

# Freedom and Socialism

For a renewal of Socialism in the 21st century



*Lêgerîn Special Editions*

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*All notes are from the Lêgerîn Editorial Team.*

*Lêgerîn is a world-wide media platform built by and for the internationalist revolutionary youth. Its ideological line is connected to the paradigm of Democratic Modernity, developed by Abdullah Öcalan from the ongoing revolution in Kurdistan.*

# Introduction

The problem of social freedom is one of the most central yet also one of the most contested themes in modern political thought. Within the Marxist tradition in particular, freedom has largely been associated with the transformation of relations of production and the abolition of class domination. While this approach has provided a powerful theoretical framework for exposing the structural functioning of capitalist exploitation, historical experience has shown that freedom does not automatically emerge solely through the transformation of economic relations.

The fact that relations of domination can be reproduced in different forms even under conditions where class power has changed demonstrates that the question of freedom requires a deeper theoretical interrogation. It is therefore clear that social freedom must be examined together with the relationship established with being and the way society understands itself. In other words, freedom is not a political gain to be achieved at a later stage; it is a process shaped within ontological<sup>1</sup> assumptions, social relations, and forms of practical action. When the human being and society are treated as fixed essences, freedom is inevitably constrained. By contrast, approaches that conceive being as relational, processual, and historical expand the material and social conditions of freedom.

In this context, Abdullah Öcalan's<sup>2</sup> approach to socialism as communalism<sup>3</sup> should not be read as a rejection of classical dialectical materialism. On the contrary, it should be discussed as an attempt to update it in order to overcome the limits revealed through historical experience. Öcalan's treatment of ontology, sociology, and socialism as interwoven

necessities makes it possible to rethink freedom as a problem of social existence that is not confined to a change in power.

The question can therefore be formulated as follows: can social freedom be established solely through the transformation of relations of production, or is an understanding of being and social ontology a constitutive component of this process? Framed around this question, it becomes possible to acknowledge the strengths of the classical Marxist conception of freedom while also making visible the theoretical and practical impasses created by the neglect of the ontological dimension. In this direction, the article will first examine the approach of classical dialectical materialism<sup>4</sup> to the problem of freedom and the limits that emerged in historical practice. It will then discuss the relationship between ontology and freedom, analyzing the determining effect of the modes of existence of the human being and society on political practice.

In the following sections, the necessity of expanding class-centered analyses will be addressed within a sociological framework, and Abdullah Öcalan's communalist conception of socialism will be positioned at the intersection of these theoretical debates. The study will conclude by discussing how dialectical materialism can be carried toward a more historical and inclusive framework through the incorporation of ontological and social dimensions.

## Classical dialectical materialism and the problem of freedom

Dialectical materialism constitutes one of the most powerful theoretical frameworks

of modern social critique. With Marx and Engels, history came to be understood on the basis of material relations of production, and social transformation was defined as being driven by class struggle. This approach removed freedom from the realm of moral or legal abstraction and reframed it as a historical problem tied to the transformation of material conditions. In particular, the labor-exploiting structure of the capitalist mode of production occupies a central place in explaining why freedom is systematically constrained.

Within the classical Marxist framework, freedom is treated as a historical outcome that becomes possible through the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the end of class domination. In this context, the state is defined as an instrument of oppression of the ruling class and is assumed to wither away with the disappearance of classes. Freedom is thus positioned as a social condition that will emerge after the seizure of political power and the transformation of relations of production.

Although this approach appears theoretically coherent, historical experience has revealed certain limitations. Socialist experiments across different geographies throughout the twentieth century have shown that freedom was not automatically established despite profound transformations in relations of production. Rather than disappearing, the state apparatus in many cases became more centralized and interventionist, while domination over social life was reproduced in different forms. This experience suggests that freedom cannot be reduced solely to the transformation of the economic base. At this point, the conception of freedom within dialectical materialism encounters two fundamental problems. First, freedom is often

postponed to the future, becoming a deferred objective. Existing authoritarian practices are legitimized as temporary necessities, and freedom is relegated to a post-revolutionary stage.

