

Changing the Matrix

Moving the Left Toward Communalism

BY CHAIA HELLER

IN NOVEMBER 2016, U.S. leftists will be offered up a blue and red pill provided by the matrix of our own failing democracy. Candidate #1 (let's call this the blue pill) will be deemed the lesser of two evils, the greater of which is candidate #2 (the red pill). But what if, after responsibly choosing the pill determined to be less evil (an act of damage control), leftists then set their sights on going off their meds—that is, what if they aimed to leave the state matrix altogether? Local communalist politics, such as those outlined by Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology, beckon to leftists and offer a way to transcend the state by creating a confederation of directly democratic communities.

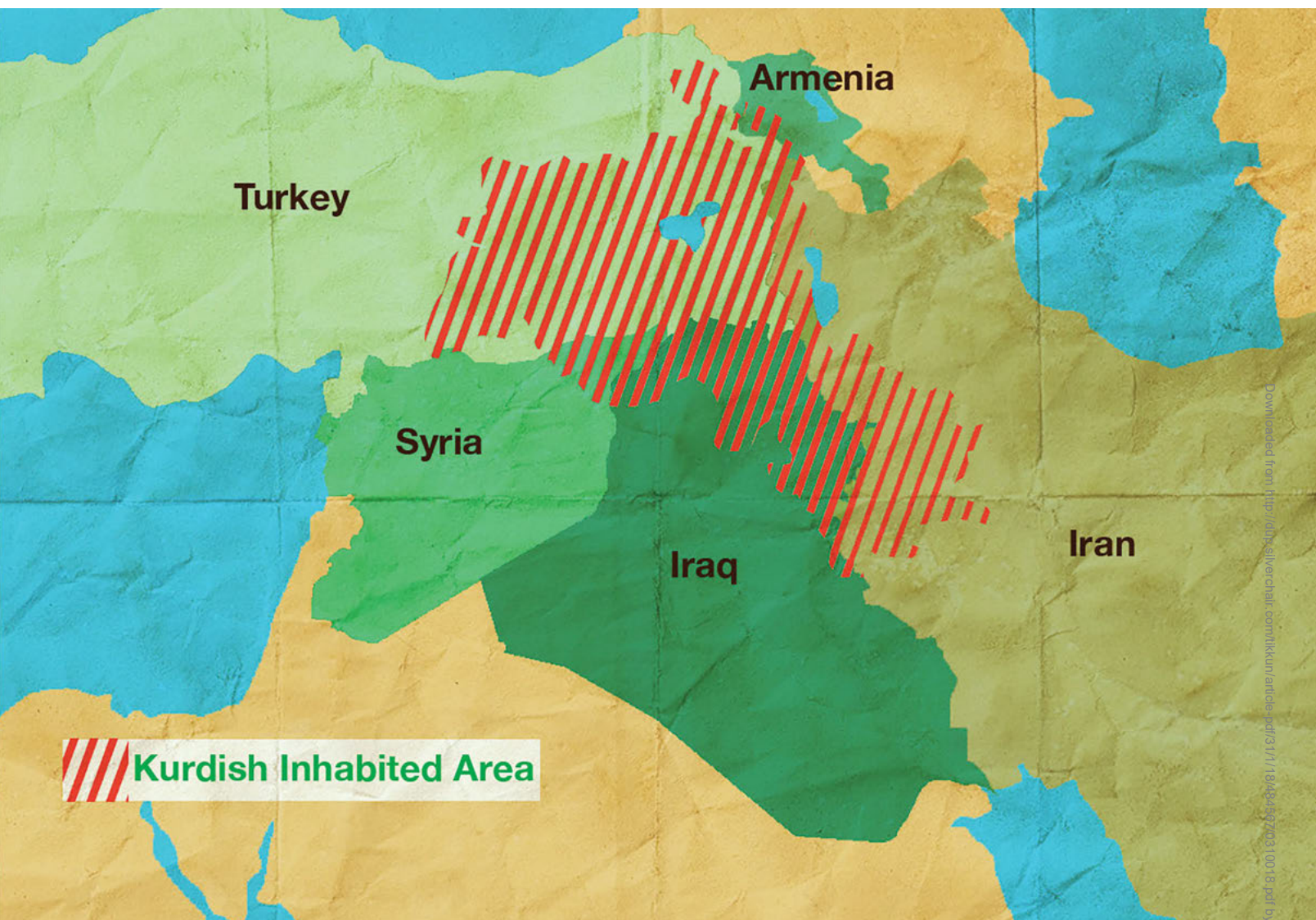
Leftists today could build a matrix apart from state power, locating political power on a communal, municipal level rather than on the level of the state. Bookchin saw municipal elections as vital public activities in which citizens have the opportunity to engage in critical debate, setting the bar high not only by discussing political issues (such as poverty, social injustice, and ecology), but also by addressing the very structure of the political process itself. Instead of running a representative for mayor or head of city council, leftist groups would run a political program that is explicitly antistate and anticapitalist while promoting decentralized,



Women in traditional Kurdish holiday dress at Newroz, the spring equinox celebration in Istanbul, Turkey.

directly democratic political power. This *communalist* program would guide stateless citizens as they forge a common charter based, in turn, on a set of general principles—such as *direct democracy, confederalism, moral economy, ecology, non-hierarchy, social justice, and equality*. This common charter would link an interdependent network of communalist municipalities, forming a confederation of self-managed towns and cities that would create the very public policy that shapes their lives by meeting in popular assemblies. In the United States, the type of popular assembly that still exists

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Kurds currently inhabit territory controlled by Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

today in the form of the Vermont town meeting would be resuscitated and reclaimed via communalist politics.

While U.S. leftists debate whether the blue or the red pill is the one with fewer ill effects, radical Kurds throughout parts of Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have stepped outside the logic of the state, building a communalist vision of their own: in 2002, the leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, first read the works of Bookchin while serving a life sentence in a Turkish prison. Refuting his former Marxist framework, Öcalan called upon radical Kurds to drop their demand for an autonomous Kurdish state. Instead they would create a stateless confederation of directly democratic communities guided by principles including social justice, gender equality, and moral economy. Citizens living in these communities would be linked by civic humanist ties rather than by ties based on shared ethnicity. The full

details of the Kurdish case cannot be addressed here. But it is worth noting that for nearly fifteen years (more recently, during a war against the Islamic State and various state powers), radical Kurds have been experimenting with direct democracy, creating a confederation of autonomous communities whose political crucible is the popular assembly.

Bookchin, who passed away in 2006, never lived to see the Kurdish experiment with democratic confederalism. Perhaps, as leftists prepare to determine which pill to swallow next year, we can look to the Kurdish case for inspiration about transforming the matrix of electoral politics by building power on the municipal level, beginning a revolution that would create a society in which citizens are empowered to self-govern rather than remain passive choosers of options deemed merely less evil. ■