

XII

Political thought

Throughout the last two chapters, we have begun to explore the field of political action. We have presented a way of distinguishing the organization of social life from political organization, differentiating those social activities that are governed by the logics of value, property, and affinity from those that subject these three forms to other organizational principles, drawn from material reality—principles that we call political ideas. It is worth noting that this distinction between the social and the political is purely organizational—it concerns how things are structured and related, it does not define specific forms or agendas that would be inherently political: it is perfectly possible, as we anticipated at the beginning of the book, that groups that talk about politics do not produce real political effects, and others that do not think in these terms fit our definition.

Next, we distinguish between emancipatory, conservative, and reactionary political orientations, differentiating each based on the criteria they use to organize themselves. Emancipatory political organization, for example, has to deal with the conflict of being guided by ideas that are not well established socially, as it draws its organizational principles from the investigation of material reality, that is, from social and natural processes that belong to the “black box” of a given social situation, from that which does not count and has no social place. Conservative organizations, on the other hand, aim to subject every new problem or collective impasse to the social forms that are already in place—not surprisingly, conservatism can always appeal to pragmatism and skepticism against the “idealism” of emancipatory politics. Its horizon is the absorption and integration of whatever it may be into already established modes of organization. Finally, reactionary political organizations short-circuit emancipatory and conservative politics: instead of drawing their ideas from the material reality made invisible by current social forms, they elect the forms of sociability operating in already established parts of society as ideals for social functioning as a whole, effectively seeking to restructure society based on these particular already dominant models. This is why reactionaries operate through social ideals rather than political ideas.

In the following chapter, we use these conceptual distinctions to define, in the most general terms possible, what a political struggle or conflict would be. Struggle exists when a form of political organization comes into conflict with the forms of organization of social life—that is, a struggle is always a conflict between different forms of organization. This definition follows directly from the concepts we introduced earlier: if emancipatory politics attempts to reorganize reality based on criteria other than value, property, and affinity, then this process will constantly encounter resistance, forces that seek to preserve the organization of social reality or reinforce the functioning of dominant structures.

What the degree of abstraction of the proposed definition allows us to do is to pay attention to the different ways in which this friction can appear in political struggle. This is what we did next, mobilizing the difference, introduced in the second part of the book, between the dimensions of composition, interaction, and perception of an organization. Using these three concepts, we also distinguish three dimensions of political struggle. First, the struggle in the field of political composition—between the organization of life aimed at the political transformation of the world and the organization of life guided by social reproduction, by the need to survive. Next, the struggle in the field of political interaction—between political processes and the world around them, which politics aims to intervene in and transform. Finally, the struggle in the field of political perception—between two ways in which political organizations are seen by the rest of the people, as legitimate forms of transformation or merely illusory groups and ideas, deceptively reproducing reality behind false promises. In each of these dimensions, we briefly analyze the conflicts between emancipatory political organizations—which aim to introduce something new, beyond value, property, and affinity—and conservative forces—which aim to keep things as they are—and reactionary forces—which aim to reduce reality to a particular ideal.

So far, we have talked about the emergence of political ideas from material reality, the specificity of emancipatory political organizations, and the different forms of struggle that these organizations may face. But how do we wage a struggle? What means does a political process have to decide, at each moment, which paths will allow us to advance and which are dead ends? And, above all, how

can we approach the field of political action from an organizational perspective, without relying on ideas of tactics and strategy that can be reduced to intentional planning, which only apply to some specific political processes?

Social negations

It is impossible to talk about emancipatory political activity without considering that political struggle is, first and foremost, the struggle to negate something that exists. That is, we must start from the fact that every political conflict, every effort to reorganize society, is also an effort to negate a given mode of functioning of value, property, and affinity. This is where the dense presentation we made of each social logic—in chapter seven—really justifies itself and takes on an active role in the theory of communist practice.

