XIV

Communist construction

The first part of the book was devoted to presenting a general overview of our historical situation, focusing on what we call "peripheralization." Among the multiple consequences of this moment in capitalism—when the organization of value and labor power no longer leads to the corresponding organization of workers—we focused on the specific implications for politics and, in particular, on an important consequence for communists: the peripheralization of capitalism means the end of any structural tendency promoting the convergence of proletarian struggles. This does not imply, however, that peripheralization puts an end to communist ambitions, but it certainly transforms the scope of our tasks, both in practice and in theory.

Next, in the second part, consisting of five chapters, we focus on what could be a theory for communist practice under peripheral conditions, that is, what would be a theory capable of assisting in the articulation of interests common to revolutionary struggles without relying on the assumption that there is an underlying political unity on which we could count. It was with this motivation that we introduced some of the main theoretical ideas of this book: the organizational point of view, different social logics, the theory of social domination, and the difference between aligned and misaligned social forms. All of this served to characterize, in an abstract and open-ended way, what is happening in peripheral capitalism. However, our purpose was never to produce a theory of how capitalism works, nor a political program to guide a concrete struggle. As we have reiterated several times throughout the text, what we lack is not an understanding of the machinery of capital domination, nor new specific political ideas, but the means to closely follow the struggles that are already being waged in this new social terrain and to continue to investigate the possible points of articulation and connection between these different political processes. That is why this is a theory of communist practice, and not of political practice in general. The ideas introduced in the second section aim to ensure the degree of "plasticity" necessary for us to take seriously the different characterizations of peripheral capitalism that we find in contemporary

struggles without thereby abandoning the task of building, where possible, a common revolutionary horizon.

We then arrive at the third part of the book, dedicated to political organization, struggle, thinking, and transformation. Throughout these four chapters, we mobilize all the ideas introduced in the previous sections to better characterize the variety of forms of struggle that the terrain of peripheral capitalism allows. The aim of these chapters was not to say what revolutionary politics "should be" today—no one needs us for that—but to try to propose sufficiently general definitions of what different political processes can be so that it is possible to navigate the diversity of contemporary struggles. The final outcome of this conceptual reconstruction was a schematic but also quite plastic view of some crucial categories of revolutionary politics, elaborated in such a way as to enable concrete investigations of struggles to take seriously the political ideas at stake in different political organizations, their challenges, and their strategic horizons.

Although the previous section of the book is absolutely crucial and already anticipates the type of approach we are trying to promote, it is only now, in light of everything we have already discussed, that we can really focus on what we previously called communist practice and give this practice some concrete contours. After all, it is only by considering all the theoretical construction done so far that we can truly understand how a fragmented social space, where the logics of value, property, and affinity do not always align in the same way, even if the dominance of capital remains unchanged, could produce forms of political struggle that are heterogeneous among themselves. The space composed of these forms of organization—with their own inventions, impasses, and strategic horizons—is the raw material of a practice that aims to investigate, construct, and articulate the common interests of the revolutionary movement.

As we will attempt to clarify in the final chapters of the book, we believe that the only thing that can effectively replace the belief in a convergent tendency of anti-systemic struggles – which would spare us the work of articulating and composing different organizational forms – is a set of concrete practices that combine the investigation of what is actually happening in the struggles with the construction of bridges and points of real interdependence between them. This does not mean,

however, that there is only one way to carry out these tasks. Historically, communist parties have often acted as a point of articulation for the different fronts of the working-class struggle, but there are many other ways in which these practices of investigation and articulation can be intertwined in concrete struggles, both explicitly – such as forums and spaces for exchange – and implicitly – as another axis of militant concern, internal and organic to the different movements, parties, and political collectives that already exist.

