



Alternatives to Sustainable Development: What can we Learn from the Pluriverse in Practice?

Jin-jiyan-azadi. Matristic culture and Democratic Confederalism in Rojava

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of Jineolojî, an emancipatory praxis elaborated by the Kurdish Women’s Movement, for contemporary degrowth and pluriverse politics. Considering Jineolojî as the most original dimension of the Democratic Confederalist model of government in Northern and Eastern Syria (compared to other revolutionary projects), the article contributes to recent debates around the central place of “depatriarchization” in pluriverse debates. In the first part, we highlight a renewed interest in matriarchy, which has emerged at the intersection of ecofeminist with post-development and degrowth thought, noting how this resonates with the rediscovery of Mesopotamia’s matristic culture, which has been key to Democratic Confederalism and its radical critique of capitalist modernity and the nation State. We also highlight the inherent contradictions of the matristic model and formulate the question whether, and under what conditions, it bears potential for emancipatory political ecologies. The second part briefly describes the article’s sources and method, namely militant ethnography carried out with the Kurdish Women’s Movement, both in Rojava and in the European diaspora, cross-referenced with an analysis of some key texts of Jineolojî. The third part investigates the process by which the matristic perspective is being currently performed in Rojava through Jineolojî: a pedagogy for women’s self-defense, the autonomous re-appropriation of communalist and ecological praxis, and men’s liberation from hegemonic masculinity. We conclude that Jineolojî does not configure as a model of society to be recovered from a pre-patriarchal age, but as an original tool for liberating social potential towards gender, decolonial and ecological revolutions.

Keywords Gender · Ecofeminism · Jineolojî · Post-development · Patriarchy · Kurdish Women’s Movement

Introduction

Recent debates on degrowth and post-development have rediscovered the idea of matriarchy, or matristic culture, as one of the radical alternatives of the pluriverse (Escobar 2018; Kothari et al. 2019) and a key strategy to overcome

patriarchy “as the source of the contemporary civilizational model that is wreaking havoc on humans and nature” (Escobar 2018: 10). The significance of matristic culture for political revolution is not purely theoretical: it can be observed today in Democratic Confederalism, as currently practiced in North and East Syria (Rojava). Considering women’s liberation a first, fundamental step towards socio-ecological transformation, rather than vice versa (Ayboğa 2018), Democratic Confederalism can be described as an autonomous life project opposing the patriarchal/ Statist order of “capitalist modernity” (Öcalan 2017). One of the most original features of this emancipatory design is the recovery of Rojava’s matristic culture through a new body of knowledge collectively developed on the part of the Kurdish women’s movement: Jineolojî, or the “science of women and life” (Jineology Committee Europe 2017). So far Jineolojî has been understood as an original Kurdish epistemology similar

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to intersectional (Shahvisi 2018) or decolonial/transnational feminisms (Al-Ali and Käser 2020), “a framework of radical feminist analysis” (Neven and Shafers 2017), or a “discourse” (Şimşek and Jongerden 2018) which condensates the philosophical developments of the Kurdish women’s struggle and informs each institution at place in Rojava. We approach it as a re-elaboration of matristic culture in a revolutionary context: not simply a body of knowledge, but also a militant pedagogy and knowledge-practice which articulates the matristic perspective with women’s self-organizing work in daily life. In this sense, the article contributes to this journal’s Special Feature ‘Pluriverse in practice’ by shedding light on one of those “knowledge systems around the world often stewarded by women” (Akbulut et al. 2022) that allow us to delink from the ‘one world’ logic of capitalist, colonial, heteropatriarchal modernity.

What motivated our interest towards Jineolojî is our belief that degrowth and pluriverse politics cannot be separated from depatriarchal politics – or else, that depatriarchization should be added to the “5Ds” of a civilizational shift mentioned by Hosseini and Barry (2022): (1) *De-carbonization*, (2) *De-capitalization*, (3) *Degrowth*, (4) *Decolonization*, and (5) *De-corrupting*. Building upon our previous research and activists work in Feminist Political Ecology, Degrowth and decolonial movements, we felt the need for engaging with Jineolojî’s attempts at recovering the transformative potential of the matristic perspective.

In the first part of the article, we highlight a renewed interest in matriarchy, which has emerged at the intersection of ecofeminist with post-development and degrowth thought, noting how this resonates with the rediscovery of Mesopotamia’s matristic culture, which has been key to Democratic Confederalism and its radical critique of capitalist modernity and the nation State. We also highlight the inherent contradictions of the matristic model and formulate the question whether, and under what conditions, it bears potential for emancipatory political ecologies. The second part briefly describes the article’s sources and method, namely militant ethnography carried out with the Kurdish Women’s Movement, both in Rojava and in the European diaspora, cross-referenced with an analysis of some key texts of Jineolojî. The third part investigates the process by which the matristic perspective is being currently performed in Rojava through Jineolojî: a pedagogy for women’s self-defense, the autonomous re-appropriation of communalist and ecological praxis, and men’s liberation from hegemonic masculinity. We conclude that Jineolojî does not configure as a model of society to be recovered from a pre-patriarchal age, but as an original tool for liberating social potential towards gender, decolonial and ecological revolutions.

