

Struggles for Hegemony have not Ceased

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Abstract. Peter Thomas's criticism of arguments advanced recently of an era of "post-hegemony" in Western democracies may be extended by considering the experience of post-colonial Asia and Africa. Reviewing the use of the Gramscian concepts of consent and passive revolution in the study of modern South Asian history, this paper argues that both of Gramsci's objectives—a general theory of power and the analysis of historically contingent and strategic politics—can be retained to yield valuable analytical insights. The paper concludes that rather than focusing on whether the analysis of hegemony can remain true to Gramsci's text, one can put the concept to analytical use in explaining political change in different parts of the world today.

Keywords: Hegemony; Passive Revolution; Subaltern History; Hindu Nationalism.

[es] Las luchas por la hegemonía no han terminado

Resumen. La crítica de Peter Thomas a los argumentos planteados recientemente sobre una era de "poshegemonía" en las democracias occidentales puede ampliarse considerando las experiencias de Asia y África poscoloniales. Revisando el uso de los conceptos gramscianos de consentimiento y revolución pasiva en el estudio de la historia moderna del sur de Asia, este artículo sostiene que ambos objetivos de Gramsci—una teoría general del poder y el análisis de la política estratégica e históricamente contingente—pueden conservarse para obtener valiosas percepciones analíticas. El documento concluye que, en lugar de centrarse en si el análisis de la hegemonía puede mantenerse fiel al texto de Gramsci, se puede dar un uso analítico al concepto para explicar el cambio político en diferentes partes del mundo actual.

Palabras clave: hegemonía; revolución pasiva; historia subalterna; nacionalismo hindú.

Summary: Consent. Passive Revolution. Hegemonic Struggles. References.

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In his careful critique of recent claims of "post-hegemony", Peter Thomas has drawn our attention to certain fundamental aspects of Gramsci's evolving ideas on hegemony that have been missed in discussions on the question in the Western academy². There are three kinds of post-hegemony arguments that Thomas has identified. The first set of arguments claims that while hegemony may once have been a relevant concept, changes since the 1990s that brought about a shift from representation to communication and eroded normative values have made hegemony inoperative as an explanatory concept of power in contemporary society. Second, some have argued that subalternity was always outside hegemony rather than within the paradigmatic hegemonic order described by Laclau and Mouffe³ (1985), and that so-called hegemony was secured not by ideology but by the cynical manipulation of power. Third, some have utilized Laclau and Mouffe's chain of equivalence which rhetorically unifies a hegemonic social

order but expanded its scope to include non-hegemonic affective elements that lie outside hegemony. All three sets of claims of post-hegemony, Thomas argues, rely heavily on the analysis of hegemony presented by Laclau and Mouffe which, in turn, depended on the partial thematic selections from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* available in the 1970s. Now that there is renewed discussion on some of Gramsci's key concepts based on the complete chronological edition of his notebooks, it is possible to subject Laclau and Mouffe's analysis as well as the theories of post-hegemony to a different critique.

I find two elements in Thomas's criticism of post-hegemony arguments particularly significant but feel they can be extended further, especially by bringing in the experience of colonial and postcolonial societies in Asia and Africa. I do so below by considering the discussion since the 1980s on hegemony in India. My somewhat extended survey of that discussion will show that an adherence to Gramsci's

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² Cf. P. D. Thomas, "After (post) hegemony", *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20 (2), 2020, pp. 318-340.

³ Cf. E. Laclau and Ch. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985.

approach continues to yield valuable insights in explaining changes in power relations in India.

