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REPLY

The post-Marxist Gramsci: a reply to James Martin

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James Martin astutely reads the haloed place Gramsci holds in the post-war Western Marxist tradition as exactly where strident divergences in that tradition have emerged, most particularly between those who, according to him, remain mired in varying modes of left melancholia and those who have successfully *mourned* the loss of what we used to call the socialist alternative. My response questions the validity of this alternative by reconsidering Traverso's arguments in defence of left melancholia as a call to action, on the one hand, and by questioning why we should mourn the loss of real world socialism rather than seizing upon Gramsci's pessimistic utopianism as a way to reenergise socialist strategy in an era of escalating inequality and populist authoritarianisms.

Key words left melancholia • utopianism • post-Marxism • Laclau and Mouffe

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In proposing his 'post-Marxist Gramsci', James Martin provides an inestimable service in unpacking the complex and contested legacy of the great Italian activist and political theorist. But beyond what Anglo literary historians would have termed his 'reception' (or their Gallic counterparts, perhaps even more suggestively, his 'fortune'), Martin reads the haloed place Gramsci holds in the post-war Western Marxist tradition as exactly where strident divergences in that tradition have emerged, most particularly between those who, according to him, remain mired in varying modes of left melancholia and those who have successfully *mourned* the loss of what we used to call the socialist alternative.

The seeds of these divergences, as Martin knows well, lies both in Gramsci's own strategic and shifting political alliances but also in the fragmented state of his writings, most notably those written under the especially brutal conditions of fascist imprisonment. To this extent, attempts to render a systematic or coherent understanding of the Gramscian corpus meet the same pitfalls encountered in the interpretation of other incomplete or fragmented works, such as those by Sappho,

Pascal or the late Wittgenstein (although, as deconstructive colleagues would argue, a completed and coherent opus is no guarantee of conceptual unity). In any case, Martin astutely evokes the riveting sets of what he calls the ‘tensions’ that run through Gramsci’s thinking, culminating in a ‘puzzling mix of reflective open-mindedness and hard-nosed centralism’, and ‘endors[ing] both the primacy of “national-popular” configurations at a political level while remaining attached to the primacy, at an economic level, of class as the historical force grounding subjectivity’. While the existence of these tensions does provide the compelling background for Martin’s at times devastating account of the various ‘selective’ readings of Gramsci that have put his work into the forefront of servicing an ever more divergent set of political concerns and positions, it is also hard not to read as a sign of the times that we are speaking in terms of productive ‘tensions’ rather than of *dialectic*, whether the contradictions at stake be resolvable or not.

But if any term marks the conflicted legacy of Gramsci’s thought, that would be the concept of *hegemony*, whose vagaries Martin effectively unpacks in terms of its relation to the state, subjectivity, and ethics. In the first instance, the coercive power of the *state* is expanded and mediated through the institutions of civil society in ways that inculcate ‘a consensual basis to class power’ (Gramsci, 1971: 238–239). But, this hegemonic construction of consent implies, in the second instance, forms of political *subjectivity* that, as Martin specifies, ‘do not automatically or wholly follow from one’s position in relations of production’, such as, most famously with Gramsci, the regionalist identities (North versus South) that played across the uneven economic development of post-Risorgimento Italy and raised specific challenges to a coherent, nationwide socialist strategy. Finally, with regard to the third instance, Martin argues,

hegemony was for Gramsci a necessarily ethical matter in so far as a state-building project – built upon the dissemination and renewal of popular common sense – ought to be itself an emancipatory process, rather than just a crude scramble for power.

While these dimensions of hegemony can nonetheless be convincingly framed within a classic Marxist–Leninist project, all three also opened up potential divergences that would question the key tenets of historical materialism in defining the objective economic basis of class identity, state power, and socialist struggle. Martin astutely tracks the resulting cracks opened up within Western Marxism by Gramsci’s apparent relevance for new social movements not based in class, on the one hand, and on the other, by intellectual developments such as poststructuralism that emphasised forms of contingency and complexity in understanding relations of power to specific subjectivities.

The watershed moment in these developments, according to Martin, came with the publication of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and socialist strategy* in 1985, a work that both brings a certain interpretation of the Gramscian concept of hegemony to the centre of political praxis and yet, as Martin, also observes, essentially evacuates what remains of classic Marxist determinism from that concept, in turn, ironically ‘consigning Gramsci to history’ in the very act of appropriating him. As such, Gramsci becomes for Laclau and Mouffe a kind of ‘double agent in the Marxist camp whose overt commitments were secretly incompatible with the implicitly deconstructive logic of his thought’. As such, concludes Martin, Gramsci

is of surprisingly little interest to Laclau and Mouffe and functions more 'as an argumentative device' for the theoretical development of their own brand of post-Marxism rather than as a 'direct political inspiration'.

