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From hegemonic projects to historical initiatives: rethinking the political practice of hegemony*

Panagiotis Sotiris (Hellenic Open University)

The aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand it attempts to retrace the emergence of the notion of the hegemonic project, in various debates, beginning with the debate within British Marxism on Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, but also the use of the notion of the hegemonic project in critical International Relations Theory. On the other hand, by means of a return to Gramsci's thinking on hegemony, it attempts to rethink the notion of the hegemonic project in contemporary political debates in the left and to suggest that we must attempt to think of hegemonic projects not as simple political projects or electoral strategies, but rather as historical initiatives of the subaltern. On this basis, the possibility of a subaltern hegemonic practice of politics is revisited.

Gramsci; Hegemony; Hegemonic project; Marxism; Radical politics.

Introduction

Retracing the emergence and history of a notion can be a very difficult process. Especially if it is a notion that is at the same time very easy to use, *au courant*, one might say, and yet it remains rather vague and without a proper substantiation.

References to notion of hegemonic project or that of *progetto egemonico* can be found from the 1970s onwards. In most cases it is not a proper concept but rather a metaphor based upon a commonsensical use of the term. One might say that the proliferation of such references follows two distinct patterns: On the one hand, the proliferation of the references to hegemony both in theory but also in politics. On the other hand, the proliferation of references to projects, political, historical, national, coincides with a period when politics are beginning to be thought less in terms of historical processes and more in terms of specific projects.

The very connotation of the word project, coming from the world of technology, management and economics, refers to an ability (or illusion) of assessing, forecasting and planning in terms of specific goals, and in this sense of controlling the historical process. As such it emerges and is very widespread in the 1970s, especially when the Left insisted that it had a political

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project that it could successfully implement. Hence the many references also in Italian texts to *progetto politico*, *progetto di classe* and *progetto egemonico*.

In this sense one of the most interesting analyses of the notion of the project is the one offered by Massimo Cacciari¹. In this text Cacciari retraces the predominance of the notion of the project as part of a broader transformation that entails the emergence of the techno-scientific worldview and a broader process of rationalization and secularization of the political. For Cacciari the notion of the project also points towards an affirmation of the constructed character of the forms of power which in its turn points towards an idea of the possibility to «govern the unpredictable»², which becomes one of the main aims of the state. Although claiming to go beyond myth, there is a utopian element active at the heart of modern conception of the political project.

Project has also other connotations. It points towards the ability of a collective subject to actually assess, foresee, organize and control a political process. A project is always someone's project, it entails a subject and moreover the quality or efficacy and plausibility of a project depend upon the ability of the subject to actually go forward with the process. Perhaps, less detailed and less specific than a plan, the project shares the same relation to a subject.

All these point to one crucial question: Leaving aside metaphors, can hegemony really be thought in terms of a project? In what follows we will attempt to offer some preliminary thoughts on this question.

1. *The emergence of the notion of the hegemonic project within Marxist debates*

1.1. Laclau and Mouffe on the notion of the hegemonic project.

If we try to trace the emergence of the notion of the hegemonic project and its use as part of a theoretical endeavour, we could start from the references in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In their move away from a classical Marxist approach towards their particular theorization of discourse, hegemonic project emerges as a notion to theorize the particular political and discursive practices by which political formations or political

¹ CACCIARI 1981.

² *Therein*, p. 98.

currents can indeed work towards hegemony. For example, already in 1981, in their reading of the problems of post-WWI social democracy they insist that

«An ever-greater chasm is thus established between the expedients of day-to-day political practice and the aprioristic knowledge of the laws of history. The paralysing consequences of such a gap were clearly seen not only in the political collapse of 1914 but also, and more especially, in the inter-war social democratic governments: lacking any national policy towards the broad popular masses, reduced to no more than political pressure-groups of the trade union movement, the social democratic parties — pushed towards power by the post-war crisis — did not initiate any hegemonic project envisaging the transformation of the relation of forces in society, failed to consolidate a new historic bloc and limited themselves to administrating passively the bourgeois order»³.

However, after their full re-articulation of the theory of hegemony as theory of discursive hegemonic practices, the very notion of the hegemonic project is also re-defined in terms of the new theoretical paradigm:

«We are thus witnessing the emergence of a new hegemonic project, that of liberal-conservative discourse, which seeks to articulate the neo-liberal defence of the free market economy with the profoundly anti-egalitarian cultural and social traditionalism of conservatism»⁴.

One of the important aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, is what they define as the «democratic logic» and its subversive and egalitarian potential. However, they also insist that by itself it does not constitute a hegemonic project. A hegemonic project also requires a set of positive proposals for the organization of the social: «no hegemonic project can be based exclusively on a democratic logic, but must also consist of a set of proposals for the positive organization of the social»⁵. For Laclau hegemonic projects emerge within this discursive terrain as articulation of both ideological and strategic elements.

The problem is it here that we also witness a tendency to treat the hegemonic project as rather descriptive, medium-range notion, aiming at the

³ LACLAU–MOUFFE 1981, p. 18

⁴ LACLAU–MOUFFE 2001 [1985], p. 175.

⁵ *Therein*, p. 189.

description (yet not the *theoretical* definition) of any politics that attempts to have a strong discursive, ideological aspect, understood as ability to forge a social alliance, a political program and a narrative. Moreover, it is exactly this reading of the notion of the hegemonic project that gives it a rather “top-down” character, in the sense that it is not something that emerges out of the terrain of social antagonism, but rather something that it is addressed to the subaltern. Laclau’s focus on populist movements exemplifies this element⁶. It is this element that we later find in many instances as a conception of the «hegemonic project» as the political and discursive strategy of a political movement, rather than an actual historical process. Moreover, it is important to note that although in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* the hegemonic project is also related to an inclusive process in order to incorporate new social movements and open the terrain to new forms of politics and aspiration, in *Populist Reason* we more or less move to a conception of hegemonic leadership that obviously points towards a rather traditional top-down conception of politics.

1.2. Bob Jessop: the notion of the hegemonic project as an answer to the limits of structuralism

However, in the 1980s we also have another important elaboration of the notion of the «hegemonic project», This can be found in the work of Bob Jessop and how he dealt with Poulantzas and the complex and uneven relation of Poulantzas to the work of Gramsci. In a series of texts, Jessop has insisted on treating the hegemonic project not as a useful metaphor or a descriptive term but rather as a proper theoretical concept.

Jessop’s main point in his work from the early 1980s is that Poulantzas work is defined by the tension between a more abstract and formal conception of structure – and consequently of the structural determinations of hegemony – and an emphasis on concrete class strategies, practices and contradictions, a tension between structural determination and structural selectivity. In light of this approach, Jessop made a distinction between a more abstract and formal conception of hegemony and the conception of a more concrete hegemonic practice articulated around strategies and hegemonic projects. In the first conception we encounter the «structuralist notion of relative autonomy and thence to the conflation of hegemony with a

⁶ LACLAU 2005.

structurally–inscribed political domination». In the second conception we deal more with concrete class strategies and practices: «in addition to the more abstract level of structural determination, it is also necessary to take account of more concrete struggles aimed at polarising class positions around particular strategies or “hegemonic projects”»⁷. For Jessop thinking of hegemony both in a more abstract and structural manner and in terms of hegemonic projects, defines the terrain of the articulation of different hegemonic political practices.

«In this context the notion of the “structural determination” of hegemony implicit in the work of Poulantzas is useful in that it points to the structural constraints on the ability to win a position of class hegemony. Moreover, given the difficulties in identifying the class character of the hegemonic principle that unifies an “organic ideology”, it would seem particularly fruitful to attempt to decipher this issue at the level of a specific political project. Thus, in so far as a specific hegemonic project makes the advancement of the demands of allied or subordinate subjects conditional on the realisation of the long–term interests of a fundamental class, it is reasonable to ascribe that project a specific class character. Even this solution involves a certain ambiguity. For hegemony could be seen in terms of political leadership on the terrain of class position without reference to the effects of the hegemonic project or it could be extended to include the requirement that the hegemonic project actually advances the long–term interests of the hegemonic class (fraction)»⁸.

Moreover, Jessop in his dialogue with the positions of Poulantzas but also with those of Laclau and Mouffe, insists that is necessary to think in terms of hegemonic projects if we are to fully theorize the functioning of hegemony. Moreover, hegemonic projects were seen as an answer the need to theorize specific political practices.

«In any case we can surely agree that the class nature of a hegemonic project does not depend upon the class origins of its organic intellectuals nor on any supposed *a priori* class belonging of its constituent elements. Further, if we want to decipher the complexities and contradictions involved in such hegemonic projects as liberal social imperialism, the “Keynesian–welfare state”, fascism, or Thatcherism, then we must consider not only questions of leadership but also those of the effects of a project»⁹.

⁷ JESSOP 1982, p. 187.

⁸ *Therein*, p. 201.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Jessop is influenced by Poulantzas and he has a positive view of the evolution of Poulantzas from a more abstract «structural determination» position to a «structural selectivity» approach. For Jessop this enables a more strategic-relational approach avoiding the dangers of both the abstract character of a general theory of the state and of an empirical approach.