Consent

The first important intervention that Thomas makes is to point out the profound impoverishment in the post-hegemony arguments of Gramsci's understanding of "consent" as a constitutive element of hegemony. As is well known, Gramsci often described hegemony in terms of a coercion-consent dialectic. Put simply, hegemony indicates a situation in which the ruling class is able to elicit the consent of the subaltern classes and thereby govern without the overt use of coercive force. Working on the historical material of colonial India, Ranajit Guha developed Gramsci's concept into an analytical description of the general configuration of power in terms of dominance and subordination⁴. Dominance describes power from the side of the ruling classes while subordination describes it from the side of the subaltern classes. Dominance, in turn, consists of the dyad of coercion and persuasion—two elements in the exercise of power by the ruling groups—while subordination consists of collaboration and resistance—two possible strategic options available to the subaltern classes. Guha strongly emphasizes the fact that whereas the generic dyad of dominance and subordination is logical, and therefore universal, in all societies characterized by power relations, the two constituent dyads—coercion-persuasion and collaboration-resistance—are historically contingent, subject to active strategic intervention by contending forces. He takes various situations from Indian history in which the different elements in the composition of power have different relative weights and shows that they produce different political outcomes. Guha then formulates the concept of hegemony as that condition of dominance in which persuasion outweighs coercion.

One must note that by distinguishing the two levels of the power configuration—a universal dyad that is a necessary structural characteristic of every social formation in which there are power relations and two historically contingent dyads, each of which constitutes a term in the generic dyad—Guha is able to retain both the structural as well as the strategic element in Gramsci's concept of hegemony. He is able to show that depending on specific variations in the relative weights of the different terms in the power configuration produced by the active political moves of different ruling and subordinate groups, there may be dominance but no hegemony. In other words, depending on the nature and degree of resistance by the subaltern classes, there may be various outcomes ranging from the absence of hegemony, various stages in the active pursuit of hegemony to

its achievement which, however, remains necessarily contingent since it is subject to structural crises as well as strategic political action by both ruling and subordinate groups.

Thomas has pointed out that a significant effect of the shift made by Laclau and Mouffe from earlier notions of structural determination of class ideology to the discursive field of representation, especially through rhetorical address, was the acceptance of an idea of consent as subjective assent by individuals constituting various social groups. Although the group was the starting point in the analysis of democratic politics, it was assumed that individuals could join or leave groups and also be members of several groups at the same time. In a sense, the liberal idea of the autonomous citizen-subject was embraced in this understanding of radical social democracy. This is not surprising in view of the prevailing political atmosphere, especially in Europe, where traditional distinctions between left and right had collapsed to bring about a large zone of convergence between the main political parties. The absence of structural social divisions was further confirmed by the rise to dominance in the 1980s of a neo-liberal view of democracy as a marketplace where consumer-citizens choose between policy options based on their subjective preferences. Consent, in the new understanding of hegemony proposed by theorists of radical democracy, was something that was discursively produced by the intersubjective play of representation among individuals who constitute various social groups.

Guha's analysis was first published in 1989, soon after the publication of Laclau and Mouffe's book but without any reference to it. In fact, in the first phase of the Subaltern Studies project in India during the 1980s of which Guha's essay was a part, there was little impact of the semiotics-based analysis of representation of which Laclau and Mouffe's work was a distinguished and influential example. Consequently, Guha felt no need to interpret Gramsci's idea of consent as an intersubjectively established agreement between groups formed temporarily and contingently by individual subjects. Rather, he and other contributors to *Subaltern Studies* adopted an older idea of class consciousness derived from Hegel and Marx but modified it to suit the specific historical and cultural conditions of India. In particular, they paid attention to the institutions and practices of religion in shaping the political activity of both ruling and subaltern groups. In this, consciousness was regarded as formed and set into action collectively.

