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# People vs. peoples: sacrifice and the foundations for sovereignty in 1640's England and contemporary northeast Syria

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## ABSTRACT

Engaging with state-centric perspectives on sovereignty, and particularly Giorgio Agamben's work, this article argues that despite sovereignty's permanence at the level of the state, the principles upon which it is built can change dramatically. Further, such change may in turn greatly transform the reach and power of the state itself. Using the trial of King Charles in 1649 as a case for of how divine right was replaced by embryonic popular sovereignty through an act of sacrifice, the article contends that several new revolutionary movements are now in turn aiming to overturn popular sovereignty in a similar way. Drawing on secondary material and fieldwork contextualization, the article contends that the Kurdish movement in Syria is currently struggling to disaggregate the state's people into a host of peoples, whose opportunities for political participation depend upon conforming to an ideologically construed vision of human nature. This, the article suggests, may set the frame for revolutionary resistance in the future.

## KEYWORDS

Sovereignty; Kurds; Syria; Kingship; democracy; Charles I

## Introduction

The ascendancy of popular sovereignty, albeit in nascent form, is often attributed to the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Prior to his trial, Oliver Cromwell, the soon-to-be protector of the realm, watched the king being brought to court under armed guard, when he suddenly had a troubling revelation. Even though the popularly-stocked High Court of Justice would almost certainly find him guilty, Cromwell realized that they first had to answer a crucial question: under what authority was he to be tried? The King was, after all, exempt from committing crimes under English law. With great concern, Cromwell voiced his question, and it echoed through the High Court in silence. King Charles of England had been charged with tyranny, treason and murder (Purkiss 2007; Holmes 2019), but which authority existed to try him?

This crucial point was not lost on the King. During his trial, he stalled the legal proceedings for three days by repeatedly demanding that the court tell him which 'lawful authority' was prosecuting him (Chamberlayne 2022, 14). Eventually, the prosecution was

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forced to tell him that he was charged ‘In the name of the people of England, by which you were elected king (...)’ (Chamberlayne 2022, 15), which Charles then refused to acknowledge as legitimate. The King was therefore found in contempt of court, and quickly convicted of treason for his role in the English Civil War. He was sentenced to death,<sup>1</sup> and in his speech on the scaffold on 30th of January 1649, King Charles claimed: ‘A subject and a sovereign are clean different things (...)’ (Chamberlayne 2022, 119), which by the time the axe fell, was the case no more.

As recognized by Edmund Morgan (1989), this turn of events marked one of the first times in early modern history when ‘the people’ claimed ultimate sovereign power. As would later be the case in France and Russia, the king’s divine right to rule was contested by a new foundational principle, namely that a state’s sovereignty ultimately rested with the voting public (although, who were to be counted as ‘the people’ was by no means an unqualified category). This principle remains foundational for most states today. However, just as the republicans in the English Civil War contested the divine right of kings, this article will argue that we are now witnessing novel leftist, revolutionary movements contesting the foundational sovereign right of ‘the people’. As a primary example, the article will show that the so-called Kurdish movement<sup>2</sup> in Syria is currently attempting to consecrate a notion of *peoples* instead of ‘the people’, as defined in accordance with an ideologically inflected vision of human nature. Drawing on secondary sources, as well as data from fieldwork in Syrian Kurdistan (otherwise known as northeastern Syria), the article will show that this novel vision of sovereignty’s foundation shifts and undercuts much of the state’s power and influence, and heralds a new way of designing social order.

In order to make this point, the article will first provide a summary of recent theorizations of sovereignty, with particular attention to Agamben’s conceptualization. The article then goes on to examine King Charles I’s execution to argue that, contrary to Agamben’s writings on *homo sacer* and the sovereign, the sovereign *can* be sacrificed (in a certain way). Although this may not entail sovereignty being wrested from the state, the article argues that such sacrifice may radically transform the foundational principle upon which sovereignty rests, which, in turn, greatly impacts the reach and power of the state. From there, the article goes on to examine how the foundational principle for sovereignty instituted by the execution of King Charles (that is, the people) – which became the dominant idiom for most states on earth – is now arguably being challenged in northeastern Syria. The article argues that the Kurdish movement attempts to parse ‘the people’ into a host of different peoples, and vest their consociation with nominal sovereignty, in order to limit and transform the state. The article ends by arguing that this disaggregation into *peoples* relies on an ideologically inflected vision of human nature, which in its own way also proscribes exclusive categories *qua* Agamben’s theorization. Before starting the argument, however, a short section clarifying the methodological operation of the paper is necessary.

## Comparison of events

Although the article examines two different cases from vastly different times and places, the operation is not thought of as a historical comparison in the sense of revealing unseen connections or structural similarities – or even suggesting that two cases share much empirical substance with each other. Instead, what the two cases have in common is that they stand at the threshold of new concepts that came to (in the case of King Charles), and will

potentially come to (as I submit with regards to Syrian Kurdistan), dramatically transform the state and its social order. They were, in the words of Bruce Kapferer, 'events': 'Singularities in which critical dimensions can be conceived of as opening to new potentialities in the formation of social realities (...)' (Kapferer 2010, 1). As Sean Kelsey (2004) has shown, such an entry into a new and unknown territory was instantly recognized by the Parliamentarians, who were both excited for and terrified of what the future might hold. In my experience working in Syrian Kurdistan in the spring of 2022, this sentiment was shared among a wide segment of the population there as well. The very newness of their project had propelled them into situations where the backlashes were unforeseeable.

As Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi (2020) have pointed out, this 'eventive' quality of pointing to something genuinely unknown and new in social (and cosmological) life, is closely connected to any revolutionary struggle. As they write: 'the notion of event (...) at the heart of revolution as a modern political form never ceases to be relevant (...)' (21), and marks 'emblematic moments in time, violent upheavals that bring about wholesale change in the political and social order, or at least seeks to do so (18)'. Revolution is in this sense almost synonymous with an event: taking a step into, or actively creating, a different world to inhabit. As they emphasize, this does not mean that there are no prefigurations of what this revolution might or should look like; there are of course ideologies underpinning and guiding both the struggle for and the implementation of the vision of what the new future will bring (Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020). Setting these ideas out in practice may of course often be considerably more difficult than initially considered, as was certainly the case in decolonial era (see, for example, Getachew 2019), and would often lead to contradictory results or a resurgence of the old order (see Haugbolle and Bandak 2017 for a reflection on what 'ending' a revolution may mean).

