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Party building

Anticapitalist strategy and the question of organization

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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No matter how much time passes, or how often history is declared to have ended, the debate over socialist strategy and organization always returns. This foundational question appeared in embryo at the very start of the workers movement in the nineteenth century and was raised explicitly by Lenin when he described his perspective as "tactics as plan" and when revolutionaries split with social-democracy during World War I. [1]

Organizational and strategic questions can be considered separately, but in reality (and inevitably at the theoretical level), they present themselves as mutually related. Therefore, it is necessary to address both in order to systematically explain either. Over the course of the twentieth century, diverse combinations and conjunctural implications have given rise to many debates and concrete formulas, such as what defines revolutionary organization, the much-discussed *reform or revolution*, Popular Front and United Front formations, vanguard versus mass parties, entryism as a tactic, and the great strategic hypotheses that dominated the past century, of which the Insurrectional General Strike and the Prolonged Peoples' War are only two. Rather than attempt to review each of these, this text offers some basic tools by which we can orient ourselves theoretically and in our political practice.

In these confusing times, when the political horizon has become blurry, we must bring it into focus and consider how to organize ourselves to achieve some clarity of purpose.

Some basic concepts

Our strategic understanding can be strengthened by considering several concepts developed through hard-won experience that may provide a theoretical base upon which other ideas can be arranged.

In 1915, in the *Collapse of the Second International*, Lenin began to develop the notion a *revolutionary crisis*. Lenin's conception has been popularized as "when those above cannot, and those below will not, tolerate the situation, while those in the middle hesitate and lean towards those below," such a situation supposes a conjunctural crisis of social relations occurring at the same time as a national political crisis. This notion emphasizes that there are particular and relatively exceptional circumstances in which the State and the system as a whole become vulnerable and, thus, can be overturned. Such a constellation of factors does not take place at just any moment and, therefore, there is a rhythm to the class struggle, one that includes ruptures and discontinuities that must be considered in terms of an understanding of crisis as a political phenomena.

Lenin's second concept is the *political event*. Lenin grasped that a crisis may be detonated by any number of events, that is, the totality of contradictions inherent in the capitalist system may express themselves, in a condensed manner, in what at first glance may appear to be minor conflicts. For instance, we have seen student revolts, democratic demands, women's mobilizations, and national conflicts set off crises. These moments of compression and eruption define what Lenin calls *political events*. Knowing how to detect such events, how to exploit contradictions and resolve a crisis victoriously, requires conscious intervention, that is, it requires political organization. Because when we start to discuss strategy, this already implies initiative, decision-making, a clear project, implantation in the working classes, and a certain balance of forces.

Political time, accordingly, does not march in linear fashion towards progress, rather, it is *broken time*, marked by crisis and interruptions of normality, opening possibilities for those who are prepared and know how to approach it. French revolutionary socialist Daniel Bensaïd spoke of *empty, homogenous time and dense time*, which is to say that there are periods when nothing happens and periods when, all of a sudden, time accelerates and many things

happen all at once. [2] Revolutionary politics implies the mastery of this kind of political time, of knowing how to react in the face of rapidly changing events. To prepare, as Trotsky put it, for the “forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.” [3]

Concerning strategy

One of the recurring debates on the radical left revolves around whether we need a political party or mass movement? Or what is the relationship between political organization (the party) and the social movement?... what a century ago was called the workers’ movement.

What is clear – despite bureaucratic and populist attempts to push real-world problems to the margins of political struggle, and the pretensions of the post-autonomy theorists who claim politics can be dissolved into social struggle – is that social and political struggles form two profoundly interrelated aspects of the same endeavor, although they have their own particular rhythms, characteristics, and reality.

Political struggle, conceived properly, is not reducible to a prolongation or intensification of social struggle. Political struggle is, strictly speaking, the struggle for power. Not in a crude or “politicking” sense, but in its most profound dimension. Constructing an anticapitalist and revolutionary strategy requires the conviction that the conquest of power by the working class is possible. Otherwise, socialist politics ends up inevitably moving in another direction, limiting itself to the promotion of day-to-day resistance (in the best-case scenario) where all transformative goals are abandoned.

