

PEOPLE, MULTITUDE, SOCIETY

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Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis (eds.), *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today: The Biopolitics of the Multitude versus the Hegemony of the People* (Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2014), 258 p. ISBN 978-1-4094-7052-6

Two Narcissisms of the Present

Paul Rekret begins his contribution to this new volume by invoking what philosopher Jason Read has called “the narcissism of the present.” How common it is, remarks Rekret, that we see passing historical phenomena as eternal conditions, that we understand momentary changes in our existence as evidence of essential but hitherto latent ontological processes, which have only now become manifest. (133) In 1914, the working class had been growing in size and power and self-consciousness. The class struggle of the moment had revealed that all history was the history of class struggles. The momentary preponderance of industrial labor had revealed that all wealth had always been derived from labor. The imminent proletarian revolution revealed that humanity had always already been waiting for the working class to arrive and save it. But by 2014 the working class had been declining in power and confidence (if not in numbers), and it seemed that it had always already been destined to decline. *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* presents – and complicates – two lines of thinking that have attempted to account for and draw conclusions from this new reality of apparent proletarian

decline. And the volume asks – implicitly – whether these two approaches can escape their erstwhile “narcissism.”

Beginning in the late 1970’s, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau developed one of the most thoroughgoing attempts to rethink socialism in light of the apparent waning of the working class. Shifting their hopes from the proletariat in itself to broad coalitions of progressive forces, they took what had long been considered a temporary socialist tactic and made it into a resolute strategy and a renewed vision for political change: The labor movement needed to join forces with other social movements. But this was not in order to regroup and prepare for a future in which could again act alone. Rather, it never should have tried to go it alone in the first place. It was widely seen as unrealistic to hope that proletarian revolution would, in the near future, achieve the transcendence of social tension. But Mouffe and Laclau went further, arguing in effect that this had always been an unrealistic hope and, moreover, that the transcendence of social tension never should have been hoped for in the first place. The working class was now fragmented, and now it was argued that politics as such had always been characterized by fragmentation. Social forces in this fragmented environment had to find new means of coming together, and politics had suddenly always been a matter of forming and re-forming alliances, of calling on “the people” (or some equivalent empty signifier) to unite and establish a new hegemony or counter-hegemony. We could no longer foresee where radical politicization might lead, and it turned out that we could never make such predictions in the first place, because politics, and therefore democracy, and therefore radical democracy, and therefore the world they create, are shifting and contingent.

About twenty years after Laclau and Mouffe came to prominence, the collaborative writing of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri captured the attention of the young left. They observed that the working class was not alone in becoming fragmented and ineffectual as a unitary social force. The bourgeoisie had also become fragmented, and so had the state and party systems that the bourgeoisie had once (more or less) controlled. Power had become dispersed and reconfigured in a worldwide “Empire,” and now it appeared that always – or at least since the beginning of the modern age (interpretations vary) – power had been capillary and decentralized, permeating lived life as “biopolitics.” The traditional working class was no longer capable of combatting Empire, and now it turned out that “the multitude” had always been a more adequate vessel of revolutionary activity than the working class, that only the multitude was capable of establishing a new world beyond the oppressive and (in any case) obsolete institutions of the state. It was recognized that the working class could no longer fulfill its historic mission of emancipation simply by negating its current alienated existence or by participating in antagonistic party struggles. The multitude, by contrast, was supposed to posit its own new forms of life. Then it seemed that active human existence itself had never really been accurately characterized by negation and overcoming but had always already been positive and self-generating. And from this positive and self-generating character of human action it followed that politics too was and had always (or long) been a matter of embodied

activity rather than distancing representation. Political transformation was not and never should have been a matter of struggling over the meaning of signs that stand in for other signs. It was a matter of enabling emancipatory affect to freely build and flow.

But *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* takes its point of departure a bit later. By the time of the Euro-American economic crisis of 2008, the Hardt-Negri-ian antipathy to state and hierarchical representation had been eclipsed in many leftist circles by a hardnosed insistence on pragmatic political organization, which could be manifested in renovated communism (as in the cases of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou) or in a more modest, gradualist radicalism (as with Mouffe and Laclau). But the global outburst of occupation movements in 2011, from Madrid and Athens and Santiago to Cairo and Madison and New York, seemed to return to a more Negri-esque horizontalism. The movements were huge, contributing to the overthrow of regimes and to a marked shift in political discourse, all without establishing fixed, hierarchical organizations or centralized coordination, and without participating in the structures of the state. Maybe the utopians had been realists all along.

