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The organizational point of view

As we have seen, the concepts we need to help us recover communist practice must, first, allow us to deal simultaneously with both political economy and political organization. Second, they must be abstract enough to preserve the differences between forms of political struggle, and third, they must still allow us to look at the world through these struggles, seeking ways to articulate them, as well as to articulate their visions of reality. The idea of the *organizational point of view* does exactly that.

Adopting a point of view

The first thing to note is that we are proposing a way of analyzing, a perspective. Observing things from *the point of view* of organization is not the same as fixing our attention on this or that part of social reality—for example, focusing exclusively on workplaces—but to learn to consider the organizational dimension of any social activity we analyze. A possible analogy would be with geometry: when we adopt the perspective of geometry, we do not choose some objects to analyze at the expense of others—everything has some form, simpler or more complex, and what we do is abstract from other characteristics (such as color, smell, etc.) to focus on the angles, contours, number of vertices and edges, and other geometric aspects of any given object.

In a way, some versions of Marxism have tried to propose that labor could serve as such a point of view, since everything could be analyzed based on the labor that each thing requires to be produced and maintained. However, this led to an eternal dispute over the meaning of the term: is “labor” the name we give to all human activity that concretely transforms reality, or should we reserve the term to describe only those activities that become commodities in capitalism? The first case could give rise to a general perspective on any action—but we would lose the ability to differentiate between work that produces value and activities that remain outside the dynamics of

capital—while the second tends to treat labor as a specific form of action, even if hegemonic in capitalism—but in this case it ceases to be a generic perspective, such as the one we seek here.

The idea of an organizational point of view is somewhat counterintuitive, as we normally understand organization as a specific type of activity. There would be organized and disorganized political actions, often considered more spontaneous; and there would be specific political organizations and everyone else would be disorganized, etc. If we look closely, this more traditional conception of organization almost always has three characteristics. The first is to assume that organizing is the same as “ordering” or adding more structure—it is no coincidence that many anti-authoritarian movements claim they are against organization, as they are against imposing any external order on people. The second is to assume that organizing is something we do consciously, on purpose—and it is no coincidence that many militants call on people to “organize,” because organizing would be an intentional act of engagement. And the third is to assume that there are some specific types of social ordering that deserve the name of political organization—for example, many Marxists will say that class organization occurs only through specific instruments, such as trade unions and parties, and will say that protests, uprisings, and other types of collective action are disorganized or spontaneous. Because of these characteristics, this more traditional conception does not consider that everyday social life is also organized: after all, there is not so much order in people's chaotic daily lives, and the order that does exist is not something consciously chosen, but imposed from outside, and none of the collective spaces in which we participate socially are comparable to the types we have already identified as political organizations.

When we say that we will adopt an organizational point of view, we are breaking with all these claims. Against the first one, we affirm that even though there are social activities that are more or less hierarchical, more or less stable, they are all organized in some way—they have structures, dynamics, and restrictions. Even the most spontaneous urban protest has some organization, if only the fact that all participants look in the same direction, remain bound by the buildings around them, behave in a certain way, etc. Against the second point, we affirm that organization exists even when we do not decide to organize and—perhaps even more importantly—that even when we decide to create collectives, parties, and other organizations, our intentionality does not guarantee

that we know precisely how we actually organize ourselves. It is perfectly possible, and common, to organize ourselves around certain principles only to discover later that our organization has other dynamics that influence us against our will. Finally, we also question the third claim: for us, there are no specific types of groups that would necessarily be political organizations, while other forms are necessarily not. It is the *effects* of social activities that will help us characterize whether they are indeed political organizations. In principle, a communist party may not be a truly political organization if it does not produce any effects worthy of the name, while a popular street fair may produce important political consequences.

The focus on organization

But why focus on the organizational aspect in particular? Remember the requirements we listed in the previous section: communist theory is the theory of a practice, and this practice involves the *concrete* composition of different movements and struggles. The organizational dimension is, first and foremost, the dimension where this composition could take place: articulating struggles means inventing ways for different political actions to reinforce each other, so that militant actions do not produce unwanted side effects in their ecology—it means learning to better navigate the way a given collective is seen by another group based on a consideration of its particular constraints and challenges. In short, our focus needs to be organizational, because that is the sphere where communist practice must produce transformations.

But it's actually more than that. We have also seen that one of the main requirements of communist theory is to be able to move between political economy and political organization. One path already taken to try to unify these two poles has been to reduce collective organization to economic analysis—for example, by arguing that the history of capitalist forms is, in essence, the history of workers' resistance and of capital's subsequent readjustments to it, or simply by assessing the extent to which revolutionary struggles merely corroborate the permanent revolution of the capitalist mode of production. It is a path in which Marxist critique of political economy absorbs the entire discussion on organization. Our approach is a little different: we believe that it is the theory of political organization that has the means to ultimately absorb political economic analysis.

