# Towards Many Democracies of Neighbors

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# Introduction

For the better part of a decade now, I have made it my mission to talk to neighbors in each place I have lived about what it is that makes a neighborhood welcoming and enjoyable. I have knocked on so many doors, had so many conversations on porches, at the end of driveways, and at dinner tables, that I started taking what I learned to others, leading workshops, giving talks, and meeting with people on their blocks to understand their context. Helping people build relationships with their neighbors around their homes is now my full-time job, and I couldn't enjoy it more. One of the most frequent things I hear is a variation on the same collective memory: people remember a time, or they remember hearing stories of a time, when people could leave their doors unlocked and a neighbor could stop by at any moment to borrow a cup of sugar. Across party lines and all other forms of division, there is still a broad sense of nostalgia about a life, whether perfectly real or partly imagined, in which neighbors took care of each other. There is this deeply human feeling that we were not meant to live life so disconnected from those right next door, and that societies are more resilient, empowering, and cohesive when they have strong neighbor-to-neighbor connections. Unfortunately, most people I have talked to have the sense that those connections are just another part of a bygone era. In my experience, they only realize that deep neighbor relationships and well-connected blocks are still possible today after many interactions with someone who works intentionally, but at the speed of trust, to make these happen. They do not realize that neighboring is a muscle that can be exercised and strengthened again, and that there are only a relatively small number of practices and principles that we need to recover to completely change the culture of a block and a neighborhood for the better. There are millions of community connectors like me around the world working to rekindle vibrant streets and neighborhoods one neighbor at a time. Across cultures, we all rely on simple acts like sharing food, taking walks, being present, listening to people's stories, looking for their gifts, and borrowing and lending tools. With enough time, intention, and trust, we find that neighbors can go from strangers to acquaintances to relationships, and even to co-creators of a shared future together.

As the world faces more and more complex crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, major wars, supply chain shortages, and social media-broadcasted political violence, it can be refreshing to realize that there is still a scale– the block level– in which average people can make an actual impact on the decisions that affect our lives. But we also look at cascading problems that seem way too big and way too pressing to allow us to shrink down to a comfortable size and zoom in on our little insular communities. Even if we put aside the extremely divisive issues that fall along partisan lines, there are issues that are almost too obvious for anyone to ignore. We live in an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. Political polarization seems to be tearing the social fabric apart. Our dollars seem to buy us less food, and of much lower quality and our technology becomes obsolete so quickly it is hard to keep up. Social media and smartphones are dangerously damaging the attention and mental health of young people. The threat of mass violence makes normal life feel much more dangerous. Those natural sanctuaries, fishing spots, swimming holes, and berry gathering spots we remember as kids have been repeatedly taken over by development. The vast majority of Americans feel like they have very little say over the decisions that affect their lives. Such problems feel so massive that to prioritize our neighborhood life can almost seem selfish, or at least like a drop in the bucket.

But what if there was a place where millions of people made a collective effort to make their own blocks and neighborhoods the most important unit of life and politics, and where all of those self-organizing blocks combined to make a culture shift that changed everything, not just locally but globally? What if there were multiple places like this, and what if the problems they had to overcome were just as large or even much larger than the ones I just listed? And what if each of these places, practices, and ideas- all centered around well-connected and well-organized blocks, apartment complexes, and villages of neighbors- could teach us lessons that could be applied on any American street in a way that could make a difference, even a very sizable dent in each of those problems?

Sometimes the greatest beauty can come out of the most dire circumstances. Our journey to discover the tools and lessons we need to revive the power of neighboring actually starts on the other side of the world, in Syria. But the image of Syria I will give here is probably not the one that first comes to your mind.

## Part 1: Introducing the Rojava Revolution

The autonomous region of North and East Syria is generally considered one of the safest, and definitely the freest, region in all of Syria. This is thanks to an almost unthinkably bold social revolution that has emerged from under the shroud of the darkness that has faced Syria as a whole since 2011.

When many Americans look at Syria, they think ISIS, the most brutal fanatical terrorist organization we have seen in our lifetimes. The Islamic State (ISIS or pejoratively called "Daesh") once held massive chunks of Syria and Iraq, spreading fear and atrocities with each advancing step. Such horrific evils, however, were matched, to the surprise of Western eyes, with its equally formidable diametric opposite: a bottom-up, women-centered democracy was budding simultaneously and laid down a line that Daesh was unable to cross. Headlines and press photos showed courageous all-women's and mixed-gender units of young fighters tearing through the ISIS lines. The global media followed a little-known militia made up of Kurdish former mountain guerrilla fighters, Arab tribespeople, and Christian villagers, known as The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), from a last-ditch defense of the besieged border town of Kobani to their capture of every last inch of ISIS' territory in Syria in just a few years. While they aired plenty of war footage, the journalists rarely dug deep enough under the surface to see the remarkable multi-ethnic social forces that propelled this resistance.

Communities of Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs, Armenians, and Yezidis in North and East Syria (popularly called "Rojava") have spent the last 11 years dealing with far worse versions of the uncertainty and precarity we are just now beginning to face with our price hikes, climate disasters, and supply chain shortages. They turned to their neighbors to get themselves through civil war and ISIS attacks, and are emerging through it all with a renewed society that is far more beautiful and far more free than they had before. It's a story of hope and I think it is very instructive for us about the possibilities that can emerge from a crisis like a pandemic, natural disaster, or loneliness epidemic when neighbors start to become conscious of themselves as a network of shared survival.

This is where this revolution becomes especially relevant to the topic of "neighboring." The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), the region's official name, can be called "a democracy of neighbors." Their system gives us a glimpse of what it would look like if the most important hub of democracy was intentional assemblies of neighbors, gathered together block-by-block, street-by-street, apartment unit by apartment unit to celebrate life together, share together, discuss together, decide together, and act together in a fully-inclusive, fully participatory manner. At its best, it is a picture of a life freed from deeply divided, hyperpartisan national politics far removed from the realities of everyday people. Instead politicians and government obey and convey: they are given specific instructions by their street and neighborhood assemblies which they convey to the next level of representation- towns, cities, regions, and the Autonomous Administration as a whole. Power flows from the bottom-up, in theory and increasingly in practice, allowing the vast majority of the decisions that affect the lives of the people to be made directly by the people themselves. But there would be no way for people to deliberate over those decisions, come to agreement on them, enforce them, and protect them if they did not spend decades quietly rebuilding their social fabric- a strong, deeply interwoven network of neighbors dedicated to taking care of each other and connecting and mobilizing their talents and assets, one block at a time.

