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From Marxism and nationalism to radical democracy: Abdullah Öcalan’s synthesis for the 21st century

“Call for Papers” Topic 1

Introduction

His name is very well-known in Turkey, but he remains largely a mystery to the outside world. He is a hero for many Kurds and a blood-thirsty criminal for the majority of Turks. Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). He made dramatic turn, which began in the 1990s, from the lionized leader of the PKK to an intellectual who largely eschews the violence of his past. Öcalan currently resides in the Turkish prison of Imrali, where he penned his three-volume *Prison Writings* (Öcalan, 2007, 2011, 2012).

For almost 15 years Öcalan has languished in a Turkish prison as the only inmate guarded by 1500 Turkish soldiers. Abdullah Öcalan is a solitary figure, sitting in a remote Turkish prison off the Sea of Marmara. He thus had lots of time to re-think the strategies of the struggle for Kurdish rights and independence. He also reflected on other key issues: the violent guerrilla tactics and strategies of his Marxist-inspired PKK, the nature of the Turkish state and its ideological foundations, the divisions and feudal structures of the Kurds, the history of civilization, and new models to resolve the Kurdish question and the problems of humanity at large.

Öcalan’s novelty is his historical approach to the Kurds and more broadly Middle Eastern civilizations. This paper advances a Gramscian interpretation of Öcalan based on his numerous writings, after his capture by the Turkish state, especially *The Road Map*, but argues that the PKK leader has moved to a more radical “democratic autonomy” position superseding the former Italian Communist leader.

Born in Ales, Sardinia (Italy) in 1891, Antonio Gramsci, was a political theorist and former leader of the Italian Communist Party. A hero for Marxists in Italy and around the world for his resistance to the Fascist rule of Benito Mussolini, Gramsci wrote his own prison writings while in jail and died in a government-controlled clinic in Rome in 1937 (Gramsci, 1971, 1992, 1996, 2007). I utilize Antonio Gramsci to help us understand cultural-civilizational sea changes that allow political space for new ideological syntheses (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 445; 506-507). Following Gramsci, I use Öcalan’s writings to stress the role of intellectuals in history. Intellectual ideas play a key role

in shaping history and molding consensus among the people in civil society in favor of or against a reigning ideological framework. An intellectual is a person whose profession is centered on the production and dissemination of ideas. Antonio Gramsci (1971, pp. 131-133) distinguished between “organic” and “traditional” intellectuals, with the former wedded to a particular social class (bourgeoisie or proletariat) and the latter connected to the older socio-economic order and “hegemonic project.” Öcalan is neither an agent of the bourgeoisie and not the proletariat in the dogmatic Marxist sense because he has criticized the one party dogmatism of Communist states and the PKK’s narrow-minded socialism of the past. So, for example, in *Prison Writings I*, Öcalan (2007, pp. 234-236) stated that socialist and national liberation movements “made excessive use of violence”; the Communist One-party state was a “tool for the strict implementation of a totalitarian understanding of government”; the “dictatorship of the proletariat” slogan was “largely motivated by propaganda purposes”; and there can be “no socialism without democracy.”

Öcalan’s theoretical influences are diverse. Democratic theory, ecological anarchist Murray Bookchin, Immanuel Wallerstein, the New Left, feminist theory, Marx, and Hegel influence Öcalan’s thought. So, for example, Öcalan’s focus in recent years on democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy beyond the state is influenced by the ecological anarchist Murray Bookchin (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2013). His goal is a new civilizational model in which “democratic civilization” will be merely one component of a still emerging global, civilizational synthesis. Öcalan favors “contemporary democracy” and federalist principles, while longing for a new historical synthesis of world civilizations (2007, pp. 255-256). A new “democracy of the people,” argues Öcalan (2007, p.237), will fail in the Middle East if it is not “superior” to Western democracy. This bold assertion reinforces the Hegelian idea that history unfolds towards universal, civilizational progress and that “contemporary democracy” is for now the highest expression of this progress. If a new civilizational synthesis emerges, sustains Öcalan, it will need to build on the real historical progress made as a consequence of the emergence of “democratic civilization”: individualism, the rule of law, rule by the people, secularism, and women’s rights.

