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Öcalan as Thinker

On the Unity of Theory and Practice as Form of
Writing

David Graeber

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I want to write a few words on the status of Abdullah Öcalan as a thinker. He has written voluminous works; but outside the Kurdish movement, the world appears to have had a very difficult time figuring out what to make of them. There seems to be confusion even over such apparently basic questions as what sort of thinker Öcalan is.

Certainly, his output is nothing if not prolific. During his time in prison in particular he has created a body of theory that really does not fit into any obvious intellectual category, ranging from essays on the mechanics of direct democracy, the possibility of a sociology based in quantum physics, to a multivolume world history focused on the Middle East. The range and sophistication are especially remarkable when one considers almost all of these writings were composed with no access to the internet, using as research materials only the three books his jailers permitted his lawyers to convey at any given time—or that, legally, he was only allowed to publish them by offering them as testimony before a court in which he stood accused of treason.

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Still, outside of certain very specific radical circles, this body of work has been almost completely ignored. There has been almost no engagement by other scholars with his ideas. In this essay, I want to consider why this is and, ultimately, make the argument that Öcalan's works make many intellectuals uncomfortable, because they represent a form of thought that is not only inextricable from action but that also directly grapples with the knowledge that it is.

Let's start with my initial question: What sort of thinker is Öcalan?

Admittedly, there is always something a slightly aggressive in an attempt to categorize another's thought. In ancient Greek, the word "categorize" meant "to publicly accuse," and even to "pin something down" suggests an act of violence—like attaching a dead butterfly to a piece of cork board underneath some kind of handwritten label. Generally, if you want to dismiss an intellectual, you place him in some category—oh, he's just a positivist, a postmodernist, a neo-Kantian. If you want to really honor that same person, you create a new category out of their name: Foucauldian, Rawlsian, and so forth. It is thus fitting testimony to the success of Öcalan's thought in Kurdistan and within the Kurdish diaspora that if one describes someone as an "Apoist," everyone knows what you are talking about—but there is no larger category of thought in which to place Öcalan himself.

Outside Kurdish circles, however, this has made it all the easier for intellectuals to simply ignore him. If you search Öcalan's name on JSTOR, the most widely read compendium of academic articles in English, you will immediately turn up 448 hits; if you pick your way through them, however, you will discover that not a single one of them is primarily addressed to his ideas: almost all of them are about the history

those of Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, or Frantz Fanon—to name a few politically engaged scholars who were neither party leaders nor academics—or even a theorist comedian like Slavoj Žižek. But in a way this is an idle question. Academics—at least critical academics—are increasingly engaged in writing works that sound like they are meant to change the world, in an institutional context designed to ensure there is almost no possibility they might actually do so. Since Öcalan's words really are, before anything else they might be, a form of political action, their ultimate meaning can only be known by what they do.

Is it a successful attempt? It's hard to say exactly how success in such matters should be measured. Certainly, Öcalan's works have played a key role in inspiring one of the most widespread movements of real-life revolutionary transformation in recent memory.

One might offer many cautions. Does not the subjective element, the emphasis on Öcalan's personal history and emotions, open up the danger of a classic revolutionary cult of personality? It's understandable that antiauthoritarian visitors are often made more than a little uncomfortable by the constant portraits of Öcalan displayed in homes and offices in places like Rojava, or the references to "our leader." It's also clear that authoritarian and antiauthoritarian tendencies are very much at war within the movement, as they inevitably must be, perhaps, in any real mass revolutionary movement (as opposed to those perfect movements that only exist in our heads). In this context, Öcalan exists as a kind of halfway figure, even a kind of living martyr—the old living leader whose image is displayed in political contexts, in a political world full of images of the heroic dead. As a prisoner of his enemies, he remains somehow halfway between. So he is also the intellectual leader who advises his followers to reject all the certainties that ordinarily flow from the role of an intellectual leader, the patriarch who calls on men to kill the patriarch within them, the ultimate figure of authority who encourages young men and women to look with skepticism on anyone who claims to know better than they.

It might be curious to ask ourselves how much time would have to pass or what would have to happen for the intellectual world to treat Öcalan's ideas in the same way that they do

of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party), Turkish politics, the question of terrorism, and legal questions raised by his imprisonment and trial. He is seen as an object of study but never an interlocutor. Even when he is an object of study, it is almost never for his actual ideas: for instance, among those 448 articles, there is only one that so much as mentions his engagement with the ideas of Murray Bookchin—and that one, only to acknowledge it as an element in the political evolution of the PKK. The same can be said of his key political concepts, such as "democratic confederalism" (mentioned in 1 of 448), "democratic modernity" (0 of 448), "jineology" (0 of 448—in fact, the existence of *jineoloji*, the Kurdish movement's *science of women*, has never been acknowledged in any English-language article on JSTOR), etc. The silence is really quite impressive, considering how regularly movements inspired by such ideas have been at the very center of world news events, many of them, daily and even breathlessly reported in the international press.

