

Epistemologies of Freedom Revisited

An Interview with Cihad Hami

Povzetek

Revidiran pogled na epistemologije svobode: Intervju s Cihadom Hamijem

Intervju je sestavljen iz dveh delov: v prvem, z naslovom *O epistemologiji*, ki je potekal po elektronski pošti, Cihad Hami spregovori o svojem pogledu na demokratični konfederalizem, politično filozofijo kurdskega političnega voditelja Abdullaha Öcalana, ki je navdihnila revolucijo v Rožavi. Deli tega intervjuja so bili pod naslovom *Epistemologije svobode* objavljeni na spletnem portalu *Kurdish Question* 29. avgusta 2015. Drugi del intervjuja z naslovom *Epistemologija v praksi* je potekal v živo v Hamburgu julija 2017. V njem Cihad Hami spregovori o svojem poznavanju današnjega delovanja ljudskih zborov v Rožavi.

Ključne besede: demokratični konfederalizem, Rožava, ljudski zbori

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Abstract

The interview consists of two parts. The first part, titled "*On Epistemology*", was conducted via email and explores Cihad Hami's perspective on democratic confederalism, the philosophy of Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan that inspired the Rojava Revolution. Portions of the interview were originally published under the name "*Epistemologies of Freedom*" by the online journal *Kurdish Question* on August 29, 2015. The second part of the interview, "*Epistemology in Practice*", was conducted in person in Hamburg, Germany, in June 2017. It addresses the Cihad Hami's knowledge about the practice of popular assemblies in Rojava today.

Keywords: democratic confederalism, Rojava, popular assemblies

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The following interview series is a reflection on social change and the nature of politics through the eyes of a young Kurdish activist from Kobane, Syria. Cihad Hami was raised in a family of small farmers in a hamlet outside Kobane. His family moved to Damascus in search of work in 1999. From 2009 to 2012, Cihad attended Damascus University's program in English Literature. When the Syrian revolution collapsed into civil war, his family returned to Kobane, which was then undergoing the Rojava Revolution. The Rojava Revolution meant not only that Kurds in Northern Syria were finally self-determining, it also meant enormous social transformation in the areas of art, culture, family and everyday life. For several months, Cihad worked as a translator until his family once again relocated to Turkey.

In 2015, Cihad resettled in Germany. Since then, he has been working as a freelance translator and plans to return to university to complete his bachelor's degree. Cihad has published several articles in English for *OpenDemocracy.net* and *KurdishQuestion.com*.

Part 1. On Epistemology

Can you tell me about Abdullah Öcalan's philosophy?

One of the major tasks of this new dialectical philosophy is to overcome dichotomies based on the division of subject and object. This division is found in society in common distinctions such as black/white, East/West, nature/society and so on. Domination and exploitation quickly arise from such thinking, as the active and intelligent subject (white, West, society, etc.) is separated and set above the passive and inferior 'object'. Öcalan recognized that in order to move beyond hierarchy and domination, a new way of thinking was necessary in order to recognize the unity in diversity of social life.

Why do you think the Left in the West doesn't offer more support to the Kurdish movement?

Oftentimes, the Western Left works and acts within the boundaries of capitalist epistemology (scientism, orientalism, reductionism, eurocentrism, positivism, etc.). This epistemology is based on the subject-object distinction and is reflected in various dichotomies such as body-spirit, black-white, west-east, north-south, etc. Under such distinctions, hierarchy and exploitation over nature and society gain more power than in previous ages in history. So, the Left approaches the Kurdish question with a capitalist epistemology, and because of this they lack a deep understanding of the Kurdish question. Another result is that the Left is often fragmented, un-systematized, and cannot put forth any coherent and rational theory that could unify the struggle and be an alternative to the capitalist world system. It is very sad to say that those on the Left are Left in the heart but capitalist in the mind, because they are loaded with capitalist conceptions.

Can you give an example of this?

Yes. Were not many American and European Leftists surprised by the Kurdish women fighters? This is because, in their minds, the Middle East is still 'backwards'. This duality between East and West is the root of orientalism. To overcome it, we must view society as a holistic and organic development. History is like a river, it cannot be cut. We have no West or East, but rather one history that is constantly moving and retains all human culture.

