



Sweeping the world clean of capitalism: Samir Amin, Abdullah Ocalan and the world of autonomous regions

Andrej Grubacic

To cite this article: Andrej Grubacic (2019): Sweeping the world clean of capitalism: Samir Amin, Abdullah Ocalan and the world of autonomous regions, Globalizations, DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2019.1654701](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1654701)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1654701>



Published online: 21 Aug 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 118



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Sweeping the world clean of capitalism: Samir Amin, Abdullah Ocalan and the world of autonomous regions

Andrej Grubacic

Department of Anthropology and Social Change, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to rethink Samir Amin's concept of delinking in terms of selective delinking and selective engagement. The notion of delinking is perhaps Samir Amin's most distinctive contribution to alternative development, as well as to a vision of a new kind of politics. Inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Ocalan, this talk will focus on stateless (con)federalism seen as an active dialectical engagement with the modern capitalist world-system, an active process of (dis)engagement capable of modifying the conditions of capitalist world-economy.

KEYWORDS

Delinking; democratic modernity; democratic confederalism; Kurds; Rojava

Samir Amin, a leading scholar and co-founder of the world-systems tradition, died on August 12, 2018. Just before his death, he published, along with close allies, a call for 'workers and the people' to establish a 'fifth international' [<https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/letter-intent-inaugural-meeting-international-workers-and-peoples>] to coordinate support to progressive movements. To honor Samir Amin's invaluable contribution to world-systems scholarship, we are pleased to present readers with a selection of essays responding to Amin's final message for today's anti-systemic movements. This forum is being co-published between Globalizations [<https://www.tandfonline.com/rglo>], the Journal of World-Systems Research [<http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/75>] and Pambazuka News [<https://www.pambazuka.org/>]. Additional essays and commentary can be found in these outlets.

Several years ago, Arturo Escobar proposed that we should rethink Samir Amin's concept of delinking in terms of selective delinking and selective engagement (Escobar, 2004). I find this proposal very compelling. It is important to note that the notion of delinking was never closed to adaptation. This intriguing strategic proposal was open to various interpretations, change and innovation. The notion of delinking is perhaps Samir Amin's most distinctive contribution to alternative development, as well as to a vision of a new kind of politics. The prospect of autocentric development, a refusal to submit to the demands of the worldwide law of value, has been proposed as a positive part of his dependency argument. In its first iteration, delinking was firmly based on the institution of the nation-state. Amin believed that the creative strength of the first phase in the history of the national liberation movement, the one that manifested itself in the nonaligned movement and anti-colonization struggles, has been exhausted. The new phase of the national liberation project requires a fresh logic of emancipation. The main actor in the strategy of delinking is the popular alliance forged by

the revolutionary intelligentsia and gathered around the nation state, seen as ‘the means to national protection and assertion, the instrument of what we have called “delinking”’ (Amin, 1990b, p. 181). If enough peripheral countries were to come together and pressure world capitalism from outside, the capitalist world system would shrink (Amin, 1990a). Amin was keenly aware of the cultural dimensions of the strategy and averse to any kind of cultural chauvinist nationalism; some of the most exciting pages of *Eurocentrism* (1989) were dedicated to this problem. Nor was delinking a form of autarky: ‘Delinking is neither commercial autarky, nor chauvinist culturalist nationalism (1990b, p. 231). In his later works, he spoke of delinking at the level of world regions or a network of world regions. Delinking was suggested as a part of the polycentric world of autonomous regions (1990b, p. 231). Regional delinking, thus defined, implies active dialectical relationship with the capitalist world-system, a process of selective cutting off and selective engagement, an active insertion capable of modifying the conditions of capitalist globalization. Refusing worldwide capitalist expansion does not necessitate isolation, but rather re-articulation of economic and political development in terms relevant to localized needs and concerns. I believe that delinking on a regional level offers an alternative project for the world left that should be further refined to fit new conditions. The place to start is the non-state space of Kurdish Rojava, and the theory behind the Rojava revolution. I do not know if Abdullah Ocalan has read Samir Amin in his Turkish prison cell. I suspect that he might have, as his ideas of delinking and regionalism bear a striking resemblance to those advocated by the great sociologist of unequal exchange.

