Freeing Thought From Thinkers: A Case Study

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'Ideas... ideas, I must confess, interest me more than men - interest me more than anything. They live; they fight; they perish like men. Of course it may be said that our only knowledge of them is through men, just as our only knowledge of the wind is through the reeds that it bends; but all the same the wind is of more importance than the reeds.'

'The wind exists independently of the reed,' ventured Bernard.

His intervention made Edouard, who had long been waiting for it, start afresh with renewed spirit: 'Yes, I know; ideas exist only because of men; but that's what's so pathetic; they live at their expense.'

— André Gide, The Counterfeiters

Our wager can be formulated as follows: there are ideas which can only be consistently thought of within certain forms of collective organization. That is, there are ideas which can only be properly developed if their conceptual construction is tied together with the practical construction of a given institutional space.

This hypothesis does not seem so perplexing at first - after all, is this not exactly what is at stake in the so called "group mind", when we witness the production of shared sense between people within a given group? In this

case, we also encounter ideas which, for anyone outside of that particular organization, appear as outright inconsistent or irrelevant, but which, within the collective, play a fundamental role: even if their irrational character might make them conceptually inadequate, these ideas nevertheless function as crucial identificatory traits. The study of these effects of sense produced within groups have further reinforced the commonsensical notion that serious study should avoid such collective structures - clear and distinct ideas are supposed to have an affinity with solitude. This, however, is not what the present text is concerned with. Even though the role of sense in the formation of groups is undeniable, and can have both useful and terrifying effects, we must first of all shed away our fascination with this well-documented phenomena in order to face another - more fragile - site for investigation: the hypothesis that certain true ideas are only thinkable through a collective engagement. In short, this is not a thesis about *ideals* - that is, common traits which organize the identifications within a group - but rather about *ideas* - rational concepts which, as thoughts, can produce consequences in the world.

But why would ideas, if true, be tied together with such a seemingly accidental condition, how could a group, which is nonetheless composed of separate and distinguishable thinking individuals, be a necessary condition for certain forms of thinking? Furthermore - and perhaps more importantly - even if we accept such a hypothesis, how could we distinguish it from yet another localized identificatory mark? That is, if this idea itself has emerged within a collective project and remains at first unfounded and inconsistent, what sets it apart from being mere a group ideal?

In this contribution we seek to develop the basic conceptual framework to make our hypothesis consistent and intelligible, and then to present a concrete case study of what it might mean to consolidate an institution that seeks to live up to this affirmation. Thus, after proposing our theory of ideas, we will turn to the case of the *Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology*, the collective project whose ongoing experimentation for the last 5 years in fact conditions the ideas developed in this text. In a sense, then, if the present work is able to attest to the consistency of its hypothesis, given that this hypothesis itself is the irreducible product of a collective effort at constructing an institution, we should have, by extension, provided the first proof of its validity.

§ 1

In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx makes the following comparison between measuring the weight and the value of two things:

A sugar-loaf being a body, is heavy, and therefore has weight: but we can neither see nor touch this weight. We then take various pieces of iron, whose weight has been determined beforehand. The iron, as iron, is no more the form of manifestation of weight, than is the sugar-loaf. Nevertheless, in order to express the sugar-loaf as so much weight, we put it into a weight-relation with the iron. In this relation, the iron officiates as a body representing nothing but weight. A certain quantity of iron therefore serves as the measure of the weight of the sugar, and represents, in relation to the sugar-loaf, weight embodied, the form of manifestation of weight. This part is played by the iron only within this relation, into which the sugar or any other body, whose weight has to be determined, enters with the iron. Were they not both heavy, they could not enter into this relation, and the one could therefore not serve as the expression of the weight of the other. When we throw both into the scales, we see in reality, that as weight they are both the same, and that, therefore, when taken in proper proportions, they have the same weight. Just as the substance iron, as a measure of weight, represents in relation to the sugar-loaf weight alone, so, in our expression of value, the material object, coat, in relation to the linen, represents value alone.

Here, however, the analogy ceases. The iron, in the expression of the weight of the sugar-loaf, represents a natural property common to both bodies, namely their weight; but the coat, in the expression of value of the linen, represents a non-natural property of both, something purely social, namely, their value. (Marx, 1976: 148)

First, the weight-relation: in order to express the physical property of weight of a given body, one must place it in relation to another body, in a scale, so that this invisible and immediately impalpable property of the first body might appear embodied as the second one. Marx makes two essential remarks about this process: (a) this scalar relation of proportion can only take place if the two bodies have the same consistency, i.e. both are physical bodies and therefore share the property of being heavy; (b) while the two bodies must be physically homogeneous, in the weight-relation they take up different functions: the weight of the first body, which cannot be directly apprehended, appears as the material body of the second element in the relation - the sugar-loaf weighs so much iron. This comparison allows Marx to exemplify what he had previously called the "simple or accidental value-form" (ibid: 139), which puts into relation the immaterial value of a first commodity with the materially determined use-value of another. Marx terms the position of this second body - which, in the example,

is responsible for incarnating in its immediate heaviness the "essential" property of the first body - the equivalent form in the relation, while the first term - here the sugar-loaf - is called the relative form, since it is the body whose essential property, at first invisible, becomes expressed in the relation with the physicality of the second body.

This analogy, however, has a limit, which marks the distinction between natural and non-natural, or social, forms. When we place two physical bodies in a weight-relation, the measure expressed in their relation, as a certain quantity of the second body, exists in each body independently of us putting them in relation in a scale. Physical bodies are naturally heavy, not only "comparatively" so - the comparison of two bodies only allows us to express their weight, it only makes weight legible as such. The value of commodities, on the other hand, is inherently social - that is, it is itself relational. Commodities, when removed from the field of exchange-relations, maintain only their natural and heterogeneous determinations, those responsible for each of their use-values, but we find there nothing to be expressed regarding value as such.

This leads us to add a third remark to the previous ones, namely, the fact that the homogeneity between the bodies in a given relation must be extended to the "scale", the measurement, itself: physical forms are made legible by physical scales while social forms are made legible by social scales. This thesis, which vacillates between the self-evident and the obscure, allows us to determine a fundamental distinction between the natural and the social relations, for in the latter case the being that is comparatively "measured" and the comparison itself are not only of the same consistency, but are rather indiscernible - nothing distinguishes what it means to express the value of a commodity and what it means for commodities to constitute their value to begin with.

This is, thus, the limit of Marx's analogy, and the starting point of our investigation: social forms, such as the value-form, *become rational* - that is, enter into relations of proportion which make certain of its properties legible - through the very same process that *renders them actual*. The very being of the social relation under investigation is homogeneous and indistinguishable from the process through which its properties become legible for us. In a certain sense, the "social scale" which we need in order to express the value-form is part of the value-form: it is not the actor in the exchange process which abstracts and renders commensurate the different commodities put there in relation - were this the case, at the moment of exchange of two commodities we could not be concerned, as we most definitely are, with their use-values - rather, it is the form of value itself, an enigmatic dimension of the form of the commodities at stake in the exchange, which is responsible for producing their

commensurability. It is this insight which leads Alfred Sohn-Rethel to conclude that

> [a] closer analysis would reveal that the 'transcendental unity of the self-consciousness', to use the Kantian expression for the phenomenon here involved, is itself an intellectual reflection of one of the elements of the exchange abstraction, the most fundamental one of all, the form of exchangeability of the commodities underlying the unity of money and of the social synthesis. I define the Kantian 'transcendental subject' as a fetish concept of the capital function of money. (Sohn-Rethel, 1971: 76-77)

In an uncanny way, we find that the true "social scientist", the empty instance capable of neutrally placing social beings in a social scale, measuring and comparing value, is none other than the commodity itself, which "evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will" (ibid: 163).

We have just examined the "meta-economical" hypothesis that the subject of science in political economy is not the actor of exchange, but something that is implicated and determined by the commodity-form itself. Irreducibly social forms are in fact constituted by the indistinguishable point where their being and their thought mutually support each other, but such a point paradoxically does not coincide with ourselves as thinking beings: the starting point of *Capital* is rather that there is such a thing as a social form which thinks - "a form of thought that is distinct from thought" (Zizek, 1989: 19).

However, while this thesis has become the cornerstone for a sophisticated theory of fetishism, our wager is that such a social dimension of thought, albeit inherently dislodged from us, does not necessarily coincide with ideology as such. In short: we maintain that the thought produced by social forms must be grasped not only as ideology but also as an idea.

§ 2

Our departing point thus renders meaningful the following question: if there are rational ideas which do not precede the collective, providing a rule for its organization, but are rather produced by the grouping itself, how are we to discern them? That is, what is the local trait - if any - which sets these social ideas apart from group ideals as well as from ideas which could have been thought independently from the institution of a collective project?

