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## **The Post-Marxist Gramsci**

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## **The Post-Marxist Gramsci**

Gramsci's ideas, particularly his formulation of cultural and ideological 'hegemony', have been a vital reference point in post-war Marxism and radical political thinking generally. Laclau and Mouffe's recasting of hegemony in a post-Marxist idiom continued a wider tendency to amplify a specific aspect of Gramsci's work, largely by neglecting consideration of his historical context or political and organisational commitments. By expanding hegemony into a radical theory of social constitution, I argue, Laclau and Mouffe drew upon Gramsci effectively to distance themselves from much of his legacy. This, I suggest, exemplified an interpretive attitude of 'mourning' that contrasts with the tendency to a 'left melancholia' that seeks an authentic radical subject prior to politics.

Keywords: Gramsci; hegemony; political subject; mourning; left melancholia

### **Introduction**

The figure and legacy of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), was indisputably central to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) radical reworking of the theory of hegemony. Without Gramsci's prison writings of the 1920s and 30s (see Gramsci, 1971 and 1995), their claim to be unveiling a new, 'post-Marxist' (rather than a non- or even anti-Marxist) mode of thinking would have lacked one its key foundations. More than most other Marxist thinkers, Gramsci offered insights that remained engaged with the classical Marxist concerns of political struggle and revolutionary advance and yet avoided being assimilated to its cruder, deterministic formulations. Moreover, his early death following imprisonment by Mussolini's Fascist regime prevented him from being neutralised by Stalinism and allowed his posthumous memory to be associated, instead, with a radical anti-Fascist tradition in Italy that distanced him from other, sectarian variants of Communism. Gramsci's apparent political and intellectual independence therefore enhanced his post-war reception among radical and left-wing intellectuals of

various persuasions. But this was achieved largely by separating his theoretical innovations from his immediate political preoccupations and commitments.

In key respects, Laclau and Mouffe's account of hegemony and their appeal to a Gramscian tradition of political theorising extended the de-contextualisation of Gramsci's legacy. For them, his innovations around hegemony signified an abstract 'logic' of social constitution more than it did a framework for examining concrete entities such as the state, civil society, intellectuals, or revolutionary agency. Hegemony was elevated in their work to a principle of societal articulation – that is, it describes the contingent, global formation of the space and limits of political contests as such – rather than a theory of specifically *capitalist* domination or class politics. This post-Marxist account of hegemony, which endorsed a pluralistic understanding of domination that fitted with the diversity of struggles under 'late capitalism', converged with the then ascendant 'post-structuralist' philosophies and theories of 'discourse' that affirmed the intrinsically multiple and malleable character of power relations. Although Gramsci was not himself aligned to this form of theorising, nonetheless Laclau and Mouffe's view of his work as tendentially amenable to it presented him as a kind of double-agent in the Marxist camp whose overt commitments were secretly incompatible with the implicitly deconstructive logic of his thought.

The effect of this reading, I want to argue, was to advance a view of Gramsci as a prescient theoretician of anti-foundational radical politics that, strangely, made him both contemporary *and* effectively distanced his work from the present. In what follows, I explore the origins of that reading in the wider posthumous appropriation of Gramsci's ideas, which amplified the concept of hegemony as a general analytical framework adaptable to various contexts. I then examine the way this legacy was drawn upon by Laclau and Mouffe to disclose a subversive undercurrent within the Marxist

tradition, permitting hegemony – and its component focus on the state, subjectivity, and the ethical dimension of strategy – to be substantially recast around a wholly new conception of political subjectivity. Finally, I assess what was missed and gained in this post-Marxist reading and suggest that, while it failed to explore important and valuable aspects of Gramsci’s work, nonetheless it invited a valuable interpretive attitude of ‘mourning’ for what has been lost in radical political theory: namely, the notion of an authentic political subject that endows left critique with moral and epistemological certitude. This attitude remains a substantial challenge for radical political theory and is distinguishable, I argue, from other left traditions that continue to invoke a ‘melancholic’ longing for that subject.

### **A Marxist for All Seasons?**

In a sense, Gramsci’s work has always been ‘out of context’. His prison writings, upon which so much of his post-war reception was built, were never obviously intended for publication nor, given his premature death, could their content be easily aligned to any singular authorial intention. Written partly in code to evade the prison censor and continuously revised over time (partly in dialogue with events outside prison. See Spriano, 1979), there is no final determination on what the texts of the Notebooks might mean for later readers. By consequence, Gramsci’s writings on hegemony and other topics have been open to various readings with different and frequently contradictory slants in their orientation. While it is illuminating to guide one’s reading of the Notebooks by reference to contemporaneous developments in Marxism (see Femia, 1981; Piccone, 1983), to the wider traditions of Italian political thought (see Bellamy and Schecter, 1993; Jacobitti, 1981), or to immediate problems and issues that Gramsci faced as a political thinker and activist (see Martin, 1998a) – all of which reveal different keys to unlock his insights – no contextual conditions can end speculation

about what his work means nor how it might be ‘applied’ in new contexts. This is a bonus in many ways, but it also means that the elaboration of Gramsci’s insights is powered by debates and concerns in an ever-changing present, leading to what Alistair Davidson once benignly characterised as the ‘varying seasons’ to studies of his work (Davidson, 1972).

