

Preface

By David Graeber

Marx believed it was imagination that made us human: unlike bees, architects first imagine the houses they would like to build, and only then set about actually constructing them. In a sense, the great question driving all revolutionary thought is simply this: if we can do this with our houses, why can't we do it with the social order as a whole? Because after all, how many of us, were we to simply imagine a society we would like to live in, would come up with anything remotely like the ones that currently exist? Yet almost every serious effort to proceed like the architect, to simply imagine what a just society should be like, and then set about creating it, seems to lead to frustration or disaster.

One might well argue that this is why we have social theory. The very idea of a social science is born from the ruins of revolutionary projects. We imagine the social equivalents of floating palaces and Tatlin's Towers, we try to build them, and find ourselves watching in dismay as they crash and crumble all around us. Surely, there must be some social equivalents to the laws of physics and gravitation that we were unaware of. As the

positivists argued in the wake of the French revolution, or Marx when he wrote *Capital* in wake of the failed revolutions of 1848, perhaps if we understood those laws, we can also understand how to avoid such pitfalls in the future. Yet every attempt to apply such a scientific approach to human society—whether by right or left, whether it takes the form of neoclassical economics or historical materialism—has proved if anything even more disastrous.

One problem—at least, this is what a lot of revolutionaries around the world began to realize by the 1990s—is that we were working with a decidedly limited notion of imagination. After all, even architects don't build their designs out of nothing, and when they do, most would prefer not to live in the sort of structures they create. And some of the most vital, most creative, most imaginative revolutionary movements of the dawn of the new millennium—the Zapatistas of Chiapas are only the most obvious, perhaps—have been those that, simultaneously, root themselves most strongly in a deep traditional past. There was a growing recognition, in revolutionary circles, that freedom, tradition, and the imagination have always been—and presumably, always will be, entangled in one another in ways that we do not completely understand. Our theoretical tools are inadequate.

Perhaps the only thing we can do at this point is to return to the past and start over.

In such circumstances, one might say, the more ambitious the thinker, the further back into the past one is likely to reach. If so, Öcalan's work, over the last fifteen years of his captivity, has been nothing if not ambitious. True, he carefully avoids taking on the role of the prophet. The latter would be easy enough, under the circumstances: to speak *ex cathedra* in epochal declarations like some latter-day Zarathustra. Clearly he does not wish to do this. At the same time, a radical by temperament, neither does he want to sit at anybody else's feet. He is never quite satisfied even with the thinkers he most admires—Bookchin, Braudel, Foucault; rather, he wishes to speak, as a self-proclaimed amateur, about a history and social science that does not currently exist, but itself, perhaps, can only be imagined. What would a sociology of freedom actually be like? One can only guess. Surely, existing

social theory has confined itself above all to those dimensions of social life in which we are not free, in which we can at least imagine that our actions are predetermined by forces beyond our control.

Above all else, Öcalan's intellectual project is driven by a recognition that the revolutionary left's embrace of positivism, the notion that it would even be possible to create this sort of science of society, has been the "disease of modernity," the religion of its technocrats and officials, and, for the revolutionary left, an unmitigated disaster—since it means nothing to those classes that actually create things:

It is with pain and anger that I have to admit that the noble struggle that has raged for the past one hundred and fifty years was carried out on the basis of a vulgar, materialist positivism doomed to failure. The class struggle underlies this approach. However, the class—contrary to what they believe—is not the workers and laborers resisting enslavement, but the petit bourgeoisie who has long ago surrendered and became part of modernity. Positivism is the ideology that has formed this class's perception and underlies its meaningless reaction against capitalism.

Even worse, such an ideology ensures any revolutionary experiment can only be instantly reincorporated into the logic of capitalist modernity, as past revolutions have invariably done.

How does one begin to go about developing an alternative—one that would do justice to the sense of meaning, mystery, creativity, even divinity, that escapes the calculations of the traders and bureaucrats, but so clearly informs the daily existence of the majority of the laboring classes of this earth? We can only begin by turning back to history, to try to understand how this situation came about to begin with. But this, in turn, means that to a certain extent, we must be dealing in myth. I should hasten to add: here I mean myth not in its (positivist) colloquial sense of "story that isn't true," but rather, in the sense that any historical account that doesn't simply describe events but organizes them in such a way to tell a larger, meaningful story, thus necessarily takes on a mythic character. If your history is not in some sense mythic, then it's meaningless. In this sense, there's obviously nothing wrong with creating myths—it's hard to imagine how an effective

political movement could *not* do so. Positivists do it too. The key thing is that one is honest about what one is doing while one is doing it.

