structural role within Syria as an agricultural producer has enabled the revolution to provide sustenance for as long as water resources are made available – making the control of dams and river flows critical spatial elements for building the new society.⁷⁷ Recently the YPG took steps to control of the Tishrin dam, a strategically important spatial aspect to the success of Rojava.⁷⁸ However, Turkey is still damming the Euphrates River, which has caused incredible human and ecological degradation in the Rojava region. Because of Rojava's heavily specialised agricultural production the workers councils recently decided to move away from monoculture by diversifying their crops, enhancing the sustainability of their insurrectionary project.

MILITARISED BORDER CROSSINGS, BLOCKADES, AND INTERNAL DISARTICULATION

The Rojava insurrection faces many obstacles to setting up a society based on radical democratic autonomy. An obstacle often overlooked in the academic literature is the all-encompassing blockade levied on the insurrectionary movement. Though the borders between Rojava and neighbouring Kurdish regions have historically been porous, since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War Rojava has had militarised border crossings imposed upon it. The militarised border crossings are used as a tool both to quell the insurrectionary movement and stop left-wing diffusion of politics within the states blockading the border. As Southworth and Stepan-Norris (2003) show, politics can diffuse across space when a concentration of radical political culture is created within a community.⁷⁹ In order to prevent this kind of diffusion and stop the radical insurrectionary movement in Rojava from taking hold within Bakur and Başur, border imperialism is being employed by the KRG and the Erdoğan regime.

According to Chase-Dunn (1998), hierarchies within the global political economy must not ignore regional inequalities⁸⁰ like the one seen between Turkey and Rojava. The logistical disruptions imposed by the Turkish and KRG regimes are a form of what Marini (1972) calls sub-imperialism,⁸¹ and they play a major role in the potential of Rojava's insurrectionary effort. Indeed the effect in Rojava is heightened by the structure of the economy and the military struggle. The inability to move goods, people, and munitions across formalised international boundaries and between Rojavan localities can have deleterious effects on the liberation struggle.

Given Turkey's history of suppression of Kurdish liberation movements in Bakur it has been no surprise to see the Turkish government resist the PKK-aligned autonomous zone on its southern border.⁸² Turkey sealed off the border with Rojava in an attempt to suffocate the insurrectionary process. Since the beginning of 2016, Turkey militarised the whole of Rojava's northern border.⁸³ The militarisation of the border has transformed ordinary logistics workers transporting goods to and from Turkey into smugglers, slowed the movement of humanitarian aid, structural inputs, and consumer goods into Rojava and hindered the movement of munitions⁸⁴ and PKK militants to the front lines.⁸⁵ Turkey's official reasoning for the action is to secure Turkey from 'terror' spilling over from the Syrian Civil War. However, there are reports that flourmills and ambulances set to enter Rojava have been held at the border for months.⁸⁶ Turkey is also advocating a buffer zone in northern Syria, which would further disarticulate Rojava localities from one

another causing deleterious effects to the life of the insurrection.⁸⁷ In the past year, the Erdoğan regime has invaded Afrîn and launched an intensive military air campaign in the region. This is a clear example of a regional power stifling a popular movement capable of inspiring people within their own borders as well as around the world. Furthermore, according to Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, the United States, which for a brief period was airdropping munitions to the YPG/YPJ as part of their support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, has instructed its military to stop the flow of supplies to the Rojava freedom fighters.⁸⁸ Now that IS has been defeated, the US government has reeled back its support: it does not want to see Rojava succeed for success might threaten to cut off oil supplies from the Middle-East or even inspire radicals within the United State's own borders and around the world.

