

THE EGALITARIAN KING?

Abdullah Öcalan and His Evolving Role in the Kurdish Freedom Movement

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Abstract: The Kurdish movement has often been touted as an egalitarian struggle, and, in many ways, rightly so. However, the movement's relation to its undisputed leader, Abdullah Öcalan, has remained relatively unexamined. This article seeks to rectify this oversight by investigating how Abdullah Öcalan informs the movement's egalitarian life. To do so, the article employs a frame of analysis that utilizes anthropological theory on kingship. Drawing on secondary sources and fieldwork in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan, the article argues that Öcalan works as and resembles a king for the movement in several key respects, greatly influencing the movement's structure. The article contends that applying this frame of analysis may bolster theoretical apparatuses for studying revolutionary movements and nuance polar understandings of hierarchy and egalitarianism.

Keywords: cosmocrat, egalitarianism, kingship, Kurdish movement, Öcalan, revolution

The victory of the battle for Raqqa in late 2017 marked a turning point in Kurdish forces' struggle against ISIS and the beginning of the end for ISIS as a territorial force. However, for my interlocutors, as well as for the Kurdish movement internationally, the victory in Raqqa was more than a mere military victory: it also signaled a triumph of the Kurdish revolutionary project and the power of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Images of a huge flag of Öcalan in the heart of Raqqa circulated widely online among my interlocutors in Turkey, Iraq, and Germany, accompanied by slogans such as "Bijê Serok Apo" (Long live leader Abdullah Öcalan), and "Bê Serok Jîyan Nabe" (Without the leader there is no life). Even the fighters themselves credited Öcalan for their victory, stating to their press bureau that "the resistance here is first and foremost for him" (ANF 2017).



It is this conundrum that the article will explore. How is it that a man, sitting *incommunicado* on a prison island thousands of miles away, is celebrated as the driving force in the victory over ISIS in a self-declared egalitarian movement, and why is the credit for the triumph dedicated to him? How is it that Abdullah Öcalan became the international leader of the Kurdish movement, both in the very practical sense, but also, more importantly, as a symbol for the movement's philosophy and accomplishments? How are we to understand Abdullah Öcalan's evolving relation to the egalitarian Kurdish movement, in terms of its structure, cohesiveness, and direction, and in relation to the notion of 'egalitarian life' addressed in this special issue? Following the special issue's definition, egalitarian life is here thought of as an ideological fixture and practical goal imbricated in unfolding revolutionary attempts at breaking free from constraints, rather than as stable and formalized systems of social organization.

Besides the host of monikers Öcalan has accrued throughout the years, such as 'commander' (*fermandar*), 'leader' (*rêber*), and 'president' (*serok*), I want to suggest that for self-identified followers of this movement,¹ Öcalan may have one more unacknowledged title. Drawing on material gathered in 2015–2017 during fieldwork on the Kurdish movement, and engaging with literature on the history of his party, the PKK (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan), I will in this article suggest that, in several ways, Abdullah Öcalan resembles and works as a king (Graeber and Sahlins 2017b; Hocart [1936] 1970, 1941; Michelutti 2014, 2017; Quigley 2005b).

The rationale for pursuing this argument is twofold. First, academic publications focusing on the Kurdish movement (i.e., the guerrilla and social movement spread across Kurdistan that is affiliated with the PKK) often either play down or partially circumscribe Öcalan's role. Instead, such analysis has tended to favor perspectives that highlight the radical democratic, egalitarian, or even anarchist aspects of the movement—particularly with regard to the site of Rojava, otherwise known as northeast Syria (see Knapp and Jongerden 2014; Leezenberg 2016; Üstündağ 2016). Although Öcalan looms large in these narratives, most commonly as the progenitor of the movement's ideology, how he himself figures in the movement, and the part he plays, has not been the subject of much scholarly attention. I propose that a closer analysis of Abdullah Öcalan (without whom, his followers claim, "there would be no life") may shed a novel light on the movement's particular form of egalitarianism and on what an egalitarian life—arguably flowing from and secured by Öcalan—might entail.

Second, my hope is that a consideration of how Öcalan relates to a self-described egalitarian and revolutionary movement might contribute to a theoretical broadening of how such radical egalitarian movements are to be considered within anthropology and social sciences more broadly (see Thomassen 2012). I suspect that one of the reasons Öcalan has not received much attention in the literature on the Kurdish struggle is because scholars have often operated with

relatively ‘secular’ optics. By this I mean that the cosmological (Apter 1997; Chertisch et al. 2020) role of revolutionary leaders is often downplayed in favor of a focus on *realpolitik* and/or formal organizational forms (see Akkaya and Jongerden 2014; Saeed 2017; White 2015). Contrary to attempts at understanding how revolutionary leaders incarnate, mediate, or generate time, life, and personhood, secular optics often separate out the ‘metaphysical’ aspects of the struggle in favor of a sober assessment of organizational schemes and material circumstances. Although this approach is undoubtedly valuable, my hope is that by bringing kingship into the study of the Kurdish movement, it will contribute to opening up alternative, more inclusive, and holistic perspectives on revolutions and egalitarian movements (cf. Cherstich et al. 2020).