Theoretical framework

Matristic culture in ecofeminism and post-development theory

Since the 1980s, postcolonial and materialist (eco)feminist thought have contributed to the formulation of critical perspectives on growth and development, arguing that modern/colonial capitalism constitutes the latest stage of patriarchy (Gregoratti and Raphael 2019; Salleh 2017 [1997]). A foundational contribution to this line of thought came from German sociologist and activist Maria Mies (1986). Inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, she looked at patriarchy as a world-scale system of gender/colonial/class relations allowing for the accumulation of capital. She criticized traditional left politics for subordinating the emancipation of women to economic growth via the development of productive forces, which exploited and devalued both women’s work and the natural world – thus laying the basis for a feminist approach to degrowth. Women’s emancipation, she and others argued (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Mies and Shiva 1993; Merchant 1996), would only come from replacing this system with one centred on subsistence production, cooperation, and (earth)care. Adopting a postcolonial approach, ecofeminists argued that GDP growth is premised not only on women’s unpaid labor, but also on the systematic violence against non-human nature and territories, especially in the (post)colonies. They also showed how environmental violence particularly affects women’s bodies and their subsistence production at the community level. Their critique of development as a patriarchal and colonial project led ecofeminists to look at peasant and Indigenous practices in the global South as the source of alternative/autonomous development (Dalla Costa 2003; Salleh 2009; Federici 2012).

Research on matristic cultures was part and parcel with this debate, especially in its German milieu (the so-called Bielefeld school): it was connected to feminist research on the historical/anthropological origins of women’s subjugation to men beyond biological determinism. Based on an emerging body of feminist anthropology, Mies (1986) wrote on matristic culture or “matriarchy” in relation to the social origins of the sexual division of labor. The basic ideas she conveyed were that: (1) maleness and femaleness were socially (re)defined in different epochs, depending on the dominant mode of production, and that (2) coming at the end of a long history of patriarchy, industrial capitalism had reduced femaleness to the role of reproduction of and service to labor power in the private sphere (*housewifization*) denying its creative, active, and autonomous power in society and the natural world. Matristic cultures in the past and contemporary experience of Indigenous

peoples in Central America became the object of lifelong study on the part of Mies' colleague Claudia von Werlhof. In her most recent writing, this author speaks of “matriarchy today as a ‘second culture’ within patriarchy, consisting of the remnants of matriarchal culture” that have survived – mostly among Indigenous peoples – against the violence of colonial patriarchy (von Werlhof 2019: 254). Von Werlhof sees capitalism as the stage in which patriarchal civilizations have fantasized about emancipating themselves from nature (or the *mater arché*) through the development of the productive forces via mechanization, resulting in a global ecological crisis. She calls this fantasy the “modern alchemy”. Maintaining a binary ontology (*pater arché* vs *mater arché*), rather than questioning the binarism itself, von Werlhof sees matriarchy as the only answer to capitalism: she mentions the Zapatista and the Kurdish revolutions as instances of “new matriarchy” in the sense of “alternatives to modernity as an alchemic war system” (2019: 255).

In degrowth and post-development thought, the recognition of patriarchy as a root cause of coloniality, racism, and ecological crisis is relatively recent (Gregoratti and Raphael 2019). Inspired by von Werlhof's work, as well as from that of Humberto Maturana and Gerda Verden-Zöllner, Arturo Escobar (2018) has pointed to the overcoming of patriarchy as a foundational source of civilizational alternatives, endorsing a New Matriarchy perspective. Escobar accepts the idea that patriarchal culture relies on “competition, war, hierarchies, power, growth, procreation” -in short: domination and control of others, including the natural world; while he sees “matristic cultures” as based on values such as “inclusion, participation, collaboration, understanding, respect, sacredness, and the always-recurrent cyclic renovation of life” (Escobar 2018: 13). Also, the *Pluriverse* dictionary (Kothari et al. 2019) enlists matriarchy among those visions and practices which, “grounded in women's struggles for survival” (Kothari et al. 2019), link political emancipation with environmental justice, countering the Western model of development.

The matristic perspective, however, is a highly contested one, and carries different significations and varied degrees of acknowledgment even within ecofeminist movements (Gaard 2011). The enormous energy spent, over the past 3 decades, by ecofeminist scholars and practitioners in defending the movement from accusations of essentialism (mostly coming from other feminists) has determined an understandably cautious attitude towards any concept associable with matriarchy, such as “matristic”, “motherhood” and “Mother Earth”. For example, a relatively recent compendium of gender and environment studies (Mc Gregor 2017) only mentions matriarchy once, in reference to the case of a women-only community in North America (Jarvis 2017). And, more significantly still, only two out of the one hundred

entries in the *Pluriverse* dictionary explicitly mention matriarchal or matristic perspectives: the entry on Gift Economy (Wörer 2019) and that on New Matriarchies (von Werlhof 2019). In other words, while relatively new developments in feminist, post-development and degrowth thought tend to finally converge in acknowledging patriarchy as a deep root of both colonial/racial violence and of ecological crisis, this does not immediately lead to embrace matriarchy as the only alternative path. More than the *mater arché*, conversations have revolved around the rejection of gender dualisms as foundational to the master model of rationality (Haraway 1991; Plumwood 1993 2002; Gaard 2011; Bauhardt 2018; Sandilands 2016), the rethinking of the economy in terms of diversity, community and eco-sufficiency, and the non-capitalist valuation of care labor as a key step towards degrowth (Gibson-Graham 1996; Salleh 2009; Wichterich 2015; Harcourt and Bauhardt 2019; Barca 2019, 2020; Nicoson 2021).

