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Blackness and Democratic Modernity

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“Modernity as a concept means time, the present. There are different moderns, depending on the age. From Sumerian modernity to Roman modernity, and even before and after them, there have been...many examples of modernity.”

Abdullah Öcalan, *The Sociology of Freedom*

“The Negro’s revolutionary history is rich, inspiring, and unknown. Negroes revolted against the slave raiders in Africa; they revolted against the slave traders on the Atlantic passage. They revolted on the plantations. The docile Negro is a myth... The only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians.”

C.L.R. James, “Revolution and the Negro”

When Portuguese caravels first arrived on the shores of West Africa, no one could grasp the historical magnitude of the social transformations that were from then underway: for

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Africa, for Europe, and for the whole world. The following centuries of brutality inflicted upon the African peoples who were kidnapped and sold were the very foundation of a new global system that shapes the modern world. As Black people, as people made Black *through slavery*, we have both struggled against our oppression and at times imagined ourselves as a totality, as a nation, which could cast off this oppression together.

This historical mission for Black freedom and autonomy can be clarified through an exchange of ideas and experiences between Black revolutionary nationalism and Kurdish revolutionary nationalism, especially as exemplified by the political shift in the thinking of the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan and the PKK began as Marxist-Leninists and revolutionary nationalists seeking to establish an independent Kurdish state in the Kurdish-majority regions of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, before reorienting to a politics of democratic confederalism and democratic nationhood. As Öcalan has put it,

My realization that I was a positivist dogmatic was certainly connected to my isolation. In isolation I grasped the alternative modernity concept, that national structures can have many different models, that generally social structures are fictional ones created by human hands, and that nature is malleable. In particular, overcoming the model of the nation-state was very important for me. For a long time this concept was a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist principle for me. It essentially had the quality of an unchanging dogma. Because real socialism hadn't overcome the nation state model and saw it as a basic necessity for modernity, we weren't able to think of another form of nationalism, for example democratic nationalism. When you said nation

there absolutely had to be a state! If Kurds were a nation they certainly needed a state! However, as social conditions intensified, as I understood that nations themselves were the most meaningless reality, shaped under the influence of capitalism, and as I understood that the nation-state model was an iron cage for societies, I realized that freedom and community were more important concepts. Realizing that to fight for nation states was to fight for capitalism, a big transformation in my political philosophy took place. I realized I had been a victim of capitalist modernity.¹

In the same way, I argue that Black liberation is not possible through the models of national “self-determination” that themselves are creatures of capitalist modernity, such as nation-statehood, which are dominating rather than emancipating, exclusionary rather than expansive—and that we must embark on a revolutionary project of constructing an altogether different modernity.

Öcalan has long reflected on the historical experience of the peoples of the Middle East, upon whose ancestors’ backs the world’s first states were built. He therefore looks to their revolutionary movements as the spearhead of the struggle to *unmake* the state, as well as the dominant male and his oppression of women. Black revolutionaries must similarly reflect on our place in the historical development of capitalism and empire. This system was built through the enslavement and dispossession of Black people, and so the democratic society to come will be—and is being—built through the rebellions of those kidnapped people’s descendants.

* * *

¹ Quoted in Nick Danforth, “An Imprisoned Nationalist Reads Benedict Anderson”, *Dissent* (2013). <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/an-imprisoned-nationalist-reads-benedict-anderson>.

The concept of modernity, Öcalan argues, denotes only the present, and the current hegemonic power that shapes it. These early Iberian slavers and conquistadors may not have been global hegemonies, but by setting in motion the European colonization of the Americas and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they enabled the development of industrial capitalism, finance, and global empire, which transformed western Europe from a society economically trailing those of Africa and Asia into the center of a new world-system. Öcalan calls these past 400 years, beginning with racial slavery throughout the so-called “New World” of the Americas, “capitalist modernity.”² The oppression of Black people was foundational to the emergence of this capitalist modernity. These emerging European powers and eventually the United States were able to expand their influence around the world because of the slave trade, whose sugar cane fed the growing ranks of a landless working class and whose cotton fed the textile mills of European industry. Blackness developed from this racial slavery in the Americas, which birthed the social category of *whiteness* simultaneously: the belief in some essential racial characteristic beyond Christianity and culture binding northern Europeans together.³ The semi-capitalist economy established in colonial America legally enshrined the separation of White and Black as a permanent social institution following the rebellions of the late 1600s that challenged the ruling planter class.⁴ The creation of the white race was a strategic response to the

² Abdullah Öcalan, *The Sociology of Freedom: Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization, Volume III* (Oakland, PM Press, 2020), 250, 258.

