Radically Democratic Transformation in Mexico and Kurdistan

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Abstract

This thesis set out to explore how the radically democratic societies of Cherán, Mexico and Mexmûr, Kurdistan and their subjects are transforming each other in a mutually constructive way. It brings the field of radical democracy into the empirical realm of daily life in two case studies. Collecting data from participant exchanges and archives, both thematic and comparative analysis were employed to examine the key hierarchies transformed in each society, limits to prefigurative transformation and the role of the communal subject as a key agent of change. The investigation found that the nature of transformation in radically democratic societies depends largely on the factors stimulating, and the path to, said transformation. Whilst the organic, unplanned nature of Cherán's continued transformation reflects the initial spontaneous reaction to an event, attempts to transform Mexmûri society are consciously carried out by subjects working towards a vision connected to a wider movement with an emphasis on ideological education.

Radically democratic transformation of society also depends on the priorities of the communal subjects of those societies, as the emerging principal agents of change: whilst Cherán emphasises the ecological transformation, Mexmûri society embraces above all the overturning of the patriarchy. Further, pragmatic limitations shape the prefigurative potential of society in its here and now. The experiences of these two case studies demonstrate the diversity of the nature of pathways to radical democracy, communal subjects' priorities in transforming society, and the impact of external factors.

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> To the resilience of Cheranis, dealing with the destructive environmental effects of pine logging and avocado monopolies in the surrounding territories. Muchas gracias a todas y a todos, sobre todo al personal del Vivero Comunal, y mucha suerte!
>
> To the courage of Mexmûris yet again under bombardment from the Turkish state in recent wakes, despite the presence of Iraqi and UN delegations in the camp. Ji bo herkes gelek spas, û serkeftin!

I'd also like to thank my supervisor Dr Peter Gardner for his unfailing enthusiasm and encouragement throughout the project, as well as my community, friends and family for their endless support.

Author’s Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The seeds of this research project were planted years ago, during travels across Bakur, Northern Kurdistan. The radical generosity of those who shared homes, meals and stories exposed me to the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM). Getting personally acquainted with their vision of a new paradigm for society sparked an interest in the movements and spaces across the world proposing and living out alternatives to the devastation and oppression of the colonialist-capitalist system; ‘autonomous geographies’ (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006) or places where ‘people display the desire and political will to govern themselves’ (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 2).

Independent research brought me to texts which would be decisive in cementing my desire to pursue deeper studies on the topic: Milstein’s *Deciding for Ourselves* (2020), featuring 10 examples of autonomous societies; and Escobar’s *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), arguing against a hegemonic or exclusive solution to global societal crises in favour of a world in which many worlds fit - a pluriverse. A desire to engage experiences of autonomy with wider society in order to avoid becoming isolated, radical bubbles; a wish to be challenged into addressing these sites from a position of critical academic solidarity to better understand their underlying dynamics; and a feeling that a comparative element across case studies could lead to rich insights for all concerned all motivated the decision to engage in research on this topic.

Central Question

From an academic perspective, this research project builds on a combination of traditions within the social sciences. On the one hand, radical democracy in the literature is largely dealt with from a theoretical standpoint, with debates over the centrality of the role of conflict (Mouffe, 2013) or the nature of the democratic peoples. The latter is explored by Hardt and Negri (2004) in their foundational conceptualisation of radical democracy, who propose the construction of a new political subjectivity, the "multitude", or 'many peoples acting in networked concert,' a plural concept containing 'the genus of true democracy' (Slaugher and Hale, 2005). From another angle, Wallerstein (1996) demonstrates the role of anarchism on political and social movements who no longer see the state as a viable agent of change. This leaves a vacancy for a new subject to be harnessed by radical political actors to faciliate their desired transformations of society. Building on these two ideas, this research project explores the multitude-inspired concept of a "communal" or "communitarian" subject (Jerónimo Lemus, 2017) filling the gap for radically democratic movements as a key agent of change.

Hardt and Negri hypothesise the 'mutual dependency of societal transformation of the system and individual transformation of the self' (2004: 13). This is explored further by Asenbaum (2021), who takes Hardt and Negri's work as a starting point in his quest to free the transformation of the individual, suggesting that the 'inner revolution of democratic subjectivity' is the true heart of the radically democratic project which centres around an individual 'freeing of the self' (93). However, there is a lack of engagement with Hardt and Negri's concept of societal transformation or the 'mutual dependency' of society and subject in transforming (2004: 13). If the subject is

conceived of in communal terms, following on from the concepts of the multitude and Jerónimo Lemus' communitarian subject, then this realm of radically democratic mutually dependent transformation between communal subject and society is left unexplored. The central research question of this thesis is located in this gap, asking: *how are radically democratic societies and their subjects transforming each other in the cases of Cherán, Mexico, and Mexmûr, Kurdistan?*

Research Aims

The main goal of this research project is to provide an analysis of how societies and subjects transform themselves and each other through everyday experience and participation in a radically democratic project: in this case specifically the towns of Cherán, Mexico, and Mexmûr, Kurdistan. Following Dirik (2022a: 30), the research project does not aim to 'demonstrate a majority sentiment' or conclusively assert the nature of subjects and societal transformation examined here, but rather to 'develop a greater understanding of subjective realities' and 'situate this within a broader sociological framework' (Sköld, 2019: 294). As such, the aim of the research is to 'present a sample' of some 'common ways' in which radically democratic subjects and societies are transforming in Cherán and Mexmûr (Dirik, 2022: 30), without suggesting that these are hegemonic or exclusive.

An additional aim of the research project is to give an insight to its reader into the experiential side of living out the struggle to build an alternative society, with all its caveats and challenges, and gain knowledge of *how* it is for those participating in them.

Exploring these dynamics through data collection in two real life case studies - themselves often overlooked in the literature on autonomous geographies - brings empirical data into the largely theoretical realm of radical democracy. Given that the broader underlying vision of this research project reflects a desire to recognise the significance of those movements and people building alternatives to the hegemonic statist, capitalist paradigm in different corners of the globe, a final aim of the thesis is that of undertakening research in a critically constructive mode of solidarity with the subjects and societies investigated. This research project is motivated by the belief that another world is both possible and urgently needed.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is set out in five chapters. First, a comprehensive review of the literature on radical democracy theory; Mexico and Kurdistan as sites of radical democracy and the case study selection; and radically democratic transformation serves to contextualise the research question and highlight gaps in the field. Second comes an exploration of the methods used to recruit participants, carry out interviews and analyse the data. Third, a presentation of the findings from the thematic analysis used on the data collected follows. Fourth, the findings are discussed in view of their position in and implications for the wider literature. Fifth and finally, the conclusion summarises the key arguments from the findings and looks ahead to the future of the field.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section comprises an exploration of the literature on radical democracy and transformation, with Mexico and Kurdistan as instructive examples. The section breaks down into three parts. First, what is radical democracy? This is a chance to explore key elements of radical democracy highlighted by its most significant thinkers today. Second, why Mexico and Kurdistan? This section opens up a brief investigation of the context of the two areas and explains the rationale behind the focus on Cherán and Mexmûr as case studies. Finally, what is the nature of transformation in radically democratic societies? This entails an exploration of the academic debates around subjects and societies and democratic transformation to summarise the knowledge gap within which this research project is positioned.

Radical Democracy

This section intends to trace the development of radical democracy as a concept and tease out its challenges, influences and implications. It is important to note that radical democracy is understood here in a twofold way, as both a political and moral principle (Roberts and Steiner, 2010). First, as an ‘umbrella term’ for diverging perspectives in democratic theories which are debated and contested, but which all work towards a ‘deepening’ of the key democratic values ‘freedom and equality’ and a broad, profound participation across society in determining its direction (Asenbaum, 2021: 101). Second, as a shifting, porous concept which goes beyond a narrow

conception of decision-making tools to encompass a multifaceted, guiding approach to building alternative societies which holistically examine and radicalise their relationships with all elements of daily life.

Core Definition

In the late 1970s, a significant shift occurred in radical politics which saw the rise to prominence of radical democracy as the ‘main alternative’ to liberal democracy (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 2). Naturally, this has led to an increase in academic output on the topic of radical democracy, as well as several debates around what the concept entails. 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 is necessarily socialist, autonomising, and founded on agonism; with Mouffe later claiming that their work provided the left with ‘a new imaginary’ (Mouffe and Holdengräber, 1989: 32).

For Volk (2018: 3), radical democratic theory can be summarised as ‘conflictive political action’ through ‘collective, political identities’ centring around agonism. The latter refers to radical democracy’s “antagonism problem” (Matijasevich, 2019). Theorists debate whether the positive conflictual agonistic state of politics in which differences and plurality of thought are reified necessarily slides into a negative antagonism in which two opposing sides attempt to win over, and repress, the other. A further element of opposition is introduced by thinkers like Bookchin (1991: 9), who sees the ‘dialectical tension’ of struggle between the state and democratic society itself as formative and definitive.

A long-standing debate in democratic studies which has particular ramifications for theorists of radical democracy concerns the role and transformation of the democratic subject. Within participatory and deliberative democratic traditions, democratic subjects are not free to change but are objects of defined transformations 'designed by others' (Asenbaum, 2021: 90). The agonistic iteration of democracy elaborated by Mouffe and others opens up an 'anti-essentialist' view of democratic subjects which are free to change, although for Asenbaum (ibid: 90-93) this angle depends on a hegemonic 'top-down' identity construction; more persuasive are perspectives from gender and queer "politics of becoming" to understand the multiplicity of 'identity transformation' in the democratic subject.

The first decade of the 21st century saw the injection of a 'new momentum' (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 2) into radical democracy studies with Hardt and Negri's multiple publications building on Laclau and Mouffe's legacy to focus on inventing different forms of democracy that go 'beyond representation' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 255). The question of what makes a democracy radical, and against which definition of democracy the 'radical' should be opposed, is answered variously: electoral democracy, representative democracy and free market democracy all feature as potential opponents (Roberts and Steiner, 2010), with more extremist commentators concluding that anything less than a radical democracy is not truly democratic (ibid).

One of radical democracy's most 'salient' tenets is the idea of returning politics to the public, visible sphere (Breaugh and Caivano, 2022: 451). Proponents often hark back to a pre-nation-state past in which politics implied citizens managing their own affairs in direct decision-making bodies such as face-to-face assemblies, rather than a

‘body of techniques for holding power’ as it is often intended today (Bookchin, 1991: 3). Making politics a public endeavour in radical democracy also entails a ‘politicisation of everyday life’ in a holistic sense, stressing that the most quotidian, mundane actions and relations impact and are impacted by how decisions are taken, and by who (Mazzucotelli, 2015: 261).

Radical democracy is often defined as ‘a never-ending process’ rather than a simple end goal, or the promise of a ‘perfect democratic society’ (Tønder and Thomassen, 2005: 4). From an agonistic perspective, the implications of this endless struggle lead theorists like Mouffe (2013: 84) to declare that there is ‘no such thing’ as radical democracy as it can never be definitively reached. Yet this conflation of means and ends (Dinerstein, 2015) is elsewhere interpreted as a nurturing element. Introducing the idea of prefiguration or ‘performativity practices for other worlds’ carried out in the here and now (Gibson-Graham, 2008) differentiates radical democracy from schools of thought like Marxism which justify their struggles to reach an ideal society with methods that don’t reflect said ideals. Indeed, two of the most prominent radically democratic projects of today, located in Chiapas and Rojava, are highlighted for their ‘exercise of prefiguration’ in resisting the ‘ontological occupation’ of lives and thoughts by the ‘discourses, structures and practices’ of the state, capital and other exploitative structures (Escobar, 2022: xxviii).

Tensions with the State

Radical democracy often implies a critique of the nation-state, developing a concept of democracy beyond both nation and state (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012).

The shift in antisystemic movements towards a rejection of the state as the principal agent of change, noted by Wallerstein (1996), both informs and is informed by this focus within radical democracy on civil society as an exclusive site of democratic struggle. For Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)[1] ideologue Abdullah Öcalan, a rejection of the statist system is implicit in developing alternative forms of decision-making, whilst Dirik (2022a) argues that so-called stateless peoples are better located to critique the foundations of the nation-state system and build alternatives, as they were never fully incorporated into statist projects in the first place. Küçükkeleş (2022: 9) concurs that refugee populations without a 'political place' in the world of nation-states are 'triggering' both the questioning of that system and a growing interest in alternatives.

Grassroots, Pluralist Character

Radical democracy has a distinctly grassroots identity. This is experienced practically in local movements organising through bottom-up structures, outside of the state and society which marginalises them; and theoretically as radically democratic discourse derives inspiration 'first and foremost' from popular grassroots movements (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 158). The bottom-up element through which radically democratic movements realise 'autonomy, participatory process, and solidarity around perceived collective identities' distinguishes them from others (Stahler-Sholk, 2007: 49-50). Indeed, Esteva and Prakash (1998: 163) find the people 'slowly discovering the power they already have' to be the most unique and inspiring element of contemporary radical democracy.

[1] Political party and armed group waging war against the Turkish state since 1984.

This emphasis on seeking to ‘regenerate people’s power’ through autonomous organising outside of the state leads some theorists to consider radical democracy as a postmodern project (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 153). Radical democrats understand modernity as having brought about ‘the death of democracy’ and as such reject it, identifying with a paradigm shift towards postmodernism (ibid). A prominent example is the Zapatista movement and their proclaimed first postmodern guerrilla war (Zaid, 1994), rejecting the precepts of modernity, capitalism and the state. Mouffe and Holdengräber (1989: 33) disagree, however, considering the project for a radical and plural democracy as fitting the modernist category, given its speaking to ‘the tradition of the great emancipatory struggles.’ The literary debate around radical democracy as modern or postmodern reflects respective desires to posit the idea as a continuation of historic developments in democratic theory and social movements or something ‘radically’ new and as such does not have a satisfactory conclusion.

The pluralist nature of radical democracy is championed by Escobar (2018) who, following the Zapatistas, invokes the “pluriverse” - a world where many worlds fit - as fundamental for designing contemporary political alternatives. Breaugh and Caivano (2022: 454) expand their definition of radical democracy to encompass plurality with the idea that ‘emancipatory political agency does not depend upon a single-axis identity’ but rather builds upon ‘plurality and difference.’ Indeed, for Roberts and Steiner 2010: 21), the ‘competing agendas and differences of opinion’ which appear in pluralistic societies should be ‘encouraged and empowered’ in radical democracy. The pluralist nature of radical democracy rejects attempts to fix its definition, rendering it inherently flexible and open to change.

