



# Reinventing democracy as an expression of freedom

February 14, 2016

The alternative parliament of the sixth New World Summit in Utrecht. Photo: Ernie Buts

AUTONOMY & ANARCHISM



The sixth New World Summit brought together activists, academics and artists from across the globe to discuss the idea and practice of stateless democracy. **Chris Keulemans**



We take our seats in the auditorium of Utrecht University. It was here that the Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1579. Claiming independence from the Spanish monarchy, the treaty marked the foundation of what was to become the Dutch nation state. Unfolding

above our heads are the handwritten pages,



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**NEW WORLD SUMMIT**, the artistic and political organization founded by Jonas Staal in 2012, has built its sixth “proposition for an alternative parliament”, this time right in the historical heart of a classic Western nation state; one of the nation states that are now in crisis and that — fearing the loss of their hegemonic position — have begun to shed the democratic principles on which they were built.

## MOHAMMADOU OULD SLAHI’S DIARY

There is no better illustration of this than Ould Slahi’s diary: on every page of his observations — confused, vulnerable, but determined to keep treating himself and his guards as human beings — words and sentences have been blacked out by the US authorities, judging them to be classified information. Ould Slahi’s fate personifies the effects of institutional state violence.

Ould Slahi’s lawyer is here: Nancy Hollander from New Mexico, an outspoken woman with a wave of white hair and piercing eyes.

In addition to Ould Slahi, she also defends

Chelsea Manning, who is being persecuted for uncovering secrets that we have the right to know. As she pointedly asks: “Should the government know more about its citizens — or should citizens know more about their government?”

If the first happens to be the case, and in our part of the world that looks increasingly likely, this is a clear sign of a failed democracy. Jonas Staal, taut and fully dressed in black, stands looking around the hall: “The movements assembled here today are too democratic for capitalist nation states to bear. That is why this Summit poses the question: can we separate the construct of democracy from the nation state?”

The place is packed. Over 200 activists, students, art professionals and representatives of citizens’ movements, political parties or unrecognized peoples from the Philippines, Kurdistan, Catalonia, Greece, West Papua, Azawad, Palestine and elsewhere. Most of them seem to acknowledge that capitalist democracy is turning into a dangerous farce. Many of them say that democracy itself is a principle worth reclaiming. And some of them have already started to reinvent it, from the bottom up, in their own parts of the world.

## **THE FLAGS OF THE ROJAVA**

## REVOLUTION

On the second day, the pages from the Guantánamo Diary have been replaced by the symbols and flags of the movements and parties that make up the Rojava revolution. Stars, the sun, sheaves of wheat in red, yellow and green.

At the very moment we are about to discuss the merits and dilemmas of the Kurdish model of democratic confederalism, Turkey's President Erdoğan is busy shredding all pretense that his nation state has anything to do with democracy. As the first speakers take the stage, 21 wounded and dying people are trapped in a basement in Cizre. The Turkish army shoots at the ambulances trying to reach them.

Bakur, or North Kurdistan, also known as Southeast Turkey, is under siege. Across the border in Syria, the Kurds of Rojava watch on in horror, while they themselves are busy rebuilding Kobane and fighting off ISIS.

The idea of democratic confederalism has been developed over the past decade by PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan and his fellow leaders as democracy without the nation state, or stateless democracy.

At the New World Summit, his niece Dilek Öcalan, a member of parliament in Turkey

for the leftist People's Democratic Party (HDP), explains that this new model of democracy presents an alternative on all levels: it decentralizes the care for land, water, energy, education, health care, housing and police.

Democratic confederalism would make politics attractive again, she argues. It offers people in each neighborhood, village, canton or region the possibility to decide how they want to live, as well as to participate in the realization of their decisions. Take the Social Contract, for example, Rojava's alternative constitution: it has not been created between a state and its citizens, but among the citizens themselves.

The practice of self-defense is central to the movements in Bakur and Rojava. Fighting back against the murderous oppression of the state is considered justified, but at the same time it forces the oppressed outside the realm of the nation state and the rule of law, effectively rendering them stateless. Yet, as facilitator Vincent van Gerven Oei suggests in a remarkably suitable quote from Walter Benjamin, self-defense will work only when it is co-dependent with education. The one can never work without the other.

Suad Kobane, European representative for

the Democratic Union's Party, or PYD, one of the largest parties involved in the Rojava revolution, calls this a model for democratic modernity, based not upon unification but on diversity; not on capitalism but on an economy that listens to the needs of people and nature.

In response to the Summit's central question, he says: "Wherever the state is strong, democracy is weak — and vice versa. The state cannot survive without people and society. But people and society can survive without a state."

The power of the New World Summit lies in the experience of coming face to face with the warriors of new democracy. Literally, face to face: in the long U-shaped design of this alternative parliament people sit right across from each other, listening intently to long witness reports of today's local revolutions.

There is a high level of concentration throughout: hardly any playing with smartphones and almost no whispering among each other. All the speakers at the conference make profound efforts to elevate their experiences to concepts and images that can be understood beyond the limits of their own community. You can sense the hard work, the sacrifice, the mind-breaking challenges these people are

facing while working towards a democratic reality that at times seems almost unthinkable in this age of relentless global capitalism.