³ See Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London and New York, Verso, 2013), 121-145, and Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London and New York, Verso, 2012).

⁴ Fields and Fields (2013), 127, and Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition* (London, Pluto Press, 2021), 79-80.

in diversity, and the basis of our unity in diversity with the people of all nations. We fight and build institutions that serve all of us and provide us with the material things we need to live in a free world separate from the state and its institutions of violence. Through such a civilizational democratization, we must dismantle the hierarchies of capitalism, queerphobia, white supremacy, and ableism, and the ideology of dominating nature. This means creating a society where humans do not dominate each other or nature. We will cooperate with the environment we live in, and use eco-technologies that do not destroy the planet and our species. That is the essence of our project of Black autonomy: a project prefigured in our daily practices of resistance, which builds a new society in the shell of the old.

nation-state bases itself on a strict imposition of a single language,” Öcalan writes, “It is possible to count different languages and dialects as a richness for a democratic nation.”²⁰ While we may need common or overlapping languages to communicate, we ought not let the fact that some of us may speak Spanish and others speak English or Igbo as our mother tongues be a reason to distance ourselves and not find common ground as a nation. Ashanti Alston captures this sense of unity in diversity and overlapping spheres of democratic belonging in his essay “Beyond Nationalism But Not Without It”:

To my folks of color: COME ENVISION: envision a world of worlds within our world where there’s principled co-existence within the wonderful diversity of the Black Community.

Harlems / Spanish Harlems / Watts / hip-hop communities / villages of the Carolina coast / college communities / gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender communities / zulu nation / new afrikan / religious communities that come together mainly on Saturday or Sunday / squatter communities / outlaw communities / kemeti communities / ibo-ghanaian-sierra leonean-ethiopian-rasta neighborhoods / nomadic poet-artist tribes / and then those of us who just be plain ignorant and harmless and crazy when we have to be and fun-loving and like to journey through and between communities and sometimes just create new mixed ones ... WHAT IF? ... and HOW?²¹

This is the Black nation, and our world of beautiful difference is how we will build democratic modernity. It is our unity

²⁰ Öcalan 2016, 26.

²¹ Ashanti Alston, “Beyond Nationalism but Not Without It” (Oakland, Jailbreak Press, 2004).

threat of potential unity between exploited European workers and Black slaves or indigenous peoples.

This thus ties the creation of the Black race directly to capitalism itself within the “New World”. Throughout capitalism’s further development, this divide was used to create a hierarchy within the laboring class where white workers by luck of being “white” were able to have more privilege in society than Black workers, even if those Black workers were legally free—what W.E.B. Du Bois termed “the psychological wage” of whiteness, by which they could be persuaded to accept less *actual* wages.⁵ White workers did not face the threat of being enslaved because someone thought (or pretended to think) they were a slave, and even after emancipation they could hold fast to the belief that someone was always beneath them in the social hierarchy. This is not to mention the reproductive labor that Black women endured as the primary caretakers of white children, and constantly being forced to have children themselves to propagate and grow the enslaved workforce.⁶ The pseudo-scientific idea of the “Black race” was rooted in slavery, and this Black race itself was literally born from those women who had the label of “Black” and the status of slave forced upon them.

These slavers and settlers were not able to simply reorder the world to their liking, however. Because these Africans were human beings, they fought back. The fights raged all across the continents and islands that enslaved people were brought to, where they were tortured via disabling forced labor, constant beatings, and sexual assault.⁷ As C.L.R. James wrote,

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (Cleveland and New York, Meridian Books, 1935), 700.

⁶ Jennifer Hallam, “Men, Women, and Gender,” *Slavery and the Making of America*. <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/gender/history.html>.

⁷ Neal Shirlie and Saralee Stafford, *Dixie be Damned: 300 Years of Insurrection in the American South* (Oakland, AK Press, 2015), 18-19.

