**Proselytising Öcalan: A brief dialogue between Dr Thomas Jeffrey Miley and Henry Lewis**

Proselytise, / **pross**-i-li-tyz /, *verb*:convert from one religion or belief to another.

**Dr Thomas Jeffrey Miley:**

The Freedom for Öcalan campaign can be a linchpin for internationalist resistance against what Öcalan himself has dubbed the dominant civilizational system. It is not mere hubris to elevate his case and his cause, branded as he is as a public enemy, indeed, a terrorist. To champion Öcalan and advocate his plight helps illuminate the tyrannical nature and catastrophic consequences of the so-called war on terror. His copious writings from his lonely prison cell on Imrali Island, where he has been confined for nearly a quarter century now, constitute an act of great existential defiance. Even captured, he refuses to surrender.

This is why it is not an error to adopt something of an evangelical or proselytizing posture in relation to the man and his message. For Öcalan's case is crucial, his abduction and inhumane isolation render clear the brutal nature of capitalist modernity, and in his writings he manages to conjure the rough outlines of a viable and desirable alternative of democratic modernity.

Öcalan has accomplished a cogent re-articulation of self-determination, in which nation-statist aspirations are definitively transcended and all mobilizational energy channelled into efforts to reconstruct radical, direct democracy against the state.

Moreover, Öcalan is no mere theorist; he is the leader and inspiration for the Kurdish Freedom Movement, and his ideas have been put into practice, at least partially, in the revolutionary regime of Rojava, in the north-east of Syria. So too have Öcalan's ideas fuelled an armed confrontation with the Turkish state, caught though it may be in a spiral of violence.

The fact that the Kurdish Freedom Movement has never been defeated nor coopted renders it exemplary, though saying so need not mean we have succumbed to a "romanticization" of the movement. To the contrary, ours is a model of critical solidarity, both in relation to the ideas of Öcalan and in relation to the movement which he leads. We have therefore engaged in critiques of Öcalan's ideas, hoping to address and correct anti-semitic and anti-black racist traces imbricated in his 5 volume Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization. So too have we advanced a critical appraisal of the accomplishments of and challenges faced by the revolutionary regime in Rojava. So no, we cannot be accurately described as romanticizing Öcalan and the Movement. And yet, we plead guilty to the charge of seeking to centre Öcalan and the Kurdish cause. Among other reasons, because their struggle is taking place at one of the main faultlines of the geopolitical order.

Championing the cause of Öcalan promises to help resuscitate what we could call a revolutionary imaginary. Our ability to envision a viable and desirable alternative to capitalist modernity has been hindered by the crimes of and defeat of state communism, as much as by cooptation into social democracy. But we are up against the terminal crisis of capitalist modernity, with climate catastrophe already beginning to unfold and the spectre of nuclear holocaust prominently on display in the confrontation with Russia. Revolutionary change would seem our last hope. A rebirth of revolutionary consciousness would seem a necessary condition for resistance to build momentum.

**Henry Lewis:**

What does it mean to proselytise with Öcalan’s paradigm and the example of the Kurdish Freedom Movement?

The central aspect of the message that must be continuously spread is to declare the existence of democratic civilization, both in the past and present.

The foundation of Öcalan's paradigm is the communal and democratic, or the moral and political society, which was the foundation for the official civilization, and which has continued in a 'chain-like' existence from the Neolithic revolution into the present. The sum of this society's existence and its systematic expression is called *democratic civilization*. It is a principle of this paradigm to conceptualise the democratic civilisation as a distinct system to the official civilisation, and it has continued in dialectical contradiction to the official civilisation system throughout history. This is the main fault-line and contradiction of history (rather than the history of class struggle which is internal to official civilization), with periods of both peace and compromise between the two systems, and war.

Due to the official civilisation system's ideological hegemony and the general paradigm it employs, it has systematically hidden moral and political society and democratic civilization from sight, even though it has always been right in front of us as the basis of all social existence, whether that social existence is based on exploiting that society and lives by extracting its surplus (the official civilization system) or whether it allows that society to advance itself (the democratic civilization system). Öcalan breaks through this spell and declares the existence of democratic civilisation.

Whilst the message of the prophets, who are perhaps the original proselytisers, was that: 'No man can be God; There is only God in heaven' - a statement which was powerful enough to trigger the destruction of Rome and the Sassanids who were the height of the first 3000 years of the official civilization with its ruling ‘god-kings’ (but a statement which only allowed civilization to continue in a different form), Öcalan's message is that the official civilisation system is neither inevitable nor necessary for society: there has always existed moral and political society as democratic civilization, and society can exist, and can exist in a more positive way, without the official civilisation system.

This is arguably a more powerful message than that of the Abrahamic prophets since it does away with the necessity of any civilisation or state for society – whether the ancient states of god-kings, the Abrahamic idea of a divine state and god's kingdom which allowed the state to continue as the medieval state, or the rational state of capitalist modernity whether in ‘socialist’ guise or otherwise. He says that it is a lie of the official civilisation to say that society cannot exist without a civilisation or state1 – whether represented as a God or otherwise. He says that, on the contrary, the civilisation and state depend on society for *their* existence, since this society is the basis of all societal existence and values. He declares the existence of moral and political society which has existed all along and shows that the answer and the option of freedom has always existed with society.

Having declared the existence of moral and political society, Öcalan's contribution is to understand how it operates *as a system*, rather than treating it as if it is unsystematic and there is nothing of commonality between its various expressions across time and place. In the process, he identifies both the social structures and mental structures across this society which can be generally represented as direct democracy, democratic confederalism, strong self-organisation, self-defence, a communal economy, independent intellectual and moral organisation and more. This systematic expression of society is *democratic civilisation*. So, he doesn't necessarily invent anything new to impose on society, but rather looks at the reality of how society already is and always has been, and develops a system on this basis in respect for society's way of living.

