

Reflections on Revolution, the Spiral of Violence, and the Legitimacy of Self-Defence

Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley

The Zeitgeist Effect and the Appeal of the Guerrilla

I first got interested in writing something on the difficult subject of revolutionary violence while trying to understand the trajectory of the Turkish and the Kurdish left in the 1970s. I realised that it was crucial to situate this trajectory within its global historical context. This was the moment of Régis Debray, cause célèbre, jailed by the same thugs in Bolivia who had martyred his friend Che Guevara. The moment when he famously argued that, in Cuba, and with Che, he had glimpsed the future, that the guerrilla tactic provided the answer to the question, “How to overthrow the power of the capitalist state?”; indeed, that the guerrilla could become “the nucleus of a people’s army” and harbinger of “a future socialist state” (p.24). When he could confidently dismiss not only “those who are addicted to the electoral opium, for whom socialism will come on the day when half plus one of the electorate vote for it” (p.83); but also, even those committed revolutionaries who remained believers in the “old obsession,” those who “believe that revolutionary awareness and organization must and can precede revolutionary action” (p.83). A moment when it was increasingly fashionable to conclude, with Debray, that “[r]evolutionary politics, if they are not to be blocked, must be diverted from politics as such,” that “[p]olitical resources must be thrown into an organization which is simultaneously political and military” (p.123).

This was the moment when Frantz Fanon’s last book and testament, *The Wretched of the Earth*, was all the rage as well. A book in which Fanon had eloquently defended the recourse to armed struggle on psychological grounds, as a “cleansing force” and practice capable of “mobilizing the people,” indeed, a practice that “binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upwards in reaction to the settler’s violence in the beginning.” What’s more, Fanon insisted, the practice of violence, “when it arises out of a war of liberation, “introduces into each man’s consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history,” that “it frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction;” that “it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (p.74).

A brilliant and provocative book, no doubt, but one which was all too often interpreted, then as now, nearly exclusively in relation to what Fanon had to say in his chapter “concerning violence;” whereas what he had to say in his chapter on “colonial wars and mental disorders,” his qualifications and words of caution, remained (and remains) all too often underemphasized, if not entirely ignored (Wolfenstein, p.432, n3).

The potential for generating a negative dialectic, for precipitating a spiral of violence and repression, was perhaps not sufficiently anticipated. Nor the political and social consequences of triggering such a spiral sufficiently foreseen or taken into account. The tactical and strategic weaknesses of the pursuit of peaceful and reformist forms of resistance were certainly well-rehearsed. But the perils of the path of violent insurgency were probably less well understood. The far-right was way more brutal, it should not be forgotten; but nor can it be denied that both sides were caught in the vicious spiral.

Enter the Spiral of Violence

It was while trying to think through the dynamics of that spiral that I came to appreciate the contribution of the great liberation theologian Helder Da’Camara, the Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, in the impoverished and marginalized North-East of Brazil, whose reflections from that fateful moment, whose interpretation of the appeal of the guerrilla, and whose illumination of the logic of the spiral of violence, definitely remain instructive, and are arguably unsurpassed, to this day.

Camara’s analysis begins with a point reminiscent of ones’ made emphatically and persuasively by Fanon, whose justly celebrated book “begins with the fact that colonialism is institutionalised violence – institutionalized and internalized” (Wolfenstein, p.103). Likewise, Camara starts by arguing, albeit in somewhat more general terms, that if you “look closely at the injustices” inside the poor countries, much less the relations between the poor countries and the rich ones, “you will find that everywhere the injustices are a form of violence.” This violence he names “violence No. 1.”

Camara continues by stating two premises, which he derives from his liberationist interpretation of Christian theology, but which can be derived from many other theological, metaphysical, and even perhaps post-metaphysical traditions as well. These premises: (1) that “no-one is born to be a slave,” and, somewhat more controversially, (2) that no-one sets out “to suffer injustices, humiliations, restrictions.” From these premises, Camara goes on to insist, that wherever human beings are subjected to such “subhuman” conditions, wherever they suffer restrictions, humiliations, injustices; without prospects, without hope,” wherever they are effectively enslaved, “this established violence No. 1 attracts violence No. 2, revolt, either of the oppressed themselves or of youth, firmly resolved to battle for a more just and human world” (p.30). In a word, violence No. 1 begets violence No. 2.

