

Rebuilding the Left (Selections)

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Marta Harnecker (1937-2019) was a Chilean Marxist theorist, journalist, and social scientist who directly counseled three separate leftist governments and indirectly influenced countless socialist thinkers, organizers, and activists in Latin America and beyond. Exiled from Chile after the coup that overthrew Allende, she landed in Cuba, where she married Cuban revolutionary hero Manuel Piñero and founded a think tank and historical research institute called Memoria Popular Latinoamericana and advised the Cuban government on policy. Later, she would also become an advisor for President Hugo Chavez.

Harnecker's work tied together an explicitly historical materialist analysis of Latin American movements both large and small with a broad variety of leftist thinkers. She eschewed the hard-lined categories and labels that many contemporary USian and European Marxists draw themselves into and pulled theoretical threads from Marx, Lenin, Mao, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Althusser (her former professor) and countless others together into the mix of Latin American theorists and leaders who have formed the movements she studied and helped lead. She believed in relentless clarity and critique, but eschewed pessimism, believing always in the very real, very close-at-hand potential for a socialist world.

Rebuilding the Left was published in 2006 – after the Seattle WTO protests and the brief coup that took Chavez out of office but shortly before Evo Morales took office – and saw Harnecker working to synthesize the movements that had taken place and those that were in the midst of happening in order to help draw a path forward. The book, alongside *A World To Build*, which was written a decade later, has been broadly influential for leftists in the Global South, but – along with its author – remains somewhat obscure outside of specific anti-imperialist circles in the US and Europe. And for shame! Harnecker's clear-headed (and easy-to-read) analysis of what party-building can and should look like in a modern context, is essential reading for partyist socialists everywhere.

This is not to say that Harnecker's writing is universally adaptable, nor is it without flaws, but few contemporary writers have given us such a well-constructed platform from which to dive into a robust discussion of party-building – what it can mean, what it should mean, and a detailed roadmap for how to get there.

As is always the case with Red Start documents, we encourage participants to use the “comment”

feature to discuss this text in the margins, and we look forward to discussing it live with you on May 24! At the very end of the text, you'll find some guiding discussion questions that we'll dig into at the event, but please feel free to bring your own, as well!

Introduction

We live in a world that is nothing like the world of 50 years ago. Ours is a world characterised by the defeat of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the transformation of the United States into the world's biggest military power with no countervailing force at all, a situation that has dealt a heavy blow to the Left and progressive forces. Ours is a world marked by the advances made by the scientific-technical revolution and their effect on the productive process and on nature: the globalisation of the economy and culture and the increasing power of the mass media. We live in a world where capitalism in its most brutal guise, neo-liberalism, uses technological advances for its own benefit and is wreaking havoc on much of the world's population and ruthlessly destroying nature as it creates 'not only rubbish that the environment cannot recycle but also human cast-offs who are difficult to recycle socially', pushing social groups and whole nations into collective neglect.

A growing discontent, nevertheless, has begun to make itself felt among extended social sectors. This discomfort has begun to transform itself, first into passive resistance and then into active resistance. In the last few years – and in spite of the social fragmentation strategy applied by neo-liberalism to try and neutralise this resistance – it has begun to manifest itself openly in demonstrations and actions against the existing global system, thus giving rise to a new international cycle of struggles.

New horizons are opening up but the challenges we face are enormous. And we are not in the best shape to take them on. We need to rebuild the Left – and urgently. To do this we must first take a harsh look at the weaknesses, mistakes and deviations that hang heavily over our past and we must make sure that we know what caused them because that is the only way we will be able to overcome them. This book wants to make a contribution to that effort.

One of my central points is the criticism of the concept of politics as the art of the possible, for this leads us to adapt ourselves opportunistically to what exists. I argue that for revolutionaries politics is the art of making the impossible possible, not from some voluntarist urge to change things but because our efforts should be realistically focused on changing the current balance of power so that what appears to be impossible today becomes possible tomorrow.

Another very important point is the reflection on what kind of political instrument we need if we are to respond to the new challenges that the twenty-first century places before us: a tool that will allow us to build a social and political force that makes possible the profound social changes we are fighting for. If we are to achieve this objective we must overcome the organic forms of the past, which were the result of an acritical copying of the Bolshevik model of the party, and get rid of the theoretical underpinnings of this model. These underpinnings do not take any account of one of Marx's central ideas: social practice as the action that allows men and women to transform themselves at the same time as they transform the circumstances that surround them, and in doing so achieve a higher level of human development.

I hope that this book does its little bit towards rebuilding the Left by contributing ideas which help to stimulate a new political culture in our ranks: a culture, as I have said on other occasions, that is pluralist and tolerant. A culture that leaves everything that divides us on the back burner and puts everything that unites us first. That unites us around values such as solidarity, humanism, respect for difference and the defence of nature. That turns its back on the desire for gain and the laws of the market as the chief motivators of human activity. That begins to awaken to the fact that being radical is not a matter of advancing the most radical slogans, or of carrying out the most radical actions – which only a few join in because they scare off most people. Being radical lies rather in creating spaces where broad sectors can come together and struggle. For as human beings we grow and transform ourselves in the struggle. Understanding that we are many and are fighting for the same objectives is what makes us strong and radicalises us. Revolutionary politics can only be conceived of as the art of making the impossible possible.

Part I: The Left and the New World

Chapter 3: Towards the Creation of an Alternative Social Bloc

The Left, therefore, is not only the Left that is organised in Left parties or organisations; it also includes social actors and movements who are trying to create autonomous spaces. These are very often more dynamic and combative; they identify with the above ideals, but are not members of any political party or organisation. The first group includes some who prefer to build their strength by using institutions to bring about change and some who opt for revolutionary guerrilla warfare; the second group includes those who want to create autonomous social movements and various types of networks.

To simplify, I have decided to call the first group 'the party Left'; and the second group 'the social Left'. I am convinced that only by uniting the militant efforts of the whole gamut of Left groups will we be able to build a huge anti-neo-liberal social bloc; a bloc in which all those suffering the consequences of today's brutal capitalism will converge.

The first task, then, will be to coordinate the party Left and the social Left, and, based on that, to arrive at that greater confluence which unites all social discontent into a single torrent.

Although it is really important that the different sectors of the Left converge, I do not believe this aim can be achieved in a voluntarist way, creating coalitions from above which might be doomed to end up as simply a pile of acronyms. The vertical vanguard–masses relationship must also be overcome.

I think that if, instead, we apply a new strategy of anti-capitalist struggle, we could create conditions more favourable to coordination.

Building a broad anti-neo-liberal social and political bloc

This bloc should provide space, as stated earlier, for ‘all those who suffer the consequences of the system and are willing to commit themselves first to the struggle to hold those consequences in check and then to try to reverse them’.

In order to coordinate the interests of such diverse actors we must be able to formulate concrete, limited demands that give priority to points of convergence.

We need to design a programme which unites all the ‘losers’ and all those harmed by neo-liberalism. Its aims would include halting the development of neo-liberalism and offering concrete alternatives to today’s serious problems.

Part II: The Crisis of ‘Party’ and Why We Need a New Left Political Culture

Chapter 4: Crisis of Theory

This crisis encompasses, basically, three areas: *theory*; *programme*, which is related to the crisis of credibility of politics and politicians; and the *organic crisis*, which we shall explain in more detail in this book.

Threefold origin

As I understand it, the Latin American Left’s crisis of theory has a threefold origin. The first is its *historical incapacity to construct its own system of thought* – one that would start out with an analysis of the real situation in each Latin American country, identifying a tradition of struggle and the potential for change. With the exception of a handful of efforts to do so, the tendency was rather to extrapolate from analytical models that refer to other parts of the world. Previous analyses were made using European parameters: for example, Latin America was considered to be a feudal system – when in reality it was a dependent capitalist one – or a European class analysis was applied to countries whose

populations were mostly indigenous, which caused people to overlook the importance of ethno-cultural factors.

In the second place, the Left hasn't been capable of carrying out a *rigorous study of various socialist experiences* – their successes as well as failures – and that is in part owing to the fact that few comprehensive, systematic studies on these experiences have been widely publicised. Nor has a serious analysis been made of the reasons for the defeat of these experiences.

However, the most important explanation for the crisis of theory is the lack of a critical study of late twentieth-century capitalism – the capitalism of the electronic information revolution, of globalisation and financial wars. I'm not talking about partial studies of given aspects of contemporary capitalist society (which do indeed exist), but of a rigorous, comprehensive study such as Marx made of capitalism at the time of the industrial revolution.

For example, how is the concept of surplus value – a central concept in Marx's critical analysis of capitalism – modified with the introduction of digital machines and robotics, on the one hand, and the current globalisation process, on the other? How does the introduction of new technologies into the labour process and into the whole economic process affect the technical and social relations of production and those of distribution and consumption? What changes have both the working class and the bourgeoisie undergone in an era where knowledge has come to represent a key element in the productive forces? How can Marxism be used to think about environmental and gender problems? How can we measure the human development that takes place through people's protagonistic participation in their social and cultural interactions? Where is globalisation headed and what will the consequences be? What are the elements that might make up a potential objective basis for transforming this mode of production?

An analysis of this type is essential, because an alternative society can only arise from the potentialities inherent in the society in which we live. And I cannot see a way to make such an analysis other than by using the scientific instrument Marx bequeathed us.

On the other hand, if we want to transform the world we must be capable of detecting the 'struggle potential' of various social sectors who will become the subject of social change. What is that potential today? Where should we be working? How should we organise them? What are the contradictions of the system? What is its weakest link?

We will only be able to give a serious answer to these questions if we make a scientific analysis of the society in which we live.

A crisis of Marxism doesn't mean we have to deny Marx's contributions

Marxism has much to contribute to all these questions. The crisis of Soviet socialism doesn't mean – as many bourgeois ideologues have triumphantly concluded – that we should necessarily question Marx's scientific contributions. Unfortunately, some sectors of the Left have been excessively susceptible to

neo-liberalism's anti-Marxist propaganda, which unfairly blames Marx's theory for what happened in the Soviet socialist countries. Nobody, however, would blame a cookbook because someone turned the oven up too high and burnt the cake.

Chapter 5: Programmatic Crisis and the Crisis of Credibility

No plan for an alternative to capitalism

But this is not enough to explain the current situation. The Latin American Left is experiencing a profound *programmatic crisis* stemming from the crisis of theory previously described. Political action is bereft of models capable of providing it with understanding and direction, because most of the old models have collapsed and the new ones haven't yet 'set'. It has had enormous difficulty in designing a programme for change which is *able to absorb the data about the new global reality* and which enables all the sectors affected by the existing system to flow together – creating the single torrent I have mentioned already in this analysis. We have more than enough diagnosis but no treatment is prescribed. We have been attempting to set sail without *a compass*.

