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# Confederalism, Democratic Confederalism and Rojava

Zaher Baher

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Many religions and ideologies from left to the right have tried to tackle class issues and other societal problems, but none of them has been able to resolve these problems, rather most of them have made the situation even worse.

Whilst these problems have remained unresolved, groups, political parties and individuals have continued to come up with different theories and different ideas for how to tackle them. Confederalism or Democratic Confederalism is one of them.

The idea of federation and confederation dates back several centuries. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) wrote a lot about federation and confederation with regards to Canada, Switzerland and Europe. However, when he observed the debates about European Confederation he noticed that his own understanding and analysis of confederation was completely different from what was actually going on at the time. His comment on this was as follows: "By this they seem to understand nothing but an alliance of all the states which presently exist in Europe, great and small, presided over by a permanent congress. It is taken for granted that each state will

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retain the form of government that suits it best. Now, since each state will have votes in the congress in proportion to its population and territory, the small states in this so-called confederation will soon be incorporated into the large ones ...” Proudhon’s analysis of the situation was right at the time and still right: “The right of free union and equally free secession comes first and foremost among all political rights; without it, confederation would be nothing but centralisation in disguise”<sup>1</sup>. In fact the EU, which is a union of States, has developed the most bureaucratic apparatuses and has become a very undemocratic confederation.

In addition to Proudhon, others like Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, have written about confederalism, but none of them has written as much as Murray Bookchin (1921-2006). In fact, Bookchin not only wrote about it, but he also connected confederalism to the issues of social ecology and decentralisation, and considered the building of Libertarian Municipalism as the foundation for confederalism. Bookchin was not just a theorist, he was passionate about his ideas and as a very active, dedicated organiser tried to put his theory into practice during the 1980s, as described here “In Burlington, Vermont, Bookchin attempted to put these ideas [Libertarian Municipalism] into practice by working with the Northern Vermont Greens, the Vermont Council for Democracy, and the Burlington Greens, retiring from politics in 1990. His ideas are summarized succinctly in *Remaking Society* (1989) and *The Murray Bookchin Reader* (1997).<sup>2</sup>

For Bookchin, building libertarian municipalism is the foundation of confederalism, an alternative to the nation-state, and the way to reach a classless and liberated society. While Bookchin placed libertarian municipalism within the framework of anarchism for much of his life “.....in the late 1990s he broke with

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<sup>1</sup> Anarchist and Radical Texts/The Anarchist Sociology of Federalism

<sup>2</sup> Libertarian municipalism – Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarian\\_municipalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarian_municipalism)

anarchism and in his final essay, *The Communalist Project* (2003), identified libertarian municipalism as the main component of communalism. Communalists believe that libertarian municipalism is both the means to achieve a rational society and the structure of that society”.<sup>3</sup>

Janet Biehl, Bookchin’s long-term partner, in her book *Ecology or Catastrophe*, describes the importance of municipalities and confederalism to Bookchin “ In Bookchin’s eyes , the democratized municipality, and the municipal confederation as an alternative to the nation-state, was the last, best redoubt for socialism. He presented these ideas and arguments, which he called libertarian municipalism, in their fullest form in *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*, published in 1986”.<sup>4</sup>

In the rest of this article I try to define Confederalism from Bookchin’s viewpoint, and the understanding of Democratic Confederalism by Abdullah Ocalan. This is followed by a brief review of what has been achieved in Rojava.

