VIII

Concrete organization and social dominance

Over the last two chapters, we have introduced some crucial ideas that we believe help us to construct a theory of communist practice. The concept of organizational point of view proposes a way of analyzing social activities that invites us to be more attentive to how each process is structured in order to better understand its scope of action and why different groups take on very different approaches to a shared social reality. The three logics of social organization—affinity, property, and value—allow us to give more specificity to this type of analysis, proposing that we focus on the way each organization articulates these three general ways of dividing its components: affinity dividing social parts by their frontiers, property by fences, and value by margins.

We therefore have a new foundation for our theory, that is, a proposal for which perspective we will adopt when observing the organization of social phenomena; and we have three very general categories that help us differentiate between them, three ways of composing these organizational structures. We now need to introduce another crucial aspect, without which it will be impossible to discuss political struggles and revolutionary politics further—that is, the question of dominance. As we shall see, one way to avoid defining politics by banners, discourses or personal values is to analyze the effects that different actions are capable of producing—and, above all, whether these effects alter anything in the current social organization. Understanding how different forms of social organization intermingle, and what it means for one of these forms to be the dominant logic of a society or organization, is therefore very important for our way of investigating political practices.

Articulating the three logics

We initially warned that the three social logics we would examine are abstract versions—as abstract as possible—of the forms of social organization we know: affinity, property, and value. However, it

is difficult to make these logics more palatable without introducing historical examples – which, in turn, could also lead to confusion, since concrete social organization is, in fact, the result of a specific mixture of these three modes.

As we mentioned, the organization of territories into nations helps us understand how affinity operates in the capitalist world, but the nation is already, in fact, a complex organization—a way of subjecting the logic of frontiers between communities to the dictates of the state, with its fences, and capital, interested in extracting value from all possible margins. It is because of this particular mixture, where value is dominant, supported by property, that the space left over for forming communities is so restricted. The same applies to the description, for example, of the functioning of laws in a pre-capitalist empire—say, in the Chinese Qin dynasty: we can certainly learn a lot about the logic of property by observing how legality can be used to mediate conflicts between communities, preserving much of their autonomy, across a vast territory. Chinese philosophers devoted much effort to understanding how it would be possible to preserve frontiers—that is, customs and cultures—while at the same time establishing dominion over an entire territory, however, what we call "order" in this social formation is not only an expression of the logic of property, but also a mixture where trade—and therefore value—facilitated non-conflictual connections between cities and communities, also facilitating the implementation of a government bureaucracy, with a system of salaried officials. Even the sphere of the circulation of commodities—often treated in Marxism as an internal dimension of the logic of value—cannot be understood solely by this logic: commodities, as we know, cannot bring themselves to market, and need to detach themselves from any cultural limits, which is why the logic of property alienation is constitutive of capitalist commercial organization.

The interest in presenting the three logics in a schematic and general way now begins to justify itself. For, armed with these three forms of division of social organization—frontiers, fences, and margins—we have the means to unify our analysis from an organizational point of view without failing to evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, how the determining articulations and mixtures of a specific social formation are formed. And note that the idea of "mixtures" would be very difficult to understand and analyze if we had not found a way to describe each logic as a very abstract type of

social division, almost like small drawings or building blocks, which we can combine and overlap in different ways, evaluating how these compositions alter their basic characteristics.

Even if they help us to advance our organizational understanding, it is clear that simply combining the three modes would not be enough: determining which of these modes is dominant, through which organizations it is sustained, what aspects of the material organization of the planet, animals, and people this form of organization propagates itself—all of this helps us to better examine how organizations are composed. Whether they are small, momentary groups or huge national economies.