But let's take a step back. In the 1970s and early 80s, the Kurdish people who would eventually catalyze what is called the "Rojava Revolution" were far from an interwoven network. Yes, they had a rich communal culture and heritage that elders could remember and try to keep alive, but after a

hundred years of constant oppression from four different nation-states that trapped Kurds in the middle, they were facing a state of what their leading theorist Abdullah Ocalan called "societycide."

State powers had pitted Kurds against Kurds and other cultures against Kurds (really neighbors against neighbors) so thoroughly that the once-vibrant and communally connected society was on the verge of non-existence. Four nation-states had been built right over the traditional homelands of Kurdish people: Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Kurds were variously denied the ability to speak their language, sing their songs, denied their very existence as a category in some states, barred from citizenship in others, and even prevented from growing fruit trees or having any of their own means to sustain themselves. Forty years ago, oppression and fear were rapidly draining Kurds and other marginalized populations of what we call "social capital" (the value that comes from strong communal connections).

In the 1970s however, Kurds started fighting back against their oppression, sometimes making common cause with other oppressed minorities such as the Assyrian Christians. One manifestation of this fight was with armed guerrilla groups, but there were vastly more people engaged in organizing a healthier day-to-day civilian life. In Northeast Syria, activists and families spent decades secretly and illegally organizing support structures to fill the gaps that the state left in their communities. Eventually, their homegrown ideology of Democratic Confederalism won favor among many different ethnic groups in the region.

Democratic Confederalism is a kind of hyperlocal direct democracy where local people band together to meet their needs themselves and ultimately make the states that have left them out to dry obsolete. It emphasizes ethnic and religious pluralism, women's freedom, and ecology, in stark contrast to priorities of the authoritarian states dominating the region. This is the background that takes us to 2012, when the Syrian government completely pulled out of Northeast Syria to fight a civil war in their major cities, leaving a power vacuum. That vacuum could have been filled by jihadists or aspiring authoritarians as in many parts of Syria, but instead the local people were able to piece together clandestine building blocks to govern their own lives in a remarkably smooth transition.[a]

One of these building blocks became what they called "communes." Despite the same name, the word has a completely different cultural connotation there from the "hippy communes" we might think of here. By commune, they mean a coordination of neighbors on the most local level, ideally less than 100 houses, but constrained by wartime conditions, often quite a bit more in practice. These neighbors pool resources, strengthen social life, and use direct democracy to decide on the decisions that most affect the people that live there. Neighbors are all welcome and encouraged and trained to participate in the commune, the most important political entity in the society. This makes neighbors, not politicians, the most important political actors of North and East Syria.

All of the 5 million or so inhabitants of the region can theoretically practice direct democracy through local communes where they live. These communes federate into councils at all the various levels of society so that power flows from the bottom-up. In conditions of war, many communes were lacking in practice, only slowly gaining acceptance with a population used to the old Syrian regime who made all decisions for them. As a fragile peace has mostly held in the wake of a truce and ongoing peace talks between the DAANES and the new regime that ousted Assad across the rest of Syria in 2024, there are ongoing intentional efforts to increase participation in the communes and ensure that everyday residents hold real power. In 2023, the DAANES, after a long consultation process with large swathes of the civil society, ratified a new social contract that laid out in formal writing the bottom-up system that had already been in progress for years. The Social Contract lists the communes first and foremost among governance units, and its emphasis that the neighbor-led decisions cannot be contradicted shows that this is truly designed to be a democracy where neighbors, not politicians or businesspeople, are the key decision makers.

So what kinds of decisions and actions might neighbors take in their communes? Here are a few examples modeled off of my film, *The Communes of Rojava: A Model in Societal Self-Direction.*

1. Through economic committees, neighbors have formed hundreds of worker and neighbor-owned cooperatives across NES that incorporate many or even all the people of local communes in the work and decisions. Examples include cooperative restaurants, retail stores, vegetable canning factories, and energy cooperatives.

2. Economic committees might also buy essential food items in bulk directly from producers for much cheaper, or they might work with agricultural committees to help build gardens or farms

3. Through safety committees, neighbors select two among them, a man and a woman, to be societal defense forces for their block. They are not to be vigilantes, but instead they seek training in de-escalation, conflict resolution, and other safety skills and then train their other neighbors in these things too so that safety becomes the responsibility of all. "Each one, teach one."

4. Neighbors go through emergency preparedness courses together and co-create a plan and roles for use in various types of disasters.

5. Peace and Consensus Committees are made up of trusted neighbors who are trained to mediate disputes.

6. Health committees train all residents in basic first aid and other vital health skills that increase neighbors' ability to depend on each other.

7. Neighbors might pool funds for special celebrations, scholarships, emergency health needs, or funerals.

8. Communes organize regular skillshares where neighbors can share their talents with others, hoping to increase the breadth of knowledge and skills with everyone.

9. Communes put special emphasis on highlighting the unique gifts that each culture represented on the block brings to the neighborhood tapestry: celebrating each other's holidays, learning each other's languages, and sharing each other's food and stories.

10. Women's committees in every commune have autonomous say over the most crucial decisions affecting women and ensure women self-organize for their safety, health, education, culture, and economic self-sufficiency.