Directly democratic bodies play a key role in the tradition of literature on radical democracy. For Arendt, councils represent the ‘treasure of revolution’ which created ‘an entirely new form of government’ in historical cases from America to Russia, France and Spain (1990: 127). The importance of assemblies is reflected in contemporary radically democratic movements from Nuit Debout, Paris to the Kurdish Freedom Movement in Turkey, providing a structure for the face-to-face decision-making so fundamental to radically democratic society (Breaugh and Caivano, 2022). Barış (2022) and Luna (2004) posit such bodies as ‘traditional institutions of decision-making’ (Barış, 2022: 178), with general assemblies representing the historical power of community in indigenous society (Luna, 2004) and demonstrating radically democratic alternatives to liberal democracy throughout indigenous thought - a decolonial outlook conspicuously absent from most other works.

Ecology, Feminism and Indigenous Thought

A broad investigation into the radical democracy tradition finds a tendency to draw on ecology, feminism and indigenous thought in its search for alternative ways of organising society which reject the paradigm of authoritarianism. The relationship between systems of hierarchy and the ecological crisis demonstrated by Bookchin led to his subsequent proposal of direct democracy through libertarian municipalism (Brincat and Gerber, 2018). This attempt to entail a ‘utopian, decentralised, confederal’ future has been impactful on both theories of radical democracy and more practical examples such as the the birth of the so-called ‘Bookchin-inspired’ experiment in radical democracy, Rojava (Ahmed, 2015). Elsewhere, Luna shows how the system of

assemblies and direct democracy in Oaxaca known as *comunalidad* developed around recovering rights to land and water, and through such process, everyone becoming environmental defenders (Rojo and Rojo, 2022).

Next, the transformation of gender features significantly as a theoretical precept for radical democracy, although its exact role is contested. Phillips (1991) argues that feminism and participatory democracy are co-constituting, and emphasises the need to rewrite gender into democracy, whilst for Mouffe (1992), women's liberation depends on removing all traces of gender and patriarchy from democracy. The key role of the gender revolution in today's experiments in radical democracy is undeniable, with the Zapatistas in Mexico and Kurdish Freedom Movement in Syria pontentially representing a 'new matriarchy' (Werlhof, 2019: 255); indeed the latter's leader Öcalan regularly refers to the need to liberate women, the 'oldest colony,' to enable a democratic paradigm (Güneşer, 2021). Women in Argentina's *Buen Vivir* movement for radical democracy position themselves as the 'knowledge-providers to prefigure alternative futures' (Habersang, 2022: 8).

Third, indigenous traditions are 'opening the doors' of radical democracy in contrast to, and rejection of, the "social minorities" position indigenous peoples are often forced to occupy (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 188). Indeed for indigenous peoples, the state has 'never been either the centre of critique or a tool for emancipation' (Dinerstein, 2015: 12). In Mexico, indigenous peoples contribute to radically democratic practice due to their acute perception of autonomy as an already-formed capacity to be protected and defended (Raghu, 2022), whilst traditional institutions of decision-making employed in Kurdistan inform current iterations of radical democracy there (Barış, 2022). Thus the

role of those who have always positioned themselves outside of, and in opposition to, statist paradigms must be highlighted in the contemporary search for alternative society building: from the indigenous Oaxacans to the Mbuti tribe, amongst many others (Gelderloos, 2010).

A final theoretical component of radical democracy is education. Understood as a basis for ‘mentality revolution’ and therefore the key to society-wide engagement with the radically democratic project, little has been published on the topic beyond Dirik’s (2022a) work on the meaning of ‘“learning” radical democracy in Rojava,’ an exploration into the process by which ‘a profound democratic culture’ and ‘egalitarian relationships across communities’ are taught and taken up by people of the region (2022a: 34-35). The education system in Rojava contrasts with positivist, statist pedagogy in taking a more holistic approach to education as part of life, and also serves to ‘strengthen society’s ability to be a political literate and acting agent of transformation’ (ibid: 36).

A propensity to be directly democratic, pluralist, grassroots, postmodern, based on assemblies, indigenous, stateless, feminist, ecological and prefigurative unites today’s radically democratic experiments, although in the spirit of plurality, there is necessarily variation and disagreement across and within projects of radical democracy. Yet these largely common elements create a unique identity for today’s revolutionary struggles.

Criticisms and Limitations of Radical Democracy

Radical democracy has not been exempt from critiques which attempt to draw out its flaws and limitations. The version of radical democracy proposed by its

best-known thinkers, Laclau and Mouffe (2001), has been accused of an excessive elevation and enshrining of conflict against a vague adversary at the core of the theory (Wiley, 2002). Perhaps for this reason, radical democracy has seemingly not fared well since the publication of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) foundational text, with the theory stuck at an 'impasse' (Wiley, 2002: 486). Such criticisms specifically target the agonistic nature of nascent radical democracy theory, and focus on its developments, or lack thereof, particularly in Mouffe's own ideas (2013). Yet subsequent significant developments to widen the scope and tenets of radical democracy from a range of scholars and perspectives in the last two decades, as covered earlier in this review, render this critique less pertinent for the contemporary field.

Radical democracy is accused of failing to tackle 'strategic and organisational issues,' lacking a clear economic program or engagement with parliamentary social democratic movements (Wiley, 2002: 487). For critics, this omission derives from proponents of radical democracy feeling that practical issues are beneath them, which prevents the theory from having any impact in the real world (ibid). Such criticism entails an understanding of radical democracy as a prescriptive ideology with top-down theorists who develop specific programs to comply with in order to achieve radically democratic societies. Yet much of the discourse around radical democracy takes it as a general attitude and approach to organising society - with common features, certainly - which will look different in every setting in which it takes root. Perhaps Wiley should look to empirical iterations of radical democracy to understand the types of practical policies employed in such a context before dismissing the idea as incapable of transcending the realm of theory.

A third critical stance against radical democracy is based on its apparent flaws when put into practice. For Matijasevich (2019: 217), contemporary examples from Croatia, Singapore and elsewhere demonstrate the ‘very real limitations’ of the radically democratic ideal when realised as a political struggle, and thus challenge radical democracy as a theoretical project. These practical examples are employed to show how radically democratic activity is only tolerated when it doesn’t threaten the interests of the dominant order; when it is sufficiently contained; and when its boundaries are demarcated (ibid). Proponents of radical democracy would likely respond to Matijasevich that with the latter caveats, the project would no longer be considered *radically* democratic. Further, Matijasevich seems to miss the point that real life enactments of radical democracy are important for what they prefigure and their transformative potential for those experiencing them and participating in them, and not necessarily because of their duration, susceptibility to co-option or inability to transcend a certain scope.

Kurdistan and Mexico

Across accounts of empirical examples of radical democracy, references to Kurdistan and Mexico are unavoidable. Representing ‘the two most prominent examples of prefigurative politics in the world today’ (Escobar, 2022: xxiii) and embodying the ‘indigenous stateless democracy, autonomous self-government, ecological and communal economy, and women’s leadership’ highlighted in the first section as key elements of radical democracy (Piccardi, 2022: 161), the well-established nature of this

tradition in Kurdistan and Mexico's geographies makes them persuasive case studies through which to explore how radically democratic movements prefigure alternative futures and transform their own subjects and existing societal hierarchies. This next part of the review explores the background of radical movements in Kurdistan and Mexico, before exploring the specific case study selection.

Kurdish-inhabited areas of the Middle East: https://www.youngpioneertours.com/maps-iraqi-kurdistan/.

Kurdistan

Around 30 million Kurds (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014) live in the Middle East and diaspora. The history of Kurdistan is often narrated from state-centric perspectives as the story of a people whose hopes of obtaining a country were 'dashed'

in 1917 (Bajalan, 2020), resulting in a century of oppression in the four nation-states into which they are split: Bakur (North Kurdistan) in Turkey, Başur (South Kurdistan) in Iraq, Rojava (West Kurdistan) in Syria, and Rojhelat (East Kurdistan) in Iran. Kurdistan often acted as a 'buffer' between the great empires of the region (Ünver, 2016: 67), and Kurds often describe themselves as having 'no friends but the mountains' (Boochani, 2018), relying on the Taurus and Zagros mountain ranges to provide refuge from enemy states and to develop alternative projects. Whilst Kurdish uprisings have regularly taken place throughout history, a new phase in Kurdish history began in 1978 with the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and an "awakening" of Kurdish identity (Barkey, 2019).

The radically democratic tradition in Kurdistan is overwhelmingly led by the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), defined as 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 Öcalan and the PKK's theoretical shift away from Marxist-Leninist thought towards the project of "democratic confederalism," itself heavily influenced by Bookchin's 'vision,' (Graeber, 2014), the KFM today sees itself as a 'societal organisation' aiming to create 'an alternative to the nation-state' through bottom-up organising (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012: 8). Bookchin theorised a local radical democracy, comprising 'face-to-face assemblies' which would overturn 'social hierarchies' (Peters, 2017: 8-9).

The KFM has attempted to put Öcalan's ideas into practice across different areas of Kurdistan: whilst democratic autonomy had been 'the official ideological line' of

the KFM ‘since 2005,’ reflected in the political organisation of Mexmûr and PKK bases in the Qandil mountains (Duman, 2022), urban Kurdish population centres in Bakur began declaring and adhering to “democratic autonomy” in 2015 (Koefoed, 2019: 131-156); whilst in Rojava the Movement for a Democratic Society has ‘built up the communes, assemblies, and cooperatives since 2012’ (Dirik, 2022a: 36). Significantly for Brincat and Gerber (2018: 20), the KFM is ‘distinguished by its prefigurative sociality,’ in that its ‘institutions and practices’ are established to realise the ‘way of being’ they contribute to building.

Mexico

Almost 17 million of Mexico’s 127 million population are indigenous, comprising 68 different peoples (IWGIA, 2022). The majority live in the south, with high concentrations in Oaxaca and Chiapas states (Refworld, 2008). From the 1930s onwards, 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). Inclusion in the Mexican nation-state meant ‘adherence to a single national identity that was decidedly non-indigenous’; indeed Dinerstein (2015: 224) highlights the wider trend throughout the twentieth century of a ‘construction of hopelessness’ in Mexico and all Latin America pursued by states towards the marginalised, above all indigenous populations.

Indigenous Mexican democratic struggles are more diverse and disparate than the largely unified movement in Kurdistan. Most accounts relate the pivotal moment of the Zapatista uprising on the 1st January 1994 as responsible for a dramatic shift in

indigenous political consciousness across Mexico - akin to the PKK's role in Kurdistan - ushering in a 'new phase of struggle' represented today in diverse sites across the country (Hernández Castillo, 2006). Sánchez-Antonio (2021), however, highlights the Oaxacan tradition since the 1980s of developing foundations of an alternative, local forms of politics invoking 'comunalidad' as a structure and a mentality for community living, led by indigenous intellectuals Jaime Martinez Luna and Floriberto Diaz. Esteva (2007) further describes the "Oaxaca Commune" as an important experiment in radical democracy in which citizens and the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) prevented the police, government and army from entering their city - outlasting the famous Paris Commune of 1871.

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 APPO adopting the Zapatista slogan of 'mandar obedeciendo' or 'leading by obeying' (Esteva, 2007: 80). Across support bases in Chiapas, the Zapatista 'community-based model' appears in '38 self-proclaimed "autonomous municipalities",' using 'open community assemblies' to create 'parallel structures of local government' (Stahler-Sholk, 2007: 51-54). As of late 2023, Zapatista autonomous communities are undergoing an evolutionary transformation (Enlace Zapatista, 2023): the movement maintains an active impulse striving for real autonomy which influences struggles across Mexico and beyond.

Case Selection: Cherán and Mexmûr

As explored above, Kurdistan and Mexico have birthed countless radical movements: from urban battles in Diyarbakir to the guerrilla struggle in the mountains of Qandil, Kurdistan; from a rural P'urhépecha town in Michoacán to city encampments in central Oaxaca, Mexico. Yet a vast majority of literature has focused on the two most famous examples of alternative society-building there: the Rojava Revolution in Kurdistan and the Zapatista uprising in Mexico. The fetishized fight of exoticised 'badass' female Kurdish warriors battling Daesh in Rojava (Dirik, 2014), and the 'charismatic genius' of Zapatista figurehead Subcomandante Marcos in Chiapas (Bruhn, 2013: 1202) have attracted an ongoing international gaze, as have their very real contributions to building alternative systems.

However, whilst Rojava and Chiapas dominate studies of autonomous geographies in Kurdistan and Mexico, this thesis takes a different path. The focus here is on two alternative cases of radical democracy which present original, unique iterations conducive to understanding subject transformation in radically democratic society. These are Mexmûr, (Iraqi) Kurdistan and Cherán (Michoacán), Mexico. Both somewhat in the shadow of their more famous siblings, whether out of academic neglect or a protective desire to conceal themselves as discussed by Graeber (2004), focusing on these examples will facilitate an exploration of societies transforming and being transformed, quietly getting on with life away from the spotlight.

Location of Cherán within Michoacán state, Mexico: https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-cheran-20170710-htmlstory.html.

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 (Hernández and Cobos, 2016). With a population just short of 21,000 (Data México, 2020) and 27,000 hectares of woodland (Hernández and Cobos, 2016), Cherán began to suffer violence and insecurity in 2008, when organised criminal gangs destroying swathes of forest completely stalled daily life and cost more than 20 lives in the town, with no reaction from the authorities (Gasparello, 2018). Gasparello (2018) employs Taussig's (1984) "culture of terror" to express the situation in Cherán until citizens took to the streets in 2011, kicking out the cartels and the municipal employees and developing their system of self-government (Wolfesberger, 2019).

Cherán is the lesser-known sibling of the more famous sites of indigenous uprisings in the country. The town has played a crucial role in the 'revindication of indigeneity' and autonomy in Mexico in recent decades (Gasparello, 2018: 99).

Cherán's uprising represents a popular, local, predominantly female-led grassroots attempt to defend land and life there. Cherán's place in the radically democratic tradition of Mexican indigenous movements is somewhat unique. Cheranis did not spend years preparing ideologically and physically for an uprising like the Zapatistas, but rather carried out a spontaneous 'resistance' led by 'ordinary people' on 15th April, 2011 in the face of criminal organisations and state impunity (González Hernández and Zertuche Cobos, 2016). Yet contrary to the situation in Oaxaca, the population of Cherán achieved a genuine 'transformation in the structure, logic and relations' of government in the town, removing hierarchical figures and installing a communal system (ibid). Cherán's uprising and subsequent transformation has won over a broad support base from across Mexican indigenous, radically democratic movements (Gasparello, 2018).

