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Cetinkaya, Hasret  (2025) Justice, rights-politics, and the coloniality of knowledge production: critical lessons from Rojava and the Jineolojî movement towards liberating life. The International Journal of Human Rights. pp. 1-25. ISSN 1364-2987

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2025.2453660>

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

Version: Published Version

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Data Access Statement: Data associated with this research is not available.

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To cite this article: Hasret Cetinkaya (23 Jan 2025): Justice, rights-politics, and the coloniality of knowledge production: critical lessons from Rojava and the Jineolojî movement towards *liberating* life, The International Journal of Human Rights, DOI: [10.1080/13642987.2025.2453660](https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2025.2453660)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2025.2453660>



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Published online: 23 Jan 2025.



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Justice, rights-politics, and the coloniality of knowledge production: critical lessons from Rojava and the Jineoloji movement towards *liberating* life

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ABSTRACT

Since 2012 a revolution has been taking place in Northeastern Syria (Rojava). This project in 'democratic autonomy', has taken place in the anomic gap left by the absence of a state, and has been driven in large part by feminist activists. These feminist activists have played a pioneering role in re-imagining a moral and political society, through Jineoloji or 'women's science'. Jineoloji now extends beyond Rojava, constituting a vibrant and powerful transnational or diasporic public sphere, working to develop and promote new ideas about justice, morality, and politics from a situated and embodied gendered perspective. Drawing on interview data and published materials, this article examines the constitution of Jineoloji, as well as the practices of research and self-fashioning activists undertake in the cultivation of new models for feminist power and legality. What emerges from these onto-epistemic practices of revolution and the entanglement of ways of being, knowledge and the law, is the production of new modes of desire, subjectivity, and rights. It argues that the practice of Jineoloji offers critical lessons for cosmological and political justice rooted in the local and a vernacular practice of rights.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 August 2024

Accepted 8 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Critical human rights; vernacular rights; anti-colonial justice; diasporic public spheres; Rojava; Jineoloji

Introduction

In 2014, the people living in the Rojava region of Northeastern Syria, many of whom were stateless persons displaced during the Syrian civil war, organised a new form of political community premised upon the principles of 'democratic autonomy' and confederalism. This bottom-up exercise in political organisation, facilitated by the organisational work of Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (TEV-DEM; *Movement for a Democratic Society*) and other activists belonging to the Kurdish Liberation Movement, founded a new political community, the DAANES (the Democratic Autonomous Administration of the North and East Syria, formerly the AANES), also known as 'Rojava'.¹ Such a constitutive/pre-
dicative act of 'founding' was graphically and performatively enacted with the publication of 'The Social Contract of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of the North and

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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East Syria Region’ (Zerilli, 2005). This quasi-constitutional document, which has now undergone three iterations (in 2014, 2016, and 2023), places the language of human rights at the centre of its provisions – making it a unique effort at rights dispensation in the absence of a nation-state. In this article I examine the implication of ‘the Rojava Revolution’ for contemporary human rights theorising, not through a doctrinal analysis of the DAANES’ social contract, but through the lens of the vernacular rights culture of ‘Jineoloji’. The vernacular rights culture of ‘Rojava’ has two dimensions: (1) a practice of human rights dispensation that seeks to rearticulate the language of universal human rights within an insurgent and relational ontology rooted in the eco-feminist political philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan, and (2) a decolonial feminist movement that works to further develop and refine that relational ontology through a politics of knowledge, being and empowerment. It is the relationship between these two dimensions, and their lessons for critical legal theorising about rights that this article examines.

Jineoloji is a diasporic network of post-institutional ‘academies’ stretching from Rojava to Europe and beyond. The name, Jineoloji, derives etymologically from the entwinement of the Kurdish ‘Jin’, meaning ‘woman’, and ‘jiyan’, meaning ‘life’, and their connection with the idea of a knowledge or science, or as the ancient Greeks called it: *logos* (the root of –ology words in English). Meaning quite literally then ‘the science of women and life/society’, Jineoloji is a decolonial praxis insofar as they take the question of gendered and colonial knowledge production and its relationship to the problem of how to live as central to their activities and way of life. By placing questions of ‘science’ and knowledge at the centre of their transformative praxis, Jineoloji highlight the integral nature of problems of ontology and epistemology for anti-colonial futures – at stake is the formation of a new cosmivision that will call forth alternative ecological, gendered and just material practices of living and meaning-making. As one Jineoloji activist described it to me:

the challenge for Jineoloji has been to re-think the relationship between ‘science’ and ‘revolutionary politics,’ and how can one develop a science, a system of knowledge about politics and society, which is developed from the perspective of the people. How is knowledge produced? Who owns it, monopolizes it?

Through their praxis, the Jineoloji movement, have served to ‘decolonise’ the dominant political concepts and ideas of our times: statism, methodological nationalism, female subordination, freedom, and democracy. The implications of such work have not yet been thought through in relation to critical human rights theorising.

Inspired by the methodologies of the Jineoloji movement, and situating their work both within the broader KLM, the vernacular rights culture of the DAANES, as well as the popular political imagination of Rojava, this article examines how the activities and theorising undertaken by these women activists in transnational ‘diasporic public spheres’ around Europe and Rojava ‘speak back’ to global human rights. They do so, I argue, in four major ways: (1) through a situated praxis of rights rooted in the ‘Global South’, they work to displace the onto-epistemological centrality of global human rights as universal, wherein the ‘Global North’ is assumed as the predominant site of the-oring human rights; (2) by prioritising the need for gender equality, both Jineoloji and Rojava practically tie questions of rights dispensation and gender relations together, demonstrating how any rights-politics must foreground Women’s self-emancipation; (3) theorising politics and legality within a context in which the state does not exist

and is not desired any longer, they produce a rights culture that emphasises horizontality over verticality in rights dispensation and the pursuit of justice; and (4) through their decolonial research and praxis the Jineoloji academies contribute to an alternative genealogy of rights and the political ontology of ‘capitalist modernity’, that begins not with Enlightenment ‘Man’ as an onto-epistemic figure of power, but with the concrete histories of colonialism and patriarchy in which subaltern peoples have been denied access to the category of the ‘Human’.

Like the project of human rights in its dominant form, Jineoloji members have a commitment to emancipation through the self-directed exercise of *becoming*-other than what ‘we’ already are (Lefebvre, 2018; Madhok, 2021; Sokhi-Bulley, 2023). Jineoloji activists more particularly are thus engaged in a feminist revolution by self-transformation, cultivating new social practices and ways of relating that prioritise ecological, gender and racial justice, by first and foremost addressing onto-epistemological justice locally and globally. They work to achieve this through their commitment to a woman’s revolution that seeks to embody, and materially restore, the values of the figure of ‘woman’/ ‘mother’ as a means to bring about justice, democracy, and planetary equality for all (Dirik, 2022; Üstündağ, 2023). This new figuration of people and society is, furthermore, dependent upon the creation of a ‘moral and political order’ and its emergent practices of autonomy, freedom, democracy, and love. To this end, the role of Jineoloji academies is one of ‘reverse tutelage’ (Meghji, 2024). Through their praxis, they become the critical and public authors of forms of knowledge about injustices, oppression and alternative ways to live. In proffering a method and critical lens through which to understand the historical ontology of our present, and the place of colonialism, racialisation, and violence therein, they make a radical grassroots and democratic intervention within a cultural and political horizon increasingly marked by ‘pluriversality’ (Escobar, 2018) and the active embrace of the politics of difference.

Exploring the political and legal imaginary of Rojava and the role of Jineoloji therein (and beyond) is significant, I argue, as this political project provides us with new vocabularies, institutions and alternative visions of rights-politics and freedom forged *in media res*. Such resources call into question the hegemonic and Eurocentric conceptions of law, justice and modernity and set in motion practices of justice that go beyond the remedies of the state – a move that is urgently needed in order to enable a more meaningful plural international normative order. At its most fundamental, the work of Jineoloji identifies a different set of injustices than the dominant and Eurocentric/universal narratives of global human rights can perceive and bring into critical focus (Barreto, 2012). The most substantial difference of perception, in this regard, lies in Jineoloji’s foregrounding of gender domination and the role of coloniality in shaping contemporary regimes of inequality and injustice. In doing so, the Jineoloji movement puts forward a powerful ‘counter-narrative’ to universal human rights (Gilroy, 2010). It is such an approach and onto-epistemological framework that this article works to reconstruct and think through.

