

### **A theory for communist practice**

We have raised a series of challenges that confront the revival of the communist movement today. Among them, we highlight the difficulty of redefining what it means to be a communist in light of the end of certain expectations about the shortcuts that the revolutionary struggle could find in the tendencies inherent in global capitalism itself. We emphasize the renewed importance of practices of political composition, aimed at building concrete articulations between different fronts of struggle, in a context of the peripheralization of the world and of the left—that is, at a historical moment when capitalism seems to be reconciling itself with its origins, abandoning any process of organizing the lives of workers beyond what is necessary to ensure the organization of the circuits of capital.

To argue in favor of this approach, we discuss the effects of peripheralization on left-wing organizations—both those that remain attached to an outdated historical ideal and those that directly confront the fragmentation of the social terrain. In summary, we oppose any expectation of spontaneous unification of proletarian struggles, pointing to dynamics such as vulgarization, saturation, and autophagy, in addition to highlighting some of the impasses resulting from the inherent multiplicity of struggles and political forces that make up peripheral capitalism. Among these impasses, we emphasize the need to recognize when plurality expresses structural fractures in capitalism, the challenges that political ecology and the divergence between organizational environments present for action and strategy – as well as the demand that organizations learn to respond to the growing tension between the social and political lives of their militants. In general, we present a historical picture in which all political unification and articulation becomes more laborious—while at the same time becoming even more necessary. And this certainly has effects on the process of theorizing and understanding reality.

In our initial discussion of the *Manifesto*, we mentioned that one of the difficulties in recognizing the practical tasks of communists, as militants concerned with "the common interests of the

proletarian movement as a whole," is precisely the way in which Marx and Engels' analysis of capitalism offers a purely theoretical path to recognizing these interests. In other words, if there were, in fact, a necessary side effect of all industrial progress, capable of preparing the ground for revolutionary forces as it reorganizes the productive forces, it would be much more convenient for communists to acquire a theoretical understanding of the fundamental dynamics of capitalism. This would allow them to anticipate the missteps of capital and point out the direction that different fronts of struggle need to take in order to constitute an internationalized revolutionary movement. The vanguard, as a category of militants who would see "further ahead" and therefore have better tools to direct the processes of struggle, would thus maintain a very particular relationship with theory—and, in particular, with the critique of political economy, conceived as the scientific basis of our understanding of the movements of capitalism.

In contrast to this particular conception of communists, we suggest that, once the hypothesis of a spontaneous convergence between proletarian struggles is eliminated, it becomes evident that the true position of communists is not to look ahead, but to look sideways. Communist practice is guided by the effort to move between political organizations and movements, always attentive to their articulation and the common elements that arise from within the processes of struggle. But if communist theory no longer serves to anticipate the unifying tendencies of a revolutionary subjectivity, what could its role be?

Let us note from the outset that the thesis of peripheralization—in asserting that there is no force inherent in capitalism capable of unifying the experiences and interests of workers—does not imply that it would be impossible to construct a rigorous theoretical understanding of our social reality. Peripheralization does not maintain that each person would live in a particular reality, nor that there would be no laws and dynamics specific to capitalism and peripheral sociability as a whole. It merely argues that these structures may be more complex and diverse than previously assumed, allowing for a much greater degree of diversity among the social environments and experiences of the proletariat. Thus, theories that tend to level such experiences, or that disregard these specificities, end up becoming politically useless. As we have seen, this seemingly small change has consequences for the function of theory in communist strategy—starting with the fact that this

theory can set aside the megalomaniacal ambition of explaining the collapse of global capitalism to focus instead on the conditions for exercising a specific practice: the communist practice of investigating and articulating different struggles.

However, if we take seriously the double thesis that there is no such spontaneous convergence between struggles and that the social terrain of political struggles today is structurally fragmented, some rather severe requirements are imposed on a new theory of communist practice. First, this theory must have the means to recognize how different social fragments in peripheral capitalism can lead to the emergence of struggles whose forms of organization and strategic thinking are potentially incompatible with each other. At the same time, given that communist practice aims to weave and compose these different political fronts, our theory must also offer means to recognize—if they exist—the points in common between different organizational forms, articulations that could lead to the construction of a larger and more consistent political “mosaic”. These requirements therefore suggest the construction of a theoretical framework quite different from the one we are accustomed to.

First of all, our theory could not maintain the traditional separation between the critique of political economy—the source of all the main categories used to analyze capitalism—and the theory of political organization— which we employ when thinking about collective action. If the connection between different political processes requires understanding how different social fragments influence the forms of struggle, then we need to be able to move between an analysis of this social terrain and a discussion of the forms of organization that develop out of it. Without this kind of transition between economy and organization, it would also remain impossible to assess how each political process responds to the contradictions between the reproduction and transformation of life, mentioned in the previous chapter.

