Transforming the statist domination of society: radical democracy in Mexico and Kurdistan

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews, email exchanges, and archival research, I examine how the radically democratic societies of Cherán, Mexico and Mexmûr, Kurdistan are transforming the statist domination of life. In this paper, I contend that Cherán and Mexmûr are transforming the statist domination of society above all through practices of women's liberation, ecology and stateless democracy, along differing structural paths. Further, the communal subject emerges as key in the transformation process.

Keywords: radical, democracy, statist, domination, transformation, Mexico, Kurdistan, women, liberation, ecology

Introduction

There is no shortage of academic output on so-called alternative, autonomous societies, places across the globe that are rejecting and resisting statist domination. Yet we lack constructive accounts of experiences from the 21st century which could and should act as inspiration for our own aspirations of societal transformation. This paper thus starts from that gap to explore how radically democratic societies are practically transforming statist domination and building alternatives, building on the experiences of the towns of Cherán, Mexico and Mexmûr, Kurdistan. Drawing on thematic analysis, I analyse participant exchanges and archives in Cherán and Mexmûr. Building on Grubacic and Dirik, I argue that Cherán and Mexmûr are transforming the statist domination of society along divergent structural paths above all through practices of women's liberation, ecology and stateless democracy; and that the emergence of a communal subject is a key element in the transformation process.

The seeds of this paper were planted years ago, during travels across Bakur (Northern Kurdistan), where I was first exposed to the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM). This personal experience sparked an interest in other movements proposing and living out alternatives to the devastation and oppression of the capitalist system; places where 'people display the desire and political will to govern themselves' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 2). The paper provides insights into the experiential side of the struggle to build an alternative society, with all its challenges. Exploring these dynamics through data collection in two somewhat overlooked examples brings valuable empirical data into the theoretical realm of radical democracy. The underlying vision aims to acknowledge those movements building alternatives to the hegemonic statist, capitalist paradigm in different corners of the globe: as such, the research is

carried out in a critically constructive mode of solidarity with the societies explored. This research is motivated by the belief that another world is both possible and urgently needed.

The paper starts with an exploration of the academic literature on radical democracy and statist domination, followed by the rationale behind the case study selection. Participant exchanges are then presented around three main themes of hierarchy transformation. Thirdly, there is an exploration of the divergent structural paths to radical democracy across the two sites, before presenting the common element at the heart of the transformations as the communal taking precedence over the individual.

From statist domination to radical democracy

Statist domination

The critique of the nation-state as a dominant, hegemonic force is found across accounts of scholars researching alternatives for society, from Holloway (2010) to Grubacic (2010) and Öcalan (2020). Dupuis-Déri (2016) presents an analysis of 'the state itself a system of domination', whilst bemoaning the lack of literature concerned with said topic. In reality, there is a growing awareness and body of scholarship around the idea of 'statist domination' (Barrera, 2021: 216), in other words the 'monopolisation' of the nation-state's 'ideological vision' which 'pervades all areas of the society' (Komar, 2012) and eliminates the possibility of imagining alternative ways of organising life and relating to one another. Escobar (2022: xxviii) refers to the 'ontological occupation' of our lives and thoughts by the 'discourses, structures and practices' of the state and capital. Öcalan takes this idea further to argue that the state embodies 'the maximum form of power', acting as the 'common denominator of all monopolies' with its 'ability to unite all these monopolies within itself in a cohesive way' (2019: 209-213).

Indeed, the intrinsic links between the state's domination and other forms of domination in society are underlined by Bookchin, who denounces the 'domination of humans over humans' at the root of the 'domination of humans over nature' in his paradigm of social ecology' (Hammy and Miley, 2022); whilst Öcalan links the 'rise of hierarchical and statist power within society' to 'women's enslavement' (Güneşer, 2021). If these hierarchies are connected to each other and enabled by a wider logic of domination, they cannot be fixed in isolation or through incremental reforms, but require a deep uprooting within society - and the development of viable alternatives.

Indeed, key sites in which radical, antisystemic alternatives are being constructed across the world today are increasingly rejecting the state as a potential agent of change in society, as noted by Wallerstein (1996). Such perspectives allow for the state itself to become an object of critique, comprehending the need to move beyond statist structures which reproduce domination, monopoly and hierarchy (Komar, 2012). Whilst the Marxists of the 19th and 20th centuries famously 'failed to liberate' the question of the nation-state's domination of society (Öcalan, 2020: 208), leading to disastrous consequences in places like the USSR

and China (ibid: 194), the shift in focus towards civil society as the main site of democratic struggle and transformation rather than the state is becoming increasingly evident, as observed in Oaxaca (Raghu, 2022); Greece (Haworth and Roussos, 2022); and Cherán and Kurdistan (Colin and Cicek, 2023).

