

Marwa Arsanios

Who's Afraid of Ideology? Ecofeminist Practices Between Internationalism and Globalism

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The Commons Meets NGOs

In a cooperative in Hermel, east of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, on the border with Syria, Khadija is running a workshop teaching Syrian women living in neighboring refugee camps how to preserve seasonal vegetables for the winter. She is cooking green fava beans on one side of the oven and tomato paste on the other. While explaining every step in the cooking process and the benefits of each vegetable, its type, origin, and local source, she pours the beans and the paste in a jar, closes it, and turns it upside down on the table. "That's how you keep the pressure in and avoid any air leaks." Every jar will serve as a meal for the family, with a portion of rice on the side. It's spring and the contents of these jars will be eaten next fall or winter. Buying fava in March is very cheap, since it's in season. "We are learning how to eat cheap and healthy," she says while stirring the tomato paste, which has been cooking on a low fire for the past thirty minutes. "Always buy seasonal vegetables and conserve them for the coming season. Each season has its vegetables and each vegetable has its preservation process."

I met Khadija in her cooperative, which consists of a three-room workshop and a big kitchen. It is surrounded by a plot of land that she inherited from her mother and turned into a food production cooperative, where she grows most of the crops and where women can gather, share knowledge, and learn from each other about food preservation, crop cultivation, seed preservation, and different ways of treating the soil. She has been running this cooperative for seven years, despite the local politics and the tensions with Hezbollah (the dominant party in the area), which often tries to make it difficult for her to continue with the cooperative. Meanwhile, she has continued to pursue her activities, producing seasonal jams and other food provisions that she sells to sustain the cooperative. Regarding the political tensions, she says to me: "Hezbollah could benefit from the fact that I am creating a micro-economy and transmit forgotten knowledge, but instead all they think about is how to have sole hegemonic power. They don't want any growth that is outside of their control." In fact, small independent organizations and cooperatives supported by international funders are usually left to do their work, unless it is believed that they oppose the dominant political power; the latter situation leads to clashes, tensions, and difficulties, such as indirectly pressuring the farmers to slow down their work or to stop it completely.

This cooperative is funded by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and has collaborated with different groups since 2013, especially humanitarian refugee



organizations. When Khadija was approached by USAID (as part of their program to fight hunger), she was already known for her skills and knowledge regarding the edible and medicinal wild plants she gathers. It is an old practice that many women carry on. Usually it is transmitted to them by their mothers or another elderly woman in the family.

Khadija opens a folder where she has gathered an extensive archive of dried wild edible weeds. She has a precise knowledge of the use and medical benefits of each plant. "This is precious knowledge from my mother. She was also a farmer and owned this piece of land that I inherited from her." After each workshop on cheap, healthy food and edible wild plants, the products are equally divided between the women to feed their families.

Since 2012, the flow of refugees from Syria has led about fifty international NGOs to set up camp in the Bekaa region. As the immediate crisis-solving apparatus, they settled in the area with the highest density of refugees. The few food cooperatives and NGOs run by women in the region became spaces where the transmission of knowledge happens. A few have begun to be used as support spaces for refugee women, in collaboration with humanitarian NGOs.

Before 2011 and the eruption of the Syrian revolution, these kind of initiatives (mostly funded by USAID and the EU) had found their place on the map of Lebanon's eco-conscious urban middle class. In urban areas they could sell produce to restaurants and directly to customers at farmer's markets. After 2011, many employed low-wage Syrian women, turning the cooperatives into fully-fledged businesses or transforming themselves into useful spaces for women from the camps – sometimes both.

The cooperative Khadija runs seems to want to reinforce the politics of the commons through the transmission of a knowledge that is embedded in a very specific geography and seasonal landscape. This knowledge of wild plants, often considered "bad herbs" in modern agricultural practice, is at the core of this cooperative.

What makes this construction of the commons possible in this case is in fact the global aid economy (USAID funding). The cooperative cannot fully sustain itself yet, since the food and herbs it produces doesn't bring in enough money.