On the other hand, some authors have criticized the post-development literature for romanticizing the supposed “traditional” modes of life, considering them as natural bearers of more sustainable futures (Nanda 2002) and of matriarchal cultures. They point to the risk of such simplified, mythologized visions being co-opted on the part of traditional patriarchies; problematizing the post/development vision of gender thus becomes an important political tool. For example, both Rita Segato and Julieta Paredes refuse the idea that patriarchal relations were absent in the pre-colonial communities of Latin America, talking instead about a “junction of patriarchies” (Paredes 2012) in which pre-colonial patriarchal systems have been co-opted, transformed and strengthened by colonial powers. Rather, they argue, colonial nation states, through the imposition of the republican public sphere, have progressively depoliticized the domestic sphere, dismantled indigenous women's relations of solidarity, and attacked women's capacity of political deliberation (Segato 2014), thus creating a new model of masculine-white-citizen authority (Rivera Cusicanqui 2014). In fact, despite being incorporated in Bolivia's and Ecuador's constitutions, the rights of “Mother Earth” have resulted in contradictory political processes (Tola 2018; Bravo and Moreano 2015). As a result, Indigenous women stress the importance of linking decolonization processes with depatriarchization (Galindo 2015) as interlinked steps towards emancipatory practices of commoning, autonomy, and sustainability.

In our understanding, the contradictions of matriarchy lay in its reassuring nature as a confirmation of gender dualism. While patriarchal civilizations have tended to deny and background women's historical agency, and subjugate the *mater arché*, men have also been fascinated by the matristic perspective and cultivated the idea that this *does* constitute a key alternative to the social and ecological evils of modernity. However, believing in a maternal principle that

preserves life by its own nature is not challenging to hegemonic masculinity – it simply offers the easy prospect of a last-resort submission to the mother’s rule after messing up with the world, so that *she* can re-establish the natural order of things. Despite its role as educator, in Western patriarchal cultures Mother tends to be framed as a loving and forgiving entity, submitted to Father’s authority – not a challenging one (Merchant 1996).

In short: when reproducing a heteronormative vision of gender and essentializing both women and Indigenous societies in a Manichean opposition between Western and non-Western world, the matristic perspective risks reducing the subversion of gender relations to a purely ethical or nominalist question. This contradiction of the *mater archè* bears the question of whether matristic models can concretely usher in emancipatory political ecologies, and through which practices, strategies, organization, and struggles. To answer this question, we interrogate the historically situated praxis of a revolutionary process which explicitly incorporates matristic principles.

Rojava’s women-led revolution

After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria (2011), the almost total withdrawal of Bashar al-Assad’s military forces allowed the Kurdish Freedom Movement to take control of the region of Rojava, now renamed Democratic Federation of North and East Syria (DFNES), and to rapidly implement its emancipatory strategy of Democratic Confederalism (Leezenberg 2016; Kùçük and Özselçuk 2016). The latter is an original paradigm of social and political organization, based on radical democracy, ecology and women’s liberation, and inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). Following this approach, a revolutionary movement has taken hold of the region, carrying out a process of self-defense against “centralization, ecological destruction, patriarchal relations, and capitalism” (Üstündağ 2016).

Despite Daesh’ and Turkish State’s military occupations and attacks—repeatedly resisted by the People and Women Defense Units (YPG and YPJ)—an Autonomous Administration has been installed in the region, and a system of grassroots communes and councils in each city’s neighbor, village and canton has become the main instrument of people’s self-organization, as ratified by the Social Contract.¹ Citizens’ direct participation in each field of life (Knapp and Jongerden 2016), the equal representation in every political charge of each religion and ethnicity present in the region (Cemgil 2016), and the will to brake with all forms of

dependency towards self-sufficiency, ecological and cooperative economy (Gerber and Brincat 2018) have characterized the confederalist revolution until now thus described as “a radical departure from the hierarchical global growth regime” (Cemgil and Hoffmann, 2016:54). However, none of the previous achievements can be understood without considering the emphasis Democratic Confederalism puts on women’s liberation: not a marginal and secondary aim, a ‘women’s affair’ to be postponed after decolonization, but a key strategy towards an ecological and stateless socialism.

Many scholars concur in defining the pivotal role assigned to gender struggle as one of the most important aspects which differentiate Rojava’s from other leftist revolutionary processes of the past and the present. For example, Saed (2017) sees ecological and gender struggles as the truly original components of the Kurdish revolution with respect to the October Russian Revolution and its development paradigm; most scholars consider the democratic confederalist model as concurrent with ecofeminist/ecosocialist/social ecology visions, and with Indigenous autonomous movements like the Zapatista (Saed 2017; Aguilar Silva 2018; Stanchev 2015; Biehl 2012). Comparing the Rojava’s experience with the Marxist-Leninist and with the Anarchist, Rasit and Kolokotronis argue that the DFNES’ innovative shift relies in the representation of women as “‘a revolutionary middle stratum’: a distinct revolutionary group with autonomous power that can push forward the revolutionary process while dispersing the authority of the vanguard movement” (Rasit and Kolokotronis 2020:2).

These authors identify three spheres in which the leading capacity of the women’s movement appears. The first is the ideological sphere, where women are seen “as a primary historical revolutionary agent that will contribute to emancipation of all” (Rasit and Kolokotronis 2020). The second is the organizational sphere, in which women’s autonomous structures are considered as “the most central tenet of revolutionary struggle” (Rasit and Kolokotronis 2020). This claim refers to the huge process of women’s self-defense which took place since the beginning of the revolution, not only at the military level (Tank 2017; Ferreira and Santiago 2018), but also through the construction of a women’s autonomous administration (Kongra Star). The latter parallels the mixed man-woman self-government structure (Tev Dem), holding the power of establishing rights and laws concerning gender issues, and even to veto the decisions of the mixed structure (Dirik 2018a; Knapp et al. 2016). Thanks to this autonomous structure, women have created their own grassroots assemblies (the communes), Mala Jin (Houses of Women), economic cooperatives, justice committees, Asayish-Jin (Women’s Gard) and many other institutions, which have given them autonomous political agency, and the ability to answer women’s needs and express their will, free from men’s control (Pavičić-Ivelja 2017; Şimşek and Jongerden

¹ See the full text here: <https://internationalistcommune.com/social-contract/>.