Second, the human subject is largely defined by class position, while everyday practices, cultural relations, gender regimes, and the micro-level functioning of power are treated as secondary fields. This makes it difficult to grasp how domination penetrates the entire social fabric.

What must be emphasized here is that these limitations are not inevitable outcomes of Marx's theory itself. The concept of praxis that emerges in Marx's early writings demonstrates that human beings are not merely products of material conditions; in transforming these conditions, they also transform themselves. However, within much of the Marxist tradition, this ontological dimension receded into the background in the face of an emphasis on historical determination. Dialectics was often confined to the sphere of production, and freedom was not addressed as a problem encompassing the totality of social existence.

Therefore, the impasse of classical dialectical materialism regarding the problem of freedom does not stem from neglecting the material foundation, but from defining the material within an overly narrow framework. Relations of production remain decisive; yet when the ways in which these relations are reproduced through human conceptions of being, social bonds, and everyday practices are not sufficiently explained, the question of freedom remains incomplete. This assessment makes it necessary to expand dialectical materialism through ontological and social dimensions.

## **Ontology: The conception of being and the question of freedom**

Approaching the problem of freedom solely on political or economic grounds constitutes one of the fundamental limitations of modern social theory. Classical dialectical materialism offers a powerful historical analysis by placing relations of production at its center; however, it often leaves in the background the deeper bonds through which human beings relate to the world. At this point, ontology, that is, the question of being, emerges as a decisive field for understanding the ground upon which freedom becomes possible. Ontology asks how the human being exists in the world. The human being is not merely an entity that produces, provides labor power, or is defined by class position. At the same time, human existence is characterized by meaning-making, relationality, and the interpretation of both self and environment. In this sense, ontology shows that social relations are not composed solely of external structures; human beings internalize and reproduce these structures in lived practice. Without a transformation in the conception of being, claims to lasting social freedom become difficult to sustain.

The fundamental critiques directed at modern philosophy by Martin Heidegger are illuminating here. According to Heidegger, modern thought reduces being to an object, privileging what is measurable, calculable, and controllable. This approach compresses the human relationship with the world into a technical and instrumental register. Being ceases to be a lived and shared process and instead becomes a domain to be managed and regulated. Such a conception normalizes domination, turning it from an exceptional condition into an ordinary one.

This ontological narrowing is not unique to capitalism. A similar problem can be observed in state-centered socialist experiences. Even where the means of production have been nationalized, human existence continues to be defined through mechanisms of central planning, representation, and discipline. Freedom shifts from a relation continuously produced within social practice to a goal administered from above. This creates a new field of tension between emancipation and power.

At this point, the approach of Abdullah Öcalan brings ontology to the center of political theory. For him, the problem is not limited to property relations or class contradictions; the more fundamental issue lies in how human beings conceive of themselves and society. When being is understood as a constantly evolving web of relations, freedom also ceases to be a static condition and becomes a practice that is constructed, disrupted, and reconstructed in everyday life. Within this perspective, freedom is transformed from a promise deferred to the future into a responsibility of the present.

This ontological framework also maintains a critical distance from identity-based or nationalist modes of existence. Fixed identities, immutable essences, and singular historical narratives treat “being” as a frozen structure. By contrast, a relational conception of being requires individuals to define themselves through the bonds they form with others. This makes it possible to conceive freedom not as individual or collective property, but as a process continuously reconstituted within shared life.

From this vantage point, there is no hierarchical relationship between ontology, sociology, and socialism. Ontology provides the

ground for sociological analysis. Sociology reveals the social manifestations of ontological assumptions. Socialism, in turn, offers a practical orientation aimed at transforming both in the direction of freedom. When the ontological dimension is neglected, socialism is inevitably reduced to an administrative model. Abdullah Öcalan's intervention is directed precisely against this reduction.

## **Sociology: The limits of class and the plural forms of social domination**

Classical Marxist sociology analyzes society primarily through relations between classes. The bond established with the means of production determines an individual's social position, while politics, law, culture, and ideology take shape upon this material foundation. This approach is highly effective in exposing the structural inequalities of capitalist society. Over time, however, it has proven insufficient for explaining all forms of social domination.