In the remainder of the article, the first section charts some of the core characteristics of how kingship has been defined in anthropological literature. It then moves into a comparison where Öcalan is examined in relation to several of kingship’s central tenets, which then feeds into a discussion about the limits of classifying Öcalan as a king, and how Öcalan’s position intersects with those of prophets and charismatic leaders. The final section discusses how thinking about Öcalan as a king helps us understand the movement’s self-proclaimed egalitarianism.

Kingship

What qualifies as the defining traits for kingship is a much-debated affair (Feeley-Harnik 1985; Michelutti 2014; Quigley 2005b; Sneath 2007), and how to approach and compare kingship has been explored in a variety of ways, from the advent of anthropology up to the present day (Heusch 2005; Quigley 2005b; Schnepel 2021; Strathern 2019; Yongjia 2011). Crucially, what multiple authors deem to be the essential contradiction of kingship is that the king’s position stands both inside and outside a social order (da Col and Graeber 2011; Graeber and Sahlins 2017a; Heusch 1985, 1997; Kantorowicz [1957] 1997; Quigley 2005b; Simonse [1992] 2018; Valeri 1985). This entails, generally speaking, garnering and reproducing some form of alterity, which permits the king to stand outside of a social order, granting him the power to constitute it. How ‘alter’ the king must be varies according to different contexts and the analyses made. In the most ordinary case, he must derive from a bloodline or position elevated beyond the people (Kantorowicz [1957] 1997; Quigley 2005b; Schnepel 2021), and in the more extraordinary cases, the king must house a deity or, in fact, be a deity (Lambek 2007; Valeri 1985). Oftentimes, these two ‘poles’ coincide.

According to David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins (2017a: 2), this necessary otherness of the king is due to people’s ontological condition of being embroiled in what they term a “cosmic polity.” They contend that all human societies are

always-already “hierarchically encompassed—typically from above, below and on earth— ... by metahuman powers” (ibid.), who guide, influence, or otherwise affect human society. Any form of social ordering is therefore related and subjugated to those powers who stand beyond them, making kings “imitations of gods” (Sahlins 2017: 23), and not the other way around. Being a king, in their understanding, entails mediating between the powers that exist beyond a given social order and the powers that a given social order has itself created (in accordance with, or by the grace of, the supernatural).

Within this continuum of kings straddling the human and the supra-human divide, authors have emphasized kings’ most central roles differently. They range from the constitution of a polity (Girard 1986; Simonse [1992] 2018), to engaging with supernatural powers such as sorcery and healing (Gluckman 1954; Kapferer 1997, 2002), providing judicial and legal frameworks (Kantorowicz [1957] 1997; Schmitt [1922] 2005), harnessing the power of nature (Frazer 1947; Heusch 1997), and, most commonly, an amalgamation of all the aforementioned. In this article, I will focus on three central tenets, while trying to show that Öcalan inhabits this inside-and-outside position throughout. I will first focus on a crucial condition for kingship, namely, the process of becoming a ‘stranger’ to the people one rules over (Heusch 1997; Sahlins 2008, 2017), before considering Öcalan’s afforded cosmocratic abilities (Hocart [1936] 1970), and, lastly, examining the ways in which the maxim ‘King = God’ might ring true for Öcalan’s particular position in the Kurdish movement.

Regarding the commentary in the introduction for this special issue, it should be noted that kingship is primarily used in this article as a (non-native) lens to re-examine the Kurdish movement’s structures in order to shed light on what egalitarian life in the movement entails. It is not intended to dominate or occlude other perspectives on political-cosmological leadership, such as charismatic leaders or prophets (Cherstich et. al 2020), as will be discussed below. Rather, by examining Öcalan as a king, the goal is to move considerations of egalitarianism beyond the conventional polarity of hierarchy and equality. As we shall see, the Kurdish movement focuses on producing egalitarianism in certain fields (e.g., women’s rights, direct democratic decision making, cooperatives), yet it relies on hierarchical relations (such as fidelity to Öcalan) to accomplish these goals. Building on this, we shall see that hierarchy and egalitarianism do not serve as conceptual opposites in the way that the movement views its egalitarian struggle. Instead, as we shall see in the conclusion, hierarchy is not defined in opposition to egalitarianism, but rather as a means for revolutionary regeneration, purification, and movement toward truth.

But in order to reach this conclusion, we first have to understand how Öcalan achieved a position of otherness, of ‘strangeness’, toward the movement in the first place. As Sahlins (2008, 2017) has argued, strangeness or exceptionality is in some form crucial to (nearly) all forms of kingship.