From its communes and councils upward, the democratic confederalist system has proved remarkably resilient, powering the defeat of the once-unstoppable ISIS caliphate. This system has weathered myriad threats including full-scale invasions by the Turkish military, embargoes, relentless attacks on infrastructure, drone assassination campaigns, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, water wars, tribal conflict, legitimate criticism, internal prejudices and oppressive attitudes, spillover from other regional conflicts, wildfires, and so much more. The movement is at a crossroads. Since late 2024, the new Syrian government in Damascus has been granted remarkable international legitimacy despite the fact that its appointed president once fought for Al Qaeda against Americans. Internal and external pressures and general fatigue with the war have brought the DAANES and the Syrian Transitional Government to the negotiating table, where the freedom movement in North and East Syria is pushing for a decentralized Syria that would allow it to keep much of its autonomous structures while integrating into the Syrian state. In some ways, it seems inevitable that there will be an agreement in which even the movement's enemies will have to acknowledge its gains as a real, unchangeable fact. At the same time, the movement will likely lose some of its ability to operate completely free of state oversight or cooperation as it makes strange bedfellows. Meanwhile, its ideological leader, Abdullah Ocalan, is engaging in a peace process between the Kurdish movement in Turkey and the Turkish government, and this process has a lready had major ramifications for Syria. Turkey has mostly halted its drone strikes, and has not interfered

as influential Kurdish figures have traveled freely and met together across borders for the first time. Nevertheless, the threat of a breakdown in negotiations and the resuming of a bloody and complex war is always looming.

Political pundits and world leaders have predicted the demise of the Rojava Revolution many times since 2012. The revolutionaries of North and East Syria do not believe for a second that their revolution will end. They deeply believe in themselves and their society's capacity for change. They believe that they can weather any storm, and that they will ultimately win. They believe that "another world is possible", and, in every interaction, they act as though it really is. They strongly emphasize this value called "bawerî", or faith, and they persist through obstacles with the utmost confidence in each other. I have to say I am convinced. The Rojava Revolution has influenced too many hearts and minds. Too many people have learned the skills of self-organization, too many women have experienced real empowerment, too many families have become democratized, too many residents and workers have felt what it is like to have a real say on their streets or on the job. Even if the people were to lose every inch of ground, they would reorganize themselves. Even if they formally folded into the Syrian state structures, they would do everything to bolster a vibrant underground counter-power of communes, cooperatives, conflict resolution, women's organizing, and diplomacy with global social movements. It is telling that they released their Social Contract in the face of the most serious wave of infrastructure-destroying airstrikes they had ever faced, and just as negotiations seem to be leaning toward some sort of integration of the DAANES into the Syrian state, they are doubling down on their commune system, doing everything they can to increase the communes in strength, participation, and number. The people have simply developed the habits and personalities of radical democracy; these are reflexes that are becoming unconscious reactions. The "cat is out of the bag" as we say in America. No matter what happens, the Rojava Revolution can never be un-experienced.

Throughout the many threats to the revolution, many people from outside of North and East Syria have asked, "How can we help?" They offer the usual suggestions: petition our congresspeople, post statements or videos of solidarity, organize rallies, donate money to the relief organization Heyva Sor, etc. These are always welcomed by my friends in Syria of course. But on multiple occasions, I have been surprised to hear their suggestion for the number one way we can help. The best way we can help is to organize ourselves and our own grassroots, pluralistic, women-led, ecological neighbor-based democracies where we live, to build little pieces of the Rojava Revolution at home. They have asked us to build real alternatives to the status quo in our own countries, to show our neighbors, friends, family, and even politicians that another way of living, one far more empowering, joyous, humanizing, and harmonizing, is possible. To create spaces on our blocks, in our buildings, in our workplaces, churches, schools, and other structures where people can feel what real democracy is like. It is in these spaces that people build a shared mindset, a consciousness and appreciation for freedom, and a heart to protect it wherever it exists, beyond borders, even thousands of miles away. These spaces make the systems and institutions that have facilitated or ignored the war on North and East Syria feel unnecessary and obsolete. They point us to a better vision, and invite us into a diplomacy based on average people and their free associations offering whatever real support they can practically offer to each other, even from opposite sides of the world. In times of crisis, I am taking their requests seriously. In my 2018 video, I called for people to organize commune-like block and neighborhood assemblies across America and the world because I saw grassroots, inclusive, neighbor-based democracy as a model that could point a way forward for us all. Since then, I am only more convinced. I have tried to start on my own block, and I have also worked with many others to help them organize theirs. The rest of this writing will be about the very practical steps we can take to organize these "democracies of neighbors" wherever we find ourselves.

Neighbor organizing has become my daily work, and I have to admit: I have not yet organized my first "commune" in a way that resembles the grassroots collective decision-making units described in the film. Maybe I should rephrase my call. Consider this a call for you to build just one "commune" on your

block, with your neighbors. I hope that soon I will have compiled enough resources and tools that you can use so that task takes far less time than it has me.

What I have done in the seven years since I started, however, is organized and helped organize countless blocks and apartment buildings in which neighbors went from completely isolated to highly social. In most cases, when I started, few in these places knew more than one other neighbor. Now, neighbors regularly care for one another, share food and tools, and hold gatherings together. I have dedicated my life to putting these ideas into practice in a way that makes sense in my own context, and I want to share some of the things I have learned. First, let's talk about neighbors.

## Part 2: Neighboring as a Verb

Any vision for grassroots governance from below, no matter how lofty its aims, always starts in a humble place: right outside your door. Whether in Rojava or Kansas, we can only create neighbor democracy with neighbors. This means that the first task is always going to be to get to know, and build relationships with, your neighbors.

It is clear that we have massive civilizational challenges facing us that I believe only good governance can solve. I believe good governance can only happen when people have real say over the decisions that affect their lives. It is only possible for everyone to have real say in the spaces in which our voices can be heard, and our voices are best heard, without excluding other voices, in small-sized forums that are geographically located in places that we inhabit everyday. Neighborhoods are one of the few places that each of us can call home. We all have neighbors, even if some have neighbors on the other side of a wall while others have neighbors on the other side of a 200-acre field. So, I believe we should organize small-sized, face-to-face forums of our neighbors on our blocks to discuss, dream, decide, and act together. Grassroots governance from below.

