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### “After Posthegemony”

It would be hard to underestimate the impact on me of the Duke/UNC Program in Latin American Studies (as it was then still called). I arrived at Duke in 1994 without any specific intention to study Latin America: I was interested rather in theoretical questions that involved authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, and Antonio Negri. But I soon found Latin American Studies to be a productive setting to pose those questions, and the Duke/UNC Program a hub of lively and challenging discussion on precisely the issues that my questions sought to address. How best to think about political agency and organization? What roles were played by culture on the one hand and the state on the other? What concepts best illuminated and explained both contemporary and historical social movements? Asking such questions in the context of specific political and social conjunctures in Latin America, from populist mobilization in Argentina to Maoist insurgency in Peru, forced me continually to reconsider the formulation of my concerns and what was at stake in my investigation, as well as preventing (I hope) my replies from becoming too arid and abstract. The path I took was formed by chance and serendipity: Peronism, for instance, became a key part of my dissertation owing to the fact that I took an inspiring class on the topic with Danny James and Alberto Moreiras; I became fascinated by Sendero Luminoso thanks largely to the opportunity provided by a Ford Foundation-funded exchange with a parallel consortium of institutions in Peru.

I was above all motivated by the fact that the structure of the Duke/UNC Program gave such latitude to student initiatives, and that we had so much input into

shaping the intellectual agenda. This was because of the key role played by working groups, run collaboratively with faculty mentors. So Alberto and I, with the help of many others over the years, organized a long-running and very active group on "Culture and State in Latin America," which became a vital part of the professional and intellectual experience of an entire cohort of graduate students. We invited countless visiting speakers, organized numerous workshops, and contributed to or co-sponsored myriad other events. But the heart and soul of the group were our regular meetings in the house that was the then home of (what was) the Duke Center for Latin American Studies, where we read and debated texts, fuelled by endless supplies of snacks, beer, wine, and pizza, as well as the odd cigarette that would lead program administrator Natalie Hartman to chide us for leaving the butts strewn on the ground outside. These were intense meetings and they made for an experience that has certainly stayed with many of us. Indeed, it would not be far-fetched to say that the "Culture and State" group has had a quite profound effect on an entire field, an impact that is registered in the first place through a whole series of subsequent publications by former working group members. None of this would have been possible without the foresight of those who planned the Duke/UNC Program with such a central role for student/faculty collaboration, and the trust (and resources) that those who administered the program, Natalie Hartman especially, put into our activities.

In my case, what came out of my involvement with the Program and my experience with the "Culture and State" working group was a dissertation, subsequently heavily revised into a book, on "Posthegemony." Indeed, the concept of posthegemony was first articulated, so far as I am concerned, as part of an event organized in part under the auspices of the Center for Latin American Studies: the 1998 meeting on "Cross-Genealogies and Subaltern Knowledges," which was also (somewhat notoriously) the last hurrah of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group. In any case, it is in *Posthegemony* that I ultimately managed to combine the theoretical questions that had first brought me to Duke with the experience in Latin American Studies (and Latin America itself) that led me to refine and even rethink those questions. The book is an ambitious one (in its earlier incarnation as a dissertation, it had a subtitle proclaiming that its historical scope was from October 10, 1492, to April 13, 2002) in which a theoretical argument contesting the concept of hegemony, as made popular in cultural studies, and the notion of civil society, as found often in the social

sciences, runs (almost) parallel to studies of socio-political conjunctures in Argentina, Peru, Chile, El Salvador, and Venezuela.

Along the way, I try to articulate a new way of thinking the grounds of politics, and the relationship between culture and state, in terms of affect, habit, and multitude. I argue, in brief, that instead of focusing on ideologies, in the sense of meaningful (mis)representations of social reality, and on discourses, in the sense of systems of significations and beliefs, we would be better off thinking about politics in terms of dispositions of bodies that are animated (and managed) by flows or blockages of energy that never fully enter into conscious calculation or understanding. I further suggest that would-be hegemonic projects that claim to underwrite the legitimacy of a state-centered constituted power are anchored on the simultaneous repudiation and appropriation of a more fundamental constituent power that constantly exceeds their grasp. My mantra, the slogan that repeats throughout the book across its various contexts from the initial moments of Spanish colonization in the Americas to the so-called Latin American "left turns" of the past twenty years, is that "something always escapes": something escapes both the institutionalized organization of political movements and the concepts and theories (hegemony theory, civil society theory) that are invoked to explain and understand them.

