

“A Beacon of Hope for the World.” **Alina Sánchez, Lêgerîn Çiya, on the Rojava Revolution¹**

Editorial introduction

After listening to a talk in the auditorium at the University of Nariño, Alina approached us and said: “From the way the speaker talks, one can tell *he has a people behind him*.” She was referring to how one can tell how much someone has felt, thought, or stood beside a people by his or her words. Alina then continued, saying, “There are some people who speak only from their head, but there are others who bring a people in their words.” At that time, I did not know that Alina Sánchez had been working as a physician for the Rojava Revolution since 2011. It was only after her death, on March 17, 2018, that the group of acquaintances she made in Colombia—including myself—learned more about her work with the communal health system in Rojava.

It was then that we found out that people called her Lêgerîn Çiya, *Lêgerîn* meaning *to search*. The following text is an edited transcription of a talk Alina Sánchez delivered in the city of Pasto, Colombia, on June 21, 2017. First, a little context. The University of Nariño organized the *International Minga Meeting for Peace, Good-Living and Non-Violence*, an event dedicated to sharing experiences of struggles taking place in Kurdistan, Palestine, and Latin America. Minga comes from the Quechuan word *mink’a*, which means a meeting to work together, to help each other communally. Alina Sánchez, along with her friend Erol Polat, a member of the National Congress of Kurdistan, were invited to speak about the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East. Together with Isabel Solís, a K’iche’ activist and intellectual, we were invited to talk about the struggle of Maya communities in Guatemala. We met Alina practicing her Kurdish with Erol in the hotel lobby.

The importance of this unpublished talk lies in the possibility of knowing Alina’s own interpretation of the Rojava Revolution. In her talk, she touches upon various topics: nation-state formation, the history of resistance, women’s communes, the novelty of Rojava in today’s world. In the midst of the 2020 global pandemic, I found my notes and recordings from Pasto. I wrote to Alina’s mother, Patricia Gregorini, and sent her the audio recording. After listening to her talk once more, I thought it would be stimulating and inspiring to have her ideas in written form. Beyond an academic contribution, Alina Sánchez shows in her words the revolutionary struggle of the women of Rojava and elsewhere.

I finish this editorial introduction with some formal notes. Alina speaks quickly and spontaneously. At one time, I thought she speaks like a river flowing through rocks. There, perhaps, lays the freshness of her lively thought. At times, she jumps from one idea to another, sometimes without concluding what she raised at the beginning. More often, she complements the idea a few paragraphs later. I divided her talk into seven sections,

¹ Speech by Alina Sánchez in 2017. Editorial introduction and footnotes by Sergio Palencia Frener. Translated from Spanish by Holly Marie Sumner and Sergio Palencia Frener, both members member of the steering committee of the Emergency Committee for Rojava (ECR), New York City.

choosing titles that I thought were consistent with her arguments. Sometimes I added words or years in brackets [] in order to clarify a sentence. For acronyms, I used normal parentheses (). At various times, Alina introduces reflections or clarifications within a sentence, sometimes up to three times within a paragraph. In these instances, I used hyphens — to separate the main argument from the clarifying idea. I also *italicized* certain words to highlight central ideas, sometimes quoting the original words in Spanish. I wrote a few footnotes to comment or clarify an aspect of an idea. Finally, I added four photos that we took during the *Minga* meeting in Pasto. I would be pleased to know that other readers also find in Alina's words the happiness she transmitted through her presence.

On the Revolution in Rojava

Alina Sánchez
University of Nariño, Colombia
June 21st, 2017

1. The Great English Invention: The Nation-State

First, I want to say one thing. I thought that we were coming to this city and to this university for the first time. It is a nice surprise to come to this university and see a great tribute to the Kurdistan Women's Movement, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). So in a way, we've already been here, we've already been in people's eyes. I'm going to tell you a little bit about the Kurdistan Revolution, about the whole process. I don't want to bore you. Sometimes you have to go into history a little bit because the idea is to contextualize and understand where things came from so we do not get the idea that this great revolution came from a [simple] repudiation, as is sometimes misconstrued. The struggle, our struggle, the struggle of the Kurdish people, is a struggle that we have carried for 40 years now.

The Kurdish people is a native population of Mesopotamia. We say Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and the Euphrates [rivers], a region of the cradle of civilization, the region of the great empires, let's say. Somehow within the empires, the Kurdish people and many other peoples lived in a way [of] resistance, in the form of a periphery, the fact of living as a periphery of resistance. The empires failed to fully incorporate them into their structures, that is, [the Kurds] were able to preserve their cultural traits, their own social organizations, their communality. After the First World War (1914-1918), mainly France and England signed a series of treaties and divided the [territory of the] Kurdish people into four parts: the largest in Turkey with more than 25 million people.

