XIII

Political transformation

We have reached the last chapter of the third part of the book. So far, we have discussed the emergence of political ideas from material reality and how this helps us distinguish emancipatory politics from its conservative and reactionary forms. We have also presented different dimensions of the conflict between political organizations and the social world, that is, different fronts of conflict in a given struggle: conflict in the fields of composition, interaction, and perception. Next, we introduced the idea of negation to try to understand how a political struggle could affect the world around it—by negating the way that reality is organized.

We have seen that a struggle does not deny reality in an abstract or blind way. A political process includes moments of refusal—which we call “anti-social” negation—where aspects of material reality underpin the rejection of simply addressing problems and situations using the social forms already available. We have seen that there is also a whole field of decisions and movements that use the form of a given social logic against other prevailing social logics: we adopt the logic of the margin to negate a community frontier, or the logic of the fence to negate a false equivalence of value, etc. These are moments of what we call "social negations," and they involve a constant stitching and rearrangement of these social logics in the name of this material reality that we refuse to erase. Finally, we also talk about the aggregate effect of these decisions and chains of social negations—the more general form that this process takes, which consolidates the emergence of a collective political structure that does not fit into the social world. The very existence of a movement, a commune, an alternative political bloc, is a political denial of reality—concrete proof that another life is more than possible, it is real.

We made a point of clarifying that these different forms of negation—or ways of acting “negatively”—do not form a cohesive whole that follows its own logic that would guarantee their connection. There are gaps or distances between each of these negative moments or forms, and without creativity and invention, it is impossible to link them together. It is important to highlight

these gaps, as they help us to link the theory of the five negations to the more classic concepts of tactics, strategy, logistics, and mobilization—the four components of what we consider to be the thinking behind a political process. Whether planned or unplanned, intentional or unintentional, centralized or decentralized, political processes need to invent their own solutions to "patch up" these different negative moments, and each of these challenges helps us shed light on the tactical, strategic, logistical, and mobilizing thinking behind a given struggle. This thinking will not necessarily be written down in documents or on the tip of the tongue of a militant or cadre, but it is recognizable when we adopt an organizational point of view and closely investigate what happens in concrete political action.

But we still need to talk about the most important thing. After all, the revolutionary struggle is not an end in itself: we do not fight to think collectively—we think together in order to win. We need to understand, therefore, what a political victory means.

Retreat and advances

Considering everything we have presented so far, we now have a way to describe what it means for a struggle to politically transform society. A political process takes a step forward when it manages to mobilize the "anti-social" negation that founds political organization in the name of making decisions that subject the three "social" negations to a new orientation. So that the social fabric, thus reorganized, is irreducible to the dominant form of social concatenation—a contrast we call "political negation," the negation of the world embodied in the advance of a new political process. We have seen that it is impossible to understand this process of transformation without mobilizing the specific content of each of the social logics we presented earlier. Not only because it is necessary to know what is being transformed, but because subjecting value, property, and affinity to another form of political organization also involves making decisions that mobilize margins, fences, and borders.

But to analyze what the outcome of a struggle might be—its consequences in terms of advances, retreats, and victories—we need to consider more than just the different social logics. After all, this

process of transformation can have different scopes, and its capacity for reorganization can be more or less limited. This forces us to consider something like the “depth” of political transformation in order to define what kind of progress it actually produces. In general terms, we will call political advance those situations in which emancipatory politics manages to politically deny the world around it to some degree. We will call political retreat those cases in which it is social reality that manages to transform emancipatory politics, uncoupling social logics from anti-social denial, undoing political denial to some extent, and reestablishing the integrity of the current social formation.