Öcalan describes how the drive towards a top-down imposition of 'national unity' by the state implies the forceful assimilation and destruction of all diversity and dissent from the status quo (2019: 213). However, the overt 'state domination from above' is but one of the faces of statist 'influence, invasion, and colonisation' which also reach the 'most hidden nooks and crannies' of society (ibid: 351). This paper aims to explore the transformation of these 'nooks and crannies' in two sites resisting statist domination in the realm of daily practice; the following section is dedicated to contextualising the dynamics of transformation, in a radically democratic direction, in the literature. For the sake of efficiency from now on the term 'statist domination' will be employed as shorthand for all forms of hierarchical, hegemonic monopolies imposed on society.

Radically democratic transformation

One proposed term to describe the shifting, porous approaches to building alternative societies which transform themselves and surrounding dynamics of domination is radical democracy. Rising to prominence in the late 1970s as the 'main alternative' to liberal democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 2) radical democracy is in some ways an 'umbrella term' for democratic perspectives which work towards a 'deepening' of 'freedom and equality' (Asenbaum, 2021: 101) and go far 'beyond representation' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 255). The 'most well-known' (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 3) attempt at radicalising democracy comes from Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 167) who proposed a 'project for a radical and plural democracy' which provided the left with 'a new imaginary' (Mouffe and Holdengräber, 1989: 32). The 'radical' element refers to the development of the concept of democracy 'beyond' the state as emphasised in Akkaya and Jongerden (2012), recognising the incompatibility of state and democracy. Indeed the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist, national liberationist paradigm embodied by the splintering of the Soviet Union led to profound soul-searching amongst movements like the KFM, which eventually abandoned their separatist, state-socialist convictions to develop radical alternatives in opposition to the state itself. This historical process enabled such realities as Rojava, the radically democratic 'Bookchin-inspired' experiment (Ahmed, 2015).

Radical democracy in the literature comprises (but is not reducible to) the following elements: the development of democracy beyond the hegemonic nation-state (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012), expressed through directly democratic bodies such as councils or assemblies; the liberation of women, the 'oldest colony' (Güneşer, 2021); organising through bottom-up structures; and a tendency towards prefiguration or 'performativity practices for other worlds' carried out in the here and now (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

In order to understand the dynamics underlying the transformation of statist domination in a radically democratic direction, we must consider those peoples and places where the tradition of rejecting this status quo and developing alternatives persists. In Indigenous thought, for example, the state has never been considered 'a tool for emancipation' (Dinerstein, 2015: 12) as in the real socialist tradition, whilst an acute perception of autonomy as an ancestral capacity to be protected and defended prevails (Raghu, 2022). It is important to recognise the role played in the search for democracy outside of the state by those peoples who have always positioned themselves outside of, and in opposition to, statist paradigms: Dirik (2022a) highlights the employment of radically democratic citizenship as consciousness-raising in Kurdistan, whilst Aragón-Andrade (2017: 15) describes the 'de-commodification, de-professionalisation, de-patriarchalisation and decolonisation of democracy' led by Mexico's Indigenous peoples.

Further, if state domination pervades even the most intimate spaces, so the 'inner revolution of democratic subjectivity' is a fundamental element of transformation in a radically democratic direction (Asenbaum, 2021). Breaugh and Caivano (2022: 463) highlight 'the emergence of emancipatory political subjects' as 'central' in locating 'forms of domination' in order to achieve a 'deepening of freedom, equality and solidarity.' The vacuum left behind by the rejection of the nation-state as a potential agent of change (Wallerstein, 1996) leaves an open question as to the nature of the new key political subject-agent - whether individual or collective.

Radical democracy appears as 'a never-ending process' rather than 'simply an end-goal or the promise of a perfect democratic society' (Breaugh and Caivano, 2022: 450). However, the literature on radically democratic transformation fails to provide accounts of these experiences in practical, replicable ways. As such, this paper starts from these very questions to enable an investigation of radically democratic societies as they practically transform statist domination and build alternatives.

The 'Mother' of Kurdish democratic autonomy and the Mexican defenders of life: case selection

Across accounts of empirical examples of radical democracy, references to Kurdistan and Mexico are ubiquitous. Compelling sites for researchers of radical democracy in autonomous societies, they respectively host 'the two most prominent examples of prefigurative politics in the world' (Escobar, 2022: xxiii) and embody the 'indigenous stateless democracy, autonomous self-government, ecological and communal economy, and women's leadership' outlined as key elements of radical democracy (Piccardi, 2022: 161).

The history of Kurdistan is often narrated from a statist perspective as the story of a people whose hopes of obtaining a country were 'dashed' (Bajalan, 2020), resulting in a century of oppression between four occupying governments: Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Whilst Kurdish uprisings have taken place

throughout history, the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978 marked an 'awakening' of Kurdish identity (Barkey, 2019). Radically democratic tradition in Kurdistan is overwhelmingly led by the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), the 'wider social movement' coalescing around 'the political vision of imprisoned leader' Öcalan and the 'democratic, ecological and women's liberationist paradigm,' also known as the 'freedom paradigm' (Dirik, 2022a: 28-31). Rooted in a shift away from Marxist-Leninist thought towards 'democratic confederalism,' heavily influenced by Bookchin (Graeber, 2014), the KFM today is a 'societal organisation' aiming to create 'an alternative to the nation-state' through bottom-up organising (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 8). The KFM has attempted to put democratic autonomy into practice across Kurdistan since 2005, most prominently in Rojava from 2012 onwards.