Disregarding these practical concerns, however, Alain Badiou has argued that what is crucial in defining an eventive revolutionary struggle is not the resulting practical work of consolidation, but rather the potency of the revolutionary *idea* (Badiou 2012, 2010). Irrespective of how an idea is set into practice, with all the contradictions, potholes and dead-ends that this entails, Badiou argues that it is 'fidelity to the idea' that marks a truly eventive revolutionary moment and struggle (see Badiou 2010, 2005).<sup>3</sup> An idea is here not understood as a comprehensive or totalized system for government, but rather as a guiding value inculcating various, and often contradictory, practices aimed at bringing the new paradigmatic idea to bear on the world. For Badiou, a radically disruptive idea (springing from an event) may therefore not be easily spatialized or temporalized, and serves as a waypoint into a new future, regardless of whether it becomes fully 'realized' or not.

It is in this sense that the two cases presented here are fused. The operation of the article is conceived of as a comparison in the sense that it sets two revolutionary events up against each other, each of which heralded the ascent of a new idea of what sovereignty should be founded upon. As the execution of King Charles was one of the first events portending the principle of popular sovereignty for state rule, the Kurdish movement in Syria is now, I submit, heralding the sovereignty of *peoples*. The reason for selecting King Charles' execution and the Kurdish case in Syria for a comparative endeavour, is therefore to highlight how the principles underpinning state sovereignty are once again, possibly, in the process of transforming.

The materials used to make this argument are mostly written and discursive. Despite having worked with the movement for a few years in Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan, and

having conducted a brief fieldwork in northeastern Syria, the amount of ethnographic insight I have into ongoing practices is limited. I will however supplement the argument with ethnographic vignettes wherever possible. Nevertheless, since the argument first and foremost pertains to changing ideas of sovereign foundations, and is intended as a theoretical intervention, the hope is that it will serve as inspiration for future research to see how and if the argument forwarded here plays out in a wider empirical arena. To such pursue this theoretical argument properly, however, a brief summary of how popular sovereignty has been theorized is necessary.

## Popular sovereignty and the state

With the execution of King Charles, sovereignty was proclaimed to be held in the hands of the people of the new English republic. In the years to come, multiple countries followed this path – often in meandering and circuitous ways – but popular sovereignty eventually became the foundational principle for most states in the world. However, as many authors have argued (Foucault 1978; Agamben 1998; Mbembe 2003), the ascendancy of popular sovereignty should not to be seen as a panacea for the ailments of the people. In his lectures at College de France, Michel Foucault (2003) contended that the system of popular sovereignty in fact laid the groundwork for an even more violent and tyrannical social order.

In Foucault's mind, it was paradoxically the sovereign position as divine that had ensured a limit to violent atrocities (2003, see also 1978). When the sovereign and sovereignty's position and legitimacy became linked to the people, it brought with it wider, more destructive formations of violence than when the king had *not* been responsible to his people – existing in a realm wholly separated from that of the commoners. When the sovereign body was no longer divinely ordained, but instead hinged *explicitly* on the body of the people, the sovereign went to great pains to *care* for the life of its subjects; *biopolitics*, as Foucault dubbed it. Sovereignty became dispersed throughout the people, and not centralized in a singular figure. The mental institution, the school, the medical institutions, and so on, were devoted to care for the subjects which now gave the sovereign – be it king, chairman or president – its legitimacy and power. As the state became headless, in his famous formulation, the body, in a sense, became its own head (Foucault 2013, 66). As a consequence of this, Foucault argued, the idea of maintaining the intactness of sovereignty became equated with maintaining the intactness of the people. This idea hence coincided with different forms of nationalism and racism – ethnic, civic, and/or linguistic – which produced new instruments of control and violence, aimed at expelling, purging, or assimilating deviant minorities – those who threatened the sovereign body.<sup>4</sup> Most crucially, however, the idea of popular sovereignty brought forth the notion of *extermination* (Foucault 2013). For, while a regent could be killed or die, and another would naturally take its place – through the machinations of an elevated lineage or by the grace of God – once the *people* became sovereign, 'the people' were under constant, potential threat by other *peoples*. This was for Foucault an essential component to the genocides of the twentieth century. It was no longer a detached sovereign which threatened a different detached sovereign and singular transgressors, but a people that threatened another people. In Foucault's mind, this idea of popular sovereignty directly underpinned the Jewish genocide (Foucault 2013, 78–79), for instance.

Taken up by Giorgio Agamben, this idea has been further developed in a radical direction. For Agamben, everyone, in some sense, lives in the camp (Agamben 1998, 2005). The camp has become the firmament of the state. To express the conceptual underpinnings of this idea, Agamben draws on an obscure Roman legal clause, namely that of the *homo sacer*, or the sacred man (Agamben 2013). *Homo sacer*, in its most basic form, denotes a person who is excluded from the polity, but by virtue of his or her exclusion also comes to define and enclose it, and therefore is absolutely constitutive of the polity's social order. It is a person who, in Agamben's words, 'may be killed but not yet sacrificed (...)' (Agamben 2013, 140), since sacrifice entails an entity being recognized as something with the potential for value transference. For Agamben, *homo sacer* presents the mirror image of the sovereign at the other end of the hierarchy, both demarcating the limits of the people in their own way (Agamben 1998, 102). While the sovereign demarcates the state/people in its elevation, *homo sacer* demarcates the state/people in its demotion. The sovereign and *homo sacer*, in other words, share similar characteristics of being in some sense untouchable and unsacrificable – standing both outside and inside the social order – and together spatializing and giving shape to the polity (Agamben 1998, 100–101). Agamben draws on these insights to build upon, and critique, Foucault. Agamben contends that popular sovereignty not only opens up the possibility of genocide – the eradication of a people – as Foucault had theorized, but also necessarily proscribes a subhuman class of people. In the face of neoliberal globalization, with its increased migration, poverty and exploitation, and the diminishing power of the nation state, Agamben (1998, 2000, 2005) argues that societies increasingly designate more and more people as *homo sacer*.