The Strangeness of Öcalan

Öcalan laid his foundation for exceptionality early on and keeps it to this day, 13 years after his capture by the Turkish state. In the memoirs of one of the co-founders of the movement, Sakine Cansız (2018: 213) describes the power and charisma that Öcalan (“the chairman”) had even before the foundation of the PKK in 1978:

We were known to others as *Apocu*. At first the name irritated me, since it was wrong to designate a movement by an individual, and besides it held risks for the chairman. But ultimately the name was not so important. Apo was an individual who stood for principles, revolution, internationalism, love of country, and an unremitting struggle. Yes, we were Apo-adherents. Basically, I liked this label, and it made me proud even before I met the chairman for the first time.

Cansız’s narrative tells us that even at the outset, Öcalan’s program was not one to debate. During this time of harsh state repression, he was shuttled around from safehouse to safehouse in different places in Turkey and Kurdistan, where he would give lectures to would-be PKK members. Rather than gathering a group of like-minded individuals, and then procedurally and collectively arriving at a political program, Öcalan was himself the wellspring for theory and ideology; his program was ‘revealed’ to selected followers in a secretive environment.

Öcalan greatly assisted in designing this mystical and elevated position. For instance, when the PKK leadership set up their headquarters outside Aleppo in the 1980s, he administered a lush villa and accompanying compound, where he instructed new guerrilla recruits in the movement’s philosophy before they were sent into the war in Turkish Kurdistan. According to Aliza Marcus’s (2007) interviews with PKK defectors, Öcalan would cultivate a rich garden with flowing water, keep white doves about him, have a pet falcon named after the 1946 Kurdish republic of Mahabad, follow a strict vegetarian diet, and be attended to only by female bodyguards.² He would also dress in relatively casual attire with a few gold ornaments, while demanding that the recruits diligently flaunted the guerrilla uniform. Marcus’s informants told her that Öcalan’s ideological lectures for new recruits would be arbitrarily timed, taking place whenever he felt inspired—frequently in the middle of the night—and could last for several hours (ibid.). These lectures were often meticulously transcribed and sent to the various guerrilla camps inside of Turkish Kurdistan, where they would be studied intently in collective seminars. And if a guerrilla raid was unsuccessful, or did not pan out the way he imagined, Öcalan would, according to Marcus, not spare the commanders, accusing them of traitorous behavior or of not following commands—often with lethal consequences.

Similar to older Sudanese kings (Graeber 2017; Simonse [1992] 2018), Öcalan was—either by deliberate action or by serendipitous circumstance—spatially detached from his ‘subjects’ in the Kurdish homeland and, simultaneously, symbolically and ritually detached from his armed retinue and followers. In his villa in Aleppo, he was surrounded by privileges and taboos, becoming a dangerous figure, acting in often seemingly arbitrary ways. As he himself has confessed, he is very cognizant of using “the methods of the prophets” (Öcalan 1998). Prophets have always been leaders in the Middle East, Öcalan argues, and provide people with necessary insights into themselves and their potential. One of Marcus’s (2007) informants details how, after a referee did not count Öcalan’s soccer goals correctly, thereby breaking a taboo regarding the exceptional skill of the leader, he exploded in a derogatory rant:

He asked Mehmet how many goals he had made and Mehmet said 12. Öcalan started shouting, “You bum, how could you forget four of my goals!” ... Later that day, when Öcalan came to give a lecture, the first thing he said was, “Where is that low-life? How could he forget four of my goals? To forget four goals is like forgetting four fighters. And to forget four fighters is to forget to kill four [Turkish] soldiers and that means to forget the revolution and to forget Kurdistan!” ... Then that night he was interviewed on [the Kurdish satellite television] MED-TV, and he started complaining again, saying, “That bum, that bum commander, he forgot four of my goals, how could he do this?” (Neval, in Marcus 2007: 266)

Although this seems petty more than anything else, the consequences of his convictions could often be lethal. Marcus estimates that at least 11 PKK members were executed on Öcalan’s command between 1983 and 1985 (ibid.: 94), and 24 to 100 between 1989 and 1990 (ibid.: 135) on suspicion of treason.

Combining this ritually exceptional position with his inclination for unpredictably sanctioning his followers, we may recall Luc de Heusch’s (1997, 2005) key arguments about the dynamics of divine kingship. According to Heusch, in order to set oneself apart from society, and thereby have the capacity to constitute it, it is necessary for a king to violate the common norms and morals of the society that the king provides for it. Heusch contends that this moral turpitude is an essential feature of estranging the king, as evidenced by manifold stories of kings’ incestuous, murderous, and sacrilegious behavior in various parts of the world (Heusch 1997; see also Simonse [1992] 2018). By acting in ways seemingly in opposition to the values of society, the king does not become an immoral being, but an *amoral* being (Valeri 1985), who by virtue of his alterity (or systematic lack of a predictable moral code) therefore has the capacity to enforce a moral order. This is seemingly also what Öcalan accomplished. By acting in capricious and amoral ways, while retaining the capacity to have people executed, he in effect distanced himself from common ethics and exercised

a sovereign power over life and death—one that is normally held by a state (Schmitt [1922] 2005).