To situate us more or less geographically, [this area comprises] all of southeast Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran. It is the largest part of Turkey. There is no census of the Kurdish people. In fact, not all Kurds are recognized as such, and there is no formal acceptance, nor can we know, but we feel that there are now forty million Kurds and

twenty-five [million] are in Turkey, that is, the largest part [of the Kurdish population]. Let's say, when the great English invention of nation-states is built and transported to the Middle East, knowing what nation-states are like, we can interpret that the identity and life of the peoples- particularly, the life of the Kurdish people- suffered from very strong assimilation politics.

We could say that after [19]23, Turkey emerged as a Republic and Kurdishness was dead.² In fact, when our first comrades began to raise the issue of Kurdishness, the elders in the villages said: "It is like wanting to bring forth sprouts from a rotten log, [from] a piece of firewood." While we cannot say it was dead, Kurdishness was in that state, [suffering] very strong policies of assimilation not only in the cultural plane, but also in the political, in the military as well. The last great uprising —[as] comrade Erol [Polat] commented—the Dersim Uprising (1937-1938), was the last great strength of the peripheral peoples in resistance and was only defeated militarily, through directly bombardments [by the Turkish state].



Image 1. A Tribute to the Kurdish Struggle
From Left to Right: Alina Sánchez, Isabel Solís, Sergio Palencia, Erol Polat.

The student movements in [19]68 were very influential within the Turkish left. The Kurdish Liberation Movement arose at the juncture of student movements, national liberation processes in different parts of the world, and the Soviet Bloc that was still standing. For many years it did not even have a name. More than anything in the [19]70s, the first claim was that Kurdistan was a colony. The goal was to recover an identity as a nation. Not only the Kurdish people suffered these practices of assimilation and extermination and genocide at a grand scale, but also the Syrian people, the Armenian people and other peoples. The

² Alina Sánchez interprets the formation of the Turkish nation-state through the concrete denial and attack of marginalized populations, such as the Kurds and the Armenians. The ontological and social formation of the Kurdish culture, or Kurdishness as she refers to it, is historically situated in a context of multinational state formation in the Middle East.

organization from the beginning had differences with the Turkish left and there were always many dialogues as well.

2. Recovering the History of Resistance

Now we ask ourselves: the rise of the Kurdish people, the great rise of the Kurdish people, was it only because of the Kurdish component? Of course not, because there were many other nationalist Kurdish organizations. The difference is that when we consider that Kurdistan was a colony, we somehow saw this need: to recover history, to go to an earlier history removed from the history of nation-states. Until now, the left — generalizing a bit— only described the history of peoples, including the history of oppression, within the framework of the State. How could we understand the reality, the life of a people and the history of oppression of that people, in a framework of less than a hundred years?

These are millenary peoples, peoples that may be ten thousand years old. We are talking about one of the areas where civilizations emerged. So the [Kurdish] movement begins to survey history. When surveying history, what emerges? Well, we say: *the narrated history*, the history we know, the history that drives, *that moves the world as well*, that is an important force in how to create knowledge at the level of a mentality, the history of power. In that recovery of history, there is the history of humanity, the history of peoples, and there is a break, there is a break from which two rivers flow — I'll explain it somewhat graphically, which is how we try to understand it as well.

This is α)³ *the history of the central civilization*. We call it that way, here it could be called patriarchy. Let's see, let's try to approximate it to the way we handle it, [that is to say] the history of the monopoly of power and of commerce. Indeed, the history of power. And, on the other hand, there is β) *the history of resistance*, the *history of the peoples*, which we call *the history of democratic civilization*. That also exists. Of course, the one we know is the narrated history of power, but we ask: Well, are those two stories separated from each other? No. The histories, let's say, the history of the central civilization and the history of the democratic civilization became intertwined with each other.

