

## IV

### **The peripheralization of the Lefts**

We began the book by proposing a return to the definition of communists in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. We argue that, in essence, the position of communists is determined by their practical concern with the connections and articulations between the different fractions of the proletarian movement - that is, by the investigation of their common interests and the construction of a totality based on these concrete interests.

We also explained that the image of communists as a dirigiste vanguard does not stem so much from what is said about communists in the Manifesto, but from Marx and Engels' specific analysis of the tendencies inherent in industrial progress. At the time, they concluded that there was an internal and necessary dynamic to capitalism itself that would lead, as a side effect, to a growing homogenization and association among workers - a crucial shortcut in consolidating the proletariat as an international revolutionary force. And, from the point of view of this analysis, it would even be easier for communists to learn about the common interests of the different fronts of proletarian struggle by studying the general movements of capitalism, rather than starting from the fragmented reality of these political movements. As we have seen, what seemed to be a necessary dimension of the capitalist mode of production turned out to be a dynamic confined to a certain time and space in the history of capitalism. Eventually, industrial and technical progress, which feeds the spiral of capitalist accumulation, managed to get rid of the need to form a working class that was increasingly united in its values and experiences - and with that, the strategic shortcut that these communists were counting on fell apart.

We have also seen how difficult it is to give up the belief in this sort of "factory defect" that capitalism carries within itself. To demonstrate this, we have described - albeit in a somewhat caricatured way - different political orientations that, in essence, function as compromise solutions: that is, political visions that, on the one hand, recognize the limits in the analysis of capitalism

presented in the Manifesto, but which, on the other hand, aim to find some other justification for why, even so, we could still count on a convergent historical tendency that would transform our particular struggles into a common, global movement. Going in the opposite direction, we claim that it is precisely the end of this illusion, as a result of the recent transformations of capitalism, that today highlights the effective content of the definition of communism as a set of practices aimed at articulating and consolidating the different struggles of the contemporary proletariat. In fact, it is because there are no shortcuts that there must be communists.

The following chapter then proposes an analysis of the historical changes we are experiencing based on what we call the peripheralization thesis. This way of understanding the disintegration of the working class is interesting because, at the same time as it recognizes that we have entered a new historical moment, with new social and economic structures, our thesis refers this change to a return to the way capitalism has always operated in the peripheries of the world system. In peripheral capitalism, there is no denying the existence of the working class as a contingent of labor constantly mobilized and expelled by capital. However, the ways of life of the proletariat remain extremely diverse, often forming irreconcilable social fractures.

Using the thesis of peripheralization as a general framework in this new context, we introduce three concepts to qualify what can happen to a revolutionary movement that still remains dependent on the belief that capital would flatten social differences and connect the entire proletariat by itself: vulgarization, saturation and autophagy. The first concept explains the illusion that, just because commodities circulate extremely easily, there would also be great homogeneity in the social terrain through which they pass. In fact, the vulgarization of social space describes a disconnection between the circuit of value and the different social environments of the workers who consume and produce commodities: things may circulate as never before, but they are appropriated and understood according to the particular referents of different contexts. The second concept, saturation, describes the disconnection between the left and this new fractured social terrain. In a context of peripheralization, in addition to the already consolidated opposition between "left" and "right", a new type of split is created: it is the opposition between, on the one hand, modern or "progressive" orientations - which, whether left-wing or not, still depend on the belief in a

homogeneity of the working class - and, on the other, new political forces that try to operate within this new framework of the shattering of the common proletarian experience.

Finally, we introduce the concept of autophagy to describe what happens within an already saturated radical political system, when left-wing organizations have no other way to orient themselves than by the failure of other movements in the same field. We describe three effects of this process of mutual self-destruction: a tendency to eliminate any contradiction in our representation of our own political line, as this makes it easier to differentiate ourselves from other left orientations; a tendency to reinforce popular disenchantment with the left as a whole, as all our energy is spent on raising criticisms against ourselves; and a tendency to conjure up a powerful reactionary threat as motivation to overcome this internal crisis.