Even though it has lost its homogeneity, class and class analysis remain indispensable for understanding the functioning of modern capitalism. Yet when examined on historical and anthropological grounds, class alone does not provide an explanation encompassing society as a whole. It is well known that hierarchies, gender-based inequalities, and religious and cultural forms of domination existed in pre-state or semi-state societies. This suggests that domination did not begin solely with class relations, but is connected to older and deeper forms of social organization.

It is precisely at this point that Abdullah Öcalan's sociological intervention gains significance. For Öcalan, class is an important form of social domination, but not its first or constitutive form. The rupture experienced by society with the advent of state civilization was not merely an economic transformation; it was also a mental, cultural, and organizational break. Male domination, hierarchical authority, relations of representation, and centralization took shape prior to class formation and deepened alongside it.

This perspective moves sociology beyond a narrowly economic field of analysis. Society is approached both as a product of relations of production and as a living structure constituted through values, norms, habits, and everyday practices. Domination cannot be observed solely in the factory or in property relations, because it is reproduced within the family, language, education, and political representation. This renders an understanding of the struggle for freedom as merely a class conflict inadequate.

Within the Marxist tradition, attempts have been made to address this gap in different ways. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Louis Althusser's analysis of ideological apparatuses, and later currents of cultural Marxism represented important steps toward overcoming class reductionism. Yet these contributions often remained limited in questioning the centralized state and party model. Social transformation continued to be conceived as a process organized from above.

Öcalan's sociological framework, by contrast, recenters society itself. Society is not a passive mass; it is a subject with the capacity for self-organization. Communes, assemblies, and local forms of organization are

therefore not merely administrative units, but constitutive spaces of social emancipation. Here, sociology does not confine itself to analyzing relations between classes; it becomes a field of knowledge that reveals society's potential for self-governance.

At this point, class is not rejected, but it ceases to be the sole determining axis. Class struggle, gender struggle, ecological struggle, and the pursuit of cultural freedom are addressed as intertwined processes. This approach acknowledges that social domination is not monocentric and carries the struggle for freedom onto a plural terrain.

In conclusion, this sociological expansion does not contradict the core insights of Marxism; rather, it deepens them historically and socially. Class analysis is preserved, but repositioned within the holistic structure of society. Öcalan's contribution lies in transforming sociology from a merely explanatory discipline into an integral part of the practice of freedom.

## **Communalism as socialism: The social construction of freedom**

In classical socialist theory, socialism is defined through the socialization of the means of production and the abolition of class domination. Within this framework, socialism represents a historical stage that emerges after the overcoming of capitalism. The state assumes a central role during this transitional process, with planning, distribution, and the coordination of production carried out through the state apparatus. Social emancipation is thus largely tied to the success of this centralized transformation.

While this approach produced a powerful alternative to the destructive effects of capitalism, over time it also generated its own limitations. Socialism came to be perceived less as a living reconstruction of social relations and more as an economic and administrative model. Society ceased to be a subject and instead became an object on whose behalf decisions were made. As a result, freedom was treated not as a social question, but as a managerial one.

At this point, Abdullah Öcalan's conception of socialism marks a clear rupture. For Öcalan, socialism is all about revealing society's capacity for self-organization and collective decision-making. Socialism is therefore understood not as a form of state or merely an economic system, but as a mode of social life. It is here that the concept of communalism becomes decisive, framing socialism as a practical process through which society reconstructs itself.

Within this perspective, freedom does not emerge automatically through the retreat of central power. It takes concrete form in communes, assemblies, and the organizational patterns of everyday life. Economy, politics, and culture cannot acquire an emancipatory function without the direct participation of society itself. Communalism is neither a collectivism that erases the individual nor a form of atomized individualism; it is a relational mode in which individuals are strengthened through social bonds.

Öcalan's understanding of socialism grounds the critique of state-centered socialism not only in historical experience, but also on ontological and sociological foundations. When the human being is understood as fundamentally relational, freedom too is constructed within relations. For this reason,

freedom cannot be distributed from a single center. If forms of social organization do not produce freedom, transformation in property relations alone remains insufficient.

