

After (Post) Hegemony

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Abstract

Hegemony is one of the most widely diffused concepts in the contemporary social sciences and humanities internationally, interpreted in a variety of ways in different disciplinary and national contexts. However, its contemporary relevance and conceptual coherence has recently been challenged by various theories of ‘posthegemony’. This article offers a critical assessment of this theoretical initiative. In the first part of the article, I distinguish between three main versions of posthegemony – ‘temporal, ‘foundational and ‘expansive’ – characterized by different understandings of the temporal and logical implications of hegemony. I then offer a critical assessment of the shared presuppositions of these theories, including their ‘pre-Gramscianism’, their indebtedness to Laclau and Mouffe’s formulation of hegemony, and their characterization of hegemony in terms compatible with modern theories of sovereignty. I conclude by arguing that the contradictions and oversights of the debate on posthegemony encourage us to undertake a reassessment of the real historical complexity of hegemonic politics and its different traditions of conceptualization.

Keywords: Posthegemony, Hegemony, Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe, Latin America, Sovereignty.

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Hegemony is today one of the most widely diffused concepts in the social sciences and humanities internationally, subject to a range of often conflicting interpretations in different disciplinary and national contexts. Such is its pervasive presence in contemporary scholarly debates, journalistic vocabularies and policy discourses that it is often forgotten that this prominence is a relatively recent phenomenon. Following hegemony's 'rediscovery' during the nineteenth century, as a variety of European nationalisms sought to imagine themselves by means of classical figures and vocabularies, references to the term were for a long time confined, particularly but not only in English, to the field of international relations.¹ Debates about hegemony had been central to the development of Russian Social Democracy both before and after October 1917. However, it was only with the thematic publication of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in Italy in the early postwar years, followed by their partial translation into English in 1971, that there began a process of international and interdisciplinary diffusion.² Since then, numerous interpretations of the significance of hegemony have been proposed in different contexts. These have ranged from theories of subjective consent to those of structural domination. Uniting most of these sometimes substantially different approaches has been a shared conviction that hegemony, however it is defined, can provide both a realistic historical analysis of the formation of modern political orders, and a suggestive perspective for theorizing their potential contemporary transformation.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, however, both the continuing relevance and conceptual coherence of hegemony have been called into question. Different theories of 'posthegemony', formulated in diverse disciplinary and cultural contexts, now propose to offer the type of realistic analysis of political action that was once ascribed to the concept of hegemony. The need for this renovation of political conceptuality is claimed to consist either in the exhaustion of hegemony as a political practice and consequent transition to a 'posthegemonic condition' defining contemporary politics, or in the discovery of a theoretical failing at the heart of the concept of hegemony as such. In both cases, the concept of hegemony has thus been argued no longer to represent an adequate basis for conceptualizing contemporary political realities or their possible forms of change. 'Posthegemony' is presented as a theory that comes 'after' hegemony, in either a chronological or logico-conceptual sense. It can also be seen, however, to 'follow' hegemony in another sense, representing something like its 'afterlife', insofar as it aspires to the type of explanatory power and general validity previously enjoyed by hegemony in critical and radical political thought, or what has sometimes been characterized as the 'hegemony of hegemony'.

This article aims to offer a critical assessment of this new theoretical paradigm, particularly in terms of its capacity to comprehend key dimensions of the usage of hegemony in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and the traditions in which it was developed. In the first part of the article, I provide a typology of different formulations of posthegemony, distinguishing between three main variants: 'temporal', 'foundational' and 'expansive' posthegemonies. In the second part, I offer a critical reckoning of accounts of three shared presuppositions of these different formulations of posthegemony. All three variants, I argue, exhibit the continuing influence of interpretations of Gramsci's thought based upon limited selections of his texts

(particularly in English translation), with a consequent neglect of more recent historical and philological scholarship on the nature and function of hegemony in the complete Italian critical editions of the *Prison Notebooks*. Similarly, all three versions assume that Laclau and Mouffe's notion of hegemony can be regarded as exhaustive of its significance and a coherent development of its underlying 'logic'. I argue that Laclau and Mouffe's formulation should instead be historically contextualized as a particular version of hegemony, reflecting the influence of debates in the 1970s regarding the role of the notion of 'passive revolution' in the *Prison Notebooks* on subsequent understandings of hegemony. Finally, these theories of posthegemony are united in their claim that the theory of hegemony represents, fundamentally, a systemic theory of power compatible with modern theories of sovereignty, rather than a strategic perspective that aims to represent sovereignty's 'real critique'.

In all three instances, the proposal to go beyond hegemony effectively results in the rediscovery of precisely those political problems to which the emergence of hegemony in the Marxist tradition – as concept and political practice – was designed as a strategic response. The ultimate significance of the debate on posthegemony, I therefore suggest in conclusion, is that a critique of its partial interpretations and oversights may not only prompt a more thoroughgoing engagement with the development of the notion of hegemony in Gramsci's integral *Prison Notebooks*, but also highlight the need for a reconsideration of the real historical complexity and contemporary relevance of the tradition of hegemonic politics.

'Temporal Posthegemony'

The first version of posthegemony is the most literal: posthegemony aims to signify that which comes *after* hegemony in a temporal sense. In the 2005 book, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, the Canadian social theorist Richard Day continued a tradition that has marked the aftermath of the Anglophone New Left, namely, the proposal to 'overcome' its lingering Gramscian prejudices (Day, 2005; see Bennett 1998, p. 62). Day provocatively took aim against what he characterized as the 'hegemony of hegemony', arguing that political movements of the new millennium – particularly the horizontalist dimensions of the alternative globalization movement – demonstrated that hegemony both had been and should be consigned to the past. As hegemony was equated with state power, contemporary political movements should renounce it. Hegemony was here understood in a relatively loose sense, as all those organizational practices and forms traditionally associated with leftist and particularly Marxist politics; an extensive textual engagement with Gramsci's (or other Marxists') arguments regarding the nature of hegemony was not offered.