Slaves on slave ships jumped overboard, went on vast hunger strikes, attacked the crews. There are records of slaves overcoming the crew and taking the ship into harbor, a feat of tremendous revolutionary daring. In British Guiana during the eighteenth century the Negro slaves revolted, seized the Dutch colony, and held it for years. They withdrew to the interior, forced the whites to sign a treaty of peace, and have remained free to this day. Every West Indian colony, particularly Jamaica and San Domingo and Cuba, the largest islands, had its settlements of maroons, bold Negroes who had fled into the wilds and organized themselves to defend their freedom. In Jamaica the British government, after vainly trying to suppress them, accepted their existence by treaties of peace, scrupulously observed by both sides over many years, and then broken by British treachery. In America the Negroes made nearly 150 distinct revolts against slavery.⁸

Fighting back against the cruelty of the slave masters is in the purest way an expression of the humanity of the enslaved peoples. Any and all people will do the best they can to express their humanity when it is being denied. For enslaved people, to express their humanity in the face of such extreme violence can only mean self-defense. This is the essence of a slave revolt, violence in defense of one's humanity. As Öcalan writes,

The right of each social group to defend itself is sacred. To defend oneself against each attack which aims to destroy the existence of a group or any of

⁸ C.L.R. James, "Revolution and the Negro", *New International* (Volume V, December 1939). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1939/12/negro-revolution.htm>.

Despite what white supremacists may say, the Black community is extremely diverse. We span national borders, languages, religions, and distinct local histories. Even within America we see Gullah people, the Black people of Harlem, Black Texans, Black LGBTQ culture, indigenous Black freedmen in Indian Country, and many other distinct but overlapping cultural dimensions of the Black nation within these borders. The nation-state, on the other hand, is structurally predicated upon imposing homogeneity. In *Democratic Confederalism*, Öcalan writes:

The nation-state in its original form aimed at the monopolization of all social processes. Diversity and plurality had to be fought, an approach that led into assimilation and genocide. It does not only exploit the ideas and the labour potential of the society and colonize the heads of the people in the name of capitalism. It also assimilates all kinds of spiritual and intellectual ideas and cultures in order to preserve its own existence. It aims at creating a single national culture, a single national identity, and a single unified religious community... The homogenic national society is the most artificial society to have ever been created and is the result of the "social engineering project."¹⁹

The diversity of the individuality and social existence of Black people is far more complex, and the boundaries of Blackness far more blurred and indefinable, than any ruling ideology of nationality could ever fully appreciate or accept.

Even the challenge of the global Black population speaking many languages is not an insurmountable one. While "the

¹⁹ Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (International Initiative, 2011), 12-13. <http://www.freedom-for-ocalan.com/english/download/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf>.

my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation.”¹⁷

This explicit rejection of nation-state nationalism is essential due to the competing conceptions of Black nationhood within the Black nationalist tradition. On one hand, Black nationalism can be viewed as pride in being Black and the view that the Black community must control the Black community. As Malcolm X put it in his speech “The Ballot or the Bullet,” “The economic philosophy of black nationalism only means that we should own and operate and control the economy of our community.”¹⁸ On the other hand, we have the view of building an independent Black nation-state advocated by movements like the Republic of New Afrika. This latter view has fallen out of favor, especially within Black anarchist and other Black libertarian communist spaces. A nation-state simply is not an adequate vessel for Black self-determination—such a “Black state” would be a stricture upon that self-determination, not its expression. Belief in Black nationhood does not inherently mean that a Black nation-state must be built; it does, however, necessitate the recognition of Black people as a people or as a nation that is distinct from the American nation and identity, as well as from all other nation-states that have Black people among their subjects, within and outside of Africa. Black nationhood is established not through the formation of a state, an instrument of imposed unity, but through our shared struggle from below against state power. Only in this way can we build a democratic nation that encompasses all Black cultures and identities.

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakunin, “Man, Society, and Freedom” (1871), from Bakunin on Anarchy, translated and edited by Sam Dolgoff (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1980). <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1871/man-society.htm>.

¹⁸ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”, 1964. <https://genius.com/Malcolm-x-the-ballot-or-the-bullet-annotated>.

its values related to its existence is not just an irrevocable right, it is the basis of the group’s existence.⁹

This sacred right belongs to all living things. He terms this “defensive force” of a social collectivity not a *power* but the “democratic defense force” or “democratic authority”, stating “A rose defends itself through its thorns; let us then call this democratic authority paradigm the ‘rose theory.’”¹⁰ This “rose theory” must frame our struggle against the persecution of the present and toward the freedom of the future. A slave revolt cradles the seed of an entirely new world, through the violent longing of the most dispossessed for self-determination and freedom; it is the revolutionary ancestor pointing the way to a *democratic* modernity. Despite all efforts to bury this history, slave revolts are at the center of our historical experience as Black people. Ever since we as Africans arrived on the shores of the Americas, we fought to free ourselves. This resistance and rebellion have come to define the “Black Nation” as a concept.

