XI

Political struggle

We have proposed that a fairly comprehensive way of thinking about political organization, which serves the purposes of our theory of communist practice, is to understand as political any collective process that puts the logics of affinity, property, and value at the service of a principle, practice, or idea that is not merely a mixture of these three more general modes of organization. We have seen that this definition remains open to different orientations—we can, after all, reorganize social life in an emancipatory, conservative, or reactionary manner—but that only the emancipatory orientation truly confronts the impasse of needing to structure itself collectively in ways that are effectively in conflict or tension with our current reality. What we are going to do now is try to unravel a little how this conflict can be expressed in different dimensions of political struggle.

The idea of political struggle is relational; it forces us to consider not only a given political organization, but how it interacts with other organizations and with its environment more generally—that is, with structures that are organized in other ways and therefore resist integration into political processes. This relational and conflictual character is what makes it more intuitive to associate political transformation with struggle than with the idea of organization—which, for many people, seems like something self-absorbed and removed from the raison d'être of revolutionary politics. But, as we have already seen, the organizational point of view does not really allow us to separate these two dimensions: the way political organizations and their social environments are composed informs and conditions what types of struggles can be waged and what effects they are capable of producing. Struggle is, in this very general sense, something like the clash and grinding between different forms of organization, like tectonic plates in an earthquake.

When we approach political struggle from this angle, we can distinguish different possible focuses of struggle. As we will discuss in the next chapter, the typology we will now present could be infinitely expanded if we also consider the specific modes of organization of each struggle. However, using only the three organizational dimensions we are working with—composition,

interaction, and perception—and the three political orientations we introduced above—emancipatory, conservative, and reactionary—it is already possible to present a fairly diverse panorama of organizational conflicts that deserve to be qualified as potential foci of revolutionary struggle.

In reality—which can only be truly grasped through investigation—these forms mix in different ways, so we will offer here only a schematic overview. To do so, we will divide the political process into general types of confrontation: the confrontation between emancipatory politics and conservative organizations, and then between emancipatory and reactionary politics. In both cases, what interests us is to analyze some of the possible points of conflict between political organization and the social world in which it is inserted—and there are at least three, as might be expected at this point: the fields of composition, interaction, and perception.

The struggle for composition

Let us consider, then, the struggle between a process of political organization and the other forms of social organization in which its own members and militants are embedded. An important example of this type of conflict, which we mentioned in a previous chapter, is the tension between work and politics: the former guarantees survival, bonds of affection and friendship, and some immediate stability, while political life brings new responsibilities, new social relationships, new costs in terms of time, energy, and money—and sometimes considerable personal risk. This is a conflict between the reproduction of life and the production of struggle that is often invisible because it initially presents itself as a kind of "inertia," an almost automatic resistance that we face simply because we try to come together and relate in ways that go against the current social dynamics. In other words, it is a struggle between emancipation and conservative forces.

Collective self-organization is certainly the only effective way for the proletariat to accumulate strength and power, but new forms of political organization often increase the contradictions of life before they are able to address and transform them. The simple redistribution of responsibilities in a more egalitarian way within a group, in principle something politically

desirable, can create anxiety and conflict, as it forces us to sustain a tension between how we behave in the rest of our lives and how we act as an organization. As we mentioned, this inertia can also be expressed in economic terms: it is clear that political organization cannot be determined exclusively by calculations of work and value, but by subjecting these issues to other principles, we often disregard the cost of time, money, and work that militancy places on people, sometimes making their participation in collectives unfeasible and reinforcing the impression that individual solutions will better accommodate each person's constraints.

There are many tactical and strategic ways to wage this kind of struggle. Some political processes manage to address this conflict by organizing people whose lives "push" them into politics out of necessity, for example when collective organization manages to secure more protection from the police for street vendors, or immediate housing in an urban occupation. These are situations in which people's lives are in such a state of instability that the political struggle itself can immediately offer more order and security. Other movements do their best to include the very reproduction of social life within the political process, centering their struggle strategy on land seizures and the ability to build forms of autonomous organization for food, housing, and lasting social ties. Still others avoid this conflict altogether—intentionally or not—by restricting their ways of organizing collectively in view of the social lives of their militants, reducing the need to face this conflict of composition directly.