A few years later, in 2007, the British cultural studies theorist Scott Lash proposed what at first sight might appear to be a similar argument, but in fact constituted a more fundamental argument against the contemporary relevance of hegemony. Hegemony had possessed 'great truth-value for a particular epoch', Lash noted; but its 'epoch is now beginning to draw to a close' (Lash, 2007, p. 55). For Lash, consonant with a particular interpretative tradition prominent in British Cultural Studies (see Williams 1977), hegemony was to be understood as a type of 'domination', albeit one exercised 'through consent as much as coercion' (Lash, 2007, p. 55). It is notable that Lash's key textual references to

support this claim were to Hall and Laclau, with only more cursory generic references to Gramsci.

The decline of this paradigm, Lash argued, witnessed the emergence of a new posthegemonic terrain: hegemony had been ‘epistemological’, but the new regime of power was much more ‘ontological’; the ‘power over’ of disciplinary societies in the postwar period was displaced by notions of power ‘from within’ and as a ‘generative force’; the ‘normativity’ of hegemony gave way to a political foundation in ‘facticity’; while hegemony was associated with ‘representation’, posthegemony was better comprehended in terms of ‘communication’; finally, ‘the “positivism” of the age of hegemony gives way to post-hegemonic empiricism’ (2007, p. 64). For Lash, therefore, the concept of posthegemony described an emergent situation that dictated a transformation of the methods and categories previously employed by cultural studies.³ Not without a tone of disappointment, Lash noted that ‘in its heyday the notion of hegemony had a great deal to do with social class. Post-hegemonic cultural studies has much less to do with social class. In many ways its analyses are much the poorer for this. Post-hegemonic cultural studies is in many ways less political’ (2007, p. 69).

What I have characterized as ‘temporal posthegemony’ can thus be understood as a periodizing theory, insofar as it posits a transition from one socio-political ‘regime’ or ‘order’ to another as a process that necessarily determines a complementary ‘updating’ of our theoretical vocabulary. Posthegemony in this sense emerges after hegemony, either due to the latter’s exhaustion or completion, but not necessarily as its direct negation. The two paradigms inhabit, and are appropriate for the comprehension of, two distinct historical epochs.

‘Foundational Posthegemony’

A much more radically antagonistic theory of posthegemony had already been proposed, even before Day’s intervention, in the field of Latin American cultural studies. At stake here was not a temporal claim regarding the redundancy of hegemony, but a theoretical claim disputing hegemony in general. While not necessarily the chronologically first formulation of it, the Spaniard Alberto Moreiras’s work, conducted largely in Universities in the USA and Scotland, can be regarded as the theoretical genesis of this version of posthegemony. *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*, published in 2001, outlined a theory of posthegemony that is closely linked to a particular understanding of subalternity as a marker of exclusion from hegemony. Following some of the indications in the Subaltern Studies Collective’s early characterizations of subalternity as a condition of autonomy and Spivak’s later emphasis on exclusion, Moreiras argued that the subaltern perspective can be ‘formally defined as the perspective from the constitutive outside of hegemony’ (Moreiras, 2001, p. 53).⁴ Defined as hegemony’s ‘outside’ (p. 107), the subaltern’s ‘refusal to submit to hegemonic interpellation’ constituted ‘a new assumption of political freedom’ (p. 126). ‘Any hegemonic relation’, Moreiras argued, ‘is only made possible through the negation or exclusion of the subaltern other’, understood as a ‘remainder of the hegemonic relation, that is, its negative register’ (p. 296). Thinking posthegemonically, therefore, implies the assumption of the ‘subaltern perspective’, as that which lies beyond

hegemony. This subaltern perspective, however also constitutes a ‘second-degree order, an order of order’, which hegemony logically presupposes, insofar as it is the necessary and foundational exclusion of any hegemonic order (Moreiras, 2001, p. 263; see also Moreiras, 2006, p. 149, p. 186). Like Day and Lash, Moreiras did not engage with Gramsci’s texts in elaborating this argument. His repeated claims that hegemony implies a ‘social order’ founded upon ‘hegemonic closure’ instead took Laclau and Mouffe’s theorization of hegemony as paradigmatic (see, e.g., p. 263).

Even more influential than Moreiras, however, has been the work of his colleague Jon Beasley-Murray. Prefigured in an essay ‘On Posthegemony’ of 2003, the 2010 publication of *Posthegemony: political theory and Latin America* consolidated Beasley-Murray’s reputation as one of the key theorists of this tendency. This book begins with the provocative claim that ‘There is no hegemony and never has been. We live in cynical, post-hegemonic times: nobody is very much persuaded by ideologies that once seemed fundamental to securing social order’ (2010, p. ix). Despite initial appearances, this argument is not reducible to the type of periodizing claim found in Lash and Thoburn. Rather, Beasley-Murray’s larger argument is that ‘we have always lived in posthegemonic times: social order was never in fact secured through ideology’; hegemony is and has always been a ‘fiction’ (p. ix, p. x, p. 284).⁵ Beasley-Murray instead proposes that ‘social order is secured through habit and affect: through folding the constituent power of the multitude back on itself to produce the illusion of transcendence and sovereignty’ (p. ix). A clear series of binaries are thus established as the foundation this model of posthegemony, defined in each instance in its opposition to hegemony: habit (rather than opinion), affect (rather than emotion), the multitude (rather than the people), constituent power (rather than constituted power) and, ultimately, the real (rather than discourse) (p. 10). Posthegemony is here configured not simply as a temporal negation of hegemony, in the sense of a response to the failure of hegemony adequately to account for the conditions of contemporary political action. Rather, more radically, it is conceived as the real but repressed ground of hegemony’s operations, an ‘immanence’ opposed to the corrupting force of hegemony’s ‘transcendence’ (p. xi).

