05 2021

A Grammar of Freedom

Preface by Antonio Negri

Antonio Negri

Translated by Kelly Mulvaney

What is the life of a communist activist today, the life of an activist after the fall of the Soviets? What is her political horizon, when her autonomy and the autonomy of her struggles are no longer confronted with the models of the past, when the history of the working class emptied the image of the Party and the Third International of any basis?

I was born in the 1930s, and so I belong to the last generation that grew up in the world of communist parties.[1] When I started doing politics, it was natural for me to understand working class action in terms of the working-class party model—so it was given by the large organizations in the Fordist factories and societies. On the other hand, the Soviet light in Stalingrad had grown more powerful in the great antifascist war, which brought victory and honor to the communist resistance across the world. And even the new revival of capitalist command over work and society was saturated by the counter-power of the workers, having to acknowledge, as a reflection of that October, economic Keynesianism and state economic planning in the construction of the welfare state. The life of a communist activist today, in a time

when this condition of struggle, when counter-power at local and international levels have become less important, can only be profoundly different from what my generation experienced. The life of a communist activist is today much more the product of a radical turn away from the models of political apparatus and institutions brought forth by the first half of the twentieth century.

But at the same—and this is impressive—the effect of a retrospective over-identification with the origins and constituent power of the communist movement can be witnessed in this activist life. It is a genuine paradox that is here construed by the feel and behaviors of the new communist activists: at precisely the moment when, in objective historical terms, they become completely disembodied, because (with the end of the "short century") they have lost access to the terrain of revolution and to the capacity to maintain its temporality, they express themselves more and more radically, because they are subjectively grounded in the ontology of class struggle, in a remote history that has been made present. Today it is not Slavic or Chinese names, but European and U.S., Mexican and Arab, Seattle and Genoa, Tunis and Madrid, Cairo and New York. And tomorrow? At the peak of capitalist power blows a strong, an increasingly strong wind!

In the rediscovered ontology, in search of freedom and in struggles around wages alike, these activists create imagination. It's a Spinozan term: not fantastical or dream-like, but to the contrary a very direct, concrete capacity to insist on the material horizon, because it is an autonomous action that the activists create to measure themselves with their own history, and they are responsible for it, they don't leave or delegate responsibility for it to anyone else. An imagination that is firmly confident and has the capacity to decide what to do and to embody what is hoped for,

and which has the certainty that the action, once expressed, does not take long to free the activist from loneliness, because she will always be nourished by the multitude. Put differently, my generation obeyed in order to revolt; that is, it moved within the canons of a worn-out tradition, which were as strong as they were superficially prescribed—a superficiality made of party officials and obligatory dates, labor unions and politics, of contracts and programs, representation and trust. "Superficial" because they often took from the communist tradition only the liturgical jewels and an asphyxiating alienation. The new generation, in contrast, can reach back to the ontology of the movement, to an honest and open perception of what is primary in the order of protest and claim, of action and construction. It is neither disobedient nor obedient but can rather build itself freely.

To be clear: she does not encounter the same reality that the working-class activists of the nineteenth or twentieth century knew, nor does she see the same transformations. The mutation she experiences is not of the kind that we experienced. If the old organizational models stopped working for us at a point, this was the case because the subjects of class struggle changed. They are no longer struggling in terms of the same scheme, in the same format. The Fordist workers struggled to break the wage system and the slavery of life-time to which they were subjugated, and they wanted to free themselves—to liberate and construct themselves— by moving within the capitalist system and struggling against it. Today, in contrast, movement is no longer only protest, or rebellion, or rejection, or the force of the negative; more than that, there is a need to create a new imaginary of struggle. Essentially: an image of the counter-power of class, which of course implies the multitudinous subjects of class, but also the dimensions of gender, race, etc. In brief, it is a project that involves the production and

reproduction of goods and society, the consumption of life and exchange with nature—a genuine reform of the historical design of capitalist development. The "form of progress" is the content of struggles today. In a way that excludes as much the urgency of accumulation as the suffocation of every alternative vital desire it causes. The activist is confronted by a capitalism multiplied by four: she must destroy it to the same extent and with the same intensity, but she must simultaneously also reconstruct life.

