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Affective Hegemonies

Jon Beasley-Murray's *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* is a groundbreaking proposition to abandon the concept of hegemony that may allow us, paradoxically, to re-politicize and reinvent our understanding of hegemonic formations.

Some clues about this theoretical direction are in the book's title, an intriguing one given that this is a work firmly committed to philosophies of affirmation. *Posthegemony*, after all, is a phrasing defined by negativity. "Post-things" are things that negate what precede them. And, indeed, Beasley-Murray frames his book as a negation of hegemony. He critically dissects the concept of hegemony and shows how its alleged rationalism, its transcendent connotations, and its emphasis on ideology and representation cannot account for immanence, affect, and habits in the production of politics. And he suggests that we abandon the concept altogether. We live, after all (always have), in post-hegemonic times. And this negation of hegemony is followed by an affirmation: a call for a political understanding of affect, habit, and the multitude.

Yet hegemony is still in the title. Affect, habit, multitude are nowhere to be seen. Preceded by the "post," what is negated is present, as if in trying to move beyond it Beasley-Murray is still drawn to hegemony. This distancing and incorporation pervades in fact the entire manuscript. *Posthegemony* is haunted by the ghost of hegemony and, in particular, the ghost of Antonio Gramsci, which is

a powerful absence in the book, engaged in only one paragraph yet always there in a phantom form.

Posthegemony is the best book written about hegemony in years, if not decades. Beasley-Murray proposes leaving behind transcendent notions of hegemony as limit, pressure, ideological representation, and negation, as something that a transcendent state imposes on "the people" from the distance. He advocates, rather, an immanent, affective, and affirmative approach to politics based on the corporality of multitudes that come together through resonance yet may also resist abrupt change through the force of habits. And he elaborates this theoretical approach through a detailed engagement with multiple bodies of literature: cultural studies, civil society theorists, studies of populism, and the work of Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others. More importantly perhaps, he grounds his argument on an intricate, impassionate examination of the political-affective terrains of twentieth-century Latin America: the affective resonances that made people support Juan Domingo Perón's government in Argentina or join the FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador; the elusive, hard-to-represent nature of the Shinning Path guerrillas in Peru; or the force of habituation in the resilience of attitudes forged in the Pinochet-era in post-dictatorship Chile. These political, historical, and conceptual dimensions make of *Posthegemony* a book of paramount theoretical importance that is already stimulating debate on multiple disciplinary fronts.

Yet this is also a book that may reinvigorate the concept of hegemony by negating it. Beasley-Murray may certainly protest. It is clear that he does not want to revitalize the notion of hegemony at all. Yet in the pages that follow I

will try to argue why this is the case. One of the tragedies of the academic infatuation with Gramsci, which the cultural studies scholars that Beasley-Murray rightly criticizes are partly responsible for, is that it has reduced a revolutionary thinker-activist such as Gramsci to a philosopher of "consensus." In this formulation, Gramsci has been presented as opposing consensus to coercion as part of a neat dichotomy in which societies allegedly oscillate between the two poles. This may be the experience of intellectuals writing about hegemony in the United Kingdom of North America, where the multitude often seems numbed by capitalism and its political-affective formations. But this was not the historical experience that forged Gramsci's thinking as a communist leader committed to revolution in the ruthless space of fascist Italy. Gramsci, in fact, was committed to understanding not only how to reproduce consensus but how to *create* it, a much more difficult task.

In this regard, one of the most fascinating aspects of *Posthegemony* is Beasley-Murray's masterful silencing of Gramsci. The first chapter begins by tackling Gramsci head on, naming the name that had to be named. The problem to be deconstructed in the rest of the book is clearly stated: Gramsci says that no power can subsist on coercion alone, that domination needs consensus, that consensus is the bedrock of politics, and that power relies on violence only as supplement. Consensus is opposed to coercion, and for Gramsci hegemony is about the reproduction of the former. Beasley-Murray read the cultural studies literature so thoroughly that the Gramsci he objects to is the one invoked, largely, in British and American academia. And then Gramsci flies away from the text and becomes literally a ghost, not to be engaged again in a book devoted not just to criticizing but also debunking the concept of hegemony once and for all.