By 2012, though, most of the occupation movements had been effectively suppressed or had otherwise lost steam. The most apparently successful of them, the Egyptian revolution, resulted in the electoral victory of a conservative who opposed most of what the less electorally capable revolutionaries had hoped for; then the conservative was in turn replaced by a military ruler more repressive than the one the revolution had deposed. Meanwhile, in Greece the social movement's desperate but hopeful energy was increasingly transferred into a political party that was already poised for electoral victory as *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* went to print. The Laclauian struggle for political hegemony, seemingly old fashioned a couple of years ago, has triumphantly returned – and by the time this review is published, it will have already ushered in a new round of disappointment. It would seem that the present is (has it always been?) pregnant with the past.

Toward a Synthesis?

The discussions in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* are refreshing, among other things, for having largely left behind this kind of most-modernism, this seemingly endless succession of claims to the mantle of exclusive contemporaneity.

Several articles in the volume accept the established lines of debate and take sides either with Hardt, Negri, and the multitude or with Laclau, Mouffe, populism, and hegemony. They apply their favored approaches to recent events, but they do not expend too much effort claiming that the latest social changes have made their less-favored approaches obsolete. Although Benjamin Ardit, for example, entitles his article “Post-Hegemony,” in fact he does not pursue too adamantly the rhetorical implication that we have really moved beyond hegemony and made it “post.” He focuses his attention, rather, on taking down the contrary thesis, arguably implicit in Laclau and Mouffe's thought, that hegemony is now the only game in town. Another article in the book is co-written by

Richard J. F. Day, author of a book entitled *Gramsci is Dead*. But here Day, like Arditì, does not develop the claim that Gramsci's concept of hegemony has really "died." His claim is simply that the concept of hegemony does not offer the *best* lens for viewing the key activities of social movements today, whose importance lies more in their defense of plurality than in their achievement of hegemonic universality. Saul Newman is a bit more tendentious when he claims that hegemony, whether in its Laclauian or Leninist-Gramscian form, really has become ineffective as a political strategy: "There is no more Winter Palace to storm" (96), he writes, and he implies that there is no longer an effective parliament to be elected to either, because state institutions have ceased to be an effective center of (bio-)political power. But Newman does not develop this argument too far. His emphasis is on the fact that movements like Occupy have done something *more* than build hegemony. Then, when Yannis Stavrakakis counters these articles in the volume's most sustained defense of the Laclauian approach, he does not claim that all emancipatory social action can be reduced to struggles over hegemony; he only states that in order to become *politically* effective, such action usually requires some kind of counter-hegemonic project involving unification around shared representations. "[I]nstead of erecting a wall between horizontalism and hegemonic processes," he writes, "wouldn't it be more productive to study their irreducible interpenetration?" (121)

All seem to agree that hegemony is something but is not everything. How, then, can we capture the relationship *between* hegemony and those transformative processes, or aspects of processes, that do not in themselves follow the rules of hegemony? Several of the articles in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* take this question as their starting point. In the volume's introduction, Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis lay out the conflicting principles of the multitude on the one hand – defined by horizontalism and the absence of leaders – and of the people on the other – which, in the Laclauian conception, is formed in the process of constructing hegemony, and which therefore requires hierarchically organized structures that can stand above and unite those people who are represented in "the" people. On the one hand, there persists an undeniable desire for equal participation; on the other, there is an apparent necessity of concentrating power and value in representative bodies and signs.

In their separate contributions to the volume, Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis work their way further through these tensions, suggesting that the opposing phenomena can be understood within a single conceptual approach attuned to the "hegemony of the multitude" (in Kioupkiolis's terms) or the "multitudinous people" (as Katsambekis provisionally calls it, for lack of a more euphonious label). Both authors share Laclau's belief in the indispensability of hegemony for the long-term success of collective movements today. But rather than rejecting the notion of the multitude as useless or even harmful nonsense – which is more or less what Laclau himself argued – Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis acknowledge the novelty and positive emancipatory effects of "multitudinous" modes of activity. As Katsambekis puts it, there may really be no need to *choose* between the two.

