RESEARCH ARTICLE

Democratic Confederalism and the Theory of History: Historical Ontologies of Political Alternative in Bookchin, Öcalan, and Graeber

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to discuss the "historical ontology of political alternative" emerging from the work of Abdullah Öcalan by comparing it to the ones of two other authors: Murray Bookchin, who has notoriously influenced his thought, and David Graeber, whose interest for the Kurdish movement and the thought of Öcalan has been significantly overlooked so far. The analysis delves into how the three authors frame the conditions of possibility for the historical emergence of radical political alternatives. Special attention is given to the contrasts between Bookchin and Öcalan in this respect, with special attention to the couple continuity/discontinuity and archaic/modern, to their distinctive views of dialectics and of the articulation between the dialectical poles, and to the roles of consciousness and knowledge in their political and historical reflections. Additionally, it investigates the theoretical and political convergence between Öcalan and Graeber, focusing on the notions, respectively, of democratic civilisation and baseline communism.

KEYWORDS:

Anarchism; Baseline Communism; Democratic Civilisation; Dialectics; Kurdish Movement; Political Imagination.

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1. Introduction

The definition of "democratic confederalism" offered by Abdullah Öcalan is hardly separable from his notion and theory of history. While democratic confederalism can be described through its programmatic contents (decentralisation, direct democracy, gender equality, ecology, cultural and national pluralism, etc.) or by observing its realisation in the communities who have adopted it, its real existence could not be thought of outside history. This is all the more true since Öcalan does not conceive democratic confederalism as an "arbitrary modern political system", but as something that "rests on the historical experience of the society and its collective heritage", that "accumulates history and experience" (Öcalan 2011, 23). In other words, it is conceived as incorporated in the living body of the "historical-society" (Öcalan 2016/2017, 10), a concept

through which Öcalan describes the idea that society exists to the extent that it incorporates its past history (Öcalan 2012, 34). Far from limiting its realisation to the Kurdish people, democratic confederalism is thought of as a freely choosable option for any people: as will be seen, since democratic civilisation is depicted as the ineradicable foundation of any social form, its collective heritage can be found in any human society.

Although so fundamental in the work of Öcalan, the role of his theory of history in his political thought has surprisingly received scarce attention so far. Nonetheless, this is less surprising if one considers that a more general tendency to ignore Öcalan as a thinker seems to exist in the academic world. In 2019, David Graeber highlighted that a search for his name on JSTOR returned 448 results, but that "not a single one of them is primarily addressed to his ideas", essentially because "[h]e is seen as an object of study but never an interlocutor" (Graeber 2019/2020b, 182). Since then, the situation has partially changed: the number of articles on JSTOR containing the name of Öcalan at the end of January 2024 has risen to 1.673, and critical engagements with his thought are increasingly being developed, concerning themes such as radical democracy (Knapp and Jongerden 2014; Jongerden 2015), jineolojî and ecofeminism (Çağlayan 2012; Exo 2019; Piccardi 2021; Al-Ali and Käser 2022; Dirik 2022; Üstündağ 2023), and the problem of the State and the possibilities of its overcoming (Matin 2019; Jongerden 2023). Nevertheless, his theoretical work is still largely underappreciated. One of the aims of the present article is precisely to discuss Öcalan's work as a thinker, without divorcing this aspect from his role as a political leader.

A significant part of the existing literature has dedicated a certain attention to Öcalan's shift from Marxism-Leninism to democratic confederalism, tending to represent it as centred upon his theoretical encounter with the thought of Murray Bookchin (Biehl 2012; Knapp and Jongerden 2014; Gerber and Brincat 2019/2020). However, the actual relationship between Bookchin's and Öcalan's approaches has scarcely been discussed in detail, favouring a certain tendency to conflate them, which caused some criticisms from Kurdish scholars and activists (Hammy 2021). This article aims, among other things, to contribute to the clarification of this relationship, highlighting the specificity of Öcalan's thought compared to Bookchin.

More broadly, this article aims to discuss the "historical ontology of political alternative" emerging from Öcalan's work by comparing it to the ones of Bookchin and David Graeber, whose interest in the Kurdish movement and the thought of Öcalan has been significantly overlooked. Here, "historical ontology of political alternative" is understood as the analysis of the conditions of possibility for the emergence of political alternatives to the dominant political system from the point of view of their historical development. For example, to investigate the classical Marxist "historical ontology of political alternative", one should look at the contradiction between the dominant relations of production and the degree of development of productive forces in a determined age and society. Following this thread through the works of the three authors, it will be argued not only that Öcalan's thought presents a distinctive "historical ontology of political alternative", but also that it significantly differs from Bookchin's; on the contrary, it will be contended that a relevant convergence exists between Öcalan and Graeber in this respect, perhaps partly due to a certain influence of the former on the latter.

The article is divided into three paragraphs. The first one analyses the theory of history emerging from Bookchin's work, with particular regard to *Ecology of Freedom*, but taking into account even *Remaking Society* and *Re-Enchanting Humanity*. It will focus in particular on five elements of Bookchin's historical ontology of political alternative: the discontinuity in the existence and development of the conditions of possibility of potential political alternatives throughout history; the centrality of consciousness and its progress among such conditions of possibility; the dichotomy between antiquity and modernity from the point of view of consciousness itself; the dialectical conception linking the "legacy of domination" and the "legacy of freedom"; and the absence of a necessary articulation between the former and the latter.

