

Social movements as laboratories of dual power

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ABSTRACT

Dual power has been associated with a historically specific conception of revolutionary strategy that for many is now outdated. In contrast I think that its strategic scope is broader and that it does not refer to just a specific ‘moment’ but rather to a dynamic that can emerge within prolonged struggles and confrontational social movements within conjunctures characterized by crisis of hegemony or at least elements of a hegemonic crisis. Consequently, movements need to be considered as ‘strategic instances’ in the elaboration of a social and political dynamic for social change.

KEYWORDS

Dual Power; Social Movements; Strikes; Marxism; Lenin; Prefigurative Politics

Introduction

Traditionally thought as a way to describe singular moments within revolutionary sequences, dual power is a dynamic that emerges during periods of hegemonic crisis, widespread social protest and contestation and emergence of massive, participatory and expansive forms of organization of movements. In what follows ‘dual power’ will be dealt both in the way it was originally defined, but also as the horizon of movements when they cross certain thresholds of mass participation, ruptural

orientation, and politicization. This is based on the assumption that within a Marxist perspective on social transformation, dual power offers a way to deal with a crucial strategic node, namely the passage from movements as contestation and protest to movements as struggles for power and transformation.

Trajectories of dual power

The notion of dual power has a long history in Marxism. In its original formulation by Lenin dual power refers to the characteristics of the 1917 Russian revolutionary sequence and the broadening of the scope of the revolutionary process.

The highly remarkable feature of our revolution is that it has brought about a dual power.¹

The crucial premise in Lenin's argumentation was the radicalisation of the Soviets as the political form that expressed the proletarian orientation towards rupture and transformation.

What is this dual power? Alongside the Provisional Government, the government of the bourgeoisie, another government has arisen, so far weak and incipient; but undoubtedly a government that actually exists and is growing—the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.²

Lenin was thinking of a revolutionary situation in progress, stressing the explosive co-existence of two antagonistic forms of power, the power of the Provisional Government and the power of the Soviets, as a reflection of the antagonistic class character of each one and a particular moment within an escalated form of class struggle. It was a confrontation between two antagonistic political projects, representing not only antagonistic class alliances but also antagonistic practices of politics.

What is the class composition of this other government? It consists of the proletariat and the peasants (in soldiers' uniforms). What is the political nature of this

¹ Lenin, V.I. 1964, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol. 24, p. 38.

² *Ibid.*

government? It is a revolutionary dictatorship, i.e., a power directly based on revolutionary seizure, on the direct initiative of the people from below, and not on a law enacted by a centralised state power. It is an entirely different kind of power from the one that generally exists in the parliamentary bourgeois-democratic republics.³

The power of the Soviets was not commensurate or symmetrical to the bourgeois exercise of power. In contrast, we are dealing with a different and antagonistic practice of politics. This is stressed by Lenin's assessment of the Paris Commune.

This power is of the same type as the Paris Commune of 1871. The fundamental characteristics of this type are: (1) the source of power is not a law previously discussed and enacted by parliament, but the direct initiative of the people from below, in their local areas—direct “seizure”, to use a current expression; (2) the replacement of the police and the army, which are institutions divorced from the people and set against the people, by the direct arming of the whole people; order in the state under such a power is maintained by the armed workers and peasants themselves, by the armed people themselves; (3) officialdom, the bureaucracy, are either similarly replaced by the direct rule of the people themselves or at least placed under special control; they not only become elected officials, but are also subject to recall at the people's first demand; they are reduced to the position of simple agents.⁴

Lenin echoes Marx's reasoning in writings such as *Civil War in France*. The political form of the dictatorship of the proletariat is radically incommensurate and antagonistic to the bourgeois state. It is not an alteration of classes in control of the same state apparatus but a new practice of politics and a new form of state power, aiming at the ‘withering away’ of the state.