Linking Gramsci and Öcalan

I use Gramsci’s writings in prison, his example, and his theoretical insights in order to explain the transformation of Öcalan’s thinking. In addition, I suggest that *The Road Map*’s contents offer the Kurds, Turks, and other peoples in the Middle East a way out of the blind alleys of authoritarianism, uncritical nationalism, and statist assimilationism.

Moreover, I argue that *The Road Map* is a text linked to a Gramscian metapolitical vocation. “Metapolitical vocation” here implies the following: (1) intellectuals rejecting direct and activist parliamentary or extra-parliamentary political interventions and focusing their energies on changing hearts and minds and the “conquest” of civil society; (2) a fixation on what Robert Nozick (1974 in Zaibert, 2004, p. 113) argued was “the fundamental question of political philosophy, one that precedes questions about how the state should be organized”; and (3) a sophisticated form of politics that is not a flight from politics, but a continuation of “war” through “non-violent” means (Bar-On, 2013, p.3). In order to distance himself from fascist or Bolshevik strategies of a “frontal assault on the state,” Öcalan advanced Gramsci’s notion of a “war of position,” or the centrality of a politics of ideological struggle (Bar-On, 2013, p. 3).

Gramsci (1971, p. 481) pointed out that political struggle is “enormously more complex” than war because it includes both elements of consensus and force. Furthermore, Gramsci (1971, pp. 479-480) insisted that “the greater the mass of the apolitical, the greater the part played by illegal forces has to be,” or conversely “the greater the politically organized and educated forces, the more it is necessary to ‘cover’ the legal State.” Gramsci (1971, p. 481) pointed out that there were “three forms of war”: war of movement, war of position, and underground warfare. He explains that Gandhi’s passive resistance is “a war of position, which at certain moments becomes a war of movement, and at others underground warfare.” (Gramsci, 1971, p.481) He also underscores that boycotts fall under the ambit of war of position, strikes are a type of war of movement, and the secret preparation of weapons and combat troops are considered underground warfare (Gramsci, 1971, p. 481).

Öcalan’s understanding of the “war of position” has indeed changed since his capture by the Turkish state. Öcalan’s call for the global spread of democratic civilization, scathing criticisms of narrow nationalism and dogmatic Marxism, and rejection of the utilization of violence should be viewed in the context of these global changes. Öcalan’s “conversion” process should be analyzed with respect to external forces combined with internal reflections precipitated by his prison experiences (Bar-On, 2009, p. 258). What Öcalan shares with the Hegelian and Marxist perspectives is that history progressively unfolds towards more rational and higher spiritual, socio-economic, or political frameworks on a universal scale (Bar-On, 2009, p. 258).

Like Gramsci, Öcalan posits a less dogmatic view of history in which there is no “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 3-18) and political struggles remain perpetually open and subject to constant movement and change. He is also, like Gramsci, a proponent of the importance of the conquest of civil society because this is where revolutionary activity should be directed in the contemporary world. For Öcalan, civil society “comprises the tool of democratic possibilities - that opens the door to developments hitherto impossible.” (Öcalan, 2007, p. 227) It is through the terrain of culture, including the media, Internet, education system and popular consciousness, which Öcalan hopes to lead the Kurdish people to their “promised land” of liberation in a manner that was impossible through the armed struggle.

Öcalan’s ceasefire call from Imrali Prison in the spring of 2013 continued his faith in the possibilities of radical change through civil society and the “war of position.” Yet, like Gramsci, for Öcalan the option of armed force is not completely taken off the table. The use of PKK armed force will depend on whether the Turkish state fulfills its commitment to the Kurds in terms of the agreed upon road map, respects individual rights such as free expression and equality, and guarantees Kurdish collective rights, including legal, linguistic, educational, and broadcasting rights.

