

Kobane and Bakur through the eyes of 1917

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As 2017 draws to a close, the left melancholy and nostalgia that surrounded the centenary of the October Revolution moves out of the flashing focus it enjoyed over the past year. Like a sad, old boat that passes once more by our harbor, or a returning comet that streaks across our skies, the memory of October 1917 was as much celebrated as it was begroaned, greeted with dirge and song alike.

Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of the famed and well-esteemed Marxian magazine *Jacobin*, wrote an eloquent epitaph to the centenary memorials and damned the Bolshevik revolution for the impossible task it set before itself and the resulting monsters that blossomed out of the bloodied soil from which the experiment sprang. A foreboding farewell, Sunkara did well to represent a revolution damned not because ventured into the unknown world beyond capitalism, but because of concrete circumstance, contingent factors, and formidable odds. According to Sunkara, the problem of the Bolshevik foray into communism rested on hopeful - if

not idealist - conceptions of history that promised a world revolution. Sadly, the lack of world revolution proved only that nothing is guaranteed, and if the soil is not purposefully planted but rather haphazardly sowed, then the harvest will bare all such marks.

In a closing remark, Sunkara takes a final jab at those leagues of leftists who attempted to translate the process elsewhere, elevating the Leninist experiment to the state of dogma.

What is curious however is that as such farewells were cast into the repositories of cyberspace, few even so much as mentioned the latest experiment that has sprung forth attempting to leap beyond that chasm of history we experience as capitalist modernity. No doubt, the promise of Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan went largely ignored. Surprising, especially given that the conditions from which this experiment surges are not all that unfamiliar. To heed the warning of Sunkara, we would do well to see if there is anything from this bold endeavor that we can salvage.

Russia 1917 and Kurdistan 2017

The construction of Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism across specific regions of Kurdistan has no doubt been met with mixed reception by the left of the global north. Shockingly, it has been anarchists and Marxist-Leninists of the west who have been the most receptive and willing to provide aid or volunteers specifically to the struggles being waged in Kobane. Beyond these two sects, however, the struggles of both Bakur and Kobane have been met with mainly with scepticism.

Curious considering the surroundings from which the struggle springs, especially when considering Kobane. Like autocratic Russia, a more or less spontaneous rupture opened in Syria that allowed the possibility of a revolutionary conjuncture to develop. The near total power that Al-Assad enjoyed before being challenged first by social movements and then by civil war was not unlike that enjoyed by Tsar Nicholas. Any kind of transparent and democratic organization could count on being completely repressed by the instruments of the state, foregoing any such possible formation. The material reality of the conjuncture that the Syrian spring presented cast serious limitations, as in 1917 Russia. The moment would belong to those forces that were best organized for the situation and that meant those forces who could organize clandestinely or with foreign aid. There should be little wonder then that Kurdish forces in Syria - with a long history of operating clandestinely due to international repression - were the democratic forces best prepared for the conjuncture. Reactionary forces, on the other hand, had from the get-go the support of foreign

governments.

The comparison with 1917 Russia goes deeper. Syria is only one of several countries who cracked under the pressure that followed the global financial crisis. Like the First World War, the so-called Arab Spring was the result of outmoded power structures that had to interface with a globalized economic system. The current conflicts that define the Middle East are no doubt intrinsically linked with the demands of capital growth, and each revolution provides an opportunity for states beyond Syria (and the economic forces they protect) to gain their own position. In this way, specific rebel and state forces in Syria represent specific state forces - American, Russian, Saudi, or Iranian - all vying for imperial dominance. While Lenin thought that imperialism would be the final stage of capitalism, it turned out Arendt was correct to assess it to be its first stage, and David Harvey even more correct to understand imperialism as a constant necessity of capitalist growth.

While wrapped entirely in transnational circuits of power and capital, the terrain from which the Rojava Revolution springs is nonetheless a local phenomena. As the First World War was a uniquely European catastrophe, the Syrian civil war is nonetheless uniquely Middle Eastern, rooted in processes of power that are unique to the region. What's more, the way history has developed is due to the unique composition of forces internal to Syria, and the way they have matured - similar to Russia. The Russian revolution grew out of a combination of local and international factors that other countries - especially Germany - did not enjoy. Likewise, the specific configuration of conditions provided an opportunity that Kurdish forces could uniquely exploit, conditions other democratic forces in other countries were either incapable of seizing or lacked altogether. No doubt, translating from such an exceptional example would render similar effects of translating the Bolshevik experience.