Let us quickly recapitulate the abstract form in which we initially defined each of these logics. The logic of affinity was introduced as a logic of frontiers, that is, of the division of organizations into separate parts that nevertheless share something in common. The logic of property, in turn, was presented as a logic of fences, in which the division separates the parts asymmetrically: one part contains the boundary between itself and what is left out, so that the other part does not share this dividing line—one part is limiting, the other limited. Finally, the logic of value was defined as a logic of margins: the difference between two parts of an organization is diffuse and can shift more to one side or the other, depending on other factors.

In the chapter in which we introduced these different ways of organizing the social fabric, our main interest was to observe how these three logics can take many concrete forms in different societies, depending on how they articulate with each other. This is a very general and rich way, despite its simplicity, of thinking about the variety of forms of social organization that we find both in human history and in the history of capitalism in particular. What we did not mention at that time, however, is that each of these ways of organizing the world also corresponds to a special type of negation.

This correlation is easy to establish. Let us begin with the logic of affinity. What is a negation determined by this social logic? It is a negation where “yes” and “no” have a common frontier. When I deny a community—for example, by emancipating myself from my family, or by joining a group with values opposed to those of the place I came from—I still share something with what I denied, either because my origin continues to be part of who I am, or because an enemy community continues to be recognized as a community by others. Denial that allows for boundaries is a denial that allows for contradictions, because the common boundary element was and was not denied at the same time. When I give you a gift, it is no longer mine – but, in a way, it still is. There is not only “this” or “that”: in the logic of community, it is possible to occupy this hybrid place where one is “this and that” as well, as we discussed in the seventh chapter.

The logic of property determines a much more conventional type of negation. If the fence separates two parts without leaving anything in common, the negation at play here is also one that separates “this” from “that” without any remainder. If a contract is signed, it is either valid or it is not – there is no third option. If the property of a piece of land belongs to so-and-so, it does not belong to such-and-such or anyone else. The negation internal to the logic of fences creates a sharp cut between what is true and what is false, between what is affirmed and what is denied, and gives precedence to the first term over the second. Either it is, or it is not—and the opposite of what it is, its negation, has no reality.

Finally, the logic of value produces a third type of negation, which corresponds directly to the functioning of margins. This is the case where between the total “yes” and the absolute “no” there are degrees – a “maybe,” a “more or less.” When a manager observes an employee working with average efficiency, he does not ask himself whether or not the person is working. It is neither a contradictory question—where the answer can be “yes and no”—nor a direct question—where the answer is either “yes” or “no”: the whole point is that they could be working “a little harder” or “a little better.” There are degrees of truth in the logic of margins, shades of gray between true and false.

Why is it important for us to understand these differences? Because, when transforming a given

form of social organization, a political process will necessarily become entangled with these different forms of negation. And why is this necessarily the case? Because, logically speaking, these forms of negation are the only possible options. Given a situation and different paths we can take, there are really only three ways to deal with the decision: either we choose "this and that," or "this or that," or the path of "more or less," that is, a little of this and a little of that. If transforming the world means concretely negating a social form, then the reorganization promoted by political struggle—the submission of value, property, and affinity to another collective principle—will necessarily involve replacing one type of negation, internal to a given logic, with another form of negation that opposes the previous logic.

When we try to replace private property with another form of political organization—for example, by returning to communal forms of land sharing—we are denying the social logic that organizes space in terms of fences through the mobilization of a logic of frontiers, which reestablishes something in common between separate parts. It is a denial that comes from the logic of affinity and helps us to structurally transform the logic of property. This is different, for example, from fighting for property to simply change hands: in that case, we would have denied property using the very logic of fences: what was not mine became mine and ceased to belong to anyone else. We can also fight against the fluctuating negativity of the margins—which dominates the intensive exploitation of labor—by mobilizing the negation of the law, which attempts to strictly delimit what belongs to the worker and what can be bought by the capitalist, for example by determining a number of hours or a certain standard of effort that would be acceptable by law. It is a denial of the logic of margins using a resource that comes from the logic of fences. Where each of these forms of transformation will intervene, however, is defined neither by value nor by property—after all, both modes are already at work in the buying and selling of labor power: the decision to alternate the mode of decision, the shift from "more or less" to "this or that," comes from a political principle drawn from the material reality of workers.