The second paragraph analyses the work of Öcalan on the same grounds, with particular attention to *Beyond State, Power, and Violence*, *The Roots of Civilisation* and the three English volumes of the *Manifesto for a Democratic Society*. It will focus on the same elements identified in Bookchin's historical ontology of political

alternative, arguing that Öcalan's position differs from Bookchin's concerning all five aspects: the continuity in the existence of the conditions of possibility of potential political alternatives throughout history; the absence of a significant role for consciousness and its progress among such conditions of possibility, whereas knowledge, especially social and historical knowledge, assumes instead an important role; a full continuity between antiquity and modernity from the point of view of consciousness and its development; a distinct dialectical conception linking the State civilisation and the democratic civilisation, centred upon contradiction and coexistence rather than on integration and sublation; and the construction of a specific articulation between the two dialectical poles based on a constitutive asymmetry, that is, the dependency of the former on the latter.

The third paragraph considers the writings dedicated by David Graeber to Öcalan and the Kurdish movement, discusses the possibility of an influence of Öcalan on him, and examines some convergent aspects in the thought of the two authors. In particular, the analysis is conducted following the thread of the distinctive notion of communism (or "baseline communism") compared to Öcalan's notion of democratic civilisation, through three works of Graeber (*Fragments of an Anarchic Anthropology*, *Possibilities*, and *Debt*), and considering the role of historical knowledge, radical political traditions, and political imagination in his thought.

2. Murray Bookchin

Although both Bookchin (1982, 41-42, 318-319) and Öcalan have attempted to reconstruct the counter-history of a "legacy of freedom" as against the dominant history of the "legacy of domination", and both have rooted their historical ontologies of political alternative in such counter-histories, the structure of their reconstructions is quite different. Such differences bear important political implications, especially regarding the definition of the historical conditions of possibility of radical political alternatives in the thought of the two authors. In this section, the structure of Bookchin's historical reconstruction of the "legacy of freedom" and its relationship with the "legacy of domination" will be analysed in these terms, with a view to the development of a comparison with Öcalan. For this purpose, particular attention will be dedicated to *The Ecology of Freedom*, but other works will be considered as well (Bookchin 1982; 1989/2017; 1995).

In this context, Bookchin presents a historical narrative that contrasts earlier communal, nonhierarchical societies with later civilisations based on hierarchy and domination, portraying the former as egalitarian, decentralised, and more harmonious with nature and technology. However, this distinction is not characterised in merely temporal terms of stadial succession: while "society in the form of bands, families, clans, tribes, tribal federations, villages, and even municipalities long antedates State formations" (Bookchin 1982, 7), the former does not cease to exist when the latter starts to emerge.

This is a fundamental point in Bookchin's argumentation. Indeed, he indicates several cases of "very incomplete developments of the State", ranging from the early Sumerian cities to the Aztec state and from the Hebrew monarchies to the Athenian democracy. Such "incompleteness" in the development of the State is explained precisely on the basis of the persistence in these societies of earlier egalitarian social forms able to confront and limit the power of the state itself: "[c]lan society was not effaced in a single or dramatic stroke, any more than the State was to be established in a single historical leap. Until they were neutralized as a social force, the clans still retained large areas of land during the early urban phase of society" (Bookchin 1982, 95). Furthermore, he adds, these communal social forms long survived "[b]eyond the city walls, in the more remote areas of the society", whereas "village life still retained much of its vitality" (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, Bookchin does not maintain that the survival of such egalitarian social forms has continued throughout modern history in the same manner. Although he explicitly aims to "rescue the legacy of freedom that the legacy of domination has sought to extirpate from the memory of humanity", identifying "the enduring features of a subterranean libertarian realm that has lived in cunning accommodation with the prevailing order of domination" (Bookchin 1982, 318), he nevertheless describes communal social forms as gradually

dismembered and increasingly disappearing throughout modern history, to the point that they would be virtually vanished in the contemporary world.

Bookchin's vocabulary is very clear: although the "old ways were to remain" for a long time within the age of hierarchical and even class societies, their temporary survival is described to occur "faintly and vestigially", as "more symbolic than real", and gradually fading away (Bookchin 1982, 95). At the same time, such development is not framed as unavoidable: communal societies and their egalitarian customs were often able to survive with few changes and even to coexist with feudal and monarchical institutions, which exploited them but were not able to destroy or radically change them. Differently, "European society, particularly in its capitalism form", due to its "historically and morally unique" character, is described as the historical cause of the dismemberment of the "legacy of freedom", precisely since "it surpassed by far every society […] in the extent to which economic classes and economic exploitation […] colonized the most intimate aspects of personal and social life" (Bookchin 1982, 97).

Therefore, while "[i]n every precapitalist society, countervailing forces […] existed to restrict the market economy" (Bookchin 1982, 133), European capitalist society would have succeeded almost completely in destroying pre-existing historical traditions of freedom: "Domination fulfils its destiny in the ubiquitous, all-pervasive State; its legacy reaches its denouement in the dissolution, indeed, the complete disintegration, of a richly organic society into an inorganic one" (Bookchin 1982, 139).

Incidentally, it should be noted that this account significantly echoes the influential one offered in *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi (1944/2001), who, indeed, Bookchin cites in both the text and the acknowledgements. In both works, the "organic" or "natural" society is described as historically able to restrict the market economy, avoiding its own transformation into a "market society" except for very rare and specific cases. The representation of the relationship between the "natural" or "organic" society and the market economy or capitalism in these terms poses an important problem, which is instead not present in Öcalan and Graeber's account: pre-capitalistic, communal societies are represented by Bookchin as completely external to capitalism, a full-fledged "outside" of it. In this framework, they appear to be equally independent and autonomous from each other: their relationship is not characterised in terms of a necessary articulation of some kind, but almost mechanical in its contingency. The success of the former would imply the destruction of the latter and vice versa. However, this point will be more thoroughly considered in the next paragraphs.

