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Democratic Confederalism and Societal Multiplicity: A Sympathetic Critique of Abdullah Öcalan's State Theory

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Abstract

The Kurdish-led project of democratic confederalism in Rojava (north and north-east Syria) has emerged as an unprecedented experience in eco-feminist and anti-capitalist direct democracy with global significance and regional ramifications. There is however virtually no critical engagement with the project's intellectual foundations in the works of Abdullah Öcalan. This paper seeks to address this gap through a sympathetic critique of Öcalan's historical sociology of the formation and dissolution of the state. It argues there is a theoretical tension in Öcalan's argument. His account of the originary rise of the Sumerian state is 'internalist' while his analysis of subsequent state-formation processes is 'interactive', which highlights the significance of external factors and hence implicitly the importance of the condition of 'societal multiplicity'. The paper then draws on Kojin Karatani's 'modes of exchange' based world history to argue that Sumerian state-formation was also fundamentally interactive occurring within and through societal multiplicity. It therefore demonstrates the need for the incorporation of societal multiplicity in the conceptualisation of democratic confederalism and the analyses of its prospects as a non-statist political community. In so doing, the paper also contributes to critical geopolitics and anarchist international theory through underlining the social history of the rise of the state and the international nature of its dissolution.

National borders are a datum, a given (Öcalan 1999: 16).

Social formations can only be understood in their temporal and physical context – i.e., they are part of their historical and geographical environment (Öcalan 2007: 185).

I. Introduction¹

Ten years on, the 'Arab Spring' appears as an ephemeral democratic moment in the prolonged authoritarian winter of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Kurzman 2013). There has however been a remarkable exception to the region-wide re-assertion of authoritarianism and spread of Islamist violence that has followed the Arab Spring: the regions of north and north-east Syria commonly known by their Kurdish name, Rojava. Following the bloody suppression of popular democratic protests in Syria by the Assad regime and the militarisation of the 2011 uprising, Syrian army and security forces withdrew from Rojava to defend the economic heartland and major population centres in the West of the country. The radical-left wing of the Kurdish movement in Syria led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which is a coalition of several dozens of civil society organisations, quickly filled the power vacuum in Rojava through a constellation of grassroots organisations and popular self-defence forces of Peoples/Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ). Despite being immediately embroiled in an existential defensive war against

the IS and other Sunni Jihadist forces, Rojava began an ambitious social revolution aiming at establishing a new, non-hierarchical, feminist and egalitarian order enshrined in a new social contract (YPG International 2017).

Central to The Rojava revolution is the idea of 'democratic confederalism', a brainchild of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (the PKK). Critically reflecting on the PKK's nationalist and Marxist-Leninist past and creatively appropriating the works of a number of critical scholars, especially Murray Bookchin (1982), Öcalan defines democratic confederalism as 'democracy without a state', 'a non-state social paradigm', the voluntary union of various ethnic, cultural, religious, intellectual and economic communities that 'can autonomously configure and express themselves as a political unit' (Öcalan 2017: 39, 47, 43). Democratic confederalism for Öcalan is therefore a radical yet more pragmatic alternative to the nationalist agenda of a statist solution to the (post-)colonial subalternisation of the Kurds and other minoritised peoples of the Middle East. In other words, democratic confederalism is a dynamic process of unravelling the state through a process whereby different ethno-cultural communities, self-organised in popular councils and communes, systematically replacing existing state's hierarchical and patriarchal relations of authority with horizontal, gender-egalitarian relations of participatory self-administration. Economically, these horizontal and intersecting socio-political networks are based on communal property relations as the basis of the cooperative and environmentally sensitive production of use-value (Öcalan 2011; Knapp et. al. 2016). Democratic confederalism therefore shares the ethos of socio-economic justice and opposition to 'global coloniality' (Escobar 2004: 207; cf. Al 2015; Reitan 2012: 335) of anti-globalisation and indigenous rights and social justice movements that have emerged since the late 1990s (Casanova 2005; Hilbert 1997: 117; cf. Hammond 2006: 123-124). It is therefore more than a non-nationalist solution to the national question of the Kurds. It is also the building bloc of 'democratic modernity' as a radical egalitarian alternative to the dominant hierarchical and patriarchal order of 'capitalist modernity' (cf. Öcalan 2007: 229; Gerber and Brincat 2018).

Over the past few years, there has emerged a relatively small but growing body of works on democratic confederalism focusing on its overall character and political origins (e.g. Cemgil & Hoffmann 2016; Colsanti et. al. 2018; Jain 2016; Knapp et. al. 2016; Yegen 2016), comparative history (e.g. Saed 2017), economic structure (e.g. Lebsky 2017; Sullivan 2018), gender dimension (e.g. Shahvisi 2018; Şimşek & Jongerden 2018), ecological aspect (e.g. Hunt 2017), self-defence doctrine (e.g. Üstündağ 2016), theoretical sources (e.g. Gerber & Brincat 2018) and intellectual implications (e.g. Cemgil 2016). These works provide valuable insights into Rojava's momentous implementation of democratic confederalism, which due to its radical character tends to be neglected by both the orthodox academia and the mainstream media (cf. Greber 2014). Nevertheless, missing from the existing literature on the Rojava revolution is any sustained critical engagement with the basic intellectual foundations of democratic confederalism in the works of its leading proponent, Abdullah Öcalan. To be sure, there are a few critical works on the Rojava revolution. But they primarily address practical and implementation challenges facing democratic confederalism (e.g. Küçük & Özselçuk 2016; Leezenberg 2016) rather than the intellectual coherence of its theoretical bases as articulated by Öcalan.