This is to say that, in our own colonized, capitalized societies, there is also the history of resistance. *If we do not take it out of the history of those peoples*, we are not going to take it and *we are going to lose our historical foundation* of thousands of years of native peoples [pueblos originarios] in the region. Therefore, what need arises from this? What does this imply? Speaking concretely, it is that we have to incorporate them into universal study⁴ because we have to create the history of peoples. There are thousands of years in which the

³ We added Greek letters to introduce the history of power, or central civilization, and the history of resistance, or democratic civilization. Alina builds on Abdullah Öcalan's civilizational struggles: "Hegemony is a principle that is usually followed by the classic type of civilization. Democratic civilisations reject hegemonic powers and ideologies." Öcalan, A. (2017). *Democratic Confederalism* (H. Guneser & International Initiative "Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan in Kurdistan," Trans.). Pluto Press, p. 45

⁴ Alina Sánchez uses "universal study" and "universal history" within a framework of critical history-making and history-writing from below, from the marginalized and non-state peoples. Rather than a Hegelian perspective of incorporating peoples or countries into a homogenized world spirit, Alina proposes to build a sort of communal democratic civilization from below, against capitalism and nation-state formations. This is a fascinating aspect of her thought.

peoples have not told their stories. In particular, the Kurdish people from their local context, have to join the universal study. It is necessary to make the narrative of the peoples and, of their particular history, in their territoriality, would have to generate the emergence of the Kurdish people; otherwise, it could never be incorporated into that universal history.

What do we mean when we say “universal history”? [We mean] that the colonization of the Kurdish people, the oppression that the Kurdish people suffer from many different sides and factors, is [a struggle] against a system. In other words, it is not only the Kurdish people, but that the powers—let's say—have targeted the Kurdish people less than others.⁵ We understand that the colonization of the Kurdish people, the solution to the colonization of the Kurdish people, means to confront a whole system, a system of material domination, and more than anything a system of ideological domination, of mentality, of masculine mentality.

3. Egalitarian societies

In this recovery of history—here I will be very brief—what we are trying to do and which also has a lot to do with it, is at that moment of the great rise of the left, of Marxism in different colors.

What was also happening with Marxism at that time, especially with the Soviet Bloc? On the one hand, *it denied religion* to a highly devout and religious people. On the other hand, the social structure of much of the Middle East is one of clans and tribes. Let's see, we cannot deny structures, we vindicate ethnicity: we call them ethnicities, clans and tribes... The conservative traits of those clans, those ethnicities, and those tribes, somehow made their cultures and that form of communal organization resist; they never become fully incorporated by the State.

The striking quality about [the peoples organized into clans or ethnicities], is that we do not have a way of thinking about how and why these communities can live without States, how can they save themselves, heal themselves from a capitalist system and a macro-economic system. Those societies, through structures that were the product of a society over thousands of years, did retain *that communality in the form of resistance*. Hence, we have to resort to that commonality. That is why we return with so much emphasis and always assert the Neolithic society. At school we study it as the Agricultural Revolution, which for us means much more than that. [After all], the longest part of human history is in Neolithic society.

In other words, the community, well, what people used to call the “primitive community,” we call the *egalitarian society*.⁶ This had a component that gave us an answer: it is the place of women in that society, the woman as a nucleus, as the unifying factor of that

⁵ This is a confusing sentence. I suggest to understand this within the context of the last paragraph, in which Alina discusses how the capitalist powers wage war against the communal forms of peoples such as the Kurds in the Middle East. This is a similar argument raised by Noam Chomsky in his inaugural lecture at the *Rojava Freedom Annual Lecture Series* (January 15, 2021) hosted by the University of Rojava. Chomsky stated that governments in Northern Africa and the Middle East consider Sahrawis, Palestinians, Yemenis, and Kurds, as “disposable peoples” living in a geostrategic zone.

society. This element, these characteristics are still present in the peripheries, in the mountains, in the peasants [campesinos] in the farmers, these components remain present. So from that moment on, we can say that *the Left proposed some issues that perhaps were valid, but within these societies that already incorporated their communality in another way, they were impenetrable*. Let's say, [collective] identity [as a key factor].

When we reassert Kurdishness, what is being proposed is directly against the structure of the nation-state, even though we have systematized it in our paradigm. In some way, the [19]70s, the [19]80s, did not define [that] we were positioned against the nation-state. But we ultimately were because we were against a monistic State, against a structure, a form of social organization that excludes peoples: a single color, a single language, a single nationality, a single religion. Let's say it is a monistic state, whose structure itself is always monistic. Well, no matter where we go; in Argentina, Colombia, China, Japan, it is the same. The people are suffering from the problem [of the nation-state or the monist state].

Perhaps a little later, in the [19]90s there was already a certain *praxis* [práctica]—because this is a characteristic of the process that Kurdistan has lived in these forty years. Many of the things that we have systematized from our thinking emerged from praxis due to the Women's Liberation ideology—which, if I have time, I will talk about because it is the most central part of all this— [it] emerged from the practice of thousands of our comrades in the mountains and women's work in society, after we systematized our ideology of women.