«In short, if we are to avoid the empiricism that derives from an exclusive emphasis on appearances, the reductionism that derives from an exclusive emphasis on one or more abstract determinations, and the subsumptionism of the “particular” vs. the “general”, we must engage in an analysis of the many determinations that are combined in a concrete conjuncture and show how they are interrelated as necessary and/or sufficient conditions in a contingent structure of causation. This entails both movement from the abstract to the concrete within a single plane of analysis (e.g., from capital-in-general to particular capitals) and the combination of determinations drawn from different planes of analysis (e.g., popular-democratic antagonisms rooted in the relations of political domination vs. class antagonisms rooted in the relations of economic exploitation). Such an approach excludes all pretence to the construction of a general theory and aims at producing the theoretical tools with which particular conjunctures can be examined»¹⁰.

It is in the context of such an approach that Jessop opts to define the basic guidelines not of a general Marxist theory of the State, but of a Marxist account of capitalist states or of research on specific state formations and the class practices associated with it.

«First, the state is a set of institutions that cannot, *qua* institutional ensemble, exercise power.

Second, political forces do not exist independently of the state: they are shaped in part through its forms of representation, its internal structure, and its forms of intervention.

Third, state power is a complex social relation that reflects the changing balance of social forces in a determinate conjuncture.

Fourth, state power is capitalist to the extent that it creates, maintains, or restores the conditions required for capital accumulation in a given situation and it is non-capitalist to the extent that these conditions are not realised»¹¹.

¹⁰ *Therein*, p. 213.

¹¹ *Therein*, pp. 116-117.

As part of this approach the hegemonic project becomes for Jessop a key concept. If we are going to go beyond the limits of an abstract theory towards a more concrete approach, then we need the notion of the hegemonic project: «structural dominance needs to be combined with the successful propagation of a “hegemonic project” for the structurally privileged fraction to become truly hegemonic»¹², even though «a long-term shift in hegemony requires not only a new “hegemonic project” but also the reorganisation of the state system as a whole»¹³. For Jessop a hegemonic project «can resolve the abstract problem of conflicts between particular interests and the general interest» and «facilitates the relative unity of diverse social forces in a social formation», since it «can resolve the abstract problem of conflicts between particular interests and the general interest»¹⁴. However, hegemonic projects «need to be adapted to the stage of capitalism (liberal, simple monopoly, state monopoly), to the international context facing particular national capitals, to the specific balance of forces at home, and to the margin of manoeuvre entailed in the productive potential of the economy»¹⁵. Jessop goes on to offer some examples of hegemonic projects:

«Among such projects we may include “social imperialism” (the extension of the international dominance of a national capital in such a way as to secure significant economic, political, and ideological benefits for subordinate groups), “Keynesian-welfare statism” (aimed at overcoming stagnationist tendencies through macro-level demand management which also secures full employment and/or meets popular aspirations for social welfare) and, most recently, “social democratic corporatism” (aimed at overcoming stagflationary tendencies through an active and concerted *Strukturpolitik* which also grants the demands of subordinate groups for participation and offers the prospects of renewed economic expansion)»¹⁶.

Jessop also made another important distinction regarding hegemonic projects. He distinguished between «one nation» hegemonic projects aiming at expansive forms of hegemony and «two nations» projects aiming at more limited forms of hegemony around the dominant social bloc.

¹² *Therein*, p. 232.

¹³ *Therein*, p. 233.

¹⁴ *Therein*, p. 243.

¹⁵ JESSOP 1982, pp. 243-44.

¹⁶ JESSOP 1982, p. 244.

«Thus “one nation” strategies aim at an expansive hegemony in which the support of the entire population is mobilised through material concessions and symbolic rewards (as in “social imperialism” or the “Keynesian–welfare state” projects). In contrast “two nations” strategies aim at a more limited hegemony concerned to mobilise the support of strategically significant sectors of the population and to pass the costs of the project to other sectors (as in fascism and monetarism)»¹⁷.

It is obvious that for Jessop the notion of the hegemonic project was the necessary way to think the actual exercise of hegemony. As he put it in an article of the same period:

«In broad terms hegemony involves the interpellation and organization of different “class relevant” (but not necessarily class-conscious) forces under the “political, intellectual, and moral leadership” of a particular class (or class fraction) or, more precisely, its political, intellectual, and moral spokesmen. The key to the exercise of such leadership is the development of a specific “hegemonic project” which can resolve the abstract problem of conflicts between particular interests and the general interest»¹⁸.

It is interesting that in this text Jessop also discusses the concept of accumulation strategy in order to also account for the importance of capitalist production processes in order to theorize class relations and hegemony. Accumulation strategies provide the economic aspect of hegemony, or the forms of «economic hegemony», and represent different strategies regarding accumulation in a value-theoretical (rather than developmental) approach. In contrast, «hegemonic projects» deal more with political and ideological forms, although Jessop is aware of both the relative autonomy and the interconnections between the two aspects.

«[G]iven the differentiation between the value form and the form of the state as well as the differential scope and content of accumulation strategies and hegemonic projects, there is obviously room for some dissociation or inconsistency between them in specific conjunctures. In general, it would seem obvious that accumulation and hegemony will be most secure where there is a close congruence between particular strategies and projects»¹⁹.

¹⁷ *Therein*, p. 244.

¹⁸ JESSOP 1983, p. 100.

¹⁹ *Therein* 1983, p. 101.

For Jessop, the success of a hegemonic project depends upon «three key factors: its structural determination, its strategic orientation, and its relation to accumulation»²⁰. It is in this sense that the distinction between «one nation» and «two nations» hegemonic projects must be made. He also insists that «successful hegemonic projects are noteworthy for their capacity to cement a “historical bloc” involving an organic relation between base and superstructure»²¹. It is interesting that in contrast to the most «politician» and ideological conception of Laclau and Mouffe Jessop attempted to offer a more complex theory of hegemony, giving a certain analytical breadth to the concept of the hegemonic project in its relation to accumulation strategies.

For Jessop if the notion of the «accumulation strategy» enables to think the dynamics of the value-form and the «complex economic, political, and ideological conditions necessary to accumulation in a specific conjuncture», the «the successful propagation of a hegemonic project secures an adequate social basis for the exercise of state power», whereas the distinction between the two notions «suggests the possibility that the contradiction between “accumulation” and “legitimation” can sometimes be resolved through the elaboration of “hegemonic projects” which successfully assert a general interest in accumulation which also advances the particular interests of subordinate social forces»²². Moreover, he insists that the notion of the “hegemonic project” can help us think of hegemony beyond simple and static consensus and in its articulation with the “national popular” indicates “the importance of non-class forces in securing the hegemony of the dominant class»²³. At the same time, he stressed that it would be misleading to believe «that hegemony is typical or normal in capitalist societies, that hegemonic projects somehow manage to secure the support of all significant social forces»²⁴.

²⁰ *Therein*, p. 101.

²¹ *Therein*, p. 106.

²² *Therein*, p. 108.

²³ *Therein*, p. 109

²⁴ JESSOP 1990, p. 211.

1.3. Stuart Hall and the debate on Thatcherism as a hegemonic project

One of the most important debates that had the notion of the hegemonic project at its centre was the debate regarding the theorization of Thatcherism in the 1980s. It was Stuart Hall, in a series of articles that were later published as a book, that attempted to explain the changing social and political landscape in Britain by referring to Thatcherism as a «hegemonic project». For Hall the hegemonic position of Thatcherism was not based simply upon its neoliberal economic policies but also upon the ways it affected and transformed the ideological and cultural terrain of Britain.

«Thatcherism's search for "the enemies within"; its operations across the different lines of division and identification in social life; its construction of the respectable, patriarchal, entrepreneurial subject with "his" orthodox tastes, inclinations, preferences, opinions and prejudices as the stable subjective bedrock and guarantee of its purchase on our subjective worlds; its rooting of itself inside a particularly narrow, ethnocentric and exclusivist conception of "national identity"; and its constant attempts to expel symbolically one sector of society after another from the imaginary community of the nation - these are as central to Thatcherism's hegemonic project as the privatization programme or the assault on local democracy (which is of course often precisely attacked in their name: what else is the "loony left"?). The left cannot hope to contest the ground of Thatcherism without attending to these cultural questions, without conducting a "politics" of the subjective moment, of identity, and without a conception of the subjects of its project, those who it is making socialism *for* and *with*»²⁵.

Being one of the theorists that defined Cultural Studies as an academic discipline, Hall was ready to insist that one of the successes of Thatcherism was that it managed to «to capture and bend to its political project some of the profound cultural formations of English society, represents the truly hegemonic character of its historical project»²⁶. In order to proceed with such an approach Hall entered into a dialogue with Poulantzas's positions and in particular his notion of authoritarian statism²⁷, to which Hall counterpoised his own conception of authoritarian populism as a better way to describe the hegemonic project of Thatcherism.

²⁵ HALL 1988, p. 8

²⁶ *Therein*, p. 91.

²⁷ POULANTZAS 2000.

«What we have always argued is that it had a “hegemonic project”. It was designed to renovate society as a whole. And, in doing so, it understood that it must organize on a variety of social and cultural sites at once, both in society and in the state, on moral and cultural, as well as economic and political terrain, using them all to initiate the deep reformation of society. It has not achieved the goal of securing a period of social and moral ascendancy over British society, whose problems remain as yet too deep and intractable for such an enterprise. But it remains, by dint of a more “directive” form of authoritarian populist politics, the leading force in British political life»²⁸.