No doubt much of this is simply one of the many cascading effects of the Turkish government's successful campaign to have the PKK placed on various international "terror lists"—which in the contemporary world is about as violent a form of categorization possible. This campaign corresponded precisely to the moment when the PKK, largely under Öcalan's initiative, renounced both separatism and offensive military action of any kind and attempted to initiate a peace process with the Turkish regime; if proof is required for how destructive such a designation can be, one might only cite here the fact that almost no one, even many of those sympathetic to the PKK, actually knows this. But it seems almost a moral principle on the part of Western opinion makers, intellectuals included, that if someone is designated "terrorist," their ideas cannot be taken seriously. Even to speculate on the motives of a terrorist is seen as validating their actions, which must always be represented as a product of blind rage or irrational hatred. This

habit of thought has caused all sorts of dilemmas for the international media—most dramatically when the PKK guerrillas successfully broke the siege of Mount Shengal in Iraq and saved thousands of Yezidi civilians from genocide at the hands of ISIS, and the Western press, which had previously made the genocide front-page news, suddenly either dropped the story or pretended the Yezidis had been rescued by someone else—but it seems to have influenced the perceptions of the academy as well. Most academics are, at least in political terms, an inherently cowardly lot. When in doubt, it's easier just not to say anything.

Still, I think there are deeper forces at play. Academics don't really know what to do with a thinker who isn't either part of the academy or, at least, in some sense playing the academic game. And, increasingly, that game is the only game in town.

It wasn't always so. Much of the most creative thought in the world— not only in Europe and America but Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well—has taken place outside of universities. Creativity tends to emerge from spaces in between (this is probably one reason the Kurdish movement has been so intellectually creative; Kurds tend to be in between everything), and the most innovative and memorable thinking has, at least from the time of the French Enlightenment, emerged from the nexus of art, journalism, and radical politics rather than from university lecture halls. There is a reason why “avant-garde,” used to refer to those exploring new artistic territory, and “vanguard,” used to refer to the political leadership of a revolutionary party or movement, are the same word (the only difference is that one is French and the other is English). Both go back to a debate in the early nineteenth century between Auguste Comte and Henri de Saint-Simon about whether artists or social scientists would be the priests of the newly emerging industrial civilization, those who would provide it with its vision and strategic

violence that constantly shatters the original unity of reason, morality, and what he calls “emotional intelligence,” but to also write in a way that attempts to refigure what a restoration of such a unity might be like. This is why he's so careful to both reveal the passions driving his commitments and to systematically refuse the language of command.

This is why so many of his key interventions take the form of suggestions, disruptions, confessions, and narratives that resist being read in any biblical or ex cathedra form. It is necessary to create a new language, avoiding both pure rationalism and “incomprehensible spirituality,” lest we fall into the same trap as previous revolutionary movements that ultimately created nothing but an unholy synthesis of both:

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.²²

But positivism, he says, has also become an idol and Marxism a form of religion—if a religion that makes sense only to the professional managerial class who have, inevitably, therefore, ended up actually managing past Marxist dictatorships. The form of writing Öcalan employs is an attempt to find an initial way to move beyond that.

²² Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*, 94–95.

One might object: But, in the end, is this so different from Marx? Marx might not have expressed a lot of doubts, but he made his passions clear enough, and he too refused to set out prescriptions as to what economic arrangements in a free society would actually be like. True, but one could also argue that Marx's refusal partakes of the very absolutism that Öcalan is trying to shun. At least this is the way most later Marxists interpreted it: a total revolution means we can know nothing of what comes after the dictatorship of the proletariat, so it is pointless to even try to imagine the kind of problems we might face. In historical retrospect all this is more frightening than reassuring. Öcalan, in contrast, is not a totalizing thinker and, therefore, does not think in terms of total ruptures. Capitalism is nothing fundamentally new. It is just a new constellation of tendencies that have existed since at least the Bronze Age. Therefore, the questions we need to ask are not entirely beyond our capacities of imagination. We can start thinking about them, even if we cannot really know where such thoughts will end.

For a revolutionary, for anyone actively engaged in political struggles, really, anything one writes is necessarily a kind of political intervention. An essay or book, even a blog post, is always a direct action. It is meant to have an impact on the world, not just to state a truth but to state it in a certain manner to a certain audience in such a way as to lead them to act differently than they had before. In embracing the antiauthoritarian tradition, Öcalan is also embracing a rejection of any utilitarian calculus that would argue that the ends justify the means, but instead insists that, insofar as it is possible, the form of one's intervention should itself be a model for the world one wishes to create. Direct action, as I have myself phrased it in the past, is the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free. A man in prison can only do this through words. It seems to me what Öcalan is doing in his writing is not just to call for a society that undoes the work of commodification, that ongoing

direction. No one at that time, even Comte, imagined such visionaries would be university professors.

Over the course of the twentieth century, college campuses came to be increasingly politicized, a process that culminated in what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "the world revolution of 1968" when outright insurrections broke out in universities everywhere from Paris to Tokyo to Mexico City. (The PKK, of course, has its origins in this student ferment as well.) What we have seen in the half century that followed might best be understood as a determined campaign by political and academic establishments to ensure nothing remotely like that can ever happen again. Campuses have been neutralized; intellectuals effectively defanged. This was done not by expelling radical thinkers from the university system (with the exception of a handful who go too far in trying to translate their ideas into action—it's always necessary to make the occasional symbolic sacrifice to remind people of unspoken limits) but rather by incorporating them. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, virtually all significant intellectual work was expected to take place within the academy. Even artists and journalists—at least if they have any intellectual ambitions—are expected to spend at least some time on academic grants or in academic lectureships, which means, of course, submitting themselves to the discipline of grant writing and peer review. And all this has happened (and this part is crucial, actually) at exactly the same time as universities themselves have become increasingly anti-intellectual. I mean this in the sense that they have been gradually redefined as institutions that are not *primarily* about scholarship or intellectual life at all: having the time to read, to think, and to debate ideas is now largely seen as at best an indulgence occasionally granted as a reward for an academic's real work, which is not just teaching but fund-raising, administration, box-ticking rituals, and self-marketing.