Here Öcalan is nothing if not honest. Disarmingly so. His own sense of greater meaning, he explains, traces back into his own well of mythic imagery from his childhood beside the Zagros mountains, once haunts of Dionysus' Maenads, from his lingering guilt at tearing the heads off birds to his first experience of the divine in the children's play of village girls temporarily set free from patriarchal authority. Let us assume, he effectively says, there is something universal here. That such experiences speak to the historical tragedy of a region whose women once made unprecedented contributions to human civilization, but which has ever since been reduced to a bloody plaything of empire:

Upper Mesopotamia became a region of battle and continuously changed hands between the Roman Empire and the two Persian Iranian Empires of the Parthians and the Sassanids. It thus became a region which was no longer a source of civilisations but a region of destruction. ... It is one of the most tragic developments of history that it has always been subjected to incursion, occupation, annexation and exploitation by other forces. It is like the fate suffered by women: although she has achieved the biggest cultural revolution, she has been violated the most.

In a sense, one can say that Öcalan here begins with that sense of outrage that has sparked a thousand patriarchal rebellions through history ("we are being treated like women!") and instead concludes that, if we do not wish to reproduce the same endlessly destructive pattern, we must turn the logic entirely on its head.

How to do so? Well, over the course of the twentieth century, I think it's fair to say that there have been two great civilizational narratives that have managed to capture the popular imagination, and thus, that have had profound political effects.

The first actually traces back to Enlightenment stories about the origins of social inequality. In its contemporary variant, it runs something like this: Once upon a time, human beings lived in happy little egalitarian bands of hunter/gatherers. Innocent of power and dominance, they

lacked any real social structure at all. Things began to go downhill with the invention of agriculture, which created the possibility of storable surpluses and invidious distinctions of property, but the real fundamental break came with the emergence of cities, and hence, civilization—that is, “civilization” in the literal sense, which simply means people living in cities. The concentration of population and resources urbanism made possible was held to inevitably also mean the rise of ruling classes capable of seizing control of those surpluses, hence, states, slavery, conquering armies, ecological devastation, but also, at the same time, writing, science, philosophy, and organized religion. Civilization thus came as a package. One could embrace it as inevitable, accept violent inequalities as the price of human progress, or one could dream of someday returning to some new version of the old Edenic state—either by revolutionary transformation, technological progress, or, in some radical versions, by encouraging industrial collapse and returning to being actual hunter/gatherers again. But civilization itself was a single entity, the inevitable outgrowth of the original sin of domesticating animals and plants, and its essence could not be modified, just embraced, or rejected.

The other story was quite different. Call it the Myth of the Aryan invaders. Here the story begins: once upon a time, there was a matriarchal civilization that stretched across the Fertile Crescent and beyond. In just about all hunter/gatherer societies, women are the experts in plant life; logically, then, it was assumed that women must have invented agriculture, and that this is the reason for the extraordinary emphasis on goddess-figures, and representations of powerful women more generally, during the first five thousand years or so of agrarian life. Here the rise of cities was not considered to be inherently problematic—Minoan Crete, a Bronze-Age urban civilization whose language we cannot read, but whose art lacks any representations of male figures of authority of any kind—was often held out as the peaceful, graceful, artistic culmination of this Neolithic matriarchal order. The real point of rupture came not with the rise of cities but with the incursions of patriarchal, nomadic or semi-nomadic invaders, such as the Semitic tribes who descended on the Tigris and Euphrates from the surrounding deserts, but even more, the Indo-European or Aryan cattle-people who were assumed to have spread out somewhere in what’s

now Southern Russia to lands as far away as Ireland and the Ganges valley, bringing their languages, their warrior aristocracies, their heroic epics, and sacrificial ritual. Again, one could identify with either side. For many poets, romantics, revolutionaries, and feminists, this was the wistful dream of a lost, pacifistic, collectivist paradise. Imperialists tended to turn the whole story on its head: British colonial officials, for instance, were notorious for trying to identify such “manly warrior races” to favor, over the supposedly passive, “effeminate” peasants they were forced to administer. And as in so many things, the Nazis simply applied colonial logic back to Europe again. Hitler, notoriously, identified entirely with the patriarchal invaders, reframing it as the overcoming of inferior womanly stock by their virile natural overlords.