In Marx's conception, which Lenin studied attentively on the eve of the October Revolution, we are not dealing with an alternative state apparatus but with autonomous forms of working-class organization, antagonistic to the state and aiming at the transformation not only of political forms but also of the relations of production. As Étienne Balibar has suggested, we can see

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lenin op.cit., pp. 38-39.

the penetration of political practice to the sphere of “labour”, of production. In other words, it is the end of the absolute separation, developed by capitalism itself, between ‘politics’ and economics’. Not in the sense of an ‘economic policy’ that has nothing new, not even by the transfer of political power to workers, but *in order to exercise it as workers*, and without stopping workers, the transfer, *in the sphere of production of an entire part of political practice.* Therefore, we can think that work, and before it social conditions, become not only a ‘socially useful’ and ‘socially organised’ practice, but a *political practice*.⁵

The importance of the Soviets was widely recognized by all tendencies of the Russian revolutionary movement. They had a history stretching back to the various forms of factory committees, strike committees, workers committees and other forms of coordination and organization in the 1905 revolution before the formation of the ‘councils of workers deputies’, the *soviets* and in particular the St. Petersburg soviet, and then the emergence of soldiers and peasants’ soviets. And in 1905 the soviets already showed their potential as organs of proletarian self-government and revolution.⁶

In 1917 there was an expansive movement of workers’ councils all over Russia, often engaged in forms of workers’ control in various forms and degrees, in a movement that was both contradictory and impressive,⁷ and led to various forms of local soviets, thus creating a situation where even before the armed insurrection of October the soviets indeed had real power.

Lenin insisted that since there was an open revolutionary crisis, these forms of autonomous proletarian organization were already establishing an antagonistic political form. They were not just forms of self-organization; they represented a novel political practice and were the product of the collective ingenuity of the working class. They were neither invented nor proposed by the Bolsheviks; they emerged as part of the dynamics of the 1905 revolution. What the Bolsheviks did was incorporate the soviets in the particular strategy for proletarian hegemony.⁸

⁵ Balibar, É. 1974, *Cinque études du matérialisme historique*, Paris : Maspero, pp. 96-97.

⁶ Anweiler, Oscar 1974, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921*, translated by Ruth Hein, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 64.

⁷ Sirianni, Carmen 1982, *Workers Control and Socialist Democracy*, London: Verso.

⁸ On the attitude of Lenin and the Bolsheviks towards the soviets see Shandro, Alan 2007, ‘Lenin and Hegemony: The Soviets, the Working Class, and the Party in the Revolution of 1905’, in *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth* in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek,

The proletariat cannot “lay hold of” the “state apparatus” and “set it in motion”. But it can smash everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its own, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies are exactly this apparatus.⁹

Trotsky, writing after the Revolution in contrast to Lenin whose basic theorization of dual power came in the form of a conjunctural political intervention, tended towards seeing dual power as a constitutive element of revolutionary situations in general.

This double sovereignty does not presuppose—generally speaking, indeed, it excludes—the possibility of a division of the power into two equal halves, or indeed any formal equilibrium of forces whatever. It is not a constitutional, but a revolutionary fact. It implies that a destruction of the social equilibrium has already split the state superstructure.¹⁰

The role of the workers and soldiers’ councils in the 1918 German revolution was also widely discussed, since that particular experience showed that the councils were more like a contested terrain between different tendencies and different social strata rather than simple expressions of ‘dual power’.¹¹

The experience of factory councils in Italy led Gramsci to important insights regarding such institutions of worker’s democracy, which in a manner similar to that of Lenin treated them as potential forms of a Workers’ State.

The socialist State already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class. To link these institutions, co-ordinating and ordering them into highly centralized hierarchy of competences and powers, while respecting the necessary autonomy and articulation of each, is to create a

Durham: Duke University Press. Shandro has also stressed the importance of relation between the Soviets and the potential for proletarian hegemony: (Shandro, Alan 2014, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony. Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle*, Leiden: Brill, p. 245).

⁹ Lenin op.cit, vol 26, pp. 102.

¹⁰ Trotsky, Leon 2008, *History of the Russian Revolution*, tr. Max Eastman, Chicago: Haymarket, p. 150.

