

Öcalan's Paradigm: Redefining the Revolution

By Meral Çiçek

13 August 2021

In general revolution is defined as a sudden, complete or marked change in something. In political science, a revolution (Latin: *revolutio*, “a turn around”) is a fundamental and relatively sudden change in political power and political organisation which occurs when the population revolts against the government, typically due to perceived oppression or political incompetence.

There are different definitions, according to the ideological view.

When a group of leftist students and workers from Kurdistan and Turkey under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan started to organise in the 1970s, revolution was defined in the light of Marxist theory. In the brochure ‘The Path of the Revolution of Kurdistan’ which was written by Abdullah Öcalan in the summer of 1978 the task of the revolution is defined as **“creating an independent, united and democratic Kurdish state”**. With creating a democratic Kurdistan [Democratic People's Republic] they meant to ensure the liberation of all social structures. For this purpose first of all a **“national democratic revolution”** and then a **“socialist revolution”** was needed. In their understanding of that time after the elimination of colonialism in all fields of life, Kurdistan would be able to take the road to an independent development in the political, economic, cultural and social spheres. The revolution of Kurdistan was seen as part of the world proletariat revolution, which started with the October revolution and went from strength to strength with national liberation movements.

In time this understanding of revolution within the PKK radically changed. The redefinition of revolution mainly rests on Öcalan's criticism of positivism and his analyses of state and power. While – as mentioned – the goal of the revolution in Kurdistan was defined as the creation of an independent, united and democratic state, together with the collapse of the Soviet Union Öcalan more and more took a critical look at state and power. This reconsideration manifested itself in Öcalan's prison writings after his capture in 1999 and his paradigm of democracy, ecology and women's liberation, developed in prison.

Öcalan analyses the five-thousand-year-old state civilisation as power and capital accumulation. While formerly believing that the foundation of an independent state, where Kurds govern themselves, would solve the question of freedom, he later came to the conclusion that the state as a structure that continuously reproduces power-relations is in contradiction with freedom. The state cannot be the structure and form to reach freedom because it is the expression of power and domination. That's the reason why the PKK changed its strategy and cut with the

objective to found a Kurdish nation-state and developed the model of Democratic Confederalism instead.

Öcalan's analysis of the five-thousand-year-old history of state and power is extremely comprehensive and a theme in itself. Therefore I will focus on aspects related to his understanding of revolution. In his book 'Sociology of freedom' [written in 2008] Öcalan expounds the most important role played by state and power as "leaving the society weak and deprive it of its ability to defend itself, by ensuring that society's moral and political fabric, i.e., its very means of existence, is continuously weakened until it can no longer play its role".

The moral and political society is one of the most central notions in Öcalan's thinking. For him the moral and political society represents the natural state of society. That means he breaks with the positivist categorisations of society according to its production relations. For example according to Marx's theory of historical materialism, societies pass through six stages: primitive communist society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, socialist society and finally stateless communist society. Or there are concepts like industrial society etc.

In Öcalan's view a society can exist without the state, class, exploitation, the city, power or the nation but a society devoid of morals and politics is unthinkable. Society cannot maintain its existence if it cannot form the key areas of morality and politics. The **fundamental role of morality** is to equip society with the rules necessary to continue existing and provide the capacity to implement them. The **role of politics** is to provide society with the necessary moral rules and, through a process of continuous discussion, to decide on the means and methods needed to meet society's fundamental material and intellectual needs.

Any society that loses the rules governing its existence and the ability to implement them becomes nothing but a herd of animals and can then be easily abused and exploited. According to Öcalan the fundamental duty of power and the state is to prevent society from using its moral and political power, the two fundamental strategies for its existence, and to replace them with law and rulers at all times:

"Historically power and the state apparatuses and relations have always instituted law in place of social morality and imposed state administration in place of social politics. This is necessary to ensure the accumulation of capital and the monopoly of exploitation. Every page of the 5 thousand year old history of civilisation overflows with examples of how to break society's moral and political capacity and replace it with law and administration by the capital monopolies."

One might think what social morality and social politics have to do with revolution. To make this understandable I should define moral and politics according to Öcalan's paradigm.