But the seasonal shifts in interpreting Gramsci began long before his own demise. Even as a young socialist activist in Turin in the years after the First World War, Gramsci’s reputation was that of an eclectic and independent thinker who could not be aligned simply to a precise established tradition. Gramsci associated with liberals and anarchists, parliamentary socialists and trade unionists, as well as his fellow revolutionary socialists (see Levy, 1999; Martin, 2008, esp. ch. 3). At a moment of profound ideological disaggregation and traumatic political ferment, when personal and party allegiances rapidly shifted, it is no surprise to find Gramsci associated with numerous groupings, many of them eager to reject the establishment ideologies of complacent liberalism and revisionist socialism (see Martin, 2015). In his ‘early’ career as a student and journalist, Gramsci was influenced by figures such as popular French syndicalist, Georges Sorel, liberal aesthetician Benedetto Croce, and even the conservative Hegelian philosopher, Giovanni Gentile (see Badaloni, 1975; Schecter, 1990). It was only after 1921, with the formation of the communist party of Italy and its strict obedience to Soviet dominated Marxism-Leninism, that Gramsci appeared to nail his colours to a mast. Even then, his reputation was never one of sectarian allegiance (see McNally, 2015) and in the early years following the Second World War, he was recalled by many as an ‘anti-fascist martyr’ alongside other figures such as the ‘revolutionary liberal’, Piero Gobetti (see Spriano, 1977; Martin, 2008: 112-20).

These associations underscore the point that, whatever his declared allegiances to socialism and Marxism, Gramsci had always been a figure who could be ‘claimed’ from a variety of perspectives, with contrasting accents to his writing making it open to selective emphasis (on which, see Liguori, 1996). Thus the eventual publication of Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks, under the editorial auspices of his erstwhile comrade Palmiro Togliatti, then the leader of the Italian communist party, initially presented Gramsci as a loyal follower of Marxism-Leninism (Togliatti, 1967). Later, as Togliatti himself inched away from adherence to the Soviet regime, Gramsci’s distinctly ‘national’ route to socialism – that is, his independence from the Soviet model of revolution – came to be emphasised (Gundle, 1995). Later Italian readers of Gramsci continued in this direction, underscoring distinctly libertarian and un-Leninist dimensions in his early writings and, in the work of the post-war philosopher, Norberto Bobbio (himself a socialist rooted in the anti-fascist experience), the liberal aspects to Gramsci’s Marxism in his focus on superstructures and civil society (see Bobbio, 1986). In the 1970s he was even associated with the Maoist ‘cultural revolution’ (Macciocchi, 1974) and, later, the parliamentary democratic strategy of ‘Eurocommunism’ (see Sassoon, 1987).

As Gramsci’s work was eventually translated into other languages, his reputation emerged as an independent-minded, anti-deterministic Marxist, untainted by Stalinism and uniquely attentive to the cultural dimension to revolutionary politics. Separated off from his own political circumstances and choices (which seemed increasingly distant and largely unfathomable in the consumer capitalism of the post-war decades), he became an ambivalent, even malleable figure, presciently sensitive to the non-economic, ideological and cultural factors that permeate and shape capitalist society and yet insistent, at the same time, on the need for a strategically calculating

revolutionary party – conceived as a ‘modern Prince’ (Gramsci, 1971: 125-205) – built, broadly, on a hierarchical vanguardist model. This puzzling mix of reflective open-mindedness and hard-nosed centralism made him hard to place in any single camp. Yet in combining the contrasting elements of a rich historical and cultural awareness with a strategic grasp of the ever-shifting positions in the wider class ‘relations of force’, Gramsci’s *Notebooks* offered the emergent European New Left a unique, non-Soviet Marxist resource for analyzing the distinctive conjunctures, national variations, and deeper, ‘organic’ structures of modern capitalist orders. His elaboration of hegemony, rather than his affiliations or analyses of local conditions, came to be viewed outside of Italy as the conceptual centre-piece of his prison writings and analyses – a mobile framework consisting of generalised observations and principles concerning class cultural and political domination that, when recast analytically, could be applied to the empirical analysis of diverse social orders and conjunctures (see Pizzorno, 1970; Portelli, 1973). Hegemony – and thus Gramsci, understood as its intellectual ‘originator’ – promised a conceptual bridge between the Marxist preoccupation with class power and revolutionary agency and the wider concerns of other types of domination and struggles for emancipation, which came to the fore in the late 1960s and 70s.

To understand the debates around hegemony into which Laclau and Mouffe intervened in the late 1970s, and which eventually informed *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, it helps to break down the Gramscian type of analysis into three overlapping dimensions that form its core themes: the state, subjectivity, and ethics. Gramsci’s account of hegemony permitted these dimensions to extend to a range of interpretations and emphases.