As Carl Schmitt ([1922] 2005: xi) has argued, the sovereign is “he who decides on the exceptional case,” meaning that sovereignty in its ultimate form resides with the figure who can suspend the law in order to enforce the law or create new laws—even those regarding life and death. Building on Schmitt’s idea, Agamben (2017) has claimed that this form of sovereignty, traditionally hidden and exerted only as a ‘last resort’, has become an evermore present fixture of state exercise of power. Öcalan, in a strange sense, accords with Agamben’s analysis. By actively not abiding by the rules that he set, Öcalan (and historical kings) highlights his own elevation and perpetually displays his claimed sovereign power.

Consequently, although people have not necessarily agreed with his decisions, Öcalan’s actions have forcefully expressed an idea about the sovereign power of the Kurdish nation, of which he himself is the ultimate the incarnation. In the war for independence, Öcalan ensured that the Turkish state was confronted by a political formation that had its own national and sovereign measurements. Naturally, this generated much support and jubilation from the repressed Kurdish people. According to Marcus’s (2007: 267) informants:

Öcalan’s belief in himself was reinforced by the esteem with which many PKK members did hold him. While some were disillusioned ... there were many more who did feel empowered by getting to meet him. After all, he was the leader of the biggest, most powerful Turkish Kurdish national movement, a movement that had helped lift the Kurds from national oblivion ...

When Öcalan was captured in 1999, his project of self-othering changed dramatically, however. Having been ousted by the Syrian authorities at the behest of Turkey and the West, he was captured in Kenya by Turkish forces, aided by Greece’s Intelligence Service (White 2015: 1). Initially destined for the death penalty, this was revoked by Turkey’s bid to join the EU, which forbade capital punishment (Clapham 2003). He was instead incarcerated as the sole prisoner on Imrali island and is not permitted visitors other than irregular meetings with his family and lawyers. Although he now lacks direct, practical influence, his ‘strangeness’ has been amplified after being forcefully removed from his followers. From his prison cell, Öcalan started publishing long written works on the history and struggles of the peoples of the Middle East as part of his defense documents, radically challenging the PKK’s previous ideological platform.³

Against the ‘old’, Marxist revolutionary system of the PKK (Öcalan 2015), Öcalan argues that the PKK’s ideology has been put in a position where the two solutions are “either a stubborn defence of the classical line, or the abandonment of that line,” and that he himself “made it a point to go beyond this”

(Öcalan, cited in Özcan 2006: 109). While in prison, Öcalan claimed that “this was the first time I saw the meaning of motherland against the background of history,” and that “gradually, I began to resolve age-old contradictions,” becoming “aware that this time my rebirth had a real and far-reaching meaning” (Öcalan, cited in Urquhart 2015: 29). A revelation occurred: “While I was grappling with myself in my cell I also began to understand the nature of the country where I was born ... Past and present merged in my imagination and the attack on my person suddenly appeared to be the same as what the Sumerian priests had done to the fertile land of the mother goddess” (ibid.).

Using this insight, Öcalan sought to move the struggle away from a more ‘traditional’ Marxist-Leninist orientation to a more personal and explicitly more mythical one, aimed at excavating what he calls a “democratic modernity” (Öcalan 2015: 56). He argues that the deficiencies of ‘real existing socialism’ necessitate a radical rethinking of what resistance and liberation mean. Democratic modernity, he posits, is a constant undercurrent of ‘capitalist modernity’, which had its wellspring in the priest-kings of the Sumerian empire. Through trickery and delusion, he deduces, priest-kings exploited the original (illegitimate) hierarchy—that of patriarchy—to claim mystical and supernatural powers in order to enrich themselves and centralize power (Öcalan 2009, 2015, 2020). This fundamental misstep engendered the global history of civilization’s state repression, war, and disenfranchisement, and needs to be rectified at the seat of its power, that is, in the liberation of women, who need to be returned to their true position as ‘goddesses’ (Çağlayan 2012), and in the Middle East, where the contemporary oppression had its original source. For Kurds, Öcalan argues, the struggle against the state is the only way to recover the original, natural Kurdish way of life, and therefore the only way to liberate themselves, their stateless history being a unique source of strength rather than weakness. Following suit, the world would also be liberated (Öcalan 2020).