Almost 17 million of Mexico's population are Indigenous (IWGIA, 2022), with the majority living in the south. A policy of 'internal colonialism' comparable to that of colonial governments in Africa has been carried out in Mexico's Indigenous regions (Hernández Castillo, 2006) from the 1930s on, whilst inclusion in the Mexican nation-state meant 'adherence to a single national identity that was decidedly non-indigenous.' Indigenous Mexican struggles are more diverse and disparate than the largely unified movement in Kurdistan, although most accounts relate the pivotal Zapatista uprising of 1994 as responsible for a dramatic shift in Indigenous political consciousness across Mexico, ushering in a 'new phase of struggle' (Hernández Castillo, 2006). Undoubtedly, the Zapatistas play a vital role in inspiring Indigenous democratic movements across Mexico: from the injection of energy into Mexico's 'forgotten' Indigenous population (Gottesdiener, 2014), to the adoption of the slogan of 'mandar obedeciendo' ('leading by obeying') (Esteva, 2007: 80), the movement maintains an active impulse striving for real autonomy which influences struggles across Mexico and beyond.

A vast majority of the literature on radical democracy in Kurdistan and Mexico focuses on the two most famous examples of alternative society-building there: respectively, the Rojava Revolution and the Zapatista uprising. The focus here is on expanding academic horizons to consider two other cases of radical democracy in the regions which provide unique understandings to the transformation of statist hierarchies in radically democratic society. These are Cherán (Michoacán), Mexico and Mexmûr, (Iraqi) Kurdistan. These lesser-studied examples - whether out of academic neglect or a protective desire to conceal themselves (Graeber, 2004) - will allow for an exploration of transforming societies getting on with life away from the spotlight.

Cherán

Cherán, located in the central Mexican state of Michoacán, is the only municipality in the country inhabited predominantly by the Indigenous P'urhépecha people (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016). In 2008, Cherán, with a population just short of 21,000 (Data México, 2020), saw

organised criminal gangs destroy forests, completely overrun the town and take more than 20 lives - with no reaction from the authorities (Gasparello, 2018). The situation worsened until citizens took to the streets in 2011, kicking out the cartels and the municipal employees and beginning their experience of self-government (Wolfesberger, 2019). Cherán's uprising has played a crucial role in the 'revindication of indigeneity' and autonomy in Mexico in recent decades (Gasparello, 2018: 99), embodying a popular, local grassroots attempt to defend land and life and winning a broad support base across Mexican society (Gasparello, 2018).

Mexmûr

To the south of Kurdish-inhabited lands lies Mexmûr (also Makhmour, Makhmur), a once 'desolate town' 60 km from Erbil, located in territory contested between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi government (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 6). Kurds fleeing 'state violence north of the border in Turkey' settled in a camp next door to the town of Mexmûr in 1998. The camp's population stood at around 12,000 in 2022 (Küçükkeleş, 2022), officially considered refugees under the UNHCR's authority. Since July 2019, Mexmûris have had their movements restricted by Iraqi federal forces and suffered under Turkish airstrikes, resulting in a 'dire humanitarian situation' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 9). Yet the inhabitants reject any victimhood, instead presenting their camp as an 'autonomous alternative to the nation-state system' (Dirik, 2022b: 160). Indeed, the celebrated model of Democratic Autonomy in Rojava was developed years earlier in Mexmûr as 'the first site' of experimentation in democratic autonomy for KFM; representing the 'mother' of Kurdish radical democracy (Casagrande, 2018) which embodies a key step 'towards non-state politics' and a 'new political consciousness' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 9).

Cherán and Mexmûr as 'marginalised' sites have suffered 'the most severe damage to nature and culture' caused and exacerbated by 'modernity' and the state (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 167). The broader environment in Kurdistan and Mexico represent sites of collapse for nation-states and oppression for the inhabitants of their lands: dystopias rendered material. These 'worst hit' populations are those creating the most promising 'contemporary initiatives for radical democracy' (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 167) from the 'cracks in the neoliberal edifice' (Breaugh and Caivano, 2022: 450).