My book, like all books (or as we would hope all books do), has taken on a life of its own since its publication some five years ago. People have read it and engaged with it, and the concept of posthegemony is being taken in new directions, not least as Alberto Moreiras and others articulate it with the notion of infrapolitics. The discussions from which *Posthegemony* emerged, back in Durham, continue as robustly as ever, if often far from their place of origin. The book has also at times proved somewhat controversial, not always in the ways that I anticipated. Indeed, it has *not* attracted controversy in the way that I most feared that it might, for the manner in which it brings together, but not quite, Latin American history with political and social theory. I say "not quite" because one of the book's features is that its theoretical meditations and its explorations of Latin American history are slightly off-set from each other, to the extent that they are marked out typographically by the use of different fonts. The strands are inter-twined and consistently resonate with each other, but they are also allowed a degree of autonomy. One might imagine a reader who would extract either a particular theoretical point or a historical vignette from their broader context, and

indeed I wanted to encourage such pragmatic and piecemeal approaches to the text, in part to make it more accessible to theorists who might not be so interested in Latin America or to Latin Americanists less concerned with theory. Yet I worried that some readers might think that all this amounted to a hierarchy of interests, either in the form of an imposition of a set of theoretical concerns on Latin American material, or by contrast in the form of the isolation of the one from the other. So if I am most proud of anything in the book, it is the fact that it has not attracted such criticisms (however much it has attracted plenty of others), and I take that as a testament to my formative experience in the Duke/UNC Program for which Area Studies was not either an end in itself or an optional extra. Here in Durham and Chapel Hill, we did not study Latin America simply "because it was there," or treat it as hermetically sealed from the rest of the world, including the world of ideas; nor did we take the region as just another object for approaches and techniques refined elsewhere without regard for the specificity, variability, and unevenness of place and history.

At present, *Posthegemony* is attracting some attention in Europe, and above all in Greece and Spain after the rise of Syriza and the *aganaktismenoi* on the one hand, and Podemos and the so-called *indignados* on the other. In each case, what started as a somewhat unconventional protest movement, not unlike North America's "Occupy," is taking form and intervening into the conventional political arena: in the case of Syriza, even constituting the national government, albeit in coalition. There has been much debate among both activists and academics--in fact, in both cases the line between the two is not easily drawn--as to how best to conceptualize this process. Many have looked to Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony as a guide; others, however, have picked up on posthegemony and my *critique* of Laclau. Moreover, it is no coincidence that in both Greece and Spain people should be turning to Latin America, for the recent history of (say) Argentina or Venezuela is taken variously as either a model or a warning of what may happen when a relatively inchoate set of protests and social outbursts (as seen in Caracas in 1989 or Buenos Aires in 2001) is formalized as a political movement under putatively left-wing banners. For Laclau, all this was part and parcel of the workings of hegemony that, as incarnated in the Kirchner regime at least, was resolutely to be celebrated. I myself am more interested in what is lost in or escapes such transformations, in what is repudiated or repressed, and I take *kirchnerismo* to be more of a cautionary tale than a path to be followed. In any event, and more fundamentally,

what is at stake are contrasting conceptions of how to understand political formations such as populism or popular mobilization, and so very different lessons to take from the extraordinary political laboratory that Latin America has provided the world in the past couple of decades. Debates played out within Latin America or within Latin American Studies, such as also the way in which my book has been set against the work of John Beverley, and particularly his *Latin Americanism Since 9/11*, take on new significance and new resonances outside the region and beyond the discipline. After Posthegemony, in this sense, there is more posthegemony, but elsewhere, and in different trappings. For something always escapes.