As a result, in the first chapters I kept looking for Gramsci and kept stumbling upon the cultural studies literature and the work of Ernesto Laclau, who in the text becomes Gramsci's Argentine ventriloquist. Laclau is in *Posthegemony* the body through which the ghost of Gramsci seems to speak. But is this the voice of Gramsci? While reading the book, I was initially confused by this absence. Because *Posthegemony* is not just any book: it is a very ambitious intellectual project built upon a relentless, thorough, very careful reading of vast bodies of work. Every time Beasley-Murray engages with an author, be it Hall, Laclau, Bourdieu, or Deleuze, he dissects their ideas from the inside out, revealing both the illuminating and the problematic fluctuations of their narrative. Gramsci, in contrast, is invoked very briefly. Could it be, I asked myself, that Beasley-Murray felt a little intimidated by Gramsci? Or could it be that, in an affective gesture that did not reach representational expression in his writing, in not confronting Gramsci Beasley-Murray was perhaps paying oblique homage to the man who first thought about hegemony?

A brief line in the book hints toward the latter. In Chapter 1, Beasley-Murray convincingly argues that in order to understand Laclau's theory of hegemony and his views of populism it is crucial to take into account that he produced those ideas in the Argentina of the 1960s (p. 42). And Beasley-Murray adds in passing, before coming back to Laclau, that the same applies to Gramsci: that his theorization of hegemony was inseparable from his experience in Italy. This was a remarkable moment in the book, in which the ghost of Gramsci briefly returns to remind us of the Italian political and historical terrains that made him write about hegemony, but only to disappear again.

Indeed, this point is crucial to understand Gramsci's analysis of hegemony. As is well known, his *Prison Notebooks* and his ideas on hegemony were produced under extremely difficult conditions in a prison cell, aggravated by his recurring weak health. And these negative conditions prompted Gramsci to articulate an affirmative theory of hegemony, evocatively embodied in his "optimism of the will."

Gramsci's primary goal as a revolutionary leader and thinker was to *create* a socialist hegemony. Hegemony was for him goal, affirmation, positivity, something to be fought for. The goal of the Italian Communist Party was to persuade the Italian multitude that communism was the common sense of the subaltern classes through a confrontation that was as political-ideological as it was cultural. This concern was the product of the Italian experience. Gramsci was particularly interested in analyzing the failure of the Italian bourgeoisie, relative to other national bourgeoisies in Europe, to create political hegemony in the whole space of the Italian peninsula, which prevented the consolidation of a unified nation-state until the late 1800s. Gramsci's interest in the bourgeois struggle for hegemony in the 1800s and the communist struggle for hegemony in the early 1900s, in this regard, are indicative of a view of hegemony as positive creation. In Gramsci, this expansive view of hegemony as a field to be fought for took precedence, I would argue, over his own thinking of hegemony as negation, limit, constrain. Yet the historical and political conditions under which English-speaking scholars read Gramsci in the 1970s and 1980s made them prioritize the latter view of hegemony (consensus and limit) over the affirmative perspective (creative struggles).

Beasley-Murray would counter-argue that, even if that is the case, Gramsci still advocated a cerebral conception of hegemony based on ideology and discourse, without looking at the affects and habits that make multitudes resonate (or not). And Beasley-Murray is here partly right. The strength of *Posthegemony* is its forceful call for an affective understanding of politics that draws on Spinoza, Deleuze, and Hardt and Negri and in general the work of authors who are keen to theorize about politics through immanent perspectives. But I would argue that the rudiments of a theory of hegemony sensitive to affects and habits are already present in *The Prison Notebooks*.

First, Gramsci shares with Beasley-Murray an immanent understanding of politics that is critical of transcendent reifications. He famously insisted that the philosophy of praxis should be conceived of as an "absolute historicism, the absolute earthliness of thought" and explicitly rejected metaphysical conceptions of materialism removed from historically-existing social actors (Gramsci 1971 [1929-35]:465, also 450). And while he did not embrace Spinozan notions of affect and the body, he did not reduce hegemony to ideology or conceptual-discursive representations either. For Gramsci, the struggle for hegemony involved contestations over popular culture and, more importantly, common sense. This interest in common-sense is important because for Gramsci the struggle for hegemony mobilized not only ideological disputes but also the non-ideological, subterranean, not-fully-conscious subjective terrains that interest Beasley-Murray. The starting point for the philosophy of praxis, wrote Gramsci, "must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude..." (1971 [1929-35]:421). And common sense involves for him the "feeling-passion" that shapes the relationship between rulers and ruled as well