Methods

This paper draws on interviews, email exchanges, and audio and video archives in order to investigate how the statist domination of society is transformed in the case studies. I received ethical approval from the University of York for the investigation. I first used my own contacts in Cherán and Mexmûr to recruit participants, employing snowball sampling to reach a wider range of people. I then carried out interviews and email exchanges with the recruited members of Cherán and Mexmûr, in the form of semi-structured individual conversations. I additionally looked at the "Memoria Viva" archives of women's collective Fogata Kejtsitani in Cherán, as well as several publicly accessible videos from YouTube channels connected to Cherán and Mexmûr, to enrich the data set. Next, I used thematic analysis to explore the key elements and contrasts in the data. I focused on collecting data from the case studies based on exchanges, archival interviews and videos, emphasising participants' own explanations and interpretations of the transformative dynamics of their societies. Thus my aim was not to 'demonstrate a majority sentiment' (Dirik, 2022a: 30) but rather to 'develop a greater understanding of subjective realities' (Sköld, 2019: 294).

I personally have been generously hosted in communities connected with struggles in Mexico and the KFM. As an advocate for the development of societies centred around a democratic, free, and communal life, I wish to do research in solidarity with those creating such models. This does not imply turning a blind eye to challenges and contradictions, but employing a constructively critical approach. I am not interested in unearthing hidden tensions in Cherán and Mexmûr, nor do I wish to become another of the 'miners engaged in the extraction of a precious resource' (Gorman, 2024) in which people and communities 'studied' in social sciences are expected to give up their time, share information and facilitate subsequent exchanges, for no obvious benefit to themselves. The western academic figure suggests legitimacy; this position is one of privilege and power, however much we try to distance ourselves from the colonialist paradigm, and as such carries a profound responsibility. I am inspired by research which contributes to grassroots movements and their agency, such as Steven Sherwood with EkoRural in Ecuador which 'enables impoverished people to analyze the roots of their problems and find lasting solutions' (EkoRural, 2025). I have tried to incorporate principles such as accountability to the case study communities and an informed ethics of care from "Designing Anti-Extractivist Research" (Gorman, 2024).

Transforming the statist domination of society

This section outlines the findings of the study, exploring how Cherán and Mexmûr have transformed the statist domination of society in a radically democratic direction. Whilst each of the hierarchical dynamics transformed in our case studies has its own history as a system of domination, they are linked to each other and enabled by broader statist logic. Through conversations with participants, certain dynamics of domination emerged as key in societal

transformation: the 'liberation of women from masculine domination', 'liberation of nature from capitalism' and 'liberation of democracy from the state' were given priority, echoing Grubacic's (2019: 1074) analysis; although elements such as morality, education, justice and health also came up often. We will now explore how our case studies have transformed these three dynamics of domination in a radically democratic direction. A caveat: participants generally referred to 'our' way of doing things, or referenced Democratic Confederalism in Mexmûr, rather than using the term 'radical democracy.' I follow Dirik (2022a) and Komun Academy (2018) in interpreting the concept of democracy in the KFM's ideology as radical. Cherán and Mexmûr certainly demonstrate attempts to implement features of radical democracy, but the concept should be understood functionally, as a means of identifying and exploring the similarities and divergences of societies rejecting the dominant paradigm, and not as a dogmatic, fixed idea.

Women, ideological bearers

The uprooting of patriarchal dominance across material, cultural and psychological realms emerged as a key transformation, most prominently in Mexmûr. Women's freedom is one of three fundamental pillars of society in Öcalan's *Democratic Confederalist* paradigm which Mexmûri society strives to embody, with Öcalan describing women as the 'oldest colony' (Al-Ali and Kaser, 2020: 227), and patriarchy the most deeply-rooted hierarchy in society. Women in Mexmûr rejected liberal ideas of representation as constituting transformation: Arjin from the *Akademiya Jin* (women's academy) highlighted how in Europe, women 'working because they have to' is considered progress, whereas in Mexmûri society women emphasise working with 'passion' for things they believe in - not out of obligation or in servitude to bosses - as true liberation. Organisationally, Mexmûr follows a paradigm of women's autonomy. All women involved in the town's structures are linked to the women-only *Ishtar Council,* independent from the (mixed gender) general people's council, which deals exclusively with problems 'with women, between women, from men to women,' explained Sara from the municipal council The *Akademiya Jin,* open to all women for education according to their needs, emphasises 'empower[ing] men and women on how to create a democratic family' and 'live together equally,' according to Arjin. Finally, the *Jineolojî* Committee researches the history, culture and morals of women obscured by male domination throughout '5000 years' and educates wider society.

By enforcing mixed-gender shared leadership and ensuring that women's affairs are dealt with by women, Mexmûr has taken clear, practical steps to prioritise women's perspective in their democratic system. This embodies Phillips' (1991) interpretation of the rewriting of gender into democracy as an essential part of overturning the patriarchal system, in contrast to Mouffe's (1992) vision in which in order to truly liberate women, gender should be entirely erased from democratic systems. Arjin observed how men from outside Mexmûr 'respect the Mexmûri women but treat their own very badly, they see that the women here

command respect' and have 'freedom and power,' a testament to their uprooting of the patriarchy dominating surrounding societies.