The result is a full-blown crisis in the reception of Gramsci, which leads to what Martin describes as an 'either/or' response. On the one hand, according to Martin, there is a vigorous reassertion of the continuing contemporary relevance of Gramsci and the theory of hegemony in classic Marxist terms as essentially grounded in economic determinism; on the other hand, a complete abandonment of the Gramscian legacy as 'anachronistic' or irrelevant within the changed circumstances of today's world. And if I read Martin correctly, both sides of the dilemma engage in a form of 'left melancholia' by their continued espousal of a unified and authentic *subject* of emancipation. For Martin, Laclau and Mouffe are understood resolutely to refuse the either/or alternative of such left melancholia by their

emptying of hegemony of any privileged social content or normative commitments in favour of an admittedly formalistic frame quite at odds with the melodramatic flavour of 'victims' versus 'villains', oppression versus freedom, which so often underscores the moral certitude of left thinking and divides society along a single antagonistic frontier.

By 'shifting the ontological status of hegemony from a theory of ideology to a "new political logic" of social constitution' based in the contingencies of antagonisms, equivalencies, complexities and ever-morphing subject positions, Laclau and Mouffe would eschew the pitfalls of left melancholia and proceed to a thoroughgoing mourning that leaves Gramsci behind even as he remains the empty moniker for their elaboration of a radical democratic pluralism as a fundamentally different project and concept of politics. And while they themselves remain as they claim 'post-Marxist' to the extent that class and economic determinants still continue to play a prominent but no longer *the* predominant role in their concept of politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 4), the broader vision of an endlessly abstract and coalitional form of political action with no epistemological certainty also begs the question of what could make such a politics able to draw the motivations, if not the enthusiasm, of political subjects. Martin alludes to this new dilemma near the end of his paper and teasingly announces a further exploration of it elsewhere:

This position [of Laclau and Mouffe], of course, creates problems of its own, which I will not explore here, about how far one can go with an abstract framework of this kind to understand and positively unify specific political struggles. For it may be that in mourning Gramsci, we bid farewell to a stable or consistent idea of emancipation that makes radical left politics appealing.

Such a conclusion is exacerbated by a view of political struggles as 'intrinsically impure and inauthentic because they do not pre-exist the logic of antagonism through which they emerge'. Deconstructing the concept of hegemony, in other words, may leave us with not much in the way of 'socialist strategy', to cite the last half of the title to Laclau and Mouffe's major work. And if this is what mourning leads us to, then despite all the issues, frankly I will take melancholia any day.

Perhaps the alternative need not be framed again in either/or terms of mourning *or* melancholia but perhaps as *both* mourning *and* melancholia, or even *neither* mourning *nor* melancholia, some new utopian renegotiation of the leftist past that acknowledges its failures and defeats while simultaneously conjuring up an emancipatory vision of a future capable of eliciting the kind of enthusiasm and commitment to make the necessary ‘impurity’ of politics and coalition building turn into inspired and durable action.

Recently, Enzo Traverso (2016) has compellingly argued for such a rehabilitation of left melancholia, not as nostalgic and ineffective handwringing or melodramatic victimology but as the very call to struggle, as the unique political sensibility capable of finding inspiration out of the courageous acts of vanquished heroes. Far from being the ‘conservative tendency’ bemoaned by Wendy Brown (2003), Traverso sees melancholia as a form of resistance in a situation where ‘a successful mourning could also mean identification with the enemy: lost socialism replaced by accepted capitalism’ (Traverso, 2016: 45). He argues *contra* Freud to ‘depathologize’ melancholia and to see it, at least in the context of utopian and emancipatory leftist politics, as an ‘enabling process’ and ‘not demotivating or demobilizing’ (Traverso, 2016: 45–51). In political terms, it would be a tragic ‘fusion between the suffering of a catastrophic experience ... and the persistence of a utopia lived as a horizon of expectation and a historical perspective’ (Traverso, 2016: 51). In other words, ‘melancholia means memory and awareness of the potentialities of the past: a fidelity to the emancipatory promises of revolution, not to its consequences’ (Traverso, 2016: 52). What Traverso (2016) accordingly calls the ‘dialectic of utopian melancholia’ (p 51) both acknowledges ‘the danger of failure’ *and* ‘the hope of success’, to cite Lucien Goldmann but also Gramsci’s remark that ‘the only “scientific” prediction was struggle’ (p 53). Traverso could have cited that other, even better known example of Gramscian wit, the equally pithy and more overtly dialectical one that does provide a kind of motto for a utopian melancholy: ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’.¹