The typology of political retreats is easier to assess, as the outcome is always a situation where emancipatory political ideas lose ground and organize fewer aspects or components of social reality than before. This can occur through a victory of conservatism, which reduces the conflict between radical politics and its social environment, reintegrating part of material reality into some form of known value, property, or affinity. Compositional struggles, in the field of interaction or perception, are reduced and stabilized through the effects of money, law, or cultural recognition. This can also occur through a transformation of political conflict into a conflict between conservative forces—which struggle for the social integration of these displaced components—and reactionary forces—which struggle for their elimination. This is often the case with the indigenous struggle in Brazil, which "disappears" in the electoral dispute between a left wing of "social inclusion" and a genocidal right wing. Finally, it can also be a direct effect of the victory of reactionary forces: this is the case with the murders of leaders and militants, removals and evictions, as well as the ideological resentment that leads left-wing individuals and groups to strive to restrict the existence of other factions of the revolutionary camp. In all these cases, there is a setback, because the outcome of conflicts in emancipatory struggles—whether in terms of composition, interaction, or perception—is a reduction in the scope of this political reorganization of social life.

Emancipatory advance, on the other hand, is more complex and nuanced, as it operates "against the social grain" and involves the expansion of political forms that do not have a guaranteed social existence. Positive political transformation can have different degrees of scope and traction: it can be fleeting and sporadic, profound and lasting, it can affect many aspects of social life at the same

time, or have a limited scope – and it is expressed as a victory in the field of composition, interaction, or perception, or some mixture of these three dimensions. In a way, we could also evaluate the typology of setbacks in all these ways, not least because the destruction and co-optation of complex political processes often occurs in parts, or influences specific dimensions of a collective process: for example, transforming a political idea into a group identification, or into a pretext for authoritarianism or new forms of management and intensification of work. Even so, we will focus the rest of this section on producing a brief typology of forms of emancipatory political advancement.

Political persistence

In a way, the smallest possible political advance is the very persistence of an emancipatory political organization, that is, the persistence of a conflict between that organization and the social organization from which it springs. Even if it is unable to advance or expand, the transformation of some aspect of material reality into a new form of collective organization that is not reduced to value, property, and affinity is an effective political transformation, even if it remains isolated and inconsequential beyond its own existence.

This does not mean, of course, that the mere duration of a political group is a necessary sign of transformation: what indicates persistence as a minimal political advance is the resilience of a political form that is irreducible to social logics, not the continued use of a banner, discourse, or a specific group of people. Compare, for example, all the small inventions and creative efforts necessary to preserve the regularity of the simple practice of being at a fair on the outskirts of the city every week, talking to passersby about neighborhood problems, with the demobilizing effect of a struggle being taken up by an NGO that professionalizes all activists and subjects the organization's existence to contractual and financial commitments. In the first case, the problem of mobilization—which we saw in the previous chapter—is solved through a connection between tactics (talking at the market), their place in a larger strategic vision (militant inquiries contributes to understanding new popular political forms), and their material feasibility (it is a small but feasible action). It is a political solution that is repeatedly reinvented and sustained by militants.

Meanwhile, the NGO that solves the problem with contracts and salaries relies exclusively on the logic of value and property to persist—and even grow—its operations. There is no political thinking there and, therefore, no advance.

Social achievement

A second form of political progress, which goes beyond the persistence of a political practice, is one in which the struggle leads to a transformation of social life, but this change bears no relation to the political form at stake in the struggle. For example, a political process may succeed in enforcing a law that was not being applied to a powerful person, sending a corrupt government official or businessman to jail—but this result, although effective, bears no trace of the political struggle that produced it, so much so that it could be the effect of very different forms of organization. It is, in fact, a transformation greater than political perseverance, for the existence of the struggle leads to a change in social reality, but this political transformation remains restricted to a social achievement. Not surprisingly, social achievement offers a type of transformation that potentially reconciles emancipatory and conservative politics, since the force of change may have come from radical political organization—whose existence represents a threat to order and therefore an incentive for change—but its form remains integrated into the vocabulary of the market, the law, and communities, just as conservatism demands.