To break with capitalist epistemology, the Left needs to dive deeper into their own hidden history and revive their traditions of freedom and ideas of a utopia of freedom. They must also build a holistic theory provided for by the unity of natural sciences and social sciences. That new theory can be called 'the epistemology of freedom', which could serve as a counter-knowledge to capitalist epistemology.

What do you mean by an 'epistemology of freedom'?

As you know, epistemology studies the nature of knowledge. According to Edgar Morin, knowledge can be defined as a translation and reflection of reality, through one's perception, language, ideas and theories. We can look and find various methods of knowledge that humans have developed over the course of history to deal with their surroundings and manage their lives. The primary ones are: mythical, religious, philosophical and scientific.

In order to grasp the nature of these knowledges, one should put them under critical scrutiny. To do so, it requires a holistic understanding of social and natural sciences. And the doorway to starting that quest is history. Here I would like to stress that history is not a mere sequence of dead events that happened in a certain period of the past; rather, history is fulfilled by the here-and-now – to use Walter Benjamin's phrase. Without a comprehensive understanding of history, both the present and the future will be bereft of sufficient truth.

Each method of knowledge retains within itself contradictions along hierarchical and libertarian lines. In this context, one can tell that we don't have just one single knowledge but rather knowledges. Thus knowledge can be classified: the dominant knowledge and oppressed or hidden knowledge. These two knowledges struggle together throughout history. This struggle goes back to the beginning of the rise of hierarchy.

What do you mean by the beginning of the rise of hierarchy and oppressed knowledge?

Hierarchy was initiated¹ by a coalition of men, namely, the elder, the hunter

¹ According to Abdullah Öcalan's historical analysis, the system of patriarchal state capitalism that we struggle against today is rooted in the development of the Sumerian clerical state, the subordination of women, nature and slaves from other tribal groups acquired through warfare (Öcalan and Happel, 2011).

and the shaman, who aligned their accumulated experiences and knowledge with force and violence to dominate society, and particularly women. At that time, women had also their own wisdom and experience to manage life in terms of food, sex and protection. According to anthropological records, during the era before the rise of hierarchy, women administrated the community. This administration was characterized by being relatively libertarian. Furthermore, the records show the absence of notions such as domination, command and coercion.

With the emergence of hierarchy, a cleavage between knowledges emerged. The hierarchical or dominating knowledge—led by the coalition of men mentioned above—and the hierarchical or oppressed knowledge that preceded before the rise of hierarchy. This struggle has continued throughout all methods of knowledge. For example, if one thoroughly examines Sumerian myths and epics, one can notice the struggle between the dominating knowledge and the counter-knowledge in myths such as the *Enûma Elish*, the Babylonian epic, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

One ought not to forget that these mythical stories were written by the dominant power to glorify the deeds of their rulers or 'God-heroes', who were males. Their counterparts, who in the epics are defeated, are Goddesses. This is very obvious in the epic of *Enûma Elish*, in which the male God, Marduk, is depicted as epitomizing order and heroism while the mother-goddess Tiamat is chaos and evil. The struggle in the epic is not merely a battle between two armies but rather describes an ongoing war between the heritage of an organic society's knowledge and traditions, which is characterized by non-hierarchical institutions structured around ethics, cooperation and relatively egalitarian values, and institutions based on hierarchy, patriarchy and class interests intertwined in the heart of the state, which perpetuates itself by coercion and violence.

Thus, one cannot simply take history as it is. Reading history upside down would be closer to the truth. There ought to also be a focus on unwritten history. For the latter encompasses the history of people and their struggle, and the written history is the history of power and rules.

Why does the origin of this hierarchical society matter today?

The heritage of the male-god Marduk was retained in the Abrahamic monotheistic religions. This explains why God is male in religious discourse, whereas the mother-Goddess has been condemned to be an object that has no power other than to obey the orders of the male.

Yet it is not a coincidence that from the very same place arises the idea of freedom. According to Samuel Noah Kramer, an expert in Sumerian history and Sumerian language, the word 'freedom' initially appears in a Sumerian cuneiform tablet that gives an account of a successful popular revolt against a highly oppressive regal tyranny. The word is *amargi*, which literally means 'return to the mother' (Bookchin, 2005; Kramer, 1959). This means, in my point of view,

a return to the era before the rise of hierarchy, patriarchy, state and class. We are still on this quest today.