Lenin Revisited

So do we throw the examples of revolutionary Kurdistan (not to be confused with the nationalist Kurdish forces of Northern Iraq) to the dustbin of praxis as Sunkara may ask us to do?

Hardly so, because Sunkara fails to decouple the experience from the *method*. That is, just because the Bolshevik revolution failed to create a communist paradise, does not disprove Lenin's theory of transition. What's more, in taking Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism in consideration, we find a new proposal altogether.

Lenin's proposal for a transition to socialism is simple. Given the autocratic nature of the Tsarist state, *within the unique configuration of power in Russia at the time*, a

revolutionary organization is to be organized clandestinely in order to unite the workers' movements and prepare them to seize the state. Once the parliamentary state would be seized, it would be smashed and resurrected by a proletarian state - one that would be directly democratic and run through councils. As Lenin had observed through historical study, since the Paris Commune, councils had sprung organically from the workers' movement as a means to develop a directly democratic, popular, and operational means of self-management. Councils had sprung in Paris in 1871 and in Petrograd in 1905 and by February 1917 had become so powerful in Petrograd once more (due especially to the operational power they wielded) that bourgeois government *had* to enter into a formal relationship of dual power with them. For Lenin, the task of the October Revolution was to give full power to these councils and smash the organs of bourgeois rule.

These councils were so central because for Lenin they embodied a certain constituent power. That is, he understood them as organs of power exercised *by* the people and not for the people - in difference to the kind of sovereign relationship parliamentary power held over broad society. Their power stemmed directly from the people and replaced any kind of sovereign or representative officialdom, turning people into active agents, protagonists of their own destinies. And yet, while the councils did indeed wield operational control of power, and while this constituent power was distinct from and antagonistic to the constituted power of the nascent bourgeois state of the February Revolution, Lenin understood that the Soviets were ultimately threatened by the bourgeois State.

Lenin's recipe for revolution in *State and Revolution* is as follows: develop as much autonomous power as possible through the proliferation and protection of councils and when a crisis comes, smash the bourgeois state and erect a council republic. However, given the autocratic composition of the Tsarist state, the revolutionary process was ultimately uneven, and while Petrograd may have been prepared for self-management, the whole of Russia was not. As such, the Soviet state became a paternalist structure that reproduced the kind of sovereign power relations that defined the capitalist state. Power was exercised *for* the people from the cordoned bureaus of the Soviet bureaucracy, and not *by* the people through the proliferation of popular councils. Party and state had become one and ruled above the people, creating a relationship in which the sovereign and constituted structures of the state and party ruled through the exclusion of constituent power from below. The council-based proposal of *State and Revolution* had been abandoned given the contingent development of history.

While the Leninist method of transition had been able to achieve power, it lacked

both the international support and the theoretical analysis to develop a constituent democracy from below. Nonetheless, by its own merit, it had become the standard lens of theory and practice across the world, even in Kurdistan.

Öcalan's Proposal

No doubt, Leninism held a particular appeal to Kurdish youth in Turkey, where the Turkish ethnostate had not only banned the Kurdish identity, but met any form of peaceful civil rights movement that proposed the recognition of the Kurdish identity with brutal force. As with the rest of the capitalist world, post-war Turkey erected a Keynesian political-economic state structure. And like all other capitalist economies, this configuration of power depended on the exclusion of internal and external others. Similar to the way that the post-war economy of the United States was premised on the exclusion of Black people (and other non-white groups) and women from the compromise between capital and "labor," so too was the Turkish post-war economy premised on the exclusion of Kurdish people and women. And in the same way that Black power recomposed first peacefully and then in open contestation, so too did the Kurdish movement adopt Marxist-Leninism only after peaceful attempts at reform had been exhausted and met with naked violence. And thus the Kurdistan Workers' Party was born by the late 1970s and Abdullah Öcalan had developed his position at the heart of the party.

The subsequent relationship of open violence between the PKK and the Turkish state was no doubt bloody and cyclical. Like the many other guerrilla organizations that developed in this post-1968 epoch, a strategy based entirely on militaristic violence had primarily worked to strengthen the constituted power of the Turkish state. All the while, the Turkish state continued to develop a discursive frame that equated Kurdishness with extreme violence and unruliness.