This paper seeks to address this gap through a sympathetic critique of Öcalan's historical sociology of the state. It argues that Öcalan fails to consistently register the causal and constitutive significance of societal multiplicity (Rosenberg 2016) in the rise, expansion, and possible dissolution of the state. Öcalan's account of the originary rise of the Sumerian state

is internalist while his account of the subsequent state-formation processes highlights the generative significance of external pressures and exigencies; a circumstance that presupposes societal multiplicity. Crucially, this inconsistency bears on our assessments of how and to what extent the state might be transcended through democratic confederalism. To address this inconsistency, the paper then draws on Kojin Karatani (2014) to show that Sumer, the first state in history, was also interactively produced. This demonstrates the transhistorical significance of societal multiplicity and its key consequences of interaction, combination and dialectical change (Rosenberg 2016: 136-141). The argument therefore shows that analyses of the origins and prospects of democratic confederalism in Rojava ought to centrally incorporate 'the international', i.e. that dimension of social reality that specifically arises from societal multiplicity (Rosenberg 2006: 308).

My critical engagement with Öcalan is important for three interconnected reasons. First, given that the Öcalan-inspired political movements have developed considerable ideological influence and organizational structures in all parts of Kurdistan in Turkey, Syrian, Iran and Iraq, the project of democratic confederalism has far-reaching consequences for the entire Middle East. Second, Öcalan's critical and reflexive approach to classical Marxism and his innovative appropriation of broadly socialist and anarchist ideas invest his project with relevance and traction to the international left at a time of deep crisis for global capitalism. Indeed, the Rojava revolution has attracted large numbers of international volunteers from across the world (Hall 2019). Critical engagement with Öcalan's ideas therefore has international political significance. And third, my substantive argument on the interactive social history of the state also contributes to critical international theory. Through its social history of the state the paper challenges the basic assumption of the traditional geopolitics that the political is determined by the space (Teschke 2006: 327). It also theoretically delineates the unavoidably international path on which the state might wither away. The paper therefore contributes to the subfields of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail & Dalby 1998; Ó Tuathail 1994) and anarchism (Prichard 2011, 2010) within the academic discipline of International Relations (IR).

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. In section 2, I provide an overview of Öcalan's political thought highlighting the problem of internalism in his account of democratic confederalism. Section 3 traces the deeper roots of Öcalan's internalism to his account of the rise of Sumerian state which is in tension with his interactivist account of the subsequent processes of state-formation. In section 4, first I briefly discuss the idea of 'societal multiplicity' as the solution to the problem of internalism. I then show how this idea is implicitly informs Kujin Karatani's interactive account of the Sumerian state-formation based on the 'modes of exchange' (Karatani 2014) highlighting the systematic significance of societal multiplicity. In the concluding section, I reflect on the wider implications of the argument.

2. Öcalan's Politics: From the Nation-State to Democratic Confederalism

In order to better appreciate the significance of my critique of Öcalan's account of state formation and the insights this can generate into the dissolution of the state through democratic confederalism, a brief account of the PKK's Öcalan-inspired 'paradigm shift' (Komun 2018; Jongerden 2017) is in order. The PKK was founded in the late 1970s with the goal of an independent Kurdish state. Ideologically, it rested on an uncritical adoption of Stalinist Marxism and its state-socialist model, and Chinese Marxism, especially its strategy of 'people's war', in the geopolitical context of the Cold War and anti-colonial movements in the Third World (Aydin & Emrence 2015; Akkaya & Jongerden 2014; Gunes 2013). Öcalan

began critically reflecting on the PKK's nationalist and Marxist-Leninist ideology during the late 1980s and early 1990s in the context of the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union, and the PKK's military impasse vis-à-vis the Turkish state. However, Öcalan's autocritique took its systematic and sustained form after his US-assisted capture in Kenya in 1999 and subsequent imprisonment in Turkey (Öcalan 2017: 30-31, 2007: 30). The result was a rejection of the PKK's nationalist programme and Marxist-Leninist ideology. The rejection forms the deconstructive element of the PKK's paradigm shift paving the way for the reconstructive element in the form of democratic confederalism.

