(POST)HEGEMONY AND THE PROMISE OF POPULISM: REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICS OF OUR TIMES

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This essay explores the current use of the term hegemony in relation to contemporary conditions of political struggle. The principal argument of this analysis will be that the term is best appreciated when understood as a specific kind of praxis which corresponds to the struggles of the contemporary left to consolidate collective forms of action in a world dominated by neoliberal hegemony and the rule of a global capitalism without limits. The analysis will focus on two specific cases in order to demonstrate this point: firstly, it will analyze the reasons that lay behind a shift in the work of Ernesto Laclau from a theory of hegemony more centered on “democratic” struggles to one more concerned with struggles of a “popular” nature, or populism; secondly, it will focus on the role of Bolivian new left movements, as understood through a framework of hegemony, in the formation of the young Spanish political party Podemos, in particular in the work of Íñigo Errejón. The essay will suggest that the current uses of hegemony in their connections with populism have emerged as a mode of engaging with the specific challenges posed to the left by neoliberal governance, where the possibility of political forms of resistance to capitalist domination have been understood to be increasingly limited, and a populist theory of hegemony has been seen as a solution to this limit. As we will see, however, this current form of thinking about hegemony has a number of limitations. By way of conclusion, I will briefly consider the concept of “posthegemony” to suggest ways in which it may be necessary to supplement current theories and practices of hegemony.

Hegemony is a term both elusive and recurrent. It provides a theory of the social for a world in which all universalizing truth narratives have lost their fantasmatic hold over our lives and, in their withdrawal, we are forced to confront the fictions that they in fact always represented. In a certain sense, hegemony theory is the fiction of social fiction; a fiction designed to account for the groundlessness of the social imaginaries with which we construct our respective worlds. It is a term
with particular currency in the field of Cultural Studies, where the emergence of the concept as part of a new methodological practice in the study of politics at the University of Essex (among scholars such as the young Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), and its reception in the Birmingham Contemporary Centre of Cultural Studies (particularly in the writings of Stuart Hall), makes it a fundamental part of what Fredric Jameson once called, not without a hint of irony, the “desire” of Cultural Studies (1993, 17). Indeed, Jon Beasley-Murray has gone as far as to say that hegemony theory should today be considered the “master trope of cultural studies” (2010, 39).

It is perhaps this diffuse circulation that makes pinpointing any precise definition of the term hegemony a nearly impossible task. Scholars often take recourse in Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks as an authority for such a definition, where Gramsci is commonly considered to be the person who coined the term in its modern academic usage. While such a genealogical approach is useful, it is perhaps limited by the plasticity of the term itself. Even in those cases where scholars make direct reference to Gramsci’s work, such as is the case of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s well-known and influential interpretation of the Sardinian’s work Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), the central theorization of hegemony is transformed in such a way as to make it difficult to reconcile with Gramsci’s original usage.

In this essay, I propose to tease out the possible significance of this term in the context of the contemporary crisis of political and nomic categories that we often refer to under the name of globalization. I will focus on a critical engagement with the term hegemony. My argument will reside in the idea that the theory of hegemony presents itself as a particular mode of understanding and acting in a world in which the nature of political conflict has radically changed and requires an entirely new set of tools adequate to what Giacomo Marramao has called the “multipolarity of contemporary conflict” (Marramao 2012, 94). Framing my argument in such a way clearly assumes a certain methodological approach to the connection between theory and practice, a connection that is perhaps still best captured by the term praxis. What I am to show is that the question of praxis is at the heart of the theory of hegemony. In this respect, hegemony theory could be considered as a certain critical relation to the practice of theory and to the theory of practice; one suited to the contemporary conditions of the political. This approach assumes a practical dimension to the theory of hegemony that I will explore in more detail by analyzing how the concept has been used to interpret the rise of the so-called “new left” in Latin America and to translate the lessons learned from the Latin American “experience” to the formation of the recent Spanish political party Podemos. Exploring the limits of the the term hegemony in this context, I will then suggest how the
term posthegemony may help us to understand the limits of this hegemonic “populist” political practice.

Hegemony and the Contemporary Question of Praxis

We must therefore understand how the concept of hegemony was formed and continuously re-formed through an engagement with a number of perceived impasses on the contemporary left. Such impasses became increasingly clear in the decades that immediately followed Gramsci’s death. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new geopolitical ordering of the world as part of a process that we commonly call “globalization.” This transformation in the nature of the political included the deterioration of the nation-state as the undisputed locus of political modernity, the disintegration of traditional class boundaries (the so-called “disappearance” of the working class), and the penetration of a global capitalism into even the most intimate areas of life, leading to an almost absolute collapse between the categories of “public” and “private.” Hegemony theory increasingly emerged not only as a theory of how ideas overdetermined social reality and the realm of human action, but it also became a question which concerned itself with what kind of action was possible in the current historical conjuncture. In a depoliticized world where the rule of capitalism and “business as usual” appeared to require neither legitimacy nor consensus to continue to function unchallenged, our current historical moment has been increasingly interpreted as a moment of crisis taking place at the heart of the political, even as a vacuation of the political, where political life has been replaced by the scientific techno-rationalization of all domains of life (“biopolities”). The problem for hegemony theory was therefore not only about the kind of politics required to combat this theoretical and practical impasse on the left. Scholars saw it as being necessary to take a step back and ask how had these transformations in the nature of capitalism and global relations reconfigured the possibility for contemporary praxis, as well as the relationship between ideas and social organization and the production of political subjects. In order words, it was necessary to ask what form political struggle could take today.