The egalitarian, decentralized multitude is one moment in the existence of the people. The people's identity can never be fixed and wholly controlled from any center, because it is inherently fractured and is continually disrupted by the multitude. The multitude itself competes for hegemony as a sign – an empty signifier – uniting all radical democratic struggles (186–187). Or as Kioupkiolis puts it, the multitude reminds us of the need for constant vigilance to prevent hegemony, however necessary it might be, from negating the liberatory principles that radical democracy strives for in the first place. Uneven power and hierarchical representation may be necessary, but that does not make them good. If the multitude can be integrated into hegemonic political processes, it could serve the positive purpose of continually undermining and renewing them, “fuel[ing] the relentless subversion of hierarchies, closures and new patterns of domination from within, holding out the prospect of a world beyond hegemony in a universe still bridled with it.” (166) The integration of the multitude into popular hegemony does not erase the tension between them. But in Kioupkiolis's persuasive conception, this can be a productive tension. Although horizontality “cannot be a permanent state,” it can be a “horizon of ongoing struggle” (164). Hegemony, perhaps, could be a permanent state, but it's doubtful anyone would want to live in it if it were not continually challenged by something like the multitude.

Nevertheless I wonder whether this multitude-hegemony synthesis can really be accomplished so easily. When the multitude is brought into the structures of hegemony, is it still the same multitude? When hegemony is perpetually subverted by the multitude, is it still the same hegemony? Is it possible merely to select and combine the best features of hegemony and multitude? Or might it be necessary first to dissociate those features from the entire conceptual and practical structures out of which they arose, and then to articulate them in a new, emerging whole?

Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen, in their contribution to the volume, point to at least a couple of aspects of the multitude and hegemony that might have to be reconceptualized in the course of bringing them together. In their terms, there would have to be “hegemony without a vanguard,” and there would have to be a kind of “self-organization” that is, at the same time, “not immediate and spontaneous” (215). The concept of the multitude, after all, is fundamentally incompatible with the principle that the masses might be directed from above by a vanguard, if by vanguard we understand, as Prentoulis and Thomassen implicitly do, an organizational elite that is external to and independent from the masses. If the multitude becomes hegemonic and yet remains in some sense a multitude, any leadership of the multitude would have to be in some way *led* by the multitude. At the same time the fundamental principle of hegemony is incompatible with pure spontaneity and immediacy; human relations are always socially and politically mediated, and human action is always organized and planned, even when it does not work out as planned. A “multitudinous people” would have to develop forms of mediation that are adequate to its principles of horizontality and maximal participation – or else it might have to identify appropriate modes of mediation that are already

in place in the multitude's activity, but which multitude theorists, with their emphasis on spontaneity, have obscured or denied.

Rekret, however, suggests that the challenge runs still deeper, because the concepts of multitude and hegemony are not only associated with different social phenomena and conflicting political strategies; they are also drawn from mutually irreconcilable ontologies. For Hardt and Negri, the existence of the multitude reveals but also depends on a certain conception of existence as such: the multitude is primordially ungovernable, uncentralizable, and unstoppable because social being in general is fluid and indeterminate or, rather, absolutely self-determined. For Laclau and Mouffe, meanwhile, hegemony is a (the) central category of effective emancipatory activity because (as Arditì points out in this volume), in their view social being as such is governed by the logic of hegemony, as diverse actors unite and divide themselves around shared representations. If the multitude can achieve hegemony, then social being cannot be absolutely fluid, because hegemony dams and redirects the flow of being. And if the multitude can take hegemonic form, then demands for absolute self-determination would be reduced to tautology, because the social would determine itself regardless of what specific rules it determines for itself; both the multitude and the hegemonic elites would amount to self-determinations of social being. At the same time, if "the people" can become "multitudinous," then the people cannot be governed wholly by the logic of hegemony, and one must modify Laclau's claim that hegemonic logic "is the very logic of the construction of the social" (quoted by Arditì: 21). A truly multitudinous people would obey a logic of its own. And this may or may not have anything to do with ontology.