2018). However, these organizational achievements have been made, and are still made possible, thanks to the third sphere mentioned by Rasit and Kolokotronis (2020), which is that of “recruitment”, “education” or “mobilization” led by women within society: a process performed in “a vanguardist manner” but able to avoid hierarchy, monopolization, and centralization.

The last sphere, that of women’s political education in the DFNES, despite considered one of the most important terrain for the implementation of Democratic Confederalism, has been little explored in its practical activation so far (except for Dirik 2018b; and Biehl 2015). In particular, it has never been observed as a concrete pathway for the realization of the matristic perspective in Rojava. And vice versa, a praxiological examination of the matristic culture, from an ecofeminist and post-development perspective, has never been done in the light of the emancipatory and autonomous processes carried out by women and communities in the DFSN until now.

Purpose and methods

In the remaining sections, we concentrate on women’s political education in the DFNES through the analysis of the theoretical proposal and the pedagogical process opened by Jineolojî. In Kurdish “the science of women and life”, Jineolojî is an original epistemology and method of knowledge production and socio-ecological transformation created by the Kurdish Women’s Movement during the last decade and now particularly implemented in Kurdistan, Middle East, and Europe. We believe this educational process represents the heart of the women’s matristic praxis in Rojava, since it articulates the recovering and renewal of the matristic culture with women’s collective practices of socio-ecological organization in the everyday life. In fact, more than as purely a ‘science’, Jineolojî is understood as a method of militant knowledge production like what Paulo Freire (2014 [1968]) theorized as “emancipatory pedagogy”, or else, as an educational grassroots innovation which, as argued by Maldonado-Villalpando et al. (2022), is essential in the reproduction of social movements, particularly in their attempts at building alternatives to capitalist modernity from the global South.

Our investigation was motivated by the desire to understand how Jineolojî’s method works, i.e. by which *knowledge* and *practices* activists are promoting the matristic perspective throughout society. Therefore, we have decided to divide our empirical analysis in two parts. Firstly, we examine the theoretical background and the epistemological proposal of the matristic perspective in Democratic Confederalism, particularly focusing on the link between decolonization and depatriarchization. To do this, we review both academic literature and primary sources such as Abdullah Öcalan’s

prison writings and some key texts of Jineolojî, cross referencing them with an analysis of semi-structured interviews that the first author has collected among Kurdish women activists and Jineolojî Committees’ members over the last 3 years.

Second, we examine the way in which the matristic perspective is embedded in Jineolojî’s pedagogical praxis in place in the DFNES. In this case, our analysis originates from the first author’s militant ethnography with the Kurdish Women’s Movement. In fact, her participation in several Jineolojî seminars and training camps in Europe (2018/2020) and Rojava—where she traveled for one month in July 2019 with an Italian women’s delegation organized by Kongra Star (the Kurdish women umbrella system of Rojava)—has represented a precious opportunity to engage in a process of observant participation.

Our positionality, as white, academic, feminist women, but also as active supporters of the Rojava’s revolution, informed our results: not a static description of a presumed researched object, but the partial and situated outcomes of an ongoing transformative dialog with the women we have met, marked, among other things, by language/communication and time limits.

The matristic perspective in revolutionary praxis

A decolonial and depatriarchal project

Jineolojî’s work was formally inaugurated in 2011/2012, at the female guerrilla’s Academy Şehîd Zeynep Kınacı, in the mountains of Qandil (Iraqi Kurdistan). The concept gave visibility to a Kurdish version of matristic culture which had been extant in the ideology of the Kurdish women’s struggle since the 1990s (Çağlayan 2012), being theoretically elaborated by Öcalan in his prison books (2020; 2019; 2017), where he described it as a founding science of Democratic Confederalism. The main argument at the basis of Öcalan’s writings on the subject is that women are the first “colonized nation” in history, whose oppression is matrix of both human-nature alienation and social hierarchies (between classes, ethnicities, religions) (Öcalan 2013). Beginning 5000 years ago with the transition from the Mesopotamia Neolithic society to the first patriarchal, class and statist ones, he wrote, the process of degradation of women’s role coincides with a progressive attack to the previous “natural” or “matricentric” societies where women had a central but not hierarchical role within the communitarian system of organization.

Building upon Maria Mies’ concept of *housewifization*, Öcalan argued that capitalism led to women’s domestication within the household and, through the institution of

the family, to the exploitation and devaluation of their “life-producing work” (as Mies defined it), which had been at the center of the Mother-Goddess societies of the Neolithic age (Piccardi 2021). Since, according to Ocalan, “to enslave man, the system first had to enslave women”, the emancipation of women is “essential to understand and generate the emancipation of the whole society”: this is what makes Democratic Confederalism a “sociology of freedom” for the Middle East (as Kurdish scholar and activist Azize Aslan explained to us²). Öcalan thus claimed that women needed to free themselves from *housewifization*, restore their pivotal role within society and recover those matrilineal forms of communality, proper of the ancient Mesopotamia, that had been attacked by modernization, environmental devastation, and cultural assimilation in the Kurdish territory (Öcalan 2017; see also Aktaş 2015).