In the first instance, his analysis of hegemony shifted attention from the economic 'base' to the 'superstructural' form of class power in the state (see Gramsci, 1971: 235-36). Gramsci had insisted that class domination in the 'West' (as opposed, that is, to Russia) was never operative simply at the level of property relations or coercion but, moreover, was mediated through a wider project of national 'leadership', which supplied a consensual basis to class power (1971: 238-39). In this aspect, his prison writings riffed on the liberal-nationalist and Hegelian preoccupations of Italian thinkers for whom 'hegemony' was already a concept in use (see Jacobitti, 1981; Bellamy, 1990). Marxist-Leninist concepts of the state, understood as a discrete instrument of class power to be 'seized', were also important but Gramsci folded into these an understanding of state-building as the formation by a class or class fraction of a national-popular programme 'to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' across 'civil society', which then formed part of a wider, 'integral' conception of the state (Gramsci, 1971: 244). Hegemony was thus modelled on an image of state-building conceived as a positive and ongoing process of 'educating' and 'civilising' its citizens (1971: 246-47), driven by social classes but extended beyond narrow interests and powers to encompass the fabric of social institutions and cultural practices outside the formal architecture of government. This state-building perspective lent the Marxist principle of class domination a flavour of strategic contingency and subtle variation over the traditional assertions of mono-causal determination and homogeneity.

Second, Gramsci gave critical attention to the intellectual, cultural, and ideological forms of civil society as the means through which consent was subjectively assembled. If modern 'bourgeois' domination involved efforts to forge a 'collective will' or common 'conception of the world' (Gramsci, 1971: 323-3), then it followed that political subjectivity did not automatically or wholly follow from one's position in

relations of production. Gramsci recognised the practical need to win over subjects both by forging a coherent intellectual and ideological project, but also by ensuring that this project imposed ‘intellectual and moral order’ on pre-existing, if fragmented, common sense attitudes and beliefs (1971: 325). Freed from reduction to class, regional social identities, local traditions, and a plurality of ‘traces’ of popular belief could be approached not as intrinsically inferior forms of ‘false consciousness’ but as legitimate, if contradictory, ways of experiencing the world. A hegemonic national-popular subjectivity – and not just a temporary coalition of interests – was key to an alternative revolutionary project and demanded appreciation of the sheer range of attitudes and values that influenced popular allegiances.

Third, hegemony was for Gramsci a necessarily ethical matter in so far as a state-building project – built upon the dissemination and renewal of popular common sense – ought to be itself an emancipatory process, rather than just a crude scramble for power. Gramsci did not devote any effort to normative questions, partly because his own socialist values were already formed by the time of his imprisonment. Like many other Marxists, such preoccupations were often viewed as secondary to the mechanics of taking power. Nonetheless, Gramsci’s scattered remarks imply that hegemony was inescapably ethical because an inclusive and popular project had to be formulated around a reasoned image of society and its normative potential; that is, it had to establish a critical ‘praxis’ through which new socialist values could be socially grounded (see Gramsci, 1971: 330-31, 332-33). For Gramsci, that meant a vision of social relations that overcame rigid distinctions between ‘masses’ and ‘elites’, common people and ‘intellectuals’, workers and peasants, centre and periphery – concerns that reflected Italy’s uneven modernity in the early twentieth century. A socialist society for him had to be rooted in the possibilities of equal participation, intellectual equality and

social responsibility enabled by industrial forms of production. At the same time, the route to this socialism was, in his view, inescapably one that demanded rigid discipline through an organised party. That meant that the ethics of proletarian hegemony stemmed not only from the 'spontaneous' organisation of workers but also from the disciplined organisation of a party regularly in contact with its 'mass' base (Gramsci, 1971: 198). Here Gramsci's Leninism sat uneasily alongside his egalitarianism: where one insisted on the necessity of elite control, centralism, and disciplined commitment, the other envisaged plurality, creativity, and intellectual freedom (see Martin, 1998b).

We can view the alternating accents in the debates of the 1960s and 70s over Gramsci's ideas in relation to these three areas. His theorisation of state-building as the model for a politics of hegemony was vital to developments in 'Western Marxism' as class domination came to be understood as a highly mediated process involving both controlling apparatuses of coercion and, increasingly, integrative cultural practices and unifying national strategies that partially included rather than simply coerced the working classes. The capitalist state, in its various permutations and extensions across civil society, was viewed as the institutional medium for hegemonic strategies and Gramsci became a frequently referenced figure in the radical political sociology of post-war capitalism, although with varying emphasis on the degrees of popular consent to bourgeois power (see Miliband, 1973; Poulantzas, 1973 and 2008; Jessop, 1990).

Nonetheless, one could still claim either that Gramsci was a committed Leninist with his ultimate commitment being to what he called a 'war of manoeuvre' to overthrow the capitalist state; or, by contrast, that he was more of a gradualist, with emphasis being on the long-term 'war of position' across civil society (see Gramsci, 1971: 235). Those who highlighted the unavoidable and irreconcilable clash of class interests emphasised hegemonic strategy as largely a preparation for a coming

revolutionary assault (see Harman, 1983); those for whom the struggle for cultural hegemony, as the ongoing negotiation of consent through ideological ‘apparatuses’, included those of a more revisionist persuasion interested in exploring the complex negotiations of class power through the media, crime or the law (see Hall, et al, 1978; Hunt, 1993).