This problem leads us to a seemingly distinct field of enquiry, most clearly

approached by Giorgio Agamben in his study of St. Francis in *The Highest Poverty*, where he investigates the relation between rules and life:

> [It] could thus be said that the *regula vitae* is that by means of which one lives, which corresponds perfectly to the expression *regula vivificans* that will define the Franciscan rule in Angelo Clareno. The rule is not applied to life, but produces it and at the same time is produced in it. What type of texts are the rules, then, if they seem to performatively realize the life that they must regulate? And what is a life that can no longer be distinguished from the rule? (Agamben, 2013: 69)

A life that cannot be distinguished from the rule - this is what Agamben calls a form-of-life: a life that cannot be separated from its form without ceasing to be life (Agamben, 2000: 3). At stake in the investigation of the form-of-life is, therefore, a very similar problem to the one we have previously formulated. Marx has shown us that social practices can produce real abstractions, abstractions which are disjunct from any particular thinker of that practice - for example, the fundamental abstraction which produces the homogeneous social being of commodities. Such an abstraction will therefore present two properties: (a) it does not pre-exist the social practice, but is produced by it; (b) it provides the conditions for such practice, but not as a regulative principle to which participants willingly adequate themselves. To affirm that such disjunction between individual thinkers and social thought might in fact produce emancipatory effects means that we must be able to conceive a practice which, not disavowing the existence of this "thought without a thinker", nevertheless establishes a different relation to it than the one encountered in commodity exchange. It is precisely such a novel relation between (abstract) rule and (real) life that Agamben recognizes as a Franciscan invention:

> Paraphrasing the scholastic saying *forma dat esse rei* ("form gives being to the thing"), one could state here that *norma dat esse rei* ("norm gives being to the thing", Conte, p.526). A form of life would thus be the collection of constitutive rules that define it. But can one say in this sense that the monk, like the pawn in chess, is defined by the sum of the prescriptions according to which he lives? Could one not rather say with greater truth exactly the opposite, that it is the monk's form of life that creates his rules? Perhaps both theses are true, on the condition that we specify that rules and life enter here into a zone of indifference, in which - as there is no longer the very

possibility of distinguishing them - they allow a third thing to appear, which the Franciscans, albeit without succeeding in defining it with precision, will call "use". (Agamben, 2013: 71)

In order to unearth the deep resonance between Agamben's study and our own hypothesis, we must first examine the re-doubling of the rule proposed by his reading of the Franciscan form of life. The social form appears here both as the "collection of constitutive rules" which define the practice of a given collectivity and as a strange "formal surplus" of life itself, the collateral consolidation of a certain way of living (ibid: 92), which does not coincide with the written rules to which one's conduct should measure up.

Let us give two complementary examples of this division of the rule into a rule that constrains individual lives and a rule that produces a way of living. The first demonstrates how this redoubling in fact inverts the relation between adequacy and exception to the law in the Franciscan orientation. In one of the oldest commentaries on the monastic rule we find the following statement: "Wearing shoes depends on a dispensation from the rule in the case of necessity; not wearing shoes is the form of life" (Agamben, 2013: 108). That is: the cases which, by some necessity or another, allow the monk to be exempted from following the rule of walking barefoot are all listed and methodically written down, while following the monastic precept, being barefoot, is not written anywhere as a rule. According to this logic, the book of monastic rules would only rule over exceptions to the rule, while following the rule would itself take the form of an absolute exception. Walking barefoot is not "accidentally" left out of the book: were it to be written as a commandment, it would cease to be what it is - for such exceptional habit, when performed, allows us to say of one's life not that it is adequate, but rather that it is *exemplary* (ibid: 14). To maintain the habit of walking barefoot beyond both duty (to submit life to the rule) and the right (to exempt life from certain restrictions) is a condition for it to found a more profound relation with the rule it incarnates: walking barefoot becomes not the case of a rule that preceded the walking, but rather, in walking, the rule itself is being made actual.

However, there is another effect of such a division of the rule: at the point where rule and life become indistinct, we encounter not only the rule which exists only as life, but also the life that exists only as the rule - which Agamben exemplifies with the case of the habitual study of monastic rules by the monks themselves (ibid: 78). As the philosopher notes, within the book of rules we find a chapter on the task of reading out loud from the book of rules once a day, in a continuous fashion, during certain meals. This means that the monks must, at some point, by following this rule, read the text of the chapter which prescribes

this rule itself, a rule whose enactment is to read it. Therefore, at the moment of reading the prescription, which in fact specifies the exact words with which the monk should begin every this reading, "his *lectio* realizes the exemplary instance of an enunciation of the rule that coincides with its execution, of an observance that is rendered indiscernible from the command that it obeys" (ibid: 77)

The re-doubling or division of the law therefore creates a "zone of indifference" between rule and life, where it becomes impossible to tell what is the norm and what is that which follows the norm, for the life which is being ruled is in fact created by the norm itself - that is, "the norm gives being to the thing".

We can recognize here a very similar structure to that of the real abstraction implied in the social form of commodity exchange: the process of thinking the value of commodities is indistinguishable from the process of constitution of the commodities themselves because the comparison which expresses their value is the same operation which consolidates their social being. In this sense, the norm which regulates the social practice does give being to the social thing - this is what is at stake in Slavoj Zizek's logion: "in the social field, the 'as if' is the thing itself" (Zizek, 2010: 285): the postulate of acting "as if" commodities are homogeneous is precisely what constitutes their social being. And it is precisely in such an operation, through which a given practice not only conforms itself to a set of precepts, but produces a formal, abstract dimension that is irreducibly linked to the practical dimension of rule-following, which Agamben seeks to recognize "a new level of consistency of the human experience" (Agamben, 2013: 87).

If the similarity between commodity exchange and the Franciscan form-of-life is grounded on the indistinction between practice and being, the main difference appears in the case of the "third thing" which this indistinction allows for: the practice of consumption, in the first case, and the practice of "use", in the latter. The use-value of a given commodity relies on its material properties, that is, on that dimension of its being which withstands the exclusion from the circuit of exchange - what the social practice conditioned by the form of value produces is not something to be used, so much as the commensurability between heterogeneous "usables". On the other hand, insofar as the indistinction between rule and life in the form-of-life does not so much allow for the existence of the formal normative dimension, but for the vivification of the rule - its interpenetration with the practice both follows and is in exception to the rule - it is rather the social being itself, the "new form of consistency" it allows for, which is given to be enjoyed. In short: commodity fetishism allows us to make a living out of the exchange of what we use, while the Franciscan form-of-life allows us to *make use of a way of living*. And why is this form of use

something distinct from consumption? Because it cannot be appropriated (ibid: 143): were I to remove myself from the social practice in order to enjoy this life on my own, this life itself would be lost, the very consistency of the thing I desire to use would be lost, for it would no longer be the vivified liturgy it just was.

A constituted practice that is constitutive of a formal life - such seems to be the core of the Franciscan invention: to put the point of indistinction between (real) practice and (abstract) rule into work by conceiving of a way of life in which this useless element of the social form - which we have called a thought - becomes a new and communal form of use, distinct from the use value (use subsumed under the commodity form). In this sense, Agamben's study of the form-of-life constitutes a first step in our investigation of what it would mean to discern an idea whose very rational ground depends on the institution of a given communal practice: such an idea could only be used, but not appropriated.

Our initial wager has been that there are ideas which are only thinkable on the condition of a practical engagement with certain forms of institutional organization. This led us, as a first step, to examine the notion of real abstraction at play in commodity fetishism. As we have shown, Marx's analysis of the form of value hinges on two operations: (a) an indiscernibility between thought and social being, insofar as the value-relation which abstracts from all concrete determination of the commodities being compared (their social being) is indistinguishable from the act of comparing two commodities in order for the first to get its immaterial value expressed as the material body of the other (making value thinkable); and (b) a de-centrement of this coincidence in regards to thought, for the site where "being and thinking are the same" only takes place negatively: it is not what we, as participants of the act of exchange, think, but rather the thought implicated in the very social form of our practices.

This initial investigation led us to recognize that "there is a kind of reality whose very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants" (Zizek, 1989: 15) - that is, social being is conditioned by an abstraction which it also produces, but this thought takes place outside, and despite, of us.

But if the concept of real abstraction does in fact allow us to verify a fundamental aspect of our initial hypothesis, it nevertheless falls short of providing us with any insight as to the possibility of turning the disjunction between our engagement with a social form and the form of thought it produces itself into something useful for everyone. In order to think such a novel form of use, whose object is precisely the point of indistinction between the consistency of a practice and that of its thought, we then turned to Agamben's study of the Franciscan form-of-life.

By turning to the relation between rule and life, as a reformulation of the

question of thought and being in social practices, we have also turned to a social structure which verifies operations (a) and (b), described above, in a clearly institutional realm - in opposition to a more general and diffuse concept of sociality. This is an important step, because one of the possible ways to negate the validity of our hypothesis would be not to so much to deny it, but rather to trivialize it, claiming that this is such a fundamental characteristic of ideas in general that it is a mere platitude to insist on this property as a special case. It is therefore crucial to affirm that we do not simply mean that ideas are inherently dependent on the socio-historical fabric of the time in which they are born, a thesis which would indeed be somewhat trivial, but rather that certain consistent thoughts are conditioned by particular institutional forms of organization, forms which can be constructed and which have, therefore, a *duration*: social structures which begin, endure, and possibly end. Our thesis does not concern sociality as such so much as one's engagement with a localized collective practice, such as the one organized by the monastic rules of the Franciscans - or by a Communist Party.