In Cherán, women's decisive role in the uprising which facilitated societal transformation has meant that they are increasingly valued in society. Interviews from the "Mujeres por la Memoria" archives, explicitly concentrated on regular Cherani women's perspectives, remarked on the 'great change': 'in order to carry out any activity in the community, women's voices and opinions are now taken into account.' Women now '<u>have</u> to be part of the Council' of 10 Elders, the maximum decisional authority in Cherán elected by direct assembly every 3 years according to Ángela, thus cementing women's role in decision-making. The Mujeres por la Memoria collective represents another important autonomous site for women to record their experiences. A discussion around women working in spaces previously considered to be exclusively male realms, such as the *Ronda Comunitaria* (community defence unit) or the tree nurseries, brought up a critique of the idea of 'men's jobs.' Cherani women like Ángela are deeply aware that 'in principle, women have always been helping in the fields' and are working to reclaim past narratives and present areas of society obscured by the patriarchy.

The most notable parallel across the transformation of patriarchal hegemony in Cherán and Mexmûr is ideological. Ángela emphasised how women in Cherán 'have this task of ensuring that in the family we continue with the project, and to make sure our children understand why things such as this struggle arise,' placing the burden of the ideological preservation of the movement through the next generations onto women's shoulders. Ángela stressed women's ideological responsibility as 'something that you [as a woman] are defending, that you are valuing, that you are taking care of…' In Mexmûr, Ronahî from the *Wexfa Jin* (women's foundation) stressed that women feel responsible not only for their own liberation, but 'freedom for women in Afghanistan, and around the world,' such is their role as ideological bearers. Indeed, Mexmûri women dominate the building of a new culture, in contrast with mainstream society in which, according to Zozan from the cultural centre, 'men make culture' and 'women stay at home.' Mexmûri women generally don't work outside the camp, whilst men out of necessity seek jobs in Mosul or Baghdad; women thus have more time to further themselves in ideological education and the building of a 'women's cultural movement or a culture for freedom' which contributes to wider women's liberation in Mexmûr, according to Zozan.

In both cases, this represents a transformation of the patriarchal monopoly on cultural and ideological production and an opportunity for society to transform further in a direction led by the women tasked with this responsibility. The trend of women either positioning themselves explicitly or naturally adopting the role of ideological bearer reflects literature on women's liberation in radical democracy, for example Habersang's (2022) work on the Argentinian *Buen Vivir* movement in which women are 'knowledge-providers' who 'prefigure alternative futures.' In both sites, increasing women's participation and consideration of women's voices and opinions are present. Yet the more profound transformation is embodied in women's quest to unearth their own histories, rediscover their

contributions to society, and lead the ideological struggle for freedom; societies across the globe could benefit from such a perspective on women's liberation as an alternative to representative liberal policy.

'Asking the forest's permission'

As Bookchin demonstrates how statist, capitalist hegemonies are directly linked to the ecological crisis (Brincat and Gerber, 2018), so Cherán and Mexmûr are working to transform the human-led domination and exploitation of the natural sphere. This dynamic is particularly notable in Cherán: the impetus for the 2011 uprising which led to the transformation of Cherani society came from attacks not on people, but the town's forests and water sources. 'All water is sacred to us but this water is sacred to our community' commented Guadalupe in a video archive. The town is considered an 'example' of what communitarian organising can achieve in the face of the colonisation of nature (Avispa, 2024). Cherán's ecological position has roots in the beliefs of the Indigenous P'urhépecha, whose ancestral rapport with the natural world differs greatly from that of statist society: in the "Mujeres por la Memoria" archives, Ximena pondered, 'when did we begin to disrespect [nature] so much? Just as our grandparents [ancestors] didn't want...' Indeed, in post-2011 Cherani society, there is a renewed emphasis on returning to the practice of 'asking the forest's permission to enter, or if you need a plant for medicinal purposes or food' according to Ximena, putting the non-human natural world on an equal, or even superior level. Mariana highlighted 'the power of nature,' referencing traditional healers in Cherán who use medicinal plants; whilst Juan, a conventional doctor, stressed how he 'shares his activities with traditional healers... respecting each other and sometimes helping each other.' This contrasts with mainstream society in which connections with nature, whether spiritual, medicinal or otherwise, are rapidly disappearing.

Juan highlighted the important role of the *Ronda Comunitaria* and *guardabosques* (forest guards) in protecting the forests and preventing 'the plunder of timber' in Cherán. Other ecologically-focused elements include the requirement of a permission from the council to cut down trees for heating; whilst Juan reported a few 'complaints of corruption' concerning this rule, the majority perceived it with 'great respect and admiration' according to Miguel from the community cafe. Patricia, member of the communal forest nursery which works to replant deforested areas of Cherán, commented that she feels 'responsible for the forest' and wanted above all to communicate this message: 'to the people that come to cut down a pine tree: cut down one, and plant two! [que corten uno que planten dos!].'

