Kurdish issues have come into stronger focus recently, with the siege of Kobane, and realisation that Kurdish fighters represent the frontline against Islamic State, in Syria as well as Iraq. Yet the deeper significance of Kurdish struggles for democracy and autonomy remain hazy for many people, as well as the key importance of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, and his extraordinary prison writings. Manifesto for a Democratic Civilisation is the sixth of his books, written in solitary confinement on an island jail in Turkey, to be translated into English.

Manifesto revisits themes in the first of these books, The Roots of Civilisation, in particular the outline of a continuity between ancient Sumerian civilisation and modern society. Many of us are familiar with the origins of many modern institutions in ancient Greece and Rome in particular, but also in Egypt and Babylon. Ancient Sumerian culture is a lot less familiar, and seems distant and exotic, with its unknown-origin language, and lack of unity among a long list of independent city states.

Manifesto is the first volume in a new series, and its subtitle is suggestive and provocative: Civilization. The Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings. A main argument is that the contours of what we call ‘civilisation’ were laid down over 5,000 years ago by the Sumerians - and the term ‘civilisation’ is not used in a complimentary way. Öcalan clearly agrees with Gandhi’s well-known quip about western civilisation – “that would be a very good idea”. ‘Civilisation’ here means what pretends to be civilised but is actually based on extreme forms of structural violence and exploitation – ‘a continuous genocide of freedom’ - in contrast with the more peaceful, much less hierarchical, neolithic society which preceded the Sumerians.

Ocalan traces several stages in the increase of ancient Sumerian violence, including the exploitation of labour that culminated in slavery, and the ‘housewifization’ of women, who were also exploited in ziggurats through the custom of temple prostitution. Ziggurats embodied the hierarchy within society, with priests orchestrating the production of a lavish surplus, and gradually ceding power to kings. The subjugation of women, to Ocalan, was symbolised by the defeat in later Sumerian mythology of the goddess (of love and war) Inanna (planet Venus, and key deity of Uruk) by the water/earthly creation god Enki (Mercury, and key deity of Eridu).

North of Mesopotamia (Iraq) lie the Zagros-Taurus mountain ranges, in the heart of Kurdistan, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers originate, and the people of these mountains had a close influence on the origins and development of ancient Mesopotamia.

Kurds are the main people occupying these ranges today, and in many ways they represent an enduring continuity with their ancestors who lived here 5-10,000 years earlier. Ocalan’s books draw attention to the central significance that Kurds occupy in world history, not least because most of the world’s first urban/stone-built centres have been discovered in south Turkey/Kurdistan such as Çatal Höyük and Göbekli Tepe, which are associated with the domestication of wheat and other markers of the neolithic revolution. Ocalan argues convincingly, though against mainstream orthodoxy, that the neolithic revolution was essentially an Indo-european phenomenon, that Indo-european society developed here, in the Zagros-Taurus mountain ranges and what is now Kurdistan, before it travelled East and West, to India and Europe; and that Sumerian society developed out of these roots, whatever the mysterious origins of the Sumerian language, and whatever the relation was with the Akkadian-speaking Semitic peoples who later ruled over the Mesopotamian city states.

To some – especially when we are not used to a Kurdish-centric world view! - these arguments may appear far-fetched. Yet what seems certain is that Sumerian society developed in relation to the tribal people who lived in the Zagros-Taurus mountains, and that these people were indeed Indo-european – tribes such as the Gutians, who conquered the Akkadian empire around 2150BC and ruled it for approximately 100
years. Akkadians were the Semitic-speaking people who established a centralised state under ‘Sargon the Great’ about 2270BC.

If the Gutians, and before them the Hurrians, whom Öcalan calls ‘proto-Kurds’ and places at the epicentre of the expanding neolithic settlements at c.6000-4000BC, are a hazy precursor of Indo-European hegemony, the Mitanni and Hittites (associated with Troy as a western outpost), who rose to power about 1600BC and conquered Assyria for over 200 years, were certainly Indo-European. They are thought to have spread use of the chariot south to Egypt, west to Greece, and maybe even east towards India, and of iron weapons. After Mitanni came the Medes, who rose to power through a confederacy of ancient tribes around 715BC, and ended up destroying Assyria and Babylonia, paving the way for the rise of the Persian empire.