Part 2. Epistemology in Practice

In this section of the interview, Cihad draws from the experience of his own village, Dihaben, to explain the practice of democratic confederalism. Dihaben is just five kilometers south of Kobane, a predominantly Kurdish city on the Syrian-Turkish border. Few outside the region had heard of Kobane prior to the Syrian civil war. This, however, changed dramatically starting in 2014, when the Islamic State (ISIS) targeted Kobane for Kurdish genocide. Armed with high-tech US military gear acquired during their raids of American and Iraqi military bases, ISIS attacked Kobane and the surrounding flatlands. Kobane was relatively defenseless, having few industrial or military resources and little infrastructure. However, rather than submitting, ordinary Kurds in Kobane formed civic militias called People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ). A months-long battle ensued, resulting in an improbable Kurdish victory. Following that victory, Kobane has become a powerful international symbol of freedom and resistance.

In many ways, Dihaben is a typical Kurdish village. Its one-story buildings are made of straw and mud-brick, a building method dating back to the Neolithic Age. Its inhabitants grow potatoes, grains and vegetables. They also herd cows and goats to produce milk, meat and cheese. Yet it is here and in hundreds of other villages like it that people are courageously seeking to practice a new kind of stateless, participatory democracy based on popular assemblies, or *communes*. Through this system, called *democratic confederalism*, Cihad's 'epistemology of freedom' finds expression in everyday life.

Cihad and I sit down to discuss the practice of democratic confederalism in his home in Hamburg, Germany. Behind him, a picture of Rosa Luxemburg hangs on the wall. We begin rather abruptly—I blurt out: "So how do the communes *actually work*?" He agrees that there are too few detailed accounts of how decisions in Rojava are made, especially given the abundance of international attention Rojava has received. He replies with an example: "Okay, how might people in the village go about building a bakery?" Although this may appear as a simple task, during wartime no task is simple. Indeed, throughout Rojava, bread is a pressing concern. Rojava is currently under embargoes from all sides—Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Along the northern border, Turkey refuses to allow the passage of provisions, including food, medical supplies and building equipment of any kind. The same is true along Rojava's border with Iraq, which is governed by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Barzani regime, who are hostile to Abdullah Öcalan and Kurdish groups that are anti-capitalist. Furthermore, for decades the Assad family's Baath regime kept Rojava in a state of perpetual underdevelopment to prevent practical

steps taken toward Kurdish autonomy. The construction of factories, heavy infrastructure and even large facilities was prohibited. There are even no hospitals in Kobane, only small clinics. As a result, since the war, villages like Dihaben have had to reinvent their own economic means of subsistence.

So how do the communes *actually* work?

My village is a small one, about ten to fifteen families. Sometimes that becomes as few as five families because people leave for the cities. But more or less, it is ten families. So these people meet every one or two weeks according to their needs. All the people—women and men—come together and talk about the problems that they are facing. For example, that they don't have a good amount of bread or that they don't get bread in time because of the distance between the city and the village.

In villages, people already meet and interact every day. They're neighbors. They work the land together and help each other. Sometimes they'll all get together in one house [for entertainment]. It's very normal to meet in one house, especially during the summer, when they rest and drink tea.

Then, if there is a problem, they say, "Let's meet officially." For example, "Let's meet on Friday after *salat*" (prayer). So on Friday they meet and they talk about their needs. I would call this their 'logical needs', like the bakery. So, they decide: "we need a bakery," and they tell that to the delegate.

What is a delegate? How do they work?

Every village has its own commune. And every commune has its own representative, or delegate to the municipality, which is larger. So, my village is connected with a town, Sheren, and in that town, there is a municipality. My village is only two kilometers from that town; it does not go straight to Kobane. So, our village is part of that municipality, which is the hub of about 20 villages. One of my cousins is the co-chair of this municipality.

So every village has a commune. They gather and they elect their delegate. The delegates must comprise 50% women and 50% men and, of course, there are also the youth.

I was talking about the problem of building a bakery, or getting bread. So that delegate would go to the town, where the municipality is located. At the municipality, the delegates meet and they study the problem, they look and see what the needs are. If it's logical and reasonable, they talk to the delegate about financing and about how much of what resources they need. So, if the municipality agrees to a bakery, they build it.

What if the municipality says no?