It is, in this sense, a rather grim picture that Foucault and Agamben have painted of the seemingly liberating act of claiming both the king's head and simultaneously of popular sovereignty. And indeed, many others have followed this bleak line of analysis. Achille Mbembe (2003, 2019), for instance, has argued that the sovereign's right to kill has not been developed thoroughly enough with the idea of biopower, and to complement it, proposes a notion of necropower: state-sanctioned mechanisms for consignment to death and death-like life. One need think of no more than slavery, apartheid, and paperless refugees to grasp Mbembe's contribution. But while these works certainly speak to recognizable conditions across the world, they are also quite immutable theorizations; there is little here that seems subject to change.

This immutable and bleak framing of sovereignty has been subject to critique and discussion. In opposition to Agamben and Foucault's (complicated) interlinkage of sovereignty and statehood, multiple authors have proposed different ways of detaching or nuancing this relation.<sup>5</sup> Audra Simpson (2014) for instance, shows that sovereignty for First nations in North America is manifested in people refusing state citizenship and replacing it with a demand that tribal lineage and community be internationally recognized as a sovereign force. Similarly, Alice Wilson (2016) has argued that sovereignty, in its actually existing form, must be seen as a form of moral contract between two or more parties engaged in a common struggle, regardless of their affiliation to the state. Perhaps most incisively, Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020) have shown in great ethnographic detail how the Cyprus' *de facto* sovereignty relies on people's performative relations, which are not without contradiction, irony, and, simultaneously, severe gravity.

This article enjoins the aforementioned critical endeavours, but from a different angle. Many authors have redefined sovereignty as only tangentially related to the state – if at all – through an emphasis on multiple, parallel and competing practices of sovereignty (see for instance Gazit 2009; Bertelsen 2016, 2009; Stepputat 2020), a reworking of the concept itself (Malabou 2014; Bonilla 2017; Simpson 2020), and contextualizing its Euro-centric specificities (Sturm 2014; Kauanui 2018). This article, to the contrary, critiques sovereignty from inside of its classical (that is statist) tradition.<sup>6</sup> The purpose is here not so much to redefine sovereignty by, for instance, disentangling it from the state (Hansen and Stepputat 2006), but to examine which principles undergird state sovereignty, how they have changed, and their consequences for social order. As a close reading of King Charles' death will show, sacrificing a sovereign may instil a new sovereign principle that greatly changes the polity's shape.

### Sacrificing a sovereign

Few write so categorically about sovereignty's immutability as Giorgio Agamben. This is apparent in Agamben's methodology, where he traces contemporary sovereignty in a straight line from Roman and Greek precedents (1998), but it is also explicit in his writing. For example, regarding the French revolution, he writes:

(...) in the eyes of the people at the time, the enormity of the rupture marked by Louis XVI's decapitation on January 21, 1793, consisted not in the fact that a monarch was killed, but in the fact that he was submitted to trial and executed after having been condemned to capital punishment. (...) When the Jacobin's suggested (...) that the king be executed without trial, they merely brought the principle of unsacrificability to the most extreme point of its development (...) according to which sacred life may be killed by anyone without committing homicide but never submitted to forms of execution. (Agamben 1998, 103)

Agamben here makes his point clear. While he acknowledges the 'enormity of the rupture' that the decapitation marked, he also seems to contend that despite this rupture, the model of *homo sacer* and sovereign remained virtually unchanged. For Agamben, 'the people' were ascendent, but only as a new component in the scheme that would ultimately lead to the camps of the *homini sacri*. Something dramatic changed, but at the same time, nothing really changed. For Agamben, as the citation above indicates, this stasis essentially hinges upon the king's 'unsacrificability' (he was, in Agamben's, terms 'decapitated', and not 'executed'). As he puts it, one page prior: 'The other defining characteristic of *homo sacer's* life, that is, his unsacrificability according to the forms prescribed by the rite of the law, is also to be found in the person of the sovereign'. (Agamben 1998, 102). Due to the sovereign's unsacrificability, in other words, Agamben contends sovereignty retains its essential structure and form across time.

However, characterizing King Charles' execution as a mere killing is somewhat misleading. There was much ceremony and posturing involved, both leading up to the execution and after. Richard Klemp (2011) points us in this direction in his work on the English Civil War. Klemp writes: 'When a royalist [and the King is here included], was found guilty of treason, the events of his final day formed a *dramatic ritual* intended to demonstrate the purging of evil and triumph of righteousness' (Klemp 2011, 323). The dramatic ritual, Klemp writes, took the form of a multivocal performance, where the powers of

the state tried to force the victim to confess to his sins and acknowledge that the justice apportioned was legitimate. On the victims' side, although some – and indeed probably most – would follow this script, there were a host of others who sought to subvert it in different ways. Holding, for instance, a long, drunk diatribe against the state under the guise of eventually coming to a confession. Or, in another case, demanding a different chopping block, because it was too low. It was, in Kemp's analysis, a place where semiotic streamlining was not easily contained, but nonetheless highly ritualized.