In this context, it should be instead highlighted that a radical discontinuity is thereby introduced by Bookchin in his account of the history of the legacy of freedom, a discontinuity which bears important consequences for the definition of his historical ontology of political alternative. Based on his account, Bookchin speaks from a historical position where the "legacy of freedom", the communal social forms which informed the organic society, have virtually disappeared, or at the very least reduced to scattered and vestigial remains of a dismembered past. Therefore, he cannot, and actually does not, define the conditions of possibility of a radical political alternative today as existing within a historical continuity with the "legacy of freedom", precisely because such historical continuity has indeed been interrupted. For this reason, what he proposes is by necessity a "reconstructive" project, and more exactly a project actively aimed at recovering the "legacy of freedom that the legacy of domination has sought to extirpate from the memory of humanity" (Bookchin 1982, 318). In other words, an active and conscious engagement is needed to overcome the discontinuity which divides the capitalist present from the communal past, thus making political alternative newly possible: "Humanity has passed through a long history of one-sidedness […]. The great project of our time must be to open the other eye: to see all-sidedly and wholly, to heal and transcend the cleavage between humanity and nature that came with early wisdom" (Bookchin 1982, 41).

The role of consciousness and its progress in Bookchin's historical account appears to be particularly relevant when it comes to highlighting the differences that exist between his thought and that of Öcalan (as well as Graeber). Notoriously, Bookchin has been importantly influenced by Hegel, and he tended, in his own fashion, to interpret history as the history of freedom, the development of which is driven by the gradual,

historical growth of consciousness, whereas the "moment of the negative" has furthermore a fundamental role: "Freedom, conceived as a cluster of ideals and practices, has a very convoluted history, and a large part of this history has simply been unconscious. It has consisted of unstated customs and humanistic impulses that were not articulated in any systematic fashion until they were violated by unfreedom" (Bookchin 1982, 142).

Bookchin discusses the case of ancient Athens precisely in these terms: its democratic institutions, arisen from the confrontation with other *poleis* such as Sparta, are described as "the conscious creations of a public realm that had largely been fostered intuitively in tribal societies and were rarely to rise to the level of rational practice in the centuries to follow" (Bookchin 1982, 132-133). The connection established between the progress of consciousness and the progress of freedom is stated even more explicitly below: "Athenian institutions were unique not merely because of their practices, but because they were the products of conscious intent rather than the accidents of political intuition or custom" (*ibid.*).

On the one hand, this implies that the freedom he attributes to the early communal society is far from being complete and fully developed precisely because it is unconscious (and such unconsciousness is strictly linked to the fact that these social forms are situated at the very beginning of human history). The progress of consciousness is thereby represented as a fundamental condition of the affirmation of freedom itself: Bookchin's historical ontology of political alternative is thus fundamentally characterised by the role of consciousness and its growth as a condition of possibility. On the other hand, its progress is dialectically made possible only through the confrontation with the negative, that is, unfreedom. In turn, this makes manifest a tension existing between the contingency of the development of the hierarchical and class society (and of the State itself) that is affirmed by Bookchin and the necessity of the confrontation with them (framed as the negative) for the progress of human consciousness and freedom. While, according to the former thesis, the conditions of possibility of political alternative appears as given from the beginning of human history, according to the latter it seems that it becomes possible exclusively after a dialectical confrontation that requires a certain degree of historical progress.

This tension is exacerbated by the fact that Bookchin appears to conceive this dialectical confrontation as implying the integration of the two poles towards a higher-level "synthesis" (as will be seen, Öcalan characterises dialectics in different terms). Although Bookchin characterises the development of the hierarchical and class society and of the State as a negative outcome, he also describes the potential freedom that would be attainable today as greater and more advanced than the one that was possible in the early communal society, precisely on the basis of the dialectical confrontation that has taken place between the "legacy of domination" and the "legacy of freedom".

Furthermore, this aspect appears to be inextricably bound with the reconstructive character he attributes to his political project and the discontinuity he identifies within the history of the "legacy of freedom", to the point that a dichotomy between the "archaic" and the "modern" is introduced: "Can we, then, *integrate* the *archaic* customs of usufruct, complementarity, and the equality of unequals into a *modern* vision of freedom?" (Bookchin 1982, 319, italics added). That a modern social form based on the "legacy of freedom" should be informed by an "integration" between the two dialectical poles he identifies is stated even more explicitly by Bookchin: "we cannot — and should not — rely on the power of custom, much less on traditions that have long faded into the past. […] Our values and practices now demand a degree of consciousness and intellectual sophistication that early bands, clans, and tribes never required to maintain their freedom as a lived phenomenon". The dichotomy between the "ancient" and the "modern" is thus centred upon different degrees of consciousness, while the contingency of the development of the hierarchical and class society and of the State can be asserted by Bookchin only in the framework of a complex contradiction.

In this sense, the historical ontology of political alternative presented by Bookchin can be defined, although not without contradictions, as rather "modernist". Based on a conception of history in terms of progress, whereas the progress of consciousness and the progress of freedom are inseparable, the conditions of possibility of a radical political alternative to the nation-state and to societies built on hierarchical principles appear as the result of a long, dialectical, historical development, which implies that, since "history has labored

over thousands of years to produce entirely new domains of reality that enter into our very humanness", "[o]ur capacity for freedom — which includes our capacity for individuality, experience, and desire — runs deeper than that of our distant progenitors" (Bookchin 1982, 41).