Hall insisted that his own conception of authoritarian populism accounted better for Thatcherism than Poulantzas’s conceptualizations exactly because it included the hegemonic dimension.

«I believed that Poulantzas had neglected the one dimension which, above all others, has defeated the left, politically, and Marxist analysis, theoretically, in every advanced capitalist democracy since the First World War: namely, the ways in which popular consent can be so constructed, by a historical bloc seeking hegemony, as to harness to its support some popular discontents, neutralize the opposing forces, disaggregate the opposition and really incorporate some strategic elements of popular opinion into its own hegemonic project»²⁹.

All these also had to do with the open question of a renewal of the British Left in order for it to actually become hegemonic again, by avoiding a narrow focus on the political and by attempting an actual “war of position”.

«When one says that the British left can be strong in corporate defence but is not “hegemonic”, one is drawing attention to precisely this failure to understand that the struggle to “remake society” has to be fought as a war of position, conducted on many different fronts at once»³⁰.

However, this requires a kind of cultural revolution from the part of Left: «What is, however, inconceivable is that the left could ever become again a

²⁸ HALL 1988, p. 91.

²⁹ *Therein*, p. 152.

³⁰ *Therein*, p. 249.

hegemonic historical force without undergoing a cultural revolution of some kind»³¹.

The reply to Hall came by Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling in the form of an article in “New Left Review”. The «gang of four» as it was nicknamed in the context of the British debates of that time, argued against the hegemonic character of the Thatcherite project and defied Hall’s conceptualization of Thatcherism as authoritarian populism. In particular, they argued against treating authoritarian populism («AP») as a hegemonic project

«AP could also refer to a definite hegemonic project which articulates an alternative vision of the national-popular interest with the specific policies necessary to secure its realization. These projects may well vary across parties even though the background assumptions of common-sense and political agenda remain the same; or the same party could formulate successive hegemonic projects to meet changing circumstances within the same framework. Despite some consensus on an AP agenda, the major parties are far from sharing the same vision of the national-popular interest. Likewise the Conservative Party itself has not always given the same weight to AP elements in its own national-popular project»³².

However, the main thrust of the critique was not simply that Thatcherism as authoritarian populism lacked the elements necessary for it to become a hegemonic project proper, in a particular a real national-popular character, but also that it did not deal with all the aspects of hegemony and in particular the economic aspects and that it over-emphasized the discursive aspects, a points that we have already discussed in regards to the work of Jessop.

«[A]s his analysis of “authoritarian populism” has developed, Hall has drawn increasingly on discourse theory. He examines hegemony in terms of the formation of social subjects and considers how Thatcherism articulates the relations between people and state. Thus “authoritarian populism” is seen as an attempt radically to deconstruct the social democratic hegemonic framework involved in the post-war settlement and to construct a new “common sense” and a new “hegemonic project”. Hall now sees Thatcherism in terms of its mobilization of popular support through a chain of equivalences of the kind: market = free choice = freedom and liberty = anti-statism = put an end to creeping collectivism. In emphasizing the specific discursive

³¹ *Therein*, p. 250.

³² JESSOP *ET AL.* 1984, p. 56.

strategies involved in Thatcherism, AP risks ignoring other elements. In particular, it could neglect the structural underpinnings of Thatcherism in the economic and state systems and its specific economic and political bases of support among both people and power bloc»³³.

Moreover, Jessop *et al.* insisted that the actual Thatcherite project aimed less at being hegemonic and more at actually restructuring British capitalism in order for it to enter the post-Fordist regime of accumulation. In this sense, it was more about a class project of capitalist restructuring than an attempt to forge some kind of consensus.

«Hall correctly notes that Thatcherism has not actually solved the crises affecting British society or the British economy. These failures cannot be attributed to the fact that Thatcherism is not yet hegemonic (as if all would be put right if key sectors of the power bloc and/or the people subscribed to AP or the doctrines of the social market economy). Indeed, these failures derive in part from the decisional autonomy enjoyed by the Thatcher “party” in pursuing its less-than-hegemonic project to restructure Britain and adapt it to the post-Fordist stage of global capitalism. The Left should exploit the resulting contradictions and try to intensify the difficulties of the Thatcherite state»³⁴.

In 1987, after another victory by Thatcher, Jessop *et al.* returned to the debate and insisted that in this case «[i]t is material concessions which have been crucial in consolidating pragmatic Conservative support in the working class, albeit strongly reinforced by the mass media and the “moving right” ideological organizations»³⁵. Moreover, they insisted that the Conservatives’ victory highlighted the way they had managed to represent the transition towards Post-Fordist flexible accumulation as their own proper hegemonic project.

The debate has been recently revisited by Alexander Gallas as part of his Neo-Poulantzian theorization of Thatcherism. Gallas suggests that we must limit the reference to the hegemonic project to specific conjunctures regarding the form of leadership / domination and accept that there are forms of leadership / domination without hegemony.

³³ *Therein*, p. 37.

³⁴ JESSOP *ET AL.* 1985, p. 96.

³⁵ JESSOP *ET AL.* 1987, p. 108.

«Against this backdrop, it is possible to develop a differentiated typology of modes of leadership and domination. Following Jessop, there are five such modes. Two are hegemonic projects (“one nation” and “two nations”); the others are passive revolution, force-fraud-corruption and open class warfare. Subsuming the term “hegemonic project” under the category of “mode of leadership and domination” has two advantages over simply assuming that there is such a project and assessing its failure or success. First of all, if the term is reserved for political projects that secure (broad or modest) active popular consent, it follows that “hegemony” is no longer taken to be the standard form of political domination. Second, framing the issue in this way allows for a differentiated assessment of the successes and failures of political projects and for moving beyond the truism that just about every political project in Britain failed to secure full hegemony»³⁶.

For Gallas, Thatcherism was a class political regime not necessarily a truly hegemonic project. It had an important impact upon the class balance of forces and represented an important offensive of the power bloc, yet at the same time it fell short of fully transforming the economy and had a very contradictory legacy up to the 2007-2008 global economic crisis.

«In my view, Thatcherism was a class political regime, which emerged in correspondence with a free-market authoritarian economic-political order. The Thatcher and Major governments presided over both by instigating and coordinating an offensive of the power bloc. This offensive was reflected in consistently implementing policies that favoured capital and disadvantaged organised labour. The Thatcherites marginalised militant fractions of the working class and implemented a repressive form of industrial relations law that exploited divisions within the trade union movement and the Labour Party, and between both. They thus re-established the “right to manage”, which amounted to the reassertion of capitalist class domination. [...].

At the same time, the Thatcherites failed to create conditions for a stable accumulation of capital over the medium term. The stock market crashed in 1987; the Lawson boom turned out to be a bubble; and there were two recessions within ten years. Besides, the course pursued by the Thatcher and Major governments in monetary policy plunged Britain into a currency crisis, which resulted in the exit of the pound from the erm. Most importantly, they locked Britain into a finance-driven accumulation strategy, which create several serious crises culminating in the Great Recession post-2007»³⁷.

³⁶ GALLAS 2016. p. 28.

³⁷ *Therein*, pp. 275-76.

The debate on Thatcherism as a hegemonic project is really important. Although, most of the answers were incomplete and in many instances overdetermined by particular preoccupations within the British Left of that period, they nevertheless dealt with important questions and attempted to rethink the hegemonic political practices of the bourgeoisie in a particular conjuncture when it had gained the initiative. In particular, they offered important insights regarding the interplay between politics, economics and ideology and the articulation of accumulation strategies and cultural transformations.

At the same time, the debate brought forward the limits of such an approach, the open theoretical questions regarding the very theorization of hegemonic political practices but also the very definition of “hegemonic”, along with the open question whether all political strategies and initiatives are necessarily hegemonic or we can treat hegemony as one but not the sole modality of class domination and leadership. As we will show, this lack of precise definitions and answers continued to be one of the defining aspects of such debates.

1.4. The use of the notion of the hegemonic project as part of the Neo-Gramscian International Relations Theory

Hegemonic project has also been part of the vocabulary of Critical International Relations Theory. In a certain way, this was almost “natural” since this particular theoretical terrain has always used the notion of hegemony, both as a descriptive term that can be traced back to Antiquity and as part of neo-Gramscian or influenced by Gramsci approaches.

However, it was when theorists with a clear Neo-Gramscian approach, such as Robert W. Cox and Stephen Gill, started to write about International Relations theory, insisting on the relevance of the notion of hegemony in its specific Gramscian formulation, the notion of the «hegemonic project» started to emerge as a crucial concept in order to analyse the terrain of international relations. Here is how Cox defined the “hegemonic” in one of his important interventions from the 1980s.

«On the basis of this tentative notation, it would appear that, historically, to become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception, i.e., not an order in which one state directly exploits others but an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony)

could find compatible with their interests. Such an order would hardly be conceived in inter-state terms alone, for this would likely bring to the fore oppositions of state interests. It would most likely give prominence to opportunities for the forces of civil society to operate on the world scale (or on the scale of the sphere within which hegemony prevails). The hegemonic concept of world order is founded not only upon the regulation of inter-state conflict but also upon a globally-conceived civil society, i.e., a mode of production of global extent which brings about links among social classes of the countries encompassed by it»³⁸.