A revolutionary strategy implies the *actuality of revolution*. [4] Not in the sense that the revolution will take place tomorrow, but only that it is possible in our epoch. The actuality of revolution carries with it a sense of anticipation, of an attempt to bring the revolution into present time and to bring present to the revolution. In this sense, the revolution functions like a *regulating horizon* for our present-day actions, if the revolution does not form part of our political horizon from the beginning, we are unlikely to approach it. Here we enter the field of *politics as a strategic art* where we must put our collective capacity to develop *strategic hypotheses* to the test. [5] Political struggle does not operate through imaginaries, nor through improvisations, rather, it must be based on a strong hypothesis, in other words, on a well-founded bet. Yet no matter how vigorously researched and prepared, any hypothesis remains nonetheless a bet. Thus, approaching reality strategically is a precondition for victory, even if it is not a guarantee.

Understanding political struggle in this manner (the actuality of revolution, revolution as a regulating horizon, the elaboration of strategic hypotheses checked against reality) brings with it two interrelated virtues. The first is to break free from a stagist view of political struggle, one inherited from a conception of historical time belonging to classical social-democracy that fails, as we have seen, to correspond to the reality of broken political time. The second is that it allows us to respond successfully to the specific rhythms of this broken time, to anticipate crises, and to prepare for forks in the road and sharp turns.

Seen in these terms, the future is not simply the inevitable result of a chain of causes. Rather, the future is itself a cause that makes us choose one or the other decision in the present, it is the regulatory horizon of our political practice. And in turn, our ability to imagine the present is conditioned (not determined) by our understanding of the past. Escaping teleological politics – where everything happens inevitably and nothing could have been otherwise, escaping the mechanical rigidity that mistakes conditioning with determination and eliminates the subjective factor of history – is a necessary precondition for strategic thinking. Bensaïd expressed this sense with a phrase that I have always liked: “the past is full of presents that never came to fruition.”

In opposition to those who write History as an inevitability after it has already come to pass, we should follow

Bensañ-d's suggestion that there is always (and always has been) a range of real possibilities. Whether or not one of them finally ends up being realized depends, fundamentally, on the correlation of forces and the level of class struggle. Typical accounts of the Spanish transition to democracy after the end of the Franco fascist regime and the often-praised [Pactos de la Moncloa](#) present a good example of how the discourse of *what happened happened because it was the only thing that could possibly have happened* to obscure political decisions and actions that contributed to the short-circuiting other outcomes which, at a specific moment, were also possible.

Here, by organizing to push one way or the other, we enter the field of strategy. Whether or not any hypothesis is correct will depend, among other things, on accumulated historical experience, the correlation of forces, the capacity for analyzing the national situation, the strength of the State, and a socialist organization's implantation in and connection with the mass movement. And after accounting for all that, it is always possible to err.

In the traditions of the revolutionary left, strategy is the basis upon which to gather, organize, and educate militants, it is a project aiming to overthrow bourgeois political power. And if politics is the struggle for power, this implies working to build a majority. In other words, having the will to join in the mass, not just differentiate from it. Breaking with the minoritarian fatalism of always being different (and lamenting that nobody understands us) in order to build, in Gramscian terms, a counter-hegemonic project and not merely an alternative political expression. Trying to reverse the correlation of forces is one of the underlying questions of all strategic thinking, and the only possible method is trial and error infused with the spirit of accumulating experience and correcting mistakes. Here the role of the organization comes into play.

Concerning organization

Returning to Lenin, another of his principle contributions was the delimitation between *class* and *party*. Starting with *What is to be Done?*, Lenin clarified the typical confusion between the two: the party does not equal the class itself, but only a group of individuals with a certain level of consciousness and broadly agreed-upon strategies. Two questions flow from this that have sparked recurring debates on the left over the last century, namely, the debate concerning conceptions of a vanguard party and whether or not there are models for such a party that are more useful than others. We'll return to this later. The fact is that Lenin never argued that revolutionary organization embodied the class as a whole. Rather, such organization represents a class-based project that may serve as an instrument for the optimization of the working class' transformative power.

One important conclusion that flows from this is that, if the party is delimited with respect to the class, there must be space for more than one party. The defense of pluralism has been a bedrock principle for all revolutionary Marxist movements during the difficult twentieth century. This is true in the first place because socialist democracy can only be learned by practicing it. Secondly, and this is no minor question, pluralism is not inevitable. I'll try to explain what I mean.

Trotsky suggested that parties, besides their well-known ambition to embody particular classes or sections of classes, are also bearers of ideology and strategic orientations. This is necessarily so because working-class ideological homogeneity is impossible – capitalism itself makes certain of this. This reality is not, in the first instance, based on conscious and massive manipulation by the ruling class, but is the direct result of economic and social mechanisms acting on the consciousness of the oppressed. The achievement of a general class consciousness among the masses – and even then not without contradictions – can only occur during a revolutionary process. Pluralism, therefore, is not only desirable in democratic terms, it is also inevitable. If revolutionary organizations, understood as such, express ideological-strategic wagers, then the existence of multiple organizations (and competition between them) is to be expected.