Nevertheless we cannot say that the Left comes up empty-handed with regard to programmatic questions; there *are* alternative proposals and practices, but they haven't yet taken shape as a fully worked-out, convincing project.

Prior to 1998, the Left won control of important local governments in several countries in Latin America, especially in Brazil and Uruguay. In those places, it began to carry out interesting social experiments from which we could learn a lot.

In addition, from 1998 on it has managed to form the governments in Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and most recently, Bolivia and, again, Chile. Throughout the region, Left forces and parties have begun to win more representation in the parliaments of various countries. The major reason for all this is nothing other than the growing popular discontent caused by neo-liberal measures, which affect more and more of the population.

But there is a danger that, once it has become the government, the Left limits itself to managing the crisis while continuing to implement the essential elements of neo-liberal economic policies: this is what some Left governments seem to be doing. This kind of behaviour is detrimental not only in as far as it fails to alleviate the suffering caused by the neo-liberal model as quickly as and to the degree needed, but also – and this is even more dangerous – in that it could annihilate the Left option for years to come.

There clearly is a lack of any theoretical work to systematise all these diverse experiences into something coherent that can be applied in other circumstances.

It is equally important to bear in mind that alternatives can't be worked out overnight – at a conference or in a working group – because any alternative in today's world must include increasingly complex technical considerations that require specialised knowledge. Moreover, right now the Latin American left has few spaces to do this job. It wasn't like that at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. At that time, spaces were created in the universities in several countries and many alternative projects and programmes were drawn up there.

Crisis of the credibility of politics and politicians

Along with this crisis of programmes and partly caused by it there is a crisis which, even if it is not a crisis of the Left *per se*, nevertheless has a huge impact on it; we could label it a crisis of the *credibility of politics and politicians*, including political parties. We live at a time when specifically political participation has decreased – a worldwide phenomenon – reorienting itself towards other directions and other forms of action. There is growing popular scepticism about politics and politicians in general.

There are several reasons for this, which include the great constraints placed on democratic regimes today – those we have discussed above.

Two further elements must be added to those discussed above and these affect the Left directly.

The Right has appropriated the Left's language

First is the fact that the Right has appropriated the Left's language. The most flagrant examples occur in the Right's programmes. Words like reform, structural change, concern over poverty, and transition today form part of their anti-people, oppressive discourse. As Franz Hinkelammert says: 'the key words used by the popular opposition movements of the 1950s and 1960s have become key words for those who destroyed those movements with sword and fire'. He adds: 'Night falls and all cats are grey. Everyone is against privilege; all want reforms and structural change. Everyone is also in favour of helping the poor.'

Left parties have shifted to the Right

Second, the Left has lost credibility because its political practice fails to stand out from the usual practice of traditional parties, right, left or centre. Often it isn't just a case of their political practice or style not being very different: 'many of the remaining major parties of the Left have drifted so far past the center that they tend to become indistinguishable from the Right, cutting welfare, attacking unions, supporting and conducting foreign wars'.

There is a climate of heightened indifference – and for a good reason. Ordinary people are fed up with the traditional political system and want something new, want changes, want new ways of doing politics; they want healthy politics, transparency and participation; they want to regain trust.

‘Indifference is ferocious,’ according to Viviane Forrester, ‘it is the most active, and without a doubt, the most powerful political party of all.’ And the worst thing is that from the point of view of the ruling class, this ‘general indifference is a bigger victory for the system than any partial support they manage to win’.

Chapter 6: The Organic Crisis

There is no political subject equal to the new challenges

If there is anything seriously affecting the Left in the current world state of affairs it is not having a political subject able to tackle the new challenges. Past structures, habits, traditions and ways of doing politics are not responding to the demands engendered by the changes the world has undergone.

I completely agree with the assessment made by Chilean socialist leader Clodomiro Almeyda that the parties of the Left ‘find themselves today in an obvious crisis, not only because their projects and programmes were deficient or lacking, but also – and in no small way – because of things to do with their organic nature, their relations with civil society, with identifying their present functions and how to carry them out’.

‘This crisis of the existing institutions of Left political parties manifests itself both in the loss of their ability to attract and mobilise people – especially young people – and in the dysfunctionality of their present structures, customs, traditions, and ways of doing politics vis-à-vis the demands that social reality makes on a popular, socialist political actor in a process of substantive renewal.’

Moreover, not only are existing institutions in crisis, but also – as Hardt and Negri say – the ‘social base in labor unions and the industrial working class is no longer powerful enough to support the Left political parties’

This crisis also affects work with social movements and new social actors.

How copying the Bolshevik model led to deviations

I think that this crisis – which I call an organic crisis – has a lot to do with an uncritical copying of the Bolshevik model of the party.

But why was this model so attractive to Latin American Marxist political cadres and those in other parts of the world? We should remember that it had been an effective instrument for making the world’s first successful revolution of the oppressed against the power of the ruling classes. It was thanks to it that heaven seemed to have been taken by storm.

According to the English historian Eric Hobsbawm, “Lenin’s party of a new type” [was] a formidable innovation of twentieth-century social engineering, comparable to the invention of Christian monastic and other orders in the Middle Ages. It gave even small organizations disproportionate effectiveness, because the party could command extraordinary devotion and self-sacrifice from its members, more than military discipline and cohesiveness, and a total concentration on carrying out party decisions at all costs.’

For Lenin, it was absolutely clear that there is no universal formula. He always saw the party as the *political subject* par excellence of social transformation, as the instrument which would provide political direction to the class struggle – a struggle that always takes place under specific historical, political, and social conditions. He therefore believed that the party’s organic structure should be adapted to the reality of each country, and modified according to the concrete demands of struggle.

These early ideas of Lenin were ratified at the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921. In one of his works he argues that: ‘There is no absolute form of organisation which is correct for Communist Parties at all times. The conditions of the proletarian class struggle are constantly changing, and so the proletarian vanguard has always to be looking for effective forms of organisation. Equally, each party must develop its own special forms of organisation to meet the particular historically-determined conditions within the country.’

Nevertheless, in spite of the International’s instructions, Communist Parties in practice followed a single model, in spite of the differences between the countries where they were founded.

The acritical emphasis placed on the working class led to Latin American parties ignoring the specific characteristics of that continent’s revolutionary social subject and failing to understand the role that indigenous people and Christians can play in revolutions in Latin America.

Viewing religion as the opiate of the people

Until the 1960s, the Latin American and Caribbean Left mechanically applied Marx’s remark that religion in his time was ‘the opium of the people’. This was because they identified Christianity with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church – owing to its support for the ruling class – and didn’t consider Christianity’s revolutionary potential in this region.

The Left paid no attention to the changes that began taking place in the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) and culminated in the Medellin Conference in 1968. It paid attention neither to the appearance of Liberation Theology and Christian Base Communities nor to the deeds of Camilo Torres, a priest-guerrilla who died fighting with the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia. These factors taken together began to change the unjustified negative view of the role that Christians can play in a revolutionary movement.

Christians in the Sandinista Revolution

It was the Sandinistas who began to correct this situation. For their struggle against Somoza, the FSLN recruited young Christians who were working in the poor areas of the cities. The idea wasn't to take them away from the work they were doing but to introduce revolutionary influence into the ecclesiastical base organisations. The recruits were left in their base communities so that this higher commitment would result in political action in this milieu. When asked to join the FSLN, they were never asked to make a choice between their Christian faith and their membership in the Front. If the Sandinistas had not posed the question of FSLN membership in these terms they would have remained a very small group of people.

Neglect of ethno-cultural factors

Similarly, the situation of indigenous people was neglected by the Latin American Left for decades (with a few exceptions, such Mariátegui and Haya de la Torre). The application of a strict class analysis to the indigenous peasantry meant they were considered to be an exploited social class and should fight for their land like any other peasants, thus ignoring the importance of the ethno-cultural factor with ancestral traditions of resistance to oppression. Today, the Latin American revolutionary movement has come to understand two things: one, that it must respect the language, customs, religious beliefs and cultural norms of indigenous peoples if it doesn't want to be identified as an ally of the oppressor; and, two, that there is immense revolutionary potential – stemming from their ancestral traditions of resistance to oppression – pent up in these economically exploited and culturally oppressed peoples.

The recent presidential elections in Bolivia, which gave a clear majority to Evo Morales, an indigenous peasant union leader from Cochabamba in a predominantly indigenous country, are the best proof of the increasingly important role that this social sector is playing.

A conception of revolution as storming the bastions of state power

Another of the Left's theoretical assumptions was the conception of revolution as 'storming the bastions of state power'. This stemmed from a conception that *located power only in the state*. Parties inspired by the Bolshevik Party concentrated all their efforts on preparing to storm these bastions and ignored other aspects of the struggle, such as the task of culturally transforming the people's consciousness. This was relegated to something to be done after power was seized.

Not setting enough store by democracy

Moreover, for many years Left organisations, influenced by the importance Lenin attributed to the dictatorship of the proletariat, dismissed another of his premises: that socialism should be conceived of as the most democratic society possible, as opposed to bourgeois society which is democratic for a minority only.

Comparing socialism and capitalism, Lenin said that under the latter democracy only exists ‘for the rich and for a tiny layer of the proletariat’, whereas in the transition phase or under socialism, democracy is ‘almost complete, limited only by the need to crush bourgeois resistance’. Under communism where the ruling principle is ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his need’, democracy will be, to all intents and purposes, complete.

These parties did not understand that the importance attributed by Lenin to the subject of the dictatorship could be explained by the need to defeat a counter-revolution which did not accept the revolution’s rules of the game for the new society and which, in order to recover the power it had lost, turned to the world counter-revolution for help. The opposition’s fierce and bloody reaction obliged the Soviet government to use a firm hand.

Other mistakes and deviations

But there are other mistakes, deviations and absences which cannot be attributed to the theories mentioned above and which have led to movements and social actors roundly rejecting Left parties.

Vanguardism

One of the Latin American Left’s most negative attitudes was to proclaim itself to be either the vanguard of the revolutionary process or the vanguard of the working class, even though this class was virtually non-existent in some Latin American countries. For a long time, it was virtually unthinkable that other organisations could be equally or more revolutionary than they were, or potential allies with whom power could be shared.

In addition, they didn’t understand that being the vanguard is not something a party bestows upon itself but something that is earned through struggle and that there can’t be a vanguard without a rearguard.

