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The peripheralization of the world

But what is "happening under our eyes"? We need to better understand this historical transformation in capitalism if we want to rise to the challenges that confront communists today.

One way of understanding the erosion of the social terrain in contemporary capitalism without reducing this process to a mere question of individualism or ideology is what we call the *peripheralization* thesis. Its most immediate and well-known formulation is that, today, the social conditions on the peripheries of capitalism are expanding towards the center of the capitalist system. In more detail, what this thesis argues is that there is a growing split between economic and social development, an effective disintegration of the living conditions of the proletariat, rooted in the transformations of their material conditions of survival, which makes any naive attempt to appeal to class unity and solidarity anachronistic and idealistic. In other words, it's not that, by isolating themselves from each other, workers today are acting against their own interests: it's their own interests - what people actually need to do to survive - that don't necessarily align today with the formation of a broad political group, guided by common demands and needs. What we call the "peripheralization thesis", however, does not treat this situation as the effect of a terminal crisis of capitalism. This interpretation of contemporary capitalism suggests that social conditions that were once relegated only to the periphery of the system - where social democracy and capitalist modernity never fully took hold - are now being adopted even in the so-called "first world" countries. In other words: on the one hand, this is indeed a new historical moment, on the other, the content of this novelty is not really that new.

It is therefore clear why this process is called "peripheralization": it refers to the expansion of social conditions from the periphery of capitalism towards the center of the system. It's no wonder that in the 1980s, the word "Brazil" ceased to refer only to a country and became, in the mouths of some

sociologists and economic analysts, a verb. The "brazilianization" of the world would be precisely the social process that brings out, from within advanced and modern economies, characteristics that would be associated with "backward" countries like Brazil: cities broken by blatant social inequality, the symbiosis between direct violence and the impersonality of the forces of capital, a police force responsible for maintaining a racial apartheid, the perpetual crisis of democratic institutions, etc. It is important to note that the peripheralization thesis does not suggest that there is a new force or trend in capitalism, leading all countries to imitate what is happening on the periphery - on the contrary, it argues that this effect is what happens when capitalism is allowed to return to its normal functioning. Historical processes such as the European modernization of the early twentieth century, the "golden years" after the Second World War and the Japanese boom of the 1980s actually represent exceptions to the regular dynamics of capitalism and depend on the intervention of other forces to be explained, such as the use of the spoils of colonial expansion to create a social security system, or the need to react and contain the advance of the communist movement throughout the twentieth century.

This is an important difference, because the thesis that we are experiencing a collapse of capitalism requires a detailed and complex explanation: after all, what would have happened, what would have been the insurmountable limit that capitalism encountered and that would be responsible for the state of perpetual crisis in which we now live? Although it doesn't contradict any argument of this kind, the peripheralization thesis affirms something simpler. It is possible that capitalism has found a limit to economic growth based on the productivity of labor - be it an internal limit or an external one, such as the destruction of nature - but that is not what is essential. The really important historical change is that it has become possible to accumulate value and exploit labour power without having to organize workers as a collateral effect, that is, it has become possible to treat workers within capitalist social relations in the same way that capitalism had already been treating those it kept on the margins of those same relations. This change - which certainly depends on the technological advances of recent decades and other recent social transformations - may even have been accelerated in response to different obstacles to productive growth, but it should not be treated as a mere temporary effect, something that a new cycle of innovations or material abundance would reverse. There is something about the peripheralization of the world that allows

capitalism to operate with fewer obstacles and detours - which is why explaining the logic of peripheralization is not very different from explaining how capitalism has always operated in many places.

As a result, instead of the slow expansion of the welfare state, liberal ideology and low-intensity democracy, bringing characteristics of advanced capitalist countries to the periphery, it is social hybridity, conflictual heterogeneity and the typology of informal work, fostered in the peripheries of capitalism since its emergence, that are now expanding towards the center. In short, the peripheralization thesis states that there has never been a necessary connection between capitalist development and the creation of a modern social space - the alignment between capitalist economy and social development has been local and circumstantial, and conditional on the deepening of social and natural destruction everywhere else. Not only that, but the hybrid forms of domination cultivated in countries, neighborhoods and slums where this alignment never existed, now emerge as the set of social technologies most adaptable and applicable to capitalist control and production. The process of peripheralization therefore indicates that the more the social space becomes fractured, hybrid and heterogeneous, the more capital can circulate without the obstacles of human inertia.

But if this way of describing the recent transformations of capitalism goes in the right direction, then it should be able to shed light on the political challenges we mentioned in the previous chapter. Let's see if this is the case.