Simple as it may seem, those in positions of power tend to adamantly deny the connection. “They pretend to believe that without the presence of ‘agitators’, the oppressed masses would remain with their eyes closed, passive and immobile” (p.32).

But such finger-pointing and attempts at denial notwithstanding, it is ultimately undeniable for anyone with a modicum of intellectual honesty to recognize that, at root, it is violence No.1 which begets violence No.2.

And then comes violence No. 3: repression. As Camara explains: “When conflict comes out in the streets, when violence No. 2 tries to resist Violence No. 1, the authorities consider themselves obliged to re-establish public order, even if this means using force. This is Violence No. 3.” What’s more, he warns: “Sometimes they go even further, and this is becoming increasingly common: in order to obtain information which may indeed be important to public security, the logic of violence leads them to use moral and physical torture,” and he makes sure to add, “as though any information extracted through torture deserved the slightest attention!”

Camara ends his illumination of the logic of the spiral by striking a prophetic chord. He notes that “the reaction of the oppressed also shows clear signs of becoming sharper,” and thus predicts that “the world is headed for [more] trouble, protest, violence, coming from the youth.” He then turns to pose the question, “Who has any illusions about the stepping up of governmental reactions?” For those who might feel tempted to succumb to such illusions, he simply reminds them: “We need only consider how many countries have submitted to extra-constitutional governments or dictatorships. Look at the map and count the number of countries in the hands of the military.” This before coming to the “inescapable conclusion ... that there is a real threat” of a further “escalation of violence,” indeed, a “threat of seeing the world fall into a spiral of violence” (pp.39-40).

To illustrate and add to the force of this prophetic, apocalyptic

chord, Camara next turns his attention to the War in Vietnam, which was still raging when he wrote. He highlights what he perceptively considers “the saddest and gravest lesson of the Vietnamese war” – namely, the fact that the National Liberation Front, in “accepting and desiring tacit alliances at the moment of battle against the common enemy,” ends up with “a political philosophy imposed on it by the Empire which finances it,” a philosophy which includes not only militant atheism, but also “blind obedience to the Party and all its methods of insecurity.” Methods such as “encouragement of informers and [the] periodic purges inherent in the dictatorships of left or right” (pp.43-44).

Thus, he comes to a crucial challenge, indeed, conundrum, if not stalemate, in terms of the prospects for an emancipatory outcome to the spiral of violence between oppressors and oppressed. On the one hand, “even a first-rate power cannot defeat guerrillas if it cannot count on the support of the population.” But on the other, the guerrillas can only “tackle the warlike power with great force” when they have “another great power” behind them. In a word, “the liberation of Vietnam (and of the countries that will suffer the same fate) is very relative: either the people continue to be a satellite in the capitalist orbit, or they are condemned to revolve as a satellite in the socialist orbit” (pp.44-45). A good dose of pessimism of the intellect, to say the least.

Situating and Complicating the Model

Camara’s nightmare vision, first published in 1971, was certainly prophetic when it came to events in the Republic of Turkey, where the violence and counter-violence between far-right and left would provide the justification for two military coups in less than a decade, first in the spring of 1971, and then again in 1980. And both coups would effectively bring with them successive crackdowns on the legal space for political opposition, not to mention the plight of Turkish workers, much less the Kurds.

But prophetic as it was, and useful as it remains, the model of the negative dialectic sketched by Camara remains oversimplified. As happens so often with models, its parsimony is both its virtue and its vice. Here again it makes sense to return to Fanon, and to Camara’s fellow Catholic, compatriot, and comrade, the critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire. These two thinkers help supplement, and subtly complicate, the model of the spiral of violence, albeit rendering its predictive capacity somewhat weaker. Alas, such are the contingencies of human freedom.

They certainly also help to correct the tendency to interpret the “lessons of history” as the basis for a dogmatic commitment to pacifism. Not surprisingly, coming as he does from the hierarchy within the Catholic Church, Camara’s arguments are directed mostly at people who are at least complicit in oppression. And so, perhaps it is effective for him to end his analysis with an ode to the virtues of Ghandi. But even if Gandhi were a saint, which he wasn’t, as a tactical matter, *in matters of this world*, it remains

far from clear in which concrete conditions Ghandi's method is likely to lead to emancipation, and in which conditions his method is likely, to reify and reproduce the "false peace," the "deceptive beauty" of "stagnant marshes in moonlight" that Camara himself so eloquently and passionately denounces (p.59).