In this sense, rather than the prophets who said that God and God's kingdom will bring salvation, Öcalan says that democratic civilisation which has always existed *is already* the basis for salvation (since this is what has allowed society to endure), and if it can be systematised to the same degree that official civilization has systematised itself, then it can provide what we might call hope, a future, salvation, resurrection, and a new life for societies everywhere.

However, this is clearly very different to a traditional form of proselytisation. Rather than saying 'God’s kingdom' or 'a workers’ state' will save you, Öcalan says, 'know yourselves, and you can save yourselves'. Rather than saying 'here are the rules to live by and here is the eternal kingdom whose rules you must obey', or 'here is the scientific blueprint for socialism which we must make our party program', he says: 'go and look into your history and your present, become conscious of yourselves; you will find all of the experience in your society needed to develop democratic civilisation.' For, it seems that society everywhere has broadly organised itself in similar ways, and so the foundations for the system of democratic civilisation can be found everywhere, and developed into that system. So, rather than imposing a system onto others in the traditional sense of preaching, to preach Öcalan's work is to open up space for an already existing society and to make that society aware of itself.

Proselytisation means that those preached to must give up their former beliefs. But rather than telling people: ‘Convert, and abandon your old beliefs’, Öcalan asks people to *strengthen* their existing beliefs and their cultures: to expand elements of their culture which correspond to universal communal and democratic values, and to be critical of elements of their beliefs and culture which have been distorted by the ruling civilisation system’s influence. He then asks people to *develop a system* which is capable of living up to their beliefs and their values and through which they can work together to *defend* their shared values and their cultures.

In the most advanced element of democratic civilisation today – the democratic Autonomous Administration in Syrian Kurdistan – which people have been told to give up their beliefs? Which Muslim, or which Christian, has been told to give up their beliefs? Which Yazidi person has been forced to give up their beliefs? Which Kurd, or which Arab, which Syriac, Assyrian, or Armenian, which Turkman, or which Chechen, has been told to abandon their cultures? Which tribe in the region has been forced to give up their ways of life and their traditional structures? Instead, with this democratic system, these people have all strengthened their cultures and have developed the means to defend their way of life and their lands, against the vengeful attacks of the ruling system. Have not the Yazidis, a people against whom a genocide has been waged, organised their autonomous political structures and self-defence, so that no ruling state or power may ever enslave them or come close to eliminating them again? Have not the different religions come together to form democratic religious councils, to promote peace between peoples and between different faiths, and to bring moral strength and the message of love for one’s neighbour – the communal and democratic elements of these cultures – to the service and protection of all society? Do the noble tribes of the region not work together through the autonomous administration? And at the same time: have the patriarchal elements of these cultures not receded, to pave for the women’s revolution which they can see is necessary for the freedom of all society? Are they not proud of their daughters who participate in society as political leaders, personnel of the women’s self-defence forces, and who are active autonomously in all areas of society’s life? And have their hierarchical elements not retreated, to embrace people’s democracy which they can see is the *true* guarantor of their values and their dignity, rather than the states throughout history which have betrayed their hopes and turned on them at every step?

Never does Öcalan say: ‘these people are pagans or infidels and must be converted to the true religion or destroyed’, and never has he been so ignorant as to say: ‘these cultures or make-believe religions are backwards and are getting in the way of the scientifically-inevitable advance of state socialism’. Because of Öcalan’s paradigm, these different peoples, of diverse and ancient cultures, have come together and have found unity under the roof of this democratic structure which they work together to maintain and defend.2 They have done this on the basis of the fundamental essence and fundamental nature of society (*the moral and political* or *communal and democratic* nature of society) which Öcalan’s paradigm makes its foundation, and which runs through all cultures of society. That is: they have found unity through the *diversity* and the celebration of their different cultures. So, to ‘proselytise’ Öcalan does not mean to tell societies to give up their fundamental culture and beliefs: it means to provide a framework – a framework of thought and organisation – for those cultures and beliefs to live more positively, to fulfil their ideals and values, to become a foundation for all society, and to defend themselves.

The social structures of democratic confederalism do not impose on society. They say: ‘organise yourselves according to your culture and traditions, and since we have a lot in common as moral and political society, we can work together in confederation’. Not only that, but since Öcalan’s paradigm attempts to identify elements of democratic civilisation in the past and present in order to turn these elements into a system, he essentially is saying that wherever society lives communally and democratically, or morally and politically, this is an example to everyone, and we can all learn from them. In this way, rather than Magnifying the Lord, Öcalan Magnifies society, and he calls on us to magnify *each other*. He says 'look, you have managed to defend yourselves and organise yourselves correctly in this way and that way. Let's deploy this systematically'. He points to an element of society and says ‘look here, this community or social tradition represents a strongly organised part of moral and political society, because it has managed to live in this way or that way which defends communal and democratic life against the official civilisation system. We can learn from this. Their way of life isn’t just by chance, but we can see that other communities have used this way of life to defend themselves, and so this must represent a system. These people already represent part of democratic civilisation: we can work with them, and can intentionally deploy across society the communal and democratic ways of life that they demonstrate, as part of the system of democratic civilisation.’

The same approach is taken for the intellectual work that must be done, and for the ‘proselytising’ or sharing of Öcalan's message. It doesn't say 'do this, do that', it says 'identify your true existence and then organise according to it and *find your own way'*, even if, since society is *in essence* the same everywhere, it means that similar forms of direct democracy and confederalism can be found everywhere. But only by identifying these forms within a particular society and developing this system on that basis, can it be not an imposition on society.

