

### **The dimensions of communist practice**

In the previous chapter, we began to discuss the effective position of communists amid political struggles in peripheral capitalism. “Amid” because our way of situating the construction of the revolutionary movement avoids positioning communists either before or above the reality of political organizations. They are not before, because, as we emphasized, the “raw material” of communist work is the concrete diversity of emancipatory politics—so that there is nothing communists can do in a political “vacuum,” no plan or strategy to be elaborated. Nor are they above, because struggles do not need external direction, authorized by a general theory of capitalism, to create and reinvent their paths and means of radical transformation of society. On the contrary, if our theory of political transformation is correct, the more rooted in the fragmented material reality of peripheral capitalism, the greater the chance that political processes will achieve revolutionary triumphs, even if localized. The fact that every victory is situated—even when it is grand and lasting—and therefore demands an additional step, an effort of communist construction, cannot serve as authorization to replace the autonomy and political experimentation of struggles with a prior and generalized direction. Both the substance and the means of building the revolutionary movement are created by the struggles themselves, so that the contradiction that situates the position of communists does not exist independently of the practical reality of the social base, the militants, and political organizers.

As we have seen, the contradiction at the heart of the communists’ existence is defined by the absence of immediate convergence or identity between the different forms of radical political processes – after all, communists would not be necessary if the development of struggles spontaneously brought them closer together. Being caught up in this contradiction means constantly confronting a given form of political transformation with the existence of others, which may either have points of contact or be distinct or even in conflict with each other. And what differentiates this from mere political eclecticism is that this confrontation cannot be external—for it is not simply a matter of being aware of the existence of other struggles, but also to consider how,

from their point of view, the struggle we are waging is perceived—nor can it be superficial, for it is not a matter of seeking individual links with other struggles, but of building networks of effective interdependence between them, when possible. It is in the form of a contradiction that this position can be experienced within the field of struggles, and it is its concrete implementation that gives content and form to communist practice: that is, it determines what it can effectively mean to "highlight," "make prevail," and "represent" the common interests of the revolutionary movement.

At the same time, also because of this same contradiction, the position of communists helps to construct a point of view that is not entirely contained within any particular struggle, as it is traversed by this more general political sphere. The existence of a "communist point of view" can, in fact, be derived directly from our theory of organization: an organization composed of the partial articulation of various concrete political organizations will interact with its environment in a different way and will also distinguish what counts and what does not count in these political processes in a unique way. This helps us avoid, once again, the interpretation that this position of the communists is derived from a more comprehensive theory or vision: if there is no practical articulation between struggles, there will be no organization based on their common interests, and if this does not exist, there can be no concrete communist point of view for communists guided by this perspective. As always, this is an organizational, practical, and concrete question: there is more concreteness in the communism of those who deal with the real articulation between two or three localized struggles than in the political practice of those who constantly mobilize the image of a new society to come to guide the strategic path of an isolated political group.

The existence of a perspective derived from the reality of the articulations that communists are capable of building allows us to advance in our understanding of their practice, even if it is impossible to anticipate their specific determinations, since these arise from the concrete reality of the struggles. Considering this point of view, we can understand, for example, why even without separate parties, principles, or objectives, communist practices still have a specific form: it is because communists perform the same tasks as every base, militant, and organizer, but from a different angle, that is, considering each struggle as part of a heterogeneous ecosystem. As we will now see, this change in perspective is not abstract, as it corresponds to a practical reorganization of all the

components of a given emancipatory struggle—its conflicts in the fields of composition, interaction, and perception.

### *Composition and political experiments*

A first clue to help us think about political organization from the perspective of communist practice is that, from this point of view, even when engaged in a particular struggle, we situate ourselves based on the contradiction between this political process and others. That is, we think about collective activity in light of a larger political ecology, even when acting in a single space. It is worth remembering that, in our theory, the only way to perceive other things in a given context is if we interact and structure this activity in a new way—and therefore it is because we are involved with the question of communist articulation and construction that it is possible for other aspects of a given practice to come to the fore. What, then, does it mean to participate in the composition of a political organization based on communist practice? The field of composition, as we saw earlier, concerns the way in which a social activity is structured—how it is divided, its internal dynamics, etc. In general, this concerns the way in which different social logics mix to form any collective process: the role of money and work, rules, bureaucracy and laws, affinity, friendship, etc.