4. The State Breaks Community Ties

By the end of the [19]90s, we made a very strong and more systematic critique of the nation-state structure. We said, “Well, let's see, if one simply looks at the reality of the peoples, before and after, why was it necessary for the Western powers to bring the model of the nation-state [to territories like Kurdistan]?” The only way to try to *penetrate each power in society and break their self-government* [autogestión]—which continues and remains to this day everywhere, in different ways—is *through a structure that breaks community ties* [lazos comunitarios]. [The state structure] denies this [communal] identity because if there is an identity, there is a joint resolution of the daily problems of society. One does not need to have an anthem, have a flag, or have a State that solves [problems for] you; people already found resolution themselves.

Therefore, we say no: *the Nation-State is a source of problems, it can never be a solution*. [This situation] can become an abyss... [In Rojava] we had to generate other types of answers, without a nation-state, that respected the particularities of each different locality, of those different territories, which are characterized as they are elsewhere, like I see here [in Colombia] for its diversity. There are thousands of peoples that coexist and when they have historically coexisted together in the same region, there are a myriad of religions, ancient beliefs: Zarathustrism, Mahdism, Maneism, Mistratism. Hundreds of beliefs that

⁶ Some of these ideas resound with Pierre Clastre's studies of an anti-hierarchical component of Guayaki indigenous communities in Paraguay. See Clastres, Pierre. *La société contre l'État: Recherches d'anthropologie politique*. Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1974.

coexisted in the region. Now all of them, all the unique identities of different groups are used [by states and paramilitaries] to divide. They were not a dividing element before.

When the peoples [lived together in their diversity], there was never a war of such intensity as the war that we are living now. [In this war, diversity] is being weaponized in some way; of products that society creates, of certain types of beliefs, certain responses, because not all peoples were grouped according to a nation. There were sectors of society that were organized according to a *shared ethic* [ética compartida], not just a nation or a belief. [This is] one of our foundational elements—very briefly—of our position vis-à-vis the nation-state.

Faced with this, there is the problem of building diversity amidst diversity and that is where we developed Democratic Confederalism, which I prefer to mention briefly so as not to talk so much myself and then I will tell you other things. Tomorrow we have to talk about that, about the women's struggle, but since it is very short, I prefer to speak now. When they asked me [to participate]⁷, there were two different topics: Kurdistan and the women's struggle. *This seemed inconceivable to me, because to speak of the Kurdistan struggle is to speak of women.*

⁷ Alina is talking about the topics requested by the organizing committee of the International *Minga* Meeting.



Image 2. Two Generations: Alina Sánchez with Hugo Blanco Galdós, an historical Peruvian fighter during the Land Reform Uprising in Cuzco, 1962.

At this time, what is the role played by women? I say *all* [the roles]. In addition to all the roles that we play at this time, the organizational structure that we were able to carry within our ranks of militants and within society, [has become] the guarantee that this process is transforming society as a whole. We say that our main fight is against a mentality, the hardest struggle that we have is against a mentality [that] we- especially women- are mentally dependent. [This mentality of dependency has been cemented for] thousands of years in the geographical structures of cities, homes, in religion, clothing, language, the way of eating; everything has established how women must always remain in the private sphere.

This is more intensely perceptible in the Middle East because religious dogmatism there is much stronger. The woman's place *in society* [de ser sociedad] is null: it is in the private space of her home. And State institutions, in some way, [reproduced this isolation] through specific mechanisms and dynamics that require labor [que necesitan mano de obra], and so on. Or assimilation by the religion of the State, which we call nationalism. These structures have also been capitalized by men, because it is a mentality, it is the same logic.

5. Women's Struggle: Dissolving the Micro-States

Hence, what is our goal? *To create a free society*. If we do not start with the structure of the system that we do not want, this exclusive and unequal system, which is [based on] the exclusion of women, [then there will be no liberation]. The break that I was telling you about earlier in which society is divided into those two rivers: democratic civilization and central civilization. That break was to exclude women from [social] life and begin male dynamics, and the color of life disappears. We do not speak only of women, because we say: "We are a women's struggle", not because there are thousands of us, not because there are women and from the first day of this struggle there may not have been a woman.

It was a women's fight because we are considering what I was saying the other day: we are trying to structurally combat a mentality and we didn't limit ourselves to fighting, look, we did not focus only on attacking the State... and the enemy... and the hydroelectric plants... and nationalism... and orthodox Islam... and the struggles between Sunnis and Shiites ... and the Alawites who are excluded ... We are building [community ties, because] there is no other way. If we want a free society, we have to free ourselves as individuals [who are] part of a collective. In order to have a truly free society we have to build it; we are not going to build it in opposition.