These contemporary concerns find a particular intensity and diffusion in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the two theorists who have undoubtedly proposed the most concrete and influential definition of hegemony since Antonio Gramsci. In their collective publication which launched them to fame Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (published originally in 1985), the term provided a theory for political action that sought to reconcile Marxist theory with the
insights provided by poststructuralist philosophy. As the authors themselves elaborate in detail in
the first half of their now canonical book, Laclau and Mouffe found in the Gramscian concept of
hegemony a theoretical outline for going beyond the class reductionism of classical Marxist theory
and the doctrine of economic determinism in the last instance. At the same time, Gramsci’s writings
also provided a theoretical basis for reconciling Marxism with poststructuralist theory, whereby
Laclau and Mouffe significantly adjusted the concept of hegemony, understanding the latter as the
product of a series articulatory practices based on a multiplicity of unsatisfied demands. Laclau and
Mouffe’s theory of hegemony was directed at “cleansing” the Gramscian concept from any
remaining essentialism (“onto-theology”) by conceptualizing social relations as discursive
articulations agglutinated together in a chain of equivalences that were never able to entirely totalize
the social field of differences. In this respect, an important element of Laclau and Mouffe’s
hegemony theory as they present it in their 1985 work is to renounce the concept of “society” given
that the latter, according to the authors, assumes some kind of underlying totality at the base of all
particular moments of social expression. In other words, the term “society” assumes that the
identity of the social is prior to the political articulations that take place among social actors. Laclau
and Mouffe contest this assumption, developing upon Gramsci’s concept of hegemony in order to
elaborate a theory of the social that regards political identities and social reality as productions of
what the authors call “articulatory practices.” Laclau and Mouffe argue that the social order is always
contingent, the product of articulatory practices that give the illusion of totality. But these practices
are nothing other than failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences that underly social
relations. Every articulatory practice is only ever partial, thwarted by its own impossibility, meaning
that the social space is never closed in upon itself and always open to the possibility that there
emerge other potentially antagonistic articulatory practices. It is an impossible metaphorization (the
notion of society as a totalizing metaphor comes up repeatedly in the work of Ernesto Laclau) which
attempts to articulate some kind of social unity — a point to which we will later return.

I shall not present in any serious detail the theory of hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe
outline in their publication, on which there is already an ample bibliography to which the reader may
refer. What it interests me to outline here is a certain transformation that the term hegemony
undergoes in the work of Ernesto Laclau. We shall see how, for Laclau, the importance of his theory
of hegemony will be increasingly connected to the possibility of a renewed political practice for the
left, for which he will invest in what he calls “popular” or “populist” struggles over those that he
otherwise describes elsewhere as belonging to a “democratic” type. This is not a new observation:
The Sliding Chain of Equivalents: Hegemony and/as Populism in the work of Ernesto Laclau

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the relationship between what Laclau and Mouffe propose under the term of “hegemonic politics” and the political field as a whole remains somewhat ambiguous. Hegemony is described in that book as one possible type of the political, one which emerged with modern representative democracy (2001, 138-9). The authors never make clear, however, what other possible types of the political might exist. Laclau and Mouffe do, nevertheless, outline two possible strategies or directions for what they call a hegemonic politics. They call the first type “democratic” and the second “popular,” associating the first of these with the industrialized world and the second with the Third World. This distinction makes only a brief appearance:

It would appear that an important differential characteristic may be established between advanced industrial societies and the periphery of the capitalist world: in the former, the proliferation of points of antagonism permits the multiplication of democratic struggles, but these struggles, given their diversity, do not tend to constitute a ‘people’, that is, to enter into equivalence with one another and to divide the political space into two antagonistic fields. On the contrary, in the countries of
the Third World, imperialist exploitation and the predominance of brutal and centralized forms of domination tend from the beginning to endow the popular struggle with a centre, with a single and clearly defined enemy. (131)

It must be remembered that one of the principles of hegemonic struggle, as both Laclau and Mouffe make clear on a number of occasions, is that the social order is never entirely sutured by any single articulation; in other words, the concept of hegemony was always envisaged as a democratically plural politics, consistent with the post-Marxist turn which moved away from questions of class to include those members of society who had traditionally been excluded from the conventional discourse of the left: feminisms, LGTBQ liberation movements, ethnic minorities, and others besides. It is no surprise, then, that Laclau and Mouffe in their study of hegemony give preference to what they call “democratic” kinds of struggle over “popular” ones, regarding the latter as the product of temporary alliances which, presumably, should eventually give way to a plural politics of democratic hegemony. In their own words:

We will therefore speak of democratic struggles where these imply a plurality of political spaces, and of popular struggles where certain discourses tendentially construct the division of a single political space in two opposed fields. But it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of ‘democratic struggle,’ and that popular struggles are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of equivalence effects among the democratic struggles. (137)

It is clear that Ernesto Laclau’s 2005 book On Populist Reason reveals an important departure from this viewpoint. This is the case not only insofar as there is increasingly a preference in the Argentine’s work towards what Laclau and Mouffe had once called “popular” struggles over “democratic” ones, but also because the very understanding of the relationship of hegemony theory to populism appears to undergo a distortion of a quite complex character, whereby the two terms appear to become “almost synonymous,” as Italian philosopher Davide Tarizzo has also noted elsewhere (2015, 26). What I wish to show here, however, is that this shift that can be detected in the work of Ernesto Laclau is no chance turn, but is part of the kind of praxis that hegemony theory advocates (or at least one of its possible avenues). This praxis can only be explained by properly understanding the theoretical and practical problems for which it is put to work.
It would be impossible to cover in this short essay the full trajectory of this shift in Ernesto Laclau’s work, which emerges as a result of a number of discussions and impasses among the contemporary left. This could be traced in Laclau’s various engagements with other key Marxist theorists throughout the 1990s — particularly the work of Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, Antonio Negri, Jacques Derrida and, of course, Chantal Mouffe. It would also be possible to trace this change through the various critiques of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony and the responses that Laclau has published on the latter (all of these debates, for the interested reader, find an interesting intensity in Laclau’s edited book with Butler and Zizek: *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* [2000]). What is important to note about this change, however, is that increasingly the problem of a leftist theory and practice did not come to center so much on the question of how to guarantee a plural and democratic politics, but rather on how to guarantee *any* kind of politics, where the neoliberal technocratic governments of the industrialized world had created a dispossessed class and a leftist movement so fragmented that any possible challenge to the system appeared nigh on impossible, and the techno-scientific rationalization of society had produced an economist logic in which there was an increasing disparity between those that governed and those that they were supposed to represent.