This line of thinking has produced an important series of critical contributions to the theory of International Relations and in general to the better understanding of the complex and contradictory character of contemporary imperialism. Here is how Andreas Bieler attempted to redefine the notion of the hegemonic project within the context of these debates.

«Social groups do not simply produce ideas, but they concretise and articulate strategies in complex and often contradictory ways, which is possible because of their class location, their proximity to the most powerful forces in production and the state. It is their task to organise the social forces they stem from and to develop a hegemonic project which is able to transcend the particular interests of this group so that other social forces are able to give their consent. Such a hegemonic project must be based on, and stem from, the economic sphere. It must, however, also go beyond economics into the political and social sphere, incorporating issues such as social reform or moral regeneration, to result in a stable hegemonic political system»³⁹.

In a similar manner Anreas Bieler and Adam Morton have presented the notion of the hegemonic project as the crucial aspect in the process of the condensation by the State of the different class strategies and the different class fractions that they represent.

«Furthermore, different social relations of production engender different fractions of social forces. This means that “foreign” capital, for example, is not simply represented as an autonomous force beyond the power of the state but instead is represented by certain classes or fractions of classes *within* the constitution of the state apparatus. There are contradictory and heterogeneous relations internal to the state, which are induced by class antagonisms between nationally and transnationally based capital and labour. The state, then, is the condensation of a hegemonic relationship

³⁸ COX 1993, p. 61.

³⁹ BIELER 2000, p. 15.

between dominant classes and class fractions. This occurs when a leading class develops a “hegemonic project” or “comprehensive concept of control” which transcends particular economic–corporate interests and becomes capable of binding and cohering the diverse aspirations and general interests of various social classes and class fractions»⁴⁰.

Jonathan Joseph has offered an interesting approach that echoes some of the debates of the 1980s but also the philosophical approach of Critical Realism. According to Joseph we must make a distinction between structural hegemony and hegemonic projects. This is not simply a difference regarding the level of abstraction but also about efficacy. Hegemonic projects can be articulate even in conditions of structural weakness. For Joseph «there are two distinct but inter-connected types (or aspects) of hegemony, concerned with (1) structural hegemony and (2) a surface hegemony of actual hegemonic projects»⁴¹. Moreover,

«Hegemony in a more conscious, political and manifold sense concerns concrete hegemonic projects and practices. This is the sense in which hegemony is often understood, but it is necessary to maintain that such hegemonic projects and strategies are emergent out of the deeper hegemonic conditions (and function). How these conscious projects emerge, however, is not pre-given and the concept of emergence stresses that such projects have their own irreducible dynamics»⁴².

The notion of the hegemonic project also plays an important role in the theorization of the neoliberal character of European Integration by Bastian van Apeldoorn and the “Amsterdam School” of Critical European Studies. Here the hegemonic project is considered to be a concept that enables a dialectical relationship between structure and agency.

«The first point is to underline the complex and dialectical relationship between neoliberalism as process and neoliberalism as project. Crucial to a dialectic understanding of the relation between structure and agency is the notion that a hegemonic project is shaped, and continuously reshaped, in the process of struggle, compromise, and readjustment»⁴³.

⁴⁰ BIELER–MORTON 2006, p. 16.

⁴¹ JOSEPH 2002, p. 127.

⁴² *Therein*, p. 128.

⁴³ VAN APELDOORN *ET AL.* 2003, p. 38.

This school of thought has written extensively on neoliberalism as a hegemonic project. They have even provided a typology of the evolution of a hegemonic project from the emergence of hegemony on the basis of the deconstruction of a previous form of hegemony, to a new hegemonic project achieving first primacy and then consolidation, to maturation and then decline⁴⁴.

This is a theoretical approach that has indeed offered a very important analysis and critique of neoliberal capitalism and in particular of the neoliberal character of European Integration. European Integration is indeed a political and institutional process that has strong elements of a project, in the sense that important aspects of it have been part of a broader political design. However, the very uneven and contradictory character of European Integration, its many shortcomings and the often observed distance between design and actual practice and reality, exemplify the fact that actual historical processes are always much more complex than simple “projects”.

The above presentation makes it obvious that in the terrain of International Relations Theory we have the same problem regarding the references to hegemonic projects: on the one hand the concept of the hegemonic project is used, in many instances, in a constructive way, offering ways to theorize particular political dynamics within particular conjunctures and also specific strategies. On the other, we have the problem of the lack of a more profound theoretical elaboration of the concept.

1.5. “Hegemonic project” as part of the vocabulary of the contemporary Left

In the past years the hegemonic project has returned as part of the vocabulary of the Left, in the form of a political and strategic concept. Take for example the following extract from a speech by Alexis Tsipras on 2013.

«The political programme that SYRIZA puts forward presents a complete hegemonic project. It is not just about winning elections and forming a government; it is about gaining power and moving Greece in a democratic socialist direction»⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ VAN APeldoorn–Overbeek 2012, p. 7.

⁴⁵ TSIPRAS 2013.

Both in discussions regarding SYRIZA but also in discussions regarding PODEMOS the notion of the hegemonic project or the synonym counter-hegemonic project has made an important return. Now the question is whether the Left can actually have (or be) a hegemonic project.

In the case of PODEMOS, where there was a more direct influence by Laclau, hegemonic project also has also been used in the sense that only a political project that includes a cultural and discursive dimension can be really successful.

In the words of Errejón «a defining feature of Podemos from the very beginning was the importance it attached to the idea of building a hegemonic project, and the struggle to create shared meanings»⁴⁶. One can find this aspect already in Errejón's doctoral thesis, where he insisted on treating the hegemonic project in terms of a discursive articulation with explicit references to Laclau and Mouffe⁴⁷.

Usually in such contexts hegemonic project refers to the ability of a collective agent to have a broader program, one that is not limited to immediate demands and that has the character of a narrative. In a certain way this is a useful reminder of the necessary distance separating radical emancipatory politics from systemic politics.

2. Hegemony in Gramsci revisited

However, I do believe that we must question the notion of the hegemonic project. Not in the sense that we do not need the elements that are included in the notion of the hegemonic project, namely a program of social transformation, an emphasis on cultural and discursive transformation, and an alternative narrative for the future. These remain indispensable. What I am trying to suggest is that this aim, this struggle, is not something that can be defined simply as a project. Or to put in different terms: hegemony is not something that can be thought of in terms of a project. Moreover, I would like to suggest that thinking of hegemony in such terms runs the danger of thinking in terms of medium-range concepts. Such an approach can end up in thinking of hegemonic projects as simply successful electoral strategies or successful campaigns of political communication. It can end up in limiting the

⁴⁶ ERREJÓN–MOUFFE 2016, p. 154.

⁴⁷ ERREJÓN 2012.

question of hegemony to the cultural and discursive aspects. It can miss all the broader and deeper structural changes involved. In order to answer this challenge, the very notion of hegemony and the hegemonic must be revisited. In this sense, it would be interesting to go back to Gramsci and the complex and uneven theorization of hegemony. Recent research, such as the work of Giuseppe Cospito⁴⁸, have helped us retrace the complexity of Gramsci's experimental approach to this subject.

2.1. Hegemony as relational modality

The theoretical approach that I will try to support is that for Gramsci from the beginning, hegemony is not a “project”. It is a relational modality emerging (“born”) in the context of a certain relations of force (*rapporti di forza*). As such it is exercised, it is a “function”, always depended upon organizations, apparatuses, practices and intellectuals that guarantee and “organize” it, but not a “project” although materialized or attempted within particular political projects. One can already see this in the tentative formulations of Q4, §49.

«These distinctions having been made, it is possible to conclude, for now, that the relationship between intellectuals and production is not direct, as in the case of the fundamental social groups, but mediated, and it is mediated by two types of social organization: (a) by civil society, that is, by the ensemble of private organizations in society; (b) by the state. The intellectuals have a function in the “hegemony” that is exercised throughout society by the dominant group and in the “domination” over society that is embodied by the state, and this function is precisely “organizational” or corrective. The intellectuals have the function of organizing the social hegemony of a group and that group's domination of the state; in other words, they have the function of organizing the consent that comes from the prestige attached to the function in the world of production and the apparatus of coercion for those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively or for those moments of crisis of command and leadership when spontaneous consent undergoes a crisis. As a result of this analysis, the concept of intellectuals is broadened very extensively, but this seems to me the only possible way to arrive at a concrete approximation of reality»⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ COSPITO 2004; COSPITO 2016.

⁴⁹ PN, Vol II, pp. 200-201; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 476 (Q4, §49).

Gradually hegemony loses not only the quotation marks that we find in the earlier formulations or its restriction to the cultural or ideological terrain, but it is expanded to a broader conception of the modality of class power in advanced capitalist formations with extended apparatuses of hegemony both in civil society and the state. It becomes the necessary modality of power in societies like those of the bourgeois epoch, where dealing with the constant efficacy of the collective practices of the subaltern becomes a permanent challenge and where complex practices of incorporating but also disaggregating such practices become part of the order of the day, especially when we talk about a period of passive revolution. The importance of «war of position» as an organic aspect of any struggle towards hegemony also exemplifies this.