Yet even if we never achieve good governance with our neighbors, knowing who these people are and fostering healthy relationships with them is good in itself. Our health, safety, mental well-being, ability to raise children, and so much more are drastically improved when we know just a few neighbors by name, and even more so when we do positive things with them. When multiple neighbors know each other, we create a healthier block. One healthier block can be a model for healthier neighborhoods. This can have a ripple effect on the culture. Knowing neighbors is worth doing anyway, but it is especially worth doing because I believe it can be the building block for a better way of governing our lives.

I work for a non-profit called The Neighboring Movement. We make this a verb: "neighboring." The places that have really succeeded at building neighbor-based power, like Rojava, typically had a strong pre-existing culture of neighborly interdependence. They already had a sense, no matter how eroded by states and individualism, that their lives are tied up with those of their neighbors. This is not the culture in America. The Neighboring Movement calls our current American culture "a culture of scarcity" with the hallmarks of fear and distrust of our neighbors, self-reliance, and insufficiency, the belief that there is not enough to go around or that neighbors and neighborhoods do not have the capacity to take care of each other. Instead, we are trying to build "a culture of neighboring," defined by joy, relationship, and abundance. We want authentic neighborhoods where neighbors give and receive care with one another, and where they make visible their collective abundance by discovering, connecting, and mobilizing each other's gifts toward the common good. We have a plethora of tools to help people walk towards that culture. In Wichita, Kansas, we have set the goal to have at least 80,000 Wichitans engage in a meaningful neighboring action by 2030. That is just 20%. Studies have shown that when 15-25% of people take an action, the culture changes. That's our plan to change Wichita from a culture of scarcity to a culture of neighboring. The main way we are doing this is by training people to hold small, simple, intentional gatherings- as simple as coffee and donuts at the end of the driveway- with a handful of neighbors. These are not just social gatherings, but gatherings with a purpose, designed to help neighbors deepen relationships by learning about each other's passions, skills, and interests and

connecting neighbors together based on those gifts. We even form accountability groups to check in on each other's progress and cheer each other on.

We are trying to move people from strangers to acquaintances to relationships where they live. Speaking only for myself, I'd add one more role: co-creators. Our 8 Front Door Challenge and Get-Together Guide on our website walks you through the steps to host a block gathering, moving through the first three of those roles along the way. With care, you can lay the groundwork towards co-creation with your neighbors, as well.

The guide shares a few ideas on a good first step: building your presence and familiarity in your neighborhood. For instance, try moving your gardening or grilling to your front yard. Or you could walk the same general route every day for several weeks, starting out with simply waving to a few neighbors, and eventually working up the courage to say hi, stop for a conversation, or even inviting a neighbor to walk with you. After you've become familiar to the people who live near you, you will start to learn their names and get their contact info, find an ally to help you plan your gathering, invite your neighbors, host the gathering, and facilitate it in a way that increases the connections of neighbors on your block. For those wanting to dive even deeper, we pay people to go through cohorts where they immerse themselves in the hands-on, practical work of neighboring alongside a learning community of care, practice, and accountability.

## Part 3: Real Democracy, One Cup of Tea At A Time

It seems to be the case that the places that inspire me the most in this world drink a ton of tea. It may be a coincidence, but I also know that brewing a steaming pot of tea is a sure way to get people socializing. In Kurdish, the word for tea is chai. The revolutionaries have a saying, "chai by chai, we make the revolution." In other words, those wanting to make change start by having conversations in people's homes, yards, and street corners, one cup of tea at a time. They learn about what their neighbors care about, building trust, connections, and relationships. An article written by an internationalist volunteer who went to North and East Syria describes the process of organizing a new commune in a village both gifted with a strong sense of communality and mutual support, but also hindered by the legacy of life under the former regime in which people were afraid to take any initiative outside of the state. The article describes how the commune organizers started with throwing together a trash cleanup day, something that could bring the village together for action with a tangible result. It seems like this was a success. As the author continues:

> "The next step was three weeks going door-to-door in the village, drinking endless chai, hearing the people's problems, and inviting them to participate in Gire Sor's first commune meeting. Once all 80 families had been visited, the first meeting took place – attended by a grand total of five people, two of whom, Hevkar says, only showed up to complain that the whole enterprise was pointless. He left the meeting feeling disheartened, even afraid."

This represents what has long been exactly my biggest fear in trying to organize face-to-face neighbor democracy. Getting people to go from hardly knowing each other to socializing together is difficult but can be done without too much trouble, even in America. But for years, I have had a massive mental roadblock imagining myself chiming on a glass to get the attention of my neighbors at a block party and saying, "This has really been so much fun. But you know what would be even better? We should have a meeting!!!" Americans rightly don't enjoy meetings very much, and I always imagine that it is hard enough to get burned out, exhausted neighbors to come together after a long day for something fun, especially when we have Netflix to compete with. So suggesting a meeting? I might as well not even open my mouth. At least, that's what my brain tells me.

Chai by chai, the work continued, and the tide turned in that Syrian village. Unsurprisingly, it was a crisis that brought everyone together, helping the naysayers to see the need for consistent collective

action. In 2020, during the uncertainty of the pandemic, I noticed a massive spike in western interest in *The Communes of Rojava*. People from all spectrums of life- conservatives, progressives, radicals, even some local politicians- were desperate for an alternative to the status quo, and found hope in Rojava's way of doing life together. In the Syrian village, it was another threat of Turkish invasion. Suddenly, everyone was coming together, training in self-defense, and the attendance at the second meeting increased fivefold. The lesson here is that these door-to-door, street-by-street, month-on-month, chai-by-chai conversations make a difference. They build trust, presence, and familiarity. As people feel less and less secure in the current system, they start to look for alternatives. And then the building blocks are already there.

Another thing happens when commune organizers meet with neighbors over a cup of tea. They hear objections to the revolution and its ideas. They don't shy away from these objections, however. They welcome them and reframe them as gifts. This is one of the key learnings that ties together all of my newest influences since 2018. Objections are incorporated into the revolution and turned into assets to the revolution.

