

Revolution and Cooperatives:



Cooperatives as a revolutionary strategy - facing capitalist modernity

Revolution and Cooperatives: Thoughts about my time with the economic committee in Rojava

In the following I will give a short insight about my experiences during the time with the economic committee of the cantons of Qamişlo and Hasakah in Rojava, North-East Syria. I will especially focus on the cooperative economy that is being built up in Rojava. As a second step, I will discuss to what extent cooperatives can be part of a revolutionary strategy around the world.

To begin with, I invite you to think about the primal purpose of all economic activity. A definition used in Wikipedia describes economy as “the institutions and actions that serve the systematic satisfaction of society’s needs”. It is evident that the capitalist economy has been failing miserably to meet the needs of society. It is clear that the means of production in the hand of private capital result in poverty, postcolonial structures and environmental destruction that puts our very existence in danger. Even though the centralized real-socialist economies may have achieved to establish a society with less material inequality, their attempts to outrace the capitalist mode of production were not able to overcome the unhealthy human-nature relationship of capitalist modernity. It showed that a state-capitalist production contradicts an economy according to society’s needs, as well.

Uninspired and liberal people around the world are tempted to conclude, since neither unregulated neo-liberal capital markets nor a fully planned state capitalism are able to provide a humane economic and social system, the obvious solution must lay somewhere in between those two extremes. However, in order to see the obvious solution one has to leave the straight imaginative line that stretches in people’s heads all the way from the “free-market” economy on the one side till the fully planned real-socialist economy on the other side. Instead, we simply need to remind ourselves that the sake of economy is to “fulfill the needs of society”. And who knows best how to fulfill their own needs? The people themselves. Therefore, the only reasonable way to build up an alternative economy seems to be for the people to take back their means of production. Which necessarily results in the build-up of an economy based on structures like cooperatives.

What is a cooperative? As the name suggests, a cooperative is about cooperation. People cooperate instead of competing against each other. The two most distinguished hard-requirements of a cooperative are that the means of production are owned by the members of the cooperation and the decisions are debated and decided collectively and democratically. On top of this, new forms of (re)production, relationships and community need to be developed at the same time since cooperatives should never be limited to address only economic forms of oppression.

Democratic Confederalism and Cooperatives

Here, in North-East Syria, widely known as Rojava, the new paradigm of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, Democratic Confederalism, proposed by Abdullah Öcalan, is being built up.



If society wants to continue its existence, it has to restore the communal economy as its foundation.

In accordance to this alternative to the predominant capitalist modernity, the Rojava revolution has gained worldwide attention by emphasizing womens' liberation, grassroots democracy and social ecology as the main pillars of the revolution. Another principle of democratic modernity is a communal economy based on ecological industry and cooperatives. For this reason, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria does not only support any project to build up a cooperative with financial and material means, but also actively visits different neighborhoods, villages and families every day in order to discuss about the principles of a communal economy and about how a local cooperative could be established in this particular place. The paradigm of Democratic Confederalism especially

stresses the importance of building up alternatives in the here and now, as a passage of the Manifesto of the Youth describes: "Today, however, the buildup precedes the resistance. Wherever there is the opportunity, buildup is realized immediately. If there is an attack, it will be defended."

The economic committee of North and East Syria releases regulations of the cooperatives which depict the basic ideological principles concerning the implementation of the cooperative economy as well as concrete rules that are supposed to prevent the cooperative principles to fade away and suggest how a democratic organization involving different committees within the cooperatives as well as assemblies on a regular basis can be put into practice:

According to these regulations, the role of the cooperatives are closely linked to the true meaning of economics discussed above: "The fulfillment of the basic needs of the society and the harmony with the environment are taken as a basis in all the activities of the cooperatives."

Furthermore, "Cooperatives, in their daily life and work need to fight against sexism in an effective way. A division of labor, which removes the burdens imposed on women and promotes women's will is the aim. Cooperatives pave the way for women to become more actively involved in social and economic life. In cooperative work, women's law is taken as the basis in matters relating to women."

The goal of the cooperatives is "to build a spirit of social responsibility for the development of a moral and political society, making themselves the foundations." as well as "The production of the basic necessities of society according to the conditions of the war economy".

The general assembly of any cooperative is meeting at least every 3 month. In the assembly other responsibilities, like the administration, finance and archive committee as well as the monitoring committee, which monitors if the principles of the cooperative are being adhered to, are elected.

The income of a cooperation are distributed as follows: 5% go to the union of cooperatives, 25% will go to the funds of this cooperative that can be used to expand and develop further cooperative activities and the remaining 70% will be open for the assembly to decide, typically it will be distributed among the members. The exact numbers, just like most of these guidelines, are not fixed in a dogmatic way and may be adjusted after discussions according to different situations. What can not be changed however, is the rule that maximal 5% should go to the regional structure (cooperative union): It may be less, but not more, in order to guarantee autonomy.