Although Bookchin had an idea and plan for putting his theory into practice, he knew very well that it would be impossible, or just a dream, to build Libertarian Municipalism and confederalism among huge existing cities, given the current mentality, education and culture of their peoples and the centralist nature of society. He realised that building Libertarian Municipalism requires a different type of education and organisation, and thought of centralization as one of the main barriers. His thinking has been described as follows: “Bookchin became an advocate of face-to-face or assembly democracy in the 1950s, inspired by writings on the ancient Athenian polis by H. D. F. Kitto and Alfred Eckhard Zimmern. For the concept of confederation, he was influenced by the nineteenth century anarchist thinkers. Bookchin tied libertarian municipalism to

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<sup>3</sup> Libertarian municipalism – Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarian\\_municipalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertarian_municipalism)

<sup>4</sup> Biehl J. *Ecology or Catastrophe*, The life of Murray Bookchin, Oxford University Press 2015, P 227

a utopian vision for decentralizing cities into small, human-scaled eco-communities, and to a concept of urban revolution”.<sup>2</sup>

However, Janet Biehl believes differently. She thinks there were other factors that influenced Bookchin. “What really inspired Murray to think about confederation was not Proudhon/Bakunin, etc., but the story of the CNT (Confederation Nacional del Trabajo) in Spain. His book, ‘The Spanish Anarchists’ focuses on the CNT’s structure as a confederation. He was trying to demonstrate that, contrary to the accusation of Marxists, anarchists really could organise themselves, and confederation was the bottom-up structure they chose” (personal communication, 9th December 2017).

Although Bookchin believed in decentralisation and an ecofriendly society, he could not believe that this could be achieved without confederalism - a network through which municipalities could unite and cooperate to share resources between themselves on the basis of their citizens and communities’ needs. However, at the same time he believed each municipality must have autonomy over policy making. His definition of confederalism is “It is above all a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities. The members of these confederal councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves”.<sup>5</sup>

The road towards confederalism requires the building of Libertarian Municipalism for which working on the primary pillars like decentralization, social ecology, interdependence and feminism are very important tasks. Each of these pillars is connected to the other, such that none of them is workable without the others. Bookchin

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<sup>5</sup> The Meaning of Confederalism | The Anarchist Library <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-meaning-of-confederalism.pdf>

Turkey, and the probability that Iraq, Iran and Turkey will come together to fight PKK and Rojava in the future. In addition we should acknowledge that there has been no effective or strong international solidarity from leftists, communists, socialists, trade unionists and anarchists, and the same movement has not emerged in neighbouring countries. Had the situation been different and some of the above conditions met, perhaps Rojava could answer my questions in more positive way and set a better example to follow.

clarified this very well when he said “To argue that the remaking of society and our relationship with the natural world can be achieved only by decentralization or localism or self-sustainability leaves us with an incomplete collection of solutions”.<sup>6</sup> Bookchin also insists that decentralisation and self-sufficiency are not necessarily democratic so will be unable to resolve society’s problems and be successful, he therefore continues to say “It is a troubling fact that neither decentralization nor self-sufficiency in itself is necessarily democratic. Plato’s ideal city in the Republic was indeed designed to be self-sufficient, but its self-sufficiency was meant to maintain a warrior as well as a philosophical elite. Indeed, its capacity to preserve its self-sufficiency depended upon its ability, like Sparta, to resist the seemingly “corruptive” influence of outside cultures (a characteristic, I may say, that still appears in many closed societies in the East). Similarly, decentralization in itself provides no assurance that we will have an ecological society. A decentralized society can easily co-exist with extremely rigid hierarchies. A striking example is European and Oriental feudalism, a social order in which princely, ducal, and baronial hierarchies were based on highly decentralized communities. With all due respect to Fritz Schumacher, small is not necessarily beautiful.....If we extol such communities because of the extent to which they were decentralized, self-sufficient, or small, or employed “appropriate technologies,” we would be obliged to ignore the extent to which they were also culturally stagnant and easily dominated by exogenous elites”.<sup>7</sup>

Bookchin was not just talking about confederalism in a political way as an alternative to the nation-state. He thought that while the state has its own institutions and politics, and maintains a capitalist economy through its institutions, forces and spies with other

