

Review

Abdullah Ocalan translated by Klaus Happel

Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation

Pluto Press, 336 pages, hardback ISBN-13: 978-0745326160, £25

Abdullah Ocalan was the leader of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which conducted a guerrilla war from 1984 with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdish state in south-east Turkey. In February 1999, he was kidnapped on the way to Nairobi airport and taken back to Turkey, where he was tried and sentenced to death, although the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

In prison on the Turkish island of Imrali in the Sea of Marmara, he has produced, as part of a submission to the European Court of Human Rights, a volume which is an analysis of the history of civilisation centred, in particular, on the Middle East. Although his approach is essentially Marxist, he rejects economic determinism as the basis for his interpretation of history and places great importance on ideology. This is reminiscent of the Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci, who also produced important theoretical work while in prison.

Ocalan regards the palaeolithic period of history, which covered 98 per cent of humanity's existence on earth, as having been brought to an end by the neolithic revolution, based upon better tools, the development of agriculture and animal husbandry. The essential counterpart to these technological changes was the development of primitive patterns of social behaviour such as fetishism, animism, totemism, matrilineal kinship, patriarchy, and so on.

The next technological revolution led to an oriental slave society. This was based on the use of bronze and the building of settlements which eventually became cities, initially on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, before 3000 BC; in ancient Sumer. A vital feature of this revolution was the development by priests of a new ideology comprising a new religion and a new mythology. This was required to transform the mental outlook of the new settlers from one based on kinship and tribal freedoms to a submissive mindset in which slavery and inferiority were accepted. Citizens of Sumer were persuaded to accept subordination to a 'divine order' which reflected and demanded obedience to gods who, in effect, decreed a slave society. The priests established an ideological hegemony over the new urban settlements by this means.

Any challenge to this took a religious form. It was the will of alternative gods, monotheism or the advent of a messiah or redeemer which provided an ideological cover for a revolt, or even an invasion, from outside to overthrow a ruling élite.

Slave society with specific local features also developed in Egypt and the Indus Valley in the Indian sub-continent, and religious rituals and beliefs came into existence to create an acceptance of their structures. Elsewhere, other less advanced peoples went through the

neolithic revolution before developing their own slave societies which were different in form though they embodied the same fundamentals as those to be found in Sumer. Greco-Roman societies did not have as rigid a religious structure as Mesopotamia or Egypt and, here, philosophical ideologies emerged.

Christianity and Islam both challenged slave society and provided the ideological counterpart to changes in the mode of production which led to the emergence of feudalism. Feudal society was basically concerned with land and land holdings, but it was dominated by religion.

Capitalism in its turn emerged through the introduction of new technologies and the scientific method, but it was accompanied by a successful ideological challenge to feudal religious dogma. In Europe this took shape as the Renaissance, followed by the Reformation, which led on to humanism, the enlightenment, individualism and secularisation.

Ocalan's view is that the Middle East failed to undergo an equivalent change. He believes it is in desperate need of its own Renaissance or Reformation, leading to the adoption of individual rights, secularisation, women's rights, pluralism and democracy. Only then can it advance.

He is committed to a socialist transition of society worldwide, but argues that this cannot be achieved by means of revolutionary violence or the establishment of a totalitarian state. He regards the Soviet Union as a failure in its overall efficiency, its excessive bureaucracy, and its denial of its peoples' rights. He further declares that traditional violent methods of achieving change have done extreme harm to the Arabs, the peoples of Israel, Iran and Iraq, and the Kurds.

He now argues that socialism can only be achieved through a wide-ranging democratisation and the achievement of a form of democracy which is superior to current Western democracies. He demands pluralist structures, participation of all in decision-making, women's rights, and peace.

'In my opinion', he says, 'one of the fundamental criteria characterising a socialist regime must be the level of democracy which it enables'. [p. 37]

Ocalan's treatise is based upon a profound study of the history of the ancient Middle East and the world in general. During the First World War a Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, wrote a History of Europe to 1550 without access to sources, while he was interned by the German authorities. Ocalan's achievement in prison conditions, with limited access to books, calls this to mind, although he does provide a bibliography and, presumably, consulted the items listed.

Ocalan might have made some reference to the controversy about the existence of a specifically Asiatic hydraulic form of society, which Marx and Engels accepted, but which

was rejected in the former Soviet Union. He might have referred to the theory of the former Iranian Kurdish leader, Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, that the Kurds are the descendants of the Medes. There are numerous other aspects of his book that raise key issues for further discussion and debate. Some of his contentions are controversial.

Notwithstanding this, Abdullah Ocalan has produced a brilliant theoretical study of the origins and development of civilisation which should be essential reading for all historians interested in a scientific approach to our knowledge of the past. It is a fascinating work which is likely to be of permanent interest. The final conclusion that democratisation, not Islamic fundamentalism or the armed struggle (apart from self-defence), is the way forward in the Middle East and elsewhere is not the message one would expect to receive from the leader of a group that conducted a guerrilla struggle in Turkey for nearly a generation. Left-wing socialists and all who oppose imperialist attempts to dominate the world should consider very carefully the arguments which he advances to justify this thesis.

As for the Kurds, he suggests that being divided between several nations (i.e. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) gives them a key advantage in contributing to change in the Middle East by democratising themselves.

'No longer will the fate of the Kurds be ignorance, war, rebellion and destruction but a democratic and developed civil society and unity in freedom,' he declares. [p. 297]

Abdullah Ocalan has written an extremely important book which everyone concerned with the politics of the Middle East, the Kurdish question, ancient history or socialist ideas should read and digest. Whatever the view taken of his previous stance as a guerrilla leader, his erudite and thought-provoking thesis is of outstanding interest and I recommend it without reservation.

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Stan Newens, historian, is a former Member of Parliament and Member of the European Parliament.

Review in *The Spokesman*

(no.95, price £6 including postage from Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, Russell House, Bulwell Lane, Nottingham NG6 0BT, England). Purchase online (www.spokesmanbooks.com).