What Öcalan is doing here is taking the same pieces and putting them together in quite a different way. In doing so, he is taking the lead from the unique situation of his native Kurdistan, in the mountainous northern fringes of that very Fertile Crescent where agriculture seems to have first emerged. Noting that “Ari” in Kurdish means “related to earth, place, field,” he argues that the original Indo-Europeans, or “Aryans,” were not pastoral invaders at all, but the inventors of agriculture, and of the Neolithic culture which effectively created much of the everyday life we still take for granted, our most basic habits in terms of food, shelter, our sense of spirituality and community. This was a revolutionary transformation of human life and as Öcalan stresses, it was a revolution created above all by women free of patriarchal authority. Such was its obvious appeal that it spread across the world, often taking Indo-European languages with it, not by migration, but by the sheer power of example, and the cosmopolitan flow of individuals and hospitality that this new and largely peaceful agrarian world made possible. The counterforce here is not the nomads, but again, the rise of cities, and particularly the ideological ground laid by the Sumerian priesthood, who managed to introduce the subordination of women, and the seeds of the state, mystifying ideology, the factory system and the brothel, all at the same time. The predatory elites, often of nomadic extraction, only then imposed themselves on a structure that already existed, ensuring that the rest of history would also be marked by endless, spectacular, pointless, wars.

This is what Öcalan calls “civilization”—an order that presents itself as gentility, moderation, legality, and reason, but whose actual essence is rape, terror, treachery, cynicism, and war. Much of the conflict of the last five thousand years has been between the violence of this originally urban system of human exploitation, and the values that still exist in the enduring Neolithic bedrock of our collective existence. Here his analysis of the role of ideology—and particularly, religion—takes a number of surprising turns.

It is precisely—if paradoxically—because of the revolutionary nature of social change that the logic of revealed religions make intuitive sense. Rather than the positivist sensibilities which—for all its disavowals since the crash of Fabian dreams in the First World War—still assumes history is mainly characterized by progress, that social change is normal and relatively incremental and benevolent phenomenon—since it really can’t imagine anything else, real history is more typically marked by intense moments of social imagination, the creation of patterns of life that then doggedly remain with us, in relatively the same form, for millennia thereafter. The Neolithic revolution, as Gordon Childe originally dubbed it, involved the invention of patterns of life—everything from techniques of animal husbandry or putting cheese on bread to the habits of sitting on pillows or chairs—that remained, afterwards, fixtures of human existence. The same is true of our basic social categories like domestic life, art, politics, religion: “generally speaking, the social realities created in the Fertile Crescent during the Neolithic are still in existence today.” In that sense we are all still living in the Neolithic. What the holy books like the Avesta, the Bible or Koran teach, then—that the truths that underpin our lives were the product of moments of divine revelation long ago—appeal to ordinary farmers, workmen and tradespeople not because they mystify the conditions of their existence, or not primarily so; rather, they make intuitive sense because, in many very real ways, what they are saying is true—or more true than the alternate rationalist theology of the bureaucrats. In a larger sense, religion, ideology, “metaphysics,” becomes both the domain in which one can speak truths that cannot be expressed otherwise, but also a battlefield for struggles over meaning whose political implications could not be more profound. What is one

to make of the prominence of Mother Goddess figures like Ishtar or Cybele in times of patriarchal domination? Are they not, Öcalan argues, both expressions of, and weapons in, battles over the meaning of gender relations, and the actual power of real-life men and women, whose very existence might otherwise have been entirely lost?

