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An Interview with Necîbe Qeredaxî

Necîbe Qeredaxî; Brecht Neven; Marlene Schäfers, Roar Magazine

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As a liberatory framework emerging from the Kurdish movement, jineology places women at the center of the struggle against patriarchy, capitalism and the state.

Following the recent developments in northern Syria, Kurdish women have often been portrayed in the Western media as fierce fighters combating the savage barbarians of the so-called Islamic State. Considering Kurdish female guerrilla fighters as heroines defending Western values of democracy and gender equality, however, frames Kurdish women in an Orientalist narrative that grants political agency and recognition only as long as their actions fit liberal Western values.

Yet the struggle that Kurdish women are waging is deeply rooted in radical political thought and practice, and as such does not lend itself as easily to a Western liberal worldview as it might appear at first sight. The Kurdish movement emerged in the late 1970s out of a fragmented Turkish left and radicalized in the torture chambers of Diyarbakir prisons following the

1980 military coup in Turkey. Since its inception it has evolved from a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist caterpillar to a radical democratic butterfly.

Abandoning the objective of an independent socialist Kurdistan, the movement now draws upon the theory and praxis of feminism, social ecology and libertarian municipalism to transcend the state. Instead of centralizing power, it seeks to re-allocate it to the grassroots through horizontal forms of representation. Inspired in part by the American communalist theorist Murray Bookchin, the Kurdish movement has clearly articulated its aspirations for a post-capitalist and post-state society and has begun to implement these ideas in the Kurdish autonomous regions of Rojava, in northern Syria.

The struggle for gender equality stands at the heart of the Kurdish movement's vision for a just society. Locating the historical root of social, economic and cultural oppression and injustice in the emergence of gender hierarchies in the Neolithic era, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader and chief theorist of the Kurdish movement, proposes a direct relation between gender hierarchies and state formation. Referring to women as "the first colony," Öcalan argues that the nation-state, monotheistic religions and capitalism all constitute different institutionalized forms of the dominant male. Fighting patriarchal social structures — or, in Öcalan's words, "killing the dominant male" — consequently becomes an imperative in the struggle for a society that will transcend the oppressive structures of the capitalist nation-state.

Within this struggle, the Kurdish paradigm stresses the importance of an enduring transformation of both social and personal mentalities; a term that resonates with the Foucauldian concept of discourse as an encompassing formation of thought, while stressing its rootedness in practice and hence underlining the need for an antagonistic struggle in order to achieve lasting change. In a framework that rethinks the boundaries of citizenship, the classical Marxist focus on class struggle is

in this way broadened to take into account other forms of oppression. The liberation of women takes on a pivotal role both for theoretical reflection on social reality and for practical efforts undertaken towards radically changing that reality. The movement asserts that for the social struggle to be successful, it is vital to fully comprehend the links between capitalist, statist and gender oppression. Taking into account insights from both anti-colonial and anti-capitalist resistance movements of the twentieth century, the understanding of struggle itself is thus fundamentally reformulated.

Jineology, a framework of radical feminist analysis that the Kurdish movement has been developing since 2008, tries to transfer the advancements of the Kurdish women's movement into society. A neologism derived from the Kurdish word for woman, *jin*, jineology criticizes how the positivistic sciences have monopolized all forms of power in the hands of men. As a theoretical paradigm, it is based on the concrete experiences of Kurdish women facing both patriarchal and colonial oppression. Using this new perspective, jineology seeks to develop an alternative methodology for the existing social sciences that stands in contrast to androcentric knowledge systems.

At the same time, it also articulates a powerful critique of Western feminism. According to Dilar Dirik, an academic and advocate of jineology, the feminist deconstruction of gender roles has contributed immensely to our understanding of sexism. Nevertheless, jineology remains critical towards the failure of Western feminism to build an alternative. It criticizes mainstream feminism's failure to achieve wider social change by limiting the framework of the persisting order. Intersectional feminism addresses these issues, underlining the observation that forms of oppression are interlinked and that feminism needs to take a holistic approach to tackle them. Yet according to the Kurdish movement, the problem is that these debates never leave the circles of academia. Jineology proposes itself as a method to explore these questions in a

collectivist manner. As such, jineology can be seen as the living practice that evolved from the discussions of women all over Kurdistan.