Academics are not only expected to avoid political engagement, they literally don't have the time.

Actually, the first statement was imprecise. It's not precisely that academics are expected to avoid politics. It's more that they must only engage in carefully regulated ways. Here one might divide those engaged in social inquiry of one form or another into two broad groups. On the one hand, we have what might be called "power disciplines," like economics or international relations or anything employing "rational choice theory." Anyone who works in a university in such fields is largely engaged in training cadres to take part in national or global bureaucracies of one sort or another (ministries, policy think tanks, banks or other multinational corporations, planet-wide institutions like the UN or IMF, and so forth). In other words, such disciplines are there to support existing power structures. While scholars working in such fields might claim to be objective and apolitical, these claims to value-freedom tend to be, as Max Weber emphasized, ways of positioning themselves politically in order to be better to influence policy.¹ On the other side, we have what might be called the "critical disciplines." These range from literary theory to cultural studies to anthropology, history, perhaps half of sociology, or anyone who is likely to regularly refer to the work of Michel Foucault. These are the disciplines the 1960s radicals were effectively folded into after the sixties ferment wound down. Those in the "critical disciplines" almost invariably define themselves as radical leftists and as opposed to the structures of power maintained by the first group; but the more they do so, the more they tend to see real-world political engagement of any kind as suspect. Such matters are ringed about by endless concretions of fear and guilt. One form this takes is the refusal to believe that anyone who has taken any sort of effective political action in the world can also make important contributions to human thought. At

¹ This is the argument of "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

one who recoils before the sight of a body being torn apart. If it were, we could just as easily conclude the world is a horrible place and turn to heroin or become Seventh Day Adventists. It has to be based on some deep felt feeling that none of this is necessary, that a society that was not founded on such horrors *could* exist. The image of the free girls playing in the mountains, making up rules as they go along, then, is the necessary foundation for the outrage at their later unnecessary deaths. Our universal experience of maternal care, in which reason and emotion, morality and economics, mind and body, have not yet been prized apart, is the necessary foundation for our indignation at the imposition of a market logic. We could never see the system as inhuman unless we had a deeper sense of what being truly human might entail.

For all the passion he expresses—or, perhaps, because of the very intensity of that passion—Öcalan takes care to largely avoid the kind of flat, declarative statements and injunctions so characteristic of the Marxist high style. He has "some doubts" about Marx's labor theory of value. It is "highly disputable." Insofar as it is wrong, it is fraud, theft, and extortion. But it's not *entirely* certain it is wrong. This means it might be right. It's just unlikely. Commodification is violence. Taken to extremes it denies us our very humanity; the most truly human aspects of value creation (childbirth, maternal love, sociality. . .) could not, he implies "should never," be quantified. But other aspects possibly could. Just not the way they are presently quantified. It's possible we might have to invent some new form of measurement. Or, if not that, then we might have to invent "new forms of gift economy" that refuse the logic of quantification entirely. But what they would precisely look like is unclear. Öcalan is careful to leave the matter open. This is an invitation to think creatively, and many in the Kurdish movement have indeed begun to take such questions up.

Commodification “paves the way for fallacy, extortion, and theft.”¹⁹ Applied to society as a whole, its logic becomes an unmitigated disaster: “the mental acceptance of the society’s commodification is to abandon being human. And this is beyond barbarity.”²⁰ The prospect of life within a system defined by such logic fills him with “disgust.” Revolutionaries employing the high style tend to avoid this sort of language or, at best, use it very sparingly.

Some would argue that Öcalan is simply being unusually honest. John Holloway calls this “the scream.”²¹ Radical theorists, he observes, may write as if their descriptions of the contradictions of global capitalism are a result of reasoned contemplation, as if having made careful examination of the workings of the system and discovered its laws of motion, they were finally forced to the conclusion that something is terribly wrong. But it isn’t really true. In every case, the analyst begins with a deeply emotional, gut feeling that something is terribly wrong. A scream of horror, even, at the violence and suffering and sheer insanity of the world we see all around us. This is always what comes first. We begin with that horror, and then try to apply the tools of reason to understand how such a world is possible. If this is the case, the passions Öcalan expresses are always there, they are, as it were, the burning fuel propelling the motor of the argument. Öcalan has just made the unusual decision to reveal them.

I think what Holloway says is true; but by bringing the passions to light, Öcalan’s work might also be said to illustrate how even this formulation is incomplete. After all, Holloway is not just talking about horror but about indignation. Why do we recoil before injustice? Why are we able to recognize it as “injustice” at all? This cannot be purely spontaneous, like some-

¹⁹ Ibid., 128.

²⁰ Ibid., 127.

²¹ John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 1.

best, they can be an object of analysis. They cannot be seen as engaging as equals in the development of ideas.