Cooperatives in Practice

Mainstream economic theory of capitalist modernity, the hidden ideological justification for oppressive and imperialist policies of nation states around the world, views the (egoistic) individual as the main economic object. Even diverse groups are being simplified as acting in the interest of one rational individual. This is no surprise considering that this theory is predominantly made up by Western, white males. Within their societies, they have indeed succeeded to a large extent to put their conception of the human being as “naturally” acting individualistically and utility-maximiz-

ing into practice. In many other regions of the world, including the Middle East, however, this image of humanity does not resemble the mindset and reality of the people. Here in North-East Syria for instance, nobody can tell me how many individual people live in their village or are part of the cooperative. The unit that is being used is almost always the family. Therefore, it makes more sense to speak of the family as economic and societal subject (as opposed to object!).

The majority of cooperatives in Rojava are agricultural cooperatives planting crops, vegetables and fruits. However, there are also cooperatives involved in livestock (sheep, cow, chicken) and various low intensive production and services like bakeries, restaurants, (cloth) shops, tailoring, hairdressing, sewing, salt production and electricity. For production-cooperatives outside of the agricultural sector that involve more complex and technology-intensive processes, the two limiting factors are at times the lack of know-how about the concrete production process, but even more importantly, the unavailability of the necessary equipment and machinery. This is a direct result of the inner-state colonialist economic policies against this region from the regime in the past as well as of the embargo today. As a concrete example, in recent months there were some women who wanted to start a cooperative for the production of socks but have not found a way to organize the necessary tools yet. Generally, the cooperatives are directly connected to the commune of the neighborhood or the village or even to several communes. This assures that their activity is in the interest of the local population.

During my time with the economic committee in Hasakeh, I was able to be part of the initial process of establishing a new cooperative from scratch. As a

first step, we visited one family in a small village in between the ancient settlement of Tell Beydar and the border-town Dirbêsiyê. While enjoying the obligatory tea, we asked the family about their assessment for the prospects of building up a cooperative with the whole village - would the other villagers agree? On this day, to get a first overview and set off the discussion, we only asked about the circumstances that could be relevant: What is the situation of the land? Do the villagers already own the land around their village? Are enough people permanently present in the village to do physical work on the field? How is the water situation? Etc. We exchanged numbers and asked the family to organize a meeting with the whole village in a few days.

About a week later, we returned to the village where everyone was already awaiting us. After shortly explaining why we suggest the village to start this project to all villagers and a few questions had been answered, they began to discuss amongst each other about the next steps to take. The self-administration only wants to act as a facilitator. If necessary, the administration will provide seeds, help with the construction of wells or improve the electricity supply. The cooperative repays the support received by the self-administration. However, there is no such thing as interest rates and in case the cooperative has issues to repay (for example due to a bad harvest or burned fields) they are not forced to pay back the funds or pay back in later years. In this village however, the infrastructure for basic agriculture was available. In the end, the village agreed on 3 persons that will take the responsibility for initiating the process and gathering the knowledge about crops and techniques. We agreed to meet again in 2-3 weeks. By the time we headed back towards Hasakeh, it was already dark and in the distance we could see the glittering lights of the city

of Mardin in Northern Kurdistan. Even though we were all tired, our mood was pleased with the prospect of a new cooperative about to enrich the Rojava plains.

On a different day we attended a meeting of a cooperative that is composed of 51 families from 8 different villages. We gathered in one of the villages underneath a row of olive trees which are older than any of the present members.



Some members of the joint cooperative sitting underneath olive trees while discussing the hardships and listening to our proposal for a sustainable long-term solution: Autonomy.

These villages are jointly running an agricultural cooperative, mostly involved in wheat plantation. The medium-term goal of these villages though, is to start a second cooperative that would produce shoe strings. On this day however, the discussion was mostly about the general role and the support of the self-administration. Soon after the meeting started, some members reported about the difficulties and hardships they face in their everyday life. One member explained that the road that connects the villages to the next town is in a very bad condition, they also lack clean water and electricity. An old man added that they have problems with an overpopulation of

rabbits and difficulties to find transportation for their children to get to school.

However, practically speaking, the Autonomous Administration does not have the agency to quickly solve fundamental issues that effect the entire region like the issue of water. The water shortage for instance, is a direct result of the massive, environmentally disastrous dam construction of the Turkish state in North Kurdistan during the last decades which significantly reduced the water flow into Syria and the Middle East in general, as well as the direct effect of more recent war crimes of the Turkish state and its Islamist gangs, namely the targeted bombing of a vital water pipeline and the restriction of water supply from the occupied areas.

More importantly, we generally had to lower the expectations of some of the cooperative members and explained that we as the representatives from the economic committee cannot bring them a ready-made solution for all current hardships of their communes. Instead, our approach was to try to convince the villagers that the only sustainable long term solution is to reach self-sufficiency, which means to become as independent as possible of the support of the self-administration for fixing their issues and overcome the state mentality. Especially considering the unstable political and military situation that we are experiencing right now in the Middle East and in particular in North and East Syria with the constant threat of local as well as global powers, one should not rely on the availability of external support. The conditions surely become even harsher in the worst case that the land of the villages falls into the hands of Islamist terrorist groups, warlords or fascist states again.