Beasley-Murray’s argument frequently refers to Hardt and Negri’s arguments regarding constituent power and the multitude; indeed, the multitude plays a formally similar role in Beasley-Murray’s argument to that assumed by the subaltern in Moreiras’s theorization. The multitude is a remainder that eludes ‘representation’ (equated with hegemony, in its turn equated with the state), and thus figures as the privileged bearer of posthegemonic politics.⁶ What is perhaps most notable is that this conception of posthegemony relies upon an understanding of hegemony as a system of ‘consent’ (p. x), as a ‘contract’ and ‘social pact’ (p. xi, xviii, p. 74), as a totalizing system, and even as a ‘fiction of an all-inclusive pact’ (p. xiv). ‘At its limit’, Beasley-Murray argues, ‘the logic of hegemony simply identifies with the state by taking it for granted’ (p. xv). While he occasionally and briefly refers to Gramsci in textually loose terms,⁷ Beasley-Murray makes very clear throughout the book that his primary reference is to Laclau’s ‘version of hegemony theory’, which he regards as the ‘most fully developed’ theory of hegemony, as well as the most influential for cultural studies more generally (p. 40).⁸

‘Foundational posthegemony’ is thus effectively conceived as both critique and – in a certain sense – logical consequence of Laclau and Mouffe’s influential formulation of

hegemony as system of differential equivalence, constitutively incomplete totalization and contingent universalization. It aims to theorize – in a formulation repeated throughout Beasley-Murray’s book, almost as a motto – the ‘something [that] always escapes’ (p. xxi) from any hegemonic system, because it always already precedes it, constitutively and arguably transcendently.⁹ Despite its name, this version of posthegemony in an important sense does not come *after* hegemony, but rather, *before* it, in a development familiar from other recent philosophies of the ‘post’ that posit the originary status of the supplement.¹⁰ Hegemony, it appears, has always carried within itself the presuppositions of its own dissolution; the epoch of posthegemonic politics signals a return and revenge of the repressed, as the ‘fictions’ of the state and its accomplice ‘hegemony’ lose their capacity to suppress the inexhaustible energies of a Real beyond representation.

‘Expansive posthegemony’

The third variant of posthegemony can be regarded as a synthesis of the presuppositions of both the temporal and foundational models. I propose to call this a form of ‘expansive posthegemony’. In different ways, the theorists of this tendency propose what could be described as a type of ‘mixed constitution’ of posthegemony, drawing upon elements of a particular theory of hegemony (specifically, Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony as the construction of chains of equivalence), and supplementing it with insights derived from the posthegemonic paradigm.

One of the most coherent theorizations of this position can be found in the work of the Paraguayan political philosopher Benjamin Arditi, currently based in Mexico. While broadly sympathetic to the project outlined in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Arditi criticizes the circularity of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. Arditi argues that the later Laclau’s theory of hegemony in particular posits an effective equivalence between hegemony and politics as such: ‘all politics become variants of the hegemonic form’, and hegemony thus ‘functions as a universal translator or Esperanto of politics’ (2007, p. 210; see, also, Arditi 2010).¹¹ While critical of some of the more exaggerated claims of posthegemony, he nevertheless welcomes its intention to register an ‘outside’ to this hegemonic circle, opening hegemonic politics up to those non-hegemonic elements that Laclau and Mouffe’s rigorous formalism had ‘foreclosed’, in an almost clinical sense.

Arditi thus characterizes posthegemony as an ‘extended’ mode of political activity (Arditi 2007, p. 224), though not simply in the sense that it includes that which hegemony is argued to have excluded (the position championed by Moreiras and Beasley-Murray). Rather, in Arditi’s formulation, posthegemony also extends the reach of hegemonic politics itself to this ‘outside’. For Arditi, posthegemony, rather than signaling the end or supersession of hegemony, paradoxically reinforces it by enabling an expansion of its frame of reference; it supplements the ‘hegemonic format of chains of equivalence’ by drawing attention to the ‘non-, extra- or post-hegemonic’ ways of doing politics (p. 212), which ‘bypass the neo-Gramscian logic of hegemony and counter-hegemony characteristic of most of what is usually inventoried under the name “politics” today’ (p. 224).¹²

This position thus represents an effective concession to the critiques of other theorists of posthegemony *vis-à-vis* the limitations of hegemony, and a simultaneous recuperation of

those insights within the broader field established by Laclau and Mouffe's theorization of hegemony. For Arditì, there is not an antinomic relation between hegemony or posthegemony, people or multitude, the real or representation, the state or exodus. There is instead always an articulated combination of the two poles in different political conjunctures. The 'hegemonic' terms under which this mixed constitution is produced, however, remains predominant: 'articulation', a key notion in Laclau and Mouffe's formulation, remains 'the task of politics', even and especially in the conjunctural articulations of hegemony and posthegemony (p. 212). Posthegemony is in this sense submitted and subordinated to a hegemonic logic.

An even more extensive revision is at work in the reflections on posthegemony of the Greek-British political and psychoanalytical theorist Yannis Stavrakakis. Like Arditì, Stavrakakis objects to any binary juxtaposition between hegemony and posthegemony, between representation and the real, between order and affect. He explicitly takes aim against the periodizing logic of what I have characterized as 'temporal posthegemony', arguing that 'the issue is not to radically isolate the eras of hegemony and post-hegemony, to present discourse and affect, symbolic and real, as mutually exclusive dimensions; it is to explore, in every historical conjuncture, the different and multiple ways in which these interact to co-constitute subjects, objects and socio-political orders' (2014, p. 123).

Yet whereas Arditì proposes to 'articulate' insights from both hegemonic and posthegemonic paradigms in the form of particular conjunctural analyses, Stavrakakis instead proposes what is in effect a posthegemonic reformulation of the Laclauian-Mouffian concept of hegemony, so that it is able to include those affective dimensions that theorists of posthegemony have argued lie 'outside' the hegemonic paradigm in a strict sense. In order to support this reformulation, Stavrakakis refers to later developments in Laclau's work, particularly the growing importance of Lacanian psychoanalysis, by means of which Laclau attempted to theorize the 'genesis' of hegemonic construction in its 'outside', in the 'drives behind such construction' (Laclau 2004, p. 326).¹³ In this sense, Stavrakakis proposes, 'Laclau's theory of hegemony on top of being a discursive theory of hegemony is also an affective theory of hegemony' (p. 129). Formulated most rigorously, such an approach results in a 'a dialectic of *co-constitution* and *mutual engagement* between discourse and affect', rather than their external opposition (p. 128). The most valid insights of the discussion of posthegemony, therefore, are regarded as having been already present in the Laclauian-Mouffian understanding of hegemony, if not in its original formulation then at least in its later and most consequent development.