¹¹ On the role of councils in the German Revolution see Broué, Pierre 2005, *The German Revolution 1917-1923*, translated by John Archer, Leiden: Brill.

genuine workers' democracy here and now – a workers' democracy in effective and active opposition to the bourgeois State.¹²

Gramsci's experience with the factory council movement was formative regarding the form and functioning of hegemonic apparatuses of a potential proletarian hegemony. One can see elements of this conception in his complex conceptualization of the re-absorption of civil society by political society within the 'regulated society'. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann noted:

By way of the councils, Gramsci took up for the first time the practical and political task of hegemony: [...] This spontaneity, in other words, which is undergoing self-education in the councils, has nothing in common with the libertarian exaltation of spontaneity. It arises rather from a critique of all those forms of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism which had so dragged down the Italian workers' movement.¹³

The theme of dual power would come forward again during the Spanish Civil War. And then one could also point definitely to the experience of the Resistance movements in occupied Europe. These movements represented forms of dual power in the sense of the opposition between the occupying forces and the collaborationist governments on one hand and the forms of popular power in the liberated areas but also between the resistance networks in the cities, especially when they took over important tasks such as the distribution of food aid or when they successfully managed to resist forced labour. One could see such dynamics of dual power in countries with large resistance movements under communist leadership in Italy, in Greece, in Yugoslavia. These movements played an important role in creating an imagery of popular power that remained for a long time afterwards.¹⁴

¹² Gramsci, Antonio 1977, *Selections from Political Writings. 1910-1920*, edited by Q. Hoare and translated by J. Mathews, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p. 64

¹³ Buci-Glucksmann, Christine 1980, *Gramsci and the State*, translated by David Fernbach, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p.160.

¹⁴ For the Greek case see Hatzis, Thanasis 1983, *Η Νικηφόρα Επανάσταση που χάθηκε* [*The Victorious Revolution that lost*]. Athens: Dorikos and Skalidakis, Yannis 2015, 'From Resistance to Counterstate: The Making of Revolutionary Power in the Liberated Zones of Occupied Greece, 1943–1944', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 33: 155-184.

Post-WWII developments and the way the Left moved towards a more reformist direction, beginning with the very idea of the National Unity Governments, would also lead to the abandonment of the conception of dual power. This was already evident in the acceptance of parliamentarism within Popular Fronts and later in the hybrid of one-party state parliamentarism of the ‘People’s democracies’. After the 1960s the official line of the communist movement turned towards a democratic, parliamentary road to socialism. Socialism was presented as the natural evolution of a democratic parliamentary process. Dual power was not part of the debate, with the exception of communist or councilist heterodoxies.

However, there would be a return of the notion of dual power in Latin America. René Zavaleta Mercado used dual power to describe particular moments in Bolivian history and in particular the 1952 liberation and the formation of the *Asamblea Popular* under the initiative of COB in May 1971, but also to assess the situation in Chile under Allende. For Zavaleta dual power is a ‘Marxist metaphor that designates a special type of state contradiction or state conjuncture of transition’.¹⁵ It is a trope referring to complex situations that cannot be easily summarized in a definition. Consequently, he referred not to dual power but to the ‘duality of powers’¹⁶ in order to theorize the complex and uneven character of such conjunctures, the ‘qualitative contemporaneity of the before and after’.¹⁷

The notion of dual power would also re-emerge as part of the attempt to theorize the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In this form it referred to the possibility of a revolution inside the revolution or in the form of the emergence of autonomous proletarian institutions in a contradictory relation to the framework of the supposedly proletarian state, something exemplified in experiments such as the Shanghai Commune.¹⁸

One could also see a return of the notion in the neo-Leninism of certain groups of the revolutionary left after the experience of the broader 1968 turmoil and the return of a reference to insurrectionary politics, the ‘hasty Leninism’ that Daniel

¹⁵ Zavaleta Mercado, René 1974, *El poder dual en América Latina*, Mexico : Siglo Veintiuno Editores, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Jiang, Hongsheng 2014, *La Commune de Shanghai et la Commune de Paris*, tr. Eric Hazan, Paris : La fabrique.

Bensaïd described in his *Impatient life*.¹⁹ After all, May 1968 was also an example of a general strike.

Antonio Negri considered the impressive wave of militancy and struggle, especially the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969, as pointing an insurrectionary sequence based upon the particular dynamism of workers struggle against the capitalist command of the enterprise within the context of the crisis of the Planner-State and of the very process of exploitation, hence the centrality of the struggle against work, which justifies a new Leninism.²⁰ It is in this context that Negri would insist in that particular period that ‘dual power’ can only be describing a very particular ‘moment’ and a relation of forces: ‘dual power is always an absolutely momentary and transitory phase’.²¹

The extent of workers’ struggles and militancy in that period, the occupations of factories, forms of workers control, experiments in self-management, raised again the question of what were the strategic implications of this new dynamics in social contestation. The very emergence of social movements in that period (from the feminist movement to strong struggles around housing and the first forms of a radical ecological movement) raised the question of how they can be incorporated into a more strategic approach.