So, to preach Öcalan's work is to point to those in the present, and make them aware that they are part of democratic civilisation. Any social group which lives communally or democratically, any social group which chooses to live according to moral principle or to self-organise politically, is *already a part of* democratic civilisation. It just needs to become conscious of it. Then, it can develop itself as a system. This is the vast majority of society (since the ruling civilisation system can only ever be a minority), and is true even if a social group such as a political movement are currently state-oriented (so long as they haven't yet become the state), since they self-organise politically and according to their moral principle, rather than living as the state would like (leaving all management of society to the state, rejecting morality, etc). Such people’s way of life obviously has little to do with the official civilisation. How can a community group, a moral community, a cultural organisation, a political campaign who work for freedom and equality, poor people or persecuted people, a women’s shelter, people who want to protect the environment, workers or farmers who live off their own labour and who are not yet incorporated into the working classes, a tribe in the desert or steppe lands, or even members of a powerful university who choose instead to work for human dignity – how can such people consider themselves to be part of the history or present existence of the official system, which runs contrary to and which destroys all of these values? Evidently, such people are part of a different history: the magnificent and dignified history of democratic civilisation which has always run alongside and resisted the official one. Is this not ‘*good news’*? To become aware of this, for many people, will be nothing less thannew life.

You and I represent individuals who work as a part of democratic civilisation. The grassroots political movements you work with are all parts of democratic civilisation. My movements are a part of democratic civilisation. Your family origins which are poor, and represent democratic civilisation and moral and political society. My family background also represents this society. I reject the history of the official system and choose to make the history of democratic civilisation, and the dignity and true values of all its members today, my foundation in life.

Öcalan repeatedly emphasises that democratic civilization is not a future utopia, but a presently-existing reality. It just requires shifting paradigm to be able to actually see it. There is not really so much 'prefiguring' to be done then, but what must be done rather is to make the already-existing democratic civilisation conscious of itself, and to build on this basis.

To say to people: 'You represent a different existence and history. Systematise it.', of course requires knowing what that history is, and uncovering the history of democratic civilization in its chain-like continuity leading up to the present, in any context. In this way, the elements of democratic civilisation today can become aware of them-*selves*, or their *sense of self,* in a different way, and can conceptualise of themselves as part of a different system, and then *live and think and act and organise and structure society* according to that system's traditions. To become aware of that society's traditions (its social structures and mentalities) and to deploy it consciously is to systematise it. Öcalan calls this historical work (or sociological work of a 'historical-society' which continues in an unbroken chain), the 'most sacred task' that anyone can undertake. Since, in many cases, these histories of societies are buried or their present culture almost destroyed by the official system, and since many therefore live without any belonging to a society, to make these cultures and this social existence come alive again and continue to develop, flourish, and transform in the present, amounts it nothing less than resurrection for those societies, or for those who have never known belonging to society, it may be like being born for the first time.

Being able to see democratic civilization with Öcalan's paradigm, declaring the existence of democratic civilisation, both in its present existence and by making all those who represent democratic civilisation conscious of themselves, and, as a necessary part of this, finding the history and continuity of democratic civilisation in the past and its history, are at the heart of what it means to preach Öcalan's work. Rather than giving us the tools to impose on society, Öcalan gives us the tools to know ourselves. Once we see these realities, and once we expose the lie of the official civilisation system and show that it was neither necessary or inevitable for society, there is nothing more that the 5000 years of this system can do to defeat society, and society will not be obliged to bow to that system ever again.

*For those who wish to understand Öcalan's paradigm for themselves, Henry Lewis recommends reading Öcalan's ‘Beyond State, Power, and Violence’, before continuing to the five-volume series, ‘Manifesto for a Democratic Civilisation’.*

**Notes**

1 It is important to clarify that Öcalan’s paradigm does not call for the destruction or elimination the *state* as a structure. The state is the 5000-year-old military, bureaucratic, and ideological tool of power and exploitation for the organised theft and plunder of society, which has also accumulated massive experience in administration. Democracy is society’s means of decision-making and the self-management of its collective life, and the guarantee of freedom and equality. *State* and *Democracy* are distinct structures with different aims – and democracy is not a *substitute* for the state since it has a completely different aim to the state. However, Öcalan’s paradigm does not call for these structures to eliminate each other, but he calls for them to *coexist* alongside each other as far as is possible.

When it comes to the existing states, Öcalan’s paradigm calls for the forces of democratic civilisation or ‘democratic modernity’ to constantly seek a principled compromise with the state based on respect for each other’s unique identity. The forces of democratic modernity must aim to coexist with the state based on compromise. They should not secede from the state’s borders, but must make it clear to the state that they respect the state’s existence and are willing to coexist with the state under the roof of that state and within its borders, and that they also expect the state to respect their *democratic autonomy*, and the democratic structures (democratic people’s congresses, grassroots democratic assemblies, and democratic confederation), which can exist even under the roof of or within the borders of a particular state. For example, in the context of Kurdish society which is split across the territories of states, Öcalan proposes the formula: ‘Democracy in Kurdistan + the states of Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq). The reason for this approach is that Öcalan recognises that it is unreasonable to expect that the 5000-year-old structure of the *state* will disappear overnight, and that it will be necessary to work together with states to get out of the current crisis. The *state* cannot immediately be replaced by democracy everywhere, and to eliminate the state completely, if even possible, would introduce a degree of chaos (which the democracy cannot yet fully manage) and a vacuum that would quickly be filled by a new state or by the democracy becoming a state. However, even if society should always seek peace and a principled compromise, society must *never* give up its democracy or accept the state’s attempts to take this away, and must be always ready to defend itself with military force and with defensive wars if necessary.

Democracy in society limits the reach of the ruling state, and over time can cut off more and more of the state’s tentacles over society, gradually freeing society from the ruling civilisation system. He likens this to slowly melting a snowball (the state) which has grown in size as it has rolled along throughout history. However, even when it comes societies which have freed themselves completely of ruling states, Öcalan’s paradigm still includes proposals for *state-like* structures in society. Elements of centralisation, stratification, and hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation will always be needed in elements of society – for example, for armed self-defence structures and public works administration or healthcare. These structures would be without the traditional power and monopoly elements of the state which use it to extract from and plunder society, meaning that this would hardly resemble states as we know them and could hardly be called *state* anymore. However, he emphasises that when this is achieved, the state-like structures are clearly differentiated from the democratic structures: the elements of state should not pretend that they are democracy, and the democracy institutions should not attempt to become a state. There should be consciousness of the different roles that these structures play in society, and it seems that overall in such a scenario society’s democracy is massively expanded and constitutes the backbone of society, while the state-like structures are constrained by this, and serve this. In this sense the balance shifts from the overwhelming weight of states and barely any democracy for society, to a sea of democracy in society and small islands of state-like structures within this. This is the impression gained, at least, from the writings of Öcalan which have been translated into English so far.

