

## Hegemony

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The conceptual development of “hegemony” has a major impact on Latin Americanist political thought beginning in the 1960s. The concept is deployed in a wide range of contexts including: the role of intellectuals in society; transition from dictatorship to democracy; the triumph of the “Washington consensus”; and the return of populism in its neoliberal and anti-neoliberal forms. Hegemony theory is seen as enabling social theory to account for the complexity of social organization in modern societies and to understand the tenuous unity of the social without losing sight of heterogeneity and contingency.

However, one could also argue that in hegemony theory, heterogeneity becomes indistinguishable from homogeneity. If there is a weakness in the theory, it is that it can only understand differences as administered within a governing logic of equivalency. For hegemony theory, equivalency is the administrative telos that guides thought and praxis. The fate of all heterogeneity is thus programmed in advance: either accede to administrative reason or relinquish all political potentiality. For heterogeneity these alternatives no doubt resonate as a false choice. To use a Lacanian psychoanalytic metaphor, hegemony theory would seem to be all about desire to the exclusion of any consideration of enjoyment, all about the symbolic to the exclusion of its relation to the real. When the question of the real does come up, as in Ernesto Laclau’s *On Populist Reason*, it is framed exclusively in terms of the reorganization of symbolic economy. Laclau understands the real as *objet petit a*, a particular that paradoxically embodies universality and thereby facilitates the mutual recognition of commonality between particulars. What gets pushed aside in this use of Lacanian theory are the ways in which the real also names a stumbling block for such economies. When Laclau claims that populist hegemony

is at the core of all modern politics, he would seem to be reducing politics to the symbolic: as either enforcing or reforming a specific configuration of the social and thereby reinforcing the perception that administrative ordering is the be-all-end-all of politics. In this respect hegemony theory is a discourse of the master.

Hegemony traditionally designates the leadership or sovereignty of a person, group or State within a society, confederacy or union. In the classical world it described the role played by leading city-States in alliances: Athens as hegemon of the Delian League, King Philip of Macedon to the League of Corinth, and so on. In the wake of the democratic revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, hegemony is used to refer to the leadership of particular States within alliances (Prussia in the German Confederation; the struggle between the US and the USSR to expand regional influence into global hegemony during the Cold War), but it also appears in a new context: describing the investment of sovereign authority in a particular leader or social group in the context of national politics (the bourgeoisie in post-revolutionary France; the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution; Perón in Argentina from 1945 to 1974).

In Marx and Engel's analyses of post-1789 Western Europe, the concept acquires a double valence; concrete factors related to class conflict are folded into the realm of abstraction, i.e., the representations through which a certain class understands and projects itself in relation to the social totality. "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas," they write in *The German Ideology*, "i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (64). The influence of ideas tends to be perceived as something altogether separate from social relations, and as constituting an autonomous cultural history. Here we see something that will emerge as a key component of

hegemony theory for later thinkers such as Laclau: a slippage whereby particularity (class interest and its ideational representatives) passes itself off as universality. Under aristocratic rule, for instance, the aristocratic code of “honor” was internalized by subordinated sectors; in the wake of the bourgeois-democratic revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, meanwhile, “liberty” and “equality” emerge as new ideational hegemon. They circulate in the realm of ideas *as if* they were free from the particularity of material relations, *as if* they were innate ideas that express the common interests and aspirations of all.

The transposition of the particular into the universal is seen by Marx and Engels as a necessary component of social authority and political power. Coercion alone is not enough; the governed must also be convinced. “Each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interests as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones” (65-66). This is the counterpart to the line in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire* about the subordinate classes (the small holding peasantry) who “cannot represent themselves [but] must be represented.”

Things look slightly different in a revolutionary context where the ascendant class acts as a universal class—that is, a non-class—whose actions are in fact in tune with the common interests of all. In such situations, what we ordinarily think of as class—social groups possessing their own discrete interests and sensibilities that are defined by their conflicts with other classes—is relatively amorphous, because the divisions between various non-dominant classes are dwarfed by their more immediate conflicts with the ruling class. The deterministic and essentialist components of Marxian thought are suspended in the revolutionary situation.

Under the combined pressure exerted by the pre-revolutionary situation, in which the aristocracy's authority was experienced by all subjugated classes as tyranny, together with the new revolutionary moment in which all non-ruling classes struggle toward the same end, class particularism has yet to crystallize. In such moments there is truth in appearances: in assuming leadership of the revolutionary assault on the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie truly does carry out the wishes of all other (non-ruling) classes in society.