At the centre of the paradigm shift that Öcalan engendered in the PKK lies 'killing of the dominant male' and 'abolishing the state' in order to found a new society that is 'democratic, gender equal, eco-friendly, and where the state is not the pivotal element' (Jongerden 2017: 5-8). Öcalan views the rise of patriarchy and the state as a more or less single but complex process. He regards the development of the nation-state, capitalism and colonialism as mutually constitutive (Öcalan 2017: 32). Indeed, he argues that 'capitalism and the nation-state became so closely linked to each other that neither can be imagined without the other' (Öcalan 2017: 32). Indeed, as the 'maximum form of power, ... the most complete and developed monopoly (Öcalan 2017: 32) the nation-state, Öcalan contends, is the 'paradigm of capitalist modernity' (Öcalan 2017: 30). For Öcalan, the nation-state's unitary and singular nature, its drive towards the homogenisation of the society, its 'quasi-divine attributes' (Öcalan 2017: 33), and its centrality to capitalist exploitation and inequality render it fundamentally anti-democratic and undesirable. Kurds' legitimate rights therefore cannot be achieved through establishing a Kurdish nation-state but 'in an approach that weakens capitalist modernity or pushes it back' (Öcalan 2017: 39). Democratic confederalism is such an approach. It is 'flexible, multicultural, anti-monopolistic and consensus oriented [resting on] ecology and feminism' (Öcalan 2017: 39). It 'poses a type of political formation where society governs itself and where all societal groups and cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils (Öcalan 2017: 42).

Öcalan's discussion of the ideological content and practical functions of democratic confederalism is rather detailed and critically draws on existing literature on participatory democracy and especially Bookchin's ideas on 'municipalism' (Gerber & Brincat 2018) but bereft on their empirical Eurocentrism (Jongerden 2017: 8). However, dynamics of implementation and consolidation of democratic confederalism within a pre-existing nation-state remains unclear in Öcalan's writings. His overall argumentation suggests a gradual process whereby democratic forces re-claim the power from the state but the actual success of a democratic confederalist project depends on the concrete balance of power. In other words, the existing nation-state within which a democratic confederalist project is being pursued must be weakened to a certain extent for democratic confederalism to become an empirical reality and assume certain longevity. This weakening can result from the struggles of the society's democratic forces using political resources of liberal-democratic states of which Öcalan tends to express a sanguine view (e.g. Öcalan 2007: 205 and *passim*). Thus, Öcalan seems to envisage a transitional period where democratic confederal project can exist and develop within a nation-state as a result of a compromise between the nation-state and the forces of democratic nation. This is broadly the path that Öcalan seems to have thus far proposed for Turkey. However, if a nation-state refuses to enter into a legal-constitutional compromise with democratic confederalist forces and/or continues to violently interfere in the working of their nascent institutions then the democratic confederalist movement has the legitimate right of self-defence (Öcalan 2016: 31). In fact, Öcalan argues that democratic confederalism can be called a 'system of self-defence of the society' (Öcalan 2011: 28).

What is missing from Öcalan's account is any substantive discussion of, or reflection on, external dynamics and their impact on the successful practice and consolidation of democratic confederalism. Öcalan seems to suggest that organs of participatory democracy can emerge and federate into larger horizontal confederal democratic constellations within a given state. Similar constellations in other countries can then confederate into wider regional configurations which can in turn coalesce into a 'World Democratic Confederal Union' to replace the United Nations (Öcalan 2017: 45). There is no explicit recognition or theorisation of the effects of the international or geopolitical factors and dynamics on domestic or regional projects of democratic confederalism. The international is essentially a passive terrain on which democratic confederalist projects unfold, intersect and coalesce into larger unions. Put simply, the argument is internalist. It rests on an intellectual mode in which concept formation and substantive analysis are conducted by reference to phenomena, relations, and dynamics internal to a particular 'society' or human collectivity (Tenbruck 1994; cf. Matin 2019, 2013a: 1-16).

Some of the political and practical problems entailed in this internalist intellectual mode are already evident. The initial electoral success of Turkey's Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which pursues an essentially democratic confederalist programme, and attempts local self-governance based on democratic confederalism in northern Kurdistan (south-east Turkey) during the 2013-2015 period were violently reversed by the Turkish state as a result of Syrian civil war and its foreign policy and domestic implications for the Turkish state (Matin 2015). Turkey also adopted an ongoing hostile posture towards Rojava occupying districts of Jarablus, Al-Bab and Azaz in 2016, and Afrin in 2018. Indeed, for any observer of Rojava it is clear that the future of democratic confederalism there has come to largely depend on a complex and precarious geopolitical balance among multiple states including US, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Syria. These developments demonstrate the decisive importance of international relations in the rise and survival of democratic confederalism.² The internalist mode of Öcalan's account of democratic confederalism, and political thought more generally, fails to adequately recognise and reflect this circumstance. In order to show the deeper intellectual roots of the problem of internalism in Öcalan's political thought the next section provides a close and critical reading of his historical sociology of the state.