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<sup>6</sup> The Meaning of Confederalism | The Anarchist Library <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-meaning-of-confederalism.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The Meaning of Confederalism | The Anarchist Library <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-meaning-of-confederalism.pdf>

administration (Churches, Banks, other Financial Institutions, Media and Courts), its economy can be imposed on and dominate the society. He thought confederalism, through its libertarian municipalities, should create its own institutions, design its own policies and education, build up its own economy, and empower its own individual citizens. So Bookchin stressed that “Confederalism as a principle of social organization reaches its fullest development when the economy itself is confederalized by placing local farms, factories, and other needed enterprises in local municipal hands that is, when a community, however large or small, begins to manage its own economic resources in an interlinked network with other communities”.<sup>8</sup>

Janet Biehl has tried to clarify and explain Bookchin’s ideas about the above concept in plain and simple language in her book, ‘The politics of Social Economy, Libertarian Municipalism’. In Chapter 11 she explains the meaning of the Bookchin quote above “A confederation is a network in which several political entities combine to form a larger whole. Although a larger entity is formed in the process of confederating, the smaller entities do not dissolve themselves into it and disappear. Rather they retain their freedom and identity and their sovereignty even as they confederate”.<sup>9</sup>

It is essential that people are economically equal according to their needs otherwise, they will remain in conflict politically. Obviously economic equality cannot happen unless people themselves control their economy. This means the economy should not in any way be in private hands, or in the hands of the State, either in what is called the public sector, or in public-private partnerships. In her book on Libertarian Municipalism mentioned above, Janet Biehl explains in Chapter 12, ‘A Municipalized Economy that the

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<sup>8</sup> The Meaning of Confederalism | The Anarchist Library <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-meaning-of-confederalism.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The politics of Social Economy, Libertarian Municipalism. Biehl, J. P 110 and 118 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6YOyGNakE86b3RLY2RZN0dySUE/view?usp=sharing>

arate from anarchism because they very much follow the tradition of classical anarchism.”<sup>22</sup>

In the case of Rojava many questions remain to be asked and many outstanding issues queried, such as: Is everybody free to be involved in politics and take part in the meetings to make the decisions? Are the issues I raised in the previous page discussed and the decisions about them taken collectively through the mass meetings and by direct action? Are the existing Cooperatives really owned by the communes, the Democratic Self Administration (DSA), or a kind of mixture of private-public ownership; also can everybody be a member regardless of who they are, and finally how are the products distributed? Are the Communes and the Houses of the People really non-hierarchical groups or organisations? Why are the chair and co-chairs in position for such a long time? Is the head of the DSA, and those at the highest levels of the Tev-Dem and the Communes elected through direct democracy or just nomination? How hard is democratic confederalism working towards an ecological society and what has been achieved so far? There are actually many other aspects of democratic confederalism that also need to be questioned.

Those of us so far who have written about democratic confederalism, in my opinion, have not answered many questions or have not been following this project properly. I know some of the comrades and friends who have written about it have not stayed in Rojava long enough to know about all sides of the society and investigate these issues. Additionally, those who have stayed long enough were comrades who were or are with the YPG/J.

Having saying all that, we should agree that when we write and analyse Rojava we should not isolate Rojava from the situation that surrounds it, we should see Rojava’s enemies inside and outside Syria and also the continuing war with Isis, the Assad Regime,

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<sup>22</sup> The Meaning of Confederalism | The Anarchist Library <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-meaning-of-confederalism.pdf>

Ocalan and PKK, at least at the moment, it is the task of political parties.

Finally we can ask ourselves a question: is what exists in Rojava democratic confederalism?

This is a difficult question especially for me to answer while I am confined to reading about Rojava, following the news on Rojava TV , Radio, websites and social media, especially Facebook. I believe that to answer this question properly and to understand all sides of this issue in relation to the future of Rojava, I may need to go there to do some essential research. This needs to include visiting cities, towns and villages, speaking to and interviewing people at every level and section of society. Visiting the Communes and participating in their meetings, following their decisions, seeing the Cooperatives, analysing the balance of power between the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem) and the PYD as well as between them and the Democratic Self-Administration (DSA) and many more work for me to do.

