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**Re-enchantment of the Political: Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic
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Re-enchantment of the Political: Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism and the Politics of Reasonableness

Patrick Huff

Abstract

With the military defeat of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) at Raqqa, its defacto capital in Syria, Kurdish led Democratic Confederalists have established themselves as a major civil and military force in the region. Democratic confederalism rests on three primary ideological pillars: women's liberation, direct communalist democracy, and ecologically sound society. Democratic Confederalists reject the state and capitalism as authoritarian and exploitive. Given the geopolitical tinderbox in which Democratic Confederalism has developed and gained increasing influence, the movement stands as the most geo-strategically significant anti-authoritarian populist movement afoot in Syria and the wider Middle East in the current conjuncture. The influence of Democratic Confederalism has also increased in North America and Europe with the formation and spread of radical left solidarity groups. Despite all this, outside of Kurdish activist circles, there has been relatively little scholarly engagement with the thought of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned ideological leader of the movement. In this paper I provide an overview and develop an analysis of Öcalan's thought by reading his writings through some of his key Western intellectual interlocutors, including Nietzsche, Wallerstein, Adorno, and Bookchin. Contra Weber's famous declaration of the disenchantment of modernity, I argue that Öcalan's project aims at the re-enchantment of the political. This, however, should not be read as a regression from modernity; this re-enchantment, instead, aims to supersede, or sublimate, 'capitalist modernity' in the development of 'democratic modernity'. This re-enchantment entails the supersession of modernity's instrumental rationality in what I call a politics of reasonableness, an individual and collective autonomy that, far from standing at odds, necessarily presuppose each other. In the current conjuncture, Öcalan's thought finds substantive form in the emancipatory rural and urban politics driving the proliferation of networked communes and economic cooperatives across the autonomous region of Rojava and beyond. Democratic Confederalism stands as a highly salient emancipatory alternative to authoritarian theocracy, statist nationalism, and neoliberal capitalism. Given its role in shaping the current socio-political conjunction in Syria and its implications for the future of the wider Middle East, Öcalan's thought calls for sustained, serious, and engaged attention.

Introduction

‘Kurds have no friends but the mountains’, a Kurdish proverb asserts. The lesson is twofold: it highlights a common identity rooted in mountainous rurality and indicates a long history of political betrayal, oppression, and inter-group conflict. These conflicts have intensified in recent years, most saliently in Rojava, a majority Kurdish region of Northern Syria. Since 2014 the Kurdish led Democratic Confederalist movement has been engaged in a dire military struggle against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). This has unfolded in the context of the wider Syrian civil war that has entangled national, regional, and international political interests. The writings of Abdullah Öcalan, the movement’s ideological leader, promote democratic confederalism as a grass roots and anti-authoritarian programme consisting in women’s liberation, direct communalist democracy, and ecological society. In the regional context Democratic Confederalists explicitly frame this project as a form of antifascism, rejecting the authoritarian populism associated with ethno-nationalist states and the theocratic fascism of IS and similar groups. Notably, Öcalan’s ideology evolved from an initial commitment to statist nationalism, guided by Marxist-Leninism, to his mature ‘non-state social paradigm’. In this paper I read Öcalan’s thought through some of his key Western intellectual interlocutors, including Nietzsche, Wallerstein, Adorno, and Bookchin. I simultaneously ground Öcalan’s ideological development in the regional socio-historical conflict-ridden context of his life history. Öcalan’s rural upbringing deeply affected him and is clearly reflected in his mature eco-social ideology. For instance, Öcalan employs Adorno’s concept of the ‘wrong life’ of authoritarian modernity in contrast with the meaningful rural life and experience of freedom of his youth amongst the Zagros-Taurus Mountains. Such a vision of lost idyllic rurality is common across many strands of agrarian populism. Öcalan’s political vision, however, is strongly oriented toward an emancipated future. Contra Weber’s (2004 [1917]) famous declaration of the disenchantment of modernity, I argue Öcalan’s project re-enchants the political, entailing the sublation of ‘capitalist modernity’ in ‘democratic modernity’. At its core is what I call a politics of reasonableness that itself can be seen as a sublation of traditional forms of rural community decision-making, now finding its substantive form in the proliferation of networked communes and economic cooperatives in Rojava and beyond.