Many nongovernmental women's organizations have emerged in the Arab world in the past twenty years, and even more since 2011 to deal with the refugees crisis, a lack of nutritional resources, domestic violence, and women's health issues. Though some do not present themselves as explicitly feminist, many

deal with women's issues or create spaces that specifically support women. Others more directly present themselves as feminist through research, discourse, and knowledge production. Often compensating for a lack of state structures, NGO structures work within the global economy and produce discourses that travel within and are shaped by this global economy. While many of these small initiatives adopt a language of "empowerment," "development," "economic independence," and "women's entrepreneurship," they also function within a very small locality, and their political struggle often becomes isolated in local politics. Gender essentialism – "women's empowerment" – overtakes any class or race discourses, which are at the core of internationalist feminist politics. "Global womanhood" becomes a category or a class in itself. Hunger is separated from class and from the failure of states to provide and distribute wealth equally. The main political aim becomes fighting hunger, without any reflection on what has caused this hunger – for example, the failure to subsidize farmers' material needs; the historical mismanagement of water distribution, which has led to drought in many areas; the overexploitation of underground water (like in the Bekaa valley); the distribution or subsidization of fertilizers for farmers, which over many years has damaged the soil; toxic waste polluting the water; and more generally the laws around property or land ownership, which favor the few at the expense of the many. NGOs do not address this mismanagement at the state level; instead, they try to compensate for it.

"Entrepreneurship" and "independence" become the ultimate goals of women's emancipation, privileging narratives of individual achievement (as in the case of Khadija's co-op); rather than demanding redress from the state for its failure, individuals are expected to bear the responsibility building structures to make up for where the state has failed. Terms like "empowerment" are used to describe these projects, which really only emphasize "powerlessness" and corner women into a narrative of victimhood. The mission of NGOs is then to intervene in order to empower the victim and "save her," without taking into consideration the existing and historical collective support networks among women – especially among women farmers; this ill-considered intervention often risks breaking up these networks in order to single out individuals and support them. These nongovernmental structures, functioning within the global capitalist economy, produce an apolitical managerial discourse that risks erasing the existing struggles of feminists.

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Marwa Arsanios, *Who is Afraid of Ideology 1*, 2017. Film still

In 2008, as the price of cereals doubled across the world leading to hunger riots in Egypt (April 2008), Syria's policy of food self-sufficiency pursued since the Ba'athist revolution of 1963 appeared vindicated. Syria had the most thriving agriculture of the Middle East. It was highly subsidized and accounted for up to one third of the Gross Domestic Product and employing up to a third of the working population. It enabled almost half of the nation's inhabitants to stay in the countryside, especially in the North East of the country, the Jazira, which is the source of two thirds of cereal and cotton production, partly thanks to irrigated zones developed as part of the State Euphrates Project. However, this achievement was in question after three consecutive dry years (2008–2010), in which Syria had to receive international food aid for nearly one million persons, its emergency cereals reserves were exhausted and tens of thousands of peasants fled to main city suburbs in search of informal work. Its agricultural work force may have dropped from 1.4 million to 800,000 workers in this period. Some believe this is also linked to the dismantlement of Syria's socialist agriculture.

– Myriam Ababsa, "Agrarian Counter-Reform in Syria (2000–2010)"¹

One immediate trigger of the 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world was the increase in the price of bread and other nutritional basics due to the failure of self-sufficient agricultural production. Movements, whether grassroots or opposition parties (such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt), were met with repressive state violence, and in the case of Syria this has led to the ongoing war, the displacement of about six million people, the killing of half a million, thousands of rapes and abuses against women, disappearances, torture and unaccounted deaths in the regime's prisons, the use of chemical weapons by the regime – all this without having a clear account of the consequences of this violence in the domestic sphere, and without having a clear account of the damage and violence inflicted upon animals, trees, plants, water, and the land. The demands of the uprisings, from very basic food and economic needs to human rights, have been met with brutal crackdowns. States reacted to their own collapse with violent repression. (The one exception might be Tunisia, where certain laws

that used to enshrine gender inequality have been abolished.)

The lack of capacity to produce cereal and to meet the demand for bread was one of the factors that finally cracked the repressive regimes' system of control. In the case of Syria, this lack was partly due to the slow dismantling of socialist agriculture and to the ensuing liberalization process, most apparent after the reforms of the 2000s. Could we talk about a failure of the agrarian revolution's ideal of self-sufficiency? We can certainly talk about a failure of the whole ideological apparatus that brought about the agrarian revolution, with its industrialized monoculture. Perhaps we can talk about the failure of the myth that monoculture will resolve the problem of hunger. Within the ecology of uprisings, the question of agriculture and the dismantling of the socialist agrarian revolution was at the core of the ideological failures of the repressive regimes. The anti-hunger program that Khadija's cooperative is part of comes in the wake of this slow dismantling of the self-sufficiency ideal.

