

# Romanticism of the multitude

Jon Beasley-Murray, *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011. 376 pp., £56.00 hb., £15.50 pb., 978 0 81664 714 9 hb., 978 0 81664 715 6 pb.

*Posthegemony* is an ambitious and often pugnacious project, which, as its title indicates, seeks to go beyond neo-Gramscian accounts of the operation of politics, and to offer alternative ways to think the political in a number of instances of modern Latin American history. It is an intervention that would, so to speak, displace the hegemony of hegemony as a way to understand the mechanisms of power. As the basis of his alternative, Beasley-Murray deploys Negri's (and Hardt's) notion of the multitude, and its array of attributes – habit, affect, *connatus*, and so on. The logic of the book also borrows from Hardt and Negri's trilogy (and perhaps Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux*): chapters take their titles from named places and dated times and have systematic interpolations that are to be read configurationally. So, 'Argentina 1972' is an attack on Laclau's political theory, which is inset with blocks of text and *matériel* on Perón, Argentine history, other writers on Argentina, and so on; 'Ayacucho 1982' engages with Peru, the armed conflict between state and Sendero Luminoso (among others) and theories of civil society; 'Escalón 1989' focuses on El Salvador, and the guerrilla war; 'Chile 1992' concentrates on Chile, new social movements and the 'return to democracy'. Interpolations are distinguished by typeface, not always too successfully, and often by date of composition. In some trivial way, the book is a diachronic assemblage but non-trivially marked by the history of its polemics. The logic changes as Beasley-Murray's final chapter turns into a more sceptical (and obviously much later) reading of Negri's multitude as immanent potential: by now 'multitude' is more problematic and less immediately promising as *explanans* than it was at the start. Yet this move destabilizes much of what has gone before: what must be adduced to decide between 'good' and 'bad' multitude, between 'multitude' as the subject of refusal and multitude as creator itself, goes unthought. Rather, an epilogue reprints an account of the Venezuelan situation of 2002: the anti-Chávez coup and its defeat at the hands of the Caracas multitude, constituent power in the streets. The import is obvious: away from theory to the place of real politics, a *passage à l'acte*.

This is, then, a project that in its continental scope and critical dissatisfaction must be taken seriously, even if doubts arise as to its success. For one thing, its compositional logic militates against its very syntactic drive: the line of flight through recent Latin American political history leaves out so much – Brazil, notably, where the ground for hegemony might seem most fertile; Mexico, where the decomposition of the party-state shows no real gain in constituent power; Colombia, where non-hegemony might just be the ground for the successful articulation of militarized state and para-statal forces; or Bolivia, perhaps the most compelling example of insurrection in Hardt and Negri's terms, which offers a potential counter-example to their theorization. (See *Imperio, multitud y sociedad abigarrada*, the record of exchanges between Negri, Hardt and Bolivian intellectuals such as Luis Tapia, García Linera and others, on the relevance of the notion of multitude to the Bolivian case, published in 2010.) The fragmentary and local production of critical theory – immanent critique – displays an admirable attention to specific formations, but leaves us without the capacity for comparison, an omission only partly addressed in the conclusion. More worryingly, the polemic ferocity of much of the writing seems to warp the argument and lead to various distortions of history and theory. All this can be seen at its most exaggerated in the first chapter, where the inaugural gesture of dismissing hegemony requires both rhetorical sleight of hand and conceptual violence that suggest an anxiety of unconvincedness. The treatment of Laclau is deeply ungenerous and contrasts with a much kinder critique of Negri's arguably far more dangerous onto-theology.

The revitalization of Gramscian accounts of the state and the question of non-coercive aspects of rule have been central to a certain post-Leninist thinking both in Europe and in Latin America. The 'war of position' (and its basis in the imbrications of the expanded state of welfarism) meant re-evaluating the ways in which the state itself was porous to civil society and vice versa: indeed whether the distinction can be made to hold at all. Thus the place and character of ideology became a fundamental problematic of much post-1960s' political thinking. Hegemony offered one account of how ideology operated: and there were a number of competing accounts of its workings, many of them contested during the same period. Concurrently, the problematic of culture emerged within the university, expressing a reaction to both the previous forms of elite and elitist culture canonized within the institutions and the shift in the forms of culture disseminated by the mass entertainment industries of

late(r) capitalism. These developments were separate, and paralleled the new histories of Foucault and others, which began precisely with a rejection of communist or even Eurocommunist ideas of ideology (after Althusser and Lacan).