It is hardly surprising, then, that contemporary intellectuals for the most part have no idea what to do with the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. He is a thinker who started out in a university context as a student activist but has since moved steadily away from it. In fact, his trajectory is diametrically opposed to most of those who have come to define what I’ve called the “critical disciplines.” He has continually refashioned his ideas around pragmatic considerations and the need to rally real people to real action, without ever sacrificing theoretical sophistication. What’s more, while many have made similar attempts, Öcalan’s has been unusually successful. It’s hard to find another theorist of the last fifty years who has taken philosophical and social scientific ideas and adapted them in such a way that he’s been able to inspire millions of people to try to treat one another differently. Yet it seems like the intellectual class is unable to take those ideas seriously for that very reason.

When I say that Öcalan’s ideas, sitting as they do outside the academy, appear to defy existing categories, I should emphasize that this is true only to an extent. In one sense, Öcalan might, at first glance, seem a familiar figure of a sort. After all, he was, at one point in his intellectual career at least, the leader of a Marxist party. Leaders of Marxist parties are expected to write works of theory. This is one way that Marxism, as a political movement, is somewhat unusual: it is perhaps the only social movement created by a PhD, and it has always been theory-driven, organizing itself internally around a series of “great thinkers”—in a kind of peculiar exception to its erstwhile hostility to any great-man theory of history. This remains true to this day. One still finds Leninists, Maoists, Trotskyists, Stalinists, Gramscians, Althusserians, or even those who have dedicated their life to expanding on the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg,

George Lukacs, or Henri Lefebvre. Marxism, though, forms a kind of alternative intellectual world of its own, with its own complex debates and terminologies, only intersecting at certain points with the academy.

As I have often remarked, in this respect Marxism stands in dramatic contrast to its great nineteenth-century rival, anarchism. While Marx in his own lifetime did intellectual battle with anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, and while anarchism's history has not lacked for "big-name thinkers" like Kropotkin, Malatesta, Magon, or Voltairine de Cleyre, not to mention contemporaries like Starhawk or Noam Chomsky, none of them aspired to or attained the same intellectual ascendancy. When Marxists denounce one another, when they "categorize" one another in the bad Greek sense, it's largely as adherents to some rival school of thought, almost invariably identified with some great male thinker—Leninists condemn Maoists, Trotskyites call their rivals Stalinists, and so on—anarchists almost never condemn one another as "Bakuninites" or "Malatestians." When they divide themselves into sects and set about attacking one another, it's generally on the basis of adherence to some rival form of revolutionary organization or practice: as platformists, insurrectionists, mutualists, pacifists, individualists, syndicalists, and so forth.² One can observe the same difference in debates: Marxists might issue bitter condemnations of one another for holding a

² True there is a bit of a fuzzy middle ground on either side: green anarchists, who have been among the most sectarian, are sometimes referred to as "Zerzanites," though I'm not aware of any who embrace that name themselves, and the most antiauthoritarian Marxists—say, autonomists or situationists or council communists—will tend to identify themselves with forms of practice rather than some founding thinker's name. It's also significant that even those strains of Marxism that resist the "great-man" model tend to be reimagined in this way if attempts are made to incorporate them in academic debate: so, for example, in the 00s Italian post-workerism was treated as if it came almost entirely from the brains of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

and its skirts to be the corner stones of heaven that they created in plenitude, and always wanted to wander around in them. As a young boy, because of this, I was described as "mad for the mountains." When I much later learnt that such a life was reserved for the god Dionysus and the free and artistic groups of girls (called the Bacchantes) who travel before and behind him, I really envied him. . . . When I was still at my village, I always wanted to play games with the girls of my village. 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 remember how I have always saluted the free women of these mountains with the morning breeze of goddesses and in remembrance I try to "add meaning to myself." I also remember the unique anger I have always felt against men—family, clan and state—for the deaths of truck loads of south-eastern women who died in car crashes on their way to other regions for seasonal work. How is it possible that they fell this low from being the descendants of the goddess? My mind and soul have never accepted their fall.¹⁸

To return to Öcalan's analysis of the commodity, in this light, the first thing that leaps out is its emotional quality; the second, the care he takes to head off any possibility that the depth of his emotions, the absolute nature of his rejection of existing forms of power, should turn into any form of absolute prescription of what is to be done.

¹⁸ Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*, 91.

This is precisely the path that Öcalan has chosen *not* to follow.

The problem with Hardt and Negri's approach, of course, is that it is still effectively vanguardist. Obviously, they are trying to shake off the old explicitly vanguardist model where the "great theorist" comes up with the strategic analysis for the masses to follow, but it's not entirely clear how successful this effort is. True, the fact that they are not the leaders of such a movement but are just writing as if they were gives them a lot more leeway in this regard. Öcalan, again, does not have the luxury. He actually is the leader of a revolutionary movement that started out organized on vanguardist principles. As a result, he is careful to write in a way that simply cannot be used to create that sort of doctrinal authority.

Let us return to Öcalan's prose, then, and consider how it departs from what I've called the Marxist high style.