Like Samir Amin, Ocalan believes that we live in the time when it is necessary to (re) invent a new kind of national liberation project. In Ocalan’s formulation, ‘when society and civilization meet, the main contradiction is between the state and democracy’ (2016, p. 63). In this collective effort to reinvent social emancipation, we need to recover, excavate and reinvent emancipatory energies and subjectivities of what he calls democratic modernity (Ocalan, 2011a, 2011b, 2015, 2016, 2017). Democratic modernity, a process and a project, is conceived not just as an alternative to capitalist accumulation, but as an entirely different civilization. The trialectics of democratic modernity includes liberation of nature from capitalism, liberation of democracy from the state, and liberation of women from masculine domination. Another defining element of democratic modernity is ‘democratic nation’. For Ocalan, the main problem of modernity is the coupling of power and state with the nation, ‘the most tyrannical aspect of modernity’. Nationalism is not just an obstacle, but a form of religious attachment imposed by the nation-state (Ocalan, 2017). The revolutionaries in Rojava speak of democratic nation as an alternative to statist nation. It is an ‘organization of life detached from the state’, as well as the ‘right of society to construct itself’ (2016, p. 21). Democratic nation is a collective based on free agreement and plural identity. Instead of an ethno-statist nation, an inevitable product of a network of suppression and exploitation, we encounter an innovative conceptualization of a form of collective life

that is not bound by rigid political boundaries, one language, culture, religion and interpretation of history, that signifies plurality and communities as well as free and equal citizens existing together and in solidarity. The democratic nation allows the people to become a nation themselves, without resting on power and state ... (2016, p. 21)

Thus defined, democratic nation does not require dominant ethnicity or a dominant language. The organization of collective life is based not on a homeland or a market, but on freedom and solidarity. Territory is important, and sense of belonging to a place is only natural, but as place-based (not place-bound) ‘tool for life’.

As Ocalan suggests,

the democratic nation is the model of a nation that is the least exposed to such illnesses of being a state nation. It does not sacralize its government. Governance is a simple phenomenon that is at the service of daily life. Anyone who meets the requirements can become a public servant and govern. Leadership is valuable, but not sacred. Its understanding of national identity is open-ended, not fixed like being a believer or a member of a religion. Belonging to a nation is neither a privilege nor a flaw. One can belong to more than one nation. To be more precise, one can experience intertwined and different nationalities ... With all these characteristics, the democratic nation is once again taking its place in history as a robust alternative to capitalist modernity's maddening instrument of war: nation-statism. (2016, p. 27)

The political expression of is democratic confederalism with democratic autonomy, which is a political expression of democratic nation, conceptualized as a pluricultural model of communal self-governance and democratic socialism.¹ He provides an elegant definition of democracy as 'a practice and process of self-governance in a non-state society ... Democracy is governance that is not state; it is the power of communities to govern themselves without the state' (2016, p. 62).

There is nothing permanent or fixed about the process of direct democracy and democratic autonomy. Democracy abhors timelines. As Ocalan writes in one of his most moving passages, the democratic nation

represents a truth that requires devotion at the level of real love. Just as there is no room for false love in this voyage, there is also no room for uncommitted travelers. In this voyage, the question of when the construction of the democratic nation will be completed is a redundant one. This is a construction that will never be finished: it is an ongoing process. The construction of democratic nation has the freedom to re-create itself at every instant. In societal terms, there can be no utopia or reality that is more ambitious than this. (2016, p. 60)²

Abdullah Ocalan has a keen interest in history. He rejects the liberal belief in 'natural perversity of mankind'. State and capitalism were a radical departure from natural tendencies towards democracy and cooperation, and they developed by crushing cooperative solidarities (Grubacic & O'Hearn, 2016). However, the state could never prevent people from relating differently to each other and to nature. Furthermore, history has demonstrated that capitalism and the state are inseparable facts and concepts that were developed in order to prevent direct association among people. In his view, democracy without state is not a new order, but a reconstitution of something that has always been present, that is always in existence, laid waste alongside the state. Democracy as self-government was a constructive force that flourished when small parts of humanity broke down the power of their rulers and re-assumed their freedoms in 'vibrant interstices', relatively autonomous from the intrusive power of the nation-state.

Therefore, progress assumes a different meaning in the conceptual language of democratic modernity.³ In this view, capitalist modernity suggests an experience of time as inevitable and linear progress with an attendant division between nature and culture, and an imagined and imposed international spatial hierarchical model (Konishi, 2015; Ocalan, 2011b).