The article begins with an initial theorisation of Jineoloji, vernacular rights and the Rojava revolution, before moving on to outline the place of human rights provisions within the Social Contract of the DAANES. It then proceeds to analyse the ways in which Jineoloji’s research contributes to a pluriversal conception of vernacular rights, focusing on the forms of injustice it diagnoses and the means through which it conceives

of potential solutions to these particular forms of oppression and domination. It focuses on the place of knowledge production within this practice and the role it plays in empowering women and furthering onto-epistemological justice globally. The article concludes by returning to the question of emancipation, highlighting the significant contribution Jineoloji makes to rethinking rights-politics in a pluriversal, decolonial, and gender focused way.

A note on methodology

Adopting a critical human rights framework informed by an increasing awareness and understanding of empire and ‘coloniality of power’, this research was influenced by the decolonial turn in thinking rights. Oriented towards examining the forms of political subjectivation and praxis belonging to the Jineoloji movement, placing the voices, experiences, and analysis of the Jineoloji activists at the centre of my account, I sought to understand how rights-cultures are articulated through other languages than hegemonic and state-sanctioned ones.

Contacting initially some of the more public Jineoloji activists in the UK, a snowballing approach was adopted. The qualitative data that constitutes the corpus of this piece was obtained through a total of 14 unstructured interviews which took place between 2022 and 2023 in Europe (in-person) and Rojava (via Zoom). Interviews were conducted with women from various demographic backgrounds – some were older and more experienced, others young and new to Jineoloji, some were Kurdish, and others were ‘internationalists’ and from European backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in English, Turkish and Kurdish (Kurmançi), with the help of a translator for two of the conversations. Most of the interviews were with individual members, with some taking the structure of group conversations – where appropriate I have signalled this in the notes below. The data collected from these interviews and through supplementary desk research was analysed through a retroductive grounded theory method, that sought to theorise and build meaning from emerging patterns and themes in the corpus, situating these themes within the critical legal theory and human rights literatures. It was retroductive insofar as theory building was constantly tested and refined through a circular method of developing explanations that could be falsified and re-worked in dialogue with the interview materials and secondary literature (Bryant, 2017; Glynos & Howarth, 2007).²

The material from interviews was supplemented by participant observations that took the form of my participation in an international conference organised by the network ‘Women Weaving the Future’ where members of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, including Jineoloji members, were involved, which took place in Berlin in November 2022. Furthermore, I was invited to participate in a smaller and closed workshop with Jineoloji activists in the Winter of 2023.

The relationship between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ in this instance has developed over time, but from the beginning it has been shaped by a critical awareness by Jineolojists about the risks of extractivism, misrepresentation, and contested authorship within the neoliberal academy of higher education. To this end, mutuality and reciprocity were core values that the activists insisted upon before inviting me to join them on their journey. This piece is informed by the words, questions, and critiques of the Jineolojists, and they have commented upon the first draft of this piece, highlighting important

gaps in my understanding of the movement. My task, as such, has been two-fold. First, to introduce critical and decolonial human rights scholars to the significance of what is taking place with the democratic experiment in Rojava, its vernacular rights-dispensation and the women-led movement of Jineolojî which resides and extends beyond Rojava. Second, and in reflecting on my own positionality further, I have come to understand my role, in part at least, as something of a translator. As I engage in a politics of translation which is not simply linguistic, but also social and cultural in explaining what this ‘way of living’ called Jineolojî involves, I hope we can begin to create new chains of equivalence and alliance across and through practices of translation. My efforts in this regard aim to describe and take inspiration from Jineolojî in a way that is attuned to the life-world’s, concepts, and modes of knowing specific to these women – even if they are here communicated through concepts, authors, and theories that the formal academy is more familiar with. Questions nonetheless remain for me about how I can support them best as a non-member, and as a Kurdish academic bound and trapped within the neoliberal metrics of impact and research excellence frameworks.

Jineolojî and the revolution: a story with many beginnings

Jineolojî and Öcalan

To situate the emergence of Jineolojî and its praxis, it is necessary to examine its relation to the long history of Kurdish women’s struggle, to the Rojava revolution and the dispensation of human rights within that territory. This is a story with multiple beginnings, and which crosses multiple geographies of resistance and anti-colonial struggle. The concept of Jineolojî, however, can be first traced back to the writing of Abdullah Öcalan, in particular his book *Özgürlük Sosyolojisi (The Sociology of Freedom, 2020)*. Öcalan, the symbolic leader, architect, and founder of the Kurdish Liberation Movement, is a political philosopher and activist who has been imprisoned by the Turkish State since 1999. From his cell, he has written several works of political theory that have inspired and motivated substantial transformations within the movement itself (Jongerden, 2023). More substantively, it is Öcalan’s ideas of ‘democratic autonomy’ and ‘confederalism’ that the project of the Rojava revolution and the formation of the DAANES has been based. Central to Öcalan’s thought is an examination of the forms of psychic and cultural power that have ensured the subordination of the Kurdish people, and more particularly Kurdish women, within the coeval structures of patriarchy and colonial-capitalism. Identifying the subordination of women as the primary obstacle to justice and equality among and for the Kurdish people (as well as humanity as a whole), and the articulation of their gendered subordination with the masculine desire to have mastery over nature, over life itself, Öcalan argues that any revolution against capitalism, colonialism and the power of the state, must begin first with a women’s revolution (Öcalan, 2013). The concept of Jineolojî appears in that *Sosyolojisi* text only three times, and on each occasion as a brief suggestion for the role a women’s led approach to knowledge production (that goes beyond both feminism and sociology) can play accelerating the destruction of the ideology and power of ‘the crafty and the strong man’.³

Upon *The Sociology of Freedom’s* Turkish publication in 2009 and its circulation among Kurdish activists in Turkey first, then further afield, female activists began to

engage in conversations about the concept of Jineoloji, its potential, and its possibilities for self-organisation, liberation, and the development of self-knowledge with political purpose. One Jineoloji member that I spoke with described how in 2011, whilst in prison, she first encountered the concept of Jineoloji. Reading Öcalan's suggestion in an overcrowded prison cell, it sparked a joy for her, and for many others such that they started a study group whilst in prison, passing letters between the different cells discussing what Jineoloji might entail for them. They exchanged letters with comrades outside of the prison too. This flurry of discussion amounted to a book *Jineoloji Tartismalari (Discussions on Jineoloji)* which was published in 2015 (in Turkish), and as she says, in that book they 'produced but *one* account of what Jineoloji entails' (Dirik, 2022, pp. 78–79).⁴ Whilst the first Jineoloji Committee was founded in 2011, and followed by a series of conferences and meetings across the Kurdish Middle East and Europe in the intervening years, it found a unique and important opportunity in Rojava with the formation of the DAANES. The work of Jineoloji is by no means confined to the territory of the DAANES, but its most powerful impact is to be found in Rojava, acting as something of the intellectual avant-garde of the democratic experiment taking place there – simultaneously carrying that political imaginary forward in terms of developing the culture of gender equality and decolonisation in Rojava and in bringing its lessons across borders and into the diasporic public spheres of Europe and beyond.