However, it should also be noted that, in other works, Bookchin proposes a more complex perspective regarding this matter. In *Remaking Society*, he identifies some "turning points" in history when political alternatives would have become available: "Western history has not been a unilinear advance from one stage to another and from one "precondition" to another in an untroubled ascent to ever-greater control over a «blind», «stingy», and intractable «first nature»" (Bookchin 1989/2017, 168-169). Other historical trajectories would have been available in earlier ages: for example, "prehistory may have allowed for alternatives before the emergence of patricentric warrior societies — societies that might have seen a more benign social development than the one that formed our own history" (*ibid.*). He identifies analogous "turning points" in the "age of cities" ("before the nation-state foreclosed the opportunities opened by urban confederations with their humanly scaled communities, artisanal technologies, and sensitive balance between town and country" (*ibid.*)) and in the "age of democratic revolutions". Such "turning points" are however read in the framework of a progressive history whereas the growth of consciousness and the growth of freedom are inextricably linked: "To the extent that inherited custom was absorbed by a commandeering morality and both became part of a rational ethics, freedom began to develop a forward rather than a backward gaze and turn from a mere longing for a «golden age» to a fervent hope for a humanly created utopia". Overall, discontinuity appears to characterise Bookchin's historical account in any case: even if the conditions of possibility of a radical political alternative are identified as existing even before modernity, in previous ages, they are not conceived as continuously existing, but as emerging and again disappearing in definite "turning points" throughout history itself.

The issues posed by the historical ontology of political alternatives emerging from Bookchin's thought seem however to be consistent with his wider conception of history, especially as presented in his *Re-Enchanting Humanity* (Bookchin 1995). Here, Bookchin criticises postmodern conceptions of history, which he describes as essentially "antihumanist", arguing that their "philosophy of immediacy" implies nothing less than the "abolition of *history* — the denial of history's reality, importance, unity, and meaning" (Bookchin 1995, 229). What he identifies in postmodern positions is actually a reversal of history as progress, whereas the "succession of ages represents not history in the sense of a progressive development away from primality but an atrophying, a steady erosion, a regressive undoing of our «inner nature»". In contrast, he affirms that "history [...] is an account of a *development* that unfolds as a consequence of the rational elaboration of humanity's potentiality for freedom and self-consciousness. History is in great measure the development of humanity away from the Island of the Lotus Eaters into the innovative fullness of freedom and self-consciousness" (Bookchin 1995, 238).

Therefore, although Bookchin, like Öcalan and Graeber, roots the emergence of the conditions of possibility of a radical political alternative to the State and the hierarchical and class society in a definite historical account and in a libertarian theory of history, the specific characters of such operation imply a rather different political outcome. In the next paragraphs, it will be seen that Bookchin's historical ontology of political alternative differs from the ones offered by Öcalan and Graeber, especially regarding the issues highlighted so far: the discontinuity in the existence and development of the conditions of possibility of potential political alternatives throughout history; the centrality of consciousness and its progress among such conditions of possibility; the dichotomy between antiquity and modernity from the point of view of consciousness itself; the dialectical conception linking the "legacy of domination" and the "legacy of freedom"; and the absence of a necessary articulation between the former and the latter. Far from being mere theoretical issues, these points of divergence bear relevant political consequences.

3. Abdullah Öcalan

The dimension of history and of the "historicity of social development" has always been central in the thought of Abdullah Öcalan (2007/2015c, 29; 2009/2015a, 49). Particularly since his departure from his initial Marxist-Leninist positions, he has considered historical analysis essential both for understanding the roots of societal problems and for informing the struggle for freedom and democracy (Öcalan 2012, 34-35). Regarding this point, Öcalan has been undoubtedly influenced by Bookchin, as well as by other authors such as Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974; Öcalan 2004/2023; Biehl 2012; Gerber and Brincat 2019/2020): the admiration he had for the American anarchist is notoriously further proved by the brief exchange of letters that occurred between the two ("Bookchin-Öcalan Correspondence" 2004/2019). However, although in the first prison writings by Öcalan (2004/2023; 2007/2015c) this influence was certainly stronger, their theories of history and historical accounts have never been fully overlapping; furthermore, the distance between the two has grown over time, even though Öcalan has never openly criticised Bookchin.

Öcalan situates the beginning of history, whereas "the dialectic principle of historical development started to work" (Öcalan 2007/2015c, 31-32), in ancient Mesopotamia, when civilisation first arose with the Sumer state and the conflict began between this and the pre-existing neolithic communities. This is not far from Bookchin's own positions; furthermore, analogously, he criticises the notion of a unilinear history and development in the same context, arguing against the idea of a determined and fixed succession of stages (*ibid.*). In *The Roots of Civilisation*, the dialectics linking the "ethnic groups of the neolithic age" and the newborn state appear rather similar to Bookchin's one: the former are said to exist "in themselves", suggesting that they need the emergence of a negative dialectical pole in order to become "for themselves" (Öcalan 2007/2015c, 68-69). Still like Bookchin, he highlights the continuity existing between, on the one hand, the first states and the slave-owning societies of the ancient world and, on the other hand, the modern state and its capitalistic form (Öcalan 2007/2015c, 71, 218). He furthermore identifies modern progress and technological development as increasing the conditions of possibility of freedom (Öcalan 2007/2015c, 218). Looking specifically at this book, it would thus seem that Öcalan inherits from Bookchin the already-highlighted tension between the contingency of the development of the hierarchical and class society and of the State itself and the necessity of the confrontation with them (framed as the negative) for the progress of human consciousness and freedom.

Nonetheless, already in *Beyond State, Power, and Violence*, it is possible to identify some features that show how the positions of Öcalan differed from Bookchin's ones, especially regarding their respective historical ontologies of political alternative. In that text, Öcalan (2004/2023, 88-89) already characterised as necessary the existence of the democratic civilisation ("natural society") as the historical counterpart of the State civilisation ("hierarchy") in a dialectical relationship: "One of the most fundamental shortcomings of social science is that it does not demonstrate the other side, the «counterpart», that throughout history has been and must be in dialectical contradiction with hierarchical and state-based societies" (*ibid.*). On the contrary, as discussed above, Bookchin (1982, 318) does not identify as historically necessary the existence of the "legacy of freedom", to the point that he describes it as virtually disappeared in our time, and a "reconstructive approach" is needed to recover it from the past.