1. An Interpretive Challenge

To engage with Öcalan’s body of work is a daunting task. Öcalan combines history, archaeology, critical theory, social ecology, and philosophy of science, in narratives rich in metaphor aimed at inspiring popular revolutionary praxis. Beyond this there are less obvious but no less significant challenges to keep in mind when engaging with Öcalan’s oeuvre. Three points are worthy of note.

First, Öcalan has been held as a political prisoner of the Turkish state for the last nineteen years. Much of Öcalan’s most relevant and significant work has been produced under severe constraint and under harsh condition of isolation. His access to books, research materials, even pen and paper have been arbitrarily restricted over the years. Communication with the outside world has been limited almost exclusively to his lawyers and even they have not been granted access to him for going on three years. Hardly fertile conditions for sustained scholarly work, not to mention the mental and physical toll taken by the torturous conditions of long-term solitary confinement. Nevertheless, Öcalan managed to produce a substantial amount of written material. His handwritten manuscripts were passed to his lawyers ostensibly as preparations for his legal defense. Once in the hands of his publishers Öcalan has no opportunity for editorial input, revision, or correction. All this must be kept in mind in any analysis of his writings.

Second, Öcalan is not a conventional scholar and his aims are not those of formal scholarship. Öcalan easily fits the figure of the Gramscian organic intellectual, a revolutionary theorist arising from and capable of articulating subaltern interests (Jones 2006: 10). Öcalan’s intellectual efforts are rooted in and aim to advance the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Where Öcalan’s mature writings exhibit a certain Kurdocentrism they do not endorse and, indeed, reject Kurdish national chauvinism. Öcalan’s mature aims are much more cosmopolitan. He situates the Kurdish struggle as a particular part of a general struggle for human emancipation from oppressive institutions and social relations.

Finally, I also want to emphasize that my efforts to tease out and clarify Öcalan's intellectual relations to Western theorists is in no way meant to reduce Öcalan's highly original work to a merely derivative status. Rather the fascinating thing about Öcalan's writing is its creative synthesis. As David Graeber (2015) observes in a preface to Öcalan's work, "[w]hat Öcalan is doing here is taking the same pieces and putting them together in a different way. In so doing he is taking the lead from his native Kurdistan..." (16). It is at this intersection of broad historical sweep and the particular historical experience of Kurds that Öcalan's thought is at its richest. My effort is to begin a process of learning from a figure whose thought has become a material social force that is at this very moment reshaping the political contours of the Middle East.

Öcalan's Early Life

Öcalan was born on 4th April, 1948 in Ömerli, a small rural village in Turkey's Southeastern Urfa Province. Twenty-five years prior to Öcalan's birth the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923, establishing the borders of modern Turkey. Like the earlier Sykes-Picot Agreement hatched by Europe's imperial powers, the Treaty of Lausanne cemented the dismemberment of the Kurdish nation, apportioning it within the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. This jostling of empires was the context within which the modern Turkish Republic emerged from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, foundering father of Republican Turkey, placed the country on a crash course modernization programme. Öcalan's childhood was spent under the shadow of Kemalist state nationalism. The Turkish constitution adopted in 1925 defined citizenship in strictly ethnic terms, declaring that citizens of the state were Turkish by definition (Özcan 2006: 66). For Kurds and other minorities this meant that engagement in civic life required the denial of their identities. Those minorities that obstinately insisted on their existence despite their constitutional erasure were marginalized and repressed. Öcalan situates his biography in the contexts of recent history and the region's deep past:

My life story coincides with the beginning of the 1950's when the drive of global capitalism of the era reached its peak. On the other hand, my place of birth is the most fertile land in the upper part of Mesopotamia—the Fertile Crescent enveloped by the Taurus-Zagros mountains—the location where the remnants of the oldest and most deep-rooted mentalities can still be found, and where the Neolithic age and the initial urban civilization existed for very long periods: These are the mountain skirts that bore the civilization

[2017: 26]

Themes connecting antiquity and modernity thread throughout Öcalan's writings. Öcalan sees enduring socio-historical continuities from the deep past to present. He believes only a thorough understanding of history can yield sufficient knowledge of the present contexts to yield revolutionary transformation. In part Öcalan's preoccupation with the long history of Mesopotamia reflects a desire to recover from the historic erasure of Kurds.