## Part 4: Enter, Neighborocracy and Sociocracy

This idea reminds me of another huge discovery I've made since making my 2018 video. There is a similar movement that is also being carried out on the scale of millions of people. India is home to probably the second largest movement for grassroots, face-to-face, assemblies of neighbors. It is also home to one of the world's largest populations of chai drinkers, and this movement has also been built one glass of tea at a time. The movement, growing out of the work of Catholic priest Edwin John and since expanding from religious communities into secular ones, is called "Neighborocracy. Their version of the communes are called Neighborhood Parliaments. My Youtube channel is called Neighbor Democracy. Smash those together, you get "neighborocracy." I had no idea such a movement existed, but now I mostly just use the term "neighborocracy" to describe what I'm looking for. Millions of people across India are organized in small circles of 30 families each on their blocks and in their apartment buildings. These neighborhood parliaments are forums in which all neighbors can discuss their common dreams, common concerns, and their plans for the future.

In *The Communes of Rojava*, I show how all areas of life- health, education, safety, conflict resolution, women, youth, etc. are organized through committees that meet in the communes. Neighborocracy has a unique way of covering all of the same areas of life. Every parliament, whether at the block level or the national level, consists of about the same number of people: 30 people or 30 households. This ensures that the forums are always small-sized, where every voice can be heard. The general rule of thumb is: everyone should be able to fit in one room, sit in one circle with no one forced to sit outside of the circle, and no one should need a megaphone to be heard. At the neighborhood parliament level, each household on a street or two will send a representative from the family to be a full participant in regular meetings. What makes this movement unique is that every single household has someone elected to a role of responsibility. If there are 30 households represented, every household will have a minister for something. There's a minister for health, a minister for education, a minister for safety- all the issues covered in Rojava- and there's also a minister for each of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals like the "No Poverty Minister," the "Sustainability Minister," and the "Life Below Water Minister." At least some sectors of the movement are integrating gender and other quotas, and generally the movement works to make sure all in each household who want to can be a minister at some point.

In this way, no one is a nobody, no one is without responsibility to their neighbors. Everyone has a role to play. At each level all the way up to the global level, the Neighborocracy movement has essentially the same types of ministers, so that action flows from the bottom up and can be addressed at scale. Indeed, one of the main principles of Neighborocracy is borrowed from Catholic Social Teaching:

subsidiarity, meaning all action and decisions should be taken at the lowest level possible, only being passed up the ladder if absolutely necessary.

It is actually children who are leading the way. They are taking the idea the furthest. There are hundreds of thousands of children's parliaments and youth parliaments. in just about every state of India, in several African countries, and now these are forming even in Europe and America. All of these parliaments are federated so that there is now a World Children's Parliament and a World Youth Parliament. Where parliaments representing different age groups exist in the same localities, all three are linked together. The children's parliament sends a delegate to the adult and youth parliaments, the youth parliament to the adult and children's, the adult to the children's and youth. Crucially, to protect the voice of young people, children and youth delegates in the adult parliaments get a say in decisions, while adults only observe and consult in the younger parliaments.

At the end of *The Communes of Rojava*, I call for communes everywhere, and even give some possible steps to organize them. The principles of Neighborocracy ("smallification", subsidiarity, numerical uniformity, convergence- the neighborhood parliament gives all local organizations and actions a voice at the table- and the right of immediate recall for all delegates) give us some further ideas that can be carried into other places. But the movement flowing out of India has two other crucial principles that have already been put to good use in organizations right here in the United States and in Europe. Both stem from the governance theory and tools known as Sociocracy. These are consent-based decision-making processes and sociocratic elections. My experiences of Sociocracy have really given clarity to the picture of how we could build hyperlocal, grassroots governance right here. In the film, I mention two ways to make decisions that allow residents to participate in their own affairs: majority-rule democracy and consensus. Consensus has long been popular in social movements, but it has also been a headache for many who have spent endless hours in meetings trying to come to a decision that everyone agrees to. I hardly have to name the problems with voting by majority. Sociocracy makes a simple shift that has made all the difference. Participants speak in rounds. Each person goes around the circle, speaking in order, one at a time, until every voice is heard. Instead of coming to decisions that everyone agrees with, they shape and reshape a proposal until they come to a decision that is "good enough for now and safe enough to try." That's the motto of Sociocractic decisions. "Good enough for now, safe enough to try."

In other words, the decision doesn't have to be my favorite, but I'm willing to experiment with it. I don't have a paramount objection. If no one objects, we have consent. And here's where I get back to the way that commune organizers in Rojava try to grow stronger through objections. In sociocracy and neighborocracy, this process is formalized. An objection in sociocracy, according to Ted Rau, must be "a reasoned statement of what can go wrong when the decision is approved." In other words, someone objects when they think the decision will harm the purpose of the group. Once made, the objection is treated like another proposal and discussed in rounds. The group might try to revise the content, set a time frame in which to try out the idea and then revisit it, or suggest that the proposal moves forward with specific ways to measure the concern raised in the objection. Each person contributes to the shaping of the proposal until a solution is found that is "good enough for now and safe enough to try." It is estimated that half of the hundreds of thousands of Neighborhood Children's Parliaments, in which children as young as 5 years old participate, use Sociocracy as their official form of governance. While sociocracy requires thorough training to work effectively, millions of children and adults have been using it to make major decisions (on things like building bridges, putting up streetlights, organizing rallies, or building libraries) for decades around the world.

Neighborocracy also uses an incredible sociocratic tool when the group selects its ministers. Unlike the divisive winner-take-all elections that govern representative democracies, elections in sociocracy are uniting processes, not polarizing ones. Electioneering, campaigning, and other zero-sum games have no place in sociocracy. Sociocratic elections combine the best of voting and consent to ensure that the person selected for each role truly feels like they represent the whole group.

Here's how it works:

1. Through rounds, every person in the neighborhood parliament co-creates the role- definition, responsibilities, and qualifications.

2. Everybody writes down on a slip of paper their name and who they nominate for the role (self-nomination is allowed).

3. Each person tells the group openly who they nominated, and why.

4. Change round- each person is given a chance to change their nomination and state why.

5. Facilitator gets a sense of the meeting and proposes a nominee, calling for consent in a round.

6. Everyone is given a chance to consent, with the nominee consenting last.

In the end, everybody has co-created the role, nominated someone, heard valid reasons for other nominations, had a chance to change their nomination or not, and finally, consented to the person selected for the role. In the end, participants should feel more united, with greater clarity on the role and why the person they have selected for it is the best candidate for the time being.

