

From Hegemony to Post-hegemony and Back: *Extimate* Trajectories*

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Abstract. Throughout the last two decades, discussions around “post-hegemony” have stimulated exchanges around different theorizations of “hegemony” and their limits – not only the one by Antonio Gramsci, but also the predominantly discursive reformulation put forward by Laclau & Mouffe. Very recently, a new article by Peter Thomas on post-hegemony (2020) is triggering new debates on the issue. In this paper, Thomas’s contribution is, first, presented and discussed. In the second section, certain issues that have been recently raised from a post-hegemonic perspective vis-à-vis Thomas’s intervention and beyond are thematized. These two exercises provide an opportunity to clarify further, by way of conclusion, certain issues at stake in the ensuing debate from an Essex School perspective.

Keywords: Hegemony; Post-hegemony; Discourse; Negativity; Thomas.

[es] De la hegemonía a la poshegemonía y viceversa: trayectorias *extimas*

Resumen. Durante las dos últimas décadas, las discusiones en torno a la “poshegemonía” han provocado un diálogo acerca de las diferentes teorías de la “hegemonía” –no solo la de Gramsci, sino también la reformulación predominantemente discursiva propuesta por Laclau y Mouffe– y sus límites. Recientemente, un artículo de Peter Thomas sobre la poshegemonía (2020) ha desencadenado un nuevo debate sobre el particular. En nuestro artículo, en primer lugar, presentamos y discutimos la contribución de Thomas. En la segunda sección, tematizamos ciertas cuestiones que, en relación a la intervención de Thomas y más allá de ella, han sido recientemente planteadas desde una perspectiva poshegemónica. Estos dos apartados nos dan la oportunidad, a modo de conclusión, de aclarar más en profundidad, desde la perspectiva de la escuela de Essex, ciertas cuestiones que se siguen del debate.

Palabras clave: hegemonía; poshegemonía; discurso; negatividad; Thomas.

Summary: Introduction. Post-hegemonic Reactions. To conclude: Discursive/affective hegemony and its negative limits. References.

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Introduction

During the last two decades, debates around post-hegemony have reinvigorated exchanges around different theorizations of “hegemony” –not only the one by Gramsci, which is the canonical reference here, but also the predominantly discursive take articulated by Laclau & Mouffe. Arguably the often polemical profile of such debates (primarily targeting the latter) has often blurred the issues at stake –as well as the real distance and the latent proximities between post-hegemony and hegemony. Instead of enriching previous theorizations of hegemony by highlighting horizontalist, affective and biopolitical aspects of political life –that were admittedly neglected in early formulations of hegemony theory–, post-hegemonic arguments purported to challenge the hegemonic paradigm *in toto*, thus leading to often bizarre conclu-

sions (like the declaration that “There is no hegemony and never has been” put forward by Beasley-Murray in his 2010 book *Post-hegemony*)². By staging a frontal attack on any type of discursive mediation (ascribing no role whatsoever to language, ideology, discourse, etc. to the point of wondering why such social and political registers exist in the first place), they have largely missed the opportunity to assist in the further enrichment of hegemony theories, especially the one associated with the so-called Essex School (which, paradoxically, seems to be closer to several of the sensibilities shared by post-hegemony theorists).

Such an enrichment involves a continuous process that had been already taking place in the case of the Essex School, for instance. Obviously, it would be impossible for Laclau and/or Mouffe –or any other scholar, for that matter– to have incorporated every

* Many thanks are due to my friend, Alberto Moreiras, for our continuous discussions about infra-politics, hegemony and post-hegemony.

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² J. Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. IX.

possible objection to their work in advance. However, what may be “beyond” hegemony, its limit, so to speak, “is beyond” in a way leaving traces within the terrain of hegemony –and Essex School hegemony theorists have been generally willing to start following these traces and see where they lead, something explored in more detail today by a multitude of scholars associated with this tradition of thought. There are plenty of indications here:

(1) The interest in illuminating the irreducible links between horizontality and verticality in political processes (especially populism); consider, for example this quote by Laclau from 2014:

The horizontal dimension of autonomy will be incapable, left to itself, of bringing about long-term historical change if it is not complemented by the vertical dimension of “hegemony” –that is, a radical transformation of the state. Autonomy left to itself leads, sooner or later, to the exhaustion and the dispersion of the movements of protest. But hegemony not accompanied by mass action at the level of civil society leads to a bureaucratism that will be easily colonized by the corporative power of the forces of the status quo. To advance both in the directions of autonomy and hegemony is the real challenge to those who aim for a democratic future [...]³.

(2) The increasing focus on encounters between discursive articulation (mediation) and the Real (immediacy), within a horizon of negativity, resulting in a radical registering of the partial and temporary character of every hegemonic articulation (another indication of the limits of hegemony, so to speak). Indeed, it becomes clear, already from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that Laclau and Mouffe’s stress on discursive articulation can only make sense against a horizon of contingency and negativity, it presupposes “the incomplete and open character of the social”⁴. This dimension was further stressed by the ensuing dialogue between discourse theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis⁵.