On the one hand there is a broad network of women's NGOs spread across the region, which are dealing with the immediate consequences of the refugee crisis. On the other hand we have witnessed the emergence, in the Kurdish area of northern Syria, of a feminist and ecological agenda that is nonetheless in a precarious situation, since it depends on an alliance with Washington, which allied with the Kurdish forces in order to fight ISIS. Though we should not necessarily compare the Kurdish struggle to the rest of the Arab uprisings – since the Kurdish autonomous women's movement has been organizing for forty years – new potential was given to this movement by the Syrian regime's loss of full control and by the 2011 revolts. The Kurdish experiment in autonomous governance (a bottom-up democratic confederalism) might have to shift from its current form, as the Syrian regime is unlikely to accept a regional fully autonomous government. But what is certain is that it has already established and institutionalized a feminist and ecological popular movement.

Perhaps the already established agricultural cooperatives and ecofeminist projects will be able to tackle the failures of the agrarian revolution, poised as they are to renew the ideal of self-sufficiency.

No-State Solution, Autonomy, and NGOs

Pelshin is a guerilla fighter. We set up a meeting with her in one of the women's houses in Sulaymanyah, Iraqi Kurdistan. She happened to be in the city because she was undergoing a foot operation. She was walking with crutches but

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remained surprisingly nimble, moving alongside me at a normal pace and climbing stairs without help. We sat with her for about five hours, first discussing a text she wrote about ecology during wartime, and then conversing freely for the rest of the time. I was trying to understand how the ecological paradigm is practiced in the communal life of the guerillas, how it is inseparable from the feminist paradigm and the gender struggle, how all these paradigms were made possible structurally through different organizations and committees, through the production and transmission of knowledge, and through the relation between this knowledge and praxis.

Pelshin:

There is a contradiction between ecology and war. When I joined the guerrillas twenty-four years ago, I entered a war atmosphere. The conditions were such that you sometimes needed to cut parts of trees, to have something to lie down on or to protect yourself from animals.

The understanding of ecology in the women's movement was strongly influenced by these kind of experiences and contradictions. Our ecological consciousness within the movement evolved within our communal life in these conditions of war.

There's always a strong parallel between the massacre of nature and that of women. We, the women's movement, had to protect our existence.

I was in the mountains of Dersim for three years, where there are a lot of mountain goats. We were hungry many times during those three years, but only once did we kill goats for food. That is a rule of the guerilla.

I want to point out something about my personal experience. I remember my childhood. My first ecological teacher was my mother. She taught me that we as humans have a place in nature, like trees and birds. I have the right to exist, like all other species in the same place. You shouldn't hurt the earth, you should protect it. Don't kill trees, don't kill animals. But we are the children of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so it took a long time for this philosophy to reach us. But these things transmitted by my mother are the signs of this old philosophy.

Pelshin is one of the ideologues of the women's movement. She serves on multiple committees; one of them is the *jineology* committee (Kurdish for "the study of women"), which is a project to rewrite the history of science from the perspective of women. The committee also publishes a quarterly journal, *Jineology*. Thinking of different paradigms of the communal life within the party and the relationship between knowledge, ideas, and practice, Pelshin presents us with so many

contradictory ideas and situations from guerilla life. How to inhabit these contradictions? In the case of the autonomous women's movement, the conditions of existence are in complete contradiction with the ecological paradigm, due to the war situation. But the ecological paradigm itself and the way it is practiced were born from the guerillas' communal situation and their life in the mountains.

The gender struggle within the Kurdish guerilla movement began forty years ago. Since then the women's units have built a solid autonomous structure on an ecofeminist and socialist foundations, following the "cutoff theory," which calls for the establishment of all-female units separate from male units, in order to build an independent female structure and leadership. The Kurdish movement has been influenced by Murray Bookchin's concept of social ecology, which proposes that the world's ecological problems stem from social problems, which themselves arise from structures and relationships of domination and hierarchy. At the core of this internationalist movement is the concept of self-defense (with an ecological bent).