Thus, Guha describes how the British imperial idea of order was combined in colonial India with the traditional Indian idea of *daṇḍa*, or the authoritative claim to punish, to produce the coercive element within the ruling consciousness of the British

⁴ Cf. R. Guha "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography", en R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI*, 1989 pp. 210-309; reprinted in *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997.

official class and their Indian collaborators. This consciousness guided the actions of magistrates and policemen, private feudal armies, caste councils, priests imposing religious sanctions, landlords mobilizing unpaid labour or exercising criminal jurisdiction, patriarchs punishing recalcitrant women, and a host of other agencies of power. At the same time, the British liberal idea of improvement or progress was combined with the idea common in Indian religions of the wealthy holding their wealth in trust for society to produce the element of persuasion in the ruling consciousness. On the side of the subordinate classes, the legal obligation of obedience was combined with the traditional idiom of *bhakti*, or devotion to authority, to produce collaboration, while legal recourse to rightful dissent was combined with religious ideas of legitimate protest against injustice. Ruling and subaltern consciousness was, in each case, a complex of contradictory elements.

In order to combat the dominant historiography –colonialist as well as nationalist– which argued that anticolonial politics in India was either the product of conflicts among Indian elites or a gift of the nationalist elite to the masses, contributors to *Subaltern Studies* in the 1980s were particularly keen to establish subaltern consciousness as an autonomous force in history. While the subaltern classes were apparently subservient to the ruling dispensation in ordinary times, their autonomous consciousness was revealed at moments of rebellion. Several studies were carried out of violent peasant revolts in colonial India. The conceptual model was provided in Guha's book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983)⁵.

Gayatri Spivak deconstructed this figuration of an autonomous subaltern consciousness to argue that Subaltern Studies historians had, in their work, established subaltern consciousness as different from elite consciousness rather than as identical to itself⁶. Thus, the claim of an autonomous subaltern consciousness was at best a strategic one; it made little sense to raise the subaltern to the status of a sovereign subject of history. Writing on the everyday forms of peasant resistance in Southeast Asia, James Scott criticised Subaltern Studies historians for romanticising the rebel peasant⁷. Open rebellion, he remarked, was extremely rare in agrarian societies, but that did not mean that peasants passively accepted their subordination. There was resistance even in everyday life, but it did not explode in open revolt. Both of these

criticisms implied that hegemony and counter-hegemony must not be understood as positive descriptions of a social formation but rather as historically contingent strategic perspectives.

From the 1990s, the work of Subaltern Studies began to be widely cited in what came to be known as postcolonial studies in universities in Britain and the United States. The emphasis there was on the discursive reading of texts in which subaltern lives were represented. The Gramscian question of hegemony was not of particular concern in these literary analyses⁸. On the other hand, the idea of subaltern consciousness –fragmented and contradictory– was pursued in ethnographic studies of everyday religious practice and popular culture, especially cinema, in India. Of particular interest was what Gramsci often called “common sense” –the untheorised intuitive perceptions of ordinary folk based on the sedimentation of their historical experience⁹. Common sense was shown to be a useful category in explaining both collaboration and resistance by subaltern groups in contemporary India.

Passive Revolution

Apart from the question of consciousness, the other aspect of hegemony that drew the attention of scholars in India was the structure of power relations configured in the state formation. The most useful Gramscian category here is the passive revolution. Comparing the emergence of the Indian republic with Gramsci's account of the *Risorgimento*, several Indian scholars in the 1980s analysed the structure of state power in India as one in which the bourgeoisie shared power with landlords, the balance between the two being held by the political leadership and bureaucracy drawn from the upper-middle class¹⁰. Passive revolution is thus seen as the Indian bourgeoisie's hegemonic strategy which has changed, sometimes minimally and at others drastically, over the last seven decades.

In his criticism of post-hegemony arguments, Peter Thomas has shown how, building on the idea of hegemony developed by Laclau and Mouffe, they have adopted the passive revolution as the paradigm of hegemony as such. Overlooking the specific historical conjuncture of Eurocommunism, the decline of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal biopolitics, Laclau and Mouffe's formal discursive tech-

⁵ R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983.

⁶ Cf. G. Ch. Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography” in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV*, 1985, pp. 330-363.