(3) An increasing willingness to acknowledge the constitutive interpenetration between representation and *jouissance* (Lacan), discursive articulation and affective investment. Something that even acquired central place in Laclau’s book, *On Populist Reason* (2005). Indeed for Laclau, Mouffe and their co-travellers, such developments were gradually accepted

as constituting essential aspects of any comprehensive take on hegemony and of future research in this field: something belonging to the order of *affect* has a primary role in discursively constructing the social. Freud already knew it: “the social link is a libidinal link. And affect [...] is not something *added* to signification, but something consubstantial with it”⁶. This is consistently repeated in later years: Affect is not something external, added to the symbolic, but an internal component of it. Affect is not some vague emotion external to signification, for it can only constitute itself on the basis of overdetermining a signifying chain⁷; and vice-versa, of course: “So if affect is an internal component of signification, signification is also an internal component of affect”⁷. For her part, Chantal Mouffe had been stressing, already from the 1990s, the crucial role of the passions⁸.

Guided by a one-sided desire for immediacy, by a “passion for the real” in its unmediated purity, some theorists of post-hegemony opted to ignore this progressive movement –and the ensuing opportunities for a productive dialogue benefiting all sides–, highlighting the issues at stake as signaling the end of hegemony and hegemony theories. However, given the direction(s) the Essex School had been already following –directions often disavowed by post-hegemonic research– if there is a positive contribution here, it has nothing to do with the alleged end of hegemony. Instead, it has to do with highlighting many of its less visible and consistently studied sides, something already accepted by the Essex School research programme well before the articulation of the post-hegemonic criticisms⁹.

More recently, a new article by Peter Thomas on post-hegemony (2020) is triggering new discussions on the issue. Thomas accurately captures post-hegemony theories as arguing that the concept of hegemony no longer represents “an adequate basis for conceptualizing contemporary political realities or their possible forms of change”¹⁰. His line of defense is not to dispute the validity of many of the arguments put forward by post-hegemony theorists; it is rather to dispute their conclusion to abolish “hegemony” altogether. Why? Precisely for the same reasons, it seems to me, that were highlighted in earlier defenses of the discursive take on hegemony. “[T]he proposal to go beyond hegemony effectively results in the rediscovery of precisely those political problems to which the emergence of hegemony in the Marxist tradition –as

³ E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London, Verso, 2014, p. 9.

⁴ E. Laclau y Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 1985, p. 134.

⁵ Y. Stavrakakis, “Laclau and Psychoanalysis: An Appraisal”, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 15(3), 2016.

⁶ E. Laclau, “Glimpsing the Future: A Reply”, in S. Critchley and O. Marchart (eds), *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 326.

⁷ E. Laclau, “Politics and the Unconscious – An Interview with Ernesto Laclau”, interview by Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis. *Subjectivity*, 3(3), 2010, p. 235.

⁸ Y. Stavrakakis, “Discourse Theory, Post-hegemonic Critique and Mouffe’s Politics of the Passions”, *Parallax*, 20(2), 2014.

⁹ I have tried to clarify some of these issues in a text that was eventually included in a collective volume devoted to this and related issues: Y. Stavrakakis, “Hegemony or Post-hegemony?: Discourse, Representation and the Revenge(s) of the Real”, in A. Kioupkiolis & G. Katsambekis (eds), *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today: The Biopolitics of the Multitude Versus the Hegemony of the People*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 111-132.

¹⁰ P. D. Thomas, “After (post) hegemony”, *Contemporary Political Theory* 20.2, 2020, p. 2.

concept and political practice— was designed as a strategic response”¹¹, he argues. Indeed, Thomas provides a more or less accurate account of the debate that has ensued, paying attention to both the different versions of post-hegemonic arguments (Day, Lash, Moreiras, Beasley-Murray) and to the way they have been received by authors closer to the Laclau/Mouffe tradition of thought (Arditi, Stavrakakis). He then moves on to discuss post-hegemonic arguments in more detail, focusing on three issues: “There are at least three significant and representative presuppositions shared by these different notions of posthegemony: first, their pre-Gramscian conception of hegemony; second, their acceptance of the hegemony of Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony; and third, their understanding of hegemony as a universalizing system of power and domination”¹².

In what follows, I shall briefly discuss Thomas’s three points (section 1). Then, I will try to thematize certain issues that have been recently raised from a post-hegemonic perspective vis-à-vis Thomas’s intervention and beyond (section 2). These two exercises will give me the opportunity to clarify further, by way of conclusion, certain issues at stake in the ensuing debate from an Essex School perspective (section 3).

Thomas on Post-hegemony

First, Thomas invites us to go back to Gramsci. His argument is that if we do that we will encounter an understanding of hegemony that is far more complex than the one attacked by post-hegemony theories. Indeed one that already takes into account many of the aspects highlighted by post-hegemonic critique like the need to think hegemony beyond a mere equation with consent (with all its subjectivist connotations). The same applies to the problematic of affectivity. Citing a multitude of mostly recent bibliographical references on Gramsci’s work, Thomas concludes that “posthegemony’s emphasis upon affect seems less a going beyond hegemony, than a rediscovery of some of the themes that were central to Gramsci’s own expansive conception of hegemony, albeit ones neglected by some (but by no means all) later interpretations of his thought”¹³. So far, the picture emerging is consistent with the strategy most post-hegemonic arguments have followed vis-à-vis Laclau & Mouffe: ultimately silencing their significant engagement with the aspects highlighted in post-hegemonic argumentation in order to justify a rather unnecessary

move beyond (and, crucially, against) the concept itself (instead of engaging in a process of further enriching hegemony theories).