«This seems to me to be the most important question of political theory that the post-war period has posed, and the most difficult to solve correctly. It is related to the problems raised by Bronstein [Trotsky], who in one way or another can be considered the political theorist of frontal attack in a period in which it only leads to defeats. This transition in political science is only indirectly (mediately) related to that which took place in the military field, although certainly a relation exists and an essential one. The war of position demands enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people. So an unprecedented concentration of hegemony is necessary, and hence a more “interventionist” government, which will take the offensive more openly against the oppositionists and organise permanently the “impossibility” of internal disintegration -with controls of every kind, political, administrative, etc., reinforcement of the hegemonic “positions” of the dominant group, etc. All this indicates that we have entered a culminating phase in the political historical situation, since in politics the “war of position”, once won, is decisive definitively. In politics, in other words, the war of manoeuvre subsists so long as it is a question of winning positions which are not decisive, so that all the resources of the State’s hegemony cannot be mobilised. But when, for one reason or another, these positions have lost their value and only the decisive positions are at stake, then one passes over to siege warfare; this is concentrated, difficult, and requires exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness. In politics, the siege is a reciprocal one, despite all appearances, and the mere fact that the ruler has to muster all his resources demonstrates how seriously he takes his adversary»⁵⁰.

In Q8, §52 the problem is posed in the following terms

⁵⁰ SPN, pp. 238-239; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 801-02 (Q6, §138).

«The question of the war of position and of the war of movement as well as the question of *arditismo*, in so far as they pertain to political science; in politics, the 1848 concept of the war of movement is precisely the concept of permanent revolution to politics, the war of position is the concept of hegemony that can only come into existence after certain things are already in place, namely large popular organizations of the modern type that represent, as it were the “trenches” and the permanent fortifications of the war of position»⁵¹.

This makes obvious that war of position also points towards a complex conception of an hegemonic political practice, emerging along with the political forms of capitalist modernity.

2.2. The radical asymmetry between hegemony of dominant groups and subaltern hegemony

At the same time, hegemony is not symmetrical between dominant and subaltern groups. There is a different function, practice and exercise of hegemony between subaltern and dominant groups which is also expressed in the different modalities of the necessary centralism and in general the political (and organizational) formations required to exercise and practice hegemony.

«Democratic centralism is “organic” because on the one hand it takes account of movement, which is the organic mode in which historical reality reveals itself, and does not solidify mechanically into bureaucracy; and because at the same time it takes account of that which is relatively stable and permanent, or which at least moves in an easily predictable direction, etc. This element of stability within the State is embodied in the organic development of the leading group’s central nucleus, just as happens on a more limited scale within parties. The prevalence of bureaucratic centralism in the State indicates that the leading group is saturated, that it is turning into a narrow clique which tends to perpetuate its selfish privileges by controlling or even by stifling the birth of oppositional forces—even if these forces are homogeneous with the fundamental dominant interests (e.g. in the ultra-protectionist systems struggling against economic liberalism). In parties which represent socially subaltern classes, the element of stability is necessary to ensure that hegemony will be exercised not by privileged groups but by the progressive elements—organically progressive in relation to other forces which, though related and allied, are heterogeneous and wavering.

⁵¹ PN, Vol. III, p. 267, GRAMSCI 1975, p. 973 (Q8, § 52).

In any case, it needs to be stressed that the unhealthy manifestations of bureaucratic centralism occurred because of a lack of initiative and responsibility at the bottom, in other words because of the political immaturity of the peripheral forces, even when these were homogeneous with the hegemonic territorial group (phenomenon of Piedmontism in the first decades of Italian unity). The creation of such situations can be extremely damaging and dangerous in international bodies (League of Nations)»⁵².

In this sense, the complexity of hegemony as both ethico-political and economic emerges, which also points to different modalities and practices of hegemony depending upon the different class positions of the social groups struggling for hegemony.

«Thus it is incongruous that the concrete posing of the problem of hegemony should be interpreted as a fact subordinating the group seeking hegemony. Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed—in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity»⁵³.

Gramsci is aware of the tentative and relational character of hegemony, something evident in the rewriting of some of the earlier notes and the attempt to both delineate his conception of hegemony and also to define the exact form of a hegemonic activity:

«The methodological criterion on which our own study must be based is the following: that the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to “liquidate”, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise “leadership” before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must

⁵² SPN, p. 189; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 1634-45 (Q13, §36).

⁵³ SPN, p. 161 ; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1591 (Q13, §18).

continue to “lead” as well. [...]It seems clear from the policies of the Moderates that there can, and indeed must, be hegemonic activity even before the rise to power, and that one should not count only on the material force which power gives in order to exercise an effective leadership»⁵⁴.

But how can we define the struggle towards hegemony?

On the one hand it is important to note that in Gramsci although we have hegemonic functions of intellectuals and of political parties and in particular of the Modern Prince, we are never talking about a hegemonic project of a political party or a political formation. Hegemonic relations are always in reference to social classes and social groups. So even if we talked about a hegemonic project, this would be a hegemonic project of the subaltern groups, by means of forms or of organization that define their proper potential for an antagonistic form of hegemony both as change in the relation of forces in the war of position, but also as process of collective experimentation aiming at what Gramsci defined as a regulated society.

It is here that the notions of the “organic” and “organicitiy acquire their proper significance. “Organicity” is not a “historicist” notion in the sense of the expression of a substance or essence of a social group. Rather, it points towards the political practices and organizational forms by means of which social groups can express their strategic potential. Regarding subaltern social groups is here that we find the connection between “organicity” and democratic centralism, in an elaboration goes beyond its initial of the debate with Bordiga on the question of «organic centralism» as the one representing the true essence of proletarian politics

«“Organicity” can only be found in democratic centralism, which is so to speak a “centralism” in movement-i.e. a continual adaptation of the organisation to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience»⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ *SPN*, pp. 57-59; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 2010-11 (Q19, §24).

⁵⁵ *SPN*, pp. 188-89; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1634 (Q13, §36).

2.3. From subalternity to historical initiative

This relation between hegemony and the subaltern and their own condition, aspiration and struggle is very important. It is an aspect that tends to be forgotten in many contemporary discussions of hegemonic projects in a top-down version. The organic relation between an antagonistic form of hegemony and the very condition of the subaltern is something always to be stressed. The hegemony of the subaltern is a claim to emancipation that originates in their proper condition and struggle, it is there that it tentatively emerges and it is in the resistances of the subaltern that the beginning of any potential practice for their hegemony is grounded.

However, is a potential «hegemonic project» simply a projection of the current condition of their being subaltern, with all its contradictions? No, as Gramsci would have suggested the crucial aspect is whether a historical initiative emerges.

«The philosophy of praxis presupposes all this cultural past: Renaissance and Reformation, German philosophy and the French Revolution, Calvinism and English classical economics, secular liberalism and this historicism which is at the root of the whole modern conception of life. The philosophy of praxis is the crowning point of this entire movement of intellectual and moral reformation, made dialectical in the contrast between popular culture and high culture. It corresponds to the nexus Protestant Reformation plus French Revolution: it is a philosophy which is also politics, and a politics which is also philosophy. It is still going through its populist phase: creating a group of independent intellectuals is not an easy thing; it requires a long process, with actions and reactions, coming together and drifting apart and the growth of very numerous and complex new formations. It is the conception of a subaltern social group, deprived of historical initiative, in continuous but disorganic expansion, unable to go beyond a certain qualitative level, which still remains below the level of the possession of the State and of the real exercise of hegemony over the whole of society which alone permits a certain organic equilibrium in the development of the intellectual group»⁵⁶.

This passage is important because of the ways it links philosophy of praxis, hegemony and historical initiative. It reminds that the philosophy of praxis emerges as part of the intellectual process of a potential hegemony of the subaltern in a complex, uneven and over-determined character in its

⁵⁶ SPN, pp. 395-396, GRAMSCI, pp. 1860-61 (Q16, §9).

contradictory co-existence with the still active hegemonic thrust of the bourgeoisie. It is also a tentative phase still requiring new and highly original formulations. Its full development would coincide with forms of historical initiative of the subaltern that would also profoundly change the very form of intellectuals and their practices, since the current role of intellectuals regarding subaltern groups is dependent on the lack of historical initiative.

If hegemony requires this kind of ability for an historical initiative, then the very notion of “being subaltern” in contrast is characterized by this absence of historical initiative. We find a similar tone in the note on methodological criteria in Q25,§2.

«Subaltern groups are always subject to the initiative of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise: only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately. In reality, even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves (a truth which can be demonstrated by the history of the French Revolution at least up to 1830). Every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian»⁵⁷.

One can also see here the relation between independent or historical initiative and integral autonomy, the crucial Gramscian notion regarding the passage of a subaltern group from “being subaltern” as subordination to “being subaltern” as struggle for hegemony and integral autonomy. One might say that autonomy and in particular integral autonomy is in a certain way the essence or the aim of an actual historical initiative. A true historical initiative refers exactly to the political, cultural and organizational forms that enable integral autonomy.

«The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a “State”: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, it is a “dismembered” and discontinuous function of the history of the civil society and thereby of the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the

⁵⁷ SPN, p. 55; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 2283-84 (Q25, §2) (translation modified).

programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character ; 5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy, etc.»⁵⁸.

