

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM – A REVIEW

Richard Gunn

From the standpoint of a Western observer, middle eastern politics resembles a graveyard where hope is extinguished and blood and terror prevails. Abdulla Ocalan's 44-page pamphlet *Democratic Confederalism*¹ points to a future where pessimism is contradicted. Hope flourishes. Grassroots equality comes into being. Emancipation thrives.

Ocalan is the leader of the leader of the Kurdish Worker Party (PKK), which Western powers currently class as a “terrorist” organisation. Ocalan himself has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999. While in prison, his political views (and the views of Kurdish revolutionaries) underwent a transformation – the result of which *Democratic Confederalism* describes. In the pamphlet's words: 'the founding of a Kurdish nation-state is not an option' (*DC* p. 19). In the middle east and elsewhere, nation states are not the solution: they are part of the problem. What is wanted is a 'non-state political administration or a democracy without a state' (*DC* p. 21) – and this the notion of democratic confederalism supplies. A pivotal section of the pamphlet is headed 'Democratic Confederalism and a Democratic Political System', and its opening may be quoted:

In contrast to a centralist and bureaucratic understanding of administration and exercise of power confederalism poses a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils... Politics becomes part of everyday life. (*DC* p. 26)

In short, democratic confederalism – unlike democratic centralism, which Ocalan's title tacitly parodies – locates power at a grass-roots rather than a state level. It is participatory rather than exclusive. Ocalan emphasises that it opposes patriarchal and 'sexist' views (*DC* pp. 16-7).

How should we regard *Democratic Confederalism's* claims? In Rojava, the regions of northern and northeastern Syria currently under Kurdish control, social relations have taken a democratic confederalist form. David Graeber, who has visited the area, describes Rojava as a 'remarkable democratic experiment'. He notes that 'popular

¹ Abdullah Ocalan *Democratic Confederalism*, second edition (London and Cologne: Transmedia Publishing Ltd 2011) [henceforth *DC*]. The pamphlet appears to be out of print, but is available online at: <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf>.

assemblies have been created as the ultimate decision-making bodies' (the assemblies being 'selected with careful ethnic balance') and that women play an active role.² Besides Graeber, other figures on the left have called for support of Rojava.³ Under threat from the militarism which pervades middle eastern politics, what is sometimes referred to as the Rojavan revolution deserves all the help that it can get.

How should the ideas in *Democratic Confederalism* be assessed? Here, it is of interest that Murray Bookchin's libertarian municipalism has been vitally important for Ocalan's political rethink.⁴ Bookchin's thought and Ocalan's contain strengths and weaknesses of a roughly parallel kind.

Bookchin's thought emphasises grassroots participation. It rejects the state's monopolisation of political activity, and turns instead to 'neighborhood town meetings' and 'directly democratic popular assemblies'.⁵ This focus on decentralised association and interaction is what is valuable and attractive in Bookchin; it is, I suggest, what is valuable in *Democratic Confederalism* as well.

It is when we turn to larger-scale issues and more entrenched political structures that problems appear.

Let me start with Bookchin. If township meetings and assemblies are the bedrock of politics, how may issues that are more-than-local be addressed?⁶ Can (say) an ecological issue that affects a number of townships be addressed in a non-hierarchical way? A phrase which Bookchin employs in connection with more-than-local issues is 'commune of communes' (or 'community of communities'):⁷ but the phrase is a source of problems. To a reader, it suggests a pyramid-like structure. Does such a structure not perpetuate hierarchy? May it not function as a renascent state?

Bookchin's thought on *entrenched political structures* is similarly unfinished. How may political action avoid being co-opted by the local and/or national state? How can radical movements resist becoming incorporated in existing institutions?⁸ At various

2 David Graeber 'Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?' *The Guardian* (8 October 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>. See also 'David Graeber: I appreciate and agree with Ocalan' (<http://en.firatajans.com/features/david-graeber-i-appreciate-and-agree-with-ocalan>).

3 See Owen Jones 'Why the revolutionary Kurdish fight against Isis deserves our support' *The Guardian* (10 March 2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/10/revolutionary-kurdish-isis-ivana-hoffman>. Also 'Prof David Harvey: Rojava must be defended' (<http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/prof-david-harvey-rojava-must-be-defended>).

4 See Federico Venturini's interview of Debbie Bookchin 'Bookchin: living legacy of an American revolutionary' in *ROAR Magazine* (<http://roarmag.org/>) 28 February 2015. Also Rafael Taylor 'The new PKK: unleashing a social revolution in Kurdistan' *ROAR Magazine* (<http://roarmag.org/>) 17 August 2014.

5 Murray Bookchin *The Next Revolution* (London: Verso 2015) [henceforth *NR*] p. 63. My comments on Bookchin refer to this volume of essays alone.

6 The problem of large-scale issues is raised by David Harvey in his *Rebel Cities* (London: Verso 2013) pp. 69, 80. Bookchin is criticised at (especially) pp. 84-5. For discussion, which argues that Harvey underestimates direct democracy's (and assemblies') capacities, see R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism? - Critics of Occupy' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) 31 January 2014.

7 *NR* pp. 45, 63-4, 89, 95, 97.