With the overthrow of the aristocracy and the triumph of the bourgeoisie, however, this ideological lability vanishes. Now the revolutionary lexicon—"equality," "fraternity" and "liberty"—begins to reveal itself as an army of tropes for advancing in dissimulated fashion the specific interests of the bourgeoisie: "liberty" now stands for unfettered economic opportunity *for capitalists*; "equality" belies the fundamental inequality perpetuated in the separation of capital and labor; and "fraternity" masks the social reality in which the many are exploited and dominated by the few. What once appeared as universality now seems to have been an illusion: for those who are not of the bourgeoisie, the only meaningful possibility for freedom is to join the bourgeoisie at the center of the hegemonic game.

A major conceptual development in hegemony theory occurs in the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose theoretical innovations respond to the social impact of industrialization in Western Europe during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, more specifically, to conflicts arising in Italy when northern industrialization begins to produce ripple effects in the lives of the southern peasantry. Gramsci's transformative appropriation of "hegemony" reflects his debt to Lenin and the latter's conception of class alliance under the political leadership of the Russian working class during the Revolution. It also marks a rethinking of the Marxian

understanding of history, of the capitalist system's limits and of its ability to reproduce its own conditions of production despite its internal contradictions. Gramsci's focus on "civil society"—as opposed to "political society" and the State—as a new terrain for revolutionary praxis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century calls into question the rigidly deterministic understandings of history and class that had previously dominated the Marxian tradition. The complexity of industrial societies, together with the interpenetration of national economies with world markets, lead Gramsci to conclude that the old revolutionary strategy of direct assault on the State is no longer capable of bringing about radical transformation of capitalist society. In modern, industrialized capitalist societies the State and its institutions have become a mere "outer ditch" behind which stand what he calls "a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks"—the institutions and organizations of civil society, which act to stabilize and reproduce prevailing relations of production and their accompanying modes of thought and action. In areas where the forces of civil society are more or less fully invested in the reproduction of capitalist social relations, classes can no longer be understood as stable, preconstituted entities possessing their own innate interests and outlooks. A revolutionary political project that would appeal to the sensibilities of subjugated classes must begin by *constructing* a revolutionary mode of perception and thought via education and culture.

Gramsci's thought has an important impact in Latin America beginning in the early 1960s, when a group of Argentine intellectuals led by José Aricó and Juan Carlos Portantiero left the Argentine Communist Party and founded the journal *Pasado y presente*. As Aricó, Laclau and others have described, Gramsci's writings appealed to Latin American intellectuals because it offered a framework in which they could understand their own participation in contestatory

politics (what Gramsci termed a “war of maneuver,” designed not to capture the State apparatus but to cultivate revolutionary subjectivity through education and cultural production) and also, just as importantly, because Gramsci’s focus on heterogeneity within the context of Italy’s relatively late and incomplete experience with industrialization provides evidence of how a theoretically driven project could work within the Marxian tradition while avoiding the trap of treating the Western European histories studied by Marx as a paradigm to be pursued (or awaited) in other latitudes, at a later date and following some lag time. Gramsci’s thought provides a space for attending to local and regional realities that cannot easily be mapped onto a single historical trajectory modeled by development of Western European countries, and it thus offers the promise of way of thinking history otherwise than the developmentalist teleology of the Hegelian tradition.

Since the late 1970s, in his own writings and in books coauthored with Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau has put forth a sophisticated account of hegemony that follows Gramsci in distancing itself from classical Marxian economism and determinism while emphasizing the political potentiality of heterogeneity in modern societies. But whereas Gramsci made room within Marxist thought for thinking culture as indispensable tool for anti-capitalist political struggle, Laclau enacts a step away from the Marxian tradition through his rejection of economic determinism tout court. That move is motivated by practical as well as theoretical concerns: the influence of post-structuralist, anti-foundationalist thinking complements the need for theoretical accounts of the emergence of “new social movements” whose primary concerns are not limited to class struggle and economic exploitation. In light of new political struggles seeking to secure rights for women, gays, and ethnic minorities, together

with the decline of traditional class-based politics (especially labor movements), economy comes to be seen as one sphere among many capable of giving rise to political demands.