In the field of politics, however, organizational composition is the site of a conflict between the pressures of the social world—in its conservative and reactionary forms—and the political form that aims to restructure coexistence, organizational structure, and collective action. Most of the time, the persistence of a political process is disputed in the field of composition: staying together, meeting, preserving critical capacity and collective vision, etc. And it is also in the field of composition that the basis of militancy and organizers is distinguished—since militants and organizers do not interact with the organized process “from the outside,” but participate and act within it. In all these aspects related to political composition, the tactical and strategic revision of the political form is always at stake, born of material reality and its power to refuse to integrate socially. How can we describe what we are? How can we relate to each other? How can we structure the organization of a political process so that it can not only persist in the face of conservative and reactionary forces, but effectively transform reality?

To formulate and address these questions from a communist point of view is to include in our considerations not only how a struggle thinks—as we have seen: its tactical, strategic, logistical, and mobilizing dimensions—but also how it appears from the point of view of other organizations. Of course, it is probably useless for an anarchist collective that maintains an urban occupation to try to see itself from the point of view of a rural union with which it has no relationship—that would be an abstract exercise—but perhaps it is not so useless to think about the housing struggle in which they are engaged from the point of view of the agricultural workers' struggle if there is a possible interaction between the two. This does not necessarily mean establishing a planned and firm relationship; it may simply mean that, in a way, both the occupation and the union share the same social environment—whether because they face the same enemy, because some residents of the occupation migrated from that city in search of another life, or because the organic produce sold on the corner is purchased from producers in that region. In all these cases, the rural union's perspective on urban occupations can shed light on aspects of the material reality of these struggles that are not directly visible from within them, allowing for the reformulation of issues that might otherwise seem intractable or invisible.

This other light, however, is very weak when the reformulation effort is purely intellectual—when militants try to see themselves through the eyes of other people. What strengthens this other perspective is the creation of connections and shared activities, such as meetings, community fairs, demonstrations, etc. The effort to compose something together confronts both organizations with their social and political differences, and through the resistance to this process, this other perspective begins to take shape. In this sense, communist practice in the field of composition—which thinks of opportunities for articulation between organizations as opportunities to learn new aspects of their own structures—is very similar to an experiment.

In a very simplified way, an experiment can be thought of as the creation of an artificial space, where we can control the influence of different factors, where we then cause some disturbances and observe their effects. As it is a controlled space, we can better understand the laws and principles that are operating there, separating these determinations from other possible causes, and thus

giving shape to something that previously remained invisible. However, in addition to the aspect of "controlled disturbance," the experiment has a second characteristic: it must be comparable to other experiments, that is, we need to be able to articulate and construct a coherent vision composed of the results of several of these artificial arrangements, whether they are able to confirm our hypotheses or not. This second characteristic is not minor or secondary: the experiment must be carried out with a view to the possibility of it being shared—that is, carried out by other people.

Now, from the point of view of communist articulation, there is something of this artificiality of the experiment in the way a political organization aims to prevent the regular functioning of society and extract new collective forms from social material reality, in order to then creatively test the consequences of this reorganization of life. What the communist perspective adds to this compositional dimension of struggles is precisely this second clause we mentioned, the condition that this compositional struggle against the world be shareable to some extent. It is the concern with a transition between the composition of different organizations that ultimately qualifies the possibility for communists to understand the experimental dimension of the efforts of the grassroots, militants, and organizers of a given political process—without the construction of means for sharing the successes, mistakes, and limits of each struggle, this dimension would be nothing more than an empty metaphor.