This conception of communalism does not invalidate class struggle; rather, it situates it within a broader field of social struggle. The labor–capital contradiction, gender inequality, ecological destruction, and cultural domination are treated as different manifestations of the same social crisis. Socialism thus claims to generate social-level responses to each of these crises.

In conclusion, socialism in Öcalan's thought is not a goal confined to the seizure of power. It is a process through which society continually reconstructs itself, requiring ongoing practice and action. Communalism does not treat freedom as a final destination but understands it as a lived experience. In this sense, Öcalan's socialism offers a perspective of social emancipation that moves beyond the state- and power-centered horizon of the classical left.

## **Updating dialectical materialism: Process, relationality, and subjectivity**

Dialectical materialism is a powerful mode of thought that understands historical change through contradictions. This is well established. The reciprocal interaction between material conditions and social consciousness constitutes its core assumption. Yet this framework has often been confined to the sphere of production. Dialectics has been identified with the laws of motion of the economic base. This narrowing is not a flaw in-

herent to dialectics itself, but the result of a particular historical interpretation.

The intervention of Abdullah Öcalan compels a rethinking of dialectics around process and relationality. Social change cannot occur solely through the resolution of contradictions between classes. It also unfolds through the transformation of the relations human beings establish with themselves, with the community, and with nature. Within this approach, dialectics ceases to be a closed historical schema advancing through fixed stages and instead becomes a continuous process of becoming.

In classical dialectical materialism, the subject is often conceived as the bearer of historical necessities, with class positioned as the primary actor on the stage of history. While this emphasis is meaningful in underscoring the importance of collective action, it addresses individual and social processes of subject formation within a limited framework. Öcalan's approach does not define the subject solely by class position. The subject is understood as a mode of existence constituted and transformed through practice.

This update does not render material reality secondary; on the contrary, it expands the scope of the material. Relations of economic production remain a crucial dimension of social life, but they are not its only one. Language, culture, gender relations, ecological bonds, and forms of political participation are also treated as components of material reality. In this way, dialectics is no longer restricted to the labor–capital contradiction, but becomes capable of analyzing the integrated contradictions of social existence as a whole.

At this point, updating dialectical materialism does not mean drawing it closer to idealism<sup>5</sup>. Quite the opposite, it seeks to move beyond idealist abstractions in order to grasp the concrete, multi-layered structure of social life. The material is not limited to what is measurable. Social relations, habits, and shared practices of living also possess material reality. This recognition deepens the social reach of dialectics.

In Öcalan's approach, dialectics shifts from a strategy focused on the seizure of power to a method for understanding society's ongoing capacity for self-reproduction. Contradiction is not an obstacle to be eliminated, but a dynamic that contains the possibility of transformation. This makes it possible to conceive revolution not as a singular moment of rupture, but as a long-term process of social construction.

In conclusion, this update neither invalidates dialectical materialism nor abandons it; rather, it reworks it in line with historical experience and theoretical necessity. Öcalan's contribution lies in removing dialectics from a state-, party-, and class-centered framework and transforming it into a mode of thought centered on society and life itself. This transformation shifts freedom from a deferred objective to a practice of the present.

## **Conclusion and discussion: The constitutive relationship between ontology, society, and freedom**

The central argument advanced here is that social freedom cannot be established solely through the transformation of relations of production. It has been clearly emphasized

that without a transformation in human conceptions of being, social bonds, and modes of subject formation, emancipation cannot become lasting. This framework does not reject the foundational intuitions of classical left thought; rather, it seeks to render visible the domains that it was historically unable to open.

Classical dialectical materialism remains a powerful theoretical tool for explaining capitalist exploitation and class-based inequalities. However, its tendency to treat freedom as a goal deferred to the future has created a structural distance between freedom and social practice. State-centered socialist experiences have demonstrated that this distance has produced not only theoretical but also historical consequences. When relations of production changed without a corresponding transformation in social relations, new forms of domination emerged alongside them.