Theoretically speaking, ecology represents 'one of the roots' of the Democratic Confederalist paradigm followed in Mexmûr, explained Dilşad, a grower, in an archival video. He reinforced that 'if we look into the oppressive system, the most attacked field is nature itself.' The criticism of mainstream society's relationship to the natural world implies that humans today are generally 'far from nature,' and the statist system creates everything with 'one template' to be the same, from

chickens in factories to humans in the quotidian, in Dilşad's words. He also gave a practical insight into permaculture initiatives in the camp, born out of research on methods for cultivating food and storing water. Nujîn highlighted the idea that 'people learn everything from nature' in another archival video, embodied in the connection between Mexmûris and their ancestral villages whose 'landscape and beautiful nature brings happiness' and whose memory is kept alive through the practice of *dengbej (singing-storytelling).* Indeed, the harsh realities of Mexmûr's geography and climate, far from inhabitants' native villages, were repeatedly cited, and Sozdar, teacher at the *peymangeh* (youth education centre) emphasised the importance given to studying 'how to improve' the environment there. Students of the *peymangeh* have ecology lessons*,* covering above all 'the ecology of the camp …[and] gaining knowledge of/for the camp,' with a plot of land dedicated to practical experiments in cultivation.

Two connected points stood out in relation to transforming the dominant societal anthropocentrism in Cherán and Mexmûr. First, the theoretical idea of ecology as fundamental is more developed in Mexmûr than in Cherán, where the ecological principles of caring for and defending the natural world are expressed spontaneously by interviewees. Second, the impression that Cheranis feel both 'responsible' for, and a sense of belonging to their forests, rooted in pre-colonial P'urhépecha belief systems, contrasts with the relationship of Mexmûris to the land they are currently on. Berivan from the women's *Ishtar Council* in Mexmûr expressed how 'everyone wants to go home to Bakur' and their mountain villages, a far cry from Mexmûr's desert climate, whilst Nujîn said 'I miss my motherland.' This difference in comprehension of the land and environment as a permanent home, as in Cherán's case, versus a foreign, temporary site in which Mexmûr's inhabitants 'are not secure' according to Newroz from the People's Council, naturally impacts the extent to which transforming the ecological hierarchy can be prioritised. The sense of indigeneity to one's environment observed in Cherán is a fundamental part of wanting to care for it and to flourish together with it; yet despite the refugeehood of Mexmûris, they still consider the topic important both ideologically and in practice.

'We no longer have a government'

A transformation of the statist system of governance lies at the heart of radically democratic society. Whilst the domination of governance by the state has many faces, the focus here is on several key components: decisional power, monopoly on violence, and political agency. Cherán has carried out a genuine 'transformation in the structure, logic and relations' of government in the town, removing hierarchical figures and installing a communal system (Gasparello, 2018:99). Carmen described Cherán's system in an archival video as 'a different type of government… with a sentiment of servitude.' The town's maximum authority is the people, with a *Concejo Mayor (*Council of Elders) acting as key organ. Patricia from the communal nursery stated that they 'reject' top-down decision-making and representation by political elites and parties*: '*we no longer

have a government, but usos y costumbres (customs and traditions: indigenous customary law).'

Practical quotidian decision-making in Cherán is structured around weekly local assemblies in each of the four neighbourhoods, with a general assembly held once every three years to decide the next members of the various councils responsible for different areas of society, according to Juan. Guadalupe narrated the development of this system: during the 2011 uprising, *fogatas* (small bonfires) were defensive measures, and also represented 'a sign of resistance' and communal point of sharing food and information. Gradually these some 300 *fogatas* became 'a point of assembly for making decisions at a micro-level,' recounted Guadalupe. This evolved into more structured local assemblies, no longer necessarily centred around the *fogata,* but still reflecting P'urhépecha customs. Juan described how assemblies can be convened when 'there are problems to solve concerning the community,' and 'all interested *comuneros* attend in a voluntary manner; there are no sanctions for absentees, but the decisions taken are binding for all those present and absent.' José, a student, added that Cheranis 'know that the participation of all is necessary for the assemblies,' demonstrating a communal sense of responsibility.

At the centre of Cherán's discourse on transforming the statist monopoly on violence was the town's community defensive force, the *Ronda Comunitaria.* The *Ronda* in Patricia's words 'is for the defence of the people,' with Juan remarking that it 'protects us 24 hours a day, by day we live protected and at night we sleep peacefully.' José compared the transformative nature of Cherán's approach to "policing" to mainstream society: whilst the Mexican police force 'are seen as enemies of society,' the contrast with the '*Ronda Comunitaria* is surprising:'

> The *Ronda* seek the wellbeing of their people and know how to avoid confrontations between them, they are armed elements who understand the responsibility of carrying a weapon...they look for the best solution through dialogue before force... and the community respects and feels comfortable with them.