Even with the formal abolition of chattel slavery, our oppression as Black Americans still continues into the modern day. Following the defeat of Reconstruction, Southern state governments forced Black people back into what was effectively a condition of slavery. Our ruthless exploitation through the sharecropper system was upheld by the “Black Codes,” which implemented a system of mass imprisonment through which the state legally re-enslaved those Black people who defied white rule. This was the inception of modern day prisons in the United States, which to this day maintains a form of legal slavery for millions of Black people.

⁹ Abdullah Öcalan, *Capitalism: The Age of Unmasked Gods and Naked Kings, Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume II* (Norway, New Compass Press, 2017), 227-228.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

Caging human beings has ballooned into a multi-billion-dollar industry, highlighting how the link between capitalism and Black enslavement has shaped the entire current landscape of “criminal justice” and law enforcement.¹¹

The legacy of slavery has created an extreme racial disparity in generational wealth, so that Black people persistently occupy the lowest rung of the capitalist hierarchy. Through this material deprivation and targeted enforcement by agents of state, Black people are continuously funneled back into the prison system and its legalized slavery. From the country’s colonial roots to the contemporary social order of the United States, both capitalism and statism—the centerpieces of capitalist modernity in the west—are built on the oppression of Black people, as well as that of the indigenous peoples of North America. And as the oppression of Black people under capitalist modernity has continued into the present in new forms, so has our resistance: changing shape and building a new world around us through struggle.

We are a nation that does not elect its own leaders but is constantly at war with the United States and other settler colonial states in the Americas. This is a nation that is not defined by geographic borders—that exists, in the words of Black anarchist William C. Anderson, “on no map.”¹² Even in the realm of cultural expression, the Black experience is defined by criminalization on one hand and resistance on the other. The simple fact that our hair is considered “unprofessional” when it is dreaded/loc’d, braided, or in its natural state is a testament to this fact. The music we create from jazz to rock to disco to hip hop have all been seen as “devil’s music” by the white majority in their beginnings. These art forms were our pure expression

¹¹ Darius Rafieyan and Cardiff Garcia, “The Unaccounted Workforce,” *Planet Money* on National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884989263/the-unaccounted-workforce>.

¹² William C. Anderson, *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (Chico, CA, AK Press, 2021).

it must be ‘demystified’ and made into a culture of resistance, rather than personality cults or escapism from the reality of fighting racism. Further, we categorically do not believe in any “race nationalism”, which demonizes white people and advocates some sort of biological determinism. We are not xenophobic; so do not entertain any race mythology about European peoples as either a superior species or as devils. And although we recognize the necessity of autonomous struggles in this period, we can work with white workers and poor people around specific campaigns. Our major point of our differences is that we are not seeking to build a Black nation-state. In fact, we believe the same class politics of “haves and have-nots” will show itself within any type of Black nation-state, whether it’s an Islamic, secular New African, or African Socialist state, and that this will produce an extreme class differential and economic/political injustice among those oppressed peoples of color. We can look at a succession of dictatorships and capitalist regimes in Africa to let us know this. We believe that a bourgeois class and political dictatorship is inevitable and that a people’s revolution will break out under such a Black Nationalist government.”¹⁶

As black people are at the bottom of the pyramid, we must be explicitly against forming a state that will inherently leave many of us at the bottom of some type of hierarchy, as all of us would not be free. As Mikhail Bakunin has said, “I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting

¹⁶ Ervin 2021, 91.

queerphobia, or any other forms of domination over our people or ourselves.

In the past, we as Black people have created our own self-defense forces to counter police violence, practiced economic collectivity to lift ourselves up together, and amassed in assemblies of the people to chart a common course. Yet when faced with hierarchies such as toxic masculinity, queerphobia, ableism, and other forms of social domination, we have often failed. It is in these areas where we must seek to transcend our practices of the past here through our organizing in the present. We must see ourselves as a democratic nation that will operate autonomously from white supremacy, queerphobia, statism, capitalism, patriarchy, adult supremacy, and all other forms of domination, *as a condition of securing genuine Black freedom*. We must study our history and work towards correcting the errors of hierarchy and authority in our striving towards democratic modernity. We must create a world where this education is understood as a self-transforming project that goes on for our entire lives, where we exercise direct control of our own lives, and where we may freely cooperate with others as equals within our communities and with other communities. We must operate independently yet be interconnected with the rest of the world. Crucially, this building of a liberated society for us as Black people must start with the creation of our own autonomous spaces that reverse our oppression and constitute the building blocks of a democratic modernity.