We have all noticed that there has been a lot written about democratic confederalism in Rojava. The vast majority of these writings are positive and supportive and agree that democratic confederalism has been built or at least is on its way to being built there.

I believe the main problem with those articles or essays were isolated the major things, events and the role, from the influence and the power of PYD. The comrades who wrote these articles did not think or did not want to mention that building confederalism and democratic confederalism should be the task of anarchists. It is the anarchists, not political parties, who should participate and involve themselves through the mass movement in this process of building confederalism and democratic confederalism, because some issues that come up can be resolved completely through the libertarian municipalism that is the foundation of the libertarian society. Bookchin wrote "before the class society there was "However we should not see democratic confederalism (or communalism) as sep-

type of economy the community needs is very different from any other type of economy that class-based societies have seen before. She says "Libertarian municipalism advances a form of public ownership that is truly public. The political economy it proposes is one that is neither privately owned, nor broken up into small collectives, nor nationalized. Rather, it is one that is municipalized - placed under community "ownership" and control."

"This municipalization of the economy means the "ownership" and management of the economy by the citizens of the community. Property - including both land and factories - would no longer be privately owned but would be put under the overall control of citizens in their assemblies. The citizens would become the collective "owners" of their community's economic resources and would formulate and approve economic policy for the community .....In a rational anarchist society, economic inequality would be eliminated by turning wealth, private property, and the means of production over to the municipality. Through the municipalization of the economy, the riches of the possessing classes would be expropriated by ordinary people and placed in the hands of the community, to be used for the benefit of all".<sup>10</sup>

The concept of Democratic Confederalism`

Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) both before and during his current imprisonment has thought about and analysed the PKK movement and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Blocks. He has also linked the experience and ideology of all the Communist parties in the world with one another, especially in the Middle Eastern Region, and observed that their achievements in real life are not what they claim. However, the trigger point for Ocalan was familiarising himself with Bookchin's ideas while in prison. Through his lawyer,

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<sup>10</sup> The politics of Social Economy, Libertarian Municipalism. Biehl, J. P 110 and 118 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6YOyGNakE86b3Rly2RZN0dySUE/view?usp=sharing>

Ocalan wrote to Bookchin a few times with a view to adapt his ideas to the context of the PKK, but Bookchin was near the end of his life.

At the beginning of this century, Ocalan realised that Bookchin's proposed citizens' assemblies and confederalism were the right solution for all the nations and ethnic minorities who are living in the countries of the region. He therefore rejected the idea of the nation-state. In fact he now believes the nation-state is the root of the problem rather than the solution and that it brought and still brings disaster to the people. He wrote "If the nation-state is the backbone of the capitalist modernity it certainly is the cage of the natural society ..... The nation-state domesticates the society in the name of capitalism and alienates the community from its natural foundations".<sup>11</sup>

He thinks that not only do nations have no future under the nation-state, but even individuals - the citizens - have no future, except for fitting themselves into a kind of modern society "The citizenship of modernity defines nothing but the transition made from private slavery to state slavery".<sup>12</sup>

Ocalan knew the root of the problem in many societies, like the Kurdish society, especially in the region he came from. For him it is not enough just to reject the nation-state, he believes people also need to concentrate on another major problem that has existed in society for a long time, women's issues. He read a lot about ancient society, from the time of the first civilisation over 10,000 years ago and the role of women through this period. He realised that all issues from the nation-state, through exploitation and slavery to women issues and gender equality are strongly connected and so cannot be resolved separately. Indeed, he thought exploitation started with the slavery and repression of women "Without

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Confederalism.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Confederalism.pdf>

true that Ocalan contacted his party and his people when he had the chance from his prison cell. He tried hard to convince them to transform the PKK into a social movement. As a result, there was a lot of discussion in 2012 and after about the idea of rejecting the nation-state, committing to a ceasefire and discussing anarchism. However the PKK did not transform into what many of us, probably Ocalan included, suggested and wanted.