Translated into the Kurdish slogan “*jin jîyan azadî*” (woman, life, freedom) the matrilineal political horizon has been constantly renewed by women’s collective agency (Çağlayan 2012; Acik 2013; Şimşek 2018), and particularly within Jineolojî’s work. It has been promoted by Democratic Confederalism since its declaration in 2005,³ and is currently at the core of women’s mobilization in the North and East of Syria. In one of our first interviews, Zilan and Avrin, members of the Jineolojî Committee of Europe, explained how Jineolojî approaches the matrilineal perspective:

If you think of Neolithic society as a thing of the past, like a dream, you cannot change nor create Democratic Confederalism. In your life there are the effects of the natural society. In Kurdish communities there are many elements that come from the matriarchal society, but we could not create a link between this evidence and our life. Before [the creation of Democratic Confederalism and Jineolojî], we talked about it in terms of utopia, but then we understood that it still exists in our life. In this sense, Jineolojî has opened a course for change. (Zilan⁴)

We say that women are the vanguard. We are the ones who must be present in a movement and lead the way. This means that we must have autonomous structures to self-manage our problems and solutions, we cannot wait for someone, a man, the State, to do it for us. In matriarchal societies everything revolved around women, today the values and work of women have become invisible, the work they do is invisible, so we

want to bring these values to light and put them back at the center of social organization. (Avrin⁵)

In other words, Jineolojî aims to revalue women’s life and autonomous agency after millennia of patriarchal oppression through the new reading of history and society proposed by the matrilineal perspective. They call this a project of “self-defense”, led by women but addressed to the entire society (Erzîncan 2021). As written in the first English version of the Jineolojî’s pamphlet, self-defense regards not only the armed self-organization against the physical and cultural genocide historically suffered by the Kurdish people, but also women’s and people’s autonomous self-government and the need for raising awareness about their resistant knowledge, dismissed by positivist androcentric science (Jineology Committee Europe 2017). It also applies to women’s labor practices historically made invisible and undervalued by capitalist patriarchy, yet crucial for human and non-human reproduction (Federici 2012).

Similarly to *sumak kawsay* (Lang 2022), Jineolojî’s self-defense consists in imagining an alternative and “democratic modernity” (Öcalan, 2020) premised upon revaluing those cultural elements that racist, colonialist, and capitalist modernity has deemed irrational, pre-modern and underdeveloped. Considering patriarchy as the first hierarchical system, emerged thousands of years before capitalist modernity, Jineolojî’s decolonizing project is deeply imbricated with depatriarchization, and the matrilineal perspective becomes the expression of this junction: not something to go back to, but a potential source of alternative development based on women’s resistance against “male-dominated”, “power-seeking paradigms” (DÖKH 2013), and the overcoming of “the alienation between woman-nature, human-nature, and society-nature” (Jineolojî Committee Europe 2017). Rooted in this perspective, Jineolojî Committees are now developing alternative education projects that, in our view, constitute the essential emancipatory praxis informing the entire experience of Rojava’s self-government.

A militant pedagogy

One of the things that impressed us⁶ more during our travel to Rojava was the pervasiveness of the educational practices – and particularly Jineolojî’s – both as activities that were happening in the majority of the women’s and people’s institutions we visited, and as a recurrent topic in the narratives of the women we interviewed, many of them underlining the importance that those trainings have had in their political

² Interviewed on September, 2018.

³ See: https://web.archive.org/web/20160929163726/http://www.freemediaibrary.com/index.php/Declaration_of_Democratic_Confederalism_in_Kurdistan.

⁴ Interviewed on January, 2019.

⁵ Interviewed on January, 2019.

⁶ The first author prefers to use the “we” instead of the “I” since her ethnographic work in Rojava was deeply rooted in the collective experience of the women’s delegation.

and personal life and in society more generally. They told us how the collective political engagement in educational practices, intended as a fundamental tool “to create the revolutionary culture in which the new institutions could thrive” (Biehl 2015:213), was there since the very beginning of the Kurdish uprising in Syria. With the installation of the self-governing institutions, a huge process of reorganization of the educational model took place in DFNES (Dirik 2018b; Biehl 2015) with the aim of subverting the statist and racist school system in place during Assad’s regime, leading to a decentralized grassroots system of schools and Academies open to people of all ages. Working within the Kongra Star (the women’s autonomous system of government in Rojava), Jineolojî has been an organic as well as vanguardist part of this process which, from the beginning, has developed as an open-ended and heterogeneous praxis, rooted in the specificity of each place and community that has engaged with it. Organizing themselves under the umbrella-name of “Jineolojî Academy”, Jineolojî’s promoters are now counting on different autonomous projects: (1) six centers in the cities of Derik, Kobane, Heseke, Manbij, Qamislo and Shehba Refugees Camp (where people who fled Turkish occupation of Afrin now live): here the main Jineolojî research and educational practices took place; (2) the public schools, where Jineolojî classes have been included in the curricula starting from 10th grade, and the University of Rojava with its Jineolojî Faculty; (3) the Andrea Wolf Institute, an internationalist structure; (4) and, finally, Jinwar, a women’s autonomous eco-village. However, as our interviewees told us:

Jineolojî is never limited only to a few institutions, research committees or seminars but, as science of women, life, and women’s revolution, Jineolojî is living wherever women are coming together, developing knowledge, connecting experiences, looking for perspectives to struggle and building alternatives together... In all academies of North and East Syria Jineolojî became a topic, no matter if they are academies organized in society ... of, for example, medicine, economy, diplomacy, or of the armed self-defense forces. Seeing Jineolojî not as a separate *women’s issue*, but as an important base in all fields of life and society is crucial (members of the Andrea Wolf Institute in Rojava⁷).