Questions over subjectivity were hugely important sources of theoretical innovation at this time, too. Transformations in post-war society led to significant changes in class cultural identities but also to the growing presence of non-class forms of political subjectivity, such as anti-war movements, feminism, lesbian and gay rights, and anti-racist politics. New developments in the study of culture, especially, began to explore the diverse inflections of ‘popular’ forms of cultural consumption with Gramsci as an inspiration (see Harris, 1992). Hegemony came to have an appeal as an overarching concept to capture the layered and unevenly distributed nature of capitalist domination in light of an increasingly fragmented and plural understanding of subjective identity. When these approaches were combined with philosophical developments in post-structuralist theories, the notion that class ideology was a structurally secure or homogenous formation imposed from above began to be displaced by attention to the way ‘subaltern’ beliefs, attitudes and values coalesced around fragments of common sense related, for example, to race or gender (see Hall, 1986). Gramsci’s attention to ideology as a lived experience – but an experience with many ‘traces’ and dimensions, constantly refigured in the play of social struggles – rather than a set of pre-prepared beliefs imposed on public consciousness came widely to be appreciated. Yet even here it was easy to insist that class remained central to Gramsci, even if the diversity of social identities was accepted. Gramsci thus endorsed both the primacy of ‘national-popular’ configurations at a political level whilst remaining

attached to the primacy, at an economic level, of class as the historical force grounding subjectivity.

Finally, the ethical dimension to hegemony was widely debated as the democratic character of modern socialism came under greater scrutiny. The expansion of new social movements around diverse political demands jarred increasingly with the idea of socialism as a unified moral community. These ‘new’ struggles were often recognised as aligned to socialism but distinct from its assumed normative concerns, which were focused on the centrality of the workplace, labour and production, and accompanying images of noble, masculine solidarity. If socialism was to connect numerous and diverse struggles, then surely plural interests and moral diversity rather than class interests and dutiful solidarity now needed to be affirmed (see Salvadori, 1970)? And yet if hegemony was fundamentally a class project, how could these relations with other struggles be sustained? Gramsci was felt by some interpreters to be a figure uniquely interested in a revolutionary project defined by plurality and democracy (see Sassoon, 1987). But he was equally open to the charge of implicit authoritarianism by virtue of his Leninist view of the party as a leading vanguard whose authority stems not from democracy as such but from its superior grasp of the structural primacy of the working class in the transition to socialism (see the discussion in Femia, 1981: ch. 5).

It is clear, then, that Gramsci’s scattered and uncoordinated observations on hegemony could legitimately support a gradualist notion of radical social transformation that prioritised capturing civil society rather than violent assault on the state; an anti-deterministic theory of subjectivity that accepted different social identities beyond class and recognised the value of unifying national-popular values and non-class aligned ideological currents; and a theory of politics whose ethical orientation was towards the

consensual formation of a new and inclusive common sense, not a dogmatic imposition of ideology. But his work also endorsed the principle of revolutionary violence in finally overthrowing the bourgeois state, the historical primacy of class identity in generating ‘conceptions of the world’, and the need for strict party discipline in pursuit of a unity of purpose that necessarily constrained pluralism and anticipated the dissolution of formal freedoms in a workers’ state.

That Gramsci’s work gathered and contained these tensions was testament to the uniquely imaginative and comprehensive character of his prison writings. But it was also evidence of the peculiar conditions of crisis that characterised his context and which permeated his reflections, allowing contrasting principles of national-popular leadership and class revolution to intertwine (see Martin, 1997). Uniquely softening the epistemological foundations of classical Marxism while affirming a nuanced version of Leninism, Gramsci’s work inevitably was replete with tensions he could not resolve. In that respect, Laclau and Mouffe’s innovation in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was to recast hegemony in a new theoretical vocabulary to move beyond these tensions. For them that meant, above all, ditching the epistemological foundations of historical materialism that gave primacy to objective economic structures in state building, to the subjective basis of social identity, and to the ethical parameters of socialism.

But before exploring the place of Gramsci in Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist work, it is worth briefly noting their earlier, separate contributions to the Marxist debates that recirculated Gramsci’s ideas in the 1970s. Both engaged critically with the prevailing Marxist theories of political subjectivity by way of the key concept of ideology, filtered notably through the insights of Althusser for whom this constituted an independent ‘level’ of social existence (see Althusser, 1971). Laclau (1977), for example, sought to highlight the specifically political dimension of ideology by way of

the experience of Latin American populism. Populist struggles, he argued, sought to coordinate different social classes and struggles by deploying ideas of ‘the people’ or ‘nation’ in their opposition to a ‘ruling elite’. Populist ideology might have class ‘inflections’ but ideology as such was not reducible wholesale to a mirror of class relations of production. Instead, certain ideological elements fulfilled the independent function of ‘articulating’ social classes. ‘Articulation’ was thus one of the key terms in Laclau’s interrogation of then contemporary Marxist theories. Likewise, Mouffe (1979b) also emphasised the way ideology forges political subjects independently of class relations. But, for her, this was an insight owed directly to Gramsci in his critical departure from Second International Marxism and she explored closely the European debates around his arguments in the Notebooks (see Mouffe, 1979a). However, in the mid to late 1970s, both Laclau and Mouffe remained committed to a broadly Marxist frame of reference and saw their contribution as one of extracting an expanded understanding of ideology that worked to join social classes with other democratic social movements, rather than renouncing the privilege of class in radical politics as such. Controversially, however, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* they brought together their individual insights to recast hegemony as a principle of societal articulation, rejecting the residual determinism of their prior work and, perhaps paradoxically, placing Gramsci directly at the centre of their concerns.

