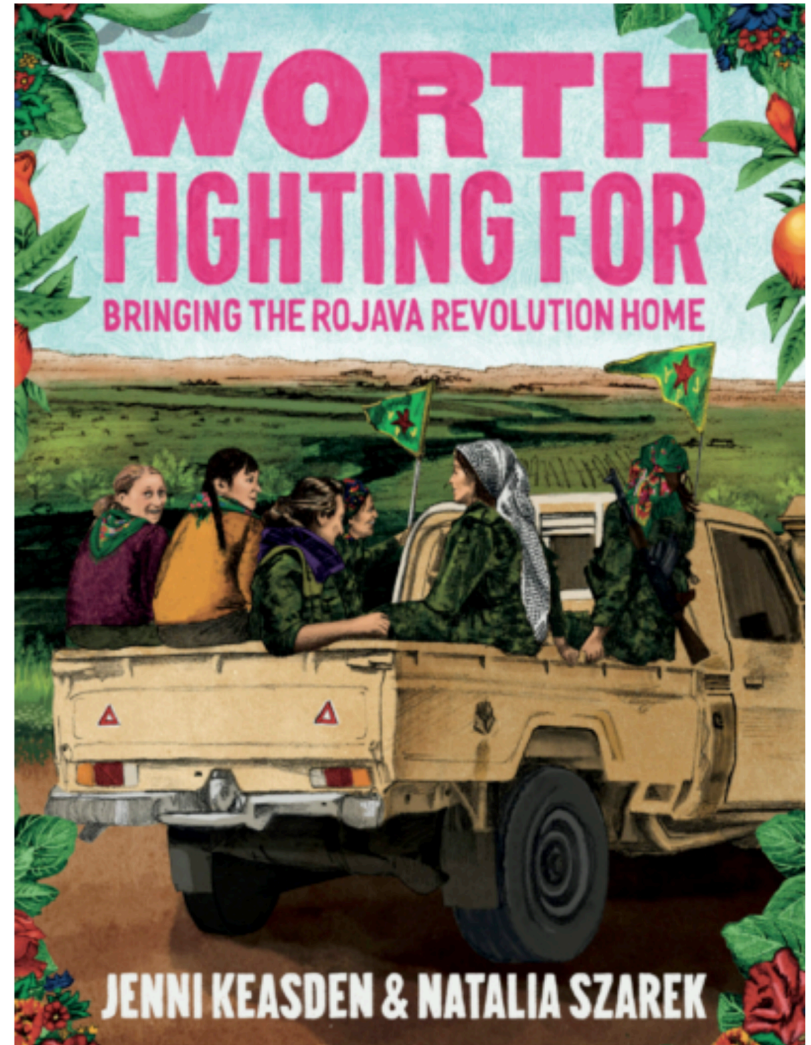


Worth Fighting For: Bringing the Rojava Revolution Home Chapter 7: Trusting (2023)



**VARC READING (2 OF 2)
OCTOBER 27TH 2024**



**THE "VICTORIA" ANARCHIST READING
CIRCLE GATHERS BI-WEEKLY TO
DISCUSS ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN AND
ANTI-OPPRESSION LITERATURE ON
UNCEDD L'KWUNGEN TERRITORIES**

7. TRUSTING

The state within us

Natalia

As the brutal Syrian summer gentled into autumn, the invasion we were all bracing for arrived. The Turkish army and its mercenaries gathered at the border while airstrikes and artillery pounded the neighbourhoods and villages of Rojava, and we were all called to our work to defend against the attacks. Jenni was pulled out of the village, away from elderly friends and fig jam and back to snapping photos for twitter and badgering campaign NGOs. I sat in a draughty flat above a car dealership in the city of Qamişlo, writing press summaries and articles for one of the many media centres that had sprung up to meet the increased demand for information about the invasion. The withdrawal of American troops from the border had opened the door for the launch of attacks by the Turkish army and Turkish backed mercenaries all along the border. The crash of artillery shells ripping into buildings across the city would jerk my attention away from my screen for a moment — *‘Where did it hit? Is someone going out with the camera?’* — before getting pulled back into the rapid-fire typing that was our role in defending the revolution that we had become part of. I knew that by staying where I was I was taking risks, and there were times that I felt scared. I also knew that I was playing out the worst nightmares of friends and family back home — war had broken out and I had put my chips down on resistance, knowing that this made

survival a riskier gamble. But although I felt fear, and guilt at hurting those I cared about, I felt like I was exactly where I needed to be.

