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On the Side of Society, Against Civilization

Virginia to Rojava

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richmond, va 2018



This essay was originally published to itsgoingdown.org in September of 2018. It is intended to compare experiments in Rojava and their readings of Abdullah Ocalan with lived experiences and struggles in so-called Virginia. At the time of this zine's release, Donald Trump has announced his intention to remove all US troops from Syria within 30 days. This includes the autonomous territory of Rojava. While we have no love for US intervention in any part of the world, we also must see this move for what it is, an opportunity to simultaneously force an alliance of the more conservative formations of the Syrian Democratic Forces with the forces of Assad, and open up space for an invasion from Erdogan's Turkish State. This outcome will have serious implications for the social experiments and communes of Rojava, as well as the millions of people and projects inspired by their efforts the world over.

***Solidarity with Rojava!
All Power to the Communes!***

*- some fragments
december, 2018
richmond, va*



ia environment and rural communities, but if all that opponent does is educate themselves without ever waking up one day and taking some form of action to oppose them, the education is worthless. Similarly, if a socialist or anarchist or revolutionary of any ideological persuasion merely studies revolutionary texts without ever undertaking some praxis, they might truly be better off reading paperback thrillers. If that education never occurs though, then the transformation of consciousness and values might never occur either. In the case of this author, it gave me the concepts and language to better understand the link between the antifascist and antipipeline struggles, a link I have long felt but struggled to express. Simultaneously, it imparts a revolutionary aspiration that subsumes the desire for something like a more perfect counter cultural identity. Am I an anarchist? Socialist? Libertarian communist? Democratic confederalist? It seems not to matter; I know I am on the side of society, against civilization.

“The alternative of utopian free life is neither a form of production nor a society, but a life that can be constructed daily by communities.” If we are to lead revolutionary lives which overcome not just our current capitalism, but also reach back for inspiration to a matricentric society that predates patriarchal civilization, then we will have to learn to cast off the mentalities within us that have allowed this brutal civilization to persist. We will have to shift our focus to how we live our lives, as Ocalan suggests, each and every day. We will have to learn new myths to pattern our lives off, giving up or at least complicating the prevailing modern mythology of hierarchic positivism. This brief essay is a piece of propaganda towards that goal.

For further readings on the theories and ideas of Abdullah Ocalan, check out the two volumes most referenced in this essay:

Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume I
Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume II

ON THE SIDE OF SOCIETY, AGAINST CIVILIZATION: Virginia to Rojava

SHOCKINGLY little consideration has been paid to the writings of Abdullah Ocalan. Imprisoned by the Turkish government in 1999, Ocalan has been writing from solitary confinement on the prison island of Ismarli for nineteen years. Most recently he has produced a four volume work, entitled *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*. He is the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party and the ideological leader of the main Kurdish political party in Rojava. Despite the very specific pressures of the decades-long regional conflict, the work has the potential to illuminate our understanding of anti-establishment struggles the world over. Reading the *Manifesto* here in so-called Virginia these past two years has heightened my own understanding of this area's more visible struggles: the resistance to two unnecessary fracked gas pipelines, and the rise of antifascism before and after the infamous white supremacists gatherings in Charlottesville.

The first two volumes of Ocalan's *Manifesto* feel up-to-the-minute relevant, despite the works making their way to English almost a decade after they were smuggled out of prison, ostensibly as defenses for his trial (the last two volumes are still being translated by the Norwegian publisher New Compass). The work, as thus-far translated, has two primary preoccupations: First, analyzing the positivist mindset which enables civilization's exploits. Second, a broad critique of capitalist modernity that very thoroughly traces its roots back 6,000 years to the beginning of civilization. (The third volume will concern itself with what Ocalan calls the "sociology of freedom"; the fourth will cover Ocalan's vision of a path to peace in the Middle East). Subjective experience and objective history are thus considered of equal importance in this aspirational screed, and the synthesis is thrilling. To borrow the cliché about good poetry, it captures what is often thought but rarely so well expressed.