This problem, that we will call “depoliticization,” where people appeared to accept the inevitability of their own subordination to an unjust and exploitative political economy without that subordination requiring even their own consent, is recurrently thematized as a central concern in Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* (2005) — the book where the Argentine political thinker most clearly advocates populism as a contemporary praxis. It is worth briefly summarizing Laclau’s main thesis here in order to better situate my argument. What Laclau argues in this work is that previous studies on populism have failed to provide convincing analyses of the latter, identifying it usually with some kind of excess with respect to “politics as usual.” For Laclau, these scholars misrecognize the way in which populism actually represents a particular form of politics. Indeed, populism is not just *any* form of politics: the populist moment is perhaps the moment of politics par excellence, as the moment of the “construction of a people” — a formula Laclau will repeat at various moments throughout the book. This “people” has no fixed identity a priori: it is the result of articulatory practices which suture social meaning in a chain of equivalences structured by a fundamental antagonism. It is what Laclau elsewhere identifies as the “empty signifier,” that placeholder for a series of equivalences which articulate what would otherwise be isolated demands. It is the function of the empty signifier, in Laclau’s theory of hegemony, to attempt to domesticate the field of
differences underlying social relations by partially suturing (“hegemonizing”) social meaning. What is particular about the “people” as a special kind of empty signifier is that it presupposes the division of the social space into two irreducibly antagonistic camps (“friends” and “enemies”). It should be clear that Laclau’s exploration of populism draws heavily from the basic tools of hegemony theory, and in many respects can be claimed to be indissociable from what he and Mouffe had earlier called “popular” hegemonic struggles.

With this basic grasp of Laclau’s general proposal, it is possible to analyze in greater detail how this relationship between hegemony and populism is articulated in On Populist Reason as a question of praxis. In the first chapter of the book, Laclau sets up his argument by analyzing the various uses that other scholars have made of the term populism. He shows that the term has invariably been associated in contemporary scholarship with an “dangerous excess, which puts the clear-cut mould of a rational community into question” (8). Laclau identifies that his task, therefore, is to “bring to light the specific logics inherent in that excess, and to argue that, far from corresponding to marginal phenomena, they are inscribed in the actual working of any communitarian space” (ibid.). This is the logic that makes populism the political form whose task is the “construction of a people.” We cannot understand the stakes of Laclau’s argument if we do not first of all appreciate that this point of departure implies a critique of liberal democratic theory. One of the assumptions of liberal democratic theory resides in the idea that any social space whatsoever is an already given and totalizing plane in which “rational actors” or “individuals” interact with one another on the basis of competing demands and interests. However, for Laclau, this form of conceptualizing the social space is restricted to an “ontic” level of discourse, presenting as social reality what is in fact nothing other than pre-established and institutionalized articulatory practices formed by the articulation of a chain of equivalences.

What it is important to understand here is that this criticism of liberal democratic theory cannot be removed from the contemporary problem of what we have called societal depoliticization. It is logical to assert that, in Laclau’s view, in order for the ontic to have come into being in the first instance, a populist or hegemonic moment would have first of all been necessary, an “ontological” moment that sutures the social space and makes the “ontic” possible. What exists as “social reality” forms part of a number of accepted sedimanted social practices. The acceptance of these sedimanted practice always implies, at some level, the erasure of that social reality’s own foundational moment: the populist moment as the “construction of a people.” The problem of contemporary politics as it is presented in On Populist Reason is, therefore, a problem of the ontic: of the fact that contemporary
liberal democracy forecloses the violent and irruptive moment of the “construction of a people” which is part and parcel of the possibility of modern democratic practice. I would argue that Laclau’s increasing emphasis on populism as a political practice finds its raison d’être in this perceived need to democratize the ontological dimension of politics that lies at the base of any established social identity.

In this sense my analysis departs from the otherwise excellent study carried out by José Luis Villacañas on the contemporary theory of populism and its limitations in his recent book Populismo (2015). For Villacañas, the fact that Ernesto Laclau’s entire hegemonic edifice is built upon the basic building blocks of “demands” implies that it is a logic that is actually subsumable to liberal theory, given that the latter also envisages society as being composed by a field of such competing demands. Villacañas’s example in this respect is drawn from the analysis of money, which he argues is analogous to Laclau’s concept of the “people” insofar as it is an empty signifier that articulates otherwise disparate elements into a chain of equivalences. Thus far we cannot fault his logic. However, the key difference from my perspective is that Laclau makes of this empty signifier the possible space of a complete renewal of those same equivalential articulations. The hegemonic, “populist” moment represents the introduction of a “part of the no part” into societal institutions, a part that otherwise finds no space within this articulated totality. In this respect, it is possible to inscribe Laclau’s thought within a larger debate on the nature of the political itself whereby, as Jacques Rancière has shown (e.g. Disagreement 1999), both Plato and Aristotle distinguished the language of politics from the arithmetical logic of exchange (i.e. the economy), placing it instead within a geometrical logic. It is only from the geometrical logic of politics that one becomes able to challenge the “ontic” level of political institutionality and vitalize the social field and its coordinates — ones that a liberal theory of democracy would otherwise accept as given. This difference is expressed in Laclau’s thought as a difference between the ontic and the ontological. Later in On Populist Reason, we see Laclau thematize this difference as one that is explicitly concerned with the problem of depoliticization:

In any event, the important thing is that we are not dealing with two different types of politics: only the second type [the “ontological”] is political; the other [the “ontic”] simply involves the death of politics and its reabsorption by the sedimented forms of the social. This distinction coincides, to a large extent, with the one proposed by Rancière between la police and le peuple. (155)
Laclau immediately admits that this definition of populism appears to empty it of any specific content: “My attempt has not been to find the true referent of populism,” he writes, “but to do the opposite: to show that populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic whose effects cut across many phenomena. Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing the political” (xi). Populism is, in a certain respect, the master-signifier that reigns above all other empty signifiers, the logical reference point to which all other master-signifiers that suture the social and political space must refer, their categorical imperative. It is the “hegemonic fantasm,” to use Reiner Schümann’s term (2003, 6-16): that sovereign concept which has no referent other than itself, a point to which we will be forced to return.