Anti-social negation

This last point invites us to introduce another form of negation. We affirm that the three negations

we have presented form the totality of alternatives “logically speaking.” But if a political process constructs new forms of social relations, then at some level it must also reject all available social paths. A political process thus also depends on a negation of the type “neither this nor that,” a rejection of the entire social arrangement. Faced with injustice, we refuse to justify it, like reactionaries, or to “cover it up,” like conservatives, with patches of value, property, and affinity—none of the paths offered are suitable: neither this way nor that. But this moment of refusal, without which there would be no space to bet on new forms of collective organization, is not just a step backward or an abstract rejection of society: it is a rejection in the name of what exists materially in reality but has no social place—and which, therefore, would find no place in the very structure that exists in spite of it. To build another society, emancipatory politics must first reject the current social arrangement. It must prefer the truth of society's material reality to the integrating power of value, property, and affinity, even if that truth is “illogical.”

It is important to remember that “refusal” here does not refer to a subjective disposition—people may be dissatisfied and organize their anger according to the logics we have already seen—nor to explicit discourse—we can reject existing social forms in the name of various idealizations and philosophies, this does not necessarily mean that we have opened a breach for the reorganization of a community. This fourth form of denial—which we could call “anti-social negation” or “material negation”—is an organizational process, like everything else: it is a gesture of refusal of a social form based on the collective organization of something that has no guaranteed social existence. Not giving in to an eviction order or removal process because the sense of history and belonging to a territory is something real that cannot be resolved with relocation and a title deed. Not being satisfied with the community defense mechanisms we have developed to deal with the dangerous and unhealthy nature of work, because the intensification of exploitation is real and will not cease with the creation of a new ritual of suffering. Not remaining silent in the face of the selective extermination of the Black population, because promises of security and justice are equally selective and social apartheid is real. In all these cases, refusal is not based on desire or values, but on organizing ourselves in the name of an undeniable material reality.

Even if it is not an abstract or idealized negation, refusal is a fragile moment in a political process.

Since, by definition, it does not correspond to any already formed social principle, these moments of refusal run the risk of being domesticated, if they can only endure through annexation to existing social forms, or of becoming fanciful ideals of political purity, when we elevate this negation to a general and immediate principle for every collective process.

The enchainment of “anti-social” negation with different logics and their respective forms of “social” negation is an essential challenge of every political process—and one that does not appear only in an initial, explosive, and spectacular moment. Not only because there is no guarantee that collective refusal will take an intense and aggressive public form, but also because this anti-social moment never remains entirely in the past. It needs to be reinvented and reaffirmed whenever the fundamental basis of emancipatory politics in material reality threatens to be undone.

Political negation

We hope it is clear by now why it was so important to introduce this radically schematic version of the three social logics. We need a way to distinguish the use that a political process makes of these forms of organization, when subjected to new collective principles, from the way they operate as affinity, property, and value in a specific social formation. Negating organization by private property using “marginal” denial, that is, passing on to each person what is due to them according to how much work they have contributed, is not the same as simply reaffirming the logic of capital and its mode of exploitation—but both forms of organization make use of the ability to move proportions according to an equivalence. Negating organization by commodity form through a communal sharing of goods is not the same as simply reaffirming identities or communities as capitalism establishes them—even though the logic of frontier is at play in both cases. For those who do not recognize the political form that guides these decisions, it is indeed difficult to distinguish between any other form of linking production and consumption and the form of value, between political discipline and state bureaucratization, between community care and the maintenance of individualistic identities—the difference becomes more evident when we consider the form that is guiding decisions in the aggregate, the constant shift from one logic to another,

which does not respect the mode of integration proper to the dominant social form.

This brings us, finally, to a fifth type of negation. We have seen that there are three “logical” negations—social negations—and there is also a fourth—anti-social negation—which rejects integration into existing social forms in the name of a “black box” of the material reality of that society. The first three not only divide or separate, but also serve to articulate and concatenate social relations, while the fourth, on the other hand, is a refusal, a moment of rejection of social totality as such, sustained by material reality. But there is yet another negation at play in political transformation, which is the product or result of the submission of social negations to this disruptive principle that allows us to politically reorganize reality.