Whatever form communist practice takes in a given context, it will need to navigate a tortuous path between the whole and the parts of the revolutionary movement. This is because communists, as we shall see, are people who act on the basis of the contradiction between a particular struggle and the larger political ecosystem in which that struggle is embedded, even if they are there reluctantly. Thus, communist practice inevitably zigzags between capitalist totality—whose fragmentation underpins the heterogeneity of struggles—, the specificity of political processes—which draw their forms, conflicts, and horizons from the specific social reality in which they operate—, and the totality of the movement formed by the common interests of these different struggles. In a supposed context of historical convergence, extrapolated from European modernity, this whole process would be much simpler: capitalist totality would already signal the centrality of the worker as a political subject, which would offer us a metric for evaluating proletarian struggles in general and pave the way for us to envision the international revolutionary movement as a whole. In the absence of this structural shortcut, it is necessary to investigate and build.

Revolutionary movement and peripheralization

When we presented our typology for the advances and retreats of political struggle, we mentioned three "side effects" that plague social achievements, political victories, and revolutionary triumphs because of their specific limitations. Social achievements can be confused with mere conservative capitulation, political victories give rise to fantasies about the unlimited power of capital to absorb struggles, and revolutionary triumphs, because they do not lead to the transformation of the entire global capitalist system at once, can fuel the idea that the most we can achieve are isolated moments of freedom, small miracles that soon disappear. All these side effects stem from the same problem:

political advances, when considered separately, will always be small in contrast to the capitalist totality. This is not an internal insufficiency of these advances themselves—it is always better to have social achievements than not to have them, just as it is better to have more political victories and more revolutionary triumphs everywhere—but a specifically communist problem, that is, a problem linked to the difficulty of situating all these transformations within a larger articulated movement.

We can quickly recall here an important consequence of the distinction we made between modern and peripheral social formations in chapter nine. To recap, we differentiated the modern "society of work" from peripheral capitalist formations based on the way the three social logics relate to each other in each of these cases. In the first case, that of modernity, the three logics would be aligned: value, property, and affinity reinforce each other, organizing the same way of life where being a worker and consumer also means being a property owner and citizen, as well as an autonomous individual and family member. The same is not true in peripheral formations, where these three logics are not so tightly aligned: the forces of value, property, and affinity often point in contrasting directions, and it is necessary to constantly negotiate with different forms of power that intersect and mix.

We mentioned in that chapter that the so-called "spontaneous convergence"—the promise that industrial progress would progressively equalize the conditions of political organization of the working class—could be considered an effect of the momentary alignment of social logics in modern capitalism. Social alignment also implies political alignment, that is, it facilitates a political transformation that affects the entire capitalist edifice at the same time. It is a context where the difference between social conquest, political victory, and revolutionary triumph becomes more diffuse, because when we transform the logic of the family, we also affect rights, citizenship, and the productive sphere, all at once. So, on the one hand, social alignment allows political struggles to more easily enter into total conflict with social reality. But if the struggle is capable, in its organization, of confronting value, property, and affinity all at once, on the other hand, it also suffers resistance from all components of the social world simultaneously. The revolutionary struggle in modernity is therefore integral, but slow. It is often more localized and restricted, but

with great transformative promise. It cuts deep, but faces enormous inertia to move. Peripheral misalignment has other characteristics. On the one hand, it is more difficult to affect all dimensions of social life at once—because of the varied ways in which the power of the market, the state, and communities operate in a fractured terrain. Because of this, it is also easier to differentiate advances that amount to small social gains and partial political victories. And even the most radical triumphs manage to gain some continuity when they occur in the shadow of the military power of a state incapable of integrating the entire national territory—with the equally grim consequence that this power manifests itself with far fewer scruples when it comes to decimating these political experiments. The "misaligned" revolutionary movement is, in this sense, more dispersed and volatile in terms of its advances: it may even exist with great intensity, albeit in a more fragmented form, as it manages to operate in the many gaps of peripheral capitalism, but it has difficulty consolidating any sense of unity or totalization, due to the variety of its forms of organization and the unevenness of its achievements, victories, and triumphs.

Today, communist practice, in this process of moving between the local and the global, between particular struggles and the revolutionary movement as a whole, must learn to navigate this second form of historical inertia as well.