At this point, the ontological dimension has been placed at the center of the analysis. Human beings exist in the world not only within economic relations, but also through meaning, relationships, and practice. Being is not a fixed condition; it is a process continuously unfolding through becoming. This understanding makes it possible to conceive freedom not as a completed objective, but as a form of relation that is constantly reproduced within social life. Ontology, in this sense, ceases to be an abstract domain of political theory and becomes one of the material grounds of freedom.

The sociological discussion presented here preserves the indispensability of class analysis while also demonstrating that social domination cannot be reduced to a single axis. Male domination, cultural hierarchies,

centralization, and relations of representation are historical phenomena intertwined with class structures. Social emancipation requires confronting each of these forms of domination. This transforms sociology into not merely an explanatory tool, but a constitutive component of the practice of liberation.

Abdullah Öcalan's understanding of socialism brings this ontological and sociological expansion together around the concept of communalism. Socialism is no longer treated as a project limited to the seizure of power, but as the process of revealing society's capacity for self-organization. Communes, assemblies, and local forms of organization are redefined not as instrumental administrative structures, but as spaces in which freedom itself is produced. Within this framework, society ceases to be a passive object and becomes the primary subject of emancipation.

This approach inevitably invites a number of critiques. The most common objection is that it sidelines class struggle. Yet what is undertaken here is not the exclusion of class, but the refusal to treat it as the sole explanatory axis. The labor–capital contradiction remains central to modern capitalism; however, social domination cannot be comprehensively understood without taking into account hierarchies and forms of power that historically predate class formation.

Another criticism holds that this perspective represents a break with Marxism, suggesting that its emphasis on ontology and society moves it closer to idealism. However, material reality is not abandoned here; rather, the scope of the material is expanded. Social relations, everyday practices, forms of organization, and shared spaces of life are also part of the material world. This approach seeks

to make visible the suppressed ontological dimension within Marxism itself.

Critiques concerning the state and power are likewise significant. The emphasis on communalism may be questioned on the grounds that it renders the problem of central power ambiguous. Yet such criticism reduces power solely to the state apparatus. In modern societies, power permeates the entirety of everyday life. The seizure of the state does not automatically dismantle these dispersed networks of power. Communalism does not obscure power; on the contrary, it renders it visible at local and plural levels.

The notion of society as the subject of emancipation may also be criticized for romanticizing society itself. Internal inequalities, reactionary tendencies, and conflicts within society may appear to be overlooked. Here, however, society is not idealized; it is approached as a field of struggle. Freedom does not develop through the suppression of tensions, but becomes possible through their open and visible articulation.

Finally, the practical applicability of this approach may be questioned. Particularly under conditions of crisis, war, and authoritarianism, the sustainability of society-centered models may be challenged. Yet this objection reflects the limits of the existing political order rather than those of the theory itself. Historical experience demonstrates that social self-organization can emerge even under the most difficult conditions. The experience of Rojava offers a clear illustration of this reality.

In conclusion, when ontology, sociology, and socialism are considered together, freedom ceases to be an abstract ideal or a deferred promise and becomes a lived social practice. The contribution of Abdullah Öcalan gains significance precisely in this effort to reconstitute this unity, offering a substantive theoretical update for contemporary left thought.

1. *Ontology is the philosophical study of being.*
2. *Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement and has been imprisoned on the prison island of Imrali since 1999. He has published several books in the form of written defences, in which he has proposed a new political paradigm aimed at renewing socialism in the 21st century.*
3. *Communalism proposes a form of political organisation based on a federation of communes governed under direct democracy. In the view of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, communalism is the reconstruction from the grassroots up of a politically and morally self-organised society.*
4. *Dialectical materialism is the philosophy of marxism-leninism, which combines dialectics and materialism. Materialism is the understanding that the development of society is fundamentally driven by material conditions, rather than abstract ideas. Dialectics is a form of reasoning that “comprehends things and their representations, ideas, in their essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin, and ending” (Anti-Dühring, F. Engels, 1878).*
5. *A philosophical conception that seeks to reduce reality to the idea, understood either as the subjective content of consciousness (subjective idealism) or, as in Hegel’s case, as the supreme rational form and category of reality (objective or absolute idealism).*

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