We have seen previously that, in the field of composition, conservatism and reactionism appear as two types of pressure on the participants in a political process. In the first case, conservative pressure leads militants to decide, increasingly, based on the needs of their survival and current social reproduction. In the second, reactionism aims to replace the unjustifiable and fragile character of new political ideas with ideal models extracted from social reality which, while giving more stability to the organization, also indicate the people and ideas that need to be eliminated from the struggle. In both cases, the social world advances on the political ideas extracted from material reality by the struggle, reducing its space. But communist practice can offer new tools to deal with these two conflicts, either because political recomposition can effectively alleviate the pressures of social life on militants—especially if it allows for a reduction in the workload in both organizations—or because it helps to bring to light even more elements of the material reality that

motivates the political character of the struggle in question. Discovering that fighting for the right to housing in the center of a city can also mean fighting for the right to return to the countryside is a way to revitalize a political idea threatened by the horizon of urban violence, for example.

In a sense, political struggle is always experimental; what communist practice does is create the means to accumulate a practical balance of these experiments. And these means do not involve communists treating the struggle with indifference or taking an external and scientific position—not least because, as we have just suggested, political organizations appear as experiments to each other, and not to impartial sociologists or historians observing everything from the outside. What communist practice adds to struggles, and what initially emerges as a contradiction in its militant practices, is precisely this science of the potential contained in the articulations between different forms of political composition. In fact, there is nothing very new about this intuition: are political organizers not interested in accounts of past struggles and their ability to shed new light on our own practices? The question is rather why we can only recognize the power of other struggles to illuminate our own organizations if we can keep our distance from them. There is, perhaps, a bit of communist vanguardism here that attempts to empower certain militants in particular to have a better overview than others—something that the concrete articulation between struggles helps to undo.

### *Interaction and political technologies*

The field of interaction, as we know, is the main stage of political struggle. It is where political processes clash with capitalist structures and the most visceral reactionary forces, and also the trench that best allows us to assess the advances and retreats of struggles, as well as their tactical and strategic successes and mistakes. Consequently, it is also where communist practice needs to demonstrate its greatest political usefulness.

The main difference between communist practice in the field of composition and in the field of interaction is that, in the former case, the articulations in question concern the interior of political processes—allowing for encounters, exchanges, and even internal reorganizations of struggles,

whether provisional or more lasting – while in the latter, what is at stake is the articulation between actions aimed at transforming the world, whose effects are measured not by the internal reorganization of the political process, but by the reorganization of social relations around us. The most traditional cases of articulation in the field of actions are certainly those of demonstrations and campaigns led by many organizations together, but the circulation of political force that emerges in moments of widespread revolt – amplifying the power of very different collectives and struggles at the same time – is also an effect of the same transfer or interactive sharing. Even if they remain separate from a compositional point of view, they come together to enhance the effect of a given intervention – which may even have a very different strategic meaning for each one. In their minimal form, these articulations reduce the cost of action for each organization and increase their aggregate effect.

Of course, these same examples also demonstrate one of the great difficulties of communist practice in the field of intervention. Given a certain set of struggles, each organized differently—revolutionary parties, center-left parliamentarians, social movements, territorial movements, autonomist collectives, etc.—and each perceiving social reality from its own composition, it is almost impossible to find coordinated actions that are not extremely simple, sporadic, and indirect in effect. Acts, revolts, and campaigns—especially if they are called not to advance the struggle but to prevent the “advance of the right”—help solve this problem by presenting themselves as means to be disputed, rather than as actions whose ends really matter to these different struggles. Any more complex, deep-rooted, and lasting joint action, given the fractured ecosystem of the left, would break with the basic logic of coordination—that is, allowing for a greater aggregate political effect than any struggle could produce on its own—because it is generally extremely costly for political organizations that are very different from each other to give in enough to sustain a shared tactical path for a long time.

Of course, there is no general recipe or model for addressing this tension from the point of view of communist practice, but it is crucial to note that this impasse we mention—the lack of guarantee that the most appropriate forms of intervention for each political process will reinforce and multiply their effects—is the most direct expression of the contradiction that situates the position

of communists. In a way, the tactical and strategic reconsideration based on this tension, which leads us to confront the question of how to formulate interventions that are more likely to produce political advances due to the field of action of other struggles, and which do the same for them, is at the very heart of this practice. But, as we saw earlier, it is impossible to completely separate the field of interaction from the fields of composition and perception—or, in the terms we presented earlier, to separate tactics and strategy from the fields of logistics and mobilization—and therefore communist practice focused on aggregate action is also a practice necessarily concerned with the internal structure of different political processes and the way they conceive of social reality.