Gasparello (ibid: 108) explains how, almost immediately following the uprising, a citizens' security body with members chosen through assembly vote known as the "Ronda Comunitaria" replaced the municipal police, whilst the General Assembly composing all of Cherán's inhabitants became the maximum authority in the town, and 'incipient' initiatives to build 'alternative economies' for the local population began to develop. Cosme-Gomez and Katayanagi (2019: 33) highlight further intriguing aspects of Cherán's experiment in radical democracy: beyond the employment of the P'urhépecha identity as a 'valuable device to keep self-determination alive,' the population maintains an 'organised distrust' in which everyone serves as a 'watchdog … to exact accountability' in the structures of governance. In this way, there is a continuous critique of positions of power; rather than attempting to 'avoid tension', this organised distrust uses tension as a 'resource' to hold everyone accountable (ibid: 46).

Location of Mexmûr (Makhmour) within Iraq:
https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/battle-makhmour-frontline-iraqs-latest-war.

Mexmûr

To the south of Kurdish-inhabited lands lies Mexmûr (also spelt Makhmour, Makhmur), a once 'desolate town' 60 km from the nearest city, Erbil, and 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 original town of Mexmûr in 1998, largely from the Şirnex province of Bakur (North Kurdistan), whose inhabitants are traditionally 'loyal to' the PKK (ibid: 1). The camp's population stood at around 12,000 in 2022 (Küçükkeleş, 2022), all of whom are officially considered refugees under the UNHCR's authority (KNK, 2023). Since July 2019, Mexmûris have had their movements restricted by Iraqi federal forces and suffered Turkish airstrikes, resulting in a 'dire humanitarian

situation' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 9). Yet the inhabitants reject a refugee victimhood narrative, instead presenting their camp as an 'autonomous alternative to the nation-state system' (Dirik, 2022b: 160).

Unbeknown to most, the celebrated model of Democratic Autonomy in Rojava was actually developed years earlier in Mexmûr. The camp occupies an important position within the KFM's tradition of radical democracy: not only is it 'the first site' of experimentation in democratic autonomy informing later iterations across Bakur and Rojava; it is also one of the region's 'most politically significant refugee camps' which finds itself 'at the centre of regional geopolitics' for its location linking Rojava and Syria to the PKK Qandil base (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 1). Thus this 'mother' of Kurdish radical democracy (Casagrande, 2018) embodies a key step 'towards non-state politics' for a 'new political consciousness' (Küçükkeleş, 2022: 9).

Following the PKK's democratic turn in the early 2000s, Mexmûr acted as a 'model' for the movement to 'organise and govern themselves,' according to senior PKK commander Murat Karayilan (ibid: 5). Dirik (2022b: 156-169) devotes a section of her book to Mexmûr entitled "From Displacement to Self-Determination", highlighting the radically democratic system in which a People's Assembly, receiving delegates from district councils, 'coordinates the camp', whilst 'civil society structures, education and health care…and economy' are self-organised, and the transformative approach to justice involves self-criticism and education, rather than prisons.

The people of Mexmûr have 'opted' to follow the system of democratic confederalism outlined by Öcalan and inspired by Bookchin, rather than 'integrating' into Iraqi Kurdish 'mainstream society' (Rudi, 2018: 108-109). The 21st March Newroz

celebrations in Mexmûr are seen as indicative of how ‘social reproduction is imagined and symbolically enacted’ in the camp, with Mexmûris embodying a ‘new Kawa’ to ‘rekindle the fire’ and ‘usher in the new time’ - such is Mexmûr’s role in the wider Kurdish democratic struggle (ibid: 109). Küçükkeleş (2022: 2), acknowledging the above literature, bemoans the lack of interest in Mexmûr despite its key position in the KFM’s radically democratic tradition, noting the mere ‘handful of empirical studies of, or involving’ the camp.

Aside from their similar population sizes and experiences of autonomy, Mexmûr and Cherán share another significant commonality: they both fit the category of ‘marginalised,’ having suffered ‘the most severe damage to nature and culture’ caused and exacerbated by ‘modernity’ and the state (Esteva and Prakash, 1998: 167). Both the towns themselves and 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. For Esteva and Prakash (ibid), these ‘worst hit’ populations are exactly those creating the most promising ‘contemporary initiatives for radical democracy’ in the face of despair. These examples embody Breaugh and Caivano’s (2022: 450) ‘cracks in the neoliberal edifice’ - the role of researchers of such initiatives is to ‘expose these fissures.’

Despite such similarities, Kurdish and Mexican radically democratic struggles had ‘rarely been discussed in connection with each other’ until recently (Gambetti, 2009: 44). In the last few years, there has been a significant increase in interest on the topic. Various themes have been explored in the literature, including the ‘development of grassroots democracy’ across Kurdistan and Mexico (Stanchev, 2015); analyses of

autonomous institutions in the two spaces (Bance, 2021); explorations of the women's liberationist elements across the movements (Rebrii and Patchen, 2022) and investigations into the 'democratic innovations' in Kurdistan and Mexico which are 'building autonomy *from below,'* establishing popular assemblies and enabling direct democratic participation (Barış, 2022: 179).

Within this recent work, however, only Barış (ibid) includes Cherán as an object of analysis, whilst none of the literature discusses Mexmûr; the focus is predominantly on the Zapatista uprising and Rojava Revolution. Expanding academic horizons to other examples from Mexican and Kurdish spaces of struggle, such as Mexmûr and Cherán, provides the potential for new insights into autonomous societies.

Mural of Kurdish and P'urhépecha women in Cherán, demonstrating Cheranis' solidarity with their Kurdish counterparts: https://anfenglishmobile.com/news/women-of-cheran-presents-Ocalan-with-mural-66427.

Radically Democratic Subjects, Society and Transformation

Having examined the theory of radically democratic society and the context of our Mexican and Kurdish case studies, the final part of this literature review is concerned with examining the discourse around subjects, societies and democratic transformations. Whilst the transforming radically democratic subject has risen to prominence in an explicit way very recently (eg Asenbaum, 2023), it touches points that have long been central to the wider debates on identity and democracy.

The (Radically) Democratic Subject

The democratic subject is defined as someone who 'participate[s] in democratic spaces' (Asenbaum 2023: 6). More fundamentally, Asenbaum argues that the 'inner revolution of democratic subjectivity' which produces the democratic subject is the most fundamental demand of radical democracy and democratic society, over and above the various elements explored earlier such as collective political action, public decision-making bodies or rejection of the state as the main site of struggle (Asenbaum 2021: 93). This emphasis on internal transformation is based on an interpretation of democracy as a subjective experience of 'equality and freedom' which depends on the democratisation, or liberation, of the self (Asenbaum, 2021: 93). Indeed, throughout the literature around iterations of democracy, from participatory to socialist, deliberative, and finally radical, the significance of the democratic subject features consistently (ibid).

However, the various democratic theories share a common, fundamental problem with respect to democratic subject transformation: the paths of democratic

subjects are seemingly determined by society's democratic goals of producing "better" and more democratic citizens, thus limiting the freedom of autonomous self-transformation (Asenbaum, 2021). As such, Asenbaum (ibid) highlights the need to develop a perspective in radical democracy which allows for the subject to freely change and transform.

Gender Theory

One source of inspiration for resolving the issue around the democratic subject's freedom of transformation comes from gender and queer theory (Asenbaum, 2021). Informed by Mouffe's (1995) breaking down of the woman/man binary into a 'multiplicity of social relations' and Hardt and Negri's (2004: 100) concept of the self as a 'multiple social subject,' Asenbaum (2021: 93) proposes a 'micro-revolution' to understand democratic subjectivity not as a liberal, individualist project but as a means to allow the freedom of subjects to self-identify, transform and co-exist with multiple identities. This approach, known as a "politics of becoming," proposes itself as a basis upon which a transformative radical democratic citizenship can be developed. However, the practical details of this project, such as how the individual transforming subject relates to its society or the community, are unclear.

Individual vs Communal Subject

Another perspective from which to address the issues of the democratic subject as reified in an immutable identity involves widening its scope to consider the subject as communal, rather than individual. Indeed, subjectivisation is defined as the 'collective

creation of new identities' (Asenbaum, 2021: 94), in which the conceptualisation of a common struggle (Hardt and Negri, 2004) informs the transformation of the democratic subject which is inherently communal in radically democratic society. Hardt and Negri (2004) famously propose the "multitude" as a somewhat vague subjectivity capable of carrying out true democratic principles, in contrast to the individual. Along similar lines, Jerónimo Lemus (2017) brings in Cherán as an example of a site in which the creation of the "communitarian subject" is a 'daily practice' rather than an absolute destination. The construction of the communitarian subject in Cherán is opposed to and in contrast to the idea of a fixed, individual subject, which represents a tool for capitalism to maintain its grip on society.

The shift to focus on communal over individual subjects in the discourse around radical democracy, society and self evokes wider discussions around societal transformation. The trend of antisystemic social movements rejecting the nation-state as the principal agent of change in society has grown from the 1990s onwards (Wallerstein, 1996). The state-based strategy for taking power and revolutionising society is now 'irrelevant' for antisystemic actors (Wallerstein, 2002) which increasingly take inspiration from anarchism over traditional socialist philosophy. Yet this paradigm shift leaves an unanswered question in its wake: who is, or who are, the new key agents of change? The literature currently fails to directly address this gap, although the mutually constructive nature of subject and society in democracy suggests that the prioiritisation of either communal or individual subjects within society will likely determine which one will represent the principal actor of societal change.

Prefiguration

Another key element of the discourse around the democratic subject and transformation focuses on its prefigurative nature. Prefigurative politics can be described simply as alternatives to “what is,” which prefigure “what could be”’ (Lin et al, 2016: 302). These prefigurations touch every element of society, imagining and practising new approaches to interactions between subjects and their environments, behaviours and perspectives (Silver, 2018). Yet the literature on prefigurative politics has focused predominantly on the economic, political features and implications of such experiments, largely overlooking the ‘transformation of social relationships and power’ which is both fundamental to the realisation of true alternative societies and questions concerning the democratic subject and its transformation together with society (Lin et al, 2016: 302). The literature also considers what prefigurative politics might stand in opposition to: perhaps strategic politics, or politics of survival. The essence of prefiguration lies in the ends and means becoming one; as the two grow increasingly far apart, a society based around strategic pragmatism or necessity is emphasised.

Indeed, if prefigurative politics strive to create “democratic microverse[s]” (Asenbaum, 2023: 13) which perform potential democratic futures, their participants are aware that the duration of such experiments is often limited, and are not aimed at merely prolonging their own survival. Their purpose is rather to both demonstrate and experience that ‘things can be otherwise’ (ibid).Through participating in such attempts at prefiguring alternatives, subjects are constantly striving to become something different, something currently not in existence. (ibid, 2021). Indeed, the very participation of subjects in a democratic process is considered a means to ‘explore’ or ‘reinvent the self’

(ibid: 101) through enacting ‘anticipatory’ initiatives (Martell, 2023: 84), regardless of the eventual outcome. As such these participants in prefiguration are both transformative and transforming subjects of society, whose fundamental role guarantees the democratic element of the transformation.

An example of a prefigurative society is found in Mexmûr. Newroz, the new year festival celebrated there every March, consists of overturning hierarchies and revolutionising attitudes towards death and life as a performance of ‘utopian social order’ (Rudi, 2018: 94) in which subjects can ‘imagine and place themselves’ (ibid: 110). Prefiguration is also embodied in the daily life of Cherani society, through regular bonfire gatherings, neighbourhood assemblies and council of elders which represent desired dynamics practiced in the here and now (Moura de Oliveira, 2023). These examples both involve invoking, performing and experiencing an idealised social order, which in turn produces subjects who can conceive of genuine alternatives and believe that they are possible.

Prefiguration has been criticised as inherently apolitical by the likes of Gramsci and seen to be potential distraction from true political goals in favour of achieving ‘private liberation’ (Smucker, 2014). This criticism opens up the potential to explore the political possibilities of prefiguration when the subject taking part in prefiguring a new society is a communal rather than individual one; exploring how a communally-based prefigurative project could lose the element of individualistic gain and reflect a societal potential for transformation.

Mutual Construction

Transformative processes are situated within the capitalist world system, and as such transformations occur in relation to this “other”, albeit in opposition (Moura de Oliveira, 2023). Indeed, agonistic conceptions of democracy highlight this struggle as fundamental to the creation of the democratic subject (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001), representing a dialectic of oppositional transformations. Yet the mutually dependent nature of society and subject transformation is rarely explored in the literature. Asenbaum (2023) proposes the democratic subject’s transformation as concurrent with the democratic transformation of society, and vice versa, focused on an individual subject with an inner transformation. However, the formation of the communal subject and its role in transforming society and the respective transformation of said subject is unexplored terrain in the study of radical democracy in theory and practice.

Knowledge Gap

Recent discourse around radical democracy and transformation is stuck on the question of how radical democracy can allow its democratic subjects the freedom to be transformed (Asenbaum, 2021 and 2023). Yet the radically democratic subject is not transformed alone, but through interaction with other subjects in society. This dynamic was highlighted by Hardt and Negri (2004) in their initial proposition for a radically democratic project, yet remains empirically under-explored. The field is also lacking empirical examples of the transformations of radically democratic subjects and societies in mutual ways, which could demonstrate the practical realities of their transformative freedom upon which to build theoretical standpoints. In this case, radically democratic transformation will be explored through the overturning of societal hierarchies, the

limitations to the prefiguration of alternatives, and the emphasis on communal subjects as agents of change.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter comprises an exploration of the methods used in this research project. It will be structured into three parts as follows: research methods, limitations and positionality.

Methods

The following section explores the various stages of data collection: sampling, recruiting and carrying out participant exchanges; examining archival data; and analysing videos, before considering the thematic analysis employed to make sense of the data.

The sampling and recruitment process for participant exchanges began with my own personal contacts in both societies. These contacts were asked to participate in exchanges themselves and prompted to suggest other potential participants, echoing snowball sampling. Participants were also contacted through publicly accessible email accounts or social media platforms. Identified participants were recruited through an initial email briefly outlining the project and asking if they would be interested in participating. A total of seven and nine participants were recruited respectively for Cherán and Mexmûr, resulting in an overall sixteen exchanges being carried out. The project aimed to reach as wide a scope as possible of members of each society, across age and gender ranges.