Women’s *xwebûn*: a self-reflexive collective practice

Educational practices, *perwerde* in Kurdish, represent Jineolojî’s core work. Even if they are not addressed only to women, women are considered the main subjects, those who

should create “their own disciplines, build up their meanings and share them with the society” (Deniz 2018:53). Training activities so far have consisted in either one-day seminars or longer programs, taking from 10 days up to 1 or 3 months. Usually, they are organized to answer a community demand, so women of that community are previously involved in the planning of the training program: this can consist of general classes (about, for example, women’s history in Mesopotamia and the rise of patriarchy, Nation State and capitalism, the role of the family in social life), but also practical ones linked to the organization of life within the confederalist system.

During our travel to Rojava, we had the chance to participate to a 7-days Jineoloji’s *perwerde* at the Andrea Wolf Institute, and to discuss with local women about their experience of training activities, finding many similarities with our own. During our *perwerde*, the educational process usually lasted the entire day and was not based on top-down pedagogies, but on sharing moments ridden with discussions, questions, criticism, and self-criticism. Instructors are not “experts” transmitting knowledge in a unilateral way, but Jineolojî members shifting between the role of “students” and “teachers”. Some were women carrying responsibilities in different areas of the movement, e.g. co-presidents of the communes, members of the Women Self-Defense Units (YPJ) or economic cooperatives, others were women who have specific skills or knowledge to share, such as healers working with medical herbs, archeologists, artisans, or musicians. When we asked the activists about their pedagogical approach, they told us that

[women] must understand that they know something, that they are strong, that they have knowledge, that it is not a teacher-student relationship (Zilan⁸).

Teacher means more like an impulse, questions, and introductions to open the mind, asking to women if this or that has also happened to them. Jineolojî is working a lot with questions. One *perwerde* that I saw was like an *heval* [comrade/friend] asking questions for 20 minutes. And in the questions you have already all the scales and the possibilities, not just the oppression but also the resistance. When it comes to the topic of *xwebûn* they are careful about not giving an answer. If for thousands of years patriarchy has defined us, we don’t have to do the same mistake. (Viyan, member of the Jineolojî Committee⁹)

Xwebûn, i.e. being/becoming oneself, is a process of self-definition and self-awareness which is promoted, during the training activities, through questions such as: “what

⁷ Collective interview on August, 2020.

⁸ Interviewed on January, 2019.

⁹ Interviewed on January and February, 2019.

is it to be a woman for you?”, “when did you meet patriarchy in your life?”, “what is the history of your people, of your family?”, “What has your family been used for by the state, the regime, the tribe?”. The intent is stimulating what Mohanty would refer to as a “self-reflexive collective practice” (2003:8) where each woman’s position regarding class, ethnicity, religion and age acquires a crucial importance for personal and collective liberation, and memory reconstruction. *Xwebûn*, according to Zilan, is also strictly connected with the recovering of the matristic society:

We must reflect on natural [matristic] society, without the state and without the mentality of power and patriarchy. It is difficult, but it can be done. We have lost a lot, but a lot still survives and if you know how to recover it, you can create Democratic Confederalism. What is still alive? The resistance of women, their *xwebun*. (Zilan, member of the Jineolojî Committee¹⁰)

As Necibe, another Jineolojî’s member, told us: “we don’t speak about ideal and pure matriarchal societies, but there are still some elements that show their influence”.¹¹ These elements are embedded in women’s daily work and historical experience of resistance, “from the leavening of dough to the treatment of sick people, from the ploughing of the land to the domestication of livestock”, or in “the most unblemished and unpretentious of knowledge” that are contained in “the experiences of a woman troubadour, a woman healer, the diary of a woman guerrilla, the biography of a woman resister” (Diyar 2018). Regaining women’s *xwebûn*, exploring their memories and their suppressed knowledge, is therefore, according to Jineolojî activists, one of the pathways to recover the matristic culture, the latter’s still-existing traces assuming a revolutionary meaning only when mobilized towards women’s self and collective liberation.

Though partially agreeing with those authors (Al-Ali and Tas 2018; Shahvisi 2018), who point to the gender binarism adopted by Jineolojî’s matristic perspective and the lack of discussion around issues concerning sexuality/ies – with the risk of reproducing heteronormativity – we believe a better sense of Jineolojî can be gained by focusing on its *perwerde* practices, rather than stopping at its discourse. It was by participating in these practices that we could experience how the *xwebûn* works as a tool for women’s self-determination, autonomy, identity building, and mutual transformation – rather than as a normative and essentialist representation of womanhood. In addition, we learned that Jineolojî is an ongoing and open-ended process, whose strategies are not fixed but continuously changing (see Jineolojî Committee Europe 2021). In fact, during the last few years, Jineolojî

members have been doing huge efforts to open the discussion with LGBTQ+ struggles and with transnational feminist movements in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, as exemplified by the internationalist conference “Revolution in the Making” organized by the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Frankfurt (2018),¹² a process that has opened the way to Jineolojî’s internal transformations.