It is this history that forms the basis for the re-articulation that Beasley-Murray provides to skewer the theory of hegemony. Hegemony as the name for a problematic emerging from the characterization of the non-coercive in politics is reduced to a particular version of hegemony theory, that of Laclau (and Mouffe, though the genealogy is shaky here) and Laclau's version is further reduced to a moment of his 1977 text *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, even though it is his later claims about populism as a moment of all democratic politics that provide the real object of critique. This involves conflating Laclau's later post-structuralist account of language with his post-Althusserian reading of ideology and then stitching in the dynamics of 'the hegemonic operation' which begins to break away from the simple (rationalist) notion of articulation. 'Laclau' is a composite figure who is, in fact, a bearer for 'populism', the real antagonist. But populism also has a bearer closer to Beasley-Murray's academic position: cultural studies. Here the substitution is as follows: the problematic of culture is reducible to cultural studies as an academic institution, which in turn is reducible to its populist variants. Hegemony theory has been used to underpin some versions of cultural studies: both are populist, hence both, and their underlying problematics, can be dismissed as merely 'screens' which occlude the real workings of power, or are themselves forms of substitution for a theoretical engagement with the state; 'culture' stands in for the state as a site of struggle, hegemony is an 'anti-politics'. This account seems far too simplistic and curiously dated.

Over the last thirty years there has been severe criticism of both the idealizing tendency of certain variants of cultural criticism (which itself must not be equated with the institutional workings of the discipline of cultural studies) and of hegemony theory, especially its overstatement of the reach of its operations, the privileges it grants to the rationalist moment of politics and the contestation of interests, and its historically delimited scope, its central role perhaps superseded in the present epoch. Laclau himself has responded to some of these, turning to a Lacanian account of *jouissance* as a necessary accompaniment to the articulatory work of signification, especially in *On Populist Reason*, a work Beasley-Murray alludes to but barely engages with other than as more of

the same. In any event, 'Laclau' hardly exhausts the account of hegemony; nor does cultural studies exhaust the concern with culture.

What is really at issue here is the understanding of the state and the production of what, for want of a better term, we could name subjectivity. For Beasley-Murray, if the workings of hegemony depend on the state, in some sense, then, hegemony can only ever be in the service of power. Populism is just what state capture of consent looks like. 'Populism is hegemony is politics'. Yet Laclau might be wrong without hegemony losing all purchase. Indeed, Beasley-Murray seriously misreads Laclau, who sees 'populism' (that is, the invocation of the people), its construction as a necessary moment of politics (especially the politics of crisis) and hegemony (as an endless contestation) as only possible within certain historically specific social formations. Within Argentina, for example, hegemony as the manufacture of consent emerges as a historical political possibility only with the extension of suffrage and the withdrawal of military rule: 1916–28; 1946–55; 1973–76; 1983–? Peronism functions as an order of consent during much of this time in part because it has access to state power but also in part because no other force succeeds in presenting a viable coalition of interests and a language, imagery and set of practices to displace it: think of the ill-fated Alianza coalition that lost power in the cataclysm of December 2001 (passed over in one brief mention in the Conclusion) and the re-establishment and radicalization of Peronism with the Kirchners. The protean and insistent quality exerted by Peronism testifies both to its own strength as articulation (support for Laclau and an exemplary instance, as Beasley-Murray somewhat deterministically acknowledges) and to the failure of competitors, with much longer term access to state and economic power. The inability to interpellate non-Peronist mass political actors is a remarkable feature of contemporary Argentine history.