This wasn't the first time I felt this way. Eight years earlier – almost to the day – I sat in a car with a computer on my lap, extension cable hooked up to a trailer parked up in the largest Traveller site in Europe. Earlier that year, a group of us had arrived at the Dale Farm Irish Traveller site in Essex and set up a protest camp. Unlike some of the county's residents, we weren't protesting the existence of the site and calling for an eviction based on violation of planning regulations: a very British form of ethnic cleansing. Instead, we were there on the invitation of the Traveller community who lived in the trailers and chalets on the site, supporting the community's intention to resist the eviction that the local council was threatening. The planned eviction would force 100 families from the land that they had bought years ago, making them homeless and leaving them with nowhere but the roadside to park up on. Over the course of many months, activists joined forces with the Dale Farm Irish Traveller community, building up trust, a high profile solidarity campaign, friendships, and lots of barricades.

While holding down a part time job at a community garden and settling into a new home in London, most of my extra time and head-space was sucked up by the Save Dale Farm campaign. Some nights I slept at the site, then cycled to the station as the sun rose to jump onto an early morning train from Essex and into London to arrive in time for work. As the eviction date approached, my job, an increasingly rocky relationship and a good night's sleep all fell further down my list of priorities. Despite the tireless work of countless members of the community and a committed crew of solidarity activists, the date of the eviction was set.

The night before the Dale Farm eviction, I still couldn't quite believe that it would go ahead. The courts had stalled the eviction process before, and on some level I trusted that it would happen again. On a logical level I knew that it was unlikely, but in some corner of my brain I still thought that governments were bound by the same moral instincts as we were. I spent the night sleeping in the back seat of the car which would serve as the media team office for the day. I woke up before dawn, cold and stiff, and waited to see what the day would bring.

Instead of a last minute reprieve from the courts, the eviction began before the sun had a chance to take the edge off a bitterly cold October night. The dawn

brought rows of black clad riot police to the gates of the Dale Farm community. They carried shields and batons and tasers, and ripped open the brick wall around the site with sledgehammers so they could swarm past caravans and chalets as whole families looked on in horror.

In the following hours I sent out press releases and gave interviews while watching riot police terrorise families, assault and arrest my friends (both Travellers and non-Travellers), and destroy a community. The news kept trickling in to where I sat with my computer: one of the mums on site was injured and had to be rushed to hospital, friends were arrested, someone was tasered. A column of smoke rose into the air as a caravan caught fire in the chaos.

I kept on writing press releases and ringing news desks. We turned down a slot on Newsnight: the formidable trio of sisters who were the spokespeople for the community needed to re-gather and be with loved ones. It was too much to ask for them to broadcast the story of their loss to millions of voyeuristic viewers. As I watched the bailiffs tear down the homes that the state had deemed illegal, destroy the community it had declared an eyesore, I promised myself that I would never allow the state an ounce of trust, that with the passing of years I wouldn't forget that the state is an instrument of violence.

When the Turkish army invaded Rojava eight years later I once again witnessed the violence of the state against communities – this time the columns of smoke I could see from the window came from bombed neighbourhoods and not a burning caravan, and we were bracing for the advance of Turkish-backed mercenaries rather than riot police. I was still doing media work, still fighting the battle of information from behind a computer screen. Still gritting my teeth as I distilled the lives of people I care about into facts and sound-bites that the media could absorb.

I couldn't help but feel that history was repeating itself in more than one way. Not just that at political crunch points I always end up in front of a computer, proofreading and uploading, but that the whole world was watching while a fascist leader commits ethnic cleansing and a land grab. The world watches, does nothing, and says "maybe after this he will stop." It wasn't the first time since arriving in Rojava that I traced a line into my past, from the war-torn Poland of my family's history, to the wreckage of the Dale Farm community, to the war-battered buildings of Syrian neighbourhoods. In different decades, and different

countries, those with power sit around a table in their suits, sip their glasses of mineral water and betray humanity.