When we contrast an entire ecosystem of organizations, fronts of struggle, and forms of reproduction of life made possible by revolutionary struggle with the social world against which we rise up, what kind of relationship is established between the political process and social reality? In other words, what is the relationship between a space that is reorganized by political ideas and principles and the rest of society? This is clearly another form of negation. One need only consider how conservatives and reactionaries describe an emancipatory political process—inventing all kinds of justifications to explain the “erratic,” “suspicious,” and “disruptive” behavior of political organizations—to realize that the principle that guides the collective decisions of a political process, that elusive “something” of political forms, simply has no place in the social world. Yes, we enforce the law, or we stop production, or we talk to the population—but to what end? Guided by what motivation? It is the general structure of this process that is in question, and what the social world does at this point is to say that either there is no rational orientation for emancipatory politics, or that this orientation is, at heart, only a private and obscure interest, reducible to the already known games of power. What is at stake here, therefore, is the existence of contours of concrete political totality—is there something that unifies and illuminates our actions or not? This contrast between the political process as a whole and the rest of the world constitutes another form of negation, which operates at a more global level, in the confrontation between the dominant logic of the social world and the set of political actions and effects that we produce.

It is not, therefore, a matter of simply refusing to create social relations – “neither this nor that” – nor of a general confirmation of one of the three modes of social organization – for there is a space dominated by emancipatory politics, and political ideas are not merely the application of another dominant logic. Taken as a whole, the patchwork of different decisions of a movement – sometimes opting for one type of negation, sometimes for another – or the aggregate field of proletarian struggles at a given moment – composed of very different organizations – does not fit into the logic of value, property, or affinity, but it is also not reduced to pure refusal, because it has its own structure, which we can contrast with the social structure. This concrete negation of the dominant social logic is what really deserves the name of political negation: not because it would be the only political moment in this whole process, of course, but because it indicates the composite or accumulated effect of the struggle, the capacity of a political process to embody another form of organization of human life.

An impasse that we often encounter here concerns the status of this contrast between the social world and the political process, a moment in which a concrete political form is consolidated, even if only temporarily. The fact is that, by imposing themselves socially as a structured collective force, political processes run the risk of “covering up” the material reality of other subsequent struggles, reinforcing the illusion that anti-social negation is always, in fact, political negation, that is, a recovery or continuation of political forms that have already managed to guarantee this more global negative contrast. It is the effect of thinking that, since Soviet socialism existed and opposed the capitalist world on some level, every revolt against work would already carry the seed of this same previous form of struggle—which makes it difficult for new political ideas, cultivated from this concrete terrain, to emerge and guide effective decisions and reorganizations of this reality. The moment we begin to believe that the conflicts that exist in the material reality of a situation are only an opportunity to rediscover already consolidated political forms is also the moment when a given political idea reaches its saturation point—a concept we discussed briefly in the third chapter. It is the moment when forms of political organization lose traction in reality.

Dimensions of political thought

The set of negations we have introduced—anti-social, social, and political—does not follow a unified logic that we can apply or anticipate. There is no guarantee that we will be able to move from a refusal based on material reality to a series of decisions that bring together different logics, guided by a political idea that also only takes shape in contrast to the current social organization. How does an invisible piece of reality become a principle that allows us to make consistent collective decisions? How do these heterogeneous decisions relate to each other? What kind of coherence do they produce, and how can this new political clarity serve to reorganize the continuation of our political activities? How can we deal with the potential divergence between the goals we plan and project for the future and the form and results that a struggle actually produces? All these questions exist and recur, demanding new answers at every moment, precisely because there is no general emancipatory political logic: if politics, in its goal of transforming the social world, must deny it at every moment, it also denies the possibility of simply following predetermined rules or scripts. But this is precisely why each political process is also a collective way of thinking, that is, a way of inventing new links between all these forms of negation.