Online interviews and email exchanges were carried out with the recruited participants from Cherán and Mexmûr. Given the hard-to-reach nature of the societies, participants were given the choice of communicating through one or other of these options. In the case of online interviews, these were semi-structured individual conversations on Zoom lasting around one hour, with some basic questions used as starting points but with sufficient flexibility to allow conversations to flow in the direction of the key topics of interest for each participant. In the case of email exchanges, it was necessary to send clearer initial questions in order to stimulate the kind of responses desired from the participants, following broad themes but in some instances tailored to the specific participants and their situations. A Protonmail email address was used to exchange with participants to ensure the security of data.

Second, I examined data from the "Memoria Viva" archives from women's collective Fogata Kejtsitani in Cherán, Mexico.[2] These consist of audio archives from interviews carried out by members of the Fogata Kejtsitani collective with women in Cherán concerning their experiences as women in society. The archives are publicly accessible, but I nonetheless contacted the page manager to obtain consent prior to analysis.

Finally, I included data from a series of publicly accessible videos from YouTube channels connected to Cherán and Mexmûr ("Mercurial Terror" and "Tejidos de Colectivos Unitierra" in Cherán, and "Makhmour Refugee Camp" in Mexmûr) which each take different key elements of their towns' transformations to provide informative content including interviews with inhabitants. The latter two data sets from archives and

[2] Accessed at https://kejtsitani.wordpress.com/.

selected videos were included to expand and enrich the scope of data collection to ensure as wide a range of source material as possible.

In analysing the data I took inspiration from qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to draw out themes across the interviews, exchanges and archives. The process started with several readings of the data collected from participants before moving to an examination of the relationships, factors and linkages across data to construct some main themes which were also informed by concurrences with findings from my literature review. I then re-read the data with the themes in mind, making adjustments where necessary until I had a satisfactory structure, next moving on to explain and interpret the thematic data and build arguments from these findings.(Reeves, Peller, Goldman and Kitto, 2013). The addition of archival and video data was subsidiary to the planned participant exchanges with key themes already largely established before analysing the former, although their content was certainly given importance in the process; videos from Mexmûr, for example, helped to showcase the role of ecological transformation which was not largely absent from interviews.

My data analysis was thus situated within the boundaries of thematic analysis, but with an 'iterative and unstructured' approach inspired by ethnographic methodologies which include multiple types of data collection across participant exchanges, interviews and archival data (Reeves, Peller, Goldman and Kitto, 2013: 1365-7). The process of thematic data analysis and any resultant findings are dependent on my own ideas, intentions and beliefs. The notion of themes simply "emerging" from data in an autonomous way is problematic as it covers up how the researcher's expectations, preconceived ideas and reading of meaning into the data

influences the outcomes of data analysis. Thus the findings are a direct result of the researcher engaging with the data from their subjective position, informed by their exploration of literature. Braun, Clarke and Hayfield (2022: 3) challenge the idea that doing thematic analysis implies following a 'step-by-step approach', recommending a more reflexive angle to thematic analysis, which I attempted to employ. I was careful to look out for unexpected results or outcomes which contrasted with my assumptions, an example of which was the emphasis put on education as a transformed hierarchy from participants despite its limitedrole in the literature review I had already carried out.

Inspiration for the selection of which methods would best allow me to answer my research question came from papers including Dirik's (2022) "Stateless Citizenship," Habersang's (2022) "Utopia, Future Imaginations and Prefigurative Politics in the Indigenous Women's Movement in Argentina" and Käser's (2018) "Militant Femininity," all of which employ qualitative ethnographic research methods in attempt to construct a sense of the experiences of those participating in building alternative societies in order to contribute to sociological knowledge - without presenting these as prescriptive in any hegemonic, universal sense. Whilst my research is based on participant exchanges and archival data rather than the ethnographic fieldwork central to the above papers, they nonetheless inspired the perspective with which I approached the processes of data collection and analysis.

Limitations

Establishing relationships with participants and being able to observe the context provide valuable data in a research project like this one. For that reason, the project was initially envisioned through an ethnographic lens, in which I would have travelled to the regions to carry out fieldwork, ideally staying in each location for some time. However, the instability in and around both regions, confirmed by the FCDO's advising against all but essential travel necessarily implied a revision and expansion of the methods of data collection. The absence of fieldwork meant a shift away from collecting so-called "thick", descriptive data which 'richly captures the human experience' towards methods which would allow me to focus on collecting less holistic and 'embedded' "thinner" data from my case studies based on exchanges and existing archival interviews and videos (Madsbjerg and Heatherington, 2016).

The revised methods consisted of individual interviews, exchanges or conversations plus archival data. Further, redirecting contact with participants to an online call or email exchange rather than face-to-face encounters sometimes presented obstacles to comprehension, as details could be easily lost or meanings misconstrued given that the conversations were not held face to face and either the participant or the researcher was not communicating in their native language. However, the shift away from fieldwork had a positive impact in prompting me to look for new avenues from which to collect data. For example, the archival interviews from Cherán and archival videos from both case studies were an afterthought intended to add to the data set but in reality contributed valuable data which otherwise may not have been deemed necessary to include. Further, this method of data collection awarded a different level of agency to the participants over what they wanted to say, and perhaps a greater control

of the narrative; there was more emphasis on their own explanations and interpretations, and less space for me as a researcher to make observations about anything other than the content of our exchanges.

My distance from the participants during data collection, whilst potentially a drawback, in reality created unexpected, valuable situations. For example, following an initial email exchange with a contact to recruit participants, this contact took the process into their own hands and conducted three interviews without my prior knowledge, recording them and sending me the audio files. This resulted in an interesting dynamic in which a participant became both interviewer and interpreter, explaining to their interviewees what they thought various questions meant and steering them to answer in certain ways. Despite the unexpected nature of these interviews, they provided fascinating insights into how the topics and questions of the research project were interpreted and understood by members of the society being investigated, even highlighting ways in which the lines of questioning needed to be less academic and direct in certain cases. Whilst this situation was born out of the limitation of my distance from participants during exchanges, in reality it provided a unique possibility for observing and understanding participants' relationships to my research topics.

Although Cherán and Mexmûr both represent hard-to-reach populations, they each had their own unique challenges in terms of recruiting participants. In Cherán, it was easy to get in contact with potential participants who expressed interest in joining the study but then failed to respond to further attempts to contact them and did not eventually participate, meaning that fewer participants were recruited than initially intended. In Mexmûr, on the other hand, the nature of my prior contacts and further

participants recruited through snowball sampling, as well as the perception there of who a researcher would be interested in speaking to, led me to exchange exclusively with people with official roles in the system, different from my original idea of speaking mostly to civilians. The reality of data collection thus required flexibility and an adjustment of initial theoretical expectations.

The archival interviews, which add a valuable contextual, historical and broader range focus to the data collection, are limited by an imbalance in the data between the two case studies: there are no equivalent archival interviews for Mexmûr, only for Cherán. However, the positive side of this limitation is that the participant exchanges from Mexmûr outnumber those from Cherán, and as such the inclusion of archival interviews from the latter site helps to redress the overall balance of data for the case studies.

The recruitment process employed snowball sampling due to my prior contacts in the areas and lack of ability to travel there and recruit via other methods. This method has been described as located 'at the margin of research practice' (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), as its findings are not generalisable. Creswell (2005), however, points out that the 'intent' when employing qualitative research methods is usually 'not to generalise a population' but rather 'to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon,' in which case snowball sampling can still provide valuable data, especially in the case of 'identifying and contacting hidden populations' (Atkinson and Flint, 2001).

Snowball sampling as a recruitment practice is certainly limited by its dependence on a network of people starting from my initial contacts, rendering the latter beholden to their primary participants to recruit further participants and as such risking

dead ends or the recruitment of repeatedly similar profiles, and a resultant dataset lacking in diversity. Often, primary contacts become quasi-research assistants onsite for the faraway researcher who cannot know the dynamics between participants or how they are contacted by the initial contacts. Rather than attempting to cover up the repercussions of these outlined limitations on the quality of the data collected, I have chosen to make the reader aware of their existence, and tried to mitigate their impact by including a range of sources for data analysis such as the archival videos and interviews.

Researcher Positionality

The positionality statement, as the moment in which the researcher recognises and expands on their situation, context and ideas before carrying out and presenting a research project, is an essential step for dispelling the idea of a neutral or objective observer in the social sciences (Pillow, 2003). Yet all too often this section becomes a mere box-ticking exercise, an opportunity for self-indulgence, or even a kind of 'catharsis' for the researcher to justify their results whilst washing their hands of any responsibility (ibid). In theory, positionality statements exist to highlight the limitations of every researcher as necessarily subjective. Gani (2024: 8) however argues that they paradoxically work to the contrary, serving to restore 'authority, reliability, and an air of objectivity.' This becomes clear as we examine who positionality statements 'stand to benefit': the researcher, and not the "researched" (ibid: 6). In a conscious effort to not fall into the same trap, I present myself as a white woman raised with Western

cosmology, who has become increasingly interested both personally and academically in exploring alternative societies which challenge the current hegemonic paradigm, with a personal perspective on the research topic formed from my context, experiences, knowledge and knowledge gaps.

I have spent considerable time living in sites carving out autonomy on varying scales and across different continents and geopolitical realities. I have come to know of the case studies explored here (Cherán, Mexico and Mexmûr, Kurdistan) as well as many others through friends, travels, discussions, and books. I firmly believe that the only hope in mitigating the most 'formidable obstacles' of today's society - 'catastrophic climate shifts' and 'brutal authoritarianism' (Milstein, 2020: 7) - will be through the development of critical, creative alternatives and as such my exploration is both hopeful and practical, with a sense of urgency as well as an emphasis on joyful resistance.

However, the experiments I look to in inspiration and admiration are almost always sites of intense struggle. The subjects constructing them were generally moved to create such alternatives due to the unbearability of their previous situations of oppression, violence, ecological destruction, etc; and often risked or even gave their lives to sustain the projects. I therefore do not wish to romanticise these societies, however utopic they may appear to the outsider. If I benefit academically and personally through contact with these sites and the innovations and ideas produced there, I must also acknowledge and pay respect to the sacrifices made in their names. I also want to acknowledge that I have previously been generously hosted and/or welcomed into homes, centres and communities connected with struggles in Cherán and other sites in Mexico, and especially the Kurdish Freedom Movement across Europe and Kurdistan.

I further wish to clarify the spirit in which this research will be undertaken. As an advocate for the development of alternative societies centred around a democratic, free, and communal life, I wish to do research in solidarity with those creating such models. This does not mean blind acceptance and appraisal, but rather taking a constructively critical approach. This project is not concerned with discovering hidden secrets in Cherán and Mexmûr, or determining the veracity of their discourse; but is rather interested in how those involved in the construction of a new society transformed and transform their societies; to what extent they are able to subvert the hierarchies of surrounding systems; and what the limitations are to prefiguring their ideal futures.

Whilst I am (to varying levels) a speaker of the dominant languages in both case study sites, I am not a native speaker, nor am I from either region. With participants from Mexmûr, I was assisted by a translator where necessary. These conditions undoubtedly limited and shaped my understanding of people's experiences and realities. Further, as I was asking questions around people's feelings and perceptions of things, nuances may have been missed due to the differing cultural contexts and cosmologies in which we (researcher and participants) have been raised.

Finally, I am aware of the potentially extractivist nature of academic research, in that social researchers 'can be miners engaged in the extraction of a precious resource' (Gorman, 2024). Often, people and communities being "studied" in social sciences are expected to give up their time, share information and facilitate subsequent exchanges - all for no obvious benefit. The figure of the western academic suggests legitimacy, enabling participant recruitment and influencing the nature of interactions. This position is one of privilege and power, however much we try to distance ourselves from the

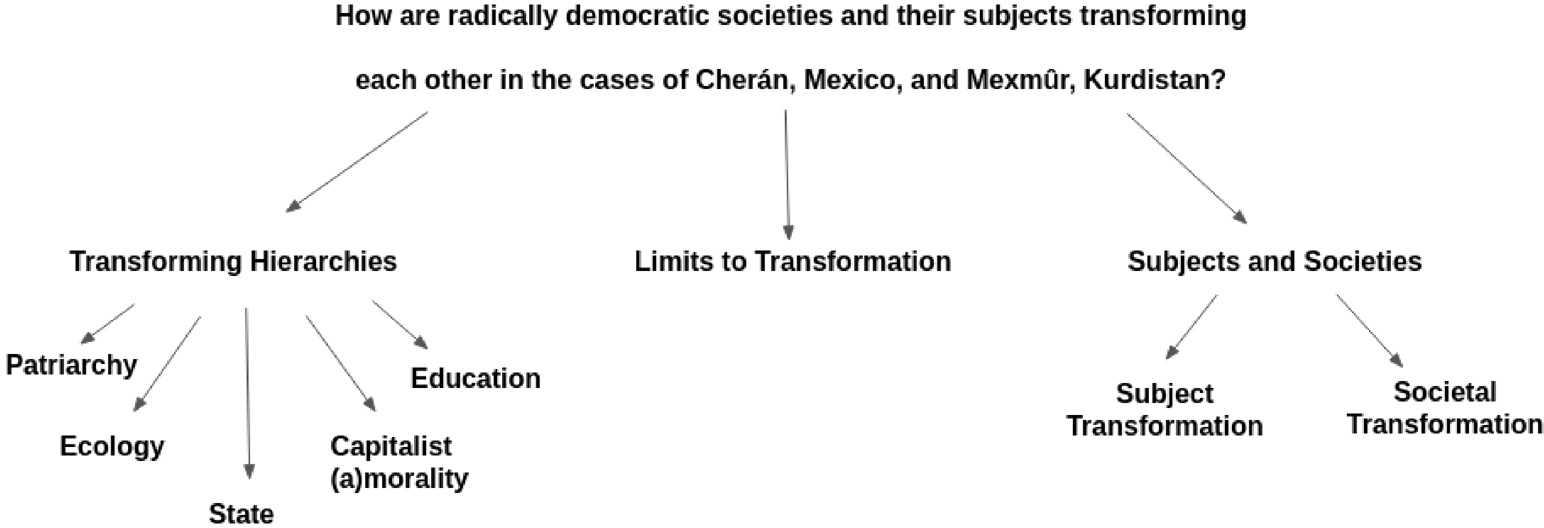
colonialist paradigm; and it carries great responsibility which I am conscious of bearing. I have tried to incorporate principles such as accountability to the case study communities and an informed ethics of care from the “Designing Anti-Extractivist Research” (Gorman, 2024), and intend to share copies (physical or virtual) of the research findings with community libraries in Cherán and Mexmûr.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter outlines the findings from the thematic analysis of exchanges with participants, archival data and videos. Of the sixteen exchanges with participants in Cherán (7) and Mexmûr (9), nine were live video exchanges, four were written email exchanges, and three were recorded voice responses; seven interviews from the "Mujeres por la Memoria" archives in Cherán and two archival videos each from channels in Cherán and Mexmûr were additionally examined. The participants from Cherán were a mix of ordinary *comuneras/comuneros* (community members) and people with "*cargos*" (responsibilities, positions in governing structures); notably even those with *cargos* often self-defined as *comuneras/comuneros*. On the other hand, the participants from Mexmûr consisted solely of people working in the structures of society, from the municipality, to academies, to women's councils. This creates a potential disparity between participants of the two case studies, also due to the context and focus of the two societies, which will be explored further below.

