

IX

The worker and peripheralization

The previous four chapters were possibly the densest so far. It could not be otherwise, as they introduced three of the main ideas we will use to construct our theory of communist practice—the idea of the organizational point of view, the idea of modes of social organization, and what it means for one social mode to dominate the others. As we anticipated, the principles of a theory that aims to accompany and learn from very diverse practices and struggles need to be very general and comprehensive—and this really makes it difficult to present them in a concise and didactic way. But now, armed with these concepts, we can begin to revisit the arguments we presented at the beginning of the book—about peripheralization and the challenge facing communists today—presenting them in a much more integrated way and, most importantly, in a way that is more appropriate for a practice that needs tools to investigate the forms of organization of different political struggles today and the possibilities for their composition.

If we want to return to our initial discussion of peripheralization as a historical process that has transformed the terrain of political struggles, we need to be able to define three things. First, we need to be able to describe in this new theoretical language the dynamics of industrial progress that Marx and Engels analyzed in *The Communist Manifesto*. Next, we need to be able to define, within this capitalist formation, what the figure of the worker is—because, as we have seen, it is this figure that, for us, enters into crisis with peripheralization. Finally, as expected, we need to define what a peripheral capitalist social formation is. Let's get started.

Capitalist alignment and modernity

We define capitalist social formation as one in which social organization by value dominates the other two modes—which must still be present—and determines the material dominance of that society, centered on the labor force and the exploitation of nature for the purpose of capital accumulation. We thus approach the famous definition of capitalist social formation that Marx

presents when he defines the social “base” and “superstructure,” the base being composed of the confrontation between productive forces and relations of production, and the superstructure containing the entire legal, cultural, and spiritual organization of society. In light of what we discussed in the previous chapter, it is not difficult to recognize the dominance of value in the material base – with labor mediating between the material and the social logic of value – and the organization by property and affinity constituting the social “superstructure” as secondary forces, but also articulated within a specific social formation. It is important that we recover this scheme from Marx, but it is more important that our theory has room for other possible arrangements, as it may be that the main contradiction of a given society is not organized by value, but directly by the logic of imperial violence, or by forms governed by affinity, with value being reduced, in these cases, to a superstructural element.

However, in order to define more specifically that central characteristic that we identified in Marx and Engels' analysis of capitalism in the *Manifesto*, we need to introduce another new idea here. As we have seen, there was something in the dynamics of industrial progress that seemed to link the constant transformation of the conditions of production to a corresponding advance in the conditions of association of workers, as a historical force that pushed us toward a unified international movement. How can we define this connection between value and the organization of workers?

When we talk about the mixture of different modes of organization, we have already seen that it is important to consider which mode dominates the others. But it is also important to consider whether this mixture is *aligned* or *misaligned*.

Alignment, in our theory, means that these three forms of organization are highly integrated and function almost as one—misalignment is the opposite and, in fact, is also the most common case. When there is alignment, the way we organize ourselves to meet the requirements of value—as workers, consumers, etc.—also meets the requirements of property and affinity. Social organization is such that the main social divisions of each mode overlap: the difference between law and crime also divides what is productive and unproductive—such as the protection of private property,

which guarantees the possibility of selling commodities—and good family and community norms are defined based on these same divisions—so that raising a child is synonymous with preparing them to respect authority and to work hard. In this context, being a “good person” in the eyes of our peers, being a hard-working person and a law-abiding citizen... it’s all more or less the same thing. Institutions themselves can also be organized in an aligned manner – for example, in a school, where the processes of personal development, discipline, and job training are extremely integrated. Now, an “aligned” capitalist society will be one where changes in the organization of value will inform changes in the field of laws and communities at every point. Everything that capital does in the field of commodity production relations would lead to a similar, or aligned, transformation in the field of the legal superstructure, forms of consciousness, and affinity, thus transforming the conditions of workers’ organization.

Another name for this social alignment in capitalism is *modernity*. Modernity can be understood as a form of capitalist social organization where industrial progress would also lead to a broader type of social development—that is, concomitant transformations in the field of property and community norms—that cut across all the contradictions of society. In the modern context, when capital reorganizes the forms of management and exploitation of labor, communities and legal regimes would accompany these transformations, facilitating the social expression of this economic tension in terms of rights and the formation of bonds of affinity among workers. For example, new forms of exploitation at work, by affecting similarly organized people, could lead to new forms of union organization and a renewed sense of solidarity around the same issues of struggle. This is the origin of the process of “spontaneous” convergence that we indicated at the beginning of this book.

In this sense, we can define modernity as a force that produces a growing alignment of organizational forms, a kind of “simplification” of life through the reinforcement of some institutions responsible for this organizational homogenization: the workplace, school, families, elections, etc. And at the heart of modernity is the figure of the worker, a kind of minimal unit of affinity and property, dominated by value—socially and materially.