Öcalan (2008) argues that independence is not a necessary precondition for respecting Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights: “Equal rights within a democratic Turkey” is the slogan. As Öcalan (2008: 39) wrote, “I offer the Turkish society a simple solution. We demand a democratic nation. We are not opposed to the unitary state and republic. We accept the republic, its unitary structure and laicism [secularism]. However, we believe that it must be redefined as a democratic state respecting peoples, cultures and rights.” Recall that Gramsci’s “war of position” contained

non-violent elements such as boycotts, while the use of force could also be an option through “underground warfare.”

Analysis of Prison Writings III: The Road Map

I argue that *The Road Map* is wedded to a Gramscian metapolitical vocation, but that the contents of the document are more radical proposals than the ideas of the former leader of the Italian Communist Party.

In Part I, Öcalan’s solutions for the resolution of the Kurdish question echo the concerns of protesters like Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados (Indignants) movement in Spain and Portugal, popular anti-government protests in Greece, and the Arab Spring in terms of the desire for direct rather than representative democracy, criticism of the disproportionate power of money in the political process, and the more radical demand to democratize society by going “beyond earlier modernist political projects” and thus end the division between rulers and ruled (Gill, 2008, p.245). Whereas Gramsci and Öcalan once saw the Communist Party as a key agent in the counter-hegemonic struggle, today Öcalan is a prophet of a more radical, popular democracy that challenges both states and dogmatic leftist elites. Öcalan is a proponent of “democratic autonomy,” which is a form of democracy that takes citizens in civil society as its starting point; moves beyond elections as central to democracy; and challenges representatives as the key agents of the democratic process (e.g., party leaders, politicians, state officials, etc.).

As a supporter of “democratic autonomy,” Öcalan opines that civil society (including minorities, cultural groups, religious communities, etc.) and direct forms of democracy replace “representative” political elites as the main agents of democracy and social change. (Öcalan 2008, p. 32)

Whereas in the past the goal of the PKK was a “national liberation struggle” with the aim of an independent Kurdish state in Turkey, its aim today is a project of “radical democracy.” In his attempts to supersede a sterile and dogmatic Marxism, Öcalan sought to think of democratic practices outside the state, the PKK (the movement or party), and a narrow class focus (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2013). This “radical democracy” not only attempts to struggle against existing political institutions and Old Left thinking, but offers an alternative to the neo-liberal project where market civilization increasingly supplants democracy. The project of “radical democracy” is not only changing the PKK, but also influencing radical, leftist social and political movements, from the “liberation movements” of Latin America to the anti-globalization demonstrations in North America and Europe (Akkaya and Jongerden, 2013).

In Part II, Öcalan outlines his key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and principles, which presumably would allow for the democratization of Turkey and the Middle East at large.

Like Gramsci in another age, Öcalan has left the world of dogmatic Marxism. He argues that democratization is not merely “the dictatorship of the proletariat” or class war, but the protection of free speech and free association for all individuals, irrespective of their class position, culture, language, ethnicity, or faith (Öcalan, 2012, p. 20). Moreover, while he insists that the Kurdish problem can be resolved within the context of a Turkish, secular republic, Öcalan rejects

the idea that it can be definitively decided through the project of the nation-state (Öcalan, 2012, p. 20). For Öcalan, a nation-state represents homogenization, assimilation, and at its worst the specter of genocide. Öcalan (2012, p. 21) insists that Turkey could even become a “nation of nations.” He is adamant that the collective rights of Kurds or Turks must be balanced with a respect for individual rights.

The democratic solution principle will attempt to democratize civil society, while civil society will not aim to topple the state (Öcalan, 2012, p. 30). The democratic solution springs from the forces of civil society rather than state-driven engineering. It seeks to protect civil society; constitutionally safeguard democratic institutions; and would not negate the existence of the state. Öcalan’s focus on civil society as the key motor for historical change echoes Gramsci, but also Rosanvallon and other proponents of more direct forms of democracy. There is even an anarchist strain in the PKK leader’s thought with the critique of state power, bureaucracies, and dogmatic Marxism, and desire for bottom-up democratic participation.

No political solution will work, argues Öcalan, without the appropriate balance between collective rights (state, civil society, Kurds, etc.) and individual rights. In a Gramscian tone, Öcalan (2012, p. 31) argues that the “ideological hegemony” of what he calls “capitalist modernity” and “positivism” must be superseded. In this respect, civil society can play a key role in undermining the prevailing pro-statist and pro-capitalist ideological hegemony.