We say that communist articulation centered on composition treats the structure of different organizations as experiments—insofar as these concrete articulations reveal potentially invisible aspects of these diverse struggles. Communist articulation in the field of intervention takes another form—it resembles the domain of technology more than that of experimental science.

Technology is, in general, the field of study and development of tools and instruments. Just as experimentation differs from mere experience in that it is transferable or shareable, technology differs from practical know-how in that it makes these processes explicit and allows them to be reproduced by others. A carpenter who knows how to make a special joint between parts of a piece of furniture depends on his accumulated experience and technical talent to perform this operation – he may even invent new uses and forms for his work tools. We say that this technique has become a technology for carpentry when this know-how becomes easily reproducible without requiring other users to occupy the same position as the original carpenter. Of course, educational workshops can teach this technique, but it is when this practice informs new tools, instruction manuals, and preparations for the means of production that it really becomes transmissible even to those who are not so technically talented. On the other hand, technology not only makes what was born from the technical experience of a few reproducible at a lower labor cost, but it can also make actions feasible on scales that are inaccessible to us individually. The separation between technique and technology is not only the difference between a talented worker and one who merely uses tools that facilitate work, but also between actions we can accomplish through our own efforts and actions that are

only possible because they involve special tools that allow us to act on the very small and the very large.

Similarly, the field of political technology brings these two dimensions together. On the one hand, it is the field of communist practice concerned with the transfer of forms of action across different struggles, allowing different strategic visions to benefit from forms of intervention that did not emerge from within their own processes of struggle. On the other hand, it is also the field where we seek to find forms of action whose aggregate effect is irreducible to the sum of the interventions of particular struggles. At the simplest level, we can think here both of the reproduction of instruments of struggle through different political processes—the adoption of European workers' inquiries in contexts of extremely precarious informal work in southeastern Brazil, for example—and of the concrete articulation of different struggles in joint actions—such as campaigns to change legislation, to block a right-wing candidate, or to organize mass protests, etc. But the more we know about the terrain of each struggle, and the more each struggle knows about the terrain of the others, the more distinct forms of articulation can become viable – ways of stitching together diverse actions into true chains of continuous political activity, combining solidarity kitchens, category strikes, occupations, networks of small producers, etc. Such constructions require complex articulations between movements, parties, and their different bases, but they also reinforce the possibility of political advances that would be impossible for any of these actors to produce in isolation.

Thinking about forms of political intervention in our organizations and others as technologies—that is, as ways of acting and transforming reality that can be improved and shared—is a bit like worrying about the “means of production” of the struggle. It means observing how we act, at what cost, and whether there are “more economical” ways to campaign and act, depending on whether we cooperate or not. And if we consider compositional articulation, which we described earlier, as an experimental look at militant “work,” we could even talk, perhaps, about the problem of the “organic composition” of struggles and how different ways of acting can reduce the militant work necessary to perform different tasks, increasing the effectiveness of our interventions. Once again, none of this implies the existence of a committee external to the

struggles trying to direct and unify different forms of action—great managers or generals of the struggles. Just as only concrete compositional articulations really make new aspects of an organization appear to its militants and to militants from other organizations, so too is the process of articulating forms of intervention constructed in the midst of action and its evaluation—and, not surprisingly, it often poses the challenge for rank-and-file members, militants, and organizers to choose between producing real political effects and ensuring the ideological distinction of their own organizations. It is in this tactical and strategic pass that the communist contradiction and its constructive task are most clearly expressed.

### *Perception and political inquiries*

Let us quickly recall our definition of the struggle for perception. What is at stake here, for a given political process, is the way in which people outside that organization conceive of what is happening there. While emancipatory forces aim to transform the social environment enough so that even those who do not actively participate in the struggle recognize the existence and legitimacy of their political principles, conservative and reactionary forces act on these social environments in order to make them indifferent or even harmful to the advancement of the struggles. The main example we gave of the type of struggle that takes place in this sphere is grassroots work, often evaluated in terms of the class consciousness it stimulates in people. On the other hand, we emphasize that, from our organizational point of view, the type of transformation we are interested in evaluating occurs in the field of social practices and relations, even if its individual outcome is the possibility for people to express and intellectually understand the world in a different way.