The figure of the worker and the senses of work

When we present the logic of value, we talk about the workforce as a commodity whose limits are negotiated within the production process—but a worker is not just their labor power, a commodity. It is also a figure that transforms an individual into an independent person who can belong to communities—that is, a way of being recognized as a person through sharing a common substrate with others, a nomadic disposition—and a way of existing for the State—as a legal subject, an owner of oneself. It is a figure that already combines the three logics of affinity, property, and value in a single individual, capable of building new communities, constituting themselves as citizens of the State, and—above all—integrating themselves into the circuits of production and consumption of commodities. The formation of the working class—through the enclosure of land, the dispossession of the means of labor, the criminalization of “vagrancy,” the segregation of women into the domestic sphere, the centrality of the individual in modern culture, the reinvention of slavery under the rule of international capital, among many other forms of social reorganization – not only produced an economic regime centered on the extraction of surplus value from labor, but an entire social world where the figure of the worker functions as a privileged form of sociability.

It is by presenting ourselves as someone who is their own master and freely chooses to sell their labor power that we can exist in the face of capital. But, of course, not everyone who works and is exploited under capitalism constitutes a worker in this sense, even in modernity. And this is no coincidence: not being able to exist socially as a worker is in itself one of the forms of domination under capitalism, especially on its periphery. And, as we mentioned earlier, both domestic work and work under a slave regime contribute structurally to the capitalist economy without, therefore, presenting this alignment between the formation of communities and proprietary regimes, thus existing in the shadows of the modern regime.

The figure of the modern worker, therefore, is not only the position of all who work—in the sense that their survival is tied to the dictates of value and capital—but the position of those who can

transform this work dynamic into the foundation for claiming their rights and their place in the family and communities they form.

This brings us to an important question: what is the reason for the centrality of the working class in Marxist analysis, the figure of the worker in modernity, or the role of labor in capitalism? The argument we find in *The Communist Manifesto* identifies the proletariat with the figure of the worker, that is, the worker as an individual "aligned" in the field of value, property, and affinity—after all, it is the worker who would be able to socially accompany the transformations produced by the expansion of industrial progress, forming ever larger political communities with other workers exposed to the same social conditions. This is a first reason for focusing political analysis on the situation of workers: the worker would be the general figure of oppression, which capitalism promotes everywhere as it dissolves all other types of collective and individual existence. Therefore, if the patterns of accumulation and exploitation change, the forms of work and, therefore, the forms of life of workers would also change in general.

But the hypothesis that capitalism produces the conditions for workers to recognize themselves everywhere as a dominated class is not the only reason why labor has a strategic place in revolutionary political thought. There is also the fact that the dominance of capital, as we saw in the previous chapter, depends on the reorganization of material reality, that is, on the capacity of human action to transform itself and other things into commodities. Labor, in this sense, is situated at the very threshold of capitalist social relations: at the point where value confronts everything that is indifferent to "relations of production" – and, not surprisingly, this limit is a point of unavoidable conflict between "productive forces" and the social forms of capital, a dispute over the extent to which labor power will have to push its own limits into matter and return with more value, and the extent to which something will resist this thrust. This dimension of labor under capitalist domination continues to operate even where the figure of the worker no longer has the same centrality.

We have therefore seen two dimensions of the working class that are relevant to revolutionary politics: the "homogenizing" dimension of the figure of the worker, which capital would promote

globally, against its own interests, and the conflictive dimension of labor under capitalism, a social place where an endless battle between human activity and the logic of value is repeated. The first dimension is indebted to modernity, as it depends on the alignment between value, property, and affinity in the formation of individuals. The second depends solely on the social and material dominance of value.

But there is still a third dimension that we associate with work and that is often lost under these two other aspects: beneath the idea of the worker there lies a more diffuse or indeterminate human creative capacity, for humanity is not only capable of dedicating itself to the reorganization of material reality based on the criteria of commodities and value. We can, after all, also subject this reorganization to other social forms—transforming reality according to the dictates of affinity or property—and to forms that simply do not fit into any recognizable social regime. Art, science, love, and politics all mobilize this inventive dimension that hinders social integration. Of course, artists, scientists, psychoanalysts, and political militants sometimes earn money from what they do—and need to orient their activities to ensure this income—but there remains a tension between what they actually do and the available modes of social integration, because they are all ways of reorganizing life and matter that, instead of integrating reality into existing social forms, attempt to subject society itself to essentially "anti-social" forms – that is, to forms that are indifferent to good taste, current opinions, romantic types, and established social divisions. There is something in what we call "labor"—and which for centuries has fueled the revolutionary imagination—that points to a capacity to subject the social world to something else, to other principles, often difficult to explain. For our part, we do not need a single name for this dimension of human activity. As we shall see, the way in which this inventive capacity is named varies in each political process, depending on how it articulates different social logics.

It was the great Promethean dream of modernity that the alignment of value, affinity, and property could guarantee the unity of these three meanings of work: work as the homogenization of social experience, as the tension between the transformation of the material world and the reproduction of capital, and as the creative capacity to subject society to other forms. It turns out that this unity is, at best, an exceptional and historically determined phenomenon.