It is true that learning to deal with the remains of the twentieth-century left is part of the challenge for communists today, but it is not our main task. What is even more important is that we learn to navigate the fractures and dynamics inherent in the process of peripheralization, because it is the political struggles that manage to interact and advance on this new terrain that will pave the way for the renewal of the proletarian movement as a whole. But what specific contradictions does this new historical condition bring to the fore?

### *The multiplicity of Lefts*

The first of these contradictions intensified by peripheralization concerns the very plurality of lefts. After all, it is very different to approach the multiplicity of political orientations against the backdrop of social unity or fragmentation. If we assume that there is a fundamental unity between all left-wing struggles, then the plurality of struggles will be understood as a superficial phenomenon, determined by circumstances: there are many immediate agendas, many fronts of struggle defined by institutions, places of housing and work, etc. - but the more anti-systemic and structural a struggle really is meant to be, the more it should have an effect on the entire social space and, therefore, the more gregarious and unitary it should be. A particular movement, organization or agenda that resists integrating itself into a collective effort to attack the most central structures of

capitalism could only be working to reinforce those same structures and disarticulate the revolutionary camp. However, if we assume that, in a fragmented social space, the very structure that links the production of commodities to workers' lives is also more heterogeneous and varied, then things take a different turn. This is because this shift from the most immediate agendas to the common anti-capitalist horizon will not necessarily lead us from plurality to unity - and an organization's resistance to this integrated political vision may actually be the expression of a structural aspect of this very social formation. Returning once again to the example of June 2013, which we mentioned in the previous chapter: it is true that, beyond the fight against the fare increase and the more ambitious agenda of zero fares, there was also the vision of "a life without turnstiles" - but even this general and agglutinating vision found different resonances across Brazil. For example, although there were significant protests in Bahia during the June Journeys, directly adhering to the "passe livre" agenda, it was the demonstrations against the genocide of black people by the police that provided more ballast for the struggle in the region in the following years. Does this mean that one of the two orientations represented a "superstructural" struggle, while the other confronted a more fundamental structure? Slavery and the overexploitation of wage labor cannot be effectively dissociated in the history of capitalism in Brazil - but neither do they overlap in the same way everywhere.

Taking the multiplicity of lefts as an indication of the very fragmentation of the social fabric doesn't mean that there aren't common interests, shared structures and deeper dynamics in capitalism that demand unified efforts and concentrated strategies. It doesn't mean that we should simply keep each struggle separate. Rather, it means that "getting to the root" of the problems does not guarantee that we will make the differences disappear, since the very "deep" structure of peripheral capitalism is full of edges and fractures. We still have to go through the immediate presentation of struggles and their limits in order to build the communist movement, but in this process, some superficial differences will dissolve in the collective political struggle, while others will not - and these can teach us about the structural fractures of the peripheral terrain, demanding new strategic and organizational arrangements.

## *Political ecology*

One concept that helps us change our view of the plurality of the left is that of political ecology, that is, approaching the field of organizations as if they formed a kind of ecosystem. It is very common to explain the difference between "ecology" and "economics" based on a difference in focus: ecology is about nature and economics is about relationships between people. But there is a deeper and more important difference than that. An economy is, above all, a way in which people's lives - and especially their survival - are connected through an established network of causes and consequences. For example, it is part of the field of economics to study how changes in labor productivity in one sector or in agricultural conditions in a given region will influence the price of food or the value of wages elsewhere in the world. When we talk about economics, we're talking about something like a unified field where changes and disturbances in one place can affect many others - like a stone thrown into a pond, producing ripples that spread in all directions.