Practical experiments in democratic autonomy

Öcalan's role in the impetus for and eventual formation of Jineoloji has been substantial, yet it is but one starting point of the story of this movement's development. Of equal importance, as one member, Lorîn, reminded me in a group conversation, was the feminist struggles of the past century, in particular the Kurdish women's struggle and important activists including Sakine Cansız among others (Cansız, 2018; Doğu, 2024).⁵ In the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions taking place across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, and the outbreak of war in Syria, a political vacuum caused by the conflict created a space in Kurdish-populated areas in North-Eastern Syria. It was in this *anomic space* that the opportunity for a new form of political self-organisation emerged and was seized upon by activists including the Kurdish TEV-DEM movement. In 2014, the DAANES was performatively declared and a new democratic organisation of society officially set in motion. This organisation expresses a *praxis* of 'democratic autonomy' and 'democratic confederalism', both of which assert people's right to govern themselves through councils and communal relations. For the more than eleven distinct and diverse ethnic and religious communities in the DAANES who have found themselves remaindered as stateless or non-citizens in the context of the civil war, and a longer history of stripping minorities of their citizenship in Syria, self-governance also renders them as 'narrators' of their own history for the first time in a very long time. One Jineoloji member that I spoke with put it in this way: 'the freedom element, actually, is also a defence of society', indicating that to foster radical democracy is to foster freedom. Greater 'democratic autonomy' is, thereby, an avenue through which the 'social fabric of society' (read: ontology of interdependency and solidarity) can be kept.⁶ Although

the political institutions of the DAANES all operate on a gender-equality securing co-chair principle, with male and female leaders of each level of the confederal system, Jineoloji have described their work as the cultural politics of ensuring equality of power in social relations in a more *everyday* and grounded way. Jineoloji have seen it their role to build equality materially through empowering women and disconnecting their sense of self from the psychic forms of power (phantasy) that circulate within patriarchal and male-centric structures. As such, education and research play a key role in Jineoloji's praxis in Rojava.⁷ This has been institutionalised in Rojava through Jineoloji's presence on the curricula of high schools in the region, as well as the formation of a Jineoloji Faculty at the University of Rojava, the founding of the Andrea Wolf Institute, with the organisation of Jinwar (a women's autonomous eco-village), and finally with the establishment of Jineoloji centres in six cities across the territory (Piccardi & Barca, 2022).

Jineoloji as a 'diasporic public sphere'

Part of what makes Jineoloji unique as a political movement is its effective transnational structure and the role it plays in constituting something of a diasporic public sphere that has the capacity to connect out with other movements, struggles and organisations, from the Zapatistas to the Colectivo Ni Una Menos, Black Lives Matter, and the Consejo de Pueblos K'iche's. If Rojava is the beating heart of Jineoloji, its life source, its inspiration and its connection to revolution, its academies across Europe and other parts of the Middle East, including the other Kurdish regions, are its points of connection and difference.⁸

It is useful to think of Jineoloji as exhibiting what Appadurai calls a 'diasporic public sphere' (Appadurai, 1996), as it connects various actors, both within Rojava and the diaspora, including its residents, those in exile, the Kurdish diaspora and political activists and writers around the world. The connection between the Jineoloji committees in Europe and beyond with those in Rojava are a key feature of the movement's strength and organisational capacity, and it is enabled by recent developments in communication technologies and the networks of capital and power from which they derive. One Jineoloji member in Rojava described the academies as spaces informed by 'common ideas', explaining further that each space essentially responds to the 'social needs of society', and that they cannot necessarily be the same in Rojava as elsewhere although some overlapping concerns arises.⁹ One long-standing member and journalist in the movement explained that:

we will find solutions together with the society, we will not find a solution to impose on the society. We see ourselves as part of that society. From the perspective of Jineoloji, this is both an ethical method and an analytical commitment. Therefore, when we discuss the solution, we see ourselves as part of the problem.¹⁰

Jineoloji, therefore, ought to be understood through a grassroot perspective as they seek to cultivate what Foucault called 'subjugated knowledges' with the community through a process of 'subjective decolonisation', releasing themselves from the oppressive and subordinating histories and narratives that have legitimated and reproduced their subordination as women (Barreto, 2012; Foucault, 1980; Motta, 2019).

Rights-cultures from ‘most of the world’: historiography through the vernacular

In this section, I theorise the vernacular rights-culture that Jineoloji and the Rojava project form part of. Like other movements, such as indigenous and subaltern activisms across the ‘Global South’, and particularly the work of the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Baris, 2022; Speed, 2007),¹¹ the Rojava Revolution is working toward liberation from imperial domination and is a *vital* resource in thinking rights on a pluralistic and global just scale (Gilroy, 2010). They do so without reinforcing state power, understanding rights as a collective endeavour to be negotiated through local processes of contestation and democratic deliberation that will result in social and personal transformation.

Jineoloji and Rojava form part of a rights-culture that extends *beyond*, but is nonetheless entangled with, universal human rights. The hegemony of human rights language is but a historical configuration of the political, in which other forms of demands and modes of emancipation as well as other practices of rights and justice, are foreclosed upon or deemed improper within liberal democratic culture (Brown, 2004). Consequently, there has been an ‘uninterrogated commitment to viewing liberalism as the default position and source of all emancipatory knowledge or as undisputedly the superior political philosophy’ (Kapur, 2018). This is despite the long history of the never-ending crisis of global human rights: the severe attacks they are met with by authoritarian political regimes who nonetheless deploy ‘rights’ strategically; and, the sustained critique global human rights regimes and apparatuses have been subjected to by scholars and activists who see them as upholding global geopolitical structures of inequality and hierarchy through moralising and disciplining discourses that take aim at culture, gender, and religious practice (Grewal, 2005). This bias and its attendant lack of interrogation is rooted in the fact that such a normative order maintains a certain self-referential authority and power, by which its critique is seen in totalising and dangerous terms. Consequently, other ‘sources’ of normative imagination and ideals are foreclosed upon – rendering them either invisible or ‘silenced’ (Barreto, 2012). Rights-struggles are, however, active, embodied, and situated in particular contexts which have their own unique onto-epistemological horizons. Taking such struggles from ‘most of the world’ into account (Chatterjee, 2004),¹² therefore, inevitably works to challenge the ahistorical, Eurocentric, and universalising accounts of human rights.

Overlapping with these conceptual problems with politics of human rights, dominant accounts of human rights, along with many of their Euro-American critiques, share an orientalist and often racialised narrative about the historical and geographic *origins* of rights, which invariably begin by asserting that ‘the conceptual, philosophical and empirical experience of rights across the global owe their formulation to the three revolutions of the modern West: the Glorious Revolution (1688), the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789)’ (Madhok, 2021, p. 36). Remaining silent, and thereby erasing other revolutions such as the Haitian Revolution (1791) as well as the Mexican Revolution (1910–17) and the processes of decolonisation that took place in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East in the latter half of the twentieth century (Barreto, 2012, p. 19). On that basis, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Rojava Revolution has been given very little attention within critical human rights scholarship. It furthermore begs the question: when does a movement/moment in history become

characterisable as a ‘rights movement’/moment with the capacity to reshape, speak-back to, or act upon the received history of human rights, as but one *form* and particular language of rights-politics within a planetary scene? And, to what extent can we speak meaningfully about rights-cultures other than universal human rights, that seek to model politics and justice around socially agreed entitlements, obligations and responsibilities?

Jineoloji women’s activism for justice has taken the form of public acts of deliberation and political organising, as well as activities of ethical self-fashioning, and the formation of the subject of rights. It is on this basis, that I ask how we might engage with ‘rights’ after, or beyond, universal human rights so as to open up avenues, learn from, and engage with other rights-cultures and provide them with the onto-epistemological validity they deserve? It is within the critical space outlined above, a terrain shaped primarily by the concern for cosmological/ontological justice, that a recent turn to consider ‘vernacular rights cultures’ can be traced. Building upon the ground-breaking work of post-colonial human rights critics like Ratna Kapur and Upendra Baxi, scholars such as Sumi Madhok, in her work on the vernacular discourse of *haq*, have argued for a decolonial and perspectival shift in our analysis of rights, that asks how might subaltern rights-struggles speak back to global human rights from non-standard locations and within epistemological horizons that represent ‘most of the world’, thereby working to change the *content* and *form* of rights-politics as such? (Madhok, 2021, p. 3, 29) Such a multidirectional understanding of the traffic of rights, goes beyond the translation of the global (universal) to the local (particular) (Levitt & Merry, 2009; Merry, 2006), to grasp the ways in which rights-politics take place in non-linear patterns across multiple locations and within a transnational dynamic characterised as much by south-to-south relations as north-to-south and south-to-north influences and translations, often without direct recourse to the signifier of ‘rights’ (Madhok, 2021, p. 20). As such, important questions about the subject of rights-politics, now to be viewed as potentially more than, or different from, the liberal subject of Enlightenment reason, arise.

