



# Re-inscribing the Hegemony of Hegemony: A Response to Mark Purcell

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I'd like to thank the editors of this special issue for a chance to respond to Mark Purcell's intervention. I'm glad to see that this kind of discussion is happening, and I look forward to reading the rest of the articles. As will become apparent, I may not have a whole lot to add to what I've said before, but at least I hope to clarify a few points.

To that end, let me begin at the beginning of Mark's article, where he suggests that I (and others such as David Graeber) deploy a narrative that "tells of a mainstream radical politics that is ignoring or marginalizing anarchist and autonomist perspectives" (2). I would say he's right about that, and would add that I have taken this argument one step further, to note that anarchists and autonomists often marginalize each other, in various ways, as do those of all ideological persuasions and identifications within what gets called the global movement for social justice.

But despite this initial acceptance of his point, I find that I can't agree with all of the statements Mark makes in regard to this concern. For example, he writes that "it is not in keeping with an anarchist sensibility to appeal to a dominant mainstream for inclusion in that mainstream" (2). First, I think it's important to remember that we're talking about what used to be called The Left, which right now seems far from dominant and mainstream, except perhaps in South America. (Though I think that's more about new and resurgent currents of indigenism than it is about ideologies from the global North).



Second, I can't speak for David Graeber, but what I've been trying to do, rhetorically, is not to gain inclusion into the mainstream Left, but to peel off, from this already marginalized formation, a few more people for the project of creating alternatives to the dominant and the semi-marginal, as I think this project is drastically understaffed.

What I'm saying is that I am convinced that non-hegemonic approaches to radical social change are, and will always and necessarily be, modalities of becoming-minor<sup>i</sup> in the Deleuze-Guattarian sense. And with this point I hope to address the bass line of Mark Purcell's commentary, which seems to imply that theorists advocating non-hegemonic approaches need to turn to Deleuze and Guattari (D&G), that we have something to learn there. I want to point out that most of us have already made that turn, in most cases quite explicitly.

I also find it necessary to engage with a second claim that Mark makes, regarding the "marginality narrative." "It is very possible," he writes, that this narrative is "inaccurate," as it "ascribes a marginality to anarchism/autonomia that may very well not exist, at least in geography" (2). After years of facing uphill battles with social scientists of many stripes, over every aspect of my 'progress' through the ranks of the academy, and noting the recent wrongful dismissals of so many radical academics in North America, I'm happy to see that a safe(r) haven is forming in geography. But I do wonder how widespread and potent it might be. Of the seven thousand geographers in Seattle this year, very few seemed to be interested in what we anarchists, autonomists, and indigenists were up to. A bit later in the year I shared a billing with David Harvey at an autonomy-oriented conference/festival in Greece. When pushed to shift his attention from the high-flying structures of global political economy, to consider the kinds of small spaces (Foucaultian heterotopias) he's famous for studying, and apparently advocating, he wowed the audience with the following comment, taken pretty much straight from Engels: "It's nice to have the anarchist communists around, but let's face it, we don't want them running the nuclear reactors." I think it's safe to say that there's still work to be done, even in geography. And so, I will move on to trying to talk about how some of that work might be done.

In his article, it seems to me, Mark is trying to rebrand the Lacamouffean concept of 'chains of equivalence'<sup>ii</sup> as 'networks of equivalence', though it's not clear exactly what he's adding to or taking away from their already existing theorization. As someone who has had what Simon Critchley likes to call the 'Essex experience', I can't argue with the claim that the conception of hegemony advocated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, following Gramsci, is seen by them as non-totalizing. Hegemony, for them, is a contested process, not a final state. (Just like everything else humans are involved in, I might add.) However, and this is where I have a problem with the postmarxist reading of Gramsci, all of those who participate in a hegemonic politics seek a non-final state that is oriented to achieving a certain sort of equilibrium, for a certain period of time – a state in which they 'become' the state, to the extent that such a thing is possible. They want

to ‘win’ and ‘lead’ and ‘direct’ and so on. (In my reading of Gramsci, they also want to ‘liquidate’, but Mark wisely ignores those unpleasant passages in the *Prison Notebooks*).

So, while the post-Gramscian conception of hegemony is necessarily non-totalizing, it has not – and cannot, without becoming something else - shed the will to totalization. This is where I (and Saul Newman, whose work I would suggest should also find its way further into the enclave of radical geographers) part company with our former mentors.

A key part of Mark’s intervention is to urge all of us wannabe Gramsci-killers (but of course the joke is Nietzsche’s: Gramsci is dead and *we* (Gramsci-lovers) have killed him) to (re-)read *A Thousand Plateaus* in such a way as to be more conjunctive in our theory and practice. This, again, is something I can agree with, up to a point. I am definitely in favour of what gets called ‘diversity of tactics’ in radical social movements. That is, I understand and accept that different groups and individuals will have different approaches to getting things done, and that we all have to try to support each other’s choices. Thus, at a protest convergence, some folks may put on gas masks and hockey pads and fight with the riot police, while others will put on neon vests and direct the members of their union to the green zone.

And, despite the polemical tone of *Gramsci Is Dead*, I’m also in favour of what is increasingly being called ‘diversity of strategies’, that is, of deploying any or all of the known modes of social change, as circumstances seem to require. Thus, the figures of Chavez and Morales represent, to me, elements of the best possible use of the state form by popular movements, and are much better to have around than, say, Calderón, Harper, or Obama. Anarkids in their social centers and squats, indigenous peoples in their barrios and (remaining) home territories and friendship centres, are doing a lot of great work in the creation of alternatives, as are the relatively privileged denizens of intentional communities and ecovillages. Perhaps most interestingly right now, the people of the Middle East and North Africa are showing how change can be achieved in ways that may very well defy the revolution/reform/exodus trichotomy.