Öcalan left his village at a young age, against his mother's wishes (Öcalan 2011: 95). His reflections on this are somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, Öcalan (2017) writes, "I am quite certain that I was right not to give in to the village society." However, on the other hand, he immediately follows up by stating, "[b]ut I was wrong in believing that capitalist modernity could offer an alternative to this way of life. Earlier in my life I made the huge mistake of radically breaking with the village society..." (31). I should note that in Öcalan's terminology "capitalist modernity" includes the Marxist-Leninism, he now disavows. Further considering village society, Öcalan explains, "...even though it had not been democratized, it was far removed from fundamental stages such as nation-state and industrialization" (31). In contrast to the village, Öcalan's assessment of urban civilization is less ambivalent. He writes,

"I think city society, which, like a magnet pulled me away from village society, is the main locus of our social problems. The city-state-classed civilization and the societal form it has caused are the main culprits not only of society's internal decay but also its detachment from nature" (2017: 31). Öcalan's

affinity for rurality and nature should not be read as advocating some form of neo-primitivism. He does not reject modernity in toto but rather Öcalan rejects a particular form of modernity, capitalist modernity. This rejection is, in large part, based on what he views as the meaningless and unethical nature of capitalism's social relations.

A core element of Öcalan's political project is a quest to delineate the contours of an ethical and meaningful life. Öcalan understands meaningful life, at least in part, as life in close communion with other humans and nature. Meaning, of course, is what has been stripped away from capitalist modernity's political forms, substituted with instrumental rationality. Öcalan praises Nietzsche's early and far-seeing recognition and diagnosis of the modern condition. On this account Öcalan (2015) suggests that Nietzsche, "...can almost be called the prophet of the capitalist era" (60). Similarly, of Max Weber, Öcalan explains that, "[h]e underlined the material characteristics of the civilization when he described rationality as the reason behind the disenchantment of the world" (61). Despite being literally imprisoned by the forces he critiques, Öcalan does not concede to hopelessness, nor does he share Weber's pessimism concerning the possibility of overcoming the apparent impasse of modernity. In this regard, Öcalan's earthly life affirming outlook is closer to that of Nietzsche. Reminiscing on his childhood wanderings in the mountains surrounding his village Öcalan recalls:

...as I young boy, because of this, I was described as 'mad for mountains'. When I learnt much later that such a life was reserved for the god Dionysus and the free artistic group of girls (the Bacchantes) who travelled before and behind him, I really envied him. It is said the philosopher Nietzsche preferred this god to Zeus and that he would even sign many of his works as the 'disciple of Dionysus'. When I was still at my village, I always wanted to play games with the girls of my village. Although this did not conform to the religious rules, I have always thought that this was the most natural thing. I never approved of the dominant culture's way of shutting women behind doors. I still want to engage with them in unlimited free discussions, in games, in all the sacredness of life. I still say an unconditional 'no' to the slavery and bond that smell of possession and that is based on power relations

[2015: 91]

In Nietzsche's thought Dionysus is used as a metaphor for humanity's growth (overcoming) and health, or affirmative life. Dionysus stands as a symbolic reference to human powers and potentials for creation and destruction, particularly in regards to cultural values. As Burnham explains, "[g]rowth, and in particular growth in the expression and feelings of power, requires both creativity (the devising of new life practices and values) and destruction (of existing practices and values, including those in the self)" (2015: 102). Öcalan seems to have read Nietzsche quite deeply so it is notable that Öcalan's reference to Dionysus is followed by his denunciation of patriarchal cultural values and his suggestion of a free life emancipated from such strictures.