This approach to the structure of *state* also based on the philosophical component of the paradigm and its dialectical approach. *State* and *democracy* are a dialectical pair. They are in contradiction to each other and yet they cannot exist without each other: if there were no state then there would be no problem of democracy, and if there were no democracy there would be no danger of state. When change and development takes place, the different parts dialectical pairs do not *eliminate* each other, but either side of the pair relies on the other side in order to develop, and can only develop *in relation to* that other side. When the state tries to eliminate democracy, it only increases the problem of democracy and incites greater democratic resistance. If a democracy were to attempt to eliminate the state, then the means required to do so and the kind of approach required to destroy a state is actually a *state-like* approach, and the democracy would only end up becoming the state itself. So the process of eliminating the category of *state*, it seems, is neither possible nor desirable. An approach which represents a better dialectical understanding is for both parts of this contradictory pair to *recognise* each other and to recognise that both will continue to exist in some form. On this basis, the paradigm therefore says that the democracy must not attempt to eliminate the existing states but must rather make the states recognise the democracy while the democracy continues with its own work with society, and even in areas where the democracy is mostly free, it will still have some state-like structures alongside it.

The approach to the state and democracy which says ‘let’s try to make the state a democracy and the means of achieving freedom and equality in society’, and the approach to dialectics which says ‘let’s eliminate and completely destroy our opponent and the opposing state to build our own system or state’ – both of these approaches are based on a failure to understand what the state *is* and why it is different to a democracy and cannot be used for certain ends, and a failure to see that complete elimination is not possible and will only lead to becoming what one was opposed to in the first place. The approach that seeks to constantly eliminate its opponent and which takes an ‘all or nothing’ approach against the state, is one which leads to constant warfare and conflict as the two sides attempt to destroy each other. This is not actually possible, and so this approach only leads to unnecessary bloodshed, pain, and suffering for society. And when it is achieved and a state is destroyed, the forces which destroy it only become the state themselves, leading to disappointment and a continuation of the pressing problem of democracy. This approach, Öcalan argues, is the approach of the 20th century: the approach of real socialist, national liberation, and social democratic movements which were all ‘denominations of capitalism’ and which only continued the problems facing society. In the 21st century, Öcalan argues, the approach of national liberation wars is no longer appropriate, and he calls instead for the approach based on compromise instead between the state and the forces of society, with self-defence always at hand when necessary. His analysis of the world situation in the 21st century is that the nation states of the 20th century have been forced to downsize since they are an obstacle to the forces of financial capital and transnational corporations, and that they will increasingly need rely on civil society and the forces of society to be able to manage the society under their territory. Furthermore, he thinks that the civilisation system has exhausted all its means of dealing with the crises and is in a deep crisis itself, and cannot deal with these crises without society. So, he thinks that in the current time, even on the side of the state there are better foundations for striking a compromise with society, and he hopes that for this reason, even though there will undoubtedly be wars between the forces of civilisation and society, there can be a more peaceful way out of the crisis and as much unnecessary bloodshed and suffering can be avoided as possible. However, it is important to emphasise that this paradigm calls on society to *never* give up its democracy and to use its self-defence forces whenever necessary to defend against the state’s incursions or denial. The main role of the self-defence forces, in Öcalan’s paradigm, is to guarantee the democracy of society and to defend against or eliminate any internal or external threats to that democracy. (This is qualitatively different to military forces which emerged from the initial hierarchical elements of society, which established themselves as the military wing or military monopoly of the official civilisation’s state, whose role, along with the other state monopolies, has always been to secure accumulation and plunder of society).

To illustrate Öcalan’s approach to the state and democracy, it might helpful to provide a *rough* and *impressionistic* sketch of the social structures developed by the Kurdish Freedom Movement itself across various parts of Kurdistan.

In the Syrian region of Kurdistan (in the North-East of Syria) the revolution flourishes most openly as the *Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria*. Here, there are grassroots democratic communes in both city and countryside, scaling up into city councils, regional councils, and democratic people’s congresses on the highest level. It seems that these congresses organise different areas of social administration (health, culture, education) which are also organised in units down to the most grassroots level of society. Society is maximally-self-organised, with women’s self-organisation, youth self-organisation, and the self-organisation of different cultural groups and religious groups. There are economic cooperatives and efforts to increase society’s economic autonomy. The result is a flourishing democracy. However, it seems that there are also *state-like* elements alongside this: there are centralised elements, hierarchical, and stratified structures, such as the military structures and defence units, management of public works and infrastructure, and presumably more. These state-like structures have been established to serve society and to protect democracy, which is a qualitative difference to the mentality and function of the official civilisation’s states, which were established for extraction from society. Yet, despite these state-like structures, it seems that society has its own, *semi-professional* structures for tasks such as self-defence, healthcare, and more, whilst exist alongside the state-like equivalents: while there are professionalised self-defence forces, there are also self-defence forces more closely tied to a particular settlement or region. As much as possible, society is self-reliant as a democracy, while also maintaining necessary and centralised state-like structures.