On the subject of self-defense – the core concept of the women's movement – I interviewed Dilar Dirik over Skype. Dilar is a member of the Kurdish women's movement. She spoke to me from her apartment in Cambridge, where she is now finishing up her doctoral thesis on the movement.

Dilar:

Self-defense actually comes from nature itself. It is something that is very organic. Every existence, whether human or not, relies on a means of protecting itself. In the human context it cannot just be in the sense of the army or states or police and so on. Rather, we must think of collective ways of protecting ourselves, because in a world in which indigenous cultures are being eradicated, in which women are being subjected to modern-day sex slavery, rape culture, domestic violence, and so on, it is simply not an option to not think about how we can defend ourselves. In liberalism, in liberal thought and philosophy in general, the expectation is that people should surrender the means of protection to the state. The state should have a monopoly on the use of force. The assumption is that you as an individual member of society should not have the agency to act because the state should decide on your behalf what is dangerous to your existence.

Look at the universe itself, how ecologies work, how environments work, how beings and existences interact with each other. They do not necessarily do so according to the social Darwinist concept of competition and survival of the fittest. Ecology is always based on

interaction, on mutualism – on cooperation, if we want to use human terms. We need to understand ourselves as part of nature, but with the acknowledgment of course that the capitalist system has made us alienated from nature. In the case of the Kurds, for example, the mountains have historically always been a very strong protector of people who have been persecuted. In 2014, when ISIS attacked the Yazidis, the first thing that they did was to flee to the mountains. Landscapes, natural geographies, and water have always been sites of protection for people. This is not because nature is there to serve humans, but rather because humans are part of nature. Until the creation of states, big cities, and especially capitalism and industrialism, people understood how to live together with nature. I know this from my own grandparents' village. They have a very different relationship to the animals they raise. They sing songs to the mountains, not about the mountains. I think many different cultures, especially indigenous people, have this kind of relationship with nature, which is very much a comradeship. For the Kurds and other groups who have always understood themselves in relation to a specific geography, who have never been part of a dominant state, and who have in many ways very local ways of organizing their lives, relying on geography to survive, the relationship to nature is like a friendship rather than an alliance.

Destroying nature is part of a policy of assimilation on the part of the dominant nation-states. The less people are aware of their link with nature, the more likely they are to become liberal individuals, with loyalty only to the state. So the more we are connected to nature through geography, the more likely we are to be conscious of ourselves, be conscious of our place in the universe, our place in ecology in general. The state is actively trying to destroy that because the state is very well aware of the connection between humans and nature. The state knows that in order for it to be legitimized and justified, it needs to break this link between humans and nature.

It is important here to think about the ways in which nongovernmental organizations can learn from the autonomous women's movement, whose politics go far beyond liberal pacifist feminism. As Dilar states in her article "Feminist Pacifism or Passiv-ism?": "Liberal feminists' blanket rejection of women's violence, no matter the objective, fails to qualitatively distinguish between statist, colonialist, imperialist, interventionist militarism and necessary, legitimate self-defense."² Could nongovernmental organizations, which often emphasize individualistic achievement, learn from the collectivist principles of the autonomous women's movement and resituate

the struggle in a collective and historical context? Instead of talking about "independence" as a goal, could we think about "interdependence"? Within a neoliberal global economy, discourses on "empowerment" replace discourses on "emancipation." Rights are emphasized over demands. Self-defense becomes a legal issue that is handed over to the state.

The agricultural cooperatives that are being implemented by the autonomous women's movement specifically in Northern Syria also come as a response to years of state agricultural policies that tried to break the ties between farmers and the land through strict agricultural and land laws. The purpose of the cooperatives is now to repair this damage through the collective work that a cooperative demands.

Land, Communes, Cooperatives, and Self-Sufficiency

In between wheat fields a small village is being built up. The houses are made of mud in the traditional and most sustainable way, just as they have been built here in the region for thousands of years. The newly planted garden makes a change in the landscape; little fruit trees, olive trees, tomato plants, cucumber, watermelon, paprika, aubergine and a lot of wildly growing portulac all around, needing just a little water and earth to grow. The village is called Jinwar, and it is a women's village.