We are accustomed to dealing with this field where action and thought meet in politics through the concepts of tactics and strategy. The problem is that it is very difficult to disassociate these terms from some sense of prior planning and explicit agreement: we decide on an ultimate goal, our strategic objective, and then we choose to follow a path to get there, our preferred tactic, etc. Defined in this way, we can conclude that a popular uprising without explicit direction or a set of dispersed autonomous organizations acts without a strategic horizon or has no preferred tactics. This is a problem similar to the one we encountered in chapter six, when we discussed the consequences of associating “organization” with only a certain type of collectivity: whatever does not conform to this predetermined type is designated as “disorganized.” We are therefore interested in understanding the dimensions of tactics and strategy in an organizational way, that is, without the assumption that they are always explicit principles, intentionally planned, based on an analysis of the objective situation, itself the result of a prior theoretical foundation. For us, tactics, strategy,

logistics, and mobilization (also called "control")—the four terms that form the backbone of concrete collective action according to contemporary military theory—are interdependent dimensions of the thinking of an organization or political process. They concern how each political process solves practical problems, whether in a planned and intentional way or not.

We briefly mentioned these components at the end of the fourth chapter, arguing that they represent an expanded understanding of what constitutes a goal (strategy), the path to achieving it (tactics), the conditions for traveling that path (logistics), and the ability to enact all these decisions in a practical way (mobilization). In light of what has been presented so far, we can now define these dimensions in organizational terms, that is, based on the different "illogical" moments that call on a political process to invent new ways of linking them together.

The tactical dimension is perhaps the easiest to define. We have seen that between anti-social denial—which attests that something in material reality refuses to be socially integrated—and different forms of social denial—ways of using borders, fences, and margins against the logics of value, affinity, and property—there is a gap, because this refusal does not determine what to do next. Tactical inventiveness concerns precisely this gap and the problem of how to transform a refusal into something lasting, how the emergence of an invisible piece of material reality could give birth to a principle that helps us make consequential collective decisions. Given that an injustice has occurred and there is no social solution for it, where to go? How can we know how far the path we have chosen is working and when we should opt for new measures? Tactical thinking invents ways for antisocial negation to spread through organizational rearrangements that turn social logics against themselves: knowing when to appeal to the law, how much to bet on sharing, when to trust in the cold light of work and effort, etc. It is worth noting that this "thinking" does not imply that there is a group of militants who evaluate and invent these solutions—of course, this can happen, but even spontaneous collective processes, which act and react in a more dispersed or decentralized way to conservative and reactionary forces, also need to find solutions to this disconnect between material reality and the forms of action we build from it.

If the tactical dimension is usually thought of as the "local" level, strategy is identified as the field of

“big” issues: political programs we want to implement, more radical horizons of social transformation, a movement’s list of objectives, etc. But here we encounter an important paradox: the definition of a political program or project, the sharing of a goal we wish to achieve—all of this can in fact play a tactical role in organizational terms. Despite its more ambitious content, its effective function may simply be to motivate militants to carry out certain established tasks or to help prove to a disputed base that it is worthwhile to join a certain organization, assisting in the process of stitching together and advancing a given struggle locally. After all, talking about strategy, talking about future goals, is something we do in the present, in a situated way – whether this projection of larger and distant goals will have greater relevance than a consensus around shared images and values is something that cannot be guaranteed. And when we define the strategic dimension in organizational terms, it is precisely this gap between the present and the future, the local and the global, that is at stake, an obstacle that every political process must face. It is the distance between social denials—the tactical decisions we make at every moment—and political denial—the more general contours that emerge for the political process from its localized activity. The strategic dimension of thinking concerns the ability to anticipate the contours of the totality of a political process from its situated dimension and to rethink what we do locally based on features of this more general vision.