He calls for radical overturning of the social Darwinism widely promoted by liberal intellectuals and state-centered social sciences. Against the civilization fueled by rationality, possessive individualism, and nation-states, he advocates a democratic civilization created by acts of everyday communism, self-organization, mutual interdependence and association. Against the utopian finality of a nation state, he emphasizes actually existing cooperative practices of mutual aid and voluntary association, as democratic practices retrieved from both past and present (Konishi, 2015; Ocalan, 2017). In agreement with the ideas of Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre (2014; also Konishi, 2015), Ocalan speaks of the 'power of everyday life'.

It is in this space of everyday life that cooperative society must be re-invented and recovered, power socialized and evenly re-distributed, as a democratic nation becomes 'once again' a restorative and creative historical force that 're-democratizes those societal relations that have been shattered by nation-statism'. Here, Ocalan's thought discloses a curious affinity with the historical sociology of Reinhart Koselleck (2004) and his notion of the temporality of lived time, or the temporality of possible futures and futures past. Society without the state is not society without history, but it is antagonistic to the capitalist present, resisting what Ocalan terms 'society-cide (2017)'. Society becomes ecological society, predicated on the liberation of women, referred to as the 'first colony' in the 5000 years long history of domination.

Progress is spontaneous and free experimentation with new social forms. He opposes the idea of progress and temporality that defined the imagined territorial utopia of liberal modernity. The resistance comes from the places and peoples least exposed to violence of the modern capitalist world-system. It points to the direction of delinking, or decentralization, both territorial and functional, as a way to encourage radical new forms of self-government that would return decision-making to local communities in democratic federal institutions (Grubacic & O'Hearn 2016).⁴ Decentralization, for Ocalan, is a form of social organization; it does not involve geographical isolation but a particular sociological use of geography. For Ocalan, democracy without a state presumes an interwoven network composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees. Federalism is seen as a basic principle of human organization. Defined as such, democratic confederalism is not a program for political change but an act of social self-determination.

This form of delinking from the world of capitalist modernity is effected through the production of alternative and oppositional conceptions of a non-state space, a recovery/invention of the new/old world that would consist of multiple autonomous micro-societies bound together within mutually agreed federal structures (Grubacic, 2011). Ocalan suggests a world-federation as a successor to the hierarchical inter-state organization of the capitalist world-system (Ocalan, 2011a, 2011b, 2017).⁵ The statist nation would be replaced by a geographical confederation of confederations, in which all affairs would be settled by mutual agreement, contract, and arbitration.

Ocalan maintains that the conditions 'are ripe in the twenty-first century to avoid the fate of confederal structures which were eliminated by the nation-states in the mid-nineteenth century, and to achieve the victory of democratic confederalism' (2016, p. 61). If the Kurds are today at the forefront of the struggle for the global democratization of society, that is because the liberation of Kurds is inextricably linked to the liberation of life, to the emancipation of humanity and nature:

In accordance with their historical and societal reality, the Kurds have vigorously turned towards the construction of a democratic nation. As a matter of fact, they have lost nothing by ridding themselves of a nation-state god in which they never believed; they are rid of a very heavy burden, a burden that brought them to the brink of annihilation. Instead, they have gained the opportunity to become a democratic nation. (2016, p. 60)

Indeed, who could be better poised to pave the way to a state-free modernity than stateless people engaged in a bitter anti-fascist struggle for dignity and life? The no-state socialism of Syrian Rojava becomes, in his words, a model for another Middle East, and another possible world of autonomous regions.

Weaving all these different threads together, he arrives at a definition of democratic modernity as an integral organization of democratic nation, communality and ecology. This 'system of liberated life' stands in stark opposition to the capitalist trinity of nation-state, capitalism, and industrialism.