Returning to the question of power, its multi-directionality and its imbrication within histories and epistemologies suppressed and erased by the coloniality of global human rights, it is necessary to understand the forms of gendered subjectivity that underpin and are (re)produced by vernacular rights cultures. What is particularly striking in this regard, when examining the rights culture of Rojava and the role played by the Jineoloji movement therein, is the dynamic ways in which such gendered historical ontologies of the self might be said to shape and promote such a culture in the first instance. It is to this insight that I will return in some detail in the following sections by examining the forms of political subjectivation and praxis belonging to the Jineoloji movement, placing the voices, experiences, and analysis of the Jineoloji activists at the centre of my account.

By attending to the subject of vernacular rights cultures in this way, however, what is at stake is a critical interrogation of the fundamental problem of being/becoming (Wynter, 2003). If the subject of human rights, ‘the Human’, is no longer considered to be the ‘transparent I’ of post-Enlightenment humanism (Ferreira da Silva, 2007), what such vernacular rights cultures disclose is a plurality of modes of being human, which in turn represent alternative ways of living, of self-fashioning, and more-than-human practices of community making (Mignolo, 2009; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015;

Odysseos, 2023). Such an approach offers a compelling route out of the problem of the critique of rights, and the question as to whether after such a critique human rights can be ‘redeemable’ given the ‘false contingency’ of universal human rights under conditions of neocolonialism, rampant neoliberalism and the proprietary ontology of liberal humanism (Marks, 2009). By attending to the ways in which vernacular rights-cultures and their attendant politics pre-figure and/or are built within non-liberal onto-epistemologies or cosmovisions, the normative pull of *universalism* and the fetishism of the political-legal *form* do not carry the same weight in posing a historical limit to the contingency of human rights (Golder, 2014). Whereas the question of whether human rights is redeemable remains within the ontological horizon of ‘neoliberalism’s fishbowl’ (Kapur, 2018), such a vernacular rights approach steps outside of the fishbowl of universalism, onto a pluriversal terrain from which radical experiments in rights-politics can speak back to, and engage in a dissensual dialogue with, the hegemonic discourse on rights – thereby transforming the *content* and *form* of how we think and do ‘rights’ with or without the prefix ‘human’ (Madhok, 2021).

Through practices of self-study, research, and experimentation in forms of communal and collective ways of living/being, Jineolojî activists are engaged in a feminist revolution in a ‘minor key’. With such efforts in self-transformation, the cultivation of new social practices and ways of relating that prioritise ecological, gender and racial justice, they not only engage in a critique of rights, but model alternative ways of *being* human. Their goal: the transformation of themselves and in turn their societies. Their means: a radical commitment to onto-epistemic justice within contexts of coloniality, patriarchy, and genocide. This is an alternative political imaginary, a vernacular, which offer us a fuller picture of the kind of rights ‘we’ need and injustices ‘we’ suffer.

By placing at the centre of their analysis the role of power through a critique of patriarchal colonial-capitalism, Jineolojî questions what hegemonic human rights already assumes it has answered through its reliance upon powerful normative fictions of liberal personhood and ahistorical ontology that fails to engage fully with the violent nature of colonial power (Mbembe, 2019). Challenging the historiography of hegemonic human rights along with the de-politicisation of justice, Jineolojîsts are active in furthering a ‘vernacular rights culture’ that is self-consciously engaged in the process of decolonisation. Recognising the significance of onto-epistemological justice in their own communities (plural) in order to enjoy rights, these activists have a clear strategy to empower people from the grassroots so that they can feel and exercise rights.

The ‘social contract’ and the place of rights in Rojava

There is something of a paradoxical quality to any discussion of human rights in the context of Rojava and the political community of the DAANES. Since Hannah Arendt’s political diagnosis of the paradox of human rights and her performative formulation of ‘the right to have rights’ (Arendt, 1951), there has been a fundamental assumption guiding human rights discourse that claims that the dispensation of political rights *qua* human rights presupposes in the first-place citizenship (despite rights universal and inalienable structure), and second that there is a state to provide, protect and fulfil such rights. What is immediately most profound about the Social Contract of the DAANES, in contradistinction, is that the universalistic language of international human rights litters

such a constituting document, despite the fact that the Rojava experiment in democratic autonomy refuses to adopt, or take the form, of the Westphalian nation state – the key political institution within the Eurocentric genealogy of rights and legality (Benhabib, 2008). References to human rights have featured in all three iterations of the Social Contract since its first publication in 2014, and its inclusion has consistently appeared as a negotiation between the normative power and legitimating force of universal human rights and the principles of democratic autonomy and self-governance that the DAANES embodies. At stake, is not a straightforward translation of universal human rights into a local and vernacular context, but the pluriversal articulation and adaptation of a unique and situated vernacular rights culture that simultaneously draws on, rejects, and enhances the very idea of human rights in its own relational and ecological ontological terms.

Given the conditions under which the DAANES was formed, and the plural constituencies that make up its population, the rights dispensation therein takes place within the context of the absence of a nation-state and the very idea of citizenship, and grants rights to a population of stateless peoples, many of whom arrived in Rojava fleeing war and displacement. As scholars such as Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden have argued, the Social Contract of Rojava does not follow the traditional Eurocentric structure of the post-Rousseauian contract – a philosophical thought-experiment that posits an account of how sovereignty might be said to have been legitimately transferred from a sovereign people to the state (Habermas, 1996; Knapp & Jongerden, 2014).¹³ Rather, the Social Contract of the DAANES is a document that seeks to establish connections between people within democratic local communities, such that they reclaim an intersubjective and egalitarian mode of existence away from any state as part of organising everyday life. Consequently, rights-relations are prefigured horizontally between people, and not simply vertically between the state and people.

In 2023, the latest version of the Social Contract was adopted after substantial public consultation processes with civil society organisations and members of the different communities that make up the DAANES. It places much greater emphasis on the language and role of human rights than in previous iterations. In the preamble to the Social Contract, it is explicitly acknowledged that the societal revolution that has taken place in Rojava ‘was achieved under the leadership of women in North and East Syria’ and this has ‘opened for an intellectual and social renaissance’, wherein in women have become a ‘fundamental pillar’ of Rojava’s democratic system. Equally, the preamble foregrounds the community’s commitments to an ecological democratic society, to communal economy, to social justice and to the principles of democratic confederalism, thereby formalising the core concerns and thematics of the broader KLM’s discourse after Öcalan’s eco-feminist turn, into a form of autonomous legality that stands in the place of the law, in the refusal to become a state.

Where chapter one of the ‘Social Contract’ discusses the basic principles of the DAANES, in chapter two this quasi-constitutional document turns to the question of human rights. Under the designation ‘fundamental rights and freedoms’, chapter two outlines several articles that describe the community’s commitments, not only to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 37), but to the right to life (article 38),

to the protection of human dignity (39) as well as the right to religious freedom (articles 40-41), the rights to organise (article 44), the right to participate in politics (article 48), the right to protection from discrimination (article 49), the prohibition of ‘all types of violence against women’ (article 50), and a constitutional commitment to the equal rights of women to participate ‘in all areas of life’ (article 51). What the social contract makes evident is how this system of autonomous legality views the injustices of colonial-capitalism, ecocide, patriarchy and ethno-nationalism, as overdetermined and entangled with one another, such that the pursuit of justice and the dispensation of rights demands a holistic political approach that challenges these obstacles to a ‘moral-political’ and thus ‘democratic’ society as an interconnected matrix of domination and oppression.¹⁴

Speaking with activists on the ground in Rojava, working both with Kongreya Star (Star Congress which is a federation of women’s organisations) and Jineoloji, one gleans an understanding of how human rights are approached and engaged with as part of their struggle for a ‘civaka ahlaki-politik’ (moral-political society).¹⁵ As such, there is an active concern to understand (1) that justice is not reducible to political articulations of ‘human rights’, and (2) that hegemonic human rights are an expression of ‘justice’ that is imposed from ‘above’ (i.e. they are non-democratic).¹⁶ Viewing questions of justice from the perspective of struggle, and as part of a history of a people ‘always overcoming injustice’, they described how there was a ‘bitterness’ or irony in thinking about justice as a right, for such a mode of the political agency required the making of a demand for justice from a body that is the source of, and reason for, injustice in many cases.¹⁷ Justice, according to these activists, must attend to questions of education, to the democratisation of the family, and thought of in a political, as opposed to legal, register.¹⁸