Therefore, we tried to convince the members that through the amplification

of the cooperative and the strengthening of the communal spirit among the villagers and between villages, we can take our future in our own hands. While a basic infrastructure is obviously necessary to maintain the daily work of a cooperative, following a cooperative strategy with foresight will also improve the general conditions of those villages. This starts with the financial or material independence that can be achieved when the cooperative can provide the subsistence for families but also includes autonomy that can be gained in the fields of self-defense or education through organization. Furthermore, as explained in the principles above, the earnings of the cooperative are to a large part reinvested and used for communal projects. Hence, the commune will sit together and discuss what project is most needed for society. Those particular villages may decide to provide a regular school bus service or repair the roads, for instance. Like this we tried to draw a future path that is worth struggling for. In this sense, the role of the self-administration is primarily to support the cooperative on the tough way towards success.

While the middle-term goal of establishing cooperatives all over North and East Syria is definitely to reach self-sufficiency for the material needs of society, the deeper purpose that necessarily goes hand in hand with the first aim, is to facilitate the restoration of communal life. Every single cooperative is a seed for a new communal economy. A committee member at the union of cooperatives in Qamişlo confirmed my assumption that the most difficult part in the process of building up this alternative economy is to change the mindset of society. In contrast to most societies in the Western hegemony, for instance, the most difficult part may not even be to overcome the harm of individualism, which has not managed to infiltrate the

society in the Middle East to that extent. Instead, a frequent obstacle for own initiative is a feudal mentality that has been internalized over years of oppression. In order to provide an alternative perspective, the committee of economy regularly visits cooperatives to initiate education and discussion about the ideological basis of the cooperative economy and the life in general that thrives towards Democratic Modernity.

One day we visited a relatively young cooperative in a mostly Arabic village south-west of Hasakeh on the way towards Raqqa for the purpose of education.



While the tomatoes a cooperative member observes in the picture were not ripe yet, the watermelons were delicious. The dry surroundings give a hint of the importance of water in the region.

Not all of us from the economic committee (including me) are able to communicate in Arabic, but since a society with three official languages is used to translation and mediation between different languages, the language barrier seemed not to be a big obstacle. The topic of this day was the value and meaning of our land. After checking up on the general situation of the village and the cooperative in particular, we started with the theoretical input. Even though an intensive debate did not follow, some members added their view-

points and we tried to clarify open questions. Just before sunset, we took a walk towards the cooperative's fields and tried some of the first watermelon of the season. Besides the typical fruits and especially vegetables, this cooperative has also gained some experience in the plantation of jute, which may play a larger role in the agricultural cooperatives in the future which I will explain below.

The education among the cooperative members is not only seen as an important part of building up a cooperative in the beginning. Instead, it is used as a constant tool to keep improving according to the cooperative values. Responding to the question how we can prevent cooperatives in North and East Syria from falling back into feudalistic or capitalist mentalities, like many attempts around the world have done, a member of the House of cooperatives answered:

“You have to renew yourself continuously. Water that flows continuously is always clean. Water that stays in the same place and doesn't renew itself begins to rot and becomes polluted. How do we renew ourselves? Through practice and education. It is not the case that someone gets an education then goes into practice, no, education continues with practice. So as long you don't cut yourself off from your population and continue education you will always have this system of discussing your experience and deciding what step to take next. With your population, you are continuously renewing yourself and are able to fight stagnation and the road that leads to capitalism.”

As mentioned above in the principles of cooperatives and as a fundamental pillar of Democratic Confederalism, ecology is a central point for cooperatives in North-East Syria, as well. While ecology is a central part in the ideological edu-

cation in order for society to regain its close connection and harmony with nature, there are also some concrete material steps taken within the work of cooperatives. One central aim is to overcome the extensive mono-culture of grain that was imposed on the people of North-East Syria by the regime.



These are the jute plants that this cooperative is cultivating this year. This particular species are used as food and not construction material, however.

Newly founded, as well as already established agricultural cooperatives, are therefore encouraged to, in case they still decide to grow grain after all, only plant as much as is necessary for their own bread. Instead, the focus of production should shift towards fruits and vegetables since the self-administration still has to import these basic nourishment from other regions. At the same time, there are very interesting on-going debates about introducing new or only rarely used crops that could also provide non-food material and thereby booster the regions economic autonomy. One proposal in this direction suggests to spread plants like jute which yields 100% biodegradable fibers that can be used to produce textiles, ropes and various other materials and has low pesticide and fertilizer needs. This could especially be an alternative to cotton, one of the few other crops that have been cultivated in the region under the

regime, which has a huge water and pesticide consumption. Since the self-administration was established, the cultivation of cotton has already been reduced for these ecological reasons.

Cooperatives are also seen as an opportunity to enhance intercultural and inter-religious exchange and understanding. Due to the diverse population such encounters automatically happen in most cooperatives around North East Syria. However, in the countryside of Hasakeh for instance, a new project of the self-administration to facilitate a multicultural society is put into practice at the moment. The concept is to build a small village with an agricultural cooperative, making use of the direct surrounding land.



One of the stone houses that is being built for the families to move in soon.