This is a very important passage because it again sets a way to rethink the very notion of a hegemonic political practice from the part of the subaltern. In contrast to the top-down conception of politics, inherent in treating politics as representation, or of building alliances by means of discursive practices and forms of interpellation, here the aim is stated in a radically emancipatory way. In the end it is about integral autonomy, about getting over being subaltern, it is about the subaltern actually being able to proceed with their own autonomous historical initiative. This is the constant renegotiation of subalternity that Pandey has referred to:

«The relation of subalternity is, necessarily, always negotiated. It is the struggle to overcome the marks of an inherited subalternity on the one hand and to reinstitute it on the other that lies at the heart of subaltern history. “Les damnés”, to be sure, but in a repeatedly negotiated and renegotiated damnation»⁵⁹.

2.4. Hegemonic practice and pedagogy

However, how are we to conceive of this attempt to bring forward such a historical initiative? If we are to abandon the notion of a top-down hegemonic project presented to the subaltern are we to fall back to some form of “spontaneism”? Gramsci was very far from such a conception. I think that one way to solve this problem, namely the problem of a dialectical approach to leadership, is to go back to Gramsci’s conception of hegemony as a pedagogical practice and relation. This is exemplified in the following well known passage from Q10ii, §44.

⁵⁸ SPN, p. 52; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 2285 (Q25, §5).

⁵⁹ PANDAY 2006, p. 4738

«This problem can and must be related to the modern way of considering pedagogical doctrine and practice, according to which the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher. [...] This form of relationship exists throughout society as a whole and for every individual relative to other individuals. It exists between intellectual and non-intellectual sections of the population, between the rulers and the ruled, elites and their followers, leaders [dirigenti] and led, the vanguard and the body of the army. Every relationship of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations»⁶⁰.

Pedagogy in Gramsci has a specific signification and there is always a dialogue with the third *Thesis on Feuerbach* by Marx, the *thesis* that articulates a dialectical pedagogical relation based upon the premise that the educator must also be educated with revolutionary *praxis*, or to follow Gramsci’s own translation *rovesciamento della praxis*⁶¹.

«The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary praxis*»⁶².

It is exactly this reference to the possibility to «educate the educator» and the reference to the «coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity» that actually defines the complex dialectic of any emancipatory collective practice of the subaltern. There is a pedagogical relation but it is not external to the subaltern and their condition, it does not have some other reference points. The pedagogical relation refers to the subaltern and their «internal relations» of «vanguards» and «masses», in a

⁶⁰ *SPN*, pp. 349-350; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1331 (Q10ii, §44). On the “pedagogic” dimension of hegemony see TOSEL 2016, pp. 305-21.

⁶¹ GRAMSCI 2007, p. 744. We must note here that although Marx writes *revolutionäre Praxis*, Engels, in the first publication of the theses makes a correction to *umwälzende Praxis*, Gramsci has in mind Engels’ version when translating the theses.

⁶² MECW, Vol. 5, p. 4 (translation modified).

process that is always in motion, And as Peter Thomas⁶³ stressed in light of such an approach it is important that we revisit the notion of the democratic philosopher, not only as a reference to a new modality of emancipatory and transformative practice of philosophy, but also as a way to rethink exactly this kind of transformative hegemonic practice emanating from the practices of the subaltern and being part of their uneven potentiality, in a constant relational interaction between the «masses» and the «vanguards».

«One could say therefore that the historical personality of an individual philosopher is also given by the active relationship that exists between him and the cultural environment he is proposing to modify. The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism, functioning as “teacher”. This is why one of the most important demands that the modern intelligentsias have made in the political field has been that of the so-called “freedom of thought and of the expression of thought” (“freedom of the press”, “freedom of association”). For the relationship between master and disciple in the general sense referred to above is only realised where this political condition exists, and only then do we get the “historical” realisation of a new type of philosopher, whom we could call a “democratic philosopher” in the sense that he is a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment. When the “thinker” is content with his own thought, when he is “subjectively”, that is abstractly, free, that is when he nowadays becomes a joke. The unity of science and life is precisely an active unity, in which alone liberty of thought can be realised; it is a master-pupil relationship, one between the philosopher and the cultural environment in which he has to work and from which he can draw the necessary problems for formulation and resolution. In other words, it is the relationship between philosophy and history»⁶⁴.

One might also suggest that this «active social relation of modification» is in fact the relation between any political formation that is engaged in a truly hegemonic practice and the subaltern social groups from which it has emanated and towards which it attempts to work, in a constant reciprocally pedagogical relation.

⁶³ THOMAS 2009.

⁶⁴ SPN, pp. 350-351; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 1331-32 (Q10ii, §44).

2.5. Hegemony and the terrain of production

However, there is another question. One of the limitations of the initial emergence of the notion of the hegemonic project in the debates on Thatcherism was the fact that the economic aspect was overlooked, both in regards to the strength and the weakness of the Thatcherite hegemonic project.

This poses the question of the relevance of this point to «hegemonic projects» of the subaltern. I am not simply referring to the «economic program», but to the broader question of the economic articulation or grounding of a true historical initiative of the subaltern. I am referring to both grounding a hegemonic practice in the terrain of production but also to the importance of this terrain for any true historical initiative.

We know that in the case of Fordism Gramsci referred to the possibility that hegemony could begin in the factory. The well known passage from Q22, §2 exemplifies this point:

«(Recall here the experiments conducted by Ford and to the economies made by his firm through direct management of transport and distribution of the product. These economies affected production costs and permitted higher wages and lower selling prices). Since these preliminary conditions existed, already rendered rational by historical evolution, it was relatively easy to rationalise production and labour by a skilful combination of force (destruction of working class trade unionism on a territorial basis) and persuasion (high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda) and thus succeed in making the whole life of the nation revolve around production. Hegemony here is born in the factory and requires for its exercise only a minute quantity of professional political and ideological intermediaries»⁶⁵.

One might find here analogies with the researches of Foucault on the new forms of discipline and normalisation that originated in the workplaces and expanded to the entire social fabric and at the same time called for new practices of domination, new forms or governmentality, that included the management of population and the new forms of subjectivity associated with this emergence. Pierre Macherey recently stressed the importance of such an approach⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ SPN, p. 285; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 2145-46 (Q22, §2).

⁶⁶ MACHEREY 2014.

Such an approach indeed points towards realizing in what ways hegemony begins in the factory. However, this also points towards another important point. That any historical initiative of the subaltern classes also requires such grounding in the possibility of resistances to exploitation but also extended experimentation with new productive practices and new forms of the social organization of production. This in its turn is based upon the historicity of the productive processes and a relational approach to economic forms. Q8, §128 exemplifies this:

«Economic Science. Concept and fact of “determinate market”: that is, the revelation that determinate forces have arisen historically, the operation of which presents itself with a certain “automatism” that allows a measure of “predictability” and certainty for individual initiatives. “Determinate market” is therefore equivalent to saying “determinate relation of social forces in a determined structure of the productive apparatus” guaranteed by a determinate juridical superstructure. [. . .]. The “critique” of political economy starts from the concept of the “historicity [*storicità*]” of the “determinate market” and of its “automatism”, whereas pure “economists” posit these elements as “eternal”, “natural”; the critique analyses the relations of forces that “determine” the market, evaluates the “possibilities of modification [*modificabilità*]” connected with the appearance of new elements and their strengthening and presents the “transitory nature [*caducità*]” and “replaceable nature [*sostituibilità*]” of the criticised “science”: it studies it as “life” but also as “death” and finds at its heart the elements of its inevitable supersession by an “heir” that will be presumptive until it will have given manifest proofs of vitality etc.»⁶⁷.

And although Gramsci did not write much about the economic aspects of a «regulated society» he did left some important references. It is obvious that for Gramsci it was never about simply the economy, since he treated economic developments and changes more like the «molecular foundation of a new civilization»⁶⁸. Of particular importance are the references to the need for a new «conformism» based upon a «collective» man. For Gramsci the «the fight... to reach the collective man, through a stage comprising the development of individuality and critical personality [...] is a dialectical

⁶⁷ GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1018 (Q8, §128). We use the translation of this passage in THOMAS 2009, pp. 335-36.

⁶⁸ FSPN, p. 270, GRAMSCI 1975, p. 892 (Q7, §44).

conception»⁶⁹. In this sense, the struggle for hegemony is also the struggle regarding the emergence of new forms of social organization of production.

«On social “conformism” it should be noted that the question is not a new one and that the alarm launched by certain intellectuals is simply comical. Conformism has always existed. We are now dealing with a struggle between two conformisms, i.e. with a struggle for hegemony, with a crisis of civil society. The old intellectual and moral leaders of society are feeling the ground give way under their feet and realising that their preaching has become just that—preaching, i.e. something extraneous to the real world, pure form without any content, an empty, mindless shell. Hence their desperation, their conservative and reactionary tendencies. Since the particular form of civilisation, of culture, of morality that they represented is decomposing, they bewail the death of every civilisation, of every culture, of every morality and are calling for repressive measures by the state or forming groups isolated from and in resistance to the real historical process, thereby prolonging the duration of the crisis, given that the eclipse of a way of living and thinking cannot take place without crisis. The representatives of the new order wanting to be born, moreover, through their rationalistic hatred of the old, are coming out with utopias and hare-brained schemes. What is the reference point for the new world coming into being? The world of production, of labour. The maximum degree of utilitarianism must underlie every analysis of the moral and intellectual institutions to be created and of the principles to be upheld; collective and individual life must be organised to maximise the yield from the productive apparatus. The development of economic forces on new bases and the progressive establishment of the new structure will heal the inevitable contradictions and, having created a new “conformism” from below, will allow new possibilities for self-discipline, in other words for freedom, including that of the individual»⁷⁰.