However, Öcalan does not simply root the necessity of the democratic civilisation in the dialectics of history he describes: the deeper foundation of such necessity is in fact to be found in the equally necessary articulation that he identifies between the two poles of the dialectical relationship. Even more relevant, however, is the nature of such articulation, that is, its fundamental asymmetry. "Natural society" is characterised as the constitutive element of any other social form, including "hierarchy" and the State as its dialectical opposite: it "plays the role of the main stem cell. Just as all cells of the various tissues of the body emanate from the stem cell, it is from the natural society that all institutions — which we can compare to tissues — emerge. […] It is possible to suppress, beat back, and restrict natural society, but it can never be destroyed, for this would be the end of society as such" (Öcalan 2004/2023, 88).

Therefore, already in *Beyond State, Power, and Violence*, the "natural society", the "democratic civilisation", although being the dialectical counterpart of the "hierarchy", of the "State civilisation", is not on the same level with it: more exactly, it is at the same time on the same level and on a deeper, foundational level. It is precisely this constitutive relationship that founds, at the same time, the necessary articulation between the two dialectical poles and the asymmetric dependency of the latter on the former. In ontological terms, the "natural society" is prior to "hierarchy": "It may well be that compared to the more differentiated cells, the stem cell is «primitive». However, it is not primitive in the sense that it is backward and should be eroded but primordial in the sense of being primary and foundational" (Öcalan 2004/2023, 93).

Öcalan takes this position openly criticising the traditional Marxist understanding of "primitive communism": "even Marxism, with its great aspirations, perceived natural society, which it called «primitive communism», as extinct, as having ceased to exist thousands of years ago. In reality, natural society has never ceased to exist. Even though hierarchical and statist societies have fed upon it, natural society has never been completely consumed and has always managed to sustain its existence" (Öcalan 2004/2023, 89). As will be seen in the next paragraph, the act of removing from "primitive communism" its temporal qualification as a lost and ancestral past to transform it into a constitutive element of any other and later society is to be found even at the core of Graeber's political reflection.

At the same time, this also implies a departure from Bookchin's depiction of the relationship between the two dialectical poles, and even of the very historical characterisation he offers of the communal society and the "legacy of freedom", precisely because "[t]he communal quality in the formation of the societal entity is its essence, not just its form, which clearly shows that in the long run a society can only exist communally. Losing communality is tantamount to ceasing to be a society. […] The human species cannot continue to exist without communal way of life" (Öcalan 2004/2023, 93).

The political implications of this difference between Öcalan's and Bookchin's historical ontologies of political alternative are quite clear: since the existence of the "natural society" is necessary as a continuous foundation for any other social form, and at the same time "natural society" is the fundamental condition of possibility of a radical political alternative to "hierarchy", such radical political alternative is and has *always* been possible throughout the entire human history. Therefore, on the one hand, there is no room here for the tension existing in Bookchin between the contingency of the development of hierarchy and the State and the necessity of a negative moment in the dialectical confrontation of the democratic civilisation with it: the dialectical contradiction itself is defined differently by Öcalan, implying a necessary articulation and a constitutive asymmetry between the two poles. On the other hand, the potentiality of political alternative is not given exclusively after a certain degree of historical development, nor its existence is linked with turning points discontinuously punctuating history itself, as it is for Bookchin. Moreover, a further implication of this point is that it is not necessary that some "integration" exists between the two dialectical poles: for clear political reasons, Öcalan is more interested in the issue of the possibility of peaceful coexistence between them, and the dichotomic characterisation he gives of the two poles makes improbable he would consider a form of integration between the two as a positive development.

However, Öcalan returns to the articulation between the two dialectical poles in what he considers his most important work (Öcalan 2009/2015a, 6): the five volumes of the *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* (Öcalan 2009/2015a; 2009/2015b; 2009/2020), of which only the first three have been translated in English so far. In the first volume, he restates that "the societies that preceded civilization can never be annihilated", and that this is true "not because they were exceptionally strong but, just as with stem cells, because social existence is not possible without them", and "[c]ivilized society can only exist in co-existence with the society that preceded it" (Öcalan 2009/2015a, 171), but he also adds in parentheses: "(A paradoxical situation similar to the one that there can be no capitalism if there are no workers)" (*ibid.*).

This is particularly interesting especially when considering how he complements this discourse in the third volume, that is, openly referring to Rosa Luxemburg: "The key shift in the paradigm of looking at history must

be in relation to the understanding that the city-based capital and power monopoly could not have developed without agrarian-village society (10,000 BCE to date). This opens the way for a fundamental methodological change. Rosa Luxemburg stated, in a very broad manner, that «capitalism, accumulation of capital, and monopoly cannot exist in the absence of a noncapitalist society»" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 181-183). The articulation described by Öcalan between the democratic civilisation and the State civilisation can thus be framed within the debate concerning the "outsides" of capitalism, which is usually considered to have been opened exactly by Rosa Luxemburg (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 65-70). Öcalan's position broadens the scope of that debate to encompass the entirety of human history, insofar as he proposes to read in terms of dependency upon its "outsides" (that is, conditions of existence of capitalism that are to a certain extent external to the logic of capital itself) not only capitalism, but also other hierarchical and class societies.