In the Turkish region of Kurdistan (in the South-East of Turkey), where Kurdish society exists under an authoritarian and highly repressive government which does not observe international law, the Kurdish Freedom Movement wages an exemplary democratic political movement which both develops self-organisation and democratic structures within society and also participates in elections in the Turkish state. Democratic autonomy was declared in 2014 in this region of Kurdistan, but was militarily defeated by the Turkish state. Nonetheless, the Kurdish Freedom Movement still wages strong efforts for the democratisation of the Kurdish region of Turkey, and for the democratisation of all of Turkey. The Kurdish-led democratic parties enjoy around 10% of the vote in Turkey, mainly gaining their support from the Kurdish region, and the municipalities in the Kurdish region for a long time maintained the system of elected co-chairs (one man, one woman – a structure which is also seen in the Autonomous Administration in Syrian Kurdistan) and have maintained their democratic structures as far as possible in the face of a fascist nation-state. However, I am not aware how many of these co-chairs remain in position considering the heavy repression of the Turkish state against democracy, and its imprisonment of thousands of Kurdish politicians, lawyers, and journalists. There is a qualitative difference between the Kurdish Freedom Movement’s engagement in electoral politics, and the traditional social democratic approach to electoral politics (including many Left and Labour parties). It seems that the aim of the movement’s engagement in electoral politics is not necessarily to take over the state itself, but as much as possible to open up space for the democratisation of society outside of the state, and to use the state as far as it is possible to the benefit of society. Whilst the social democratic parties and Left Labour parties organise society intensively before elections, and then channel all the organised energy of society into the state, to ultimately waste this energy when the state turns out to be incompatible with their ideals, which also means that the organisation of society which they had diligently built then dissipates after the election since their ideas for society did not really go beyond the state, the Kurdish Freedom Movement, on the other hand, organises society democratically *as an end in itself*, and engages with the state and engages in electoral campaigning on this basis. When traditional social democratic movements organise, they organise in society and direct society’s organised energy towards the state, which means that the energy of society is lost to the state. When the Kurdish Freedom Movement organises, it organises in society and directs this to *society itself*, and even when it engages with the state it does so from this basis, meaning that society’s energy is stored and is used to build up society’s self-organisation and strength. This means that whatever happens at the ballot box, and no matter how much the Turkish state represses the democratic political campaigns, no matter how many elected politicians it imprisons or activists it kills, the movement itself cannot be destroyed since it emerges from a society which is continually striving to increase its self-organisation and consciousness.

However, the important point here is that the Kurdish Freedom Movement and Abdullah Öcalan’s paradigm does not reject working with, or attempt to eliminate, the state. It seems that the Kurdish Freedom Movement provides an example for how to engage with the state and pursue democratisation in both societies that live under powerful states and where the space to declare autonomous democracy is more limited, and also societies that are in more peripheral regions, under weaker states with less reach, and who can establish their autonomous democracy openly and defend it more easily.

Due to this paradigm’s approach to the state which continuously seeks peace and principled compromise, I would not say that Öcalan’s ideas have *fuelled* armed confrontation with the Turkish state. Öcalan’s paradigm rather tends towards peace, and even in the scenario of state repression and legitimate armed self-defence, it always leaves space open for conditional peace based on mutual recognition and rights. Öcalan himself has continuously declared unilateral ceasefires between the PKK and the Turkish state, and has continually been at the centre of peace negotiations. ‘Peace in the Middle East’, is a watchword of the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

2 This is a region upon which a prolonged and genocidal war is being waged by powerful states and which thus faces immense challenges, and there are inevitably disagreements and intense debates and tensions between peoples as they slowly develop and build their alternative, and mistakes made by the democratic authorities, as the society navigates its way to an exit from the crisis. But this makes the achievements of this democratic system all the more impressive, and it only demonstrates how effective democracy is. It is democracy which *allows* for disagreements and difficult problems to be resolved through dialogue, and it is democracy which allows for wrong decisions to take place without them becoming embedded and disastrous, since democracy is the most flexible form of governance. It is the self-defence forces which are part of, and which guarantee this democracy, which allows this society to continue building its freedom and equality, despite the attacks of multiple state armies, extremist proxy groups, and a war waged by NATO’s second biggest army.

So, I do not think that the Autonomous Administration and all of society’s social structures and institutions in that region or movement are *perfect*, but I do think that they are an example of the *best* kind of organisation for society to resolve its problems, to exit the current crisis, and to achieve freedom and equality. It is not ‘romanticisation’ to recognise the significance and achievements of this society or to see it as an example for others, and it is wrong to dismiss or denigrate the way of life of this society. To do so – to fail to recognise a society which exists in a different way to the ruling system and to also fail to recognise that there are qualities to such a society that can be universalised, or which represent a system/have a systematic quality – is, ironically, what Öcalan’s paradigm aims to overcome.

To assume the existence of *perfection* in the first place and to then look for it in different societal systems, is a mistake. This seems to be a feature of the ruling civilisation paradigm. The idea of perfection seems to be related to ideas such as *determinism*, *fatalism*, *inevitability, linear progression*, which are related to the official civilisation’s rule, reflected in terms such as *authoritarianism, absolutism, etc*. This is an ideological approach which does not reflect reality. Reality always includes contradiction, contradiction which means that reality is always complex and open to change, which means that there is always the possibility of error, which means that no outcome can be perfectly predicted and no interaction with reality can be a perfect approach. Therefore, Öcalan’s paradigm, is instead based on *probability* and on a probabilistic approach to thinking. Such an approach allows for decisiveness and decision-making according to the best option, but also contains an openness to being wrong and to being corrected. Such an approach underpins an attitude of *listening to each other* and the practice of *dialogue*, and is reflected in social institutions such as *democracy*. This way of thinking provides part of the basis for resolving problems within society. The approach which assumes *perfection*, on the other hand, is traditionally characteristic of official state and civilisation systems which have crushed society under their weight and deepened the social problem, in their misrecognition of reality on many levels and their imposition of their own distorted ideas on society. For those people who look for perfection, and who dismiss the achievements of the Kurdish Freedom Movement when they find imperfection: what for them is the perfect example of social organisation which they provide as an example for society? Since there is no perfect social system, they cannot provide this, and they have no grounds to dismiss the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Ideas of perfection do not match the reality that we take decisions according to probability and our interpretation of best option. The only question then, is, what is the *best* option for society?