Meanwhile, although Laclau identifies at the beginning of On Populist Reason that populism would be but one mode of constructing the political — in the same way as, we should not forget it, hegemony was presented in 1985 as but one possible type of political action — by the end of his book it is not clear what other kinds of politics might be possible. Laclau writes that: “populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such” (67). It is at this point of Laclau’s essay on populism that the slippage between the terms “populism,” “hegemony” and “politics” becomes apparently absolute. Firstly, the logic of populism becomes that of hegemony theory itself: the “operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification [which, we should recall, is also the definition of the logic of populism] is what I have called hegemony” (70). Secondly, in a later chapter, Laclau equates this logic of what is now populism/hegemony (now “nearly” indistinguishable, now “almost synonyms”) with the very possibility of any political practice, indeed, of any politics tout court: “Does this mean that the political becomes synonymous with populism? Yes, in the sense in which I conceive this last notion” (154).

In sum, Laclau gives a special symbolic function to his revised notion of hegemony/populism, one that adopts a double role. On the one hand, it suggests a form of “reactivating” the political against the “death of politics” whose mode would be the “construction of a people.” It responds, therefore, to a very contemporary problem which is the fragmentation of the left in a depoliticized social terrain governed by a capitalist machine of exploitation without limits. On the other hand, it provides a theory of the political which is totalizing, and I mean this in a double sense: firstly, it totalizes everything that we understand by the term “political” (there appears to be no other forms that political conflict might take, though Laclau sometimes
ambiguously suggests otherwise); secondly, it totalizes all social relations, insofar as the “construction of the people” is the basis for the construction of any social identity and any social unity whatsoever. We must remember, in this respect, that every social relation is always understood as the product of articulatory practices based on the formation of chains of equivalence and the positing of fundamental antagonisms. There appears to be no space in Laclau’s theory for any social relations outside of the political field. When he writes that “all struggles are, by definition, political” (193, Laclau’s emphasis), this must be taken very seriously. Oliver Marchant arrives at the same conclusion in his book *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007), who defines the political ontology of Ernesto Laclau as being a “first philosophy” of the social: “the social has to be conceived of as a kind of ‘sleeping mode’ of the political … [wherever] we look, we will find the political at the root of all social relations” (148, my emphasis).

The question of democracy does not altogether disappear from Laclau’s discourse in *On Populist Reason*, however; but it has now been subordinated to the logic of populism, in a seemingly inverse move to the one played in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Laclau writes, for example, that “the construction of a ‘people’ is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning” (169). How can we explain this strange reversal? It is useful to recall here the special function that democratic articulations of hegemony had in Laclau and Mouffe’s earlier work, in order to better appreciate how the concept of populism here becomes problematic with respect to it. One of the most important arguments that Laclau and Mouffe present as a justification for theory of hegemony was the plurality and diversity of the different demands that became available in a situation of what they would have called a “democratic” type. It is important not to overlook this point. What Laclau suggests elsewhere is that the very conditions that make a practice of a hegemonic politics possible are grounded on the postmodern collapse of singular and totalizing (“grand”) narratives, opening the political terrain to a multi-polar social field where different competing hegemonic articulations are able to cohabit the same space (remember that only in the the case of popular demands, considered secondary in 1985 to democratic ones, was the social space constituted strictly as a “people”). This is an observation about the contemporary political situation in which we live that he has elsewhere called the “revolutions of our times” (see Laclau 1990). What this means is, for the Argentine philosopher, as long as there is no closure of the political field around a singular and totalizing identity or suturing, there is democratic hegemonic practice. See, for example, this earlier reflection by Laclau on the possibility of hegemonic politics and democracy today:
Theoretical categories which in the past were considered as bearers of a univocal sense become deeply ambiguous once that sense in seen as the actualization of only some of the possibilities opened by their internal structure. Once this is realized, once the deconstruction of those categories fully reveals the power games that govern their actual structuration, new and more complex hegemonico-political moves become possible within them. (1994, 2)

Guaranteeing the openness of the social field, the possibility of continuously being able to negotiate and renegotiate hegemonic articulations among various competing identities, is therefore fundamental to the possibility that a practice of hegemony would remain democratic. It might be possible to suggest on the basis of such an observation that hegemony theory presupposes an “impossible metaphorization”: it sutures the totality of social relations through an empty signifier that is regarded as both necessary and inherently incomplete.

