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a world  
without  
maps**

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# introduction

It is no secret that maps were invented to expand the power of their makers. Maps are created to dominate, to designate borders of nation-states and of private property, and entail the aim of capitalist accumulation and extraction of resources of all kinds. *A World Without Maps* is a series of four videos excerpted from my film "Mapping Lessons," that responds to the fabrication of these boundaries.

In her exhibition text, curator of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale Shubigi Rao writes,

"What do we find when we listen, read, record, think and make? For one, that even the most solitary of journeys is not one of isolation, but drinks deeply from that common wellspring of collective knowledge and ideas. Even when we work alone, we amplify the voices of others, and this form of sociability is why when we create, we are collective."

It is very much in this spirit, that the publication *About A World Without Maps* features five exchanges I had with people whose work – spanning the worlds of activism, farming, scholarship, and music – deeply informed the making of this project, along with two of my own texts reflecting on the process and the themes.

A new conversation on *A World without Maps* will be released in the form of a newspaper every second Monday of the Biennale, when the exhibition is free to the public. Please take a copy, read it, and keep it on your shelf, or pass it along to someone you think might enjoy it, as you would anything you read. After all, the newspaper much like the image was one of the most powerful tools to spread a shared sense of self in the fabricated communities of nation-states. It is time we imagine different communities beyond these borders – we cannot afford not to.

Philip Rizk, Berlin, April 2021

# traces of a world without maps

Philip Rizk

In 1917, the US authorities deported the Russian anarchists and life-long collaborators Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, along with a bunch of other unwanted immigrants, to their home country Russia. The day Berkman crossed the border, he got on his knees and kissed the snow-covered ground, later writing in his diary, "It was the most sublime day of my life."

Days after his arrival in Moscow, on 23 November 1917, during his walk through the banned markets, Berkman found great excitement around one of the central newspaper stands. Leon Trotsky, then secretary of foreign affairs, had discovered amongst the papers of the tsarist regime the documents of a secret accord signed between Britain and France, dividing up between them the territories of the Ottoman Empire – the "sick man of Europe." That day Trotsky had published the secret meeting outcome, known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, for the whole world to see.

Berkman's journey took him across revolutionary Russia. Sadly, the excitement he had first felt so deeply turned into profound disappointment. Through his travels, Berkman discovered to his dismay that the dream he and many others had dreamt for years was slipping through their finger. Many of his old comrades were in prison, some had been killed in battles with the new authority, and others had fled. Toward the end of his time in Russia, Berkman wrote in his diary:

"With every day of passing travels, I came to realize that this revolution, unlike ever before, had opened a door through which was flowing a tumult of ideas, emotions, expressions and fears. The more I traveled the more I realized that this flow had different lives. Every city, with its peoples, languages, rhythms embraced the spirit of this revolution in its own way. Russia is my birthplace, yet, here I find myself a stranger, for my heart lies elsewhere, tied to the vision, not the territory. This spirit of revolution had struck me too, but those in power were implementing their own vision at the cost of so many others amongst whom I found myself. I have travelled amongst those that had other dreams, fought for other utopias. It leaves me deeply longing for more."

Kulthum Ouda traveled from revolutionary Russia back to her home near Nazareth, in 1920, just months before the invasion of the French and British armies.

She had left for Russia after she married a Russian doctor working in Palestine, arriving just prior to the imperial war (WWI) during which she volunteered as a nurse, and then led the Department for Work Among Women of the Communist Party in the Ukrainian countryside. It was there where Berkman had found the strongest opposition to the Bolshevik onslaught on the spirit of the Russian revolution. Amongst those villages, the anarchist Nestor Makhno had led an army of farmers against the remaining pro-tsar Russian troops and sought to establish farmer-run Soviets. Following her journey to Palestine, Ouda was hired by the Language Institute of Moscow meant to assist cadres in bringing the revolution to Asian and Middle Eastern countries.

I am crossing the wires, blotting out the state and its hegemonic narrative, erasing the sad endings of powerful beginnings.

There is no record of Ouda ever joining the Communist party. What if, living in the Ukrainian countryside, she and Berkman met there? Maybe she made similar observations to Berkman? She could never have uttered them except behind closed doors, never have written them down, never have left a trace of opposition to that mighty state while living there, because doing so would have meant risking her life. Berkman published his diary only after leaving Russia. Writing today, over one hundred years later, what interests me is not the Rus-

sian revolution per se, but the potential it unleashes, how the vision of it traveled. Not what it turned into, how that experiment ended, but how it started. What matters was that the story was traveling, drawing an image of the impossible becoming possible in people's minds.

In 2017, I met Abdalla Hanna, a Syrian historian in self-imposed exile. In a text he shared with me, he recorded a woman from a village telling of her visit to her injured husband in the army barracks where he was stationed toward the end of WWI. There he recounted to her stories he had heard about the revolution, and getting the details wrong, told her that affordable housing had been made available for all.

Hanna was told the story while gathering oral histories from farmers throughout the Syrian countryside in the 1970s. Although the government had sponsored his study, the state censor didn't approve it upon publication and punctured every single copy full of holes. As a result of that work, the Syrian authorities never permitted him to teach, effectively silencing him without locking him up.

Based largely on the discovery of the private papers of Abu Kamel Qassab, a rebel leader exiled from Aleppo in the 1920s, scholar James Gelvin submitted a PhD thesis in 1992. His research is the only trace publicly available of this record. After Gelvin carried out his research, the Egyptian owners sold the archive to a Saudi academic institution that does not make it accessible to the public. In the private papers, the scholar found notes of meetings for the establishment of local councils particularly around Damascus, a short-lived experiment that the French invaders quickly wiped out upon their arrival.

Where revolt has once taken place, where people have tried to turn dreams into reality, a seed is sown, that must one day sprout again. In his book *Revolutionary Dreams*, historian Richard Stites introduces the principle of "psychic mechanisms" to describe this. One hundred years after Syria's revolt against French invaders and the first attempts to build structures of local governance, these ideas began to flourish once again. Following the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011 when opponents of the Assad regime began to liberate entire areas from the dictatorship, communities set up local councils to govern their own affairs. The media industry complex has covered over these stories with the only story that they consider to matter – a war and a refugee crisis. But the reason for the battles is exactly this: autonomy, liberation, a new way of living. That November, anarchist Omar Aziz, "Abu Kamel," wrote a manifesto on local councils that inspired a generation. He paid for his ideas and actions with death in a regime prison.

Twice in her life Hannah Arendt taught a course entitled "Political Experiences." In her lecture notes she wrote that the purpose of the course was to develop the "reproductive imagination," which makes it possible to "relive a period vicariously." Elsewhere she described the role of storytelling in training our "imagination to go visiting." For Arendt, "this is not a question of empathy, as though I tried to think or to feel like somebody else, but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not."

We often hear that stories are told by the victor. Map-making is part of these stories, as well as travelogues, particularly colonial ones, that include the mapping of space to be explored and captured. Both Alexander Berkman and Emma

Goldman make references to experiences of a religious type in the descriptions of their visit to Russia in 1917. "A feeling of solemnity, of awe overwhelmed me. Thus my pious old forefathers must have felt on first entering the Holy of Holies," Berkman writes. In her book *The Most Sublime Day in the Life of Alexander Berkman: On the Attainable Success of the Russian Revolution*, Bini Adamczak proposes that this appearance of religious language, is "evidence of moments in the political discourse of Emancipation, whose secular translation fails because in a language of limited rationality they are considered unrepresentable in an intelligible manner." Sometimes we don't have the words to capture the most critical of experiences.

In 2021, I am not Alexander Berkman, I am not Kulthum Ouda, but I will walk in their steps, exercising my reproductive imagination.

We must find ways of telling these stories.







# a discussion paper on local councils in Syria\*

Omar Aziz, Damascus, October 2011

## **Introduction: Living in two temporalities**

Revolution is by definition an exceptional event that alters the course of a society's history and transforms human subjectivity. It is a simultaneous rupture in time and place during which people live in two temporalities: that of the powers that be, and that of revolution. A revolution's success hangs on its ability to secure the autonomy of its own time so that society can move into a new era.

The revolution in Syria, now in its eighth month, has a long struggle ahead to bring down the regime and create new spaces for living. The ongoing demonstrations have so far succeeded in breaking the authority's absolute hegemony over place: its control over geography is now only relative and varies from one region to another and from one day to the next, even from one hour to the next. Persistent protests have also produced a National Council incor-

porating a wide spectrum of grassroots movements, organizations, and political parties. The council thus has the ability to project an alternative representative legitimacy to that of the authority, both regionally and internationally, and to exert the efforts necessary to protect the Syrian people from the regime's murder and brutality.

Nevertheless, revolutionary mobilization remains external to people's ordinary activities and has not managed to integrate itself into their everyday lives, which continue as before, as if subject to a daily "division of labor" between revolutionary activity and ordinary activity. As a result, social formations in Syria exist within two overlapping systems of time: that of the powers that be, which continues to regulate ordinary activities, and that of the revolution, in which activists work to bring down the regime. The danger lies not in the overlap between these two temporalities, which is





a natural feature of revolution, but in the dissonance between the two trajectories – ordinary and revolutionary – in the lives of the masses. The movement, then, has two things to fear in the period ahead: that people will tire of pursuing the revolution because of its impact on their work and family lives or that they will increasingly resort to the use of weapons, leaving the revolution hostage to the gun.

Accordingly, the better social formations can assert their autonomy from the powers that be through people's efforts to distinguish the time of revolution from the time of the powers that be, the more successfully the revolution will have created the conditions necessary for victory. Recent months have been especially fertile in experiments focused on emergency medical care and legal assistance; we now urgently need to enrich and broaden these initiatives to include other areas of life. Integrating life and revolution is vital to ensure the revolution will thrive and succeed. This in turn demands a flexible social formation that will activate reciprocity between the revolution and people's everyday lives. In what follows, we will refer to this as a "local council."

What follows is a discussion paper exploring the benefits of establishing local councils, composed of individuals from different cultures and social groups, which will work toward:

■ Supporting people in managing their lives autonomously of the institutions and agencies of the state (even if only partially)

■ Creating space for collective expression which will strengthen individuals' own efforts at mutual assistance and transform their ordinary activities into political action

■ Activating the revolution's social activities in local contexts and coordinating frameworks of support.

The central issues of concern for local councils are as follows:

### **People: Strengthening affinity and interdependence**

■ Supporting residents arriving in or migrating away from a given area

■ Providing logistical support to the families of detainees

■ Meeting the basic needs and expenses of families in crisis, as well as providing moral support.

The time of people's daily lives has been stripped down to the search for a safer place for themselves and their families. Likewise, their daily labors consist of an exhausting quest to find out what has happened to disappeared loved ones or where they are detained, a quest they undertake with the help of relatives or acquaintances in the areas where they have sought refuge.

The role of the local council is to subsume these miserable tasks, which are governed by the time of the powers that be, into the labor for which society takes collective responsibility. The council must therefore, at a minimum:

- i) Find safe accommodation and provide supplies for individuals and their families arriving in the council's local area, in coordination with its counterpart in the region where they have come from
- ii) Compile the details of detainees and transfer them to the relevant revolutionary body, coordinate communication with legal bodies, and support families seeking news of loved ones in detention
- iii) Keep details of the needs of families in crisis and aim to cover their expenses



through financial assistance from the public or the Revolutionary Regional Funds.