Necibe Qeredaxi has been a journalist and advocate for Kurdish rights for eighteen years. She is a founding member of a research center for jineology in Brussels, which will soon open its doors to the public. The aim of the organization is the promotion of research in the human and social sciences that concerns women's emancipation. The center will be organizing seminars and workshops, will carry out research on gender violence and women's oppression, and seeks to reach out to feminist movements in Belgium and beyond.

What is jineology and what does it struggle for?

Necibe Qeredaxi: The term jineology is composed of two words: *jin*, the Kurdish word for "woman," and *logos*, Greek for "word" or "reason." So it is the science or the study of women. What is jineology, for those hearing about it for the first time? Jineology is both an outcome and a beginning. It is the outcome of the dialectical progress of the Kurdish women's movement, as well as a beginning to respond to the contradictions and problems of modern society, economics, health, education, ecology, ethics and aesthetics. While the social sciences have dealt with these issues, they remain influenced by the reigning hegemony and have distorted the issues at hand, particularly the relations between men and women. Jineology therefore proposes a new analysis of these fields.

What do we base our analysis on? First, upon the dialectics of the evolution of the Kurdish women's movement within the Kurdish freedom movement. From its outset, the Kurdish freedom movement did not only struggle against the contradictions of nationalism, but it also struggled against the contradictions within Kurdish society itself. It was thus engaged at the same time in a national struggle and in a gender struggle. The Kurdish freedom movement began its struggle in Mesopotamia, where women constitute a historical potential. Jineology fo-

So it's not that the Kurds come to organize the Arabs or the Turkmens. Instead, the Assyrians have their own armed units (Sutoro) or the military council of Manbij is staffed by both Kurds and Arabs. So on all fronts we see that the national struggle is no longer the struggle of a single nation. It is a democratic struggle.

In one of his speeches Öcalan says he created the expression *Jin, jiyar, azadi* — woman, life, freedom — as an enchanting expression. What is *Jin, jiyar, azadi* directed against? It is directed against the formula of death, sex and slavery. Death here means both physical and mental death. And slavery refers to how the entire society is enslaved through the figure of the woman. Therefore, this formula is not just for Kurdish women, but also for women of other societies. This means that the struggle for a democratic nation and the gender struggle are always waged together.

Brecht Neven is a recent graduate in political science at Ghent University. He wrote his dissertation on the ideological paradigm of the Kurdish movement, making a comparison with the anarchist movement during the Spanish Civil War. He is currently enrolled in an MA in Journalism at Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Marlene Schäfers is a social anthropologist and currently FWO [PEGASUS]2 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Middle East and North Africa Research Group at Ghent University, Belgium.

Her research interests include the impact of state violence on intimate and gendered lives, the politics of memory and history, and the intersections of affect and politics, particularly in relation to Turkey's Kurdish communities.

parallel, in the end it is often the political struggle that subdues the women's struggle. Do you consider there to be a risk that the Kurdish women's struggle might become secondary to the political movement? What are your thoughts on this?

A national struggle is always full of risks. In the Middle East, a national struggle on its own can become very dangerous if there is no gender struggle to accompany it. In terms of terminology, the Kurdish freedom movement actually does not claim to wage a national struggle anymore, but a struggle for a democratic nation. Because if the nation is not democratized it is always at risk of being used against another nation. We can see this in Southern Kurdistan [the Kurdish Region in Iraq]: here, there is now a nation with authority, but because it hasn't been democratized it remains a risk for its own society.

So what is the difference between a nation and a democratic nation? The aim of the national struggle is the creation of a state. It seeks to bring down one state and erect a new nation-state in its place, based on the idea of one nation, one language, one history, one flag, one culture. The aim of the Kurdish freedom movement, however, is not that. The aim of the democratic nation is that society governs itself through democratic autonomy. The governance of society becomes the self-governance of society. There is nobody here coming from the outside in order to govern society, but society governs itself. In terms of institutions this means that there are councils and communes, which are shared with other nations. The system of co-leadership, for instance, includes Arabs, Turkmens, Armenians and so on.