The Portuguese Revolution with its particular characteristics and dynamism seemed at least initially to justify again the possibility of revolutionary sequences and the question of dual power, along with important dynamics of both self-management but also workers’ control.²²

The notion of dual power was part of the debates around Eurocommunism. Although its proponents insisted on the acceptance of bourgeois parliamentarism combined with forms of mass participation, thinkers such as Christine Buci-

¹⁹ Bensaïd, Daniel 2013, *An Impatient Life : A memoir*, tr. by David Fernbach, London: Verso.

²⁰ Negri, Antonio 2005, *Books for Burning*, edited by Timothy Murphy, translated by Translated by Arianna Bove, Ed Emery, Timothy S. Murphy & Francesca Novello, London: Verso, p. 35.

²¹ Negri, Antonio 2014, *Factory of Strategy. Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin*, translated by Arianna Bove, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 214.

²² Varela, Raquel 2019, *A People’s History of the Portuguese Revolution*, London: Pluto. See how Vaquela points to how it was workers’ control more rather than self-management that pointed towards a dual power dynamic.

Glucksmann spoke about a potential ‘dual power of long duration’²³ as part of a strategy for hegemony

Nicos Poulantzas would propose such a conception of a ‘democratic road to socialism’ that could combine forms of representative democracy with forms of direct democracy from below as a divergence of what he thought was the ‘classical’ strategy of dual power, which he associated with a strategy of a frontal attack to the state. However, what he actually proposed as a strategy for a ‘democratic road to socialism’ has common elements with the strategy of ‘dual power of long duration’.

Transformation of the state apparatus tending towards the withering away of the State can rest only on increased intervention of the popular masses in the State: certainly through their trade-union and political forms of representation, but also through their own initiatives in the State itself. This will proceed by stages, but it cannot be confined to mere democratization of the State.²⁴

Daniel Bensaïd was more critical of such conceptions of a ‘dual power of long duration’. Bensaïd was aware of the complex temporalities involved in any revolutionary strategy, but he insisted on the strategic importance of rupture.

A long process? Yes, if it is about underlining with this the battle during which the proletariat accumulates experiences, develops its conscience, elevates itself to be a virtually dominant class, as candidate for power; this was the process that Trotsky was thinking when he was saying that power will be more difficult to take and more easy to keep in the developed capitalist countries. But this decisive process does not erase the moment of rupture, what Lenin designed as revolutionary crisis. This rupture does not principally concern the political apparatuses but mainly a profound division of the social consensus itself. It is a necessary strategic moment in relation to the specific structural conditions of the proletarian revolution.²⁵

In the revolutions of the 20th century the question of dual power, or of the duality of powers, constantly returned, despite the fact that the ‘rapid’ sequence of the Russian

²³ Buci-Glucksmann, Christine 1977, ‘Eurocommunisme et problèmes d’Etat’, *Dialectiques* 18-19 : 137-153, p. 153.

²⁴ Poulantzas, Nicos 2000², *State, Power, Socialism*, London: Verso, p. 261.

²⁵ Bensaïd, Daniel 1977, ‘Eurocommunisme, révisionnisme et austromarxisme’, *Critique Communiste* 18-19, p. 193.

Revolution did not manage to have a successful ‘repetition’, whereas strategies of ‘prolonged people’s war’ proved to be more effective. Daniel Bensaïd encapsulated this tension between these two revolutionary ‘hypotheses’ (the insurrectionary and that of a ‘prolonged people’s war’):

For the hypothesis of the insurrectional strike, the duality of power assumes a principally urban form, of the Commune type (not only the Paris Commune, but the Petrograd Soviet, the Hamburg insurrection, the Canton insurrection, those of 1936 and 1937 in Barcelona...). Two opposed powers cannot exist for long in a concentrated space. A rapid dénouement is imposed, which can lead on to a prolonged conflict: civil war in Russia, war of liberation in Vietnam after the insurrection of 1945 ... For this hypothesis, the work of organising soldiers and demoralising the army (in the majority of cases, conscripts) plays an important role.