However, this clarification only opens up the field for a much more precise interrogation of our hypothesis: we could very well accept that consistent and rational ideas are dependent upon the basic tenets of sociality, because the resources for rationality are indeed indistinguishable from those of language - this would be the "trivialized" hypothesis - but how could it be the case that structures built upon these resources, that a submission to rules which we could otherwise suspend, might affect the space of what is thinkable?

§ 3

In order to recognize Agamben's own contribution to this problem, we might reformulate this division between a "constitutive" and an "instituted" social space in terms of the difference between survival and life.

Let us take up the following distinction, already proposed by Marx: at the constitutive level of our capitalist sociality, to survive and to live cannot be immediately distinguished - or better: only value presents the auto-poetic and transformative form of living proper (the "organic unity" of capital). The consequence of a mode of production where the organization of labor is mediated by the value form is that the concrete activity of men is directed by the reproduction of life, that is, their animal survival, while the abstract and universal quality of labor, the generic capacity of this transformative potency, is placed at the service of the production of surplus-value. In other words, the "what" and "how" of our laboral activities is determined by the market (we work on what will allow us to continue to exist) while the self-relating, self-

transforming dimension of labor becomes the relation between value and valorization (capital). Unlike what is suggested by some accounts of Marxism, the domain of "use values" is not exterior to the form of value simply because it is the domain of concrete properties of objects - as Marx writes in the very first pages of *Capital*, there is a *history of use* ("the discovery of these ways and hence of the manifold uses of things is the work of history" (Marx,1976: 125)) so that utility and usefulness are not unaffected by the different modes of production and intercourse which mediate their intelligibility as uses. Another way of putting it is to say that the form of use *defined by its opposition to the abstract* is a historically determined form of relation between man and things that is as much mediated by the form of value as the relation between commodities. This is why no plea for a return to "concrete" things truly manages to point a way out of the capitalist economical form. Furthermore, the recently developed theory of the general intellect as the immanent (immediate) production of something common, a theory which relies heavily on a particular fragment of Marx's *Grundrisse*, equally misses the point: the fact that knowledge is potentially available to all, insofar as the knowledge-commodity presents an inherent tension with the property-form which encloses it, does not mean that the access to this knowledge brings about a new form-of-life - it is perfectly possible to have access to something and still be unable to *participate* in it. The theory of general intellect as a recuperation of the "generic life" of man equally confuses having access to the use-value of knowledge (its consumption for the reproduction of an expanded or more complex form of survival) with the effective capacity to "live by" ideas in the sense Agamben touches upon in his theory of forms: to give something of ourselves in the ruled processes that allow ideas to consist.

We see, thus, that in Agamben's theory of forms-of-life, it is not only a new concept of form that is at stake (one in which rules participate in the constitution of what there is to be enjoyed) but also of a new concept of life. This is not life as what exists privately, in man's relation to himself and to his needs, but rather as the access to a sort of fragile fruition - locally, but collectively constructed - which adds nothing to the existence and reproduction of people, and which cannot be owned (it is collectively produced through rule-following), cannot be consumed (it is not a concrete thing whose properties could be depleted or destroyed) and corresponds to no particular need of any particular person.

Marx himself, in his *Parisian Manuscripts*, writes of a situation which directly resonates with Agamben's proposal:

In order to supersede the idea of private property, the idea of

communism is enough. In order to supersede private property as it actually exists, real communist activity is necessary. History will give rise to such activity, and the movement which we already know in thought to be a self-superseding movement will in reality undergo a very difficult and protracted process. But we must look upon it as a real advance that we have gained, at the outset, an awareness of the limits as well as the goal of this historical movement and are in a position to see beyond it.

When communist workmen gather together, their immediate aim is instruction, propaganda, etc. But at the same time, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means had become an end. This practical development can be most strikingly observed in the gatherings of French socialist workers. Smoking, eating, and drinking, etc., are no longer means of creating links between people. Company, association, conversation, which in turn has society as its goal, is enough for them. The brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures (Marx 1974: 302)

Let us work through this passage in some detail. First of all, Marx distinguishes the "idea" from the "real activity": the idea of private property from its actual existence, the idea of communism from its real movement. As usual with Marx, this is not merely a distinction of registers, between the abstract and the concrete presentation of a given thing. The idea of communism can in fact work *against* the real communist movement, insofar as, from the standpoint of an idea that has no effective reality, "the real estrangement of human life remains and is all the greater the more one is conscious of it as such" (ibidem). The actual communist movement, however, does not overcome the actual relations mediated by private property so easily as its ideal version: communist practice, in reality, moves slowly, step by step, it undergoes "a very difficult and protracted process". But Marx suggests that the very shift away from the abstract realm of the idea to the harsh reality of concrete struggle is already "real advance": being aware of "the limits as well as the goal of this historical movement" constitutes our first victory as communists. There is a great sense of pragmatic realism here, a true conviction that being exposed to our real limitations is preferable to being trapped in a dream of great things, without actuality.

The second paragraph, however, introduces a strange twist into this orientation. Marx stops speaking of communist strategy in general terms and turns to the "communist workmen" gathered together for the purposes of

accomplishing some tasks of importance for the political movement: agitation, propaganda, political formation. This active movement, a painfully difficult process of liberation - which is a hundred times more important than the work of philosophers, seating home, aloof, thinking of the idea of freedom - is nonetheless suddenly interrupted or distorted by the appearance of "a new need". This new need has a very peculiar structure, because, unlike the "real estrangement of human life", which can only be superseded by the actual overcoming of private property, it can find satisfaction in the present, in the very process of socialization of workers. This new need, which is *produced* by the very formal dimension of the organization, the forming of workers, inverts the relation between means and ends: rather than organize in order to accomplish certain tasks of interest for the movement, the communist workmen take part in the harsh struggle for actual communism so that they can engage in "smoking, eating and drinking". In a sense, they become, in their pleasure in "company, association, conversation", like the lazy philosophers Marx had just criticized, who think of communism for the pleasure of thinking. However, here, the free association of men, unlike in the case of the philosopher, freely associating ideas, is a reality. A reality which Marx emphatically praises, even though it does not present itself as an effective contribution to the actually existing communist movement.

This "new need", which takes the form of a new satisfaction, an uncalled for pleasure, makes a sudden and unwanted appearance here. From the standpoint of those who, having abandoned the narcissistic satisfaction of wallowing in the ideal, dedicate themselves to the actual communist practice, with all its grit and frustrations, to suddenly have their hard-earned efforts of collective mobilization turned into a "mere" means for people to gather and talk can only be experienced as a deviation, a stoppage or even a betrayal. But they are powerless against it. As Jacques Rancière puts it:

> Here is the problem that is likely to transform the enthusiasm of the communist into the despair of the revolutionary - the nobility of humanity *already* shining on brows that should have lost even the appearance of it in order to produce the future of humanity. […] The obstacle to the transformation of Straubinger communists into revolutionary proletarians is not their status as artisans, but their status as communists - not the heavy weight of their journeyman past but the lightness of their anticipation of the communist future (Rancière, 2003: 82-3)

Without a theory of this "vivified" dimension of collective organization which

serves no need which pre-existed its formation - that is, without a practical place for this strange short-circuit between means and ends - it becomes impossible to prevent the insistent and recurring split within the revolutionary movement, a split between those moving in the direction of a future transformation of society, and those who, having suddenly been exposed to this "new need - the need for society", relish in its present satisfaction.

Rancière has dedicated much of his work to the question of the status of knowledge within such organizations. Both in his *Proletarian Nights* as well as in the specific case of Jacotot, in the *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the philosopher studies the relation between the constitution of a space where *progress towards an end is suspended* and the sort of intellectual capacity that was formed by this collective suspension. In the case of Jacotot, Rancière speaks of the space created with this "new need" as the forming of a "circle of power":

> The circle of powerlessness is always already there: it is the very workings of the social world, hidden in the evident difference between ignorance and science. The circle of power, on the other hand, can only take effect by being made public. But it can only appear as a tautology or an absurdity. How can the learned master ever understand that he can teach what he doesn't know as successfully as what he does know? He cannot but take that increase in intellectual power as a devaluation of his science. And the ignorant one, on his side, doesn't believe himself capable of learning by himself, much less of being able to teach another ignorant person. Those excluded from the world of intelligence themselves subscribe to the verdict of their exclusion. In short, the circle of emancipation must be begun (Ranciere, 1991:16)

However, what does it mean to "begin" such a process? For Rancière, it means, first of all, a collective engagement with the affirmation of a form of equality. Not a positive equality, like the positing of people's equal capacity to accomplish some task, to learn some given content, etc, but rather a negative one: instead of the indelible inequality before knowledge (for some men do know more than others), Rancière focuses on the axiomatic equality of men *before any man's ignorance*. This can be translated into the following proposition: a man that cannot transmit to others what he knows, does not know. If a man desires to know something, he then equally desires for someone else to be able to verify that he knows. Within the "circle of power', those involved are not treated as if they carry knowledge that they were previously unaware of, some hidden content waiting to be shared, but begin to partake in

a form through which t*heir ignorance can be put to use*: if one desires to learn something, he will demand a master not because he needs someone to teach him, because he needs someone who knows more than him, but rather because he needs someone who, in the process of being taught by him, will be in position to verify that he in fact came to know. The circle of power is therefore the circle where ignorance is itself formed into a potency. And, accordingly, one of the principal consequences of this strange association between collective engagement and intellectual effort is that the question of the *content* of a given knowledge becomes secondary to the form in which this knowledge is acquired:

> [Jacotot's] problem wasn't the instruction of the people: one instructed the recruits enrolled under one's banner, subalterns who must be able to understand orders, the people one wanted to govern - in the progressive way, of course, without divine right and only according to the hierarchy of capacities. His own problem was that of emancipation: that every common person might conceive his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity, and decide how to use it. (...) whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies. And whoever emancipated doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe. He will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind" (Ranciere, 1991: 18)

Rancière finds in the workers' circles - places where the very intellectual empowerment of the poor made them uninteresting for the revolutionaries, who were rather interested in raising "class consciousness" - a secular embodiment of Agamben's Franciscan organizations. A circle of power is, quite precisely, a form-of-life where living - one's human dignity - is indistinguishable from form - from the collective affirmation of ignorance's power - and where this indistinction, finally, is available for each participant to "decide how to use it".