8 For a discussion of this question, see Benjamin Dangl *Dancing with Dynamite* (Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press

points, Bookchin refers to a political 'tension' between (on the one hand) confederal municipalities and (on the other hand) the state:⁹ our question must be what this 'tension' entails. What political response does the tension require? Where, exactly, does the tension lie? Is it solely between the state and municipalities, as Bookchin assumes, or may it be present inside municipal assemblies? For a reader of Bookchin's essays, questions outstrip answers.

From Bookchin I turn to Ocalan. As I have suggested, both writers focus on local and popular assemblies. Herein (I suggest) lies their attractiveness and strength. What can we say about weaknesses? Do these too run in parallel? I suggest that Bookchin's unanswered questions are echoed in *Democratic Confederalism's* claims.

(i) Bookchin's lack of clarity about *large-scale political decision* reminds a reader of a statement made close to *Democratic Confederalism's* end: 'Although in democratic confederalism the focus is on the local level, organising confederalism globally is not excluded' (*DC* p. 31). What does this mean? How may more-than-local issues be addressed? A passage which may explain this refers to 'social actors' who are 'federative units', and which 'can combine and associate into new groups and confederations according to the situation' (*DC* p. 27). Through such a combination and recombination, the 'democratic process...from the local level to the global level' may be sustained (*DC* p. 27). Such a view of the 'democratic process' is attractive, owing to its fluidity and its attempt to sustain participation through levels of discussion. Undoubtedly, the passage articulates a valuable regulative idea. This said, questions can be raised about how Ocalan's model operates. If decisions at different political levels clash, how are differences resolved? Is there a global assembly, which presides over assemblies of a local kind? If so, how are centralist and localist perspectives integrated? Perhaps a reader of my comments will object: why ask such questions? Is not Ocalan's underlying idea sufficient? My answer is that, unless questions are addressed, a movement tends to drift towards received social forms.

(ii) In regard to *entrenched political structures*, difficulties that resemble Bookchin's also arise. How do the local meetings that are fundamental to *Democratic Confederalism's vision* relate to existing and, indeed, future states? If (as we have seen) democratic confederalism posits 'a type of political self-administration', and if the state 'continuously orients itself towards centralism' (*DC* p. 23), what does the following passage mean?

The contradictory composition of the society necessitates political groups with both vertical and horizontal formations. Central regional and local groups need to be balanced in this way. (*DC* p. 22)

2010). The question, which Dangel discusses in its Latin American variant, has world-wide application.

9 *NR* pp. 18, 78, 89, 93-4.

How can a contradiction be 'balanced'? It can, no doubt, be endured or managed or even used – but if it *is* a contradiction it cannot merely disappear. Does Ocalan understand balance as mere disappearance? It seems that he does, when he says that 'democratic confederalism is open for compromises concerning state or governmental traditions' (*DC* p. 22). What sort of compromises does *Democratic Confederalism* have in mind? In its concluding section, the pamphlet makes clear that democratic confederalism 'is not at war with any nation-state' (*DC* p. 32) – and this declaration is vitally important, given the PKK's previous stance and (especially) its relation to Turkish politics. But the passage continues by warning that democratic confederalism 'will not stand idly by' if the state mounts 'assimilation efforts' (*DC* p. 32). What sort of warning is this?

Before addressing this question, a comment is needed. Ocalan and the PKK are (let us agree) in good faith in rejecting 'war' as a route towards emancipation. Rojava and all it stands for is a glorious and respectable new beginning. If this is so, Ocalan's words do not threaten renewed military initiative. *Of course*, defensive military struggle will be vigorous (as events at Kobane make clear). This “of course” is part of Ocalan's meaning when he says that democratic confederalism 'will not stand idly by'. But this is not – and, indeed, cannot – be the warning's only sense. Let us imagine a situation where a Rojava-style revolution is not at war with existing states. In such a situation (in a *non-war* situation), the state's 'assimilation efforts' continue and go forward “peacefully” – through co-option and incorporation and the redirection of struggle into institutionalist forms. If democratic confederalism 'will not stand idly by' in the face of *such* assimilation, what forms of struggle will it choose? Will it side with grassroots movement, and view political institutions with suspicion? Or will it side with institutions against interactive movements and allow 'assimilation' to proceed? What Ocalan says about balance and compromise suggests – only *suggests*, because *Democratic Confederalism* does not always explain itself fully – that, sadly, the second alternative will be favoured.

What Bookchin says about 'tension' and what Ocalan says about 'assimilation' remain unclear, in related ways.

Concluding, I stand back from these more detailed reflections. In theory and in practice, everything concerning the Rojavan revolution and democratic confederalism is up in the air. Iraqi politics and Turkish politics and – most of all – Islamic State developments make the 'remarkable democratic experiment' (Graeber) of Rojava terrifyingly vulnerable. If it survives, there are various possibilities. Egalitarian and participatory and non-patriarchal attitudes may flourish, or traditionalism may assert itself. Developments in Rojava may follow a grassroots-style (and revolutionary) or an assimilationist (and establishment-oriented) course. One thing is certain: tragic and traditionalist and pro-establishment outcomes are much more likely if international support remains thin on the ground – and if democratic confederalism goes undiscussed. Rojava should be on the lips of Western revolutionaries. The stakes are immense, for world as well as middle eastern politics. Is democratic

confederalism an initiative that breaks neoliberalism's grip?