## Part 5: Starting With What's Strong

I mentioned before that in Neighborocracy, every single household has a member elected as a minister of something important to the neighborhood's flourishing. Everyone has responsibility to the community, is valued for their gifts, and has a forum to actively use those gifts on a regular basis as a part of true, grassroots neighborhood self-governance.

But how do we go about discovering what each person's gifts are in order to have confidence in selecting them for their role? Here we can integrate one final tool that not only is a tried-and-true strategy for making invisible gifts visible, but also might hold the key to my biggest hold-up in neighborocracy organizing: how to move from a joyous, social, fun group of neighbors to an intentional, participatory decision-making unit that discusses, decides, plans, and carries out the important stuff in life. This final principle is Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a strategy and mindset pioneered by the recently departed and dearly loved John McKnight, along with Jody Kretzmann.

Once again, this is a set of ideas that should be so simple. In fact, I feel like I have been skirting around it my whole life. ABCD says, "instead of starting with what's wrong, start with what's strong." When organizing with individuals or communities, we are always more effective when we start by discovering the hidden gifts that are already present instead of coming up with a list of problems or needs to be fixed. McKnight and Kretzmann discovered when they asked simple questions to neighbors in any community pretty much anywhere in the world, no matter the outside reputation, they could draw out hidden gifts of the head, hands, heart, and spirit, as well as passions, dreams, talents, skills, and capacities that people are waiting for an invitation to share with others. These assets include individual gifts, associations, social and informal exchange, physical spaces with meaning and possibility- like parks, meeting houses, rivers, shortcuts, monuments, edible plants, and empty lots- and even institutions, provided they are willing to let neighbors set the agenda. When an ABCD approach is used, we can match the gifts of some neighbors to the gifts of others, multiplying them for the common good. We can also address problems, but not from a place of overwhelm and scarcity, but from a sense of abundance. Right here, close to home, we can mobilize the hidden gifts of our neighbors to address the gaps. With such a simple mindset shift, we can discover our collective power that will allow us to keep all decisions and actions at the lowest level possible, without outsourcing responsibility to outsiders- unless we do so on our terms. ABCD tools, integrated with intentional neighboring, help build a sense of trust on our blocks. They make visible what was previously invisible, showing us who has what strengths and how we might connect them to others and then mobilize those connections for mutual benefit. ABCD's tools for gifts discovery, connection, and mobilization would be an incredible bolster to the Sociocratic election process.

Finally, I return to my biggest struggle in organizing these entities. Whatever you call them- communes, assemblies, neighborhood pods, neighborhood parliaments- they only reach their full potential

when neighbors come together to discuss, dream, decide, and take action on the things that matter to them. Communes are more than just neighbors having a good time grilling hot dogs, as important as that is. In America, it just seems like neighbors struggle enough simply making time to socialize with one another. If they do, that is a huge win. Can't we just enjoy each other's company and not be so serious? Why do we need more meetings? Can't we just have fun? Father Edwin John, founder of Neighborocracy, has always said that in order to be a compelling option for people, neighborhood parliaments need to ensure that people are using them to regularly do stuff together. People need to see a clear purpose, that things are getting done and that life is getting better. It was only in practicing ABCD in my neighborhood that I found what I think is the answer to how to ensure that people want to gather with a proactive, constructive purpose. Start with people's gifts. Find out what people already love to do, find others in the neighborhood who love to do those things too or who want to benefit from those things, connect them together, and give them space to mobilize for their mutual good. For instance, if I use ABCD tools to discover that I have 5 neighbors on my block who all love the nearby green spaces enough to be willing to help steward them, I could invite those neighbors together and encourage them to decide on ways to do that together. A meeting based on something people love to do and would likely do anyway does not feel draining at all, but exciting. We can play games at block parties that reveal and connect all the people who love to bake, to read, to pick up litter, to celebrate their culture, to fix and build things, all the people passionate about education or who want to make a safer street. If you think about it, these are the same categories of life that are addressed by the commune committees in Rojava and the ministers in Neighborocracy. By pointing out connections and possibilities, people will get excited and can be moved to act. To act, they must meet, and they ultimately must decide. We can be there with helpful tools and practices and structures to ensure these meetings give all who participate an equal voice and that all neighbors are invited to mobilize around their passions. When there is passion and energy and buzz, it is natural to want a place where that buzz can be stewarded and organized. Hence, a commune, a neighborhood parliament, an assembly. A circle in which residents can behold their collective assets and gifts, create an artistically visualized asset map, ponder these gifts with fresh eyes, share stories of ongoing collaborations, and dream up who to introduce to who next, and how to mobilize for what and when.

## Part 6: Becoming Rooted

In this section, I have sketched out my influences and my path over the last 6 years. I've been busy trying to connect the communes of Rojava to the neighborhood parliaments in India, to introduce both to Asset-Based Community Development, and to take examples of all of these things, meld them with Sociocracy, and apply them in small ways right on my block. I'm doing this all with the purpose of moving people from strangers to acquaintances to relationships to co-creators, moving blocks and buildings from atomized individuals to social pods to co-creating grassroots, face-to-face assemblies that take more responsibility and influence over the decisions that affect our lives. I have moved a few times, and in every place, I've managed to create a social pod. Neighbors are in group chats together, and each time I've moved, I've made sure to pass on connections to the neighbors who still live there, empowering them to move forward without losing trust or momentum.