Fanon, of course, was positioned much differently. He was an Afro-Caribbean intellectual who came to be organically linked to the Algerian Freedom Movement. He was thus very far from any temptation to end up, in affairs of this world, to pledge his allegiance to the Vatican. To the contrary, he was a militant atheist, a "dialectical materialist." But he was, of course, also a trained psychiatrist. His understanding of the consciousness of the oppressed was thus based on tons of direct lived experience and professional training, not to mention professional treatment. In this respect, it is not surprising that his account of the psychoanalytic dynamics at work among the oppressed, including especially his passionate presentation of the psychic costs of the workings of Violence No. 1 on their consciousness, his account of their traumas, is understandably more subtle, and therefore less teleological, than the oversimplified model so parsimoniously if skilfully sketched by the Archbishop.

Crucially, Fanon observes that the first manifestations, and indeed, the vast majority of violence committed by the oppressed is directed "horizontally," not "vertically," that is, it tends to be aimed not at oppressors, but rather, pits oppressed versus oppressed. As Wolfenstein has ably summarized Fanon's argument: "institutionalized violence engenders a self-destructive counterviolence in the colonized individual." In *Black Skin, White Masks* he had analysed the phenomenon of self-hatred; in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon extends his line of argument towards an explanation of "intra-racial violence" (Wolfenstein PM, p.103).

For Fanon, the first step towards transcending self-destructive self-hatred and horizontal violence, the first step towards decolonization, is to "negate the negation," to recover one's own sense of dignity and humanity through a "violent rejection of the master-slave relationship." Fanon thus explicitly invokes Hegel, with whose work he was intimately familiar, having even self-consciously set out in *Black Skin, White Masks* to adapt and correct Hegel's analysis of the master-slave dialectic, via a materialist inversion of the motives of the master (if not those of the slave) – "For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work" (<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/sa/gordimer/july6.html>).

However, this moment of "negating the negation," the act of violent insurrection, of bloody rebellion is thus a necessary condition for emancipation; but it is clearly not sufficient. This because, as Fanon also insists, "violent action is pathologizing even if, in the colonial context, it is also humanizing." Indeed, according to Fanon, only if "spontaneous rebellion evolves into

organized mass movement," only if "spontaneous anger is transformed into critical consciousness, will the energies released in the violent action not be dissipated." Political commitment, political organization, even revolutionary discipline, active participation in the collective struggle, are thus depicted by Fanon as imperative for the mental health of the oppressed (Wolfenstein, p.103).

Mental health should not be expected to be the norm, perhaps especially in the traumatizing context of colonial wars, as the Archbishop's more simplistic model would seem to suggest. To the contrary, in a pathological situation, pathologies should be expected as the order of the day. The impulse towards emancipation, the will towards life, need not win out over the impulse to self-destruction, the will towards death. Necrophilia can reign supreme. Horizontal violence need not ever give way to collective insurgency; and collective insurgency always runs the risk of devolving back into internecine violence amongst the oppressed.

This is a spectre that looms in the background of Fanon's thought, hauntingly, one he tries exorcise by shifting focus from "self-hatred" to "intra-racial violence." This shift, however, requires further justification and explanation. Unfortunately, Fanon didn't live long enough to clarify how "intra-psychic" dynamics are translated into "inter-personal" acts.

Paolo Freire's short but suggestive analysis of horizontal violence is helpful in filling in the gaps left by Fanon's silence in this regard. Freire emphasizes the ways in which the hatred and prejudices of the oppressors can get internalized in the self-images and worldviews of the oppressed. Indeed, their consciousness and consciences can come to be corrupted by disregard and even hatred for their fellow oppressed, which manifests itself in the phenomenon of horizontal violence. As Freire explains it, apologetically, "Because the oppressor exists within their oppressed comrades, when they attack those comrades they are indirectly attacking the oppressor as well" (p.44). But he could have put it the other way around just as well, if less apologetically: that because the oppressor exists within the oppressed, when the oppressed attack their comrades, it is the oppressors within them who are lashing out. In a word, the enemy is also within us. And so, the ability, the willingness, to redirect the rage away from the fellow oppressed, to channel it instead towards the oppressor, requires confronting this "enemy within."