One is forced to ask whether Laclau’s increasing emphasis on populism, with its fierce division of the social field into two antagonistic camps, does not pose a problem for this more “democratic” element of hegemony theory. The problem is that the practice of populism provides no guarantee for this democratic openness to the groundlessness of social (re)production that Laclau elsewhere identifies as hegemony’s very condition of possibility. Ultimately this is why, as Laclau is forced to admit, there is nothing about the form of populism (and also, therefore, of hegemony) that necessarily leads to a democratic practice of the left (see On Populist Reason, 87). Laclau’s theory of populism/hegemony has received many criticisms on the basis of this problem. We shall not go over too much old ground here. All I will point out in this respect is what has been excellently analyzed elsewhere by Antonio Rivera García: that Laclau’s populism, by treating the importance of the renewal and reactivation of the political and the ontological dimension of politics — indeed, in prioritizing this dimension of political struggle over that of “sedimented” social practices — is in reality concerned with what we might otherwise call “executive” over “legislative” power. Rivera García notes that, despite Laclau’s apparent anti-Schmittian perspective, there is nevertheless a Schmittian emphasis in this distinction which leads Laclau to privilege the decisive moment that Schmitt would have called “dictatorship”: in other words, the constitutive moment of any political order, the state of exception that suspends that decision over who is a friend and who is an enemy. In the words of Rivera García: “el populismo está más inclinado al momento de la reactivación, al
instituyente-constituyente, al politica, en suma” [populism is more inclined towards the moment of reactivation, to the instituted-constitutive; in sum, to the political] (43).

I do not mean to bring into question the democratizing character of Laclau’s theory of hegemony/populism. I would be even willing to go so far as to say that Laclau’s populist politics is always democratizing, from a certain perspective, even if we consider the case of right-wing populisms such as those that we are currently witnessing emerge in Europe (whether or not the effects of these articulatory practices are democratic does not upset this basic structural logic: the point is that unsatisfied demands manage to achieve a certain level of articulation in the public sphere and are thereby granted an institutional place where they previous held none). Italian philosopher Davide Tarizzo has argued a similar point, defining the concept of the “people” in Laclau as a “voluntad de democratización” [will to democratization] (25, Tarizzo’s emphasis). This does nothing however to solve the double bind at the heart of Laclau’s theory of hegemony/populism. This double bind is presented in the form of a double injunction, a double hegemonic fantasm, as two mutually exclusive supreme principles which, while they can refer to no other principle, ground the logic of hegemonic theory. Namely: 1) that the reactivation of the political in the form of populism is necessary, whatever its form, to combat the death of politics (associated with liberal democratic theory and especially with neoliberal governance); 2) that hegemony theory is only effectively democratic when it is plural (and perhaps, even, when the social space is not sutured as belonging to a single “people”); a state of affairs that populism as hegemony can never guarantee, given that it is only a will to democratizing, not a will to the endurance of democratic institutions.

We will temporarily leave to one side some of these problems we have detected in Laclau’s theory of hegemony/populism. To return to the core of my argument, we have seen that this tension between democracy and populism, which was always latent in Laclau and Mouffe’s hegemony theory, takes on a certain characteristic in Laclau’s work in which a preference for democratic hegemonic struggles was eventually replaced by one for populist struggles. I have argued that this was no accident: this tension between the popular and the democratic was born of the fact that hegemony theory was not only an explicative tool but a praxis, a response to a new political paradigm which was constantly re-adapted according to the specific set of problems it faced. That same feature that was once the most celebrated feature of the ‘post-Marxist’ concept of hegemony — the groundlessness of any social order and the idea of a political community as a failed attempt to domesticate social differences (the nature of plural and “democratic” struggles) — eventually became a problem for the theory of hegemony, insofar as it did not provide the necessary
construction of a “people” without which there was no real practice of politics. The theory of hegemony attempts to guard itself from, but in doing so ultimately absorbs within itself, the same problems that it was designed to combat. Between the necessity for a new political force on the left capable of standing up to neoliberal hegemony, on the one hand, and the celebration of the collapse of universalizing discourses as the advent of a new plural and democratic politics, on the other, there is an enormous abyss which hegemony theory can only temporarily suture at best.

As José Luis Villacañas has noted, however: “El concepto de hegemonía nunca sobredetermina la totalidad de la realidad, como pretende. Pero esto no quiere decir que no tenga eficacia histórica” [The concept of hegemony never overdetermines the totality of social reality, as it claims. But this does not mean that it does not have historical efficacy] (2015, 146). This double bind that we have detected at the heart of a theory of hegemony/populism has not prevented it from becoming one of the dominant forms of social analysis existing today in the contemporary humanities and social sciences, as well as a relatively successful political practice across a number of different countries. This, of course, forms part of its very malleability and of its use as a tool for grasping with the contemporary conditions of global capitalism. Let us now turn to an example of how this theory of hegemony as populism has been utilized to develop political practices aimed at overcoming the imasses of a left paralyzed by the dominance of a technocratic neoliberal governance. To do so, we will explore the case of Íñigo Errejón Galván of the Spanish political party Podemos, whose interpretation of Latin American populisms as hegemonizing processes became a political praxis for constructing a new kind of populist-left in Spain.

**Contemporary Practices of Hegemony/Populism: The Promise of Populism in Latin America and Spain**

Retrospectively, the explosion of new left-wing political mobilizations that took hold across Latin America at the turn of the twenty-first century (the so-called “pink tide”) can be regarded as a practice of a Laclauian populist politics *avant la lettre*. Beginning as a motley array of more or less disarticulated social movements across various sectors of civil society, each with their own individual agendas, the movement was eventually articulated as a national and transnational anti-neoliberal bloc and became institutionalized throughout the continent in various ways. Hegemony theory provided theoretical tools for interpreting the crisis of neoliberalism in Latin America and the organic
responses of the new left, as well as for developing strategies to exploit these successes and export them to other contexts.

One clear example of how the theory of hegemony in its populist vein has been employed as a tool for importing the successes of leftist movements in Latin America into the European context is demonstrated by the intellectual and political career of Íñigo Errejón Galván. Errejón carried out his doctoral thesis in Political Sciences at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, where he studied the hegemonic discursive construction of the left-wing party Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia during the first term of Evo Morales’s presidency. As we shall see, Laclau’s notion of hegemony and populism are determinant for Errejón’s way of understanding the contemporary situation of Bolivia.