Building communal life among women

Jineolojî’s *perwerde* does not consist just in seminars and discussions, but in the lived (re)experiencing of communal life. As Amara (an internationalist activist, member of Jineolojî) recalls, at the first 10-days training that took place in Raqqa in 2019, just a few months after the liberation of the city,

we were sleeping together, preparing food in the Academy, cleaning, and we had daily discussion about what is needed for a daily life. And *there* is the education. This is one of the most important things, that women come to live together and create a collective way of living. They come from so different backgrounds, so they have the feeling of freedom, there is no man telling you to bring the chay [tea], so you do yourself, you do it for your friends. The women told me that was one of the most impressive things and they did not want to go back home. (Amara¹³)

Ronahi, a member of the diplomacy of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, also told us that *perwerde* is the first thing that most women have done for themselves, and not on behalf of the husband or the father, and this is why it is so important for the development of a sense of autonomy and communality between women.¹⁴ By participating in several training moments in Rojava and in Europe, and discussing with other participants, we realized how the longer sessions (1 week or more) are the most impactful precisely because they give women the opportunity to break the ‘housewifization’ model, by socializing housework and reflecting upon its value. In fact, being structured by self-organized communes, *perwerde* are designed in a way that reflects the principles of Democratic Confederalism.

When asked about Jineolojî’s intervention in women’s work and alternative economy, the members of the Andrea Wolf Institute answer that:

With Jineolojî we look into history asking how economy has been organized in more communal and matri-

¹⁰ Interviewed on January, 2019.

¹¹ Interviewed on February 2019.

¹² See the website here: <http://revolutioninthemaking.blogspot.eu/>.

¹³ Interviewed on January, 2019.

¹⁴ Interviewed on December, 2018.

centric societies. We are looking for traces of communal economy in all times of history and different parts of the world. Sharing this knowledge with women in society, asking for more examples and speaking about women's role in economy today, opens up reflections and discussions. In North and East Syria, there are still many traces of communal economy... In villages, until the present days almost every family is doing small scale farming, gardening, and keeping animals, and women are in most cases taking the major role in the works around house and garden. Economy is often organized in bigger families and village communities. Supporting each other, sharing, exchanging, planning economy together are common practices... Being forced as young woman to bake bread in the 'tenu' [oven] every morning for a big family cannot be romanticized as ecological and self-sufficient but must be defined as one shape of women's oppression. Jineolojî takes the role to show the strength, richness, importance, and beauty of communal and ecological forms of living and working, separating them from the narrow forms of organizing life that have been developed through rigid religious moral, state, patriarchy, and capitalism. Its approach would be to underline the importance of economical self-organization, but in communal ways. Instead of one-woman being servant to a husband, women of the neighbourhood can organize to make bread cooperatively, sharing the work and act with organized strength.¹⁵

In our understanding, this approach reflects an autonomous women's praxis of socio-ecological emancipation in which concepts of "democratic", "social" or "communal economy" (Aslan and Akbulut 2019) come to life through the Kongra Star women's organization. This is neither a romanticization of communal relations or women's care work, nor a call for women to enter the capitalist labor market or to be dependent on State subsidies, but a self-reflective practice of commoning (Federici 2012) aimed at socializing reproductive work, while also fostering women's autonomous and democratic decision making (see Aslan 2021: 212–215). Offering spaces for gardening, natural medicine, agroecology, or food production based on local products, *perwerde* allow women to recover, relearn and revalue their own reproductive work as a powerful source of social change, environmental sustainability, and economic autonomy. In other words, by breaking women's isolation, liberating care work from patriarchal relations, and transforming it in self/collective/earth-care, *perwerde* represent

a prefiguration of the economic rules and values that might govern a non-patriarchal society.

It is not by chance that, under the umbrella of Jineolojî Academy, a women's eco-village named Jinwar has been built in Rojava (2018). Here, around 70 women and children are living together, self-organizing the re/production of their life in a sustainable and communal way (Aguilar Silva 2019). Similarly, a program of women's economy (Aborya Jin) has been created as a field for discussion and action, and many women's autonomous economic cooperatives have been born in the DFNES, mostly in the agricultural field (which is the subsistence base of Rojava) and in food production and marketing (Aslan 2021; Azeez 2017). These are examples of what the Mexican sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2012) has called *entramados comunitarios* (communitarian entanglements), i.e., collective practices and relations that escape and resist the capitalist logic of accumulation, and, we could add, also the patriarchal logic of *housewifisation*.

Challenging dominant masculinities

Creating communal spaces for women, whether they are *perwerde* or cooperatives, is not an easy process. Jineolojî members told us that many women have internalized both patriarchal and capitalist values, assuming individualistic behavior, and "specially among young women there is a big tendency to look towards Western, European, American, capitalist ways of living" (members of the Andrea Wolf Institute¹⁶). However, the biggest problem that was pointed out was toxic masculinity, or men's sexist behaviors. Especially those women who have left their villages and moved to the cities, they explained, are now isolated in households where they are considered "buka male" (housewives); they suffer patriarchal violence and a regime of shame which is a huge obstacle for them to get involved in women's projects. According to Felek, spoke-person of the Women's Academy in Kobane, the crux of the problem is that many men do not accept to live with emancipated, "strong women", and this happens both in the family but also in the political. That is why, she told us:

After each training women ask that their husbands also participate in order to break the established dynamics and restore new family balance. As well as women, even the majority of men who are starting to receive training, have already attended school or university during the years of the regime, but the difference is that the education that takes place within the Academy focuses on the role of women, analyses her figure, the aspects of sexism present in society, is based on

¹⁵ Collective interview on August 2020.

¹⁶ Collective interview on August 2020.