So the founding idea here is not that of one single nation. In Rojava this system has advanced the most. Here, different nations are organizing themselves within the framework of the Kurdish freedom movement. They don't organize themselves under the Kurdish freedom movement, but are engaged in this struggle in parallel and together with the Kurdish movement.

cuses on this potential and the historical realities behind it. A second reference point for us are the realities of Kurdistan today, the realities of a natural society which has been destroyed and subjected, but which is nevertheless still alive.

Who developed jineology, and why? Jineology is a concept that seems to have come into circulation only recently. What does it respond to? What were the circumstances of its development?

The Kurdish women's movement today is very large and advanced in terms of its institutions. It has evolved from a basic level of self-organization to the organization of military units and a women's party. Now we are at a moment where the women's movement has become like an umbrella. Underneath this umbrella, in all four parts of Kurdistan, there are hundreds of civil, party and military units. Now that the movement has grown, there is the need for a leading mentality in order to impact society. As long as these developments remain caught within a number of intellectual, elite and vanguard organizations, there will be no lasting social change.

There is always the risk of reverting back to the past. In 2008, *Sociology of Freedom*, the texts of Abdullah Öcalan, were published in five volumes. In the third volume, Öcalan proposes jineology as a science that can transform the mentality of society. Because while there certainly is change, we have to make this change long-term and effective at the level of the underlying paradigm. In order to make the progress we have achieved so far last, we cannot content ourselves with reform only.

Öcalan says that if the progress we have made won't be supported scientifically and academically, and if men won't transform themselves, then there is always the risk that male power will re-establish itself and oppress the potential established by women. This means that in order to create new potentials and lasting social change, gender transformations also have to occur within the society. Following this proposal, in 2008 a com-

mittee with about thirty members was founded to discuss jineology and the ways in which we can develop it. Since then, jineology committees have been founded in many cities in Northern Kurdistan. When we look at Rojava, there are a great number of jineology organizations there, including the central jineology academy as well as several jineology centers. In Europe, jineology has been on the agenda of the women's movement for the last three or four years, and a large number of conferences, seminars and panels have been organized in different countries.

Over the last three years we have come to understand that this has to become more institutionalized. Therefore, in the beginning of 2016 a group of us from mixed backgrounds — journalists, academics, members of the women's movement, intellectuals — came together and in 2017 established the Jineology Center here in Brussels, where we want to work more closely together with feminist movements all over Europe. Most of us are volunteers. We don't receive money because we want to run jineology as something that everybody can work on and participate in.

You mentioned that you want to reach out to feminist movements in Europe. This makes me wonder about the relation between jineology and feminism. How is jineology different from feminism? And to what extent does it also draw upon feminism?

Jineology is not an alternative to feminism. This has to be made very clear. We don't say, let's get rid of feminism and erect jineology in its place. We have said this very clearly and I want to repeat it here one more time. Some have said that jineology is Kurdish feminism, but this is not the case; it is not Kurdish feminism.

Why?

Because when the Kurdish women's movement first began, it analyzed the contradictions of Kurdish society and began tackling them through a women's struggle. When it researched

notion of a woman's nature or essence. What is your position on the notion of women's nature?

This was a very critical discussion during our camp in Cologne this summer. I believe that the feminist women's movements haven't explored this enough either. The arguments that have been brought forth so far do not all point in one direction. Human existence is both a biological and a social existence. The existing sciences have denied very important historical truths. For example, some say there is no such thing as women's nature. But biology has proven that in the beginning there was only the XX chromosome, not the XY one. What does this tell us? It tells us that the biological existence of women can also encompass that of men, while the reverse is not true.

