

Review: Liberating Life: A Woman's Revolution Abdullah Ocalan

Cora Roelofs, Boston Friends of Rojava and Syria

localutopia@riseup.net 617 721 3799

In recent years, the International Initiative of the Freedom for Ocalan - Peace in Kurdistan campaign has made available in English some of the key writings of Abdullah Ocalan. Liberating Life: A Woman's Revolution is one of several pamphlets compiled from Ocalan's books and unpublished works, some which pre-dates his imprisonment on Turkey's Imrali Island in 1999, and some of which was written in prison. Ocalan's imprisonment has in no way diminished his influence as the ideological leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and the revolution in Rojava. Following the Syrian Democratic Forces' recent victory over ISIS in Raqqa, the news sources reported on a gathering of women fighters posed in front of an enormous flag of the bushy-eyebrowed philosopher's face as a YPJ (Women's Protection Units) commander dedicated that victory to Ocalan, the lost women fighters, and to the women of the world, of all ethnicities and religions.

Ocalan's visage flaps on yellow flags in every public venue in what is now called the Democratic Federation of North Syria and wherever supporters of the Kurdish Freedom Movement are gathered. This repeated visual representation of Ocalan is complemented as often by the recitation of his words. One of the most common and popular Ocalan quotes is "The freedom of our society is measured by the freedom of women" followed by the enthusiastic chant "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!" -- women, life, freedom. These are not hollow words, but an action plan based on an historical analysis, revolutionary strategy and ideological commitment with its origins in Ocalan's writings.

Liberating Life is an easy introduction to Ocalan's method: start with understanding Neolithic Mesopotamia, see where it all went wrong, and develop a revolutionary practice based on this analysis. Specifically, in Liberating Life, he is concerned with the origins of patriarchy; its codification in the state, religious institutions and the family; and its perpetuation for the

convenience of capitalism. The enslavement of women, he writes, is the beginning of the loss of freedom for all. The origins of hierarchy and domination of the earth evolved from the violent transition from a society based on “primitive socialism”, ecological principles, and reverence for women and their life giving (and maintaining) powers, to one based on the “strong male”, war and pillage. Civilization developed a reverence for cruelty in place of reverence for life, as women, especially those who defied men in their families, religious institutions, and the state, were systematically burned at the stake.

In prison, we know that Ocalan has had access to books by Murray Bookchin, Maria Mies, and Fernand Braudel. We see their influence reflected in Ocalan’s critique of hierarchy itself, of “housewification” (the pushing of women out of history, science, and public life and into the role of servants, to be followed by men outside of the ruling classes), and of the family as currently embedded in capitalism. All of these analyses point to material solutions to the deep crisis of capitalist modernity. Indeed, his critique of feminism as he understands it, is its lack of actual practice taking form in strong organizations. He suggests that feminism lacks a philosophical arc that includes a way forward and direct links to militant women’s movements.

In addition to taking on necessary concrete organizing practices, he also prescribes new revolutionary modalities. He writes that the further development of society requires a new social science, termed “Jineoloji” or the science of women. Jineology is completely different from the “multipartite” disciplines that developed under patriarchy and academic “scientism” (his term to critique positivism), in that it combines method and objectives, and dispenses with divisions between modes of inquiry. It takes the “question of women” as the fundamental starting point for investigation of history, science, sociology, and epistemology. It is especially concerned with

ethics and aesthetics which are central to the pursuit of a beautiful moral society that is worth living in.

Ocalan is clear that he believes that women are more closely connected to nature and possess more accessible emotional intelligence (which might be interpreted as “nurture”). He suggests that women are naturally more “comprehensive,” responsible, and realistic than men. Until women find freedom and equality in society, there will be no free society, because it will be skewed away from these values and practices. Thus, women’s revolution is the revolution. For Ocalan, women have replaced the working class as the agents of liberation, but in order to take on this role, women must be free of the “enslaving emotions, needs and desires of husband father, lover, brother, friend and son.” Separate women’s organizations and institutions are necessary, and have been made a fundamental component of the Rojava Revolution. In addition to gender-balance in leadership of all organizational structures, there are women’s committees on the economy, women’s police, women’s academies, women’s courts, and women’s militias. These are to exist even as women participate equally in all other social organizations.

Linking theory to practice in North Syria, we find the founding of a women’s ecological village: Jinwar (www.jinwar.org). The statement of Jinwar’s purpose includes: *“We seek to reclaim a meaningful life by advancing an alternative life approach. Social solutions to social problems are neither abstract nor elite; they are not transcendental, isolated, or disruptive. In essence, women’s consciousness and lifestyle represent a stand taken against these symptoms of fragmentation. We draw upon the life experiences of women who used inclusive, communal, and enriching opinions and common goals to enable solutions. We consider it a revolutionary process, a process led by women, a process of women’s solidarity.”* Jinwar’s theory-to-practice in this small village embodies Ocalan’s analysis that “Democratic modernity, the alternative

system to capitalist modernity, is possible through a radical change in our mentality and the corresponding radical and appropriate change in our material reality.”

Some Western feminists may be uncomfortable with Ocalan’s “essentializing” of women’s qualities. However, Ocalan is clear that the roots of women’s oppression lie in social relations, and not in their biology. By extension, we may interpret that these admirable qualities that he sees in women are not a burden, not the exclusive possession of women, and are expressed to different degrees in different women. Without a state and a cultural hegemony to measure and enforce “comprehensiveness,” “closeness to nature”, and “emotional intelligence” as signifier of womanhood, it’s hard to see the harm in his attributions. Indeed, interviews with women leaders in the region reinforce the positive impact on women and on men of recognizing and honoring these qualities in women.

Additionally, Ocalan has been criticized for having been made a god or supreme leader, and for a cult of personality for which he is the personality. However, all we have of Ocalan are his words. From the isolation of Imrali Island, he has no ability to direct the minds and actions of this supposed cult. Having spent some time myself in the midst of those yellow flags in outposts of this solidarity movement, I am clear that the flags of Ocalan represent freedom to the bearers, not just for him, but for everyone and, especially, for women.

Liberating Life concludes with Ocalan’s optimism that the twenty-first century shall be the century of women’s liberation. Necessarily, that also means the overthrow of the state and capitalism and their replacement with his vision for political society engaged in democratic confederalism and an ecological communal economy. He writes that he wishes to assist with this development of humanity, not only through writing, but by helping to implement the changes. I wish it to be so. His imprisonment, total isolation, and lack of access to lawyers is an extreme

contravention of human rights, and unsurprising given the threat that his ideas pose to the fascist Turkish state, the region, and, perhaps even to capitalist modernity and its dominant war machine. Freedom for Ocalan! Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!

The full text of Liberating Life: A Woman's Revolution can be found at <http://ocalan-books.com/> The world-wide movement for freedom for Ocalan from the Guantanamo of Europe is gathering energy from the revolution and from increasing concern for Ocalan's life in light of the absence of any direct contact with him since April 2015. Please add your voice for his freedom at <http://www.freeocalan.org/>.