Öcalan's Political Coming of Age

Turkey was not left out of the wave of revolts that swept the world in 1968. Of course, the '68 wave manifested in different socio-political contexts with their content grounded in local histories and particular configurations of forces. Turkey's student left of '68 was highly fractious. Multiple sectarian tendencies fought outright battles with each other over what may now appear as matters of ideological minutia. The "Kurdish Question" was one of many points of dispute among the factions of the youth movement. The Dev-Genç, The Federation of Revolutionary Youth, an umbrella group, was perhaps the most sustained effort at coordination among the various radical tendencies of the Turkish left. Ankara University was a hotbed of revolutionary ideology and it was in this milieu that Öcalan, then a student of political science, found himself. Öcalan recalls, "[i]n Ankara in 1970, I joined the fearless revolutionary youth. The killings of Mahir Cayan and his friends at Kizildere (March 1971) and the execution of Denis Gezmis and his comrades (May 1972) called on us honest sympathisers to continue their legacy" (2011: 129). Developing a Guevaraist strategy Gezmis, a student leader, formed The People's Liberation Army of Turkey (THKO) to wage guerrilla war against the Turkish state. Likewise, Cayan led a splinter group, People's Liberation Party-Front of Turkey (THKP-C). Though short-lived, their revolts proved inspirational for a generation of radicals and clearly had an influence

on Öcalan's own strategic analyses. It was, however, another death that would catalyze the Öcalan's move to armed struggle.

By the mid-1970s Öcalan was elected chair of the Ankara Higher Education Union (AYÖD). His successful efforts to stabilize AYÖD and his powerful charisma won him a numbers of followers. Of this period Öcalan (2011) explains, "[w]e gathered a group of a dozen young people, all from similarly poor families. Some of them were of Turkish descent and had joined us for their internationalist stance" (130). It was 1974 and this group was the nucleus of what would become The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) but it would be another four years before the PKK announced itself. Throughout this period the small cadre of militants focused on building intellectual, ideological, and physical capacity for struggle, not necessarily armed struggle. In 1977 Haki Karer, a well-liked recruiter and organizer for the group, was assassinated, ostensibly by a rival faction, but this was perceived as a part of a conspiracy by the Turkish intelligence services. In Öcalan's (2011) recollection this was the moment that truly radicalized the group and spurred the creation of the PKK. "Our political platform and the name of our organization, PKK, was set up and decided upon as an immediate consequence of his murder. We all regard it as his legacy" (113).

The PKK and After

In 1978 The Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, was officially established and in November of that year it held its first Party Congress. The formative cadre was composed primarily of poor and working class youth. Ideologically they adopted a rough hodgepodge of Marxist-Leninism and Kurdish nationalism. Öcalan (2011) explains that, "...our knowledge was obtained from a few books only, which we discussed and understood at beginner's level. Obviously, this insufficient understanding led to flawed analyses both of history and the current situation" (53). This kind of practical self-critique is common throughout Öcalan's and seems to express a genuine desire to learn and grow from mistakes. One suspects that this characteristic of reflection and adaptability was a key to the group's survival and success, more so than any particular points of their initial ideology. Despite their initial ideological shortcomings the group proved themselves to be highly capable organizers among the people. Crucially, they centered the so-called Kurdish question, i.e. the historic and contemporary status of Kurds in Turkey and the wider diaspora. Understandably this gained them wide popularity among marginalized and often brutalized Kurdish populations. As White (2015) explains "This emerging new movement faced an ideological climate in which the state and Turkish nationalist denied the very existence of the Kurdish people generally — and readily resorted to violence in an effort to stifle the movement" (30). The PKK was willing and able to meet force with force. Among their first actions as guerrillas the PKK targeted particularly hated landlords and officials they saw as colonial agents for the Turkish state. They were disciplined and bold but not particularly well trained so in 1980 PKK cadres relocated to militant training camps in Lebanon. That same year a military coup took power in Turkey. The PKK continued to train, build, and organize. As White (2015) notes, "[t]he party's Second Congress...set the PKK's military strategy, comprising three phases: defence, balance, and offence. Reminiscent of Mao's strategy of protracted war, this envisaged an proceeding in stages from asymmetrical guerrilla attack up to conventional war" (31). It was not until 1984 that this strategy saw sustained implementation; the PKK went to war against the Turkish state.