For the hypothesis of prolonged popular war, dual power assumes a more territorial form (self-administering liberated zones), which can coexist for a longer period of time in conflict with the established order.²⁶

More recently, George Ciccariello-Maher has suggested that we can find elements of a dual power dynamic in aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela:

Here, dual power refers not only to the unstable situation of tense equilibrium between this alternative structure and the traditional state but also to the second, nonstate, dual power itself. It is the condensation of popular power from below into a radical pole that stands in antagonistic opposition to the state but functions not as a vehicle to seize that state (unlike Lenin’s initial formulation), but instead as a fulcrum to radically transform and deconstruct it.²⁷

Dual Power and social movements

What do all these have to do with contemporary social movements? I believe that the notion of dual power or of duality of powers can describe the dynamics, or the

²⁶ Bensaïd, Daniel 2018, ‘Strategy and Politics: From Marx to the Third International’, *Historical Materialism*. 28:3, p. 253.

²⁷ Ciccariello-Maher, George 2013, *We created Chávez. A people’s history of the Venezuelan Revolution*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 240

historical horizon we can see in social movements. I am not suggesting that social movements *are* forms of dual power. Dual power indeed refers to a revolutionary situation combining a crisis of hegemony with a crisis of the State. However, it can be helpful to understand the social and political potential that we can see in movements.

In particular I am referring to a series of movements from the 2010s onwards, from the movements that were emblematic of the ‘insurrectionary cycle of 2011’,²⁸ to the grand cycle of movements in the 2010s up to the Gilets Jaunes insurrection, impressive labour struggles, the 2019 popular rebellion in Chile. These movements emerged in the context of a broader and deeper social and political crisis or even a crisis of hegemony, which was also grounded on economic crisis of 2008, and the exhaustion of the neoliberal paradigm.

Although many of them did not have the typical form of a working class strike, they were based upon the contemporary condition of labour, and in particular increased precariousness. The social coalitions around these movements were formed around labour and not some fragmented and atomized version of the ‘people’.

These movements went beyond simple demands, particular or sectoral, but represented a broader protest against authoritarian neoliberalism. This made them more political even if they declared to be ‘anti-political’, and they included increased politicisation even in cases that were far from ‘insurrectionary’.²⁹ Their repertoire of struggle included the reappropriation of public space, including occupying the public infrastructure they were defending or looking for spaces that could be used as strategic points of protest, deliberation and debate. They placed great importance on direct democracy and political participation. They declared to represent some form of popular power or counter power. They reclaimed popular sovereignty or even declared that they were practicing real popular sovereignty. They included attempts towards a ‘constituent process from below’.

Also important in these cycles of protest were large networks of solidarity, from networks against evictions to social pharmacies and self-managed clinics,³⁰ to

²⁸ Khatib, Kate, Margaret Killjoy, and Mike McGuire (eds.) 2012, *We Are Many. Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*, Oakland: AK Press.

²⁹ Eric Blanc has offered an exciting overview of how the teachers’ strikes in the US also induced an impressive process of repoliticisation (Blanc, Eric 2019, *Red State Revolt. The Teachers’ Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*, London: Verso).

³⁰ Rakopoulos, Theodoros 2014, ‘The crisis seen from below, within, and against: from solidarity economy to food distribution cooperatives in Greece’, *Dialectical Anthropology* 38: 189-207;

soup kitchens and markets without intermediaries, initiatives of solidarity to migrants,³¹ and experiments in self-management of indebted or closed businesses.³² They were also learning processes. The experience of the profound changes induced by the crisis enabled the more open discussion of alternatives. In the Greek experience this was very obvious in the ways that after 2011 for many persons, some of them without any militant background, getting involved more in collective practices, from protests, to solidarity networks became an existential choice, dedicating time and energy, something that even after 2015 took the form of strong engagement in grassroots movement of solidarity to refugees and migrants.

Collective problem solving as social experimentation emerged in various forms within contemporary movements: innovative forms of coordination and communication, including ingenious use of existing infrastructure such as social networks; collective expertise in dealing with logistical questions, while at the same time maintaining some form of democratic process; coping with shortages.