For Öcalan morality means social conscience. He underlines that for 98 percent of history it was not laws but moral rules that were valid. That's why he uses the term moral society. He defines morality as the best way to meet the basic needs of life. Morality refers to carrying out all social activity, especially economic efforts, in a good way. Thus everything that is social is moral and everything that is moral is social. Politics as direct democracy is effectively morality itself. The source of morality (and of democracy) is the collective mind of social practice and its capacity for work. Together with the civilisation process morality was replaced with state norms and by doing so an erosion of the moral society happened. In all civilised societies the reach of morality (as well as of direct democracy) shrank and the reach of law increased.

Let's get over to Öcalan's definition of politics. Öcalan underlines that political affairs and state affairs are not one and the same; to the contrary they are in open contradiction. State and power are the negation of politics. For Öcalan politics is essentially the acts of freedom, equality and democratisation needed for moral and political society to sustain its nature or existence under any and all circumstances. The essence of democratic politics can be summarized as follows: implement its moral principles, engage in any political discussion about its most basic needs and make any decisions. The main task of democratic politics is to restore the free functioning of moral and political society. The conclusion is that politics, freedom and democracy are inseparable and mutually define each other. He says "If freedom is the space within which politics expresses itself, then democracy is the way in which politics is exercised in this space."

When Öcalan talks about moral and political society he does not talk about prehistoric times. He talks about the natural state of social nature that is constantly lived and will continue to exist so long as the society's existence does not end. With David Graeber's words, "The moral and political society exists as a repressed substratum in all societies". The role of politics is to make this existence free, equal and democratic. This is the society whose realisation he aims for. Because in his paradigm moral and political society is the freest and democratic society. A functioning moral and political fabric and organs is the most decisive dynamic not only for freeing society but to keep it free. Because here individuals and groups become subjects.

According to Öcalan, "Revolutions are forms of social action resorted to when society is sternly prevented from freely exercising and maintaining its moral and political function. Revolutions can and should be accepted as legitimate by society only when they do not seek to create new societies, nations, or states but to restore moral and political society its ability to function freely."

According to this, the role and task of revolutionaries is to contribute to the development of moral and political society: “Revolutionary heroism must find meaning through its contributions to moral and political society. Any action that does not have this meaning, regardless of its intent and duration, cannot be defined as revolutionary social heroism. What determines the role of individuals in society in a positive sense is their contribution to the development of moral and political society.”

Öcalan criticises the understanding and practice of revolutionism as ‘social engineering’. He criticises the self-conception of revolutionaries that see themselves as free subjects that have overcome the capitalist system and objectivise the people that should be liberated from the system. In the practice of many revolutionary movements we see that the social revolution was seen as a dress, which the society should wear. We see that many cadres did not recognise themselves as part of the social question and disconnected from society as if they were not socialised in it and if the system did not reproduce itself in their thinking and acting. Another point of social engineering is to believe that you can decide for the society, that you know what the needs of society are, that you know better than society what is good or bad for them and by doing so dispossess the society of its decision-making power. Such an understanding and practice cannot be seen as ‘liberating the society’. On the contrary, this understanding serves to create new power relations, hierarchies and by doing so reproduces the system you actually oppose. In this context Öcalan also underlines that “Attempts at social engineering are part of what liberalism does to create capital and power monopolies”.

This wrong understanding of revolutionism exerted influence within the Kurdish revolutionary movement under the leading role of the PKK for many years and still does. For example for years the term ‘creating a new society’ or ‘creating a free society’ was used within the Kurdish revolutionary movement. But in his book *Sociology of Freedom* Öcalan criticises this term and the understanding behind it. He says that “Revolutions cannot be interpreted as the re-creating acts of society. Revolutions can only be defined as social revolutions to the extent that they free society from excessive burden of capital and power.” And for him the unique way to do this is to struggle against factors that prevent the development and functioning of moral and political social fabric. In this sense the task of revolutionaries cannot be defined as creating any social model of their making but more correctly as playing a role in contributing to the development of moral and political society.

Let us now go on to another essential component of Öcalan’s criticism. He acknowledges the great heritage left by all the revolutions of the modern era. But he underlines that their biggest deficit was not to be able to solidify an alternative modernity. Therefore they could not prevent to dramatically melt within capitalist modernity. He believes that scientific socialism, especially the October revolution

and the Chinese revolution did not show the strength to overcome the material culture structures of capitalist modernity (economic, social and political institutions) and its mindset and scientific world.

The conclusion of this critique is that revolutions need to be based on the material and non-material structures of an alternative modernity understanding. In Öcalan's paradigm and conception this is Democratic Modernity. The redefining of revolution within the PKK is based on a rebuilding according to the concepts and the theory of Democratic Modernity.