But now I'm staying rooted for a while. I started by doing our 8 Front Door Challenge several times to organize a winter porch party, a spring celebration on my lawn, and an outdoor movie night outside a neighbor's house. During these gatherings, we've played games, called attention to the things that made us each interesting and the gifts we could contribute to our blocks, brainstormed how to welcome new neighbors better, and generally cultivated trust. Using an ABCD tool called a learning conversation, I've had endless cups of chai on neighbors' porches. I've sat down with almost 30 neighbors on two streets for an hour or so at a time, asking them some of my favorite questions designed to draw out their hidden gifts, the things they care about, and their dreams for the neighborhood. I've discovered

such abundance, and it would be a shame if I simply sat on all this information and filed it away. I've tried to step into the role of "community connector," looking for common themes in these conversations, introducing neighbors to each other, and encouraging them to mobilize around these commonalities.

So my next step is to organize a fun gathering with the purpose of showing my neighbors how incredibly cool and gifted all of my other neighbors are. I want neighbors to walk away with a glimpse of just how many interesting things I've learned through these 30+ hours of one-on-one conversations. Then, I will invite neighbors to point out the connections. What are the common passions, hobbies, and areas of concern? Those who care about *this* passion should meet over here and discuss how they can connect further, those who are excited about *that* possibility can meet on the other side of the room, and so on. From there, I dream of making the case to my neighbors that these gifts, these new associations, these dreams are too precious to let flounder after a one-time thing. I'll propose a regular meeting of our two blocks, in which every neighbor will be invited and every household will be left a chair in the circle- even if they are absent.

## Part 7: Towards Democracies of Neighbors

All of these learnings come together towards a broader vision, beyond simply organizing grassroots governance at the block level. Recall the idea of subsidiarity, to keep action and decisions at the lowest level possible. When we strengthen the ability for people at the base to take ownership over the decisions that affect their lives, and when we ensure that there is less need to outsource responsibility to higher authorities, we make unwieldy and far-removed institutions like the state closer to obsolete in our lives. I have laid out here a sort of toolbox that helps us strengthen society from the bottom up. We have ABCD's focus on discovering, connecting, and mobilizing the hidden capacities of society (neighbors, associations, their informal and social economies, and so on). We can combine that with neighborocracy's emphasis on subsidiarity and the convergence of all these grassroots forces in and through the neighborhood parliament. In converging grassroots forces, we can create an alternative network of societal infrastructure that can make the state more and more obsolete in more and more lives. This means that the arena in which the politics that affect most people's everyday lives moves closer and closer to home, and involves an ever greater number of people's voices. By linking hundreds and thousands of these structures from bottom to top to cover ever-wider areas, we increase the capacity of society and nullify the power of the state.

To bring it back full circle, let's look at some helpful terms that Abdullah Ocalan has created to inspire what became the Rojava Revolution. These are democratic autonomy, democratic nation, democratic confederalism, and democratic modernity. I will quote at length from Havin Guneser in her book based on these ideas called *The Art of Freedom*. When we organize neighbors on our blocks to share power, decision-making, care, goods, etc, we are creating little spheres of **democratic autonomy**. Democratic autonomy is defined as:

> "democratic governance, or the authority of the people based on radical democracy. It is not representative, and it aims for direct involvement and participation of the grassroots organized [...] in production [...], education, [...] social relations and decision-making mechanisms, and for self-defense. Everything from communes and councils, in suburbs, neighborhoods, and municipalities, and even faith and cultural communities, mutual aid associations, and all of their autonomous organizations constitute this self-governance."

But to Ocalan, lasting change has far more to do with a change in mindset, mentality, and personality than it does structures. The Kurdish freedom movement puts special emphasis on fostering a personality fit for participatory democratic life. A huge part of this is their idea of the **democratic nation** . This is the kind of nation fit for making states obsolete, because it is not tied to a state, specific borders, or even shared ethnicity or language. The democratic nation is more about a common mindset, a shared

consciousness of freedom, grassroots democracy, and solidarity. One finds hope, strength, identity, and connection with anyone anywhere in the world who is experimenting with all of the beautiful things we have been talking about. In that way, we will always be striving to create our own democratic autonomy in our own neighborhoods, associations, workplaces, schools, etc, but we will also be longing for others to experience democratic autonomy, too. Their success does not negate our own, but we can aid each other as fellow members of **democratic modernity** , the ever-present counter-trend in history of people struggling for more loving, more participatory, more empowered lives. But mental ties are not enough to tackle massive civilizational challenges that will not be hindered by our well wishes for others while we focus our work inward. As I said before, I believe we can only tackle these challenges through good governance. **Democratic confederalism** involves the tangible linking of all of these democratic autonomies, from blocks to neighborhoods to municipalities, counties, regions, continents, all the way up to the global level. Democratic confederalism is the linking of these little democracies in a way that ensures each local unit coordinates with other units, but remains autonomous, without being usurped by the whole. Power in democratic confederalism does not lie with the state, but starts on blocks, floors, and in small face-to-face assemblies in millions of different nooks and crannies. It does not seek to take over the state or create a new one. In fact, it does not necessarily need to even be in conflict with the state, though grassroots civil society should always retain the right to defend itself. Both neighborocracy, democratic confederalism- whatever you want to call it- and states can co-exist happily.

States are just one form of institution, and ABCD's concept of the "helpful outsider" role that can be played by institutions is helpful here. John McKnight and Cormac Russell, in Chapter 9 of *The Connected Community: Discovering the Health, Wealth, and Power of Neighborhoods*, give some vital criteria as to what a helpful outsider looks like, and they share some moving examples of people in institutions playing this role. Helpful outsiders *serve while stepping backwards*, *work to reduce institutional dependency, cheer on community alternatives, are honest and open about what they can't and won't do, affirm what communities can do, they take an oath to do no harm, they are interested in reseeding community life, not just reforming their institutions, and are courageous when challenging the status quo.* McKnight and Russell give the example of the late Henry Moore, former assistant city manager for the city of Savannah, Georgia, who had the ethos that cities should always ask how they can support what neighbors are already doing. He secured some city funds to be set aside for this purpose. Any resident could write to him with a proposed action to improve their neighborhood. He asked that the resident find two other people on their block who could sign the letter to say that they were ready to support the effort. Then he left the option open. The residents could ask the city for support if they want, or they could go on without city support. If the residents requested funds, they could receive up to $100 to each idea, with the stipulation that the money would always be used communally, not to pay themselves. He would then hold dinner celebrations at a nice hotel in which residents could share a display showcasing their projects. Such a story is inspiring, but sometimes it seems laughable to imagine most government institutions stepping into helpful outsider roles when to do so might reduce the perception that such institutions are needed at all. Governments tend to want to preserve and reinforce their power, often at the expense of neighbor power. In that case, all that is needed is for such institutions to accept the right of the self-organized communities to keep doing what they are doing without interference. Cynically, this would mean that their jobs get a lot easier.