Appealing to concepts of ‘wekhevi’ (equality), ‘xweserti’ (autonomy), these activists outlined the complex entanglement in the present of two temporalities of rights, one global and top-down, which they pragmatically describe as ‘a tool’ for struggle, and another more vernacular temporality of rights that builds upon those Kurdish values/concepts of wekhevi and xweserti, along with other ‘pivane jiyane’ (principles of life) that arise from the moral-political/democratic society that they struggle to retain and reconstruct.¹⁹ Invoking the values of a pre-patriarchal and pre-institutional Mesopotamia, that include self-governance (autonomy), an ideology of equality, and matricentric society (which they often refer to as ‘natural society’), they outline an imaginary or vernacular culture of rights, where such rights are derived from ‘the values which have been defended – which have been protected from those days’ (Graeber & Wengrow, 2022).²⁰ Similar to the work of María Lugones and Rita Laura Segato, the Jineolojists find in a return to pre-colonial/pre-patriarchal history models of feminine power that although gendered do not exist within the kinds of hierarchy, intensity and binary difference that emerges under colonial violence, the state-form, and the rise of religious power (Lugones, 2010; Segato & Monque, 2021). Central in understanding the significance of emancipatory ideas is an attunement to the everyday, and most specifically the ‘ways of being, valuing, and believing’ which have survived and resisted coloniality within the fractured locus of colonial difference (Lugones, 2010, p. 751). It is these values that Jineoloji and the Rojava Revolution are cultivating in different ways (Holloway, 2020).²¹

Jineoloji's analysis of contemporary injustices: method and application

Having explored the normative ambivalence of (human) rights dispensation in the Social Contract of the DAANES, in this section I explore in greater detail the role that Jineoloji plays in social and cultural terms – both within Rojava and beyond. Described as the ‘science of life’ by one interlocutor, practicing Jineoloji is in a process of ‘revealing its method, its path’.²² Whilst Jineoloji is variably describable as ‘a body of knowledge’, ‘a militant pedagogy’ and a ‘knowledge-practice’, (Piccardi & Barca, 2022, p. 1274) its revitalisation of practices and epistemologies within Kurdish social, cultural, and political life, pushes these beyond their historical and geographical application. Within the ‘diasporic public sphere’ the different locations and temporality have in common a focus on the amplification of the voice of ‘jin’ (women), so as to uncover words and worlds that are unknown, erased and oppressed through patriarchy, colonialism and statehood (Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2020). Whilst one might read this as referring primarily to the *voices* of Kurdish women, the perspectives of internationalist members in Europe clearly indicate how they have adopted the Jineolojical method and applied it to their own contexts, roots and histories. Internationalists and Kurdish members alike are inspired by and come to embody Jineoloji's ethos and commitment to uncovering the *truth* of (all) who come to identify with being ‘Woman’ (this being a political and social rather than purely biological category).²³

To understand the critical paradigm of Jineoloji, one useful place to begin is with an internationalist member's perspective and her lived experience of Jineoloji. Growing up in rural France, but always politically involved in various social movements, Stephanie's encounter with Jineoloji touched her deeply, and she described how it gave her an account of patriarchy and its connection to colonial-capitalism. But most affectingly, it enabled her to understand that despite our present being co-constituted by patriarchy, such a condition of gendered inequality was not always the default social condition for all ways of life, or peoples. Stephanie's political education through Jineoloji started with something of an epiphany: ‘For me it was a like a total change of vision of the world and of myself, of women around me, and of society, and the social role of the women in transforming life’. Commenting upon her own transformation and her relation to others, Stephanie goes on to state how ‘Jineoloji could give me answers that other movements could not’. Offering an analysis of the roots of gender inequality as well as the formation of what Foucault might describe as ‘who we have become’, Stephanie describes how Jineoloji on the one the hand provided her with an understanding of the history of humanity, of women and of the Middle East, whilst at the same time inspiring her to begin a ‘search for me about who I am and what happened before to women in Europe, and in the place, I am coming from’. Stephanie, reflecting here on the personal aspect of her work with Jineoloji in Europe, is invoking the existence of a paradigm, a conceptual framework, a philosophy of history, that is central to the Jineoloji academies – namely that a women's revolution is required in order to break with the history of civilisation/patriarchy and enslavement under colonial-capitalism, invoking here what Öcalan calls ‘housewifisation’ (a concept he borrows from the Marxist feminist sociologist Maria Mies) (Piccardi, 2022).²⁴ Significantly, housewifisation for Öcalan is not just about the enslavement of women, turning them literally into the figure of the ‘housewife’ through various forms of patriarchal revolution, but also of the Kurdish mind, and

of the subaltern mind (Öcalan, 2013, pp. 26–29). As such, the women’s revolution is a revolution of consciousness, of subjectivity, of moving women’s standing in social life beyond the household into the public sphere as political actors of equal standing (Cetinkaya, 2020). Alternative imaginaries of justice as articulated by the movement and called forth by Jineolojiî, more specifically, are therefore unthinkable without women’s liberation. Any struggle for justice is inevitably always a gendered process, but this is foregrounded in this revolutionary praxis.

Constituting what one member called a ‘horizon-opening science’,²⁵ Jineoloji builds upon theories and struggles of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, feminist movements across the world, as well as the philosophical thoughts of Öcalan. The basis of all institutions of power-over others is masculinity, Zozan tells me, as she points to how Öcalan diagnoses patriarchy as a central problem in the emergence of all of these power structures through the history of Mesopotamia, and ‘capitalist-civilisation’ more generally. Offering Stephanie a deepened phenomenological sense of self-and-world relation, Jineolojiî was a way to analyse her existence and that of others through a non-positivistic worldview. This critique of ‘positivism’, which is central to Jineoloji’s method, takes aim at what Stephanie calls a ‘mechanistic’ and non-vital account of science that is ‘cutting off what is in our mind, our bodies, our hearts, our history, our sociality, by instead putting everything on the individual’, and favouring the influences of ‘the state and nationalism’.

Stephanie explains that she ‘gets confidence from Jineoloji’, as it provides her with meaning and an explanation of the injustices she witnesses; ‘you know that it’s bringing beauty and beautiful thing in the society’. She described it as both a ‘paradigm, an epistemology and a methodology that can enable every woman to find herself’ (to this idea of the self, I return in the last section). It offers her an ecological worldview which renders another world imaginable: a world where women are not simply oppressed but are engaged in the ongoing and continual resistance against all forms of oppression, and in which women have values they are cultivating and spreading across geographies and differences. Integral to this work, Jineolojist’s like Stephanie argue, is its capacity to help fight against ‘depression, loneliness and to not accept the patriarchal family’, such that they might come to live a ‘hevjiyana azad’ (literally translated: ‘a free co-existence’). Such a way of life is premised upon a mode of deep relationality that sees ‘our existence in link [*sic*] with all kinds of relationships, between women and nature, woman and society, human and nature, old and young people, mothers and daughters, mothers and children, animals and plants’.²⁶

Another Jineoloji member, Narîn, describes such a ‘hevjiyana azad’ as the ‘rebuilding of balance’ between different existences that *can* co-exist without oppressing each other through a philosophical, historical and sociological approach. What also emerges is the way that women have a central role to play as the intermediaries between these different actants/species, as woman are able to give (new) meaning to life and its reproduction (both biologically and socially, in terms of mutual support, friendship, love, the preparation of food and the sharing and shaping of moral ideas) (Holloway, 2020). Here we see something of the embodied work of refiguring the human as a sociogenic, and thereby thoroughly ecological as well as praxis driven, being fashioned by both nature and culture in combination (McKittrick et al., 2018; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). But how does this pan out across geographies and temporalities in which Jineoloji is

prevalent? This is to ask and comment upon how ideas, concepts, and theories travel, and how they act upon the everyday of its members.