But this is not the only struggle that takes place in the field of organizational composition. For in addition to conservative forms of organization—which resist the political reorganization of militants through economic pressures, appeals to laws, and community and cultural values—it is often necessary to deal with tensions with reactionary forces within emancipatory organizations.

Here, we are not talking about informants, sabotage, or any actions by third parties against a political process—all of which concern the interaction between different organizations. After all, spies organize themselves differently than militants! The confrontation with reactionary forces in the field of composition concerns the tensions created within the same organization, that is, tensions between different ways of organizing among the same people. And, as we have seen,

reactionism is defined above all by the process of electing something already well known, a concrete part of reality, and elevating it to the status of a principle of general political transformation, at the expense of everything that remains outside this reduced model of social life. The emancipatory process, on the other hand, draws its ideas from material reality, which makes its political principles capable of guiding a transformation of the social world towards something new, while at the same time making these ideas more fragile and difficult to justify or explain completely.

This paradox specific to emancipatory forms of organization—the need to point to a new collective path, but on the condition of depending on forms without guaranteed social recognition—is also a source of internal conflicts with reactionism. When a political process loses the means to sustain this creative openness, linked to its material reality, two options arise. The first possibility is to rely on conservatism, on the rules, laws, and principles that already govern society, but thus losing its explicitly political character. This is when, without knowing how our revolutionary principles relate to a given situation, we decide to treat a case of theft in the organization as a common legal problem, for example. To treat it as a "police matter," we don't need to invent anything; we just need to rely on what is already socially in place.

The second, more reactionary option involves a different procedure, often chosen precisely to avoid admitting that, on this particular point, we have no means of reorganizing social life. This involves emulating the logic of political conflict, but in a displaced way: instead of inventing new ways of dealing with the problem or situation, we select already established people, groups, or models to determine what is going on and what to do. This is when the power of reputation, intellectual authority, or the availability guaranteed by the economic means of a particular individual takes precedence over collective political orientation—we continue to act on the margins of the social world, and therefore do not appear conservative, but in practice we cede the power of social reorganization to a particular group or individual, which defines the reactionary operation, as we defined it in the previous chapter. This second option involves replacing openness to something new and unknown with something already established and partial, which cripples the composition of that organization—and can lead to expulsions, punishments, rifts, accusations of all kinds—but has the benefit for the identity of militants of emulating the form of political conflict, as it preserves

a tension with the social world. It is, therefore, still a reactionary solution.

The struggle for interaction

The second dimension in which the struggle takes place is also the most recognizable – the field of interaction. In general, when we talk about political struggle, we immediately think of some kind of confrontation between different groups or forces – and, not surprisingly, it is to describe the interactions between political organizations and reactionary forces that we use concepts of war and military strategy, literally or metaphorically. But before discussing this type of struggle, we need to consider another type of political intervention: one that does not interact with opposing political forces, but with conservative organizations. Unlike the previous case, we are not talking about the pressure that social life under capitalism exerts on political militants, but about the interactions between political organizations and their social environment in general.

The struggle to transform existing social structures — this is almost the very definition of emancipatory politics — and intervention in our social environment can take many different forms: training and conversation activities, protests, petitions, demonstrations, barricades, marches, promotion and support for other workers' organizations, creation and maintenance of kitchens, campaigns, denunciations, artistic interventions, propaganda, publications... However, from an organizational point of view, these actions are not inherently political—what makes them political is the fact that they are subject to principles that exceed the logic of affinity, property, and value and, therefore, produce consequences that lead the world to reorganize itself in a new way.

