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Working class, social movement, alliances - and the
limits of radical democracy

Hegemony and United Front

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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We publish below the summary of a contribution presented by Daniel Bensaid, in the framework of the “strategy cycle” at the summer university of the LCR which was held in Port Leucate from August 24-29, 2007 (references have been changed to English language versions where available).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/francenew.jpg>]

During the 1970s, the notion of hegemony served as a theoretical pretext to the abandonment without serious discussion of the dictatorship of the proletariat by most of the “Euro-communist” parties. As noted then by Perry Anderson, it did not however eliminate, in Gramsci, the necessary revolutionary rupture and the transformation of the strategic defensive (or war of attrition) into the strategic offensive (or war of movement) [1]

At the origins of the question

It appears from the reflections of Marx on the revolutions of 1848. Ledru-Rollin and Raspail were for him the representatives respectively of the democratic petty bourgeoisie and the revolutionary proletariat” Faced with the bourgeois coalition, the revolutionary parties of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry should ally themselves with the “revolutionary proletariat” to form a hegemonic bloc: “When he is disappointed in the Napoleonic Restoration the French peasant will part with his belief in his small holding, the entire state edifice erected on this small holding will fall to the ground and the proletarian revolution will obtain that chorus without which its solo song becomes the swan song in all peasant countries” [2].

This opposition of the victorious “choir” to the funereal “swan song” returns in 1871. The Commune is then defined as the “veritable representation of all the healthy elements of French society” and the “communal revolution” represents “all the classes of society which do not live from the labour of others”.

From the end of the 19th century, the Russian revolutionaries used the term hegemony to characterise the leading role of the proletariat in a worker and peasant alliance against the autocracy and in the conduct of the bourgeois democratic revolution. From 1898, Parvus thus envisaged the necessity for the proletariat “to establish moral hegemony”, and not only a majority power over the heterogeneous urban populations.

That is why, according to Lenin, the social democrats “should go to all classes of the population”, because the consciousness of the working class would not be really political “if the workers are not used to reacting against any abuse, any manifestation of arbitrariness, oppression and violence, whatever the classes which are the victims of it” Whoever draws the attention, the spirit of observation and the consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even principally, on itself is not a social-democrat, because, to understand itself, the working class must have a precise knowledge of the reciprocal relations of all the classes of contemporary society. This Lenin is much closer to the attitude of Jaurès to the Dreyfus affair, than that of a Guesde, advocate of a “pure socialism”.

If the term hegemony does not appear in the controversy between Jaurès and Guesde on the implications of the Dreyfus Affair, its logic is nonetheless present in it [3] “There are times, states Jaurès, when it is in the interest of the proletariat to prevent too violent an intellectual and moral degradation of the bourgeoisie itself [...] And it is because, in this battle, the battle, the proletariat has fulfilled its task towards itself, towards civilisation and humanity, that it has become the tutor of bourgeois liberties that the bourgeoisie was incapable of defending”. He was right, but Guesde was not wrong in his warning against the drifts and possible consequences of participation in a government dominated by the bourgeoisie.

For Jaurès, to the extent that the power of the party grew so did its responsibility. The time would come then “to sit in

the governments of the bourgeoisie to control the mechanism of bourgeois society and to collaborate as much as possible in projects of reform” which are “the founding work of the revolution”. Guesde, on the contrary, a socialist in a bourgeois government is never more than a hostage. The irony of history ensured that Guesde the intransigent ended his career as minister of a government of national and patriotic union, while Jaurès was killed as a probable obstacle to this Union.

Gramsci enlarges this question of the united front in fixing as its objective the conquest of political and cultural hegemony in the process of the construction of a modern nation: “The modern Prince must be and cannot but be the proclaimer and organiser of an intellectual and moral reform, which also means creating the terrain for a subsequent development of the national-popular collective will towards the realisation of a superior, total form of modern civilisation”. [4] This approach is adopted within a perspective of passing from the war of movement characteristic of the revolutionary struggle in the “East” to a war of attrition (or of position), “alone possible” in the West: “This is what the concept of the united front seems to me to mean... Ilych, however, did not have time to expand his formula”. [5]

This enlarged comprehension of the notion of hegemony allows us to specify the idea according to which a revolutionary situation is irreducible to the corporative confrontation between two antagonistic classes. What is at stake is the resolution of a generalised crisis of the reciprocal relations between all the components of society in a perspective which concerns the future of the nation as a whole. In fighting to make *Iskra* “a newspaper for all Russia”, Lenin was not only already pleading in favour of an “effective collective organiser”, he also opposed to the corporative localism of the committee men a revolutionary project on the scale of the whole country.