With respect to the notion of the *vanguard*, the Leninist delimitation of the party with respect to the class has often

been misunderstood as a total separation, thus isolating the supposed vanguard group of enlightened individuals from the real mass movement. The history of the Bolshevik Party itself demonstrates that there can be no self-proclaimed vanguard. Instead, the historic right to act as such, as Ernest Mandel put it, must be won. And this right can only be won through participation in the heart of mass struggle. No one gets to be a leader, or to play a leading role, unless this position arises from within the struggle of the mass of the working class.

In the history of the revolutionary left, the best theoreticians have always been leaders, and many of the best leaders have made important theoretical contributions, for instance, Lenin, Gramsci, and Bensañd himself, to name a few. The same holds true when consider people known for their practical leadership, such as Che Guevara, where we find that his theoretical production is greater than is often considered. This demonstrates how the party, the political organization, acts as a mediation between *theory* and *praxis*.

The party is the vehicle through which strategic hypotheses are elaborated, not out of thin air, but based on the combined, accumulated historical experience of its members. This accumulated experience – and its assimilation by party activists who are themselves implanted in, and learning from, different struggles – transforms the organization into a transmission belt in a double sense. The party is, in this way, as much a producer as a product of mass revolutionary action.

The second critical aspect in our conception of political organization (after properly conceiving of the party as a mediating force between theory and practice) is *political strategy*. A strategic party is one that not only educates and accompanies the masses, it is also capable of organizing advances and retreats, making course corrections based on rhythms and moments arising from the struggle. That is, a party that understands how to move in broken, political time.

Lastly, the party must play a leading role in an *historic bloc* composed of a galaxy of diverse forms of organization based on the subaltern classes in what Gramsci called civil society, this operation takes place at the *social level* that we spoke of earlier, a level that is distinct from the political sphere. When referring to this *historic bloc*, we use the term *coordination* (articulación in Spanish) to describe the formation of a collective will that transcends particular interests, one that becomes self-aware and counterposes itself to the dominant powers. The party's task is to facilitate this process of coordination, generating organizing hubs (*centros de anudamiento*) that offer a common vision and strategic hypothesis.

This does not mean, and this is important to emphasize, establishing a political leadership the realizes a project that is external to the struggle. Remember, Mandel's affirmation that a vanguard must with the right to lead, that is, it must be recognized as such by the masses. And as there is a plurality of political organizations, we must also understand that ideological debates and competing strategic hypotheses can only be proven in reality, something that is not possible if the contending organizations are not rooted in the mass movements. The party, then, appears as the political leadership of an *historic bloc*, but it achieves this position because its objective is accepted by the masses, who recognize it as their own.

Having arrived at this point, let's review. We have been talking as if *party* and *political organization* are at all times synonymous, however, there are clearly other forms of political organization besides a party.

1. In the debate over *party form*, what we often find instead are political groups, which also organized on the basis of ideological boundaries and strategic hypotheses, but which do not function as parties but as *lobbies*. These organizations often lack democracy – both internally (who and how to makes decisions, participation and structures for debate, etc.) and externally – and transparency as no one knows who is a member based on what criteria, many times they even hide their existence, etc.
2. On the other hand, the party (or parties) should not be confused with institutions designed for the political

struggle that, at specific historical moments, the workers' movement as a whole creates. When the class as a whole identifies itself as a revolutionary alternative (when a new historical bloc arises and is articulated) the need for autonomous and unitary forms of organization appears, such institutions take on the dual roles of acting as counter-power organs within capitalist society and as instruments for the training of the masses in socialist self-management. The most recurrent historical example of these sorts of institutions are soviets, which are nothing more than the Russian word for councils. When soviet-like institutions arise, the parties (based on an inevitable and desirable pluralism) intervene in the soviets, but soviets are much more than the sum of these parties: they are the instrument that the class empowers for its own emancipation. They are, at that point, the form of political organization that mediates between the class itself and its own conscience.

Taking from Gramsci's interpretation of Lenin, we might say that the accent should be placed on the direct social agent, on the working class. Only in this way can a dialectic be established between the class and a political leadership that prevents the party from converting itself into a body that is not only delimited with respect to the class, but separated and alien to it.