While noting some important achievements and military victories, today Öcalan is also very critical of this period. As the organization grew it began to lose sight of many of its principled commitments. Öcalan's critical reflection on this is worth quoting at length:

...many of the negative practices adopted during the formation phase of the PKK from real socialist praxis or from the system around us now came to light. Many activists also increasingly neglected our socialist ideology, which they had not internalized satisfactorily in the first place. Cadres affected by traditional Kurdish identity began to feel like little Nimrods because of the military and political power they suddenly had. Other with strong feudal traits assessed everything against their own qualities and ideas. To obtain their purposes, they played intensely on others' primitive nationalism. With their feudal mentality, backed by primitive nationalism, they became ever more brazen. They pillaged and destroyed what numerous

activists and supporters had accomplished. All in all, between 1987 and 1997 the PKK lost much of its original character and structure

(2011: 54)

Despite being able to garner widespread popular support among Kurds and possessing competent tactical capabilities against the state, the PKK began to fragment due to external pressure exerted by the war with the Turkish state and various poisonous internal squabbles and power struggles. In his self-critical recollections of this period, Öcalan points to a basic failure of strategy and wider vision. He writes unambiguously that, "...the essential reason for the shortcomings of the early PKK was its concept of the state and its approach to violence" (Öcalan 2011: 56). And yet the PKK endures. In the late 1990s, seeing the need for internal reforms, those still dedicated to the emancipatory ideals of the movement initiated a process of thoroughgoing reform. After Öcalan's capture in 1998 the PKK's ideological reconstruction continued and haltingly overtures toward some kind of peace process began to emerge with the PKK declaring a unilateral ceasefire in 1998, though it failed to hold. Another ceasefire was declared in 1999 and was formally maintained until 2004 (White 2015: 44). Meanwhile, Öcalan continued to write from prison and reevaluate his previous positions. At some point, Öcalan encountered the work of American libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin. It appears Öcalan saw in Bookchin (1995a; 1995b; 2005) a kindred spirit and took inspiration from his vision of decentralized non-state municipalism and ecological society. It is with this new direction, this turn away from the state power, that Öcalan's project of re-enchantment of the political really began.

2. Political Re-enchantment

Öcalan's project, what I call the re-enchantment of the political, relies on several interrelated conceptual elements, a framework. A full exposition is beyond the scope of this paper but I want to highlight two significant domains of Öcalan's theoretical framework. First, Öcalan's historicism is a constant and crucial feature of his mature thought. He argues that in order to have a proper grasp of present circumstances, one must develop an understanding of the recent and deep past. Öcalan emphasizes deep structural historical continuities running from prehistory to antiquity to modernity. As a revolutionary Öcalan does not reject historical change, rather he is adamant that substantive social transformations can only come through the acknowledgment of and ultimate dismantling of age-old oppressive structures. Second, through his historical analysis Öcalan delineates three epistemological systems—myth, hierarchical religion, and scientism—that make truth claims about the world and guide meaningful action. He calls these knowledge systems "methods," Öcalan views them as structuring socio-cultural meanings and practical action from era to era.

Öcalan's Reading of History

Even the slightest engagement with Öcalan's writings reveals a strong preoccupation with history, the history of Western Asia in particular. To appropriate Eric Wolf (1982) Kurds are a people without history, that is, their history has been obscured and marginalized by powerful states and empires. So it is unsurprising that Öcalan centers the historical agency of Kurds and celebrate their achievements in his analyses. At another level, however, Öcalan's historical concerns are more universal with cosmopolitan aims. A reader expecting to find in Öcalan's mature writings the typical political manifesto outlining immediate aims, strategies, or tactics will be disappointed. One will discover something much richer and subtler. Öcalan's is a diagnostic history: contemporary social maladies are seen as rooted in enduring historical relations. Once this is understood Öcalan's more immediate political goals and strategy become more apparent.