3. Öcalan's State Theory: Between Internalism and Interactionism

Öcalan's critique and fundamental rejection of the nation-state in favour of democratic confederalism is based on an historical sociology of state-formation over the *longue durée*. This historical sociology has two key parts: the originary formation of the state in Mesopotamia and subsequent instances of peripheral state-formation. This section demonstrates a tension between these two parts highlighting the theoretically and methodologically internalist premises of Öcalan's account of the former process and the interactionist character of the latter, which Öcalan himself addresses under the rubric of 'interdependent development' (Öcalan 2007: 38). Öcalan's strategy for achieving democratic confederalism is implicitly based on the internalist framework of his account of the rise of Sumerian state and therefore insensitive to the causal significance of societal multiplicity and therefore inter-societal interaction and geopolitical competition.

To substantiate the above claim, I primarily engage with the English translation of Öcalan's key text of historical sociology, namely, *The Roots of Civilisation*.³ On the first few pages of this book, Öcalan sets out the basic claims of his historical sociology. With Sumer as his main

empirical referent Öcalan first establishes a socio-historical and logical link between Mesopotamia, the *neolithic revolution* (i.e. sedentism, the domestication of animals, and cultivation of plants), and the rise of the state, which he uses interchangeably with ‘civilisation’ and ‘state-based society’. Öcalan then enumerates the basic features of Sumerian society, i.e. hierarchies of class and gender legitimised through religion by the priests, and mythology as the cultural reflection of these hierarchies’ conflictual processes of emergence and reproduction. Here I quote some key passages from the introductory pages of *The Roots of Civilisation* to highlight two main aspects of Öcalan’s conception of the originary emergence of the state and its fundamental features, i.e. its theoretical reliance on a base-superstructure causal schema and, more importantly for my argument, methodological internalism both of which are arguably native to orthodox Marxism (cf. Shilliam 2006).

Öcalan (2007: 6-8) writes:

The most determining trait [of civilisation] seems to be that human labour, once it yields significantly more produce than it is required for immediate consumption, becomes subservient to a social elite that administers and appropriate surpluses. Thus, the dimension of servitude is introduced into human relations, and with it the notion of property. The way this actually happened in Sumerian society was through the establishment of units that served as cultic location, sites for the coordination of collective labour, and centres of social governance [i.e. temples, or *ziggurats*, which], were ... the womb of state institutions. ... *The institution of the state and of the politic [was] fuelled by the formation of classes ... (my emphasis).*

The direction of causality in Öcalan’s claim regarding the rise of the state is very clear: development of ‘productive forces’, e.g. domestication of animals, cultivation of plants, and slavery, in pre-Sumerian kinship-based communities in Mesopotamia, generated a social surplus that led to social stratification and class formation which in turn gave rise to the state. This claim regarding the originary formation of the state is explicitly reiterated throughout *The Roots of Civilisation*. For example, Öcalan (2007: 14, 20) argues that:

While the neolithic age was based on an agrarian, sedentary revolution, civilised society is chiefly defined by reference to urbanisation and the creation of a state, the *latter being based on the former*. The reorganisation of human communities on unprecedented scale was made possible by the rise of formalised and hierarchical institutions in the *economic basis* of society and its conceptual superstructure – the centralised state. ... *Mainly through its own highly productive system* Sumerian stratified civilisation managed to adapt, absorb and lay claim to all the technological and scientific advances of the Stone Age. ... *(my emphasis).*

As it can be seen, in line with orthodox Marxism, Öcalan derives the state from a process of social stratification, i.e. class formation, generated by the creation of a material surplus in the early agrarian-sedentary communities.⁴ In other words, the state is derived from developmental dynamics generated by the dialectic of the forces and relations of production within a social unit and hence excluding inter-societal forces and dynamics. As Öcalan explicitly notes: ‘our discussion of the process of transition to civilisation has been focused on ... firstly the accumulation of means of production and secondly the question of mental preparation for this change’.⁵

Following his basic account of the emergence of Sumer as the first state-based society Öcalan immediately highlights its expansionist impulse. 'The Sumerians', he writes, 'can [also] be accredited with the first colonial settlements and imperial expansion.' The manner of this expansion was highly conflictual. Faced with the prospect of subjugation and enslavement by the statist civilisation, pre-state pastoral and ethnic communities put up fierce resistance with self-transformative effects. Thus, implicitly echoing Charles Tilly's (1975: 42) famous dictum of 'war made the state and the state made war', Öcalan (2007: 68-69) argues that:

... in order not to be swallowed up [by slaveholding-statist civilisation] ethnic groups had to isolate themselves and put up resistance. ... Their own material interest compelled ethnic groups to reorganise both internally and against the *external forces* in order to secure defensive and offensive powers. [This] led to the formation of tribal confederations [which] in the long run had two choices. It could either be successful against its enemies and, by virtue of increasing centralisation, transform itself into a state with an urban centre in its own right, or disintegrate in the face of defeats, its members retreating into less accessible terrain such as mountain or desert regions. [The latter was the more common pattern in history] (my emphasis).⁶

Öcalan also suggests that the longevity and episodic success of such resistances partially depended on geography and ecology. Mountain peoples were therefore more able to resist the expanding state-based civilizations such as Sumer.⁷ These circumstances provide Öcalan with a composite and flexible definition of collective identity to which territoriality, mythology, language and probably above all common subjugation and resistance are central elements. These pre-national and non-state communities have always been the historical core of the anti-state and anti-systemic struggles. Öcalan's emphasis on the transformative agency of the Kurds as a nation, which has been neither totally assimilated nor has forged its own state and therefore is endowed with a democratic historical liminality, is based on this argumentation (cf. Scott 2009).