### **Recasting Hegemony: To Gramsci ... and Beyond**

The outstanding argumentative manoeuvre made by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* consisted in shifting the ontological status of hegemony from a theory of ideology to a ‘new political logic’ of social constitution. What did this mean? In essence, it meant amplifying the idea of articulation, making it the principle underlying all social relations and identities rather than a subordinate moment within

capitalism. 'Society', they argued, 'was not a valid object of discourse' if it was viewed as governed by a 'single underlying principle' (1985: 111). The social totality could no longer be conceived as an objective structure with a 'positive' essence for which ideology functioned as a more-or-less glutinous medium joining together the otherwise firmly established layers of economy and state (1985: 95-6). Rather, society was more like an incomplete but ongoing narrative – akin to a text – than a material object. What gave it coherence was not something fundamentally outside subjectivity but a capacity to keep weaving together its various parts into a coherent story through which subjects could identify. That did not mean society could be narrated any way whatsoever or simply at will – its components are often firmly fixed in their own storylines – but it did suggest that the overall coordination of social arrangements was 'incomplete' and open to inventive transformation. There was no 'necessary' script or archetypal agency outside the narrative, no global 'direction' to history or fundamental class actor that had to be acknowledged. Social relations were constituted not around an objective core but through narrative threads that could, in principle, be blended in infinite, complex and contradictory ways. Hegemony, for Laclau and Mouffe, therefore designated the logic – or implicit conceptual structure – of relating otherwise disparate elements of 'the social' by way of merely contingently and selectively assembled narratives.

This alteration to hegemony's ontological status radically changed the character of the component dimensions of state, subjectivity, and ethics, noted above. Inevitably, it altered the significance of Gramsci, too, by presenting him as an agent in the deconstruction of the Marxist tradition. Let us look at these aspects in turn.

Laclau and Mouffe's reformulation of hegemony elevated the status of 'politics' beyond merely a moment of adjusting state and civil society to the demands of economic relations of production. Hegemonic politics, Gramsci had understood, did not



unfold *within* an established ‘totality’ of social relations but was what secured ‘the very unity existing in a concrete social formation’ (1985: 7). In displacing the Marxist notion of societal form endowed by a mode of production, Laclau and Mouffe presented political action as a distinct and independent practice of installing a dominant frame to social order. The central motif of this political logic was ‘antagonism’ – political opposition to a blocking force that is presented as preventing the full constitution of society, thereby anchoring a narrative that incites subjects to invest in the prospect of society as an achievable order. There were, of course, many kinds of antagonisms but none (such as class struggle) could be endowed with automatic primacy over the others. Hegemonic politics entailed the temporary elevation of one antagonism to stand ‘metaphorically’ as the ‘negative essence’ unifying all others (1985: 95).

While Gramsci’s state-building language of ‘historic bloc’, war of position/manoeuvre, and relations of force, captured elements of this contingent assemblage of discrete parts into a relational unity, his account of hegemonic politics remained wedded to an awkward ‘sociological’ language that implied clearly delineated, rather than fully relational, objects and agents. Thus his shifting emphasis in the binaries of state and civil society, coercion and consent, sometimes made it unclear precisely whether hegemony was more a narrowly political arrangement (forged through the state with coercive backing) or a deeper cultural process (achieved exclusively through consent) (see Anderson, 1976-77; Howarth, 2015). Nor did he insist on antagonism as the key moment in the unification of an ensemble of such forces since class antagonisms remained for him theoretically privileged. Thus Laclau and Mouffe supplanted many of Gramsci’s concepts with a symbolic lexicon of ‘articulation’, and ‘chains of equivalence’ and ‘difference’, which emphasised the building of a nation-popular discourse to govern social relations, with varying degrees of force and consent.

Indeed, the state (when mentioned at all) was viewed rather abstractly, as a site of contingent struggles rather than a privileged institutional framework (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 180). In their new vocabulary, strategic and action-oriented concepts rather than structural constraints were central, leading some critics to accuse them of ‘voluntarism’ (for example, Rustin, 1987) and to bemoan the absence of firm sociological grounding (see Mouzelis, 1990).

Key to Laclau and Mouffe’s framing of hegemonic politics was, famously, the concept of ‘discourse’ (1985: 105-114). With this concept, subjectivity was again centred as the necessary medium of hegemonic articulation. But where Gramsci had explored ideology and common sense – understood as conscious, if often unreflective, psychological constructs for conceptualising experience – Laclau and Mouffe drew upon post-Freudian (and, following Althusser, specifically Lacanian) ideas of subjectivity that underscored the largely unconscious and affective organisation of identity via the internalisation of ‘chains’ of symbolic difference (1985: 114-22). Discourse described an ‘articulatory practice’ that conjoined polyvalent symbolic elements into a relatively stable, but essentially unfixed, relational whole. When elements were articulated discursively, the identity positioned in that discourse was thus modified in the process, as was the totality. Thus when democracy and capitalism are articulated, they both alter as a consequence rather than remain fundamentally distinct. The subject was ‘discursively constituted’ in so far as it invested itself libidinally in roles and position in discourses which nonetheless could, in principle, be endlessly reconnected to numerous other discourses. What coordinated articulations was not anything material or objectively external to them but, rather, the antagonistic identification of a symbolic opponent (for example, capitalists, racists, fascists, etc), which contingently fixed and stabilised otherwise precarious discursive ‘positions’ (for