An ecology is something a little different. Unlike the economy, where things are already connected and only survive because of that connection, an ecology or ecosystem is a unit where the connections are not all given in advance. A habitat where plants, different fungi and animals coexist is certainly shaped by these creatures and the different connections they establish, but it is possible that one of these beings migrates to another place and starts to connect with another habitat, leaving the previous one behind. It's also possible that beings inhabiting the same place have such different characteristics that they belong to completely different ecologies, because they depend on different creatures and natural processes - like fish that depend on a specific degree of water salinity that, for other creatures in that region, is totally irrelevant. In an economy, we are born entangled in this network and cannot escape it, whereas in an ecology, we need to adapt in order to connect, or find another system that suits us better. There is something about the idea of ecology that forces us to consider the specific quality of the connections and forms of dependency at play, as these are not universal and can break down or transform.

This distinction is relevant to us because one of the consequences of peripheralization for left-wing organizations concerns the need to develop an ecological "intuition" as part of their different strategic visions.

In fact, one of the most important ways in which the belief in what we previously called the tendency towards convergence or social homogeneity presents itself is as a promise that all structural anticapitalist struggles would be connected through political economy. Because of the economic connection between all parts of the capitalist system, a disturbance in one part of the world of workers could, in principle, reverberate in others because of the underlying economic unity that connects all of us. It is undoubtedly true that capitalism forms a world economy and that it is therefore impossible to consider patterns of accumulation and circulation of commodities without taking into account this international network of causes and consequences. However, from a political point of view - which is not only concerned with the fall or rise in prices, the shortage or greater supply of labour, etc., but with creating new forms of popular organization and power - peripheralization signals a break with this essential connectivity. Instead of being able to resort to the economic substrate as a guarantee of articulation between different struggles or of continuity between a particular struggle and the anti-capitalist horizon, organizations now need to think more actively about how they connect with others and what the aggregate effect of their actions is on the correlation of forces. In other words, we need to understand our particular place within a larger political ecology, a space shared with other concrete political actors where their actions and those of other actors influence each other.

The first difficulty that this produces - and that each organization needs to invent how to confront - is internal. If capitalist political economy guaranteed that a local political intervention could spread and potentially disrupt the entire system, then every political organization would have reason to consider itself a protagonist in the revolutionary movement. It's ironic, given that the vision of the fathers of political economy, such as Adam Smith, was precisely that economic exchange would reconcile self-centeredness and the common good, with each citizen contributing to society by caring only about themselves. There is something of this spirit that is preserved in the idea that, because we are all connected through the political-economic effects of a given group's

actions, that group could formulate its own path without direct concern for how it affects others political actors, since one organization's fight for revolution would already be the fight for revolution for everyone. If we start from this assumption, the news of social and political fragmentation that we are analyzing here could produce a wound in our political narcissism: after all, what does it mean to preserve a revolutionary horizon when we depend on other organizations to connect our actions to the structural effects we aim to produce? Under these conditions, how is our conception of militancy transformed, our justification for adhering to a particular strategic orientation, our way of conceiving the successes and failures of other forms of struggle with which we don't agree, but on which we depend, at least indirectly?

This change in perspective leads to a decentering of political action, forcing us to consider not only our interaction with other political groups, and how this interdependence can both intensify and neutralize the actions of particular actors in a given ecology, but also the concrete means by which these interactions take place. It is possible, for example, that several organizations are competing for the politicization and adherence of the same small portion of the proletariat - so that a successful membership campaign by one group means the failure of another, even if the two groups act from totally different agendas. It can also happen that political actors with whom we have profound disagreements, and who act on very different fronts, nevertheless produce beneficial side effects for our struggle, such as when "influencers" on social networks make agendas and slogans more palatable to the general public, somewhat reducing workers' resistance to certain discussions, even if, in our practice, these terms mean something completely different.

### *Divergent political environments*

However, including in our strategic considerations the networks of interdependence that connect different political organizations does not mean uncovering any harmonious or conciliatory tendencies between them. In fact, the problem of political ecology allows us to understand why the vulgarized peripheral terrain exacerbates some of the impasses and contradictions faced by contemporary political organizations.