In mapping this traffic across the transnational ‘diasporic public sphere’ it clearly became apparent that an ‘origin’ or ‘beginning’ of Jineoloji was something its members were disinterested in identifying, namely because they understand Jineoloji to be a situated practice concerned with the lives of women everywhere. Lorin described how each committee is inspired by common ideas and roots, such as the history of women from the goddesses, the broader feminist movement, and the Kurdish freedom movement’s 50-year struggle, as well as the diaries of martyrs who gave ‘their lives for the love of freedom’ – thereby framing the practice as a ‘multicentred science’ wherein every woman is the inspiration for Jineoloji.²⁷

It is through the activities of dissemination and sharing, such as conferences, workshops, Zoom meetings, publications of research reports and through the Jineoloji magazine, which Berixan refers to their ‘main axis’, that the ideas of Jineoloji are shared.²⁸ Such ideas are informed by the various sciences and knowledges that they have produced and collected from oral traditions, mythologies, and epics, knowledges that are discussed in training sessions and academy meetings as they seek to reveal, in a contrapuntal fashion (Said, 1993), the hidden histories of women’s agency and power within them. Bringing inspiration to one another, through such ‘consciousness raising’ exercises of research and self-study the Jineoloji members curate a space for knowledge that brings about a ‘new life’ by cultivating an autonomous system that fosters and brings about liberation.

Given Jineoloji’s transnational and diasporic structure as something less than a social movement and something more than a tradition of critique, the work they undertake operates across geographies that produce very distinctive forms of resistance through research. At its most drastic, this contrast is rendered visible by comparing the differences between Jineoloji in Rojava and the nature of the practice/academies in Europe. As several of my interlocutors have described, in Rojava Jineoloji is most urgent and vital; it is there that Jineoloji is developing in the accelerated temporality and liberatory context of revolution. For the members based in Europe, Rojava stands as something of ‘a holy place’ and a vital source of ‘huge hope’ within a context of an intensifying neo-liberal affective landscape organised around the sublimation of democracy and the disenchantment of everyday life.²⁹

By way of contrast, Jineoloji’s activities in Europe have had to take on a different approach; recognising that political institutions and political economy is more well established and populations are more conservative, their work has become more ‘fluid’ in its method, and their work, is in a sense much harder.³⁰ Consciously theorising their work as contextually motivated, conditioned and problem driven, the European Jineolojist’s describe:

Our role in Europe is a little bit different, because in Europe the state [and capitalism] is everywhere. The state [and capitalism] is everywhere. And, so Jineoloji, first of all, needs to bring this awareness that we can have, to share it in a wide [manner] — you know — not just for any kind of group, social group, but trying to make it really, encourage, in Kurdish we say ‘Mala Gisti’ [translated directly as ‘a public house’, invoking here images of town hall meetings and political deliberation]. Like to make it as a gift for the society, that the society will bring even more awareness through the Jineoloji work. And I think

also our role is, like, to give a spirit. Like, liberation, it's also a spirit of liberation, [...] of resistance, understanding of who we are, bring people together through the woman, bringing [people] together, because they [the system] are dividing us. And then, everywhere where there are women, they will be able to act [...] to transform society.³¹

In practice, this means that Jineoloji work in Europe must use different cultural references in the public to both connect and continue to build solidarity with members and others. Whilst it might be more 'difficult' in some respects to do their work in Europe, they are also witnessing a huge interest from the public as their Jineoloji camps testify to. These camps which are weeklong in duration and take place across Europe are well attended and sought after – revealing perhaps most starkly that people are desiring 'another way of living' both in Europe as elsewhere, such as in Rojava. Having described how Jineoloji works across different geographies, and named the injustices it identifies, in the next section I turn to touch more upon how its knowledge production is a key avenue through which global epistemic justice is enabled.

Jineoloji, epistemic justice and the politics of knowledge production

The knowledge that Jineoloji is seeking to rejuvenate and remember has been historically excluded from dominant regimes of truth. In retelling their histories from the standpoint of women's exclusion and subordination, however, they bring together knowledges, their production, and the task of empowerment in a fashion which motivates political action. Not only do these activists challenge orientalism, positivism, and the monopoly of knowledge in the 'Global North' by questioning the purpose of dominant modes of knowledge production which does not serve women's livelihood; they also call for modes of knowledge production that provide deeper meaning and connection to everyday life and struggles, fostering both understanding and hope. In this section I outline and analyse what knowledge production practices Jineoloji are engaged in, and how such critical perspectives provide a means of empowering women. It is this kind of knowledge that I will argue in the last section is significant for the revolution, as there is a convergence between self-study, ethical formation, and revolutionary politics. Before turning to the point about embodying Jineoloji, cultivating the values of the 'moral-political' society, it is useful to understand the processes of self-study more closely, and the role that 'educated hope' and 'political education' plays within the paradigm/practice.

Jineoloji must be located against what one of my interlocutors named 'a history that has been ignored for more than 5000 years', that is the history of housewifisation.³² For the members of Jineoloji, learning about this history, and attending to knowledges that belong to, and on the terms, of women, is strengthening: 'my horizons broaden, my courage increases and my hope rises'.³³ This different kind of knowledge and modes of learning which are brought about through communal and collective means is a way through which women's own histories are brought forward. It is a form of subaltern knowledge production that sees the world through 'the eyes of the peoples', taking place 'outside [of] the system'.³⁴ Resisting the colonial erasure of knowledges that exist in Mesopotamian societies (ancestral and contemporary), Jineoloji is simultaneously engaged in learning, research and the sharing of knowledge from the perspective of women to other women as well as the societies they are embedded in and engaged with. This form of education has also established the 'connection between science and

organising, science and revolution, science and women's movements' through an inherited legacy of (Marxian) system-critique from the larger Kurdish Freedom Movement; such a situated and problem-driven lens challenges the logic upon which knowledge is conceived and built.³⁵ What is less explicit, but central to the lens of Jineolojiî, is the critique of positivism and also the lack of affect in doing research and connecting to one another. As traditional knowledges, according to several members of Jineolojiî, are institutionalised, divorced from the society they engage in, and offered through a deeply rationalist paradigm, the question of emotions and hapticality in knowledge production is rendered illegitimate as the basis of science. Cultivating empathy, and thereby noting the needs of those around you, is described by Zozan in terms of the act of 'feeling *per se*, is something ethical' in itself.³⁶ Connecting to one another is, therefore, crucial in the method of Jineolojiî as it seeks to produce common knowledge, and doing so through learning and sharing it together through its academies that are located everywhere: 'We describe our work as an academy without walls'. Reminding me that the gardens are the first academies, Berixan refers to the role of Jineolojiî as the midwife: 'I just help the existing knowledge to be born, primarily by asking questions' – a phrasing that gestures towards a view in which she is not necessarily producing knowledge itself.³⁷ For several members this kind of knowledge gave them energy – Jineolojiî's spirit – and was described as 'talismanic'.³⁸ Jineolojiî, as well as the political theory of Öcalan, have been talismanic, or even sublime, for the Kurdish women's movement in that sense.

Seeking access to the dark wisdom of past feminist struggles, Jineolojists are engaged in a process of 'subjective decolonisation', releasing themselves from the oppressive and subordinating histories and narratives that have legitimated and reproduced their subordination as women (Motta, 2019). Through self-study that attends to a new body of knowledge that is premised upon the need to re-world and re-root women's activities and their reproductive labour in common, Jineolojiî politicises among other things motherhood and womanhood so as to nurture horizontal and prefigurative forms of social relations outside of the histories and narratives of patriarchy, and women's subordinate location within power structures. As the Jineolojiî Committee of Europe describes, this self-study is historically minded and inspired by Mesopotamian myths of matricentrism and human ecology (Jineolojiî Committee of Europe, 2017). But this is not to be conceived in a nostalgic vein of 'something to go back to, but a potential source of alternative development based on women's resistance against "male-dominated", "power-seeking paradigms", and the overcoming of "the alienation between women-nature, human-nature and society-nature"' (Piccardi & Barca, 2022, p. 1278).