With the planting of the communal garden the women are aiming to create a base of self-sufficiency for the village, but also to maintain the connection to the earth and food. In an area of quasi-desert and wheat mono-culture, being the result of the Syrian regime's policy to industrialize agriculture since the 1970s. It will change the territory, revive the ground and create an example of how a commune can live and work with the land in a sustainable way.³

This is how a women's commune that is being built in the north of Syria describes itself. It is one of the ecofeminist projects of the autonomous women's movement, striving to create self-sufficient agricultural production for the village but also trying to repair the land after a history of industrialized wheat monoculture and drought. At the same time, the members of the commune are repairing themselves, their relationship to the earth, creating an intimacy with the land. This intimacy encompasses different dynamics and affective relations

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between humans, nonhumans, and matter.

The commune is built on state-owned land that was taken over by the autonomous government after the Syrian regime's forces were pushed out of the north. Eventually, thirty houses will be built on the land, inhabited mostly by widowed women with their children, and other women who want to live away from traditional domestic life. Most of the state-owned land was turned into agricultural cooperatives, some of which are women-only. The cooperatives are run by the farmers themselves, with technical supervision from the autonomous government's agricultural department. In this area of the country – the Jazira region – the Ba'athist regime had established state farms and cooperatives in the late 1960s. They were run by representatives who strongly supported the regime, and the cooperatives functioned as a control mechanism for propagating Ba'athist ideology. In addition, the Ba'athist regime paid the farmers a paltry monthly salary for their labor, and this intentional impoverishment was a way for the regime to maintain control over the different ethnic groups living in the area. Today, almost all of the territory formerly occupied by these state-owned farms has been taken over by the autonomous Kurdish government. There are now about fifty-eight cooperatives spread all over the region, which have helped make the region agriculturally self-sustaining for the past seven years.

It remains to be seen how many of the ecofeminist projects spearheaded by the Kurdish women's movement will survive this tumultuous period, as the autonomous region begins to negotiate with the Syrian regime over territory and resources (oil), and as reconstruction deals are made in the wake of major fighting. For all the power and success of these projects, a crucial question must be asked: Are we falling back into a gendered division of labor, where women are placed in the role of caretakers?

At a conference on “decolonial practices” held at the Akademie der Kunst in Berlin this summer, Françoise Vergès said:

Women are often put in the position of cleaning and caring for what is broken. There are fifty-three million domestic workers in the world who are cleaning the city for the white middle class ... We must think about waste and the production of waste as a capitalist mode of production. Women are now expected to clean and care for what has been broken in the earth, for the damage that has been done to the earth, to the land. But before rushing and doing the naturalized work of “repair” and care, let's take a moment to think about

how it was broken, why it was broken, and by whom.⁴

All the projects I have discussed – from the NGOs working within the constraints of the international aid economy to the ecofeminist projects of the autonomous women's movement – are necessary alternatives. But they can only exist in a more sustainable manner if the question of responsibility is articulated: Who has inflicted the damage?

The Syrian regime has pointed to drought and climate change, rather than their own crimes and corruption, as reasons for the uprisings that began in 2011. In this way, the regime has used ecological concerns to cover up its own repressive violence and intentional mismanagement of resources. In an interview with a Russian TV channel in 2016, Asma al-Assad talked about the 2008–11 drought as one of the worst in the history of the modern Syrian state and as the main reason for what she called the “crisis.”

The response to this should not be to dismiss climate change and drought as factors in the uprisings, but rather to insist that the regime should bear the responsibility for the drought – another one of its many crimes. Only then can the ecofeminist work of repair and growth begin to bear fruit.

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Unless otherwise noted, stills are from Marwa Arsanio's video *Who is Afraid of Ideology 2* (2018). All images courtesy of the author.

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1

In *Agriculture and Reform in Syria*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch (University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2011), 83.

2

Dilar Dirik, "Feminist Pacifism or Passiv-ism?" *Open Democracy*, March 7, 2017
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3

See
<https://internationalistcommune.com/jinwar/>.

4

Françoise Vergès, comments made during panel discussion at "Colonial Repercussions" conference, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, June 23–24, 2018
<https://www.adk.de/en/projects/2018/colonial-repercussions/symposium-III/programme/index.htm>.

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