Öcalan historical analyses are indebted to the works of Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, V. Gordon Childe, and Robert J. Braidwood. Indeed, Öcalan's thought cannot be sufficiently understood without recognizing the centrality of Braudel's (2012) concept of *longue durée*, the long-term. The same can be said for Wallerstein's (2004) world-system, the spatial corollary of the *longue durée*. From this vantage point Öcalan's critical diagnosis of the problems of modernity begins in the deep past of the Neolithic, an era beginning in Western Asia approximately 12,000 years before present and ending roughly 5,000 BP. Childe's (1935; 1951) theory of the *Neolithic Revolution* is significant to

Öcalan's thinking. Childe identified the Neolithic as the transition zone from nomadic hunting and gather to settled agriculture and animal and plant domestication. In this transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age archaeologists discern the development of the first states. Braidwood's (1960) archaeological excavations along the Taurus-Zagros mountain ranges, which geographically define the northern arch of the Mesopotamian plain, showed this region to be among the earliest sites of plant and animal domestication. This is significant for Öcalan because these hilly flanks, Upper Mesopotamia, are considered the traditional Kurdish homeland. Öcalan's highly Kurd-centric reading of this history sees the ancestors of modern Kurds as key contributors to the Neolithic Revolution. Recent archaeological evidence supports the contention that ancient peoples of the hilly flanks were precocious domesticators, at least in terms of animal domestication (Zeder 2008). Though one may remain highly circumspect regarding how one might legitimately delineate and link these ancient peoples to contemporary cultures, especially in the context of the genetic and cultural crossroads of Western Asia.

Nevertheless, Öcalan's reading of the deep history of Western Asia forms a foundational element of his political thought. For it is in this context that he identifies the emergence of not only the proto-state but concomitantly the rise of patriarchy and the enslavement of women. In Öcalan's account this stands amongst the gravest historical crimes whose consequences we are still trying to overcome. Öcalan's reading of history sees the hierarchical social structures of the proto-states of the Neolithic and the fully-fledged states of the Bronze Age as built on the subjugation and enslavement of women. Öcalan (2017) makes use of the ancient three-tiered Sumerian ziggurat as a metaphor for long enduring hierarchical social institutions (57). This structural metaphor, interestingly enough, is paralleled in Braudel's (1981: 21) own metaphor of economic history as a three-storied house, material life at base, then markets, and capitalism. Braudel (2012) argued that historians must make use of short, medium, and long-term analytical frames. Historical change may be a constant but particular structural relations change at different tempos (243). Öcalan, for instance, argues that the rise and endurance of patriarchy underwrites hierarchical states and the ideology of human domination of nature. Öcalan (2017) juxtaposes the rise of patriarchy with what he believes to have been a previous era of widespread matricentric societies; a period of relative egalitarianism Öcalan dubs "primordial socialism" or "natural society" (61; 63). Öcalan characterizes the preceding history in terms of two key moments he calls the first and second sexual rupture. He predicts a third and forthcoming sexual rupture. The first sexual rupture—the rise of patriarchy and state—come about through an alliance of three figures, proto-priests arising from shamans, the strongman hunter, and elder males. Taken literally or at face value this seems to be a far too simple and linear view of a highly complex and spatio-temporally heterogeneous historic transition. Öcalan, however, seems to often make use of an abbreviated rhetorical style, heavy on metaphor and analogy. Öcalan characterizes the second sexual rupture as the intensification of patriarchy with the rise of the major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Women's subjugation is sacralized. To remedy this predicament, Öcalan calls for a third sexual rupture. Öcalan calls, metaphorically, for the necessity of "killing the dominant male" (87). Summing this thesis, Öcalan writes:

...man is a system. The male has *become* a state and turned this into dominant culture. Class and sexual oppression develop together; masculinity has generated ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state. When man is analysed in this context, it is clear that masculinity must be killed.
(2017: 89)

Öcalan's call for a radical reevaluation of gender relations has been taken up in Rojava and other areas of Kurdistan as a popular movement for women's liberation.

Öcalan's methods: myth, meaning, and a critique of scientism

Öcalan identifies three "methods"—mythology, hierarchical monotheistic religion, and positivist scientism—have historically constituted particular "regimes of truth," à la Foucault (1980). Öcalan sees the mythological method as the oldest and associates it with the Neolithic era. He believes the mythological method still holds important insights for the present and future. Öcalan explains, "[t]he

mythological approach is environmentally oriented, free of notions of fatalism and determinism and conducive to living life in freedom. Its fundamental approach to life is one of harmony with nature” (2015: 32). Öcalan is more critical of the latter two methods. He critiques hierarchal monotheism and positivist scientism as dogmatic and absolutists in character.