This interpretation appears all the more consistent when considering that Öcalan does not define "noncapitalist societies" as necessarily consisting of full-fledged, entire societies, but rather as characterising specific groups (and social practices): that is, those groups whose unpaid social surplus makes capital accumulation, profit, and the existence of the State itself possible, such as "the historical agrarian-village society, the society of women confined to their homes, of the craftspeople who live off their own labor, of the poor and the unemployed of the city (who live through subsidies)" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 181-183). Incidentally, it is perhaps worth remembering that Karl Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, described labour exactly as "the real non-capital" (Marx 1858/1986, 204).

Moreover, in the third volume, Öcalan also defines more clearly the constitutive asymmetry already highlighted above, specifying its implications along different lines of thought: "a) A society without capital and power is possible, but capital and power without a society is not; b) An economy without capital is possible, but capital without an economy is not; c) A society without a state is possible, but a state without a society is not; d) A society without capitalists, feudal lords, and masters is possible, but capitalists, feudal lords, and masters without a society are not; e) A society without class is possible, but classes without a society are not" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 184). Again, the point is that the democratic civilisation pole of the dialectical contradiction is also foundational to the other pole of the contradiction. For Öcalan, this is true not only on a very abstract level, but even in the concreteness of history: "Even empires rest on numerous different internal leaderships. Every type of aşiret, tribal, and peoples' leadership, all religious authorities and kingdoms, even republics and democracies, can be united within a single empire. In this sense, it is important to understand that even empires, which are generally seen as very highly centralized, are a kind of confederalism" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 298-299).

The relationship between "capitalist modernity" and "democratic modernity" is framed analogously. Not only Öcalan avoids the necessity to adopt a "reconstructive approach", like Bookchin with the "legacy of freedom", he also excludes that the "democratic modernity" (that is, an already-existing alternative development of modernity different from the capitalistic one, and in continuity with the democratic civilisation rather than with the State civilisation) is a political project at all, affirming its reality as independent and autonomous from the dimension of consciousness: "I have neither discovered nor invented democratic modernity. […] [D]emocratic modernity has been dichotomous since the emergence of official civilization, whenever and wherever it arose. What I am trying to do […] is to give due recognition to this form of civilization […] that exists whenever and wherever official civilization exists and to meaningfully clarify its main dimensions" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 238). Democratic civilisation, in turn, should not be regarded as a political project, much less a reconstructive one: "democratic civilization is not conceived as the return to some illusory past «golden age» or as an imagined future «utopia». It is the daily expression and meaning of a way of life that is constantly, even instantaneously, being realized in thought and action" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 281).

Even "democratic confederalism", defined as a "governing system", is not described as an arbitrary political project, but as a "choice" of democratic modernity as its fundamental political model, which "reflects its historical basis and complex social nature" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 300). As mentioned in the introduction, within the brochure *Democratic Confederalism*, it is furthermore possible to read that "democratic confederalism

rests on the historical experience of the society and its collective heritage. It is not an arbitrary modern political system but, rather, accumulates history and experience. It is the offspring of the life of the society" (Öcalan 2011, 23).

This is even more relevant when one recalls the centrality of consciousness and its progress in Bookchin's historical ontology of political alternative. On the contrary, it is quite clear that Öcalan conceives democratic confederalism (the radical political alternative to the State and capitalist modernity) as materially incorporated within the very body of the "historical-society", as a part of its "collective heritage", a direct expression of its spontaneous life and embodied historical experience. This fact, combined with Öcalan's representation of political alternative as necessarily, continuously possible throughout human history, also implies that it would be impossible for him to consider modern societies more capable of freedom than the ancient ones: it is not a certain degree of consciousness that makes the political alternative possible.

For Öcalan, conversely, knowledge, especially historical and social knowledge, not consciousness, can be identified as a condition of possibility for the realisation of a radical political alternative. In this framework, however, knowledge does not substitute consciousness functionally: we should not imagine a progress of knowledge, whereas the attainment of a certain degree of it would make a radical political alternative possible at a certain point of historical development. On the contrary, modern societies almost risk being disadvantaged from this point of view, compared to early communal societies, precisely because a great part of historical knowledge concerning past forms and values of democratic civilisation and democratic confederalism has gone lost, or has been deliberately excluded from historical accounts, according to Öcalan.

This is the reason why he dedicates so many pages to the reconstruction and understanding of historical knowledge: "The problem [of] democratization and its solutions are closely linked to the relations between historicity and the present. […] Society is the most advanced history. This reality must be understood; otherwise we cannot free society of its problems or provide democratic solutions. For this reason, the very first thing the despots do is eliminate social memory, and thus the very first thing democrats must do is protect social memory, or history. Capitalist modernity tries to destroy human memory and present the present as if it were eternal or, rather, the end of time" (Öcalan 2012, 34-35). This is also the reason why he criticises so often modern European social sciences, affirming that they largely share individualistic and ahistorical methodologies, making it impossible to correctly know forms of modernity and government outside the historical stream of capitalist modernity and the State. History is thus represented by Öcalan as the very matter of which our present is made: the continuity between past, present, and future could hardly be declared more strongly. This furthermore implies that an adequate knowledge and understanding of history is a fundamental condition of possibility for the realisation of a radical political alternative. History is at the same time what proves and ensures the continuous existence of the political alternative and a treasure trove of possibilities and solutions for the present. As will be seen in the next paragraph, Graeber's positions in this regard appear largely sympathetic to Öcalan's.

4. David Graeber

David Graeber has been one of the most ardent supporters of the Kurdish cause and a highly interested reader of Öcalan's work; he has also written a preface for the first volume of the *Manifesto for a Democratic Society*, and contributed to collective works about Öcalan and the Rojava Revolution (Graeber 2015; 2016; 2020a, 107-113; 2019/2020b; Graeber and Öğünç 2016). In this paragraph, among other things, it will be contended that it is possible to detect a certain influence of Öcalan on Graeber's thought, especially concerning his last, much-discussed work, written with David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.