In the theory of Öcalan democratic modernity should be thought of as a specific term for the last 400 years of democratic civilisation. It exists as the opposite pole whenever and wherever networks of capitalist modernity [the last 400 years of classical civilisation] are found. According to Öcalan "Whether successful or not, whether free or enslaved, whether marked by similarity or diversity, whether approaching equality or far removed from it, whether ecological and feminist or not, whether it has attained significance or not – in short, close to the characteristics of moral and political society or distant from them – democratic modernity exists at the heart of capitalist modernity always and everywhere."

Öcalan's theory of democratic modernity has three main dimensions:

1. The mindset of a Democratic Nation as conscience revolution [Öcalan underlines that there cannot be a lasting or permanent social revolution without a revolution of the mind]
2. Democratic Autonomy as embodiment revolution [This dimension is about democratic governance + reinforcement of moral and political society]
3. Democratic Confederatism as democratic modernity's political alternative to capitalist modernity's nation-state

Öcalan does not disconnect social revolution from political or systemic revolution. For him in order to overcome capital and power monopolies it is essential to restore moral and political society its ability to function freely. The more the moral and political society functions freely the more capital and power monopolies will lose their ability to function freely. The democratic self-organisation of the society and the struggle against all forms of power and exploitation are parallel processes. For example in Rojava the political struggle against the dictatorship of Assad and the social struggle to organise the people in order to free and strengthen the functions of moral and political society [in form of neighbourhood communes, people's, women's and youth councils, grassroots organisations in all fields of the live etc.] take place simultaneously. In fact the level of self-organisation determines the political relationship between the state power and the revolutionary movement.

In this way according to Öcalan revolution must be based on simultaneity. He breaks with a positivist understanding which lines up things and prioritises some issues and postpones other to a moment 'after the revolution'. For Öcalan, there is no 'after the revolution'. There have been and still are revolutionary movements whose understanding is very positivist. For example in the years prior to the founding of the Kurdistan Worker's Party the majority of Turkish left movements said that the Kurdish question in Turkey would be automatically solved with the revolution. Therefore there was no need for a separate organisation of Kurds. They should just support the socialist movement in Turkey and after their victory Kurds would be free and equal. But actually the question of democracy and freedom in Turkey is mostly based on the existence of the Kurdish question. The Kurdish question is not a sub-conflict but a central one in Turkey and therefore a democratisation of the country is only possible through a political solution of the Kurdish question.

There are also many examples in history where the gender issue was put back behind the class struggle and argued that after a successful revolution the whole society, men and women, would be free. Öcalan also criticises the understanding that first you have to make a revolution and then after the revolution socialist life can begin. Actually this understanding postpones the free life to a time 'after' the revolution. But revolutionaries are those who live the values of the revolution now and here. Those who are not continuously challenging the capitalist modernity in their own thinking and action will not be able to play a leading role in revolution. That means that the life of revolutionaries must be revolutionary. The revolution is nothing happening outside of your life. You cannot reject the capitalist system but live its modernity. How do you live? How are your relations? This is what determines revolutionism. In Öcalan's understanding socialism means democratic participation in society and conscious and active life against capitalism.

While Abdullah Öcalan opposes the distinction between primary conflicts and sub-conflicts he gives the women's question a central role. Because in his analyses of the history of power and oppression the degradation and enslavement of women constitute the core of all social questions. He explains that from a historical and social perspective the women's question is the most comprehensive question. Therefore no question can be solved without realising women's liberation. He defines democratic modernity as age of the women's revolution and civilisation. And he underlines that the 21st century has to give priority to the women's revolution. One of his main critique of socialist and revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th century is that they have not pivot around women's liberation. According to him any socialist movement that does not put women's liberation in its centre cannot be successful in liberating life:

"Liberating life is impossible without a radical woman's revolution which would change man's mentality and life. If we are unable to make peace between man and

life and life and woman, happiness is but a vain hope. Gender revolution is not just about woman. It is about the five thousand years old civilisation of classed society which has left man worse off than woman. Thus, this gender revolution would simultaneously mean man's liberation."

In this sense according to Abdullah Öcalan's paradigm true social revolutions must be woman's revolutions at heart. He sees a dialectic between women's liberation and revolution. And he views the 21st century as the age where maybe for the first time in the history of state and power based civilisation the possibility to realise the woman's revolution is higher than it has ever been.