With regards to the execution of King Charles, Klemp (2011) relates that he too did not follow the script as intended:

On a cold January morning in 1649, he chose his clothing to define his public image, wearing a second shirt to avoid shivering and being seen as fearing his death. Just before the axe fell, he put on a white satin cap, explicitly symbolizing purity and perhaps a reminder of the coronation, when he substituted white garments for the traditional purple to connect purity and the day of his union with the English people. Like Charles at his coronation, some victims also wore white to link the spiritual purity they brought to their executions with another marriage (to Christ). Klemp (2011, 325)

Charles I did not articulate the prescribed themes of regret and absolution. By not doing so, he signalled that he would not defer to the new supposed authority of the people, but also offered up and incarnated a now defeated, and past, social order. At the gallows, he stood steadfastly on his claims that the execution was illegitimate, and spoke at length to the mass of spectators that had gathered, while the guards around him tried to drown out his speech and keep people back (Purkiss 2007, 559). He claimed loudly that 'a sovereign and a subject are clean two different things' over the clamour (Chamberlayne 2022, 119), and that 'this is my second marriage day (...) before night I hope to espoused to my blessed Jesus' (Purkiss 2007, 559). Interrupting his speech, the executioner led him to the block which was placed facing the High Court of Justice, so low that the King had to lay down. The King objected to this placement, but his complaints were rebuffed. Right before the axe fell, he managed to cry out that he was a 'martyr of the people' (Chamberlayne 2022, 123), and that he went from a 'corruptible crown to an incorruptible crown' (Chamberlayne 2022, 120), before he spread his arms out like Jesus on the cross, ready to accept his fate. The axe cleared his head with one fell swoop, to the sound of a collective, loud sigh from the onlookers (Purkiss 2007, 556), presumably either from relief or defeat. The executioner forgot to say the customary words of 'behold, the head of a traitor' (Klemp 2011), when he picked up the head, but then proceeded to throw it into the clamouring crowd. In a fit of chaos people rushed to dip their handkerchiefs in his blood, and cut off locks of his hair (Lacey 2003; Purkiss 2007).

The sequence of this event should tell us that this is not an ordinary killing. It was, not the casual murder of a *persona non grata* or a highwayman (*homini sacri*); it was highly ritualized, and profoundly changed symbolic and social dynamics, both for those who sighed from relief and for those who sighed from defeat. It was an execution that strongly incorporated elements of sacrifice.

For those who sighed from relief, the sacrificial frame was obvious. When King Charles was executed, he took the monarchy with him. There could not, in that moment, in that context, be a situation where popular sovereignty was ascendent without it. As such, a



sacrifice of monarchy, through the vessel that embodied it – the King – was needed to usher in a novel social order; the sacrifice of the King transformed England from a divine monarchy to a nascent republic. In the Court Room, this sacrificial frame had found a radical legal foothold. The King was accused of treason, and the reasoning was as follows: since the King was the embodiment of the state, and the state was the embodiment of the people (according to the Parliamentarians), a king killing the people was tantamount to the king attacking himself (Kantorowicz 1997, 25; Clarendon 2009, 331). And this could not stand since it meant that sovereignty's necessary and defining unity had been fragmented. To restore sovereignty's unity, the fragmenting element (in this case, the institution of kingship) had to be destroyed.<sup>7</sup> To pursue this argument during the trial, the prosecutor brought in 30 odd witnesses who testified that the King had ordered soldiers to kill people (thereby attacking Parliament, which was his 'body'), which consequently rendered him punishable by death.

This legal-sacrificial frame was doubled by a religious frame, namely Charles I's designation as a 'man of blood'.<sup>8</sup> 'The man of blood' had become an increasingly popular epithet for the King in the Parliament's army towards the end of the second civil war leading up to the trial. Borrowed from the bible, the eponym suggested that 'the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of the man that shed it' (King James Bible 2022, Numbers 35:33, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>), meaning that in order to placate God for the bloody devastation wreaked during the civil wars, the blood of the man who caused it was proscribed. In order to avoid God's wrath for the blood spilt, in other words, a blood sacrifice was necessary. Purkiss vividly relates: 'the judges decided that blood must have blood (...)', and that 'Charles' blood [was] redemptive, fertilizing; it [would give] life to the nation on whose soil it [was] spilt (...)' (Purkiss 2007, 555). Therefore, according to Purkiss, 'Charles' blood was to inaugurate a new republic and his head was to adorn it; it symbolized the new state's resolution' (Purkiss 2007, 555). Put differently, the sacrifice of King Charles heralded England's new republic, but also served to appease God and restore divine favour.

But as can be gleaned from the widely diverging reactions to his death, this was not a sacrifice that uniformly transformed people. For the defeated, King Charles' execution signalled that God's justice had now left the world, and retreated into a different realm; they were now left without God's direct intervention on Earth. It therefore generated a form of waiting, penitence and searching for signs of when the divine order would return, as Andrew Lacey (2003) details. The blood and locks, and later relics, were circulated in secret after the time of his death, and were thought to have great healing powers, in what quickly became known as the Cult of the Martyred St. Charles (Lacey 2003). His divine and just rule had, in other words, been displaced, and in its absence, before its glorious return, slivers of justice, truth, and the healing powers of sanctity could be found in his teachings and physical remains. Strikingly like Jesus himself, Charles' death spread the holy powers he had physically incarnated around England, 're-enchanting', so to speak, the world he had left. In his apologist narrative, Mark Kishlansky argues that Charles' 'captivity, cruel treatment, and sense of injured innocence, made for predictable comparisons to the life of Christ' (Kishlansky 2018, 102), and that 'the Christ-like imagery would prove deeply effective propaganda: transforming defeat into victorious sacrifice (...)' upon his execution (Kishlansky 2018, 105). As we have seen, Charles himself encouraged this comparison in his speeches, acts, and costume, as well as in his post mortem memoirs, the

*Eikon Basilike*.<sup>9</sup> As Purkiss (2007) succinctly summarized, political cause became religious truth for his followers.

These two different reactions show that it was not a *clean* ritual of sacrifice. It is not a sacrifice in the traditional sense of a preordained, recognized ritual where a victim takes on or sheds properties intended to accomplish a singular thing or relay a particular message. But it would be misleading not to consider King Charles' execution as incorporating elements of sacrifice. It did, after all, bring enormous cosmological change for both royalists and republicans. For republicans, since the figure that now had claimed to be a direct stand-in for God's justice was dead, it meant that he either had never been divinely appointed, or that it now was God's plan that they, the representatives of the English people, were to rule. For the royalists, Charles' death meant that now they were left without God's intervention in the world, and that they would have to find ways of living politically without God's instructions. Despite their differences, underpinning both these accounts was a democratization of sovereignty, and a destabilization of time and the relation between divine and political reason.