What remains unclear is the connection between this negative moment - the potency of ignorance, after all, is not yet an idea - and its collective consequences. Rancière himself, following Jacotot, stops short of developing this next step, as both of them consider this "new need" produced by the circle to revert, in the next moment, to the private sphere of each separate individual. It is true that there is a moment of collective mediation - it takes at least two ignorant men for learning without a teacher to take place - but each decides on their own how to use this potency in a way that is not indebted to the form which preceded it. Neither Rancière nor Jacotot believe the circle to have institutional consistency, nor that the duration of this collective endeavor could

condition the access to what it has made possible.

§ 4

One of the reasons for this limitation is that, for Rancière, the process of emancipation prompted by this engagement renders *all knowledge* indifferent: an emancipated man "will learn what he wants, nothing maybe". While this is true - an organization where ignorance is the common measure, rather than knowledge, truly has no way of determining what one should, could or must learn - there is still another domain in which knowledge and thinking might be at stake, a domain we have debated in the very beginning of our study: that of the social form itself. A circle which suspends its aims must also suspend any determination of what one must know or think, but in order to exist, such a circle must itself *be an embodiment of a form of thought*. After all, there are collectives which are incapable of surviving the suspension of their future goals, which cannot function without an operating ideal, while others, such as Rancière's "circles of power", insist in the absence of such an orientation. In this distinction, there are different ways of abstracting at stake - on the one hand, groups that abstract from their ignorance to focus on their common knowledge, on the other, collectives that abstract from what they know in order to turn ignorance into a common potency.

What this means is that, in order to understand the new place of thinking in a circle where a certain indifference to thought is promoted, we need a theory of ideas which would allow us to state that, while the individual participants of a collective might be busy with their private concerns, the very institution they compose *goes on thinking*.

There is perhaps no other philosopher today more equipped to supplement our Zizekian theory of social forms - of collective forms in which there is thought outside of thinking subjects - than Alain Badiou and his theory of political ideas.

For Badiou, thinking is not a particularly conscious or unconscious activity - its principal property is to produce and maintain an *immanent indifference* to its given domain. This does not in fact contradict the Freudian theory of the unconscious, for the unconscious is nothing but the fact of an indistinction, attesting to the lack of determinate difference (a signifier) between the sexes. Nor does it exclude the possibility that there be conscious thinking - in certain cases, one might very well experience such localized indifference but, ontologically, this would be rather accidental. But this definition of thought also applies to domains that are simply heterogeneous to the scale and form of individual consciousness: scientific texts, artistic works, inventions of love

and political organizations. There is nothing preventing us from stating that *a collective organization thinks* - even though the thought implicated in such a being might not be homogenous to the thought of any of those who compose it. Different forms of organization answer to particular and concrete organizational problems, to quite material challenges, just like Jacotot's circle was an experimental answer to the problem "can there be learning without the positing of the inequality of intelligences?". The limitation of Rancière's theory is to assume that this answer was to be found in the thinking of the participants of the circle, rather than on the circle itself as a social form of thinking.

What is equally important for us, however, is that Badiou associates his theory of "immanent ideas" to the distinction between survival and life, which we have already explored. That is, the "signal" at the individual level of the participation in an idea is not the conscious apprehension of this thought, but rather the transformation of survival into a life worth living - a live "according to an Idea". In opposition to survival, which for Badiou - as for Marx - means the domain of the reproduction of individual human beings, in whatever degree of complexity these might take, to live means "to participate, point by point, in the organization of a new body, in which a faithful subjective formalism comes to take root". (Badiou, 2009: 35). But in order to understand how life and form are related in his account, we must briefly attend to the concepts of *formalism* and *participation*.

While Agamben talks about forms mostly with the juridical field in view, that is, in terms of *norms* and *rules*, Badiou thinks formalism from the standpoint of mathematical activity - but what is gained in this shift? For our purposes here, it suffices to realize that a juridical rule has a reach bound by a given community - it is a form based on a constitutive *difference*, which is why the French philosopher Lyotard, studying the problem of rule-following and juridical norms, coined the term *differend*, to name the fundamental impasse that takes place in the encounter between two "different differences", the impossibility to translate the rules of a community into the rules of another. Mathematical formalism, on the other hand, is essentially a set of rules bound by *indifference* - indifference to consciousness (it can contradict our intuitions), to community (its deductive power does not respect particular customs) and even to the physical world (there are consistent formal systems with no natural models at all). This does not mean that Badiou considers all formalism to be mathematical, but rather that only a concept of formalism based on indifferentiation could *also* apply to mathematics - it is the most *general* concept of formalism.

The importance of this definition of formalism for Badiou's theory of life shines forth if we remember Marx's discussion, in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, on the transformative and universal dimension of human practice, that dimension which

exists only as capital when human practice is mediated by value as a social form. For Marx, the generic life of man, that which truly defines what it means to live, is one's capacity to participate in the universal, in the transformation of the very concept of what it means to be human. In a sense, the generic is the *inhuman* in man, or at least the *not-yet-human*, for it concerns those activities and productions which fall outside the current concept of humanity. By thinking forms from the standpoint of their indifference to a given situation, Badiou is in fact connecting the capacity of formal experiments to exceed what in-forms them - formalism's *negative universality* - back to Marx's theory of genericity, which was, all along, the Marxian theory of a true life. In short, it is only by participating in forms which exceed their own material - exceed the confines of a community, an experience, a consciousness - that people have access to a life that is not mere survival. Rancière's description of the "circle of power" falls short of properly accounting for the experience it investigates - the experience of partaking in the "new need" recognized by Marx's analysis of the inversion of means and ends in certain workingmen's organizations - because it thinks emancipation solely in regards to what people are *freed from* - freed from teachers, freed from inequality - and, from that standpoint, nothing might come from paying attention to the organization which promoted this emancipation, since considering this institutional dimension a conditional form for this experience would mean binding the "unbinding" back into something, and therefore losing it. Badiou's theory, however, thinks emancipation also as *freedom to accomplish something* - that is, freedom to participate in an Idea.

This participation, as we have mentioned in passing, is nonetheless not the same as conscious apprehension, sentiment, or even personal experience. Let us recall that, in Plato's theory of "participation" (*metaxu*), developed through several of his later dialogues, this term is evoked as a way to explain the relation between the sensible and the realm of idealities, the relation between the local case and the general form. A given chair "participates" in the idea of Chair - its multiple being is seen as 'one' from the standpoint of the Idea of which it partakes. This could lead us to assume that "to participate in an Idea", in the case of a political organization, would mean to treat the actual concrete organization as the local case, and our apprehension of it, or our imagination of its ideal version, as the form - but what we get is rather the opposite: the organization itself, in the indifferent or negative universality of the formalism it embodies, is rather what carries traits of the general or generic idea, and *those who are formed by it* - workers, ignorant men, etc - are the multiple unified *from the standpoint of the social formation*. Participation becomes, for Badiou, the name of an immanent mediation between two regions of the world, a set of determined beings and a practical formalism which in-differs from its

determined situation.

When Marx describes the congregation of French socialist workers, gathered for the purpose of "instruction, propaganda, etc", but, strangely satisfied by "company, association, conversation", their apparent lack of revolutionary goals should not deceive us: they might be occupied with "smoking, eating and drinking", but the organization composed by them goes on thinking. It is *from the standpoint of this form* that "the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures"

§ 5

It is important to realize that Rancière's investigations on the workers' circles in the eighteenth century were carried out as a response to a first - and failed - attempt to take creative revolutionary thinking in Europe out of the university and back into militant organizations. That is, Rancière was answering to the practical failure of Louis Althusser's effort to reverse the consolidated tendency which had displaced critical thinking from political organizations into academia.

In schematic terms, there has been an observable shift in the site of elaboration of political theory in the Left before and after the Second World War. If the beginning of the century saw a profusion of thinkers whose ideas were deeply connected with the political processes in which they took part - consider, for example, the relation between different theoretical positions of Russian revolutionaries and their practical engagements before and after the Bolshevik revolution, or Lukacs' (best) theoretical work and its connection to the struggles of the Communist Party of Hungary in the 20s - the rise of fascism brought about a novel dissociation between political thinking and political engagement. Many important and creative thinkers turned their political engagements towards armed combat and resistance against the fascist threat, while at some point securing academic positions at universities which could guarantee them some basic stability during such dark and troublesome times. Furthermore, the increasing visibility of the atrocities taking place in the Soviet Union, plus the dissolution of the Third International, also led people away from Communist Parties and in search of a place where critical thinking - and criticisms of party politics - could properly flourish. The paradigmatic case of this trend was, perhaps, that of the Frankfurt School, which even gave an institutional form to this division between political militancy and critical thinking, but it is a division that lives on until today, usually taking the form of critical thinking directed against the ossifying, alienating and militaristic effects of collective organization in general.