And so the paradox we alluded to above (a communist radicalization precisely at the end of the era of socialism, just as it seemed that this history was over) is enriched with new sustenance and deepens in a most profound way. This is the crucial point where the new generations take off: Here, the battle begins not based on lack, or on the agony of emptiness, but on the desire for fullness, for a luxuriance of constructive passions. Here, the revolution does not repeat itself, but invents itself anew.

But for my generation, too, there was a moment in which for the subjugated, the proletarians, the creativity of desire for transformation sprang forth in an unstoppable way: that was 1968. "Taking the word" empowered the masses of workers and students. Against the wars in Algeria and Vietnam, the development of the anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial rebellions was impressive. Why did they not lead to an effective revolution? Why did "taking the word" not go beyond the word? As we know, the answer is multifaceted and complex. What is certain is that my generation was not able to turn its many battles into one—or, better said, to form that *weapon* which would have brought a decisive blow to capitalist power. On the other hand, the victory of capital did not consist in a final blow against its proletarian enemy; it was not the victory of Pompey over Spartacus celebrated on the Via Appia with hundreds of crucifixions. No, the victory of capital over 1968—

based on the displacement of the battlefield along epochally-significant lines of technological transformation—left plenty of room for proletarian struggle and imagination, even as it shattered the illusion of the factories and unions that capital was no longer able to transform. The Fordist factory ended and the era of the "social factory" began, in which every productive and reproductive act, every moment of interdependent life would become taken advantage of by capital. But while exploitation and alienation expanded immeasurably, the exploited began—in the mutation of the mode of production—to recognize themselves not only as singular actors in social networks, but also as participants in the collective production of the common. Work had become different: on the one hand socialized and abstract, as a further step of the capitalist process of subsumption and exploitation; on the other hand networked and singularized, thus giving life to the *social individual* on whose power all capacity for valorization depends. In this contemporary articulation it is this social individual that must be "expropriated"; it is the common that the socialization of networked work creates, the common of wealth that the singularities compose—this is what capital must tear apart if it wants to continue to dominate.

Was there, then, a capitalist victory over '68? Surely, yes. But the transformation of the mode of production brought forth a new subject. We, my generation, were beat. Not the young people, who took up the struggle at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, who had become immaterial workers, who had appropriated unexpected technological capacities, new actors in the drama of class struggle playing out on this new terrain. Surely it is in this framework of the common that the life of a communist activist must be evaluated today.

Whoever fights today, whoever lives in this new social reality as a communist activist, has a new image of liberation from exploitation and projects this into a good life of passions that ontologically speak of the common and of power. We trust in this genuine generational rebirth much more resolutely than we could trust in the people of the second half of the last century—the men and women who, through the great technological revolution they experienced, were beat and transformed… Today their virtues resound tiredly on the horizon.

Forgive me for the long introductory reflection, as my task here is to introduce the work of Raúl Sánchez Cedillo. If I have written this as a preface to the selection of his essays printed here, it is because Raúl is in all ways a *homo novus*. If I speak of the precariat, he has always been precarious; if I write as an academic, he writes as an activist; if I use old categories (sometimes with an obsession to negate them), he plays with new concepts and organizes them for new subjects; if I often—too often—grow tired poking at the problems that the memory of a life has given me (and I sometimes try, in my exhaustion, to sweep the dirt under the rug), Raúl faces up to the problems of today and does not allow himself a possibility of postponing their discussion. Because for him the political problem is here and now, and he does not believe it can be hidden, even if one thinks there is no solution. What is fundamental is the determination of the problem, its presence and, I would say, its task. Ontology always has priority over rhetoric. I have argued that the Gramscian aphorism "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" was perhaps sensible for my generation but is surely mistaken when it comes to defining the task of a communist activist today. I confirm this now, comparing that statement with the figure—and the will—of the concrete activist that appears in the writings presented here. Raúl knows

that reality is complex and sometimes requires decisions of rupture, and from this perspective he knows to read the event; but he also knows that the intellect (whether it is "optimistic" or not)—of 1968 for example, but especially in the past decade after 15M,[2] in post-Fordism, in the capitalist society of value *extraction* from the *common* of society—is certainly part of the enormous potentiality that intellectual and interdependent work (the common) brings forth.