This discussion relates to what seems to be a characteristic feature of all paradigms: the feature of a paradigm which provides an argument for *how society can be best organised*, which is related to the idea of a *utopia* or an *ideal society*. The question of a utopia is certainly relevant to the practice of ‘proselytising’ or spreading any paradigm, and will once again reveal how to preach Öcalan’s paradigm or the example of the Kurdish Freedom Movement is quite different to the traditional sense of proselytisation.

It was the official civilisation system’s initial enslavement and exploitation of society, 5000 years ago, which lead society to seek new utopias in the first place. The official civilisation system developed a paradigm which included the utopia of *paradise* to respond to this need. Öcalan’s interpretation of this utopia of *paradise* is that the representation of paradise was based on society’s real experience of free life and material abundance during the Neolithic revolution. The Neolithic revolution took place after the last ice age ended 12,000 years ago, which was the start of the earth’s current climatic period. Due to improved climatic conditions, society developed agriculture, domesticated animals, established both a settled-village and nomadic pastoral life with all kinds of new cultural production, and enjoyed an economic surplus for the first time. Such an improved life, such a degree of new production both material and immaterial, and the production of a surplus for the first time, was seen by society as divine, and sacred, and worthy of praise. This was also a period of general egalitarian relations, where communal and democratic society could live its life freely before the initial hierarchical elements of society had turned themselves into the civilisation system. But eventually the official civilisation system was built to enslave society and to extract this surplus which society had gained experience in how to produce. This official civilisation system, in the paradigm or worldview it designed, included the utopia of *paradise*, based on society’s experience of abundant and free life which was certainly missed by those who had been enslaved. The utopia of *paradise* provided the hope necessary for the enslaved members of society to endure their extreme conditions and painful life, and it delayed the question of how society should best be organised until a next life, to dampen desire for freedom and equality against this system in the present. However, the important thing is that this representation of the utopia of *paradise* was partially developed according to the example of a social reality that was real, that *already existed,* and that was *already experienced* by society. It referred to the *communal and democratic* life of human society when it is able to manage itself democratically according to its own will and values (politics and morality), and to enjoy its social value and surplus for itself, free from the enslavement, exploitation, and theft of the ruling civilisation system. From this point onwards, it seems that most utopias or representations of ideal societies actually represent such an imagined version of this real society: they represent what is the *normal functioning of moral and political society when unimpeded by the official civilisation system*. Even if these utopias fail to see that this is how society actually existed before, and how society has always existed outside of, the official civilisation system, it is notable and insightful that when utopias have been imagined, they are commonly based on the communal and democratic life which in Öcalan’s paradigm is society’s *very nature*. Of course, the reason that such utopias have to be imagined rather than observed as already existing society, is due to the ideological hegemony and the framework or worldview of the ruling system which systematically hides this society from sight, even though it has always been right in front of us. Most utopias that are influenced by the official civilisation system’s paradigm also include an imagined version of the civilisation system and its state, but a supposedly *good* version of it: such as a state in the form of God’s kingdom, a worker’s state or a soviet state, a bourgeois state with democracy, or an independent nation state following a national liberation struggle – all of which are promised to the poor and oppressed society to somehow lead to the communal and democratic life described above. These utopias or proposals for an ideal society, provide a mental framework which presents the state and civilisation system as beneficial for society, and so they allow the state and civilisation system to continue in practice, even if the supposed use of the state and civilisation system is to create a communal and democratic society. Since the state and official civilisation system are the oldest tools of power, extraction, and accumulation from society which have been refined over thousands of years, they cannot be used as tools for freedom and equality. Since they are the *cause* of society’s problems, they inevitably cannot be the *solution* society’s problems, and so such utopias which include a supposedly *good* version of the civilisation and state, inevitably lead to the continuation of society’s problems. Moreover, since these utopias do not recognise the reality of society, which self-organises itself communally and democratically and which cannot be imposed upon from above by a state, and since they do not recognise that the communal and democratic society already exists in many forms (diverse cultures, peoples, religions, political structures) as the basis for development, meaning that a new version of ideal life does not need to be imagined, to attempt to apply these utopias to society is to practice *social engineering* and to attempt to *design society* according to these plans. This results in genocide, massacre, the denial of culture and beliefs, and forced assimilation of all the elements of society which do not fit into these plans. The end result is not the utopia that was aimed for, but a replication and continuation of the civilisation and state system, whose role as tools are to establish power over society and to extract its surplus, and the result is also the betrayal of and bitter disappointment for all those who had put their hopes in the promised utopia. These understandings of *utopia* or the ideal way to organise society, which do not take the presently-existing society as their starting point, are one of the reasons for the blood-soaked history of the official civilisation system. Such utopias which reflect, and which have lead to, different versions of the official system, obviously do not provide and have not provided a realistic answer for solving society’s social problems. Since they are part of the official civilisation paradigm, they do not recognise the existence of the society which has always existed outside of and alongside it, and so they fail to find a solution for society on that basis. There are also those who dismiss any attempt at finding solutions or bringing about positive change in society as ‘utopian’ (in the sense of unrealistic and unrealisable), and who say that the ruling system can never be changed or overcome, or that this is just human nature, etc. Contrary to what such people might claim, these people actually do have a utopia of their own: the ruling system is their utopia, in the sense that, whether they are conscious of it or not, they have a mental framework which says that this system is how society *must* be run. Theirs is the most miserable utopia of all. Their utopia is tied to *fatalism* and the idea that this system is inevitable, and is no different to the *determinism* which says that the advance of communism is inevitable, or to the fatalism which says that God’s kingdom is inevitable – these are all different expressions of the same official civilisation approach to thinking. Anyone who dismisses the efforts of others as ‘utopian’, while claiming that they have no utopian ideas of their own, is either ignorant and unaware of their own position, or is lying and trying to mask their support for this system and their opposition to other systems.