Althusser, who also fought in the war and later established himself

as a philosophy professor at the university, did nonetheless contribute to the inversion of this movement. The force for this alternative route, which distinguished him and his students from the well-established Marxist *intelligentsia* of the times, was surely the influence of Maoism, which inflated new life into the theory of party politics and into theory in general, through its commitment to a conception of practice as the origin of "correct ideas". And the palpable effects of this commitment can truly be felt in Althusser's method and thinking: not only did he establish an unusually horizontalist interlocution with his students - informally developing a methodology of work that would accompany him for all his life, informing his writing and style - but the very consolidation of his theoretical project, with the publication of *Reading Capital* (1968), was itself a collective endeavor. This tendency to infuse theoretical work with a collective form was also apparent elsewhere: Althusser was one of the few Marxists of his time who remained faithful to both the French Communist Party and to the idea that Marxist "concrete analysis of concrete situations" should also apply to militant institutions themselves. These two Althusserian intuitions - firstly, promoting collective research projects, and, secondly, positing critique from within rather than outside institutions - can be understood as the cornerstone upon which a return of thinking to political organizations is conditioned.

However, it is interesting to note that even if Althusser helped to demonstrate the need for a new form of association between collective practice and critical thinking, the actual consolidation of a group based on this Althusserian principle did not include him. The *Cercle d'Epistemologie*, composed of some of his most brilliant students, was conceived outside strict academic confines, taking upon itself the task of editing an innovative journal of politics, philosophy and psychoanalysis called the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, in which the basis for a new theory of discursivity was to be collectively elaborated. Unfortunately, the journal as well as the *Cercle* did not survive the intense political activity of the end of the sixties in France: insofar as the project was mostly organized around a sophisticated theoretical production, with no clear view of its own institutional or political stakes, it could not withstand the sort of tensioned association between students and workers that characterized militant experimentation in that historical sequence. Even though the members of the *Cercle d'Epistemologie* have mostly explained the group's disintegration in terms of their different positions towards the political movement in France - some displaying a more strict to Maoism, others much less so - it is clear that the very form of the project revealed itself to be detached from the organizational challenges of its time (Hallward & Peden, 2012). Simultaneous to the development of the *Cercle*, however, there was also the foundation of

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic School, the *École Freudienne de Paris*, arguably the greatest experiment in collective organization in France at the time. Lasting from the mid-sixties to the early eighties, the EFP was a project that, curiously enough, also counted with the presence of Althusser both in its beginning and its termination (Tupinambá & Yao, 2013: 405-435) . Leaving aside the many merits and failures of this endeavor - which would deserve a full analysis in its own right (Hamza ed, 2015: 159) - we should not underestimate its importance to the shift of investment which led some of the most active members of the *Cercle* away from their own collective and towards the construction of the School. This fact is noteworthy because it reveals how some of the missing elements in the Althusserian "scientific" view of collectivity were perhaps to be found in the debates over the collective organization of Lacanian psychoanalysts at the time (Tupinambá & Yao, 2013).

Rancière was not part of the *Cercle* - even though he had taken part, alongside some of them, in Althusser's *Reading Capital* project a few years before - but we can easily understand his conceptual turn away from Althusserian themes and towards the archives of the worker's movements as a response to the failure, of both his master and his peers, to jointly articulate collective engagement and thinking. Rancière's work, from *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1975) up to *Le Maître Ignorant* (1987), has been usually read as a fierce critique of the fetishization of the working class by the revolutionary movement - which it mostly definitely is. As Rancière demonstrates, specially in his *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (1983), the paradigm of production in certain Marxist trends leads to a fetishization of the worker that effectively prevents equality from ever taking place amongst comrades. But we also find in these studies the basis for an alternative theory of thinking that is indissociable from collective organization. As we have already discussed previously in this text, Rancière finds in Joseph Jacotot's "universal method of emancipation" a theory that binds the engaged wager on equality with the creation of a space for learning. However, as we have also seen, neither Jacotot nor Rancière take the additional step of conceiving the experience of the emancipatory workers' circles as the basis for a new form of organization: for both of them the engagement with this affirmation, albeit tying one person to another through a common ignorance, does not constitute a durable social link.

It is within this long history of failed or incomplete attempts to associate collective organization and creative thinking that the *Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology* (CSII) seeks to inscribe itself as yet another precarious step forward.

The *Circle* was created in 2012 with the aim of incorporating the lessons extracted from these previous experiments into the ongoing movement of re-

connecting collective engagement with theoretical production, in a renewed attempt to both challenge and revitalize the party-form under contemporary conditions. In its guiding document, the *Circle* refers its own name back to four crucial tasks that fall upon any attempt to work through the conjunction of thinking and partisanship today, connecting these challenges to four thinkers we have already mentioned here:

(1) The construction of a *Circle* which distinguishes between two parts within a political party – one transitive dimension, focused on the specific demands of the world as it is, and an intransitive dimension that, from the point of view of the world, doesn't answer to any specific demand – must be able to distinguish between a political dimension driven by *finality* and another one guided by *uselessness*. Thus, the construction of the space of the Circle depends of our capacity to know what is a *community without a purpose*.This task is named by Giorgio Agamben.

(2) A Circle of *Studies*, whose emblem proposes the articulation of thought with militancy, has the duty of transforming its own operation into an example of this approach. Thus, it is necessary to invent a concept of study that makes possible *a productive use of mastery* – setting power at service of knowledge – as well as asserting a method of work capable of establishing a bond between the participants based on *common problems* – producing power from the vicissitudes of knowledge. This task is named by Jacques Rancière.

(3) A Circle of Studies of the *Idea* – a space dedicated to the invention of a concrete institution, but whose constructive principle is something that does not exist yet – needs to be able affirm that practice can be oriented by what is inexistent and indistinguishable from a thought. In other words, it is necessary to investigate in what way can politics be understood as *the incarnation of an Idea*. This task is named by Alain Badiou.

(4) A Circle of Studies of Idea and *Ideology* cannot, however, stop questioning the difference between the work of transforming the world and the expenditure of energy invested on repeating our current coordinates. That is, we need to conceive how the existing social bonds might be further tightened by our efforts to break them, and, from this investigation, think about what would be *a political intervention* irreducible to the ideological processes that put the will of change into the service and maintenance of the present. This task is named by Slavoj Žižek. (CSII, 2016)

These four points are then summarized in the following wager:

> At the crossroads of their philosophical projects, we find one of the most radical attempts to produce a new formulation of the communist hypothesis, as well as its most courageous reaffirmation, by the shared premise that the opaque core of what is *common* – the uselessness, the ignorance, the inexistent and the symptom – is also what links thought and militancy (CSII, 2016)

§ 6

The *Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology* explicitly takes upon itself the task of continuing an experimentation which, in fact, has not been conceived as such by its own precursors. In the previous section we have briefly sketched the genealogy of the problem and introduced the *Circle*'s affirmation of belonging to the experimental history of articulations between organization and thinking. In this section we will concentrate on describing some of the formal mechanisms which characterize the group's functioning.

CSII's composition has become increasingly complex in the last few years. Currently, it is a collective which counts with more than 50 members, spread around more than 5 countries, working alongside political parties and trade unions in Brazil, organizing academic events in different countries, book translations, study groups, experimenting with the use of psychoanalysis in political strategic thinking, as well engaging with different militant activities. Still, this complexity is supported by a few formal mechanisms that guarantee the *Circle*'s basic unity. What interests us in our brief analysis of this collective is to understand in which sense this unity can truly be based on "the opaque core of what is common": that is, we are interested in the concrete collective experiment the *Circle* has produced through its appropriation of the theoretical resources presented thus far.

Let us take a look at four different aspects of this formal structure: how to enter the *Circle*, how to stay in, how to position oneself in it, and how to make its failures productive.

(A) Entry
In order to join the group, one has to fill in an admittance form, divided into two sections: one demanding objective information about the candidate, another asking for the proponent to write a commentary on the *Circle*'s project. The submitted form, however, is not evaluated by the members of the collective

based on its content, or even based on the political identifications of the candidate: rather, what is evaluated is whether the form has been filled in a way that de-authorizes it. For example, some candidates, when faced with the need to submit to a formal entry procedure, seem to feel obliged to write in their forms that they do not believe in admittance forms, either by explicitly stating it, or by leaving parts of the form simply blank. In those cases, the *Circle* evaluates the form negatively - and an email is sent back to the candidate, explicitly stating the reasons for refusal and inviting her to submit a new form. In every other case, regardless of the content of the comments submitted, the form is accepted.