⁷ Cf. Scott, J. C., *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

⁸ Cf. N. Srivastava and B. Bhattacharya, *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

⁹ Cf. A. Patnaik, “Gramsci's Concept of Common Sense: Towards a Theory of Subaltern Consciousness in Hegemony Processes”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23, 5, 1988, pp. PE2-PE10; M. S. S. Pandian, “Culture and Subaltern Consciousness: An Aspect of the MGR Phenomenon”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24, 1989, pp. PE62-PE68; C. Zene (ed.), *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Subalterns and Dalits*, London, Routledge, 2013.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Bardhan, *The Political Economy of Development in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1984; S. Kaviraj, “Critique of the Passive Revolution”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23, 45-47, 1988, pp. 2429-2444; P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, chapter 10.

nique of an equivalential chain ordering the structured network of social institutions was taken to be an exhaustive description of Gramsci's passive revolution. When it was discovered in the new millennium that such a mode of structuration was no longer operative, hegemony itself was declared obsolete.

Thomas has pointed out from the chronological edition of the *Prison Notebooks* how, beginning with his analysis of the Italian Risorgimento, Gramsci used the passive revolution as an organizing idea to describe the variety of strategies of alliance, conflict and incorporation by which the bourgeoisie in different European countries sought to achieve hegemony. Passive revolution was not a synonym for hegemony. On the contrary, it indicated the lack of hegemony and the formulation of a political project to acquire hegemony. Consequently, there can be no exhaustive description of the many forms of the passive revolution; they are contingently defined by the specific historical context. One only needs to look through Gramsci's notebooks to see how he used the idea of passive revolution to analyse political transitions (or their absence) in France, Germany, Italy, Britain or Spain. He used the military metaphors of war of manoeuvre and war of position to speak about the range of tactics that could be employed in relation to allies and adversaries. Underlying this analysis was the suggestion that the seizure of state power as the precursor to the transformation of social relations on the model of the Bolshevik Revolution was not an option available to the working class in Western European countries where bourgeois dominance over institutions of civil society was far more entrenched. But nowhere did Gramsci imply that bourgeois hegemony was anything but historically contingent or that the passive revolution was anything other than a strategically formulated project to achieve hegemony.

Kaviraj's detailed analysis of the passive revolution in India showed how power was shared between the dominant classes because no one class had the ability to exercise hegemony¹¹. However, sharing power meant a ceaseless push and pull, with one class gaining a relative ascendancy at one point, only to lose it at another. He described these changes from the inauguration of the planning regime under Nehru in the 1950s, through the food crisis of the mid-1960s, the reconstitution of the ruling Congress Party by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, the authoritarian phase of emergency rule and its overthrow by popular vote, to the attempt under Rajiv Gandhi to provide greater space for the growth of private capital in the late 1980s. Kaviraj presented a synoptic political history of the relative dominance and decline of the industrial capitalists, the rural proprietors and the bureaucratic elite within the framework of the passive revolution of capital.

The characteristic features of this phase of the passive revolution in India lasting until the 1980s were the relative autonomy of the state as a whole from the

bourgeoisie and the landed elite; the supervision of the state by an elected political leadership, a permanent bureaucracy and an independent judiciary; the negotiation of class interests through a multi-party electoral system; a protectionist regime discouraging the entry of foreign capital and promoting import substitution; the leading role of the state sector in heavy industry, infrastructure, transport, telecommunications, mining, banking and insurance; state control over the private manufacturing sector through a regime of licencing; and the relatively greater influence of industrial capitalists over the central government and that of the landed elites over the regional state governments. Passive revolution in this phase represented the inability of the capitalist class to exercise hegemony.