A conception of politics as collective inventiveness and ingenuity stresses the fact that emancipation as transformation can only be thought of as a way to liberate antagonistic social practices by means of collective research, learning and experimenting with new forms of social organization. The emergence of alternative social configurations, antagonistic to the logic of capital can only be the result of a long process of social experimentation. This is a politics of a radical democratisation which is not limited to the political sphere but also has to penetrate the realm of the economy, in the form of a repoliticization and thus transformation of the supposedly socially neutral terrain of social production and reproduction.

This is already echoed, in the *prefigurative* potential that Althusser stressed in the 1970s when he insisted on the traces of communism in contemporary capitalist societies, a *leitmotiv* of his work in the 1970s. For Althusser ‘The increased collectivisation of capitalist production, the initiatives of the popular masses, and,

Rakopoulos, Theodoros 2016, ‘Solidarity: the egalitarian tensions of a bridge-concept’, *Social Anthropology*, 24:2:142-51; CareNotes Collective 2020, *For Health Autonomy: Horizons of Care Beyond Austerity—Reflections From Greece*, Brooklyn: Common Notions.

³¹ Lafazani, Olga 2018, ‘Homeplace Plaza: Challenging the Border between Host and Hosted’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117(4):896–904; Tsavdaroglou Charalampos and Maria Kaika 2022, ‘The refugees’ right to the centre of the city: City branding versus city commoning in Athens’, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 59(6) 1130–1147.

³² Barrington-Bush Liam 2017, ‘The solidarity ecosystems of occupied factories’, *ROAR*, <https://roarmag.org/essays/worker-control-viome-greece/>

why not?, certain bold initiatives by artists, writers and researchers, are from today the outlines and traces of communism.’³³

However, in order to read these traces of communism in contemporary struggles, in experiments in self-management, in the defence of public goods and public spaces, in new forms of participative democracy of struggle or in the gestures of solidarity, we must be able to hear what the masses are doing and saying,

*opening one’s ears to them, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses’ imagination and inventiveness.*³⁴

In such a perspective movements do not only represent a dynamic of antagonism but also have the potential to be the sites of the emergence of alternative, non-oppressive and non-exploitative social forms and relations.

The prefigurative marks that moment when movements seek to actualize that promise, to materialize faith in an otherwise and transform personal subjectivities, interpersonal relations and structures of power.³⁵

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein has attempted to link the notion of prefigurative politics with the Blochian conception of the concrete utopia but also with Marx’s critique of political economy:

The prefigurative critique of political economy is itself a process of theoretical prefiguration that follows the movement of autonomous organising, the forms of which depend on the movements’ struggles.³⁶

³³ Althusser, Louis 2014 ‘Conférence sur la dictature de prolétariat à Barcelone. Un texte inédit de Louis Althusser’, *Période*, <http://revueperiode.net/un-texte-inedit-de-louis-althusser-conference-sur-la-dictature-du-proletariat-a-barcelone>.

³⁴ Althusser, Louis 1977, ‘On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party’, *New Left Review*, I, 104, p. 11.

³⁵ Brissette, Emily 2016, ‘The Prefigurative Is Political: On Politics Beyond “The State”’, in Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia (ed.) 2016, *Social Sciences for an Other Politics. Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 116.

³⁶ Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia, 2015, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America’ The Art of Organising Hope*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 204.

Moreover prefiguration is ‘an embodied process of reimagining all of society’ and that points to left wing politics that ‘rejects the idea of revolutionary change guided by a vanguard as well as the idea of a transition in which the revolutionary goal is deferred to an unspecified moment in the future’.³⁷ But this does not preclude its articulation with the strategic:

The promise of the prefigurative depends on its articulation with the strategic. The prefigurative can give us hope and nourishment, a sense of what we are fighting for, and the will to go on, while the strategic can provide a way forward, forging the path that will transform the whole.³⁸

The prefigurative dynamic of the new forms of direct democracy, self-management and collective ingenuity, does not represent a denial of the necessity for a process of revolutionary rupture. Rather, it points to more ‘continuous’ – yet not less ‘ruptural’-process during which the experiences of movements, including their prefigurative practices, do not create ‘islets of communism’ but point to a hegemonic political practice that is not based on the simple enunciation of discourses but on the concrete experimentations, the collective experiences and the accumulation of knowledge during movements, in a ‘war of position’ which has all the characteristics of a ‘prolonged people’s war’.