In any case, we have greatly enhanced the tools of our theory by stating that we need not only to consider social and political activities from an organizational point of view, but we also need to ask ourselves how each organization mixes, in its composition, the logics of affinity, property, and value. We should not underestimate the consequences of this intermediate step, because we can now say that—according to our three fundamental questions of composition, interaction, and perception—the way each organization uses these three logics in its composition will affect which other organizations it interacts with and how the social structure will appear to it. For example, an organization that divides its members and actions based on the logic of affinity, fighting against proprietary divisions, may not have the means to assess how value influences its structure — nor have the means to alter its flows and effects on its political environment — while an organization that uses legal tools to alter the correlation of forces that defines the margins of value may ignore the forms of community it produces. It is not a matter of saying how everything is organized, but of having better means to distinguish the various forms of organization we investigate.

Social dominance

We need, then, to take one last step in relation to the idea of different modes of social organization. After all, the idea that these different modes are articulated is not sufficient to distinguish the main contours of each social formation, or different modes of production. To do this, we need to understand what it means for one social logic to dominate the others. To understand the idea of

domination from an organizational point of view, we need to pay attention to the form of interconnection or integration of different organizations.

In fact, we can say that a social form is dominant when it organizes most of the social fabric, ensuring most of its connections and differences. For example, it is clear that there is commercial trade and a series of cultures and communities within an empire, but the logic of property and state domination is what determines the integration of everything that happens in the four corners of this social world. The same is true of capitalism: there is no capitalism without private property, without white supremacy, and without heteronormativity ensuring social reproduction—yet it is through the logic of value that the entire world economy is interconnected. This approach is a direct extension of our more schematic way of defining social logics and their combinations: if each logic is treated as a way of dividing social organizations, and if concrete organizations combine these three forms in specific ways, what we are now discussing is how these organizations, with their particular formats, connect with each other—which forms facilitate this connection most in a given historical context? If I go out on the street offering my labor in exchange for favors—or even demanding that the state employ me, since the right to work is in the constitution—I will have less chance of being socially integrated than if I sell my labor. It is the way in which the organization of my life most easily connects and interlinks with the rest of the social organization around me.

This does not mean that everything in the world needs to be organized directly under the dominant logic; what dominance determines are the means by which even other organizational forms are woven into the whole. A family can relate through kinship, affinity, and even love, but if it wants to be part of capitalist society, it will need to somehow deal with the fact that most consumer goods cost money and that most occupations and ways of earning money come through the exchange of commodities. Similarly, there may even be commercial exchanges between isolated peoples, but if they want to relate to each other as part of the same social reality, they will have to find ways to relate to each other through gift-giving and kinship. Even activities that are not social in the sense we are dealing with here—for example, the process of creating a work of art—will need to adapt if they have ambitions to circulate socially in a given historical context: they may need to take on ritualistic or sacred traits in some cases, or find a place in financial speculation in others. Acquiring

this form so that a process is socially integrated does not mean that everything that happens in that process is absolutely determined by that form—only enough for the integration to be effective.

The crucial point here is that, in general, the process of integration into the dominant logic does not happen after activities and processes are already locally organized—as if we created new things and then tried to understand their place in a social puzzle. This simpler and cruder type of integration is what Marx called "formal subsumption," an adjustment to try to integrate social components created without this integration in mind. For example, the integration of artisanal workshops into the functioning of the capitalist market, or the integration of indigenous lands into the legality of a state. However, the dominance of a social logic is only truly consolidated when the new pieces of this puzzle are already created or organized locally with this challenge of fitting into the whole in mind. Here, the totality is already anticipated in the form of its parts: I already cultivate food with the intention of selling the harvest, I already educate my children in view of how they will enter the job market—here, other human logics and activities try to conform to the board rules even before the game begins. This is what we call "real subsumption," and we can easily observe it operating in modern cities: look around you and almost everything around you was produced to be sold as commodities—and what's more, it was produced using other things that were themselves produced in this way.

If social dominance depends on this profound transformation of the organization of life—ceasing to be a principle of posterior connection between things to become a more active and internal force in social processes—it still needs a third type of process to truly consolidate itself.