instance, as worker, citizen, or national subject). Hegemony was thus a process weaving together new and old discourses (such as, for example, feminism, gay rights, socialism) with floating discursive elements (such as equality, freedom, rights, and so on) around opposition to global antagonists in order to maintain wider coalitions and models of social organisation (1985: 134-45). Importantly, Laclau and Mouffe now fundamentally rejected Gramsci's (and, more generally, Marxism's) 'essentialist' presupposition of structural primacy to social class as the anchor fixing subjective identity and political alignment. There was no one single type hegemony but, rather, multiple, co-existent and intertwined *hegemonies* (for instance around race, class, gender, locality, ethnicity and so on) whose articulation could take many forms, with varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion (1985: 137-8).

With this rejection of the primacy of class identity and economic determination, Laclau and Mouffe now explicitly presented the ethical quest for hegemony as a strategy for a 'radical and democratic pluralism' (1985: ch. 4). While some critics on the left suspected this was a capitulation to 'bourgeois democracy', there was, as we have seen, a much longer history of debates in European socialist and communist parties about how social movements could be reconciled to assertions of the primacy of class demands and identity. Hegemony of the earlier variety, for many, amounted to a dogmatic and potentially undemocratic imposition of domination. Laclau and Mouffe's resolution was to present hegemonic unity as a looser framing of political subjectivity that aligned various demands around a global contest for rights and liberties. This was a reoccupation of democratic radicalism but it was no bourgeois individualism; nor did it imply only a model of representative democracy. It certainly rejected the classic 'Jacobin' model of a party-led revolutionary politics that invested authority in a vanguard organised outside parliamentary institutions, which had preoccupied Gramsci

(1985: 176-77). Thus Laclau and Mouffe decisively renounced the idea of a privileged theatre or script of political struggle: ‘there is not *one* politics of the Left whose *contents* can be determined in isolation from all contextual reference’ (1985: 179). If social agency was open-ended and multiple, then a radical democratic ethics was to be organised around the principle of open-ended and ever evolving differences, not an *a priori* communal identity.

It is clear that the driving logic behind their elaboration of hegemony was radically different from Gramsci’s. As David Howarth points out, their project was ‘not intended as an intervention in Marxist and Gramscian scholarship’ but sought primarily to extract insights from Gramsci to reconstruct hegemony anew (2015: 195). Although Gramsci problematised economic determination in upholding class power, foregrounded subjectivity in securing consent, and endorsed a politics that recognised the diversity of identities and traditions that any hegemonic strategy needed to gather, ultimately he remained complicit in the economism of Marxist theory. Laclau and Mouffe did not dispute any of this; nor did they seek to align Gramsci with their own project. In fact, they made little attempt to discuss his historical context, biographical circumstances or distinctive project at all (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 65-71). ‘Gramsci’s theoretical innovation’, they underlined, ‘is located at a more general level’ than his particular biography or analysis of Fordist capitalism (1985: 66).

Instead, Gramsci appeared as a theoretical inspiration to their deconstructive reading of Marxist political theory, presenting him as a subversive germ within the body of the tradition; a ‘watershed’ figure who fundamentally unsettled its epistemological and political commitments (1985: 65). That permitted them both to recognise his insights – in expanding the ‘logic of hegemonic politics, as a logic of articulation and contingency’ thereby breaking with overt economism (1985: 85) – *and* to signal his

limitations – in remaining implicitly attached to economic determination as the singular, privileged ‘space’ of hegemonic politics (1985: 137). In effect, Gramsci was presented as *inconsistent* in his reasoning: he demolished the deterministic frame, rejected its model of base and superstructure, but continued to endorse economistic implications in conceptualising the parameters of political strategy. It is in this breach between a deconstructive logic and its full intellectual and strategic implications that Laclau and Mouffe sought to locate their own innovation:

It is clear from the above that we have moved away from two key aspects of Gramsci’s thought: (a) his insistence that hegemonic subjects are necessarily constituted on the plane of the fundamental classes; and (b) his postulate that, with the exception of interregna constituted by organic crises, every social formation structures itself around a single hegemonic centre. As we pointed out earlier, these are the two last elements of essentialism remaining in Gramscian thought (1985: 137-8).

Thus we might say that Gramsci functioned as an argumentative device in the theoretical elaboration of Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism, more so than a direct political inspiration. His purported inconsistency opened the way to their own manoeuvre ‘beyond Gramsci’ (1985: 136) towards a consistent theorisation of hegemony. In so doing, they distanced themselves from particular sociological or organisational questions while asserting continuity with a specific critical insight in his writing, with the implication that this insight enabled them to radicalize ‘certain of Gramsci’s concepts’ for contemporary radical politics (1985: 178). ‘Hegemony, ‘historical bloc’, or ‘war of position’, for example, could now be recast for radical democratic purposes. Like other appropriations of his ideas, this appeal associated Gramsci with a particular theme in his work and allowed him to operate as a guarantor

of their continuity with a radical political tradition within Marxism. This is how Gramsci continued to appear in Laclau and Mouffe's later citations following the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – not as an analyst of state power, ideological consent, or even as critic of capitalism but, rather, as the limit point of Marxism's effort to theorise radical politics.