On the other hand, the will—insofar as its efficacy is brief and limited—must adapt to this power and remain within it: a "pessimism of the will" to tone down the "optimism of the intellect"; prudence; rejection of ideological extremism and terrorism, the capacity to immerse oneself in the real and a certain humility that almost feigns letting itself be overtaken by the movement... in order to understand its tendency, of course, but not individually, not in the abstract, and only insofar as it is multitude. These are our children, these new communist activists, these new partisans of resistance, but all the wiser and more political than we!

Two or three brief comments to conclude:

First, on the topic of organization—which in the language of this new generation does not consist in creating cage-like and/or ineffective institutional paths, but rather in determining the relationship between forms of life and political modes of expression. The whole warehouse of old organizational figures of the political (as parliamentarians and/or in the sociological derivation) can be left by the wayside. The topic of representation is dried out and destined to inactuality. And yet none of these comrades understands themselves as an individual anarchist. The

communist activist grounds her rejection of representation in the claim to a form of political organization that is at once a form of life and a form of social production: of collective life, of the common, of the construction of an "other" world in anticapitalist struggle. The common is now the web of the political, it is the motor that organizes—that means, it moves the singularities in political action and makes possible the mutual saturation of forms of life and figures, modes of political expression.

When we take on these assumptions, we understand how violent the confrontation must have been that resulted from the decision made by Podemos—against the rebelliousness of the 15M movement—to proceed with orthodox forms of party organization. Podemos asserted (and maintains) that direct democracy is not possible, is an illusion, and that, in order to do politics, one must go through the parliamentary eye of the needle. But the 15M movement rose up precisely to do justice to this illusion. Will it be possible, Raúl and his communist comrades ask themselves, to lend another perspective to this uprising? They answer yes: it is the way of the common that must be traveled, the path on which the recognition of the common goods that organize our life and our life-essential economies is woven together with the subjectivation of this recognition and the organization of a *foundation* (not a party) *of the common* (Fundación de los Comunes).[3] The subjectivation of the common makes up the political dimension of life. From this emerges the concreteness of political struggles, from minimum wage to universal basic income, from the enforcement of the right to housing for all to the autonomous management of social welfare from below. And this always insofar as organizational autonomy is effective as a social counter-power.

From this perspective, the writings published in this book, from the years 2007 through 2021, together discuss the question of

whether (and how) there can be new political creations, new institutions. Raúl was already asking this question before 15M—when movements were much larger in other parts of Europe than in Spain (or at least so it appeared).[4] 15M changed the landscape and brought the events in Spain to the center of the scene. Following the event 15M, the struggle opened towards the definition of a new institutional horizon. We've already said it, for Raúl the way forward is clear: let us construct a network of municipal, transdividual institutions,[5] of counter-powers that break with the "democratic" system *bestowed* after the fall of Francoism. A new "republicanism" is ripe.

But this demand would—secondly—not be new if it were not traversed by the awareness that there is a new political "anthropology" of the *citoyennes*, which allows constituent power and the ethic of solidarity to function together, as it were, at all levels where power is exercised and citizens express themselves participatively in the institutions. Behind the counter-power on the basis of which "direct democracy" should be implemented, there must be a woman, a man, a worker, a producer, etc., who—from a systemic perspective—is in a position to direct the work of the institution. The "body machine" that Raúl conceptually elaborates is by no means contrived or abstract; it is much more "machinic" and open for the "trans(in)dividual."[6] To direct systemic complexity and to always maintain its openness: it is in these aspects that Raúl's proximity to the teachings of Guattari and Deleuze becomes evident, and in another way, to Simondon. Within this framework, the result is always a strategic rejection of any fixation of movement processes: the rebirth of Podemos as "Party" and its resolute introduction of the "autonomy of the political" appear to Raúl as that which they are: the domestication of the political power of the multitude, a total illusion that quickly

becomes catastrophic. The "body machine" and its multitudinous extension cannot support these unnatural contortions.