In 2014 Graeber wrote an article for *The Guardian*, during the first weeks of the ISIS attack on Kobane, asking why the world was ignoring the revolution of Kurds in the region (Graeber 2016), and in December

2014 he visited Cîzire, in Rojava, for ten days. In an interview with Pinar Öğünç, he suggested that the Kurdish revolution and large-scale democratic experiment had the potential to challenge the assumption, widely accepted in the West, including within the radical left, that "real revolutions" are impossible, thus opening new extraordinary spaces for social and political imagination and practice: "I've spent my life thinking about how we might be able to do things like this in some remote time in the future and most people think I'm crazy to imagine it will ever be. *These people are doing it now*. If they prove that it can be done, that a genuinely egalitarian and democratic society is possible, it will completely transform people's sense of human possibility" (Graeber and Öğünç 2016, 30).

A recurrent theme in Graeber's interventions about the Kurdish movement and Öcalan is that their theoretical background has been often ignored, probably because of orientalist (or directly racist) approaches, even when the Kurdish combatants have started to appear on the pages of major newspapers in the world for their fight against ISIS: "I find it remarkable how so many people in the West see these armed feminist cadres, for example, and don't even think about the ideas that must lie behind them. They just figured it happened somehow" (Graeber and Öğünç 2016, 26). Graeber has particularly developed his observations concerning this point in his essay *Öcalan as Thinker*. Here, as mentioned, he highlighted that among the 448 articles in JSTOR citing his name (in 2019), "not a single one of them [was] primarily addressed to his ideas" (Graeber 2019/2020b, 182). Graeber's willingness to engage with the thought of Öcalan is thus quite clear.

In his 2015 preface to the first volume of Öcalan's *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*, Graeber frames him in a change within global revolutionary thought he identifies after the 1990s, in connection with the new awareness of the limits of past political imagination: "There was a growing recognition, in revolutionary circles, that freedom, tradition, and the imagination have always been — and presumably, always will be, entangled in one another in ways that we do not completely understand" (Graeber 2015, 10). This is why, in his opinion, "some of the most vital, most creative, most imaginative revolutionary movements of the dawn of the new millennium […] have been those that, simultaneously, root themselves most strongly in a deep traditional past" (*ibid.*); here, his thinking is particularly directed towards the Zapatistas and the Kurdish revolution itself, which, incidentally, he cites together even in other texts (2020a, 109-110).

The emphasis placed by Graeber on the value of history and its understanding for the realisation of a radical political alternative in the present is quite "Öcalanian" in spirit. Since Graeber and Wengrow (2021, ix) had been working on *The Dawn of Everything* for ten years before publishing it, Graeber had probably already in mind a part of that work when commenting Öcalan's historical account and his critique of dominant civilisational narratives: "Before the birth of the ziggurat system to which Öcalan draws attention, there was perhaps a millennium of egalitarian urbanism about which we know very little. But the implications are potentially extraordinary — particularly because, once you know what to look for, egalitarian experiments begin to appear everywhere across human history" (Graeber 2015, 17). Graeber clearly felt that he and Öcalan were part of the same intellectual and political movement: "In this context, it seems to me that Öcalan is asking precisely the right questions, or many of them, at a moment when doing so could hardly be more important. Let us only hope that as political movements learn the lessons of history, as new social theories are born, as they will inevitably be, and as our knowledge of the past is likewise revolutionized, and that the author of this book will be released from his present captivity and able to participate as a free man" (Graeber 2015, 18).

However, while their historical accounts clearly diverge on many points — for example, Öcalan presupposes a certain unity of the state and dominant civilisation throughout history, while Graeber tends to deconstruct them following the different movements of singular elements composing them that he understands as not necessarily entangled — their historical ontologies of political alternative appear quite similar, and similarly diverging from Bookchin's one. Furthermore, such convergence cannot be reduced to the probable influence of Öcalan on Graeber, because its fundamental elements have been present in the work of the latter for a long time.

The key concept in order to grasp such convergence is the notion of communism — in *Debt*, he also uses the more specific terms "actually-existing communism" and "baseline communism" (Graeber 2011, 95, 98) —

that Graeber develops on the basis of Marcel Mauss's (1925/1966) *Essay on the Gift*, which he reads in the framework of the debate about the NEP in USSR and the related search for anthropological bases for non-monetary economies. Already in *Fragments of an Anarchic Anthropology*, Graeber attributed to Mauss the discovery of the fact that "the origin of all contracts lies in communism, an unconditional commitment to another's needs" (Graeber 2004, 16).

A few years later, in *Possibilities*, he clarifies the notion, affirming, still on the basis of Mauss's text, that "the most elementary form of social contract was, in fact, communism: an open-ended agreement between two groups, or even two individuals, to provide for each other; within which, even access to one another's possessions followed the principle of «from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs»" (Graeber 2007, 133). The implication he draws is that such "total reciprocity", as against "total war", "remains the kind of base-line of sociality, even to the present day" (*ibid.*), to the point that Graeber (2007, 133, 284) proposes a genealogy of both hierarchy and the market on the basis of this notion of communism. The most relevant consequence is that "[a]ll forms of hierarchy […] rest on egalitarian, even communistic, practices whose logic can always be invoked to subvert them, since it is the basis of so much everyday morality" (Graeber 2007, 284).