After arguing that the mythological method is a necessary and generative element of historical interpretation, Öcalan (2015) asserts that, “[t]he mythological method should be given back the prestige it lost when it was discredited by monotheistic religious dogma and by the scientific method; method alleging to bow to absolute laws.” In the same breath, however, in a seemingly contradictory move, he criticizes science as contemporary mythology. “...there are indications that many of the current scientific theories that are seen as the antipode of the mythological approach are themselves nothing but mere mythology” (33). What is going on here? Examining this seeming contradiction actually reveals a deeper consistency of Öcalan’s thought.

The philosopher of science Mary Midgley (2003) has articulated a position similar to that of Öcalan. Unlike the other authors mention in this paper I do not claim that Midgley had any influence whatsoever on Öcalan’s theorizing. But their conceptual convergence is enlightening nonetheless. Midgley explains, “[m]yths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning” (2003: 1). Put in this way it seems that for both Öcalan and Midgley mythology is inescapable. Mythology, however, does not exist in some timeless void or a realm of abstraction detached from reality but is rather deeply historical in its relation to daily life. “But really such symbolism is an integral part of our thought-structure. It does crucial work on all topics, not just a few supposedly marginal areas such as religion and emotion, where symbols are known to be at home, but throughout our thinking” (Midgley 2003: 1). This view led Midgley to what I might call a realist conception of myth. Myth can be wrong or maladaptive in as much as it misleads efforts to obtain human and ecological flourishing, the reverse is the case as well; myth is adaptive in as much as it contributes to flourishing. Mythic notions may serve a perfectly useful, and even an emancipatory, purpose in one historical context but become oppressive in another. For instance, Midgley, like Öcalan, is critical of Enlightenment notions of individualism, domination of nature, and the omniscience of science as having outworn their usefulness. “They are living parts of powerful myths – imaginative patterns that we all take for granted – ongoing dramas inside which we live our lives. These patterns shape the mental maps that we refer to when we want to place something” (Midgley 2003: 4). The role of myth in Midgley and Öcalan’s analyses is comparable (though with significant divergences) to Foucault’s (1980) *discourse* and Castoriadis’s (1998) *social imaginary* and Barthes’s (1972) *mythologies*. It seems, however, likely Öcalan’s critical stance toward scientism directly nods toward Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002 [1944]) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* wherein the authors denounce much of the dominant legacy of the Enlightenment as destructive myths, particularly what they views as the perniciousness of instrumental rationality.

Öcalan (2015) describes the rise and reign of dogmatic religious authority in antiquity as “the age of disguised kings and masked gods” and he describes capitalist modernity as “the age of naked kings and unmasked gods.” With Öcalan’s allusion to the process of stripping away in modernity one thinks of Marx and Engels’s famous lines lamenting advent of modern capitalism. “All that is solid melt into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (Marx and Engels 2008: 38). For Öcalan one of the key problems of capitalist modernity is its penchant for epistemological (and by implication ontological) dualism, positivism’s strict dichotomy of subject and object is one primary instance. Öcalan understands these and other modernist dualism as underwriting a warped view of human life and society, a view that facilitates oppression and exploitation. Characterizing his own critical approach, Öcalan (2015) explains, “[i]t is not an endeavor for an alternative method but rather an endeavor to find a solution to the problems that a life detached from the values of freedom creates” (39). Öcalan’s solution seems to entail a practical open-ended holism and a practical social intuition that at its core values and affirms the complex unity of life. Öcalan is concerned with the human being and the dynamic multi-tiered and interpenetrating relations of the individual and society and nature.