They certainly failed to understand the distinction Lenin established between the moment in which the party and the revolutionary organisation is formed – during which the leadership cadres are trained – and the moment when it manages to acquire the authentic ability to lead the class struggle. Most Latin American Left organisations never managed to acquire this ‘authentic ability to lead’.

Each organisation fought over the right to be called the most revolutionary, the most just, and all the other accolades: what mattered most was the sect, the T-shirt, and not the revolution. That’s how sectarianism arose and most parties fell prey to it.

The political-military organisations thought all parties which were not engaged in the armed struggle were reformist. And some of these non-armed-struggle parties (especially the Communist Parties) claimed that, by definition, there could be no one further to the left than they were – disparagingly branding those who *were* to their left as ‘ultraleftists’.

Verticalism and authoritarianism

The vertical style of leadership – which translated into an attempt to lead from above, handing down to the rank and file lines of action drawn up by the political leadership – was common practice. The leadership cadres were the people who knew where to go, and therefore decisions about everything that was done were handed down ready-made from above. It was assumed that anything the leadership thought was right, and therefore that the members simply had to carry out the instructions handed down. Such leaders took no trouble to convince people of the correctness of their proposals.

Those who determined the line were the leadership cadres, and the tendency was to create mechanisms which allowed them to keep control in their hands by, in practice, denying access to new blood.

Social movements as mere transmission belts

There is a close connection between the above and the existence of a tendency to consider grassroots movements as there to be manipulated, mere channels through which to hand down the party line. Leadership of the movement, jobs in the leadership bodies, the platform for struggle, everything in fact, was decided on by the top ranks of the party and then the line to be followed by the social movement in question was handed down. The movement was not able to take part in making decisions about the matters which most concerned them.

To support this position, the leaderships have used Lenin's thesis about unions at the beginning of the Russian Revolution, when a very close relationship seemed to exist between the working class, the vanguard party and the state.

However, few know – as a result of the ahistorical and incomplete way in which Lenin has been read – that this notion was abandoned by the Russian leader towards the end of his life when, in the midst of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its consequences in the labour sphere, he foresaw the possible contradictions which could arise between workers in state companies and the managers of those companies. He argued that unions should defend the interests of the working class against the employers, using, if necessary, the strike – which would not, in a proletarian state, be aimed at destroying that state but only at correcting its bureaucratic deviations.

This change went unnoticed by Marxist-Leninist parties which, until very recently, understood the metaphor of the transmission belt to describe accurately Lenin's thesis on the relationship between the party and the social organisation.

An over-reliance on theory, dogma and strategy

Another problem was that theory was excessively overvalued. This translated into an over-reliance on theory and a tendency to be dogmatic. There was a tendency to make general theoretical analyses or to copy foreign models, and an inability to explain how concrete processes worked.

For decades, generally speaking, the Left imported prefabricated models from other revolutionary experiences, and, most of the time, parties developed their strategies not by trying to find their own road, tailored to the country's own conditions, but by patching something together with bits copied from strategies developed in all kinds of revolutionary experiences all over the world.

It is important to remember that both the 26th of July Movement in Cuba and the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua were able to win their struggles because, among other things, they were able to take further an existing tradition of national liberation struggle. They made the revolution, as someone said, in Spanish and not in Russian. Their spiritual fathers were Martí and Sandino. This has also happened in the recent revolutionary process in Venezuela. Its leader, Hugo Chávez, has known how to resuscitate the thinking of Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez, (Bolívar's teacher) and Ezequiel Zamora.

What a difference between this and the profile many Latin American Leftist organisations had! What does the sickle on the red flag of many communist parties mean to our people? What do Ho Chi Minh or even Che Guevara – names that were adopted by some guerrilla movements – mean to Guatemalan indigenous peoples?

One result of this was the strategist deviation. Grand strategic goals were formulated – the struggle for national liberation and socialism – but no concrete analysis was made of the existing situation, the starting point. Among other things, this was the result of the erroneous belief that revolutionary conditions existed throughout Latin America – all that was needed was to light the spark and the whole prairie would burst into flame. This led to slogan-based political agitation which was of no help in building a popular social force.

Debates were therefore sterile. It was difficult to make progress if only general, very theoretical questions were discussed and concrete circumstances were never analysed. In fact, many of these theoretical debates resulted in splits because they divided the various forces even more.

This led to two errors which were often interrelated: on the one hand, it was believed that the path toward unity should avoid theoretical debates; on the other there was an exclusive emphasis on practice (*practicismo*) which rejected any attempt to theorise about reality.

Over-reliance on theory and dogmatism both existed in the most widely disparate branches of the Left, in traditional Leftist parties as well as in the self-proclaimed revolutionary Left, though this relationship was not symmetrical. The latter was inspired by the genuinely Latin American process of the Cuban Revolution and tried to find its own path.

I do not think it is particularly bold to make this claim: that the absence of a well-argued theoretical-historical analysis of conditions in individual countries and on the sub-continent as a whole is one of the reasons why – when hegemonism and sectarianism have been overcome and there is a genuine desire for unity – it has still been difficult for Latin American revolutionary forces to move towards unity.

Subjectivism

Unfortunately, this lack of concrete analysis also meant that these parties made extremely subjective assessments of the correlation of forces in a given situation. There was a tendency for leadership cadres filled with revolutionary passion to confuse their desires with reality. No objective analysis of the situation was made, so they tended to underestimate the enemy's and overestimate the party's own strength.

In addition, leaders tended to confuse the mood of the most radical party members with that of the rank and file. Many political leaders were in the habit of making generalisations about the mood of the people based upon their own experiences garnered in the region or sector where they operated, on their guerrilla front or, more generally, from those around them – who were usually the most radicalised elements.

The view of Chile held by people who worked with the more radicalised sectors of the population in that country was different from that of those who did their political work with the less politicised sectors. The revolutionary cadres who worked in a combative poor neighbourhood in Chile didn't see things the same way as those who worked among the middle classes. The same thing occurred in countries where there were war zones and political spaces. The guerrilla fighters who engaged in confrontations with the enemy and who, thanks to their military victories, gained control over certain zones tended to believe that the revolutionary process was more advanced than did those activists who operated in legal spheres in the major urban centres, where the ruling regime's ideological power and military control were much greater.

The only guarantee against committing these errors is to ensure that leaders themselves are capable of making an evaluation of the situation that does not depend on their mood but on their ability to take the pulse of the masses, the enemy and the international situation. Once they have done this, it is essential to decide on the lines of action that enable them to capitalise on the situation.

It is important that the top leaders learn to listen and that they avoid projecting their preconceived notions when meeting with intermediate and rank-and-file leaders. If they don't know how to listen – which requires a healthy dose of revolutionary modesty – and if they are given false information, what then happens is that the lines of action handed down do not correspond to the real potential for mobilisation.

Moreover, there has been a tendency for the Left to deceive itself, to falsify the figures about demonstrations, meetings, strikes, or the forces that each organisation has – all of which later results in lines of action that are not correct because they are based upon false information.

The Left deceived itself not only about numbers but also about the assessment of actions it proposed taking. If the objective to have a given number of representatives elected to parliament was not attained, this was not admitted. Instead the leadership would always try to present the outcome as a

victory – saying, for example, that more votes had been registered than in the previous election. Or, if a general strike was called and there were only partial strikes, no setback was acknowledged; instead there was talk about how successful the strike had been compared to previous actions of this kind because there had been an increase in the number of workers who didn't go to work.

In the 1970s, the awful blows the Left received and the upsurge in the Central American revolutionary process meant that left-wing leaders matured quickly. They began to become aware of all of these errors and deviations. I realise, however, that becoming aware of something doesn't mean it is always immediately incorporated into political practice. There's nothing unusual about that, because a certain amount of time is required to overcome the habits of decades, and for changes to be assimilated by mid-level and rank-and-file cadres.

Chapter 8: Politics as the Art of Making the Impossible Possible

Is it possible to come up with an alternative?

Does accepting that there is a theoretical, organic, programmatic crisis mean we must sit back and do nothing? Can the Left come up with an alternative in spite of being in this situation and the immensely unfavourable correlation of forces in the world?

Naturally, the ruling ideology takes it upon itself to say that there is no alternative, but hegemonic groups don't stop at words, they do everything possible to eliminate any alternative that crosses their path. This is what happened to the Popular Unity Front in Chile and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and it's what they've spent over forty years trying to do to the Cuban revolution and are now doing against the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the revolutionary process that is beginning in Bolivia.

Unfortunately, some sectors of the Latin American Left use the argument that politics is *the art of the possible*. When they realise that it is not possible to change things immediately because of the unfavourable correlation of forces that exists today, they think that they have no option but to be realists and accept this impossibility by opportunistically adapting themselves to the existing situation. Looking at politics this way, in fact, excludes any effort to come up with an alternative to capitalism in its present form, because limiting oneself to *realpolitik's* guidelines means being resigned to doing nothing about the existing situation, renouncing one's own politics and submitting oneself to the politics of the ruling classes.

Politics cannot be defined as the art of the possible

The Left, if that's what it wants to be, cannot define politics as the art of the possible. *Realpolitik* must be opposed by a notion of politics which is realistic, doesn't deny what is happening but does set about preparing the way to transform existing reality.

Gramsci criticised 'excessive' political realism, because this leads to the position that politicians should 'operate only in the sphere of effective reality', and should not concern themselves with 'what should be' but only with what 'is'. This implies that politicians are not capable of seeing beyond their noses. In his opinion, diplomats – not politicians – are those who must move 'solely in effective reality because their particular activity is not to create new equilibria, but, within certain legal limits, to preserve the existing equilibrium'. He thought that a true politician was like Machiavelli: 'a party man, a man with strong passions, a politician of action who wants to create new balances of power, and for that reason can't stop being concerned about what "should be" – not, by the way, to be understood in a moral sense'.

But this politician doesn't create from nothing – he starts from effective reality. He dedicates his efforts 'to the creation of a new correlation of forces' using whatever 'is progressive in that reality and strengthening it'. He always '*moves in the plane of effective reality, but so he can control and overcome it (or contribute to it)*'.

For the Left, politics must therefore be the art of discovering the potential that exists in the present concrete situation in order to make possible tomorrow that which appears impossible today. A correlation of forces favourable to a popular movement must be built, using that which, its weaknesses notwithstanding, constitutes its strengths.