We have to know what the dynamics are, because all sectors are part of that revolutionary process: the most conservative sectors and the most religious sectors, the right-wing sectors, well, all sectors are part of society. The problems of society will not be solved if they are not solved with those sectors as well. It is not that we are a group [of vanguards], *the patriots*—as we call it— the people who have understood these contradictions and have a very strong resistance identity, well that is autonomy and was solved. No! We must make a dialogue between these contradictions. If we are saying that this society is founded upon a patriarchal mentality, in a dominant mentality that has its correlate in material reality, we [women] have to fight directly against that.

If we do not do it as women, if we do not build from other logics as women, then how are we going to fight with those same elements? *How are we going to adopt the same logic to fight power with power?* [¿Cómo vamos a entrar en las mismas lógicas para combatir el poder con poder?] That is not possible, it is simply not possible... And if we do not organize as women and if we do not create our autonomous women's organizations, there will simply be only one of the elements [of change]. *There is variety in life and we have to make that variety begin to contradict, begin to contradict and begin to build that society*. But this element was suddenly gone, the element of women, the femininity of life. I'm not referring only to women, it's that [the element of femininity] was not considered in the Middle Eastern society as I was telling you.

Therefore, for that element [to take place], women have to build ourselves amongst women, we have to debate life amongst women, to see how we women see life, how we want to organize the economy, how we want to care for our children, how we see the State. Let's say, we create a collective identity. In the most unifying moments of society, women gather; they have an almost *natural* quality—if this was said wrong, sometimes people complain a little bit about the word “natural” because it is portrayed an absolutist way. [But] women have this in common, and in society when we say, "we must liberate society by liberating women", we are talking about that. That is not a problem.

6. Simultaneously Liberating Women by Liberating Society

We do not address the issue of women as a women's issue; here everyone and here is my partner [Erol Polat, who previously spoke about this]. We all dedicate ourselves to the topic of women because we [women] are all dedicated to the topic of society. Speaking about women means speaking about society for the simple fact that a society cannot be enslaved if women were not first enslaved; sectors of society cannot be excluded if women were not first excluded. It cannot be done, creating marginal, sectorized, fragmented spaces, if first women were not first excluded in a private space. It's not possible.

On the other hand, if we want to build a free society in diversity, an ethical, political, and ecological society as we say, we have to break with that dynamic, we inevitably have to break with that dynamic, we are going to liberate women by liberating society. The society is, in fact, within the processes. [In many interpretations] this is not the case: society is always on one side. I will generalize, and forgive me those who do not feel identified; this is a generalization. Society is left aside [in various interpretations]: we treat topics, struggles, or aspects of society in a marginal way, in which people are not included.

Within a family, you cannot separate the issue of gender violence from the issue of economic wellbeing, from the issue of the destruction of their land, of not having land or being unable to plant. You cannot divide society itself; [society] represents all diversity. In society all religions are represented, skin colors, cultural tastes, languages, dances. I don't know, some like rock and roll, others like traditional music, everything is represented. And if we want dialogue, let's go out and build a society democratically because everything is represented in society. That is why [we propose] a system of *building in parallel* [different social aspects]. Maybe this is not correct word, but that's essentially [what is meant].

For example, many times we are asked about our position against the fight for abortion rights or with this or that. Yes, for us all forms of struggle are valid, we do not invalidate any, but we build [upon] what has happened to those around us. The question of "the movement" cannot be fragmented from the question of the people, it really cannot be that way. I was telling you about a great participation of women [in Kurdistan] in the [19]90s. Women created their army. We do not like to say "army" because we understand it as having the dynamics of the State. In 19[93] we called it the "Feminine Fronts". From there no one stopped it; we organized our own party, our own institutions, all autonomous.

That was a radical change within the organization, internally and outwardly, because suddenly a family that lives in a situation—as I said to the students [at Nariño]— [women are] married before they are born. It is already a society [...] of destiny, determinism, where *the role of women will be, what the role of men will be* is already totally determined for a woman or a family. We say [and propose] *the family as a microstate: the enemy is not [outside], the State we are fighting is not above us. The State is within the family*. It is almost a quantic question: the micro represents the macro, the macro [represents] the micro.