As adherents of jineology we don't agree with the idea that woman's nature does not exist; instead we want to research this question further. We believe that the social sciences have played a role in the denial of the truth about women. Once you stop denying the truth about women, you open up the question of how this truth has been distorted and oppressed. If you acknowledge that there used to be a truth about women, but that the biological and sociological aspects of this truth were transformed, then we can have a discussion. But if you say there is no woman's nature, that's it, then that is also a form of dogmatism without much difference from the dogmatism of religion or mythology.

In the matriarchal system, women's nature opened up the path for socialization. What were the kinship relations in that society? For example, why is there a prohibition on sexual relations between brother and sister? How were these positive taboos created? These are the products of women's nature, of women's analytical and emotional reason. If that is not women's nature, then what is women's nature?

In a lot of national struggles we see that even if women's struggles and the national struggle run in

We neither reject religion entirely, nor do we embrace it as something that is true and that we defend. Instead, we approach religion more from a sociological perspective. How did religion come about, how did it become an institutionalization of mythology? For us, at its very base religion is mythology that has become institutionalized. But at the same time it can also be a method for resistance.

Often, those in power use religion as a means of legitimizing their power. They use it to establish their laws on its basis, to give form to society, to create a dominant system that even enters your dreams. They intervene in all aspects of your life. We know that the two stages of mythology and religion brought immense setbacks for women. For example, the idea that woman was created from the forehead of Zeus, or that she was created from the rib of man.

We therefore believe that researching the transformations from the stage of animism to that of shamanism, of mythology and religion is important. According to jineology, both animism and shamanism are in fact forms of religion. Animism is a belief based on the force of nature, while shamanism is based on patriarchy. The figure of the shaman brings together the material and moral force of the hunter, and together with the figure of the military commander creates a triangle of religion, military power and authority, which has become the nucleus for the erection of hegemony over women through the colonization of their labor and minds.

At the same time, we don't deny religion. There are also positive elements within religion, moral and cultural elements, which religion defends. Moreover, religious movements have also resisted against hegemony, particularly those religions that do not have an abstract god, such as Yezidism, Alevism, Zoroastrianism, but are instead centered on the human.

Within feminism the idea of gender being socially constructed has led to a lot of skepticism towards the

feminist movements it realized that it can take certain parts of feminism as its legacy. But Kurdish society and the societies of the Middle East cannot be changed only through feminism. We have a critical view on feminism. Feminism is not able to view from a holistic perspective the entire set of problems of a society, especially in the Middle East. Also, feminism has become too divided, and it has severed itself from social realities. It has limited itself to the elites.

What is true for Europe is not always true for the Middle East. Women of course share certain things across all continents, but we are also different. For example, in certain countries in Europe women are fighting for the right to abortion, but in the Middle East women are still circumcised, they are still raped. Therefore, the perspectives of feminist women's movements remain inadequate for the realities in many places of the world.

But this does not mean that we don't accept the legacy of the international women's movement. Our references in jineology are inspired by the heritage of the Western feminist movement. For example the Suffragette movement in Great Britain, the women's communes during the revolution in France, the women's struggle under the leadership of Alexandra Kollontai, the women's struggle in Germany under the leadership of Rosa Luxemburg, Maria Mies, a contemporary ecofeminist, or the women's struggle in Latin America. We see all of these as part of our heritage, but we also see that the feminist movements are very Eurocentric. Plus, they have submitted to the power of the capitalist system and patriarchal mentality.

Many feminists don't see the connections between the triangle of patriarchy, capitalism and the nation-state. Breaking this triangle apart, they break apart their enemy. What then happens is that some men fight against capitalism and the nation-state, but they don't see patriarchy as part of the problem. Or some feminists only see patriarchy as a problem,

but don't see how this mentality is linked to the state and to capitalism.

Two weeks ago I was at a conference in Berlin. Someone from the feminist association organizing the event remarked, "what does what is happening in the Middle East have to do with us? Women are bearing arms, that's wrong. Why do you bring their issues into our country?" This is an example. Of course not all German women think like that, neither do all feminist organizations. But there are many who do.