This proposal may seem strange, as it is difficult to understand how the point of view of collective action—something more fragile and rare—could encompass and clarify what is happening in the gigantic machine of the world economy. But nothing prevents us from observing the circuits of value, at their different scales, from an organizational point of view. For example, we can think of what we call “value form” – the form that anything must adopt in order to be integrated into commodity circuits – as a certain way of organizing different people, things, relationships, and processes. Paradoxically, although the field of collective organization seems more restricted than the field of political economy, the key concept of the former—organization—is more general than that of the latter—labor. Working, even in a very general sense, is a way of reorganizing some material, while not all organization is a form of work. When we look closely at social reality in terms of forms of organization, some of these forms can be described as forms of work, but others cannot—and, as we have seen, this kind of flexibility is important to us, because peripheralization fragments social life in ways that a unified view of what labor is can no longer patch up. Gig work, online work, self-employment, informal labor, formal labor, domestic labor, slave labor, labor that is “analogous” to slavery, free labor, labor that we do not experience as such — there are so many forms of labor in the capitalist world that, instead of seeking a single meaning for the term, hidden behind all these forms, we adopt the point of view that they all organize the life of the working class in some specific way. And it is these different forms of social organization that we need to deal with.

Composition, interaction, perception

But what does it mean to observe reality from an organizational perspective? Terms such as “structure” or “dynamics” are important, but too vague, so we propose a slightly different approach. We consider that the organizational perspective is one that is interested in three interconnected questions. How is a given thing *composed*? What is it capable of *interacting* with? And what is *perceptible* to it? Let's analyze each of these questions.

How is a given social activity composed? That is: what are the parts that constitute a given activity, how do these parts relate to each other, how do they limit each other? A party is composed of a

certain number of instances, such as local groups, committees, sectors, leadership, etc. – each of these instances is composed of different people who relate to each other in particular ways. The same person may be in a local cell and be part of a regional committee, and need to behave differently at each of these levels. The question of the composition of an organization is subtle, as it mixes an analysis of how the parts relate to each other to form a whole with an analysis of how these relationships define what counts as a meaningful part to begin with. As we said, the same person can count as a militant and a leader—that is, as different parts—depending on the relationships that structure each party instance. At the same time, the difference between a local meeting and a more general coordination instance is given by the specific relations that occur in each of these spaces: for example, in one place the person acts as a militant, like the others, in another as a directing officer, making decisions on behalf of other people. At the same time, analyzing activities based on how they are composed means realizing that the organizations themselves are composed of organized parts.

What can a social activity interact with? That is: given a certain structure or way of acting, what can this organization effectively transform? I may think that my leafleting in the subway is capable of producing effects on the class consciousness of all workers, through a cascade effect, and thereby affecting the more general correlation of forces in my city—but we are not interested here in the invisible transformations we seek or intend to produce. In the case of leafleting, we would say that our organization is able to interact with a certain number of passersbys, alter their routine a little, offering them reading material, a quick conversation, and—with luck—a critical perspective that they may be interested in reflecting on and sharing with others.

The question of interaction is difficult, because we are often unable to separate the effects that a given practice is actually capable of producing from a whole series of future events that we would like to see happen and that are often the real reason for adopting that particular tactic. When we manage to distinguish our real scope of interaction from the more general field of effects to be produced, we also rediscover here the subtlety at play in the previous question: depending on the relationships we establish with other things—whether we hand out flyers or speak through a megaphone, for example—this also changes how we define the entities with which we interact—it

is possible that the flyer and the speech reach the same people, but it is as if in each case we need to define these people in different ways, as interlocutors or as an audience, for example.

What is perceptible to this social activity? That is, what aspects, what features of reality, matter, make a difference, to the activity in question? We already anticipated this type of question when we discussed the idea of social or political environment and saw that the same elements could matter in different ways to different groups. For example, consider the meeting between a radical anarchist collective and a group of street vendors. From the point of view of this anarchist organization, what makes a difference in this meeting is that street vendors are workers oppressed by the state—their names and lives in particular may not be so relevant, and many of the militants will not remember them afterwards—and that the content of the meeting will remain confidential—the militants may not pay attention to the workers' names, but they will certainly wonder if there is an informant among them. From the workers' point of view, it is not the state that is important, but the presence of the police specifically, and as much as they are suspicious at the meeting, it is possible that this is because of the militants' pretentious and arrogant manner, and not because they think the meeting may be being recorded. Basically, these are the same conversations, the same people, and the same space, but depending on which organization we consider, we also need to consider how this changes what will be noticeable – what makes a difference.

Composition: how the parts of the organization relate to each other; *interaction:* how the organization relates to others; *perception:* what makes a difference in the organization's environment. Now, it is not difficult to see that these three questions are related: the answer to each one influences the answer to the other. The way an organization is composed conditions what it can interact with – and the type of interaction the organization is capable of also conditions what it considers perceptible, what makes a difference to it. Finally, what makes a difference helps determine what will count as part of the organization, and with that we return to composition. For us, considering something from an organizational point of view means considering that activity based on these three interconnected questions.