Such successful confrontation requires constant dialogue. Even more, it requires cultivating a culture open to critical self-reflection, a willingness to question hollow dogmas, tolerance of ruthless critique, in order to vanquish the oppressor within, as well as to make sure that he is not resurrected. Which is why Freire goes on to "emphasize that there is no dichotomy between dialogue and revolutionary action," though he perhaps overstates the case when he goes even further and asserts that "dialogue is the essence of revolutionary action" (p.116).

The Necrophilia of Oppression

For Freire, revolution is about love for life. This is a point implicit in Fanon's account as well, but Freire's work has the virtue of spelling it out explicitly. Not only do oppressive social relations literally kill, both through acts of omission and acts of commission. So too do such oppressive relations condemn all too many to "an almost unnatural living death: life which is fully denied." Oppressive social relations constrict people's creativity, they restrict and confine their lives. In this respect, the emergence of a revolutionary will to struggle to overthrow such oppression is best understood as a labour of love – love for life, love for creation. Indeed, Freire insists, the revolution seeks to create life, even if, in order to do so "it may be obliged to prevent some men from circumscribing life" (p.152).

Oppression, by contrast, is "necrophilic." It, too, may be "nourished by love," but of a very different kind. Not love of life, but "love of death" (p.58). The dilemma, though, is this: anyone who engages in violence, anyone who takes the life of another, even if it is a necessary act, one done in the name of life and creation, anyone who commits such an act of violence will always run a heightened risk of falling victim to a resurgent bout of "necrophilia." A risk of resurrecting the vanquished oppressor within, of rekindling the romance with death and destruction.

This necrophilia of oppression, this love of death and destruction, is ubiquitous in the contemporary world. A point powerfully made by Walter Benjamin, who provides a final complement and refinement to the model of the spiral of violence sketched by Archbishop Da Camara. In his prophetic essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," originally published in 1936, Benjamin offered a prescient and piercing early diagnosis of "mass society," and even "the society of the spectacle"- a condition (a) underpinned and propelled forward by transformations in art and in the "mass media" in the age of mechanical reproduction; and (b) intimately intertwined with the rise of fascism. Benjamin honed in on the significance of the Futurist movement's glamorization and glorification of the alleged beauty of war, adducing it as evidence of the extent of human "self-alienation" experienced in "mass society." In his words: "Mankind's ... self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (pp.234-235).

Benjamin, following Freud, held the modern experience to be centered principally on "shock." As Buck-Morss has explained: "In industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience." Under such conditions, "response to stimuli without thinking has become necessary for survival." Consciousness comes to serve largely as a "shield" and a "buffer," protecting the organism by preventing the retention of external stimuli from

being "impressed as memory," even "isolating present consciousness from past memory." The depth of memory thus flattened, "experience is impoverished." This "crisis in cognitive experience" is in turn linked to the cultivation of narcissism, a narcissism which "functions as an anaesthetizing tactic against the shock of modern experience," and which is "appealed to daily by the image-phantasmagoria of mass culture." It also renders fertile "the ground from which fascism" can spring forth.

The romance with death and destruction thus runs deep. It is a romance inherent in oppressive social relations of any sort; but it is greatly exacerbated by the alienation, the shock and the traumas experienced in, and the reactive narcissism generated by, everyday life in modern, industrial society.

Apocalyptic Undertones in the Model

All of these important addendums – Fanon's emphasis on the significance of horizontal violence; Freire's emphasis on the internalization of the oppressor within the psyches of the oppressed, as well as his emphasis on the intimate links between oppression and necrophilia; and Benjamin's emphasis on how the shock and traumas of life in industrial society tend to undermine the very capacity for reflective "consciousness" – all of these additions ultimately serve to reinforce the apocalyptic undertones already evident in the Archbishop's parsimonious sketch of the spiral of violence, even if they also render the model's predictive power somewhat less robust. But the most basic point of Archbishop Da Camara's parsimonious model remains intact: institutional violence begets violence, either of the self-destructive or the insurrectionary sort, or both.

As Bob Marley, quoting Haile Selassie, puts the basic point about oppression begetting violence, in a similar apocalyptic vein: "Until the philosophy that holds one race superior and another inferior, Is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, Everywhere is war, Me say war. That until there is no longer, First class and second class citizens of any nation, Until the colour of a man's skin is no more significant than the colour of his eyes, Me say war. That until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all, Without regard to race, Dis a war. That until that day the dream of lasting peace, World Citizenship, The Rule of international morality, Will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, But never attained, Now everywhere is war, War."