### **Mourning Gramsci: beyond left melancholia**

So far I have argued that Gramsci's significance for Laclau and Mouffe's project lay, to a great extent, in offering up a theoretical framework whose 'logic' they understood to be fundamentally at odds with his own Marxist commitments. His attention to political struggles and to subjectivity went further than any other Marxist in expanding the principle of contingency over economic necessity. In accentuating this aspect as the logic of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation continued the post-war convention of separating off Gramsci from his historical circumstances so as to appropriate aspects of his ideas with which they could develop their own critical project. Inevitably, the effort to locate in his work the germ of a post-Marxist orientation discarded a whole variety of other legitimate insights and potential approaches to his work, much to the alarm of many (see Forgacs, 1989). How on earth could a revolutionary such as Gramsci be assimilated to a radical democratic pluralism without betraying the essence of his politics? However, here I think we need to appreciate the audacity of Laclau and Mouffe's argumentative manoeuvres, often missed because of the baffling complexity of their language and ideas. Although Gramsci appeared to be utterly central to their innovations, theirs was nonetheless a rather deracinated – if highly sophisticated – appropriation that, ultimately, consigned him to history. Suspended between the seemingly dying project of Marxism and the radical democratic politics yet-to-be-born, the post-Marxist Gramsci, I want to suggest,

encapsulated an interpretive attitude of ‘mourning’ for the left.

What do I mean by an attitude of mourning? Mourning refers to the process of negotiating loss, that is, the way a lost object of affection – a person, experience or an idea – is held closely present as one adjusts, eventually, to its absence. More than just a psychological disposition, mourning creates an interpretive space to enable the transition from one way of being to another. In this respect, mourning is oriented towards the future; it is a means of approaching new circumstances by positioning oneself, momentarily, more firmly than ever behind the old (see Derrida, 2001). While it is possible, as Freud (2005) pointed out, for mourning to become ‘melancholic’ – that is, to become obsessively attached to the old object and refuse to let it go, often to the detriment of one’s own integrity – mourning is often a positive way of ceding to the new. In this respect, the ghostly presence/absence of Gramsci in Laclau and Mouffe’s work might be said to have offered up a space of negotiation for left political theorising. Gramsci, as I have suggested, is present as an intellectual point of reference but also absent as a substantial historical figure with whom Laclau and Mouffe seek to engage beyond extracting general insights. He provides the frame but not for the most part the content for rethinking radical political strategy. Laclau and Mouffe’s later work persistently cites Gramsci with affection, yet he is not especially interesting to them as a figure beyond such references. As the source of a political logic, rather than a political experience, programme or model of organisation, his presence simultaneously signals for them the validity of a coalitional form of emancipatory politics *and* the loss of any epistemological certainty to this vision, especially in the form of an organised revolutionary process rooted in the structure of industrial capitalism. In that respect, Laclau and Mouffe’s reclaiming of Gramsci for post-Marxism was simultaneously a

way of letting him go, that is, of negotiating away the inheritance of Marxism by taking its most inventive adherent as their point of departure.

For some on the left, Laclau and Mouffe's formulation of hegemony appeared to advance too readily beyond dependable points of reference in Marxian socio-political analysis. The initial reception of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was marked, not surprisingly, by some bitterness and claims of 'betrayal' (see, for example, Geras, 1987 and Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). Yet a good number of initial sceptics also came to accept that their work was not the threat it at first appeared (see Hall, 1988). It neither denied the existence of class nor refused the pervasive influence of capitalist economic relations, particularly of neoliberalism, in conditioning society and left political strategy. For others, however, a starker choice was on offer: *either* we should accept the continued validity of Gramsci's project (or key aspects of it) *or* recognise that the game is up and the hegemonic form of politics is over.

The first position is, broadly, that of Marxists for whom the framework of historical materialism remains defensible, meaning that hegemony refers by necessity to a practice operative fundamentally within the structure of capitalism and hence unavoidably aligned to its class relations (see, for example, Joseph, 2002). The latter are viewed not as 'discursive positions' whose inflections may be infinitely rearticulated so much as objectively material relations constituted outside ideology and hence intrinsically privileged points of reference in any radical politics. Gramsci's work, from this perspective, is irreducible to some abstract logic and is still relevant in its particular sociological content and revolutionary political inclinations.

On the other hand, the second position involves rejecting Gramsci's model precisely in order to salvage the radical left project from the compromises and constraints of hegemonic politics. For recent critics of Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci 'is



dead'; new forms of social activism render obsolete the authoritarian logic implicit in the very idea of hegemony (see Day, 2005). While hegemony theory may enable critical insights into capitalist (and other forms of) domination, its roots in a statist view of power means Gramsci offers no genuine insights for thinking a contemporary radical politics of emancipation. Formulated to understand revolution in industrial capitalism and to promote a disciplined and wholesale alternative, hegemony fails truly to recognise the spontaneous forms of popular politics and anti-capitalist resistance that persistently escape the rigid logics of articulation. As Beasley-Murray (2010: xv) insists: 'At its limit, the logic of hegemony simply identifies with the state by taking it for granted'. But, he continues, 'something always escapes' the transcendent articulations of hegemony and a radical politics worthy of its name must be able to understand the 'immanent' forms on their own terms.