In light of what we saw in the previous chapter, we could say that social achievement requires political thinking to frame the problem—how to bring injustice to light, something that exists materially but had no social existence?—but does not involve political thinking to solve the issue. The solution is more law enforcement—an avoided but already prescribed use of the logic of property and the state. This does not mean that nothing happened, because the arrest of the corrupt would never have happened were it not for the force of antisocial negation and its subsequent mobilization to pressure a social structure content to turn a blind eye.

Political victories

A third type of political advance is one where the struggle produces consequences that are no longer reducible to the mere application of the three social logics, but which do not directly threaten the dominant logic in the social formation. On the one hand, it is no longer a mere social achievement that could easily be appropriated by conservative forces, as it is impossible to justify the new mode of social organization that has been produced without mentioning the material reality and political form at stake in the struggle. On the other hand, the social reorganization promoted by political struggle remains essentially compatible with value as the dominant social and material form in capitalism.

Perhaps the most notable examples of this type of transformation are the reduction of the working day, the abolition of slavery, and women's suffrage. In all these cases, it is not just a matter of applying what was already socially accepted in a particular case, but of effectively establishing new contours for social logic itself, restricting the reach of the commodity form, property rights, and family segregation over entire social groups. These are truly political victories that lead to the limitation of the power of capitalist domination and even make clearer the true terrain of the revolutionary struggle, its anti-systemic character, by staging a conflict between emancipatory politics and the dominant social structure. But they are also relative political advances, as they are not capable of replacing value with the political principle that led to the reorganization of laws, communities, and, indirectly, the market itself.

If, on the one hand, political victory is more profound than social conquest, as it is composed of consequences that help to disseminate the political form of this struggle, on the other hand, the scope of this transformation remains restricted to logics that do not have social dominance. The three examples we gave above demonstrate this: they all involve the effective transformation of laws and communities based on principles that cannot be reduced to property and affinity, but they do not subject the form of value—the dominant logic in capitalism—to a similar restriction. Limiting the workday is different, after all, from replacing the principle by which human subsistence is socially guaranteed, since the scope of the commodity form remains essentially the same. The abolition of slavery, as a legal and community process, can mean the absorption of a new contingent of people into the wage labor market under conditions of extreme impoverishment, just

as the new social condition of women, guaranteed by rights such as voting and divorce, can also lead to effects that do not prevent the adaptation and continuation of capitalist domination.

In the case of political victory, political thought goes beyond the motivation for an already established social solution, actually introducing a new rationality into the social world, grounded in material reality. Universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery, and the reduction of working hours are ways of reorganizing social life that force capitalism to yield to what is materially attested, beyond the constituted social reality. What political thought fails to achieve in these processes are the means—tactical, strategic, logistical, and mobilizing—to ensure that these victories are reproduced. After all, the guardians of these victories are laws and institutions external to the political process—conservative or reactionary social forms that sustain these advances, either out of fear of the political mobilization that would otherwise arise, or because capitalism has already found ways to adapt to these defeats and it is not necessary to try to undo them.

It is crucial to note that neither social conquest nor political victory are retreats or missteps – both transform humanity, sometimes in glorious ways. But each carries a particular side effect because of its limitations. If social conquest allows the political struggle to be confused with a conservative retreat—since political force does not translate into political advancement, which remains governed by the three logics—political victory, being relative and subject to the dominant logic, can be understood as a sign of the structural impotence of struggles. In a context where there is no articulation or continuity between political victories, the persistence of the dominant logic in the face of the victory of emancipatory politics is often taken as a sign that the real victory was that of capitalism itself. Hence the paradoxical correlation between a period of scattered political victories and growing despair in the face of the supposed power of capital to absorb and integrate any collective novelty. In periods of absolute retreat, it is easier to fantasize that a victory would bring the entire system down, while in historical periods where there are victories but no spontaneous convergence of struggles, we are surprised by the resilience of capital and fantasize about our own resounding defeat.