How should we, then—and this is the third point—do politics? By not ceasing to promote a movement of emancipation that is increasingly strong, increasingly aware of its strength, and increasingly capable of expressing this strength as counter-power. This, too, seems to be a contradictory project: how should it be possible to build a counter-power that is capable of creating a lively point of political proposal and social agitation, and perhaps also of exercising rebellious force, but also of preserving its own continuity in a process that has no prescribed end? A counter-power that presents itself over and again, and often chaotically, as an uncertain product of class struggle? The answer remains open here to the libertarian imagination. But we are not uncertain; we hold a light of hope in the diffuse horizon that is characterized today by the tragic combination of the pandemic and the crisis of neoliberal politics, a light in which the event of the common presents itself in the confrontation between capitalist discipline and the capacities of the new generations.

Hopes, the event of the common, new institutions? Those are the words—the words of an old communist who I am and who is here attempting to follow a "doing politics" that has become, for him, entirely unreachable. And nevertheless I can testify that the more Raúl rejects in this book the senseless path of the dominating commando and the illusory strategies of the autonomy of the political in the left, the more immediately he grasps the nodes of political processes and the contradictory nature of the contemporary history of political neoliberalism, which is becoming more and more radically problematic. Allow me to close by saying that the joy of a young and lively intelligence awakens one's fascination when reading this book, and this illustrates the truth of

its critique. Joy, imagination, hope at the critical margins of capitalist domination: that is the regime of passions that Raúl proposes to his readers. It's not just a matter of happy institutions, but of offering a grammar of freedom.

Lo absoluto de la democracia
Contrapoderes, cuerpos-máquina, sistema red transdividual
Raúl Sánchez Cedillo
Subtextos, mayo 2021
https://transversal.at/books/lo-absoluto-de-la-democracia

Das Absolute der Demokratie
Gegenmächte, Körper-Maschinen, transdividuelles Netzwerksystem
Raúl Sánchez Cedillo
transversal texts, Mai 2021
https://transversal.at/books/das-absolute-der-demokratie

---

[1] On Negri's political work in the 1950s, see the first part of his autobiographical trilogy: Toni Negri, *Storia di un Comunista*, Milano: Ponte alle Grazie 2015. All comments to this preface have been added by transversal texts.

[2] On May 15, 2011 the occupation of the central plazas of Spain began, creating a new social movement in line with the occupations of the squares of the Arab Spring. Many texts in this book analyze this movement as "15M," which is more than a date, event and movement at once.

[3] On the Fundación de los Comunes, in the development of which—and which in certain ways succeeds Universidad Nómada (2001-2012)—Raúl Sánchez Cedillo has played a decisive role, see the website: https://fundaciondeloscomunes.net.

[4] For earlier texts in English concerning these questions, see Raúl Sánchez Cedillo, Towards New Political Creations. Movements, Institutions, New Militancy, https://transversal.at/transversal/0707/sanchez-cedillo/en; and Pablo Carmona, Tomás Herreros, Raúl Sánchez Cedillo and Nicolás Sguiglia, Social centres: monsters and political machines for a new generation of movement institutions, https://transversal.at/transversal/0508/sguiglia-sanchez-cedillo-carmona-herreros/en. On Europe as a political space, see the co-written series of texts by Toni Negri and Raúl Sánchez Cedillo: Democracy today is wild and constituent, https://transversal.at/blog/Democracy-today-is-wild-and-constituent; The hope of the democratic monster, between Syriza and Podemos, https://transversal.at/blog/The-hope-of-the-democratic-monster; For a new experience of economic government: a call to Podemos, https://transversal.at/blog/A-call-to-Podemos; For a constituent initiative in Europe, https://transversal.at/blog/For-a-constituent-initiative-in-Europe.

[5] On the developments of municipalism in Spain in the 2010s, see Christoph Brunner, Kelly Mulvaney, Niki Kubaczek and Gerald Raunig (Eds.), *Monster Municipalisms*, https://transversal.at/transversal/0916.

[6] On these notions, elaborated in the current volume, see also Raúl Sánchez Cedillo, On the idea of a transdividual network system, https://transversal.at/transversal/0318/sanchez/en.