This project of Black autonomy is therefore sharply distinguished from Black separatism. To quote Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin:

[W]e also have differences with the Black (and other race) nationalists, although we may share many basic ideas with them on cultural autonomy. We also believe in and treasure many of the traditions and history of our peoples, but believe

of our pain, our struggle, and most importantly our identity as human beings. When we write music about police brutality, we are speaking truth to power. Even songs that are just about having fun have a political depth. For us, these songs are a way to escape the grind of capitalism. Yet these art forms are only seen as “good” when they are able to be commercialized and sold for profit to white audiences. When hip hop as a genre was taken over by white corporate interests, we saw that the true drive to create this music was taken away, and its rebellion was recuperated. This is capitalist modernity attempting to overtake that democratic yearning for freedom through the arts. Why is it that N.W.A’s song about police violence and nurturing a revenge fantasy against one’s oppressors has appeared on mainstream, socially nihilistic shows such as South Park? The answer is clear: capitalist modernity.

The Black Nation exists as a collectivity *through* our constant resistance to the United States and its statecraft across generations. Our communities have only been able to hold together in the face of statist violence, whether that be at the hands of the police or other state bureaucrats like Child Protective Services (CPS), by developing communal structures of our own, for our collective life and resistance. CPS, for example, ostensibly exists to save children from violence, but is more often used to punish poverty and tear apart Black and indigenous families. Contrary to the state’s instruments of punishment and its assumptions about the universality of the nuclear family, the Black community has cultivated ideas such as “it takes a village to raise a child” for generations. We challenge the prevailing ideology of parenting under capitalist modernity through our own practices of communal family life. I wish to be clear that this is not a universal or intrinsic part of being Black in America, but due to the oppression we have faced from the days our ancestors first arrived on these shores to the modern era, we have been forced to be the “other” in society, creating our own social world within it.

As Jessica Gordon Nembhard has documented in vibrant detail, this imperative to develop our own communal institutions to overcome our oppression has placed us at the leading edge of cooperative economics throughout our history. From mutual aid societies of free or escaped Black people pooling their funds to buy the freedom of their families to the farming cooperatives organized to escape sharecropping and secure political rights, these have been foundational to the struggle for Black freedom.¹³

When groups of people are faced with oppression they typically have to create alternative systems to the official ones that clearly do not serve them. As a Black autonomist I must stress that we as Black people cannot push for integration into a system that was not created for us, and which does not contain institutional pathways for any kind of genuine democratization. We must continue to consciously create our own communities (or take control of existing ones where we are a dominant force), via a prefigurative politics, and from there confederate with other oppressed nations as we operate through the processes of consensus and direct democracy. Rather than seeking to carve out space for ourselves within these settler states and the capitalist order, both of which were built through our oppression and enslavement, we should instead strive to lead the way in the development of a fundamentally different kind of society by people of all nations and cultures.

Öcalan termed this future free social order assembled out of the autonomy and power of society's oppressed groups *democratic modernity*.¹⁴ He asserts that democratic modernity is the opposite of capitalist modernity, being "an economy free of monopolism, an ecology that signifies harmony with the environment, and a technology that is friendly to nature and human-

¹³ See Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University, 2014).

¹⁴ Öcalan 2020, 193.

ity."¹⁵ As the basis for building a regenerative new relationship to the rest of life on earth, democratic modernity is a parallel concept to what Murrery Bookchin called "free nature," where through a politics of direct democracy we are able to serve as conscious ecological stewards, a society that administers itself in harmony with first nature free of bureaucracy and the state. Just as capitalist modernity was birthed through our enslavement, it will be buried—and democratic modernity created—through our revolt.

Constructed by the former underclass within the United States, such a democratic society will be built within the shell of the old, nascent in our communal practices of resistance to capitalist modernity. We build prefigurative structures that demonstrate the political possibility of entirely new ways of living together. These structures can be as simple as spaces where we as Black people are able to express our autonomy outside of white supremacist influence; that is, not necessarily autonomous *physical* spaces but also creating the mental, spiritual, and emotional spaces where we can express ourselves without fear of violence. Further, we must build economic centers that work to separate our communities from dependence on capitalism and the state, and tie them back to us as the people, and united on a confederal basis. This would enable a given community to control itself while still working with other communities throughout the country and even across national borders. We can build community gardens, give-away shops, revolutionary collectives and other projects that are woven together to take back control of society. Such would be a reversal of Orlando Patterson's concept of social death in slavery, being a social rebirth. For Black people, the construction of a democratic society would mean at minimum a society that is not controlled by the state, patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism,

¹⁵ Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Nation* (International Initiative, 2016), 17. <http://www.ocalanbooks.com/downloads/democratic-nation.pdf>.