To be clear, this is not a direct contest of Agamben's claim that the king cannot be sacrificed (although, if anything was sacrificed, it was definitively the King). Rather, it is a qualification. Agamben argues that the king cannot be sacrificed, because the position of the sovereign stays stable, due to its necessarily constitutive outside-inside position. And assuredly, even as the King was executed, the notion of sovereignty still remained incredibly central to the establishment of a new discursive and practical regime of governance (see, for instance, Bonney 2001; Coward 2002). However, the fact that state systems retain sovereignty even after revolution, says little about the order that sovereignty 'guarantees' and protects. After the execution of Charles, the people nominally became the sovereign power, but as Morgan (1989), Ernst Kantorowicz (1997), Lorenzo Sabbadini (2016), and Feisal Mohamed (2020) have all remarked, the people quickly became singularized and incarnated in Parliamentary representatives. As Morgan (1989) writes: 'The first formulations of popular sovereignty in England (...) elevated the people to supreme power by elevating their elected representatives' (92). Nonetheless, the new axiom that came to fill the space that divine appointment had previously held, namely the axiom of 'the people' as incarnated by representatives (landed, male gentry of course), spurred radical changes in the judiciary, the command of the army, taxes and levies, and so on. Sovereignty was hence not removed or displaced with the execution of the King, but, instead, a profound transformation took place in its firmament.

We may therefore note that despite sovereignty's permanence in state discourse, what social order sovereignty denotes is not permanent. To paraphrase Agamben's language, the camp is not *the* camp – or at least, it doesn't have to be. There is still space for incredible variation, and what sovereignty entails can change profoundly. Which axiom underpins sovereignty's foundation is of great importance in shaping human relations – and these axioms profoundly contribute to demarking the power and domain of the state. This insight I think is crucial to understand several new revolutionary movements in the Middle East and beyond. The next section details how the Kurdish Movement in Syria serves as an instantiation of a global process challenging the precept of popular sovereignty. Drawing on the political programme of the revolutionary guerilla organization, the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), the Kurdish movement has since the beginning

of the Syrian revolution in 2011 struggled to keep the sovereign throne vacant, so to speak, rather than working towards placing 'the people' on it.

This argument runs parallel with other literature concerning the Kurdish movement and sovereignty. Whereas multiple authors have concerned themselves with the ways that the Kurdish movement has arguably redistributed sovereignty (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016), mimicked it (Galvan-Alvarez 2020), dissimulated it (Üstündağ 2016), or partially appropriated it (Ali 2016; Leezenberg 2016), my interests here will stay with the changing foundation for state sovereignty. Put differently, I am taking for granted that sovereignty as a category remains attached to the state, *qua* Agamben's claims, but direct attention towards how the axioms underpinning this sovereignty have changed.

### Sovereign people vs. sovereign peoples

Like in King Charles' time, the understanding that sovereignty is necessary at the level of the state, and is to a certain degree unapproachable, is at the heart of various different revolutionary movements today. In Chiapas, for instance, the *autonomia* of the Zapatista movement is premised upon expanding and reinforcing the categories that are acknowledged as providing rights to self-determination – not seizing or overthrowing the state as such (Ronfeldt et al. 1999; Reyes and Kaufman 2011; Harvey 2016; Clare, Habermehl, and Mason-Deese 2018). Similarly, the landless peasant movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra [MST]) in Brazil deploys the state sovereignty directly as a discursive tool in its struggle against *latifundism*, and uses the Brazilian constitution to argue for land redistribution, and alternative forms of citizenship (Meszaros 2000; Wittman 2009). Lastly, in the case that we will examine here, the revolutionary movement in northeastern Syria actively distances itself from an attack upon state sovereignty. It has accepted that the sovereignty may be impermeable at the state level (due to how international relations and global capitalism works) (see Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016; Schmidinger 2018; Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg 2019), but that what this sovereignty signifies, and which axiom is at the heart of it, is crucial and malleable.

This programme of not directly challenging the sovereignty of the state has been both a strategic and an ideological tenet for the movement. Starting in earnest in 2012, the Syrian government troops mostly left the Kurdish areas in the northeast of the country to deal with revolutionary insurrections in other parts. This retreat of state forces left the door open to Kurdish self-organizing. The Kurds in Syria had a long-standing relation with the Kurdish guerilla organization, the PKK, who had used Syria as a base for operations until the late 90's, and had recruited local Kurds into their forces over the years. When the state troops left, PKK guerilla soldiers quickly swept in and started organizing a militia, set up check-points, administrative units, and organized local decision-making councils in collaboration with their local sister party, the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*). However, during this process of attempting to realize their ideological goals, the PKK never sought direct conflict with the Syrian state or advocated for a separate nation state. Instead, they emphasized that their project could still fit very well within a (reconfigured) Syrian state, as their ideological leader, chairman Abdullah Öcalan (2015), had advocated. According to my friend and minder in Syria, this strategy was a stroke of genius: 'At one level, it made the Syrian government focus its attention elsewhere, and at the same time it made sure that [the PKK] could build a strong society'.

The 'strength' of this society was seriously challenged by the ascent of ISIS in 2014. However, with the cost of approximately 11 thousand martyrs (SDF 2022), and with crucial US-European support, ISIS was finally decimated as territorial force, and the Kurds gained more land for their projects. When I visited Syrian Kurdistan in May 2022, the revolutionary project had come to a stalemate. Turkey threatened to invade northeastern Syria to purportedly secure its borders, the US was noncommittal in its defence of the region, and the Syrian state, with the support of Russia, seemed close to winning the civil war. What remained now was figuring out what settlement could be reached, and how much would have to be given up by the Kurds.

Despite this seeming defeat, or at least position of weakness in negotiation, I still found a few persisting practices that served to forward the guiding idea of disaggregating sovereignty to the *peoples* in the region, while not directly challenging the state.

### *Peoples' participation and rights*

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of the movement's programme is to forward and protect peoples' rights. This programme carries with it a crucial distinction from state practices: it is not *the* people's rights, but rather *peoples'* rights, in plural, which are to be protected and take centre stage in creating social order.