I realised that, on some level, I was still waiting for a government body of some kind to step in and make it stop. Whether it would be the UN or NATO or the Arab League, the Americans or the Russians, in the back of my head I was still trusting that someone with the 'real' power would put a stop to this.

They didn't and they won't.

As bombs rained down on North and East Syria, America issued a statement that amounted to: 'well, the Turkish army is here now, so they might as well stay'. Families who had fed me and given me a place to sleep were driven out of their homes by the Turkish-armed militias that streamed across the border. For days the roads were packed with people seeking refuge, carrying food, children and a few possessions on their backs or squeezed into cars. And then the cities and towns fell eerily quiet as those who remained stayed indoors and waited to see what would come.

The United Nations Security Council met twice to talk about the situation but did nothing except "express concern". In Serekaniye, where the mercenaries had crossed the border from Turkey to surround the city, my friends and comrades were shot at, bombed and burned. The overseas NGOs left, evacuating their international staff and leaving behind empty offices and local employees. And on top of all that, four months later the UN closed the only crossing where humanitarian aid had been getting into the region.

Britain said 'we won't give Turkey new weapons contracts, but they can keep the ones they have'. One year later they signed a new free trade deal with Turkey and continued to export military equipment.

Today, the occupation of Serekaniye and Tel Abyad continues, and the families driven out of their homes hunker down for another cold winter in refugee camps.

Even more surprising than the failure of state powers to intervene on behalf of people was the small part of my brain that was trusting them to do the right thing. I was unsettled to find that there was still part of me that gave the state a moral credibility that it simply doesn't deserve, and I had to ask myself, "who do I put my trust in, and why?". Perhaps this lingering trust in the state is not so surprising after all — I grew up white and middle class in America, a society

Every system finds ways to maintain itself, but when we learn to recognise it we can fight it. They may build the cages that contain us, but way too often we throw away the keys ourselves. Still, life always finds a way — the vines clambering over fences, the seeds taking root in the unlikelyst of places, and the trees shattering concrete with unstoppable strength. Throughout history humans have turned towards freedom the way sunflowers turn towards the sun. The impulse for justice and solidarity, for humanity and beauty, runs strong in our veins, we just need to trust it.

and glittery tops. After observing that most of us only wore black, the residents started bringing us rhinestone-studded black tops and sequin-adorned black hoodies, and from then on they became Dale Farm protest camp fashion, a fusion of two worlds. We learned that it was important to not just give solidarity, but to receive.

At Dale Farm, we wrangled with the tensions between a non-hierarchical and meeting-heavy style of activist organising and a community decision making process that was based on natural leadership and chats over tea in caravans. We learned to adapt, and that what felt right for us wasn't necessarily right for everyone. When we're open to learning different ways of seeing the world, we chip away at the state mentality we hold in ourselves. We begin to imagine new horizons and ways to get there that we weren't able to see before. We become more free.

We didn't manage to prevent the eviction of the Dale Farm Traveller site. Amongst its shortcomings and failures, and the pain and heartbreak it caused, the eviction resistance at Dale Farm had a beauty to it because it was a moment in which we chose to stand together. I learned a lot about the violence of the state from the Dale Farm eviction resistance. But more importantly, I learned how powerful people can be when they stand together. I learned about the strength of women, and that the deepest understandings of oppression come not from the people who study it, but those who live it. I learned these lessons again and again in Rojava, and in re-learning them I deepened my understanding of why the community at Dale Farm, and the resistance to the eviction, posed such a threat to the British state.

The night before the Dale Farm eviction, a few of the women from the community burst into the small chalet that had become our media centre, where the press team was furiously writing social media posts and last minute appeals to the public. They swaggered past our laptops in their stilettos, raucous and dressed to the nines as always, and insisted on distracting us with hysterical laughter and handstands. We couldn't stay serious in the face of their antics, and we laughed together while blog posts and press releases sat unfinished on our screens. From them we learned that sometimes the most important work is not part of the action plan, but it's strengthening human connections, and giving value to the friendships that we had built through living and struggling side by side.

where the violence of the state is mostly aimed at people of colour and the poor and working classes. Although I had come face to face with police brutality at protests and developed anti-state politics from years within the direct action climate movement, I still held the ability to opt out of resistance — and the resulting state violence — more often than not.