This village is constructed completely new for displaced families and the unique detail is that families of different ethnicity and religions are put together deliberately. The first time I visited this place, the well, provided by the economic committee, was already used to water nearby vegetables of the cooperative. As of now, only one of the three families (Arab Muslim, Kurdish Ezidi & Syriac Christian) that are supposed to initially start the project are living at the place and so far they only live in a temporary tent. When we visited them

a while later 2 stone houses had already been build up and the second family was expected to move in within the next days.

One concept that is in the process of planning in some areas while already implemented in other cities is the idea of a cooperative market, that allows surrounding cooperatives to sell their products. During an assembly with a large joint cooperative of 3 villages and around 300 families north-west of Tirbespî, this was also discussed as a proposal. Last season this cooperative had the problem, that they harvested more than they could use themselves and sell in the local places. This led to some of their vegetables turning bad. In order to prevent this in the future, the assembly took the decision to invest a part of their earnings from last year into a fridge for storing vegetables. In addition, we suggested to open a cooperative market in the nearby town of Tirbespî in order to be able to sell all their vegetables to society.



The cooperative members are discussing a solution to for their storage problem. The elected administration is moderating together with a representative of the the cooperative union on Qamişlo.

A similar project is currently being implemented in Hasakeh. For this market we scouted different abandoned buildings around the city, most of them were at least partly damaged by the war, but

we ended up finding a suitable one. These cooperative markets, which will be stores run in a cooperative way, as the name suggests, will not only be a place for the local cooperatives to sell their products. Likewise, local farmers that have difficulties to sell their harvest will also have the opportunity to sell their products. Furthermore, it is planned that as another step also products from cooperatives operating in different regions will be offered. This would provide the basis for a cooperative trade of different goods between different regions. Besides providing a place for cooperatives to sell their products centrally and creating more cooperative work places, the main advantage of the concept of a cooperative market is that there is no intermediate trader that will charge an extra fee. Therefore, the general society will also benefit because cooperatives can provide lower prices than the general market. The cooperative markets will only amplify this advantage and can be an important step to bypass the logic of profit-driven markets.

Among the cooperatives of North-East Syria that I have seen, there are some in which the responsibility to be a driving factor of women liberation has been put into practice and the involvement of women has been fully realized. In other regions, especially in the southern areas where feudal and patriarchal influence has been stronger, which is no surprise considering that some of those regions have only been liberated from the crucial rule of the so called Islamic State in very recent years, the inclusion of women is progressing slower. At one cooperative meeting for instance, the women were mostly sitting on the floor next to the male members that were sitting on chairs. In other occasions only very few women were present at all. In situations like this we try to encourage the participation of women in a twofold

approach: In the described case for instance, one committee member rhetorically asked: “Do the women not know how to do agriculture?” - trying to playfully point to the fact that women are sitting at the side during the meeting, taking care of the children. At the same time however, we later also took the time to explain and discuss in detail why the participation of women is vital for the common life, the cooperative and this revolution.

Just like in other aspects of life in Rojava, also the economy has an autonomous women section (*aboriya jin*). Earlier this year, I was part of a delegation where we had the chance to visit two cooperatives of the autonomous women economy. One of them is an agricultural cooperative not far from Tirbespî, which aside from the cultivation of a great variety of vegetables and fruits also includes some animal farming like sheep and goats. When this cooperative first started, they payed out wages to the members. Nowadays however, they have overcome the classical salary system and instead distribute the products and the earnings gained from selling their products on the local market. While there are some cooperatives where each member (family) receives the same share of the return or harvest, this cooperative decided to allocate the resources according to the specific needs. Even if two members do the same work for instance, the member whose family consists of 5 children receives accordingly more than the other member with only 2 children. This shows that the cooperatives can decide autonomously in their assembly how to structure their cooperative as long as they stick to the basic framework. This cooperative is organizing through a weekly *Tekmil* (report&reflection) and a monthly general assembly as well as a monthly education, either work related or on an ideological level.

The policy about work in this cooperative is organized according to the motto: “Everyone according to their ability”. Which implies that the work does not have to be hard work on the field in case of illnesses or a general physical weakness. The biggest difficulty this cooperative is facing is the embargo that is put onto the autonomous region by all surrounding nation states. The embargo does not allow them to import important parts to repair their tractor for example.



Members of the cooperative are fixing young vegetables. In this women cooperative actually also some men are working. However, only as part of a member family- no “single” men can become members.

The other cooperative is located in Tirbespî itself. This autonomous women cooperative produces several different jams and canned vegetables. Some of the women had earlier worked for an NGO but now earn more money at the cooperative while others were stuck in their homes before and experience working with the cooperative also as a tool of empowerment. The responsible person from the women economy explained that in one year one of their machines broke and they could not pay any wages. At least, she argued, this was helpful for the members to realize that this is their own project and not a normal wage labor. And in the following years they were able to increase their earnings.

An interest insight of those visits was also that both cooperatives are closely linked to each other since the agricultural cooperative directly produces some of the raw products (fruits/vegetables) for the cooperative producing jam and other canned food.