These undertakings require organization, data management, and administrative experience, yet they are by no means impossible, whatever the context. The revolution has produced a generation of experts in organizing demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins, and can encourage new administrative expertise in tasks that people already perform intuitively.

This responsibility will not replace the role of relatives or acquaintances (at least initially) and nor should it be in any way obligatory. People who are becoming accustomed to coping without the services of the state, and have found temporary alternatives in the form of kinship relations, need time and practice to move towards more sophisticated and effective forms of collective social contact and conduct.

### **Human reciprocity: Establishing new areas of mutual exchange**

■ Providing a space for people to discuss their affairs and seek solutions

■ Building horizontal connections between local councils in a given region and extending those connections to other regions.

The revolution has transformed human subjectivities by extending the horizons of their lives. They know now that the struggle is the way to achieve liberation; they have been shown by their own determination that another tomorrow is possible. They have discovered that they possess a new and unfamiliar way of defining themselves, and capacities of creation and innovation that transcend the stultifying individualism in which a half-century of dictatorship attempted to imprison them. They have seen that mutual aid opens new doors of rich and colorful social engagement.

The local council's role, here, lies in activating this mutual aid and extending it into spheres of life beyond the movement against the powers that be, i.e. by:

- i) Encouraging people to raise issues relating to their livelihood and needs, to discuss them with others and seek collective solutions.
- ii) Scrutinizing issues that require solutions from beyond the local public, such as funding or support from other regions.

### **Land: Rediscovering mutual interest**

Defending local lands expropriated by the state or at risk of expropriation

Arbitrary state expropriation of land in cities and rural areas across Syria, and subsequent population redistribution, have been central pillars of the policy of social domination and exclusion employed by the authority. This policy has sought to create “safe” residential areas for police and military officers, and commercial developments providing housing and shopping areas for the rich. The revolutionary mobilization we are seeing in rural and suburban areas is partly a result of people’s rejection of this policy of expropriation and exclusion, which tears apart the spaces in which they live.

The role of the local council is to directly defend lands and properties which the state is expropriating, regardless of pretext. The council must:

- i) Rapidly inventory the lands and properties subject to expropriation orders.
- ii) Communicate with the revolution’s legal networks and lodge legal challenges to overturn, or at least delay, expropriation orders.
- iii) Make defending properties and lands an issue which concerns all local residents.

### **The formation of local councils**

The process of establishing a local council takes place under the aegis of the movement in each region – it will be more difficult in regions subject to a heavier security presence and easier in regions where the revolutionary movement is stronger.

The local council’s work is a gradual process that will vary according to need, circumstance, and the extent of people’s engagement. The success of any one council will enrich the experiences of other councils and provide encouragement to their members. Establishing a local council will not be an easy process, but it is the basis for the continuation of the revolution. The challenge lies not only in security repression and the siege of people and place, but in the practice of new and unfamiliar relationships and ways of life. This practice demands an autonomous formation that breaks with the authority and supports and develops economic and social activities in the region where it is located, ideally possessing administrative experience in various fields.

The project of establishing local councils should take place first in places where conditions are most conducive. These places can function as pilots for the establishment of councils in areas where it is more challenging. Since electoral processes cannot take place under current conditions, local councils should be composed of people working in the social sector, those who enjoy wide public respect, and those equipped with experience in social, organizational, and technical fields, who are willing and able to undertake voluntary labor. The local council’s work should proceed in stages, according to local priorities and with the collaboration of local council members, local activists, and volunteer activists from outside the area with relevant experience.

### **The National Council has a key role to play in the following areas:**

- i) Legitimacy: the National Council validates the concept of the local council, giving it legitimacy and facilitating its acceptance by activists on the ground
- ii) Funding: the National Council’s willingness to manage the finances of the Revolutionary Funds – one of the essential functions for which it must take responsibility – provides flexibility by covering startup and running costs which the region itself may not be able to afford
- iii) Facilitating coordination between regions and extending coordination to the governorate level, while regions and subregions continue to take initiatives in line with their own visions for the movement. It is this autonomy that has given the movement its demonstrable flexibility, even if it has probably suffered from a lack of friendly spaces to protect it. The National Council’s role is essential in creating common ground and strengthening connections between regions.

\* Translated by Katharine Halls



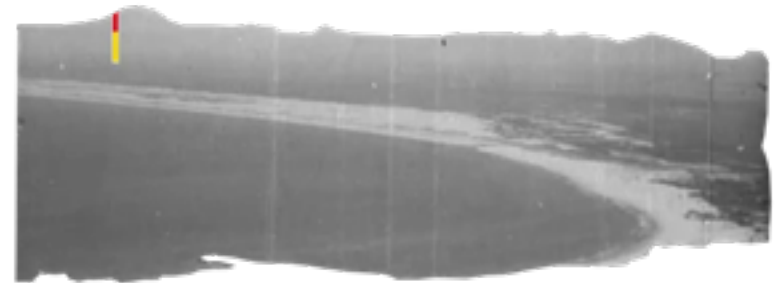
# We cannot afford to wait for the next time

Yasser Munif in conversation with Philip Rizk

**Philip Rizk:** From the perspective of someone who participated in the Egyptian revolution, I believe the Syrian revolution went much further. In Egypt, between the years of 2011 and 2013 in particular, we had a revolution of consciousness: we learned revolutionary lessons, people learned with their bodies what it meant to fight an oppressive regime, we learned lessons of togetherness, we learned a lot about how and how not to organize. We were able to fracture the Egyptian regime, but in the summer of 2013 they came back stronger and more oppressive in order to reimpose their authority. Structurally the counter-revolution of this brutal regime has been winning ever since, but in terms of consciousness, their brutality is only a sign of the weakness of the system. While we have reaped no material gains, on the level of political consciousness the regime has been los-

ing ground ever since Egyptians stormed the first police station and occupied the first square.

My reading of the Syrian revolution is that in regards to political consciousness, Syrians went through a similar process from March 2011 when protests broke out. People were utterly transformed and radicalized as they developed political astuteness and critical thinking through acts of revolting. Yet, unlike Egypt, on a structural level Syrians also went through a revolution in governance, whereby revolutionaries liberated entire communities and large territories from the regime. In my mind, this is the most under-celebrated revolutionary event in the region's modern history. It is of course desperately sad that this radical moment was transitory. With so many forces vying to profit from that vacuum of power, and





so much money and arms channeled into the territory, most of these radical experiments were short-lived. And the cost was huge; there is no doubt about that. Yet, I believe it is critical we hold onto the radical potential kneaded out in these communities, despite their shortcomings and their passing, not in order to idealize or monumentalize them, as is so often the case, but to prepare for next time. This is something we so rarely do. Prepare.

In my film "Mapping Lessons" I am trying to look ahead. Rather than document the past, I want to prepare for the future. A lot of films about struggles try to educate or inform viewers after the fact. I don't feel we have that luxury now; with the world on fire in so many places, we have no time to waste. We need to prepare for the struggles to come.

When the Russian anarchist Alexander Berkman who had been living in exile in the USA crossed the border into revolutionary Russia in 1920, he wrote in his diary, "It was the most sublime day of my life." You entered liberated Syrian territory in 2012. Can you describe what it is you felt when you entered liberated space? As someone who grew up with politics all around you, who knew so deeply what the brutality of a regime meant, can you describe what you felt?

**Yasser Munif:** I went back to Damascus in 2011 and 2012, and what I witnessed was transformative in every way possible. I remember going to a protest in Old Damascus and chanting with protesters slogans such as "Down with Assad" and "One, one, one, the Syrian people are one." The feeling of uttering these words is difficult to convey. The protest was short because the thugs of the regime soon attacked us. However, my first ex-

perience of protesting in the streets of Damascus, despite its brevity, was transformative. The emotions I experienced were extreme and contradictory. It was a powerful combination of joy, fear, hope, and love.

One of the most important aspects of the Syrian revolt is the liberation of territories and their management by revolutionaries. Syrians undertook a lot of political exploration in these autonomous zones. People experienced for the first time the meaning of living with dignity, without the harassment of the secret services and other state agencies. After almost fifty years of Baathist rule, Syrians were finally discovering the meaning of freedom. The regime didn't want them to succeed because that would undermine and delegitimize the state in the eyes of most Syrians. The success of the autonomous zones constituted an existential threat for the regime. As a result, these areas were systematically targeted by the regime and its allies.

When the revolt erupted in 2011, most Syrians wanted reform because they thought overthrowing the regime was unattainable. They quickly realized that the only way forward was the toppling of the Assad regime. Revolutionaries began liberating territories and building alternative economic, cultural, and political institutions. They discovered that the state is not the source of stability as the regime had taught them for decades, but rather the source of violence. They found that the state is not necessary to make their villages and cities liveable. Territorial and political autonomy, as you suggest, was one of the most important achievements of the Syrian revolt. People learned a tremendous amount through the struggle in the past several years.

There were evidently many shortcomings and challenges, yet inhabitants in the liberated territories learned to live without and against the state. Villagers developed creative strategies to defend their communities. They learned how to produce and provide the basic necessities for their communities. Revolutionary councils and courts were established to govern in the liberated territories. Syrians were rethinking the meaning of being human and of living with dignity on a scale never achieved before. I believe we can learn tremendously from these revolutionary practices, while at the same time trying to understand their shortcomings.

**PR:** I remember an email you sent me in 2012 in which you forwarded a friend's description comparing the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Rojava in northern Syria to the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia in terms of how the party hijacked the revolution. Years after the hijacking of the Russian revolution it took the world's left – for lack of a better word – a very long time to recognize that Russia's communism wasn't the ideal that they had been fighting for. This realization was often a very long process – in some cases it took generations and divided movements. In 2014, after the crackdown on the Egyptian revolution, I was one of those people that saw in the Kurdish movement in Rojava a radical force that was missing in the rest of the region. It was only after countless conversations with many Syrians – Kurds and non-Kurds alike – and years of research into this project, that I saw, despite Rojava's many radical features, the truth of this email you had sent me.

During a year I spent in Berlin in 2016-17, I came to understand how the narrative of the Rojava revolution was playing a

similarly divisive role within opposition movements across the globe to the one that Soviet Russia had played in the past. Most certainly, there were and still are revolutionary-spirited people in Rojava but the governing institution there is not what it claims to be. I realize that certain decisions were made out of political pragmatism – after all as a community the Syrian Kurds have many more enemies than friends in the region. But it is important to me to think about the repercussions the Rojava narrative has had on the revolutionary battles of the Syrian revolution.

In 2011, the PYD decided not to participate when civilians across Syria – including Kurds – rose up against the brutal authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad. In some cases the PYD's forces clearly undermined the liberatory experiments in which Kurds who were not members of the PYD participated, both in the territory under their control as well as in neighboring regions, as you described in your writings was the case in the city of Manbij. Due to the hegemony of the Rojava narrative, the actual revolutionary events against the Syrian regime were largely silenced and placed in the shadows for many of the world's leftist circles, much like the activities of non-Bolsheviks had been in Soviet Russia. Berkman was abhorred by the stories he started hearing particularly when he traveled to the Ukrainian countryside: the fighters the Bolsheviks killed and the activists they imprisoned who had fought with them so recently. The PYD acted similarly, arresting Kurdish citizens that voiced any critique of them, and aiding the Syrian regime in crushing competing radical projects in their vicinity. In the grand narrative of events, one rarely hears about the struggles that were crushed, then nor now.