These alternatives to Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theorisation of hegemony offer illuminating if contrasting insights into how differently to conceptualise contemporary radical politics. But they are premised on a similar assumption that Gramsci's legacy is an either/or matter: either he speaks to a present that remains largely conceivable in Marxian terms or his legacy is an anachronistic framework that cannot be salvaged. The danger here is that instead of mourning, the enthusiastic acceptance-or-rejection ends up in a kind of 'left melancholia': a refusal to negotiate the loss of certainty concerning the bases and direction of radical left politics. That is to say, there is a continuing attachment to the spaces and frontiers of struggle that will produce a unified radical political subject from the underside of capitalism. As Elizabeth Anker (2015) argues, left melancholia is often expressed in narratives of antagonism between 'innocent victims' subjected to the malign forces of 'evil villains' whose misdeeds are the fundamental cause of their victim's oppression. This narrative – which finds a key

source of inspiration in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* – offers up a 'melodramatic' structure in which ambivalence and complexity is removed in favour of an implied moral and epistemological certainty over the prospects of radical struggles for freedom. For Gramsci's advocates, these struggles pertain fundamentally to class politics within capitalist structures, however complex and layered such structures are shown to be; for his detractors, they extend beyond established class politics to popular contests that regularly escape the statist logic of unification. For each, there is a dimension of authentic struggle whose antagonism sits outside hegemonic framing and that radical left politics is charged with acknowledging as the purified subject of its vision for emancipation: Gramsci legacy is thus either welcomed for recognising this dimension or it is viewed as incapable of helping us think it anew.

In refusing this logic of either/or, Laclau and Mouffe presented an interpretation of Gramsci whose attitude was unsentimentally and selectively directed only to his theoretical innovations and not to his politics. Their appropriation of his name was a bid to force the left to think outside the traditional narrative of left melodrama without necessarily abandoning its insights altogether. Antagonism and emancipation remain as touchstones for their hegemonic approach to politics. But the direction of their reading was irrefutably *away* from Marxist political reasoning, with its calculations over the proximity of other ideologies to the supposedly socially grounded (or rational) interests of classes. Political struggles, they implied, were intrinsically impure and inauthentic because they do not pre-exist the logic of antagonism through which they emerge. Which is not to say that some antagonisms are not more extensive and deeply rooted than others. But, having taken us to this insight, Gramsci's contribution to its reformulation was otherwise wholly limited for a pluralistic politics where political subjectivity was to be forged contingently from highly diverse struggles and identities.

Much of Laclau and Mouffe's important innovations to radical political theory, I believe, hang fundamentally on this emptying of hegemony of any privileged social content or normative commitments in favour of an admittedly formalistic frame quite at odds with the melodramatic flavour of 'victims' versus 'villains', oppression versus freedom, which so often underscores the moral certitude of left thinking and divides society along a single antagonistic frontier. This position, of course, creates problems of its own, which I will not explore here, about how far one can go with an abstract framework of this kind to understand and positively unify specific political struggles. For it may be that in mourning Gramsci, we bid farewell to a stable or consistent idea of emancipation that makes radical left politics appealing.

## **Conclusion**

Gramsci has been an undoubtedly attractive figure in radical political theory on the left since the end of the Second World War. To a great extent this has been in spite, rather than because, of the precise details of his revolutionary politics. That he was a revolutionary is important since it invests his reflections with an awareness of the contingent and relational structure of society. But in his later writings from prison he did not fetishise the revolutionary moment so much as attend to its complex conditions and ever-present obstacles. Thus his thinking has drawn attention from theorists across the political spectrum precisely because it cannot be presented as a simple programme of action but, instead, explores how such action becomes possible or not. The probing yet fragmented nature of his prison writings – but also his own personal history of largely non-sectarian politics – have permitted his name to function as a bridge to other left and radical traditions, despite his own professed commitment to communist politics in a broadly Leninist mould. There is simply more to Gramsci's later intellectual enquiries than can be contained in a single set of strategic imperatives or political

alignments.

Laclau and Mouffe's appeal to Gramsci, then, was another variant in a lengthy tradition of utilising his insights to reflect on the conditions of radical politics. But their post-Marxist recasting of hegemony was distinctive because it inaugurated a process of relinquishing the Gramscian inheritance by reclaiming and amplifying only a selective aspect of his thought. In this – inevitably – something was both lost and gained. What was lost was a close attention to the distinctive context and commitments that shaped his world and made possible his insights. But what was gained was a whole new vocabulary of theoretical enquiry that drew sustenance not from canonical texts and epistemological certainties but, rather, from an elevation of politics to the ultimate horizon of any social order. This was certainly among *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*'s most enduring contributions, even if it rather reduced Gramsci to the marker of a theoretical impasse within Marxism and the bearer of a logic that exceeded his own communist politics. But in so controversially deploying Gramsci ultimately to move beyond Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe offered a framework to avoid the tendency to a left melancholy that seeks out an authentic subject of emancipation liberated from uncertainties of politics itself.

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