Whilst this research project was framed as an investigation into radically democratic societies and their transformations, not one of the participants used the term "radical democracy" to describe their society, system or ideology. Indeed, many participants simply referred to "our" system or way of doing things, although in Mexmûr there was also a tendency to reference Democratic Confederalism. Yet both Cherán and Mexmûr exhibit attempts to implement the features of radical democracy outlined in the literature review. The scope of this project is not to debate the extent to which either society can be considered a radically democratic one; in this regard the findings speak

for themselves. Here I follow Dirik (2022) and Komun Academy (2018) in translating or interpreting the concept of democracy in the KFM's ideology as radical. Radical democracy as a concept should be understood functionally; it is useful as long as it is understood as a means of recognising and grouping societies with certain elements, allowing us to explore their similarities and divergences, and not as a dogmatic, definitive term.



Grouping of themes from data analysis

The findings are organised according to eight themes focusing on elements of radically democratic transformation in Cherán and Mexmûr. Each theme is broken down into three subsections: findings from Cherán, findings from Mexmûr, and a summary of the most salient elements from a comparative angle across the two case studies. The first five themes derive from hierarchies from mainstream society which the case studies are rejecting, overturning and transforming. These stood out in the data and are in most

cases corroborated in the literature on key elements of radical democracy, as such providing five clear themes through which to explore the transformation of society: patriarchy, ecology, state, capitalist (a)morality and education.

Patriarchy

In the investigation of ways in which Cherán and Mexmûr are transforming state-centric hierarchies, the patriarchal dominance of woman by man in material, cultural and psychological realms emerged as a prominent example. Women's liberation featured as a key element of radically democratic society in the literature review, mirrored here by the importance placed on the theme in the case studies.

Cherán

The findings concerning the transformation of the patriarchy in Cherán are based on the seven (all women) interviews from the "Mujeres por la Memoria" archives. Of the seven exchanges with Cherani participants for this project, none mentioned the uprooting of male hierarchy in Cherani society towards a liberation of women as a key element; although it should be pointed out that only two of those interviewed were women. In contrast, in the archival interviews (which focus explicitly on women's perspectives in Cherán), women's increasing participation in Cherani society and their leading role in the uprising which facilitated the transformation of Cherán is emphasised across the board. The interviewees largely stressed the way that women are increasingly taken seriously in Cherani society and seen as necessary contributors with

valuable opinions in a tangible way since the uprising. One participant (CIA1) stated: "Now we've seen a great change, no? A great change in that in order to carry out any activity in the community, women's voices and opinions are now taken into account." The same interviewee stressed that women now "have to be part of the Council" [of 10 Elders, the maximum decisional authority in Cherán which is elected by direct assembly every 3 years] (CIA1), ensuring women play a role in the key decisions in Cherani society.

Further responses highlighted how women now work in spaces previously considered to be exclusively male realms, such as the *Ronda Comunitaria* (community defence unit) and the tree nurseries. The same participant took this analysis further, emphasising how the labelling of these supposedly "men's jobs" twists the fact that "in principle, women have always been helping in the fields" (CIA1); this implies a deeper awareness of the obscuring of woman's active historical role by the patriarchy and a desire to of reclaim areas of society for women in the present as well as narratives of the past.

Mexmûr

Across the exchanges with participants in Mexmûr, women's liberation was touched on by everyone without fail; the de-rooting of the patriarchy stands out as the most prominent example of the town's transformation of hierarchies from surrounding statist society. Indeed, all the nine interviewees, proposed because of their positions in the structures of governance or society in the town, were women, which speaks for itself to the extent of women's participation in Mexmûr.

Yet what the participants stressed above all with regards to attempts to transform patriarchal society were not more superficial elements like representation and participation, but rather the efforts to create real autonomy for women. First, one Mexmûri participant (MP2) chose to highlight how in Europe women "working because they have to" is considered a step forward for women's liberation; but in contrast in Mexmûri society, Kurdish women "are trying to create culture, society, [and] creative approaches to raising children, agriculture" and in other areas. Working "with emotion [and] passion" for things they believe in, not out of obligation and in servitude to bosses and systems, is perceived as the real women's liberation in Mexmûr.

All women involved in the town's structures are linked to the women-only *Ishtar Council,* which is independent from the (mixed gender) general people's council and deals exclusively with problems "with women, between women, from men to women" (MP1). Further women's autonomous structures include the *Women's Academy,* which is open to all women for education depending on their needs, with a focus on trying to "empower men and women on how to create a democratic family" and "live together equally" (MP2); the *Women's Trust,* which works to help women obtain "financial independence" to provide for themselves and their families (MP7); and finally the *Jineoloji* Committee, which researches the history, culture and morals of women hidden by male domination throughout "5000 years" and educates wider society on these topics (MP5).

The latter represents an attempt to rewrite gender and women's perspective into the democratic society, along with the method of enforcing shared leadership roles and ensuring that women's affairs are dealt with by and for women. This method reflects the

radically democratic line of scholars such as Phillips (1991), who see the rewriting of gender into democracy as essential to liberate women in society. This contrasts with Mouffe's (1992) perspective, who instead asserts that women's liberation depends on removing gender entirely from democratic systems, although it is hard to envision how Mouffe imagines putting this into practice in reality. Mexmûri society has taken clear, practical steps to introduce and prioritise women's perspective in their democratic system.

Whilst participants stressed the role of autonomous women's structures in the liberation of women from patriarchal dominance, the idea runs even deeper in Mexmûri society. Women's freedom is one of three fundamental pillars of society in Öcalan's *Democratic Confederalist* paradigm which Mexmûri society strives to embody; the others being ecology and democratic nation. Öcalan famously considers women to be the "oldest colony" (Al-Ali and Kaser, 2020: 227)**,** and patriarchy the most deeply-rooted example of hierarchical hegemony in society. Indeed, one participant stressed that women in Mexmûr feel responsible not only for their own freedom, but "freedom for women in Afghanistan, and around the world*"* (MP7). Another interviewee observed how men from outside Mexmûr occasionally bring their wives or mothers to hospital there: "they respect the Mexmûri women but treat their own very badly, they see that the women here command respect, they have freedom and power" (MP2). This gives a striking insight into the extent to which the patriarchal hierarchy which dominates in the surrounding society is turned on its head in Mexmûr.

Women, Ideological Bearers

The most notable parallel between the transformation of patriarchal hegemony straddling discourse and practice in Cherán and Mexmûr is an ideological one. A Cherani source (CIA1) 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, and its continuation through the next generations, onto women's shoulders. The interviewee (CIA1) went on to say that "it's something that you [as a woman] are defending, that you are valuing, that you are taking care of, and other people don't do it," making clear her perception of women's ideological responsibility in Cherani society.

On the other hand, Mexmûri participants mentioned the dominance of women in both the town's *peymangeh* (centre for higher education), where female students outnumber male students twenty eight to two, and the general building of culture. This contrasts heavily with mainstream society outside of Mexmûr in which "the men make culture" and "the women stay at home" (MP4). The Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP)[3] closure of the road to Hewlêr (Erbil)[4] where many women previously went to work means that women are now largely unable to leave the camp, whilst men out of necessity seek jobs further afield, in Mosul or Baghdad. As such, women remain longer within the Mexmûri system, with more time and opportunities 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 (MP4).

[3] Ruling political party in Başur (Iraqi Kurdistan)
[4] Capital of Başur (Iraqi Kurdistan)

Although less explicitly stated than in Cherán, women in Mexmûr seem to increasingly embody the position of ideological bearers of their movement and their system's ideals, and take responsibility for furthering these. 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 job, overtly or otherwise. The trend of women either positioning themselves explicitly or naturally adopting the role of ideological bearer reflects elements of the literature on women's liberation in radical democracy, such as Habersang (2022)'s work on the Argentinian *Buen Vivir* movement in which women are 'knowledge-providers' who 'prefigure alternative futures.' On the other hand, the idea of radical democratic societies heralding a 'new matriarchy' (Werlhof, 2019: 255) is not explicitly corroborated by the findings from Cherán and Mexmûr, where the focus centres on the destruction of the patriarchal hierarchy and the liberation of women.

In Cherán, archival interviews present this dynamic through the lens of increasing women's participation in society, such as in positions previously considered unfit for women, and the taking into consideration of women's voices and opinions. In Mexmûr, however, the transformation is happening at a more profound level. Women discuss their quest to unearth their own histories, to rediscover their contributions to society, and to lead the ideological struggle for freedom, playing out in material terms through autonomous women's institutions and academies in the town. The transforming of the patriarchal hierarchy thus has a key place in Cherani and Mexmûri societies, if at differing depths.

Ecology

The second hierarchy in which our case studies demonstrate transformations of hierarchies is that of the ecological dominance by humans of nature. The relationship between humans, considering themselves to be apart from and above all other life, and nature, seen as an inert set of resources to be controlled, exploited or destroyed at will, is a hierarchical one of domination. As explored in the literature review, Bookchin demonstrates how all the systems of hierarchy present in mainstream statist society are a direct cause of the ecological crisis (Brincat and Gerber, 2018). As such, radically democratic societies like Cherán and Mexmûr must necessarily engage with and transform the ecological hierarchies in order to transform society at large.

Cherán

If women's liberation takes an indisputably central position in the exchanges with Mexmûri participants, the equivalent theme for interviewees in Cherán, and the most prominent example of hierarchy transformation there, is undeniably the relationship to ecology and the natural world. Indeed, the impetus for the 2011 uprising which led subsequently to the transformation of Cherani society and development of an alternative structure came from the attacks not on people, but on the town's forests and water sources. "All water is sacred to us but this water is sacred to our community… it made us very mad," commented someone in an archival video from Cherán (CVA1), showcasing the importance of the environmental and ecological factors in stimulating the uprising.

The overturning of this hierarchical relationship has roots in the beliefs and culture of the P'urhépecha of Cherán, whose rapport with the natural world traditionally looked very different to that of statist society, with an interviewee (CIA2) from Cherán's archives wondering "when did we begin to disrespect [nature] so much? Just as our grandparents [or ancestors] didn't want…" From Cherani accounts of post-2011 society, there is a renewed emphasis on returning to the dynamic of "asking the forest's permission to enter, or if you need a plant for medicinal purposes or food" (CIA2), putting the non-human natural world on an equal or even superior level. Another archival interviewee (CIA3) highlighted "the power/potency of nature" through reference to traditional healers in Cherán who use medicinal plants, something corroborated by an interview with a doctor (CP1) who stressed how he "shares his activities with traditional healers… respecting each other and sometimes helping each other." This contrasts with the mainstream societal paradigm in which connection with nature, whether spiritual, medicinal or otherwise, is suppressed in favour of both the pharmaceutical industry and extractivist anti-environmental policies.

Several participants highlighted the significant role of the *Ronda Comunitaria* and *guardabosques* (forest guards) in protecting the forest and preventing "the plunder of timber" (CP1). Examples of ecologically-minded policies in Cherán include the requirement of a permission from the council to cut down trees for heating homes; whilst one interviewee (CP1) reported a few "complaints of corruption" from members of society concerning this rule, the majority perceived this role with "great respect and admiration" (CP2). Another participant (CP6), member of the communal forest nursery which works to replant deforested areas of Cherán, commented that she feels

“responsible for the forest, for nothing more than the forest,” and wanted above all to communicate one clear message which demonstrates the prioritisation of the ecological agenda for Cherán’s inhabitants: “to the people that come to cut down a pine tree: cut down one, and plant two! [que corten uno que planten dos!].”

Workers in Cherán’s communal forest nursery: https://es.globalvoices.org/2015/04/06/cheran-el-pueblo-purepecha-que-instauro-un-autogobierno-con-exito-en-mexico/.

Mexmûr

The theme of ecological transformation is found in a few participant accounts from Mexmûr, as well as featuring centrally in an archival video. One interviewee briefly described the inclusion of lessons on ecology for students of the *peymangeh,* covering above all “the ecology of the camp …[and] gaining knowledge of/for the camp” (MP6).

The harsh realities of Mexmûr's geography and climate, far from the camp inhabitants' native villages, were repeatedly cited, and importance was given to studying "how to improve" the environment there (MP6). Another participant stressed the difference between Mexmûr and neighbouring lands due to the "cultural difference" of Mexmûris not simply accepting their fate in a barren desert but rather working to change things by planting trees, managing water storage and introducing permaculture techniques (MP4). Mexmûr is considered "a paradise" compared to the "other side" thanks to the ecological responsibilisation of its society (MP4).

On an ideological level, ecology represents "one of the roots of our (Democratic Confederalist) paradigm" (MVA1), as noted in the previous section. This is emphasised in one archival video, with the speaker stating that "if we look into the oppressive system, the most attacked field is nature itself" (MVA1). The criticism of mainstream society's relationship to the natural world is clear: 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 (MVA1). The video provided a further practical insight into permaculture initiatives in the camp, which are carried out thanks to Mexmûris carrying out research to understand the best methods to cultivate, store water and gather seeds in a desert environment. Another archival video showcased the idea that "people learn everything from nature," highlighting 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)* (MVA2).

Small-scale cultivation in Mexmûr:
https://lacuna.org.uk/migration/joy-grief-and-resilience-in-makhmour-refugee-camp/.

The Natural Environment as Home

Two connected points stand out in relation to Cherani and Mexmûri society's attempts at transforming the mainstream ecological hierarchy. First, the elaboration of ecology as a fundamental ideological pillar is more sophisticated in Mexmûr, and yet this did not translate into a corresponding importance awarded to the theme in participants' accounts; whereas in Cherán, the ecological principles of caring for and defending the natural world are seemingly expressed spontaneously by all interviewees, although the terminology used is less explicit. Second, the impression that Cheranis feel both "responsible" for (CP6) and a sense of belonging to their forests, almost certainly

rooted in pre-colonial P'urhépecha belief systems, contrasts with the relationship of Mexmûris to the land they are currently on.