Returning to the example of a small left-wing party: its internal structure determines the type of

action the organization is capable of undertaking. If a series of approvals and hierarchies determine the levels and activities that the party sanctions, and if the party is of a certain size—say, a few thousand militants spread across capitals in the southeast of Brazil—then there will be a certain repertoire of ways in which the party can interact with the world around it. It may be able to interact with residents of different neighborhoods through its local meetings, it may be able to interact with people on the street in protests and leafleting, or it may be able to compete with other organizations, such as student councils and union slates. And all these ways of interacting with social reality condition how the party understands that reality: what matters and what doesn't matter in the lives of workers, which aspects of the university and trade unions are relevant, what is the meaning of elections, etc. Now imagine that the party suddenly grows from thousands to millions of members, covering hundreds of cities throughout the country. Its structure will need to change—new internal mechanisms will be created, such as congresses, currents, tendencies, new partnerships with other social movements, etc.—and with that, its way of interacting with reality will also change—suddenly the question of whether or not to contest elections will become a practical rather than a speculative question—and the way of seeing this reality will also change. We would very likely begin to hear leaders talk about “the Brazilian people” and their broader needs, worrying less about the role of workers and their self-determination. In short: composition conditions interaction, which conditions perception... which in turn conditions what elements we consider capable of other compositions.

The perspective of an organization

Here we find a very important consequence of the concept of organizational perspective, an aspect that offers further justification for why it is a good approach for communist theory. Note that the three questions that define the organization's point of view invite us to consider *that organizations themselves form points of view*. After all, our definition ends up proposing that each organization acts as a kind of “sensor” of reality, conditioned by its internal structure, the elements that compose it, and its relationships. A good analogy here would be an eye, which allows us to register certain colors and shapes because of its material composition, since this composition of chemical elements, forming certain tissues such as the retina, allows this organ to interact with different frequencies of

light. Changes in the structure of the eye or brain can alter the frequencies with which this organ interacts or registers, and therefore the colors it can perceive. Similarly, for us, a collective organization also interacts with its environment based on its composition, which limits what can be “seen” of that reality—and changes in the organization lead to changes in what makes a difference to it.

This idea is not as easy to understand as it seems. We are not just saying that individuals who participate in organizations come to see the world differently; we are saying that the organizations themselves embody these perspectives.

Of course, individuals—being organizations themselves: biological, historical, psychic, etc.—see the world in their own ways, which are not completely transformed depending on the space they are in. When I join a political group, I continue to see the world through my own eyes, but at the same time, what I pay attention to, what makes a difference, and what I need to take into account can change dramatically. If I begin to develop my skills as a coordinator or organizer of certain tasks and learn to see the activities of my comrades in this way, I will also be able to look at other processes from this different point of view. And if I start looking around with my organization's tactics and strategic vision in mind, suddenly I no longer see just everyday situations, I can also begin to see ways and opportunities to advance our work.

However, it is not just about changes that affect individuals—new things we learn in an organization and then take with us into our lives—but often about perspectives that we can only adopt while actively participating in a specific collective process. A surgeon looks at the human body while performing an operation in a more cold and dispassionate way, but when he leaves the hospital, he does not continue to look at people in this way—and even if he does, this perspective no longer has the same reality: it is the hospital itself, its environment, its protocols, and the surgical practice itself that makes it easier to adopt this position. Violent combat may force militants to pay less attention to risks of life and death than they would in other situations—it is not people who decide to attack their enemies without thinking about the consequences, it is the practical organization of combat itself that makes this perspective important, at the risk of increasing our

chances of dying if we don't. In this sense, perhaps the ideal analogy is not so much the eye—which, as our primary means of vision, seems irreplaceable and always central—but a spyglass or telescope: something that, because of its specific structure, allows us to overcome the limits of individual vision, but which we can leave aside – and even if we carry new representations with us, the specific perception we had access to through the telescope is lost.

Understanding that the organizational point of view also helps us understand organizations themselves as concrete points of view is important for communist practice. First, because it makes it quite natural to consider that the disintegration of modern society creates the conditions for diverse proletarian perspectives, conditioned by the different ways in which each space will need to organize itself in order to survive. Second, because it reinforces the need to take seriously the way each organization or political movement describes the reality of contemporary capitalism—it makes it easier for us to find, in the different theories and explanations that each struggle presents, signs of their different forms of organization. And finally, because it shows that the very idea of an "organizational point of view" as a way of approaching communist practice is itself the result of a particular form of organization, that is, it is what remains *perceptible* to a movement concerned with *interacting* with different revolutionary political organizations in an attempt to *compose* the proletarian movement based on their common interests.