However, I remain most interested in autonomous social movements, i.e. in those that seek to maximize their distance from the dominant order (geographical, theoretical, virtual, symbolic, practical) on as many axes as possible (warding off/minimizing the state form, capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, colonialism...). And in these movements, in my experience, there will continue to be little purchase for concepts like “democratic centralism,” even if such centers are “impermanent,” even if they “carry out an organizing function for a time, and then dissolve, thereby allowing other centers to form and coordinate in another part of the network” (7).

In praising impermanence and fluidity, Mark seems to be speaking favourably about the anarchist/indigenist/autonomist modes of organizing that,

with the rest of his intervention, he seems to be trying to displace. But as I've already pointed out, the problem I have with this approach is that such networks/chains, in a hegemonic frame, are always subjected to a hegemonic articulation, that is, a moment of (desired) totalization and direction. ("For Gramsci achieving hegemony is necessarily a process of a particular social group *assembling* many irreducibly different groups" (5)).

The key term Mark deploys in his restatement of the logic of hegemony is, for me, the word 'our'. He writes as though everyone must necessarily see themselves as part of a singular entity called "*the* social field" (5) or "society" (9). But many of us don't see it that way. This is a key point that can't be emphasized too strongly, as it comes up again and again if one spends time with the protagonists of many of the most vibrant social movements around the world today. In most cases, not only do these protagonists wish to avoid dominating or being dominated through a "leading group," but also wish to avoid "relatively centralized and organized node[s]" of any kind. As I have learned from my involvement in these movements, this also usually includes non-statist federations of the sort that I've previously advocated in theory, and tried to create in practice. Even these seem too much like a state for most people involved in autonomous struggles these days, and I think they're right.

The re-inscription of the hegemony of hegemony is also apparent in Mark's own lapses into either/or thinking. Despite the claim to support what I would call diversity of strategies, he is in fact quite dismissive of radical autonomous alternatives, which he sees as motivated by nothing more than "an ephemeral flight from control that will quickly be recaptured." (9). Either-or logic is impossible to escape, it seems.

Maybe the Aymara know a thing or two that escaped Deleuze and Guattari (See Raul Uzbechi's recent book *Dispersing Power*), though I suspect that our favourite dear departed radical theorists would see "networks of equivalence" for what they are – oak trees masquerading as strawberry plants. Today's autonomous movements know that the state and corporate forms must be actively and continuously warded off. Shuffling the contents of these forms is not enough, because that's exactly what the dominant order is doing, has always been doing, and will continue to do.

Since we are always already operating in a world that is 'both both/and and either/or', it's necessary to try to untangle Mark's abstract-philosophical pronouncement ("You Gramsci-killers are not Deleuze-Guattarian enough") from the political gambit that drives it. I would suggest that ultimately, what he is trying to do is adjust the values of autonomous movements, to make us friendlier to what we can only see as statist, authoritarian structures. He thinks this will make us more likely to 'win' control of 'society', but we don't want that for ourselves - nor for anyone else.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Although no footnote can do justice to any of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts, it might be helpful here to note that the term 'becoming-minor' comes from *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1987) and is most fully explored in the plateau '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal'. Here a dichotomy is set up between 'majoritarian' and 'minoritarian' becomings. One can think of the 'major' as a dominant pole in a system of relations of power. D&G write: 'When we say majority, we are not referring to a greater relative quantity but to the determination of a state or standard in relation to which larger quantities, as well as the smallest, can be said to be minoritarian: white-man, adult-male, etc. Majority implies a state of domination' (291). In the system of sex/gender relations, then, man is the major, and woman is the minor. D&G also say that 'all becoming is becoming-minoritarian' (291). This, of course, begs the question of what a 'becoming' might be. For the moment, let us say that becoming involves a radical change in the fundamental structure of an entity, that proceeds without any set plan and is usually unwilling. By insisting that all becoming is minoritarian, I take D&G as suggesting that any becoming worthy of the name must take off from the dominant relations of power, must involve a radical, usually problematic difference. Such as, for example, a woman picking up a hammer at a construction site and using it with greater facility than the men. What is the relevance of all of this to the passing reference made in the main text above? It is that seeking hegemony is a mode of becoming-major, i.e. of domination. It is planned, willed, known, or at least it hopes that its plans and willing will give it what it seeks. Whereas non-hegemonic approaches do not seek to become major, to become a pole of power/domination, but to *dissipate* all such poles.

<sup>ii</sup> The following discussion of the concept of 'chains of equivalence' is drawn from Laclau's contributions to the book *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (co-authored with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2000). For Laclau, no political cause can be purely or fully universal, since it is impossible for those who advance a cause to fully transcend their own particular interests in its success. Similarly, there is no such thing as a pure particularity, since no identity can exist without establishing what it is *not*. In a hegemonic articulation, particular interests "assume a function of universal representation," leading to a mutual "contamination" of the universal and the particular (56). This process operates via the establishment of "chains of equivalence," extended systems of relationships through which identities compete and co-operate, each seeking to enlarge itself to the point of being able to represent all of the others. It is crucial to note that while the universalizing element is itself part of the chain, it simultaneously sets itself above it, via the metaphorical separation and elevation of its particular concerns (302). In practical terms, we can think of this as an extension of Gramsci's notion of hegemony to cover situations in which the "fundamental social group" is not a class, but any kind of identity at all. If the Green movement were successful in its program, for example, a vast array of social groups would line up under the banner of 'ecological sustainability', each expressing its own particular concerns about environment destruction through the lens of the Green movement: parents as guardians of the well-being of vulnerable young children; people of colour as those affected by environmental racism; and so on.