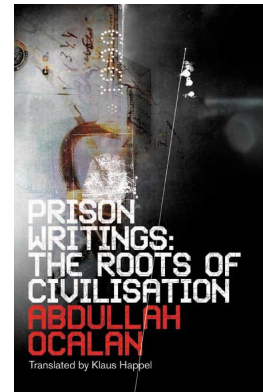


Review by Michael M. Gunter

Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation, by Abdullah Ocalan. Translated by Klaus Happel. Pluto Press, 2007. 320 pages, with notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00, hardcover.

For almost a quarter century, Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan led the Kurdistan Workers party (known universally by its Kurdish initials, PKK) and its predecessors in a guerrilla war against Turkey that resulted in some 37,000 deaths (the great majority being Kurdish), 3 million displaced persons, and 3,000 destroyed villages. He eventually lost the military struggle and was captured after escaping to Europe, where he tried unsuccessfully to begin negotiations for peace. He was condemned to death by a Turkish court, which later commuted the sentence to life imprisonment as part of Turkey's EU candidacy. Given the new-found pride and determination of many ethnic Kurds in Turkey, however, Ocalan and his call for democratization to solve the Kurdish problem may yet win the final political victory.



The present volume follows upon an earlier one (*Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question*) written during his original trial in 1999; surprisingly, it contains little on the Kurds. However, it does contain much Marxist analysis on political, social, economic and religious developments in the Middle East from ancient Sumerian times to the present. A projected second volume will follow and deal more specifically with the Kurds.

The book is divided into five parts, the first of which surveys ancient body politics from Sumer to Rome. Ocalan states that “the earliest state-based society and the oldest written sources of human history can be found in Lower Mesopotamia and can be accredited to the Sumerians” (p. 5). He also argues that “the mythological fabrications of the Sumerians, their rituals and practices of worship, constituted the oil that fuelled and kept the machinery of social institutions, both in sub- and super-structure, running smoothly” (p. 15). This pattern largely replicates itself in the base and super-structure of all subsequent polities and illustrates the importance of the institutionalization of religion in creating a patriarchal political order to which the individual was completely subordinated.

In his second part, Ocalan examines medieval Europe and the Middle East as well as the impact of Christianity and Islam. He concludes that the former has been more supportive of progress and modernity: “The Christian religion ... played quite a positive role in the intellectual and structural development of the European nations” (p. 172). Although Islam at first opened with an era of progressive achievements, dogmatism and fatalism stifled further development. This, of course, was not an uncommon view of many modernist leaders in the Middle East including Kemal Ataturk and Gamal Abdul Nasser. The Ottoman Empire “only had to guard the cultural graveyard” (p. 174) — in other words, the Middle East already was declining relative to the West during Ottoman times.

In contrast, the European Renaissance and the development of capitalism propelled the West forward by emphasizing the importance of the individual, secular thought, new modes of production, scientific progress, and new forms of political organization such as democracy and the nation-state. “The East, in particular the Middle East, has been in a defensive position ever

since” (p. 110). Ocalan deals with these developments in the third part of the book. He also points out more negative traits of the West such as the continuance of state-based male domination as well as the imperialist grafting of European traits onto the rest of the world. The original promise of “unsuccessful real socialism [communism]” (p. 286) failed to provide a solution to these problems, and with its collapse democracy became the main form of government because it enabled individuals to seek freedom nonviolently.

In part four, Ocalan contemplates the contemporary international situation and its future, arguing that the Middle East should adopt such modern European achievements as individual rights, secular thought and politics, and pluralism. However, the Middle East remains the principal region that dogmatically resists assimilating Western civilization. This situation makes the Middle East ripe for its own renaissance based on its own cultural past.

Democratization is the means to achieve this renaissance, and it constitutes the fifth and final part of Ocalan’s book. Female and minority rights can help establish pluralistic, federal body politics, which can offer mechanisms for resolving existing social, religious and ethnic conflicts. Globalization also plays a role in dissolving despotism. Decentralized federations can merge into a democratic Middle East Federation: “Geographic and cultural similarities throughout the region, and shared economic needs and water resources, might form the basis for a democratic federation of the entire region” (p. 287). Civil society is the primary means of furthering these changes. Armed struggle only results in weak, reactionary and autocratic regimes. Organized armed defense, however, is legitimate. The Kurdish question links Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, four of the main states in the Middle East.

Ocalan is long on theory but short on specifics for implementation. Nevertheless, his vision of a modern, democratic, and federal Middle East freed from its reactionary past inspires new hope for a better future. Thus, Ocalan’s treatise is impressive not so much for the philosophy of history it espouses, but for the glimpse it conveys of the author: a man stamped as nothing more than a terrorist by Turkey, the United States and the EU and, therefore, unworthy of serious engagement, but who nevertheless is revered by millions to whom he gave a new sense of dignity. It can be read with profit by anyone who seeks to forge a modern secular future of peace and progress for the Middle East built upon the best offered by previous world civilizations. As Ocalan himself writes: “There is no need for a war of civilisations. ... People in the Middle East should make their barren ground a holy land again and boldly and generously open their hearts to all that exists” (p. 175).

The manner in which Ocalan’s treatise was compiled is noteworthy. Apparently, he simply gave handwritten pages to his lawyers or relatives infrequently visiting his cell in the island prison of Imrali. On other occasions, he dictated to the lawyers or had them take notes while he spoke. He had no access to sources and no one with whom to discuss matters. One wonders to what extent the Turkish authorities were aware of what he was doing and permitted it. The translator and editorial team are to be commended for having produced a readable and interesting manuscript. Their joint project ends with more than 10 pages of notes, a short bibliography, and useful index.

Michael M. Gunther is professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University. This review has been published in *Middle East Policy* 14 (Fall 2007), pp. 166-167.