Let's think, for example, about the workers in Marx's time, subjected to the immense power of their capitalist bosses who could, at the drop of a hat, throw them out into the street without any means of survival. Struggle under these conditions was suicide. What then was to be done? Accept exploitation, submitting meekly to it, because it was, at that point, impossible to win the battle? Or fight to change the situation, using the possibilities inherent in their condition as exploited workers: the existence of large concentrations of workers, their ability to organise, and their identity as an oppressed class? The workers' greatest strength – they were much more numerous than their class enemy – lay in their organisation and unity. However, that strength had to be built and it was only because they followed this path that what initially seemed impossible became possible.

Let's use a contemporary example. There's no doubt that today in Latin America the working class's negotiating power has diminished greatly. This is due both to the spectre of lay-offs – those who have a stable wage-paying job are a privileged few – and to the fragmentation that this class has suffered under neo-liberalism. Looking at these objective facts, some claim it is impossible to fight back under these conditions. It is obvious that the classic tactic of union struggle, the strike – which is based on the unity of the industrial working class and its ability to bring production to a halt – is not effective most of the time nowadays. Opportunists, therefore, take advantage of this to try to immobilise the workers' movement and convince it that it should passively accept its existing conditions of over-exploitation.

But the art of politics, in contrast, consists in discovering how the present weaknesses – and they really are weaknesses – of the industrial working class can be overcome in order to build a trade union as a social force adapted to the new world situation. *A new union strategy must be built*: nineteenth-century class solidarity is no longer enough. If industrial working-class unity was essential back then, today *the unity of all of those exploited by capital* is essential – permanent and temporary employees, contract workers and those doing outsourced work, *and all other social sectors that have been harmed by the neo-liberal system*.

I agree with Isabel Rauber that ‘we must formulate a proposal that puts the emphasis back on the central, organizing role of the working class, yet recognises its present weakness and aims to rebuild its strength by encouraging all those who have jobs and the underemployed, unemployed, or marginalized to work together with all those who are oppressed and excluded to build a social force able to go up against the ruling powers with its own power, fight them for power and win’.

This is the only way to recover the negotiating power which the working class on its own no longer has, and the rest of the population even more conspicuously lacks.

Changing the traditional vision of politics

To think about building strength and about the correlation of forces is to *change the traditional view of politics*, which tends to reduce politics to the struggle related to legal and political institutions and exaggerates the role of the state. One immediately thinks of political parties and of the battle ‘to direct and control formal instruments of power’. According to this notion of politics, the most radical sectors focus all their political action on *seizing political power and destroying the state*, and the most reformist sectors focus on *administering the political and executive power of government* as the most important (and virtually the sole) form of political practice. The people and their struggles are the great ignored. This is what Helio Gallardo calls the ‘politicism’ of the Latin American Left.

Some have argued, and rightly so, that the cult of the institution has been the ‘Trojan horse’ that the ruling system introduced into ‘the heart of the transforming Left’s fortress’; thus managing to undermine the Left from inside.

The work of activists has been progressively delegated to people who hold public and administrative positions. *The high-priority effort stopped being collective action and became parliamentary action or obtaining a presence in the media*. The activity of members tended to be reduced to election day, to putting up posters and participating only in isolated and occasional public actions.

Worse still, party financing comes increasingly from the participation of party cadres in state institutions, parliament, local government, election boards and the rest, with all that this entails in terms of dependence and vulnerability to pressure.

Overcoming the narrow definition of power

To think about building strength is also to look beyond the narrow view which sees power only in the repressive aspects of the state. The enemy's power is not only repressive, says Carlos Ruiz, 'it also builds, moulds, disciplines ... if the power of the ruling classes acted only to censor, to exclude, to impose obstacles and repressive measures, it would be more fragile. If it is stronger it is because, as well as avoiding what it doesn't like, it is capable of creating what it does like, of moulding behaviour, of producing knowledge, rationalities and consciousness, of forging a way of seeing both the world and itself...'

To think about building is also to overcome the old, deeply-rooted mistake of trying to build a *political force* – whether through arms or the ballot box – without building a *social force*.

Politics as the art of building a social force in opposition to the system

The birth of a social force in opposition to the system – in other words, an anti-capitalist force – is what the ruling classes fear most, and their narrow conception of politics as a struggle to conquer spaces of power in the institutional legal-political apparatus stems from that fear.

For the Left, on the other hand, politics must be the art of constructing a social force in opposition to the system. But this is only possible if it succeeds in 'dismembering the barriers that the enemy puts up to prevent this force being built. This is why it is so important to have a broad understanding of all these barriers and not just to observe them and go up against only some of them. These barriers are precisely the way the ruling classes are wont to organise the dominated, politically and socially.'

The Left must not, therefore, see the people or popular social forces as something given that can be manipulated and only needs to be stirred up, but as something that has to be built. It must also see that the ruling classes have a strategy to prevent this from happening. This implies not getting carried away by the situation, but acting on it, choosing in which of the existing spaces and conflicts efforts must be concentrated in order to achieve the principal objective – building the popular force. This building process doesn't happen spontaneously, it needs a subject who builds, a political subject able to direct his or her actions according to an analysis of the overall political dynamic. Obviously this political subject will need first to overcome the errors and deviations described above.

Chapter 9: Why We Need a Political Organisation

Because of the twentieth-century Left's errors and deviations, the crisis of politics and politicians we analysed earlier, and the original and combative action of some new social movements and actors, there has been a tendency – which is on the rise – to dismiss political parties and even the slightest move towards centralising the leadership of any struggle. Some suggest that at the current stage in the fight,

we can do without parties and the Left's task should be confined to coordinating these groups and minority interests – race, gender, sexual or cultural preferences of any kind – around a common purpose.

To back up their arguments they point to the practices of the world movement against globalisation. At the 1999 Seattle protests, for example, 'what most surprised and puzzled observers was that groups previously thought to be in opposition to each other – trade unionists and environmentalists, church groups and anarchists, and so forth – acted together without any central, unifying structure that subordinates or sets aside their differences'.

However, it is one thing to manage to hold successful one-off demonstrations against globalisation or the war in Iraq, but something else entirely to succeed in overthrowing a government and using the power gained to build a model of a society that is an alternative to capitalism.

I am not against a proposal to coordinate all these social actors, and I do not believe anyone sees it as a negative thing. However, I fully share the British historian Eric Hobsbawm's concern that the sum of these minorities does not a majority make; that if these groups unite only because their immediate interests are the same, that unity 'looks very much like that of states temporarily allied in a war against a common enemy which then disintegrates once their common goal disappears'.

The countless individual and collective members of the non-party Left do not have the means to coordinate their many different demands, or to channel and express their discontent in an organised fashion, or to generate spaces of social opposition which progress from being myriad expressions of resistance to constituting a real danger to the system's self-reproduction.

And why does this possibility not exist?

First, because *transformation doesn't just happen spontaneously*, the ruling ideas and values in capitalist society – that rationalise and justify the existing order – permeate the whole of society and exert their greatest influence on the popular sectors. Second, because it is necessary to formulate a social project that is an alternative to capitalism, a project for a different country. Third, we have to be able to defeat vastly more powerful forces that oppose such a transformation. And defeating them isn't possible without a political body that 'formulates proposals and is capable of giving millions of people a single will' while at the same time unifying and coordinating various emancipatory practices.

The effects of the ruling ideology

With regard to the first point, we must remember that 'the view that people have of the world is historically constructed', and that this world view, also known as common sense, is to a lesser or greater degree shaped by the ideological influences of the ruling class – under capitalism this is bourgeois ideology. This is particularly true among those sectors of the population which lack the theoretical weapons to distance themselves critically from this ideology.

Manufacturing consent

No one any longer disputes the ability of modern mass media to influence public opinion. The media, which are increasingly concentrated in fewer hands, take it on themselves to 'channel thought and attitudes' within parameters acceptable to the ruling classes and thus deflect 'any potential challenge to established privilege and authority' before it 'can take form and gather strength'. According to Chomsky, bourgeois liberals set only one condition for accepting the democratic game: that, by controlling the media, they can 'manufacture consent' and 'tame the bewildered herd'.

By converting politics into a *marketplace for ideas*, the ruling classes – who have a monopoly on *manufacturing consent* – have the weapons needed to lead the man or woman in the street into parties charged with safeguarding their interests. The free market does not lead to free opinions, although they would have us believe it does. As Benjamin Ginsberg says: 'the hidden hand of the market can be almost as potent an instrument for control as the iron fist of the state'; this echoes Chomsky's verdict, quoted earlier, that 'propaganda is to democracy as the bludgeon is to the totalitarian state'.

This alone explains why it is the most conservative parties – which defend the interests of an infinitesimal minority of the population – that have transformed themselves, quantitatively speaking, into mass parties and explains why the social base of their support, in Latin America at least, is the poorest sectors of the urban periphery and rural areas.

These mechanisms for manufacturing consent are not only used during election campaigns; they begin much earlier, influencing people's daily lives through the family, education, culture and recreation. It has been shown that 'the most effective and long lasting political "indoctrination" is that which takes place outside the political sphere and does not use political language'.

This is why these people should be exposed to other experiences and sources of knowledge that help them to change their world view, discover the underlying causes of their exploitation, and, as a result, find their path to liberation.

This is not to say that in certain situations the people cannot waken from its slumber and discover the real interests that motivate various social sectors. This is what happens during periods of great social upheaval and revolution. The ruling classes remove their masks and expose their methods of struggle. Peoples become politicised and learn at an astounding rate.

The 11 April 2002 military coup in Venezuela against the democratically elected president, Hugo Chávez, allowed the population to see who was who: the pro-coup senior officers in the armed forces were unmasked; the fascist intentions of many opposition politicians, self-proclaimed democrats, were clearly exposed. The level of political consciousness in the popular sectors increased enormously. The people learned in a few days far more than it could have learned from books in years.

Drawing up a social project that is an alternative to capitalism

A political organisation is necessary, in the second place, because there is a need for a body to design a project that is an alternative to capitalism. We have already seen that this undertaking needs time, research and knowledge of the national and international situation. It is not something that can be improvised overnight, and far less so in the complex world in which we live. And this project must be encapsulated in a programme that is to the organisation what navigation charts are to sailors.

The programme allows us to orientate ourselves and not to lose our way; to move forward confidently, not to confuse what has to be done now and what has to be done later, to know what ‘steps to take and how to take them’.

Many programmes that are very revolutionary on paper can become a brake on the process if people try to use them as a banner for the immediate struggle. Instead of bringing forces together they scare them away.