Positions in the revolutionary movement

And how are we all affected by this challenge? Here, we can make a small typology of the positions we can find ourselves in relation to different political processes—this will ultimately lead us to define the position of communists. As always, our interest is to adopt an organizational point of view, so that these distinctions do not imply recognizable functions, identities, or catchphrases, but only describe the places we can occupy within more complex organizations, struggles, and political ecologies.

Without going back into detail on our typology of forms of political transformation—persistence, social conquest, political victory, and revolutionary triumph—it is important to remember that all these ways for a struggle to advance politically depend on the capacity of political thought to

negate, in different ways, the social world and conservative and reactionary forces. We analyze these forms of negation and their relationship to the different dimensions of political thought in the twelfth chapter. What matters to us now is to consider that, this being the case, where there is political transformation there is not only conflict between different organizational forms, but a series of real contradictions at play. *Contradictions*, because if political transformation implies the denial of something, and if that something still exists, then those who participate in a struggle will inevitably become involved with forms of organization that cannot be simultaneously maintained. And it is these contradictions that have helped us to situate the different positions we can take in relation to the revolutionary movement.

For example, one contradiction we may experience is that between the life we lead, inserted in the current social world, and the existence of a given political struggle in which we do not participate directly. A person who picks up a meal every week at a community kitchen may not participate in the maintenance and defense of the social movement that created the kitchen, but still recognizes that this struggle makes a difference in their life—and proves this regularly by standing in line, respecting other people, talking to others about the kitchen and the quality of the food, and possibly rebelling if reactionary forces try to prevent the organization from functioning. Even if they are not actively building the political transformation at stake in the fight against hunger, they are involved in it by interacting with the kitchen and its militants as a relevant part of their social reality.

Now, this position—external to the political process, but linked to it—is precisely the position of the *social base*, which we discussed briefly in the eleventh chapter when we talked about the "struggle for perception." Remember that we pointed out, at that point, that it is possible to distinguish between people who are only in the social environment of a political organization—in its surroundings—and those who actually form its base by asking the following question: among the people who interact with the political organization in some way, for which of them does it make a difference that this organization is political? That is, in the exchanges and other interactions between those who do not participate and those who participate in a given political process, does

the political dimension of this organization of life make a difference? Does it create another type of interdependence or does it operate exactly as if the political organization were just any social group?

We call the social base of a movement or organization those people for whom the political dimension of that group makes a practical difference in their lives. Even if they do not actively participate in a given struggle, if this political reorganization of the world ceased to exist, something would really change for that person. In contrast, another person who also eats at the solidarity kitchen, but for whom healthy food or the dignified treatment they receive there is not important enough to distinguish that kitchen from a welfare-oriented "NGO" kitchen, would not be part of the social base of that organization. Not surprisingly, the social base—whether it be a social movement, an election campaign, a revolutionary party, or a spontaneous protest – does not actively and constructively participate in any political dimension of the struggle, even though it is linked to that struggle: it interacts externally, voting for a candidate on election day, buying products that finance a social movement, discussing opinions with family and friends, accepting food baskets or other material support, passing through the turnstile of a subway station taken over by militants for free. They remain essentially in the "environment" of this political reorganization, relating to its effects.

Things are different for *militants*, that is, for people who participate directly in the composition of a political organization. It is worth remembering, once again, that "organization," for us, does not mean exclusively a stable, formal group with its own name and ideology—from an organizational point of view, there is no one who is not a participant in multiple organizations: what makes a difference in the above definition is participation in a political process, whatever collective activity that may be. By participating in a collective activity that is not organized solely by the logic of value, property, and affinity, the militant embodies a second contradiction, a tension between an orientation toward transforming the world and another determined by social reality. Whether participating in a spontaneous protest that has formed, distributing a party newspaper, coordinating meetings, or engaging intensely in a strike, those who act politically find themselves caught up in another contradiction, which creates tension between two conflicting ways of living

the same life: the one that inserts us into the social world—at work, in the law, in the family, etc.—and the one on which the advancement of a political struggle depends.