When Germany sells weapons to Turkey and Saudi Arabia, when it supports the dictatorships in the Middle East, it is a responsibility of the feminist movements to stand up against this, and jineology critiques them for failing to do so. These movements should not stand in contradiction to social realities; they need to think globally. We believe that jineology can bring new energy to these movements. We can be like a bridge to build symbiotic relationships and create a shared platform, where we evaluate the critiques of the feminist movement and work together on those things that make jineology strong.

The Kurdish movement has become very popular recently in the West. Especially in liberal and left-wing Western media we have seen many images of Kurdish women fighting against ISIS. This has been a great source of fascination in the West. From the perspective of jineology, what's your position on the role of women in war and self-defense? What is your answer to the critique that women should not carry weapons?

I would say there are both advantages and disadvantages to this. The advantage is that it has lifted the embargo that was for a long time imposed on the Kurdish freedom movement, including the fact that it stands on the list of terror organizations. The movement has been criminalized and viewed very negatively, but this outlook has now been challenged on an international scale. The Kurdish freedom movement is not only concerned with Kurdish society, but also with the other ethnicities and re-

We believe that there is a crisis of the system, which is coercing all members of society — including those carrying different sexual and gender identities. The system works by dividing society and governing each division differently. According to jineology, each identity has the right to express itself and to organize itself. We see that within the capitalist system not all social identities, whether they are religious, ethnic or gendered, manage to organize themselves. But we also believe that there should be no such division within society. Identitarian categorization creates gaps within society that the system easily exploits to further divide us.

We believe that we need to discuss queer theory further. I think we, as theorists and adherents of jineology, are still very much at the beginning of a process of learning. It's clear that for our society, queer theory is very new. But once we discuss it further, maybe society will respond to it positively. Let me only add that within the Kurdish freedom movement there were also people who were transgender, which was something very normal — it was never a reason to be refused membership in the movement.

Actually, we can observe what you talk about when we look at how the European right is instrumentalizing gay rights, using a queer or feminist rhetoric even when they are not actually feminist. In particular, the right has been very successful at instrumentalizing gay and women's rights as a means of excluding Black and Muslim men. We saw this very clearly in Germany after the events of New Year's Eve in Cologne two years ago.

In the Middle East it's the same with the feminist Islamic movements. They banned all the social transformations inside the communities with reference to Islam and use Islamic arguments to oppress society.

In relation to that, how do you view the role of religion? And what about men or women who are religious — is there a place for them within jineology?

ences, seminars, we experienced the establishment of a great synergy. For us this tells us that we are on the right path.

We believe that the capitalist system has created great social crises. This crisis does not just concern Kurdish society but has a particularly great influence in Europe. Through jineology we want to create a discussion platform about the social sciences. We know that the existing social sciences are not the solution to the social crisis, but we believe that jineology can create new currents and discussions within the social sciences. In particular, we want to create a common platform for discussion with the feminist movements in Europe. We consider discussions with European feminists very important. We want to discuss questions of gender, as well as the problems that now emerge as part of a social crisis here. Why, for example, is racism becoming ever stronger? What is the reason for this? Why is the economic crisis progressing? And is this really an economic crisis, or perhaps rather an intellectual crisis?

We want to discuss these issues with other women so that we can find a new way of thinking about questions of economics, health, ethics, aesthetics, method and violence. With the classical ways of knowledge production, through legal reform, we cannot put a stop to structural violence. Instead, we want to go deeper and ask where violence and gender oppression come from; develop the concepts of self-defense, of co-existence, of co-leadership. We would like to discuss all of this with European women.

One of the things we have been wondering about is jineology's position in relation to queer theory, since queer theory actually seems to take up some of the critiques that you make of classical Western feminism. There is also a lot of criticism from Black feminists or other non-white women of feminism being very Western-centric. What is your position towards queer theory and other critiques of feminism?

ligions with whom we are living side by side, like Arabs, Assyrians, Syriacs, Chechens, Armenians, Turkmens, Azeris, Jews, Christians, Shiites... This has come to light and created a more positive image of the Kurdish freedom movement. That's one side.