Öcalan contra Weber

Despite his fidelity to modernism Weber did not celebrate disenchantment as an unambiguous good. Indeed, he found its implications troubling, though unavoidable. Summarizing Hennis's (1989) assessment, Lassman (2000) explains, "[u]nderlying all of Weber's political thought is the problem of the continuing existence of the free human being under modern conditions of rationalization and disenchantment" (95). Weber (2004) first articulates this view in his 1917 lecture *Science as a Vocation*, followed shortly by his *Politics as a Vocation*. These lectures complement each other. The first of these essays diagnosis the loss of meaning and guiding values as a fundamental condition of modernity. The later essay sketches the political consequences of this disillusionment, or devaluation of values. Science first appears to have filled the existential void left by dissolution of values that it facilitated. Weber, however, finds science ultimately lacking. For Weber science is a methodology that cannot provide its own warrant precisely because it can say nothing of values or meaning. Valueless science becomes the model for an age of instrumentalism. Consequently, the rationalized bureaucratic state stands as the inescapable political corollary of positivistic scientism. Thus Weber, though in many ways trailing Nietzsche, announces the modern dilemma. Öcalan (2017) expresses his affinity for Nietzsche in this regard, writing, "[t]he great philosopher Nietzsche (it would be right to call him the strongest oppositional prophet of the capitalist era) was the first to notice the dangers associated with the 1870 declaration of the German nation-state" (237). Beyond his critique of the state, Nietzsche's appeal for Öcalan can be seen in their shared stance toward affirmation of meaningful life against rationalistic pessimism and political nihilism. In aims of overcoming, Nietzsche too, can be seen as seeking his own re-enchantment of life against the mediocrity of modernity.

Öcalan's political re-enchantment and the politics of reasonableness

Öcalan, while acknowledging the disenchantment thesis, does not share Weber pessimism concerning the inevitable historical necessity of instrumentalist bureaucratic state. Öcalan, in agreement with Bookchin (2005), views history not as a closed system marching inevitably toward a grey destiny of bureaucratic rationality but rather as an open-ended struggle entailing a legacy of both domination and freedom.

When I claim that Öcalan has re-encharnted politics I must be clear that this re-enchantment in no way constitutes a return to a pre-modern reliance on superstition, religious authority, or folkloric magical thinking. Öcalan's political re-enchantment is not a resurgent political primitivism or neo-romanticism. Öcalan certainly values and celebrates what he sees as the real achievement of previous eras and believes those achievements should be recovered if they are useful. The force of Öcalan's thought, however, is directed toward the present and future. For instance, Öcalan sees great value in the wisdom contained in ancient mythology and recuperation of this wisdom is an element of Öcalan's project of re-enchantment but this cannot be read as simply a desire to return to a pristine past. The Hegelian concept of *aufheben*, the simultaneous movement of preservation, change, and progressive transformation, is helpful here. Unlike the old Jacobins of the French revolution, Öcalan does not want to wipe the slate of history clean and restart the calendar at year zero. His revolutionary project is preservative as well as transformative. A core transformative or supersessional element of Öcalan's project entails the immanence of ethics and values to political form. In other words, Öcalan views politics as existing in substantial ethical praxis rather than the domain of formal or abstract right. In this sense, for Öcalan, politics cannot be something outside or above society but immanent to it. Bookchin (1995a), perhaps the most salient influence on Öcalan's mature thought, draws an important distinction between politics and statecraft. Statecraft entails, "...the exercise of its monopoly of violence, its control of the entire regulative apparatus of society in the form of legal and ordinance-making bodies, and its governance of society as a means professional legislators, armies, polices forces, and bureaucracies" (220). In contrast, Bookchin understands politics to mean something more "organic" and "intimate." The political is a particular form of sociality. "Politics, conceived as an activity, involves rational discourse, public empowerment, the exercise of practical reason, and its

realization in a shared, indeed participatory, activity” (221). Bookchin and Öcalan’s projects of political re-enchantment significantly coincide. As Bookchin explains:

In calling for the ‘re-enchanting’ of humanity, I refer – playfully – to the importance of recognizing humanity’s *potentiality* for creating a rational, ecologically oriented, aesthetically exciting, and a deeply humane world based on an ethics of complementarity and a society of sharing

(1995b: 232)

This is a vision shared by Öcalan but it took the outbreak of the Syrian civil war for it to come to the world’s attention.

3. Contemporary Rojava and the implementation of the politics of reasonableness

TO BE CONTINUED...

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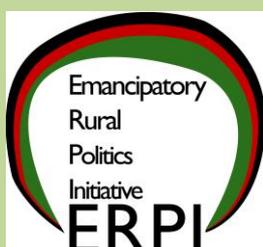
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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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