In this sense, a militant is someone who constantly needs to find ways to carry out tasks, participate in collective actions, and take risks that can undermine their own social security or social stability. They are part of a process of political transformation that, in turn, transforms and negates their own relationship with the social world—with family, friends, bosses, norms, and laws.

It is possible to occupy this position without occupying the position of social base—that is, without establishing useful relationships with the struggle. Many middle-class militants experience this tension between the struggle and their social lives without the benefits of the struggle being immediately useful to them—they do not need food from the soup kitchen, they will not be included in the new forms of community and cooperation that they help to produce, nor are they residents of the region that will benefit from the public policy they are trying to implement. When someone is positioned both as a social base and as a militant for political transformation, we call this position a *political base*. Even though this overlap of contradictions is more difficult to achieve, the position of the political base is more solid than that of the militant, because the "external" relationship with the benefits of politics somewhat eases the "internal" tension between social organization and collective political reorganization. If we eat better by fighting together, there is more reason—and sustenance—to continue fighting.

We can also define a third position based on the contradictions that political transformation produces in people's lives. As we have seen, the political reorganization of reality is composed of a series of inventions, reevaluations, and strategic redirections of this process. This means that political transformation, in its course, also needs to abandon certain ways of doing things and adopt new tactics and even rethink its more general horizon. Of course, this need to rethink and reinvent our own forms of struggle is also part of the struggle with the conservative and reactionary forces of the social world, but it is expressed as a contradiction between a given political form and its own transformation—whether through course corrections, reassessments, or political retreats.

The person who is caught up in this contradiction between different moments or forms of a given struggle takes on the role of *organizer* of that struggle.

Of course, the image that immediately comes to mind is that organizers are therefore people who have the formal responsibility of evaluating actions and commanding new directions—coordinators, important political figures, "heads of state," or leaders—and it is true that the form that organizers often adopt emulates those that value, property, and affinity constitute socially, with hierarchies, managerial roles, or charismatic influences. But according to our definition, anyone who has an active relationship with the current state of a political process and participates in its reorganization, even if only momentarily—even if only solving a specific problem to better adapt collective action to the situation it faces—is adopting this position.

Again, it is possible for someone to be simultaneously affected by the contradictions of the social base, militancy, and the position of organizer—in a way, it is this complex position that defines, in many struggles, the place of what we traditionally call the *revolutionary subject*, that part of the proletariat that is politically active and organizes and reorganizes its own struggle. And, once again, it happens that this overlap allows for a better handling of the organizer's contradiction, since that person has immediate access to the successes and failures of each tactical move, as a militant and political base. However, in struggles where hierarchy and division of labor are very marked, the position of organizer can become almost completely separated from the others—giving rise to a variety of bureaucratic types.

This brings us, finally, to the position of *communists*. As we have already anticipated, the contradiction that defines this position is that between the particularity of a specific struggle and the field of emancipatory struggles as a whole. In a way, despite normally being part of a specific movement, in which they are active and possibly help to organize, communists are those who have “one foot outside” their own organization: they consider what actions to take, what organizational revisions to propose to the collective, or even how to participate in a specific collective action, based on the fact that their organization exists within a larger political space and that we need to take this into account. This is a contradiction, not mere duality, because the communist's "foot outside"

does not stem from a lack of engagement or adherence, but from its deepening: it is in order to win that we need to consider our interdependence with other struggles and political processes.

It is crucial for us to define the position of communists based on a contradiction, as there are ways to occupy "diplomatic" positions between different struggles without this effectively implying any conflict or effective communist construction. This is the case, for example, with formal agreements between parties and movements to form broad fronts that serve the interests of the organizations in question. There is no need for any conflict or contradiction here—and therefore no communists need to be present—since the connection created is based on political forms as they already exist. Nothing needs to be transformed or reoriented for a "petition for democracy" to circulate among many different organizations.