It seems that Öcalan’s paradigm includes the most realistic and realisable proposal for how to best organise society of all: by looking at *how society already exists* outside of the official civilisation systemand by making this the basis for developing a system. It seems more realistic to say ‘let’s look at how society has organised itself historically and in the present when it is not taken over by the ruling system, and develop a system on this basis’, than it is to say ‘let’s use the tools of the state to design our ideal society. This is achievable despite society’s millennia-old cultures and ways of life’. It seems more realistic to ask, ‘if our history has been hidden from us, then what are the traditional social and mental structures of our moral and political society, or how has democratic civilisation expressed itself in our context, and can we resurrect these cultures and develop or transform them today as the basis for our freedom?’, rather than asking ‘can we cut ourselves away from society and attempt to apply our ideas of what is best to our small commune without basing ourselves on any existing tradition?’. A paradigm whose starting basis is the society that already exists, seems to provide the most realistic proposals for how to organise society, and the most realisable *utopia* in practice, since it is a development of what is *already practised.* Such a utopia, which is about allowing the existing society to express itself and develop itself as a system, rather than trying to force society to fit into a model imposed by a state from above, seems much less likely to result in denial, massacre, and genocide of society, and to the betrayal and disappointment of those who put their hopes in it. Through democracy, society itself is the agent which constitutes and which in many ways *implements* this utopia. It is not left to a middle-class who secure positions in a new state, and inevitably risk betraying the movement they helped to lead.

This paradigm’s ‘utopia’ for how best to organise society is another way in which the preaching or ‘proselytising’ with Öcalan’s paradigm is quite different to the traditional form of proselytising and the utopias that have been proposed to society within this.

Since everyone’s paradigm or worldview includes some idea of how society must be organised, if anyone dismisses the Kurdish Freedom Movement or Öcalan’s ideas as ‘utopian’ in the sense of being unrealistic or unrealisable, (or who denigrates any social movement or the respectable efforts of those who are trying to solve problems in their society or to live in a correct, moral, and principled way), the only question they should ask themselves is: How successful has their own utopia been? How close did their idea of a utopia come to being realised? If it was realised, did it solve the fundamental problems facing society? If not, why? Was it, or is it, due to circumstance, or to more fundamental shortcomings of the understanding behind their utopia? How realistic did their understanding turn out to be? This is partially rhetorical and also a genuine call for critical evaluation, and a humble approach with respect to others. Such people must consider that many of those who find inspiration in Öcalan’s paradigm and in the type of social organisation he proposes, might do so because it actually corresponds to, and they recognise it as, the reality of their own society or community, and the communal and democratic life they have always lived. For those who live as part of such communities, it seems that the meaning and power of Öcalan’s paradigm is often easy to grasp. For those who dismiss such a real way of life as utopian: this is related the ignorant and the arrogant qualities of the ruling system and its paradigm or worldview towards others, which has always denied and refused to recognise the many peoples of the world, has denigrated their ways of life, and has led to their denial and colonisation.

Whilst it is always right to engage in sincere dialogue, there is also the possibility that some dismiss the Kurdish Freedom Movement because they secretly hope for it to fail, since they do not like the idea of a challenge to their existing worldview or the idea that their views might have been wrong. This only reveals that the intellectual structure of their worldview is fragile – it is probably based on an idea of perfection that doesn’t exist or an inevitability and certainty that doesn’t exist. It also reveals that whatever their idea of the best way to organise society is, it is probably a form of organisation that relies onthe *liquidation of* and *denial of* any of society that develops a different system to this. This overwhelmingly likely to be a statist civilisational approach. Instead, such people, unless they have already become the state and power themselves, should realise that Öcalan’s paradigm and the Kurdish Freedom Movement does not *eliminate* views that are different to its own: rather, it both aims to learn from their positive elements and also to criticise their negative elements, in order to *strengthen* those views and make sure that there is space for them, and a place for them, in the system of democratic civilisation, and that they can achieve their ideals as a part of this system. Öcalan’s own struggle and paradigm is built on the basis of efforts waged by many heroic, historical movements for society’s freedom and equality: his paradigm could not exist without them, and neither can the system of democratic civilisation. In general, probabilistic thinking, going with the probabilistically best option, leaving open space for being wrong and for being corrected, basing oneself on social reality as far as possible, is what brings confidence and open-mindedness when engaging with different ideas to one’s own. It is a foundation of democratic thought and practice, and of democracy in society.

3 The *Magnificat* is a canticle. A canticle is a hymn, psalm, or song of praise with lyrics taken from the bible, which is sung as part of the ritual worship in many church services. *Magnificat* means *magnify* in Latin, and the words of the Magnificat are taken from the Gospel of Luke, in a scene which narrates the visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, who spraises Mary for her faith. Mary begins her response with: *‘My soul doth magnify the Lord’* [Magnificat anima mea Dominum].

**Further considerations:**

Another element of Öcalan’s paradigm which underpins the specific way in which it would be spread or ‘proselytised’, is its approach to *universalism* and *relativism*. Universalism, in relation to society, is the approach which would assume that one particular way of thinking or organising society is universally valid and correct, and which denies or ignores the particularities of particular societies. Relativism is the opposite of this: it is the approach that every society’s way of thinking or organising itself is completely unique and can only be understood on its own terms, which denies that there is anything in common between these societies or that there could be a structural relationship between them. With universalism, all the different *parts* of a structure are subsumed within the *whole* of a structure, and it is not considered how each part might also operate on its own basis and might change the structure. With relativism, each part of a structure is taken purely on its own terms, and the *relationship* between different partsof a structure and how they operate *as a whole* is not considered. These two approaches of universalism and relativism are reflected in the sayings: ‘my truth is the only truth’ vs ‘everyone has their own truth’, or, ‘only my way goes’ vs ‘anything goes’. These approaches are two sides of the same coin – one imposes a structure and the other hides any structure at all.