In this sense, the admittance form functions a bit like the "door of the Law" in Kafka's parable: it looks like an examination will take place - and many people do in fact become paralyzed before the obscurely simple criteria of entry - but the only wrong answer is to dismiss the examination as illegitimate. This is an essential condition, nonetheless: were the *Circle* to approve everyone indistinctively, its entry form would be a mere *formality*, but insofar as the very fact of legitimately filling it creates the object to be positively evaluated in the group's voting process, the admittance form becomes part of a *formalism* - that is, the object under analysis is not the external referent represented by the written form (who the applicant is, his political beliefs and so on), but what the form itself creates, its most superficial and internal consistency.

(B) Permanence

However, the entry form is not the determining operator of belonging in the *Circle*'s logic. Rather than deriving consistency from a mechanism that distinguishes the inside from the outside of the collective, CSII relies on a different protocol which privileges the connection of one meeting to the next: the work note.

Once someone is accepted into the *Circle*, the only necessary commitment of this participant is to write, after every meeting, a short anonymous note - of any content whatsoever. Every cell meets on a weekly basis, but one's presence in these meetings is in fact considered secondary to the handing in of the work notes: it is the presence of the writing that marks one's engagement with the project, not the physical presence in the meeting space. As written in the *Circle*'s project:

> All work is supported by the following affirmation: presence at the meetings is not a guarantee of thought – by this we mark the distinction between presence and participation. Presence allows for the creation of cohesion through a common sense, invariably

produced when a group discusses a common subject. Participation, on the other hand, is how we can subtract from such cohesion the reason for engaging with what resists understanding. The mechanism which operates the distinction between presence and participation is the work note. (CSII, 2016)

All notes written by the members of a given cell are then gathered together and a minimal systematization of these fragments orients the debate and study to take place in the following meeting. If a participant fails to hand in four notes in a row, the next meeting is cancelled - and if the missing notes are still not accounted for, she is then considered to have abandoned the Circle. This is how the notes are described in CSII's project:

> The work note is a text without any restriction on theme or size, and which must be written both individually and anonymously. The anatomy of the work note serves three different functions:
> (a) The work note is a small fragment of individual development
> (b) The work note is the text which guides the direction of the next meeting of the cell
> (c) The work note is a marker of discipline, a written seal of regular commitment

If the work note is a fragment of elaboration, it is because the one who writes it thereby materially fixes his doubts, which can then be assumed and worked on. While the work note is an individual undertaking, it is also, as any form of labor, a social vector – a well constructed note is one which transforms an individual lack of knowledge into a collective lack of knowledge, thereby becoming of use for the whole Circle. (CSII, 2016)

The case of the work notes already gives us a hint of how one might operationalize the idea of a "negative mediation" between collective organization and thinking. After all, the content of the notes is not prescribed anywhere, it is only the formal fact of writing that truly counts as a marker of one's engagement with the collectivity. The heterogeneous content of the work notes is thus supplemented by the homogeneous form of commitment it allows for. And while the formal discipline of writing the notes guarantees the continuation of the cell, the questions, commentaries, criticisms put to writing direct the theoretical elaborations of the group without the presupposition of consensus amongst its members.

Finally, it is interesting to realize that this seemingly simple formal discipline - to write down, after every meeting, an anonymous note of any theme

and length - is the source of the greatest anxiety for most members. As with the case of the entry form, the suspension of any criteria of what should and should not be written creates an indeterminate space that is usually filled with the participant's fantasies of what is expected of them, etc. Because of this, the work notes become a privileged site, within the organization, where the libidinal impasses of organization are enacted.

The formal indifference at stake in both the admittance and the permanence processes shares some similarities with the "golden rule" of psychoanalysis: the rule of free association. In psychoanalysis, the suspension of any extrinsic constraints on what the patient should speak of is an essential condition for the "realization of the unconscious" (Lacan, 1981) and the establishment of transference - for it is precisely in such absence that the *intrinsic* constraints of speech shine forth, rules that command what we can and cannot say, even though there is no external ruler demanding us to obey this. The production of an agent concretely responsible for these intrinsic deviations - someone who knows this imperative that one cannot but obey - is what we call transference, and the work of the analyst is to refer the supposition of this agency or knowledge back to the speaker, through scansions, interpretations and so on.

In the *Circle*, the indeterminate space created by the purely formal character of the work notes produces a similar absence, which is equally followed by a certain form of transferential work, of displacements and suppositions concerning other members and the group itself. This enactment or realization of transference ultimately allows the *Circle* to treat some of its obstacles - and the "other" who would be responsible for such interdictions - as objects of interpretation, even though there is no one in the position of an analyst: as it turns out, the analytic effects in a collective need to be *formally homogenous* with the site of their intervention in order to produce any sort of effective transformation, which is why only collective interventions are capable of interpreting these symptomatic formations (Hamza & Ruda ed, 2015: 133).

(C) Positions

The constitution of a *Circle* cell requires that there be at least two people, for this is the minimal number necessary for distributing the two basic positions which compose its functioning: the "Plus one" and the General Secretary. The position of the "Plus one" was invented by Jacques Lacan as a way of preventing the work groups in his School - which he called "cartels" - from using the collective work as an excuse to fortify the identificatory traits between the participants of those groups, which would further consolidate the already existing "doxa" and hinder the appearance of new ideas (Lacan, 2001: 229-242).

In order to avoid this, Lacan proposed that each group would include "plus one" member, someone whose principal function would be to provoke the remaining members to work through new ideas, relentlessly questioning any collective production and thereby preventing them from turning collective work into a mechanism of confirmation of their own common sense. In the *Circle*, a similar mechanism was adopted for every cell, but with an essential variation. This is because, contrary to Lacan's own proposal, the *Circle* cells are not "project-oriented", that is, they are not means to a specific goal or product, so that, after achieving it or completing a work cycle, the group would disintegrate. Since one of the principle tasks of the *Circle*'s organization is precisely to find a possible mediation between *duration* (militancy) and *difference* (thinking), some adaptations to this position had to be made.

First of all, in the *Circle*, the "Plus One" becomes a position that anyone could occupy - it is not connected, as in Lacanian Schools, with a certain degree of personal analytic experience. Unlike the "desire for absolute difference" (Lacan, 1981: 276) in psychoanalysis, which can only be produced through a singular and painstaking analytic process, the position of the "Plus One" in the *Circle* is readily available to all. Why? Because - and this is a second transformation of the Lacanian concept - the task of the "Plus One" is not conceived as that of provoking elaboration through the dissolution of what is common. To understand this, we must only remember that the psychoanalytic Schools starts off from homogeneity - for every participant of a "cartel" is a psychoanalyst of the same theoretical orientation as the other, so homogeneity and consistency are presupposed by the group - and so, in those cases, the "Plus One" could only introduce difference *against* the consolidation of these commonalities. Here, however, the group *begins* from heterogeneity - the *Circle* accepts anyone, with no particular requirements of age, academic background or social class - and difference is introduced precisely through the forcing of this heterogeneity into a partial synthesis of the collected work notes, that is, by being treated as the intersection or common point of the collective. The "Plus One" remains, as with Lacan, responsible for keeping common sense in check, but not through skepticism or critical punctuations - which would still be interventions concerning the *content* of the notes - but through a *formal* "short-circuiting" of seemingly incongruent work notes, exposing the members to a collective association of their private ideas. Since this is a formal work - which produces not an "absolute difference", but rather a common indifference - there is no personal experience, knowledge or desire required to occupy this place. The challenge for desire - the anguish - is rather on the side of the participants, who have the boundaries of their private thoughts removed without the excuse of any sort of positive communion. In fact, it is up to the members of the cell

to interpret any crystallization of the "Plus One" into a master or teacher when, faced with the effects of its purely formal work, they seek to credit its consequences to a substantial or personalized cause - such as the particularities of the participant occupying this position.

If the psychoanalytic-inspired position of the "Plus One" has effects, above all, on the *Circle*'s study methodology, the position of the General Secretary is specially concerned with the material conditions of existence of the group, always seeking to confront the space of thought within the collective with the collective effort required to maintain it. The position of Secretary has a long tradition in Leftist political organizations, where it is usually conceived as the instance that is responsible for the administrative supervision of the institution. From this classical conception, the *Circle* retained the Secretary's responsibility over the administrative functioning and over the material resources of a given cell, as well as the understanding that this position must be financially remunerated, for it constitutes a labor activity, like any other. In this way, no matter how small a *Circle* cell might be, the question of how to materially maintain its space is always kept in view. But the General Secretary of a cell is not solely responsible for guaranteeing that the material basis of the group's existence become objects of thought for the participants - by referring back to them the problems of logistic, of task division, of payment, etc - but also for guaranteeing that every cell remains compatible with whatever other cells that exist in the Circle, or that *might come to exist*.

