

The history of the workers' enquiry

The main function of the *Common Space of Organizations* is to invite different organizations and political movements to talk a little about their experiences, with the expectation that these meetings can stimulate our debates and theoretical discussions, produce a new vision on the different ways in which the left organizes itself currently and, mainly, allow us to create connections between our collective and the groups that participate in the enquiries. The "militant poll", a central activity of ECO, is however a practice that we are still trying to understand. So far we have only carried out two surveys – the first with the [Invisíveis collective](#), the second with [Ação Popular Revolucionária](#), part of the PDT – and these experiences have already been enough to confront us with a series of challenges and questions still unanswered. How can we recognize, based on the reports of specific activists, what is relevant, or structural, in their respective organizations? What is the political function of the enquiry– just to produce examples so that ECO theorists can better elaborate their ideas? Is there a gain in this for the organizations we invite?

Motivated by these questions, we decided to spend the last month on a more or less systematic study of the history of workers' enquiries, the original model for this type of investigation, so that it would be possible, from then on, to begin to develop a theory of militant enquiries. What I present in these notes is the balance of these discussions from February and March.

In the meeting we dedicated to the history of the workers' enquiry, we used two texts as a basis. The first, the book by Marcelo Hoffmann, currently only available in English, called [Militant Acts](#), which tells the history of the poll, from Marx to Foucault. The second, a text written by Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, called [Workers Enquiry: a genealogy](#). Guided by these references, and returning to the sources they use, we try to construct an overview of the history of the workers' survey. We begin our review with the [famous questionnaire](#) written by Marx in 1880, also discussing the other uses that Marx and Engels made of the direct and indirect speech of workers – notable examples being, certainly, Engels's 1845 book, [The Situation of the Working Class in England](#), and the long chapters on the working day and machinery in the first volume of Marx's [Capital](#). Next, we revisit Lenin's quarrel about the use of enquiries – a practice he mobilized during the writing of [The Development of Capitalism in Russia](#), but later abandoned, preferring access to information about the world of work through official means, such as surveys and administrative reports. We have seen that, in a very different way, Mao Tse Tung made extensive use of the survey, both in his long investigation of the [peasant situation in Hunan](#), published in 1927, and in a series of later texts that demonstrate that the practice of *investigation*, as it would later call it, it can be considered one of the true pillars of Maoism. In the post-war period, we compare the resumption of the workers' survey in the American Trostkist trend [Johnson-Forest](#),

led by CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya – which discarded the questionnaire format in favor of first-person narratives, written by the workers themselves –, the recovery of poll, influenced by the Americans, in the French group [Socialisme ou Barbarie](#) - which used the publication of workers' reports to organize reading and debate groups, aiming at the self-organization of the class rather than the intellectual clarification of their living conditions. We also saw how this path led to the famous Italian autonomist magazine [Quaderni Rossi](#), perhaps the most consistent effort to think and experiment with different forms of workers' survey, in direct discussion both with Marx's original questionnaire and with the American and French heritage. However, the debate with the practice of Maoist investigation remained absent in these three moments of the survey's resumption - quite possibly because, in Mao's texts, the survey had taken on a perhaps unrecognizable form, whose purposes also did not exactly align with those of the European Marxist heterodoxy of the time. Still, we follow the arrival of this Maoist influence in the "establishment" practices that were adopted by French Maoists in the 1970s, mainly by members of the [Group for the Foundation of the Union of Marxist-Leninist Communists of France](#) (UCMLF). For these activists, the survey did not concern either the process of raising workers' class awareness, nor the clarification of their social condition for the strategic elaboration of political groups – it served, in fact, as a model of articulation between intellectuals and the people. Finally, we also discuss the influence of this Maoist tradition – which we will return to later – within Brazilian political thought. Even though in Brazil it is important to recognize the role of Catholic Action in promoting worker survey practices – or "worker surveys" as Father Joseph Cardijn, [founder of the "See, Judge and Act" method, called it](#). – Mao's influence also appears here, albeit sideways, in Paulo Freire's [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), which recognizes an innovative proposition on pedagogy in Maoist texts.

But what can we learn from this long – albeit incomplete – history of the workers' poll? In our meetings, we learned some basic but crucial lessons.

The first is that the survey is the result of a lack of knowledge. But, above all, it is a *political non-knowledge*. Even in the questionnaire proposed by Marx, which contains almost exclusively objective questions about the respondents' work environment, the *choice* of questions is precise, and clearly guided by underlying theses that derive directly from the author's political position. If Marx had not been involved with the International Workers' Association, that is, if he had not had strategic objectives in view, he would certainly not have been clear about what needed to be discovered through questionnaires aimed at the experiences of the working class – there is therefore an underlying engagement, without which the abstract or commonplace ignorance we all have of the details of others' social lives would not become a demand for knowledge. Politics, even in Marx's objective and "scientific" questionnaire, guides what is relevant and what is not, giving shape to not-knowing.