The article “Evo Pueblo. La hegemonía del MAS” (Evo People. The hegemony of the MAS), published in Bolivia as part of a collection of essays he co-edited, summarizes some of the main arguments of Errejón’s doctoral research. The Spanish political scientist begins his analysis with a commentary regarding the MAS’s electoral success during its first term. Referring to the electoral figures, he suggests that, if the MAS’s landslide victory in 2005 had been unexpected, their even greater electoral achievements in 2009 demonstrated that they were now the uncontested hegemonic force of Bolivian politics. Errejón puts forward that:

En paralelo al cambio electoral, una transformación político-discursiva menos explícita pero más radical había modificado la política boliviana en esos años: no es sólo que el Movimiento Al Socialismo fuese la fuerza más votada, es que su diagnóstico de la realidad, sus símbolos y propuestas, habían pasado a ser parte del imaginario colectivo de los bolivianos.

[Parallel to this electoral change, a less explicit but more radical political-discursive change had modified Bolivian politics in those years: it is not only that the Movement Towards Socialism had gained the most votes, but that its diagnostic of reality, its symbols and proposals, had already become part of the collective imaginary of Bolivians.] (2011, 112)

Errejón proposes to draw on discourse theory and hegemony in order to explain the MAS’s capacity to “articulate” and “direct” the collective “will” of a majority in the country, where he
proposes to pay special attention to the concept of “populism,” saving it from its ordinary, “pejorative” acceptation (ibid.). He is speaking of course of none other than Laclau’s theory of populism. His acceptation of Laclau’s revised notion of populism, and its relationship to hegemony theory, must be contextualized as part of the same series of problems that had concerned Laclau: in other words, the question of how a politics of the left becomes possible under the rule of neoliberal governance and in a moment of generalized depoliticization. Errejón’s recourse to the Laclauian notion of populism would appear to be based on the assumption that the current fragmentation of contemporary social identities, so typical of neoliberal societies, should be considered as a limitation with respect to the possibility of a leftist praxis. The question for Errejón, in other words, is how to create the possibility of a leftist movement in an age of depoliticization. Errejón writes that: “La política contemporánea esta (sic) profundamente marcada por la fragmentación, de tal manera que lograr la ‘unidad’ del sujeto priviligiado es la tarea primera y primordial de todos los movimientos que aspiran a reorganizar la vida social y a ejercer el poder político” [Contemporary politics is profoundly marked by fragmentation, in such a way so that achieving the ‘unity’ of the privileged subject is the primary and most primordial task of any movement that aspires to reorganize social life and exercise political power] (114). The formula is undoubtedly Machiavellian. Regarding the Laclauian notion of the construction of a people which he is soon to mobilize to support his analysis of hegemonizing processes in Bolivia, Errejón adds, in the same vein: “La desconfianza hacia el ‘populismo’ sería entonces, en realidad, desconfianza hacia la política misma y expresaría el deseo inconfesado de sustituirla por un conjunto de técnicas administrativas que diluyan el conflicto y por tanto ‘naturalicen’ el orden existente como neutral y bueno para todos” [In reality, this suspicion towards ‘populism’ is a suspicion towards politics itself, expressing the unconfessed desire of substituting it for a set of administrative practices that dilute conflict and therefore ‘naturalize’ the existing order as being neutral and good for all] (120). Fear of populism is a fear of politics: what we should understand to be underlying this assertion is the same notion that led Laclau to differentiate between the ‘ontic’ level of sedimented social practices and the ‘ontological’ level which constituted politics. Populism as a hegemonizing strategy is once again presented as the antidote to the problem of depoliticization. For Errejón, Bolivia appears to be a case in point where this depoliticization and institutional paralysis was overcome by the success of a left-wing hegemonizing force: the MAS.

This form of understanding populism as the possibility of reactivating the constitutive moment of politics that underlies social practices will therefore inform to a large extent Errejón’s interpretation of historical events in Bolivia. Errejón proposes that Evo Morales and the MAS stand
out for their ability to have articulated a collective sense of the Bolivian “people” in order to unite a series of unsatisfied social demands which were being expressed in Bolivia by a number of social movements from the year 2000 onwards. His wager is that the Movement Towards Socialism was able to position itself within this conjuncture in such way so as to be able to articulate and direct a “people” which emerged in the aftermath of the crisis of the neoliberal state. This neoliberal crisis is regarded by Errejón as indicating a lack of institutional will or ability on the part of the state to satisfy a proliferation of unsatisfied demands within civil society, that later became articulated in a chain of equivalences as the Bolivian “people.” As a series of popular struggles at the turn of the twenty-first centuries gave a sense of collective articulation to these movements, finding particular intensity in the so-called October agenda following the 2003 Gas Wars, Errejón identifies the political party of the MAS as a catalyzer for a “new popular identity” (129).