One of the Left’s most common mistakes in certain Latin American revolutionary sectors has been the inability to draw up a minimum programme that, following an exhaustive analysis of the concrete reality of the country in question, of the region and of the world, indicates the immediate tasks, tasks that enable the party to mobilise the broadest spectrum of the masses against the main obstacle facing the revolutionary movement at that moment.

The need to give millions of people a single will

A political organisation is necessary, in the third place, because we must be capable of overcoming the vastly more powerful forces opposing the transformation for which we’re fighting. This will not be possible, as I argued earlier, ‘without a body that formulates proposals and is capable of giving millions of people a single will’; that is to say, a body that unifies and coordinates the various emancipatory practices around goals common to all actors. When we talk of unifying we are thinking of ‘grouping together’, ‘uniting’ the various actors around these goals which are of common interest. Unify by no means implies ‘to make uniform’, ‘to homogenise’ nor does it mean to suppress differences but rather to act in common, building on the different characteristics of each group.

The anti-globalisation or anti-war movement is *multicoloured* and must continue to be so, but I don’t think that is anything new: as Hardt and Negri argue, all victorious revolutions were multicoloured and were victorious precisely because they were able to unite various actors around a single cause. All we have to do is analyse the slogans that led to their victories: peace, bread and freedom in Russia; the battle against the tyrant of the day in Cuba and Nicaragua. Whether the differences between the actors who took part in the struggle were or were not respected afterwards is another thing altogether.

The history of triumphant revolutions, on the other hand, demonstrates over and over again what can be achieved when there is a political body which is capable, first, of advancing a national alternative programme which acts as a glue for the most disparate popular sectors and, second, is capable of concentrating their strength on the decisive link, in other words, the weakest link in the enemy's chain.

This political body is, as Trotsky said, the piston that compresses the steam at the crucial moment, making sure it doesn't dissipate but is converted into the locomotive's driving force.

If political action is to be effective, and the popular movement's acts of protest, resistance and struggle are to achieve their anti-system goals, there needs to be an organising subject capable of directing and unifying the multiple initiatives that arise spontaneously and capable of encouraging more initiatives.

Solid organisational cohesion doesn't only produce the objective capacity to act; it also creates an internal climate that enables the organisation to make an energetic intervention in important events and to make good use of the opportunities arising therefrom. It is important to remember that in politics it's necessary not only to be right, but also *to be right at the right time*, and to have the forces needed to put one's ideas into practice.

If this is not the case, a feeling of not having a solid organisation and the insecurity caused by not being able to implement decisions because of a lack of discipline have a negative influence that can be paralysing.

I have no doubt that many of those who are unwilling to discuss the need for political instruments identify these instruments with the anti-democratic, authoritarian, bureaucratic, homogenising single party, which they rightly reject. I believe that it is very important to overcome this subjective block because I am convinced, as I wrote earlier, that there can be no effective struggle against the current system of domination, nor can an alternative socialist society be built, without the existence of a body capable of bringing all the actors together and of unifying their will for action around the goals they set.

Since to 'politicise' does not mean to 'party-ise' but means transforming those who are suffering from injustice and oppression into subjects who are resolved to do their part to change this situation, we do not necessarily have to think about the traditional formula for a Left *party* when we think about the need to build a *political instrument*.

PART III: The New Political Instrument

Chapter 10: The Characteristics of the New Political Instrument

Understanding the importance of social practice for creating consciousness

If we start out from the thesis that the working class and the popular movement can only liberate themselves through the struggles they engage in, then the new or renewed political organisation must be compatible with this thesis. This implies a profound change in the way of thinking about politics and the organisation.

Politics cannot be reduced to political institutions, and the role of the state must not be exaggerated. The narrow view of power – as we have said before – which thinks power resides only in the repressive state apparatus must be discarded. We have to understand that a political force cannot be built without building a social force.

Instead of placing so much importance on importing theory into the workers' movement, the new political organisation should pay close attention to the various ways social discontent with the oppressive ruling system is manifested and to the initiatives and kinds of struggle that arise from these forms of discontent. It should also create spaces where those social sectors and grassroots initiatives which feel themselves to be affected by the existing situation can meet. Working in conjunction with the social movement, it should try to discover the spaces and ways of confrontation that allow this movement to become increasingly aware that it will only overcome its ills when all unite and build a social force capable of going up against the existing system of class domination.

An organisation immersed in society

The new political organisation must be deeply involved in society, immersed in the popular sectors. The strength of the organisation should be assessed not so much by the number of members it has or by the internal activities that the party puts on, but by the influence that it has in society.

As Enrique Rubio says, 'it's not about putting people in the party organisation or society into the party's project but rather about putting politics into people's lives and the party organisation into society'. Member identity ought to be legitimised by what is done *outside* not *inside* the party. This means that members of the new organisation should occupy most of their time in forging links between the party and society. Intra-party activities should be reduced to what is strictly necessary and a culture of excessive meetings should be avoided. Intra-party activities that I think are of great importance are those to do with the political education of members, activities that many Left organisations today have put on the back burner with results damaging to their future. They end up

with no trained cadres, who can take over from older cadres, who did indeed receive a systematic political education.

Overcoming the tendency to homogenise

The party Left still finds it difficult to work with difference. The tendency, especially in class parties, was always to homogenise the social base where they did their work. If this could be justified in the past because of the identity and homogeneity of the working class among whom these parties did most of their work, it is an anachronism now because there is such a wide range of social actors. Today it's more a question of unity in diversity, of respect for ethnic, cultural and gender differences and of a sense of belonging to specific collectives. This makes it necessary to attempt to channel members' commitments according to the potential of each sector or person, without trying to homogenise the actors. This is where the idea comes from that groups that are already working together because they have similar interests and activities can develop their activism using those same groups as a base. It is important to have a special sensitivity to be able to perceive all points of contact that could enable the organisation, mindful of the differences, to advance a platform of common struggle.

New times, new language

This respect for difference must also be reflected in the language used. It is essential to break with the old style of trying to send the same message to people who may have very different interests. One cannot go around imagining amorphous masses; what exist are individuals, men and women who are in different places, doing different things and subject to different ideological influences. The message must become flexible if it is to reach this concrete individual. We must be capable of *tailoring the message to the individual*.

The Left's messages in the television age cannot be the same as they were in the 1960s or in Gutenberg's time either. We are living in the era of the image of the soap opera. 'The culture of the book, of the written word', as Atilio Borón says, 'is an élite culture today; it is no longer a mass culture.' People today read very little or not at all. To communicate with them we have to master audiovisual language. And the Left faces a big challenge: how to do this when the major audiovisual media are completely controlled by huge national and transnational monopolies.

There is often a desire to compete with the major television channels, but this is clearly impossible. Not only are the financial resources lacking but, even when an organisation has the money, the economic groups that monopolise the media don't let the Left enter the market.

There are, however, alternative forms of communication in Latin America that the Left hasn't yet explored enough; these include community radio, neighbourhood newspapers and municipal television channels.

Overcoming hegemonism

The Left must give up all vestiges of a hegemonist attitude if it is to be capable of coordinating all the forces opposed to neo-liberalism.

I should make it clear that hegemonism must not be confused with *hegemony*. The latter is *the opposite of hegemonism*. It has nothing to do with the steamroller policy that some revolutionary organisations, availing themselves of the fact that they are the strongest, have tried to use to get others to support their policies. Nor does it have anything to do with the attitude of trying to charge royalties to organisations that dare to fight for the same causes.

If a group is to exercise hegemony, others must accept as their own the proposals that this group, political front or movement puts forward.

It is not a question of manipulating but, on the contrary, of rallying all those who are convinced and attracted by the project to be undertaken. And people will only join an undertaking where there is respect for others, where responsibilities are shared with other forces.

Of course, this is easier said than done. What tends to happen is that when one organisation is strong, it often undervalues the support that other organisations can give. This is something that has to be fought against.

Instead of bringing in new support, a hegemonist attitude has the opposite effect. On the one hand, it creates discontent in other Left organisations; they feel manipulated and obliged to accept decisions in which they have not taken any part. On the other hand, it reduces the number of potential allies since an organisation which assumes this type of position is incapable of representing the real interests of all the popular sectors and makes many of them skeptical and distrustful.

Moreover, the concept of hegemony is a dynamic one. Hegemony is not achieved once and for all. *A constant process of renewal* is necessary to keep it. Life goes on, new problems appear and, with them, new challenges. If the organisation is not capable of responding to these, it could lose its influence in society.

Today, important sectors of the Left have come to understand that it will have greater hegemony when it manages to get more people to follow its political line, even if this does not happen under its banner. And the best way to do this is to win as much support for these ideas as possible, support not only from political and grassroots organisations and their natural leaders but also from important figures in national life.

The degree of hegemony achieved cannot, therefore, be measured by the number of office holders a party has. What is crucial is that those who are in office adopt the line of the political organisation as their own and implement it, even if they are not members of that organisation. Moreover, if a party does have many of its members holding office in a given organisation, great care must be taken not to fall into hegemonist deviations. It is easier for those holding such a position to impose their ideas on others than to risk the challenge that winning people over implies.

Creating a new relationship with the popular movement

Respecting its autonomous development

If we think that practical struggle is of the utmost importance if the people's consciousness is to develop, our political instrument must show great respect for popular movements. It must contribute to their autonomous development, leaving all attempts at manipulation behind. Its basic premise must be that political cadres aren't the only people who have ideas and suggestions; on the contrary, popular movements have a lot to offer because through their daily struggles they learn, discover new ways, find answers, and invent methods which can be very useful.

If there is anything sabotaging the relationship of the party Left with popular movements – and with the new social actors in general – it is the authoritarian style of most of their cadres, who are used to leading the masses by giving them orders. Yet social movements, and especially the new actors, don't take kindly to being led; they need to be convinced, to give their support freely and consciously to proposals that arise from outside their own movements.

New actors are particularly sensitive about the subject of democracy. Their struggles have generally begun by fighting back against oppression and discrimination. Small wonder, therefore, that they don't want to be manipulated; instead they demand that their autonomy be respected and that they be allowed to participate democratically in the decision-making process. They promote consensus in their own organisations, and, if that is unattainable, they believe that decisions must be adopted by a very large majority. 'They avoid using narrow majorities to impose their will on the minority. They believe that if most people are unconvinced, it makes no sense to impose a measure adopted by a narrow majority. In their opinion, it is preferable to wait until people mature and come to see the merits of a given measure by themselves.... This approach prevents the damaging internal divisions that often plague Left movements and parties and avoids really serious mistakes.'