The *Ronda* consists of women and men who live in the town, rather than an elite, disinterested force separate from ordinary people. Further, the *Ronda Comunitaria* and their forest guard counterparts do not hold a monopoly over the use of armed force in Cherán. Carmen described how 'if something happens in the town, everyone is ready to defend themselves.' Finally, José cautioned that whilst Cherán itself is 'a very safe place, it is very unsafe to transit through or travel to the neighbouring villages at night.' The image of comparative security in the town reinforces how Cheranis have made their society safer for all by removing the institutions of hierarchical structured force and introducing a defensive guard for, and of, the people. This demonstrates the baselessness of the classic criticism that stateless societies would never work because people would turn violent, steal and attack each other if left to their own devices, showing that

a community-led guardian system which answers to and made up of the local population people is not only possible but conducive lowering crime rates (Pressly, 2016).

The Indigenous P'urhépecha people of Cherán existed long before the Mexican state, and as such are well-equipped to critique and find alternatives to it, having never fully relied on it (Dinerstein, 2015); indeed, the indifference of state forces to the cartel loggers destroying Cherán's forests confirmed the harmful image of the state for many Cheranis. Yet the material reality in Cherán is one in which the Mexican state is still present, as a source of resources: María mentioned having to 'ask for [material] support' from the government. Juan suggested that only an 'extremist group of *comuneros* doesn't openly accept dealings with the government' whereas a majority of Cheranis are to some extent in favour of this situation. Further, the use of law as a 'counter-hegemonic' instrument during Cherán's battle for recognition by the Mexican government embodies a strategic positioning of Cherani autonomy in relation to the state (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016) rather than an outright rejection of the latter.

In Mexmûr, the statist domination of decision-making is transformed into a system of local assemblies, described by Sara: every other year two co-mayors are elected by vote, along with a council of seven others responsible for different elements of society. The candidates for these positions propose themselves with the support of their district, of which there are four in the camp. A People's Assembly, receiving delegates from district councils, 'coordinates the camp' (Dirik, 2022b: 156-169). Newroz stated that there is 'no hierarchy' in Mexmûr apart from the 'hevserok [co-mayor - one woman, one man] leadership system.'

Whilst there is no state armed force present in the camp, as of November 2023 (Rûdaw) the Iraqi army has a military presence in the nearby hills, whilst next door the KDP *peshmerga* keep guard from their own lookout post. The reality of regular Turkish bombing of Mexmûr and surrounding areas,[1] and the continued threat of Daesh' presence in neighbouring villages, renders the camp's internal security and external defence sensitive topics. However, when Daesh attacked the camp in 2014 and the PKK came to Mexmûr to defend the area, Mexmûris also fought to protect themselves, cementing their capacity for self-defence in times of need, as well as their rejection of the state's monopoly of force.

Mexmûris, as refugees, lack recognition by any state: they are citizens of no state. Dirik (2022a) interprets the statelessness of refugeehood as making space for alternative conceptions of citizenship without reliance on the state which was never within reach of the refugee in the first place. Sara from the municipal council was keen to stress that the Mexmûri system is 'different from Baghdad… we can manage ourselves, we don't want to work with them' but strategically try to obtain resources from them. Mexmûris reject refugee victimhood for political autonomy and the creation of their own system and attempts to 'improve

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[1] For reports of the latest Turkish attacks on the camp on 10.09.24, see https://hawarnews.com/en/3-women-injured-in-turkish-occupation-bombing-of-makhmour-camp.

ourselves,' according to Sara, yet simultaneously employ their refugeehood as something the government should 'protect,' recounts Newroz, demonstrating a strategic employment of identity.

Both Indigenous Cheranis and Mexmûri refugees are already situated somewhat outside the state system, and thus are able to exercise autonomous political agency which doesn't depend on the state for validation. This confirms ideas of Indigenous people and refugees as advantageously located to conceive of and build alternatives to the current hierarchical systems, as argued by Dinerstein (2015) and Dirik (2022a); indeed those of us born and raised as citizens of the statist paradigm and thus lacking such imaginative faculties can look to Cheranis and Mexmûris for inspiration. We also see how both Cherani and Mexmûri societies are able to use their agency to relate strategically to the state when it benefits them without being dependent on, or defined by, statist structures.

Discussion

Eventful action, ideological instruction

Structurally, the political mechanisms giving rise to our radically democratic case studies have causal relationships in shaping the outcomes in a path dependent manner: exemplified by a spontaneous reaction to an eventful moment in Cherán, and an organised ideological struggle in Mexmûr. Cherán and Mexmûr thus demonstrate two clear principal ways in which radically democratic societies transform statist domination. Firstly, Cheranis did not spend years preparing ideologically and physically for an uprising, but rather carried out a spontaneous 'resistance' led by 'ordinary people' on 15th April, 2011 against ecological destruction at the hands of criminal organisations and state impunity (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016). This fits the idea of an eventful collective action which sparks the development of a society with group agency which can shape autonomous, capable subjects. In fact, the lack of any one cohesive ideology in Cherán, or indeed ideological instruction, represents a stark difference from Mexmûr: the transformations in society there came about in the wake of a disruptive event and people's attempts to make sense of it, meaning that there is no singular orthodoxy to follow, but rather the expression of a communal agency which comprises disagreements and diversity.