Therefore, if we are in a family—where I say that there are roles already highly predetermined— and suddenly in the [19]90s, women [in Kurdistan] organized themselves and regained their self-esteem. The fight for self-esteem is very important, it is vital; the woman empowers herself and begins to build herself, collectively. Soon one of those girls went to the guerrilla, she went to the ranks as a guerrilla. Symbolically, she makes a break. For hundreds of years, or dozens of years, the women traditionally occupied a [private] role and, suddenly, how it is going to continue, how it is going to be acceptable [for] a woman, for my sister to be a guerrilla, for her to be a military commander, for her to be a political leader, to do societal work, to be a great reference, to be empowered, to live, and not need to marry, to not need to have children of her own, to be a person tremendously recognized by society because, in addition to fighting for women and being in the struggle for their nation, [she changes society]?

This within a family is a bomb, it is a mine [una mina], because it is breaking with a structure that previously gone unquestioned. We were talking about this today with a comrade: until [female and male] comrades start expressing another society, another type of ethics, another type of mental independence is possible, that [society] does not exist. The moment the guerrillas begin to represent that, the family nucleus begins to transform diametrically. The influence within society was very strong, but that is why I say: more than the question of [fighting] against the State, [the women's struggle] begins to transform within itself. These are extremely feudal societies, feudal in the conservative sense, of tribal fiefdoms, let's say.

The process that society undergoes was always parallel to the process that the insurgency or the [revolutionary] organization undergoes. Perhaps later when we declared ourselves sovereign, another story begins, because now the enemy was no longer up there, now there is no one to blame, now we are responsible for ourselves, [for] the history of northern Syria. [...] Maybe [you] want us to talk about Rojava? I love talking about Rojava because besides, that is where I live.

7. Rojava: A Beacon of Hope

Well, I'm going to talk to you about the Rojava Revolution, which for me —and I am Argentinian —is like a beacon of hope for the world. Perhaps someone will say, “An

Argentinian fighting there in Kurdistan, what is she doing in the middle of the war? Why did you seek such a complicated conflict?” But I say: [while one aspect of the struggle] is Kurdish, we are fighting to build a free woman, [the struggle in Rojava] goes much further. Well, I’ve gone down a rabbit trail [me fui por las ramas]. I am going to give you a little context about the Rojava Revolution. I do not like for things to appear as if they came out of nowhere and that we may be in very similar situations. Our [female] leader [?] tells us about *creating moments*. I’m going to talk about it that way; I will tell it as a creating moment.

a. Origin of the Third Way

In 2011, the Arab Spring began in Syria — I’m going to cut it short. There was no society-building project on the part of the groups that were revolting against the Syrian regime. In fact, the opposition sectors had a Sunni imprint. I don’t know if you know, the government of Bashar [al-Assad in Syria] is an Alevite government which is like a religious minority. So the opposition almost always had that [religious] character. In fact, the Syrian Arab Spring was about the mosque leaving with a slogan on Fridays⁸ [los viernes de la mezquita se salía con una consigna]. It had a more closed Sunni religious imprint, I don’t mean extremist, but very strong. At that time, the Kurdish people within northern Syria were a systematically denied people. The Kurdish people had no right to their language, they had no right to their political organizations.

The political persecution was very strong, mainly after our leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was a refugee, was captured [in Kenya, on 15 February 1999]. Almost all the Kurds [in Syria], who were two and a half million,⁹ were undocumented and had a paper that said “foreigner” and their family, their ancestors—who knows how far back! — had been from there. Well, that was the point, I am telling about the situation in 2011 in a simplistic way. So [the Kurds] declared the *Third Way* [of Spring uprising in Syria]: not with the regime, because morally towards the Kurdish people it was not possible to raise that, nor with the opposition, which was an opposition that had already been intervened in 2012. Therefore, the Kurdish people declared themselves the Third Way and began to organize the system of Democratic Confederalism.

Let’s say, all those ideas from so many years of struggle are beginning to be put into practice. In an area where there was a very strong national diversity — because we are not talking only about Kurds, the Kurdish population. The people organized and formed their assemblies. The [Syrian] State had no choice but to withdraw at that time with almost no war, withdrawing all its institutions and the Army remains only in two places which are Qamishli and Al-Hasakah, two cities in the easternmost part of northern Syria.¹⁰ This

⁸ Alina Sánchez uses this example of people leaving the mosque “with a slogan on Fridays” to depict the importance of institutional religions during the first part of the Syrian Arab Spring and Civil War.