As Clodomiro Almeyda said, *creative, new, revolutionary, transforming ideas* do not have to originate only within the party – so the party, therefore, need not limit itself to collecting demands that originate within the movement. It should also collect ideas and concepts that enrich its own conceptual arsenal. The relationship with popular movements then, should be a *two-way street*. Unfortunately, it still tends to be a one-way street.

Moreover, coordinating the party Left with the social Left would be easier if the traditional narrow conception of politics were discarded; this tends to reduce politics to the struggle that has to do with political-legal institutions and to exaggerate the role of the state. This conception permeates both the most radical and the most reformist sectors. We have seen that politics is reduced by the former to taking power and destroying the state, and by the latter to administering political power or running the government. For both, the people and their struggles are the great ignored.

The people's motives are the starting point

It must also be understood that it is a huge mistake to try to lead grassroots movements by ordering them around, by coming to them with already-worked-out plans. The political instrument's role is to facilitate, not to supersede. We have to fight to eliminate any sign of verticalism, which cancels out people's initiative: popular participation is not something that can be decreed from above. Only by working with people's motives, only if they are helped to work out for themselves why certain tasks are necessary, and only when we win over their hearts and minds will they be willing to commit themselves fully to the actions they undertake.

Wherever possible, we must include the rank and file in the decision-making process and this means creating spaces where people can express their opinions.

Learning to listen

This means that we must learn to listen, to speak to people and then, from all the thoughts that have been collected, we must be able to make the right diagnosis of the people's mood; be able to synthesise anything that can unite them and generate action; be able to fight against any pessimistic, defeatist thinking that exists. We must listen carefully to all solutions the people themselves come up with for defending themselves or for fighting for their demands.

Only then will the instructions given not be seen as orders coming from outside the movement. They will, instead, help to build an organisational process capable of encouraging, if not all, at least many of the people to join the struggle. Then, building on that, it will be possible gradually to win over the more backward and pessimistic sectors. When the latter understand that the aims being fought for are not only necessary but possible, they too – as Che said – will join in the struggle.

Make sure the people feel they are the active subjects

Besides, when the people realise that it is their ideas and initiatives that are being put into practice, they will feel that they are the active subjects of what happens, they will grow as human beings and their willingness to struggle will increase exponentially.

Moving from military-style leadership to popular education methods

After all that has been said up to this point we can understand that political cadres for the new era cannot be cadres with a military mentality – today we are not leading an army, which is not to say that at some critical junctures, there might not be a need for such a shift. Nor can they be populist demagogues, because we are not leading a flock of sheep. Political cadres should be, basically, *popular educators*, capable of empowering all the wisdom existing among the people – that derived from their cultural traditions and their tradition of struggle as well as that acquired in their daily battle for survival – by merging it with the most comprehensive knowledge that the political organisation can contribute. Creative initiative and the search for answers must be encouraged.

No more workerism

If the new political organisation's theory is based on a correct assessment of social practice, it must take into account not only the economic exploitation of the workers, but also all the other kinds of oppression – the destruction of humanity and nature that cannot be explained simply by the relationship between capital and labour.

It must abandon class reductionism by taking responsibility for defending all social groups that are excluded and discriminated against economically, socially, politically and culturally. While it should be concerned with class problems, its concern must also extend to ethno-cultural, race, gender, class, sex, and environmental problems. It must bear in mind not only organised workers' struggles but also the struggles of women, First Nations people, people of African descent, young people, children, retired people, the disabled, LGBTQ people, etcetera.

It is a question of no longer simply taking responsibility for defending all those exploited and discriminated against, but also of understanding 'the radical political and transformative potential that exists in the struggles' waged by all these sectors.

Since ecological movements tackle a problem that affects all of humanity – the deterioration of the environment – I agree with Helio Gallardo that this movement 'could act as a catalyst and a coordinating axis along which other struggles can join in shaping an alternative sensibility for change'; more recently, the anti-war movement in the more developed countries has brought about a very broad-based convergence.

A body to coordinate all the different emancipatory social practices

The new political organisation should not try to gather to its bosom all the legitimate representatives of struggles for emancipation but should strive to coordinate their practices into a single political project by generating– as Helio Gallardo says– 'meeting spaces so that the assorted social groups and their discontents can recognise each other and grow' in consciousness and in the specific struggle that each one has to wage in its own area: the neighbourhood, university, school, factory, etcetera.

Gallardo argues that ‘a constructive tension between social movements should arise; they should not lose their autonomy and roots, because those are their source of strength; let parties or organic structures of a new kind bring these social movements together, let them not try to represent them nor suffocate them, but most importantly, do let them take on the job of creating a national project. It’s very difficult for a social movement – whether of young people, ecologists, women, peasants, people of African descent or indigenous peoples – to be able to come up with a national project.

Democracy: the cause to champion

The new political organisation must take democracy as its cause because it understands that the fight for democracy is inseparable from the struggle for socialism.

But before continuing, I think it’s important to define what I understand by democracy.

I believe that a democratic regime must take three central aspects into consideration: representativity and civil rights, social equality, and political participation by the people as active subjects. Whic

Political or representative democracy

The first aspect, *political or representative democracy*, refers basically to the political regime; it focuses on the freedom to elect those who govern and on civil rights for all citizens. This democracy, which proclaims itself to be the people’s government, can be – and this is in fact what happens with bourgeois democracy – a democracy that benefits only a minority of the population. This is why it is sometimes referred to as formal or representative democracy since, in the name of the people, it benefits only a minority. It creates first- and second-class citizens. And for that reason it is becoming more and more discredited.

Nevertheless, we cannot reject all kinds of representation because of the bad use to which bourgeois democracy has put this concept. Under socialism, there must be a system which allows citizens to be represented. ‘It isn’t’, as Sánchez Vázquez says, ‘a matter of advocating the abolition of representative democracy or delegated participation in the name of direct participation, which far from excluding delegated participation complements and enriches it.’

One cannot govern without delegating government tasks to representatives of the people. Direct democracy is viable at the local level, in small communities, but it cannot be exercised on the national level, except in exceptional cases (plebiscites, referenda).

What must be rejected then, are not the representative aspects of democracy but bourgeois democracy which favours privileged sectors of society and which, therefore has no interest whatsoever in creating mechanisms for direct democracy.

Therefore, I think all reflections on the technical aspects of representativity – I call them ‘representativity techniques’ – are valuable. These seek to ensure real representativity and a system of accountability to the electors. I believe that the Left should make efforts to ensure that all minority currents are represented and protected at the state level – provided, of course, that their interests don’t conflict with national interests.

Real or social democracy

The second variety is known as *real, substantial or social democracy*; its fundamental purpose is to find a solution to the problems that affect people the most: food, land, work, education, housing: all those things that make it possible to move towards a more egalitarian society. In practice, this form of democracy can be exercised by a political system that doesn’t function in the traditional manner of Western representative democracy.

Participatory democracy

But socialism’s identifying characteristic must be the existence of participatory democracy. The people collectively constitute the real active subject who builds the new society where all forms of popular self-organisation are encouraged and respected, with no attempt being made to subject people to the party or the state.

As a project, socialism cannot be separated from democracy; it cannot be anything but the highest expression of democracy and must greatly expand democracy in comparison with limited bourgeois democracy.

Democracy can’t be decreed into existence, it has to be built

After the experience of the recent dictatorships in the southern cone of Our America and of various types of authoritarian governments in many other Latin American countries, the Marxist Left – which didn’t sufficiently value democracy because it associated the word ‘democracy’ with bourgeois representative democracy – understood that it had to rescue the cause of democracy, which until then had been in the hands of centrist and conservative forces. The challenge was to reappropriate democracy and give it its full meaning – not just its political, but its social and participatory meaning.

The defeat suffered by the socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union made the need for this reappropriation even more clear. The alternative, socialist society that we want to build must be completely democratic. What we perhaps do not understand is that democracy cannot be decreed into existence from above, that democracy is not possible if people do not undergo a process of cultural transformation, and that this is achieved not only through political education or ideological propaganda but also through practice. As Marx says, people change their circumstances and change themselves through their practice.

It is therefore essential that those of us who fight for an alternative society, who work with popular movements and with Left or progressive governments, understand that we need to create spaces for real participation, both where people work and where they live, and in schools, universities and elsewhere. If people do not become actors, the active subjects of their own history, we shall be able to solve some of our peoples' problems – health, food, education, housing – but we shall not be able to ensure that people transform themselves into the subjects of their own destiny.

An organisation which is the harbinger of the new society

An organisation which places its emphasis on the social practices of the different popular sectors rather than on the theory it contributes has to be careful that its own practice does not contradict the values of the society it aims to create. In its inner workings, the organisation, as harbinger of the emancipated society, must take the lead in embodying the values of democracy, solidarity, cooperation, camaraderie. It must project vitality and joie de vivre.

In a world where corruption reigns and, as we saw earlier, political parties and politics in general have become increasingly discredited, it is essential that a Left organisation presents a distinctly different ethical profile; that, in its day-to-day existence, it is capable of practising the values it preaches; that its praxis is consistent with its political discourse, as Che's was. That explains why he is so attractive to young people, who are tired of a discourse that has nothing to do with the facts.

The new morality should tend to make the contradictions between social and individual values disappear by aspiring to build a world of cooperation, solidarity and love.

And this struggle to transform daily life should begin at the same time as a commitment to activism. There is no need to wait for the triumph of a social revolution since, as Che said, the 'individual subjects himself to a process of conscious self-education'.

'The point is to learn how to struggle every day against all alienating institutions and structures, searching for a way to replace them [and] inventing new ones, which does not rule out struggling for big social and political transformations.' If we struggle for the social liberation of women, we should begin as of now to transform the relationship between man and woman in the heart of the family, to overcome the household division of labour and male-chauvinist culture at home. If we think that young people are the raw material of our work, then we should educate them to think for themselves, to adopt their own positions and be capable of defending them, based upon what they feel and think. If we struggle against racial discrimination, we must carry that through into our own lives. If we struggle against the alienation caused by consumerism, then we should translate that into an austere lifestyle. One of the fundamental values that we must teach ourselves and others is that thought and action should be consistent with each other and double standards must be rejected. Che is one of the greatest examples of this.

Moreover, it is essential that the organisation we build should embody the values of honesty and transparency. Any behaviour that tarnishes its image, even slightly, cannot be tolerated. The organisation should create a way to exercise strict vigilance over the honesty of its cadres and leaders.

To sum up: in order to respond to the new challenges set by the twenty-first century we need a political organisation which, as it advances a national programme which enables broad sectors of society to rally round the same battle standard, also helps these sectors to transform themselves into the active subjects building the new society for which the battle is being waged.