The movement in Rojava certainly doesn't compare to revolutionary Russia in scale, but it had a similar binary effect on the narrative. One was either with or against, since it was considered the revolutionary litmus test of the Syrian "catastrophe" or "civil war" as it has come to be known. I want to ask you, what mistakes did those supporting and defending the Syrian revolution make that might have contributed to this tragic outcome? What lessons can we learn to prevent something similar from happening the next time?

**YM:** You raise a very important point about Rojava. The question of Kurdish self-determination is central to our understanding of the Syrian revolution. The Kurdish struggle has a long history that can be traced back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The end of World War I saw the emergence of new ethnic identities (Arab and Kurdish) and national identities (Syrian, Iraqi, Jordanian, and

so on). Kurds, like other communities in the region, wanted to establish their own homeland but these aspirations were crushed for a variety of reasons. In Syria, Kurds faced Arab chauvinism after independence and especially from the 1960s onward, when the Baath Party seized power. The Syrian state created a cordon known as the Arab Belt at the borders between Syria and Turkey by displacing Kurds and replacing them with loyal Arab tribes as part of its efforts to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish nation in northern Syria and south-eastern Turkey. The Syrian regime often weaponized Arab tribes against Kurdish communities. Regime repression, along with Arab chauvinism at the popular level, made it difficult for Kurds to feel they belonged to the Syrian societal fabric.

When the revolution began in 2011, many Kurds participated in the grassroots revolts. The regime gave the PYD limited autonomy in exchange for staying neutral in the ongoing conflict, and tasked it with crushing the revolutionary Kurdish grassroots movement. The PYD position was understandable at a certain level since some opposition groups had aligned with Turkey and were implementing its anti-Kurdish agenda in Syria.

In the past several years, Kurds in northern Syria have shown that it's possible to build radical alternatives. They have been experimenting with participatory democracy, popular autonomy, and feminist politics. Of course Syrian Kurds have the right to self-determination but this question should be addressed democratically with the people living in these areas. The PYD and other Kurdish parties should not impose "a solution" from above. Furthermore, they should not build alliances with regional and

international state actors in order to impose their program on the communities living in northern Syria.

The other issue is that many groups in the Syrian secular and religious opposition sided with Turkey and opposed Kurdish self-determination. The PYD is also problematic because it presented Kurdish self-determination as incompatible with the Syrian revolt. This is why PYD leaders used Orientalist tropes to mislead international opinion. They present Rojava as a democratic, feminist, secular, and progressive entity surrounded by a sea of authoritarianism and fundamentalism. In the end, this politics benefits the Syrian regime and undermines both grassroots Syrian and Kurdish struggles. Instead, Arab and Kurdish revolutionaries should collaborate and learn from each other.

The main challenge ahead, in Syria and regionally, is how to counter an authoritarian despot through democratic means and how to build lasting alternatives. The Syrian revolt and the struggle in Rojava have shown that this is an extremely difficult task. On the one hand, Syrians had no choice but to protect themselves against the violence of the regime. This means that Syrian revolutionaries could not avoid the militarization of the revolt. The challenge is how to prevent the military revolutionary forces from taking over, eroding the democratic process, and imposing their agenda. Political and economic autonomy were difficult to build and maintain because they faced the regime's violence from outside and pressures from the military groups from within. So, the question is how do we preserve autonomy in the midst of violence? How do we begin the project of the collectivization of the land to provide basic commodities

to the population without alarming or antagonizing rural populations? How do we push for the collectivization of the land without reproducing the failures of the land reform implemented by the Baathist regime in the 1960s?

Your film "Mapping Lessons" provides sophisticated historical and analytical readings of the revolts in the region. One of the central themes is that collectivization of the land and political autonomy are vital to the revolutionary process. You witnessed and actively participated in the Egyptian revolution. As people in the region prepare for the next round of revolts, what lessons can we learn from these revolutions and specifically the ways they addressed the questions of autonomy and collectivization?

**PR:** I would like to connect this question with the open question at the end of your previous paragraph. The Baathist regime implemented collectivization from the top down, which was the reason for the demise of such a project. The critical point is not to establish practices and structures for communities even if they are radical, because here force will always play a role. Communities need to decide for themselves or else a radical idea becomes no more than the imposition of control and the following of orders.

My reading is that the state form itself is the culprit, this central system imposed by colonial desire. There have always been alternatives but it is as if we are not allowed to think them. Syrian farming communities can determine the positive and negative consequences of policies without a central body knowing what is best, just like the revolutionaries you described who sought reform at the



beginning of 2011 and then quickly realized that no change would be possible without ridding themselves of an entire regime. The conversation with Walid in this collection provides an important example. As a farmer, Walid grew up under Baathist authority like any other Syrian farmer. He only discovered the disaster of the regime's policies once revolutionary forces pushed the regime out of the area he lived in. It is now that he is working desperately to make a truly independent system possible, independent of an authority that crushes from above. He seeks to live and teach an agricultural system that is sustainable in the true sense – both with regard to organic food production and what that brings with it in terms of liberation from agro-businesses that are always closely tied to the state.

As to what we can learn from these revolutions, this is really what my film is trying to engage with but in a visual-auditory manner, in a way that text can't, so I suggest for people to watch it to get my answer to that question (you can do so on the website: [filfilm.com](http://filfilm.com)). But in addition, there are two critical points in my mind, and they are both related to solidarity. I realize this is a hard task and much easier said than done, but I get the sense we will never win these battles if we try to fight them alone. In 2011 the region lit up with intifadas, and because we were caught unprepared we also had no strategy in place to try and connect our struggles. The way I see it, the revolts in Syria or Egypt or Yemen or so many other places in the region should not have been fought as if we were trying to topple singular dictators or regimes.

For one, all of them share financial and military backers, and if these powers are not impacted, they will just keep

propping up new dictators, in most cases worse than those who came before. How we can create these links of solidarity I am not sure, and I am glad I don't have a clear vision because it is one that should be developed collectively. We need to have that conversation, now after the fact, though I am afraid many of us are too tired.

The second point is the connection between urban and rural communities. Here, as I had mentioned in my questions to you, Syria certainly went much further than Egypt, and yet in the conversations I had with Syrians who participated in revolutionary councils, emphasis was rarely placed on food production. This too often seemed like a secondary issue for farming communities to work out for themselves, while for the Syrian regime food was certainly a primary strategy of attack on the revolution. The regime consistently carried out sieges, targeted bakeries, wells, and food convoys. Particularly if we are thinking in the realm of autonomy from a centralized system, food and its production in a self-sustainable manner need to be a critical part of the conversation. From what I can tell, this disconnect is repeating itself these days in the protest movement in Iraq, for example, where urban protesters do not seem to be having this conversation with farmers – though I hope I am wrong.

Finally, while this project is all about lessons, it is also speaking of lessons with hesitation. While I think we must learn from what came before, we should not glorify – we need to study radical experiments in both their successes and their shortcomings. So anything this conversation or my film can offer are guidelines or starting points, nothing more. Anyway, the next time will be different, but let us prepare nonetheless.



We cannot afford not to. In light of what I write here, can you tell me from your experience spending time with a revolutionary council in Manbij in 2012, what the conversations about agriculture were like? From your early reports on the visit I don't remember you writing about that.

**YM:** Manbij is an interesting case study. It's a medium-sized city in northern Syria with 200,000 inhabitants, and is surrounded by hundreds of small villages that produce wheat and other crops. Assad lost this region in 2012 and 2013 because it wasn't considered vital for the survival of his regime. The regime moved its forces to what it perceived as "Useful Syria" which consisted of a region that stretches from the western coast to the south-west, and includes Damascus and Aleppo, in addition to other coastal cities with a large Alawite population.

The regime left most of the northern region, which is the food basket of Syria. While the opposition and Kurdish forces controlled these regions, they didn't implement any noticeable agricultural policies. This was a missed opportunity for revolutionary forces since they could have created an alternative agriculture. Instead, Manbij and other cities in the north were barely able to produce enough food for their population. There are multiple reasons for the failure to create an alternative agriculture in the region (with the exception of Rojava). In the past, most farmers depended on the regime for loans, seeds, and fertilizers. When the Syrian regime implemented land reform in the 1960s and early 1970s, its goal was to control the farmers who previously worked for, and were ruthlessly exploited by the notables of Aleppo, Hama, Damascus, and

other cities. The mindset of the Baathist bureaucrats of that era was to create dependency among farmers and turn them into a loyal and docile base in the countryside. When the revolution began in 2011, many farmers found it challenging to produce crops without state support. Revolutionaries who controlled the local council in the city were mostly middle class and upper-middle class who were unable to implement radical economic reforms.

The regime's goal was to starve opposition areas and make bread available in the regions it controlled. One way it did this was by seeking to buy crops from the farmers in Manbij and elsewhere by offering them a higher price than that offered by the city's revolutionary council. To prevent this, the revolutionary council fixed the price of strategic crops, such as wheat, and set up checkpoints to prevent smuggling into the regime's areas. The regime used various strategies to starve the population and weaken revolutionary forces. As you suggest above, it targeted bakeries, and in many cases it burnt the crops in these regions. In addition, the revolutionaries of Manbij had to defend the bakeries and mills to prevent military groups from taking them over.

In my recently published book about the Syrian revolution, I argue that it is essential to study the politics of bread to understand the dynamics on the ground and the relationships between various actors and regions. Bread is an essential commodity in times of peace in Syria because the diet is centered around it. During war, bread became even more essential, and the regime, as well as military groups, understood that the control of bread could lead to the control of populations and territories. Throughout the

conflict in Syria, bread was weaponized by the regime and ISIS. It will be vital to rethink the politics of bread and alternative agriculture in the future.

**PR:** And to end this conversation, I want to throw the question you asked me back at you. What do you think we can learn from these revolutions?

**YM:** One of the important lessons for me is that Syrians and others in the region were able to create democratic spaces but when they were attacked, they couldn't defend them for extended periods. The Syrian revolt has shown that it is possible to create democratic projects locally. The challenge is to scale these up to the regional or national level and prevent reactionary politicians from hijacking them. There are countless examples of communities who created democratic spaces at the local level but were unable to build a network.

My second remark is connected to the first. It is clear after ten years that the Syrian revolution could not have avoided militarization because of the regime's violence. The militarization of the Syrian revolution, as well as other revolts in the region, was unavoidable. Revolutionaries needed to defend their communities against state violence. The question for us is how to maintain and defend the democratic process in the context of violence. How to prevent military groups from gradually dominating the political sphere and undermining these revolts?

The third point is related to the question of the state and the violence that is intrinsic to it. I think that we need to think about this question more seriously to create alternative political spaces and imaginaries that don't end up reproducing the violence of authoritarian rulers.

The response ought to be a combination of local projects, as well as ways to connect them to each other at the national and regional levels.