The morality and conscience principle entails the importance of religion and morality in democratic decision-making. Abstract reason and administrative solutions will merely aggravate problems, or at worst lead to genocides (Öcalan, 2012, pp. 33-34). Here Öcalan indirectly pays homage to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) written by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002). Modernity was a dialectical process consisting of both cultural advances and barbarism, argued Adorno and Horkheimer. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the modern Enlightenment’s attempts to counter myth with reason led to the “mythology” of a modern world dominated by excessive faith in “instrumental reason.” From this perspective, the horrors of the Holocaust can be interpreted as merely a continuation of the project of modernity with its extreme, utopian faith in “instrumental reason” and technological progress. For Öcalan, “capitalist modernity” also entails contradictory progressive and barbaric processes in which the Kurds’ conservatism and feudalism can be superseded and yet new structures of domination are imposed through the universal spread of capitalism.

In part IV, Öcalan maintains that he has learned from the Turkish state and his incarceration. For Öcalan, the armed struggle is identified as “a fight for truth.” (Öcalan, 2012, p.78) Did not Gramsci also learn from prison through his writings and the re-thinking of strategies in order to defeat capitalism? The “truth” that the armed struggle revealed is not that the Kurds need a state (as this state may replicate the assimilationist Turkish state), but rather “the existence of the Kurds.” (Öcalan, 2012, p. 78) The PKK is today more concerned with finding democratic solutions within Turkey rather than the armed struggle, attaining a nation-state, or socialism. In this respect, Öcalan has superseded Gramsci’s attachment to the Italian Communist Party.

A Gramscian reading of *The Road Map* allows us to see how changes in mentalities and civil society are preludes to revolutionary political change. Gramsci stressed the role of hegemonic and

counter-hegemonic ideas in civil society rather than merely the repressive apparatus of the state in the maintenance of liberal, capitalist democracies. Öcalan is convinced that for the first time in history the Kurdish-Turkish conflict can be solved through discussions and without arms. This position strengthened as a result of Öcalan's incarceration in 1999, but it has its genesis in Öcalan's turn towards "democratic autonomy" in the early 1990s. His claim is that "democratic civilization" is spreading worldwide and this will assist the Kurds in their struggle for their rights.

What is remarkable about Öcalan's *Road Map* is that he has presented the Turkish state a framework for the resolution of the "Kurdish problem." Öcalan comes off as a peacemaker. This is a remarkable transition for a man that once lived by the gun. Imrali prison is a bitter pill for Öcalan to swallow, but it has perhaps transformed the lionized PKK leader into a veritable Gramsci of our times.

Öcalan is a new breed of organic intellectuals of "subaltern forces helping to organize workers, peasants and indigenous peoples," as well as other hitherto neglected groups in civil society from women and Kurds in the Middle East (Gill, 2008, p. 182). Öcalan represents a larger wave of movements in the new millennium, which Gramsci scholar Stephen Gill has called "the post-modern Prince", or "a set of progressive political forces in movement." (Gill, 2008, p. 182) These movements, including an array of indigenous movements in Latin America, Occupy Wall Street, and some elements in the Arab Spring, are proposing more innovative forms of political agency, which question the division between rulers and ruled (Gill, 2008, p. 237-248). While Öcalan's attention to the importance of civil society echoes Gramsci, his proposals in *The Road Map* for a more plural, inclusive, and flexible form of politics that rejects neo-liberal globalization, statist nationalism, and the Communist Party transform the ideas of the Italian Communist hero. Despite his incarceration, Öcalan has "singlehandedly shaped the Kurdish issue within the Turkish republic." (Kiel, 2011, p. 1) Yet, his radical democratic proposals for the resolution of the Kurdish "problem," if implemented, will lead to the loss of real power for Öcalan, the PKK, and leaders and states throughout the Middle East. In his embrace of "democratic autonomy" from the bottom-up and rejection of the dogmatism of the party or state, Öcalan is more revolutionary than Gramsci.

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