A Critical Reckoning of Accounts

Posthegemony's influence thus far has remained largely restricted to some tendencies in (North-American-anchored) Latin American cultural studies, and related international networks of contemporary radical political thought (see Orellana, 2015).¹⁴ While some scholars in these fields have judged posthegemony's emphasis upon 'affect' to represent a useful supplement to the discursive emphasis of Laclau and Mouffe's formulation of hegemony (see Gordillo 2013), others have been more skeptical regarding both its periodizing claims and its undifferentiated characterization of other understandings of

hegemony and its history (see Emerson 2013; Chodor 2014; Starcenbaum 2015/16; Freeland 2015). Posthegemony has not, however, made a broader impact in the many fields in which hegemony remains influential, including history, sociology, international relations and international political economy.

Posthegemony nevertheless constitutes a significant current in contemporary political theory and philosophy, considered in terms of the substantive theses proposed by its three major tendencies regarding the nature of political order and action. Perhaps even more importantly, these three variants of posthegemony, whatever their differences in approach and emphasis, also have a representative status, in terms of their enunciation of more widely shared presuppositions about the origin, nature and implications of the concept of hegemony, and particularly of that formulation of hegemony that their proposals aim to overcome or to supplement. There are at least three significant and representative presuppositions shared by these different notions of posthegemony: first, their ‘pre-Gramscian’ conception of hegemony; second, their acceptance of the ‘hegemony’ of Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony; and third, their understanding of hegemony as a universalizing system of power and domination.

Hegemony after Gramsci

The contemporary prominence of the word ‘hegemony’ in the English language, as previously noted, owes much to the reception of Gramsci by the Anglophone New Left following the publication of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* in 1971 (Boothman 2008a). Indeed, hegemony is not merely associated with Gramsci, but has sometimes been regarded, erroneously, as his own invention. It is therefore remarkable that the scholarly debate about the notion of posthegemony has occurred without any sustained engagement with Gramsci’s actual writings on hegemony (see Gordillo 2013; Chodor 2014). The discussion of posthegemony has remained, seemingly unwittingly, largely derivative of the coordinates of interpretations of Gramsci that became influential in the 1970s, particularly those in Anglophone cultural studies.

This is perhaps most evident in posthegemonic theorists’ persistent equation of hegemony with a generic notion of ‘consent’ conceived in terms of a subjectivist assent to power, which is projected from the individual level to that of social classes and groups (see, e.g., Lash, 2007, p. 55; Moreiras 2001, p. 126, p. 263; Beasley-Murray 2010, pp. 2-3, p. 25, p. 63). This has undoubtedly been a dominant interpretation in the Anglophone reception of Gramsci since the 1970s, particularly those readings that regard as paradigmatic the famous note from the beginning of the *Prison Notebooks* in which Gramsci first began to use the notion of hegemony in relation to the contradictions of the Italian Risorgimento (Q1, §44, p. 41). The notion of hegemonic consent has also remained a significant element in other later sophisticated versions of hegemony such as that of Guha, for whom consent is a necessary if not sufficient condition for a mature hegemonic system of governance (see Guha, 1998, p. 20, p. 23).

The extent to which such a conception comprehends the full development of the notion of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*, however, has been problematized by more recent historical and philological scholarship. On the one hand, this work has directed

attention to the historical and political context of Gramsci's reformulation of hegemony in the more complex terms of a dialectic between 'leadership' [*direzione*] and mass mobilization in concrete political projects. It was a reformulation overdetermined by the problematic established by Mussolini's 'manifesto' of 1923 regarding *forza e consenso*, which had a profound impact on the 'languages' (in the sense of Pocock 1989) of political and theoretical debate in Fascist Italy. On the other hand, new interpretations have highlighted the ways in which received notions of 'consent' are problematized throughout the *Prison Notebooks* and reformulated not according to the model of an individual's (more or less conscious) intention or act, but in terms of relations of forces between social groups (La Porta, 2009; Frosini, 2010, pp. 147).

Similarly, posthegemony's claim for the novelty of its own conceptualization of the role of habit and affect in securing social and political order neglects the extensive discussion throughout the *Prison Notebooks* of these themes in terms of the organizing/disaggregating function of *senso comune* (see, e.g., Gramsci 1975, *Q11*, §12, p. 1375-95), of the impact of 'molecular' transformism of the *persona* (*Q15*, §9, pp. 1762-4), or of the integration of social, economic and affective organizations (for instance, in the analysis of the novelty of 'Americanism': *Q22*, §11, pp. 2164-9). It is on the basis of his attention for these themes that Gramsci stresses the need to conceive of revolutionary politics not in a limited, 'diplomatic' sense (*la grande politica* of elites), but in terms of a thoroughgoing process of expansive and simultaneous 'intellectual *and* moral reform', an idea encapsulated in the evocative metaphor of the 'modern Prince' (*Q8*, §21, p. 951; *Q13*, §1, pp. 1555-61; my italics). Viewed in this perspective, posthegemony's emphasis upon affect seems less a going beyond hegemony, than a rediscovery of some of the themes that were central to Gramsci's own expansive conception of hegemony, albeit ones neglected by some (but by no means all) later interpretations of his thought.