Fourthly, revolutionaries need to propose bolder economic programs. Neoliberalism is experiencing a profound crisis everywhere and if people of the region don't propose an alternative project, capitalism could become even more authoritarian and destructive. The alternative economic configuration should be based on redistribution, justice, and a healthy relationship with the environment. Revolutionaries did some experimentation on this front in the past ten years, but more is needed.

Finally, we need a feminist prison abolitionist politics. The prison system is an extremely important institution in the Arab world and needs to be dismantled. We cannot create alternative political, economic, and cultural spaces in the Arab world as long as there are prisons. The Arab revolutions brought attention to this question. Prisons were a taboo subject before 2011, but the revolts changed that. So far, the prison system has expanded and become more violent in many countries in the region, but let's not forget that the repression and violence inside prisons increase due to effective struggles outside them.

Both of us are interested in questions of autonomy and the state. Your film is an exploration of the different ways autonomy (the process of delinking a community from the state) was implemented historically in the region. There have been more and less successful experiments with autonomy (political, economic, spatial, etc.) in Arabic-speaking countries since 2011. The revolts since 2011 could be understood as resistance against the

state and the violence that is intrinsic to it. Consequently the state is facing a crisis of legitimacy in the region and beyond. How do you envision people addressing that question? How do people build sustainable autonomous spaces and how do they defend them from state violence and state recolonization?

**PR:** The only way I can imagine this being possible is the attack on and complete disintegration of the state system to begin with. On January 28, 2011, we have accounts of Egyptians attacking over eighty police stations and partly or completely torching them. Many of these were infiltrated by the population living around them, liberating prisoners and forcing the officers on duty to flee. It came at a high price. It is in the battles on that day that the police killed many protesters. These battles marked January 2011 as a serious confrontation with the state, as people everywhere got involved. Police stations were the local face of a regime that had been exploiting, imprisoning, torturing, and killing without any form of accountability. Consequently police and other security forces had to withdraw from some areas completely. A system of control that had become so deeply enmeshed in society was pushed out and, while crime rose, many areas started local initiatives called popular committees to distribute resources in a fair and transparent way, to monitor the streets from criminals, as well as state infiltration trying to re-impose their power often through criminal networks. But the authorities quickly regained control.

The decay of the system didn't go far enough. It might sound morbid to desire this, but it is only for the ruling class and the elites that the current circumstances are tolerable. This regime is

crushing people, making money off their backs, and sucking every form of life out of them; there is no justice system to speak of, no public educational or medical system. Only wealth can make life tolerable in Egypt and it comes with the clause of shutting up. So the first step is decay, it is one we cannot predict, it will come sooner rather than later. The more critical element is the second: what comes in its place. Here I agree with you, and this is the reason for these conversations: we need to think and plan and prepare, which includes reading and talking and practicing. There is a reason my film is not restricted to portraying examples from the region – I visit moments from the Paris Commune, 1936 Spain, the uprising in Argentina in 1969, and re-edit films from Soviet Russia because we need to get beyond limiting our thinking to the confines of the nation-state in the "Arab world."

How can we avoid replicating old systems if we haven't looked at other models? I think we need to move beyond creating national alternatives if we are going to escape the model of dictatorship, and neoliberalism for that matter. We need to think smaller and we need to try other forms of living, starting with the smallest of ways, thinking how we organize a social gathering, who we live with and take communal decisions with, where we buy our food or learning to grow some, what form our protests take, or if we make a place for children in our circles of resistance. We cannot afford to wait for the next time for us to begin this experimentation.



# knowing that there exist other worlds

Linda Quiquivix in conversation  
with Philip Rizk

**Philip Rizk:** Recently you shared a brief journal entry you wrote during your first visit to the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico:

“Land is everything, almost. Wow. I knew this, but for the first time, I have lived it. Even for three days I lived it.”

In his book *Blood Narrative*, Chadwick Allen references blood, land, and memory as “three primary and interrelated tropes or emblematic figures that contemporary indigenous minority writers and activists have developed in their work..to counter, and potentially subvert, dominant settler discourse.”

In 1994 when the EZLN (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) came onto the public scene – they had been organizing clandestinely for ten years – they took land, land that had been taken from them. They built alternative structures to those of the state.

Since you wrote that journal entry, you’ve spent a lot of time on the land. Can you describe the feeling that you experienced on that visit? I have the sense that it could help unlock the complex of tropes that Allen is giving us.

**Linda Quiquivix:** Recognizing the importance of land as profoundly as I did on my first visit to Zapatista territory surprised me. And I was surprised at my level of surprise. I had already been accompanying the Palestinian movement for many years before then, where of course the question of land is so central. I had also been a student of the Zapatista struggle for even longer, where land is itself the struggle and the possibility for continued resistance.

I think my surprise came because the realization that day hit me on a personal level. I grew up in an industrial farming community in Southern California, which in the US context means that our community is largely Indigenous, migrant, undocumented, and exploited. The working conditions farm workers face were known by us all because the fields were next to our homes, schools, and shopping areas, so the scenes were unavoidable. Growing up in this context, many of us, who are children of undocumented migrants especially, are told by everything around us that to work on the land is the worst possible fate, and the way to avoid that future is to do well in school. This is coupled with racial tropes about how migrants are dirty and how Indigenous people are backward because we are so close to nature. So, sadly many of us try to do all we can to show how clean we are by staying away from the soil, and to prove how modern we are by separating ourselves from nature, too.

I had believed all that growing up, and because I wanted to be accepted as modern, as clean, and as deserving of a better life, I underwent all the schooling I could. I had fallen into the dominant settler discourse about how humans are separate from nature, about how those worthy of living are those who can dominate nature for capitalist ends. Thankfully, I accidentally stumbled into a master's program in geography, a discipline I was surprised to learn had Marxist, feminist, anarchist, and other critical influences. There I started to learn about peasant struggles against capitalism around the globe, and it was then when I first saw the acronym EZLN and began learning about the Zapa-

tistas. I was intrigued by everything geography was making me unlearn, so I enrolled in a doctoral program and eventually came to use my dissertation work as an excuse to learn more about how to accompany the Palestinian struggle.

It was a year and a half after graduating from all the possible formal schooling I could get when I wrote that journal entry on my visit to Chiapas, and so by then I had felt really knowledgeable about land struggles. But maybe it was because I had mostly been reading about them rather than living them that the land question remained for me just a question of principle: Indigenous people had land stolen, and so they deserved to get it back.

That changed after being invited to stay with a Zapatista family in the jungle even for those few days during the Escuelita, or Little School, which is when I kept that journal. Living there meant being intimately connected to where my food and shelter had come from that I realized I was so used to going to the grocery store for food and paying a landlord rent for housing. So even though I had considered myself very anti-capitalist, I realized there I would have no idea how to survive without capitalism.

I had already known that the Zapatistas build their own homes, schools, and clinics as alternative structures to the state; that they grow, process, and cook their own food for both the household and cooperative economies. And that to coordinate all this on a scale that extends well beyond the family homestead – the scale of an organization still in rebellion and resistance throughout Mexico's state of Chiapas – they have also built their own government that practices a democracy actually worthy of the name.

The Zapatistas are great teachers of how power functions, and they understand profoundly how capitalism is a system that requires our participation. They know that if we are to effectively resist it, we need to stop asking it for things. I realized while with them that when we ask capitalism for food, shelter, health, security, and education, we are in effect asking it to grant us permission to live.

There in the Lacandon Jungle, I was surprised that I was recognizing myself for the first time as a land-based animal who required not capitalism but land in order to live. I realized that I had given up land because I'd wanted to be modern, allowing others to take it because I had only known land as exploitative, as what would drag me away from modernity, as what would place soil under my fingernails, causing others to consider me dirty and unworthy of the world. The Palestinian struggle had already taught me about dignity, however, and I think that had made my heart strong enough to accept what was to become a new way of living for me from that point on without being paralyzed by what the dominant society would have to say about it.

**PR:** In an online discussion you co-led some months ago, you explained that the EZLN's unit of understanding themselves in the world is the collective. In Bilad al-Sham (the Levant), traditionally there is such a unit of collectivity around land ownership called the *mashaa'* – the commons.

In 1950, the influential legal theorist Carl Schmitt published his *Nomos of the Earth* (The Law of the Earth) under a pseudonym, written in isolation after escaping punishment for his intimate involvement



with the Nazi regime. In it, Schmitt argued that a worldwide territorial order had been established between 1492 and 1890 under European hegemony. He writes, "In some form, the constitutive process of land appropriation is found at the beginning of every settled people, every commonwealth, every empire." In Bilad al-Sham, collective land ownership clashed with the very essence of the colonization of those lands and thus it's no surprise to learn that all colonizers of that region systematically destroyed such a collective way of being.

In Schmitt's equation, land appropriation, dispossession of Indigenous communities, and the destruction of collectivity is the necessary founding violence of colonization as well as state-making in formerly colonized countries. If this is the case, then its opposite is also true. Making communities collective again can undo that destructive process of state-making.

You are a farmer, a geographer, an educator, and an author. In a text you wrote, you reference this statement from geographer Bernard Nietschmann, "More indigenous territory has been claimed by maps than by guns." You are also the author of the soon-to-be published book, *Palestine 1492* in which you write about how maps were used to oppose the *mashaa'*, enabling imperial private property to replace collective ownership.

How can we begin to make a world without maps (عام بلا خرائط)?

**LQ:** I remember when I first began my dissertation on Palestine/Israel, I went into the project wanting to provide a history of its borders but quickly realized I couldn't get there without first providing a history of its maps. In doing that work, I came to see what Nietschmann meant when he said that "more indigenous territory has been claimed by maps than by guns," and so I went on with the project understanding the map itself as the problem.

While in Palestine on fieldwork, I began volunteering at Aida Refugee Camp organizing art lessons for children, which allowed me to learn more colloquial Arabic in ways that were far more joyous than with adults in a class. When I mentioned to some of the camp's leaders that I was a geographer, they immediately asked if I would map the camp. My instinct was to answer, "No, the map has ruined everything!" I'm pretty sure I said something like that because we got into a discussion about the dangers of making the camp more visible if Israel were to get a hold of the maps. "Israel already has maps," I remember them answering and adding that when Israel conducts

raids and arrests them, they show Aida residents a map of their own camp with their names over the buildings in which they live. They said to me, "We're the ones that don't have maps."

We soon mapped the camp together in a Geographic Information System, and it may be the most precise map that exists of the camp because those who live in it helped create it. A few years later, I learned that residents used the map to help resolve some water issues and to plan rooftop gardens. What I learned through the experience is that the map itself is just a tool that can be deployed in either helpful or hurtful ways, depending on context.