His analysis of the roots of capitalism begins not with Medicis in Venice or with tulips in Amsterdam nor factories in Manchester, but with the emergence of civilization itself six thousand years ago in the fertile crescent. The emergence of agriculture, he contends, is where surplus product – and thus capital – first arises. This time also saw the transition from matricentric societies to civilizations dominated by the "strong and crafty" man, who tricked and trapped his way from hunter-provider to matricentric villages to the authoritarian head of

a household. “The fundamental rule of his profession was to know where the most profit was to be made and to steer towards those places,” says Ocalan. “This is probably what is meant by the saying ‘capital has no homeland.’” The metaphor is both a summation of the history and useful way of understanding how power is wielded today. Housewifization, in turn, is named as the first form of slavery and the basis of all its myriad subsequent forms (and thus we see the Rojava constitution mandating gender equality in matters of governance). To employ Maria Mie’s definition, as Ocalan’s editor’s do:

“Housewifization means the externalization, or ex-territorialization of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalists. This means women’s labor is considered a natural resource, freely available like air and water. Housewifization means at the same time the total atomization and disorganization of these hidden workers. ... As the housewife is linked to the wage-earning breadwinner, to the ‘free’ proletarian as a non-free worker, the ‘freedom’ of the proletarian to sell his labor power is based on the non-freedom of the housewife. Proletarianization of men is based on the housewifization of women. In sum, about 6,000 years ago, humanity started to shift from matricentric societies to housewifized civilizations oriented around the accumulation and concentration of surplus product.”

The ziggurat serves as the model for the basic class structure that perpetuates itself in every civilization, right up to those we live under today. On the three floors of Ocalan’s symbolic ziggurat are:

- 1) On top, the “gods,” or the holders of power.
- 2) Those “who uphold the legitimacy of power” in the middle.

And on the lowest level:

- 3) the laborers or slaves who “work to be fed”.

This basic social structure has pervaded every iteration of civilization these past six thousand years. Our current era is that of the “naked kings,” because we all know who the powerful are; they do not have to rule under the pretext of divinity or divine right. These ziggurats of hierarchy both permeate throughout any given civilization, and the metaphor serves as a functional way of understanding the entirety of a civilization.

In Virginia, for instance, we know that our electricity monopoly, Dominion Energy, wields immense power to further enrich itself. It’s not difficult to imagine their CEO, Tom Farrell, as a king demanding sacrifices to further Domin-

It’s not a difficult step to then see how this willful prioritization of self over all else makes possible the direct human on human oppression so relished by the neo-Nazis. You could see it in the faces of the participants in last year’s Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville; an unnatural, fear-derived rage arisen from their belief that the permanent displacement of non-whites could bring them a lasting happiness. From the the hierarchical, civilized mind arises a fear-driven desire not to share the ill-begotten wealth of this country, and the willingness to look at the climate change’s threat to all of humanity and react with indifference. These fascistic white supremacists represent the most outlandishly virulent form of the civilized mindset, and the civilized and indifferent “good German” mindset is the Petri dish in which they thrive. Ocalan’s rally cry of “free life or genocide” thus carries the ring of truth. The Alt-Right, and all those who find them unthreatening, would prefer a holocaust to helping.



Just as it would be self-limiting to ignore the oppression, the same goes for an awareness of the more radical struggles in the world. It’s difficult, once one becomes aware, to sit idly by as Rojava’s YPJ and YPG militias fight a two front war against ISIS and the Turkish state whilst bargaining with Assad’s Syria for their autonomy. They are defending the world’s most radical democracy, and we in so-called Virginia can (and have) take inspiration from their example (and vice versa).

We ought to direct the course of each day towards a freer life and against the causes of our suffering, towards fuller moments and perhaps less objective certainty. For the pipeline opponent, it is important to have some basic inspirational understanding of the damage the ACP and MVP would do to the Virgin-

paragraph) that they should stop attacking the state and instead work to create direct democracy within it. This reflects Ocalan's own shift in focus from having a concrete or objectively existing thing, like a country, towards an emphasis on process, towards cultivating a living communalist sensibility that values pervasive democratic participation and gender equality.