On the other hand there is the disadvantage that strength is seen as only a question of arms. For example the women of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) are depicted as great heroes for fighting ISIS with their weapons. But what is the strength at stake here? Is self-defense only a question of arms? Or can we think of other forms of self-defense? Once ISIS and colonial oppression are defeated, once the fighting has come to an end, should we say that this women's struggle has also come to an end? This is exactly the point where the actual question begins. For the Kurdish freedom movement weapons are a means of self-defense, but self-defense does not only occur through weapons. In Europe, for example, people don't carry weapons in their hands and are nevertheless attacked in their midst — people blow themselves up in their metros. So you cannot only rely on the state to defend you.

This begs the question how society can defend itself mentally and ideologically, through organization and mental development. One of the most important methods through which a society can defend itself is the development of the concept of free coexistence. We recently saw one of the most interesting examples of this in Şengal. A woman from Şengal, for example, said that "only yesterday Arab Sunnis were our guests at dinner. And the next day they came and destroyed our house and kidnapped my daughter." This means that here, in this society, a free coexistence has not been developed. How did the Arab Sunnis look at Şengal, how did these people live together? We need to develop the concept of free coexistence to answer these questions.

So you are saying this free coexistence is a foundation for self-defense?

Yes, exactly. People have become isolated from each other, they don't assume any moral or social responsibilities for each other any more. Society has been broken up in the name of individuality. Through jineology, we want to develop the sensibility and responsibility for each other again.

In that sense the armed struggle is only the beginning of something else?

Yes. For example, only a small part of the education of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the YPJ and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) concerns the use of weaponry, perhaps around 20 or 25 percent. The rest is ideological, political education, personality development. Because the aim is not just to clear certain areas of ISIS through use of arms, but it is about establishing certain social relations.

For example, in the areas taken over by YPG/YPJ or SDF, the local people are encouraged to engage in agriculture and animal husbandry. There are regions where for seventy years the Assad regime didn't let people plant wheat. And those women carrying arms; there are many who are now involved in activities in Europe. So there is always the potential for something else, other than arms. These people can be a part of society, they can form an organization, engage in civil activities, educate society, run an academy. In the end, what is important is transformation at the level of mentality.

Within the Kurdish movement, the most important analytical tools seem to be gender and identity, that is, the Kurdish identity and the liberation of women. I wonder to what extent class is still a tool for analyzing social struggle?

If we look at the transformation of the Kurdish movement, we see that after the 1990s a number of fundamental changes took place. In the beginning, the Kurdish movement waged mainly a class struggle, founded upon Marxist-Leninist ideas. The main aspect of the paradigm change [in the 1990s] lies in the understanding of class struggle as founded upon the col-

onization of the mind. In classical Marxism, the idea is that class differences are the reason for oppression and for struggle. But Öcalan says that because oppression occurs in the mind, and because it is first and foremost an oppression of women, we first need to struggle against this oppression. If the foundational quality of the oppression of women is not understood, then no struggle can ever be successful.

We believe that as a first step we need to ask how mental oppression has been imposed. According to jineology, this oppression has been imposed in three ways: first, women were oppressed sexually and thereby objectified. Second, women became oppressed economically. And third, ideological transformations — such as mythology and religion — have contributed to this oppression.

With the help of jineology we seek to enter into the depths of history and search for the point where women were made to disappear, in order to do things differently. Many people ask why the symbol of jineology is a spindle. The spindle is an instrument that mothers created more than 10,000 years ago and that has survived to this day. We follow the spindle's thread throughout history, in order to research how women's resistance has evolved around this symbolic thread.

We can see that jineology is very closely related to the Kurdish struggle. But what is the importance of jineology for women here in Europe? Is jineology only something for Kurdish women or might it also be a source of inspiration for women elsewhere?

The way in which we conceive of jineology unfolds in two stages. The first has to do with introducing and informing people about jineology, and the second has to do with institutionalization. What our efforts on an international level during the last four, five years have shown is that jineology is not only for Kurdish women. Every place we went — in South and North America, in Europe, in Australia — at different panels, confer-