The influence of the Latin American “experience” on the formation of Podemos’s political strategy has been noted by its own party members, as well as other scholars, on number of separate occasions. As his essay makes clear, what Errejón saw in the Bolivian case was the potential of the populist promise to bring an end to the depoliticized times of neoliberal hegemony. We cannot help but speculate that Errejón was reading the success of the Bolivian left through the lenses of a young generation of Spanish intellectuals who were faced with a Europe in which neoliberal governance had become the logic of a new common sense, to the expense of viable options on the left and of the precariat classes. Such appears to be the suggestion by Pablo Iglesias — also scholar of political sciences and Secretary General of Podemos — who, during a speech in the Vicepresidency of the Plurinational State of Bolivia in 2014, made this connection between the Latin American and Spanish situation explicit. For Iglesias, the success of social movements in Latin America and new political populisms were the promise of another possible future that appeared to be missing in Europe (see “Pensando el mundo desde Bolivia,” Iglesias 2014). In an earlier essay on social movements in Bolivia, Iglesias had earlier affirmed that: “Creemos que América Latina es a día de hoy el mejor laboratorio de transformación social tras en fin del breve siglo XX cerrado con el colapso soviético, y camina en dirección de una integración regional económica y política alternativa al neoliberalismo” [We believe that Latin America is today the greatest laboratory of social transformation after the short twentieth century which closed with the Soviet collapse and now moves towards a regional economic integration as an alternative politics to neoliberalism] (Bolivia en Movimiento, 2014, 27).
What is most important from the perspective of this essay is the way in which this theoretical perspective on the contemporary impasses of the left, as understood through a Laclauian lens of hegemony/populism, became the basis for a new kind of political party in Spain. Following the economic crisis in Europe in 2007 and the emergence of the 15-M movement, it became clear for the future members of Podemos that Europe was undergoing the organic crisis that was the opportunity that they had been waiting for. Íñigo Errejón, already with experience with the electoral campaign in his work in Venezuela, became the Secretary for Policy and Strategy Campaigning for Podemos and has organized Podemos’s electoral campaigns since the founding of the party. The results have been nothing short of impressive. Podemos officially made its entrance in the Spanish political scene in January 2014. In the elections to the European parliament in May 2014, only months after the official formation of the party, Podemos were elected to five of the seats with almost ten percent of the vote. In the recent general elections of December 2015, Podemos became the third party of Spain in what is a traditionally two-legged race, gaining approximately twenty percent of the vote. An explicit part of the strategy has been to interpelate the Spanish electorate as a dispossessed “people” against their antagonistic other, the casta or caste (see Iglesias Turrión “Pensando el mundo desde Bolivia,” where he discusses this strategy at length). The parallels between the electoral strategy of Podemos and that of the MAS in Bolivia, but also and especially with Laclau’s formulation of the task of politics par excellence as the “construction of a people,” are all too clear.

The nature of this electoral success cannot be understood in isolation of the role of the concept of hegemony and of the Latin American “experience” for the formation of Podemos as a political party. Salvador Schavelzon, who has studied in great detail the scholarship that many member of Podemos have carried out on Latin America, confirms the importance of this influence when he writes:

La hegemonía, sería un concepto clave alrededor del cual se construiría la Hipótesis Podemos, en un campo de discusiones ligadas al estudio de procesos políticos de cambio, pero también consideraciones sobre liderazgo, el papel de los medios de comunicación, y las campañas políticas a partir de asesoría política de las que futuros dirigentes de Podemos participaron.
[Hegemony would be a key concept around which the “Podemos Hypothesis” would be constructed, in a field of discussions linked to the study of political processes of change, but also considerations regarding leadership, the role of the media, and the political campaigns based on political counsel in which the future leaders of Podemos participated.]

I do not wish to exaggerate the influence of the theory of hegemony or of the politics of Latin American new left governments in the current formation of Podemos. Figures like Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón are extremely original thinkers who have developed individual interpretations of the current situation in Latin America, one in which their general attitude is one of support but to which they are also able to take a critical distance on occasion, and have been extremely successful in moving from the university platform to the public platform of national politics in Spain where they have often been forced to adapt their strategy in an ongoing and improvised fashion. But my point is not to highlight the discrepancies that may or may not exist between Laclau’s understanding of hegemony and/or populism and that which is exploited by Errejón, or any other member of Podemos for that matter. What is important here is simply that the language of hegemony, in its populist vein, provided the theoretical tools to pinpoint the impasses and opportunities for the left, and that this was always engaged with a question of how to renew the constitutive moments of political practice in the face of the neoliberal technocratic administration of government. The example of Íñigo Errejón’s political and intellectual career shows how the concept of hegemony as it develops throughout time cannot be studied in isolation of the praxis that it presupposes.

This transference of ideas and practices from Latin America to Spain implies a certain point of translatability. If hegemony as a theory of populism is a framework adequate to understanding the emergence of the Latin American new left, and of intuiting the applicability of such new left strategies to the case of Spain, then we must assume that it provides a form of thinking about politics that in some way must transcend the specifics of each country’s political history. Here is where it becomes important to understand how the theory of hegemony is engaged with a question of praxis specific to the contemporary political situation of the West. Laclau’s theory of hegemony in its relationship to populism, the emergence of Latin American new left movements and the formation of Podemos all appear to respond to the same basic question: how to reactivate the social under the banner of the left, or how to re-politicize the question of administration and governance
in a world which appears to be modeled on the technocratic rule of market logics dominated by
global capitalist interests. The question continues to be for the left, although now in a much more
sophisticated manner, perhaps, how to bring about in the “people” a reactivation of their social
conscience, in order to awaken them from their deep slumber, from the “sedimented” practices of
the social that is the “death of politics,” and to a “reactivation” of the political and a
“democratization” of institutions such that a leftist practice once again becomes viable. This is the
crux of hegemony theory, which is perhaps always inseparable from a certain populist framing of the
political.

Posthegemony: On the Tragic Condition of Populism

We must now make some concluding remarks. It is my hope that this analysis, though all too
brief, will have sufficed to convince the reader that the theory of hegemony as it is employed in the
humanities and social sciences, but also in its most directly political applications in Latin America
and Spain today, cannot be comprehended in isolation from the question of how it developed as an
issue of praxis adequate to the specific historical moment in which we are now living. Faced with a
general vacuation of political life as we become more and more subject to the techno-scientific
rationalization of society, everyday more and more animal- or machine-like under a form of rule that
Michel Foucault had once called “biopolitics,” hegemony theory tries to think through the way in
which it may be possible to re-politicize the field of the social to resist the total subsumption of all
life to the machinic logic of capital.