Comparing the cooperatives of the women structure and the general economic structure, it made the impression to me that the women cooperatives were better organized and generally more elaborated which results in a productive outcome and quicker material and ideological improvements on the one hand but also has a greater danger of resembling some traps of western cooperatives. The cooperatives of the general structure had less influence from the economic committee which may lead to more independence and autonomy and a communal spirit on the one hand but may explain that their structure and organization seem sometimes more loose and less focused.

Considering that especially for the women structure my insight was very limited this comparison may be rather arbitrary. Therefore, instead of concluding that the women cooperatives are generally better organized but less independent, I rather want to stress that cooperatives in North-East Syria develop quite differently according to their local circumstances (village/city, type of product, activity of committee) but most importantly, according to the will of their members.

Other work of the economic committee

Especially confronted with the reality of an ongoing war, a huge inflation crises due to international sanctions targeting the Assad-regime that hit the self-administration just as hard as well as a strict embargo in all directions, the top priority that the Autonomous Administration has put for itself is to secure basic provision of nutrition to prevent people from starving. Even though cooperatives are well suitable to fulfill this role, the targeted expansion of the self-initiative of society to build up cooperatives is not enough yet, therefore the self-administration is running several fields of production.

One example are the crop silos. During the harvesting season I spent a week at various silos in the Qamişlo canton. The administration buys the crops directly from the farmers and later distributes it to different bakeries etc. In order to provide some financial security to the farmers in times of a highly volatile Syrian pound, the price for crops has been pegged to the US dollar. I asked several of the employees at the silos about their situation. Most of them have been working at this place for at least 25 years - most of the time for the regime, in recent years for the self-administration.

They told me that compared to working for the regime, their working hours have reduced significantly which gives them time to be with their families. In addition, nowadays food and drinks are provided for them.

In front of the gates of the crop silos there were endless lines of trucks wait-

ing every day, loaded until the very top with the fresh harvest, for their turn to weigh and sell their crops. Sometimes the mood among the farmers was quite tense, everyone wanted to be next in line. Even though waiting for hours in the hot sun may have explained some of the temper, the underlying reason was most probably the generally difficult economical situation that further intensified after the US had introduced new sanctions a few days before.



After the quality check the harvest is dropped into a pit underneath the ground from where it is moved into the big Silos by electronic suction control.

Overall however, the harvest this year was nearly twice as high as last year. While last year entire areas of crop fields were burned down by Islamist gangs (ISIS sleeper cells and others) in order to weaken the autonomous organization of the people in North and East Syria, these terrorist attacks have been greatly reduced this year with the huge dedication of the volunteer Social Defence Forces (Hêzên Parastina Civakî - HPC).

They kept watch and ward of their local fields around the clock and thereby secured the subsistence for thousands of farmers and the nutrition for all people of North and East Syria.

Another example to provide the avail-

ability of basic food are the “Newroz” stores in every city where food and other basic household products are sold for affordable prices. During times of intensification of the constant crisis like during the outbreak of the Coronavirus, the self-administration additionally gives out free food-packages for poor families.

Another task of the economic committee is to prevent individuals to take advantage of a situation of crises by offering overpriced goods. Independent of the current crisis, the committee also works in order to prevent monopolies from establishing or maintaining their presence in North-East Syria. Private enterprises are still existing in North and East Syria and there are also no plans to expropriate the owners of the small retail shops that are the most visible economic activity within the cities of North-East Syria, for instance.

Furthermore, private ownership is protected according to Article 41 of the social contract that was declared in 2014. The same article also states however, that private property may be deprived for the sake of social interest. The goal of the economic philosophy of North and East Syria is to put private property in the service of society. What this means in practice has to be ascertained with the experience on the ground. One of the more obvious conclusions is that any kind of monopoly will be prevented.

One day a worker of the economic committee returned to Qamişlo from a meeting in another city and brought back 2 bottles of the same fruit juice and two different receipts. He showed us that at one town he paid almost three times as much for the exact same juice compared to the other town. He told me that they will try to talk to the owner of the store to adjust his prices to a reasonable level.

In general, the economic-committee is constantly working on plans and several project for the future such as the recycling of cow and chicken manure to gain methane and biological fertilizer and many more projects to foster the transition towards an ecological and social economy in the midst of the ongoing war.



Another preoccupation of the economic committee is to rebuild and maintain the basic infrastructure as a basis for further work: This picture was taken in the countryside of Al-Hole where we were examining the remains of the a water channel providing water for the city before ISIS deliberately destroyed it as a tool of warfare. The plan is to rebuild the water system and we were trying to figure out which route has priority.

Cooperatives as a revolutionary strategy - facing capitalist modernity

The idea to start building up socialist elements withing capitalism through cooperatives, often accompanied by some kind of (con-)federal unionism, is not new. This strategy may indeed sound tempting in theory. However, estimates suggest that today there exist already up to 3 million cooperatives with nearly one billion members worldwide, therefore 12 % of humanity is claimed to be involved in cooperatives, also in many centers of capitalist modernity cooperatives are formally a part of economic reality. The International Labor Organization (ILO) even claims that 50% of the world´s agriculture outcome is marketed through cooperatives. If all this is true and cooperatives are supposed to be the solution for an economy based on democracy, why is the world not a better place yet? Is it just because the current mode of production does not provide the necessary conditions for cooperatives to show their actual potential?