One Mexmûri participant expressed how "everyone wants to go home to Bakur" and their mountain villages (MP3), a far cry from Mexmûr's desert climate, whilst an archival video featured the phrase "I miss my motherland" (MVA2). This difference in comprehension of the land and environment as the permanent home of one's society, as in Cherán's case, versus a foreign, temporary site in which Mexmûr's inhabitants feel they "are not secure" (MP9), impacts the extent to which it is a possibility and a priority to overturn ecological hierarchies. The sense of indigeneity to one's environment observed in Cherán is a fundamental part of seeing it as an equal, wanting to care for it and not exploit it; this runs counter to the reality of the refugeehood of Mexmûris, which appears to have somewhat limited the development of a transformed ecological relationship.

State

The next hierarchy featured in the data concerns the statist hierarchy itself. As explored earlier, radically democratic societies have to grapple with the nation-state system as a fundamentally undemocratic one, and as such develop alternatives (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012). The statist hierarchy is multi-faceted and involves many areas of society, although here the focus is placed on the most prominent aspects cited in participant exchanges: decisional power, guarded by the state in election competitions between political elites and top-down government structures without the

direct participation of ordinary people; violence, of which the state's total control is represented by armies and police forces; and political agency, which the statist system monopolises through its sole validation of agents acting within state structures.

Cherán

The transformation of the statist hierarchy of decisional power was discussed prominently by Cherani participants. Firstly, a speaker in an archival video (CVA2) described Cherán's system 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 the organ of the people (Fabregas, 2023). A participant (CP6) further distanced Cherani society from the statist ideas of top-down decision-making and representation by the political elites and parties that "we reject," stating that "we no longer have a government, but usos y costumbres (customs and traditions - indigenous customary law)."

Example of a *fogata* in Cherán: https://piedepagina.mx/el-costo-de-cuidar-la-tierra/.

Practical quotidian decision-making in Cherán is structured around weekly local assemblies in each of the town's four neighbourhoods, with a general assembly once every three years to decide the next members of the various councils responsible for different areas of society (CP1). An archival video (CVA1) from Cherán explained the development of this system: during the 2011 uprising, *fogatas* (small bonfires) were used as defensive measures against the enemy 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" (CVA1). This evolved into more structured local assemblies over the years, no longer necessarily centred around the *fogata,* but reflecting traditional P'urhépecha customs like the Council of Elders. An interviewee (CP1) described the assembly protocol: 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." Another participant (CP3) added that Cheranis "know that the participation of all is necessary for the assemblies," reflecting an awareness of the importance of everyone taking active responsibility and sharing their opinions in order for the directly democratic system to work.

The statist monopoly on violence and its transformation also featured prominently amongst Cherani accounts of society. At the centre of this discourse was the town's community defensive force, the *Ronda Comunitaria,* discussed earlier for its role in guarding the forests. The *Ronda* for one participant (CP6) "is for the defence of the people," with another (CP1) remarking that it "protects us 24 hours a day, by day we live

protected and at night we sleep peacefully." A further interviewee (CP3) 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" (CP3).

Indeed, the *Ronda* consists of women and men from Cherán who live in Cherán and form part of its social structures, rather than an elite, disinterested force which is separate from the ordinary people; this is evidently perceived by Cheranis.

Ronda Comunitaria members in Cherán: https://subversiones.org/archivos/128624.

Further, the *Ronda Comunitaria* and their forest guard counterparts do not hold a monopoly over the use of armed force in Cherán. One interviewee (CVA2) described how “if something happens in the town, everyone is ready to defend themselves.” Cheranis, having already lived through the 2011 uprising in which they stood up to, and defeated, the invading loggers, know themselves to be capable of armed self-defence when necessary. A final observation surrounding the hierarchy of violence and its transformation in Cherán came from an interviewee (CP3) who 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 and peace which reign inside the town, unlike the surrounding territories, reinforces how Cheranis have made their society less violent and safer by removing the institutions of hierarchical structured force and introducing a defensive guard for and of the people.

The third area of statist hierarchy transformation which emerged through data collection concerns political agency and (in)dependency. The indigenous P’urhépecha people and their culture 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 potential source of resources and validation: one participant (CP4) mentioned having to “ask for [material] support” from the government, whilst another (CP5) was keen to stress that “it’s not all about asking things from the government.” A further participant (CP1) 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; if the government allows them to pursue autonomy whilst still providing resources, it is unsurprising that Cheranis would be generally supportive of this status quo. The extent to which said “dealings with the government” (CP1) condition the autonomy of Cherani society, however, will be explored later on.

Mexmûr

Across the globe in Mexmûr, the statist hierarchy exercised through decisional power is transformed into a system of local assemblies, described by a participant (MP1): 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. Another interviewee stated that there is “no hierarchy” in Mexmûr apart from the “hevserok [co-mayor - one woman and one man] leadership system” (MP9).

The discourse around transforming the statist hierarchical monopoly of violence in Mexmûr is complex. 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,[5] and the continued threat of Daesh’ presence in neighbouring villages, renders the camp’s internal security and external defence sensitive topics which were not openly discussed in participant

[5] 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.

exchanges. 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.

The key area in which Mexmûri society is transforming the statist hierarchy is that of political agency. As refugees, they lack recognition by any state in the form of IDs or passports - they are citizens of no state. Dirik (2022) 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. One participant 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 get resources from them (MP1). A somewhat contradictory idea came up across data collection in Mexmûr: that Mexmûris reject refugeehood for political autonomy and the creation of their own system and attempts to "improve ourselves" (MP1), yet simultaneously employ their identity as refugees whom the government should "protect" (MP9). Mexmûri society rejects "assimilation" in favour of an autonomous system (MP3) but continues to petition Baghdad for help, as in the case of needing greenhouses to grow food, demonstrating a strategic employment of identity from Mexmûris.

Political Agency from Outside the State

The transformation of statist hierarchies is evident across Cherán and Mexmûr, although differing elements stand out for each case study. In Cherán, this was reflected particularly in the transformation of the statist monopoly of violence and force into a community protective initiative of and for the people which provides safety and security

for the town. In Mexmûr, this was exemplified by the transformation of political agency from a statist hierarchical imposition to something in the hands of the people. Both sites share in the transformative shifting of decisional power away from a top-down statist approach towards popular horizontal assemblies and direct democracy.

The most striking element brought out by a comparison of how statist hierarchies are being transformed in Cherán and Mexmûr is that of the position of indigenous peoples and refugees: as both groups are already situated somewhat outside the state system, they are able to use this positionality to develop an autonomous political agency which doesn't depend on the state for validation. This confirms the idea explored in the literature, elaborated by Dinerstein (2015) and Dirik (2022), of indigenous people and refugees as advantageously located to conceive of and realise alternatives to the current hierarchical systems. 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.

Mexmûr camp and surrounding mountains: https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/16092024.

Capitalist (A)Morality

Next, Cherán and Mexmûr are both attempting to transform the hierarchy of the capitalist (a)morality of mainstream society. The guiding principles of capitalism, which can be considered an amoral system, are represented by competition, expansion and greed; these dominate as societal ends in the global system. This emerged as an important theme across data collection, but was conspicuously absent from the panorama of features of radically democratic societies present in the literature on radically democratic societies.

Cherán

The most fundamental element of transformation of the capitalist moral hierarchy in Cherán relates to the unity of the people and their obligations to one another. One interviewee (CP3) highlighted "the mutual respect between all people" in Cherán, "and their [personal] qualities," as outstanding features of Cherani society, whilst a participant in an archival video (CVA2) commented that "these days the whole town takes care of each other, everyone cares for everyone [todos se cuidan entre todos]." This caring, communal ethos amongst Cheranis, embodying the opposite of capitalist ideals, is demonstrated "when there are fires": "everyone gets together and goes to help put out the fire(s)" (CP6). Another interviewee (CP4) discussed feeling "grateful" to her society for everything it does for her and her children, demonstrating an awareness of, and wish to not take for granted, the ethical culture under construction in Cherán.

A section of an archival video (CVA1) explained how the link between an ethical society and defence against the attacks of capitalism depends on creating and maintaining a traditional, communal “culture,” which is what will “save us” and ensure the “union of the *comuneros* in Cherán.” Without this ethical culture, “there will be no protection” for such autonomous societies (CVA1). In Cherán, the building up of a culture with clear morals takes as a reference point the pre-capitalist indigenous P’urhépecha society, with its emphasis on a way of life ‘strongly linked to the “spirit” of each season,’ following principles of collectivity and unity (CDI, 2015: 33). Indeed, the history of the P’urhépecha locality demonstrates a propensity for struggle (ibid: 61), and a rejection of an eternal imposed system: a participant (CP1) highlighted that as Cheranis “we know that systems wear away” and are continually improved and replaced by new generations, but the key feature is the “common objective” of the people which aims at building a better society (CP7).

The maintenance of indigenous customs and duties which keep the town running and the community alive is linked to the creation of a transformed, moralistic society in Cherán. The knowledge of belonging to a P’urhépecha tradition motivates Cheranis to “accept cargos and commissions” through a “moral obligation to carry them out,” as one interviewee explained (CP1). These duties can be delegated to any *comunera* or *comunero*, who can in turn “refuse”; “whoever refuses” is not “punished,” but can be “stigmatised in the community as someone who lacks the will to carry out” the necessary duties for Cherani society (CP1). Another participant (CP5) embodied the moral attitude which the people of Cherán are trying to promote: “I was entrusted with a job and I have to be responsible for that.”

Mexmûr

Participant exchanges in Mexmûr suggest that the attempted transformation of capitalist amorality into an ethical society is an explicit goal towards which Mexmûris consciously strive. One interviewee (MP9) explained how life in the camp is organised in accordance with the KCK system (KCK-Info, 2024) around three basic units - economic cooperatives, communes, and academies - promoting a culture of mutual aid and satisfying everyone's needs, in antithesis to capitalist competition, expansion and profit-hunting. She stressed how "as Kurds we are communal," and so the system in Mexmûr has been created "according to our morals and our culture," rather than those of the hegemonic capitalist society (MP9). Another participant cautioned that "many people" in Mexmûr are still affected by capitalist culture, and it can be difficult to overcome this (MP2), but that the continuation of communal Kurdish traditions and new efforts to build an ethical society rooted in Öcalan's paradigm persist.

Inhabitants of Mexmûr taking care of one another in material ways also stands out in data collection, with an interviewee explaining how people feel "morally obliged to help" the poor people in the camp because as a small place, they "all know each other and can't leave people poor"; although there is a desire for poor people to become "autonomous" and not depend on help (MP1). The familial ties and shared heritage means that "those with more resources help those without," and as such "people don't get rich here," but no one is left hungry or sleeping on the streets (MP1), in a stark contrast to capitalist societies.

Radical Responsibility

The discussion around Cherán and Mexmûr transforming the hegemonic hierarchy of capitalist amorality into societies with ethical aims does not in either case implicate the economic realities of the capitalist paradigm, which certainly persist in the lives of inhabitants of both towns. Rather, the transformation highlighted by participants of the case studies in relation to capitalism relates to the governing, guiding morals of the systems. Interviewees in both Cherán and Mexmûr reported a focus on mutual aid and care, referring to ancestral traditions and familial ties in both cases. The societies emphasise everyone taking responsibility for problems which affect the whole town, be they fires or hungry people. The wellbeing which in capitalist hegemony is sold as an egotistical consumerist practice is lived in Cherán and Mexmûr as a community-wide ethical principle in which the important unit is the group, not the individual.

Education

The final hierarchical transformation to be explored concerns education. This theme follows on from the discussion of how Cherán and Mexmûr are transforming the morals of their respective societies, in that education there includes teaching and learning the ethical principles of one's culture, rather than just neutral facts and empirical knowledge. The educational hierarchy in which teachers and academic institutions bearing objective truths dominate students' instinctive curiosity and other forms of knowing and learning is subject to transformation in our case studies. As with the previous theme, transforming education was scarcely present in the literature on key

elements of radical democracy, yet plays an important role in the empirical reality of the transformed society as a whole in our case studies.

Cherán

On paper in Cherán, the educational system has not changed much since the 2011 uprising and societal transformation: schools are still under the jurisdiction of state authority, and whilst some attempts have been made to introduce P'urhépecha language lessons into the curriculum, the results are seemingly minimal thus far. Whilst records of educational transformation were absent from exchanges with participants, a different story emerges from the video archives. One contributor (CVA2) described the youth of today as "more schooled" and therefore "more capable of speaking" and "defending the town/people [pueblo]." She attributed this to the school of life and experience which the younger generations lived firsthand through the struggle to liberate and defend Cherán and develop an alternative system, as well as "the experience of the elders" which is passed down to the youth in unofficial ways outside of schools, such as around fogatas (CVA2). Whilst the formal educational system remains seemingly untransformed, alternative educational opportunities in Cherán outside of institutional structures are perceived as increasing significantly since the uprising.

Mexmûr

In Mexmûr, the view of transformation of the conventional educational hierarchy which emerges from participant exchanges is striking. Two fundamental educational principles guide all the institutions in Mexmûr: first, that everyone is permanently "both

students and teachers" (MP2), corroborating Dirik's findings of the emphasis on 'enabling students to be teachers in the classes' in Rojava (2022a: 38); and second, that instruction and research is centred around the needs of society. A participant from an academy in Mexmûr presented their perspective on education: it should be "free for everyone" and "always open to new ideas," with no limitations (MP2). Indeed, "shepherds and university graduates alike" are welcome and "we can learn under a tree" (MP2). For this participant, the difference with conventional education stems not from how the system works, but "the ideology behind it" in which educational institutions don't see themselves as providers of knowledge in a one-way direction, but rather "want to receive and give education" (MP2). Indeed, if someone from the camp requests education on a topic about which academy members are not informed, "they study it themselves" then pass the knowledge on, demonstrating a horizontal approach not only to teaching but also the very topics of instruction (MP2).

Another interviewee (MP6) from the *peymangeh* explained how the student-teacher hierarchy is overturned. All members of the academy take turns on a rota to be responsible for "cleaning, making tea, serving guests" and even preparing the breakfast that is shared by students, staff and teachers alike before classes (MP6). The peymangeh does not use exams to grade students, but rather teachers are responsible for ensuring that everyone is "listening" and engaging throughout the lessons (MP6). The participant described how she herself attended a state college and compares this experience with Mexmûr: in the state system, the topics are imposed and limited, whilst here "they can be chosen" and students have the chance to "get to know their society and the world and improve themselves" (MP6). This education should help students to

get to know themselves, as well as the Mexmûri system: as mentioned above, education is a crucial tool for imparting "the morals" of society (MP9), and as such differs greatly from the theoretically neutral education of the mainstream system.