Not only is Rojava being blockaded by Turkey, the KRG to the east in Başur have sporadically coupled with the Erdoğan regime to create a totalising blockade. The Rojava-Başur crossing at Semalka has been closed repeatedly since 2012 when the PYD took power.⁸⁹ This strategy was enacted the very week the PYD announced its plans for autonomous governance in Rojava.⁹⁰ The KRG has even gone as far as digging ditches two meters deep and three meters long along the Rojava border to stop the smuggling of goods.⁹¹ What the PYD want from the KRG is access to food, medicine, and spare parts. It seems unlikely that it will get this.⁹²

Though the KRG and the PYD are ethnic hevals their geopolitical situations and political ideologies says much more about their actions than their Kurdish ethnicity. The KRG formed in 1991 and came into power as a neo-colonial statelet of the West. The KRG is a major supplier of oil to the core capitalist nations and is susceptible to capital investment. The KRG remains a good example of how a statelet that subscribes to neoliberal capitalism can carve out definite borders and self-determining governance structures as long as it remains structurally tied to core capitalist nations.

When asked about Rojava as a Kurdish liberation struggle one KRG official said: 'No, no, no. That is Syria, that is not Kurdistan! Kurdistan is here!'⁹³ This shows how definite spatial boundaries and consciousness informed by state based territoriality can erase histories of liberation struggles, as poisonous statist ambitions become a reality. If evidence of the impediments of nationalist consciousness for trans-zonal solidarity is needed, the KRG provides it. At the same time, it seems clear that transnational consciousness militates against it: leftists like Anna Campbell have rushed to the aid of the Rojava insurrection even at the cost of their own lives.⁹⁴

IS and the Assad regime have fluctuated in their control of the space to the

south and patches of land between Kobanî and Afrîn. IS controlled land between all three cantons before the YPG and YPJ were able to win military victories enabling them to sustain flows between Kobanî and Cizîrê. Logistics routes out of Rojava are surprisingly most frequently available to and from the south through enemy controlled territory – whether it is through IS or the Assad regime’s territory. However, it often requires bribes causing upward pressure on the cost of consumer goods and inputs as well as a high level of risk for logistics workers.⁹⁵ Surrounded by hostile state actors and a civil war, logistics workers must put their lives on the line in order to sustain the insurrection. This creates labour conditions that are among the most dangerous in the world.

The combined effect of Turkey, the KRG, IS, and Assad’s Syrian State on Rojava’s logistics infrastructure amounts to a totalising demobilisation programme that blocks structural inputs from productive processes in Rojava. As Khalili (2017) points out, the control of logistics has been an essential strategy for conquest throughout history. ‘The proliferation of roads, markets, and civilian institutions has gone hand in hand with fighting battles’.⁹⁶ Military historians traced Roman conquest to the maintenance of trading routes to Meroe, the eastern deserts, and central Africa;⁹⁷ the city state entrepôts of trans-Mediterranean trade associated with the birth of the modern world-system with the logistical necessity of the Christian Crusades;⁹⁸ the rail system throughout Europe to the conquest of Prussian and French empires;⁹⁹ as well as the incorporation of old supply routes used in the genocidal settler colonial ‘Indian’ wars into the modern United States highway system.¹⁰⁰ Even today the modern interstate system in the United States serves the manufacturers of military technology in order to maintain seamless logistics routes for munitions in conquest.¹⁰¹ The nationalisation of such logistics routes shows the relationship between the state, war, and capital. Thus, the ability to sustain the flow of munitions is intrinsically tied with the movement of goods.

Arrighi (2010 [1994]) connects this analysis of logistics explicitly to capitalism, development, and state-power by showing that naval supremacy as well as the accompanying control of important trade ports and routes contributed to the rise of subsequent global hegemony throughout the history of the modern world-system.¹⁰² Following this logic the success of the insurrection in Rojava is tied to the ability to move munitions and militants to the fronts of the insurrection as well as the ability to access structural inputs for the development of their egalitarian economy. However grim the militarisation of Rojava’s borders looks, the PYD has begun negotiations to set up a possible corridor for goods to move to and from Iraq with the Bagdad government, but disagreements about who will control the crossing have led to delays in the process.¹⁰³