The first and most obvious way is that Öcalan takes care to always place himself, personally, in the picture. To some extent, of course, this is an effect of the circumstances under which his most recent works were written. The only reason Öcalan was allowed to publish these books at all is that, legally, he was entitled to offer testimony explaining the context for the crimes of which he was accused; all of the books he has written from his island prison were, as noted above, statements addressed to a Turkish court. But clearly this isn't the only reason. The *Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization* reads much less like a manifesto than a unique combination of history, autobiography, and theoretical reflection, each driving the others. Childhood fantasy blends into mythic visions and these into rage at current injustice, in a way that perhaps only makes sense in the writings of a man who has spent decades in a prison cell contemplating the nature of human freedom:

I always thought the peaks of the mountains to
be the sacred throne of the gods and goddesses

different position on the revolutionary status of the peasantry or the relative importance of alienation and exploitation in Marx's analysis of capitalism, but anarchists, when they engage in similar heated debates, almost always argue about some form of action (When is it okay to break a window? Must one condemn someone who assassinates a head of state?) or question of revolutionary organization or decision-making process (Do we use consensus or majority vote?). I've known people to have been kicked out of Marxist groups for departing from the party line on the origins of language. There is no real equivalent in anarchist or anarchist-inspired organizations, which tend to embrace a certain ideological multiplicity.

In other words, Marxism has tended to be a theoretical discourse about revolutionary strategy, while anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice.

This is obviously not a hard-and-fast distinction, but I think it's an important one—not least because it helps us understand any number of historical phenomena that might otherwise have remained obscure. It makes it much easier, for instance, to explain how these different poles of revolutionary thought have come into relation with the academy. As I've noted above, in terms of founders of Marxist schools of thought (Leninists, Maoists, Gramscians, Althusserians. . .), one can proceed almost seamlessly down the line from heads of state to French professors. Admittedly, the former are seen as a bit *outré* from the academic standpoint. Nowadays Mao Zedong is still respected as a classical Chinese poet, but his *Little Red Book* is largely a figure of fun; to cite Lenin as a theoretical source in an academic paper (let alone Stalin or Enver Hoxha) would seem bizarre. But purged from any likelihood of real-world consequences, Marxism can live and thrive in the academy. Academics are perfectly comfortable with warring sects. In many ways the sensibilities of academic sectarianism and revolutionary sectarianism have come to inform each other so much that they sometimes seem barely distinguishable. In

contrast, since anarchism without real-world consequences is basically nothing, it has never been able to find a way to fit in. One might observe here, for instance, that despite the fact that almost all the gods of poststructuralism (an intellectual movement that has come to be very much driven by a “great-thinker” model), whether Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Derrida, declared themselves anarchists at some point in their intellectual history, almost none of their latter-day academic avatars are aware of this—or, if they are, act as if it has no particular social or political significance. A cynic might say this is because it doesn’t, since such professions did not influence anyone’s social or political action in any way; a more generous assessment would be that it had no effect on the way their ideas were received in the academy itself.³

Öcalan did not precisely abandon Marxism for anarchism, though his general intellectual trajectory has definitely been to move in the direction of the antiauthoritarian tradition of which anarchism has always been a part. He started his intellectual career in the world of sectarian Marxist thought, gradually transcended it, and, ultimately, has left it almost entirely behind. But doing so (and he, obviously, is not the only one to have made such a journey, even if each does it in her own particular way) tends to create its own sort of intellectual crises. Because it’s not entirely clear what, if one abandons the vanguardist model, the role of an intellectual, let alone an intellectual leader, would be. If one’s job is not to lay down the party line, then what, precisely, is it? Is it simply to provide as clear

³ There is, obviously, still something of the old radical reading circles that exist outside both the academy and sectarian Marxism that still center on the overlap between art, activism, and journalism, and such authors are still very much favored there. But much of it is now simply a diminishing penumbra on the academy.

makes sense if you assume, as they do, that intellectuals like Marx or his latter-day interpreters are at least to some degree simply the voice of social movements: they crystallize an emergent insurgent common sense. This is how it is possible to argue that Marx’s labor theory of value was true when the workers’ movement embraced it but that housework is now constitutive of value, because feminist scholars and activists have forced society to recognize it as such.

But, of course, such intellectuals don’t just tell people—even revolutionary people—what they already think, they also play a role in molding and shaping that emergent understanding. To a certain degree they could even be said to bring new realities into being just by pointing out that they are there. Hence, the combination of declarative statements (“productive labor is this,” “empire is that” . . .), injunctions (“should not be defined as,” “must be recognized to be,” “must be understood” . . .), and the strategic use of passive voice to describe historical processes that appear to be happening largely of their own accord (“every fixed measure of value tends to be dissolved, and the imperial horizon of power is revealed” . . .). The results often read like something halfway between an academic essay and a political manifesto. The language of science seems constantly on the verge of slipping into the language of prophecy. Sometimes it clearly does. But for the authors this is not a problem: just as the Hebrew prophets, according to Spinoza, effectively created the Hebrew people by “organizing the desires of the multitude” around a certain vision of history, so too, Hardt and Negri argue, can revolutionary thinkers in the present day bring a revolutionary subject into being,¹⁷ like some massive, ferocious, and wonderful demon, by correctly calling out its name.

¹⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 65.

And, he adds, noting that it causes him “great sorrow” to have to say it, “Even Karl Marx could not refrain from taking this bait.”