I had also learned this lesson by seeing how the map of Palestine with the colonial borders the British decided on in 1923, well before Israel existed, is something Palestinians have long adopted as a symbol of resistance. That map appears everywhere in everyday life, especially in refugee homes and communal spaces. And it terrifies Israel. In this way, the colonial map is deployed in ways that help the struggle to keep Palestine alive. But it can also be hurtful in other moments, I think. Sometimes when it dominates our imaginations, we can come to believe the struggle is one between Israel and Palestine rather than between Empire and Palestine, with Israel a very useful tool of Empire itself, which is the topic of the book I'm currently writing. Something we see is that dependence on the colonial map of 1923 to talk about the Palestinian struggle has the danger of erasing the the global terrain of struggle that has so much in common with it, as well as the regional terrain. Syrians in the Golan Heights – a place also captured in war by Israel in 1967, along with the West Bank, Gaza, and the Sinai – share a fate

with Palestinians, but they're made invisible by that map. With the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad, it wasn't surprising to see many in the Palestinian movement having trouble showing solidarity with Syrians, and I think that the dominant, narrowed mental map that illustrates the problem simply as Israel, rather than as Empire more broadly, had something to do with that.

The private property maps the British imposed on Palestine during colonial rule were intended to destroy the *mashaa'* because the existence of communal land stood in the way of effective colonial rule and the imposition of capitalism in the region. Today, many in the Palestinian leadership wish the British had successfully titled all of the *mashaa'* so that individual Palestinians today could make land claims against Israel using colonial documents. It's not clear if they realize that many parts of Palestine, especially in the northern West Bank, continue to exist as Palestine precisely because peasants refused to allow the British to map, which then made it impossible for the land to be sold to Jewish settlers from Europe on the eve of the creation of Israel.



The *mashaa'* and other communal arrangements worldwide stand in the way of colonialism and capitalism, and they stand in the way of Nazi philosophers like Carl Schmitt. Very few scholars are able to effectively battle these phenomena the way the commons can. Schmitt argued that the collapse of the cleanly demarcated Europe/non-Europe territorial order built by 1492, following decolonization and the subsequent move toward universal human equality, would usher in endless war everywhere. This has been understood by scholars as prophetic in the post-9/11 era with the never ending global "War on Terror." That a Nazi philosopher could be so insightful has caused anxiety in some academic circles and quite a bit of paralysis because they don't know how to effectively battle the Nazi. The reason why I suggest the commons is more effective at this fight than academia, is because most academics seem to accept that that all politics is reducible to the negation of the Other (the friend/enemy distinction) that Schmitt assumes to be a law of nature throughout his entire analysis, indeed arguing it applies to "every settled people, every commonwealth." I don't doubt Schmitt could be correct that it applies to every empire. Where Schmitt fails is by assuming that the negation of the Other applies to all worlds.

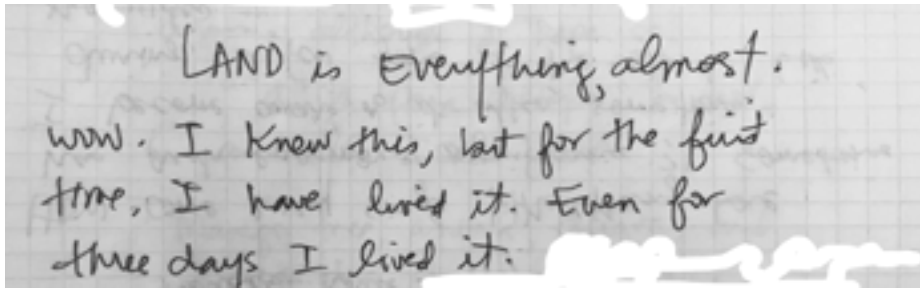
The commons are a testament to the continued existence of other possibilities, and they know what most academics trained in systems of western academia don't: Worlds that do not negate difference are not only possible, but exist, and we must continue to create new ones if we are to effectively resist. The commons know that when the foundational unit is the collective rather than the individual, Schmitt's lament no

longer makes sense. Sharing the world with someone who is not you is itself the condition of possibility for the collective, for the commons, for the *mashaa'*, for another world where many worlds fit. This is why capitalism has needed to destroy the commons wherever it can, and it's why we need to protect the commons wherever they still exist and create new ones where they currently don't.

**PR:** Your very personal story around land is a powerful one. Thank you for sharing it. I imagine living these harsh contrasts can have powerful effects, from growing up in a community around industrial farming in California to studying intricate issues around the mapping of land and walking alongside the Zapatistas. Listening to your story, I find it important to identify education, especially higher level US education that is so sought after as a status symbol with its absurdly high price tag, as a means to an ends. It helped channel your energy and desires but the academe is not the container of them. You write that while you had considered yourself very anti-capitalist, at the time you had no idea how to survive without capitalism. That is a harsh reality to come to terms with. In closing, I have a question about life without capitalism.

A year and a half ago I became a father. It's had its special moments and also hard realities. But more than anything it is a thrilling new experience that has caught me by surprise. One of the biggest challenges I am constantly grappling with is how to be an example of a person who is intimate with earth, which our species bears the burden of being in the course of destroying. You are one of the few people I know who shows deep sadness by what we have done and are doing to the earth, not unlike when





something bad happens to one of our most loved ones. My question is about teaching, a very different type to formal education, itself often so intricately tied to capital. How do you feel you are able to impart this sadness but also anger to a generation growing up in these times? Without growing that emotion, I think we will have a hard time truly opposing capitalism.

**LQ:** Thank you for bringing up the climate emergency and for integrating questions of parenting, teaching, and holding space for fierce emotion while doing organizing work in the face of it. Our movements often find difficulty integrating these complexities, but I can't see a way out without something so fundamental.

The last couple of months on this small and mighty little farm I'm a part of, we've been experimenting with farm-based education focused on this question. It's with a small group of families and friends of all ages, all outdoors and with face masks due to the pandemic. This is youth aged from 7 to 17 and their parents or guardians, along with others who aren't parents, all encouraged to learn together and try to figure out what we do together.

It's a nine-week accompaniment of our pumpkin patch, which we're conducting a soil experiment on to capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere into the

ground while philosophizing about different worlds: namely, Indigenous worlds versus the world of capital. All who are part of the pumpkin patch accompaniment befriend one or two plants, and every Saturday visit them, observing their development from sprout to maturity. Along with learning about the magic of photosynthesis and how plants in their infinite generosity not only make their own food but also our food and the soil's food, we learn to listen to the wisdom of the plants, which allows us to sit with our emotions, our grief, and compost it into something new.

I'll do my best to illustrate. Pumpkin seeds have their first two leaves already inside the seed. When the seeds are activated by water, sunlight, and warmth, those leaves will sprout and do the work of photosynthesis, allowing the plant's subsequent leaves to develop. Those first two leaves wither away and die after their work is done. We also see that squash blossoms similarly die off after doing the work of attracting pollinators to fertilize the fruit, or the pumpkin. Accompanying plants closely like this allows us to philosophize together with them about big questions, like what death and life could mean, and what their relationship might be.

The plant teaches us that the first leaves to sprout, like the blossom, live in order to continue life, and then die. Before their death, each leaves an

inheritance for what comes next. It's a complementary relation – death and life. And because the plant's parts work collectively, the death of one is not the end. It is never the end, and it is never truly a death because of that inheritance it has left so that life continues.

This is very much Mesoamerican philosophy and many other Indigenous philosophies that, unlike Western philosophy, don't separate humans from nature and don't believe nature is there for human domination. Living out a complementary rather than a competitive relation with the living world around us offers the chance for humility to know we have enormous lessons to learn from the small. I think that anyone who raises and cares for children already has so much to say about this, and I'd love to know your thoughts about this since becoming a father. It's why it was intentional to invite folks who don't have children to be part of this program – to learn from little kids, the critical thinking of kids who are always asking adults "why" and are rarely encouraged to keep asking. Part of the intentionality behind it is also because a lot of folks on the left have a difficult time organizing with kids and don't see a place for families in movement work, seeing them as obstacles to what they believe the "real" work to be. But if the work is to create another world, one where many worlds fit, it's going to take people of all ages. Of course children are important because according to the wisdom of our plantcestors, our task is to keep life going.

With these conversations on death and life on the farm, we make it a point to clearly distinguish Indigenous worlds from the world of capital, which has a very different relationship to death and life. With capitalism, death is necessary

for the accumulation of power, and the logical conclusion is what we're witnessing today: mass extinction, the extinguishment of life. Here we're able to have discussions about what capitalism's worldview and spirituality is, and ask ourselves what kind of world we want and what our own spiritualities want to be. We don't provide answers but instead provide encouragement to question everything, which we do by making what we've been told is normal – the modern world, the world of capital – look very strange, to say the least.

It's an experiment at the moment, to begin our education work with the wisdom of plants and Indigenous philosophy before diving into the realities of the current mass extinction. The hope is that, by knowing that there exist other worlds with other ways of living on the planet, it will minimize the paralysis many feel when they first start to really study climate change. When we don't know that other worlds are not only possible but already here, even if not as strong as we need them to be right now, many of us might either trick ourselves into ignoring the realities of what's happening, or not ignore them but get stuck in the sadness and grief without being able to effectively compost it into movement, into rebellion, into resistance to create something new.







# imagining Syrian agroecological futures

Walid in conversation with Philip Rizk

**Philip Rizk:** Organic farming has existed for a long time in the Levant. But what I understood, when we met, is that you learned its methods only later in life. How did that happen and why?

**Walid:** Welcome dear brother. I hope all's fine with you and your family, and praise be to God, may he give you and all your loved ones good health and strength.

We did some organic farming back in Syria but the methods were quite different from those I learned later in Lebanon. Our experience in Syria lasted from the 1970s to 2000, around which time modern agriculture arrived in Syria, and farmers started to work differently. At some point they were given hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers by companies working closely with the state. Bit by bit, what the farmers had before was disappearing. Any farmer in Syria used to have a plot where he used chemical fertilizers, and another smaller one, a garden, where he experimented with a

semi- (70%) organic method, so he'd use organic fertilizers, sulphur, and sometimes chemical stimulants, like foliar fertilizers.

I actually learned the use of agrochemicals in Lebanon when I worked at a company in the Middle Bekaa Valley. We got really sick from toxic inhalation and suffered from fatigue. But then, as you know, I was introduced to someone called Ferdi and the way of farming I was more familiar with from before in Syria, using manure, cow dung, and the like. I was now committed to these practices and learned about the principles of a new kind of agriculture, entirely different from the chemical type. I felt I was home and it's been five years now.

**PR:** Are you interested in teaching these methods? If yes, why and how?

**W:** Yes. I'm truly, deeply interested in organic farming. I love it because it has no adverse side effects whether on human beings, animals, or the land itself. I also like to teach it because I was born and raised in a rural environment. I teach at Buzuruna Juzuruna ("Our seeds, our roots") School in Lebanon. At the moment, we have a project of around 15 dunams (15,000 square meters), and there are twenty households involved. I am the trainer and coordinator. I give them classes about the basics, principles, and concepts of organic farming – the pros and cons. The classes are very popular and the prospects for the approaching harvest are really good. Information along with manual practice in real life complement one another. We need to see the fruit of our work. Here in Lebanon, due to the financial crisis and the collapse of the currency, and since imports need to be paid for in dollars,

organic farming is gaining wider popularity.

**PR:** Let's move farther from the world as we know it, from the dictatorship and the bloodshed of the last years. Instead, I'd like to see how you'd imagine another world, another Syria. What would the agricultural system be like, compared with under the current regime? Can you describe how this might affect family relations, relations among people in general, and between the country and the city? Let's try to envisage something that is imaginary while still conceivable.