This is not to say, however, that I am planning to abandon Latin America or Latin Americanism. On the contrary. Rather, I am interested in taking posthegemony as an optic through which to readdress and reopen issues that may seem to be settled, questions that have apparently long been answered, in the study of Latin American history and culture. Perhaps one of the most common misreadings of *Posthegemony* is the notion that it addresses simply the new, the now, or even the near future: posthegemony as what comes after hegemony, as an attempt to grasp only innovative and unheralded forces (*chavismo*, Podemos) that arguably break the hegemonic frame. But my contention is that the frame was always already broken. Or, as I put it in the very first line of my book, that "there is no hegemony and never has been." It is not that posthegemony follows on from hegemony; rather, it replaces it at every turn. Equally, then, it is not that populism obeys the logic of hegemony, and that it is only if we wish to move beyond populism that we need to consider other conceptualizations. No. My argument against Laclau is that, however much his work is predicated upon and even (self-declaredly) mimics populist logics, it does not help us understand how populism functions. Indeed, it is precisely because it is mired in populism that it cannot get beyond it. Hegemony theory does no more than reiterate all the tired populist gestures; only posthegemony provides proper critical perspective. And I make a similar critique of civil society theory in its relation to neoliberalism: however much the notion of civil society is held up as some kind of bulwark against neoliberal technocracy, in fact it simply replicates and reproduces neoliberalism's basic assumptions and predilections. Hence the choice of historical examples taken by my book, in which I seek out the best and most central cases for the theories I criticize. My point is that if Laclau's theory of hegemony cannot even provide a satisfactory description of Argentine Peronism, or

civil society theory a convincing account of Fujimori's Peru, then how much less able are they to illuminate (say) *zapatismo* or narcotraffic in Mexico.

I am therefore interested now in going back and filling in the gaps that necessarily structure even such an ambitious (and, frankly, rather long) book such as *Posthegemony*. For instance, I have been working on a project that investigates what was omitted in the trajectory from 1492 to 2002, specifically the colonial period and the transition to Latin American independence. I propose that the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries be re-interpreted in terms of the constituent power of the multitude, as instantiated in piracy, indigenous insurgency, and their effects on the imperial apparatus on the one hand and nascent nation-states on the other. Similarly and more recently, I have been engaged on a project likewise to reopen the archive of twentieth-century Latin American literature, with a trio of essays that re-read canonical figures in the light of the concepts of affect (with the Peruvian José María Arguedas), habit (with the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges) and multitude (for the Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos and the Latin American Boom in general). And when it comes to theory, I suggest a not dissimilar exercise in what Borges might term producing one's own precursors. If nothing else to attenuate the aura of novelty and faddishness that inevitably attaches to a neologism such as "posthegemony," this involves returning to the critical tradition and teasing out their posthegemonic potential. To some extent, this is what *Posthegemony* already did: for all the book's claims to be advancing a new theory, it is also a work of synthesis, weaving together aspects of theorists from Judith Butler to Michael Taussig or Slavoj Žižek, and reading someone like Pierre Bourdieu against the grain so as to ally him with a figure such as Deleuze who is otherwise very different indeed. In fact, in some ways this is where the entire project began, in the intuition that there was a secret connection or overlap between Bourdieu's empiricist sociology and Deleuze's postmodern extravagances. In the same vein, I hope at some point to reveal a posthegemonic Gramsci, inverting or repurposing the master-thinker of hegemony himself. So, After Posthegemony? The excavation of a pre-posthegemony, even in the unlikeliest of quarters.

Again, however, none of this would have been imaginable if it were not for the impact of the Duke/UNC Program in Latin American Studies. This is, or was, one of the few places in which a project of this kind would be not only tolerated but actively encouraged. Alberto and others in the Program taught us that Latin American Studies

was only worth it if conducted on its own terms, rather than in pursuit of agendas set elsewhere. But given that the history of Area Studies has always involved its being commissioned on behalf of other interests (whether diplomacy and the state department or transnational commerce), we were also taught therefore that Latin American Studies had to be taken against the grain, even inverted and turned against itself. It is in that spirit, I like to think, that posthegemony is a truly Latin Americanist concept.