Like all the positions we have described so far, the position of communists may appear separate or superimposed on the others, but here the situation is slightly different. The more rooted in the experiences of the social base, militancy, and collective organization, the more chance the communist position has of finding a way forward for its contradiction—because it has greater access to the material reality from which struggles draw their different forms. Our habit of thinking of communists as a superior caste could give us the impression that it is easier to find communists among the organizers of a struggle, then among militants, and finally among the political base of that struggle, respectively—as if there were a pyramid going from the base to the great communist leadership at the top. In practice, however, this is not the case: it is much more common to find political bases capable of circulating between different struggles than militants or organizers, who are usually extremely attached to their own political insertions, theories, and worldviews.

What is unique about the position of communists is that this position cannot stand alone: it is impossible to be a communist who is neither a base, nor a militant, nor an organizer of a struggle. In this extreme case, it would be possible to recognize the "foot out" of particular struggles, but what about the "foot in," which characterizes the contradiction of the communist? It is possible that there are people who move between different struggles, active in different spaces for a period of time, always concerned with the role of that organization in its larger political ecology, but this

would be a case of a kind of militant nomadism, which is different from simply occupying the position of communist.

One possible hypothesis—and one that will certainly occur to some—is that a person who wants to think about the contradiction between different political struggles in order to bring out their common interests, but who does not act as a base, militant, or organizer of any of them, is a "communist intellectual." It is tempting to accept this answer: after all, it is in the intellectual field that the connection between real struggles and the revolutionary movement can be most easily described and idealized. However, it is almost impossible for the fundamental contradiction of the communist not to dissolve, in this situation, into a kind of eclecticism or political fantasy—after all, where would the basis for contradiction come from for a person who only accesses struggles from the theoretical problem of identifying their common substrate and general directions? It is important to recognize, even so, that the intellectual who confronts the ghosts of idealism experiences, in a way, a real conflict. In writing this book, we have been repeatedly confronted with this very problem: sometimes it is necessary to take such long abstract flights, removing ourselves equally from all the struggles with which we are in contact, in order to better think about what may exist in common between them, that the rarefied airs make us question the usefulness of this intellectual adventure.

What allows us to address this particular conflict, however, is not some new concept or philosophical justification, but a return to militant practices: never losing our footing within concrete political organization. It is from political experience that the contradiction that defines the communist position presents itself most clearly. After all, the constitutive difficulty of the revolutionary movement is neither to make political agreements between struggles, nor to philosophize about a substance from which all struggles would arise, but to radicalize the political transformations that different processes are capable of producing from their concrete composition. It is the effort to build a concrete interdependence, made up of articulations that pass through the bases, militants, and political organizers, that constitutes the horizon of communists.

It is also worth noting that the contradiction that underpins the position of communists is also what justifies all the theoretical construction we have done so far. It is only from the point of view of those who are faced with the need to simultaneously consider different processes of political transformation that the question of political thought arises concretely. What does a given political struggle think? How does it differ from that other one? At what point, objective, or task could they meet? These are questions that the base, the militants, and even the organizers of a political process do not need to ask themselves in a practical and recurring manner.

It is also only in light of this contradiction that we can situate the practical challenge of communists—and do so without imagining an intellectual vanguard capable of assessing and deliberating the revolutionary path through some crystal ball—and finally return to the *Communist Manifesto*.

The practice of building without convergence

In the first chapter, we argued that, in the *Manifesto*, communists are not defined by their particular form of organization, by having more knowledge, more commitment to the revolution, or a more consolidated vision of the forms that a post-capitalist society will take. Communists are those who, within any political struggle, “highlight and make prevail the common interests of the proletariat” and who “represent, always and everywhere, the interests of the movement as a whole.” What we argue is that, when there is no spontaneous tendency toward convergence between the fronts of proletarian struggle, actions such as "highlighting," "making prevail," and "representing" become much more complex and consequential practical activities, as they participate in the effective construction—and not just the direction—of these “common interests” and the “movement as a whole.”