Academics are snobbish creatures, they tend to dismiss anyone infringing on their territory unless they can be reduced to an object of study in their own right. No doubt many will object: how much of this really stands up? Considering the circumstances under which the book was written, I'd say the achievement here is quite impressive. Abdullah Öcalan seems to have done a better job writing with the extremely limited resources allowed him by his jailers than authors like Francis Fukuyama or Jared Diamond did with access to the world's finest research libraries. True, much of the picture defies the current wisdom of professional archeologists, anthropologists, and historians. But often this is a good thing, and anyway, this wisdom is itself in a process of continual transformation. The past is always changing. The one thing we *can* be sure of is that fifty years from now, much that is now accepted without question will have gone by the boards.

Still, in one way, this study does smack up against what has been a particular point of scholarly resistance when it embraces the idea of early matriarchy. Most theories ebb and flow with intellectual fashion; there's a generational pattern where theories once widely embraced (Karl Polanyi or Moses Finley's ideas of the ancient economy are nice examples) come to be universally rejected, then once again revived. In the case of theories of matriarchy, or even ones that granted women a uniquely exalted status in Neolithic societies, this has not happened. To even speak of such matters has become something of a taboo. In part, no doubt, it is because the idea continues to be so eagerly embraced by precisely the tendencies within feminism that academics tend to take least seriously, but even so, resistance is so stubborn it's hard to avoid the conclusion there's some kind of profound patriarchal bias here at play.

(It is a telling sign that the most common objections here make little logical sense. The most common is an appeal to the ethnographic record: while Neolithic and Chalcolithic art, not to mention Minoan art,

does seem to represent a social order in which women hold almost all authoritative positions, there is little or no evidence for similar societies in the anthropological literature. True. But the ethnographic record also contains no evidence for democratically organized city-states like ancient Athens, and we know that they existed, indeed, that such city-states were fairly common in the late Iron Age, before largely disappearing around 300 BCE. But even if one does insist on ethnographic parallels, the logic doesn't work. Because another common argument is that the existence of a material culture in which virtually all representations of powerful figures are female demonstrates nothing in itself, since these might simply be mythological scenes, and actual social life might have been organized entirely differently. However, no one has ever managed to produce an example of a patriarchal society in which artistic representations focus nearly exclusively on images of powerful women, mythical or otherwise, either. So either way, we are dealing with something ethnographically unprecedented. The fact that almost all scholars, however, take that to mean we must conclude that men were running things, strikes me as a clear an example of patriarchal bias as it is possible to find.)

Like anthropologists, archeologists and historians have developed the annoying habit of writing only for each other. Most don't even write anything that would be meaningful for scholars in other disciplines, let alone for anyone outside the academy. This is unfortunate, because in recent decades, information has begun to accumulate that could, potentially, throw all our received understandings into disarray. Almost all the key assumptions of the civilizational narrative we have been telling, in one way or another, since the time of Rousseau, appear to be based on false assumptions—ones that are simply factually incorrect. Hunter/gatherers for instance do not live exclusively in tiny bands, and they are not necessarily all that egalitarian (many seem to have had seasonal patterns of creating hierarchies, and then tearing them down again.) Early cities, in contrast, were often startlingly egalitarian. Before the birth of the ziggurat system to which Öcalan draws attention, there was perhaps a millennium of egalitarian urbanism about which we know very little. But the implications are potentially extraordinary—particularly

because, once you know what to look for, egalitarian experiments begin to appear everywhere across human history. “Civilization” or even what we call “the state” are not single entities that come as a package, take it or leave it, but uncomfortable amalgams of elements that may now be in the process of drifting apart. All of these processes of rethinking will have enormous political implications. In some areas I suspect it will soon be evident that we have been asking all the wrong questions. To take just one example: It is almost universally assumed that creating equality or democracy in a small group is relatively easy, but that to operate on a larger scale would create enormous difficulties. It’s becoming clear that this simply isn’t true. Egalitarian cities, even regional confederacies, are historically commonplace. Egalitarian households are not. It’s the small scale, the level of gender relations, household servitude, the kind of relations that contain at once the deepest forms of structural violence and the greatest intimacy, where the most difficult work of creating a free society will have to take place.

In this context, it seems to me that Öcalan is asking precisely the right questions, or many of them, at a moment when doing so could hardly be more important. Let us only hope that as political movements learn the lessons of history, as new social theories are born, as they will inevitably be, and as our knowledge of the past is likewise revolutionized, and that the author of this book will be released from his present captivity and able to participate as a free man.