It is arguably even more remarkable that the advocates of posthegemony have not paused to consider the rich reflections on Gramsci and hegemony produced within Latin America itself, particularly given their disciplinary and sometimes also geographical location. These include the now classic contributions of figures such as Portantiero (1981), Aricò (1988), or Coutinho (1999), as a number of critics have already suggested (Bosteels 2013; Starcenbaum 2015/16; Cavooris 2017).¹⁵ There are also, however, more recent studies from Latin America that have made important contributions to the ongoing philological reassessment of Gramsci's writings, placing particular emphasis upon hegemony's relation with other central terms in the *Prison Notebooks*, including those of passive revolution, united front, war of movement and permanent revolution (Kanoussi, 2000; Del Roio, 2005; Bianchi, 2008). Furthermore, there have been significant attempts to operationalize hegemony and related concepts in new and radical ways for the analysis of contemporary politics in various regions of Latin America and beyond (see, e.g., Modonesi, 2013; Tapia, 2011). None of these attempts at rethinking both the historical and contemporary relevance (especially in Latin America) of hegemony is discussed by any of the advocates of posthegemony, despite their claims that hegemony is particularly redundant for comprehending Latin American realities.¹⁶

Furthermore, the timing of the debate on posthegemony can seem particularly ironic to those familiar with the most recent international Gramscian scholarship. For precisely in

the same period in which the superannuation of hegemony has been declared, the field of Gramsci studies, not only in its traditional ‘centre’ in Italy but also internationally (as the previously cited Latin American contributions testify), has witnessed a wide variety of significant projects revisiting and in some cases substantially revising our understanding of hegemony in both Gramsci’s thought and the wider Marxist tradition. Indeed, the new Gramscian scholarship of the last 15 years has been defined by its exploration of the complexity of hegemony as both concept and historical reality (see Frosini and Liguori, 2004; Boothman, 2008b; D’Orsi, 2008; Liguori and Voza, 2009).

In a number of important studies, for instance, Fabio Frosini has argued for a differentiated analysis of the various forms of hegemony theorized in the *Prison Notebooks*, focusing in particular on the importance of Gramsci’s development of the concept of ‘passive revolution’ as a dialectic (that is, mutually constitutive, rather than antinomic opposition) of subaltern and hegemonic instances (Frosini, 2012; 2015; 2016a; 2016b). In a similar vein, Giuseppe Cospito’s work has focused upon a diachronic reading of the development of hegemony throughout Gramsci’s writings, placing a particular emphasis upon the implications of Gramsci’s inheritance of the Bolshevik identification of hegemony with historically concrete processes of ‘leadership’ [*direzione*] (rather than an abstract system of power or domination) (Cospito, 2011, pp. 77-126; 2016). Further afield, studies such as those of Craig Brandist (2015) and Lars Lih (2017) have documented the complexity of the Bolshevik discussions of hegemony, which were Gramsci’s initial stimuli, emphasizing their attempts to think not only problems of state power and its contestation, but also the cultural, social and ethical relations undergirding it – precisely the dimensions posthegemony posits as constitutively lacking from the hegemonic paradigm.

These and other works of recent scholarship represent fundamental resources for reconsidering the history and potential of hegemonic politics. The fact that the debate on posthegemony has not engaged with this new research is not to be attributed simply to a failure to do one’s ‘homework properly’, as Stavrakakis claims in an overly polemical formulation regarding another supposed omission in this debate (2014, p. 127). Rather, it gives evidence of the enduring influence of the ‘images of Gramsci’ (and of hegemony) generated by older discussions of the *Prison Notebooks*, which the findings of recent scholarship has not yet been able to displace in the more general fields of study in which Gramsci’s legacy, and particularly the notion of hegemony, continue to play a significant role.

Hegemony after Passive Revolution

Rather than developed on the basis of a critical reading of Gramsci’s work itself, the field of posthegemonic theories has instead emerged in the wake of Laclau and Mouffe’s particular understanding of hegemony. Posthegemony’s implicit equation of this influential formulation of hegemony with hegemony as such reflects a more widespread view that Laclau and Mouffe’s project represents both a coherent continuation of Gramsci’s supposedly fragmentary reflections, and also a ‘culmination’ of the tradition of thinking about hegemony within Marxism (particularly in terms of their elimination of the residual class essentialism and reductionism that Laclau and Mouffe argue contradict the motivation and underlying ‘logic’ of the original ‘difficult emergence’ of hegemonic politics in the Second

International).¹⁷ It is on this basis that the theorists of posthegemony assume that a critical dissection of Laclau and Mouffe's paradigm could simultaneously exhaust hegemony in all of its variants.

The theory of hegemony first presented in Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* undoubtedly represents a novel and ingenious reformulation of the Hobbesian-Rousseauian tradition in modern political thought that posits the achievement of unity and order as the fundamental problem of both political action and theory. Their famed hegemonic 'chain of equivalence' or 'hegemonic articulation' effectively functions as the 'mechanism' or 'technique' by means of which (political) unity is achieved out of (social) diversity, even if contingently and provisionally. In formalist terms, it can be regarded as a substitute for the 'covenant' that gives rise to Hobbes's body politic and commonwealth, or for that miraculous moment that witnesses the transition from the 'will of all' to the 'general will' in Rousseau.¹⁸ Understood as their own distinctive theory, and as an attempt to address this fundamental problem of modern political thought, Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of hegemony constitutes one of the most significant radical theoretical projects in recent times.

Whether or not it can be regarded as an exhaustive reading of the many complex dimensions of Gramsci's critical inheritance of the Bolshevik tradition of hegemony, or as a plausible extrapolation of the concept's underlying 'logic', however, is another question. In their earlier individual works from the 1970s, both Mouffe and Laclau had engaged in different ways with Gramsci's writings, Mouffe in a directly textual mode and Laclau in more general conceptual terms (which he explicitly acknowledged was indebted to Mouffe's earlier reading; see, e.g., Mouffe 1979a and Laclau 1977, p. 141).¹⁹ The collaborative *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from 1985, however, is notable for operating at a high level of abstraction from Gramsci's carceral writings themselves (cited only three times: Laclau and Mouffe, 2014, p. 58), while giving more attention to the then-available scholarship on them (see, e.g., pp. 185-6).²⁰ Rather than an interpretation, reading or development of Gramsci's thought itself, therefore, the positions developed in this book are more accurately characterized as being inspired by discussions of the *Prison Notebooks* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and overdetermined by the general interpretative paradigm that was promoted by them.