Drawing principally from Saussurean linguistic theory and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Laclau develops an account of hegemony as a process whereby a particular “demand” (say, a strike organized by meat packers seeking improved working conditions under a repressive regime) is taken up by other disaffected groups who see the strike as significant for them. Formally speaking, the logic of hegemony is almost identical to Saussure’s description of language [*langue*] as a system composed of differences. Whereas traditional theories of language posit that meaning derives from the connection between signifier and signified, Saussure theorizes signification as bypassing the signified and proceeds along channels between signifiers. The sense of a given signifier is determined by its contiguity with (likeness to and difference from) other signifiers. The proper sense of the word “dread,” for example, is determined by its proximity to words such as “worry,” “fear” and “anxiety.” If these latter words did not exist, “dread” would be obliged to cover all of their meanings and would thus have to relinquish much of its specificity. Signification happens through the metonymical sliding from signifier to signifier. However, as both Lacan and Derrida will both point out, a system could never constitute itself through endless deferral; systems require limits, which can neither belong to the system nor be completely foreign to it. The need for a limit in Saussure’s linguistic system is evidenced by the fact that as speaking beings we always think and act *as if* the relation between word and mental image were natural rather than conventional and relational. For Lacan, the term that accounts for this gap between linguistic reality and our perception as speaking beings is the *point de capiton*. Literally a “quilting point” in a cushion, it describes how

language produces the effects of stable meaning despite the fact that in language stability is nowhere to be found. The *point de capiton* is the internal limit, an exception within language to the differential logic of signification.

Laclau understands hegemonic situations as constituted in an analogous way. In the example of the striking meat packers a hegemonic situation arises when particular demands begin to resonate with other groups who are at odds with the regime for their own reasons (say, the regime's hostility to intellectual freedom, its refusal to extend civil rights to women, its violation of constitutional protections against torture, its refusal to safeguard privileges of the old elite, etc.). On the basis of their shared opposition these discrete groups come to see their demands as analogous with one another; they form a "chain" in which particular demands are seen as synonyms for the same thing: *a unified front against tyranny* which in turn translates as *freedom*. Laclau calls this process the creation of equivalencies. In the meantime, one such particular tends to find itself in the central position of embodying the hopes and aspirations of all. In the context of the French revolution universalization is illustrated by the capacity of the bourgeoisie to be the part that represents the whole, to carry out the wishes of other groups disaffected with the *Ancien Régime*. Universalization is contingent: there are no essential criteria to be found within the constituted social order that could explain why the bourgeoisie—rather than, say, the proletariat—should find itself at the center of the new hegemonic situation; and likewise, there is no reason why some other group or figure could not take its place at some other moment.

Laclau's theory of hegemony gathers together the important elements of Saussurean linguistic theory, including the spectral presence of antagonism, which translates the Lacanian

and Derridean concerns about the system's boundaries or limits. The boundary, as we have seen, is the condition of possibility for the system as such, but as limit it also marks the impossibility of full constitution; it casts a shadow within that the system can neither appropriate nor expel. For Laclau, the constitutive limit of social organization is found in antagonism. On one hand antagonism is a *sine qua non* for the hegemonic conversion of social differences into equivalencies: it is only when groups feel their specific way of life to be threatened—by the tyranny of the absolutist monarch, by domination under aristocratic rule, etc.—that they can see the particular demands of others as synonymous with their own interests; equivalence presupposes the existence of a common measure. Where Marxian thought only allows for this kind of social malleability in the exceptional time of revolution, for Laclau this residual indeterminacy constitutes the norm of modern social life. How do we account for the difference?

One explanation can be found in Laclau's elaboration of the Marxian principles of contradiction and antagonism in light of Althusser's development of the concept of overdetermination. Following Althusser it is longer tenable to describe antagonism as a conflict between classes based on predetermined, stable and mutually exclusive interests. Overdetermination sheds light on the way in which class consciousness is informed by a multiplicity of social registers, not all of which are reducible to the category of class. How does this affect our understanding of antagonism? With antagonism we find the social relations of production (e.g., the separation of labor and capital) interwoven with the specific manner in which social life *in general* (not just in the workplace) is constituted at that historical moment. For example, conflict between workers and capitalists can only become antagonistic when one

group (the workers) experiences a dispute over conditions within the workplace as a threat to its way of life *outside* the workplace. In the time of late capitalism, sociality is informed by the myriad ways in which we are encouraged to identify ourselves as consumers in so many marketplaces. If precarious employment has become paradigmatic in the time of flexible accumulation, then the relations of production could be said to threaten my social being *as a consumer*, since my ability to consume depends on my having disposable income, being able to afford education, health care and so on. Antagonism names conflict between an inside and an outside (e.g., the equation of social membership with consumerism) with which it does not share any necessary common measure. The logic is not unlike that of the threat discussed above, in which the formation of a chain of equivalencies depends on the shadowy presence of an external register (the tyrant, the absolute monarch) over against which each of the terms defines itself using a common language of equivalency (emancipation, freedom).