To quote Ocalan directly:

> "Neither total rejection nor complete recognition of the state is useful for the democratic efforts of the civil society. The overcoming of the state, particularly the nation-state, is a long-term process. The state will be overcome when democratic confederalism has proved its problem-solving capacities with a view to social issues."

In other words, it is strong civil societies, well-organized with ample space for average neighbors to organize, decide, and act together to solve common problems through their own abundant gifts, that will make the state obsolete.

It's an interesting predicament in which we find ourselves in 2024: public trust in the state has never been lower, and yet we continue to outsource all the realms of life that should be covered by civil society to that very state. In the past two presidencies, public trust in the government to do what is right most of the time *among members of the party that controlled the presidency* has not exceeded 36%. Among the other party, it has been a rare outlier when trust inches above 15%. Yet the book *Bowling Alone* and the recently released film based on it, *Join or Die*, have tracked the decline of associational and neighboring life that has nearly brought us to a state of what Ocalan calls "societycide." Even so, it is obvious that people across the political spectrum are looking for alternatives, even if our imaginations of what is possible have long been stunted. Many people who work in governments are burnt out as their job descriptions get ever-longer and their desks overflow with paperwork. Following the horrific 2016 ambush of five officers, the former Dallas Police Chief, David Brown, famously cried out against this state of affairs: "We're asking cops to do too much in this country [...] Every societal failure, we put it off on the cops to solve[...] Policing was never meant to solve all those problems." Civil society has failed by relinquishing our own power for far too long.

Almost every neighbor I have visited in my work expresses a longing to have supportive and trusting communities again. They have these same sorts of faint collective memories of a time in which people felt safe leaving their doors unlocked and when neighbors could stop in and borrow a cup of sugar any time. My hope with this writing is that we can rekindle that imagination and expand it, taking tools and vision from people who have been forced to get creative and have done remarkable things out of dogged persistence and mutual care. There has never been a better time for this work. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic reminded so many of us to think globally by acting locally, to check in on each other, to reach out to neighbors we had lived next to in silence for far too long. These efforts may be counter-cultural, but they are not counter-human. They are aligned with our deepest longings. I am reminded that I spent years seeing Rojava as almost the sole beacon of hope, not knowing that millions of people, led by children, were organizing a similar system in India. I am now positive that even as I say this, there are countless people sitting in face-to-face meetings to discuss, dream, decide, act, and celebrate with their neighbors in contexts I have never even heard of. There is something of a stirring, a great weaving. Scores of peoples and movements, even those in some of the most centralized structures on earth- like the Kurdish freedom movement's formerly top-down party or Neighborocracy's roots in the Catholic Church- are coming to the same conclusions, often with no idea of each other's existence. They are realizing that the way forward for humanity lies in decentralizing and sharing power, in people co-creating life together with their neighbors and those they work, play, study, and live with, in creating structures in which everyday people can have effective say over decisions, and in linking these spaces together across seas and continents for better collaboration. You and your neighbors can join in this great weaving. May these tools be just one guide on your journey, while you discover and practice your own tools and lessons. And may you be generous with these lessons and stories, playing your part by sharing them with the rest of us as you learn them, inspiring us all to fully embrace our roles in the local and global democratic nation.

## Further research

**Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES)/Rojava**

The Communes of Rojava: A Model in Societal Self Direction:
<www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDnenjIdnnE>

Donate to relief in North and East Syria:
<www.heyvasor.com/en>

Explainer: Participatory Governance in the Social Contract of North and East Syria:
<docs.google.com/document/d/1r2KPJNGBJckhIzJW0_qEq7Z8ahUzYhej9uLGbcrVXyY>

Explainer: Communes:
<www.rojavainformationcenter.org/2020/05/explainer-communes-the-building-block-of-democratic-confederalism>
Latest news:
www.rojavainformationcenter.org>
Civil Diplomacy Center of North and East Syria (contacts with civil society and DAANES):
<www.nescivildiplomacy.com>
Chai by Chai, Village by Village, the Work Goes On:
<www.mesopotamia.coop/chai-by-chai-village-by-village-the-work-goes-on>
The Art of Freedom by Havin Guneser:
<www.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=1083>

**Neighboring**

The Neighboring Movement:
<www.neighboringmovement.org>
The 8 Front Door Challenge:
<www.neighboringmovement.org/8fd>
Neighboring tips:
<www.canva.com/design/DAFl0oSiCag/_tLib3G0vzv4tlOwihTuew/view?utm_content=DAFl0oSiCag&utm_campa

**Neighborocracy and Sociocracy**

Power to the Children documentary on Neighborhood Children's Parliaments (NCPs):
<www.powertothechildren-film.com>
Neighborocracy podcast interview
<www.scottishcommunitiesclimateactionnetwork.podbean.com/e/neigborocracy-an-indian-success-in-giving-real-voice-to-the-people>
Weaving Global Governance From Below:
<www.sociocracyforall.org/childrens-parliaments-sociocracy-case-study>
Sociocracy: A Neighborhood Case Study
<www.docs.google.com/document/d/1HbtLy2BblTiYkXDVBprNznDyRsFSudOXFmeQnwG1vSs>
Sociocracy for All:
<www.sociocracyforall.org>
School Circles film:
<www.schoolcirclesfilm.com>

**Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)**

ABCD Institute:
<www.resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/Pages/default.aspx>
The Connected Community by John McKnight and Cormac Russell:
<www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/714103/the-connected-community-by-john-mcknight-and-cormac-russell>

The Library of Unconventional Lives

Ian Campbell
Towards Many Democracies of Neighbors
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