Anyway, it seems obvious that only a small part of those statistics accounts for “true” cooperatives that are not yet integrated into the capitalist mode of production. In addition, it seems like the ILO counts every field that is not in the hand of a big international firm a cooperative. Closely related, for our main issue more importantly however, is the question why has the significant existence of cooperatives across different regions and times often not led to any revolutionary movement or at least po-

litical organizing? Is there something fundamentally flawed with the idea of cooperatives as a key to overcome capitalism? The fact that many liberal western scientists and organizations like the UN are proposing to foster cooperatives, as well, is another reason for doubt. What is there interest? Will cooperatives even be used to stabilize the current power structures?

One thing that is certain is that we will not overcome capitalism by simply adding cooperatives. We do not even have to talk about stateist, financial or international power structures that will rather sooner than later prevent society from taking the majority of the economy, including the core industries, under their control: The current owners and profiteers of the means of production do not even have to actively interfere into the potential danger of cooperatives taking over, since those alternative economic institutions simply get absorbed by the system as soon as they reach a considerable size or influence. A very good example is the Basque cooperative Mondragón, which is taken as an example that cooperatives can work well even on a large scale, even by allegedly radical proponents of cooperatives like Richard Wolff. In practice however, the true cooperative basis of this conglomerate seems to have broken down under the pressure of capitalist assimilation. Outsourcing their production for cheap labor has become part of their practice, furthermore, nowadays only a third of the people working for Mondragón are actually members of the cooperative.

This tendency of absorption is the reason why the ideology of liberalism is so powerful in preventing any kind of alternative to gain ground, not only in economic but also in other political and social spheres. Liberalism is able to absorb the ideas or movements of any op-

position and even creates their own opposition to later use them to delegitimise any true opposition. Following the same logic, there is also the danger that assimilated cooperatives even help to prolong the survival of the capitalist system.

By providing help in the adaption to necessary reforms and time trends like the consideration of ecological aspects or giving employees a voice on the surface level without touching fundamental contradictions, assimilated political movements, including cooperatives, make capitalism more resilient against critique and attacks.

Therefore, many fellows argue that for allowing cooperatives to take the role of leading us towards a serious alternative to capitalist modernity, they need to be embedded in a profound revolutionary strategy. Before a revolutionary situation, cooperatives may only be able to play the role of preparing, educating and building up a minimum of alternative structure, so that we do not have to start from zero as soon as the opportunity to challenge dominant power structures realizes. Furthermore, I agree with Noam Chomsky that “the roots of a successor project of capitalism and its neoliberal organization will have to be constructed within the existing economy”. Abdullah Öcalan furthermore states that “It is a necessity of social nature that there is resistance and an alternative to capital accumulation and the resulting instruments of power whenever and wherever they exist”. This goes hand in hand with the understanding that the status quo will not simply dissolve itself without violent counter-revolutionary attacks as an alternative economy arises. Instead, even in a future where democratic modernity has been recovered, capitalist modernity will continue to coexist for the time being, at least in the mentality of society.

At the same time, cooperatives may stand for a theory of revolution, that focuses on preparing for the appearance of a “Kairós-moment” (window of opportunity) through organizing and establishing concrete alternatives. The power vacuum in North-East Syria prior to the beginning of the Rojava Revolution can be described as such a “moment of opportunity” which led to success since the window of opportunity was recognized and society had been organized many years in advance.

This concept combines and distinguishes itself from other approaches to revolution: The classical/orthodox Marxist view of waiting for the revolution to appear through historical determinism and history as progress (which degrades us to passive observers until the conditions are ripe) on the one hand as well as the Leninist strategy of forcing revolution through organized vanguardism or a rather insurrectionist/spontainist approach of claiming “revolution is whenever and wherever we want it to be” on the other hand (organization is key, but trying to force the revolution without acknowledging the external time frame and conditions is hopeless). In a cooperative revolutionary strategy the cooperative is used as a tool of organizing and preparing which has to start right away, while always having a broad but clear analysis of the political situation in order to recognize a Kairós moment as soon as it appears in which the cooperatives (along with other institutions & structures) will be set free from their leashes and provide the foundations for the emerging alternative.

Hence, this strategy admits that a revolutionary rupture is only possible or sustainable if the conditions are suitable, while stressing however, that those opportunities can only be taken if the necessary preparations had been taken in the years or decades before. The main

contradiction of trying to implement a cooperative economy within the capitalist hegemony is the unsolved riddle of how to create cooperatives that reach beyond the niche while avoiding the constant pressure of the logic of capitalist markets. Following the argumentation of Rosa Luxemburg, I agree that within capitalist modernity, cooperatives are bound to fall into traps. In her pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution* Luxemburg heavily criticizes Eduard Bernstein for revisionist argumentation. While I defend Bernstein’s analysis that capitalism is adoptable and would not inevitably collapse rather soon as many of his critics like Luxemburg predicted (with my slight advantage of access to 120 years more of capitalist history), I agree with her general criticism and use her argumentation why his proposed cooperatives and trade unions “are totally incapable of transforming the capitalist mode of production”:

Cooperatives may either fall in the assimilation trap, which means giving in to market competition. In this case, sooner or later, the control of production by the interest of capital becomes unpreventable for the survival of the cooperative. Or alternatively, if the members are resisting the first trap and manage to keep some of their principles alive, they fall into the second trap of isolation and self-exploitation. In this case they are relatively detached from the capitalist market but since no alternative is existing, this leads to the (relative) insignificance of a neighborhood utopia, burn-out of members or dissolution. Luxemburg explains: “[cooperatives] are obliged to play the role of capitalist entrepreneur toward themselves - a contradiction that accounts for the usual failure of cooperatives in production, which either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers’ interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving.”