A practical example of the principle "everyone is both student and teacher" (MP2) is that of the *jineoloji* academy, responsible for researching and imparting knowledge about *jineoloji (women's science).* The members of the academy give "education on how to live in equality between men and women" in society, with the idea that their very "students in the future will give back education" to them, based on their own experiences and research (MP6). Thus transformed educational praxis in Mexmûr does not have a clear hierarchy in which teachers are fixed in a superior position; rather the goal is for everyone to be knowledgeable enough to teach, and humble enough to receive instruction.

Formal and Informal Education

The most notable difference between transformations of the educational hierarchy across Cherani and Mexmûri society is the element of formality. In Mexmûr, the academic institutions are consciously taking responsibility to impart the morals of their system to students and organising the educational system according to their principles, which represents a clear transformation of the conventional statist ideas and methods of education. On the other hand in Cherán, the most radical, transformed educational settings are found outside the official institutions, located rather in informal exchanges: around *fogatas,* through lived experiences and interactions with elders.

Thus the path to transformation of the educational hierarchy differs along an axis of formality in our case studies.

Other Transforming Hierarchies

Within the themes concerned with transforming hierarchies, many others could be elaborated: the shift of the economic system towards a cooperative economy exemplified in Cherán with the setting up of “communal tree nurseries” (CP7), to the recentring of the justice system towards a restorative practice involving consulting wise elders (or *white beards*) in Mexmûr (MP9) would be worthy of their own investigations, amongst others. Due to limited space and time, the focus now shifts to exploring the limits of transformation in the subsequent theme.

Limits to Transformation

The next section explores the extent to which the ideals of radical democracy can be, and are, carried out in real life examples of radically democratic societies. Whilst earlier themes have touched on some of the problems experienced within Cherán and Mexmûr in their attempts to embody autonomous alternatives to the hegemonic system, the consideration of both practical and ideological limitations to their transformations emerges from the data as a significant theme in its own right. This follows the considerations of the role of prefiguring futures (Lin et al, 2016) and the impact of ‘conflict-ridden everyday realities’ on visions of the future (Habserang, 2022: 484) in the literature on projects of radical democracy and transformation.

Material

In Cherán, two main pragmatic limitations feature in several participant exchanges. First and most prominently, the economic situation, referred to variously as problems with “economic sustainability” (CP2), “economic income” (CP7) or “the lack of resources” (CP5). One interviewee (CP4) explained how these difficulties affect the population and society in Cherán: “families need resources and money, especially if they have children,” and as such people “have to leave” the town to look for better-paying jobs, or any jobs. Whilst some find work in nearby places like “Zamora,” CP4 mentioned a further consequence of the poor economic situation in Cherán, namely that it pushes immigration particularly to “the USA.” Another interviewee (CP5) corroborated this idea, stating that “sometimes we need a lot of resources in order that people can stay here;” giving the impression that sometimes migration for work is the default situation.

Cherán’s somewhat stagnant economy, featuring “among the great weaknesses in the community” (CP2), is thus perceived as a limit to societal transformation in that the lack of resources stunt possible initiatives and push *comuneras/comuneros* to look for work outside which does not contribute to improving their town’s local economy but rather plays into the exploitative capitalist dynamics of mainstream society. Another layer to this limitation is its psychological impact: the inability to achieve economic autonomy or self-sufficiency means that Cherán depends materially on Mexican “government funds/support [apoyos]” (CP4), with one participant (CP6) responding that

sometimes “the government doesn’t want to send” the necessary resources which Cherán expects, leaving Cheranis feeling powerless.

The material reality in which Cherán exists does not necessarily compromise the prefigurative element of the project if the political policies of survival are pursued consciously. Yet the dependency mindset which is produced through these encounters runs counter to the ideas of responsibilisation and autonomy at the heart of the transformed system. Further, these “weaknesses*”* (CP2) open up possibilities for exploitation and co-option, as seen with the introduction of the government-led *Sembrando Vida* program into the community, seen also in other rural areas of Mexico involved in radical projects of autonomy like Chiapas. The program is accused of ‘the destruction of the community fabric and of the organising structures of decision-making’ as well as making it ‘difficult’ for recipients of *Sembrando Vida* funds to participate in ‘social resistance movements for ‘fear that they will lost the benefits of the program (Santiago, 2022). Not only has this undermined the genuinely communal reforestation projects, but the relationship with and reliance on government support acts to condition and truncate certain radical elements of society - “the most extremist *comuneros”* (CP1) - which may otherwise seek out a more profound transformation.

The other practical limitation to Cherán’s societal transformation highlighted by participants is that of “organisation and mutual agreements,” which one interviewee (CP3) considered the “most important challenge for Cherán.” He developed his point in reference to the need of Cherani society “to be more open to other possible solutions, search for more innovative alternatives in questions of forest management to make the most of the forest” and simultaneously “increase the revenue and the care of the forest”

(CP3); linking together the economic difficulties explored above with this more logistical limitation. Yet another participant (CP2) referred to Cherán as an "organisational example" for wider society, demonstrating that the perception of Cherán's challenges is by no means homogenous.

In Mexmûr, difficulties related to lacking resources were also highlighted across multiple participant exchanges as a key practical limitation to societal transformation. Several interviewees mentioned the absence of "land for agriculture" (MP9) which keeps the population dependent on "hormonally-produced food from "other" Mexmûr [the state-run town next door to the camp]" (MP8), whilst another cited the dearth of "resources" as an obstacle to producing "cheap food" (MP1), therefore stunting initiatives of self-sufficiency and food sovereignty. The latter participant (MP1), a member of the municipality committee, described the "most difficult part of the role as having to tell people there isn't what they need," in a "material" sense. This is corroborated by another interviewee (MP8) who lamented attempts to "give theoretical education" on topics of cooperative and communal economies and buying local produce whilst being unable to "put things into practice because of the limitations of resources." For this participant (MP8), the "main purpose is to change the minds of people" and convince them of the superiority of the Mexmûri system compared with mainstream statist society; thus their inability to "show practical results" means that often the very theory "doesn't make sense" to members of the community who don't have any opportunity to "go out to see other examples of alternatives."

As in Cherán, the secondary problem caused by the poor economic situation is that many people, especially young men, "have to look for work outside Mexmûr" (MP1),

especially in Mosul and Baghdad. This represents a potential threat to the system in the camp, with youth potentially losing themselves in the hegemonic capitalist society outside and forgetting the morals and culture with which they were raised. Another practical limitation mentioned is the “geopolitical position” which Mexmûr is forced to occupy: the “weather, bombs, embargo” are the key problems highlighted by a participant (MP3) who went on to describe how “10 mothers lost their babies” due to the blockade placed on Mexmûr by the KDP who failed to provide the women with hospital permits. However, these material challenges are countered by an interviewee (MP1) who presents Mexmûr’s situation along the lines of the “radical in-between of prefigurative politics and the politics of survival” coined by Lin et al (2016): “our system is not like the city [statist] system,” but rather “works both according to the political situation <u>and</u> according to civil society.” This eye to practical limitations and difficulties whilst also “developing an alternative” system which can be “a model for others” (MP3) demonstrates the conscious, autonomous political agency of Mexmûri society.

Ideological

The extent to which our case studies practise prefigurative ways of being and doing in radically democratic society are certainly shaped and limited by the material realities in which they find themselves. Yet the essence of prefiguration - the imagining and enacting of that which you wish already existed - is more profoundly affected by ideological limitations of Cherani and Mexmûri inhabitants’ comprehension of and belief in their alternative systems. In Cherán, several participants highlighted the challenge of obtaining a shared, common understanding of the project and its aims amongst all the

comuneras and *comuneros*. One interviewee (CP6) commented that the "most difficult thing" about working to transform Cherani society is "getting people to understand;" and "that they understand that what *usos y costumbres* is doing is good," because "there are many people that don't understand this." A further interviewee (CP7) gave a more balanced view of the situation:

> "We all have a perspective of the system of governance, and whilst being inside the governing structure doesn't mean you will understand it 100%, nor does never having served in the administration mean that you are ignorant of the system."

From this angle, direct participation in Cherán's project of transformation was not considered necessary to comprehending it and seeing its benefits.

The lack of widespread, communal understanding is a potential limitation for Cherán: although radical democracy embraces conflict and disagreement as an inevitable part of creating an alternative, the situation in Cherán as described by another participant (CP5) is that "sometimes people don't understand that everything is for the benefit of the community." This demonstrates the work that still needs to be done in terms of education, communication and consciousness-raising of the population in order to move away from a default mode of politics of survival towards a more united vision of the goals for Cherán and the ways that they can already be enacted prefiguratively in the here and now, not just by individuals and groups in the community but the communal subject at large.

In Mexmûr, potential ideological limitations to societal transformation are somewhat minimised in participant exchanges. One interviewee (MP9) highlighted the

history of the population of the Mexmûr refugee camp who actively fled from Bakur and "chose to come here instead of accepting Turkey's assimilation plan to force them into Western [Turkish] cities" to explain how Mexmûris can both "understand" and "accept" the system "very well." She stressed that there are no "ideological difficulties" in Mexmûri society because all the inhabitants "believe in Rêber Apo [Öcalan]'s system" and comprehend it fully: the older generations decided to leave behind everything to put this system into practice, whilst the younger generations have been raised and educated inside it (MP9). Another participant (MP5) pointed out the advantageous position of Mexmûri women for being able to "understand well the problems of capitalism," due to their lived experiences of intersectional oppressions as women, Kurds and refugees; as such there are "no problems giving education" to them in the ideological sense.

This interviewee (MP5) suggested "religion" as amongst the "most difficult" of ideological obstacles to the full transformation of Mexmûr society, away from the hegemonic statist paradigm. She underlined how "Mexmûri people accept socialism but they don't want anyone touching their [religious] beliefs because they are the most important thing to them" (MP5). Whilst the system in Mexmûr is not incompatible with religious beliefs and practices, with the majority of the population (at least) culturally Muslim, religion certainly emphasises different values and morals to those prioritised in Öcalan's philosophy. This is seen above all in the "relationship between men and women" as conceived of in traditional Islam, which contrasts with the women's liberation paradigm which is being promoted in Mexmûri society and actively taught and implemented by the women's and *jineoloji* academies (MP5). A further participant (MP2)

summarised the situation: “here they live in this system but still sometimes have a block in their brains” which can limit the ideological comprehension and enactment of an alternative, transformed society.

Prefiguration or Survival: a Radical In-Between?

Limited resources and economic opportunities certainly create challenges for the transformations of society in both Cherán and Mexmûr, as explored above. Yet what stood out in accounts of both case studies was the psychological impact of secondary effects of these practical realities which impact the prefigurative “transformation of social relationships and power” (Lin et al, 2016: 302) explored in the literature review. Younger generations are pushed to emigrate in search of work, and faith in the viability of these alternative systems is at risk of eroding when people cannot witness initiatives put into practice successfully. Thus whilst material limitations introduce an inevitable pragmatic element of survival politics into Cherani and Mexmûri societies, the deeper limits to a prefigurative realisation of transformation are ideological. These include economic difficulties, but also each case study’s particular psychological limitation: for Cherán the lack of widespread comprehension and appreciation of the project of transformation being carried out, and in Mexmûr the continued strength of religious beliefs and the values they imply. As such both Cherani and Mexmûri societies seem to consciously exist in a radical in-between on the scale from survival to prefigurative politics.

Subject Transformation

The final two themes examine the transformation of society in relation to its subjects. The aim is to obtain an idea of how individual and group subjects in Mexmûr and Cherán are agents of their societies' transformation, as well as being themselves transformed in the process. These themes are more abstract, concerned with the subtler dynamics of transformation, and as such the findings are not intended to be conclusive but rather highlight subjects and societies mutually transforming each other and how this is lived in our case study sites. Thus the following section explores the position of the individual subject as both agent and subject of change through radically democratic transformation.

Cherán

The transformation of individual subjects in Cherán through their experiences of their societal project carried out since 2011 is briefly touched upon in a limited way in exchanges with *comuneras/comuneros.* In fact, in one exchange discussing the impact of participating in the autonomous structures in Cherán, the interviewee (CP2) said: "I don't think it has changed me, because I have always had certain responsibilities." This raises a pertinent question about the extent to which transformations of individuals and societies can be pinpointed to the officially recorded processes or to the formal participation in structures of governance and other institutions. A more historically-inclined exploration of organising prior to the official movement's beginning would certainly be necessary to better understand these dynamics, although separating formal participation from informal collaboration remains challenging and contrary to the popular nature of the transformative societal projects investigated here.

In Cherán, perceptions of such personal transformations were divided. For example, another participant (CP5) reported that he "changed a lot" through his new role in the autonomous structures, saying "before I wasn't used to living in this system but now my life has changed a lot, in my work and what I do." Further, in an archival video from Cherán, one interviewee (CVA2) mentioned that the "youth nowadays are more prepared… more capable of speaking and defending themselves" since living through and participating in the uprising and subsequent attempts to transform Cherani society. It is important to note that this was an observation from an older *comunero* of the transformation of others, rather than a self-description or feeling of having personally changed through participation in the project, and as such does not necessarily reflect the views of said "youth" in Cherán.

Mexmûr

Dirik (2022) highlights the KFM's emphasis on liberating 'the individual from mentalities' (36), and indeed in Mexmûr, several participants highlighted their personal transformations "through participation in the system" (MP1). One interviewee (MP1) discussed her role and responsibilities in Mexmûr as giving her a clear incentive "to do [her] best for these people" and help them "to improve themselves" as she has improved herself. She described how previously she stayed in the home with her children, and although she "could read and write" she felt unable to "help" in society (MP1). "Since working in the system," however, "[she] finds power inside herself," and wants to "manage and work for society to empower other women" like her, something that would be more achievable "if Turkey gives us rights in our land [referring to their

original villages which they had to leave behind when they fled from Bakur]" (MP1). Another interviewee (MP3) noted an "important change from participating in the structures" of Mexmûri society, citing "discipline" as a "very important" personal transformation which has helped her to "get stronger" since doing this work. These accounts suggest that passive existence in a radically democratic society such as Mexmûr is not sufficient to create transformed individuals, but rather the active element of participation and taking on responsibilities has a significant impact.