This determination of the unknown by political engagement allows us to clarify a second fundamental dimension of the enquiry, which we will return to later, namely, that the enquiry is necessary when a meeting is impossible. The principle is simple, but important: we carry out surveys – whether through questionnaires, publishing reports or mobilizing in collective investigations of a situation – because somehow we are not organized with those from whom we expect answers, testimonies or information. There is something that stands between "them" and "us" and it is this tension between political union – which places activists and workers on the same side of the struggle – and social difference – which separates political organizations from the reality of concrete workers, or even separates parts of the working class from each other – which motivates the existence and form of the workers' survey.

This tension is also relevant when it comes to understanding why the practice of enquiries was often accompanied by debates about how to avoid the instrumentalization of the working-class experience by activists. After all, the danger we run – whether when asking about the life experience of workers, or when designing the strategic role of surveys as a kind of unifying mechanism and class awareness – is that the unifying effort of the survey, overcoming spatial or ultimately serves to reinforce the difference between organized political actors, on the one hand, and workers, on the other, trapped in the gears of capital. As we mentioned above, each political group we studied interpreted this danger in its own way, proposing very different solutions to the problem – but practically everyone, in some way, recognized the need to deal with this tension. It makes sense: after all, it is not only an obstacle in the path of the workers' poll, but also its reason for being.

However, we also find a second question – which is linked to this first – in the history of enquiries. We saw that, especially in the case of post-war militant currents, the interest in the workers' survey was intrinsically linked to the reassessment of the role of the instruments of struggle and organization of the working class. Groups such as the Johnson-Forest tendency, the Socialisme ou Barbaire group and Italian operaismo all shared, in one way or another, the diagnosis that greater attention was needed with the influence of the State on communist political practice. Whether it was the criticism of the socialist state by Dunayevkaya and James, the discussion about autonomy in the labor movement in the works of Castoriadis, or the denunciation of the functioning of unions and parties among Italian autonomists – there was a certain consensus that it was necessary to find other means of allowing the self-organization of the working class, other forms of mediation and organization of their experience of work and resistance, which did not run the risk of being absorbed and refunctionalized by para-state institutions – whose ultimate purpose had become to appease the political struggle and frame it, through bureaucratization, judicialization or the electoral cycle, in terms that facilitated the integration of the struggle back into the dynamics of capital. In this context, the practice of the workers'

survey emerged as a fighting tool capable of unifying the experiences of the working class, their demands, knowledge and expectations, in a self-reflexive movement that bypassed mediations informed by state logic.

This "immanent" mediation role of the workers' enquiry is crucial for us. Not only because it allows us to think about other collective tools that also aim to carry out a similar operation – such as, for example, [the anonymous reporting newspaper](#) created by the *Invisibles*, who participated in our first survey, or even the famous clandestine newspapers of the Russian revolutionaries, such as [Iskra](#) – but also for serving as a counterpoint to the role of Maoist investigations. It is true that most of Mao's texts on the practice of investigations precede the seizure of power by the communists in 1949, but, unlike what is happening in Europe and the United States – which respond quite directly to the transformations they witness in the Soviet Union – there is a curious continuity between a text like [Opposition and the Cult of Books](#), from 1930, and later texts by Mao, like [On the Work of Propaganda](#), from 1957, [Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?](#), from 1963, or [On Education](#), from 1967. For some reason, the practice of research offers a guiding thread that connects the concern with knowledge of the complex Chinese situation, in a pre-revolutionary context, with the theory of how to reorganize the political culture of the Communist Party, already in a position of power.

In fact, the Maoist theory of the enquiry seems to us to be essentially different from that developed in the United States and Europe. Even though Mao never tires of saying – as he said in 1930 – that "we need to understand the cities and the countryside" or – as he said in 1967 – that "we have to study conditions in China", the model he builds for research differs other approaches at crucial points. The first is that the reference to the relationship between enquiry and meeting is explicit. In *Opposition to the Cult of Books*, the practice of polling is understood as primarily a practice of meeting – a practice that Mao describes in detail, discussing who should be called to "fact-finding" meetings and who need not be there, the appropriate size for such meetings and even the best method for taking notes. Furthermore, the relationship between knowing and acting is presented in an innovative way in this text, where it states that "investigating a problem is, in fact, solving it". In other words, instead of carrying out investigations or surveys to reveal future points of intervention, Mao suggests that it is the intervention itself – its first instance being the meeting itself – that produces the elements we want to know.