Of course it's in the interests of the state for me to believe that the state is on my side. And to an extent, it will be, in its divide and conquer strategies to secure my compliance at the expense of others. By offering some people legitimate forms of 'resistance' within capitalism, while criminalising the existence of those who don't fit within certain parameters, the state invites us to throw other struggles under the bus.

But a freedom that is based on the oppression of others isn't truly freedom. This is why countless revolutionaries, from the Zapatistas to Audre Lorde, have argued that a crucial step towards collective liberation is recognising that our struggles are linked. The challenge we face is to find ways to wage resistance — both in acts of collective self defence, and inside our own heads. If we don't get rid of the state inside our heads, we'll lose sight of how interconnected our fights are, and we'll sell each other out.

In many ways the Dale Farm eviction resistance was the third and final blow of a series of failures in political organising that I experienced in quick succession over the year leading up to it. First was the implosion of Climate Camp — a powerful network of anti-capitalist groups that mobilised against climate change using militant, direct action tactics — due to a crisis of vision and internal conflicts. Arguably, the beginning of the end was the failure of the 2009 COP15 UN climate talks to produce a meaningful global climate agreement. Despite its proclaimed lack of trust in state-solutions to climate change, Climate Camp participated in a massive mobilisation that geared itself towards intervening in national and international decision making processes. Although the outcome of the COP15 talks affirmed our low expectations, it seemed like a lot of us just lost steam in the face of the feeble agreements produced by the summit. When we give everything that we've got and those in power still fail us, what's left to do?

After the 2009 COP15 summit, the Climate Camp network staggered and lost momentum, and was eventually ripped apart by conflict and exhaustion.

The second movement collapse that had a big impact on me was the militant anti-fees students' movement of 2010. Protests, walk outs, occupations and direct action spread like wildfire across universities, colleges, secondary and even primary schools as tens of thousands of students expressed their outrage at the proposed tripling of University fees. After months of student revolts, the Liberal Democrats (widely backed by students due to their election pledge to oppose an increase in fees) buckled and Parliament voted in the fees increase. A few half-hearted demonstrations in early 2011 petered out as students turned back to their studies to claw back hours of work lost to political meetings and occupations. What would it have looked like if we had refused to back down? Did we stop fighting because despite our moral outrage, government decisions had too much legitimacy for us to reject them?

After the losses of Climate Camp, the student movement and the Dale Farm eviction, I stumbled along, keeping a toe dipped into the world of radical politics, but never so deep that I couldn't pull it out. I found a sense of purpose and community in growing vegetables and joining a sports team. I drifted away from Traveller solidarity organising after a year. I started to limit my political involvement to delivering trainings on media work and facilitation, and showing up to the odd demo or participating in one-off projects and events.

Looking back on the years where I held my relationship with political organising tentatively, I can see all the different ways in which I was trying to avoid caring about something too much and then getting hurt. I increasingly wore my political beliefs as an identity rather than something that was expressed through action. At the time, the only way I could express my sense of fragility and fear was through the language of boundaries and self care, which worked as a form of individual self protection even if it didn't challenge the root cause of my fear and fragility. I learned to laugh at the starry eyed idealism of my youth, because it was easier to imagine myself naive than to face the question of what it would take to try again. I didn't realise it at the time, but the state had successfully defined the parameters of what I thought was possible, of what I could bear to imagine. Without realising it, I learned to enforce the mentality of 'there is no alternative' onto myself and others. I didn't learn to balance the

organising. One that centres human relationships and trust building over formal systems and policies. One that is organic and emergent — not trying to fit things into boxes and binaries, but seeing what grows out of the complex web of people, place and time. It was a way of organising that has stood the test of time and produced a huge social movement capable of adapting while staying true to its values. It was a way of organising that I found incredibly difficult, and regularly pushed me way out of my comfort zone.

Life in Rojava is full of all sorts of twists and turns, scattered with long periods of waiting for something to happen (sometimes I knew what I was waiting for, usually I didn't) and making plans that don't happen because something else happens instead. Being out of control became something I practised every day, and slowly it started to feel more comfortable. I came to recognise that often my desire for control (including feeling like I have control because I have access to information) comes from a sort of state mentality. But the opposite of that grasping for control is not powerlessness. It's trust. And trust makes you powerful.