Öcalan's interactivist approach to state-formation among pre-state ethnic and pastoral communities is sensitive to the fact and consequences of societal multiplicity, but it is at clear variance with Öcalan's internalist account of the rise of Sumer as the first state-based society. In the former, the imperative of independent survival, what Leon Trotsky (1985: 26) calls 'the whip of external necessity', engenders both group and ethnic self-awareness and concomitantly political centralisation and hierarchization among essentially classless societies lacking in a social surplus (cf. Matin 2007). In fact, the interactivist method and logic that informs Öcalan's account of Sumer's expansion and its ramifications for stateless groups confronting it are discernible across much of *The Roots of Civilisation* even though it is often undermined by statements of technological or ideational determinism (e.g. Öcalan 2007: 194, 217, 219).

Öcalan's internalist conception of the originary rise of the state entails a number of problems: it contradicts Öcalan's forceful critique of the economic reductionism of orthodox Marxism with which his own critical intervention actually begins; it is challenged by the more recent Marxian scholarship on the rise of the state or state-like structures among classless tribal nomadic societies and in premodern epoch more generally; (e.g. Rosenberg 2010; Steel 2010; Matin 2007), and most pertinently, it problematises the efficacy of a singular focus on the direct-democracy strategy of the dissolution of the (nation-)state that marks democratic confederalism project.

Given the subject matter at hand the last point requires particular attention. If by Öcalan's own admission states or state-like structures could emerge within socially un-stratified and politically non-centralised societies due to intersocietal dynamics and external pressures what would rule out such a circumstance in political communities based on democratic confederalism? In other words, if dynamics generative of class and state can be *external* to a given society what would protect democratic confederal entities from succumbing to such dynamics, which are particularly strong in the Middle East? This question is doubly pertinent in our epoch of globalised capitalism in which societies are more than ever interconnected and interactive.

The ways in which the struggle against Turkish state for Kurdish rights and recognition have given rise to the relatively centralised and hierarchical political-military organisations of the PKK is an important case in point (cf. Holloway 2005: 237). Equally, if not more, relevant is perhaps the fate of the Soviet Union where the ideal of council-based direct democracy soon degenerated into a gigantic and incredibly repressive party-state as Öcalan himself correctly and recurrently observes. Interestingly, that degeneration was the result of Stalin's conscious de-internationalisation of the revolution under the banner of 'socialism in one country'.

It might be argued that the tension can be pacified by considering the possibility of two different methodologies within Öcalan's historical sociology: an internalist one for the originary case of state-formation and an interactionist one for the subsequent cases all of which take place in the context of the interaction with the originary state. There are two problems with this argument, one logical and one substantive.

The logical problem is that if such methodological dualism is accepted then the formation and prospects of democratic confederalism must be framed and studied within an interactionist approach. But Öcalan's own texts and much of the existing literature suggest otherwise where the practice of democratic confederalism is a theoretically domestic project even though it can have transnational – not international – dimensions and effects but one to which the international is not constitutive.

The substantive problem is that there is a relatively large literature that demonstrates the interactive nature of Sumerian state-formation itself for which societal multiplicity is a precondition. The next section substantiates this argument.

4. The Intersocietal Construction of Sumer

The problem of internalism is obviously not peculiar to Öcalan's writings on the rise of the state and democratic confederalism. Nearly half a century ago Reinhard Bendix (1967: 308) argued that classical sociologists assume 'social change consists of a process that is internal to the society changing'. Indeed, internalism is the intellectual source of 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer & Schiller 2002) and at the heart of Eurocentrism (Matin 2013b). A particularly potent and productive solution to the problem of internalism is provided by the Marxian strand of historical sociology within IR, which theoretically emphasises the fundamental significance of 'the international', that is, the ontological condition and consequences of societal multiplicity, for the rise and development of specific social orders through its consequences of coexistence, difference, interaction, combination, and dialectical change (Rosenberg 2016). The key theoretical implication of the recognition of societal multiplicity as a transhistorical generative condition for human sciences is the imperative of

abandoning sheerly internalist and externalist modes of concept-formation and analysis in favour of an interactivist approach to social phenomena that centrally incorporates societal multiplicity and its consequences. Leon Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' has merged as the main intellectual idiom of this 'international historical sociology'.⁸ However, any approach that is not monadic but relational, and hence plural, in its social ontology can in principle avoid the problem of internalism. One such an approach is Kojin Karatani's world history based on the idea of 'modes of exchange' (Karatani 2014), which is also the key source of my account of the interactive development of Sumer in this section.