The situation began to change from 1991 with the adoption by the Indian government of the structural adjustment policies advocated by international financial agencies. The crucial change was the dismantling of the licence regime, greater entry of foreign capital and foreign consumer goods, and the opening up of sectors such as telecommunications, transport, infrastructure, mining, banking, insurance, etc. to private capital. This led to the decline of the dominance of a handful of monopoly houses drawn from traditional merchant backgrounds, the rise of many new large companies in fields such as pharmaceuticals and information technology, and much greater confidence of the capitalist class as a whole to compete in global markets and even seek avenues for the export of capital. All this led to the spectacular growth of the Indian economy at the annual rate of eight or nine per cent in the years preceding the global financial crisis of 2008-09.

Changes in the economy were tied to decisive political changes. First, there was a distinct ascendancy in the relative power of the corporate capitalist class as compared to the landed elite. Second, although the state continued to be the most important mediating apparatus in negotiating between conflicting class interests, the role of the bureaucratic class, or more generally the urban middle class, in leading the autonomous interventions of the developmental state significantly weakened. The middle class began to see the state apparatus as riddled with corruption and inefficiency and regarded the corporate capitalist sector as professionally committed to economic growth and national prosperity. The urban middle class which once played a crucial role in running the autonomous state of the passive revolution now came under the moral-political sway of the bourgeoisie.

But this did not mean that the bourgeoisie had achieved the hegemony it sought. Following Gramsci's analytical approach, scholars argued that whereas the corporate capitalist class had achieved hegemonic leadership over civil society composed mainly of the urban middle class, it could only exercise dominance over the rural masses through the governmental agen-

¹¹ Cf. S. Kaviraj, "Critique of the Passive Revolution", *op. cit.*

cies of the state¹². Further, Sanyal argued more generally that capitalist accumulation in postcolonial countries was dispossessing far more people than could be absorbed in the capitalist growth sector and was thus producing an absolute surplus labour population¹³. Displaced from their traditional occupations, these people were forced to find a subsistence in the so-called informal economy which was, however, fully embedded in market relations. To sustain its political legitimacy, the capitalist class was compelled to agree to the state spending a part of its tax revenues in benefit schemes for sustaining the livelihood of the surplus population. This was an entirely new technique of persuasion adopted by the postcolonial capitalist class.

The passive revolution of capital in India thus entered a new phase in the 1990s. The corporate capitalist class established its dominance over the landed elite and gained a position of leadership over the urban middle class. But while its influence over the central government increased considerably, it became dependent on the agencies of regional state governments to distribute benefits to the urban poor and the rural masses in order to contain disaffection. Soon these benefit schemes became entangled in an electoral process of competitive populism in which regional leaders and parties attempted to build majorities by promising greater benefits to their constituents. Owners of capital were faced with a tactical choice: support a nationalist party and leader who promised to end populist waste and bring pro-business reforms or accept the reality of populist regional parties as an insurance against mass unrest. This was the choice offered by Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. The capitalist class unanimously chose Modi¹⁴.

Unfortunately, following the global slowdown after 2008-09, conditions were no longer favourable for radical pro-business reforms. Even with lower tax revenues, Modi's government was forced to resort to the usual populist spending to quell agitations. But the BJP then unleashed a campaign of Hindu nationalism, demonising the Muslim minority and claiming to unify the nation under Hindu leadership¹⁵. It was an attempt to redefine the Indian republic. Modi now endeavours to further empower the corporate business houses under the cover of Hindu nationalism. Whether this will turn into yet another distinct phase of the passive revolution remains to be seen¹⁶.

Hegemonic Struggles

The Indian discussion on hegemony shows the continued analytical usefulness of concepts such as class

consciousness, class leadership and passive revolution which were central to Gramsci's inquiries into historically contingent strategies in different countries to achieve hegemony and counter-hegemony. Although carried out in the same period as discussions in Europe, the US and Latin America, the Indian discussion did not adopt, except in a purely formal sense, the methods of discursive or semiotic analysis, nor did it impose on the political process an abstract framework of intersubjective communication. Faithfulness to historical conditions ensured that the analysis recognized the continued relevance of both coercion and persuasion in ruling class strategies as well as the presence of both collaboration and resistance in the political actions of the subaltern classes. Scholars found that the resultant patterns of alliance and confrontation among the different classes have continued to change.