as a naturalized view of the world that is "the immediate product of crude sensation" (1971 [1929-35]:418, 420, etc.). These ideas are certainly underdeveloped and under-theorized. But in arguing that the struggle for hegemony involves a common sense not reducible to conscious representations, Gramsci anticipated, if in embryonic form, some of the points made in *Posthegemony* about the political power of non-representational forces embodied in affects and habits.

Additionally, it is important to note that Beasley-Murray's argument for abandoning notions of hegemony is quite different from that articulated by other authors who have also objected to the concept. Derek Sayer, for instance, criticized the validity of "hegemony" by arguing that people do not challenge the state not because they consent to it but because they are aware of the state's power of coercion and repression. Every state, he concludes, is ultimately founded on force and violence (Sayer 1994). Another well-known critique is that of James Scott (1990), who argued that hegemony is the appearance of consent performed by the oppressed to deceive the powerful, a "public transcript" of misleading acquiescence that hides a "hidden transcript" of dissent. Sayer and Scott, in other words, argue that the notion of hegemony is misleading because subaltern actors are conscious of their oppression and, deep inside, they are free subjects. This has been the point made by Tim Mitchell (1990) when he argued that Scott assumes a mind-body dichotomy in which the bodies that bow down to the powerful only strategically are, deep inside, autonomous subjects unaffected by domination.

Beasley-Murray's critique of hegemony, however, does not follow this path. The theoretical apparatus built in *Posthegemony* is in fact hostile to

utilitarian views of political action such as Sayer's and to Scott's dualism between mind-body and public and hidden transcripts. Even when he often flirts in passing with the idea that people are, indeed, free and fully conscious (as we shall see), Beasley-Murray is well aware that subaltern actors are bodily and subjectively affected by formations of power. Unlike Sayer and Scott, and very much like Gramsci, Beasley-Murray is interested in the problem of the creation of political legitimacy: the subjective constellations that make bodies *willingly* rally behind a leader, a cause, or a government. And this is, at heart, what the Gramscian theory of hegemony is all about, even if we may debate the role of discourse, the body, the media, ideology, affect, the working class, or the multitude in it. Beasley-Murray, tellingly, never questions that Peronism has been hegemonic in Argentina for the past sixty years, or that in the 1940s Perón and Evita resonated with the multitude in ways not seen before in this country. What he questions are the attempts to explain this hegemony through rationalized, transcendent concepts (ideology, representation, consciousness) that miss its affective power: the fact that millions of people identified with Perón and Evita at a bodily, often hard-to-articulate, affective level. This is why what Beasley-Murray proposes is an affective theory of hegemony.

Beasley-Murray may still object that the concept of hegemony is too full of representational baggage to be recycled this way. But I think we still need a concept of this kind to embody this problem, one of the most fundamental in politics. The alternative proposed by Beasley-Murray, *post*-hegemony, is still very close, a hyphen away, to the word he tries to remove from our lexicon. Given this proximity, I do not see why we cannot redefine hegemony as an affective political formation. And to elaborate this point further it is worth noting that on

several occasions throughout the book Beasley-Murray, betraying his Spinozian-Deleuzian sensibilities, seems to replicate the view articulated by Sayer and Scott: "people know that work is exploitation and that politics is deceit."

But what is it exactly that people "know" and why would such an awareness undermine an affective view of hegemony? Most people in Canada and the United States certainly "know" they are exploited in their jobs and that politicians lie. But most of them also believe that capitalism is the best way of organizing labor and that they are free subjects who live in democratic societies. In other words, people may "know" that work is exploitation and politics deceit but this does not mean that they do not naturalize capitalism and see liberal democracy as legitimate. Like the characters in the TV show *The Office*, who hate their alienating jobs and know they are screwed over by the company yet are apolitical and naturalize and accept the status quo.