The outside of hegemony (the threat *or* the interpellative force of consumerism) is thus constitutive of the inside *and* irreducible to its terms. It is the condition of possibility for social subjectivity but it also marks a gap that prevents the social from becoming a full subject. The radical outside introduces an aporia at the heart of social and political life, and for Laclau it shows why classical Marxian economism is unsustainable ("New Reflections," 23). Antagonism requires that equivalency be understood in dialectical manner as the other side of heterogeneity; equivalency does not negate social differences so much as it allows them to find themselves in others. But equivalency between differences is also inscribed by an even more radical kind of heterogeneity: the singularity of the "radical outside," an Other whose presence

is not legible within the equivalential chain, but which nonetheless enables their relations to be configured as equivalents.

The deconstructive notion of a radical outside would seem to position Laclau's hegemony theory against all forms of ethical, political and epistemological closure. No matter how inclusive and open a hegemonic situation becomes, there will always be an *other scene* that has not been subsumed within the identitarian logic of equivalency, a scene whose trace is inscribed as unnamable within the lexical system of the hegemonic situation. Hegemony theory thus appears to be aware both of its own contingency—in Laclau's terms, it would thus be non-ideological—and of the fact that its language retains a debt it can neither name nor liquidate.

In an essay entitled "Tesis acerca de la forma hegemónica de la política" (Labastida 1985) Laclau shows how hegemony theory sheds light on subtle but important shifts in the manner in which the political sphere is constituted, beginning in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and carrying through the late 1960s in Argentina. Laclau has examined in other venues how the vicissitudes of the Peronist movement during the period of Perón's exile (1955-73) could be mapped onto a theory of hegemony (Laclau 1997). To my knowledge, the "Tesis" essay is the only published work in which he attempts to work out how hegemony theory could provide a broader understanding of post-Independence Argentine history. Not surprisingly, he maintains that the crisis of Liberalism and the emergence of populism in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century constitute not just a change in regime but a reconfiguration of the political as such. Regrettably, however, this important point is not fully developed in the essay. Particularly surprising is the fact that Laclau's brief discussion of the mid-1940s in Argentina does not address whether or not the emergence of Peronism itself could or should be understood in

terms of the logic of hegemony. Instead, Laclau limits himself to a remark on how the opposition sought to disqualify Perón's labor reforms by linking him and his political tactics to a chain of well-known villains (Rosas, Hitler, Mussolini). But was Peronism in its inaugural moments the product of a hegemonic operation or was it something else? Laclau does not pose this question. Perón's tendency to fashion himself as the "older brother" (more than "father") of the Argentine labor movement could be likened to what Laclau calls the universalization of the particular. But it is far from clear that the emergence of a new social actor in October 1945 could provide evidence of the formation of equivalential relations among discrete groups and their particular demands.

Another important point in Laclau's discussion of Argentine social history is found in his observation that Latin Americanist political thought and practice have frequently lapsed into a paradigmatic mode of thinking in which historical sequences drawn from the European context are elevated to the status of historical paradigm (e.g., 1789 is understood as "the bourgeois revolution" and posited as the culmination of world history or as a necessary stage between feudalism and socialism). Latin American historical processes are then interpreted as proceeding in a parallel direction (Mexico experiences its "bourgeois revolution" relatively late, in 1910) while historical elements that do not map neatly onto the trajectory of European history are categorized as deviations from the historical norm: as "regression," "the return of barbarism," "uneven development," etc. For Laclau this paradigmatic understanding of differences renders hegemony inconceivable, since hegemony—like Saussure's signification—presupposes a constitutive role for contingency in political events. Laclau finds an instance of this paradigmatic thinking at work in 19<sup>th</sup> century Liberalism, which reduces the social in its

entirety to the civilization/barbarism opposition and thereby precludes difference from appearing as anything other than a falling away from truth. Liberalism successfully establishes a social rationality for which all differences are defined a priori as barbarism, i.e., as the absence of a moral code, etc. In such a discursive situation there can be no thought of differences forming equivalencies vis-à-vis antagonism, and thus hegemony itself becomes unthinkable. He identifies a similar paradigmatic operation in the Liberal opposition to Peronism, whose supporters it seeks to delegitimize as political actors by portraying their civic presence as a deviation from the proper course of historical development, e.g., in the infamous description of Peronist delegates as an “*aluvión zoológico*.” Finally, Laclau locates another paradigmatic tendency in the armed guerrilla movements, especially following the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana where such groups began to understand their situations—through an inversion of Eurocentric paradigms—as essentially the same as those faced by national liberation movements in Asia and Africa. Paradigmatic thinking blocks the hegemonic operation insofar as it makes equivalence depend on the erasure of social difference, and thus renders heterogeneity literally unreadable. If we take seriously the Saussurean thread in Laclau’s thinking, it is not just that paradigmatic thinking remains deaf to heterogeneity; it actually prevents social difference from taking shape. There is no heterogeneity before relation, and it is relationality itself that is foreclosed by Liberalism and other forms of paradigmatic thinking.