Taken together, a utopian vision promoted by Ocalan, a vision of planetary delinking and planetary confederation, of nature in humanity and humanity and nature, of liberation of women, colonies and nature, of democratic socialism without a state, of democratic nation without nationalism, constitutes an insurgent and integral ecology of hope that should be placed in dialogue with the ideas of Samir Amin. Would Samir Amin be in favor of Ocalan's proposals? I have to say that I have my doubts. One of his more cherished ideas was a proposal for the fifth international, a global political party of the left. While he was a proponent of autonomous national projects, they were based on the concept of a statist-nation and worker/peasant -controlled states in the Global South. I suspect that Samir would have detected a disconcerting similarity with the ideas of the Zapatistas and the 'new' antiglobalization anarchists. We should not shy away from disagreements. If Amin was correct in his analysis of the crisis of the capitalist world-economy, we need to have as many creative disagreements as we can possibly afford. I won't attempt to hide my agreement with Ocalan's project of democratic autonomy. I think that an attempt to institute a global political party would be a mistake. The left needs to recover a part of its' history that was suppressed by various forms of Leninist internationalism. As Edward Thompson was fond of saying, history is forever unresolved: it is a field of unfinished possibilities. We reach back to refuse some possibilities and we reach back to select and develop others. That is what we need to do today. We need to refuse some historical possibilities. By this I refer to liberal vision of civilization and progress. But I would also mean refusing Lenin's vision of party-centered and state-centered internationalism and socialism. National liberation should be understood as democratic liberation from the statist-nation. Socialism should reinterpreted as movement against the state/party form. We should select and develop other unfinished possibilities. We should, as one Japanese exile had said, wake the people from their utopian dream of nation states, and sweep the world clean of capitalism, by reviving the old democratic project of libertarian communist modernity.

Notes

1. There is no doubt that Ocalan's thinking follows, and further develops, the (con)federalist project of other theorists of democratic modernity, including Peter Kropotkin and Murray Bookchin. Ocalan was mainly familiar with Bookchin, whom he read, and actively corresponded with, during his incarceration.
2. The alternative to capitalist modernity is democratic modernity, with the democratic nation at its core, and 'the economic, ecological and peaceful society it has woven within and outside of the democratic nation' (2016, p. 28). In opposition to nation-statism, democratic nation, "detaches" itself from the nation-state as a core institution of capitalist modernity (2011b). This would imply a deliberate fragmentation of the nation-state into non-state communities and townships linked together in complex new federal structures wherein the mutual relations of its members would be regulated by mutual agreement and social custom.
3. This is the real meaning of the curious formulation according to which 'The solution to the Kurdish question, therefore, needs to be found in an approach that weakens capitalist modernity or pushes it back' (2011b, p. 20). Ocalan's interpretation of history, just like Kropotkin's, is modern in a very peculiar sense: it is nonlinear and restoratively historical. History is projected into the future, and the present is seen as a product of backward capitalist modernity (Konishi, 2015).
4. For an in-depth conversation on de-linking as a strategy of democratic space-making see Grubacic and O'Hearn (2016).
5. Ocalan is quite clear that he sees Kurdish democratic autonomy as a model for the Middle East and the world, as 'an emerging entity' that 'expands dynamically into neighboring countries' (2011b, p. 36). The name of this emerging entity is democratic confederalism, a project that 'promises to advance the democratization of the Middle East in general' (2011b, p. 20).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Andrej Grubacic is Professor and Chair of Anthropology and Social Change at California Institute of Integral Studies-San Francisco. He works with the social science departments at Rojava University and Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences. He is the author and co-author of several books, including *Don't Mourn, Balkanize: Essays After Yugoslavia* (2011), *The Staughton Lynd Reader*, and *Living at the Edges of Capitalism: Adventures in Exile and Mutual Aid*.

References

- Amin, S. (1989). *Eurocentrism*. London: Zed Books.
- Amin, S. (1990a). *Delinking: Towards a polycentric world*. London: Zed Books.
- Amin, S. (1990b). *Maldevelopment: Anatomy of a global failure*. London: Zed Books.
- Escobar, A. (2004). Beyond the third world: Imperial globality, global coloniality and anti-globalisation social movements. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1), 207–230.
- Grubacic, A. (2011). *Don't mourn, Balkanize: Essays after Yugoslavia*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Grubacic, A., & O'Hearn, D. (2016). *Living at the edges of capitalism: Adventures in exile and mutual aid*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Konishi, S. (2015). *Anarchist modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian intellectual relations in modern Japan*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures past*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (2014). *Critique of everyday life*. London: Verso.
- Ocalan, A. (2011a). *The road map to negotiations*. Berlin: Mesopotamien.
- Ocalan, A. (2011b). *Democratic federalism*. Cologne: International Initiative Edition.
- Ocalan, A. (2015). *Manifesto for a democratic civilization, I*. Porsgrun: New Compass Press.
- Ocalan, A. (2016). *Democratic nation*. Cologne, Germany: Neuss International Initiative. Retrieved from <http://ocalan-books.com/english/democratic-nation.html>
- Ocalan, A. (2017). *Manifesto for a democratic civilization, II*. Porsgrun: New Compass Press.