Jineoloji and on the women's revolution. Training for men is necessary because the practice of co-chairing is considered of fundamental importance, but above all because it is necessary to change the mentality of man so that we can live together in a revolutionary society.¹⁷

Zozan, member of the Jineoloji Committee, also pointed out during our *perwerde* that:

Jineoloji is not the science just of women, but of communal society. Today, the only way to rebuild a balance is through women's *xwebûn* and the transformation of men.¹⁸

Facilitating women's participation to educational activities is one of the ways Jineoloji is fighting sexism and patriarchal violence; at the same time, men's education in Rojava—both militants and not—has become an important tool of Jineoloji. These moments often take place during mixed *perwerde*, but also in training activities addressed exclusively to men. The latter correspond to a recent project (2019–2020) which, under the name of *kuştina zilam* or *veguhartina zilam* (killing or transforming the man),¹⁹ includes a series of men-only training activities organized by the women's movement and particularly by Jineoloji Committees.

During our trip, we had the chance to visit the first of these activities which was held, in July 2019, at the Kobane Women's Academy, a big building located in the heart of a green area called “Kobane's Forest”, in the city center, and founded in 2018 as a place exclusively organized by women. Around 30 men were participating for a few weeks. The first thing that impressed us was that only women were teaching to them, which is a basic rule for these *perwerde*, and that men were having “classes” and organizing their communal life as guests in a women's place normally closed to men's presence. The method, the women explained to us, was quite similar to that of *xwebûn*: starting with questions about what it is to be a woman, first, and then a man, the aim is that of stimulating an analysis of gender relations rooted in one own's lived experience in the family, in the household, in political life. Another key topic was that of women's history and struggles, and the importance of having women's autonomous structures – something that, as Jineoloji members told us, is not yet clear for and accepted by every man.

Training activities for men are an original aspect of the movement's matristic perspective, which shows Jineoloji's

aim of challenging dominant masculinities and gender roles not only within families and communities, but also in politics. In fact, training activities are pivotal to strengthening the system of quotas (women must be at least the 40 percent in each administrative level) and the *hev serok*, the co-chair system, between women and men, which characterized any role of political responsibility in the DFNES, from the communes' level to the regional assemblies, and so on (Tank 2017:422).

Moreover, men-only training activities also serve to familiarize them with the new women's rights promoted by the law, which prohibits polygamy, forced marriage, child marriage, and condemns honor killings, domestic violence, and gender-based discrimination, through a women-only tribunal (Dirik 2018a; Shahvisi 2018). The aim, as the activists told us, is not to teach men or to take care for their improvement, but to show them their duties and their responsibility towards the realization of the matristic proposal of Democratic Confederalism.

Conclusions

For more than 3 decades, ecofeminism's unique contribution to degrowth and post-development thought has consisted in pointing to how modern/colonial/capitalist modernity has been inherently shaped by (hetero)patriarchy, particularly by denying the social relevance of social and ecological reproduction and confining women to such undervalued, domestic sphere (*housewifization*). This approach has fostered an interest towards matriarchy, intended as a women-led praxis of subsistence production, cooperation, and (earth)care, and its anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and ecological potential – an interest which has also characterized Democratic Confederalism. However, many feminist and decolonial political ecologists have tended to either eschew or openly criticize the matristic perspective, highlighting its essentialist and gender-dualist connotations, historical inaccuracies and contradictory political outcomes.

Starting from this debate, the article has investigated the emancipatory potentialities of the matristic perspective as embraced by the Kurdish Women's Movement in Rojava, particularly through its Jineoloji praxis. We have shown how Jineoloji's pedagogy is helping Rojava's women to undoing *housewifization* in three ways: first, by fostering women's self-definition and collective memory reconstruction, giving them a new sense of social agency as knowledge producers; second, by valuing women's capacity for self-management and commonality beyond male power – which is consistent with the practice of women's self-defense and autonomy in every area of social life that is an essential conquest of Democratic Confederalism in Rojava; third, by offering training to men, thus initiating an innovative process

¹⁷ Interviewed on July, 2019.

¹⁸ Conversation held in July, 2019.

¹⁹ See <https://jineoloji.org/en/2021/01/20/booklet-killing-and-transforming-the-dominant-man/>.

of deconstruction of dominant masculinity as related to both traditional and modern gender roles in Kurdish society. In short, more than the mythologizing of an ancestral model, or the mechanical reversing of gender hierarchies, Jineolojî is proving a dynamic, decolonial experiment in depatriarchization.

It is important to consider, however, that only a small fraction of Rojava's 5 million population has been reached by Jineolojî practices, thus their impact, and particularly those addressed to men, are only partially detectable now; as Jineolojî activists made clear to us, the depatriarchization of society will be a long process and will need these pedagogical moments to reach more people in more systemic ways. In addition, the repeated military attacks conducted by Daesh or Turkish State forces are continuously threatening what Kongra Star's and Jineolojî's women are building, as in the case of one of the most developed Jineolojî Centers, that of Afrin, which has been destroyed during the Turkish military occupation of the city in 2018. Since war is to be considered a key dimension of colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal modernity (Mies 1986), it should come as no surprise that it is this very force which is halting the depatriarchization of Rojava.

In conclusion, we argue that Jineolojî's key contribution to contemporary degrowth and Pluriverse pathways has consisted in reappropriating the matrilineal perspective as a tool for alternative – decolonial and depatriarchal – modernity-building. More than a model, it holds the promise for recovering and liberating historically denied, silenced, and devalued forces – a women-led revolutionary process addressed to society as a whole, whose outcome is not predefined but expected to be shaped along the process.

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