Although the revolution was certainly Kurdish led (at least in the beginning), there has been a perpetual focus on not framing the struggle as an ethno-nationalist state-building project, but as a project whose success hinges upon the active participation of other peoples in the Middle East (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016). This is starkly reflected in the movement's military organization, where different ethno-religious groups from their own separate divisions, and come together in an alliance under an internally elected central command (in fact, most of the fighters in the alliance are Arab, see Holmes 2019a). In my own fieldwork, it was quite clearly evidenced in the various institutions I visited. From the lowest neighbourhood council, to the highest governing body of the military institutions, there would always be two co-leaders. One of them would be a woman, and one would be a man, and the man and the woman would never be from the same ethno-religious community. In addition to Kurds, I encountered Arab, Assyrian, Catholic, Turkmen and Armenian co-leaders. In the 15 odd interviews I conducted, all my interlocutors emphasized how important it was that schools taught peoples' native languages, and having separate cultural centres for various minorities, independent women's centres, multi-ethnic cooperatives, and coordinating bodies with quota minorities (see also Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016; Knapp and Jongerden 2016).<sup>10</sup> As one female co-leader told me succinctly: 'Without all different peoples participating and having their own rights, we will end up reproducing the hierarchy and tyranny of the state'.

While no representative of the movement will speak highly of the state, they will simultaneously argue that overthrowing the state is both an impossibility and ideologically fallacious. Instead, like the republicans during the English revolution, the movement's project may be seen as stretching the paradigm of popular sovereignty to its fullest. In Agambenian terminology, such an undertaking may be considered an 'apparatus', in the sense that the movement deploys a strategic 'manipulation of powers' to push towards the limit of how paradigmatic ideas are *supposed* to function (Agamben 2009,

2–3).<sup>11</sup> Just as the republicans juxtaposed the previously isomorphic entities of the people and the king to stretch divine sovereignty to its limit, so too is the Kurdish movement juxtaposing *the* people with *peoples* to stretch popular sovereignty to its limit. Aside from in the interviews I conducted, this attempt can be clearly found in the preamble to the Social Contract, unilaterally proposed and ratified by the Kurdish movement in Syria in 2014:

We, peoples of Rojava-northern Syria, including Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and the different doctrines and sects, recognize that the nation-state has made Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, and Syria a hub for the chaos happening in the Middle East and has brought problems, serious crises, and agonies for our peoples.

The consensual democratic federal system guarantees the participation of all individuals and groups, on equal levels, in the discussion, decision, and implementation of affairs. It takes ethnic and religious differences into consideration according to the characteristics of each group based on the principles of mutual coexistence and peoples' fraternity. It guarantees the equality of all peoples in rights and duties, respects the charters of human rights, and preserves national and international peace.

Within the consensual democratic federal system, all segments of people, in particular women and youth, shall form their organizations and democratic institutions. The democratic federal system guarantees free practicing of all political, social, and cultural activities, and enjoying all the merits of free and equal life. (Internationalist Commune. *Social Contract of Rojava and Northeast Syria*. <https://internationalistcommune.com/social-contract/>)

As Jongerden and Knapp have argued: '[This] social contract does not produce a state, or a sovereign power, vis-à-vis individual people, but is based on the idea that politics emerges from relations among (territorially) defined groups of people' (Knapp and Jongerden 2016, 97). As they correctly point out, it is not the supra-imposed institution of the state that gives rise to the social order, but rather the consensual contracts formed between distinct and irreducible ethnic and religious groups. There is hence no singular 'people' different groups have to amalgamate into in the movement; only in their equally 'headless' condition (or non-dominative position) can a polity based on consensus and democracy be founded.

The movement's reluctance to bolster or answer to a pan-Syrian common identity, and efforts to inhibit Kurdish ethno-nationalist territorial claims (Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg 2019), also testify to this effort. For example, in 2016 the movement changed the official name of the territory under its control from *Rojava*, a Kurdish term indicating the western part of greater Kurdistan, to Northern Syria, to undercut both territorial restrictions and Kurdish nationalist connotations. Moreover, when I was conducting research, a representative from the PYD told me that a confederation of the various institutions, elected officials, interest groups, parties, and assemblies in the region were now in a process of finalizing a new social contract, since the territory held by the movement had now expanded to different areas of Syria, and new ethno-religious groups needed to have a say. Contrary to a constitution, the social contract of the movement does therefore not hold a sacred status, intended to cement a certain social order in time and denote stable and unified qualifications for participation/citizenship. Instead, it serves as a flexible concord that needs to be adapted democratically and consensually to the changing circumstances of the movement as it expands.

In this sense, the movement's effort to fragment and apportion 'the people', is also a project directed at reconfiguring the state. By emphasizing the uniqueness and self-determination of the variety of different religious, cultural, and ethnic groups in the region, the movement effectively seeks to pluralize the idea of the people to such a degree that no one will recognize themselves in the state's call to 'the people' during times of crisis or for consent. Accordingly, when there is no 'the people' that the state can call upon to attack or repress other people, then the current foundation for the state sovereignty will fall upon itself, and the state will have to be greatly reconfigured (see Hammy and Miley 2022; Knapp and Jongerden 2020; Barkhoda 2016; and Cartier 2019 for optimistic suggestions of what such a novel peoples-state relation would look like). The movement's efforts to reify and pluralize peoples, in order to forge a new nominally democratic social order, may in this way also be seen as pushing popular sovereignty to its limits in order to install a novel sovereign principle.

### *Representational aversion*

This attempt at installing a novel sovereign principle based on the precedence of peoples, is also strongly connected with the movement's general reluctance to engage with practices of representation. As we saw with Parliament in the aftermath of Charles' execution, the elected representatives quickly claimed the role of both being and representing the people. At the same time, the representatives were careful to emphasize that *the* people (propertied and male) were not the same as 'mere people', and that 'the sovereignty of the people must not be confused with the unauthorized actions of individuals or of crowds or even of organized groups outside Parliament' (Morgan 1989, 95). Hence, Parliamentarians first tailored what counted as 'the people', before they claimed to stand-in for them and encompass their interests. The movement in northeastern Syria is currently moving in a seemingly opposite direction. Building on the pluralization peoples, the movement seeks to decentralize and fragment representational positions, and how large of a segment such representatives may encompass and speak for.