This more traditional dimension of the fight against the conservation of the world is accompanied by another, less visible one. After all, every connection, material resource, and human effort mobilized by a political organization from its environment—whether its interaction with the owner of its rented headquarters, with the bills that arrive at the end of the month, with printing and fuel costs, with neighbors, with the market, crime, laws, institutions, etc.—is also part of this same field of struggle, where conservative resistance confronts our forms of organization. This is another crucial aspect of the struggle, because the more fragile our organization is—that is, the

greater our dependence on other communitarian, economic, or legal processes—the greater the pressure that the social world will exert so that its own structures also dominate the political forms of emancipatory organization. The need to pay for militants' travels – for effectively political purposes – can lead an organization to prioritize the dispute for party funding – and thus end up privileging issues of property or commodities over its own strategic objectives. The struggle to transform the world is thus accompanied by the struggle against being transformed by the world.

In a way, the struggle against conservative forces is where political organization most directly touches the structures of the capitalist world: it is where we feel the effects not so much of our opponents' moves and strategies, but of the very fact that we are playing the game "away from home," on hostile ground. It turns out that this dimension is confused, and often obscured, by the presence of explicitly reactionary forces. The political struggle as a confrontation with reactionary forces involves forces that seek not only to resist emancipatory transformation, but also to impose another type of transformation, one that is reductive and mutilating—and they seek to subject even, and especially, emancipatory organizations to this destructive process. After all, if there is one thing that a reactionary can accuse of being "out of place" in the world, it is political organizations that fight for something that does not yet socially exist.

Most of the time, it is conservative organizations themselves that become reactionary forces when confronted by emancipatory political organizations. This is because even if conservatives want to keep the world as it is, the world they want to keep usually does not include people trying to transform it. The police are certainly the first of the supposedly conservative forces to be affected by the presence of political action—and the reactionary methods they normally use most devotedly to preserve white supremacy suddenly become more comprehensive models of containment of militants and organizations. But this reactive process also impacts people and other institutions, as long as it is possible to identify who is disrupting the order. In the presence of a transformative political force, the market itself quickly reveals itself to be a political arena, setting aside the trappings of the free flow of goods and becoming an instrument of embargoes and trade wars when necessary.

The political struggle against reactionism is the most difficult, as it accumulates the impasses of the transformation of conservative structures with the deliberate attack on the emancipatory field—it is like playing against a stronger team on a sloping field that tends against us. And it raises a unique question, crucial to the political struggle, which is to understand what, in a given political context, an emancipatory victory against reactionary forces means: does it mean destroying their organizations, effectively eliminating the existence of these groups and ideas, or does it mean emptying them of their social and political support, rendering this reactionary process ineffective? As a political force that "particularizes" social reality, reactionism offers itself as a concrete and less structural target – which can hinder the tactical analysis of what would be an effective long-term combat.

In this sense, in addition to the dangers it poses—as it turns militants into targets of different types of silencing, dismissal, imprisonment, ostracism, murder, etc.—the struggle against reactionism faces an additional "temptation." Because it is a type of political reorganization of social life guided by the particular, which leads to demands for the destruction of some other part of the world that hinders the interests of this specific group, reactionary forces open up the possibility of also reducing the emancipatory political struggle to the preservation of the world itself, to the avoidance of the "greater evil." There is a risk here that the struggle against an enemy will end up replacing the emancipatory political principle—the struggle for another way of life—with another direction, offering a much clearer and simpler direction for our struggles, despite abandoning a horizon of deeper and more real transformation.

The struggle for perception

When we discussed the problem of social and political environments a few chapters ago, we talked a little about the conflict of perspectives that emerges when two organizations are rooted in very different social fragments. At that point, we did not have our theory of modes of organization or our definition of peripheralization as a process of misalignment of these modes, but we could certainly use these ideas, along with our theory of organization as a point of view, to better understand why this kind of divergence of perspectives is happening more and more. And, as we

have seen, we are not talking about divergence of opinion or political ideology, but about differences large enough in the way the social terrain is organized in different places to justify and influence the production of political struggles and organizations that are even incompatible with each other.