After the failure of the German revolution of 1923 and with the ebbing of the post war revolutionary wave, the task was not to proclaim the situation constantly revolutionary and advocate permanent offensive, but to undertake a prolonged struggle for hegemony through the conquest of the majority of the exploited and oppressed classes of the European workers’ movement which was profoundly and durably divided, politically and in trade union terms. The tactic of the “workers’ united front” seeking to mobilise in unity responded to this objective.

The programmatic discussion on a body of “transitional demands” starting from everyday concerns to pose the question of political power was the corollary of this. This debate, which was the object of a polemical confrontation between Thalheimer and Bukharin during the 5th congress of the Communist International, was first relegated to a secondary level, then disappeared from the agenda, in the course of successive purges in the Soviet Union and the CI.

In opposing to the dictatorship of the proletariat a notion of “hegemony” reduced to a simple expansion of parliamentary democracy or a long march through the institutions, the Eurocommunists watered down the message of the *Prison Notebooks*. Enlarging the field of strategic thought, upstream and downstream of the revolutionary test of force, Gramsci articulated the dictatorship of the proletariat to the problematic of hegemony. In “Western” societies, the seizure of power is inconceivable without a prior conquest of hegemony, that is to say without the affirmation of a dominant/leading role inside a new historic bloc capable of defending, not only the corporate interests of a particular class, but providing an overall response to an overall crisis of social relations.

The revolution is no longer only a social revolution, but also and indissociably an “intellectual and moral reform”, destined to forge a collective will both national and popular [6]. This perspective demands that we examine anew the notion of “withering away of the state” since the revolutionary moment does not lead to its rapid extinction, but to the constitution of a political state and a new ethic, opposed to the old corporate state

The notion of hegemony involves then for Gramsci:

– the articulation of a historic bloc around a ruling class, and not the simple undifferentiated addition of categories of discontent.

– the formulation of a political project, capable of resolving a historic crisis of the nation and social relations as a whole.

These are the two ideas which tend to disappear today from certain not very rigorous usages of the notion of hegemony.

Is hegemony soluble in the post-modern soup?

At the end of the 1970s, the confused recourse to the notion of hegemony claimed not only to respond to the contemporary conditions of revolutionary change, but also to fill the gaping vacuum left by the unexamined liquidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat [7]. Orthodox Marxism, of the state or party, then appeared to have run out of steam.

The question re-emerged in the 1990s in a different context. To open a breach in the horizon drawn by a triumphant neoliberalism, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe bent its interpretation, conceiving it as a chain of actors without a strong link, or as a coalition of social subjects refusing to subordinate themselves to a contradiction deemed to be principal.

The exclusive hegemony of a class inside a composition of alliances which is more or less tactical and variable will be henceforth replaced by “chains of equivalence”.

The struggles against sexism, racism, discrimination and ecological damage must be articulated to those of the workers to found anew a left hegemonic project. The difficulty resides in the modalities of this articulation. Bourdieu responds to this with a “homology” postulated between different social fields.

But if one renounces any structuring of the fields as a whole by an impersonal logic – that of capital as it happens -, the articulation or the homology can only represent the decree of a vanguard or an ethical voluntarism. This is the heart of the controversy between Žižek and Laclau. The latter envisages a first strategy which would conserve the category of class, in trying to reconcile it with the multiplication of identities represented by the new social movements, and placing it in an enumerative chain (movements of race, gender, ethnicity and so on... “without forgetting the good old workers’ movement”!

The Marxist concept of class is however hard to integrate into this enumerative chain, to the extent that, in resigning itself to becoming the simple link in a chain, the proletariat would lose its privileged role. An alternative strategy would seek to expand the notion of working class at the risk of dissolving it in the magma of a wage earning class without cleavages or of the people as a whole, making it thus lose in another way its strategic function.