⁹ According to a New York Times article, “Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria, making up between 5 and 10 percent of the Syrian population of 21 million in 2011.” In other words, around 2 million Kurds live in Syria. See: Kingsley, P. (2019, October 14). Who Are the Kurds, and Why Is Turkey Attacking Them in Syria? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/world/middleeast/the-kurds-facts-history.html>

¹⁰ Al-Hasakah is the name of the biggest city in northeastern Syria, capital of the province or governorate of Al-Hasakah. After the 2011 rebellion, several cities and towns in this province became part of the

whole assembly system started to be created. Some attempts had already been made before, but at the time, the Kurds begin to jointly form communes in each neighborhood, several communes forming an assembly, and began to form the confederal system because, let's say, in the part of the northern Syria, the Kurds live there in three patches [or regions].

It was in [19]63 — if I'm not mistaken — a policy that was called the Arab Belt¹¹ which was the forced exile of Kurdish populations and founding of Arab towns with the intention of dividing the Kurdish people. To this day, this continues to weigh heavily [on people]. These Kurdish regions are beginning to form their assemblies and within the communes begin the general communes and the women's communes. From that moment, the people began to organize themselves. That was a tremendous challenge, I don't want it to be portrayed through rose-colored glasses. It was a challenge.

b. Reconstructing the Social Fabric: Women's Communes

Right now, we are fighting because there are people [organizing into assemblies]. You go to the assemblies—I worked in the assemblies for a time—people say: “But there is no electricity... the roads are bad... our fighters, who are defending us against the Islamic State, are away for too long and they cannot see their family...” What do I know! All kinds of problems and the neighbors themselves start saying: “Well, who is responsible for this?” The State no longer exists, it is the assemblies themselves. The most difficult step, I believe, the one that we have been taking for at least the last two years is that: self-determination is not only a right, it is a responsibility. People have learned and grown [within] a system. The system they know is that of representative democracy, [that] which we know [too], it goes without saying.

Suddenly, the assemblies are the ones that have the responsibility and the possibility of addressing from the locality and debating the local context—let's say the component of the territory is essential—because there is no political flag, no religious flag, nor even the national question, because *it is the locality* [es la localidad]. There are the same problems, let's say, the problems that your neighbor suffers, that you suffer, that the other suffers. In a society that has a very strong communal sense, things work, they are resolved. The strongest step was all that assumption of responsibility and above all the strongest change was that new ethic — not ethics in the general Christian sense, as people sometimes understand it that way— but, well, the values of rebuilding *the social fabric* [la trama social].

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The city of Qamishli, located very close to the Turkey-Syria border, was momentarily the capital of the Rojava. Today part of the city is under Syrian state control, including the airport.

¹¹ In 1963, the Baath Party takes the power in Syria. One of the main goals of the Baath regime was to control the oil resources in the northern territories, originally populated by Kurds. In 1965, the government builds 41 Arab villages all along the border between Syria and Turkey. Through the Arab belt, the Syrian state gave land to landless Arab populations displaced by the Tabqa dam project, built between 1968 and 1978. The Syrian regime replaced the Kurdish names of villages for new ones in Arab. In 1973 the Arab belt was called “Plan for the establishment of state model farms in the Jazira region.” The Arab belt was 10-15 kilometers wide and 350 long between the Iraqi border to the east and the Ras al'Ayn region to the west. See: Human Rights Watch. (2009). *Syria. Group Denial. Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*. (S. Leah Whitson & I. Gorvin, Eds.).

A social fabric that had been corrupted because there was nothing to solve [because] the State solved it; it excluded you and you survived. Suddenly, if the social fabric is not rebuilt, how are the people going to respond to their own problems? How will the people be able to manage their affairs if the social fabric does not exist? And the social fabric is within the structure of that society, of the family. The woman is the one who has the greatest responsibility, that is why the Women's Communes are created. Suddenly, the woman who had been at home cooking all her life, who could not even enter the mosques, suddenly this woman begins to speak little by little, women begin to argue among themselves and, suddenly, this woman is inserted into the public sphere.



Image 3. Alina Sánchez holding the Kurdistan Communities Union flag, or Koma Civakên Kurdistan (KCK)¹²

But there is one very important thing: we always hear about institutionalization, we understand it in a very negative way. In that, we [in the Rojava Revolution] have another position, and our leader [Abdullah Öcalan] speaks a lot [about it]. *One form of self-defense is institutionalization*. If we do not institutionalize, we do not guarantee a structure that can shelter, let's say, receive the people, and that [allows] people to debate and that the *people have the tools to resolve* [their own issues]. [Otherwise] it will depend on good will. If we do not institutionalize the communes where *women gradually gain self-esteem and courage* and, let's say, from their own very different logic, to be able to solve the problems of their

¹² I want to thank Debbie Bookchin for the information about the KCK flag.

neighborhood [barrio], the questions that our *grandmothers taught us*¹³ that are beginning to come into discussion.