As a next step, Luxemburg argues that the only way to avoid the capitalist market pressure is to withdraw from this mechanism. She proposes that (production-) cooperatives need to organize the demand side of the economic circle in an independent way. She suggests that this would be the role of consumer cooperatives. So consumer cooperatives are the missing puzzle piece for the solution? Not so fast, Luxemburg continues that this will still be a very limited scope due to the limitation of the product range demanded by consumer cooperatives which is usually bound to food and small scale production. In order to take control of the economy however, system-relevant industries would be needed. At the same time however, she describes how a symbiosis between production and consumption cooperatives could still achieve an economic production circle mostly independent of the main capitalist market structures. If we don't have illusions that this on its own will pose an existential threat to global production patterns, it may provide an environment for organizing and gaining valuable experiences.

So we have seen that cooperatives will hardly be able to develop according to our wishes in a capitalist system. At the same time, if cooperatives would function perfectly within the capitalist system, would this not indicate that cooperatives are not the root of the alternative economy that we are striving for? Marx describes the self-exploitation trap when he states that "the workers become their own capitalists", which is arguably a more favorable situation compared to being exploited by an exterior "real" capitalist, but the goal should be an economy which is not based on the extraction of profit at all. The fact that cooperatives can hardly survive in capitalist modernity without giving in to compromises, self-exploitation or some other form of assimilation, shows

that the capitalist hegemony is not the natural habitat of cooperatives.

Another common critique towards cooperatives as the base of a future economic system is that they do not fundamentally break with the wage system. Just because we pay our wages to ourselves, it is still a wage. This issue goes hand in hand with the fundamental question whether we can organize a complex economy without the use of any money. Even though these are very interesting and important questions, neither wage labor nor money is a necessary attribute of a cooperative. The core principles of a cooperative can also (probably even better) be applied in a system without any wage or even without any money. But the details of this require another discussion.

In addition, as describes above, in Rojava some cooperatives have at least succeeded to overcome the wage system in the sense that each member works according to their needs and receives a share of the outcome according to the necessities of their family. Furthermore, the economic committee of North-East Syria is constantly considering and making experiences in different ways how a new economy can be realized. There is a village in Rojava for instance, where money has been abolished as a daily tool. The only time those villagers have to use money is if they leave their village for a different region. However, this is only a small scale experiment.

If we honestly believe that a fundamentally different way of organizing life is possible, we have to believe in the ability of society to rediscover a communal and cooperative way of fulfilling its needs. The strongest argument in favor of using cooperatives as a revolutionary tool is the fact that cooperatives are a fundamental part of the alternative socioeconomic system that we want to

create one day. Even if one concludes that trying to implement this “breath of socialism” in the current system today is not promising, it may still be useful to gain experience in all different aspects of the building of a cooperative economy, for instance, transforming a capitalist company into a cooperative.

Regarding this issue, we can learn from our experience here in Rojava. In the first years of the revolution, the construction of cooperatives were done according to different principles than today. To keep it short, one can say that the early cooperatives shared some of the shortcomings of most western ‘capitalist’- cooperatives nowadays. For instance, it was possible for people outside of the cooperative to invest in them and therefore make profit of other peoples’ labor. The self-administration recognized this shortcoming and soon new principles was introduced which bounds the cooperatives to the local commune which ensures that the cooperative is run by the people for themselves. This is one example of the very important experiences that the people in Rojava involved in the construction of an alternative economy make every day. And we have to acknowledge that even with the most sophisticated and thought-through theory how a cooperative economy should be build up, many mistakes and new difficulties will only appear in practice.

This is a strong argument for starting to make at least some of those experiences everywhere around the world. Why should we wait for external condition to change? Hence, one could conclude that if the people of Rojava had started building up cooperatives long before the Autonomous-Administration was established, they would have learned from this mistakes and the cooperatives would be at a more mature state today, more able to be the backbone of the en-

tire economy. However, we need to keep in mind that the Kurdish minority in North-East Syria was not even allowed to own their own fields, houses, shops and were even banned from planting trees. These oppressive conditions obviously did not allow to gain experience in the establishment of cooperatives. Even though the majority of the people around the world are not suffering under such extreme direct oppression, we should remember that a serious attempt to build up a cooperative structure will face the confrontation by states and various individuals and institutions that benefit from the current system. Hence, if we ask “Should we build up cooperatives around the world?”, we also need to answer the question “(Under which conditions) can we do it?”. And the crucial question that follows is “How should we do it?”