Second, Thomas highlights the need to distinguish between Gramsci’s “hegemony” and the work of Laclau & Mouffe. He is far from dismissive of Laclau & Mouffe: “Understood as their own distinctive theory, and as an attempt to address this fundamental problem of modern political thought, Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding of hegemony constitutes one of the most significant radical theoretical projects in recent times”¹⁴. What he wants to question is the impression that they can be seen as some sort of comprehensive continuation of Gramsci: “Whether or not [Laclau & Mouffe’s project] [...] can be regarded as an exhaustive reading of the many complex dimensions of Gramsci’s critical inheritance of the Bolshevik tradition of hegemony, or as a plausible extrapolation of the concept’s underlying logic, however, is another question”¹⁵. This is beyond dispute and seems consistent with the way Laclau & Mouffe themselves had formulated their project from the beginning, as drawing on Gramsci’s legacy but—at the same time— as introducing some important new insights: “we are no doubt radicalizing the Gramscian intuition in several respects” they argued in the 2001 preface to the 2nd edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*¹⁶. Already in 1985, they had highlighted the fact that their reformulation of the problematic of “hegemony” moves in a direction that “goes far beyond Gramsci”¹⁷.

If post-hegemony theorists have assumed that Laclau & Mouffe’s reformulation is the only way to read and utilize Gramsci¹⁸ this is obviously a misunderstanding. I am not a Gramsci scholar, but having encountered the caricature of Laclau’s and Mouffe’s positions sometimes sketched in post-hegemonic arguments (in order to score an easy point?) it wouldn’t surprise me if their attacks on Gramsci are similarly one-sided. As for their reduction of Gramsci to Laclau & Mouffe (alleged by Thomas), it clearly presents us with a problem; when they attack “hegemony”, reducing a long conceptual history to only one of its episodes, they may be very well potentially ignoring other possibilities and readings. It comes as no surprise, though, that they prioritize the Essex School because, just as Thomas himself acknowledges, they may want to deal with “one of the most significant radical theoretical projects in recent times”. Who could blame them for that? It seems that post-hegemony theorists had very good reasons for this choice and this is why some of them have no problem to ac-

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹² P. D. Thomas, “After(post)hegemony”, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ E. Laclau y Ch. Mouffe, “Preface”, in *idem*, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 2001, p. XIII.

¹⁷ E. Laclau y Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁸ P. D. Thomas, “After(post)hegemony”, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

cept the critical point raised by Thomas¹⁹. Moreover, as Moreiras points out, this may be a lacuna they are willing to cover in future research initiatives. May I add here that productive exchanges never stopped taking place between the Essex School and post-hegemony theorists as well.

However, it would be arguably preferable if, instead of practicing what seems like a “narcissism of small differences” (in Freud’s sense) in dealing with the Essex School, they could be a little more generous in acknowledging that the problems and the dimensions they highlight are already addressed in one way or the other in this tradition and so, with a little extra effort, contemporary hegemony research could encompass them in a more comprehensive manner. If I understand Thomas’s argument correctly, his overall perspective is similar: on top of reducing the problematic of hegemony to Laclau & Mouffe, post-hegemony ignores the many ways through which the specific critical points it raises are already animating hegemony theory itself. In other words, Gramsci’s “hegemony” is hastily elevated into an enemy –just like Laclau & Mouffe’s theorization is–, whereas, from a hegemony point of view, “post-hegemony” is ultimately revealed as an *extimacy* companion of hegemony²⁰. If the Essex School plays such a prominent role here –leading Thomas to protest the reduction of Gramsci to Laclau & Mouffe in post-hegemonic arguments– this is perhaps because this *extimacy* is revealed more clearly vis-à-vis Laclau & Mouffe.

Third, Thomas highlights a final issue animating the post-hegemonic critique of hegemony. Very often, hegemony is

thought in terms of ideology (often, the Althusserian version of ideology), or sometimes even conflated with it (see Williams 1977). In this case, hegemony/ ideology is understood to be a system of ideas in which subjects are constituted, (mis)recognized and manipulated (akin to the Althusserian process of interpellation); hegemonic struggle is then taken to be synonymous with processes of ideological mystification or demystification [...] Hegemony is thus ultimately conceived in terms compatible with most modern theories of sovereignty, that is, in terms of the functioning of a coherent system of legitimate and legal power founded upon the command of subjects (in the dual sense of the word). Indeed, with its focus upon consciousness, subject constitution and the production of consent, hegemony is effectively posited as a formal mechanism for the more secure and durable realization of constituted sovereign state power, or as a mode of its production²¹.