Viewed from an Indian Gramscian perspective, therefore, the post-hegemony arguments discussed by Thomas seem strangely abstract and insubstantial. The point is not to discover how true these arguments are to Gramsci, but whether the concept of hegemony has been put to sufficient analytical use in explaining political change in Europe or the Americas. In this, I must agree with Thomas's criticism.

I prefer to describe what appears to be a long period of hegemonic rule in Western Europe from the 1960s as the integral state of the passive revolution in which, as Gramsci defined it, state and civil society were brought together without dissolving their difference. The bourgeoisie exercised its leadership over other classes through a complex hegemonic strategy combining economic and cultural activities in civil society with legal and political moves by the state¹⁷. There were two phases in the life of this integral state: the first was characterized by the welfare state through which the unifying leadership function was carried out, and the second was the period of neoliberal biopolitics in which the unifying function was taken over by experts. But the integral state is always subject to structural crises. The financial crisis of 2008 was a major one which, in its aftermath, exposed the massive social inequalities that had been produced by the rise to dominance of finance capital. What has followed is a massive hegemonic crisis in which the traditional political parties are no longer able to exercise leadership in shaping and representing electoral preferences, just as expert opinion no longer carries the widespread credibility it once did. A significant sign of the political crisis is the unpredictable rise of populist movements and leaders in many European countries.

¹² Cf. P. Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, chapter 10.

¹³ Cf. K. Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism*, New York, Routledge, 2007.

¹⁴ Cf. P. Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019.

¹⁵ Cf. A. Ahmad, "Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Age of Hindutva", en *idem*, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia*, London, Verso, 2000.

¹⁶ Cf. P. Chatterjee, *I am the people...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Cf. P. D. Thomas, *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism*, Chicago, Haymarket, 2010.

Observers of Indian politics have been long familiar with populist parties and leaders as an aspect of electoral democracy. But Western observers seem to have been perplexed by the sudden popular support mobilised by populist parties of both right and left varieties in Europe as well as by the mass enthusiasm for an autocratic Donald Trump. Laclau's analysis of populism¹⁸ was generally ignored by liberal analysts who continue to believe that this is merely a passing phase that will soon be replaced by a return to the old hegemonic order. Radical commentators such as Mouffe¹⁹, on the other hand, have put their faith in the transformative possibilities of left populism. What is missing from the discussion is an acknowledgement of the role of owners of capital as a fundamental class that is both organised and self-conscious.

The strategic astuteness of the class was shown by the alacrity with which it was able to coordinate its response to the financial crisis of 2008 in order to force the political leadership in the United States and Europe to take unprecedented steps not only to stall a general collapse of the economy but in fact subsequently strengthen the position of the financial

houses²⁰. Despite internal divisions, the class has succeeded in uniting under a common leadership in recent political crises such as Brexit, the Greek debt default or Trump's refusal to step down from power. The Gramscian insistence on class leadership in hegemonic struggles, missing from most of the discussion on post-hegemony, seems to me vital in anticipating the possible trajectories of change in both global and national arenas. Whether there is a new post-national global political order, or a more rigid entrenchment of national sovereignty, or a general confrontation between the West and China, there is no doubt that an organized and self-conscious capitalist class will play a determining role in that transformation. That is what the Gramscian understanding of hegemony suggests to us. It also points out the corresponding reality that all other fundamental classes are at present demobilised and scattered. This inadequacy is unlikely to be made up by spontaneous mobilisations that lack organization and leadership²¹. A much more sustained strategy of counter-hegemonic struggle will have to be found.

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¹⁸ Cf. E. Laclau, *On populist reason*, London, Verso, 2006.

¹⁹ Cf. Ch. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Londres, Verso, 2018.

²⁰ As documented by Tooze in: A. Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, New York, Viking, 2018.

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