Augmenting the seamless flow of capital in the global neoliberal marketplace has not only become the primary focus for transnational corporations, but is also embraced by nation-states as well as international organisations like the World Bank, World Economic Forum, and the United Nations as measures of development.¹⁰⁴ Due to the closely intertwined nature of capital interest with national and transnational institutional interest this should come as no surprise. The United Nations describes the mastery of logistics as a central aspect to competing in global trade¹⁰⁵ and the World Bank in recent years spent a great deal of time and resources in understanding how land-locked developing countries – which lack access to a seaport of their own – can improve their ability to compete in the neoliberal marketplace.¹⁰⁶ States have also dedicated time and resources to militarising and securing port complexes and export processing zones.¹⁰⁷ Though all of this is done in the name of capital accumulation through coercive and exploitive processes, it is important to remember that protectionist and autarkic ambitions do not make up a free society. Instead the insurrectionary aim is to have freedom of movement without the coercive and accumulative processes that are associated with neoliberal global capitalism.

The material impacts of isolation and fragmentation are very real in Rojava. Production beyond community sustenance agriculture often has a roll to play in the global economy,¹⁰⁸ both in terms of exchange of finished goods as well as in terms of access to critical inputs. These types of productive processes in Rojava could be significantly improved if regional actors were not imposing blockades on the region.¹⁰⁹ A dearth of medicine and baby formula is present in the war stricken Kurdish territory. This has led to an increase in infant mortality.¹¹⁰ Along with these shortages and the ever increasing upward pressure on prices due to higher costs on movement there is also a thriving black market where prices are often higher.¹¹¹

Due to Rojava's constitutional aim of federating Syria and not creating a separate state of their own¹¹² Rojava still uses Syrian currency as an exchange intermediary. Higher costs on goods due to the militarisation of Rojava's supply chain and the devaluation of Syrian currency due to the civil war has created high levels of material struggle.¹¹³ The Syrian Pound was trading for roughly forty-six pounds per United States dollar at the outbreak of the civil war. In November of 2017 the Syrian Pound was trading for roughly 515 pounds per United States dollar.¹¹⁴ These factors lower morale and possibly quell the insurrectionary movement.

It is important to note that even if the insurrectionary project is able to sustain itself and construct a cooperative society post civil war, the PYD does not have access to the sea in order to build a port; it cannot operate an airport without

the permission of the Syrian state because it is not recognised in the interstate system;¹¹⁵ and most likely it will not be able to develop an acceptable exchange intermediary to be used outside of its borders for the same reason. As Wallerstein (2004) points out, reciprocal recognition between territorial entities is fundamental to the functioning of the interstate system. Many territories have proclaimed autonomy, but failed to be recognised as such. Without reciprocal recognition the proclamation of autonomy is relatively meaningless.¹¹⁶ Without trans-zonal solidarity the Rojava movement is precarious.

CONCLUSION

The blockades and logistical obstacles facing Rojava in its current struggle for autonomy are considerable. Supplies of munitions and troops from other areas of Kurdistan and around the world are blocked from coming to the aid of the YPG/YPJ. Moreover, the prospects for development are severely hampered by the lack of access to critical inputs and humanitarian goods. The ability for Rojava to export raw materials and manufactured goods has been severely undermined by the militarisation of its borders. These conditions are explained by a systematic inversion of neoliberal and military logistics practices that suppress economic self-determination. If the disarticulation of the Rojava cantons are also considered it is evident that the flows of internal exchanges, redistribution, and mutual aid networks between localities within Rojava are also weakened. This amounts to the totalising suppression of Rojava's movement infrastructure and an act of state violence against the people of Rojava.