Well, this observation can obviously open an unending debate encompassing most concepts of political modernity. In order to avoid that and make a long story short, let us just say that if such a description does not fit Gramsci as the post-hegemony research programme often assumes (this seems to be Thomas’s argument in this section), it certainly does not fit the tradition initiated by Laclau & Mouffe. Why is that? Simply because, stressing the centrality of unconscious processes and the continuous encounters with a Real which is beyond discourse –but simultaneously registered within it–, animating its always partial and limited, divided and contaminated articulation (a relation of *extimacy* similar to the relationship of post-hegemony to hegemony as conceptualized from a Laclau & Mouffe perspective), their Lacanian ontology is purely incompatible with such a rationalist and mechanistic conceptualization of subjectivity, sovereignty and universality.

Post-hegemonic Reactions

How does post-hegemony respond to Thomas’s points? We have already seen Moreiras accepting the challenge of going back to Gramsci to elaborate a more comprehensive critique of hegemony in its many versions. Other academics associated with post-hegemony have raised further issues with Thomas’s argument. Because when Thomas puts forward the idea that, by focusing on Laclau & Mouffe, post-hegemonic arguments have ignored alternative understandings of hegemony present in Gramsci, he seems to have something concrete in mind: “[t]he problem of hegemony as leadership functioned as a strategic perspective that guided and structured [Gramsci’s] approach to the concrete task of political organization”. Hegemony is “a method of political work, or of political leadership understood as pedagogical practice”²². How is this supposed to happen, asks Matos? And he highlights this quote by Thomas:

hegemony in these texts and interventions signified the capacity to propose potential solutions to the social and political crises afflicting Italian society, with the aim of mobilizing the active engagement of popular social strata in a project of social transformation, in opposition to the passive assent to existing hierarchies secured by Fascist dictatorship. This conception of hegemony as a strategic perspective and practice remains central to Gramsci’s carceral writings. [...] Hegemony in this sense is also central to Gramsci’s argument in

¹⁹ A. Moreiras, “Apostilla para Peter Thomas desde el texto de Jaime Rodríguez Matos”, *Infrapolitical Deconstruction* [online resource: <https://infrapolitica.com/2020/06/21/apostilla-para-peter-thomas-desde-el-texto-de-jaime-rodriguez-matos/>].

²⁰ “Extimacy” (*extimité*) is a Lacanian neologism designed to capture the topological and conceptual paradox of external intimacy and thus destabilizing ordinary spatial categorizations and oppositions such as the one between inside/outside, internal/external.

²¹ P. D. Thomas, “After(post)hegemony”, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²² *Ibidem.*, p. 15, also cited by J. Rodríguez Matos, “Dino-Gramsci 2020... No Thanks!”, *Infrapolitical Deconstruction*, 2020 [online resource: <https://infrapolitica.com/2020/06/21/dino-gramsci-2020-no-thanks-by-jaime-rodriguez-matos/>].

1931 that “the most realistic and concrete” meaning of “democracy” involves conceiving it in terms of a hegemonic relation in which there is a “becoming directive” [dirigente] of popular social strata...”.

It is here that Matos, writing from a post-hegemonic perspective, highlights a rather problematic turn (didacticism). Isn’t the reduction of political work, and especially leadership, to a pedagogical practice, “the most regressive and appalling way of understanding all of our recent history?” he asks. And he continues:

Is that not a slap in the face of just about everyone who has walked out to protest all over the world in the last twenty years? Were not the “leaders” that so pedagogically set out to take over things in the last twenty years the ones that truly needed to shut up and take some notes? Have we not had enough of these pedagogues [...]?²³

This reads like a valid objection. Surely, there are many grounds on which we must reject visions of a “pedagogical march towards communist society, always led by a minority elite, an intellectual class, whether it is communist party cadres or the duly committed members of the academic intelligentsia and its pedagogy of the politically correct”²⁴. In general, theory –and the elitism it can generate– cannot take precedence over our encounters with the Real of the political. The relationship between the two clearly calls for a more nuanced and aporetic articulation beyond didacticism. This is clearly one of the central axes of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis –one of the main resources on which Laclau & Mouffe have drawn. Lacanian theory and praxis locates its intervention(s) beyond any naïve didacticism (clinical, academic or political) and highlights the many connection(s) between the discourses of the master and the university –so vividly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The gap between theory and praxis seems to be irreducible and this is not merely a division between “theorists”, on the one hand, and “activists”, on the other. It is a division internal to all of us (splitting sovereign subjectivity), between our knowledge and our desire. The crucial task is not to bridge this irreducible gap –either through didacticism or through its inversion: some kind of unmediated spontaneism; the urgent task is to thematize and interrogate it in more clear and potentially emancipatory terms. As Lacan has put it in one of his seminars: “the theoretician is not the one who finds the way. He explains

it. Obviously, the explanation is useful to find the rest of the path”²⁵.

When they comment on the course of Podemos, Muñoz & Moreiras seem to be advancing a similar argument on the theory/practice nexus. They see their decline not as something due to “secondary factors” like the course of historical events, or the deepening social fragmentation and disorientation of society. For them, their political-theoretical groundwork was problematic from the beginning: “«Podemos» failure is also a failure of theory”²⁶.