This passage written during November-December 1930, represents a relatively-early conception of the possibility for a new practice of hegemony emerging in the terrain of production, something evident in the relative economism of the reference to a new utilitarianism and the confidence to the performance of the productive apparatus. However, gradually Gramsci's conception will become more rich and complex. As Giuliano Guzzione stresses, the question for Gramsci becomes how to fully reinstate the notion of the «plan» and its «authentic valence as an instrument for an integral reorganization of society and of production according to the social exigencies

⁶⁹ FSPN, p. 270q GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1111 (Q9, §23).

⁷⁰ FSPN, pp. 276-277; GRAMSCI 1975, pp. 862-63 (Q7, §12).

of the “mass”, of the subaltern and also to anticipate, explain and conceptually elaborate the novel forms of liberty and individuality potentially present in it»⁷¹. Gramsci’s elaboration on the «collective worker» in Q9, §67 is also exemplary in this sense. It also stresses how the very essence of social antagonism inside the terrain of capitalist production, including Fordism, also creates the possibility to reappropriate science and technology in new forms.

«For the individual worker, the junction between the requirements of technical development and the interests of the ruling class is “objective”. But this junction, this unity between technical development and the interests of the ruling class is only a historical phase of industrial development, and must be conceived of as transitory. The nexus can be dissolved; technical requirements can be conceived in concrete terms, not merely separately from the interests of the ruling class, but in relation to the interests of the class which is as yet still subaltern. A compelling proof that such a “split” and new synthesis is historically mature is constituted by the very fact that such a process is understood by the subaltern class-which precisely for that reason is no longer subaltern, or at least is demonstrably on the way to emerging from its subordinate position. The “collective worker” understands that this is what he is, not merely in each individual factory but in the broader spheres of the national and international division of labour. It is precisely in the organisms which represent the factory as a producer of real objects and not of profit that he gives an external, political demonstration of the consciousness he has acquired»⁷².

This approach which can also be linked to the «new intellectualism» that Gramsci proposed, based upon the experience of *Ordine Nuovo*⁷³ is also very

⁷¹ GUZZONE 2018, p. 274.

⁷² *SPN* p. 201; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1138 (Q9, §67). See also Gramsci’s reference to the «collective man» in an August 1932 letter to Julia : «Modern man should be a synthesis of those traits that are... presumed as national characteristics: the American engineer, the German philosopher, the French politician, recreating so to speak, the Italian man of the Renaissance, a modern type of Leonardo da Vinci who has become a mass-man or collective man while nevertheless maintaining his strong personality and originality as an individual» (GRAMSCI 2011, vol. 2, pp. 194-95).

⁷³ «On this basis the weekly “Ordine Nuovo” worked to develop certain forms of new intellectualism and to determine its new concepts, and this was not the least of the reasons for its success, since such a conception corresponded to latent aspirations and conformed to the development of the real forms of life. The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life,

important in the sense that it indeed offers a way to rethink how such a reappropriation and at the same time profound transformation of science and technology is possible exactly by means of stressing the creative and thinking potential of the collective worker. As Giorgio Baratta noted:

«Rendering universal, that is entrusting to the “collective man” the *general intellect*, valorising the “creative” capacity, the “possibility to think” of *every human*, even if he/she is reduced to a living appendix of the mechanic system of the taylorist-fordist organization. This is the authentic challenge that Gramsci as a communist expects that the workers’ movement is in the process of launching against fordism, pointing to its *spirit of scission*, which is not only ethico-political scission of the working class from the bourgeoisie, but also scission and therefore workers’ reappropriation of *science* and *technique* from the domination and control upon them from the part of capital»⁷⁴.

It is also important to remember how Gramsci always had a dialectic conception of different regimes of accumulation, which he considered inherently contradictory and traversed by antagonistic dynamics. Gramsci’s approach to Americanism is in this sense exemplary of this approach. In contrast to the classical economist conceptualization of progressive productive forces versus reactionary exploitative relations of production, but also in contrast to the tendency to see only the aspect of subordination and subsumption, he saw in the entire, complex and uneven technological, social and “biopolitical” *dispositif* of Americanism not only the consolidation of bourgeois rule and hegemony but also the subaltern yet active dynamic of an alternative economic and in the long run civilizational form, the possibility of a new *civiltà*.

«The elements of a “new culture” and “new way of life” which are being spread around under the American label, are still just tentative feelers. They are not due to a new “order” deriving from a new basis, because that has not yet been formed, but are due to the superficial apish initiative of elements which are beginning to feel

as constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit); from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialised” and does not become “directive” (specialised and political)». *SPN*, pp. 9-10, GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1551 (Q12, §3).

⁷⁴ BARATTA 2004, p. 25.

themselves socially displaced by the operation (still destructive and dissolutive) of the new basis in the course of formation. What is today called “Americanism” is to a large extent an advance criticism of old strata which will in fact be crushed by any eventual new order and which are already in the grips of a wave of social panic, dissolution and despair. It is an unconscious attempt at reaction on the part of those who are impotent to rebuild and who are emphasising the negative aspects of the revolution. But it is not from the social groups “condemned” by the new order that reconstruction is to be expected, but from those on whom is imposed the burden of creating with their own suffering the material bases of the new order. It is they who “must” find for themselves an “original”, and not Americanised, system of living, to turn into “freedom” what today is “necessity”»⁷⁵.

These are very important observations, exactly because they point not simply towards a new economic configuration but towards a more profound process of societal transformation based upon elements and tendencies already existing through the struggles of the subaltern through their constant and constitutive presence within the realm of modern capitalist production. The struggle for hegemony is about different and inherently antagonistic (despite their common rooting in the same contradictory productive processes) forms of socialization. In this sense, an alternative “economic policy” can never simply be an “economic process” conceived simply as a series of measures aimed at alleviating some of the consequences of capitalist exploitation. It has to initiate a profound process of social transformation, in the sense of the struggle of the subaltern as labour towards an integral autonomy also rooted on a collective re-appropriation of the productive process.

3. *Hegemony can never simply be a project*

3.1. The challenge of new historical initiatives

All these have a broader significance for the political practice of contemporary radical left movements. They point towards a profound rethinking of the very practice of politics.

What is important is that hegemony (and hence any project for hegemony) is never simply a political project or an electoral campaign or a

⁷⁵ SPN, p. 317; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 2179 (Q22, §15).

communication strategy to change the terms of the dominant discourse. It is here that we find the difference between a potential hegemonic political practice and the actual political practice of contemporary left-wing formations. We are discussing a politics aiming at a potential hegemony of the subaltern we are referring to a broader historical process, rooted in the collective practices, struggles, resistances of the subaltern classes, their collective inventiveness and ingenuity.

In order for a «hegemonic project» to be truly a historical initiative of the subaltern classes it has to emerge, to be deeply rooted in the collective practices of the subaltern, their struggles and the very dialectically contradictory condition of being subaltern. As Peter Thomas recently stressed:

«There is no Rubicon lying between subalternity and hegemony, just as civil society and political society are not conceived as spatially distinct zones. Rather, there are degrees of subalternity, and degrees of emergence from it, ranging from inchoate rebellion, co-optation, partial or merely asserted autonomy, to complete autonomy. Were there no degrees of subalternity, were civil society a terrain of total domination instead of a continually renewed hegemonic relation of subordination, hegemony, as the emergence of capacities for self-direction and leadership of previously subaltern social groups, would not be a realistic political strategy»⁷⁶.

3.2. Towards an experimental conception of politics

Hegemony includes interventions and the emergence of collective forms that enable such a process of achieving integral autonomy and hence the potential for an independent historical initiative. It also includes a process of social experimentation and not just leadership. Gramsci had stressed this aspect and the importance of the experimental practice, a point which echoes a similar reference by Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*⁷⁷

⁷⁶ THOMAS 2018, p. 873.

⁷⁷ «The question then arises: What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word “people” with the word “state”», MECW, vol. 24. p. 97. This reference to the need to answer the question scientifically should not be read as suggesting that it is a question of abstract speculation or formalist

«One might say that the typical unitary process of reality is found here in the experimental activity of the scientist, which is the first model of dialectical mediation between man and nature, and the elementary historical cell through which man puts himself into relation with nature by means of technology, knows her and dominates her. There can be no doubt that the rise of the experimental method separates two historical worlds, two epochs, and initiates the process of dissolution of theology and metaphysics and the process of development of modern thought whose consummation is in the philosophy of praxis. Scientific experiment is the first cell of the new method of production, of the new form of active union of man and nature. The scientist-experimenter is also a worker, not a pure thinker, and his thought is continually controlled by practice and vice versa, until there is formed the perfect unity of theory and practice»⁷⁸.