In the “Tesis” essay Laclau proposes a key distinction between two forms of hegemonic politics, which he terms *transformismo* and *ruptura popular*. *Transformismo* refers to the centrist political strategy of using moderate reform to marginalize radical elements of the political spectrum and thereby to secure the positions of traditional elites. *Transformismo*

entails recognition by the prevailing order of unsatisfied demands on an individual basis, so that they cannot come together and form the equivalential grouping of a counter-hegemonic politics. *Transformismo* is perfected as a strategy by leaders such as Disraeli, Bismarck and Giolitti. *Ruptura popular*, meanwhile, refers to a situation in which popular demands are not addressed sufficiently by the status quo, and thus an opposition takes shape based on equivalency between differences and acting in the name of “the People.” *Transformismo* and *ruptura popular* name two versions of hegemony, one of which serves to strengthen the existing social, political and economic system while the other breaks with it by constituting an alternative order. This distinction is an important—albeit frequently overlooked—step in any attempt to understand the somewhat perplexing fact that, despite Laclau’s insistence that hegemony constitutes the core of modern political thought, hegemony theory itself is unable to provide any meaningful distinction between “Left” and “Right” politics. Hegemony, in other words, is equally capable of manifesting itself in conservative programs as in progressive or socialist projects.

As suggested at the outset, Laclau’s theoretical development of hegemony presents itself as leaving space for heterogeneity in comparison with other accounts of social organization. While this may be true of the “popular/ruptural” form described by Laclau in the “Tesis” essay, it is decidedly less so in the case of “transformative” hegemonic operations, where the principle goal is to absorb social differences so as to neutralize their ability to form counter-hegemonic equivalential articulations. One difficulty with this conceptual distinction between rupture and transformism, however, is that it presupposes that we can readily distinguish between popular rupture and conservative transformation, whereas Latin American

history would seem to indicate that the distinction is frequently anything but clear cut.

Consider, for instance, the inaugural scenes of the Peronist movement in October 1945. On one hand, there is the occupation of the Plaza de Mayo by striking workers, heretofore regarded as second class citizens and whose presence in the civic center of the nation was portrayed by the Liberal order as defiling the nation's most hallowed ground. This is clearly a scene that evinces popular rupture, even if the degree of social differentiation among participants turns out to be relatively minor. But in the parallel to this scene, which occurs in the same plaza after nightfall, we see Perón himself returning to center stage after his time in prison, telling the striking workers that they have accomplished their primary objective (read: the liberation of Perón himself). He counsels them to suspend plans for further demonstrations and to return to their homes, and from there to resume their regular work routines. Whatever connection Peronism as social movement bears with what Laclau calls popular rupture, nothing could better illustrate the conservative impulses of *transformismo* than Perón's speech of the night of October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945. This is not to say that the demands associated with the rally (the liberation of Perón *but also* the restoration of the far-reaching reforms authored by the Secretary of Labor) are simply absorbed by the existing political order; on the contrary, General Farrell's government would soon dissolve and, against the expectations of the various anti-Peronist elites, Perón would be elected President the following year. *Transformismo* takes places here at another level: in dispelling an incipient threat to the prevailing order of capitalist developmentalism, a threat that Perón's discourse does everything in its power to bring back under the sway of the State.

As Brett Levinson has shown, the situation becomes even more complicated when one looks at the possible correlations between hegemony theory and the neoliberal restructuring of

the social in terms of the market. The descriptive and normative selling point of hegemony of late has been that it provides a framework for thinking the common (equivalency) and difference (heterogeneity) at the same time, and without subordinating one to the other. But Laclau's hegemony theory is also formally indistinguishable from the logic of the market, which happens to be most effective when it works to make room for a nearly-unlimited diversity of differences: different brands for different niches and different individual tastes. This is not to say that hegemony and the market are always the same thing; as Levinson reminds us, we can also envision a hegemonic politics that would oppose the unlimited opening of the social to global capital. But it is a reminder that there is nothing in hegemony theory that could establish a secure and stable distinction between itself and the market, or between popular rupture and conservative absorption.

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