What Muñoz & Moreiras argue is that, by taking Laclau & Mouffe’s corpus as a model, Podemos believed they had secured the establishment of a new common sense able to reinvigorate the commitment to democracy that had been abandoned by the establishment elites, *La Casta*, inclusive of the socialists: “They never thought about specific Spanish conditions, where the complexities of political life were bound to make their theory, in spite of its original brilliance, a largely unusable corset”. In other words, they believed that the “hegemonic hypothesis, predicated on popular unity, and dependent on the linking together of popular demands under authorized command” could be “used to neutralize internal conflicts and dissent within the party while, at the same time, disregarding institution-building and a solid and plural organization on the ground”²⁷.

However, these were not the only problems that Podemos had to face; one should not forget, for example, the role of the ordoliberal euro-zone framework, which was also important in the Greek case. Besides, similar problems were encountered in cases where the influence of Laclau & Mouffe as a model was not a central factor. Despite what is often mentioned, this is the case with SYRIZA, once more, where Laclau & Mouffe had a minimal influence on strategy; although *a posteriori* we can use a Laclau & Mouffe analytical framework to make sense of SYRIZA’s victorious march to power through the establishment of equivalential linkages between different demands and sectors of the population and the (partial) unification process –not “unity” as Muñoz & Moreiras mention– that followed (which, in any case, were part of left-wing strategy well before Laclau & Mouffe systematized them). All this is not say, though, that the point raised by Muñoz & Moreiras should not be taken seriously. But even if one accepts the alleged reification of a Laclau & Mouffe framework by PODEMOS, what is the reasonable conclusion that follows from that? Isn’t it that such a reification should be clearly avoided and that equivalential unification

²³ *Idem*.

²⁴ A. Moreiras, “An Invitation to Social Death: Afropessimism and Posthegemony, Archipolitics and Infrapolitics”, *Tillfallighetsskrivande* [online resource: <https://www.tillfallighet.org/tillfallighetsskrivande/an-invitation-to-social-death-afropessimism-and-posthegemony-archipolitics-and-infrapolitics>].

²⁵ J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII, Transference*, Cambridge, Polity, 2017, seminar of 19 June 1968. This argument is fully elaborated in my introduction to *The Lacanian Left*: Y. Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left*, Albany, SUNY Press 2007, cf. esp. pp. 13-14.

²⁶ G. Muñoz y A. Moreiras, “«Podemos» Failure: The Inadequacy of «Hegemony»”, *Tillfallighetsskrivande*, 2020 [online resource: <https://www.tillfallighet.org/tillfallighetsskrivande/podemos-failure-the-inadequacy-of-hegemony>].

²⁷ *Idem*.

is not enough in the long-run? That there are certain limits here and that we are not dealing with some sort of political *Panacea*?²⁸ In other words, that one should benefit from hegemony theory, but also move beyond hegemony, or rather try to advance it in new directions without necessarily going against it? Consider this quote from Chantal Mouffe from her joint book with Errejón:

We need a synergy between electoral competition and the wide range of struggles that take place in the social arena. It's clear that the democratic demands that exist in our societies cannot find an expression solely through the vertical party form, that they also need horizontal forms of expression. A new form of political organisation that articulates the two modes –that's how I conceive “left-wing populism”. Clearly, however, that response will have to be concretised in different ways depending on the specific circumstances of the different European countries –this is not about imposing a single modality²⁹.

It seems to me that this is implicitly accepted by Muñoz & Moreiras who fall short of proposing that we go directly *against* hegemony, because what they eventually propose is precisely going *beyond* in a manner that can arguably be recuperated by a reflexive understanding of hegemony: “For years we have suggested that, given that hegemony theory, while a brilliant descriptor of political action in general, is an inadequate and insufficient principle to organize society along the lines of thorough democratization based on equality, it was *necessary to think beyond hegemony*”³⁰. The same phrase is repeated towards the end of their text: “The decline of Podemos reveals an important lesson: if progressives are to have a chance to create long lasting social change, they must go *beyond hegemony*, which is a concept that ultimately belongs to the twentieth century grammar of militant politics and is unfit to navigate the heterogeneous nature of all too complex contemporary societies”³¹. Now, it seems to me that if the “beyond” is seen as signaling a radical break with hegemony –both as political practice and as a type of theorization– then post-hegemony morphs into anti-hegemony (and anti-hegemony theory). This is especially the case when “post-hegemony” assumes the form of a new politico-theoretical frontier dividing us into “friends” and “foes”; wouldn't that be precisely what

such a project seems to deny: a hegemonic way of operating? I am wondering whether declarations of clear cuts and passages –even when they target hegemony– indirectly remain within a hegemonic terrain ultimately betraying the desire of adherents of a radical version of post-hegemony. Of course, this is not a problem for moderate versions of post-hegemony that accept that hegemony is still very much around. What seems to gain importance here is a desire to take into account hegemony but also highlight –and sponsor– disavowed dynamics that would allow a more comprehensive and sustainable opening onto a more democratic/egalitarian future: “unleashing a new political sequence based upon the equalitarian symbolization of the social”³².