Yet what of the double bind that we identified above in the work of Ernesto Laclau? We saw
that, in Laclau’s work, hegemony theory was subject to a double ethical injunction: on the one hand,
a repeated need to guard the social from its own political vacuation by constantly renewing its
possibilities and keeping alive the populist moment; on the other hand, hegemony theory was
grounded on the impossibility of closing the openness of the social, the groundless ground that
conditioned any temporary articulation of social totality. The problem, as we have seen, was that one
could never guarantee the other. The question thus becomes that of what happens the day after the
night before, when the ecstatic moment of enjoyment has passed and, waking up next to those that
we had shared our enjoyment with, we must learn how to cohabit in the new marital bed. The
libidinal investment that a populist theory of hegemony presupposes cannot be maintained
indefinitely; constant identification with and love for the leader is impractical once this takes an
institutional form. A reactivation of the political must always lead to sedimented practices. Laclau himself indicates this problem in his analysis of Peronism, noting that what Perón had succeeded to do in his exile was to make his own persona an empty signifier to such an extent that his figure was able to give a unified articulation to entirely contradictory demands. But the Peronist dream fell apart when Perón finally returned to Argentina and took power — it was impossible to sustain this identification amongst such heterogeneous and contradictory demands.

The question regarding the success of the institutionalization of current left-wing populisms in Latin America is of course one that to a certain extent remains to be determined, and some governments have been more successful in the short term than others in this respect (compare the relative stability of the MAS in Bolivia, for example, with the cases of Venezuela or Ecuador). One must nevertheless ask whether the recent electoral turn back to neoliberal right-wing parties in Argentina and Venezuela — parties that we had once thought the new left had entirely discredited — does not speak partly to this problem of institutionalization. The problem is how to account for the heterogeneity of the social within a theory of hegemony/populism. Given that hegemony theory envisages all social relations as the product of a temporary suture of the social differences in chains of equivalence, it is not concerned with that more radical heterogeneity that Deleuze would have described as belonging to a constant process of becoming, or that Derrida would have described as the wholly other; a radical alterity that escapes any logic of antagonism, or of the division between friends and enemies, exceeds perhaps any political determination tout court — the non-subject of the political. What I mean by this is that the demos is never fully captured by the hegemonic fantasm, and therefore every temporary suture is subject to its own unforeseeable overcoming in the form of its other, its own internal otherness. Identification with the leader cannot last forever. On the other hand, given that the liberal democratic notion of the “individual” does not presuppose such determined cultural identifications as the Laclauian “construction of a people,” it does not live off the same need to constantly renew love for the leader. Perhaps this can explain, in part, why a populist theory of hegemony has been extremely successful in mobilizing people against a neoliberal elite, but this mobilization is short lived and, in the aftermath of that populist moment, it is in the long term much more difficult to sustain as a practice.

This is the tragic condition of populism: each reactivation of the potentialities of the social also inaugurates its own death, and the populist politics of hegemony becomes a constant effort to reanimate the people. The Laclauian “people” are like the walking dead: they are still born, and the moment of their inception also marks their inevitable death. It should not come as a surprise
therefore that some of the most enduring displays of populist politics take place in the leader’s absence. If Laclau would have us believe that it is only the ontological moment which can re activate what is sedimented at the ontic level of the social, then this ontological moment, assuming it ever really existed, must be lived and relived, re-marking that original mark that brought into articulation the various elements of unsatisfied demands that underlie social relations. This constant keeping alive of the memory of the leader in the people, a truly Machiavellian task, is perhaps not entirely impossible. But one must wonder at what cost. The question is whether it is possible to envisage a political language that exceeds the logic of identification which a populist politics, left or right, requires. This would presuppose another, different way of re-politicizing our current global societies, a repoliticization which exceeded any antagonistic logic of historically sutured identities, even if it accepted that the latter are at times necessary.

This is the position that I will identify with the term “posthegemony.” There is not space here to explore how in this I interpret, coincide with or differ from others who have discussed the term. It is safe to say that the theory of posthegemony as I conceive it corresponds to a politics of the singular, of that excess that can never be entirely captured by the moment of hegemony. Yet neither is it the death of politics, the naturalization of a certain view of the social that was once invented by the ontological moment of the political. A practice of posthegemony is one which takes a critical distance to both of these contemporary forms of imagining political relations. In fact, unlike hegemony, posthegemony does not entirely coincide with the political field, for it does not understand the field of the political to exhaust all the existential possibilities of human life. In this sense, it takes a certain distance to the call of politics, even to the constitutive moment of the political in its attempt to re-interpretate us as subjects of the “people.”

It is important to clarify that this critical distance to hegemony theory does not mean that a theory of posthegemony cannot support or coincide in various respects with those new left populisms in Latin America and the south of Europe that continue to offer hope that a different kind of politics may be possible. But it does not do so uncritically and unconditionally. It reserves for itself a space for thinking which resists all ideological capture, a space for thinking that not only can be institutionalized, but has been institutionalized at various historical moments, often going under names such as those of justice, freedom and thought. These are enormously problematic terms, always being appropriated and captured by logics of identity and politics, but this does not mean that one should give up on the posthegemonic struggle. On the contrary, in a world where the notions of freedom and thought lose currency and institutional space, it is perhaps more necessary
than ever to think about how it might be possible to supplement current hegemonic practices on the left with those of posthegemony. This would entirely compatible, it seems to me, with the kind of civic Republicanism that is proposed by José Luis Villacañas in his excellent study Populismo (2015).

Have we the ear for it? A posthegemonic practice is perhaps, before all else, the art of listening — not to my friend or to my enemy, not to anybody whom I have already been taught how to recognize in advance, but to that absolute other who conditions all possibilities of thinking another possible politics.

Esta distancia es para mí el residuo de lo que es aprincipal y resiste captura en el poder del demos, el rumor de ese ‘proceso sin principio ni fin’ que la práctica poshegémónica busca escuchar, contra toda reducción o violencia filosófica o política.

[This distance is for me the residual of what is aprincipal and resists capture in the power of the demos, the murmur of this ‘process without beginning or end’ that a posthegemonic practice seeks to listen to, against all philosophical or political reduction or violence.] (Moreiras 2015, 137)

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