This additional role has been incorporated into the function of the Secretary because, unlike the case of the classic form of the revolutionary Party, where such a function was originally devised, the *Circle* does not count with consensus or a common knowledge as the basis for its cohesion. Rather, the trust in the formal dimension of organization leads CSII to assume a reflexive position concerning its own economic and logistical structure. Rather than seek universality at the level of a *determinate content*, it seeks to infuse universality into the institution via a *formal indifference*, that is, by testing if its most practical rules of organization are able to accommodate differences in social class, gender, study, and even political affiliation. The General Secretary is thus responsible for de-centering debates and conceptual discussions through the intervention of protocols that refer what takes place in a meeting to the very formal conditions of the meeting cell itself. This interruption gives the collective a chance to treat its own material basis - that which must disappear for a group to appear as a naturally-bound organism - as the site of transformations and inventions that concern the *space* of the institution as such. For this purpose, the General Secretary supervises the application of a series of protocols, controlling the length of the debates and of the collective readings, guaranteeing that

all meetings be recorded for posterior access by members of other cells and that quoted bibliography and references be made equally available to all - all mechanisms devised to guarantee that any given meeting be formally traversed by the concern with those who are not present. Most importantly, this position is responsible for overseeing the application of the *Circle*'s methodology for deliberative processes - one which determines that any important local decisions of a given cell should be put to a vote that includes whatever members outside of that cell who wish to participate in that deliberation.

It is important to note that both the position of the "Plus one" as well as that of the Secretary do not substantially contribute to the *Circle*'s study or collective orientation, they merely give form to whatever ideas the collective might incorporate. On the one hand, the collected work notes become the material for an associative composition that corresponds to the thought of no one in particular. On the other, whatever thinking does in fact consolidate itself through this formal process is then "put to the test" of providing an orientation that can both answer to the practicalities and economic matters of the *Circle* as well as of surviving its exposure to those who have not thought it - both current and future members of other cells.

In this way, whatever any given member thinks on his own, the very structure of the *Circle* guarantees that she will be confronted with two thoughts that were thought *not by, but through* her: the product of the free association of particular elaborations after each meeting, brought into play by the "Plus one", and the concrete impasses of collective organization, rendered visible by the General Secretary. To assume the former in order to orient oneself in the latter is a task whose subject can only be said to be the *Circle* itself - rather than its particular members or even the sum of all of them.

(D) Process

Even if this static presentation of the formal structure of the *Circle* already allows us to discern how it is that one might conceive of a concrete organization where thinking takes place at a remove from the thinkers who compose it, it is only by considering this structure in its dynamic unfolding that the truly essential property of this device comes into view, namely, the capacity of this form of organization to recognize thinking not so much in the "positive" excess, where the "whole is bigger than the sum of the parts", but rather in the failures of the collective, at those sites where this formal machinery halts or stumbles.

In order to grasp the *Circle*'s functioning we must consider at least two distinct temporal instances: a first one, where the group meets in order to collectively study and debate, and a second one, where this study is applied to the maintenance and transformation of the collective itself. The results of

this second moment are then inscribed back into the first, further orienting the direction of the *Circle*'s theoretical investigations. These two moments correspond to two positions taken by the participants of the *Circle*. In the first instant, while concerning themselves with the conceptual apprehension of certain ideas, the members participate in the *Circle* in the form of "thinkers", but *no collective thought is taking place* - since the collective organization merely supports the space for plural debate and elaboration. In the second moment, while applying the partial results of their theoretical investigation to the concrete problems of the collective, the members contribute to the Circle in the form of a "thought", even though *no one counts at that point as thinkers* - since the problems at stake here are indifferent to whatever conceptual debate the participants are involved in. It is only from the temporal standpoint that the disjunction between the collection of thinkers - those who *compose* the organization's thinking - and the collective thinking itself - which is only later at the *disposal* of thinkers - becomes apparent.

For example, in a first instant, a member of the *Circle* might present to the rest of the group a particular theoretical point of his interest - however, given the absolute porosity of the entry form to quite heterogenous new memberships, the transmission of this particular argument might be restricted to solely a few members, perhaps those with a previous background on a given topic. In a second instant - which can immediately follow the first - the failure of transmission is taken as an object of thought: does someone who fails to transmit what he knows truly know what he thinks he does? What would have to be done differently for that particular argument or presentation to reach those members it did not? At this point, the theoretical presentation is no longer the sign that there is a thinker in the room, but rather the index of a problem for a different sort of thinking, one that concerns both the presenter and the remaining participants alike.

Another possible situation is when, in a first instant, the group decides to participate in a certain practical activity - such as organizing an academic event, or regular visits to the suburbs to talk to workers. In a second instant, however, the economic conditions for the participation of all the members is brought into play: how should the *Circle* organize its economies so that such an activity would not rely on an unfair division of labor, or so that it would not exclude those who have no money for transportation from joining in?

In all these cases, what takes place is not simply the poor application of the *Circle*'s rules, but rather that a well constructed formalism can render useful impasses and problems legible, thereby allowing us to experiment new ways out of them. These problems can sometimes be solved locally, through refinements in the application of a given principle, but sometimes they actually require

the extensive reformulation of both conceptual and practical aspects of CSII's guiding project.

This brief view of the *Circle*'s dynamism already allows us to see that what truly mediates between these two moments, giving them their common ground, is in fact "the opaque core" of the organization. The *Circle* is bound together by the *useless* dimension of the collective, those aspects that concern the mere maintenance of the space, being of no theoretical interest or political utility. By the *ignorance* of its participants - not so much the inequality between the members' knowledge of a given topic, but the fact that everyone is equally ignorant of the collective effects of this inequality on the organization itself. By the *inexistence* of the Circle's very idea - for no separable instance of the collective contains its own *raison d'etre*, requiring always a further step to find its proper function. And by the *symptoms* which get in the way of this very process, when the indeterminate space produced by a thoroughly formal set of rules with no particular content comes to be inhabited by the group's different phantasms and attempts to make sense of the collective's disjunctive structure. As we hope to have shown, it is this negative moment - which expresses itself as uselessness, as ignorance, as inexistence and as symptomatic formations - that truly oscillates between an obstacle and an object for thought, and and which decides if participants are thinking the organization, or being part of the object that is practically worked through by the collective form itself.

§ 7

In the previous section we focused on the internal logic of the *Circle*'s formal mechanisms, describing in detail some of the basic rules that define the properties of the space discerned by CSII's practice. In this concluding section, we would like to explore a question that members of the *Circle* often pose to themselves, not without some despair: the question of the political usefulness of this form.

As our previous presentation made quite clear, none of the defining protocols of the *Circle* are directed outwards, to the transformation of the world. Both the entry form and the work notes inform the *consistency* of the collective, while the "Plus one" and the General Secretary put this consistency to the test of conceptual and economic heterogeneity - that is, testing the genericity of this consistency. The outside world exists for the *Circle,* first of all, as *an opportunity to think the universality of its own form*. Evidently, the individual members of the collective are under the same superegoic pressure to "change the world' as any other political militant or Leftist sympathizer today, and therefore this seemingly self-centered - circular? - program is hard to justify, even for themselves.

However, rather than a moral or conceptual defense, this particular mode of organization has shown its usefulness in its concrete consequences.

The *Circle* has engaged with political processes in two different ways: through activities which require the *Circle* to operate in accordance to the current Leftist tactical logic and through activities which allow CSII to either extend or reproduce its own functioning within different organizations and contexts. Let us call the first sort of engagement a "constructivist" one, and the second, "investigative".

Interestingly enough, the *Circle*'s constructive engagement usually takes place as a response to demands, made either by particular members of the collective or by people visiting a meeting, for a concrete "proof" of CSII's political contribution, either as a way to legitimate its existence or as a good reason to join the group. As attempts to provide others with such a validation, the *Circle* has joined in street protests, helped with electoral campaigns in Leftist parties (both for internal party elections as well as for municipal and national campaigns), produced and distributed political pamphlets, participated in base party organizations and housing occupations. In all these activities, however, a dual objective is always at stake: to fulfill a given task and to do it in such a way that the political identity of the *Circle* is clarified to some other instance or institution. This duality is not accidental, it is rather an implicit condition of any constructive orientation: a task can only be considered functional for a given objective if this objective is known beforehand and the result of the task can be compared to this anticipated aim - that is, it will be considered a successful transformation if it obtains (an at least approximate version of) the ideal that was already known before the practical engagement. This second operation, which compares the anticipated ideal and the result of a task, comes with certain presuppositions, the most important of all being not to disturb the tenets which support the political identity one is trying to belong to through this constructive engagement. This means that - leaving aside the arguable contribution of these activities to the "accumulation of forces" of the Left - little can be expected from these practices in terms of new impasses and problems for political thinking: were the Leftist ideals at stake in such an activity be shaken by some problem or obstacle, the conclusion one could reach is simply that this was a failed activity, or not a Leftist activity at all. This disjunction between identificatory validation and political problems - which follows the logic of the famous Lacanian joke: "my fiancée is never late, because, if she is late, she is no longer my fiancée" - has the consequence of rendering it impossible to learn anything from the Left's failures, for there is no formal index in these failures to allow the Left to recognize itself therein. And, accordingly, the effect of such activities for the Circle is usually that there is nothing to preserve

from these experiences: tasks are completed, more or less successfully, with no strategic clarity gained. Only, perhaps, a sense of belonging to the Left is provisionally produced - until the next time the same question is raised once more.

The other sort of activity - one in which the *Circle* seeks to expand its reach, or replicate its own form - does appear as an answer to a call or demand for political action, but rather takes place as *an invitation to experiment*, that is, as the organization's curiosity to test its own universality in a local and concrete manner. What is at stake here, then, is not merely the transformation of a given situation's *content* - distributing flyers and pamphlets where materially there were none before - but rather transforming the situation's very form.