The vulgarization of social space

A crucial consequence of the process of peripheralization - and one that directly affects any politics concerned with the common interests of the proletariat - is what we call the vulgarization of social space. By "social space" we mean, here, the space where we share our social experiences - not a geographical space, but the communicative dimension, which encompasses things like public space, the circulation of discourses and information, etc. The simplest way to define this process is by comparing vulgarization to the opposite process, "popularization". When we say that an author

popularizes an idea, it may well be that the idea in question is being simplified, as in a popular science book, but its essential content is being preserved and the popularization is making that idea accessible to a greater number of people. The vulgarization of something, however, goes in the opposite direction. When we say that an idea has been vulgarized, it doesn't just mean that it has become more accessible, but also that it has been trivialized - something has been lost in the process of disseminating its content. In popularization, the more an idea circulates, the more it ceases to be private and becomes public, many people understand the same thing, while in vulgarization, the more something circulates, the more its public dimension becomes private, i.e. everyone uses and understands it as they see fit.

Now, the condition for the interpretation of each person, or each social group, to be sufficiently different from one another for the circulation of an idea or discourse in the public space to become vulgarized is precisely that the experience of the world is not being leveled, creating a shared social environment with the same references. The social references - the real components of social life - determine whether we are experiencing a process of popularization or social vulgarization. We are undoubtedly living in a time of the greatest connectivity and circulation of information that humanity has ever seen, but this does not mean that there is any degree of homogeneity in people's social experience, and therefore the conditions for an idea or discourse to circulate, producing a new common sense or a new political vision. There is no point in the wide circulation of an idea or resource of interest to the people if what really makes a difference to each person's life, the concrete environment with which we interact on a daily basis, is increasingly fragmented, creating very different forms of appropriation of what connects and crosses these different contexts. Vulgarization is one of the effects of a common material circulating through a fragmented social terrain: it will be absorbed and refunctionalized according to the needs of each social fragment. The vulgarization of social space is, in this sense, an important consequence of the process of peripheralization, a way of describing how a class structure can continue to exist - a common circuit, connecting life, work, capital and surplus value - without this producing a common class experience, since the social environment of each worker, category or group can be quite different from one another, even incompatible in terms of values and the way they organize themselves.

It is very common to approach this issue from another angle, arguing that neoliberalism simply alienates people from collective life, promoting an individualistic and atomized life. The paradox of this way of describing the effects of contemporary capitalism is that, at the same time as it denounces a crisis of public space and the end of a certain sense of collectivity in the working class, the final effect of this process would still be social homogenization, a great levelling: capital would still be responsible for equalizing us all through a new experience of atomized individuality.

A fundamental problem with the thesis that neoliberalism has simply forced everyone into the position of individuals in competition with each other is that it doesn't take into account the real effects of capitalism's abandonment of the organization of workers' lives: in practice, this process not only means a greater disintegration of the collective experience of the proletariat, but also a greater reliance by workers on alternative forms of survival, such as support networks, extended families, churches, etc. It is only a very particular social group that, still managing to guarantee its social reproduction almost exclusively through money, now finds itself truly isolated and atomized. For many people, the effect has been the opposite, with an increased degree of dependence on others - often aggravated even by the contrast with the prevailing discourse, which values competition and independence. Not surprisingly, the crisis in the world of work has also led to a crisis in the work of social reproduction, intensifying the care work carried out almost always by women within the family structure, in the shadow of monetary exchange.

For us, it is important not to be content with treating this process of fragmentation of the working class as if it were just an ideological effect of neoliberalism, which would have tricked workers into retreating into cultural bubbles or fighting only for their private interests. This way of thinking doesn't help us for two reasons. Firstly, because it makes it seem as if very little would be needed to reverse the situation politically: a critique of the neoliberal discourse would be enough and workers would once again start looking for their association and recognize their common cause. Secondly, because this explanation also feeds the belief that we criticized in the previous chapter, giving the impression that, once we remove this disintegrating force - supposedly responsible for the decline of class consciousness and the emergence of so-called "identity" politics, for example - we could simply return to the revolutionary politics of the last century.

What's more, part of the reason why this reading of contemporary individualism continues to be promoted without much criticism has to do with the very process of vulgarization that we mentioned here. Even though there is indeed a discourse that increasingly promotes the centrality of the individual in competition with others, its absorption and use in different social contexts can vary greatly. For example, even though it is visibly hegemonic, the discourse of entrepreneurship is socially "vulgarized": in some places, popular entrepreneurship creates bonds and brings people together, in others, it actually establishes unbridled competition, even becoming a model for subjectivity. But as the referents of each of these fragmented contexts are different, it is not possible to register these variations without making some effective change of position. Without observing how the referents of each social space differ, everything happens as if individualism were really a leveling process, since it is truly dominant in the field of discourse and images.