Linked to each of the positions we listed above is also a different type of political construction. The base builds the political environment of the struggle, transforming the organization's surroundings so that it is less costly to defend and engage with this emancipatory process. Militancy builds the advancement of forms of political organization, fighting for transformation in all dimensions of the

political conflict we analyzed earlier: struggles in the domains of composition, interaction, and perception. Organizers help transform the gains of the base and the militancy into inventive revisions of these political forms that we want to disseminate—remembering, of course, that they do not need to be leaders to do so, it is enough that any militant also dedicates themselves to building and rebuilding the form of their own organization. Communists, in turn, build means so that the articulation between different political struggles can drive the base, the militancy, and the organizers.

Where this complex construction moves in a revolutionary direction, the contradictions we mentioned become less intense due to the growing prevalence of the political pole: the environment becomes more conducive to struggles, organizations are better equipped to confront challenges and more flexible in the face of new ones, and the more a struggle advances, the more the environment, power, and flexibility of other struggles also advance. Where no construction is possible, either the struggles disappear or they experience an often unsustainable intensification of their contradictions: bases become distrustful and resentful, militants face mental health problems and often dedicate themselves to criticizing one another, organizations face the saturation of their forms and the possibility of self-destruction, and the communist horizon is either lost or returns to the fantasies of an enlightened vanguard, supposedly prevented from operating by the lack of political consciousness of others. As we can see, the idea of construction is what replaces, in our theory of communist practice, the role of spontaneous historical convergence.

And in light of the idea of communist construction, we can now reiterate the following:

Communists do not organize themselves into separate parties. They are people who form the base, the militancy, the organizational core of different collectives and movements—but who take on an additional contradiction for themselves, one that is impossible to experience without prior involvement in some specific struggle. Communists, therefore, have no interests that separate them from the proletariat in general. Nor could they have any, since recognizing and cultivating their common interests from the scattered fragments of the proletariat is the only way to address the contradictions of communist practice. Communists do not proclaim particular principles. The

material reality of society is the only possible source of new political principles and objectives, and in seeking to build links between movements, communists can only be guided by the advancement of struggles created and conceived on the basis of these diverse principles.

Communists differ from other workers' parties in only two respects. First, by investigating the different forms of political organization in which they are involved, transforming the experience and impasses of different political movements into elements that concern organizers, militants, and the rank and file of other organizations. Second, by representing these cross-cutting elements, whether they be problems or solutions that cut across different parts of the same ecology, as concrete signs of the existence of an interconnected revolutionary movement—a common political matter that different organizations can draw on and which, in this way, illuminates the "movement as a whole."In practice, communists therefore constitute the most resolute fraction of workers' parties—because assuming the contradiction between the strategic orientation of their own movement and the existence of other struggles depends, by definition, on having more conviction in the role and power of other political processes than we would need to simply participate in a particular struggle. In theory, communists have an advantage over the rest of the proletariat in that they have a clear understanding of the conditions, progress, and general aims of the proletarian movement – but where could this clarity come from if not from refusing to be satisfied with the way other struggles appear from the point of view of our own militant insertion, preferring instead to rely on concrete investigation of different social and political fragments of the peripheral space? By bringing into their organizations a concern for the movement as a whole, communists also import theoretical tools that help us to increasingly contemplate our common interests, whether in grassroots work, militant tasks, or strategic reorganization.

It becomes easier to understand, we hope, why a book on the theory of communist practice has so intensely mobilized the idea of peripheralization. At the level of internal contradictions within a particular struggle, it is quite plausible that this idea has no immediate usefulness. It is from the specific point of view of the communist contradiction that the problem of political fragmentation and historical inertia characteristic of peripheral capitalism becomes a real issue. And it is only from this same point of view that another, equally fundamental point becomes clear. Finding the means

to produce a growing effective interdependence between organizations, struggles, and emancipatory strategies is not only preparing the revolutionary movement to inhabit the eroded terrain of peripheral capitalism, but also reorganizing this terrain based on other collective principles—after all, capitalism increasingly dispenses with this material articulation of collective life, crossing political and social fragments. In this sense, advancing in the mission of materially articulating struggles is also—by a paradoxical coincidence—the beginning of what could be another mode of production of social life.