The state teaches us that the unknown is scary, and so we control ourselves through limiting what we dream is possible. The state doesn't trust the people, and it cements its power by making sure that we don't trust each other. For revolution, we need trust. When we let go of state mentality, we swap having all the information for having shared values, we build trust rather than control. If we keep clutching at control, things will only be as big as we can hold in our hands. But by letting go the world around us opens up to its revolutionary potential, and becomes so much bigger than any one of us.

We made a lot of mistakes during and after the Dale Farm eviction resistance which have weighed heavily on me for years. But a lot of things still bring me hope when I think back on them. How a group of activists, including lots of youthfully militant anarchists, and a traditional Irish Traveller community learned to work together, live together, and love each other. How the impeccably dressed site residents, confused about why we were always so dirty and scruffy, would generously bring us clothes from the boot sales they would visit. This continued for weeks, with us awkwardly refusing the brightly coloured

strategy will include intervening in and defending ourselves from these systems or taking their resources back when the time is right. But anything states and state-based institutions give up will only be hard won by social movements around the world applying pressure. This will happen through boycott and blockade building up alternatives and putting ourselves on the front lines. And what we win from the state can only ever be part of the battle. We also have to build a new world on our own terms.

The Rojava revolution shows us that if people are organised and determined the only limits - to what we can achieve are those that we place on ourselves. If we fundamentally believe - however deep down - in the ultimate power of the state we will never overcome it. On the other hand, if we truly believe in the power of society, and strengthen that belief in others, we can build a new world.

In Rojava, I came head to head with my own state mentality from pretty much the moment I arrived. Just showing up to join the movement demanded that I handed over a level of control over my life that would have previously been unthinkable. With a scant few words of Kurdish and virtually no knowledge of social etiquette and expectations, upon arrival a fellow internationalist volunteer and I were handed off from pickup truck to pickup truck like a baton in a relay race with no information about what might happen next. We had to swap control and information for trust and adaptability, a theme that continued throughout my time in Rojava.

Back home, I had perfected my ability to plan. I was proud of it. Effective political action boiled down to planning: nailing down your theory of change, your action plan, your comms strategy. At first I mistook the chaos of everyday life in Rojava as bad organisation and bad planning. It didn't take too long for me to check myself and exercise a bit more humility. Obviously the movement in Rojava is capable of planning and executing immense organisational tasks with precision and punctuality - from front line military tactics to housing and feeding hundreds of thousands of people displaced by war.

The sometimes haphazard approach to making decisions and plans wasn't down to a lack of organisation, it was a manifestation of a different way of

patience of long term struggle with the insistence, the militance, of 'this isn't good enough'.

I know I'm not the only one to have entered a social movement full of love and idealism, and withdraw in pain and cynicism. I would see old comrades on the street sometimes at big mobilisations, moments where we would heave ourselves out of our lethargy, let ourselves experience a glimmer of hope, a reminder of what we can accomplish when we work together. But mostly, having failed too many times before, we couldn't even imagine what victory would look like.

In those years, I missed being totally absorbed in something, and I ached for the unwavering faith that I was doing something that was right, that my life followed the line of my beliefs. But I was also so scared of feeling the crushing despair and loss of hope that followed the collapse of Climate Camp, the failure of the anti-fees student movement, and the eviction of Dale Farm.

All of these events produced a huge number of people committed to a cause and convinced of the corruption of the system. We shared a perspective on what was wrong and we'd started to build networks of trust and action. But it seems to me that those of us who were immersed in the radical political movements of the 2000s and 2010s weren't quite able to take the next steps and build a movement that could withstand the loss of individual battles and continue fighting the war. Yet so many of us were and are ready to do so - we just hadn't quite found the way.