Nonetheless, it is in *Debt* that Graeber (2011, 94) expands more extensively on his reflections about this "foundational" communism, which here is directly defined as "any human relationship that operates on the principles of «from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs»". Furthermore, he criticises the notion of "primitive communism" and its correlated concept of future utopian communism (defining it as "mythic" or "epic" communism) on temporal premises: that is, the tendency to relegate communism to a semi-mythical part of a distant past or towards distant possible futures. On the contrary, he maintains that communism "is something that exists right now — that exists, to some degree, in any human society, although there has never been one in which *everything* has been organized in that way", that "[a]ll of us act like communists a good deal of the time", and that "all social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism" (Graeber 2011, 95). His conclusion is nothing less than this: "In fact, *communism is the foundation of all human sociability*", and "[b]aseline communism might be considered the raw material of sociality, a recognition of our ultimate interdependence that is the ultimate substance of social peace" (Graeber 2011, 96, 99).

Graeber clearly conceives communism as a set of organising and moral principles, social practices, and values that inform the very structure of any human society. This conception is not far from Öcalan description of the democratic civilisation, which as seen is not limited to "a civilisation which is outside traditional classed civilisation" (Öcalan 2016/2017, 18), but includes social groups defined by their life conditions and social practices that are fully within the sphere of the State civilisation, although remaining inherently a "noncapitalistic society" (Öcalan 2009/2020, 181-183). Although Graeber proposes three fundamental social forms, (communism, hierarchy, and the market) while Öcalan is more interested in the distinction between natural society and hierarchy, State civilisation and democratic civilisation, capitalistic modernity and democratic modernity, both conceive one of them as occupying at the same time two distinct levels: that is, both the democratic civilisation and the "baseline communism" exists both in opposition with hierarchy and capitalism and as foundational to them.

Therefore, it can be said that Öcalan and Graeber, at the very least, share a large part of their respective historical ontologies of political alternative: for both, a radical political alternative is continuously possible throughout human history precisely because its fundamental condition of possibility is the very foundation of any existing social form. Taking into account their shared belief, for which the realisation of such a radical political alternative also depends upon the existence of a continuous tradition of freedom in a given context, as well as upon the quality and quantity of historical knowledge, and considering their common engagement in criticising dominant civilisational narrative with the aim to reconstruct different historical accounts, which makes past revolutions, rebellions, forms of resistance, democratic communities and values visible, it would

be hard to argue that such similarity is a coincidence. The book *The Dawn of Everything* itself was not aimed to formulate new political proposals, but to show that the possibility of radical political alternatives exists and has always existed by making visible the richness of our democratic past, and to make it possible for us to recognise and embrace that past as embodied within our present (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). This appears to be fully consistent with Öcalan's own position and theory of history:

> We have to embrace as our own the history of those who so heroically resisted and attacked: let us embrace this as our own history ─ the history of democratic civilization. […] And if this history is not written we cannot wage a successful struggle for democracy, freedom, and equality. History is our roots. Just as a tree cannot continue its existence without its roots, the human species cannot choose a free and honorable way of living if it doesn't base itself on its social history. The prevailing civilizational history proclaims that there is only one history and no other. Unless we can break free from this reductionist and dogmatic notion of history, a democratic and socially conscious history cannot be developed. It should not be presumed that the history of the democratic civilization is lacking or void of events, alliances, and institutions. On the contrary, this history abounds with the richest materials. It has a wealth equal to that of the history of the civilization: it has its own mythology, religion, philosophy, science, and arts; it has its own authors, sages, and poets. All we need to do is to acquire the skills to evaluate, select, differentiate, and write it according to our own paradigm! I am not saying that we cannot make use of the weapons, institutions, and mentalities of the enemies and rivals. But I am saying that, in addition, we have to develop our own mentality, institutions, and weapons, and that we should base ourselves on them. If not, we can never escape being the victims of their mentality, institutions, and weapons, and becoming like them (Öcalan 2009/2015b, 295).

Finally, differently from Bookchin, Graeber and Öcalan appear to share a similar position even concerning the role of consciousness and its progress in the context of their historical ontologies of political alternative. As seen, the very structure of their theories of history seems to exclude that it can play any role within their thought, precisely because the conditions of possibility of a radical political alternative have always been given, and, if anything, it is historical knowledge which has a certain value in making such alternatives feasible. However, it is worth noting that Graeber has also developed an explicit critique of the positions on consciousness like Bookchin's. In particular, Graeber has contested as a Eurocentric assumption the idea that human consciousness concerning one's own social and political institution is a conquest of (European) modernity and Enlightenment: the whole *The Dawn of Everything* is to a certain extent an attempt to demonstrate this point through the examination of ethnographic and archaeological material (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 92-98). On the same grounds, Graeber had already criticised the tendency to conceive democracy as a rare, Western invention, openly contesting both Bookchin's and Castoriadis's theses about the uniqueness of the ancient Athens (Graeber 2004, 86-92), who relegated, on the contrary, non-Western egalitarian assemblies to "primitivism". Öcalan's identification of the origins of the democratic civilisation in egalitarian Neolithic communities seems to be heading in the same direction: in both cases, opposing the representation of democracy as a rare (Western) achievement is the first step to demonstrate that it has been the norm rather than the exception in human past.

5. Conclusion

As the discussion conducted so far suggests, it is thus possible to identify a distinctive historical ontology of political alternative in the thought of Abdullah Öcalan, which not only differs from but often properly contradicts Bookchin's, while potentially unexpected convergences have been found between Öcalan and David Graeber. Moreover, the analysis of this aspect of political thought holds an inherent interest. Critically

examining the assumptions that define the boundaries imposed by individuals and movements on political imagination can be highly beneficial, allowing for questioning these limits and potentially creating new spaces for political practice. In this framework, as all three authors have well clarified, writing new histories is a fundamental step to thinking of different presents and futures. Furthermore, although it would be naïve to overlap the limits of political practice to the limits of political imagination, it would be equally naïve to overlook this dimension when considering political achievements apparently beyond the limits of political possibilities, such as those attained by democratic autonomy in Kurdistan.

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