How is this type of action integrated into communist practice? There is a specificity here that is worth mentioning. Looking back, it is interesting that articulation in the field of composition is the most counterintuitive—the idea that interaction with other organizations can reveal unthought-of dimensions of a struggle is perhaps the most difficult to conceive—and articulation in the field of intervention is more pragmatically understandable—as it directly involves the attempt to create more strength for our different political interventions. This differentiation certainly stems from the

fact that there are many ideological and organizational justifications for political processes to express themselves in such distinct ways, but there is a certain set of common political enemies against which all these struggles rise up—this would make tactical and strategic articulation a little more intuitive.

When we consider the social environments of struggles, this intertwining becomes even stronger: even though each struggle “slices” reality differently, people generally live in the world of peripheral capitalism. We know that peripheralization produces organizational fragmentation in social life, producing a series of different arrangements between value, property, and affinity. It turns out that, while political organizations normally express the tension between a particular arrangement of these logics and their specific emancipatory principles, people need to navigate and circulate between these different fractures, crossing divided cities, social environments that are very different from each other, often desperately clinging to the logic of commodities for guidance, since this is, today, the only way capable of integrating the entire social fabric. This difference between a necessary circulation between social fractures, on the side of the people, and a truncated circulation between political organizations, allows us to recognize the popular content of communist practice. Perhaps paradoxically, considering the complexity of everything we have analyzed so far, we must conclude that the point of view of the contradiction between particular struggles and the totality of the revolutionary movement is, within the sphere of emancipatory politics, the position that best reflects the more general contradictions of social life in peripheral conditions. The communist horizon is, after all, that of the “world in which many worlds fit” – a reunion between political form and the variety of forms of life.

It is by considering this transit of people through different social environments that we can understand why, in the field of perception, communist practice tends to produce a reversal in the logic of base work. If base work aims to produce recognition, on the part of the people, of the legitimacy of a given political struggle, from the communist point of view it is the bases of the different struggles that have the power to shed new light on the political consciousness of the militants and organizers of different political processes. That is why the practice of articulations in the field of social environments takes the form of inquiries.

Even though it has taken many different forms throughout the history of Marxism, the practice of "workers' inquiries" generally has the characteristic of shifting the core of political thought from militants to workers. Even though they often involve political activities indistinguishable from grassroots work—meetings, conversations, neighborhood and workplace inquiries, newspaper distribution, public events, etc.—inquiries end up taking on a different form by more directly confronting the essential communist contradiction. Carried out by militants with particular political orientations, the inquiries offer themselves as a mediation between workers isolated from each other, a mirror for them to build new horizons of articulation among themselves – from sharing forms of resistance to creating a more comprehensive collective consciousness. In other words, the form of the inquiries, as a communist practice, exposes the struggles to the possibility that the political point of view of the workers does not coincide with the restricted vision of the organizations that carry out the inquiries. It is possible—and very common—that, from the point of view of a given social environment, the differences we make between our organizations and ideological conceptions do not make that much difference, and we all appear to the people as part of the same political camp—something we are often unable to conceive for ourselves.

This makes the inquiry, for communists, a crucial tool both in understanding how the different social fragments that make up peripheral capitalism are connected and in identifying the gaps that can allow, based on concrete practices, the construction of a perception of the totality of struggles—a point of view that is largely indifferent to our ideological categories and is generally guided by the aggregate difference we can make in people's real lives. In this sense, the inquiry is neither an experiment—it does not act through recompositions and articulations between organizations—nor a technology—since it does not concern the articulation between forms of action. What inquiries construct, in short, is a perception of the common interests of different struggles, that is, a rearticulation between parts of the social fabric capable of illuminating and evaluating the relevance of the distinctions we draw for our bases, militants, and organizers. By submitting all emancipatory political construction to the court of popular perception, the inquiries root communists in the only trustworthy substrate – closing the circuit that goes from the base to the communists, and back to them.