Reflecting on how he found this new truth, Öcalan asked rhetorically:

Why then can I be so effective? I am currently considered to be a miracle; this is because I revealed the state of ideologylessness and absence of morale in the Kurdish existence within the framework of my personality, and the extent of my own self-realization through this very unveiling corresponded quite easily with the concrete circumstances of this phenomenal social and political existence. In fact, the miraculous quality of every historical leap emanates from such a conjunction. (Öcalan, cited in Özcan 2006: 104–105)

This new paradigm, Öcalan contends, had in other words been revealed to him, through his person. Somehow exalted, Öcalan had perceived the lack of ideology—that is, of *true* ideology—permeating the lives of Kurdish people, and now saw it as his task to transmit this insight by means of his writings.

Through personal enlightenment and introspection, he had gained particular insight and access to the true realm of history—an access to the correct understanding of the unfolding of time and the factors that determine its progress.

This power that Öcalan proclaims for himself, namely, ‘making history by being history’, is a common feature in kingly regimes (Sahlins 2014). In other kingdoms, this power is often accorded by the ancestors, who are either housed within the king, are privileged discursual partners of the king, or in fact are transformed into the king himself (Feeley-Harnik 1985; Heusch 1997; Schnepel 2021). This has similarities with the genealogy of Öcalan. As he himself argues, every ‘historical leap’ occurs when a person generated by socio-historical circumstances unveils the truth of those socio-historical circumstances. For Öcalan, there are multiple people who have accomplished this task during their own historical period, such as Lenin (Öcalan 2015) or Marx (Öcalan 2009). The PKK, as he says, was tied up in the nation-state paradigm for liberation for a long time, and it took the fall of the Soviet Union to expose how this project had reached its natural limits (Öcalan 2011). Öcalan claims that his philosophy is thus correct for the new historical period: he has surpassed Marx, Lenin, Foucault, Braudel, and Wallerstein, and in this way he has incorporated them. Much like the Shilluk kings described by Simon Simonse ([1992] 2018), then, Öcalan too views his power as inherited from a realm of alterity, whose emissaries precede and will succeed him.

Öcalan as Cosmocrat

At the same time, however, Öcalan may also be seen as the ‘first’ ancestor. Through his inspired exegesis of the true spirit of human history, Öcalan has created an ideological paradigm wherein the liberation for Kurdistan has been moved into an uncertain, yet inevitable time. As the revelation of history has come through his person, and is no longer in the continuum of Marxist resistance, his position as chairman has taken on a more (explicitly) cosmocratic role. Afforded the opportunity of radically restructuring central ontological precepts, he has become the singular arbiter of what Kurdish politics entails and in which realms it is to be found.

This became perhaps the most apparent with Öcalan’s disavowal of the power of death. Citing Viveiros de Castro (1992), Sahlins (2008) argues that death is the ultimate wellspring for alterity, since it presents itself as a force necessarily beyond human reckoning, coming, essentially, from the ‘outside’. Domesticating death, in some politico-cosmological sense, is in Sahlins’s and Viveiros de Castro’s eyes the foundation for social order. Hocart ([1936] 1970) specifies this claim further, contending that the domestication of death is one of the key aspects of kingship as an institution. In Hocart’s words, kingship is,

originally, “an organization to promote life ... by transferring life from objects that are abounding in it to objects that are deficient in it” (ibid.: 3), through ritual mastery. In his role as ‘king’, Öcalan accomplishes this feat neatly. Öcalan presents a domestication and revaluation of death through his, and the PKK’s, evolving construction of martyrdom.

The PKK was in fact founded on a commitment to its martyrs (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012). During my fieldwork in 2015–2017, all formal, communal speech in the movement was prefaced by a moment of silence for the martyrs, and images of martyrs abounded in political space. This harmonizes with Olivier Grojean’s (2014) account, where he maintains that creating the ‘New Man’, modeled upon the martyrs, became more and salient as the PKK’s ideology and organization evolved. Handan Çağlayan (2012) echoes this sentiment, contending that after the guerrilla Zilan’s suicide bombing of a Turkish military outpost in 1996, Öcalan extolled her, positing her as the model for the ‘New (Wo)men’ to be emulated among cadres and civilians alike. In her letter to Öcalan, explaining her actions, Zilan (1996) writes:

Dear President,

I see myself as a candidate for a voluntary death. I willingly concede that to give our lives is, from the standpoint of your unending and tireless work for our liberation, not enough ... Through your struggle you have succeeded in bringing our people to life. You are the guarantor of the Kurdish nation and a guardian of world humanism ...

I consider this action as a duty. I am convinced that to overcome my weaknesses and the realisation of my freedom, this action has to be carried out ...

I want to be part of the total expression of the liberation struggle of our people ...

Under the leadership of Apo, the national liberation struggle and the Kurdish people, will at last take its richly deserved place in the family of humanity.

My will to live is very strong. My desire is to have a fulfilled life through a strong action.

The reason for my actions is my love for human beings and for life!