Capitalist misalignment and peripheralization

We mentioned that the alignment of affinity, property, and value in capitalism gives rise to the modern capitalist form of organization, with the figure of the worker at its center. With this description, we are able to recover the analysis presented in the *Manifesto*, which we consider to represent only a particular historical moment. In fact, with the tools we have developed, it is not difficult to understand why capitalist modernity could be nothing more than a geographical and temporal exception.

We spoke above about the alignment of the three logics—and what happens when they are not aligned? Well, first of all, it is worth noting that misalignment is the normal situation, the general case: there are many more ways to organize without having to overlap affinity, property, and value than there are ways to align these forms of organization everywhere. In fact, it is worse than that: it is effectively impossible to guarantee the total alignment of the three forms of organization. Consider the case of so-called “fictitious commodities,” that is, those commodities that are necessary for capitalist production but are not created through that production process. This is the case with land—which we do not produce—labor—since workers are born, they are not produced in factories—and money itself—which is also not created by commodities, but by relationships that are beyond anyone’s control, as changes in languages and ways of speaking exemplify very well. These commodities must undergo a specific type of process in order to exist as value-bearing commodities: they must be fenced off, their community ties broken, so that they can then be presented on the market. To return to our abstract language: common frontiers are replaced by fences—only then can things be exploited and traded marginally. If this happens, then capitalism must necessarily operate in a misaligned manner somewhere. It is no coincidence that it has always operated in this way in places where it has concentrated the massive enclosure of land and people, that is, in the colonies.

Life on the peripheries of capitalism is—and always has been—misaligned. We mentioned above the figure of the worker as a paradigm of the integrated organization of affinity, property, and value,

but it is difficult to find this type of alignment both in peripheral countries and in the peripheries of large central cities. Instead of this homogenizing trend, the periphery is where we constantly need to alternate which form of organization we should prioritize: often, in order to secure some work, we need to go against the law and against our own community ideals; to fight for rights, we need to put our economic survival at risk; to defend our families and communities, we need to go against our economic interests. Nowhere in the world do people work as hard as in the periphery, but paradoxically, everyone is always striving to *become* a worker, as if this status were never real enough. And in fact it is not: the circuits of capital absorb as much labor as they can, but they do not need to reorganize people's lives in such a way that the state and the nation absorb and integrate the entire population in the same way. In Brazil, for example, there are many more people working than there are formally employed and than there are citizens whose interests have a place on the national stage.

We can finally give a more technical definition of what we call peripheralization. If modernization is the historical process through which industrial progress would increasingly produce an aligned and integrated social organization, peripheralization is the reverse process: the greater the expansion of the domain of capital, the more it produces a misaligned and fragmented social world—and benefits from it. And according to our theory, this would be a much more spontaneous and much less costly trend than modernization. Not only because there must always be regions of the capitalist system where these modes of organization do not fit together harmoniously, but because the logic of value and capital becomes much more “pure” when it does not have to be compatible with just one form of law and one general form of community.

This way of defining peripheralization makes it much more natural to understand why we initially stated that it is both an important transformation of capitalism and a return to a well-known state. Of course, life on the periphery of capitalism is different when we interact with more central regions of the world where some organizational alignment still exists. However, the form this experience takes when this modernizing trend dissipates is not entirely new, as it closely resembles the way capitalism has always operated on its margins.

Another thesis that can perhaps be clarified now concerns how this process affects the left. As the social terrain becomes increasingly fragmented—that is, increasingly misaligned in terms of how affinity, property, and value structure our lives—the composition of each political organization also varies more. And when the way they are constituted in the struggle against capitalism varies, so too do the ways in which they interact with their environments and the way they will cut out pieces of this world, producing very different perceptions of our social reality. Of course, it is still possible to rally people as workers, but perhaps now we can understand why this strategy does not work like as before: it is the social terrain itself that is not organized in the same way, even though, due to vulgarization, we may have the impression that everyone understands the same thing when we invoke this figure.

Does this mean that peripheralization implies the end of classes, the crisis of value, or the end of the revolutionary horizon? Not at all. Social organization based on the accumulation of capital has never encountered so little friction as it does today, which means that the ability of value to shape the terrain of economic exchange has never been so absolute. The figure of the worker dissolves, but labor conflict becomes even more widespread when the inertia of legality and human dignity does not impose so many obstacles. It is true that we cannot count on the transposition of the missteps of the process of capital valorization in terms of general laws and rights or in terms of mutual recognition and spontaneous solidarity, as there is no longer an alignment between these logics. But it is also true that the creative and transformative potential that we have learned to recognize in the figure of the worker never belonged exclusively to that figure—it merely embodied, at a specific historical moment, the much more general contradiction between social organization and the proletariat's potential to extract its own form from that which lies beyond the dominance of capital. Today, it is up to all of us to recognize this creative dimension—the source of popular power—wherever it appears.