The “new social movements” thus seriously test a definition of socialism based on the working class and the Revolution with a capital R. Slavoj Žižek responds that the proliferation of political subjectivities, which seems to relegate the class struggle to a secondary level role, is only the result of the class struggle in the concrete context of globalised capitalism :In other words, the class struggle is not soluble in the kaleidoscope of identity or community categories, and hegemony is not soluble in an inventory of equivalences in the style of Prévort.

Political metamorphoses of the social actors.

Reporting an interview in which Stalin justified to an American journalist the single party for a society where the limits between classes are supposedly being eroded, Trotsky states in *The Revolution Betrayed*: “It appears from this that classes are homogeneous; that the boundaries of classes are outlined sharply and once for all; that the consciousness of a class strictly corresponds to its place in society. The Marxist teaching of the class nature of the party is thus turned into a caricature. The dynamic of political consciousness is excluded from the historical process

in the interests of administrative order.

In reality classes are heterogeneous; they are torn by inner antagonisms, and arrive at the solution of common problems no otherwise than through an inner struggle of tendencies, groups and parties. It is possible, with certain qualifications, to concede that “a party is part of a class.” But since a class has many “parts” – some look forward and some back – one and the same class may create several parties. For the same reason one party may rest upon parts of different classes. An example of only one party corresponding to one class is not to be found in the whole course of political history – provided, of course, you do not take the police appearance for the reality”. [8] Thus he took a new road. If the class is susceptible of a plurality of political representations, there is some interplay between the political and the social.

The theorists of the 2nd International had noted that economic fragmentation prevented the realisation of class unity and made its political recomposition necessary but they regretted that this recomposition was incapable of establishing the class character of the social actors. The concept of hegemony appears to deal with this vacuum. Breaking with the illusions of a mechanical progress and of a one way historic direction, it demands the taking into account of historic uncertainty. One can, says Gramsci, only specify the struggle and not its outcome .

The distance maintained between the social and the political allows on the contrary envisaging their articulation as a determined possibility. Trotsky thus accused his contradictors of remaining prisoners of rigid social categories, instead of appreciating live historic forces. He saw the division of politics into formal categories of sociology as a theoretical corpse.

In the absence of conceiving politics according to its own categories (despite strong intuitions on Bonapartism or totalitarianism), he contented himself however with invoking these enigmatic “live historic forces”, and calling on them to the creativity of the living. For him, as for Lenin, there was then no other outcome than to consider the Russian Revolution as an anomaly, a revolution out of time, condemned to hold come what may, while awaiting a German and European revolution, which did not come.

In Leninist discourse, hegemony designated a political leadership inside an alliance of classes. But the political field remains conceived as a direct and unequivocal representation of presupposed social interests. Lenin was however a virtuoso of the conjuncture, of the right moment, of politics practiced as a strategic game of displacement and condensations, as the contradictions of the system can erupt under unforeseen forms (for example a student struggle or a democratic protest), where one did not expect it. Unlike the orthodox socialists who saw in the world war a simple detour, a regrettable parenthesis in the march to socialism along the swept roads to power, he was capable of thinking of the war as a paroxysmal crisis requiring a specific intervention.

That is why, in contrast to an orthodoxy postulating the natural fit between social base and political leadership, the Leninist hegemony supposes a conception of politics “potentially more democratic than anything in the tradition of the Second International”. [9]

The founding distinction between the party and the working class opens indeed the perspective of a relative autonomy and a plurality of politics: if the party is no longer confused with the class, the latter can have a plurality of representations. In the debate of 1921 on the trade unions, Lenin was logically with those who felt the need to support an independence of the trade unions in relation to the state apparatuses. Even if all the consequences of it are not drawn, its problematic implies the recognition of a “plurality of antagonisms and points of rupture”. The question of hegemony, practically present but set aside, could thus lead to an “authoritarian turn” and the substitution of the party for the class. The ambiguity of the concept of hegemony must indeed be settled, either in the sense of a democratic radicalisation or in that of an authoritarian practice.

In its democratic sense, it allows the linking together of a multiplicity of antagonisms. It is necessary then to admit that democratic tasks are not reserved solely to the bourgeois stage of the revolutionary process. In the authoritarian sense of the concept of hegemony, the class nature of each demand is on the contrary fixed a priori (bourgeois, petty bourgeois, or proletarian) by the economic infrastructure. The function of hegemony is reduced then to an “opportunist” tactic of fluctuating and varying alliances in the light of circumstances. The theory of combined and uneven development would necessitate on the other hand “an incessant expansion of the hegemonic tasks” to the detriment of a “pure socialism”.