The most common understanding of strategy suggests that the connection between tactics and strategy naturally goes from the global to the local: we start with our general goals and then analyze the steps to get there. But, as we have just seen, this process can be purely intellectual or just a specific way of delimiting tactical progress. From an organizational point of view, the field of strategy concerns both the accumulation that the concrete steps of the struggle produce in terms of a larger vision and the means that this struggle has to take advantage of what is consolidated as a horizon to better inform future local decisions, its next steps. There is, therefore, a circuit that connects the socially mobilized negations and the more general contours of the movement or struggle, which form the contrast to the political negation of the social world: it is clear that we can be guided by programs or strategic visions recorded in documents and consensuses among militants, but the real contours of the political process are built step by step by the political form that this organization consolidates for itself—and it is the circuit that connects this more general

form and the next localized steps of a struggle that really constitutes the organizational core of the strategy. It may even be strategic for a struggle to give up programs or the promotion of clear objectives at times when this has no mobilizing power. This does not mean that it no longer has greater objectives or a strategic function, but that it may be strategic – in the sense of preserving political negation and its connection with tactics – to recognize a moment of true disorientation.

Another fundamental component of political thinking is logistics. Much of our efforts here—especially in the chapter dedicated to political struggle and the different dimensions of conflict in the struggle—are aimed at suggesting that the “political economy” of militancy is a crucial issue in emancipatory political organization, especially under historical conditions of peripheralization. When capital does not guarantee minimum conditions for association among workers, collective organization can become extremely costly, for example. This is reflected in an organization’s political thinking in the logistical dimension of action. Many proposals for action and many political objectives are valuable and interesting, but if they do not find concrete conditions for their realization, they will either be impractical or depend on the intensification of the conflict between the political and social forms in which the militants are inserted. This not only destabilizes the composition of the struggle, but also weakens the capacity for intervention—we can withstand conflict with enemy forces for less time—and even the perception of the struggle—because everyone realizes when a political process is incapable of taking into account the reality of the people it aims to mobilize.

We can define the field of logistical inventions as one in which political thought must link anti-social negation and political negation, that is, articulate the objectives that shape the political process and the specific constraints and characteristics of the material reality that motivates and underpins this struggle. There is no pre-established roadmap for reconciling the political energy of a refusal of social integration with lasting forms of reproduction for this new struggle – and it is often logistical constraints that first force a political process to surrender once again to the available forms of social reproduction: value, property, and affinity. As the slogan of an important struggle for food sovereignty says: “the pantry of a territory measures its strength” – that is, logistics grounds political objectives in material reality.

Finally, there is one last component of political thought, which in military theory—so steeped in the hierarchical logic of the state—is called “control” or “chain of command.” Leaving aside this unnecessary trappings, the issue here is the ability, in a collective process, to carry out collective actions at the tactical, strategic, and logistical levels. After all, there is no point in an army commander being able to devise a brilliant strategy, with well-thought-out and plausible steps, if the order to attack is not carried out by the soldiers on the battlefield. In the field of emancipatory politics, this issue appears in a slightly different form: it concerns the capacity to mobilize political processes—mobilization not necessarily in the sense of following a chain of command, but of actively adhering to and acting on ideas. The problem arises for party cadres and militants, for protests organized by struggle fronts, for revolts that erupt suddenly, or for long processes of peasant guerrilla warfare—in all these cases, mobilizing means transforming tactical viability into concrete action. An army can compel people to mobilize through contracts, laws, patriotic ideals, shame, sadism, or money—many political organizations rely to a greater or lesser extent on similar mechanisms—which align the logistical cost with the tactics and strategy of a given combative process, but these means or ways of ensuring mobilization through control are only particular forms of collective action giving concrete form to political forms.

For us, the question of mobilization as a dimension of political thought therefore corresponds to the chain of all these negations that we have seen, simultaneously. There is political mobilization or not according to the tactical capacity to link the refusal of new collective decisions, according to the strategic capacity to link these decisions to the balances and objectives of the struggle, and according to the logistical capacity to link this political vision to the limits and aptitudes that make up the material reality of this process.

Where these denials pave an alternative political circuit to the limits of the social world, there is mobilization. And conversely, where there is mobilization, whether planned or unplanned, based on party discipline or not, the result of anger or conviction, there is political thought—even if silent—creatively leaping from negation to negation.