But for Beasley-Murray, 'hegemonic processes stand in for the other, more complex, means by which dominance is asserted and reproduced.' Hegemony is thus a misunderstanding, a misrecognition of other operations, just as 'culture itself operates as a screen, a fetishized substitute for the political logic of command'. These formulations are somewhat opaque, but seem to suggest a way in which the language of politics and the content of culture are no more than epiphenomenal, or, possibly, a deliberate obfuscation. The real 'logic of command' operates otherwise, directly on bodies through affect. Here we can see a displacement of the classic problem involved in false consciousness – why

the 'screen' in the first place? A possible answer might be that this illusion promotes consent – a second-order (if unsatisfactory) version of hegemony. The rather more sensible notion that 'affect' might be affected by language is abandoned with the claim that the only virtue of populism is to have left the terrain of representation.

On the new terrain of 'unrepresentational and unnarratable affect [and] habit' a theory of dominance will emerge that shows how the state operates its legitimacy 'well below the threshold of consciousness'. At one level, this is just Althusserian interpellation: the Pascalian 'act as if you believe and the belief will follow' was modulated into an account of behaviour and its repetitions. Butler's 'performativity' is close to this, with 'gender' being a (fallible) iteration of *gestus*, albeit tied to image-for-the-Other and signification (indeed Butler moves towards something like hegemony to account for both iteration and its critique). Beasley-Murray claims a different lineage: Bourdieu, James, Auyero and Kraniauskas. And their work does indeed expand the understanding of Peronism to include its coding of place and body, and its enactments of collective identity, but not to the exclusion of signification as a moment of the implantation of rule. The figure of Eva Perón as a means to suture hegemony proves its dangers with the fissures in Peronism in 1973 and the revolutionary (if ultimately failed) rearticulation of the Montoneros.

The dismissal of 'hegemony', then, is a dismissal of language as a medium and means of political subjectivation, or perhaps a judgement on language as only capable of producing political subjection. The invocation of affect, however, merely displaces the problem of subjection and its counterpart: if the state exerts power through an unconscious colonization of affect as habit, what counter can be made to this pervasive direct and real subsumption of bodies and agency by the state? A partial answer comes in the discussion of terror in 'Escalón 1989': the guerrilla both forms a war machine as 'an alternative mode of social organization' and reorders affect through visceral means, yet precisely effects this (exemplarily) and is shown to do so through a 'combination of testimonio and literary collage'. Here a signifying practice does the work of counter-subjection. So local hegemonic practices but no hegemonic work at a national level: this seems an arbitrary and self-amputating restriction.

Somewhere here is a peculiar self-denying ordinance of the intellectual. One argument against theories of hegemony has always been their privileging of the articulatory function of the intellectual. (Gramsci's

own emphases are a case in point.) But equally the post-'68 critique of Leninism has downgraded the function of the party as the site of counter-sense and strategy. Negri's multitude as self-organizing and self-presenting is one consequence of this: a noumenon/phenomenon in flight from the old model of a working class to be led. But this curiously Heideggerian monism generates its own problems of theodicy and the genesis of the capturing state. One route for explanation has been the insidious role of the intellectual and the apparatuses of discipline and control. Beasley-Murray is trapped in a repetition of this manoeuvre: his own work attempts to think beyond representation in a highly discursive fashion, choosing literature of all things for the few illustrative examples of non-theoretical texts. 'Hegemony' and 'populism' are the signifiers of comprador capture, whilst affect and habit mark a line of flight for emancipation. But the distinction won't work, and the gesture is one of a romanticism of the multitude rather than one of the people.

**Philip Derbyshire**

## Pro-choice

Richard Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2010. 286 pp., £16.95 hb., 978 0 69112 762 0.

In *Empire for Liberty*, Richard Immerman states: 'the key debate, as one historian frames it, was whether American imperialism resulted from the conscious choices of statesmen ... or [was] the inevitable result of the industrial capitalist economy and social structure.' It is clear on which side the author falls. 'The American empire developed into what it is today because individuals make – or made – choices.' Immerman thus proceeds to 'historicize and contextualize six American leaders [from Franklin through to John Foster Dulles and Paul Wolfowitz] whose choices affected the growth of the American empire'. Though these leaders sought to promote the so-called 'national interest', they also concentrated, Immerman writes, on 'preserving and often expanding a particular definition of individual and collective liberty'. Despite this apparently ideal, individualistic approach that he promises, the subjects he chose nonetheless 'represent attitudes toward, and visions of the American Empire that are grounded in a specific time and environment', and therefore also reflect the views held by the political