Hegemony and social movements

The Gramscian conception of hegemony sets up the bases of a democratic political practice “compatible with a plurality of historic subjects”. That is also implied by the formula of Walter Benjamin according to which it was no longer necessary to study the past as before, historically, but politically, with political categories. [10]. Politics is no longer a simple updating of historic laws or social determinations but a specific field of forces reciprocally determined. Gramscian hegemony assumes fully this political plurality. It is increasingly difficult today to presuppose a homogeneity of the working class. Kautsky and Lenin had already understood that the class did not have immediate consciousness itself, that its formation went through constitutive experiences and mediations.

For Kautsky, the decisive intervention of intellectuals bringing science to the proletariat “from the outside” represented the main mediation. For Lukacs, it resided in the party, incarnating the class in itself as opposed to the class for itself.

The introduction of the concept of hegemony modifies the vision of the relationship between the socialist project and the social forces liable to realise it. It necessitates the renunciation of the myth of a great Subject, emancipation. It also modifies the conception of the social movements, which are no longer “peripheral” movements subordinated to the “working class centrality”, but entirely separate actors, whose specific role depends strictly on their place in a combination (or hegemonic articulation) of forces. It finally avoids ceding the simple incoherent fragmentation of the social or removing it by a theoretical coup, by envisaging Capital as system and structure, of which the whole conditions the parts.

Certainly, the classes are what the sociologists henceforth call “constructs”, or again according to Bourdieu “probable classes”. But on what rests the validity of their “construction”? Why “probable”, rather than improbable? From whence comes this probability, if not from a certain obstinacy of the real in inserting itself in the discourse. To insist on the construction of categories by language helps resist essentialist representations in terms of race or ethnicity. Still an appropriate material is necessary to this construction, and without this it is hard to understand how the real and bloody struggle of the classes has been able to haunt politics for more than two centuries.

Laclau and Mouffe admit to taking their distance from Gramsci, for whom the hegemonic subjects are necessarily constituted on the basis of fundamental classes, which supposes that any social formation is structured around a single hegemonic centre. A plurality of actors, plurality of hegemonies? This fragmented hegemony is contradictory with the original strategic sense of the concept, as unit of domination and legitimacy, or “leading capacity”. In a given social formation there would exist, according to them, several nodes of hegemony. By pure and simple inversion of the relationship between unity and plurality, singularity and universality, plurality is no longer that which it is necessary to explain, but the point of departure of any explanation.

Plurality of the social or society in fragments

After the era of simple oppositions (People/Ancien Régime, Bourgeois/Proletarians, friend/enemy), the front lines of

political antagonism become more unstable in increasingly complex societies. Thus, class opposition no longer allows a division of the whole of the social body into two clearly defined camps. The “new social movements” would thus have in common the concern to distinguish themselves from the working class and to contest the new forms of subordination and commodification of social life.

The result is a multiplicity of autonomous demands and the creation of new identities with a strong cultural content, the demand for autonomy being identified with freedom. This new “democratic imagination” will be the bearer of a new egalitarianism, worrying in the eyes of neoconservatives. For Laclau and Mouffe, to renounce the myth of the unitary subject on the contrary renders possible the recognition of specific antagonisms. This renouncement allows the conception of a radical pluralism allowing the updating of new antagonisms, new rights, and a plurality of resistances:: For example, feminism or ecology exist under multiple forms, which depend on the manner in which the antagonism is discursively constructed. There is a feminism opposed to men as such, a feminism of difference which seeks to revalorise femininity, and a Marxist feminism for which capitalism remains the main enemy, indissolubly linked to patriarchy.

So there will be a plurality of formulation of antagonisms based on the different aspects of the domination of women. Similarly, ecology can be anti-capitalist, anti-productivist, authoritarian or libertarian, socialist or reactionary, and so on. Hence the modes of articulation of an antagonism, far from being predetermined, result from a struggle for hegemony”. Behind this tolerant pluralism there is the spectre of a polytheism of values out of the reach of any test of universality. The war of the gods is no longer very distant.