This historical contextualization is decisive for comprehending the nature of the particular reformulation of hegemony proposed by Laclau and Mouffe. For their emphasis upon hegemony as fundamentally a theory of ordering and structuration – the political as the form of 'institution of the social' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014, p. 137) – can be regarded as an unwitting formalization of those readings from the late 1970s, particularly but not only in the Italian debate, that understood the concept of hegemony in the light of the then newly valorized concept of 'passive revolution' (see De Felice, 1972, 1977; Buci-Glucksmann, 1975; and particularly the interventions collected in Ferri, 1977).²¹

Underemphasized in previous readings of the *Prison Notebooks*, in the late 1970s passive revolution became a key concept both for interpreting the overall structure of Gramsci's thought, and for understanding its contemporary relevance (particularly in terms of the problematic of 'transition' and its relation to the political proposals associated with so-called 'Eurocommunism'; see Frosini 2008). As it is steadily developed throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, passive revolution, as a comprehension of the specificity of the bourgeois

hegemonic project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, depicts the process by means of which unity and stability came to predominate over difference, or the forms in which continuing bourgeois dominance was secured through the neutralization and incorporation of autonomous subaltern organization within the existing state order (see Voza, 2004; di Meo, 2015).

The debates of the 1970s, both in Italy and increasingly abroad, effectively posited passive revolution not only as the form of bourgeois hegemony, but as the paradigm of hegemony as such; consequently, hegemony began to be conceived primarily in terms of a theory of a general *system* of power relations. Despite – or perhaps precisely because – Laclau and Mouffe’s intervention from 1985 does not explicitly thematize the notion of passive revolution or distinguish it from that of hegemony, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* both inherits precisely this generic systematic emphasis and provides what is arguably its most sophisticated formulation and certainly most influential development. Were this the only or even dominant conception of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*, their reading could be legitimately regarded as exhaustive of the potential of Gramsci’s theory, as theorists of posthegemony have assumed.

As Gerratana (1997) emphasized already during the debates of the 1970s, however, Gramsci does not theorize merely one form of hegemony, or even differently articulated forms of a fundamentally unitary hegemonic politics. Rather, he aims to analyze the qualitatively different forms of hegemony that emerge in the context of different political projects. The model of bourgeois hegemony represented by passive revolution neither exhausts these different ‘forms of hegemony’, nor does it represent an originary paradigm from which other forms are derived. On the contrary, in the development of the *Prison Notebooks*, the concept of passive revolution emerges after the concept of hegemony, as index both of its development and of its deformation.²² It represents an attempt to specify those conditions of ‘hegemonic failure’ that Gramsci came to see as increasingly characteristic (particularly throughout the late nineteenth century) of the bourgeoisie’s class project and contradictions. Passive revolution is a derivative model produced by a mimetic failure, a ‘deformed’ hegemony or a type of ‘hegemony without hegemony’, to echo the Gramscian formulation made famous in a slightly modified form by Guha’s analysis of the political forms of colonial difference.²³ If passive revolution can be characterized as the ‘norm’ of political development in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its exception is constituted by hegemony understood in a more expansive and fundamental sense, that is, in the sense that Gramsci inherited from the Bolshevik debates and developed further throughout his political activism in the 1920s and in his carceral writings, as a strategic perspective and practice of political leadership among subaltern classes.²⁴

When posthegemonic theorists propose to go ‘beyond’ the understanding of hegemony made influential by (among others) Laclau and Mouffe, it can therefore be argued that they are in fact proposing to go beyond hegemony conceived in terms of the passive revolutionary processes of bourgeois hegemony, rather than beyond hegemony as such. In so doing, however, their critique ultimately points towards the need not for the superannuation of hegemony in the abstract, but for the contextualization of its contradictory and contested development in different historical periods.

Hegemony after Sovereignty

Perhaps the most symptomatically representative feature of the debate on posthegemony has been its assumption that hegemony fundamentally refers to a system of power and domination, founded upon the securing of (intersubjective) consent. As previously noted, this assumption accurately reflects some of the dominant themes that have marked the reception of the *Prison Notebooks* over the last 40 years, both in the Anglophone world and beyond, particularly in studies that have valorized Gramsci as a theorist of modern state formation and geopolitical rivalries.²⁵ Similarly, posthegemony's invocation of the social contract tradition continues another common representation of Gramsci as a theorist who views the foundation of state power fundamentally in terms of processes of consent and their forms of consciousness.

From the 1970s onwards, this interpretation has frequently resulted in hegemony being thought in terms of ideology (often, the Althusserian version of ideology), or sometimes even conflated with it (see Williams 1977). In this case, hegemony/ideology is understood to be a system of ideas in which subjects are constituted, (mis)recognized and manipulated (akin to the Althusserian process of interpellation); 'hegemonic struggle' is then taken to be synonymous with processes of ideological mystification or demystification (or in the Althusserian sense, the failed interpellation of 'bad subjects'). Hegemony is thus ultimately conceived in terms compatible with most modern theories of sovereignty, that is, in terms of the functioning of a coherent system of legitimate and legal power founded upon the command of 'subjects' (in the dual sense of the word). Indeed, with its focus upon consciousness, subject constitution and the production of consent, hegemony is effectively posited as a formal mechanism for the more secure and durable realization of constituted sovereign state power, or as a mode of its production.