In her letter, Zilan (Zeynep Kinaci) views her actions as deriving from a sense of duty, through which she can rid herself of her weakness and fully commit to the struggle as conceived and directed by Öcalan. In a sacrificial motif, she reasons that since her will to live is very strong, her suicide bombing will be a testament to, and will amplify the power of, Öcalan’s philosophy, and, accordingly, will contribute to moving the Kurdish struggle into a place of freedom. In this configuration, martyrdom becomes the *essence* of the struggle itself, as it signifies a totalized, revolutionary commitment.

According to Öcalan, however, martyrdom is not a death in the sense of non-being or the cessation of life; rather, it is a process of transformation in which the martyr is given new life through the ongoing struggle to realize Öcalan's ideological paradigm (see Gunes 2013). An epigraph dedicated to a recently fallen fighter in Rojava explicates Öcalan's conceptualization (cited in Internationalist Commune 2019):

Four butterflies decide to find out what fire really is. The first butterfly flies far past the fire, comes back and says, 'Fire is something that gives light'. This is not yet all the knowledge about its nature, and so the second butterfly flies a little closer to the fire, turns around and tells: 'Fire is something that gives warmth'. But even that is not enough to explain its nature, and so the third butterfly approaches the fire even further, until the flames flicker over its wings. When it returns, it says, 'The truth about the fire is that it is something burning.' The fourth butterfly circles around the fire, turns around, burns and suddenly plunges into the fire, shines for a moment and then disappears into the flame until the butterfly is no longer visible. That is the only butterfly that really understands what fire is, but it can no longer tell others.

In this analogy, Öcalan surreptitiously presents himself as the truth of the fire or revolution. It is after all he who has discovered what true resistance is, and how it is to be accomplished. Hence, when one exterminates oneself within the fire, one becomes unified with Öcalan, while it is up to Öcalan's other followers to continually keep the 'fire' alive.

This regeneration of martyrs' lives is further illustrated by the PKK's most important ritual celebration—Newroz, the Kurdish New Year and national day celebration (Rudi 2018). Newroz as an annual festival signifies both the ethnogenesis of the Kurdish people and the beginning of the Kurdish calendar.⁴ According to myth, Newroz marks the day when the Median people overthrew their tyrannical Assyrian emperor, Zahhak. To celebrate the emperor's downfall and signal the people of their victory, the revolutionaries lit pyres, which ushered in a new time of peace and prosperity and marked the genesis of the Kurdish people (Gunes 2013; Rudi 2018). In the PKK's appropriation, often immensely popular, Öcalan is positioned as the figurehead, surrounded by martyrs, for whom the fire is lit. In a form of ritual assertion, Öcalan in this way becomes the container and mirror of the Kurdish people's primordial struggle. Consequently, the celebration suggests that as long as Öcalan is kept alive (in some form), so too do the martyrs who have fallen for him—those killed in historical (and mythic) time, as well as those in the present. While Öcalan's project is being enacted, in other words, "martyrs do not die" (*şehid namirin*), as the staple chants of Newroz proclaim. Through Öcalan, a martyr's death is therefore not extinction, but rather, as Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982: 4) contend, a *transformation*—a "transfer of the soul from one

social order to another (albeit imaginary) order.” Like Hocart’s ([1936] 1970) king, the ritual makes Öcalan into a vessel for ontological transformation in and of the world, adjudicating and transferring life from objects that abound in it to objects deficient in it.

Öcalan, the Egalitarian King?

Hocart ([1936] 1970, 1941) goes further, however. For him, as later discussed in Sahlins (2008) and Graeber (2017), kingship is ultimately marked by the equation King = God. In the final sense, they contend, the king’s alterity must (in some way) actually be *part of* a divine realm. If this precept is to be filled for Öcalan, we must extend our anthropological understanding of what counts as the divine foundation for kingship. For while it is arguable that he is divinely placed, his power ultimately arises from the Kurdish nation itself.

As Öcalan had previously straddled this-worldly and other-worldly domains—working as a leader connected with a spiritual world (the truth of the Kurds’ history and fate), but profoundly rooted in the vernacular (training followers, designing attacks, education, etc.)—his capture decisively revoked his ability to interact with and guide the ‘profane’. Having taken Öcalan away from his foothold in the world of *realpolitik*, isolating him and silencing him, self-immolation (and suicide bombings) became, in the most literal sense, a means for his subjects of bringing him back. According to Grojean (2012: 163–164), a “wave of 92 self-immolations and at least 11 suicide bombings (and probably 4 to 5 attempts)” took place across 15 different countries after Öcalan’s capture. While the self-destructive actions certainly functioned as political instruments directed at NATO and Turkey, given that Öcalan had extolled self-sacrifice as the ultimate testament to and expression of his philosophy, they also became spiritual means of assimilating with Öcalan, now that his followers had few other concrete actions for direct approbation. Put differently, the acts of self-immolation were not only sacrificial acts directed at reuniting Öcalan with the world that he had left, but also personal acts of unification with Öcalan. Self-sacrifice, in a sense, both confirmed Öcalan’s separation from the world and exhibited the possibility of uniting with him (in a different world), arguably anointing him as a divine figure, according to Hocart’s maxim.