Beyond the Bio- and the Political

What could that logic be? Kioupiolis and Katsambekis, and less explicitly also Prenzoulis and Thomassen, have sketched certain aspects of it. Stavrakakis, though clearly committed to a Laclauian outlook, proposes several amendments that may enable Laclauianism to better account for the embodied, affective phenomena that the Negrian outlook emphasizes. Still, it remains unclear whether a thoroughly new, *integral* approach to the multitude *and* hegemony is possible at all. The new form still floats precariously between the mutually antagonistic systems from which it arose. The "multitudinous people" does not yet have its own proper name, and it does not yet appear as part of its own coherent whole.

Perhaps it is not inherently necessary to reconcile the dialectical confrontation of two approaches in a newer, better synthesis (especially when both these approaches have rejected the hope for dialectical syntheses and call instead for more open-ended conceptions of how tensions develop in history). If the competing approaches are driven to adjust themselves without losing their distinct individuality, radical theory will continue to benefit from their ongoing confrontation. Nevertheless, the discussions in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* point to the possible inadequacy of this state of affairs. They point to the existence of two sets of phenomena that are crucial

to contemporary projects of emancipation, but which are accounted for by two different and largely incompatible sets of terms. If it is important to grasp the *interrelation* between hegemony and the multitude within a complex whole, it is worth asking whether a different conceptual framework may be better suited to the task.

One might begin to glimpse the outlines of such a framework by addressing those aspects of the material that are most contested, those points of greatest tension between established conceptions of the multitude and hegemony.

As several contributors to *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* observe, the question of *representation* raises problems for both approaches. One side of the debate complains that representation is fundamentally unjust; the other side insists that representation is inevitable. In their own terms, both are right. But both views are also incomplete, because there are multiple kinds of representation, and these exist alongside multiple kinds of non-representation. Representation is probably a part of all human activity – humans think by creating abstract signs that stand in for loose bundles of perceptions; they communicate by circulating those representational signs; they can act together because they share certain (collective) representations; and they can draw apart by opposing established representations and proposing new ones. Yet not *everything*, or at least not every aspect of everything, is representational. People signify, but they also feel and do; people represent themselves, but they also *are* themselves. And politics take place on both levels, in struggles over representation *and* in rearrangements of embodied experience. If at a given moment one or the other (or perhaps yet another) pole takes precedence, that is more likely a function of historically determinate change than it is a fundamental feature of being. A fully elaborated theory of the multitudinous people could grasp representation as both a persistent feature of human existence *and* as a historically contingent fact, which at certain moments comes to the fore and at other moments loses efficacy and salience.

The problem of *mediation* is similar. The multitudinous strand of thought (along with its many precursors) presents mediation as inherently dominating or alienating. The hegemony-oriented strand is undoubtedly right to object that mediation is inevitable, that people never really interact immediately but interact always through some kind of structure that influences the character of their interaction. Yet being inevitable does not make something unassailable. The question, rather, might be differently posed: What *kinds* of mediation may be preferable to other kinds? Moreover, if the *feeling* of immediacy is a real feeling, then what kinds of mediation provide the experience of immediacy? And, if I may borrow a term from anthropologist William Mazzarella, how is such “im-mediation” *organized*? And if the false feeling of immediacy is a problem, in what does its problematic character rest? And, finally: How might more *legitimate* modes of mediation – modes that are not experienced as alienating – be brought into being, without unduly deceiving us about their mediated (and never immediate) character?

Part of the difficulty in providing coherent answers to these questions – answers that respect both the legitimate desires of the multitude and the practicalities of hegemo-

ny – is that the two concepts operate on different levels of analysis and are applied to different spheres of social activity. Laclau and Mouffe base themselves in the sphere of the political. They acknowledge social context, and they lead occasional forays into the economy and the arts, but their primary concern is with how social change can be achieved through specifically political action – the articulation of complaints into demands, the mobilization of people around representations of justice and injustice, the establishment of hegemony within political culture and, ultimately, within structures of state power. Hardt and Negri, by contrast, do not merely deny the importance of politics as a distinct sphere of action; their entire conception of social change concentrates on the extra-political, that is to say, on the bio-political, on microstructures of power that reach into the crevices of personal and libidinal practice. Laclau and Mouffe are able to offer a perspective on politics, while Hardt and Negri’s biopolitics is less a politics than an *ethics*, a way of caring for the self and of relating to others, coupled with the rather messianic belief that this mobilization of affect will, almost without coordination, quicken our steps along a path toward collective salvation. For Hardt and Negri, salvation is not achieved by political victory; it is immanently contained in the multitude’s many disparate steps.