One of the first things I was told when arriving in Syria, was that I should be careful about using the term 'government' in conversation with spokespeople for the movement, since this implied a Parliament stocked with representatives. Instead, I was told that they term that the movement preferred was the 'autonomous administration' (see also Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg 2019), where the people in charge served as elected civil servants instead. Although this is arguably a mostly discursive manoeuvre (Leezenberg 2016), the conceptual distinction is crucial. With the self-determination allotted to each particular community, the idea that that a singular person could stand in for a variety of these communities was deemed authoritative and unacceptable. This became very clear to me when I visited a local neighbourhood council meeting in the main city of Qamislo.

In the meeting, different representatives from different commissions attended (like the commission for women, self-defence, youth, and economy), and gave reports on what had been done to the local co-leader of the council. The co-leader did not have any power to direct these efforts, but was instead told by the various representatives of the commissions what they needed her to do. The representative for the youth commission, for example, asked the co-leader to go to the local municipality and secure a permission for a youth demonstration against the potential Turkish invasion, while she would go and

coordinate with the other youth commissions in the area. Other commission representatives asked for other things, which essentially left the co-leader with no mandated power of her own, working rather as an intermediary for the directly expressed desires of the particular groups living in the council's particular area. Her capacity as a 'representative' was in essence equated to voicing the desires of the particular communities in her locality; in this sense, she could not speak *for* them in a representational capacity, but rather, in a limited sense, only transmit their wishes to appropriate institutions.

It should be said however, that the meeting was overseen by a guerilla soldier from the PKK. She both introduced the meeting, and ended it by giving a rousing speech against Turkish imperialist aggression. Talking with the fighter after the meeting, and asking her about the system, she admitted that there still was quite a 'way to go' for people in northeastern Syria to fully understand the project. She lamented:

There is still an issue that people want to be told what to do. They come to us and ask: can you do this? What do I do now? And so on. We try not to intervene, but we do have to guide. Many times, I have said: this is not my problem! You have to resolve this problem with your group. Where is the problem? The problem is in your group? Ok, then you have to resolve it in your group, right?

Obviously a bit frustrated with how the movement was working, it was nonetheless obvious that her desired outcome for the project was limiting the need for representational work. Her ideological impetus was clearly in favour of resolving as many issues as possible locally, without involving mechanisms of representation.

This aversion to representation extended all the way to the highest offices in the region. Rather than being given a broad mandate as a representative of the people to implement and advocate for policy independently, I was repeatedly told that the movement's highest officials only assist in coordinating between local, nested democratic structures that are already in existence, furthering cooperation, communication, and logistics (see also Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016). Naturally, how this fully exists in practice may be rather different, but in terms of official ideology, the emphasis on administration highlights that the officials do not have the mandate to stand in for, or 'representationally' encompass the people, but rather only to carry out tasks previously allotted to them by particular communities. The espoused ideology hence prohibits anyone from standing in for the (totality) of the evolving polity, instead only answering to the particular and specified demands of distinct communities, unrelated to a notion of 'the people' as a singular unit. This too contributes to stretching the paradigm of popular sovereignty to its limits. In the last section, we will see what novel sovereign principle this continuous emphasis on the plurality of peoples is arguably leading to.

## The sovereignty of nature

In order to answer this question, we have to turn to the ideological architect of the movement, Abdullah Öcalan. Abdullah Öcalan has written out the ideological programme for both the PKK and the PYD, and in lieu of a further extended fieldwork in the region, we must unfortunately mostly rely upon his writings as an indications for what this novel sovereign principle might be. Despite his imprisonment in Turkey, his influence is still

very strong in northeast Syria. His image is almost omnipresent in all official institutions, and he is continually venerated by the military forces as the impetus and guiding light for the struggle (see, for example, MedyaNews 2021).

Abdullah Öcalan's philosophical approach essentially posits an ongoing dialectic between two different forces, stemming from the Neolithic era (Öcalan 2004, 2009, 2015, 2017). For Öcalan, these two forces are, broadly speaking, those of hierarchy and egalitarianism. In Öcalan's work, he posits that prior to the Neolithic age, there were no stable, centralized, or authoritarian hierarchies. People lived in egalitarian groups that could not be easily pinned down territorially. In the Neolithic age, however, a principle of hierarchy eventually emerged through the 'original sin' of patriarchy (see also Çağlayan 2012). Building on the presumed hierarchical difference between men and women, new authoritarian formations sprang forth, morphing into the priest-kings of ancient Babylon, and gradually evolving into the state formations we recognize today. However, in parallel with this hierarchical development, people still retained their primordial connection to and inclination towards the natural order of egalitarianism. This impulse, as is taught in the movement schools of Rojava, has come forth uncountable times throughout history in cases of revolutionary upheaval and resistance (as in the early days of the Soviet Union, in the Paris Commune, and so forth). Nonetheless, as it stands now, the world has become subsumed to what he dubs 'capitalist modernity'; the society that people have constructed outside of (or at least in opposition to) their true egalitarian nature. Hence, what novel revolutionary struggles should do to usher in the alternative 'democratic modernity', is recover and institutionalize this true moral, ecological and communal human nature (see also Knapp and Jongerden 2016; Hunt 2019; Jongerden 2021).

As one PKK interlocutor put it to me in a conversation we had (which is apparently an ideological fixture rather than a discursive anomaly, as Frederike Geerdink's 2021 book testifies to): 'Does not your heart flinch when you see children being murdered?', to which I responded in the positive. 'Well, then that is your human nature – do you think that anyone would not react with horror and anger at seeing a child being killed?'. I responded no. 'No? This is the shared humanity that we all have. No one can take this away from people'. This sentiment of my interlocutor is not only echoed in Öcalan's writings, but can also be found in the movement's perpetual emphasis on living ecologically, as well as in the natural metaphors employed in political discourse. The then female co-leader of the movement's party in northeastern Syria, echoed this attitude in her 2016 interview with Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga (2016), where she describes the underpinnings of the project:

We are all born with a different sex and skin color, and we are born into a religion, a language, and cultural and ethnic affiliations. Despite these differences, like flowers in a garden, we all share ethical and humane principles (...) Yet from early prehistory up to the present, monarchs, despots, and tyrants have endeavored to mold people for their own benefit and destroy the natural underpinnings of society. (Abdullah in Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga 2016, 262)

Like the example of the killed child, the usage of a garden to conceptualize human society, is a popular trope in the movement. In both examples, as well as many more in Öcalan's writings, the movement's discourse seems to suggest that peoples can only become sovereign when they act in accordance with their true human nature.