The vulgarization of social space therefore creates a new kind of political impasse: it is possible to observe very general trends, which seem to cover and structure the whole of social life, and yet not observe any of the consequences we would expect from a discourse having become hegemonic. The particular appropriation of widely circulated content creates a kind of obstacle to the political challenge of connecting particular struggles to a larger collective vision, obscuring, behind the great mass of more or less similar materials that everyone consumes and produces, how diverse social experience has become. And this superficial impression that we are all going through the radical transformations of peripheral capitalism in a similar way can reinforce the expectation of a great popular political convergence, blinding us to the real extent of our challenges. In a context of vulgarization, it is not enough to name different social demands in the same way in order to create a common political field; we need to rearticulate social reality itself and build, from the articulation of concrete struggles, a common social ground capable of supporting an effectively shared revolutionary vision.

The saturation of political forms

The difficulty of navigating and interacting with a fragmented social terrain brings us to another effect of peripheralization, more explicitly political, which we can call saturation. The term comes from chemistry, where it describes the moment when a solution can no longer dissolve any substance in its medium - for example, when we pour sugar into a glass of water and, after a certain amount, the crystals just settle to the bottom, unable to mix with the liquid. We call political saturation the moment when a given political form loses its traction in reality, becoming incapable of naming real processes, of interacting with them and transforming them - it's the moment when the form no longer mixes with its social environment.

This saturation effect is noticeable in several of the political orientations that were formulated on the premise that the social terrain in modern capitalism would always tend to produce a greater homogenization of workers - whether these orientations were left-wing or right-wing. In a way, the process of peripheralization introduces another political opposition in addition to the well-established one between "left" and "right": the difference between political forms that depend on a spontaneous process of convergence and those that already take into account the existence of a vulgarized and divided social space. Not surprisingly, there may be much more similarity between conservatives and progressives who depend equally on maintaining an institutionality that is already in tatters than between a left that ignores peripheralization and the potentially radical political energy that arises from peripheral social fractures.

In fact, the problem of political saturation could help us understand why debates about the "left" or "right" character of the June Journeys in Brazil have never led us to any interesting strategic conclusions. Analyzed from the angle of political saturation, the famous dispute over the role of June in the consolidation of reactionary forces over the last decade could be re-evaluated. Instead of the game of mirrors where one part of the left blames the other for adopting the wrong tactics, opening up space for the strengthening of our political enemies, we could describe 2013 as a turning point where an entire progressive political system - made up of institutional, reformist, revolutionary, autonomist, anarchist forces, etc. - found itself unable to channel the social forces of a fractured social terrain not because of an incompatibility of values, but because of the forms of political organization that underpin this entire system. The right wing that gained ground,

therefore, was not the one that expressed the supposedly latent conservatism of the people - nor the one that would be effectively "revolutionary" in its objectives - but the one that managed to take advantage of the circumstantial alignment between its ideals - such as criticism of democratic institutions, praise for individualism and private life, the centrality of the market in the face of the weakening of public forms, etc. - and the new cleavages in this socio-economic terrain. A right wing that has found ways to interact with its social environment, regardless of the specific political outcome of this interaction. The hypothesis of political saturation will thus allow us to distinguish the impotence of the left in adapting to the new historical conditions from the real power of the "bolsonarista" right, avoiding a series of sociological fantasies about the rise of an almost omnipotent Brazilian extreme right.

Moreover, the inverse tendency to try to live up to the political energy of our time by describing contemporary revolts and forms of struggle as essentially "formless" - usually correlating the crisis of formal labor to the crisis of political forms - can also be put into another perspective. After all, it is from the exclusive point of view of modernist left progressivism - whether of a more moderate or radical flavour - that contemporary revolts explode as if they had no specific form: it is an effect of the contrast between an already saturated political vision, incapable of interacting with these new processes, and new political forms already shaped by a vulgar social terrain, with their own normative and organizational commitments, which look nothing like the convergent and homogenized class struggle we expected to find.

Political autophagy

In a context of political saturation, in which the interaction between the political forms of the left and the social terrain is compromised, what happens to this system of radical political organizations and ideas? One possibility is that, unable to be guided by the concrete effects it produces in social reality, the left turns against itself. This is the paradox of "autophagy", the grotesque gesture of ingesting one's own body: the same desperate act of feeding oneself in order to stay alive is what accelerates one's destruction.