But here we start to encounter the limits of thinking of Öcalan as a king. Öcalan’s path to deification does not abide by Graeber and Sahlins’s (2017a) classificatory scheme, for instance. Contrary to this conceptualization, the ‘alter’ realm that accorded Öcalan his powers did not come from a place separate from the subject population (as per Sudanese kings). Quite the opposite, Öcalan’s elevation and special insight were sourced *in* the Kurdish struggle. Despite Öcalan’s claims to having formulated a universal history, it is a history

that nonetheless departs from the Kurds and the broader Middle East at its center. According to Öcalan, Kurds have a special place in the universal and human history due to their statelessness, as a sacred nation, in some way (Öcalan 2015). Accordingly, the spiritual world that the Kurdish people reach through sacrifice to Öcalan is paradoxically also the true world of the people themselves. As such, Öcalan's deified status hinges upon his revelations and the Kurdish people's history forming a sort of closed circuit: Öcalan would be nothing without the particularities of the Kurdish people, and the Kurdish people would never know the truth about themselves without Öcalan. The relation is therefore mutually regenerative and revolving as opposed to (other) kingly systems, wherein the realm of the 'beyond' (and its kingly emissaries and incarnations) is strictly separated from the subject population. In other words, the divine power that has made Öcalan into some form of king is profoundly autochthonous (contradicting, especially, Sahlins's regal classifications).

Moreover, thinking of Öcalan too strictly as a king may overshadow other important ways of considering his stature. In many ways, Öcalan is also similar to a prophet and a charismatic leader—with some important caveats. Undoubtedly charismatic, Öcalan almost certainly gained followers through their "recognition of a leader's divine or superhuman powers," as expressed by Charles Lindholm (2013: 4). Öcalan's power to liberate Kurdistan was—and is—seen by many as completely unique. However, Lindholm contends that the underpinning of charisma is fragile and fleeting (see also Adair-Totef 2005; Turner 2015; Weber [1921] 1978). Charisma is necessarily transient since it is linked to its incarnation in a particular person, who, by virtue of his or her own power, may or may not be successful in institutionalizing his or her religio-political precepts.

This does not fit perfectly with Öcalan. Contrary to this Weberian ([1921] 1978) schema, Öcalan was accorded institutionalized, officiated powers from the outset of the struggle. There was no contradiction between his indisputable charisma and his inclusion in an institutionalized, formalized organization. In fact, the opposite might be true, in that his institutionalized position in the PKK accorded him more charisma than that of a singular individual attracting solitary political acolytes. As such, Weber's matrix for how charismatic authority is transmitted—by blood, appointment, or magical signs (Lindholm 2013: 10)—does not readily apply to the PKK. For its members, successors will become stewards and placeholders for Öcalan through elections. Rather than thwarting an institution, Öcalan presents himself *as* an institution (reflected by his Turkish moniker *Önderlik*, meaning 'leadership', not 'leader').

A similar point of comparison could be made with regard to prophets. Öcalan certainly exhibits properties of prophets by providing a meta-narrative of history where the Kurds (and the world), at some uncertain point in time, will revert back to a sort of blessed 'state of nature/divinity'. However, prophets—although very contextually variant (see Ardener [1989] 2018; Werbner 2011;

Wright 2004)—often seem to serve (nominally) only as intermediaries between deities and the populace. Many adopt a self-effacing ethos, where their own role in communion or divine transmission becomes minimized in favor of a direct divinity-to-people relation. In other words, prophets do not want to be eulogized and venerated, for they serve only a higher power. But Öcalan's veneration seems crucial, both for him and his followers, as he is not a mere instrument of (divine) history—he *is* the lord of history. Öcalan's proselytization does not claim that sovereignty over the world resides in a removed realm, but rather that sovereignty over the world resides with him, when united with the unique powers possessed by the Kurds (and the rest of humanity).

Nonetheless, the point of framing Öcalan as a king is not to argue that other revolutionary leaders do not share some of his traits (see Holbraad 2014; Michelutti 2014) or that he is distinctly kingly, but rather that a frame of kingship may reveal central (metaphysical) structures in a movement that might otherwise be overlooked. As we have seen, Öcalan's position as the leader of the Kurdish movement is intimately connected with martyrdom, taboo, revelation, and hidden truths—all metaphysical aspects related to kingship, although not uniformly or strictly 'kingly' in themselves. Kingship therefore does not need to be an analytical straitjacket. It may instead provide an analytical point of departure from which to examine how the impact of a given person or phenomenon originates from or relates to metaphysical ideas of hierarchy and egalitarianism, while drawing on a well-established canon of anthropological theorizing.