Given, however, Laclau's stress on heterogeneity³³, the negative ontology framework operative in a Laclau & Mouffe understanding of hegemony and the ensuing research, from a discursive perspective –which captures many of the insights put forward by post-hegemony theories (the need to discuss limits and recast hegemony in a way avoiding reification and pedagogic rigidity and embracing affectivity, the problematics of horizontality and the commons, etc.³⁴)–, do we need to abolish altogether the value attributed to (partial) equivalential unification processes? Wouldn't that accept *a priori* the conditions exacerbated by neoliberal fragmentation and rob us from an important and still useful moment of left-wing strategy? (without it perhaps nobody would have even heard of M15 and the Greek Aganaktismenoi in the first place; in the American case, for example, OWS evaporated in thin air only to re-emerge as a sensibility animating Bernie Sanders campaigns). My fear is that, by disavowing hegemony completely, the egalitarian symbolization of the social that Moreiras proposes may gain something only by losing something else: the –insufficient but necessary– moment of equivalential unification needed to establish any salient political symbolization in the first place.

The post-hegemonic means he puts forward in order to achieve this goal may seem initially appealing: “posthegemony proposes a practice of general dissensus, that is, a refusal of hegemonic intrusion in singular life (whether personal or collective), wherever it comes from. This results, or should result, in political practice understood as the permanent negotiation of conflict”; “It postulates an emancipation from the state apparatus, which includes an emanci-

²⁸ On the crucial questions of the limits of left-wing populism, also see Y. Stavrakakis, “The (Discursive) Limits of (Left) Populism”, *Journal of Language and Politics*, advance online publication, 2020.

²⁹ Chantal Mouffe, in Ch. Mouffe and Í. Errejón, *Podemos: In the Name of the People*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2016, p. 125.

³⁰ G. Muñoz & A. Moreiras, *op. cit.*, emphasis added.

³¹ *Idem*, emphasis added.

³² A. Moreiras, “An invitation...”, *op. cit.*

³³ P. Biglieri & Perello, “The Names of the Real in Laclau's Theory: Antagonism, Dislocation and Heterogeneity”, *Filosofski Vestnik*, XXXII (2), 2011.

³⁴ Such reflections particularly focusing on the experience of Podemos are articulated by Alexandros Kioupiolis in A. Kioupiolis “Late Modern Adventures of Populism in Spain: The Case of Podemos, 2014-2018”, in G. Katsambekis & A. Kioupiolis (eds), *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019.

pation from any counterhegemonic inversion of the state apparatus”³⁵. Obviously, the cultivation of dissensus is essential here, a point repeatedly highlighted by the Essex School³⁶.

However, is merely saying “No” ever enough? The landslide win of the “No” in the 2015 Greek referendum provides a suitable example. First of all, I think it is important to acknowledge that the No in the referendum constitutes a true accomplishment in itself, as it took place against all mainstream media, with capital controls imposed, under circumstances of extreme tension and insecurity (with the closed banks soon being coupled by shortages in medicines etc.). At the same time, its “heroic” character should not make us disavow its formal structure. The “No” did constitute an empty signifier *par excellence* in Laclau’s sense. In other words, it incarnated a primarily negative gesture of Machiavellian nature, registering solely a desire “not to be dominated” anymore in the brutal, often *undemocratic* and *undignified* way experienced throughout the Greek crisis. It constituted, in essence, a radicalized, politicized Bartleby type moment of “leave me alone!”, “Enough is enough!”, “No more austerity!”, “I really prefer not to... It did not, however, include any positive indication of the way forward in terms of concrete policy directions (for example, with regards to the currency situation). The challenge was thus to transform this negative gesture into a positive course of action. This is exactly where a certain short-circuit has obviously emerged. Because such a course inevitably had to navigate within the broader hegemonic landscape³⁷.

We should not entertain the fantasy that this constraining landscape will allow one to follow an alternative orientation, it is never a matter of free choice. What if the hegemonic state –and inter-state– apparatus does not allow you to move away? It is here that some *extimate* articulation of the two logics (call them hegemony and post-hegemony) becomes necessary if only to win some breathing space allowing the formulation of such “Nos” in the first place and facilitating their positive articulation in an egalitarian direction. Post-hegemony theorists like Moreiras are very much aware of this predicament and hence the importance of the historical example of *marranismo* and the resulting ethos one could extract from it³⁸. What I am wondering here is whether the radical break imagined by post-hegemony, the “going beyond” posited, may have important hegemonic conditions of possibility and thus may require a twin operation of *extimate* mutual engagement³⁹.

So, isn’t it the case that a double movement is needed here? One that can utilize the advantages of hegemony –especially in its Laclau & Mouffe version– while at the same time it avoids its reification and invests in its enrichment, thinking simultaneously *within* and *beyond* hegemony in an *extimate* way (incorporating post-hegemonic insights in further advancing hegemony theory or theory and politics in general, if one wants to avoid using the word “hegemony” altogether). Well, a discursive understanding of hegemony is designed in a way that allows and invites precisely this process. Let me clarify, in the following section, why this is the case.

To conclude: Discursive/affective hegemony and its negative limits⁴⁰

This is precisely the case for at least two reasons inscribed within the theorization of hegemony in the Laclau & Mouffe tradition:

First, because discursive articulation cannot be reduced to a mere linguistic representational operation premised on some sort of attainable unity, but encompasses performative dimensions that rely on affectivity.