When we discussed the idea of vulgarization, we mentioned the contrast between the space of commodity circulation - which is increasingly globally unified - and the social environments on which workers depend to survive - which are increasingly fragmented. A social environment is made up of all those concrete markers that make a real difference to a person or organization, beyond the representations and ideas we can entertain privately: what we can and cannot do and talk about, who we rely on, how we relate, etc. An environment is not the same as the social structure in general, but rather how that structure exists specifically for us, filtered by our living conditions, our goals and real needs. The police may be an institution that exists in the four corners of the city, but the way it exists in different social environments varies radically along racial and class lines that we know well - and even if a white middle-class intellectual is extremely critical of the role of the police as an effective part of his social environment, the presence of the police is most likely a marker of safety and not of harassment and risk to life. In other words, we are not talking here about the opinion or theory that a person or organization defends: a social environment is a snapshot of reality, considered from the point of view of how things in that environment interact concretely with a specific social actor. Now, just as peripheralization divides social space into fragmented contexts - whose referents form potentially conflicting environments - it also affects the political processes that emerge from this fractured terrain. In other words, even if a number of political organizations depend on each other, this does not mean that they belong to the same political environment and therefore share the same referents and cut out social reality in the same way. On the contrary, navigating the effects of this divergence between environments is a particularly important difficulty that peripheralization poses for interaction between political organizations - and between organizations and their social bases.

In general, this divergence presents itself as a contrast between perspectives, between what we consider important in our way of organizing and acting and what appears to us as part of another organization's environment. Even when this contrast is not the basis of open conflicts or irreconcilable dissent, it can silently lead to disagreements and inconsequential articulations between groups that, on paper, would seem to be interested in getting together. From our point of view, meetings can be important because of the decisions we make, preparing activities and political interventions. Whereas, from the point of view of other workers present, what really counts and

makes a difference is the conviviality provided by the meeting, or even the opportunity to eat or rest after work - so that, after the meeting, no one devotes themselves to doing anything that was agreed. Similarly, it happens that we think that people who occupied a piece of land are not interested in doing political training or taking on important tasks for the advancement of the land struggle because of their lack of commitment - but the actual threat of eviction soon reveals that it was actually a mismatch of perspectives: their iron commitment is not to the revolutionary future, but to the occupation itself, for which they would fight until the end. In other cases, it can be frustrating to realize that from the point of view of another movement, say an "equipe" of delivery app workers, which we respect and would like to work with, we are not so different from some other groups that we consider reformist sellouts: while for us, the often costly decisions we make to distance ourselves from institutional politics marks a very important difference, it is possible that the fact that the social composition of our group and that of a bland NGO is practically the same is something much more relevant to that group of workers. These are incompatibilities and conflicts that become even more contradictory and difficult to recognize because of the supposed unity or closeness that we expected to be guaranteed by all belonging to the same revolutionary political field.

If the idea of political ecology serves to draw our attention to how peripheralization demands a new type of strategic mapping, the issue of the divergence in the way different organizations "see" each other introduces a problem of a different order. This is because what is at stake is not the strength of bourgeois ideology or even the particular intentions of militants, but effectively the way in which each political organization needs to cut out and evaluate social reality in order to be able to produce effects in their respective political environments. This means that the basis of this conflict of perspectives is the very difference of concrete political action - and that there is therefore something to learn about other organizations from these disagreements, when we are able to perceive them. The effective transformation of this type of conflict ultimately depends on the production of struggles and forms of action that concretely demand new ways of "slicing" reality, new political environments: shared references that serve as the basis for another common political "language" between the organizations in question.

### *Survival, life and militancy*

As we have noted a few times throughout the book, the process of peripheralization of capitalism is closely linked to a growing dissociation between the organization of commodities and the organization of workers - or between the progress of industry and social progress, in the sense of the development of people's living conditions. It's no wonder, then, that in order to talk about some of these impasses we need to resort in this chapter to ideas coming from the life sciences, terms like "ecology" and "environment": after all, at the heart of the process of peripheralization is a new relationship between labor and life - which means that we also need to rethink the relationship between life and militancy.