If the prophets of the multitude and the practitioners of hegemony are operating in different spheres, they can both be right, and yet they might have nothing to say to each other. We might be able to accept both approaches; but the two approaches might never actually meet. Of course, implicitly we tend to sense that Hardt and Negri really do have a political strategy, derived from the generalization of their micropolitical imperatives. But their theoretical perspective offers little space for identifying the structures of articulation between micro-practices, specific mobilizations, and general social transformation. At the same time we can (though we less often do) read certain ethical/micropolitical implications into the thought of Laclau and Mouffe, based for example on the inherent value of antagonism, struggle, and debate as against the dull injustice of total social harmony, whether it be imposed in the present or imagined in a post-revolutionary future. But in order to reconstruct this Hardt-Negrian politics or this Laclau-Mouffean ethics we must go beyond the bounds set by their approach.

What if we grounded our approach neither in the political nor the ethical/micropolitical, but in the *social*, which contains them both? By “the social” I mean that sphere of human existence whose extent is determined by the reach of all human relations, in their generality and in the shape of their multiple particular forms. The lens of the social focuses attention on the relationship *between* different social spheres as they combine in concrete structures to form the social whole. The political, in which hegemony operates, *does* relate to the micro(bio)political, where the multitude advances. But this relationship is largely invisible from the vantage point of politics – which makes it easy for someone like Laclau to dismiss the multitude as largely meaningless nonsense. And the relationship is similarly ungraspable when seen from the vantage point of the multitude, which,

not without reason, experiences the political as a power imposed from outside. Each sphere draws from the other – without quite grasping the significance of what it does.

It seems to me that from *this, social* perspective a positive program for a “multitudinous people” could begin to be conceived. The ethics of the multitude could be framed as a guiding principle of politics and could serve, as Kioupkiolis suggests, as a continual corrective to the inherent hierarchies and strictures of hegemony. We don’t need to insist that it will ever be possible to live in a world free of representation and mediation in order to ask how political action and social forms can be as participatory, egalitarian, and non-alienating *as possible*. It is probably true, as several contributors to *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today* argue, that the utopian hopes of multitudinous movements can only be fulfilled, however partially, if they are coupled with some kind of new hegemony, within structures of political power. But it is probably also true that the social imperatives of radical democracy can only be realized, or at least can be approximated and approached, if pragmatic politics are pressured from within and without to establish more horizontal forms of participation and representation. It would seem that “radical democracy” can only be made truly radical when the bounds of its own politics are shattered by what lies beyond. Democracy only becomes radical to the extent that its practices of hegemony are bent under the weight of (something like) the multitude.

In order to achieve this, it seems to me that it might be necessary to resist the temptation to hastily ontologize. A given approach may operate in one specific sphere of social existence – the political or the biopolitical – but it becomes problematic the moment it raises the particular experience of this sphere to the level of universal being. An approach may find that history has brought its favored sphere of operation into momentary light, but it gives into the narcissism of the present when it claims that the momentarily salient (for example, political or biopolitical) sphere has always already been the basis of the other spheres. The notion of the social might offer a way of encompassing, situating, and conceptualizing the interaction and potential transcendence of multiple spheres.

Then, maybe, as the bounds of politics and biopolitics break down, the multitudinous people could open itself to socially embedded history. Maybe its advocates would not feel the need to claim eternal validity on the basis of momentary truth but could continually respond to their present world, adapting to it without accepting it. They could seek to be adequate to a moment that is always inadequate to their ideals. Without succumbing to fashion, they could provoke their generation. And, before ontologizing, they might be content to socialize.

The beginnings of such a shift, it seems to me, are palpable in this book.