What this reading overlooks, however, is the extent to which hegemony for the professional revolutionary Gramsci did not represent primarily a 'theory', or at least not in this formalist sense of a representation or description of a given, more or less coherent and stable, system. Rather, the problematic of hegemony as leadership functioned as a strategic perspective that guided and structured his approach to the concrete tasks of political organization. From his encounter during his sojourn in Moscow in 1922-3 with the Bolshevik debates over hegemony's historical importance in the revolutionary movement and its continuing relevance even in the early days of the New Economic Policy (NEP), to his attempt to implement a hegemonic programme of anti-Fascist struggle as leader of the Italian Communist Party (outlined in the 'Lyon Theses') and the extended intervention *On the Southern Question* composed just prior to his imprisonment, Gramsci attempted to conceptualize hegemony as an intervention into the relations of forces between different political projects and processes. Rather than a representative function, hegemony in these texts and interventions signified the capacity to propose potential solutions to the social and political crises afflicting Italian society, with the aim of mobilizing the active engagement of popular social strata in a project of social transformation, in opposition to the passive assent to existing hierarchies secured by Fascist dictatorship.

This conception of hegemony as a strategic perspective and practice remains central to Gramsci's carceral writings. It is the basis for his argument that in 1930 that the condition

of subalternity can be defined in terms of the incapacity of subaltern classes and social groups consciously to assume the tasks of self-direction, because subjected to the organizational and institutional forms of the existing dominant classes (Q 3, §14, pp. 299-300). Hegemony in this sense is also central to Gramsci's argument in 1931 that 'the most realistic and concrete' meaning of 'democracy' involves conceiving it in terms of a hegemonic relation in which there is a 'becoming directive' [*dirigente*] of popular social strata, or as a progressive annulment of the distinction between those governing and the governed, due to the 'organic' transitions between them that the practice of hegemonic politics promotes (Q8, §191, p. 1056). It is also in this optic that Gramsci proposes in 1932 that 'every relation of "hegemony" is necessarily a pedagogical relation' (Q10II, §44, p. 1331), in the sense of the 'reciprocal' and non-hierarchical relations between directive and directed instances, each of which is transformed in their interrelationship. The development of hegemony as a criterion for historical research, particularly in order to analyze the forms of production of modern sovereign state power – that is, the line of Gramsci's research that flows into the development of the distinct concept of passive revolution – does not annul this strategic conception, but presupposes it, as the political perspective that such a narrative seeks to ground by diagnosing its historical obstacles.

Hegemony in this sense is not primarily a matter of the processes of centralization, universalization and homogenization involved in the formation of a political system. Rather, it is a method of political work, or of political leadership understood as a pedagogical practice. Rather than a cartographical model of differentially located demands, or a formalist theory of the impossibility of the social totality's definitive completion or closure, this conception of hegemony is instead conceived as a response to the historically given problem of the uneven stratification of the subaltern social classes and the consequent need for a structured project capable of engaging those different strata in the learning processes specific to their own self-emancipation. It aims to constitute a 'real critique' of the sovereign paradigm of modern state power in a precise sense, namely, in the sense of 'undoing' the self-referential closure of sovereignty by experimenting with alternative forms of popular empowerment and socio-political organization (Q7, §33, p. 882).

The 'something that always escapes' from sovereign closure was thus historically not excluded from the concept of hegemony, but on the contrary, was central to a significant tradition of its elaboration. By nevertheless proposing the need to go 'beyond' hegemony, the debate on posthegemony risks not simply falling behind it, but also to foreclose the potentials that its complicated historical development can still offer for the comprehension of contemporary political action.

Conclusion: Hegemony after Posthegemony

The debate on posthegemony highlights both the continuing influence of Gramsci and some of his central concepts on contemporary radical political theory, and the extent to which this influence has been shaped by the complex history of conjuncturally overdetermined interpretations of the *Prison Notebooks*. By positing an exhaustive equation between particular formulation of hegemony from the 1970s and hegemony as such, posthegemonic theorists have neglected the alternative resources in the tradition of hegemonic politics and

Gramsci's thought to which more recent scholarship has drawn attention. These resources suggest that many of the themes that the debate on posthegemony has valorized – affect, constituent power, the critique of sovereignty – were not only present in Gramsci's theorizations of hegemony, but in fact constituted key elements in his development of it as the strategic perspective within which the *Prison Notebooks* were composed.

Posthegemony's proposal to go beyond hegemony thus finally results in a return to precisely those political problems to which the emergence of hegemony in the Marxist tradition – as concept and political practice – was designed as a response. The ultimate significance of this debate can therefore be comprehended in at least two senses, one 'textual' and the other 'political'. On the one hand, the critique of the partial interpretation and oversights that formed the presupposition for the formulation of posthegemony suggests the need for a more thoroughgoing and widespread engagement with the development of the notion of hegemony in Gramsci's integral *Prison Notebooks* and the scholarship that has proposed new readings of it. On the other hand, recognition of the limitations and foreclosures of the posthegemonic paradigm highlights the need for a reconsideration of the real historical complexity and contemporary relevance of the tradition of hegemonic politics, as a strategic perspective that aims to represent sovereignty's 'real critique'.

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1 For the most comprehensive surveys of the conceptual history of hegemony, see Bongiovanni and Bonanate 1993 and Cospito 2016. Anderson, 2017 contains some useful insights on post WWII usages in American political science, but provides a less accurate reconstruction of the concept's earlier history, particularly prior to the Italian Risorgimento and following the 1917 Russian Revolution.

2 The thematically organized publication of Gramsci's carceral writings occurred in Italian in the late 1940s and early 1950s, upon which were based early English translations (the most prominent of which was Gramsci 1971). The Italian critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* (Gramsci 1975) has formed the basis for subsequent scholarly research, leading to current ongoing work on a new critical edition in the relevant section of the *Edizione nazionale* of his writings (Gramsci 2007-). For a corpora-based analysis (of the British National Corpus) of the strong influence of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971) on the increasing use and changing meaning of the word 'hegemony' in the English language in the wake of its publication, see Boothman 2008a.

3 A similar argument is implicit in Thoburn's contemporaneous adoption of the theme of the decline of civil society as a cause of the transition to posthegemony (Thoburn 2007).

4 See Guha, 1982, p. 4, p. 8; Spivak, 1988. A similar linkage of posthegemony and subalternity is operative in Williams, 2002, which also includes some periodizing tendencies (see, e.g., p. 109).