This *Manifesto* is thus not “an endeavor for an alternative method but rather an endeavor to find a solution to the problems that a life detached from the values of freedom creates,” not a critique of any objective system which attempts a ceteris paribus analysis of human life, but of the scientific “capitalist modernity mentality.” To posit another system to overcome capitalist modernity is to engage in the mentality of oppression – the hierarchical mentality which enables the civilized human to desire domination and exploitation.

The *Manifesto* calls for the overthrow of any outlook which perceives pervasive “mutually antagonistic pyramids erected around notions of ‘inferior’ and superior,” to quote Murray Bookchin, and live like you're not of higher or lower importance than your environment or the people around you (though this does not mean be passive in the face of a threat or oppression; self-defense is encouraged, and this is why Rojava's militias are called Self-Defense Forces). Though we are of nature, we are nearly unique in it for our ability to empathize. Ocalan, very much a student of Bookchin's *The Ecology of Freedom*, calls for us to make use of our second nature – our vibrant subjectivity – and become active participants in furthering the evolution of humanity. The free mind turns its focus to “deal[ing] with the moment of creation in social events,” says Ocalan, and away from domination. From *The Ecology of Freedom*:

“Thus, the effort to restore the ecological principle of unity in diversity has become a social effort in its own right—a revolutionary effort that must rearrange sensibility in order to rearrange the real world.”

The pipeline-building executives of a powerful electricity corporation like Dominion and the neo-Nazi Alt-Righters are both useful illustrations of the civilized mindset at work. In the case of the corporate suits, they see their own comfort as being of greater importance than the health of other humans and apparently also of the James River, which flows right outside their Richmond headquarters' front door. They believe their lives can be enriched by the unnecessary extraction of a natural resource. Only a mind trapped in hierarchic perception could ever see themselves as being enriched by a process as destructive as fracking natural gas and then transporting it 600 miles through a landslide-prone mountainous region.

ion's reign. Nor is it difficult to imagine the dozens of other slimy Dominion executives and their spineless lobbyists, politicians, and PR wormtongues as a sort of priest class dedicated to both upholding the machinations of the Dominion profit machine and the public perception of Dominion's power as natural, inevitable and basically benevolent. Meanwhile, us captive rate payers should just be grateful that our lights turn on everyday, and we should simply continue to work and pay our bills. We are the wage slaves on the ground floor.



Ocalan calls the problems of our financial age of capitalist modernity a “social crisis” in which power is openly and brutally wielded, but he always comes back to pointing out that today's problems have very old roots. “I want to emphasize that the interdependency of political, commercial, and economical monopolies is not unique to capitalism, but that it has existed since the beginning of civilization and the onset of urbanization and dynasties”. Like a rusted and heavy chain, the various iterations of these forces have linked themselves together throughout the history of civilization to beat down any movement that respects the sanctity of all life. Thus this *Manifesto's* emphasis on retelling history to show that this civilization “has been at war for all of its five thousand year life.” The real source of our civilization's power is violence.

But older than civilization is what Ocalan terms “communal society.” Historically, this iteration of human life prevailed in the Primitive Communal and Neolithic eras—for hundreds of thousands of years prior to the beginning of civilization. This “communal mother society” still exists within and in spite of civilization, and manifests itself as a community's natural will to take care of itself. Society is what springs up in natural disasters, or anytime or anywhere that humans help each other without the motive of accumulating resources for

themselves. In this country, we see it in contemporary protest movements, vividly in the Standing Rock action against the Dakota Access Pipeline. I've seen it the ongoing resistance to the proposed fracked natural gas pipeline here in Virginia, and in the spontaneous coalition of clergy, students, residents, anarchists, Black Lives Matter activists, socialists and medics that amassed to counter the August 12, 2017 white supremacist rally. Such resistances express an ancient societal solidarity.