Karatani captures and represents the fact and causal significance of societal multiplicity in his key concept of 'modes of exchange' as a substitute for classical Marxism's idea of 'modes of production' (Karatani 2014: x). Interestingly, Karatani derives the concept of modes of exchange from *Das Capital* where, he notes, 'Marx began his inquiry not from mode of production but rather from the dimension of commodity exchange' (Karatani 2014: 4). Karatani then argues that Marx's own approach suggests that 'economic base' in historical materialism is not reducible to 'production'. Thus, 'the state and nation originate in their own distinct modes of exchange (economic base)', and 'it would be foolish to distinguish these from the economic base and regard them as ideological superstructure' (Karatani 2014: 4). Thus, Karatani explicitly rejects the idea of a structural separation between the economic base and the political superstructure (the state), the former subtending the latter *à la* classical Marxism; an idea that he attributes to Marx and Engels's projecting back on history an ideological assumption of capitalism itself. This move pre-empts the intellectual basis of the tension that we identified in Öcalan's historical sociology which even though critical of economic reductionism of orthodox Marxism fails to conceptually articulate and consistently apply an account of the socio-economic *and* political reproduction as interactive and mutually constitutive processes. The result, as we saw, is the conceptual and logical disconnect between Öcalan's account of the originary state-formation in Sumer, subsequent developmental processes, and the emergence of democratic confederalism and democratic modernity.

Now crucially, Karatani argues that from Marx's perspective 'exchange of commodities' always takes place between communities even when the actual act of exchange is carried out by individuals for these individuals represent communities (Karatani 2014: 5). Conceptualising 'commodity exchange' as a collective relational phenomenon enables Karatani to consider 'reciprocity' as a variety of 'exchange' between communities. This is a crucial move since as we shall see it provides a different perspective on the emergence of the state among ancient classless communities.

Karatani identifies four types of mode of exchange: A: reciprocity (gift and counter-gift), B: plunder and redistribution (domination and protection), C: commodity exchange (money and commodities), and X: transcends these three modes and is the return of the repressed mode A in higher dimension (Karatani 2014: x, xi, xix, 9). Actual social formations have always consisted of complex combination of these modes of exchange. Historical forms generated by these forms are: nation, state, capital, and X (world republic), respectively (Karatani 2014: 9).⁹ However, modern world system is fundamentally constituted through the highly efficacious combination of 'Capital-Nation-State' and will collapse without any of these three components, which in terms of a mode of exchange approach have distinct historical origins (Karatani 2014: 9). However, for Karatani all of these modes and their corresponding socio-political forms have emerged and evolved not from within a single social formation or

community but from within a heterogeneous system of multiple and interacting (exchanging) social formations, i.e. societal multiplicity.

Having outlined the basic features of Karatani's approach I will now sketch his account of the historical rise of the state. The departure point of Karatani's account is revealing. He reverses the order of historical causality involved in the common, including Marxist, accounts of the rise of the state which view it a product of the Neolithic revolution. Indeed, Karatani specifically challenges V. Gordon Childe (1951) whose work has informed Öcalan's historical sociology of Sumerian state formation (Karatani 2014: 59). Drawing on Jane Jacobs, Karatani argues that sedentism and urbanism preceded agriculture, which in and of itself could not give rise to the state. In fact, the 'Agricultural Revolution was a consequence of the rise of the state' (Karatani 2014: 63). This is because the fixed settlements and cities that emerged in civilizational river basins such as Mesopotamia were populated by hunter-gatherer groups who had concentrated there for fishing purposes and river-based transportation of goods they needed to obtain from other communities through trade (Karatani 2014: 64; Smith 2009: 25-26). The Sumerian cities were indeed 'merchant cities trading far up Euphrates, which they called copper river' (Watson 2001: 24). Indeed, 'the importance of trade was disproportionate to [Sumerian economy]' partly because 'Sumer was a resource-deficient area' (Smith 2009: 24-25). However, these merchant cities were also armed settlements. As early as 3000 B.C.E they witnessed the construction of 'massive walls, built of mud brick to protect [them] from external attack' [which] marked a new level of social organization' (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 45). Karatani describes these urban settlements 'proto-city-states', which are also called 'fortress towns', that defended against external enemies, pirates, and bandits – they were armed states (Karatani 2014: 65), which enjoyed systematic military advantage over their rural hinterland against which they often led armed expeditions (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 49-50).

[Proto-city-states] began above all as places that made it possible for communities to engage in trade with other communities. Agriculture began and then spread to the hinterlands. It was through *trading* and *warfare* conducted among these proto-city-states that large-scale states came to be established. And, finally it was these states that led to the development of irrigation agriculture. This was done for the propose of expanding exports to neighbouring countries, as we see in the case of Sumer. Large-scale irrigation agriculture was made possible, in short, by the "world-market" that existed at the time. In other words, it began in a world system composed of multiple city-states (Karatani 2014: 64).