Dual power becomes a way to think the extent of the emergence of a potential working class hegemony, an indication not only of a relation of forces, but also of an active potential for transformation. It refers not only to the possibility for the seizure of power, but also for the liberation of the various forms of collective ingenuity of the subaltern masses. It is evidence not only of a catastrophic equilibrium of forces but also of the emergence of a collective intellectuality in active rupture with dominant ideology.

The challenge of power

³⁷ Maeckelbergh, Marianne 2016, ‘The Prefigurative Turn: The Time and Place of Social Movement Practice’, in Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia (ed.) 2016, *Social Sciences for an Other Politics. Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 122.

³⁸ Brissette, Emily 2013, ‘Prefiguring the Realm of Freedom at Occupy Oakland’, *Rethinking Marxism* 25:2:218-227.

Thinking of social movements as potential laboratories of dual power can also help us deal with the challenge of political power. In most cases this is presented as the possibility of a progressive or left-wing government. However, with the exception of the Latin American experiments – and even in those cases with serious contradictions and shortcomings at least in Europe the results of the attempts towards ‘left-governance’, either in the form of SYRIZA’s government or of Unidos-Podemos participation to a government with the Socialists, can only be described as a defeat. This was particularly evident in Greece where we ended up with a supposedly left-wing government implementing the neoliberal policies of the EU-IMF-ECB ‘Troika’. I suggest that the only way of avoiding another spectacular defeat is incorporating into strategy the ‘dual power’ dynamic that we can see in movements.

Poulantzas’s insistence that the state is the material condensation of a relation of class forces is important. However, we should not read this as suggesting that the state can be easily transformed on the basis of the presence of the subaltern classes and their struggles in its interior, or/and of their representation by some form of ‘left governance’. The State is a *material* condensation, i.e. a materialized, solidified and institutionalized relation of forces manifest in the class character of its apparatuses, practices, discourses, and knowledges it produces and codifies. The State represents an *excess of force* from the part of the ruling social bloc. Even if we follow an ‘enlarged’ conception of the ‘integral state’, following Gramsci’s definition, a definition that would indeed ‘interiorize’ social movements in the broader framework of the integral state, we would still need to pay attention to the fact that the different practices ‘interiorized’ are neither symmetrical nor even. The extent of the fortification and insulation of decision processes makes necessary a reverse excess of force from the part of the subaltern classes. This has exactly to do with strength of the movement, the radicalism of demands, the extent of the politicization of the subaltern classes, the degree of programmatic preparation, and the extent of forms of self-organization, self-management and self-defence.

However, there is another dimension to the dual power dynamic of social movements. Attempts towards social transformation have faced the persistence of capitalist social forms in particular those that have to do with the persistence value-form and the fetishistic character of the market, even under public ownership or substitution of the market by the plan. Transforming the relations of production (and

not just ownership) requires a process of experimentation with alternative forms of social organization of production, self-management, and socialization of knowledge. It also means a process of attempting to revolutionize forms of socialization of private labours by means of non-commercial networks, new forms of distribution and new forms of participatory democratic planning. It also requires a cultural revolution, new forms of mass social and political intellectuality, a new ethos of mass participation, a revolutionizing of social norms, gender roles, family practices. Transcending the market is not easy since it is not only an economic practice, but also a form of perceiving the world. Non-market distribution of goods and services, including adjusting production to actual social needs is a very complex. It can be to some extent facilitated by algorithmic processes, but algorithmic processes also entail the danger of mystification, which means the transformation required in collective practices cannot be simply treated as a technical exigency. And there are goods and services that are still being perceived as at least partially beyond the market despite extensive privatization: health, education, public safety, care, basic infrastructure. Moreover a series of challenges, from climate change to socially – in the last instance- produced public health emergencies (such as the pandemic) also point to the need for planned allocation of resources and the planned prioritization of activities and production processes.