**W:** Agriculture is in the first place the mainstay of human life. The land is the source of our energy, vitality, and wholesome nutrition. Farming is what connects us to it. Now, our mode of working was quite different before this regime. People used to live on *baraka* [blessing], love, and mutuality on the one hand, and on the other, on animal husbandry, without heavy machinery, fertilizers, or

chemicals, worlds apart from the current practices of monoculture. This regime exploited the peasant, putting him under its sway using loans and public money, so he had to plant according to its dictates. This sadly put an end to the Syrian peasant's freedom. There was now an absolute monopoly.

As regards the future of organic farming, I usually think of how we can make something out of nothing. How? We can rely on our own local resources and subsist until we reach self-sufficiency, agrarian autonomy, and freedom, so we don't have to wait for someone to give us seeds and toxins. Native seeds can be our immediate alternative, along with natural pesticides, companion planting, and recycling. This model is viable, can be implemented immediately, is healthy for humans and nature, and finally is respectful of the land and the native seed. We count on the young people. God willing, they'll return to the land and play a major role in working the soil. They'd be an added labor force. We can then reproduce the native seeds and propagate them in the national market, and give the people back our old alternative methods of agriculture. This means self-reliance away from the state and the regime. An agricultural renaissance can be achieved through sustainable alternative solutions, for our own sake and for posterity.

**PR:** My final question comes from what you're saying about how before the state's domination, people used to live on *baraka*, love, and mutuality. Then the state, you say, took away the peasant's freedom. So, can you imagine a life independent from the state in your lands? Can you see this state replaced with a system of communities bringing together single or groups of villages or whole

towns that decide for themselves how to live and farm, based on relations of mutuality rather than domination from outside forces? Where does farming figure in a reimagined communality?

**W:** Participatory work within a community is bound to succeed due to its sustainability and autonomy in every respect. I'll give you an example. My grandfathers and my father grew wheat and raised animals. Their land gave every possible kind of yield, and they bartered these for commodities at will, deciding who to trade with and where to buy. That freedom was lost under this state and this regime. You had to grow and specialize in certain crops that you sold to the government. People used to be able to trade freely but then trade ended up narrowly restricted with everything the peasant does being dictated and tightly controlled by the state. So, for example, if the peasant sold wheat to the state for 10 liras a kilo, the state would sell it abroad for 40 or 50, stealing his labor. Bear in mind that the little profit in the peasant's case would also cover expenses like irrigation water and supplies, leaving him with even less, while the state was the sole winner, gaining up to 400 percent profit.

I'm for participatory work and civic assemblies within or across villages, and through networks of these, collaboration and coordination on a wider scale, more mutuality and self-sufficiency with nothing to import and freedom to export to wherever we decide.

This is my view. And from where I see it, there will be in the coming days wide room for ecological farming, sustainable agriculture, and organic farming, leading to an autonomy that will allow us to avoid chemical toxins and Nitro-

gen-based fertilizers. We'll have made something from our own country's products and resources, transformed through the ideas and expertise we acquired from and shared with the peasants. Whoever wants to make good use of these should have access to them, as part of all-inclusive homegrown production.



# seeds have been traveling since the beginning of time

Vivien Sansour in conversation with Philip Rizk

**Philip Rizk:** Some time ago you appeared on the weekly #HUNGERFORJUSTICE Broadcast Series, which describes itself as laying “the building blocks for a post-COVID food system.” There you said, “my work with seeds is all about seeds but really it is not entirely about seeds – the seed is a catalyst to go on a journey, at least for myself.”

I am interested in this principle of the journey. In her extensive study of the genre of travel writing, particularly of the colonial type, author Mary Louise Pratt claims that travel writing created codes that produced “the rest of the world.” She argued that travel books “gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized.”

**Vivien Sansour:** The only time a plant can travel is as seed. And seeds have been traveling since the beginning of time. Just like we have, I guess. For me, when I travel I learn more about where I come from. And I learn more about how the world sees Palestine. For many years, people have responded to where I come from as a place that either didn't exist or only existed in biblical times. But I know where I come from through its hills and plants and the entirety of its biocultural presence. Seeds have offered a platform to assert this presence through their stories. Stories that we create ourselves for ourselves and our people. These seed stories also travel and they flip the script on those who have felt entitled throughout history to impose their interpretations on who we are. I love the seeds' magical powers in journeying on another level and almost



in another realm: one that doesn't obey the dominant world but transcends its limitations of time and geography.

**PR:** You collect seeds, you make and share food, you also plant and harvest. It must be a lot of work, but also a lot of fun. One cannot separate seeds from land. It's no surprise prophets made allusions to this critical relationship – it is after all one that goes to the roots of things. While land and seeds produce food and life, they have also led to some of the deepest conflicts in human history, one still ongoing all around you. During your time in the fields do you hear references to *al-mashaa'*, the old practice of shared communal land? What do people say? Has that shared way of life left root in people's conception of self and community?

**VS:** *Al-mashaa'* in the physical sense is mostly no longer. It is a concept that I had often loved hearing about from farmers and herders who I got to know throughout the years. It's a concept so foreign for the colonial mind because it does not fall into a transactional relationship between persons and commodity. Land, for people who work it, is a living being not a commodity. It's a real place with its own character and energy. It's also a generous place from which you feed yourself and others. I think of *mashaa'* now in the context of myself and my community. How can we turn our own lives into *mashaa'*? How can I offer myself to something that can serve something greater than myself. I contemplate a lot the idea of self and our sense of ownership of it – how does that limit our ability to be free and open to transformations? How have we made ourselves into commodities somehow? I am not sure. As the land has been brutalized and renamed, how do we

reconcile ourselves and our relationship to it? How do we begin to mend this broken relationship when we are so afraid and caught up in the webs others have created for us? I am not sure about anything but I think a lot about the idea of the self as a *mashaa'* as a way to release pride, or rather pain, in order to potentially create something different for our human species.



**PR:** *Mashaa'* of the self. I have never thought of it that way. That idea needs some time to settle in. In Palestine, the British considered *mashaa'* an “unmitigated evil,” so I guess if you are trying to be *mashaa'* yourself, to them and their neo-colonial counterparts you become an unmitigated evil. Private property is a prerequisite for the existence of capitalism, as well as the nation-state. But how do you begin practicing being *mashaa'* unless you are part of a bigger community practicing it? I don't think we can become *mashaa'* as individuals.

**VS:** What a delight to be an unmitigated evil to forces that have never known freedom because they have always been confined by ideas of ownership. The truth is even in our struggle for political liberation, we are limited in our ideas of freedom. What I mean by offering myself to the whole world as *mashaa'* is that perhaps detaching from the sense of self as a private and autonomous entity allows me a kind of freedom. Because maybe in doing so, I can link my own wellbeing with the collective, forcing the collective and myself to become braver than we have been. That's the hope anyway. Or perhaps it's my way of dealing with an overwhelming pain about the state of things. I know I am not alone in this pain. I often crash and burn so it's hard to give you a good answer. It's a concept I have to allow to settle in myself. What does it mean when I say I want to give myself away?

**PR:** I want to ask one last question on a related note. In the interview I mentioned earlier, you refer to Palestinians as Indigenous people - *محلي / أهلي - سكان اصلي / بلدي*. I think this is an obvious term to use, but few Palestinians I have met use it. What most Palestinians I have met do, on the other hand, is claim their situation is unique, their occupation more brutal than other occupations. I can understand where that sense of urgency emanates from, and by no means do I want to downplay the brutality of Zionism. Rather, I want to think strategy and I think this way of thinking is doing a large disservice to the struggle. Wouldn't it be better off relating to Indigenous struggles against dispossession all over the world? To connect this to where we started – the seeds in the Palestinian heirloom library, how far have they gone and from how far have they come? How do you make that exchange, that journey happen?

**VS:** We are people of the land. That is what Indigenous means to me. Our relationship to land is an intimate one. In most hills and valleys, the trees and the rocks have names and nicknames and references to people who were our parents, grandparents or great grandparents. We know that we have inherited a system of knowledge that co-evolved with this terrain, so for us land is more than private property or a parcel one buys – it's a living relationship that has been passed down to us over generations. It's understanding its seasons too. I agree with you that we must link to other Indigenous people and other struggles not just as strategy but also as a need. We all share a history of trauma and a continuing attack on who we are. There is a lot to learn from each other and a lot to share. I try my best in my work to move away from a sense of Palestinian uniqueness and move closer to our connectedness to other people of the land. This is why I travel a lot to meet and be with people who, like us, are trying to save their communities and their lands in the midst of a growing capitalistic world. How do we love ourselves more? I always ask myself this. How can we bring out joy more? And how can we share it with others who are also working on regaining their strength to fight for a more tender world, one that has space for the past and has room to heal our *mashaa's*, and perhaps even forge a better relationship between land and all its people. I think a lot of the Arabic saying: *الفرح قوة* (Joy is strength) – that's how I relate to being Indigenous.



# on musical improvisation: (un-)making the nation-state in the “Middle East”

Dirar Kalash in conversation with  
Philip Rizk

**Philip Rizk:** A mutual friend told me that he attended one of your musical performances in Ramallah where you began with a short talk about improvisation. What do you tell your listeners? Why do you do this?

**Dirar Kalash:** Since the political themes of my work can often be seen as external to the music itself, they cannot be inferred just by listening to it, so that's why I offer narrative introductions. In general, I point to the context of the creative process, or sources that are external to the sphere of music but still inform and inspire the piece.

To give you one example, *By Any Means Necessary*, my solo piano piece, dissects the cadence of Malcolm X's famous speech of the same name, something which is often lost on listeners. Rather than “explain” the piece, I'm simply

bringing to light the driving force behind it, the human thrust integral to its rhythmic momentum, which is emblematic of the political momentum around the speech. After all, there is more to an instrumental piece than its compositional structure.

Music generally doesn't need to be explained, because it speaks directly to the auditory faculty and the mind. But unfortunately, some aspects of our musical culture and practices of listening impede communication between the audience and the musician, holding it hostage to the dictates of what we could call received wisdom. These pull in the opposite direction from deep listening, and hence from real appreciation of music. That's generally what I tell my audiences, to encourage them to listen without preconceptions. As you know, the music I make is very different

to what people usually hear, and that makes it more likely that some kind of miscommunication, misunderstanding, or prejudgment will take place.

**PR:** The way you talk about the engagement with an audience is a familiar struggle in terms of my own work. My film “Mapping Lessons” does not only engage a particular political subject matter, colonial and neo-colonial in nature, but also addresses the political form of image-making, editing and relating image to sound that engages with a whole history of image-making. It is not always easy to allow the work to do its work – like you say, to let it appeal directly to one's auditory and cognitive perceptions. It's not always easy to strike the balance between hinting at how someone might read something, or where to listen or look, and when to just let things be and run the risk of

having them misread or missed. I don't think viewers and listeners need to know every aspect of the debates that I am dealing with; rather I hope for them to remain open to a different kind of logic.