It is important to remember this dimension because it is at the heart of the main form of dispute that occurs in political organizations and that depends on political perception: what is called in Latin America "base work" – "grassroots activity" in other places. Base work can take many different forms, and although we are accustomed to thinking that only the poor workers qualify as the "social basis" of a movement, politics can have very different bases. The base of a parliamentarian is their loyal electorate, the base of a student movement is the students—and both the electorate and the students may not belong to the most impoverished strata of the working class. Thinking this way, we see that many revolutionary organizations do not suffer so much from a lack of a base as from a particular composition of their social bases, which is not the same thing.

In organizational terms, we can define the base as follows: the base of an organization or movement is that part of its environment for which it makes a practical difference that the organization in question is political. Whether it is because the movement's actions make a difference to those people in the domains of value, property, or affinity, or at all levels at the same time: from the point of view of the base, the political actions of the organization count and make an effective difference in life. This can appear in many ways, beyond voting and openness to participate in activities and calls: clandestine movements can be covered up and hidden among the people, economic networks can be created and buying and selling conditions facilitated to allow the creation of solidarity kitchens, organizations can be welcomed by different communities and peoples, etc. What is common in the formation of a base is the promotion of practices that facilitate recognition and interaction with what the organization has to offer politically—that is, what exceeds affinity, ownership, and value in your organization. If the political organization only makes a difference to its environment in terms similar to any other organization—say, because it sells t-shirts at a community fair, like any other business—we do not consider this link to constitute the basis of that organization. We will return to this idea of a base in a later chapter.

Base work is a different kind of struggle from the conflict that is waged through interventions: it is not just about transforming social reality, but about changing the way social actors see themselves and political struggle. The famous theme of "class consciousness," one of the desired effects of grassroot collective action, points to this special effort to transform not only how the world is organized, but other people's and groups' perspective on the world and the emancipatory struggle. In our view, however, this effect is not a matter of persuasion, clarification, or education per se, even though these can be important components: it is, above all, a matter of creating conditions that make it materially feasible and opportune for more people to engage, as they can, with emancipatory struggles—it is by changing the environment and making interaction with revolutionary politics something beneficial and interesting for others that one has, as an effect, the production of points of view that also recognize the value of this struggle. To paraphrase Marx, we could say that it is the change in the social being of the class that alters the social consciousness of the class.

There are two ways in which base work can encounter resistance and difficulties. Where the emancipatory struggle comes up against the conservatism of its environment, the central clash is over the reality of political principles when compared to the harshness of social life. How can we know, after all, that the political component of a given movement is not purely a facade to ultimately reinforce the gains in status, control, or money for a few? The legitimacy of political organization is at stake: is it really guided by a different principle, or is it just another group of opportunists or lost idealists? As we have said, this struggle for the perception of emancipatory politics does not take place intellectually, but as a consequence of practices where the existence of that political group and its principles makes a difference.

The struggle against conservative ways of seeing and interpreting political processes depends deeply on the social conditions of that environment. If people's survival is only viable if everyone strictly adheres to the way everything is already organized, there is very little chance of creating any new political base, because political engagement makes everything risky and even more precarious. But

these conditions for the formation of a base are even more crucial when they are contested by reactionary organizations.

In this case, reactionism actively hinders the creation of conditions for the experience of new relationships and forms of organization that could lead to the formation of an emancipatory political base—such as the establishment of new rules of isolation between workers in a company, the fostering of a climate of suspicion and threat of lay offs, or the offering of benefits to those who tell on others. Making betrayal, giving up, snitching, and violence ways to make social life easier are some of the ways reactionism changes the social environment according to its destructive political ideals. Reactionary politics also affects this process when it manages to transform the profound asymmetry between reactionary and emancipatory politics into a competition between two political ideals of equal quality, as if fighting for the transformation of the world and fighting for the supremacy of a piece of the current world were the same thing. This often happens in the electoral process, when the difference between left and right is reduced to the difference between two candidates competing for people based on charisma and mutual accusations—but it also happens a lot in the field of mass communication, when left-wing campaigns aim to "learn from the right" how to present themselves and compete with ideas. When this happens, radical political organizations may continue to attract supporters, but they are no longer able to form effective bases.