These communities were marked by the dominance of exchange mode A, i.e. gift and counter-gift. This prevented the concentration of wealth as the material basis of class formation and hence the state. In communities based on exchange mode A 'a higher community is established through the principle of reciprocity. Lower-level groupings are subordinated to higher-level groupings, but they preserve their autonomy ... [and can defy] decisions and regulations issued by the higher order' (Karatani 2014: 68). This argument is similar to Adam Watson's account of Sumerian inter-city-states' relations as 'hegemony', that is, 'a system in which one city, through its ruler, was accorded [religious-based] legitimate authority to arbitrate between other cities and to keep competition and the use of forces within acceptable limits, but not to interfere in their internal affairs' (Watson 2003: 27-28). This more or less confederal system persisted even when these communities began engaging in crop cultivation and livestock herding. Thus, 'the tribes and tribal confederations that emerged were characterized by a segmentary, stratified structure that even when these expanded in scale could never become anything more than simple chiefdoms. ... With the

spread of precipitation-based and irrigated-based forms of agriculture, people did not fundamentally abandon the lifestyles and principle of reciprocity that had persisted since the period of hunting and gathering' (Karatani 2014: 59). Thus, the main factor in increasing labour productivity was not technological improvement in material means but the growing efficacy of the organization of labour time of reciprocity-based communities through the development of a composite structure of systematic coercion and ideological consent, that is, the state. The rise of the state therefore involved the combination of exchange modes B and C.

What is noteworthy about Karatani's account is that although it involves a consistent emphasis on trade, it displays a progressive emphasis on the significance of military exigencies, i.e. geopolitics in the sense of the inter-societal infusion of space with power. This is particularly evident in the concluding paragraphs of the section entitled *The Origins of the State*. There, interestingly, Karatani posits in explicit terms the tension between internalist and externalist explanations of the rise of the state and shows how an interactivist perspective based on the idea of modes of exchange can resolve it 'when we see that the origin of the state lies in a kind of exchange between ruling and ruled communities ... the conquering side offering protection to the vanquished in return for their subservience, as well as redistribution in return for the offered tribute [thus] the reality of conquest is disavowed by both parties' (Karatani 2014: 70).

Karatani acknowledges that states can arise even in classless communities that have not experienced actual conquest or subjugation by external forces but have only experienced its threat especially in cases 'where warfare is the normal condition ... and the threat of external invasion is constant' (Karatani 2014: 71; cf. McNeill and McNeill 2003: 47). But even in such cases, he correctly notes, 'the sovereign is something that comes from outside' (Karatani 2014: 71). In words reminiscent of those I cited from Öcalan above, Karatani argues that 'once a state comes into being, the other communities around it must either submit to its rule or become states themselves. [Thus, in even internal, self-transformative processes of state-formation] external relations with other states will always form the backdrop' (Karatani 2014: 71-73). Other world-historians concur. The endemic and systematic character of warfare resulting from the imperative of collective self-preservation and territorial accumulation entailed the 'development of imperial, bureaucratic government in civilized landscapes and the countervailing emergence of shifting, far-ranging tribal alliances among pastoralists on the grassland steppes' (McNeill and McNeill 2003: 55-56).

Geopolitical (warfare and military) and economic (trade and exchange of commodities) aspects of Karatani's argument regarding the rise of the state are shared by many other world historians and historical sociologists (see *inter alia* Chase-Dunn and Grell-Brisk 2016; Smith 2009; McNeill and McNeill 2003; Watson 2003; Hobson and Hobson 2002; Buzan and Little 2000; Barfield 1989; Diakonov 1985). Both sets of circumstances presuppose the condition of societal multiplicity and display emergent properties leading to its historical reconfiguration. They therefore demonstrate the causal and constitutive significance of societal multiplicity is transhistorical but not supra-historical. The logical implication is that the transcendence of the state too can only be an international or a world-systemic phenomenon. As Karatani argues 'Capital-Nation-State is a product of the world system, not of any one nation. Accordingly, its sublation cannot occur within a single nation (Karatani 2014: xix; Holloway 2005: 14-15, 219). This observation is particularly important as it bears on the question of the feasibility and prospects of democratic confederalism as a non-statist alternative to capitalist modernity, which in Öcalan's works is, as I have shown above, generally envisioned in a methodologically and strategically singular manner.

5. Conclusion

Marx and Engels observe that ‘empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples “all at once” and simultaneously’ (cited in Teschke 2006: 331). This vital observation directly broaches the international and yet, ‘the determination of international relations remains ambivalent’ in the works of Marx and Engels and classical Marxism more generally (Teschke 2006: 331; cf. Shilliam 2006). Russia’s experience of ‘socialism in one country’ threw the theoretical and historical significance of this theoretical ambivalence into the sharpest relief. This is why Öcalan’s (2007: 72) call for subjecting Marxism to ‘thorough self-criticism and severe corrections’ is entirely legitimate. However, I have sought to show that Öcalan’s own contribution to the ‘severe correction’ of Marxism has been *theoretically* inadequate through highlighting his failure to develop a consistent theoretical and analytical appreciation of the fact and consequences of societal multiplicity.¹⁰ This failure, I argue, undermines Öcalan’s ability to have a holistic and realistic assessment of the conditions of possibility and long-term success of the project of democratic confederalism.