We've insisted a lot so far that the crisis of capitalist modernity has put the task of connecting and articulating different fronts of struggle back on the agenda, because this won't happen spontaneously. This has led us to consider, regionally, the question of political ecologies and, in the more local register, the mismatch between political perspectives, the result of divergences in the environments of each organization. But the main way in which peripheralization appears for a political struggle does not involve the composition between two or more organizations, but the articulation between the social and political dimension of any given struggle, that is, the way in which the social reproduction of life and its transformation are related within a particular political process. To see this, we need only think of the risks that the struggle poses to people's lives. In a modern, urban context, where political conflict is almost entirely mediated by rights, the state itself is responsible for guaranteeing some degree of harmony between the drive for political transformation and the reproduction of life, either by recognizing the instruments of workers' representation - unions, parties, etc. - or guaranteeing rights of protest as part of the expression of citizenship. All of this changes outside of this exceptional little regime. In the evergrowing periphery, stopping work to take part in a protest can mean not only a significant loss of income, but a real risk to one's life. It's a simple example of how the demands of the political struggle can come into direct conflict with the struggle to continue living.

It seems almost obscene to point out the existence of this kind of contradiction - especially to those who are not new to the periphery. However, one of the consequences of the process of peripheralization of capitalism is that it has become impossible to try to get around this impasse - or worse, to try to take advantage of the way in which the contradiction between economic and political life pushes the middle classes and all those who are still able to reconcile life, work and militancy, to the center of the struggle. The crisis of the "society of work" is causing precariousness to advance everywhere, increasing workloads, the difficulty of separating work, rest and leisure, intensifying the exploitation of the sexual division of labor... and therefore spreading, in varying degrees, the conflict between what we need to do to survive and what is needed to transform our lives.

In the midst of this crisis, it becomes clear that there is no need or guarantee that political struggle will lessen the burden of living. Even if it is true that collective struggle is the only way to transform the world, this does not mean that the personal cost of fighting is always less than that of persevering alone. On the contrary, what we see is that joining protests, organizations and political movements can bring a series of new demands, new burdens in terms of time, money and health - physical and mental - and new anxieties, creating conflicts in the family and at work and potentially alienating us from the social environments we depend on to live. None of this needs to happen, but an organizational and political effort becomes indispensable to prevent these contradictions from silently shaping our political spaces.

However, thinking about the political economy of militancy is counterintuitive for many of us. It's no coincidence that there is a very clear difference, at least in the Marxist tradition, between the theoretical tools we use to analyse the logic of capitalism - concepts like "commodity", "value", "capital" - and the way we describe political action and organization, with terms that generally come from military theory. It's as if discussions about strategy and tactics are already shielded from questions about their social and economic costs for militants - and if someone brings up this kind of consideration, they are depoliticizing the debate, preoccupied with personal gains.

It's worth noting that military strategy itself has long been thought of not just in terms of strategy and tactics, but includes at least four terms: strategy, which defines the general objectives to be achieved; tactics, which defines the specific path to be taken and how it should vary depending on the setbacks we encounter; logistics, which describes the costs of different tactics and the means we have to effectively take one path rather than another; and control, which concerns the ability of those involved in a given tactical mobilization to carry out what has been determined. In the case of armies, this is quite easy to illustrate: one's strategy might be engaging in war with an enemy in order to better position oneself geopolitically, tactics can be the selection of battles and specific ways of confronting them, logistics has to do with the material conditions of bringing food, ammunition and other resources to soldiers in battle and control, the ability of generals and strategists to effectively inform these soldiers of what to do and to receive relevant information from them in order to revise their plans. Note that logistics and control are not minor elements: if it is impossible to guarantee the feeding of a troop and good communication, a given tactical path may have to be abandoned - all four of these elements influence each other in today's military thinking. With this in mind, we can say that the political economy of militancy, the concern with the effects of the struggle on people's living conditions, is one of the main ways in which logistics and control emerge as central issues in the contemporary revolutionary movement. Political organizations that only want to propose ways out of a situation of oppression and exploitation, ignoring how much different strategies and battles consume the lives of workers, will be unable not only to carry out their plans, but to understand why they are viewed with such suspicion and contempt.