The Individual: Subject Not Agent of Change?

Exploring the transformation of individual subjects through participation in and living through the transformations of their societies, Cherán and Mexmûr, provides mixed perspectives and perhaps raises more questions than in answers with respect to the role of responsibility, active engagement and formal structures. However, notably no interviewee or archival video across either case study made reference to the role of the individual as a key unit for enacting change in society. Following the fall of the state as default principal agent of change documented by Wallerstein (1996), the gap is not obviously filled by an individualistic vision of agency in our radically democratic case studies.

Societal Transformation

If neither state nor individual are considered key proponents of societal transformation, that leaves us with the question: who is? As such, the final theme of this

paper explores the role of group, communal, or societal agency in stimulating the creation of radically democratic societies in Cherán and Mexmûr; as well as how through participation in and the forming of radically democratic societies communal subjects are created.

Cherán

The communal nature of the agent of transformation in Cherán was mentioned in several exchanges as a fundamental element of events in 2011 and subsequently. One participant (CP3) cited Cherán as “an example for the whole word because of the unity of its people who came together in the face of an evil that affected the whole community; they were able to resolve things between them,” and as such Cherán’s process of transformation was born, enabled by the communal nature of a spontaneous uprising. Another interviewee (CP4) emphasised how “the whole town rose up” because they were all “very affected,” describing Cheranis as one collective whose unity was to some extent created by the communal rage and refusal embodied by their engagement in a defensive popular struggle.

A further participant (CIA4) mentioned that in the moment of danger in which *comuneras* and *comuneros* stood up to the loggers, no one “looked at the risk… because we were doing something for our community.” Thus the collective nature of the agent which enabled the transformation of society in Cherán co-exists with the unifying effect of participating in said transformation which facilitated the birth of the communal agent in a co-constitutive nature in participant accounts. This corroborates findings from the literature review, in which the conceptualising and living of a common struggle

(Hardt and Negri, 2004) helps to create a communal subject, a phenomenon previously observed in Cherán by Jeronimo Lemus (2017) as a site of quotidian construction of the "communitarian subject."

Mexmûr

The role of the communal rather than the individual as transformative agent and transformed subject was not explicitly discussed in exchanges with participants in Mexmûr but rather emerges as an impression through comments about other topics. The prioritisation in Mexmûr of ideological preparation and the formation of a moral society, especially amongst the younger generations, was emphasised when discussing education. One interviewee (MP9) described how the camp inhabitants "get all their morals from education" in the Mexmûri system. This can be interpreted as the intentional creation of a communal element with common ideals which will continue to transform Mexmûri society, whilst simultaneously the people as a collective occupy the position of a subject being transformed through engagement with and existence in this system. The accentuation on forming a cohesive communal subject is further highlighted for example in the peymangeh academy: the "first year of education," according to a participant (MP6), is based on the philosophy and paradigm in "Apo's books" on which the Mexmûri system is based, in order to "better understand the system" in which they live and which they create.

Mutual Transformation: Creating the Communal

Discussions around the role of the communal agent as the key transformative unit and in society are overt in exchanges with Cherani participants, in which the transformation of the collective was also emphasised: the mutually constructive nature of communal subject and transformed society in Cherán is clearly perceived and communicated. The dynamics in Mexmûr were less overtly discussed, but the reported prioritisation of the creation of a collective subject with a common ideological vision and objectives for societal transformation suggests that the position of the communal as transformer and transformed is both perceived and given importance in the town, especially in relation to young people, the natural successors who will provide the new impetus for transforming society in the years to come. Thus both case studies corroborated the idea found in the literature of democratic subjects concurrently transforming alongside democratic society, in a mutually constructive way (Asenbaum, 2023). Asenbaum (2021: 94) describes the process of group subjectivisation as the 'collective creation of new identities' enabled by a common struggle, which is embodied by the situation in Cherán, whilst Mexmûr's experience of emphasising education of shared ideological principles and culture in order to produce an active collective subject is understudied thus far.

Conclusion

Throughout participant exchanges and archival data collection in the radically democratic societies of Cherán and Mexmûr, certain themes persist. The overturning of hierarchies from mainstream society which are replaced by new dynamics rooted in prefiguration stands out in both case studies: in Cherán the reappropriation of the statist

monopoly of violence and the overturning of the ecological dominance of humans over non-human nature are the clearest realms in which this is reported, whilst in Mexmûr the overturning of the patriarchal hierarchy to liberate women and thus wider society, along with the educational revolution, most obviously showcase the town's transformation. Cherán and Mexmûr demonstrate two clear principal ways in which radically democratic societies and their subjects co-constitutively transform each other. First, through the communal subject taking action for and on behalf of the collective, which enables the development of a society with group agency shaping autonomous, capable subjects; this is observed above all in Cherán with their popular spontaneous uprising and subsequent political, social transformation. Second, through ideological education and the creation of a moral society which births conscious subjects who contribute to maintaining and furthering this society, as witnessed in Mexmûr's emphasis on building a culture of shared ethical principles.

Finally, the most striking comparative element emerging across participant exchanges and archival data on Cherán and Mexmûr is that of the levels of awareness at which subjects are operating to transform their societies. In Mexmûr, people report an explicit awareness of the societal dynamics that they are trying to instill, quoting concrete ideological positions tied to the wider KFM and Öcalan's writings which shape their own transformations. However in Cherán there is a more spontaneous and implicit understanding of the desires for and direction of societal transformation which does not have the same weight of years of theoretical study or connections to broader struggles, but develops organically and in varied ways across Cherani subjects. Our case studies nonetheless share many common features from the success of hierarchical

transformation to the prioritising of the communal subject as the key agent of change to both transform, and be transformed by, their society.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The following section contains a discussion of the findings from data collection and their implications for the wider literature on radically democratic transformation. The nature of transformation in Cherán and Mexmûr seems to be shaped by three main factors, explored below.

Eventfulness and Path Dependency

Cherán and Mexmûr demonstrate two clear structural paths to transformation in a radically democratic direction. First, Cherán's 2011 uprising against organised crime and on behalf of the forests, rivers and land represents a spontaneous action or event sparking a process of rejection of the status quo, engagement in collective struggle, and development of alternatives *after* the fact of resistance. Second, Mexmûr's strong ideological emphasis and consciousness of the processes of societal transformation reflect the intentional efforts of ideological education with the aim of creating a cohesive moral society.

The case of Cherán shows similarities with the theory of "eventfulness" coined by Sewell (1996). The idea that significant events can 'significantly transform structures' (ibid: 262) and shift the fundamental dynamics of society is corroborated by Cherán's transformation and development of alternative systems subsequent to the largely spontaneous events of 2011. For Della Porta (2008), protest events with 'highly relevant cognitive, relational and emotional impact on participants and beyond participants' are

especially likely to have effects on ‘the movement actors themselves’ (48) and in ‘cementing collective identities’ (43). Participants in Cherán reported a mix of consequences as individuals from participating in the uprising and the following processes to transform their town. Yet the transformation of Cherani society was undeniably facilitated by the events of refusal and reclaiming of power carried out by Cheranis in 2011, without which it is not clear that the development of an alternative paradigm would have been possible.

On the other hand, the idea of eventful protests as the key structural factor in the transformation of society does not fit Mexmûr’s experience. Mexmûr’s long history of connection with a wider, organised, militant struggle in both the physical and ideological arena, as well as the specific Mexmûri context of refugee populations fleeing violence and assimilation from the Turkish state, provides the engine for societal transformation and the creation of an alternative paradigm, heavily influenced by Öcalan and the KFM’s prescripts.

The observations from Cherán and Mexmûr to some extent corroborate the idea of path dependence in the literature on historical sociology. Mahoney (2000: 507-8) defines path dependence as ‘specifically those historical sequences in which contingent events set into motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties.’ In Cherán’s case, the “eventful” uprising of 2011 reflects the idea of a ‘reactive sequence’ in which the initial cause sets off a chain of events dependent on the prior steps (ibid: 508-9). The experiences of Mexmûr, on the other hand, resonate more with the ‘legitimation explanation’ type of path dependence in which reproduction of a certain institution or element of society occur when agents of that society view it as

'legitimate and thus voluntarily opt for its reproduction' (ibid: 523); the efforts to instil in Mexmûris the values of their system mean that they are educated to choose to maintain and further said system. Cherán and Mexmûr's varied paths to radical democracy through path-dependent sequences offer an explanation as to the differences in their transformed societies.

Agency in Transformation

From a structural perspective, path dependency helps to explain radically democratic transformations in Cherán and Mexmûr. Yet it is not a wholly satisfying explanation of the broader picture of the case studies. An over-reliance on path dependence to explain societal transformation leads to potentially simplistic, deterministic conclusions. It seems clear that a key eventful protest in Cherán and decades of struggle connected to a wider movement in Mexmûr have shaped transformed societies and subjects, but equally the latter have autonomous agency in prioritising certain elements of transformation over others.

Following Wallerstein's (2002) premise that the state is no longer the principal agent of change, the collective or communal subject steps into this vacuum in Cherán and Mexmûr to become the key actor for transforming society. Simultaneously, the transformation of society towards a radically democratic horizon is a formative process for the "communitarian" subject which feels responsible for, and to, its society (Jerónimo Lemus, 2017). The individual subject is transformed into a communal one who maintains and evolves society in a radically democratic direction through interaction and

participation. Thus the communal subject transformed by society becomes responsible for the further transformation of society, resulting in a process in which the communal subject and society mutually transform each other.

The communal subjects, as agents of transformation in Cherán and Mexmûr, act on diverse priorities to emphasise differing elements of radically democratic society. For example in Mexmûr, the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression is central to transformation, with significance also given to revolutionising education, a somewhat unexpected outcome following the literature review in which few theorists dwelled on the importance of education for radically democratic projects (Dirik's (2022) account of education in KFM discourse and its putting into practice in Rojava is a notable exception). In Cherán, overturning the ecological domination of humans over nature takes precedence, along with the transformation of statist monopolies of force in favour of a community-led defensive pratice. The practical priorities of radically democratic societies and their shaping by communal subjects represent potential lines of exploration for radical democracy studies.

Further, the agency of communal subjects in determining the nature of societal transformation in Cherán and Mexmûr is demonstrated by their diverse natures. In Cherán, the desire for transformation appears organic and spontaneous, in the hands of the subjects themselves. This is evident from the decision taken to stay and defend the P'urhépecha historic territory and Cheranis' own homes in 2011, and the subsequent 'social construction of a project rooted in cultural identity' and 'the restoration of values' closer to P'urhépecha traditions as well as more beneficial to the people living there (Martínez Aparicio, 2017). The current lack of one cohesive ideology in Cherán, or

indeed ideological instruction, represents a stark difference from Mexmûr: the transformative subject there has developed 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 there is an explicit awareness from subjects of the societal dynamics that need to change, and are changing; as well as a conscious desire for their Democratic Confederalist system to be a functional, inspirational model for others. This reality echoes the role of the wider KFM in emphasising ideological education to shape subjects which could embody the new idea of an alternative system and create a society in its image. It also reflects the choice made by Mexmûris decades ago to follow their movement and its ideology rather than accept assimilation, leaving behind their war-torn villages to pursue an idea that they believed in; as such 'the camp's identity and its politics…cannot be separated' and it is impossible to comprehend the dynamics of Mexmûri society without understanding this underlying fact (Krajeski, 2012) of continued communal agency driving transformation.

"Not an island"

The third factor in determining the nature of radically democratic transformation is a pragmatic one. Given that autonomy narrowly understood as absolute self-sufficiency or autarky is not realistic for a society the size of Cherán or Mexmûr, the towns cannot survive as naive prefigurative islands in the sea of capitalism, nor are they unscathed by

developments around them. A recent report on the scarcity of water in Cherán prompted by wider hydrological conditions in Mexico quoted one inhabitant as saying “Cherán is not an island” (Vera, 2024). Necessarily, both resources and problems will come from outside: from places, institutions or governments which condition and shape the direction of society in our case studies, which along with geographical, climatic and geopolitical factors will determine and limit the transformation of the towns and their ability to prefigure society.

From the findings in Cherán and Mexmûr, it becomes clear that the main issue is not that of physical limitations but rather the ideological impact of material conditions. When subjects cannot witness the putting into practice of their alternative systems and theories which they develop and create, nor their eventual successes, the resultant impact on morale and limit to future imaginations becomes more of a barrier to transformation than the immediate lack of physical resources, confining society to a position located in the ‘radical in-between’ (Lin et al, 2016: 302) of prefiguration and survival politics. The other side of the coin, however, is that the real achievement of Cherani and Mexmûri societies comes from the transformation of subjects into collective ones, capable of organising their own communal life despite challenges and practical limitations.

Finally, it is important to understand that radically democratic society and transformation imply a certain flexibility in the perspective; a central tenet is that everything and everyone has the ‘capacity to change and be changed’ (Brosi and bell hooks, 2012: 77), that there is always transformative capacity in subjects and societies,

which runs counter to any determinism when exploring the nature of transformation in radical democracy.

Chapter 6: 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 these experiences, happening right now in real communities across the world, can and should inform theories of radical democracy, transformation and much more. Cherán and Mexmûr represent two immensely rich and complex case studies from which we can learn a great deal about the realities of radically democratic transformation: not to draw sweeping conclusions but rather to understand some of the ways of doing and being, and of organising society, that are not only theoretically possible but already exist.

Through a comprehensive review of the literature, rich participant exchanges and archival data collection, and a thorough process of thematic analysis, the research project found that there are three levels to how radically democratic societies and their subjects are transforming each other in Cherán and Mexmûr. From a structural perspective, the political mechanisms giving rise to the radically democratic societies there 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. On a more quotidian level, the agency of the communal subject - itself created through the transformation of society - equally stimulates the transformation of society in both case studies, shaping the direction of transformation and which elements are prioritised. Pragmatically, dynamics from

surrounding systems condition the potential to realise certain ideological precepts in material ways, which limits the prefigurative transformation desired in society.

To conclude, much remains to be explored in deepening our understanding of autonomous, alternative societies: from the role and nature of the communal subject, to the extent of freedom and flexibility in the transformation process, to the historical factors provoking transformation, to name a few. As more of us realise the need for an alternative to our current paradigm, comprehension of these pioneer sites of radical, democratic experiments will become increasingly fundamental.

This project has awarded me priceless insights into radically democratic societies and their transformations in two striking examples. It has also led me to a realisation, verbalised by Holloway (2020: 19), of the need for caution around 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 immensely 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.

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