Chapter 11: A New Paradigm for Internal Organisation

Thus far I have spoken about what are the most important characteristics essential to the organisation or political instrument we need to tackle the huge challenges set by the world today. Now we need to examine those things that have to do with this organisation's internal workings.

Unite your members around a community of values and a concrete programme

What unites the members of a political organisation should be mainly a 'cultural communion of values' from which they should derive their 'projects and programmes'.

The political programme should be *the glue*, the unifying element par excellence, that which gives coherence to the organisation's political conduct. Whether we are talking about a Left political organisation or a more broadly based political front, the acceptance or not of the political programme should be the dividing line between those who are inside the organisation and those who choose to stay outside. There can be divergence over many things, but there must be consensus on questions concerning the programme.

There's a lot of talk about the unity of the Left. Without a doubt, unity is essential in order to move forward, but this is unity to struggle, unity to fight back, unity to transform. It is not just a unity of Left acronyms, since hidden among these acronyms there might be those who believe that we can do nothing else but adapt to the existing regime and, if there are people like that, they will deplete the organisation's strength instead of adding to it.

It is important to realise that there are amounts that add to, amounts that take away from (like the example above) and *amounts that multiply*. The clearest example of the latter is Uruguay's Frente Amplio, a political coalition which brings together all the parties of the Uruguayan Left, and whose membership is markedly greater than the membership of all of the parties that comprise it. This unifying initiative by the Left successfully brought together a great number of people who previously did not belong to any of the parties that formed this coalition but who today participate in the Frente Amplio's Rank and File Committees. Two thirds of the Frente Amplio's members had no party

affiliation; the remaining third were members of the constituent parties.

Contemplating different kinds of membership

Membership crisis and Left sensibility

Everybody knows that during the last few years there has been a generalised membership crisis, not only in Left political parties, but also in social movements and Christian Base Communities: it is not unrelated to the changes the world has undergone. However, in many of our countries this *membership crisis* has gone hand in hand with an increase in the Left's influence in society, and of *Left sensibility* in the popular sectors.

We think it very probable that the demands typically made on people before they can join in organised political activity are one factor that might have caused this crisis – that and the factors discussed above. We need to analyse whether or not the Left can create *different kinds of membership* in order to cultivate this increasing Left sensibility in society: not everybody has the same vocation for activism, or feels inclined to be active on a permanent basis. This fluctuates with the political times one lives in. Ignoring this fact and demanding a uniform kind of membership is self-limiting and weakens the political organisation.

Membership according to interest group, stable membership, and conjunctural membership

There are, for example, those who are willing to work in a specific area – such as health, education or culture – rather than in a cell in their workplace or in a local organisation. There are others who feel called on to be active only at certain times (such as elections) but who are not prepared to be all year long, though at crucial junctures in the political struggle they can always be counted on and in their daily lives they promote the Left's project and values. Trying to fit membership into a single pigeonhole which is the same for everyone – a 24/7 kind of membership – leaves all these potential activists out in the cold.

We must create the kind of organisation which makes room for all the different types of membership, which allows varying degrees of commitment. Its structures must become more flexible in order to maximise this differentiated member commitment, without establishing a hierarchy of value among them. This will be, in some way, a network-type organisation.

Besides, I agree with Clodomiro Almeyda that the value and effectiveness of a person's political commitment should not be measured by their formal affiliation to a group, but by their *concrete contribution* to the promotion and development of the organisation's political projects and line.

Adapting rank-and-file organisations to their environment

In order to make it easier to be a member in this differentiated way, structures and the rank-and-file organisations will have to be tailored to the kind of environment where they carry out their party work. Clodomiro Almeyda considered that one valid criticism of Leninist party organisation was that it standardised the various levels of party structure without taking into account that every social environment is different. The cells or nuclei were structured in exactly the same way everywhere, without keeping in mind the specifics of each milieu: a factory isn't the same as a large rural estate or a university or a television channel.

Collaborating with those who are not members

The political organisation should not confine itself to working with members who make a commitment to the party, but should also aim to work to include non-members in many tasks. One way to do so is by encouraging the creation or use of bodies that are not internal party structures. These can be useful to the political organisation, for example, by allowing it to take advantage of existing theoretical or technological skills such as research or advertising and publicity.

An interesting initiative along these lines is to bring together those persons – particularly experts – willing to contribute to the discussion of certain thematic questions such as agriculture, oil, housing, education and foreign debt. What used to be La Causa R (The R Cause) was involved in this kind of experiment in Venezuela during the last presidential electoral campaign. The FMLN in El Salvador has been trying this out since 1993, as has the EZLN in Mexico.

Activism as a way of life

The revolutionary struggle has tended to reduce the areas targeted for change to things related to the economy and the state, but little has been done to challenge the alienated culture and civilisation we live in; activists have forgotten that even under socialism 'the new society has to compete very fiercely against the past' because 'the failings of the past are handed down to the present in individual consciousness' and, therefore, 'a continuous effort has to be made to eradicate them'.

'The principal battlefield of this struggle is daily life'. For a long time, the political importance of everyday life has been undervalued. Daily life is not considered to be a political space in the broadest sense of the word.

'The transformation of daily life can only occur when the individual snatches or finds a space and time in his/her life in society for individuality.' I think this proposal by Orlando Nuñez is very important, because if we cannot do what he suggests, then activists become dehumanised, lose their sensitivity and grow more and more distant from the rest of humanity. The struggle against individualism, a task that

we should all devote ourselves to, does not mean denying the individual needs of each human being. 'Individual interests are not antagonistic to social ones; the one presupposes the other.'

I also think it is necessary to change the mistaken relationship between activism and sacrifice. In the past to be an activist one had to have the mentality of a martyr: suffering was revolutionary, enjoying oneself was regarded as something suspicious. In some way this was an echo of the collectivist deviation in real socialism: party members were just cogs in the party machinery; their individual interests were not taken into consideration. This does not mean that we don't appreciate revolutionary fervour, passion for activism, sense of duty, of rebellion, of responsibility or the spirit of self-denial that activists must have, especially the leaders. Nevertheless, as far as is possible, they must strive to combine their duties as activists with developing the fullest possible personal life. And if the political tasks prevent them from having a more human life, they should be aware that this could result, as Che said, 'in extreme dogmatism, cold scholasticism and isolation from the masses'.

I agree with Helio Gallardo that the classic Leftist practice – 'fundamentalist, serious, rigid, often heroic ... but also not very appealing to the people ... and frequently, sterile' – must be overcome.

Giving up authoritarian methods

From bureaucratic centralism to democratic centralism

Left parties were very authoritarian for a very long time. What they practised was not democratic centralism, but Soviet-influenced bureaucratic centralisation. The *general line of action* they followed was not previously discussed by all members and passed by a majority, but was decided on by the top leadership with no input from the members. The latter were limited to following orders that they had never discussed and often didn't understand.

But when combating this bureaucratic centralist deviation, efforts must be made to avoid slipping into *ultrademocratic* deviations which result in more talk than action, since everything, even trivial matters, are the subject of debate that frequently neuters any concrete action.

Because bureaucratic centralism has been criticised, there has been a tendency in recent years to reject all forms of centralism. This is reflected, for example, in the following quote from Immanuel Wallerstein: 'What the antisystemic forces should be concentrating on is the expansion of real social groups at community levels of every kind and variety and their grouping ... at higher levels in a nonunified form. The fundamental error of antisystemic forces in the previous era was the belief that the more unified the structure, the more efficacious it was.... Democratic centralism is the exact opposite of what is needed. The basis of solidarity ... has to be subtler, more flexible, and more organic. The family of antisystemic forces must move at many speeds in constant reformulation of the tactical priorities.'

‘Such a coherent, nonunified family of forces can only be plausible if each constituent group is itself a complex, internally democratic structure. And this ... is possible only if, at the collective level, we recognize that there are no strategic priorities in the struggle.... The battle for transformation can only be fought on all fronts at once.’

We agree with Wallerstein that the battle must be waged on many fronts. However, we do *not* agree that there is no need for the partial strategies of each sector to be coordinated into a general, single strategy at the most critical junctures in the struggle. It is this coordination which the enemy is most afraid of because they know that is where the strength of the anti-globalisation movement will lie.

Personally, I do not see how political action can be successful if it is not unified and for that reason I do not think that there is any method other than democratic centralism, unless a decision is taken to act by *consensus*. The consensus method appears to be more democratic because it tries to get everyone’s agreement; but in practice it is sometimes much more anti-democratic, because it grants *veto power to a minority*, so that in extreme cases a single person can block the implementation of an agreement supported by the overwhelming majority. The best-known example of this is how the United States uses its veto in the UN Security Council. And anyway, the complexity of problems, the size of the organisation and the political timeframe – which means that at certain times decisions must be made quickly – often make it almost impossible to use the consensus method, even when it is not being used as blackmail.

There is no political effectiveness without unified leadership

There cannot be political effectiveness, then, without a unified leadership which defines the actions to be taken at various points in the struggle. This unified leadership is possible because it reflects a *general line of action* which has been discussed by all members of the organisation and approved by the majority. Those who are the minority must accept whatever course of action emerges triumphant and work with other members to carry out any tasks that it entails.

Nevertheless, if this general line is to be implemented, the concrete actions that the activists have to carry out must be identified. This must be done through a wide-ranging debate in which everyone is allowed to give their opinion and where the agreements finally reached are binding on everyone. If there is to be a unified course of action, the lower levels of the organisation must keep the higher levels’ instructions in mind when making their own decisions. A political movement that seriously aspires to transform society cannot afford the luxury of harbouring undisciplined members who, in matters of strategic importance, disrupt its unity of action, without which no effective action is possible.

This combination of single central leadership and democratic debate at the organisation’s various levels is called *democratic centralism*. It is a dialectical combination: in complicated political periods, periods of revolutionary upsurge or war, the balance tends to tip in the centralist direction; in periods of calm,

when the rhythm of events is slower, the democratic character tends to come to the fore.

A correct combination of centrism and democracy should encourage the *initiative* of the leaders and all the members. Only creative action at every level of the party will assure the triumph of the class struggle. In practice, this initiative is manifested in a sense of responsibility, dedication to work, courage, and aptitude for problem solving, for expressing opinions, for criticising defects, and for exercising control – with comradely care – over higher-level bodies.

If this doesn't happen, the party as an organisation will cease to make sense because it fails to abide by the principle of internal democracy. An insufficiently democratic existence interferes with the creative initiative of the members and the consequence is their flagging participation.