If we do not create a structure that allows, that gives that space to women: what is she going to depend on? On a man telling her: “Come, stand up and speak”? That will never happen. And if it happens, it would be an exception to the rule. We have to institutionalize; it is a measure of self-defense. Yesterday I think I said that we understand self-defense in many ways and one of them is militarily, one of them is weapons, or the physical sense, [but another] one of those ways is institutionalization. *There has to be a structure that organizes and gives continuity to that process that does not depend on* [isolated cases of men’s] *goodwill*.

c. Coordinated Autonomies: Democratic Confederalism

This is the reason for the whole process that women have suffered and gone through in these five years, almost six years, since 2012. In Rojava, the change in society has been more qualitative than quantitative. The society is realizing that problems cannot be solved if the other is not included, if there is no dialogue; in order to be able to manage itself, to be able to solve its problems, [there must be inclusion]. So, what appears? We speak of Democratic Confederalism: yes, there is the Kurdish people and there are the Arab people [in Rojava]. The Kurdish people in that region are culturally, politically, and socially oppressed by the Arab people. But there is an Arab population, so how do we solve the problems of the neighborhoods or the problems of society if we do not [have] dialogue and solve [them] with the Arab sector?

There we realized that the enemy actually exists in our minds. I will tell a personal example. There are other sectors [of Kurdish society] that are more intervened from the outside, political parties, and we say: “Well no, but that family is from another party, it is from a party that is very against [us], is very allied [to the other sector]” Well, without those families if there is no dialogue, then how is the commune going to function without that family if the family has the same problem as that commune? If we do not incorporate them, if there is no dialogue that allows all sectors of society, in those assemblies, [to participate]. That is why I say: institutionalize a structure that allows direct democracy, which is what is happening at that time. If we do not incorporate the different sectors, it will not be possible.

How can we [organize a commune] in such diversity, among divisions— the divide and conquer that has penetrated so deeply — through a structure that shelters different people starting from their cultural identity, from their locality? That is why I say: Society itself harbors all kinds of differences. When we talk about problems and people are responsible, there is no one to blame. What I am saying is that what emerges is that, if we do not solve [the communal organization] with the other, then we do not solve [anything] because the other also lives here.

¹³ The idea is interesting although not entirely developed: the knowledge and practice of grandmothers is important to rethink woman’s autonomous organization in the present. This relation between daughters, mothers, and grandmothers is central in recent indigenous Maya artistic expressions in Guatemala. The song *Jun Nim K’aslemal* [One Immense Life], by K’iche composer Aurora Nohemi Chaj.

Erol [Polat] said: “We did not invent confederalism; confederalism existed in a lot of moments in history.” I think that here in Latin America there have also been a lot of forms of confederalism. We said that we can even change the name: they are *coordinated autonomies* [son autonomías coordinadas]. Well, that's what confederalism is all about! Autonomy: that each people, according to their characteristics, to their problems and in their diversity, that they can self-manage [auto-administrarse] in a coordinated way because we know that if there is no coordination of problems [nothing] will be resolved. So, at this time, after the [Rojava] Revolution triumphs, which started in a part [of northern Syria] and I told you that mainly in the [Kurdish] population, the Islamic State [ISIS] arises.



Image 4. Alina Sánchez holding the Kurdistan Communities of Women flag, or Komalên Jinên Kurdistan (KJK).

I'm not going to talk about the Islamic State because that would be a lot [now], but what I am going to say is that the Islamic State is not a religious issue: It is a [strategy of] activating an extremist sect managed in many ways. Some [regional powers], mainly from Turkey, [support the Islamic State] *against a project of society* [in Rojava]. That is the reason for the Islamic State, because we are fighting a war, we are defending the border of that liberated zone, we are putting the body to a war that does not belong to us, we are clear [about that]. This war does not belong to us, the different powers [such as the United States and Russia] are facing each other in that place to contest certain contradictions, to position themselves [in the region], to have more geopolitical control of some things. We are putting our bodies in a war that does not belong to us. That is not the war of the peoples, but nevertheless, [the war is taking place] not only in northern Syria but in all of Kurdistan.

I believe that the Kurdish people at this time, like other peoples perhaps [...], is representing a very strong struggle and, above all, at the level of the peoples' mentality against a system that oppresses the peoples. That in a general sense, and in a more specific sense women, because I believe that the most universal thing— I always feel that way—*the most universal thing in our organization* is, us, the women, because it *is the most anti-systematic thing that we can propose*. Speaking about women, I say it again, is speaking about society [...]