Revolutionary triumph

Finally, there is what we might call revolutionary triumph. This is the situation in which the outcome of the political struggle is the transformation of emancipatory political forms into dominant principles that reorganize all social logics. A triumph does not have to be total—it is not a matter of replacing the dominant logic throughout the world, all at once and everywhere. The crucial point is that the political form extracted from material reality becomes capable of determining and even subjugating the dominant logic. By becoming the general organizing principle, the political form gains an incomparable degree of concreteness, becoming the form of reproduction of social life itself, even if in a restricted space and time – as is the case of the Paris Commune, the Quilombo de Palmares, specific regions and moments within socialist state experiments, and great cooperative and community triumphs around the world. What all these political advances have in common is not the specific content of their politics—as we saw in chapter ten, there is no guarantee that an indigenous commune in Venezuela will follow principles compatible with an anarchist experiment in Greece—but the ability to embed this political orientation, irreducible to value, property, and affinity, in the very material dimension of social life.

Like all forms of political advancement, revolutionary triumph is a localized form of expansion of the political struggle—it cannot happen everywhere at once or in the same way. The idea that there can only be triumph in emancipatory politics if our advance is total and complete, extinguishing the struggle against capitalism at once, is a fantasy based on the thesis of a spontaneous convergence of struggles. According to this fantasy, national proletarian struggles would lead us to political victories, and these victories would add up to an international revolutionary triumph. Once this illusion is dispelled, we see that one of the consequences of revolutionary triumph is to reveal that the last adversary of communist politics, once the supremacy of value is undone, is the very material reality of emancipatory politics. For this material reality brings to the fore the main challenge of political thought—that is, our ability to struggle by means of materially propagating and expanding our own forms of association, reproduction, and production of collective life. In other words, the struggle does not end with revolutionary triumph: what we gain when we triumph is the right to struggle against our own limits, and not just against the limits of capital.

This more radical form of transformation, like the previous ones, can also carry an unwanted side effect, which is the confusion between its situated character and the impression that—since there has been no total planetary revolution—there are only isolated gains of freedom and egalitarianism. This is the criticism that many make of even the most impressive political triumphs in human history, diminishing their importance or validity by contrasting them with the reality of the rest of the world. If social conquest is confused with conservative capitulation and political victory with a fantasy of capital's omnipotence, the situated quality of revolutionary triumph often leads to the characterization of revolutionary struggle as an ephemeral clearing, a respite doomed to exist only in a momentary manner. We will return to this point in the next chapter.

A good way to summarize this typology is to consider the four forms of political advance in the context of a struggle for land. The struggle against forced removal threatened by the state is a political advance, a form of persistence. The struggle for the legalization of occupied land through legal means, with the aim of expropriating land without social use and enforcing the constitution, is a social conquest. The struggle for land that manages to secure occupation through military and community conflict, but still depends on selling production to the market, is a political victory. The struggle that manages to reorganize the relationship with the territory, allowing people to live off what they grow and establish other relationships of association among themselves and with other spaces, is a localized revolutionary triumph. We can also evaluate each of these cases in terms of the advancement of political thought over the rest of the world: persistence is the mobilization of tactical, strategic, and logistical dimensions to maintain the existence of a given organizational process; social conquest manages to mobilize a political process to rearrange existing social logics; a political victory manages to transform mobilization into a submission of social forms to material reality, but without altering the dominant social logic, while revolutionary triumph transforms mobilization into active thinking about the forms of reproduction of another collective life.

Revolutionary orientations

From an organizational point of view, all components of political thought act and respond to the specific social arrangement in which a given struggle takes place. It is the concrete negation of a form of social organization, motivated by disruptive negation, that effectively allows political transformation to produce something that is not a mere repetition of the social form in which we are inserted. But a side effect of this concreteness is that struggles also borrow forms that resemble those they are fighting against. And, in fact, we can confirm this intuition by verifying that there is indeed a correspondence between the main orientations adopted by the revolutionary movement and the way in which each of them constructs the political negation of reality.