Second, because this is always a partial process stimulated by the limits of discourse (negativity) and bound to reproduce them. In other words, the hegemonic operation is firmly situated in (and, paradoxically, animated by) an ultimate horizon of negativity and impossibility.

Obviously, the aforementioned dimensions explode any reliance on “traditionalist” understandings of sovereignty, universality, pedagogy, but also unmediated spontaneism.

Let us briefly examine how this schema operates vis-à-vis hegemony and populism in particular. It certainly does not presuppose some pre-existing popular unity –the emergence of “the people” is never the starting point but rather the result of equivalential articulation– nor does it rely on the production of “the people” as One. This is ultimately impossible but this does not necessarily lead to the vindication of an argument in favor of celebrating extreme multiplicity and spontaneism. Why? Purely because, even if the One is impossible, its structural position does not disappear. It remains operative in politics as the name of an absence that, although inscribing its own failure, at the same time sets in motion a process of affective investment. The latter allows a partial unification

³⁵ A. Moreiras, “An invitation...”, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Cf., in this respect, Y. Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political*, London, Routledge 1999, esp. chs 3 and 5; also cf. Y. Stavrakakis, “Paradoxes of Polarization: Democracy’s Inherent Division and the (Anti-) Populist Challenge”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 2018, pp. 43-58.

³⁷ I am drawing here on Y. Stavrakakis, “Laclau and Psychoanalysis: An Appraisal”, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 15(3), 2016, pp. 304-335.

³⁸ A. Moreiras, “Sobre Populismo y Política. Hacia un Populismo Marrano”, *Política Comun*, 10, 2016, [online resource: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/pc/12322227.0010.011?view=text;rgn=main>].

³⁹ Moreiras’s work on marrano populism offers the opportunity for precisely such a reflection, to which I shall return in the future. Cf., in this respect, *idem*.

⁴⁰ In this section I will be partly drawing on Y. Stavrakakis, “On Laclau’s Alleged Monism”, *POPULISMUS working papers*, n° 11, 2020 [online resource].

crucial in sublimating –but not erasing– multiple autonomous struggles and spontaneous movements in a way still important in effectively organizing political activity against a given *status quo*:

[W]hile I agree with Badiou that the One is not, I do not think that there is mere multiplicity either but, instead, failed unicity. This leads to a different type of ontological approach, one in which the primary categories will not be mathematical but linguistic. Failed unicity means that you do not have unicity conceived as a ground, but you do not have a fully fledged multiplicity either. One does not do away with the category of the One entirely, in the sense that the failure of the One in constituting itself as ground does not lead to its disappearance; unicity remains but with a twist, acquiring the status of a simulacrum. This means, in my view, that totality, unicity, is not a ground but a horizon, the latter being understood as the cathectic investment which gives to it a centrality fully exceeding its ontic identity. This cathectic investment is exactly the point in which affect enters the scene. The important point is to realize that without this cathectic (affective) investment in an object (which is what we call hegemony) there will not be a symbolic order either. So the affective, the cathectic investment, is not the other of the symbolic but its very precondition⁴¹.

As a result, “[we find ourselves within a process of articulation in which an equivalence is established between a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in a way which maintains the internal differentiation of the group”, Mouffe argues⁴²:

As Laclau and I have repeatedly stressed, a relation of equivalence is not one in which all differences collapse into identity but in which differences are still active. If such differences were eliminated, that would not be equivalence but a simple identity⁴³.

In that sense, the process of the construction of “the people”, the way populist discourse establishes a hegemonic relation, is neither holistic nor monist; it never results in establishing homogeneity and unity. In fact, this would be impossible within the negative ontology of hegemony theory as it is re-signified by a discursive perspective. Why? Well, simply because

hegemony as a process is enabled because hegemony as a final state is ultimately impossible. Complex realities demand complex interpretations and we can encounter here phenomena or principles that flourish on the crossroads between the necessary and the impossible. Indeed, very often we desire and commit ourselves to ideals that are ultimately impossible or fictional, but are also necessary to kick off a certain process and potentially change reality⁴⁴.

At any rate, Laclau’s and Mouffe’s focus on the generative and enabling operation of discursive articulation(s) relies on a horizon of negativity: “It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices”⁴⁵. What they designate as “hegemony” comprises an irreducible Sisyphean struggle to negotiate the dislocations, failures and crises that political projects encounter from within (from their inherent inability to fully capture and reshape the real and to represent their constituencies in a definitive way), and from without (from the challenges put forward by other representations within political antagonism). No closure is achievable here:

The requirements of “hegemony” as a central category of political analysis are essentially three. The first is that something constitutively heterogeneous to the social system or structure has to be present in the latter from the very beginning, preventing it from constituting itself as a closed or representable totality. If such a closure were achievable, no hegemonic event would be possible, and the political, far from being an ontological dimension of the social –an “existential” of the social– would be just an ontic dimension of the latter. Secondly, however, the hegemonic suture has to produce a re-totalizing effect, without which no hegemonic articulation would be possible either. But, thirdly, this re-totalization must not have the character of a dialectical reintegration. It has, on the contrary, to maintain alive and visible the original and constitutive heterogeneity from which the hegemonic articulation started⁴⁶.