Once all the contact between Ocalan and the outside was cut off in April 2015 and a new situation emerged when Erdogan announced a very brutal war against all Kurdish people, not just the PKK, the PKK became more militarised. So for the PKK it became more important to concentrate on fighting than to continue the discussion that commenced in 2012. In Rojava more or less the same thing happened. However, there, instead of having to fight the Assad Regime, it was forced to fight against Isis in defence of Kobane and other places\*. There is no doubt that during a war in any country the mass movement will be weaker and the military will be stronger. So too in Kurdistan, Bakur and Rojava, the PKK and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) became more powerful at the expense of the mass movement.

From this I can conclude that in Bakur and Rojava a couple of high-disciplinary and authoritarian political parties, PKK and PYD, are behind building democratic confederalism in both Kurdistan, Bakur and Rojava. It is these parties that are the ones making major decisions, planning and designing the policies, and also setting up diplomatic relationships with other countries and other political parties. It is they who negotiate with their enemies or the states, and make war or peace. Of course, these are very big issues and extremely important as they shape the future destination of the society. However, unfortunately it is the political parties which are making these decisions and not the people in their own assemblies and mass meetings, or through direct action.

For Bookchin building Libertarian Municipalities and confederalism is the task of people, or "Citizens" as he called them, but for



in Bookchin's view, historically provided the substrate of oppression out of which class relations were formed".<sup>20</sup>

However, Janet Biehl believes that Ocalan's theory is almost the same as Bookchin's and that Ocalan put Bookchin's theory into practice. As she said on one occasion: "The way I think of it, Bookchin gave birth to the baby, and Abdullah Ocalan raised it to a child."<sup>21</sup> She continued, noting that "Ocalan altered some of Bookchin's original model. Bookchin was an anarchist, and as such he was opposed to all hierarchies, of race, of sex, of gender, of domination by state, of interpersonal relations. Mr Ocalan emphasised gender hierarchy and the importance of the liberation of women. [That is] one of the biggest theoretical changes I can see." 10

In addition to these similarities and differences, in my opinion there is another main difference between Bookchin and Ocalan. Bookchin sees building libertarian municipalities as the foundation of confederalism. This building relies purely and completely on the education, organisation and participation of the people. Ocalan believes that participation is the people's own job and should be done through mass meetings/assemblies to discuss and debate existing and related issues, and that decisions should be made collectively. The main tool that can be used for this purpose is direct democracy and direct action.

For Ocalan, although the aim is the same, as I have shown above, the way of to get to the destination, to a certain extent, or at least as far as we can see in Rojava and Bakur, is different. Until this moment Ocalan is the leader of PKK and he is the spiritual leader of the Kurds in Bakur and Rojava, as well as of many people in Basur and Rojhalat [Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan respectively]. It is

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<sup>20</sup> The Murray Bookchin Reader. Edited by Janet Biehl (page 75) <https://archive.org/details/themurraybookchinreader>

<sup>21</sup> Golphy O. Rojava's democratic confederalism: the experiment of an American theory. 2016. [https://www.reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar/comments/4fxpd5/rojavas\\_democratic\\_confederalism\\_the\\_experiment/](https://www.reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar/comments/4fxpd5/rojavas_democratic_confederalism_the_experiment/)

woman's slavery none of the other types of slavery can exist let alone develop.....without the repression of the women the repression of the entire society is not conceivable".<sup>13</sup>

Ocalan is deeply concerned about women's issues and he thought even women is nation but a colonised nation. Testament to his genuine belief in what he wrote, is his insistence that the involvement of women is the first and essential step in the struggle to resolve their own issues as well as the entire problems of society. He was working on these ideas when he was in the mountains and he managed to involve many women in guerrilla fighting, even some non-Kurdish women. However, over time he became more aware of the role of women, not just in fighting the state with weapons, but in fighting the state in different ways and in building a new society based on Democratic Confederalism "The democratic confederalism of Kurdistan is not a State system," he wrote "It is the democratic system of a people without a State."<sup>14</sup>

Why was Ocalan so insistent on Democratic Confederalism? What is Ocalan's definition of this concept?