Both approaches serve the ruling civilisation system, and these two approaches are deployed by the ruling civilisation system to distort our understanding of both itself, and society. To distort the civilisation system, the civilisation system presents itself as universal, so that it can be imposed upon any society whilst ignoring that society’s own way of life, and it also takes a relativist approach to hide the fact that it is a structural continuation from previous civilisations: it treats each link in the chain of civilisation as if it is entirely new, which hides the main structures of civilisation of 5000 years which all civilisations have maintained and means that society does not challenge these foundations: the state, class, and city as tools of power. To distort society, the civilisation system seems to deploy its universal approach to say that the society that lives outside of the civilisation system simply doesn’t exist or presents it negatively (‘savages’, ‘barbarians’, ‘backwards’, ‘irrational’, ‘no souls’ etc.), or it deploys a relativist approach to acknowledge that there are many different forms and expressions of social existence, but that there is nothing in common between them, meaning that society can never see that it has features which have a *systematic quality* and is prevented from systematising itself.

Öcalan’s approach is that the principles of the universal run through and are expressed in the particular, and the particular expresses the universal while also having some unique qualities. The universal structures the particular and affects the particular, whilst the particular both expresses the universal and can also *change* the universal with its particularity. Öcalan applies this approach to understand both the official civilisation system, and moral and political society. For the official civilisation system, Öcalan argues that while each new civilisation has been different to others in some way, and while civilisation has different forms throughout history, (such as the ancient civilisation, the medieval civilisation, and the Eurocentric civilisation [‘capitalism’]), certain fundamental institutions continue and are reproduced in a ‘chain-like’ formation throughout the history of civilisation: the institutions of state, city, and class as tools of power, which are what defines *civilisation*. That is: any expression of the official civilisation system has both *particularities* and features which are *universal* to civilisation. For society, Öcalan argues that being moral and political is society’s essence and nature, and is expressed in institutions seen across societies which are essentially communal and democratic, but that these institutions express themselves through many different cultures, ethnicities, religions etc. Whilst the essence of society is *universal*, the form that this essence takes is *particular* or *relative* to each society. Importantly for society, this means that it actually has a *systematic* quality just like the official civilisation system, on the basis of its universal features. The Roman civilisation, and the medieval Islamic civilisations are clearly different, yet they both contain some features in common – states, cities, and class stratification to extract value and surplus from society – which makes them part of the system and history of civilisation\*. So why hasn’t society’s expression throughout history been treated in the same way, and why hasn’t its systematic quality been identified? Because the ruling civilisation system’s ideological hegemony has taken the necessary steps to try and prevent this. Thus, Öcalan provides the basis both for understanding the official civilisation system as a system over 5000 years, and for understanding moral and political society from the start of human existence until today *as a system*: a system which he calls *democratic civilisation.*

When it comes to preaching or ‘proselytising’ Öcalan’s paradigm: this approach to the universal and the particular is one of the reasons why preaching the paradigm does not require imposition on society. To approach a society with Öcalan’s paradigm is to try to understand how universal characteristics of society are expressed in the particular form of that society. It both preserves the uniqueness of that society, while showing what it has in common with other societies. Crucially, it gives space for that society to influence the universal: by trying to understand how a particular society has historically organised itself to maintain its life and freedom, we might draw new conclusions on the universal structure of democratic civilisation and be able to develop our understanding of democratic civilisation. If a society in the present develops the structures of moral and political society in a new and advanced way, this has the possibility of being shared across other parts of society. Just as individual civilisations or states within the overall civilisation system developed new forms, and then spread these new forms across different states and power systems to universalise them if they were effective, so too do particular expressions of democratic civilisation develop new forms and culture which will contribute to the advance of democratic civilisation everywhere.

This is a very important point. What this means is that Öcalan’s paradigm does not assume that it has the entire answer – instead, it asks us to go and understand society so that we can learn more, can learn from each other, and can develop this answer. Öcalan’s paradigm is based upon *dialogue* with society: the paradigm offers something to any society and is capable of identifying some universal features of any society, but it also recognises that that any particular society has something to offer to our universal understanding and development. Öcalan’s paradigm, in fact, *requires* learning from any particular society in order to understand how democratic civilisation operates universally, and how we can develop it. It seems that a key feature of this paradigm is that it must be used to learn from others: from the different expressions of democratic civilisation. To share Öcalan’s paradigm means to engage in dialogue, it means to share with others, and to learn from others at the same time to improve what we know and increase our understanding.

So, this approach to ‘proselytisation’ is quite different to the traditional approach, which assumes that it has the final answer, that its answer is so universal as to override the particularities of a society, and which seeks to impose on others rather than learning from them, rather than walking while asking questions, engaging in dialogue, and working together with others to develop a system of freedom and equality for society.

To understand why there is a qualitative difference between the preaching traditional paradigms of thought, and the preaching or sharing Öcalan’s paradigm, we could also look at further approaches of the philosophical component of this paradigm – such as its approach to subjectivity and objectivity; its approach to dialectics; how it determines what is good or bad, true or false, beautiful or ugly, and free or un-free; its approach to determinism or ‘the game called fate’ vs freedom. We could also expand on the methodological component of this paradigm, and also the organisational and praxiological components of this paradigm. All of these components come together to provide a paradigm which leads to a humble and respectful approach to society when spreading the paradigm or rather, trying to *develop* it by working with society. However, there is not space to outline the paradigm in its fullness here. The important thing is to understand that Abdullah Öcalan’s intellectual paradigm breaks from the ruling paradigm as it has expressed itself in different forms over 5000 years (including in its ‘social democratic, real socialist, and national liberation denominations’), and represents the start of an intellectual or scientific revolution. For this reason, our understanding of all aspects of life and our approach to all social practices transforms with this paradigm, including what it means to spread, preach, or ‘proselytise’ in society.

\*Just as Öcalan’s paradigm includes space for state-like structures, but within a different mentality or framework, so too, of course, does it include space for cities, and even for aspects of stratification (which could be called *class-like*) within certain structures in society. Öcalan draws on the history of autonomous and semi-democratic cities and city federations which have defended themselves against more powerful states in his historical understanding of democratic civilisation. Of course, within the Autonomous Administration and other parts of Kurdistan, cities are part of this organisation.