Of course, one need not be fully persuaded by such grandiose, apocalyptic motifs. But at the very least, if one takes into account the insights of this adapted model of the spiral of violence, it can help overcome the temptation to fetishize violence, and so help when it comes to tactical considerations about the likely consequences and costs in terms of human suffering of engaging in insurrectionary violence.

In a word, it can help avoid falling into the same trap of over-confidence, if not blind faith, in the redemptive powers and emancipatory potential of violent insurrection that gradually came to dominate many left wing circles, both in the West and in the Republic of Turkey, over the course of the sixties and into the seventies.

But at the same time, crucially, it can also help undermine any temptation to believe the tactical arguments made by those who promise peace without being willing to deliver even a modicum of justice, without any amelioration of institutional violence.

Abdullah Öcalan and the Legitimacy of Self-Defense

Enter Abdullah Öcalan. One of the aspects of the democratic confederal project that Öcalan emphasizes is the imperative of self-defense. This is a point of clear discrepancy between Öcalan's radical, anti-statist understanding of democracy and contemporary mainstream liberal, statist appropriations of the term. Not surprisingly, it has also proven a major obstacle for Turkish authorities the times in which they have opted to engage with Öcalan in always aborted negotiations for peace. For Öcalan is adamant that "only self-defense will make peace possible," indeed, that "[a] peace with no self-defense can only be an expression of submission and slavery." He objects to the imposition by contemporary liberalism of "peace with no self-defense on societies and peoples," dismissing such a "unilateral game of democratic stability and reconciliation" as "nothing but a fig leaf on the bourgeois class domination achieved by armed forces," or even "a covert state of war." To this end, he insists that "[t]he major plank in capitalist ideological hegemony is the idea that a true peace is a peace that requires no self-defense" (p.129).

He further specifies that "[t]here are different parties to any peace," only to add that "the complete dominance of one party over another does not and cannot denote peace" (p.129). Though he admits that it may in fact be "possible to achieve stability and quiescence under the rule of the gun," he nevertheless contends that "this cannot be called peace" (p.130). For this reason, he stakes out an unmovable position, as a point of principle, that "a complete disarmament of the different parties is not on the table" (p.130). "In the final analysis," he concludes, "peace is the conditional reconciliation of democracy and the state" (p.131). Accordingly, "[a] cease-fire that does not include a moral and political solution cannot be called peace" (p.130).

Öcalan's position is in an important respect reminiscent of the classic argument advanced by Helder Câmara in *The Spiral of Violence*, where the archbishop distinguishes between genuine peace and a state of stagnant quiescence; nevertheless, Öcalan draws a very different conclusion than does the more pacifistic

Câmara about the consequences of a violent response to systemic oppression. Whereas for Câmara such recourse to counter-violence is likely to trigger a spiral of repression, Öcalan seems to suggest that it could also serve to re-equilibrate power relations, and in so doing lead to an opening for genuine peace. While, conversely, Öcalan also contends that "[c]apital and power monopolies are like wolves pursuing their prey; they seize what they want from those who lack self-defense – like grabbing a stray sheep from a disbanded flock" (p.191).

Öcalan has elsewhere justified armed insurgency in the Kurdish context as an historic necessity which achieved the consolidation of Kurdish identity. In *The Sociology of Freedom*, he renders this reasoning in more generalizable terms, by contending that "self-defense for societies is not simply military defense," for "[i]t is intertwined with the protection of identities ..." (p.261). This line of argument draws him close to the militant anti-colonial tradition of the likes of Frantz Fanon. However, Öcalan embraces a substantive vision for self-determination that differs dramatically from the statist strategy espoused by Fanon – since, in his words, "[d]emocratic confederalism leaves no room for hegemony of any sorts" (p.220).

Self-defense as a prerequisite for democratic peace. Otherwise the wolves will prey upon the stray sheep. Here we can glimpse that Öcalan's will to resist remains unbroken. Even so, his consequentialist calculation is questionable. The spiral of violence is at least as likely as the opening for democratic reconciliation. Yet Öcalan's intuition, his reasoning, is perhaps not reducible to an account of costs and benefits, even if his logic cannot be plausibly portrayed as deontological either. Rather, it has to do with the concept of democracy, the core democratic ideal of self-determination. For Öcalan is adamant: "[a] society that insists on determining its own course, that rejects colonization or any form of imposed dependency, must be capable of self-defense" (p.190).