Majorities and minorities

Democratic centralism implies both that the minority submit itself to the majority and that the majority respect the minority's position.

The minority must not be quashed or marginalised; it must be respected. Nor should the minority be required to completely submit to the majority. The minority should submit itself to the *actions* proposed by the majority at concrete political junctures, but need not renounce its political, theoretical and ideological *convictions*. On the contrary, it is the minority's duty to continue fighting to defend its ideas until they convince the rest or are themselves convinced by others.

Why should the minority continue defending its positions and not capitulate to the majority position? Because the *minority might be right*: their analysis of reality could be more accurate because they have been able to discover the true motivations of certain social actors. For this reason, those who are in the minority at a given time have not only the right but the duty to stick to their positions and fight to convert as many other members as possible to their positions through internal debate.

And anyway, if the majority is convinced that their position is correct then they have no reason to fear ideological struggle. On the contrary, they should welcome it, confident that they will succeed in convincing the minority group.

Creating spaces for debate

For the inner workings of an organisation to function democratically, it is vital that it create spaces where members can debate, consolidate positions, and become enriched through exchanging opinions.

To date, except for rare exceptions, party cells or nuclei have been the preferred space in the organisation for exercising internal party democracy. However, it is obvious this is a very limited space in which to examine certain questions in depth, especially those concerned with establishing the

general party line and the lines for different sectors. Larger meetings seem much richer – meetings where good speakers can come together to get to the root of their differences, which in turn helps the others present to form their own political beliefs. It is a way to begin to encourage people to *think for themselves*.

How could anyone think, for example, that a debate about the country's economic situation and the line to take on this could be discussed in the workplace or local cells or nuclei? Doesn't new thinking emerge through debate? What kind of debate can you have in a group of ten, twenty or thirty people who don't have a thorough understanding of the subject? Wouldn't it make more sense to get the party's main experts together and have them debate the issue so the other members can hear them state their positions – and then make up their own minds?

Finding the most appropriate mechanisms for improving democratic debate inside political organisations is one of the challenges facing the Left.

Currents of opinion, yes, factions, no

It is entirely normal that different opinions exist within a political organisation; these are in fact only a reflection of the different political sensibilities of its members. Besides, I think that the organisation's thinking can be enriched if members form groups around given positions. What must be avoided is that these currents of opinion become closed groups or factions: in other words, veritable parties within the party. Something else to avoid is letting the theoretical debates become the excuse for a power struggle over something that has nothing to do with the question being debated. The former can be achieved through internal legislation that recognises the right to have different opinions but which imposes sanctions on factions.

On the other hand, if the goal is to democratise debate, then the most logical thing would be not to have permanent groups, and, at least on some questions (especially new questions), to allow people to move between groups. For example, the people who take a given position on the role of the state in the economy will not always be in the same group as those who take a particular position on how the party should encourage women to get politically involved.

And while we are on the subject, I think that in the 1990s there was an excellent example of democratic praxis in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In the city government the mayor's job is rotated through the various ideological tendencies of the PT and each mayor forms his or her staff by selecting representatives of the various tendencies.

The new praxis is only possible if one assumes that the positions taken by the current one belongs to 'will have to be complemented by the dialectic of dialogue and debate with others. Otherwise, if one takes the old traditional position that one represents the proletariat and everyone else is an enemy',

then one's attitude will automatically be different: these others will have to be either 'neutralized or crushed'.

This is only possible if one starts out by acknowledging that one does not possess the whole truth, that others might possess some of the truth and that their positions, therefore, are legitimate. If the dialogue and the debate fail to lead to an understanding, consensus, then differences must be resolved through a vote. But this would only work if all involved are willing to submit themselves to the results of the vote. Tarso Genro says that 'this is the bedrock on which to build the political culture of a modern socialist party, a revolutionary, non-autocratic party that doesn't propose to bureaucratically impose its program upon society or even on itself'.

Now, being open, respectful and flexible in debate does not in any way mean refusing to fight for one's own ideas if one is in the minority. If members remain convinced after the process of internal debate that their ideas are correct, then they should continue defending those ideas, as long as they also respect the need to preserve the party's unity when acting upon decisions reached by the majority.

And, speaking of debate, it is important to recognise that today it is almost impossible to have an internal debate that is not also a public debate, so the Left must learn how to debate keeping this in mind.

Building leadership that respects the internal composition of the party

The new Left culture should also be reflected in a different way of constituting the political organisation's leadership. For a long time it was believed that if a certain tendency or sector of the party won the internal elections by a majority, then their cadres should occupy all the leadership positions. To a certain extent this was because the generally accepted idea was that a party can only govern when the leadership is as homogeneous as possible. Today different opinions tend to predominate; it is thought that leaders who accurately reflect the *internal correlation of forces* within the party are better because this helps members from all tendencies to feel more involved in party work. But this opinion can only become effective if the party has managed to acquire the new democratic culture: if it hasn't, then bedlam will result and render the party ungovernable.

Real democratisation of the political organisation demands that members participate more effectively in electing their leaders, who should be elected according to their ideological and political positions rather than their personal attainments. It is important, therefore, that these different positions are made known to party members through internal publications. It is also very important to find a more democratic way of deciding on candidates and of ensuring elections are held in a way that guarantees the secret vote.

Internal plebiscites and polls

On the other hand, I think the direct participation of the party members in the most important decisions is a good idea and can be implemented through a process of *internal plebiscites* or polls. And I

stress ‘the most important decisions’, since there is no sense in consulting the membership about decisions regarding day-to-day, routine business which does not necessarily need rank-and-file input – and, anyway, it would be unworkable. Direct polling of the party’s support base, however, is a very effective way to democratise the organisation’s decision-making process.

The political organisation polls the people

Polls of the sort just mentioned can be taken, not only of party members, but also of party sympathisers or of those whom we could call its potential electoral support. This method is especially useful for nominating left-wing candidates for local government, if the point is to actually win the election and not just use it as an opportunity to promote the party’s ideas. Polling the electorate about the various candidates proposed by the political organisation is the best way to avoid missing the mark. Elections have been lost in the past because candidates were chosen for purely internal party reasons – prestige in the party, representation of a given internal correlation of forces – without taking the public’s opinion about the candidate into account.

The people have been successfully consulted in Latin America. For example, La Causa R (The R Cause) in Venezuela held a popular referendum a few months after the military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Movement. In this poll – taken by placing ballot boxes on the main streets of Caracas – people were asked if they thought the then-president of the republic, Carlos Andrés Pérez, should continue to govern or not. Of the 500,000 people who voted, most of them from the metropolitan region, 90 per cent were against his continuing as president. This referendum helped to create a political situation in favour of the president’s resignation, leading to a new political reality in the country: this was the first time that parliament had asked a president to leave office and be judged before his term was up. No law provided for this type of consultation, but neither did any law prohibit it. The mass participation of the people – although the results were not formally recognised – was in itself a political event.

Giving pluralism its due

The political organisation that we’ve been speaking about should be democratic not only internally, but externally as well. It should recognise the importance of supra-party initiatives ‘without underestimating the decisive importance of renovating and empowering party organisations.’

A political organisation for those exploited and excluded by capitalism

If, as we mentioned above, the numbers of the traditional industrial working class in Latin America have been declining – as opposed to those of workers who have unstable, insecure jobs and to the marginalised or excluded by the system, whose numbers go up every day – the political body must recognise this fact and cease to be an organisation solely for the traditional working class; it must transform itself into an organisation for all the oppressed.

A political organisation which is not naïve but is preparing itself for any eventuality

The opportunity that the Left now has to compete openly and legally for spaces must not lead it to forget that the Right only respects the rules of the game as long as it suits its purposes to do so. To date, there has never been a single example anywhere in the world of a ruling group that has given up its privileges willingly. The fact that its members agree to withdraw from the political arena when they think their retreat may be in their best interests shouldn't deceive us. They may tolerate and even help bring a Left government to power if that government implements the Right's policies and limits itself to managing the crisis. What the Right will always try to prevent – and we should have no illusions about this – is any attempt to build an alternative society.

It may be deduced from this that as the Left grows and begins to occupy positions of power, it must be prepared to confront fierce resistance from the sectors closest to finance capital who will use legal or illegal means to block a democratic transformation that will benefit the people. The Left must be capable of defending victories achieved democratically.

New internationalist practice for the globalised world

In a world in which domination is exercised on a global level, it seems even more necessary than before to coordinate strategies of resistance on a regional and supra-regional level. The world social fora and other international meetings have made significant advances in this direction possible – but there is still a lot left to do.

What Enrique Rubio pointed out in 1994 is still totally relevant today: we should try to coordinate all 'the excluded, overlooked, dominated, and exploited in the world', including those who live in developed countries; a kind of coordination, cooperation, and alliance between 'all political and social subjects who take part in the struggle for emancipation' in an effort to build world identities. We need to elaborate 'a strategy that includes coordinating with forces that operate in the three great world power blocs', and to establish multilateral relations with each one of them as a way to 'disrupt the political sharing of zones of influence among them'.

'It is essential to put capitalism in check from the political sphere, whether the state or non-state, activist or non-activist, party or non-party, from social movements, from scientific-technical centres, through cultural and communication centres, where sensibilities are constructed in a decisive manner, and put it in check from self-management organisations ... or to put it in a slightly schematic and perhaps even shocking way, the revolution must be international, democratic, multiple and profound, or there won't be a revolution.'

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Harnecker makes a distinction between “the party left” and “the social left.” What is this distinction? Is this distinction relevant in our context? Is it useful for a mass organization to differentiate itself from “the social left” the way a party might?
2. Harnecker describes three specific major crises (and a number of minor ones) that are, in her estimation, causing stagnation on the Left. Which of these continue to hold true, and do we see them in our context as well?
3. Explain Harnecker’s criticism of the Bolshevik model. Do you think this criticism is fair? Does it make sense in our context, and if so, is it worth taking on board?
4. Harnecker is openly friendlier to religion than many socialist theorists have been. Do you think this has merit, wholly or partially?
5. “Politics is the art of the possible.” What does this mean and why does Harnecker reject it? Explain her alternative vision. Does this jibe with your idea about revolutionary thought and practice?
6. Why is Harnecker so insistent that a new sort of political instrument is required for the left? In what specific ways does that look different than the older party model?
7. What characteristics of the new political instrument that Harnecker describes make sense in the context of party-building in the imperial core?
8. Harnecker defines elements of democracy quite explicitly. Do you agree with her definition? Based on her definition (or yours), which of these do you think we struggle with most? (In our organization, country, world, etc.)