All these point to the full spectrum of the need to rethink social transformation as experimentation. These processes require mobilization, participation, initiative from above and from below, and a commitment that goes beyond simple following rules and regulations. They also need to overcome the element of ‘alienation’ from these processes: consumers wanting to have a say about the products they consume, students and parents about schooling, patients about the health system, and above all workers about production processes. Dual power can describe exactly this democratic process and impulse that can help deal with these challenges and offer ways to actually deal with them – and the movements I am referring to included such dynamics

Does this mean relying only on the creative potential unleashed in protests, contestation and solidarity? Do we just rely on forms of democracy ‘from below,’ as

suggested by other currents from the municipalist anarchism of M. Bookchin³⁹ to all the currents that centre on the commons and horizontalist conceptions?⁴⁰ Do we abandon the question of the State?

No! It'd be impossible to initiate real ruptures, which also means confrontation with capital in regards to measures such as forced nationalizations, rationing of resources, capital controls and increased worker/s' rights, without an almost 'exceptional' use of state power and on the basis of social mobilization creating the conditions of a 'constituent process'. However, a strong state is not all it takes. We need to move beyond the fetishism of the market and the fetishism of the State, which represent the double process of mystification of social relations of domination and exploitation. This is the only way to enhance the emergence of antagonistic social practice, relations and forms. If we try and think the main challenges facing us to today, from the pandemic to Climate Change and the need to make again pertinent the need for a non-capitalist organization of the economy, the necessity for a perspective that moves beyond the call for a 'Strong State' becomes evident. In the case of the pandemic and the failure of the 'lockdown strategy' to deliver, it became obvious that the challenge has been not of suspending social life, but of collectively inventing ways and practices that make it safer, by redesigning production and reproduction on the basis of solidarity and collective mobilisation and not coercion enhanced surveillance. In the case of Climate Change, the extent of the need for changes in productive and consumer paradigms and the increased need for decentralization and collective use of limited resources also entails a very wide spectrum of collective redesigning of production that goes beyond the scope of state coercion and have more to do with collective initiative and self-management. And similar challenges emerge in any attempt to reclaim sectors of the economy from market forces.

Consequently, I think the idiosyncratic Leninism of using the notion of dual power to describe such challenges is to a certain extent justified. By pointing to both collective ingenuity and the question of political power dual power maintains the link between social experimentation and the 'art of the insurrection,' and points not only to ~~the~~ some future insurrectionary 'war of movement,' but also to the contemporary 'war

³⁹ Bookchin, Murray 2014, *The Next Revolution. Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, edited by Debbie Bookchin and Blair Taylor, London Verso.

⁴⁰ Sitrin, Marina and Dario Azzellini 2014, *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy From Greece To Occupy*, London: Verso.

of position.’ Moreover, it links contemporary movements with a conception of socialist transition as process of intensified struggle and conflict between a capitalist and a non-capitalist logic. And it also points to a conception of the political organization as a laboratory for unleashing what Josep Maria Antentas has described as ‘strategic imagination’, namely

thinking strategically from a self-reflective and permanently innovative point of view, and having an indomitable and insatiable will to search for new possibilities to transform the world. In that sense, all strategy for revolution also has to be a revolution in strategy.⁴¹

The trace of dual power

What I have described as potential dual power in the context of movements, is something that emerges in the context of very strong movements, almost insurrectionary cycles of protest and contestation and in periods of acute social crisis that also induce some form of collapse of functions of the state (evident in the importance of solidarity movements). Such a ‘dual power’ approach offers a way to think of social movements in a strategic manner: treating them not as pressure groups but as collective processes that study their terrain, produce alternatives, and create forms of counter-power; creating conditions of a democratic participation that breaks down traditional hierarchies and enhances mass politicization; using them as terrains where political currents are educated in the experience of the struggle and the knowledge coming ‘from below’; realizing that they can be experimental sites for the elaboration of programmes, alternatives, forms of self-management and fully endorsing their prefigurative potential; and incorporating them in the political process and conflict, while at the same time respecting their autonomy.

Consequently, social movements with the rooting, the capacity and the collective ingenuity that point to a ‘dual power horizon’ remain the necessary condition for any political project that could point beyond the strategic impasse of the contemporary Left.

⁴¹ Antentas, Josep Maria 2017, ‘Strategic Imagination and Party’, <https://urpe.org/2017/06/14/josep-maria-antentas-strategic-imagination-and-party/>.