When talking about building up a cooperative economy, this often implies actually establishing new cooperatives from scratch, which promises to allow us to implement every step purely according to our principles. However, another possibility is to make use of the existing know-how and facilities by taking over existing firms to turn them into a cooperative.

What makes this strategy worthwhile considering is the advantage of being able to seriously materialize a change of property control since we would not be limited to small scale production anymore. In addition, such a takeover immediately poses the questions of class, power and violence since it will quickly show how the state with the police as its executive power is protecting the interest of private profit and property. A well-known example of factory takeovers are the worker-reclaimed factories in Argentina in the 2000s’. Following the economic depression of 2001, many businesses went bankrupt, laid of work-

ers and closed their factories. One important factor was that the occupations and takeovers of factories were embedded in a general political movement opposing the neoliberal politics of the Argentinian state. In the end, however, unless such a movement can gain huge momentum and overtake a significant part of the main industries (this would likely be a scenario in the dimensions comparable to a general strike), it will still be exposed to the same contradictions of a capitalist environment.

It is obvious that the role of cooperatives has to differ according to the current socioeconomic and political circumstances in different regions around the world. Therefore, in the end, I will try to give an outline of what different strategies in three different categories of settings may look like.

The first stage I call center of capitalist modernity. Even though one has to look carefully to find any culture that has not been influenced by the age of capitalism until today (literally there is even no culture/place on earth not affected considering climate effects), I am talking about modern capitalist nation states where the hegemonic system is not even perceived as a historical system since it has reached far beyond material conditions and is omnipresent in the peoples' mindset. In this hostile environment, the traps that cooperatives encounter (described above), are most relevant and difficult to overcome. It is here that we have to ask ourselves if time and effort of revolutionaries may be better invested in different projects or different regions of the struggle. If we still decide to build up cooperatives in this first scenario, the focus of cooperatives may be related to basic needs like health-/care, housing or culture rather than in the production of goods. Hence, the only viable compromise may be that the role of cooperatives shifts to a dif-

ferent focus: Cooperatives can become places of education and organizing: A way of creating community and bringing a neighborhood together. This may remind you of one of the central aims of cooperatives here in Rojava, discussed above, as well. What distinguishes this from other existing social/community centers? In some sense not a lot, but even if it is just a collective cafe, shop or bike repair, if implemented consistently, it is still more than just a place for people to hang out and take a break from the everyday hustle within capitalism, it is a small material realization of communal economy and democratic modernity. May it only be for the purpose of providing a concrete alternative to arouse from sleep society's drive for a meaningful life and provoke appetite for more.

The second category or stage may apply to countries and regions where the mentality and economic unlogic of capitalism have not managed to reach every corner or where the influence of the state is not as comprehensive as in the center of capitalist modernity. In such an environment cooperatives may actually have the breathing room to reach some extent of autonomous economy, even if, for example, only limited to a certain region within a nation state that has a politicized society. Even if this will rather realize in remote areas far from capital cities, once a network of cooperatives has been established within a loophole of external and internal pressure, society will be willing to defend this new freedom from attacks by the state or international market forces. Therefore, for this second scenario, the goal should be to sincerely build-up a parallel economy which eventually challenges the hegemonic power relations.

The third case I describe as absence of nation state power or a situation where the power is in the hands of the people in form of a revolu-

tionary movement committed to people's liberation. In this scenario, the aim should be clear: Materialize cooperatives as the base of a communal economy. North-East Syria in the last 8 years, obviously, falls into the third category. Important to consider is that it is hardly possible to just jump from 0 to step 3. This means that if the society has not had the change to gain any practical nor theoretical experience in organization of life and economy in a cooperative way, it is not possible to enforce this from above. This is a significant difference in which Democratic Confederalism distinguishes itself from centralist real-socialist attempts of the past: The members of the economic committee stress that it is vital to take the detour via, what I describe as steps 1 and 2, in order for society to build up a profound alternative economy instead of imposing the way of producing, and thereby living, from above. This may be a positive outlook that cooperatives within scenario 1 or 2 may indeed play an important role of paving the way until scenario 3 realizes. If the phases of politicization, organization and experiences were missed out, or politically not possible (like here in North-East Syria due to the oppression by the regime as describes above), these steps will therefore be taken even though we are actually in the third scenario.

In the end, I still can not imagine how a fundamental alternative economic system cannot be based on some kind of collectively owned units with democratic member control, in other words: Cooperatives. This does not imply that building up a cooperative is always and everywhere a strategically clever and revolutionary thing to do. I tried to share my thoughts on why this approach can be totally in vain, misleading or even counterproductive. At the same time, I also presented some ideas why, how and under which circumstances we should maybe still consider to start building a cooperative economy today, no matter where we are. Rojava shows that the cooperative economy reaches far beyond the fulfillment of society's economic needs: It shows that the establishment of cooperatives can and should go hand in hand with women liberation, radical

ecology, intercultural exchange, grassroots democracy and the reestablishing of communal way of living. In short: Cooperatives are Revolution.



Cooperative economy? This way! Ultimately, the question whether a cooperative is revolutionary or not depends on whether the intention of its members is revolutionary or not.