For its part, Dominion acts in the six thousand year old tradition of civilization, remorselessly expressing its political and economic power to capture the profit that this proposed pipeline will generate for them. When I've talked to the people directly in its path about their meeting with Dominion officials, they universally say they feel completely unheard. Dominion and their state politicians seem like they are talking about an entirely different happening from the protestors. This difference in language and perspective around the value of this proposed pipeline illustrates the gulf between societal and civilizational mind-sets: for society there is no value to something that's a broad threat to public health and which will damage gorgeous tracts of forest and the nearly pristine waterways which lace the Blue Ridge mountains. Neither natural beauty nor the well being of the rural environment and the working class people who inhabit it factor into Dominion's civilizational notions of value. This fundamental disconnect leaves no common ground for conversation or compromise.

Even more searing than the terrible scene of bucolic waterways turned bright orange with runoff from pipeline construction, are those of the infamous torch march and subsequent Unite the Right rally. Who can forget the four hundred some white men clad in Nazi and Neonazi insignia, carrying torches and chanting "you will not replace us." The scene of a half dozen of them cornering DeAndre Harris and beating him bloody in the parking garage immediately adjacent to the Charlottesville police station. Or most scaring, legs flying up in air as a grey Dodge Charger plows into a crowd of previously joyful counter-protestors. That is civilizational violence at street level; tellingly the representatives of the state there that weekend, the police (of local, state and national persuasion), did little to intervene. The Unite the Right attendees were vastly outnumbered by the counter protestors, but nearly all of fascist demonstrators were willing to be violent. Such is the story of civilization versus society that Ocalan tells: society is greater in number than civilization, but to be civilized is to be brutal. Society's power lies in the love-driven compulsion to provide for one another, and this manifested itself on A12 in the multitude of street medics amongst the counter protestors, providing care and handing out water bottles when not otherwise engaged. The fascist demonstrators appeared to have no medics amongst their

ranks, demonstrated in their inability even to take care of their leaders when a few of them got mace in their eyes (the treatment is to have someone pour water in your open eyes as you put your head back—very elementary). The only advantage they had that weekend was that they did not hesitate to use violence; from where else could they derive power?

In his earlier works, Ocalan calls on his followers not to focus on attacking or attempting to displace the state, but to instead focus on building autonomous democratic structures within and in spite of the state. (It makes sense then, that Rojava is in talks with the Syrian government for autonomous self-rule within the Syrian state, not for an independent nation.) He argues when society congeals enough to start expressing itself politically within the state apparatus of civilization, it expresses itself as "democracy" or "democratic civilization." According to Ocalan:

"Democracy is based mostly upon the substratum majority and multitudes that have been betrayed, oppressed, and exploited mostly by the hierarchic upper-strata, whereas civilization is based mostly on the section of the upper strata that pursue the oppression, exploitation, and ideological hegemony."

The radical democratic tendency is thus the tendency towards society, or towards a civilization that has been made "full of love and joy". Ocalan contends that a complete revolution will be one in which society completely sublimates civilisation, overthrowing the latter's disembodied notions of value. (In various other works, Ocalan goes into detail about the process of the decentralization of power, advocating for the creation of smaller centers of democratized power in the form of community councils, or communes, that have great autonomy from any central or federal authority. These ideas in sum are usually called democratic confederalism, and underpin the constitution of Rojava.)

The first volume of the *Manifesto* expresses a deep respect of our own ability to perceive, calling it the "main path to knowledge and sound principle of regime in relation to what truth is." Much less of interest is the objective route to truth; "vulgar positivism" receives much of the blame for what is wrong with industrialized modern civilization, and for what was wrong with scientific socialist attempts to overcome it. This essay will not go offer a detailed critique of the latter's faults because this is not the point or even a main preoccupation of Ocalan's work, and he expresses a deep respect throughout the first two volumes for the achievements of socialist thinkers and revolutionaries. The PKK was a conventional Marxist-Leninist party when he helped found it, and the party reportedly had a difficult time with Ocalan's Bookchin-inspired idea (see below