Turning now to two examples of how Jineolojiî collects and re-articulates knowledges, I look first to what they call 'the library project'. Inspired by the long history of women's libraries, this project was set up by Jineolojiî members (initiated by academic and journalist Nagihan Akarsel, who was assassinated in October 2022) and is located in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan.³⁹ The library projects primary focus is the creation of a *memory space* and repository as a mode of resistance, that documents and records women's knowledges and histories. The 'Kurdish Women's Archive, Research Centre and Library', was launched in June 2023, and is a meeting and learning space for women (Centro de Jineolojiî, 2023). The library is building this resistant memory by (1) collecting books by Kurdish women, (2) books on Kurdish women, and (3) collecting oral literature by

attending to the voices of the different communities, including their dengbajs and nursery rhymes, all of which are at risk of getting lost.⁴⁰

The library is a tangible means to maintain the memory of people, as it is a space in which women are brought together and share their lives, dreams and problems as they are shaping and collecting their own history, in their own voice, through a situated and contextual perspective (Jineoloji Committee Germany, 2022). Constituting a multi-faceted space that reflects women's complex realities, this library contributes to building a science from the perspective of women's experiences and in their relationship to one another, society and ecology. Furthermore, the library project furthers several components of Jineoloji which seeks a 'science of relationships for a free, political-moral, and democratic society', by documenting and archiving the cultural heritage of these women holistically (Jineoloji Committee Germany, 2022, p. 17).

Another way through which jineolojists are producing knowledge, is through a project on natural medicine, which Arya a jineolojist from Rojava has been involved in. This project is concerned with how values and knowledges of the natural society – which has survived despite capitalistic colonial-patriarchy emergence – can be made communal. Arya describes how in Rojava they have many 'wise women that we call healers' who have been 'collecting herbs from nature for thousands of years and who know what they are used for'.⁴¹ Such an inherited knowledge includes how to harvest herbs in their right season, as well as the methods through which this collection is best achieved. These women's ways of engaging with herbs has persisted in the resistant response to colonial-capitalism, as modern medicine traditionally has ignored the wisdom of traditional and female knowledges. Declaring that 'we refer to them as goddesses', Arya celebrates how they are seen to be the creators and protectors of life, as they carry forward ancestral knowledge to the present day, with their bodies constituting the architecture of the archive of such knowledges.⁴² In this regard these Kurdish women 'healers' form part of a long transnational tradition as described with political potency by Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch* and by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English before her (Ehrenreich & English, 1973; Federici, 2021). Calling them goddesses refashions, objectively and subjectively, these women in the image of the goddesses of ancient Mesopotamia. In doing so, it works to transform them into powerful and important figures within an ecology that takes what might appear to be banal knowledges and reinvests them with new power and reasoning. As a result, a shift in self-understanding about these women's knowledges is performatively produced. These women and their knowledge and activities are given deeper meaning, and this is mirrored back to women as a source of knowledge, empowerment and agency. This ultimately challenges patriarchal and positivistic knowledges.

Arya tells me: 'we try to make women recognise their own knowledge and see how they can reach a level of [female and ecological] consciousness and awareness through their own values'.⁴³ Knowledge re-making is, then, ultimately a process of re-humanisation, as it gives 'legitimacy, authority, voice, sense and visibility' (Lugones, 2010, p. 746) to these women who have been denied the position as knowledge-makers and carriers: as creators of new modes of living. Liberation, thereby, emerges 'infra-politically', (Lugones, 2010, p. 747) as these women actively respond and resist centuries of oppression both as women and as Kurds through their everyday actions, values, and knowledges. What emerges is perhaps best described through 'the tension between the dehumanization

and paralysis of the coloniality of being, and the creative activity of be-ing' (Lugones, 2010, p. 754). It is to this point that I turn to next, in order to highlight how the formation of and participation in such a science of women/life is related to the transformation of women's subjectivity and subordination; thereby emphasising how self-knowledge is intimately connected to the political-ontological problem of being human, and in giving greater meaning to life itself (Escobar, 2018).

To change the world, we need to know\transform ourselves

The reality of women who find and recreate themselves, who can be themselves, can develop the power to transform both society and men from the power of change they create in themselves. It can expand the capacity and values of living together and pave the way for free individuals and free relationships. As we increase this struggle, the space of the hegemonic male system, the capitalist system, will narrow – and the capacity for free life, free women and free men will expand. (Doğu, 2024)

Jineoloji features as a central feminist tool for liberating society and people, thereby moving towards decolonial and ecological futures different to those that currently stand before them. At its root, Jineoloji is about materialising a moral-political and democratic order, and it is within this order that members and activists seek to cultivate novel ways of life, new modes of being, doing and saying. Through an aesthetic and ethical project that works through collective self-transformation, Jineoloji and the Rojava revolution more broadly seeks to expand ideas of self-governance and autonomy that prioritises ecological, gender and racial justice. Jineoloji activists, therefore, undertake work on their own 'self' in order to transcend their non-revolutionary 'self(s)', thereby effecting a revolution at the micro-political level of subjectivity. Their wager? That by transforming the self, they can contribute to the transformation of social relations to the extent of instigating something of a paradigm shift, and instituting a new society, a new moral and political order that is the lived and embodied expression of justice. A justice that centres *healing*, and the repair of the 'colonial wound'⁴⁴ through intelligence, love, mercy, resistance and courage. Building an *affective community* of solidarity, activist and research networks and a strong sense of familiarity through political organisation, Jineoloji activists offer a radical re-articulation of the political limitations of liberal and colonial-capitalist selfhood, as such. This model of selfhood requires emergent practices of ethical self-management as a means to prefigure the political and creative project of democratic autonomy: placing at the centre of such a project the fostering of values such as 'respect, affection, neighbourly relations and solidarity' (Öcalan, 2015).

Many interlocutors, in Rojava and the European Jineoloji diaspora space referred to a process of becoming 'ungovernable', as they described how they had to first free themselves from their colonised self through a process of 'mental revolution'.⁴⁵ Such a colonised self was forged in and sustained by various systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism. For many of these women, the Kurdish women in particular, the oppression they have suffered is also more fundamentally characterised by the experience of having 'no name, no language, and no country' in the eyes of the sovereign (law) and the nation-states in which the Kurds are indigenous to its land (Doğu, 2024). Having had their identity and histories ignored, the struggle of these

women breaks with the denial (and self-denial) which renders them invisible and non-existent within the colonial politics of recognition: ‘the more I learn about these things, the more strengthened I am’.⁴⁶

Creating a new sociality, therefore, provides a means through which they express and come to *be* themselves. It is particularly through the world-making concept of ‘Xwebun’, which is translated as being/becoming oneself, that new synergies of being, existing and knowing is created.⁴⁷ In this way, any change at the micro-political level instigates the macro-political social transformation. Jineoloji members are crucial actors in designing and producing other figurations of being human within an alternative political imaginary to hegemonic rights – as different forms of (gendered) subjectification and ideas of relational, horizontal, and ethical justice are furthered. This is captured by a member explaining ‘if we want change, we need to start within ourselves’ (Miranda, 2018). Gul, for example, describes how this self-knowledge of one’s ‘own roots [...] developed in me, and after a while you get to become the subject of this work’,⁴⁸ thereby, pointing to that process and connection between self-understanding and self-fashioning/becoming.

It is through women researching themselves and their past, their identity and history, that a material convergence emerges between new modes of knowledge-making and new ways of being/becoming. This Jineoloji activity stands as a material example of how one can break with the coloniality of knowledge and its intrinsic connection to the ‘coloniality of being’, and what they describe as ‘the dominant mentality’ of ‘civilization’ (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). Provoking reflection, and new modes of recognition and understanding, such a process of ethical self-making links *being* with *knowing*. As one member in the European diaspora adds an insightful point: ‘the fact that knowledge can be produced from the society through that society’s own dynamics has been totally erased from this society’s memory’.⁴⁹ Jineoloji, as such, disrupts the *colonial amnesia* which has excluded women as narrators of history and life. Self-study is, therefore, central to Jineoloji’s revolutionary politics, as self-understanding and research is a means through which a decolonial politics of the self is enabled:

you make the research, you understand yourself, so you search again. This knowledge is then shared with the community, and together you search more.⁵⁰

It is, as such, a constant and unknown process of recovering subjugated knowledges from women to one another, and society.