There is no 'no'. The decision is built on the will of the people, so if there's something that the people need, they have to do it. They don't have the power to

say no. It just administrates. The job of the municipality is to study how it needs to be built, the place it needs to be built, how many workers should work there, in the bakery, and how many hours the bakery should be in operation according to that village. But the one who makes those decisions is that small commune.

What if they don't have the money?

If they don't have the money, they ask the municipality in Kobane.

The good thing is that those 20 villages meet every month. Because every village has its own commune and its own delegate, the council of the delegates meets in the municipality. They coordinate with each other. They can share goods—things that one village has that the others don't have.

Then, that municipality [*Sheren*] meets regularly with the municipality in Kobane. So it's like that. Every neighborhood has its own commune and its own delegate.

I also asked this question to my cousin—what if the municipality wants, for example, to build a school in my village? The answer is that municipality has no right. If the communes don't agree with it, the decision won't be taken.

The delegates rotate, correct?

Yes, the delegate is the link. They don't have the right to impose order. Their main job is to connect the network between the commune and the municipality. They simply discuss the people's demands with the municipality.

How do you vote on a delegate for your town?

Like I said, you have 20 villages and you meet. They vote for people most capable of this responsibility—I wouldn't call it power. It's a responsibility. The people most suitable for this job are the ones who know how to talk and how to discuss. For example, I have my family: I would say, I propose my brother Shero. And my cousin might say that she proposes her sister. Out of the 10 people, there will be four chosen to take this position, to take this responsibility. It's democratic, it's based on majority rule.

But there is something here. If the delegate makes mistakes, if they violate the morals of the community, they will be flexibly replaced. The town will come together and say this person has made a mistake that is against the philosophy of the communes, against the people, and so this person is no longer in that delegate position and he becomes once again a normal member of the commune.

It's a hard job to get people to know this system because it's very new. One year after the Revolution, the PYD [Democratic Union Party] made a process for education.

At the end of 2013 and in early 2014, people who had a good knowledge of Öcalan and a good knowledge of this philosophy, they would form groups—Ferhad's group was five people—and they would go to each village to educate

them about the communes and they would set up a commune. So it was started by people like Ferhad, PYD members, PKK members, who understood it very well. They would go and set up communes.

In 2013, my brother Ferhad and his friends would go to each village to educate people about how this system should be run. Before setting up a commune, they would go talk to a village one time, two times, three, four, five times. When the village was ready, they would then sponsor the election. Then the people would run the commune by themselves. So setting up the communes began like that.

When I came to Turkey in 2013, this process of building communes was just starting. Now its 2017 and the people know how the system functions. They know how to set up these communes run without asking people like PYD fighters or PKK members.

I didn't realize that your village was so politically active.

I didn't know that either!

When I met with my cousin [the municipal co-chair] in Turkey in 2014, she was not interested in politics. But then when we met later, she was explaining the details of democratic confederalism to me—in practice! I was really surprised. I was asking her questions, trying to figure out if there was any contradiction between theory and practice—you know me, I'd say if there was a contradiction—but it was just like how Bookchin tells it. I was truly amazed. After I talked to her, I was really optimistic.

She wasn't interested in politics?

She was not interested in politics *at all!* But her father, my uncle, was pro-PKK. But before [the revolution], she was not interested in politics; she would not know how to talk about Öcalan's ideas. She was sympathetic I would say, because of the family. But now she talks in a very powerful way. She has been trained, she speaks with confidence. And she has also a very strong personality now. I realized that, too. I was amazed by that. She's a co-chair of a very, very important town in the Kobane canton. It's the first town outside of the Kobane municipality, it's very important. And the other co-chair is a man about 50 years old. She is only 24 and they work together. [He smiles.]

That is a big change in this society. Before the revolution, a man would not listen to a girl—but now they talk, they eat with each other, they do politics. She said to me, "My decision is possibly even more important than his," because she is a woman. If my cousin does not accept the decision then the decision will not be honored.

What kinds of things do you think could improve?

I think the communes are functioning very well in meeting the people's material needs. But there is still a lack on the political level. It is functioning very well

at the level of everyday needs, like 100%. But I think, politically, because of war, because of the situation in the Middle East, a lot of people still don't know this system, or they don't accept it. They still believe in the power of the state; they still don't trust themselves. They don't trust that they can run something.

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