However, already by the 1980s, a new strategy began to brew that would lead to the reformulation of a new proposal for transition. Critiquing historical Leninism's conceptualization not just of ethics but of democracy and freedom, Öcalan has concluded that for socialism to exist, dissolving the nation-state is as necessary as dissolving capitalism. Especially as women's organs began to develop within the PKK, the state - as a sovereign structure - became recognized as an obstacle to freedom, and a constituent conceptualization of democracy became formulated.

Öcalan proposes constituent democracy as both a means and ends. That is, if we wish constituent power to be the means of governance - government by the people - then a form of struggle that is premised on democracy is needed. Considering such, Öcalan articulated a method of transition premised on the constant erosion of the state. Taking where Lenin left off, Öcalan proposes the development of constituent

power to the degree that it is able to wield a certain operational power and take over the constituted and sovereign functions of the state and capital. In Öcalan's view, there is no necessary final battle between capital and the state on the one hand, and democratic and constituent forces on the other. This does not mean he is not unaware that at any point that the state and capital will feel threatened as its monopoly of operational power is slowly eroded. Rather, the point is to develop the operational capacities of constituent forces to govern *differently* from the ways capital and the state do.

Under such a proposal, the primary motor of transformation that Öcalan imagines that would construct this new democracy would be an extra-parliamentary one. He calls for:

the establishment of well-organized social units in all areas of society. These units will enable a third political means of overcoming the classic structures of state and society besides the aforementioned democratic struggle and armed resistance. While the aim of this third tier will neither be to oppose nor support the notions of the classic state and society, its theory and praxis will aim at building a new kind of society within the given framework of international power balance.

It is this *third means* - located within the constituent sphere of power - that is to be organized to "conquer democracy" through the development of a *counter-democracy* within the shell of the old. Parliamentary (as well as militaristic) fronts exist only to defend the gains made by this extra-parliamentary field. It is in this way that revolutionary transition comes about. That is, through the organization of autonomous structures that subsume the operations of everyday life.

What Öcalan thus imagines is the growth of a constituent-based power parallel to the current bourgeois state. These fields and sites would increasingly divorce themselves from existing power structures and would form Democratic Autonomies (as a relation to the existing bourgeois state). If the majority of fields would be taken in specific territories Democratic Confederation (as a kind of self-administered polity) would be established. Democratic Confederation is a system of self-rule that combines both constituent and constituted powers in such a way that popular, constituent forces control coercive apparatuses. In this system, constituent power is divided into two camps: a nested web of councils that are organised along geographic arenas (street, neighborhood, village/district/, city, canton) and into interest-based organisations

(forming within feminist, youth, and other civil movements). These interest-based organisations operate as germ-seeds that organise people into broader interest-based organisations. These social actors form federative units that serve as germ cells, and they “can combine and associate into new groups and confederations according to the situation” through exercising autonomy and free association. Within this interest-based level of social organisation, “all kinds of social and political groups, religious communities, or intellectual tendencies can express themselves directly in all local decision-making process” thus resulting in a participatory democracy that demands the involvement of individuals and social groups in order to forge a constituent strength. This interest-based constituent wing operates alongside the nested council structures (another constituent wing), intervening within each level of it and forming the foundation of this new democratic society. This is the inception of the revolutionary transition as it begins the transformation process of constituent forces.

Öcalan essentially seizes the opportunities of the civil sphere that have been created by progressive forces. Let us recall Lenin, in *What Is to Be Done?* he proposed a method of organization given the circumstances of autocratic Russia. He admits: “We have neither a parliament nor freedom of assembly, nevertheless, we are able to arrange [secretive] meetings of workers who desire to listen to a Social-Democrat. We must also find ways and means of calling meetings of representatives of all social classes that desire to listen to a democrat.” Lenin’s method is based on secrecy *given the political reality*. Current political reality is different in comparison to then and Öcalan seizes this difference. Nonetheless, he recognises that this method of revolutionary transition requires that society have “democratic minimum standards and be equipped with the necessary organizations and institutions” such that “it will aim evolutionary peaceful change through shaping alternatives on the basis of existing structures.” As such, the frame of struggle moves primarily through the constituent sphere, i.e. through the development of social movements that unite while forming autonomous governance structures.