I have argued that a place-based analysis is insufficient to understand liberation processes and that other dimensions of sustainability need to be analysed. Consciousness shaped by territoriality plays a role in preventing trans-zonal anti-systemic movements from taking hold. This is why a geography informed by anarchist ethics of universalism is so important. Scalar analysis is also wanting in the analysis of Rojava. The place specific analysis of Rojava neglects multiple scales of governance that suppress the insurrectionary movement. Rojava confronts the imperialism of world powers including the United States and Russia, and must also interact with the sub-imperialism of regional powers and the transnational institutional environment.

Exchange and political networks are also very important when analysing the survival of the insurrectionary movement. Rojava is in need of structural inputs and humanitarian goods in order to sustain the insurrection. It also needs ideological diffusion to develop a trans-zonal anti-systemic insurrection. The reification of

nationalist consciousness through geographical consensus remains a formidable obstacle to anarchist insurrectionary movements. The study of Rojava's insurrection is incomplete while the analysis of the blockades and the creation of possible networks is lacking.

I have argued that economic blockades and militarised border crossings in Rojava point to the ways that imperial and regional powers quell popular movements that aspire to move away from *status quo* global capitalism. Some work has been done on the disruption of logistics networks including Breitbart's (1978) analysis of the anarchist revolution in Spain and its difficulties overcoming blockades imposed by European powers.¹¹⁷ Alimahomed-Wilson and Potiker's (2017) analysis of the colonial suppression of Palestine's logistics infrastructure is a second contribution.¹¹⁸ Future research looking into the ways in which state powers militarise space might include how the United States enacted a trade embargo after the Cuban revolution and how that embargo restricted the strength of the revolutionary movement and the Cuban economies productive capacity.¹¹⁹ The collusion of United States elites with Chilean elites created a food shortage that was part of the United States's Cold War policy to not 'let the world witness a successful democratic-socialist experiment'.¹²⁰ The Saudi Arabian military – with support from the United States – recently bombed the port of Aden thus demobilising the movement of goods to and from Yemen as a means of economic warfare. This was done as a part of their opposition to and suppression of the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. The Irish liberation movement in Northern Ireland has also repeatedly been subject to the militarisation of space and boundaries exemplified by the '15 "peaceline" partitions—ranging from corrugated iron fences and steel palisade structures, to permanent brick or steel walls, to environmental barriers and buffers'.¹²¹ The argument could be made that the United Kingdom does this in order to subdue popular movements and subjugate the Irish population. However, a further investigation would be needed.

Future research might look at the ways in which these phenomena have marginalised subservient populations during freedom struggles as well as how the collusion between elites around the world create a global capitalist empire that maintains the *status quo* via spatial militarisation. I encourage the further development of theory that helps us to understand the ways that empire militarises space around insurrectionary movements, isolating such movements using tactics of border imperialism that both cut off supplies to the insurrection and disrupt trans-zonal anti-systemic movements from forming. This type of analysis is a central yet commonly overlooked aspect of the limits of liberation movements.

In conclusion I would like to advocate for a synthesis of the world-systems perspective with that of the anarchist perspective. There has been some progress

made on the synthesis of anarchism with global political economy,¹²² but the development of theoretical tools and empirical analysis is still wanting. As mentioned above the place-based analysis of anarchist social formations is undoubtedly of much use to our understanding of prefiguration, anarchist undercurrents in society, and counter-hegemonic social formations and knowledge production. However, without a larger systemic critique of global political economy anarchist theory will continue to be assigned a marginal role within the academy. This is why I am calling for an *anarcho-world-systems perspective* in which we read the world-systems canon¹²³ through an anarchist lens and create constructive dialogue by offering anarchist critiques to their often statist solutions. Though the solutions provided by world-systems may not be to the liking of those with anarchist politics there is much to be learned from the fantastic analysis world-systems offers on the structural constraints placed on anarchist social formations as well as the structural world level forces that often shape anarchist social formations. A synthesis of these two perspectives is needed in order to better understand how territory, scale, and networks shape the place-based analysis of anarchist social formations as well as how anarchist social formations affect the world capitalist system.

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