Beyond showing the problem of internalism in Öcalan’s political thought and his conception of democratic confederalism, the argument of this paper has some broader purchase. It draws on and contributes to critical IR, critical geopolitics and political geography by indirectly addressing the challenge of what the scholar of critical geopolitics, Fraser MacDonald (2010: 318) calls the “undead” character of classical geopolitics’. It does so through highlighting the intersocietal character of the investment of space with power through the idea of societal multiplicity as a plural social ontology whose key consequences of interaction, combination and dialectical change underlie the intrinsically multilineal nature of social life’s concrete congealment. As such, the paper illustrates in the intellectual idiom of historical sociology the crucial insights of critical geography on the historicity of the spatial configurations of power and the state, and the potential strategies to overcome them (e.g. Taylor 1994; Agnew 2005).

The paper’s argument on the implications of the international for the consolidation and success of democratic confederalism also resonates with anarchist IR’s research programme which also considers anarchy an ontological category since ‘society lacks a transcendental orderer, and social order persists with competing authority claims’ (Prichard 2018: 247). Indeed, as Prichard (2018: 248) suggests anarchy and multiplicity are arguably synonymous highlighting the strategic way in which anarchism and a multiplicity-grounded approach such as uneven and combined development can productively interact. Implicit here is of course the obvious but necessary distinction between ‘anarchy’ as an analytical category that refers to the condition marked by the absence of an effective, overarching world authority, and ‘anarchism’ as a normative category that signifies a basic commitment to ‘systemic opposition to domination’ and to ‘freedom as non-domination’ (Kinna & Prichard 2019: 222). Thus, ‘anarchy’ is a particular form of ‘societal multiplicity’ and does not exhaust its historical modularity. Indeed, this paper has sought to extend the theoretical premise of the argument that geographies of resistance are intrinsically relational (Springer 2011) through the complementary argument that societal multiplicity is the immutable terrain on which all radical political projects, including democratic confederalism as a variant of ‘anarchism’, are pursued; a circumstance that is not adequately reflected in Öcalan’s articulation of the idea.

Finally, to the extent that societal multiplicity incorporates ‘difference’ and ‘alterity’ the argument of this paper also speaks to the normative agenda of postcolonial critique (cf. Matin 2013b). It is therefore clear the theory of uneven and combined development, anarchism and

postcolonialism all share democratic confederalism's ideal of a politics of solidarity-in-difference grounded in a polycentric, interactive, and multilinear view of history and committed to eradication of imperial and inter-subaltern hierarchies. A critical debate among these approaches can therefore yield positive results for all of them. This paper is a modest attempt at prompting such a debate.

Notes

¹ The original version of this paper which I started writing in 2016 sought to critique the problem of internalism in the literature on, and discourse of, democratic confederalism in order to argue that the fate of Rojava revolution was likely to be largely determined on the terrain of the international. As I finalise the paper three years later, that sober assessment seems confirmed. On October 9, 2019 following a greenlight by the US and Russia, Turkish army and its allied Syrian rebel forces attacked northern Syria and invaded large parts of the areas governed by Autonomous Administration of North and North East Syria (AANE), i.e. the institutional organisation of democratic confederalism in Rojava. Turkey and Turkey-backed forces stand accused of war crimes (Amnesty International 2019) and ethnic cleansing (Cole 2019). The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been forced to withdraw from all major urban centres along the border. What will remain of AANE will largely depend on how AANE will reorient its strategy and tactics in the face of the overhaul in the radical shift in the balance of power among key forces currently acting on Rojava, i.e. Russia, Syria, Iran, Turkey and US. The current resultant of this complex parallelogram of forces seems increasingly unfavourable to AANE.

² The rapid formation of a regional alliance, tacitly backed by the US, against the Iraqi Kurds' independence referendum in September 2017 demonstrated this same point with respect to the wider Kurdish movement (Solomon & Sheppard 2017).

³ Unless stated otherwise all subsequent citations from Öcalan in this section are from this source. All discussion and citations are based on the English translations of Öcalan's works.

⁴ Curiously, late in the text Öcalan attacks 'the idea of class being the prime mover in history' (Öcalan 2007: 29).

⁵ In *The Roots of Civilisation* (2007) Öcalan provides contradictory statements on the exact relation between these two aspects. For the view that the material precedes and elicits the ideological see Part I and p. 217. For the obverse see *inter alia* p. 194. For some explicit statements indicating 'technological determinism' in historical process see p. 219, 224 and 225.

⁶ Indeed, 'the Sumerian city states were finally unified by an outside force, their northern neighbours, the Akkadians, under Sargon' (Smith 2009: 28).

⁷ Öcalan suggestively notes that the Sumerian word for the Kurds was '*kurti*' or 'people of mountains'.

⁸ For an extensive list of primary and secondary writings on 'uneven and combined development' visit www.unevenandcombined.com. For important critiques see *inter alia* Teschke (2014); Ashman (2006).

⁹ It should be noted that Karatani understands 'nation' not in the restricted modern sense of the word but in the broader terms of 'something that intends communality and equality' (Karatani 2014: xiv).

¹⁰ The epigraphs to this paper are intended to show this inconsistency.

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