**DK:** I agree with you: on the one hand, we as cultural producers don't have to provide the audience with “everything they need” in order to know or to “make sense” of the cultural production. But in my work, I intend for the audience not to be simply receptors, but cultural collaborators, to engage in creating a cultural discourse and process. That should hopefully lead to more openness, which is crucial to socio-cultural processes. The audience don't need to understand or grasp everything they're “offered,” but they need to engage in asking the questions, and connecting the dots if I may put it like that.





produces aesthetic and intellectual concepts. So in the case of Arab culture there are terms like the “golden age of Arabic music” and the “music of the good old days” which are used to refer to music production between 1930 and 1970 as a discrete, completed past in which so-called Arabic music reached its apogee and produced an ideal type that could never be recreated. What this model does is petrify or mummify music, in both its theory and practice. The expression “bringing tradition back to life” is even worse, gesturing quite literally to the death of the object at hand.

Such a vulgar and naive historical outlook betrays nationalistic motives rather than musical taste or preferences. Indeed the music of that period was itself part of a growing nationalist culture, and, as such, developed within the rubric of nationalism. We live in a time of near-total ignorance regarding the scientific and intellectual heritage of the Arabic *maqam* tradition – including the writings of al-Farabi, al-Urmawi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and many others – which is in fact more sophisticated than the musical knowledge available to Arab societies today. This periodization of the “golden age of Arabic music” illuminates Arab culture’s thorny relationship with its past, and hence with its future. The entire historical process is compressed into a single period which begins, not coincidentally, with the First Congress of Arab Music, brainchild of the orientalist musicologist Baron d’Erlanger, which was held in Cairo in 1932. Confining the language and logic of music within nationalist-historic ideas drastically inhibits its potential.

By contrast, Black music shows a different logic of development free from historiographical or other theoretical limitations. Black music is driven by and rooted in the lived realities of Black

communities in the US, from the cotton plantations through Black churches to the nightclubs of Harlem and Chicago. What had started off as vocal and melodic music with a simple structure at a time when drums were banned went on to produce the most sophisticated approaches to music in all respects – vocally, rhythmically, melodically and harmonically. Black people/ African-Americans didn’t just think about “bringing African music back to life,” they engaged with the sonic and musical world they lived in, on every level. This approach is summed up by the motto of the Art Ensemble of Chicago: “Great black music, ancient to the future.” While “future” is open to different interpretations, it necessarily gestures to something beyond the present while indicating continuity.

**PR:** There is something deeply liberating in the music you describe: made by Blacks in America, rooted in both the past and present, while looking to the future. I imagine that part of what made that music was the community around it, the coming together of people. It is clear that you believe in the ability of music to move people. But you say that a certain cultural logic, with its preconceived notions, blocks a deeper engagement with some types of music. Is music a liberating force? Is that why authorities – colonial and neo-colonial – fear it? And, if it is a liberating force, does a listener need practice or training in order for it to be effective?

Maybe I can formulate this in a different way. After Amiri Baraka’s death in 2014, you wrote an obituary or rather a salute to him. There you quote a line from one of his texts, “We want poems that kill,” explaining that Baraka found the need to take a decisive stance. I think to most people it makes more sense to take a stance in a poem than in music. I ask

this because I don’t want this conversation to be limited to a theoretical plane. How do we enter into the praxis of music as a liberating force?

**DK:** Given that music is a product of the historical process, as I’ve said, I tend to see musical practice as a politics of time and place. Its raw material is sound, which can be understood as “voice” in the political sense of the word, as much as it can be understood as physical or mathematical energy – that is, as an act of free speech or a political demand, or conversely as political acquiescence.

What’s relevant here is the fact that musical practice has no existence other than as a relationship. This relationship is interpersonal and social, and manifests itself in multiple forms on both individual and collective levels – from musical culture and music theory to the political economy of music production, which is closely linked to social and political dynamics. This is not to say music is a political instrument, but ours is an age where politics is ubiquitous as far as human relations are concerned, and so music has to be political. Granted, today everything is political: religion, media, cultural practices whether neoliberal or radical, tourism, economics, and so on. Things get more complicated though in our case because music is also about cognition, perception, and the senses. Which brings us to the main point of your question: What is the role of musical culture within political relationships, particularly in colonial or authoritarian contexts?

I think that to answer this question we need to look at the means and mechanisms of production in music. Black music, for example, is rooted in a collective practice able to bring community members together – more than that, to bring them closer to one another, organize

**PR:** In a 2013 interview with *Ma3azef*, an online magazine dedicated to contemporary Arabic music, you said, “To look at traditional or classical music is to look back, to the past, but with free music you’re looking ahead, to the future.” When we talked for the first time about this exchange you told me you were interested not only in free music but also the *maqam*. How do you see the difference in approach between traditional or classical music and that of “the new music” or what some people call free jazz?

**DK:** Firstly, the material essence of music is mathematical and sonic relationships (sonic in the sense of sound as understood by physics), which places it outside of time and place – like any mathematical or physical equation. But as a sociocultural practice, it’s subject to a cultural logic which varies with context. And the fact that societies and hence cultures are products of the historical process shapes the logic that

them, and assign them roles. Hence the white man's ban of drums during slavery. Music, in this way, helps establish and strengthen collective visions and a communal spirit. On closer examination, most folk music is communal: the desire for freedom taking on musical form.

Community, however, means something different today compared to a century ago. Music too, undoubtedly. But the fact that music shapes community continues to hold. Societies have become consumer-driven, and music has become a commodity; the same goes for all other aspects of society. Equally, there's a very close relationship between a society's desire for freedom and its ability to liberate its voice – and I don't mean liberation in the trite sense of that word.

Radical changes that took place in Black music were always tied to the struggles fought by Black people as a community. It is probably worth noting that most of these changes were sonic, purely musical, rather than verbal ones– they didn't pivot on the lyrics or poetry except in a few cases. In other words, music as raw material prevailed over the verbal.

Let's compare this to Arabic, and particularly Palestinian, music. Palestinian music reached its highest point during the years of the first intifada, having gone through shifts and transformations since the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout the Arab world, although music centered around words, the sound kept changing. A collective mode of musical communication was often at the heart of this change. This applies everywhere from Iraq (al-Tareeq) to Morocco (Jil Jilala). But later, dabke came to be performed onstage accompanied with prerecorded music, which speaks volumes about the failure of Palestinian collectivity; the failure to invent a contemporary,

immanent sound echoes the failure to articulate a united political voice.

Musical practice in the contemporary Arab world is overwhelmingly in crisis, caught between attraction and repulsion in relation to its presumed "heritage" or "tradition." This is not to say that heritage is itself the source of attraction or repulsion, but rather that it stands as a historical and geographical landmark that animates culture and politics alike. It follows that the musical encounter, for both musician and listener, is also subject to a dynamic of attraction and repulsion.

**PR:** In recent messages we had a short exchange about children and music – I think it's important to add some of those ideas to this conversation. In light of your assessment of one of the effects of popular culture today, the existence of preconceived notions of what music is considered to be and how people tend to relate to the world around them sonically, I want to ask if you have any suggestions about how we might introduce young children to sound. How might we bring music into their world in a different liberatory kind of way, that lets sound work its magic and undermines the hegemonic way that society imposes its understanding of music as commodity, music that is rigid, with so few possibilities?

**DK:** I'd put it as simply as this: we should let young children introduce us to sound. They are curious, and I've seen many children, as young as two years old, show noticeable curiosity about the worlds of sounds. So in this sense we should provide them with the tools to understand their own sonic worlds, rather than impose a particular musical culture on them, or teach them to play instruments in this or that way.



We really need to learn from children this "freshness" of hearing and curious listening. I think musical education is very harsh, especially with children – that is changing slowly, but not systematically. We shouldn't forget that music is being taught, even to young children, as a technical craft, which is absolutely wrong: they don't hear what we hear, even if they could play it. So music educators need to consider that first of all what young children hear is raw sound, even if it sounds like music to us. I don't know much about the science of auditory cognition in children, but I do notice that they hear differently. We should listen along with them, and provide them with the means to understand their own sonic worlds.

My question to you is really rather simple: I'm very curious about the way you connect sound and image in "Mapping

Lessons" – how do you approach the soundtrack as a composition, or in other words, how are your sonic decisions related to your visual decisions, and how do they come together in dealing with notions of history, colonialism, and articulating a statement?

**PR:** For some people, the essay film form is unfamiliar, like a language one doesn't know, except for maybe a few phrases. Visual languages, like any language, need practice in order to master them or even feel comfortable conversing in them. I find the essay film, as a form, important because it allows the film to do something it can't when in other languages, such as narrative or documentary modes. The essay film allows for fiction to intermingle with "reality." It also gives images a different kind of power by being more open to the relationship they have with other elements in the film: images don't have to relate directly to images, the text that appears need not be simply a transcript of the words you hear from within the image, and finally image and sound have a much more playful relationship. "Mapping Lessons" is not a character-led film, where the audience can follow one or multiple main characters – while there is a single protagonist, we don't see her and actually don't learn so much about her. Also, the film's narrative does not abide by the usual rules of time and space; we move between place and time often unknowingly. In light of these missing typical guides, it is music that can act as a different kind of guide for the viewer, if they open themselves up to it. The score does not begin peacefully, it does not softly accompany or support the image with its double, the soft Disney tune to accompany the tale, the anthem to accompany images of the nation. The film's soundscape immediately shakes you up, it breaks with

expectations, and might bring about feelings of estrangement. At the beginning of the film, we are met with quite familiar landscape images shot from the inside of a car, a routine modern journey through streets, but that viewing experience is utterly disrupted by the music that accompanies it. This discord is a reference to what continues to unfold in the rest of the film. The soundscape throughout the film helps prod and provoke the audience to question their reading, to challenge assumptions, to disrupt what we might take for granted. Improvised tunes that disrupt the order of the nation-state.

To close, I want to ask about your experience of the use of music in Palestinian films. Image and sound have a rich and complicated relationship. As someone who spends a considerable amount of their time with sound, making it, listening to it, what do you make of the use of music in Arabic-language films?

**DK:** The relationship between sound and image in Arab cinema has always been a bit odd. Since its beginnings, one can see a continuous gap between music made for film and music made for the specialized music market. This difference can even be seen in the work of musicians who made both. I think it has to do with how these films, whether features or documentaries, represent reality.

In older movies, music expresses a certain wonderment at modernity, featuring Arabic music soundtracks with a melodic nature for instance. This reflected the wonderment felt by the Arab elites. Meanwhile, traditional music would be emphasized in such vulgarized and stereotyped ways. In both cases, film music suffered from alienation.

In the case of Palestinian cinema, from its inception to the present day, things are not entirely different, but we could consider it a political alienation, involving the hackneyed deployment of Palestinian and Arabic political song, from Sheikh Imam to Sabreen; the use of so-called "world music," be it Arab jazz or "Sufi" music; and the nostalgic sound of unaccompanied oud. Where original scores are composed, the music often ends up sounding nostalgic or sentimental, because it's captive to a Palestinian imagination that is defeated by its own alienation.

It is unfortunate when music and sound in cinema are not dealt with on their own terms, are not seen as autonomous. The attention is focused on their pictorial aspect; this superimposition of sorts, of images in music form placed over visual images, serves only to reproduce images of an imagined past and a mystified present.