On the other hand in Mexmûr we see how ideological education and the creation of a moral society which births conscious subjects contribute to maintaining and furthering this transformation, rather than any one decisive moment; as such the idea of eventful protests as the key structural factor in the transformation of society does not fit Mexmûr's experience. In fact, there is an explicit awareness concerning the process of transforming domination, as well as a conscious desire for their Democratic Confederalist system to be a functional, inspirational model for others. Mexmûr's connection to decades of struggle and ideological debate within the PKK and wider KFM mean that it has inherited certain structural features; the emphasis on women's freedom, for example, can be traced directly

to the 'immense struggle' carried out by female guerrillas 'to liberate their emancipation from the male gaze' within the PKK (Souvlis and Dirik, 2017).

Thus observations from Cherán and Mexmûr to some extent corroborate the idea of path dependence from a structural perspective, which helps to explain radically democratic transformations in Cherán and Mexmûr. The connection to a wider movement and struggle in Mexmûr, and the lack thereof in Cherán, also influences dynamics of transformation in the two societies. The most striking comparative element is that of the levels of awareness at which the subjects of each society are operating to transform their societies, seemingly due to their differing paths to transformation: Cherán's organic development contrasts with Mexmûr's organised intentionality.

Creating the communal

Moving beyond structural dynamics, the actual content of overturning the statist domination of society in Cherán and Mexmûr shows that the key element underpinning their transformations is that of the communal taking precedence over the individual. Across the three areas explored, there is a common node of communitarian agency coming to the fore. Firstly, women's liberation is observed in Mexmûr as a collective undertaking involving women learning, researching, organising together and exercising their autonomy as a key group subject in society, 'creating a new sociality' in order to become, know and exist in a new way as embodied in the concept of "xwebûn" or 'being/becoming oneself' (Cetinkaya, 2025). Ecologically speaking, in Cherán the communal develops and extends to include non-human elements like the forest or the rivers which take priority over individual preferences. Finally, in both societies governance, defense and political agency are reimagined as collective processes requiring new structures such as assemblies, communal protection rounds and shared identities. Thus the creation of a communitarian subject comprises the most radical transformation of society, that of the communal taking precedence over the individualist domination of statist domination, with group agency replacing hierarchical authority and autonomy substituting submission.

If state-dominated society prioritises the individual, attempting to undermine the peoples' 'natural tendencies towards democracy and cooperation' and 'crushing cooperative solidarities' (Grubacic, 2019: 1075), any radically democratic project aiming to free society from domination must emphasise the communal, communitarian subject, created through daily practice and positioned as a key agent of transformation. Indeed, in response to Wallerstein's (2002) premise that the state can no longer be the principal agent of change for radical movements, in Cherán and Mexmûr the communal or communitarian subject steps into this vacuum to become the key actor for transforming society; indeed the very transformation of society towards a radically democratic horizon is a formative process for the communitarian subject which feels responsible for, and to, its society, and evolves society in a radically democratic direction through interaction and participation. This opens up questions for future research

concerning the freedom and agency of the individual as part of a wider communal subject in radical democracy.

Conclusion

The experiences of societies opting out of the statist system and attempting to create a radically democratic alternative is strikingly overlooked in the literature in favour of theoretical debates. Yet experiences of societies capable of organising their own communal life in resistance and as an alternative to statist domination can and should inform theories of radical democracy and beyond. Cherán and Mexmûr represent two richly complex case studies which are transforming the statist domination of society along divergent structural paths above all through practices of women's liberation, ecology and stateless democracy. Further, the emergence of a communal subject is key in the transformation process. Much remains to be explored in order to deepen our understanding of such autonomous societies: from the role and nature of the communal subject, to the prioritisation of transforming certain elements over others, and the limitations to hierarchy transformation.

As the need for an alternative to our current paradigm becomes increasingly undeniable, comprehension of these pioneer sites of radical democracy will become increasingly fundamental. Yet as Holloway (2020: 19) warned, we should be cautious of the 'exoticisation of hope,' or the idea that 'for people of the "North," hope lies in the "Global South," in Kurdistan or Latin America, exciting places that are comfortably far away.' Learning from the valuable experiences of those autonomous towns must now enrich our own local, immediate struggles to reclaim hope and act to prefigure better societies here and now.

As of July 2025, Mexmur is under embargo at the hands of the KRG and Iraqi governments, whilst Cheran is once again under attack from organised crime which acts with complete impunity. In the words of P'urhépecha Community in Resistance (2025):

> 'Not one step back in defense of our autonomy!
>
> For life, dignity, and the memory of those who have fallen in defense of territory.'

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Acknowledgements

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