An example of this sort of investigative practice is the *Circle*'s work in Rio de Janeiro, from 2014 to 2016, trying to organize within the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL) a political formation course that would cut across the radical and aggressive political divergences within PSOL itself - which split the Party into two halves that sabotage one another, themselves divided into more than 20 different political tendencies. Offering to take care of the logistics of the course, the *Circle* shifted the axis of debate from the ideal content of the course - an ideal that no two tendencies in the Party agreed upon - to the question of what form this activity should take so that the divergences between political ideologies could, rather than be "solved" into a consensus, be in fact made *indifferent*. Directing meetings towards organizational and administrative questions - for example, what size and scope such a course would need so that all the tendencies could give elective disciplines? - the *Circle*'s activity revealed an unexpected result, one that surely did not sit well with the identificatory structure of the Party, even though it clearly took the Party's best interests in view. This disjunction between the Party's ideal and its common form appeared in the symptomatic response it gave to the *Circle*, a sort of *common resistance* - coming from usually disagreeing peers - that such a proposal was simply impossible, even if it was nothing more than the most naive affirmation of the Party's explicit unity. Even without the support of the Party's administrative structure or its militant organizations, the *Circle* nonetheless experimentally created a unified "summer course" of political formation for militants. The activity remains the largest formation course given by PSOL in the state of Rio de Janeiro, with more than a dozen disciplines given by militants of some competing currents of the Party. It was, for sure, an utter failure, insofar as the *Circle*'s lack of experience in dealing with the vicissitudes of party politics lead it to navigate the political sensibilities of its interlocutors without enough care or attention to its contradictions, reinforcing certain divisions and falling short of making the space available to the most radical political tendencies in

the Party. Because of this, the *Circle* was powerless to distinguish its formal engagement with the Party from the accusations that, in doing so, it was merely holding on to a hidden ideal of what should be taught and accomplished by in the course it proposed. That is, CSII lacked the knowledge of how to distinguish the investigative activity of an idea from the constructivist engagement with an ideal that was simply not that of the institution at stake. However, insofar as this experiment was not attempted for the sake of proving the *Circle*'s own ideal apprehension of itself - so that its failure would put the collective's "real" Leftism in question - but rather with the aim of verifying if it was possible to export CSII's fundamental wagers into new contexts, this failure was *homogeneous* with the *Circle*'s organization, internal to it. Because this experiment *composed* the trajectory of a thinking, it was later at the disposal of its members *as a challenge for thought*.

A great deal has been written since the 60's to criticize the capacity of constructive engagement to respect the plurality and contradictory views that Marxism now recognizes as a fundamental characteristic of the working class's composition. Against the unifying and idealized presuppositions of task-driven, identificatory militancy, certain Marxists propose a more spontaneous approach to militant activity, suggesting that today we must first of all respect the creative differences of each local struggle and then find ways of unifying them in a common banner. In short, this strategic model trusts that we can let go of "base work" today because we not only know that there is no homogeneous base waiting to change the world in an organized fashion, but also because we know that local struggles, being part of the same capitalist "cycle of struggles" will already implicitly carry within them a deeper homogeneity, which a communist project can "tap" into in order to unify them from the global perspective. From the standpoint of the work we have proposed here - and considering specially the Marxist treatment of social forms as the thinking implicit in the most immediate being-there within a given form of sociality - it seems to us that such a response fails to break away from the constructivist approach. It merely substitutes the *position* that we should all act in a certain ideal way in order to achieve our political goals for the *presupposition* that, however we act, this ideal of unity will be preserved: in the case of PSOL, it would mean that all the different tendencies of the party could be expected to ultimately desire their own unity, something we would be able to attest by finding a common trait running through all their different and incongruous positions.

While this critique of constructivist political engagement has the clear benefit of departing from heterogeneity rather than engaging solely with instances of previously established consensus, it carries with it one fundamental

precept that still ties it to the model of engagement that it criticizes: the assumption that *there can be a common purpose*. The basic schema of the constructivist or functional activity remains in place: a transformation which departs from a unified want or a set of partial wants, and achieves its more-or-less ideal satisfaction. What CSII's wager on the political usefulness of investigative activity achieves is a break with this basic model of action, while preserving its original vocation.

One could argue, after all, that failing to organize a unified course of political formation in a Leftist Party is just that, a useless failure. Or that visiting workers in the suburbs with the explicit goal of just listening to what they have to say does not contribute to the betterment of the worker's lives in any meaningful sense. And this much is true, if seen from a disengaged standpoint - that is, a standpoint that is not committed to the experimentation, constitutive of the *Circle*'s project, of testing if this organization is itself capable of formally accommodating anyone. From within CSII, however, these failures and useless activities take on a different quality. Having separated the tasks of composing a thought and having it at the disposal of its members - that is, separating the transformations which affect the capacity of the collective to indifferently welcome everyone from the intellectual apprehension of these transformation's rules and effects - the true achievement of the *Circle* is to *affect the range of actual, concrete people over which this failure or uselessness falls*. And such an extension is not meaningless when considered from the standpoint of the following affirmation: not everyone has the right to experience failure as part of a form of thought.

Class struggle does not simply divide the world between those who have and those who don't - it also divides us between *those who have the lack of what they do not have* and *those who are expropriated of this lack itself*. The former are those who can subjectivize their suffering and turn their symptoms into the "stuff" of psychoanalytic investigations, scientific and political thinking, etc - in short, those who have enough material resources *to live*, that is, to participate in generic thinking. The latter are those whose suffering is, at best, the material out of which the thinking of others is composed: sociologists, generous charities, Leftist militants, populist and religious leaders - all are ready to *refer* to the harsh conditions of mere survival, but those who are too busy surviving simply cannot afford to join in the "cycle of struggles" that is supposedly constructing a new common ideal.

The *Circle of Studies of Idea and Ideology* is experimenting with a form that, while being porous to the heterogeneity of the world, nonetheless exposes those it forms to a political experience of thought where those engaged in it are allowed to collectively assume their own failures - that is, to "acquire a

new need", as Marx puts it - and *live by them*. It is true that political activities conceived as localized experiments on a form's capacity to include anyone can be said to serve no purpose. But our wager is that, in doing so, the *Circle* also seeks to expose anyone who wishes to engage with it to *a life that is at no one's service*.

Finally, it is important to note that CSII does not constitute a mere application of philosophical and political ideals into the field of militant practice. Even if the project did begin with explicit reference to contemporary political thinking, to the point that certain authors are even quoted in the *Circle*'s project, the concrete existence of its different cells has required the document to be re-written several times over, philosophies to be reconsidered, and presuppositions to be challenged. In fact, the current state of the *Circle* is not one of stability, and our case study does not represent more than a partial fragment of an on-going transformative practice. It does seem truly important to put the partial results of this investigation to writing - and a brief comparison of our elaborations here to the original guidelines of the *Circle* would be enough to show that these elaborations have followed rather than preceded the collective application of those guidelines - but it is also crucial to end this brief case study with some final remarks on the current tensions and limitations with which the *Circle* struggles, and which surely will lead us to a renewed engagement with our guiding thinkers and ideas, hopefully leading to new militant experiments.

The *Circle* today faces two great impediments: the problem of inhibition and the problem of time. First of all, it has become increasingly hard to dispel the fantasies that, below the affirmation that "anyone can study philosophy", there lies a secret superegoic injunction to speak in a sophisticated way, or to understand certain ideas. The very expansion of the *Circle*, the fact that there are other cells working in parallel, to which a participant has no direct access, seem to create a space for any member who feels insecure about his ignorance to deposit his fantasies and suppositions. This problem, which we are still learning how to deal with, could also lead us to a renewed engagement with Jacques Rancière's work, leading us to pose, for example, the question of the superegoic imperative that the "axiom of equality" can become without some sort of supplementary mechanism. How are we to deal with the inhibition - which also appears as aggressive resistance - that emerges there where the *Circle* is incapable of dispelling the supposition that those who have more academic formation or political experience are more "in the know" of what to do than those who have just joined CSII?

The second problem concerns the economic solution that the group will need to invent in order to deal with the fact that militancy either takes up the time of work or the time of rest of the *Circle*'s participants. In a sense, the

problem at stake here has a classical form in Marxist thinking, namely, that *militancy is a form of leisure*, and leisure is a time whose "stuff" is taken from the time of consumption of labor force or the time of its reproduction (rest), both of which are covered by one's wage, and both of which are therefore under the rule of remuneration. The usual solution is appeal to a voluntaristic dimension, arguing that militancy is its own reward. Badiou himself, in his theory of "true life" could be said to spouse this position. The concrete obstacle of organizing meetings, visiting the suburbs, or having free time to read or debate, has turned the economic tension into a problem worthy of philosophical consideration: how should one treat the economic constraints of militancy? Should we perhaps look for a revitalized Leninist theory of "professional revolutionaries"? No solution today seems apt enough to guide us, but we are currently engaged with several experiments on how to pay militants for the time politics takes from our lives, experiments which, thus far, have revealed surprising results - for example, the unexpected solidarity between the working class and the working militant, who, on account of her pay, is seen as someone who also struggles to survive, who therefore belongs to a common struggle, rather to the privileged few who have spare time available to engage such activities without any risk.

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