Likewise, it is undeniable that after September 11, 2001, George W. Bush managed to secure unparalleled levels of political legitimacy and support in the United States. The narrative of the "war on terror" amplified by a powerful media machine indeed became hegemonic, accepted as common sense by the majority of the American people. But this hegemony was and is profoundly affective, based on the memory of the horrors of 9/11 and the inculcation of bodily fears modulated by the media-state complex (Massumi 2005). The affective power of this hegemony explains its resilience and the fact that the American Left recurrently failed to undermine it through rational discourses or ideological debates alone (for instance, arguing that Bin Laden had been supported by the CIA in the 1980s, or that the terror attack was a response to US imperialism, etc).

Examples of affective hegemony such as this, when affective formations are mobilized to legitimize imperial power, also remind us that these hegemonies, while producing subjectivities, also have negative dimensions, in the sense that they limit-negate the possibility of imagining alternative futures. Affirmative notions of hegemony, in other words, also need to account for the negativity that defines any attempt to reproduce and challenge formations of power. As Benjamin Noys (2010) has argued, the growing intellectual hegemony of theories of affirmation in the humanities has led to an unfortunate dismissal or subordination of notions of negation and negativity that are nonetheless fundamental to account for the destructive-constraining power of capital as well as for the negation of the status quo created by revolutionary action. An affirmative theory of hegemony, in other words, should in my mind also account for the negativity that is inseparable from politics, not as abstract Hegelian negation or as purely reactive force but as a moment in a creative-disruptive generativity (see also Coole 2000).

The most telling expression of Beasley-Murray's tacit commitment to examining political processes that can be read through a positive-negative view of affective hegemonies is his use of Bourdieu's notion of habit. Beasley-Murray emphasizes throughout the text that certain patterns of domination can be resilient over time, partly because of not-fully-conscious forms of bodily habits ("affects at standstill") that makes people resist abrupt changes. This is apparent in his chapter on Chile, in which he analyzes how the transition between dictatorship and democracy in the 1990s was notably measured and conservative in contrast to other countries in Latin America, with the military (including the senator-for-life Augusto Pinochet) retaining key positions of power. Beasley-

Murray's examination of habitual forces in the reproduction of political legitimacy provides us with an insightful and in fact fundamental theoretical tool to examine affective hegemonies and account for their negative elements: the forces of habits that limit, constrain, and negate the possibility of radical political change.

Finally, while *Posthegemony* puts forth a compelling and very persuasive argument about the political power of affects it often seems to suggest that the latter are divorced from discourse, representation, and conscious forms of ideology. But it could be argued that the academic genre of writing about affect, of which *Posthegemony* is part, has made highly conceptual interventions at the level of representation in order to reveal affective, not-fully-articulated political processes. Beasley-Murray, however, often seems to suggest that affect and ideology-belief-representation are incommensurable realms that exclude each other. In one of the many moments in which he outlines this dichotomy, for instance, he writes, "Peronism shows that populist politics are structured by habit, rather than belief" (p.63). But one cannot but wonder why belief should exclude habit and vice-versa. Peronism, in fact, reveals that the two dimensions have been entangled, and that a conscious endorsement of populist social reforms (belief) has been for millions of Argentine men and women inseparable from the affective impact of Evita's death.

And while notions of ideology as false consciousness or utilitarian manipulation are certainly simplistic and problematic, "ideology" is still a heuristically important concept to account for the legitimizing power of certain conceptual articulations and affective formations. A clear example is the narrative on "the war on terror" in the United States, which has been an

ideological configuration that legitimizes imperial violence overseas but works at affective, not-fully-conscious levels. In short, the power of affective notions of hegemony and ideology lies precisely in their capacity to examine how affect, habit, and representation come together to produce political power.

There is much more that could be said about *Posthegemony*, a book that in its conceptual and historical breadth defies summary as well as any attempt to analyze the complexities and nuances of its narrative in just a few pages. But there is no doubt that Jon Beasley-Murray has written one of those books that will survive the tyranny of time and academic fashions, for it challenges us to re-think old conceptual apparatuses, to ditch what is no longer useful to understand the present, and put new conceptual assemblages to work. For Jon, this exercise in critical thinking is not just a theoretical act but a call to engage our bodies and affects in new forms of radical politics.

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