\* Translated by Ma Hoogla-Kalfat & Katharine Halls





# 2011 is not 1917: on the use of eutopian images

Philip Rizk

In the year 1516, Thomas More published the novel *Utopia*, its title a word he had coined. Over five hundred years later, the word has stuck with us, but the play on words the author had intended has been lost, leaving only one of the two possible meanings in common use in reference to the Latin word *outopia*, the impossible place. It is time to resurrect the second possibility of the term, *eutopia*, the better place. With eyes set on the present – not a faraway future – I want to think about what role images can play in imagining better places. A critical place to start is, once again, the Russian revolution.

Esfir Shub was one of the many people whose lives dramatically changed following the fall of the tsar and the success of the Russian revolution. At the turn of the century, the Lumière Brothers had

sent a cameraperson to film in Russia, as well as show the tsar the workings of their new invention. The dictator was captivated and in the years that followed had a dedicated camera operator film various aspects of his life – at home, eating with his family, or panning across the vast land he owned. Yet as film equipment became more widespread in the following years, he imposed harsh restrictions on what was permitted to be filmed throughout the Empire. All this came to an end on February 17, 1917 when the revolutionaries toppled Nikolai II Alexandrovich Romanov and removed his family from power. Only a few years later, that archive of royal footage fell into the lap of editor and filmmaker Esfir Shub. Her first feature film titled “The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty” was the first film of its kind, editing images in such a way as to undermine the inten-





tions of their creators. Years later, it would be labeled the first found footage film. She imbued images intended to serve authoritarian domination with new meaning for a radical counter-narrative, subverting the power that once lay in them.

Less than a hundred years later, another revolution broke out – in Syria. Starting in March 2011, people throughout the country went down to the streets protesting a dictatorship that had suppressed them for decades. For a time, the most radical experiment the region had seen broke out when the government was forced to withdraw from entire regions and people took control of determining their own way of life. Yet, not unlike the Russian revolution, this one would also fall short of most of its protagonists' desires.

Meanwhile 2011 is not 1917, and images have come to function and circulate in an utterly different way. What are the images that come to your mind's eye of Syria today or five or ten years ago? Overwhelmingly these are determined by the media, a power that can decide which images we see and how we look at them, akin to the tsar's censorship rules. The media narratives serve someone's purpose, whether it is the news editor's sense of the world's breaking stories or a national media agency that toes a political line. Like Esfir Shub, I want to re-edit images to subvert the common narrative about what has been happening in Syria.

In the film "Mapping Lessons" we follow the journey of K, who is traveling from post-revolution Russia to her home near the city of Nazareth, only months before the invasion of the French and British armies. In her book *Fantasia*, the novelist

Assia Djebar describes the arrival of the French military fleet at Algiers. On board the ships are artists ready with easel and brush to represent the event before it happens.

These paintings were to be enjoyed by the French public; they told the story of the colonizers. In those days most travelers journeyed in order to explore and to extract, whether stories or natural or human resources, to loot, to conquer and to dominate. In her book *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt writes that travel writing created codes that produced "the rest of the world." Travel books, she explains, "gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized," not unlike the Lumière Brothers intention to use the moving image to map the world for European audiences at a time of mass colonization. K undoes that intention of journeying; she is returning, countering the male gaze. Hers, too, is a discovery but one of a revolutionary process that has begun in her absence, while her own gaze has been shaped by revolution too.

In "Mapping Lessons," images accompany this journey in a particular way. Unlike Shub who relied on a single archive of images for her first feature film, "Mapping Lessons" cites various types of footage differently.

The initial archive of footage was filmed by S who traveled to Syria three times between 2011 and 2013, often crossing borders where they no longer existed. S wanted the footage to be used to tell the stories he had witnessed on those solidarity journeys. In my use of S's footage, I do not tell his story, but K's fictional-



ized journey is informed by the communities S meets along his way, as well as many other tales. This is fiction based on reality, much like the historical fiction of a novel. Later on, footage is added that was filmed by activists in various parts of Syria, tutorials about their experiments in building different forms of autonomy. I re-edited these visual manuals, contrasting them with other moments in time. This tactic of juxtaposing images is one that Esfir Shub's colleague, Sergei Eisenstein, introduced. He edited the images in his films with the intention of having them clash or create contrasts that would push his audience to think, rather than consume images solely for the sake of entertainment. In my practice of juxtaposing images I use two very different types of footage.

The first are images of power, footage from colonial archives, shot from military planes or soldiers on foot, or commercial cinematic representations. I use them with the intention to suck the power out of them, to lay bare their barbarian intent.

The second type of footage I use is about other anti-colonial, anti-state, anti-capitalist struggles, whether archival material, fiction films, or documentaries. I want to juxtapose the struggle for autonomy in Syria with some of those in other places and times, from the Russian revolution, the Viet Cong resistance, or Spanish resistance against fascism, to narrative portrayals of the Paris Commune. I use these as one would use citations in a text. In his unfinished *Arcades Project*, author Walter Benjamin wrote, "Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show." In part he wants to show "a world of secret affinities." In my film, images are doing a similar thing. And while the viewer will not always know the reference, that is not so critical. Rather the question is, what do the images do? We

don't need to know what they are, there is no need to be a well-read expert, but to open oneself up to the effect images may have on you. "A quote disrupts," Benjamin writes later. Can we engage a visual, rather than a linear logic? I am putting struggles in conversation with one another, which may or may not have ever been in touch, may or may not have inspired each other – I want to feel the spirit of the matter.

The historian Richard Stites writes about "psychic mechanisms," where utopian acts of social daydreaming leave effects on future generations that often can't be grasped. So even when those desires are crushed, they leave a residue of a psychic kind that will one day be revived. Can images be mediums of these desires? These images are meant to break the certainty, to unleash a stance of questioning, to create a fracture, not to present a perfect alternative, but to allow us to dream again. Too often images are used to tell a story that has taken place. I want to tell a story that could take place – concrete eutopia, rooted in the present, preparing for the next time.

In the 1980s, we were told "there is no alternative." In 1992, a historian declared the "end of history." In 1994, we yelled back "another world is possible." From 2010 onwards, we chanted, "the people want the downfall of the system."

As an epitaph for his film "The last Bolshevik," Chris Marker quotes George Steiner, "It is not the literal past that rules us... it is images of the past." The images exist, we can't wish them away or undo them. But we can create counter-images, we can attack images, the images of capital, the images of power, we can re-edit them to question their meaning, to make them awkward, to make them cry out, to reveal those behind the easel.





## Contributors' biographies

**Philip Rizk** is a filmmaker and writer from Cairo living in Berlin. In his films he experiments with methods of “making the habitual strange.” He did this through performance in “Out on the Street” (2015) and the work-in-progress “Exercises on Trials” both co-directed with Jasmina Metwaly, and through the technique of montage in his found footage films “Mapping Lessons” (2020) and “Terrible Sounds” (2022). In a world that is breaking down, a question that runs throughout Rizk’s projects is, how do we prepare ourselves for what is to come? Rizk is a member of the Mosireen video collective behind the archive 858.ma. His writings include “2011 is not 1968: a letter to an onlooker” and the co-authored book *On Trials: A Manual for the Theatre of War*. He irregularly teaches in classrooms and workshops. You can follow his work on: [filfilm.com](http://filfilm.com)

**Omar Aziz** was a prominent Syrian intellectual, economist, and longtime anarchist dissident. He returned to Syria in 2011 following the beginning of the revolution and co-founded the first local council in the working-class district of Barzeh, Damascus, in late 2011, thus contributing significantly to the subsequent development of community self-organizing. Kidnapped by the Syrian air force intelligence on 20 November 2012, he died in a Syrian dungeon three months later.

**Yasser Munif** teaches classes about Arab and global revolts, the history of racism in the US, feminist theory, critical globalization studies, and postcolonial theory. His research examines grassroots struggles and politics from below in marginal sites. His work has appeared in publications including *Rethinking Marxism*, the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*,

and the *Journal of Palestinian Studies*. Yasser is the author of *The Syrian Revolution: Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death* (Pluto Press, 2020). He is the co-founder of the Campaign for Global Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution, which organizes cultural events and political actions in the US to raise awareness around grassroots politics in Syria.

**Linda Quiquivix** is a popular educator, translator, and seed saver based in California. She is currently writing a popular book called *Palestine 1492* that places Israel/Palestine into conversation with Black and Indigenous liberation struggles in the Americas. You can learn more about her writings at [www.quiqui.org](http://www.quiqui.org).

**Walid** is a Syrian farmer, married with three kids who all love working the land. Walid grew up under the Syrian Baathist regime and came to understand the nature of the dictatorship’s agricultural policies when opposition forces pushed the regime out of the area he lived in. Currently based in Lebanon, he is now working on a project practicing and teaching sustainable and organic food production. He would advise anyone to get into it, even as a side job, because it gives us love, security, and positive energy.

**Vivien Sansour** is an artist, storyteller, researcher, and conservationist, whose work has been showcased around the world. She founded the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library as part of her efforts to advocate for seed conservation and agrobiodiversity. This led to collaborations with internationally acclaimed chefs the late Anthony Bourdain and Sami Tamimi. Born in Jerusalem, Vivien was raised in both Beit Jala in Palestine and the US, and proudly calls herself a PhD drop-out.

**Dirar Kalash** is a musician and sound artist whose work spans a wide range of musical and sonic practices within a variety of instrumental, compositional, and improvisational contexts. Dirar extends his practice into interdisciplinary theoretical research. He has produced several solo and collaborative musical albums and is active as a touring musician. He has also created several sound installations, live audio-visual performances, and photography projects.

**Katharine Halls** is an Arabic-to-English translator. She was awarded a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant for her translation of Haytham El-Wardany’s *Things That Can’t Be Fixed* and her translation (with Adam Talib) of Raja Alem’s *The Dove’s Necklace* received the 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award and was shortlisted for the Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize. Her translations for the stage have been performed at the Royal Court and the Edinburgh Festival.

**Ma Hoogla-Kalfat** (formerly known as MF Kalfat) is a cultural worker and producer based in Cairo. He has translated between Arabic and English, edited a film e-zine *Terr.so*, programmed film screenings, and contributed original work to several publications. Hoogla-Kalfat, and is currently writing a book, *Covering the Naked*, that tries to map the occurrences and appearances of the naked human body across a labyrinth of literature, discourse, visual images, popular culture, and daily life experiences in Egypt and beyond.

**Naira Antoun** is a contributing editor at *Mada Masr*, an independent Egyptian online newspaper founded in June 2013. She works as a freelance editor and copy editor and is a therapist-in-training.

**Salma Shamel** works with video and text. Her video work has been shown at Crossroads at SFMOMA, European Media Art Festival in Germany, Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival in Scotland, Cámara Lúcida in Ecuador, Cairo Video Festival in Egypt, CODEC Festival Internacional de Cine Experimental y Vídeo in Mexico, Athens International Film and Video in Ohio, and more. Her academic and non-academic writings have been published in *Rethinking Marxism*, *The Derivative* (by Beirut Art Center), *Jadaliyya*, *Mada Masr*, and others. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Media, Culture and Communication Department at New York University.

## **About A World Without Maps**

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Scan here to watch the four videos that make up "A World Without Maps," and access the entire publication.