Accordingly, what is at stake in politics is never the end of history or some sort of definitive resolution of all contradictions and antagonisms. On the contrary, it is rather a temporary crystallization, a partial

⁴¹ E. Laclau, “Politics and the Unconscious...”, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

⁴² Ch. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, London, Verso, 2018, pp. 62-63.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, p. 63.

⁴⁴ The most graphic example is offered by someone who, in the start of a sexual relationship, says “I love you!”, “you are the best!” or something along these lines, as a result of a feeling of desire or infatuation towards the love-object. Obviously, this is bound to entail some exaggeration, an *over-estimation* or *idealisation* in Freud’s sense (S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, London, Imago Publishing, 1949, p. 74). We know, again from Freud, that such a –quite often arbitrary– overvaluation of the sexual partner is, typically, the necessary background opening the road to a sexual act: “It is only in the rarest instances that the psychical valuation that is set on the sexual object, as being the goal of the sexual instinct, stops short at its genitals. The appreciation extends to the whole body of the sexual object and tends to involve every sensation derived from it” (*ibidem.*, p. 150). As a result, “the loved object enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism, and [...] all its characteristics are valued more highly than those of people who are not loved, or than its own were at a time when it itself was not loved” (*ibidem.*, p. 73). We also know from Lacan that love implies desiring and offering something that one does not possess: “love means giving what you don’t have” J. Lacan, *The seminar...*, *op. cit.*, p. 34). Can it really happen otherwise?

⁴⁵ E. Laclau y Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁴⁶ E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London, Verso, 2014, pp. 80-81.

fixation of the balance of forces and representations, which may retroactively and temporarily be accepted as the “common sense” of a community, as what it “takes for granted”⁴⁷.

This constitutive character of negativity and heterogeneity, of limits and impossibilities⁴⁸, was part and parcel of Laclau’s theory from very early on and it is a mystery how it has escaped the attention of many commentators: “For me [...] «populism» is the permanent expression of the fact that in the final instance, a society always fails in its efforts to constitute itself as an objective order”⁴⁹. It is against such an impossibility that hegemony and populism operate⁵⁰. Furthermore, it is an impossibility they cannot eliminate and are bound to reproduce; yet, innegotiating this failure they may also facilitate a populist unification process potentially increasing the chances of popular empowerment: “If the fullness of society is unachievable, the attempts at reaching it will necessarily fail –although they will be able, in the search for that impossible object, to solve a variety of partial problems”⁵¹.

All hegemonic projects eventually face their politico-discursive limits. In Laclau’s perspective, all discourses are always already dislocated, so to speak; no full identification or social closure, no monism, holism, homogeneity or unity are ultimately attainable. It is only the registering of such irreducible impossibilities that introduces political pluralization: “The fullness of society is an impossible object which successive [antagonistic] contingent contents try to impersonate ad infinitum”⁵². As we have already seen, The One –and “the people” as One– is impossible and cannot be achieved; the One is a constitutively split one (here the Lacanian influence is, once more, important). Yet its structural position does not evaporate; it remains as a potent invocation in human life, although its designation is ontologically unstable and marked by an internal division, which is impossible to remedy. It can only indicate the presence of an absence. The universal pole remains operational, but the universality at stake is always a contaminated, weak universality: “This relation, by which a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it, is what we call a hegemonic relation. As a result, its universality is a contaminated universality: (1) it lives in this

unresolvable tension between universality and particularity; (2) its function of hegemonic universality is not acquired for good but is, on the contrary, always reversible”⁵³. In that sense, the employment of a *pars pro toto* logic by Laclau⁵⁴ is, in actual fact, what demonstrates that this operation cannot be fully consumed, it is itself the trace of its irreducible particularity, impurity and instability.

By identifying “the people” and their “adversary” as unstable categories, however, Laclau leaves them open to internal contestation and redefinition. Thus, in Laclau’s theory, populist discourse is able to reconstitute symbolic political community along lines that allow for deeper internal agonism and greater recognition of the impermanent edges of every expression of collective identity⁵⁵.

“The people” emerges, of course, within particular contexts, as a single signifying unit and only thus (through its affective valuation) can it facilitate the strategic unification still necessary –but surely not enough– for popular empowerment. However, this single signifier can only operate, within Laclau’s Lacanian ontology, as a signifier of the lack in the Other, as a vanishing mediator. It points to and renders visible a constitutive split; its partial meaning is never transparent and holistic, it is always subject to anomalies and displacements, within a horizon of ultimate failure and negativity. It is in this sense that Laclau offers a crucial extension of Lefort’s thesis on the democratic emptiness in the locus of power making it compatible with the (symbolic and strategic) unification process on which popular agency and struggles partly rely: “if the notion of emptiness is restricted to a place of power that anybody can occupy, a vital aspect of the whole question is omitted, namely, that occupation of an empty place is not possible without the occupying force becoming itself, to some extent, the signifier of emptiness”⁵⁶.

It seems to me that by taking into account these dimensions a more reflexive dialogue between hegemony and post-hegemony theories can emerge benefiting both a more rigorous account of political processes and contemporary political activity in its elaboration of alternative futures.

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- ⁵¹ E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical...*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
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