Material dominance

In addition to the integration that attempts to glue together diverse social parts—formal subsumption—and the integration that already guides the creation of new pieces of the puzzle—real subsumption—there is also the question of how social logic will deal with processes that it cannot sufficiently control or absorb. After all, there is a limit to how far we can determine whether we organize ourselves according to this or that social logic. Faced with the pressures of

capital and competition, I can decide no longer to sell only the surplus production of my farm and start choosing what to cultivate based on what will sell more, even if I no longer eat what I plant, and I can even change the way I work and treat the soil because of this – but there is something in the earth that has been there for thousands of years, will continue to be there after humanity, and is indifferent to this whole process. Here we encounter forms of organization of reality – whether of life, physics, or whatever – that we cannot fully absorb in the form of a society. This introduces a third challenge to social dominance, which is the domination of material reality.

By "material reality" we mean here everything that participates in the integration and dominance of a social logic, but which cannot be entirely controlled or guided by it. The organization of life and physical phenomena are the most obvious examples of this type of materiality: even if capital puts a price on the minerals it extracts from the ground, it cannot synthesize these substances "out of thin air"; it must find ways to integrate them into the social world. The chemical and physical properties of a certain stone cannot be fully absorbed by the market, but they can be used in different ways—for example, the rarity of a metal can be used as a criterion for its pricing or monopoly, even though its disposition in the ground, millions of years ago, was not conceived with the luxury market in mind.

Material domination does not occur, in this sense, through a social rearrangement of how things are organized, since we are dealing here with elements that we cannot directly alter, but mainly through the instrumentalization of these uncontrollable aspects in the name of social reproduction. It is as if the most advanced form of domination were one that delegates to non-social processes the task of creating conditions for the perpetuation of the dominant social form. Say we live far away from any source of clean water, in a region where it rains little—and this is no coincidence: it was the only place where we could find housing, given the way our society is organized. Now, geographical distance is not in itself something that capitalism controls, but it can imbue this spatial organization with the task of reproducing class relations, since the lack of access to water puts me in a position where I need to buy bottles of water, at exorbitant prices and contaminated with microplastics, in order to survive. Capital is not capable of creating physical space, but it knows how to propagate capitalist relations by instrumentalizing this material

dimension.

Material dominance is essential for the reproduction of a social formation; it is what ensures not only that a society creates new "pieces" that fit into its totality, but also that even that which it cannot create continues to ensure the integrity of this social whole. This negotiation with materiality can take place through selective processes of reorganization—such as the choice of partners for sexual reproduction, in the case of kinship; the restriction of access through logistics, in the case of states and empires; or the "productive consumption" of goods, in the case of capitalism. These are all cases where we actively reorganize processes that exist independently of our social organization. But there are also cases where this reorganization is more passive, for example, transforming a natural disaster into a “business opportunity” that exploits the desperation of climate refugees. Certainly no process of material domination is as frightening and complete as the way contemporary capitalism integrates the planetary metabolism today: on the one hand, it actively destabilizes life on Earth, and on the other, it transforms this instability into new spaces of accumulation and exploitation.

There is one aspect of this conception of material reality that we do not discuss in detail here, but which will play a crucial role later in this book. It is the fact that, for us, what counts as material reality is *relative* to a given organization. We define material reality as follows: it is everything on which a social organization depends, but which is indifferent or independent of it to some extent. In other words, it does not need to be a process that is totally alien or external to the human world in general; it suffices that it be indifferent to the social formation we are analyzing. We use examples here that contrast the organization of people—which can be more easily changed socially—and the organization of natural processes, as these cases make clear the challenge at stake in material domination, which is to propagate itself through means that cannot be entirely controlled. But this differentiation is only for didactic purposes.

There are natural organizational processes that do not present great resistance to social integration—think, for example, of the chemical processes that capitalism has “domesticated” to the point of controlling them with unbelievable precision, synthesizing all sorts of materials that

exist only for industrial purposes. And there are also forms of human organization that—like the material reality we described above—do not meekly conform to any social logic or any mixture of them—and which therefore exist for a given society as an "anti-social" threat, a source of resistance and refusal of immediate integration. This is the case with egalitarian collective organization: people who come together to act under a political principle that cannot be reduced to community, property, or value are a source of both fear and social fascination, just like a storm or a meteor tearing through the sky.