As General Cemil Bayik of the PKK says, the revolutionary process

is no longer determined by a takeover of power or state which hitherto had been an indispensable mark of a successful revolution. Rather, revolution is a process taking place in the [civil] society as such. Politics is shaped by the assertiveness of the society itself. Political groups organize themselves in all social arenas and develop into an alternative power. The state is not to be overturned violently but is subjected to a continuous transformational process, with the [civil] society acting as watchdog. This concept assumes democratic politics and democratic awareness on the part of society.

In this way, it is the struggle that transforms the masses. It is their organization into alternative and autonomous structures that begins the process of revolutionary transition. The protagonists of this latest historical stage are to be the people themselves. They have to propel and usher a new era of democracy through the creation and proliferation of autonomous institutions that are prefigurative of a new society, while at the same time serving to deepen the politicization of broad society. In essence, the program is to create an alternative, autonomous government parallel to the current shell of the system of social (re)production.

While Öcalan bases the revolutionary processes' primary site of contestation within civil society, he still holds that parliamentary intervention and militarism have a role. Essentially, while an autonomous social configuration is constructed by civil society, Öcalan recognizes the necessity to reform the current political institutions to erode their power. At the same time, Öcalan keeps the card of self-defense up his sleeve. He has made clear space for the use of armed violence as a means of self-defense: "If that struggle [for democracy and autonomy] is blocked, obstructed or denied, legitimate self-defense will be allowed, ultimately even in its armed form."

Repeating the words of Bayik, the revolutionary process that Öcalan puts forth demands a democratic minimum within the current state formation in order to be achieved. If this democratic minimum is not present or if it is revoked, then people have the right to defend themselves.

Essentially then, the process is such that a dual constituent pattern is constructed that organizes people into organizations and *then* into councils. That is, constituent power is developed so that it can take operational control of the functions of everyday life. The revolution - as a process rather than event - begins today and it is a process that begins to wrench increasing quantities of operational capacities through constituent organs constructed by an orchestra of forces. That is, while the PKK originally held a structure typical of communist parties (leader, central committee, party congress), a [liberation movement](#) made up of autonomous organs and structures that extend well beyond the PKK has since formed. This kind of cohesive bloc of parties and organizations that all share a similar vision and have agreed to build it together make up a sort of "orchestra of forces." Orchestra, not as in a conspiratorial sense, but in a musical sense.

Just as important however is that while the main thrust of this transitional process is created through extra-parliamentary forces, there is still a necessary parliamentary power that is established. In this context, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey stands as a parliamentary-wing of the Kurdish liberation movement. While the HDP's ability to stave off the violent hand of the State was not the most successful,

we can also attribute this to the racialized perception of Kurds as terrorists in Turkey. While the Kurdish left has been able to establish pockets of regional power, due to the national ideological apparatus that has constructed a powerfully negative narrative around Kurdish liberation, the HDP's struggle to mobilize electoral constituents was going to be difficult to begin with.

New Hopes and the Empires That Strike Back

No doubt, the historical conditions in which this method of transition has been tested are difficult. In the political territory that has been carved out in Kobane, however, we find a blossoming example of a radical and constituent democracy that - despite external and internal threats - has yet to buckle under the lure of emergency dictatorship. Within Turkey, however, the current devolution of Turkish democracy into an authoritarian regime can be understood as a kind of counter-revolution that seeks re-assert its monopoly of power against the inroads made by the Kurdish liberation movement.

In these struggles, nothing is guaranteed. Indeed, Antonio Negri reminds us of Machiavelli's crucial lesson, that "there is no other necessity in human history than that born out of the victory or defeat that characterizes life in the continuous struggle between political subjects, interests, ideals, and productive forces." Hence, the sum of history is ultimately dependent on how actors "play the game," so to speak, how they react to the relations of force within the parameters established by constituted forces of power.

1917 proved to be an exemplary year despite the poor odds and the theoretical shortcomings on which they were founded. Sunkara is right to look back and see 1917 for what it was. Like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri tell us in their latest book, *Assembly*, let the dead bury the dead. But today, we have new comrades, living comrades that take up the torch of hope and liberation. In 2017, let's look to them and see what we can forge together to shine a light on the path forward.