For Martin, the problem with left melancholia is the fixation on ‘an authentic subject of emancipation liberated from the uncertainties of politics itself’, while the work of mourning enabled by Laclau and Mouffe leads us to ‘bid farewell to a stable or consistent idea of emancipation that makes radical left politics appealing’. The dissymmetry here between an ‘authentic *subject*’ on the one hand, and a ‘consistent *idea*’ of emancipation on the other, is telling. Indeed an ‘idea of emancipation’ may not necessarily suppose ‘an authentic subject of emancipation’. While Martin seems to conflate the two and vacillates between them, one could also observe in this gap precisely the space in which Gramsci’s concept of hegemony *as* socialist strategy can effectively take place, namely as a way to maintain what ‘makes radical left politics appealing’: the *idea* of emancipation over and against its potential limitation to any given subject or subjects of emancipation. Indeed, I would argue the immense, persuasive power of the Marxist Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is precisely in its ability to overcome various divisions of alienated labour. And while the so-called ‘southern question’ looms large in his thinking, it is less a question of specifically regional identity than of overcoming the divide between industrial and agricultural labour, with each side understanding its implication in the capitalist relations of production that exploit them equally if differently. Overcoming the state and ideological forces that work to pit the one against the other, both kinds of workers

(regardless of region per se) find solidarity in the *idea* of their common emancipation from the chains of capitalist exploitation.

For the post-Marxist Gramsci, however, hegemony would seem to have developed as a shifting alliance of different identities, or 'subject positions' not necessarily motivated by any common set of economic determinants (race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on). Laclau and Mouffe claim to be still 'Marxist' (1985: 4) to the extent that class remains a key player without subsuming all other positions to itself, but the weaker alternative evokes the reputedly pragmatic coalition politics of the Euro-American centre-left over the last half-century. In this sense, and as we have seen over the last several decades, the so-called practical left ends up embracing the neoliberal love of the state reduced to mere technocracy, with the disastrous results we are witnessing. While the liberal left has presented itself as the friendly face of diversity, the right has everywhere bolstered its electoral fortunes through the wedge politics of difference and privilege. In the absence of that lost socialist alternative, whose proper mourning also means its active forgetting, both right and left have been complicit in the rapidly escalating inequality enabled by the worldwide triumph of capitalism. Within the context of the 1985 publication of *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, the concerns about dwindling working class enthusiasm for the left as well as the need to find a theoretical model that also effectively integrates the spread of new social movements make sense, especially within the contemporary Western discomfort with the outcomes of existing socialism as represented most prominently in the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other avowedly communist regimes.

Forty years later, the urgency is that of thinking through the *commonality* of how the various subject positions identified through coalition politics are all, in different ways, increasingly stressed under the hyper-exploitation of late capitalism. Developments such as the 'Occupy' movement with its vitriol against the 1% may represent a brief glimpse of what a contemporary counter-hegemonic socialist strategy might look like. Gramsci, if we recall one of those 'tensions' Martin cites in his work, would no doubt have seen the failure of this movement as a result of its excessive faith in spontaneity and corresponding lack of a centralised party apparatus able to lead beyond the momentary ecstasy of revolt to a genuine transformation, aka revolution, of society and an emancipation from the capitalist mode of production.

I come back then to the concept of utopian melancholia. The 'idea' of emancipation states itself more as a *lack* than as a loss, which situates it as the very horizon of politics, the utopia we can never properly mourn and be done with because it is not yet the case. The idea of emancipation can lead us forward whether or not it is concretely 'realisable'. Utopia is thus not necessarily opposed to pessimism, but is only meaningful when dialectically energised by it, to cite again Gramsci's slogan of *pessimismo dell'intelligenza, ottimismo della volontà*. While Laclau and Mouffe correctly offer a frank word of caution against the passive comfort of awaiting the iron rule of history to be more or less self-propelled into its end as classless society, and that the indefinite fight for radical democracy is by definition endless and requires forever an ongoing collective struggle, such pragmatism may also, on the other hand, de-energise the left's traditional constituencies and finds its sinister riposte in the kinds of authoritarian populisms we see all around, which are also typically fuelled by regressive, decadent utopianisms that rest on the claims of a single strongman to bring back a supposedly lost but utterly imaginary past: right-wing melancholia, if you like.

As Martin correctly concludes, ‘something was both lost and gained’ in Laclau and Mouffe’s revisionary mourning of Gramscian hegemony, but whether and in what ways his legacy can still inspire further possibilities and repercussions, that remains to be seen. Many years ago, in the throes of new left revisionism there was the call for a ‘return to Marx’. It would seem, at this point, that a call for a return to Gramsci might well be in order, at least if we want to think beyond the confines of a post-Marxist Gramsci and reignite the radical, if melancholically infused, utopianism of his thought and the urgency of his clarity in seeing through the false populisms of his time, which have lately come back to haunt us.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Note

¹ The slogan appears in various places and in varying versions across Gramsci’s writing, a full detailing of which has even generated a Wikipedia entry: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pessimismo_dell%27intelligenza,_ottimismo_della_volontà

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