The Movement's Egalitarian Life

This leads us finally to the question of what Öcalan's role as 'king' means for the self-proclaimed egalitarianism of the movement. At the most obvious level, we have seen that the famously egalitarian practices of the movement are directly intertwined with, and arguably subsumed within, a hierarchical relation to Öcalan and his program for liberation. In a paradoxical way, it is his unelectable position that encourages the democratic virtues of the movement—of which there are many—since the essence he found in (the Kurdish) people is their natural propensity for voluntarism, cooperation, and communalism (Öcalan 2015). Rather than being polar opposites, the movement shows that hierarchy and egalitarianism may go hand in hand and, in fact, serve as each other's mutual foundation. However, taking this argument one step further, we have seen that thinking of Öcalan as a king illustrates the shortcomings of conventional, Eurocentric ideas of hierarchy for analysis of revolutionary movements. In classical political theory, Weil ([1950] 2014, [1955] 2001), Bakunin ([1916] 1970), and Arendt ([1964] 2016) all counterpose hierarchy and egalitarianism, for instance, and see them as oppositional principles in struggles for social

reorganization. These polar sentiments are echoed in the Kurdish case, where scholars such as Leezenberg (2016) and Marcus (2007) conceive of the PKK as a hierarchical 'Stalinist' organization, with Öcalan ruling as a despot, while the egalitarian aspects of the struggle are considered as separate, contradictory, or autonomous. As we have seen, these classifications do not accord well with the movement's own conceptualization. Hierarchy is not viewed as a uniform, stable, or untraversable social condition in the movement. Rather, it is thought of as a consecrated threshold that can and should be overcome.

As we have seen, the movement posits a unity between its members and Öcalan, while at the same time holding him as an unelectable, elevated figure. By this elevation, it follows that the Kurdish people are also somehow elevated above themselves. Put differently, although the people are of the same substance as Öcalan, they have not yet reached the same *quality* of substance that he has. Öcalan hence encourages an upward movement of people's values, priorities, and lives. In this sense, although Öcalan's position is above the people, his elevation does not denote hierarchy as a form of rigid, stable separation, intended to be kept intact, but rather as a graduated scale intended to be ascended, as the martyrs at Öcalan's side in the Newroz celebration testified to. When Öcalan is split from the people, so too are the people split from themselves, meaning that if they follow Öcalan's philosophy and want to recover their full (or best) personhood, they must strive to ascend through his values and doctrines. Contrary to other conceptualizations where hierarchy is seen as an obstacle to equality, then, the Kurdish movement conceives of hierarchy as a form of auto-encompassment (since the people and Öcalan are the same and encompass each other) and a necessary guide in the perpetual process of *becoming* equal. Hierarchy is not intended as a static barrier, but rather as a tool for aspirational, movable processes of ascension in and through time.

This ascension may, as we have seen in the case of Zilan, be a deeply personal and bodily project, as her dedication to ridding herself of 'weakness' illustrates, but it is also a schema for wider socio-political transformation. Promoting women's rights and autonomy, an ecological and cooperative economy, and freedom of faith and religion are all steps on the way to return Öcalan's vision of an uncorrupted state of nature for the Kurds (and humanity writ large). The hierarchy that Öcalan inspires is therefore not one he 'intends' to keep. Öcalan's goal is to arguably restore *everyone* to 'kingship', in the sense of reuniting them with their true values and history, which only he (at the moment, and unfortunately) is in possession of.

Framing Öcalan as a king, in other words, illustrates not only how egalitarianism and hierarchy may complement each other. It also shows that hierarchy, when considered outside its typically Eurocentric framework, may form a key component in the regeneration of a revolutionary movement's desired egalitarian life. Hierarchy in the movement is not considered a hindrance to equality and

freedom, but rather an integral component for reanimating life and resistance and reifying followers' personalities to the point where the guiding hierarchy becomes obsolete. In stark terms, Öcalan shows that egalitarianism is not a condition that can or should be merely implemented, but rather a distant goal that may only be arrived at when the entire (Kurdish) world has been transformed.

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Notes

1. Followers call themselves *Apocî*, quite literally 'Apoists'—playing off Abdullah Öcalan's sobriquet, Apo. Apo is a contraction of *Apê*, meaning uncle, and *-o*, a suffix of endearment.
2. Dilar Dirik (2022: 318) has recently questioned the reliability of Aliza Marcus's interviews. Dirik argues that the defectors' accounts may not be reliable due to ideological bias and circumscription of their own roles in the atrocities. Marcus's book is nonetheless one of the few written works drawing on first-hand accounts detailing Öcalan's stay in Syria and his leadership role.
3. As Özcan (2006) points out, this process of ideological transformation preceded Öcalan's capture, but took on a much clearer and unified form once he had been incarcerated.
4. The Kurdish year in 2022 was 2722, allegedly counted from the day when Zehak was overthrown.

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