In its most extreme version, the autophagy of the left appears as an active effort to eliminate and sabotage other political sectors of the same camp, under the premise that they constitute a real obstacle to political transformation, but in general, this dynamic presents itself in a milder form, as a constant critical evaluation of all other forms of action and political theory within the left. But what would lead an explicitly emancipatory political tendency to decide to focus its energies on criticizing - and, in more serious cases, actually fighting - other fronts of struggle that are relatively close to it? The simplest way to understand this process is by mobilizing the theses we have presented so far.

Let's make a quick summary. The process of peripheralization allows capitalism to unify and homogenize the circuits of value without, however, having to organize workers' lives in such a way as to bring their social experiences closer together. In this context of fragmentation, in which the social terrain is divided up based on the different ways in which groups, categories and even geographical regions manage to guarantee their survival, their concrete referents are also differentiated, the social environments with which each fraction of the working class interacts both at their workplaces and outside of it. We call vulgarization the way in which everything that circulates in common throughout society is appropriated differently by each of these social fragments. We then call saturation the consequence of this process on political organizations and movements that try to interact with the working class as if they still shared a common social environment, the fruit of the social homogenization produced by labor in capitalism. In this context, radical ideas and actions no longer produce the same effects, either because not even popular agendas are able to bring the masses together, or because we have become incapable of evaluating the reasons why the people seem to align themselves with reactionary forces.

What we can conclude from this summary is that, in the context of peripheralization, the political system of left-wing organizations itself becomes a small fragment of the social fabric. Left-wing political organizations - whether they like it or not - share many common referents: similar ideas, behaviors, stories, and this when they are not made up of social strata that are also somewhat homogeneous, further expanding the reach of this shared context. It follows that the last reliable indicators that any left-wing orientation can access are those produced by other fractions of the left

itself. Not surprisingly, it is easier to analyze the contradictions between a revolutionary political organization and the social class of its militants than it is to apply this type of criticism to other social spaces. This is because the left is more familiar with the particular social context, culture and political economy of its own sector. On the one hand, because of vulgarization, the lefts can only look at their own shared context, and on the other, because of the saturation of their forms of struggle, political failures and defeats are growing in number, making all left currents easy targets for each other. The necessary social conditions are thus in place to turn political autophagy into the last source of energy available to the already politically saturated left.

As the internal conflicts between left-wing tendencies and projects become the most relevant regulators of political action, some side effects begin to emerge. On the one hand, it becomes very important for each political line to differentiate itself from the others - since the only available strategic indicator we have comes from the mistakes and failures of other movements - which leads organizations to overvalue their differences and hide their contradictions, compromises and impurities. This process, in turn, makes it even more difficult to interact with the new social terrain, which is increasingly conflictual and full of contradictions - further reinforcing the political saturation and subsequent autophagy of the left. On the other hand, since practically the entire left-wing camp ends up depending on these minute internal criticisms and differentiations, the aggregate effect of this internal process is a generalized disenchantment of people with the entire revolutionary camp. In other words, exactly the same dynamic that confirms each political position at the expense of defeating the others signals to outsiders that the entire leftist camp is wrong and lost. This, in turn, also reinforces political saturation and restarts the whole autophagic process.

A third harmful effect of this process is that the more it intensifies, the more it seems that the only way to stop it is to give up on finding a common political goal for the revolutionary movement and instead appeal to the need to unite against an enemy. Despite the appearance of pragmatism - putting aside differences to face a common threat - this solution carries with it a very great danger. This is because no real political strategy can depend on overestimating the strength of opponents: we can't underestimate it, it's true, but there can be no benefit in representing the opponent as all-powerful either - not least because if no victory is possible we will simply lose the reason to fight.

However, in the context of left-wing autophagy, references to the extreme right, fascism, the forces of capital cooptation, etc., often don't stem from real confrontations and evaluations, but from the rhetorical need to create a motivation capable of momentarily interrupting the fratricide so that some particular political line can be heard. The more intense the autophagic process, the greater the temptation to represent the right as an overwhelming and limitless force. And if it has no limits, then its presence would potentially encompass the entire working class, which we then look at with deep suspicion.

The thesis of the peripheralization of the world, however, is not a pessimistic or defeatist thesis. In fact, by introducing a series of political dynamics that can be explained by the difficulty of the revolutionary left adapting to our historical moment, this thesis also recovers our capacity for action and response, avoiding ways of describing our situation in which all force and agency is on the side of capital and growing reactionarism. Instead, the peripheralization thesis proposes a hard bargain: it is possible to reopen the communist horizon - but on the condition that we take responsibility for inventing and maintaining what, until now, we considered to be a burden of capital itself.