We can recognize in the very structure of the practice of Maoist investigation – which combines meeting, problem solving and knowledge – the three dimensions that make up what we call *organizational trinitarianism in the STP*. For our research collective, adopting the organizational point of view means, above all, considering that the way a political process is *composed* – who participates in it, how it is structured – the way it *interacts* with the world – what is capable of changing and

what remains beyond its reach – and the way in which the world becomes *intelligible* to this process – what aspects of the world "appear" and make a difference for activists and organizations – are three aspects of same issue. Now, when thinking of the survey as a meeting – that is, a composition process – where dealing with problems – that is, interaction with the world – is what conditions knowledge – that is, the intelligibility of what is relevant – Mao For us, we were thinking about the survey from an organizational point of view.

However, there is a point that separates the practice of Maoist investigation from what we call *militant polling* – and that brings Mao's experiment closer to the tradition of workers' polling. This point concerns the other aspect of the organizational point of view, which we discussed in a previous meeting, namely, the difference between considering political organization as a *type* or as an *approach* to any collective action or structure. As we have seen, one of the problems with thinking about political organization as a particular type or form of activity is that, in contrast, we need to consider that, outside the scope of this specific type of action, what we have is *disorganization*. As one of the key characteristics of the idea that political organization is a particular type of collective action is the belief that it is a form of intentional and self-conscious action – because *we decide* to organize ourselves, it is something we do on purpose – it follows also that disorganized social or political action lacks consciousness. The problem here is not so much that this would imply a depreciation of social life that bypasses political organization, but rather that this approach establishes a qualitative division between social reality and organized collective action.

In another text we discussed – the brilliant summary of the collective *Notes From Below*, called [The worker survey and social composition](#) – we saw how it even expanded the theory of the survey to include not only technical composition (the conflict between labor force and means of production, or between labor and capital, within the productive arena) but also social composition (the conflict between labor power and its means of social reproduction, which occurs outside the work space), still an important division between the intentional and the unintentional remained. This difference is notable, for example, when they write that "the transition between the technical/social composition and the political composition [of workers] occurs as a leap that defines the political point of view of the working class."

Reading the text carefully, it is evident however that the collective in no way takes the position that workers, both in the field of production and social reproduction, are mere "toys" in the hands of social and political structures. At various times the authors point out that "in the three parts [technical, social and political composition] class composition is both a product and a producer of the struggle for social relations in the capitalist mode of production" – that is, there is an intelligence and an intentionality in the forms of resistance immanent to each of these components, to

which the workers' survey must pay attention. From the point of view we adopt here, however, such a position is not sufficient. For us, the organizational point of view does not serve to simply draw attention to the fact that workers are an active, conscious and resistant part of the fight against capital, preventing an avant-garde dualism that assumes that there is no intentionality outside of organized militancy. What interests us is rather the opposite, that is, *to generalize* the theory of social composition – to expand *into the discussion on political composition* the type of structural analysis that the survey dedicates to understanding the class struggle. This means recognizing that opacity – the political non-knowledge that we mentioned previously – *is not eliminated* by the "leap" that takes from the technical and social composition to the political composition, supposedly self-reflexive, as it is the "self-organization" of workers as a class. Militant organizations not only remain part of the social world, and therefore permeated by its contradictions and structures, but they also produce, through their own practice, new gaps between what we want and what we are doing, between the real dynamics of a political collective and the that we have direct access to this process.

Even the theory of Maoist investigation – as the terror of the cultural revolution can demonstrate – is incapable of effectively abolishing this differentiation between opacity and transparency, even if in many ways it proposed to invert it, treating intellectuals as alienated subjects and the people as holders of tools for self-reflection and understanding reality. And when this qualitative difference is preserved, it is always possible to accuse someone of acting in bad faith, of giving in to counter-revolutionary dynamics, as long as it is possible to provide proof that the accusation is made from a more enlightened point of view – whether this is defined like that of the militant Leninist or the peasant alignment.

The theory of the enquiry or militant investigation, therefore, begins from the premise – derivable from our thesis on the organizational point of view – that, since we cannot distinguish social organization in general from political organization in particular in terms of intentionality, transparency or self-reflexivity, then we need to admit that our militant organizations are themselves the product and producers of a certain lack of knowledge, of a gap that separates those organized from what organizes them. This is not, however, a pessimistic premise – the effect of not having "yet" overcome the alienation of life under capital – quite the opposite: the organizational point of view treats this opacity as an effect, above all, of the fact that we are capable of participating in things greater than ourselves.