Peter Thomas has suggested that such an approach is not limited to the sciences but it refers also to a hegemonic political practice, a practice of experimentation, transformation and emancipation.

«As he developed this line of research, he increasingly emphasized that hegemony as a project involves something similar to the most rigorous forms of modern scientific experimental practice; hegemony, that is, is represented as a research project for the creation of new proletarian knowledge (Q 11, §34: 1448–9). Political actors aiming to build a hegemonic project must continually make propositions, test them in practice, correct and revise them and test their modified theses once again in concrete political struggles. This process results in an ongoing dialectical exchange and interchange between the existing political conjuncture and attempts to transform it, and even more crucially, between leaders of a political movement and those who participate in them. A political project of hegemonic politics thus comes to represent a type of «pedagogical laboratory» for the development of new forms of democratic and emancipatory political practice»⁷⁹.

Gramsci invokes such an approach in the way he discusses democratic centralism in Q13, § 36:

construction of theories. Rather, it is pointing towards a conception of scientific experimentation and in this sense the entire period of transition is also a period of experimentation. As André Tosel had stressed political practice is in the sense the experimental terrain of this science. (Tosel in BALIBAR–LUPORINI–TOSEL 1979).

⁷⁸ SPN, p. 446; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1449 (Q11, §34).

⁷⁹ THOMAS 2013, p. 27.

«Democratic centralism offers an elastic formula, which can be embodied in many diverse forms; it comes alive in so far as it is interpreted and continually adapted to necessity. It consists in the critical pursuit of what is identical in seeming diversity of form and on the other hand of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity, in order to organise and interconnect closely that which is similar, but in such a way that the organising and the interconnecting appear to be a practical and “inductive” necessity, experimental, and not the result of a rationalistic, deductive, abstract process-i.e. one typical of pure intellectuals (or pure asses). This continuous effort to separate out the “international” and “unitary” element in national and local reality is true concrete political action, the sole activity productive of historical progress. It requires an organic unity between theory and practice, between intellectual strata and popular masses, between rulers and ruled»⁸⁰.

This conception can also be found in a text of Balibar from the early 1980s where he presents the political organization as a terrain of experimentation and insists on the necessity of a new hegemonic political practice antagonistic to the dominant forms of politics.

«From Marx to Lenin, R. Luxemburg, Gramsci and others, to contemporary “critical communists” the same exigency perpetuates itself and which emerges from the class struggles themselves: to find an original form of political practice, not no less, but *more* effectively “democratic” than the one incarnated in the “pluralism” of the representative institutions of the bourgeois state itself; making the revolutionary party at the same time the means in order to take power and also to exercise it in a new way; therefore progressively surpassing within it the “division between manual and intellectual labour”, the opposition between those “governing” and those “being governed”; to found upon this other practice of politics the possibility to unify the different forms of struggle against social exploitation and oppression; to define a “mass line” able at the same times to adapt itself to the changes in the conjuncture and to correct “opportunist” deviations [...] from the moment that an organization could start functioning not only as a “general staff”, but as an *experimenter* and as an *collective analyst* of the social movement to which it inserts itself [...] the dilemmas of “democratic centralism” and of the “right to tendencies” would have the chance to be sublated»⁸¹.

3.3. Hegemony as new practice of politics

⁸⁰ SPN, pp. 189-90; GRAMSCI 1975, p. 1635 (Q13, § 36).

⁸¹ BALIBAR 1982, p. 1139. It was a text by Tassos Betzelos that reminded me of this important text by Balibar.

It is only such a political practice that can indeed help a hegemonic project that can indeed an historical initiative. It is a kind of political intervention that is at the same time an attempt to help the subaltern elaborate new forms of collective and democratic politics as a necessary means for their attempt towards integral autonomy. Again it is Peter Thomas that offers a description of this new practice of politics

«Leadership, or in other words, the instability of uneven tendencies towards transformation rather than the equilibrium of order; politics as a tendentially unifying project of knowledge formation, rather than relations of hierarchical command; institutions of constituent power and their immanent expansion, rather than constitutional limitation; labour as a dynamic social relation of the ceaseless transformation of modernity, which it is the task of a militant communist movement to politicize. Far from a left-wing variant of the state-centric dimensions of modern political thought, Gramsci's dialectical chain of hegemonic politics represents a radical alternative. It constitutes a movement from a complex analysis of historically existing forms of domination towards the elaboration of an even more complex theory of alternative political organization»⁸².

In light of the above, a potential hegemony of the subaltern emerges as an antagonistic practice of politics, a hegemonic practice of politics. It refers to the possibility that from the resistances, struggles, collective aspirations of labour new forms of production can emerge that can be more egalitarian, sustainable and democratically coordinated, based on the collective knowledge, experience, ingenuity of the subaltern, provided that we learn «how to be attentive to the masses' imagination and inventiveness»⁸³. It refers to the constant defence, reclaiming and reproduction of commons, both physical and cultural. It refers to the potential for new popular cultures in their constant interconnection with high culture and the reclaiming of everything that can be emancipatory and critical in it. It needs to be based on the constant effort of overcoming the disaggregating effects of racism and nationalism and of building new forms of subaltern “popular” identity. It should be based upon the inclusion of struggles against patriarchy and a profound transformation of sexual and gender practices and norms. It refers to new forms of radical transformative civility that have to be at the same

⁸² THOMAS 2013, p. 29.

⁸³ ALTHUSSER 1977, p. 11.

time agonistic and dialogic. It refers to new forms of democratic participation and initiative at all levels, including the emergence of new figures of subaltern citizenship. It requires new forms and practices of collective intellectuality, in the workplace, the neighbourhood, civil and political society. It should be based on new forms of collective organization, and potential forms of an «integral united front» conceived as collective experimental sites for the production of new intellectualities, subjectivities, strategies and initiatives.

This means that we no longer talking simply about building a successful electoral coalition or an electoral “machine”. It is not about simply having a radical yet “realistic” political program. It cannot be reduced to having an educational role in the relation to the masses. It is not about simply “constructing” a new populist appeal. Rather it is about a constituent process, materialized both in political initiatives and molecular processes, through which a new radical and antagonistic politics is reconstituted within the subaltern, based upon struggle, resistance, solidarity and unity against the disunity and the social cannibalism induced by contemporary forms of passive revolution. A constituent process through which alternatives are re-elaborated and new forms of “common sense” emerge and through which the subaltern emerge as an autonomous political force.

In a similar manner, regarding the organization of the economy, what is needed today is exactly something similar to the approach of Gramsci to Americanism and Fordism and his attempt to see the potential for a radical antagonistic economic form emerging out of the contradictions of «Americanism». In this sense, the challenge is to make an assessment in a similar form of the variety of the contemporary forms of post-fordist organization of the work process, along with the new forms of precariousness and the increased role of affective labour, and attempt to discern the potential of the subaltern to create conditions for antagonistic forms and practices, both in the terrain of production by reclaiming the potential of the increased importance of knowledge and skills and in the terrain of circulation by generalizing forms of exchange and resources allocation that do not reflect the imperatives of the market.

This would require new expansive forms of recomposed forms of trade union activity able to cover the new forms of precarious and flexible labour, exemplified in contemporary struggles, but also recomposed forms of “classical” trade unions that can create new coalitions of labour. It would require a new grounding in the neighbourhoods and new forms of collective organization of demands that could overcome the effects of racism. It would

need new forms of militant research, co-research, education and artistic production and the production of a new popular culture. It would require new forms of public space, new forms of informed and enlightened circulation of information, news analysis in contrast to the current re-emergence of all forms of irrationalism. It would require new forms of militancy integrated in everyday life and in mass forms so that more and more people get exposed to the transformative potential of such forms of political participation. It would require new forms of unity, dialogue and exchange between not only different currents of the left but also different movements and sensitivities. In other words, it would mean the emergence of a new historical bloc.

Only in such a way we can have not simply a political project but a process by means of which a new historical initiative of the subaltern can emerge. We can fight in such a manner the regressive and divisive effects of the far right and the new forms of reactionary populism. We can create new forms of popular unity. And we can hope that if a new condition of acute hegemonic crisis emerges we do not simply have large movements, but also movements marked by elements of an antagonistic hegemony of the subaltern, movements that can combine militancy with persistence, movements that can move beyond their leadership. To give an example from the Greek experience: in the summer of 2015 we had a tremendous display of determination from the part of the subaltern in one of the most polarized political battles of modern Greek history. At the same time, the same subaltern social groups accepted the “realism” that capitulation was the only solution. They did not accept it positively of course, but their intellectual and political horizon was such that in the absence of a transformed common sense, but also in the absence of autonomous forms of organization and alternative “organic” forms of leadership, they did not opt for those calling for the struggle to continue. This was exactly an example of the absence of historical initiative and of a truly hegemonic political practice and of the political and organizational mediations that would have enabled such practice and such initiative.

The constituent process described above, and the political, organizational, and pedagogical work and experimentation aiming at a new historical initiative, refer exactly to the possibility that in the next such historical bifurcation we might have a better chance. The crucial question is whether contemporary left-wing movements, especially those that claim to be hegemonic, actually attempt to help the emergence of such historical initiatives. For the moment this remains an open question and challenge.

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