By ‘the Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings’ Öcalan denotes an enduring model of ‘civilisation’, that lasted from Sumerian times up to the European Renaissance at the threshold of capitalism about 500 years ago, when ‘the age of naked kings and unmasked gods’ begins. A paradox here: the age of ‘disguised kings’ is the age of rulers who acted out the role of kings and emperors with all the pomp and pretence of divine right; while ‘masked gods’ denotes the polytheism that took over from deities more directly representing natural forces, characteristic of tribal societies – a masking process that can be observed in the rituals presided over by priests in the ziggurat: ‘the initial masked gods were the Sumerian priests but just behind them…. were the disguised… kings’. Afterwards, in the transition from Uruk’s ascendancy to that of Ur, ‘The masked gods, who gave birth to the state, became progressively subordinate to the disguised king.’

Naked kings and unmasked gods here represent the modern elites who have done away with the pomp and pretence of kingship, their values of naked self-interest and profit, and the state itself. Rome is viewed as the last and strongest ‘god-king civilization’. It merits more space than this book gives it in laying down the structures of modern power, where propaganda about ‘Pax Romana’ and ‘foundations of modern Law’ masked constant conquest and exploitation of other lands and theft from weaker sections of society.

The book starts with an exposition on method, drawing a line over the methodology of mainstream Marxism, quoting Foucault to criticise
Lenin and the Soviet system for using the capitalist state’s method of knowledge and power, and dismissing positivism as ‘contemporary idolatry’, with emphasis instead on intuition, doing away with the false dualism between material and spirit, or object and subject: ‘a two-way legitimacy for capitalist modernity’, which ‘acquires most of its power from erroneous social construction’.

Poignantly, Öcalan speaks with the experience of a long-term prisoner: ‘love for truth is the only guarantee of free life’. Epistemology should be based on ‘independence of mind’. The aim is a ‘sociology of freedom’, that recognizes how much of what we see as reality is a social construction.

Among key influences, he cites Max Weber’s critique of modernity as ‘the trapping of the society in an iron cage’, Fernand Braudel, Adorno, Foucault, Wallerstein, Edward Said for his critique of Orientalism, recognizing from a Middle Eastern perspective, the priority of society over individualism that erodes society, and also Murray Bookchin, whose book *Ecology of Freedom* has been a significant influence on Öcalan’s transition from traditional Marxist-Leninism to a more ecological view: ‘Democratic society should be anti-industrialist and economy and technology should be ecologically sound’.

Recognising the mother goddess as a symbol of neolithic society, inculcating strong moral values that linked people with nature, Öcalan admits his own ‘biggest delusion’ when ‘I too fell for the disease of modernity’, undervaluing his mother and farmer father, killing birds for sport, describing his transition to a realisation that ‘modernity is backward’ – an ecological consciousness: ‘The only way that cities can become fit for human dwelling is to transform them into ecological villages’. He quotes Adorno that ‘the wrong life cannot be lived rightly’ and sees genocide as the great crime this wrong life is based on.

Öcalan traces women’s subjugation, which became pronounced around 2000BC and continued through ancient Greece, impervious to the wonderful advances men were making. This feminist historiography was spelt out in his previous book *Liberating Life: Women’s Revolution* (2012), and the Kurds fighting Islamic State in north Syria arguably represent the world’s most women-liberated society ever, resisting the most misogynist.
There is relatively little on the Kurds in this book, though by implication, they are inheritors of neolithic, nature- and community-based society, along with other indigenous peoples presently struggling for survival against naked capitalist interests, and Öcalan expresses his view that ‘the societies that preceded civilisation can never be annihilated’. As he spelt out in his first books, in many ways Kurds, and their struggles for basic freedoms, are important on the world stage because they have been resisting assimilation into the mainstream for 5,000 years.

The book ends with the theme that human beings have to make a transition from false kings and gods to a genuine ‘democratic civilisation’. Öcalan’s writings are important because they emphasize the destructive patterns inherited from ‘ancient civilisations’, that we have failed to get free of, and because they have had such a profound impact in Kurdish communities in north Syria and Turkey, that have given form to a model of federal, multi-ethnic democracy that questions the nation state and empowers women to a completely equal level with men, not as an aim, but as a starting point, already widely implemented in political structures.

There is a lot that must be learnt from the Kurdish democratic movement, and its inspiration in Öcalan’s writings, if we humans are ever to progress beyond the power structures laid down in ancient Sumer, Greece and Rome, based on exploitation, oppression and unceasing wars. As this book asks, why do we call those civilisations so long ago ‘ancient’? We humans were young then, inexperienced in how to handle power over large populations. Athenian democracy was soon obliterated by Alexander and the Romans, and to realise its potential we need to forge fresh power structures, beyond control of corporate interests and capital. It is the society we live in now that is ancient, like Rome, contemplating a terrible fall after centuries of increasing corruption and incessant wars. Is it still possible that we can we break free from enslavement to past structures, rejuvenate our political impulses, and develop into a peaceful, truly democratic civilisation?