This arguable replacement of popular sovereignty with human nature as the foundation for sovereignty does not necessarily entail that *everyone* is included, without preconditions, however. In accordance with Agamben's (1998) assertion that sovereignty may only be effective with an included exclusion (*qua* undocumented migrants, felons, and explicitly fascist parties in Anglo-European states), the same practice may be seen in northeastern Syria. Primarily political groups, but also social, cultural and religious groups may be denied voices and legal status if they do not subscribe to the social contract (Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg 2019). During my stay there, I was shown the offices of several parties that still subscribe to a Kurdish nationalist programme, but who had not sought licences from the administration to conduct politics and did not accept the social contract. Their offices had been closed several times, leading to great controversy both inside and Syria, and militant youth groups had set fire to their offices on several occasions, without serious repercussions (STJ 2021). Similarly, although both neighbourhoods and ethno-religious groups have the opportunity to form their own armed militias, they must be subsumed to the general military structure of the region which abides by the social contract. Parties and organizations that do not profess loyalty to the social contract, are banned from forming armed organizations. As such, the movement's human nature is therefore not to be seen as a completely open and inclusive condition. In order to participate, groups have to reconstitute themselves in accordance with the ideological programme that designates it.

Despite retaining these exclusionary practices, this does not mean that the state is left intact. Rather than claim to comprise and represent the people of a given territory, as states relying on popular sovereignty do, the movement offers different groups the opportunity to *become* part of the movement's constitutive peoples. If the idea of what primordial 'human nature' entails is accepted, groups will be given the opportunity to participate in the democratic and consensual concord, and be allotted irreducible autonomy and right to self-determination, as one among the multiple peoples participating in the project. By doing so, the movement is not challenging the state directly. The ascension of peoples does not imply that the state has to be destroyed – it will still have a sovereign foundation. However, this new foundation greatly impacts what powers, decisions and capacities the state is afforded. It can, for instance, no longer claim legitimate violent force on the basis of mobilizing 'the people', nor can it claim to make decisions in the name of the people. It must instead, accommodate the 'natural' order of things, where peoples only act in concert on the basis of consensus or agreement. The movement's novel approach, I suggest, offers human nature as the new authority under which popular sovereignty may be put on trial.

The future facing Rojava is now darker than perhaps ever before. Turkish aggression, resurgent ISIS enclaves, mass migration, and contradictory US commitments all point in the direction of either the absolute destruction of this political experiment, or its subsumption to already-existing authoritarian structures. However, the republican principle instituted after King Charles' sacrifice was also overturned only a few years later. But despite this setback, and in accord with Badiou's assertion of the interminability of a revolutionary idea, popular sovereignty eventually became the foundation principle for sovereignty, not only in Britain but across the world. If my suggestion here proves correct, regardless of how the future of northeastern Syria turns out, it is quite possible that we may come to see popular sovereignty being challenged by a host of peoples in the not too distant future.

## Notes

1. Although it has been a matter of some debate whether or not King Charles I execution was an assured outcome at the outset of the trial (see Kishlansky 2010; Kelsey 2018; Holmes 2019).
2. 'The Kurdish Movement' is something of a misnomer. It is a revolutionary movement which, although predominantly Kurdish, counts a host of other peoples, creeds, and faiths among its cadre, and has a universalist political project. For the sake of legibility and simplicity however, I will nonetheless refer to this movement as the Kurdish movement for the rest of the article.
3. Badiou's full philosophical exploration of the event is of course much more complex than presented here. But suffice it to say that Badiou's attentiveness to the Idea is what affords him the opportunity to recuperate the Idea of Communism, since it stands as an unfinished project which cannot be properly contained or spatialized (due to it being an Idea), and may therefore continuously pull subjects into its orbit.
4. Foucault uses racism here in a quite uncommon way. See Foucault 2003, 43–65.
5. For an initial vitalization of this discussion, see Hansen and Stepputat 2006.
6. This is also not to claim that the particular frame adopted here is the only, or perhaps even the best, frame for analyzing sovereignty. As multiple authors cited above have shown, a pluralization of (conceptions of) sovereignties may be significantly better suited to capture any given transformation of power and violence in a particular context. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will be thinking and working with sovereignty as a state-related and seemingly monolithic theoretical unit, as it is used in the scholarly tradition of Schmitt, Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe – tracing its roots to Thomas Hobbes and Jean Bodin.
7. There has here been much debate on whether the institution of kingship necessarily had to be abolished as the outcome of the trial, as opposed to finding a new regent or coming to a compromise (see, Kelsey 2001; Peacey 2001; Holmes 2010), but despite contrafactuals, this reasoning won out. It should also be said that this reasoning was not shared by all Parliamentarians uniformly.
8. There has been some debate on how much causal and historical significance should be placed of the eponym 'man of blood'. For Crawford (1977; see also Holmes 2019), the epithet 'man of blood' testifies to the strength of radical Parliamentarians' religious motivations and inflections, while others have claimed that an overemphasis on the religious language draws attention away from the core political motivations (Carlin 2020; Rees 2018).
9. The *Eikon Basilike* was a propagandistic biography of Charles' life, purportedly written by the King himself (although this has been strongly disputed). As Lacey (2007) has pointed out, it sought to highlight the righteousness of Charles' decisions, and the struggle in discerning the correct political and spiritual path, not only for himself but for his followers.
10. This is not to say that the system has not changed, as it certainly has in the 10 odd years of the revolution and civil war. See Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019) for a recent summary.
11. Agamben does not here use the term 'ideas', but instead favors the term 'knowledges'. However, the way that 'ideas' have been previously deployed in the paper, i.e. as opened and structuring imaginations and values that inculcate a variety of practices and institutions, I think that the two terms are closely enough related to not expand on this in the main text.

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