From these narratives it also becomes clear that this self-transformation is a moment upon which these women are brought into being as *full* beings, and no longer defined by men or their subordinated gendered roles. Berixan explains:

Who am I? Where did I come from? Who am I as a woman? Has woman been created out of the rib of a man? Why are women second-class citizens? When you do research into it you realise the man is brought to life by women, not vice versa. A woman carries a man in her womb for nine months. But then how did this reality turn upside down?

Berixan reflected further, explaining how the treatment of her as a person is very recent in the 5000 years history of patriarchy. She goes on to tell:

There cannot be a reality, a human reality that is afraid, running away or ashamed of its own existence. Or because of being a woman. There cannot be a personality, an individual who is constantly oppressed, who is constantly kept under pressure, as if they are in need of

someone's protection. I mean, I have experienced all this in my own life. But if I think it within the historical process, I see that what all women have experienced throughout the history is also embodied in me. There is such a side to that as well. What my mother went through is somehow embodied in me. It's not separate or unconnected actually.⁵¹

Conclusion: another life/world is possible

Throughout this article, I have sought to offer a decolonial feminist interpretation of the emergence of a vernacular rights-culture in Rojava and its diasporic public spheres. On my reading, the name 'Rojava' not only names the territory governed by the DAANES in Northeast Syria, but also a transnational political imaginary that inspires and gives hope in dark times. What I have found particularly interesting about thinking Rojava and rights-politics in the frame is how, on the one hand, the DAANES has ensured the dispensation of rights to a considerable population of multi-ethnic and stateless peoples under conditions of ongoing civil war, and in the absence of a formal state-structure. What's more, they have radically reappropriated the vocabulary of international human rights, re-embedding it within an entirely alien political ontology of cosmivision at odds with the neoliberal hegemony of contemporary human rights practice. On the other hand, I have been particularly interested in how a feminist movement like jineoloji has sought to deepen and further refine such an ontology through practices of epistemic retrieval and transformation. What they have offered is nothing short of a new paradigm in thinking political injustice and a powerful alternative philosophy of history that breaks with the normative underpinnings of universal human rights. In this article, I have sought to map out the contribution of jineoloji movement to thinking injustice and as a vernacular practice of rights that is attuned to the ways in which colonial-capitalism and patriarchy constitute historical limit to the potentiality for a radical redemption of human rights in its universal form. Drawing on the theoretical framework of vernacular rights-cultures, I have argued for a pluriversal conception of rights-politics that is open to learning from, and being inspired by, alternative political imaginaries and cosmivisions of rights that are always already at work in 'most of the world'. In the context of Rojava and the jineoloji movement there, and in Europe, this alternative cosmivision and its vernacular rights-culture has taken the form of a plurality of emergent practices of autonomy, research, love, and mutual support. These material practices are expressed through the intellectual work of the movement and its capacity to empower and 're-humanise' women to feel their rights through projects like the 'Kurdish Women's Archive, Research Centre and Library', and the Women's natural medicine project in Rojava.

By putting into question, the onto-epistemic frameworks of human rights and dominant modes knowledge production more broadly, Jineoloji offers a different narrative of patriarchy and colonial-capitalism. Jineoloji is further concerned with the *root causes* of these systems, and the injustices they create, as it researches, diagnoses, and seeks to solve the problems facing the communities they are living and working in. The solution, however, is not only in undoing these systems, but also in changing one's relationship to them and their influence on one's sense of selfhood. Jineoloji, thereby, offers an alternative genealogy of the human and of human rights, that begins not with Enlightenment 'Man', but with the demand made by those gendered

subjects who have historically been denied access to the category of the ‘Human’, such that they might come to be treated as equals and claim their rights with power. Such a politics of re-humanisation takes place however with a context, onto-epistemology and set of values that challenge the core ontological assumptions of traditional humanism, taking place within a tradition and history of resistance that belongs to a thoroughly pluriversal conception of the myriad ways of being and becoming human. For the onto-epistemology of Rojava and the Jineoloji project such an image of being extends beyond the anthropocentrism of the human, to embrace the ways in which all forms of being are entangled within relational ties with the natural and more-than-human world.

The members of Jineoloji understand that the decolonisation of Kurdistan and Kurdish sociality extends to all four corners the corners of the planet; that the liberation of Kurdistan, of women, and of life itself demands the creation of a ‘geographical imagination that extends well beyond the corners of the nation-state’ (Mbembe, 2016). In doing so, they demonstrate how coloniality traverses various enclaves in the global majority. The reach of Jineoloji beyond Kurdistan to Europe and the Americas highlights that its method and application has wider appeal and potential, as it speaks to a multitude of people that are imagining and materialising ‘another life’, ‘another world’, a new ontology, demonstrating how such a utopia is both possible and indeed revolutionary. How, in fact, it is necessary in order to save the world.

Notes

1. Rojava Information Centre, ‘Beyond the frontlines – The building of the democratic system in North and East Syria’, <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2019/12/report-beyond-the-frontlines/>.
2. On ‘retroduction’ (see Glynos & Howarth, 2007).
3. Öcalan, *The Sociology of Freedom*, 109, 295, 296, 372.
4. Interview with Berixan.
5. Interview with Lorin, Hêlin and Ezma. See also (Cansiz, 2018; Doğu, 2024)
6. Interview with Narin.
7. Interview with Lorin, Hêlin and Ezma.
8. Interview with Arya.
9. Interview with Lorin, Hêlin and Ezma.
10. Interview with Zozan.
11. On the Zapatistas and their decolonial politics of rights (see Speed, 2007; Baris, 2022)
12. I borrow this concept of ‘most of the world’ from (Chatterjee, 2004)
13. Compare with (Habermas, 1996), especially Appendix 1 ‘Popular Sovereignty as Procedure (1988)’.
14. On the concept of a ‘moral-political’ or ‘democratic’ form of society, see Öcalan, *The Sociology of Freedom*, p. 243.
15. Interview with Mizgin.
16. Ibid.
17. Interview with Lorin, Hêlin and Ezma; Interview with Zozan.
18. Interview with Stephanie.
19. Interview with Lorin, Hêlin and Ezma.
20. Ibid.
21. John Holloway echoes this reading of Öcalan and his concept of a moral-political society, describing it as those everyday activities of social life that ‘gel’ and ‘hold everything together’.
22. Interview with Berixan.

23. Interview with Stephanie
24. For more on Öcalan's engagement with Mies (1986) work on housewifisation and its relation to jineoloji's praxis.
25. Interview with Berixan.
26. Interview with Stephanie.
27. Interview with Lorin, Hêlin and Ezma.
28. Interview with Berixan.
29. Interview with Arya.
30. Interview with Berixan.
31. Interview with Stephanie.
32. Interview with Arya.
33. Interview with Berixan.
34. Interview with Gul.
35. Ibid.
36. Interview with Zozan.
37. Interview with Berixan.
38. Interview with Arya.
39. Interview with Zozan.
40. Interview with Zozan.
41. Interview with Arya.
42. Ibid.
43. Interview with Arya.
44. Walter Mignolo and Alvina Hoffman, 'Interview – Walter Mignolo/Part 1: Activism and Trajectory', E-International Relations, <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/01/17/interview-walter-mignolopart-1-activism-and-trajectory>.
45. Interview with Zozan.
46. Interview with Berixan.
47. Interview with Zozan.
48. Interview with Gul.
49. Interview with Gul.
50. Interview with Stephanie.
51. Interview with Berixan.

Acknowledgement

This article is only possible because of the generosity of time, insight and inspirational work of all the women in Jineoloji, Kongra Star and the Syrian Democratic Council. Their strength and determination in constant struggle against overwhelming force is a testament to the power of democratic autonomy and the possibility of a different and more just future. My heartfelt thanks must go to the Jineoloji members who gave feedback on this article, as well as Prof Sumi Madhok and Dr Liam Farrell who supported me in getting this project off the ground. Finally, my thanks go to Remziye who supported me with translation and transcription services for this project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data statement

Data associated with this research is not available.

Ethics statement

This research was granted ethical approval by the ethics committee at the London School of Economics, where I was based during the data collection period. All interviews are anonymous and have been given pseudonyms.

Funding

This research was awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions fellowship in 2022, and was funded by UK Research and Innovation.

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