Instead of combining the antagonisms at work in the field of social relations, Laclau and Mouffe rest on a simple “democratic expansion”, where the relations of ownership and exploitation would be no more than one image among others of the great social kaleidoscope. The “task of the left” would no longer be then to combat liberal democratic ideology, but to “deepen and enlarge a radical pluralist democracy”. The different antagonisms exacerbated by the social and moral crisis are nonetheless related to the ills of the world, to the disorders of generalised commodification, to the deregulations of the law of value, which under the pretext of partial rationalisations, generate a growing irrationality. What is the great factor of convergence and the movements gathered in the social Forums or the anti-war movements, if it is not capital itself?

Laclau and Mouffe end up logically by criticising the very concept of revolution, which would imply necessarily in their eyes the concentration of power with a view to a rational reorganisation of society. The notion of revolution would be by its nature incompatible with plurality. Welcome plurality! Exit the revolution! What is it that allows then a choice between the different feminist discourses, or the many ecologist discourses? How do we render them “articulable”? And articulable to what? How do we avoid plurality collapsing into itself in a formless magma?

The project of radical democracy definitively limits itself, for Laclau and Mouffe, to celebrating the plurality of the social. They must therefore renounce a unique space for politics to the profit of a multiplicity of spaces and subjects. How to avoid then that these spaces coexist without communicating and that these subjects cohabit in reciprocal indifference and the calculation of egotistical interest? Following a “logic of hegemony”, in the articulation between anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-capitalism, the different fronts are supposed to support and strengthen each other, to construct a hegemony. This logic would threaten however that the autonomous spaces would become eroded in a single and indivisible combat. A “logic of autonomy” (or of difference) would allow on the contrary each struggle to maintain its specificity, but is at the price of a new closure between different spaces which tend to separate off from each other. But without convergences between diverse social relations, absolute autonomy would no longer be a more than a corporatist juxtaposition of identity-based differences.

Taken in a strategic sense, the concept of hegemony is not reducible to an inventory or a one to one sum of equivalent social antagonisms. For Gramsci, it is a principle of rallying of forces around the class struggle. The

articulation of contradictions around the class relation does not imply their hierarchical classification in principal and secondary contradictions, or the subordination of autonomous social movements (feminist, ecologist, cultural) to the proletarian centrality. Thus, the specific demands of the indigenous communities of Latin America are doubly legitimate.

Historically, they have been deprived of their lands, culturally oppressed, dispossessed from their language. Victims of the steamroller of commodity globalisation and of imposed cultural uniformity, they are today revolting against ecological waste, the pillage of their common property, for the defence of their traditions. The religious or ethnic resistances to the brutalities of globalisation present the same ambiguity as the romantic revolts of the 20th century, caught between a revolutionary critique of modernity, and a reactionary critique nostalgic for the old days. The balance between these two critiques is determined by their relationship to the inherent social contradictions to the antagonistic relations between capital and labour. That does not mean the subordination of different autonomous social movements to a workers' movement itself in permanent reconstruction, but the construction of convergences of which capital itself is the active principle, the great unifying subject.

The concept of hegemony is particularly useful today in envisaging the unity in plurality of social movements. It becomes problematic on the other hand when it amounts to defining the spaces and the forms of power that it is supposed to help to conquer.

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[1] Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci", *New Left Review* 1/100, November/December 1976

[2] K. Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1978, p. 134

[3] *Le Monde*, May 16, 2003

[4] Gramsci, *The Modern Prince*, http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison_notebooks/modern_prince/ch01.htm.

[5] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison_notebooks/reader/q07-16.htm

[6] The idea of an "intellectual and moral reform" is taken from Renan and Péguy, whose thought had found an echo in Italy through the intermediary of Sorel.

[7] 7. See Etienne Balibar, *Sur la dictature du prolétariat*, Paris, Maspero, 1976; Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le Parti communiste*, Paris, Maspero; Ernest Mandel, *Critique de l'eurocommunisme*, op. cit., and *Réponse À Louis Althusser et Jean Ellenstein*, Paris, La Brèche, 1979

[8] 8. L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/ch10.htm>.

[9] 9.E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist Strategy*, Verso, London, 2001, p.55. See Daniel Bensaïd, "La politique comme art stratégique", in *Un Monde À changer*, Paris, Textuel, 2003.

[10] 10. See Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century", *New Left Review*, 1/48, March-April 1968