Now, speaking just for myself, I think Öcalan is going a bit far here: it seems to me that the labor theory of value can be said to reveal a deeper truth, that the world we inhabit is largely our own creation, and insofar as Marx did fall into a trap set by the political economists of his day (which to a certain extent, I would agree he did), it was in seeing value-creating labor as necessarily “productive” rather than a matter of caring, tending, maintaining, and nurturing. Still, I didn’t introduce these themes primarily to work out the difference between Hardt and Negri’s position, Öcalan’s, and my own. In fact, I had something of an ulterior motive in citing the passages that I did at such length. I did so, because I also want to draw attention to the profound difference in their prose styles.

The mode of exposition, I think, cannot be entirely divorced from what it is that’s being exposed. Let us consider the matter more closely then.

Hardt and Negri are employing what might be called the classical Marxist high style: one which not only relies heavily on technical language drawn from a variety of philosophical traditions but operates in constant reference to received sources of intellectual authority. This starts, of course, with the need to first lay down the correct reading of Marx. They follow by noting the weight of intellectual authority (“numerous scholars have recognized. . .”) and end up arguing that certain writers—feminist ones in this case—actually play a key role in constituting the realities they describe. This kind of language

an analysis of the political, economic, or social situation, so as to allow democratic movements to collectively decide what to do about them? Is it to discover subtle forms of power and domination that might lie invisible in daily life or to try to understand the appeal of the values or forms of desire that support them? Is it to reexamine the past for forgotten social possibilities or to speculate about those that might exist in the future? Should one write works for the general public and, thus, figure out how to translate otherwise obscurantist theoretical language into accessible terms that can inform democratic debate, or is it better to play the academic game, even if it means writing in abstruse jargon, so as to give intellectual respectability to ideas that would otherwise be dismissed as plebian rantings? Just framing the question this way makes it obvious that there is no one right answer to this question. Indeed, imagining there should be only one right answer is itself a symptom of the vanguardist habits of thought with which we are trying to break. But knowing that doesn’t make the task any easier.

Öcalan’s problem was all the more acute, because he was not precisely in a position to reimagine himself whole cloth; he was still the head of a political movement, a figure whose history and writings were already a source of guidance and inspiration for millions of human beings. This placed him in the paradoxical situation. You can’t simply order people to question authority. On the other hand, to try to destroy his own authority entirely—as, say, Louis Althusser tried to do when he wrote his famous confession that he’d never actually read volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital*—would not really have done anyone much good.⁴ In fact, a case could be made that it would have been profoundly self-indulgent, since it would have meant squandering a unique historical opportunity.

⁴ Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir* (New York: New Press 1996). Anyway, Althusser’s confession didn’t really work. When people decide they want adopt you as a god simple self-abnegation will rarely be adequate to stop them.

The quality of Öcalan's writings—particularly those written since his imprisonment—can best be seen, I think, as a very self-conscious effort to grapple with this common problem (how to move from the theoretical vanguard of a top-down movement to providing intellectual support to a bottom-up one) in this extremely unusual form. This would appear to be the first time in history that the leader of a vertically organized political movement of the sort whose leader is always seen as the “first theorist” has decided to use his theoretical writings as a way to convince his followers to reject that model. There was no real precedent for how to do this. He was pretty much forced to make it up as he went along.

What I want to do in the rest of this essay is to examine some of Öcalan's writings in this light.

Now, I've said that Öcalan was facing a common problem in an unprecedented form. Insofar as he was abandoning Marxism and embracing more antiauthoritarian politics, there are, of course, plenty of precedents for how one proceeds. The first step, generally speaking, is to announce a series of theoretical breaks with Marxist orthodoxy: the concept of alienation or the priority of class struggle or the declining rate of profit. Öcalan has made a whole series of such breaks. The danger here is how to do so without either establishing some new orthodoxy or sinking into a nihilistic relativism that will make it impossible to make moral arguments of any sort. What's called “68 thought” in France—for instance, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida. . .—began as a movement to break free of the shackles of Marxist orthodoxy and ended up largely bouncing back and forth between both of these bad options or, alternately, embracing both at the same time. Öcalan makes it clear he wishes to avoid falling into either trap. Let's consider in this light one of his key ruptures with Marx, over the nature of the commodity and the

by and around the strong man seizes the social values generated by mother-woman. Capitalism is the act of groups with advanced speculative intelligence who would not abstain from using violence when necessary and frequently. They are the early capitalists of England, the Netherlands, and, prior to them, of Italian city-states like Genoa, Florence, and Venice; they were intertwined with the state, and, like members of a sect, had their own special lifestyles.¹⁵

In other words, where Hardt and Negri see capitalism, once a purely productive force, now spent, reduced to a sheer thug-gish brutality, stealing the products of our loves and passions, Öcalan insists it was always so. The greatest trick the capitalists played on us was to convince us it was ever anything else:

Just as with the initial Uruk merchants' religions, the construction of a new version of the mythological narrative was given to what they called the political economists, who were really the inventors of the religion of capitalism. What was being constructed was nothing but a new religion, with its own sacred book and intricate sects. Political economy is the most fraudulent and predatory monument of fictive intelligence, developed to disguise the speculative character of capitalism. The English classical school of political economy came up with just the right bait: the labor theory of value. I really do wonder why they decided on this notion. I suspect a main reason was to distract the workers.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

for pottery. What would have determined the exchange value?¹⁴

It might well be, he continues, (it often was) that a merchant might jack up prices by creating an artificial scarcity, even by destroying valuable resources or commodities. Destroying things involves labor too, of course, but no one would seriously suggest that a division of Sumerian soldiers sacking and burning a rival city to neutralize a competing wool producer and preserve their merchant's monopoly were working harder than the women who actually spun and wove the wool! One suspects in the back of Öcalan's mind here is the story of the British East India's suppression of the Indian cloth industry, which was accomplished by military force, but which also opened world markets for British cloth exports and, hence, made possible the industrial revolution—a revolution that, he argues, itself paved the way for the emergence of the labor theory of value to justify such conquests in the eyes of British workers.