5 Despite this transhistorical claim, Beasley-Murray's book still contains some traces of periodization in its endorsement of the theses of the collapse of any state-civil society distinction (p. xii), the emergence of biopolitics as an epochal transition (see, e.g., p. 203, p. 215), and the declaration that our 'epoch [is] now posthegemonic in the temporal sense, beyond even the fiction of hegemony' (p. xvii).

6 While Negri seems to share Beasley-Murray's criticism of Laclau – whose formulation of hegemony Negri characterizes as a 'Kantian transcendentalism' – his recent work does not oppose the multitude to hegemony, but instead has proposed a reconsideration of the fruitfulness of both Bolshevik and Gramscian conceptions of hegemony as an 'organic construction of a revolutionary constituent power' (Negri, 2015; see, also, Negri, 2017).

7 For Beasley-Murray's single, decontextualized citation of Gramsci, see 2010, p. 1. The edition used is a partial English translation (Gramsci 1971), rather than the Italian critical edition (Gramsci 1975).

8 Beasley-Murray elsewhere specifies that he refers to Laclau and Mouffe's collaborative *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; in this instance, however, he is referring to the influence of Laclau's *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* on the development of cultural studies in general and Stuart Hall in particular.

9 This 'something' that always escapes could be conceived as transcendental in the sense that it would constitute the condition of possibility for a hegemonic system, which could be defined as a hegemonic system only insofar as generative of such an escaping 'something'. In this sense, posthegemony precedes hegemony logically, if not necessarily chronologically.

10 On the originary status of the supplement in general, see Derrida 2011, pp. 75ff. On the primordial nature of the postmodern in relation to the modern, see Lyotard 1984, p. 79.

11 There is a certain irony in Arditi's description of the later Laclau's theory of hegemony as a 'universal translator or Esperanto of politics', given that a significant dimension of Gramsci's reflections on hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* consisted in the development of his long-standing critique of Esperanto into a distinctive theory of non-foundational translatability and a critique of the theoretical and political weakness of what he characterized as 'Esperantism'. See Ives 2009. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for highlighting this connection.

12 While Arditi correctly notes that the notion of counter-hegemony is prominent in some contemporary neo-Gramscian discussions that conceive of hegemony primarily in terms of a theory of power, counter-hegemony is not a notion used by Gramsci himself.

13 'So if I see rhetoric as ontologically primary in explaining the operations inhering in and the forms taken by the hegemonic construction of society, I see psychoanalysis as the only valid road to explain the drives behind such construction – I see it, indeed, as the only fruitful approach to the understanding of human reality' (Laclau 2004, p. 326). This conception of a hegemonic 'dual constitution' (of the political and the social, of representation and the real, of the vertical and the horizontal, of form and force) is even more strongly emphasized in Laclau's final book (2014).

14 Despite its theorists' frequent references to Latin America, posthegemony does not yet appear to have been widely deployed in theoretical or political debates in Latin America itself, as noted by the editors of the Argentinian journal *Políticas de la Memoria* (2015/16). Recent years have instead witnessed a renewal of discussions in Latin America regarding the fertility of hegemony, as both analytic lens and political strategy. For some examples, see Cabezas 2015 and Dal Maso 2016.

15 For overviews of the significant Argentinian discussion in particular, see Burgos, 2004 and Cortés, 2015.

16 As Bosteels (2013) suggests, 'Latin America' constitutes something of a 'black hole' in the debate on posthegemony. See, e.g., Beasley-Murray's argument that his 'book [is] about political theory and Latin America, not political theory in Latin America or Latin American political theory' (2010, p. xx).

17 For an example of the claim of continuity between Gramscian and Laclauian-Mouffian hegemony, see, e.g., Butler et al., 2000, p. 1, p. 11, pp. 91-92.

18 For a suggestive comparison of Hobbes and Laclau's constructivism, see Olson, 2016, p. 23. For an interpretation of Rousseau that makes a case for his 'Laclauian-Mouffian' dimensions, see Inston, 2010, pp. 126-7.

19 For an account of Laclau's evolving analyses of populism and hegemony, and their indebtedness to Mouffe's work on Gramsci, see Mazzolini 2019, p. 41.

20 In particular, Laclau and Mouffe developed their theorization in critical dialogue with the influential studies from the mid to late 1970s of Buci-Glucksmann, de Giovanni and Salvadori. Contributions from all three had figured prominently in an important volume of translations of Gramscian scholarship edited by Mouffe in 1979.

21 For the influence of this perspective on debates in Latin America at the time, in which both Laclau and Mouffe participated, see del Campo 1985 (which collected the papers presented at the famous 'seminar of Morelia' in 1980), and particularly Laclau's contribution to this volume (Laclau, 1985, pp. 19-44). In this text, Laclau explicitly thematizes hegemony in terms of the dynamics that Gramsci had seen as characteristic of passive revolution, defining, for instance, the de- and re-articulatory 'social politics' of both Disraeli and Bismarck as 'hegemonic' (p. 21). While he also distinguishes between the hegemonic forms of 'transformism' and 'popular rupture' (pp. 23-4), both forms ultimately remain subordinate to this logic of the 'disarticulation and rearticulation of positionalities' (p. 21), or of a structure of power productive of subjects.

22 While 'hegemony' plays a central role from the earliest stages of Gramsci's carceral writings, beginning in February 1930 (*Q1*, §44, p. 41) and continuing throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, 'passive revolution' is not nominated until late in 1930 (*Q4*, §57, p. 504), and only elaborated in theoretical terms much later, throughout 1932 and 1933. On this development, see Thomas 2020.

23 'Dominance without hegemony' (Guha 1998, p. xii). For Gramsci's original usage of the phrase 'dictatorship without hegemony' in the context of reflections on the role of Piedmont in the unification of Italy, see *Q15*, §59, pp. 1822-4.

24 I explore the significance of this alternative understanding of hegemony in the following section.

25 For recent critical reflections on this tradition of interpretation, see Morton, 2007 and Worth, 2015.