Self-defense and strong institutions, as preconditions, or constituent components, of self-determination. "Societies without self-defense," Öcalan insists, "are societies that have surrendered and been colonized by the capital and power monopolies" (p.191). This formulation reveals that Öcalan is attune to a dual danger for freedom: on the one hand, capital, on the other, the state, or "power monopolies." Both of these forces constitute a credible threat to democratic society, and render it imperative for self-defense to "be established" and "always ready to defend," to "inhibit the attacks and exploitation" emanating from the two.

If these are two dangers against which self-defense is imperative, there are also two mistakes which must be scrupulously avoided. The first of these is "to entrust self-defense to the monopolistic order." But conversely, the second is "to try to become a power

apparatus under the rubric of forming a state to counter the existing state” (p.191). Here we glimpse the anti-statist dimension of Öcalan’s logic at work. For if the problem is framed as one of monopoly, then forming a state of one’s own can only mean cancelling out the democratic credentials of the struggle. Rather, a reconciliation of sorts, at minimum, if not a smashing of the bureaucratic apparatus, more maximally, must be sought.

But Öcalan is not sanguine about the prospect for abolishing the state altogether, or for that matter, for abolishing capitalism, at least in the short term. To the contrary, he foresees, “we will be living with capital and with power apparatuses for a while” (p.191).

Öcalan is particularly attune to the militaristic dimension of the nation-state system, which he juxtaposes to the framework of democratic confederalism, within which “social self-defense is best realized” (p.260). According to Öcalan, the nation-state is only conceivable as “a product of war,” and “[t]he institutions of power and the state, referred to as the civil administration, are essentially a veil over this military armor.” Indeed, he contends, even “[t]he apparatuses known as bourgeois democracies” are best interpreted as but “efforts to apply a coat of democratic polish to this militarist structure and mentality” (p.261).

The “nation-state,” Öcalan surmises, is intimately and inextricably linked to the phenomenon of fascism, the various power practices of which can best be interpreted as “the formal expression” of the nation-state’s “purest form” (p.261). As such, he insists, the militarization of the nation-state can only be stopped by democratic confederalism’s resort to self-defense. The tight connection between the nation-state form and militarism and fascism, then, are what justify for Öcalan the imperative of the capacity for societal self-defense. In his judgment, “[s]ocieties deprived of self-defense face the danger of losing their identities, political qualities, and democratization” (p.261). In contrast, even dialectical contradiction, to the militaristic and fascistic tendencies of the nation-state, “[s]elf-defense can, in fact, be defined as the concentrated expression of democratic politics” (p.260).

But are not the units of self-defense themselves vulnerable to emulating the very militaristic tendencies against which they are meant to serve as bulwarks? Öcalan has elsewhere contemplated this very real possibility, in the form of a thorough-going self-criticism of the state-like behavior of the PKK, over which he long presided and remains, at least formally, the head. In *The Sociology of Freedom*, Öcalan suggests that the kind of self-defense militias he has in mind have a considerably different command structure than the classic paramilitary guerrilla. In this vein, he argues that such units “are not a military monopoly but are under the tight control of democratic organs in accordance with society’s internal and external security needs” (p.220). In a word, the suggestion here is that the self-defense units are conceived as subordinate to the citizens’

direct-democratic assemblies. Such an interpretation is certainly consistent with their objective, which Öcalan characterizes as “to validate the will of democratic politics,” and further, “to render harmless any internal or external force that attempts to frustrate, prevent, or otherwise undermine this will” (p.220). Indeed, Öcalan would doubly subordinate the command structures of these self-defense units to democratic accountability – both to the participatory assemblies and to the members of the units themselves, though he remains silent about just how such double-subordination would be effectively coordinated and secured. He simply writes: “The command structure of the units is under the dual control of both the organs of democratic politics and unit members and can easily be changed, if necessary, by motions and their democratic approval” (p.220). Despite its ambiguities, this formulation remains most instructive, for it points well beyond the actual balance and relation of forces within the Kurdish freedom movement as it is currently structured.

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