This creates a level of transnational trust that allows for probing questions. Not only the speakers are working hard, so are the listeners. The audience tries to translate the ins and outs of these new models of democracy to their own practice. Jodi Dean, Professor of Political Science, comes up with some essential questions about democratic confederalism. These are questions that seem to resonate with those of other thinkers and activists from around the world: people who are equally fascinated by the Rojava revolution, but also eager to highlight the dilemmas that every revolution faces if it wishes to realize its ambitions while staying true to its ideals.

There seems to be a disconnect between democratic confederalism and stateless democracy, Dean says. Is democratic confederalism a rethinking of the state, or does it go beyond the state? Are its aims relatively modest (as in: don't fear us, Turkey, we are not out to separate ourselves from the nation state) or far more radical (as in: this model should be expanded, to turn the whole Middle-East upside down, its maps and its stagnant power structures)?

And, a vital question, also to local activists across Europe: would democratic confederalism run the risk of creating closed communities, tolerating only those who share a language, culture and worldview, making them inaccessible to migrants and refugees — or can it be the foundation of a society open to the world?

This is where the debate opens up. Ideas begin to circulate and connect. Quite organically, monologue makes way for dialogue. Representatives of local movements hold up their practice to show how they correspond to or differ from the Rojava model. They reach out for international connections, eager to strengthen their movements with hard-fought wisdom from beyond. They sense that we are living in a time when the whole system is trembling on its foundations, and that it is up to us to come up with sustainable solutions before we will be cast away as the debris of outlived dictatorships and failed democracies.

“There is a clash going on between statist civilization and the civilization of the oppressed,” says Dilar Dirik, the fiery spokesperson of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, who is so eloquent about the necessity of having women at the forefront of the revolution.



Referring to movements across the world, like the Zapatistas, the Palestinian *intifada* and Black Lives Matter, she calls out to build our democratic confederalist structures globally while building our autonomy locally. “Democratic civilization is being mobilized by the oppressed. It is humanity’s desire to express itself as freedom.”

## “FUTURE DEMOCRACY”

We enter the third day of the New World Summit. This time, the slogan Future Democracy has been written on the screens above our heads in all the languages represented here today. The complexity of this endeavor is best illustrated by the fact that the word “democracy” doesn’t even exist in some of these languages. That doesn’t stop anyone here, however, of speaking in the vocabulary of change.

“Yes,” says Quim Arrufat, “let’s bring democratic confederalism to our part of the world, as an alternative to the Europe of banks and nation states.” Arrufat, who was a member of Catalunyan parliament for the eco-socialist party Candidatura d’Unitat Popular (CUP), gave up his seat in parliament recently, as all members of CUP continuously swap positions in order not to cling to power. He remains a tireless

campaigner for popular self-determination.

Later this year, together with Jonas Staal and the New World Summit, he will take the initiative to assemble similar movements in Europe to discuss models of future democracy for this continent, where parliamentary democracy looks tired and shaken.

Others from the Basque region, Greece, Azawad and the nations connected to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), also say “yes”. And so does Younes Osman Nuur of We Are Here, the collective of undocumented refugees in Amsterdam: “We are highlighting the existence of people who have been invisibilized, we are creating a new political space, we understand democracy as a practice, as something you have to do.”

If capitalist democracy means private property, individualism and state institutions, says Indian lawyer and social justice campaigner Radha D’Souza, then we as communities designing our place in future democracy should work on freedom, justice and yes, place — the place where we are, where we have ended up, be it out of choice or out of emergency, the place that we have a responsibility for.

Underestimated, perhaps, in this swirl of

energy and new transnational connections, is the role of the arts. The art world, too, has been colonized by global market interests or by social-educational agendas, both resulting in an ornamental, harmless position for the artist and her work. By reclaiming her independence, there is so much more the artist can contribute to the imaginary of a new, common world.

It is no coincidence, then, that this New World Summit is hosted by visual artist Jonas Staal, artistic director Maria Hlavajova of BAK, base for active knowledge in Utrecht, and Jolle Demmers of the Center for Conflict Studies at Utrecht University. That's a Netherlands-based triangle of arts, academia and revolutionary reflection right there.

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In the temporary design of the New World Summit, a visualization of an alternative

parliament, Demmers says that art can provide a radical frame for the imagination that enables the mobilization of collective action. Art can help us see that what looks like fate, like the irreversible outcome for the oppressed and the invisibilized, is not actually fate — it can be changed, and art can help us change it. This is about art that you make not in order to become an artist, says Ilena Saturay, theater maker and representative of the National Democratic Movement of the Philippines, but in order to take part in the people's struggle.

We're talking about a practice of art, says curator Vivian Zihler, that opposes Anglo-European tactics of dispossession. Art that is a mandate. Art that gives permission.

And at the New World Summit, the act of giving permission is a shared privilege, a reciprocal act. An invitation to join the ongoing practice of reinventing democracy, both on the most local level and in the global arena. Each invitation is followed by the next. Just before all the members of this imaginary but very real parliament get up to approach each other with new proposals for working together, we receive an invitation from Amina Osse, deputy minister for foreign affairs of the Cezîre canton, for all the representatives of the parties and movements assembled here: next stop, Rojava!

## Chris Keulemans



Chris Keulemans is a traveling writer and journalist. He is the chairman of ASKV, center for undocumented refugees in Amsterdam. He was a member of the New World Summit delegation that visited Rojava in October 2015.

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