A second important difference between the theory of communist practice and more traditional forms of political theorizing lies in its starting point. Rather than starting from a theory of the structure of capitalism—of what would confront all workers in a similar way—we need flexibility in our theory to keep up with the different ways in which this structure presents itself in each social

context. This flexibility implies that more aspects of the workers' situation must be grasped from this diverse reality than a general theory of capitalism could directly offer. But if the content of our theory must emerge from the struggles themselves, we nevertheless cannot just start from scratch every time. We need some fundamental determinations in order to investigate reality without fixating on immediate appearances—and, at the same time, we need to avoid these markers replacing or distorting concrete investigations carried out on a case-by-case basis. These concepts should rather serve as the basis for questions that guide concrete investigations, facilitating consideration of the challenges that peripheralization poses to political struggles and preventing us from taking a particular political experience as a general model for all situations. In this sense, the “social theory” that communist practice requires is not so much a theory of social reality, but a theory of how to investigate social and political reality.

It turns out that this effort to contextualize social structures theoretically produces a curious effect: the greater the diversity of the phenomena we want to analyze, the more abstract the general theory we use needs to be. Try it out: create a list of different objects—the more varied the list, including animals, ideas, dreams, objects, etc., the more abstract the answer to the question “what do all these things have in common?” will be. Similarly, our theory needs to include in its list of political processes the difference between struggles in the countryside and in the city, in the peripheries and in urban centers, in peripheral and developed countries, and so on. A more traditional solution would be to select two or three examples as paradigms of the struggle in general and, based on them, compare the rest of the list. In the case of the example above, it would be like having a list that includes various animals—cat, dog, chicken, mouse, insect—and defining that the dog is the “ideal animal,” so that cats are “dogs that drink milk” and chickens are “dogs that lay eggs.” But if we really want to differentiate between animals, we need abstract concepts such as “mammal,” “amphibian,” etc. Similarly, if we want to take the differences between struggles seriously and, at the same time, discover what they may have in common, we need more abstract concepts than we are used to when we talk about class struggle, parties, unions, etc. – which does not mean that these elements have no place in our analysis.

Finally, our theory of communist practice would also need to break with the traditional conception of theory in another important way. It is not just a matter of assessing or describing how each political struggle is rooted in different social conditions and contexts; we must recognize that only from the reality of each of these fronts of struggle can the means for effective articulation between them actually emerge. This is a direct consequence of admitting that there is no hidden tendency that theory could discover and then bring into different political processes. In the absence of such a shortcut, all the concrete material from which common articulations and political bridges could be built must be contained within the organizations and concrete struggles themselves. It makes no sense to expect people who study the reality of revolutionary politics to have the political or intellectual capacity to contribute, through the makings of their individual minds, to the strategic direction of this common weaving. The reasons for any articulation, its terms, and the conditions for its effectiveness arise from within these struggles themselves. In other words, it is not just a matter of describing a multiple political reality, but of recognizing that different political forms also prescribe something about reality and the means of its transformation, even indicating possible paths for communist composition. The object of our theory, therefore, is not "raw" social reality, but social reality as conceived by the different political movements involved in a given political composition. This point is subtle and deserves more careful analysis.

The break with theoretical tradition that we are proposing here is, in a way, a reversal between knowledge and political engagement, or between understanding and action. From the point of view of communist practice, there is no general theory of capitalism—or of any social system—that can be derived from conceptual elaborations and then mobilized for political struggle, either by pointing out its paths or by justifying the need for capitalism's overcoming. It is not capitalism that needs to be understood by communists, but rather the common interests that emerge from proletarian movements. It is certainly in the interest of various radical struggles to analyze and understand different aspects of what they are fighting against; however, this does not guarantee that they will focus on the same aspect of the capitalist system, nor that they will do so in the same way. The subject matter of communist theory is precisely these different ways of mapping the terrain of struggles. Does this mean that communists are not concerned with developing a theory of the capitalist system as a whole? Of course not. Rather, it means that a theory of capitalist

totality can never be more true than the actual composition of different political organizations that unite under communist guidance. In short: from a communist point of view, our view of capitalism is determined by the totality of proletarian struggles. Thus, the theory that allows for the best articulation and composition between different proletarian forces across the globe will also be the best way to understand the enemy we are fighting.

In this sense, the process of articulating and composing different struggles is also an effort of “collage” that might transform their particular political visions, the result of comparing their experiences and ways of analyzing reality. The richer and more diverse this totality of struggles is, the more expressive and accurate its ability to describe the very form of capitalism will also be. The best general theory of capitalism is, therefore, the one that best articulates anti-capitalist forces—not only because that is its function, but because it is precisely the forces that rise against the capitalist world that can most clearly identify its contours and limits. It is a bit like the parable of the blind men around the elephant: each one, upon touching it, perceives a different shape. However, in our case, it is a matter of articulating these fragmented perceptions in order to jointly surround and defeat the beast.

The requirements we impose on a communist theory are therefore very demanding. It is necessary to create a unified theoretical framework capable of dealing simultaneously with political economy and collective organization; but it is also necessary to take a step back from specific analyses of social reality in order to better investigate how capitalism presents itself in different political contexts. All this so that it might be possible to learn, from the real movement of articulation and composition of political struggles, a vision of capitalist totality that is truly concrete—and therefore surmountable.

With all this in mind, it is time to try to build the foundations of this theory by introducing some fundamental concepts.