



Project
MUSE[®]

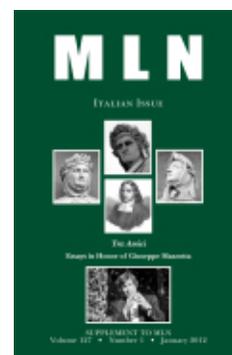
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America (review)

Charles Hatfield

MLN, Volume 127, Number 2, March 2012 (Hispanic Issue), pp. 404-406
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mln.2012.0080



▶ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mln/summary/v127/127.2.hatfield.html>

REVIEWS

Jon Beasley-Murray. *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America*.
Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. xxi + 376 pp.

Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America is a bold and ambitious polemic against the theoretical foundations of Latin American political and cultural theory. In it, Jon Beasley-Murray challenges what he calls the “ubiquitous common sense” (15) of Latin American cultural studies: hegemony theory, or the idea that “the state maintains its dominance (and that of social and economic elites) thanks to the consent of those it dominates” (x). Beasley-Murray’s book is not merely a revision of hegemony theory or a new account of the workings of ideology, but instead a radical and wholesale rejection of both: there is no hegemony, he argues, “and never has been” (ix). It is not so much that “power is *now* posthegemonic” (xi) as that “we have always lived in posthegemonic times,” and thus social order was never actually “secured through ideology” (ix). One of the problems Beasley-Murray identifies with the idea of hegemony is thus that it can never account for the vast range of “processes that involve neither consent nor coercion” (x). However, its main problem is that it always “takes the state for granted” (55). Hegemony theory, in other words, is a machine for converting constituent power into constituted power; the politics that it engenders turn out to be an anti-politics that in some form or another folds “the the constituent power of the multitude back on itself” (ix). This, argues Beasley-Murray, is hegemony’s essential problem, which it crucially shares with populism, cultural studies, and civil society theory: all these formulations limit the constituent power that enables them in the first place.

Posthegemony broadly entails a break with Gramscian notions of ideological hegemony and a turn towards Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and Hart and Negri’s version of the multitude. Beasley-Murray carries out his argument over a series of historical case studies: “Argentina 1972,” “Ayacucho 1982,” “Escalón 1989,” and “Chile 1992.” In the first half of *Posthegemony*, Beasley-Murray suggests that Peronism worked at “an affective register” that was “only later overcoded by ideology” in an effort to resolve the tension between its “structure of feeling” and its “ideological articulation” (64). Beasley-Murray then argues that the same Peronist populism is at the heart of Laclau’s theorization of hegemony—a populism that it cannot explain and ultimately reproduces. Given that Laclau’s idea of hegemony is the “single most influential formulation for the development of cultural studies” (40) Beasley-Murray traces the

“secret history” (25) of cultural studies that reveals its unacknowledged Latin American populist origins. He also finds a “submerged Latin Americanism” in Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato’s civil society theory (89). Indeed, one of the most compelling features of Beasley-Murray’s book is the Latin American genealogy it offers for some of the most globally pervasive theorizations of power and politics.

Populism substitutes “sovereignty for any other conception of power” (56); cultural studies “is oblivious to, and even helps to hide, a recent vast expansion of political and state control” (27); and civil society theory—and the new social movements it encourages—depends on “the state’s protection or legitimation for the spaces [it has] carved out within civil society” (84). Civil society theory in particular, argues Beasley-Murray, “imposes a series of boundaries, drawing on the force of social movements to legitimate political order, but restraining that force at the point at which it might challenge the state” (95). In place of the formulations he repudiates, Beasley-Murray offers a theory of posthegemony that involves first uncovering the constituent power of the multitude that hegemony, cultural studies, and civil society negate, ignore, or contain, and then undoing the related conversions of “affect into emotion, habit into opinion” and “multitude into people” (xx). *Posthegemony* rereads Latin American history—from Columbus to Chávez—in terms of “the real workings of power and domination” (xii) that “never emerge into discourse” or representation (188) and operate outside ideology or “well below consciousness” (67). Thus Beasley-Murray builds on the Bordieuian concept of habitus to show, for example, how the power of the colonial *Requerimiento* existed by means of “a common habitus [of the colonizers] that lies beneath ideology and beneath hegemony” (6); how “Peronism’s hold” is better explained by the “institutional inculcation of habit” than by ideology (25); and even how habit best describes “the quiescence that followed” the postdictatorship period in Chile (184). But if habit is at the heart of *Posthegemony*’s theory of power, it is equally important—along with affect and Hart and Negri’s concept of the multitude—for the political future it imagines. This is an affirmation of the multitude as “a collective subject that gathers on affect’s line of flight, consolidates in habit, and expresses itself through constituent power” (228). But the multitude’s potential as “an immanent power . . . beyond hegemony” (227) does not point only to desirable futures: the multitude itself is “ambivalent” (229), and “the fruit of its labors to date is the world we see around us” (230). Thus Beasley-Murray concedes that it would “seem more likely that the multitude will simply call forth a new state form, perhaps all the more repressive and insidious than before” (230). But things may not go that way after all: the April, 2002 Venezuelan countercoup, argues Beasley-Murray, was a “*chavismo* without Chávez” that “points to posthegemony” (296).

It is curious, however, that what Beasley-Murray identifies as the privileged site for political “strategy” turns out to be the “gap between embodied structures and actual practices” (197). This “gap”—between who we *really* are and the things we actually do—has been the ground zero for an entire body of

Latin Americanist cultural and political thinking from Martí to Kusch and beyond. In other words, one has to wonder if Beasley-Murray's starting point for politics is what it has always been for Latin Americanism: a subject position, only now no longer understood in national, regional, cultural, or racial terms but rather as "radically *open*" (234), all-inclusive, and heterogeneous—but a subject position nonetheless. Indeed, while Beasley-Murray acknowledges that the project of reorienting our understanding of power away from ideology and towards habit and affect involves reclaiming "subjectivity" (228), one has to wonder if subjectivity is ever something that has to be reclaimed for Latin American thinking, an intellectual tradition perhaps best understood as focused not on having the right beliefs but instead on having the right subject positions. To insist, in other words, that what matters "is how things present themselves to us, not what they may represent" (205), is to carry out a familiar Latin Americanist exchange—what seems true given who we are instead of what is true—that brings us back to the primacy of the subject. The question, in the end, is whether or not Beasley-Murray's theorization of posthegemony duplicates, albeit in a radical and ethereal form, the crucial logic of Latin Americanist identitarianism. But this in no way changes the fact that *Posthegemony* is a book of major theoretical importance and profound political and disciplinary implications. It ranks high within the crowded field of recent work on the relationship between culture and politics in Latin America. Beasley-Murray's book will be a main point of departure for our most important debates for many years to come.

The University of Texas at Dallas

CHARLES HATFIELD

Joan L. Brown. *Confronting our Canons: Spanish and Latin American Studies in the 21st Century.*

Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2010. 247 pp.

Joan Brown courageously broaches a controversial topic, namely: the need for a common canon in Spanish and Latin American Studies. Brown's call for action is based on numerous arguments. Perhaps, the most powerful is the finding that the core canon of a survey of fifty-six graduate reading lists is based on three universal items: Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, *Lazarillo de Tormes* and one of a combination of titles by Benito Pérez Galdós. The eight other common works from Spain are: *El poema del Mio Cid*, Gonzalo de Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, Juan Ruiz's *El libro del buen amor*, Fernando de Rojas' *La celestina*, Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla*, Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño*, Francisco de Quevedo's *El buscón*, and some portion of Mariano José de Larra's *Artículos de costumbres*. The only other common element was Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*.