While many of us continued to seek ways of changing the world, many of us also lost some of the boldness and ambition with which we used to throw ourselves into political organising. Having experienced the deception of infiltration by undercover police officers or the crushing betrayal of harmful behaviour from comrades, we found it hard to keep on trusting each other. Most of us had been hurt in one way or another by our political organising - whether by the state or by our comrades - and we turned to spaces outside of our movements to heal and soothe us. Some of us had families, and found that many of our social movements are geared towards those without children. Others built walls of cynicism around ourselves as protection from hurt and heartbreak, or approached political organising with the desperation of addiction, self destructive and isolated. Some of us grappled with mental health crises, homelessness, substance abuse and criminalisation, and turned to survival. Others found ways to make the struggle less

hard, confining it into smaller and smaller parts of our lives and keeping it at arm's length from our hearts. Or we let ourselves be absorbed by the system — or built systems out of movements to access security and stability, a pay cheque and a sense of progress. Although our coping mechanisms and levels of involvement in political organising varied, it felt like we were all doing our best not to get hurt, finding individual ways to protect ourselves rather than building forms of collective self defence.

The way the state pressures us to scale back our resistance is shaped by our position in relation to the state. It was easier for me to pick and choose how to engage with activism because the security afforded me by my middle class background, university degree and white privilege. At the same time, as an immigrant, certain kinds of direct action carried more of a legal risk for me with the threat of deportation. But at the end of the day, I could always fall back on an NGO job — embellishing my CV with my activist exploits — and be seen as the edgy political friend who attends protests on weekends and wins debates at house parties. Or I could launch myself back into full-on political activism, aware that my experience of state oppression would be buffered by my social, financial and legal safety net. Neither of these options — which felt like the only two available to me — felt like they were building a social movement that was driven by those most impacted by the violence of the state and capitalism. A movement with a powerful and principled commitment to self defence, so that those at the sharp end of the state and capitalism don't risk the most through resisting.

During my time in Rojava, I was pushed by revolutionaries within the movement to ask myself lots of questions that I wasn't sure I knew — or wanted to know — the answers to. Deep down, do I believe that a state is an inevitability? Do I think that what I'm fighting for is possible? Has the idea of a state become so entrenched in my mind that however militant the tactics I use are, I am simply lobbying the state in more confrontational ways than a petition? If I truly believed that our communities and social movements, and not the state, are the key to radical social change, what political work would I be doing? If I really believed that we could win, how would I be living my life differently? Do I moderate my resistance to forms that still allow me to successfully navigate life under capitalism?

I don't think I'm the only one to have traded the ambitious dreaming of my youth for the slightly jaded and tired pragmatism of political maturity. But I'm

intensely grateful that the folks I met in Rojava insisted that we don't confuse complexity and nuance with cynicism and resignation, that we don't use 'sustainability' as shorthand for selling out. I can't speak for everyone, but I know that my hope and trust in our social movements was ground down by what felt like our powerlessness compared to the state, and by our own failure to stand by each other in collective struggle. In Rojava I learned to link these two things together and open the door to rebuilding my sense of belief in radical social change.

In the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, the term 'state mentality' refers to how we internalise the state in our perspectives and behaviours. This includes both our acceptance of the state as an inevitability, but also how we replicate the power relations of the state in our relationships to others. Becoming aware of our tendency towards state mentality is an important step towards freeing our minds from the internalised state. A lot of anti-oppression movements focus on how we internalise white supremacy and patriarchy and unconsciously reproduce it through our actions and attitudes. In the same way, because the Kurdistan Freedom Movement sees the state as another relationship of domination, being able to challenge this mentality within ourselves is an important part of dismantling it on a systemic level. This is an important concept in the movement itself, not just for internationalists coming in. This means everyone in the movement is on some level still fighting the state within, fighting state-like thinking. It might take the rest of our lives, but the important thing is to keep working on it.

State mentality is how we reproduce systems of domination. It can show up as being a bit of a control freak, as trying to impose 'revolutionary values' from the top down rather than inviting and convincing people to adopt them. It can show up as assuming that people, especially people from groups the state has marginalised, can't be trusted. When we see these tendencies as an example of state mentality, we can analyse them politically and bring our personal change into conversation with system change. State mentality can show up in non-hierarchical groups as much as in top-down ones. If we see hierarchy only as a structure rather than a mentality we won't be able to challenge it. However it shows up, it creates distance between us and stops us from trusting each other. When we let go of personal control, we open the door to building collective power.

This isn't saying that dominant political institutions don't play an undeniable role in how political battles play out. They do, and any effective social change