Two caveats must be added here. First, pluralism and democracy are confronted by the constant danger of bureaucratism. Both external pluralism and democracy (that is, a recognition of the legitimacy of class institutions and a commitment to participate honestly and loyally in the movement of the masses) and internal (democratic centralism understood as outlined above, featuring rank-and-file control, the permanent training of activists who are capable of understanding and intervening in debates and in the elaboration of strategy, term limits, publishing organs that are open and comradely, the right to form tendencies, and the absence of leadership by fiat, etc.) are necessary to confront this ever-present danger. Second, strong links and real implantation in living movements – in both the social field and in civil society – can act as a safeguard against bureaucratization, integration into the state apparatus, and capitalist cooptation.

Outlines of a proposal

So far, I hope it is clear how debates regarding strategy and organization intersect and interlock, in other words, it is not possible to think about what kind of organization we want without thinking at the same time about why we want it. BensaÃd posed the question like this: Is a revolution possible and do you want to fight for it. And, if so, you must determine what political instrument is necessary because, with respect to revolutionary organization, the form is part of the content.

The *party form* is always historically conditioned, but this raises a question about whether there are better, or more revolutionary, models as such, an idea into which many supposedly Marxist groups have repeatedly fallen and which is deeply anti-Leninist at heart. However, if there are no set forms, there are useful criteria, references, and guides as long as we keep in mind that the type of party that we must build today arises from our own concrete global situation and the balance of forces between the classes, the specifics of the crisis in which we find ourselves, and the evolution of the working-class and social movements.

The greatest challenge facing the social revolution is that it is the first in history that necessarily implies the prior awareness of one's goal. Thus, political struggle is essential to make a revolution since it can shape class consciousness, it is a means by which to accumulate experience, and when a revolutionary crisis opens, it can act to alter the balance of forces. Conscious leadership is, therefore, at the center of the conditions of possibility for the success of the social revolution.

And in this sense, the main criteria for building the kind of party we need were provided by Lenin are still valid and correct today as long as we keep in mind that they are criteria, not models.

1. A delimited and active party, one which acts as an element of continuity amidst fluctuating collective conscience. This will not always mean the same thing for party members, and it is clear today that it is necessary to allow for a diversity of compromises that fit our lives under late capitalism. But it is essential to maintain a militant nucleus, and not resign ourselves to the dissolution of ties between revolutionaries or to rely on plebiscitary formulas.
2. A party committed to political action across the whole society. The party must not remain passive in the face of injustices, however small they may seem, it must participate in all local and sectoral battles, not merely shutting itself up on the margins of concrete conflicts. And this is true in all areas of work, be it the economic/union struggle or work in elected or other institutions.
3. A nimble party, capable of responding to unforeseen events. One with an internal political culture trained in and accustomed to the democratic debate that is capable of making sharp turns while remaining cohesive.
4. A party capable of presenting an overall vision. In other words, capable of acting with a strategic vision, formulating strategic hypotheses, and contributing to the coordination of the historical bloc through its implantation and work in social movements.
5. Finally, a party capable of thinking about concrete mediations and temporary forms of organization. That is, one that is capable of developing specific tactics so as to not be paralyzed in the absence of a pre-ordained script that brings the revolutionary horizon into focus.

The great challenge we face today, the question that must guide our political action, is how to advance towards the coordination of a new historical bloc that, as such, is not a simple sum of its parts but is capable of thinking of itself as a totality, one capable of opposing the dominant classes. For this to be possible, it is essential to build class structures and institutions, not in a merely economic sense, but to go much further and establish contact and collaboration between them. We must strengthen not only combative unionism (very important in this period of crisis) but also social unionism, housing assemblies, mutual support networks in neighborhoods, social centers, the feminist movement, and all those spaces of self-organization where community ties are built, struggles that expose the system's contradictions and promote processes of class self-awareness and self-activity.

But we must also encourage a pro-party spirit of organization. The party is not simply a participatory space or one more identity on a list, rather, it is the organization through which the political struggle takes place. It is where we come together and organize politically to create *organizing and social hubs* as we try to construct a new correlation of forces.

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[1] See Lenin ["What Is To Be Done"](#) and ["The Collapse of the Second International"](#).

[2] Daniel Bensaïd ["Leaps Leaps Leaps": Lenin and politics"](#).

[3] Leon Trotsky ["The History of the Russian Revolution Volume One: The Overthrow of Tzarism"](#).

[4] Georg Lukacs, 1924 "[Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought 1. The Actuality of the Revolution](#)".

[5] Daniel Bensaïd 2006 "[On the return of the politico-strategic question](#)".