It is easy to understand how a Kurdish revolutionary from Turkey might not feel he really has the luxury of viewing capitalism as somehow independent from the imperial violence it unleashed on the rest of the world, and how he might instead embrace, as Öcalan does, the tradition of Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, which argues capitalism was a system of speculation and trade before it became a system of production. But the contrast with Hardt and Negri is revealing. Öcalan is arguing that capitalism *began* in the way that Hardt and Negri claim it is now finally ending. Ultimately, capitalism is simply a continuation of a long tradition of violent patriarchal expropriation.

[Its] birth can be described as the modern link of the tradition whereby a band of looters gathered

¹⁴ Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2*, 72.

labor theory of value. In *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*, he first brings up the issue by writing: “Here I have to note I do not share Karl Marx’s concept of *commodity*. The opinion that the exchange value of a commodity can be measured by the workers’ labor has initiated a conceptualization period fraught with disadvantages.”⁵

This particular passage is from a work mainly about the emergence of civilization in the ancient Middle East, and the book goes on to argue first of all that the commodification process begins not with forms of labor but with the gradual transmutation of earlier gift economies and the reduction of social relations into impersonal relations of exchange—a process that, he observes, was made possible primarily by lending money at interest (an observation that, I might add, converges quite nicely with my own observations on this subject in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*).⁶ If *all* social relations are commodified, society would simply disintegrate.

Commodification, he continues, severs not only relations between people but between those people and their natural environment, leading to “ecological disaster”:

This happened because of the profound distinction which has been made between material and moral values, which form a natural unity. In a way this severing has cultivated the seeds of poor metaphysics. By leaving the material without spirit and the spiritual without matter, the path was being paved for the most confusing dichotomy encountered in the history of thought.

⁵ Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1: Civilization: The Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings* (Porsgrunn, NO: New Compass Press, 2015), 127; 2nd revised edition will be published by PM Press in 2021.

⁶ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2012).

Throughout the history of civilization the bogus distinctions and discussions that have divided every aspect of life into either materialism or morality have destroyed ecology and free life. The concept of inanimate matter and an inanimate universe combined with an incomprehensible spiritualism are occupying, invading and colonizing the human mind.⁷

This is a critique of commodification very much in the spirit of Marcel Mauss and the anthropological tradition inspired by him, which argues similarly that the creation of impersonal markets and the corresponding emergence of universalizing “world religions” (which developed in tandem with impersonal markets with uncanny consistency in India, China, and the Eastern Mediterranean alike in the middle of the first millennium BCE) was what made our familiar distinctions between egoism and altruism, materialism and idealism, body and soul, possible to begin with. If so, then alienation would appear to occur first—to use the appropriate Marxist jargon—in the sphere of circulation rather than that of production.

But there are other problems:

I have some doubts about another aspect of Marx’s concept. I am quite doubtful that social values (including commodities) can be measured. Commodities cannot be regarded as a mere product of abstract labor but, rather, as a combination of many non-countable non-natural properties. To claim the opposite paves the way for fallacy, extortion and theft. The reason is clear: How are we to measure the total amount of non-countable labor? Moreover, how are we to measure the labor of a mother at birth and that of the family that

⁷ Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*, 127-28.

these positions explicitly. And, indeed, they largely avoid taking on such questions directly; but the entire thrust of their argument is that this would have to be the case.

For me, what Hardt and Negri propose is the very definition of a postmodern argument. If historical change brings to the fore certain aspects of, say, capitalism or the state that one was not previously aware of, what does one do? Does one re-examine history in that light and come up with a new theory of what capitalism or the state has always been; or does one simply declare that the world changed entirely sometime around 1975, and we are living in a totally new reality? (This may sound silly, but it’s almost precisely what Hardt and Negri and a host of other scholars actually do. And they call that new system “postmodernity.”) Öcalan’s procedure is the opposite. He takes the first option. If feminism—including, in his case, the tireless efforts of female guerrillas in the PKK to have women’s issues accepted as primary concerns and not something to be addressed “after the revolution”—has made certain aspects of capitalism impossible for him to ignore, his response was to reimagine what capitalism was in the first place. Even in his volume on capitalism he introduces the problem by taking things straight back to ancient Mesopotamia:

At this point, I think it is necessary to rethink Marx’s treatment of the labor theory of value. . . . The view that human labor is the basis of exchange value is highly disputable; this is true also for Marx’s analyses. Whether defined in terms of concrete or abstract labor, exchange value always has a speculative aspect. To illustrate, let us presume that the first merchant from Uruk, in one of his colonies along the Euphrates, tried to exchange stones and metal compounds in return

“society”) within the shell of capitalism. No longer masters of producing value, capitalists are reduced to simply appropriating, privatizing, patenting, and extracting rent from the use of things they never really created in the first place. This can only be accomplished through a fusion of capital and state power, a fusion that they ultimately come to label “Empire.” The emergence of Empire, in turn, means power has come to define reality itself:

The political must also be understood as ontological owing to the fact that all the transcendental determinations of value and measure that used to order the deployments of power (or really determine its prices, subdivisions, and hierarchies) have lost their coherence. . . . Empire constitutes the ontological fabric in which all the relations of power are woven together—political and economic relations as well as social and personal relations. . . . Every fixed measure of value tends to be dissolved, and the imperial horizon of power is revealed finally to be a horizon outside measure.¹³

Many have found such grand declarations seductive and inspiring—we are living in a giddy new age, we are already creating communism when we surf the web, anything is now possible—but in many ways, what they’re arguing seems completely ridiculous. Are Hardt and Negri seriously arguing that only factory labor produced value in 1845, because, at that time, most male factory laborers thought it did, and their wives were not allowed to weigh in on the matter? Do they really believe that “affective” or caring labor did *not* produce society before feminists made it impossible to ignore by putting it, as it were, on the political table? It’s hard to imagine they would hold

¹³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 364.

raises the worker? Then, how are we to measure the share of the whole society in which this object called “value” is realized?⁸ Hence, exchange value, surplus value, labor-value, interest rate, profit, unearned income and so forth are all forms of theft through official and state power. It may be meaningful to develop other measures or new forms of a gift economy to replace the exchange system.⁹

Obviously almost every issue raised in this passage is a heated matter of debate within the Marxian tradition, starting with whether Marx actually intended to propose a theory of price formation in the first place and proceeding through a whole series of feminist debates about whether “reproductive labor” produces value for capital (i.e., Silvia Federici’s position) or whether the whole point of the value system in capital is to define certain forms of work as “real value-producing work” and to de-validate others (i.e., Diane Elson’s position).¹⁰

In a way, the position Öcalan is taking here bears a good deal of similarity to that taken by Michael Hardt and Antonio

⁸ Similarly, in volume 2: “How shall we then define the reward for a mother’s labor of carrying the proletariat for nine months and then nurturing him or her until he or she is fit to work? And how do we determine the owners and how do we reward all those who, over thousands of years, had contributed to the construction of production tools, which now have been stolen by the capitalists? Let us not forget that, in not a single case the value of the tools of production is equal to what it is sold for at the market. Even the technical inventions used in a modern factory are the products of thousands of people’s collective creativity. How are we to determine the value of their labor and whom are we to pay?”; Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 2: Capitalism: The Age of Unmasked Gods and Naked Kings* (Porsgrunn, NO: New Compass Press, 2017), 76; second revised edition will be published by PM Press in 2020.

⁹ Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume 1*, 128.

¹⁰ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012); Diane Elson, ed., *Value: The Representation of Labor in Capitalism* (London: CSE Books, 1979).

Negri from the *Labor of Dionysus* to their celebrated *Empire*—perhaps not entirely surprisingly, considering they are both activist intellectuals coming out of the Marxist tradition but writing work in dialogue with antiauthoritarian social movements (and Negri also spent a certain portion of his intellectual life in prison). Still, I think the differences are, if anything, even more revealing. Öcalan has taken the insights of feminism and used them to reimagine five thousand years of political economy, to argue that true social value was never something that could be measured and that any attempt to do so was always already a form of violence; Hardt and Negri argue instead that it was the rise of feminism itself, in the 1970s, that rendered “the law of value” obsolete.

It might be useful to quote some of the passages where they originally lay this out.

Marx thus conceived the labor theory of value in two forms, from two perspectives—one negative and one affirmative. The first perspective begins with the theory of abstract labor. . . . The quantity of value expresses the existing relationship between a certain good and the proportion of social labor time necessary for its production.¹¹

This approach, they emphasize, is concerned with how the system orders itself and, therefore, uses the language employed by the political economist in Marx’s day. But there’s another form the labor theory of value can take and sometimes does take in Marx’s work: a more radical form. Workers are constantly struggling to establish what labor power actually is, and this is a dynamic, antagonistic, political struggle. One effect of that struggle has been to establish women’s unpaid work as a legitimate form of labor:

¹¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Dionysus: Critique of the State Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 8.

The relationship between labor and value is thus not unidirectional. As numerous scholars have recognized over the last thirty years . . . what counts as labor, or value-creating practice, always depends on the existing values of a given social and historical context; in other words, labor should not simply be defined as activity, any activity, but specifically activity that is socially recognized as productive of value. The definition of what practices comprise labor is not given or fixed, but rather historically and socially determined, and thus the definition itself constitutes a mobile site of social contestation. For example, certain lines of feminist inquiry and practice, setting out from an analysis of the gender division of labor, have brought into focus the different forms of affective labor, caring labor, and kin work that have been traditionally defined as women’s work. These studies have clearly demonstrated the ways in which such forms of activity produce social networks and produce society itself. As a result of these efforts, today such value-creating practices can and must be recognized as labor.¹²

It’s for this reason, they explain, that the “law of value” no longer applies; social values can no longer be measured; feminism has opened the way to a postmodern society in which new forms of value producing cooperation have emerged outside of the factory and workplace, from subcultures to the internet, invading our daily existence, and identity politics replace class politics, because it’s the production of those identities that is now the most important form of labor. The values they produce are “beyond measure.” In fact, they go even further: what we are really witnessing is the emergence of communism (aka

¹² Ibid., 8–9.