For example, there are political movements that rely mainly on the logic of affinity to confront capital and the state and find in the organization of frontiers the contours of a general strategy that we could call, returning to the Marxist tradition, *dual powe*r. Now, the strategy of dual power is a way of building a new world that is at once separate from, but within, the capitalist world—an autonomous space whose strategic ambition is unthinkable without considering the rest of the world, which remains dominated by capital—and this political logic also presents a form of organization by frontiers: it also divides the world into separate parts, but with a common substrate, since we separate ourselves from capitalism in order to better combat it. Many revolutionary enclaves and models of struggle based on the creation of spaces of autonomy that can be used as refuges and points of attack against the capitalist system are organized in this way. It is a strategy of "this and that": outside capitalism in order to better fight within it.

Political movements and struggles that rely on state power and the force of property logic to measure political forces against capitalism and national domination tend to organize themselves based on the insurrectionary strategy. This approach—which ironically shares something with electoral logic, despite despising it—is also articulated by the asymmetrical organizing principle of fences and barricades, as it aims to create a clean break, a before and after, in social functioning. In the case of insurrection itself, this clean break represents a change of regime; in the electoral case, it represents only a change of representative—but the basic form of both is to establish a limit beyond which everything will be different. Either capitalism or socialism. Either this party's government or that party's. This same logic can be seen in the idea of taking over the state, of "expropriating the

expropriators": once taken from our enemies, these social institutions and political instruments are ours, we plant our flag there. This does not mean, however, that the insurrection seeks a mere reversal between the dominant and the dominated, as if it were only a matter of changing the "owner" of the state. After all, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not symmetrical to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie: while the former is governed by a restricted group, identifiable by a particular characteristic that defines membership of the ruling class, the proletariat inhabits the twilight zone between society and its material base, so that a people-oriented government would be infinitely more diverse and democratic than any bourgeois democracy could ever be.

Finally, struggles that are waged directly in the field of value—strikes, boycotts, the creation of cooperatives, etc.—also acquire characteristics of the division of parts in terms of margins. This is the strategy of communization. Here, we do not build something separate, but within capitalism, as in dual power, nor do we directly bet on the seizure of state power to reorganize the dominant principle asymmetrically, as in insurrection, but we constantly measure forces with our adversaries, in a constant and direct process of transforming the material conditions in which both parties find themselves – to the point where it becomes more costly to insist on the capitalist organization of labor than to transform the relations of production. Struggles involving negotiations with the boss—such as demands for higher wages—are specific examples of how workers' organizations "push" the margins of value toward the valorization of workers. But even more systemic transformations—such as the creation of cooperative networks, the immediate collectivization of the means of production, the establishment of self-management experiments and forms of democratic economic planning—also operate as processes, creating a field of forces between the form of value and a common and collective way of life.

We thus see that the three social modes can be used to form three major revolutionary strands: the strand of dual power, which brings together many of the struggles centered on social organization based on affinity; the insurrectionary strand, which combines political efforts that have state domination as their main stage of struggle and transformation; and the communizing strand, where we find forms of struggle that seek support in the internal tensions within the logic of value itself. Of course, in reality, struggles tend to mix these different general strategies, combining them

in different ways. Insurrectionary struggles may require phases of dual strategy, organizations based on the communization of the economic power of capital may seek assistance from legal or parliamentary mechanisms that serve as protection, and so on.

As we mentioned earlier, the way in which different forms of struggle intertwine with specific social forms of organization is a determining factor in their ability to articulate with other political processes. And many of the difficulties that peripheralization poses for contemporary struggles, analyzed in the third chapter, stem from these variations. Struggles centered on the production of autonomous communities may view forms of political organization that seek to challenge the state in some way with great suspicion—just as political processes that are directly articulated by the logic of value may distrust the capacity for transformation and expansion of organizations concerned with the sovereignty of particular territories. However, the set of forms of political organization that emerged from the material reality of capitalist society, giving shape and direction to these different movements and strategies, constitutes the only possible source of the "common interests" of the proletarian movement as a whole. They constitute the living matter of communist practice.