Ocalan shortened the definition of Democratic Confederalism to just few words "democratic, ecological, gender-liberated society.....or democracy without State".<sup>15</sup> He thought that capitalism has been built on three pillars: capitalist modernity, the nation-state, and industrialism, and he believed that people can replace these with "democratic modernity, democratic nation, communal economy and ecological industry"<sup>16</sup> respectively.

The idea of democratic confederalism for Ocalan is people organising to manage themselves. He sees it as a grassroots task, enacted by collective decisions made by the people themselves about

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Confederalism.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Confederalism.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Democratic Confederalism - ROAR Magazine

<sup>16</sup> Democratic Confederalism - ROAR Magazine

their own issues through direct democracy, which rejects control by the state or any dominant administration. He wrote “Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people. Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm. It is not controlled by a state. At the same time, democratic confederalism is the cultural organizational blueprint of a democratic nation. Democratic confederalism is based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to say “[Democratic Confederalism]...can be called a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state. Democratic decision-making processes must not be confused with the processes known from public administration. States only administrate [sic] while democracies govern. States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus”.<sup>18</sup>

Examining the definition and views of Bookchin about confederalism and of Ocalan about democratic confederalism, can we see similarities and differences between the two concepts and views? I personally see that both the concepts as well as Bookchin’s and Ocalan’s views on these concepts share many similarities. They may have chosen different conceptual labels, but the meaning of them and the aims are the same.

Minor differences are that Ocalan replaced the concept of confederalism with democratic confederalism and instead of using the concept of Libertarian Municipalism uses a different form of administration that has been put into practice in Rojava. As far as I know, Ocalan saw his theory as a solution to the conflicts and problems between the nations and ethnic minorities especially in the region he came from. However, Bookchin went further in that he believed that confederalism is the solution for all human beings and the way to end capitalist domination in every way. So for

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Confederalism.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Confederalism.pdf>

Bookchin confederalism is the solution to the problems that people are facing world-wide and not just in one region or some countries.

There is another difference. Ocalan in his analysis of the history of human civilization, exploitation and slavery believes that slavery started from the enslavement of women and hierarchy started from the domination of men over women, although elsewhere he agreed with Bookchin “I have repeatedly pointed out that the patriarchal society mostly consisted of the shaman, the elderly experienced sheikh, and the military commander. It may be wise to look for prototype of a new society within such development with “a new society” we mean a situation where hierarchy emerges inside the clan. The immanent division is finalised when hierarchy gives rise to permanent class-formation and a state-like organisation”.<sup>19</sup> The issue of hierarchy is the soul of Ocalan’s theory, as libertarian municipalism was for Bookchin, although both of them see hierarchy as the foundation of the class society. It is quite clear that Bookchin has looked at hierarchy and hierarchical society in greater depth than Ocalan, and at how domination existed before class society through the heads of tribes, heads of families, elders, and the domination of men over women. Janet Biehl wrote in the Bookchin Reader: “According to Marx “primitive egalitarianism” was destroyed by the rise of social classes, in which those who own wealth and property exploit the labor of those who do not. But from his observations of contemporary history, Bookchin realised that class analysis in itself does not explain the entirety of social oppression. The elimination of class society could leave intact relation of subordination and domination.....Bookchin emphasised that it would be necessary to eliminate not only social class but social hierarchies as well..... Hierarchy and domination,

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<sup>19</sup> Capitalism and unmasked gods and naked kings: Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization, Volume II (page 110). Published New Compass Press, Porsgrun, Norway and International Initiatives edition, Cologne, Germany 2017