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Post-hegemony: politics outside the usual post-Marxist paradigm

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The post-Marxist outline of hegemony

‘Hegemony’ functions as the codeword for the mechanics of political activity within a paradoxical representation of totality that shows the inadequacy of all representation. Gramsci described it as the practice that shapes a national-popular collective will in its efforts to become state through wars of position. His theory of hegemony and the concomitant thesis of ‘becoming state’ widened the horizon of socialist politics by abandoning the Leninist putschist strategy of revolution as a mythical seizure of power. Gramsci nonetheless retains Lenin’s aspiration to reinstitute the whole through revolutionary action, incremental or otherwise, so, like Lenin, his thinking about counter-hegemonic projects bears the imprint of a strong notion of totality. By the seventies many of those who were sympathetic towards Gramsci and took their inspiration from his heritage, particularly theorists of the now defunct Italian Communist Party or close to its position—like de Giovanni, Cacciari and Marramao—found this unsatisfactory and began to question it, together with what they saw as remnants of class-reductionism in his thought. They became neo- and post-Gramscians, while others, who also made the move from critical Marxism to a critique of Marxism, started to refer to themselves simply as post-Marxists.

Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* fired the opening salvos of post-Marxism in English-speaking academic circles. Their book remains a tour de force for anyone interested in a discourse-theoretical revival of the concept of hegemony; it reconstructs the political and intellectual itinerary of European Marxism, traces the genealogy of the concept of hegemony within that tradition and proposes ‘radical democracy’ as an image of thought for progressive politics. Their project in many ways continues the Althusserian critique while avoiding the metaphysics of the ‘last instance’: the target of Laclau and Mouffe (hereafter L&M) is the Hegelian expressive totality as well as essentialism, either under the guise of economism or of the transcendental subject as seen in class-reductionism. Their goal is to disengage the socialist project from its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century incarnations. They identify how, from Luxemburg to Trotsky, and from Lenin to Gramsci, the politics nurtured by historical materialism invariably resolved the play between the logic of contingency and the logic of necessity in favour of the latter. This enclosed the doctrine within the bounds of onto-theology and crippled the practical purchase of socialist politics.
The break with essentialism seeks to free the hegemonic form of politics, Gramsci’s key contribution to progressive political thought, from the constraints of laws of history and their designated subject of emancipatory politics, the working class. Their goal here is to update socialist politics for the complexities of a democratic and pluralist setting. In emphasizing political practice instead of the laws of history, L&M deliver us a post-Gramscian hegemony governed by contingency. Instead of invoking a general contradiction as a principle of explanation for oppression, rebellion and change, they speak of the articulation of a series of discrete struggles in chains of equivalence that suspend the particularity of struggles or, more precisely, that generate relations of equivalence that make each struggle signify its own particularity as well as a supplementary meaning. This supplement is critical, as it allows formally distinct struggles and demands to coalesce into a novel subjectivity to challenge a given constellation of power. Equivalence also requires the production of frontier effects or antagonisms—a moment of negativity—to separate an inside from an outside and therefore to demarcate the wide array of forces that will coalesce in a friendly collective ‘us’ confronting named adversaries. These chains and antagonisms can be macro or micro, state oriented or unfold in the field of civil society.

The ambivalence about the ontic or ontological status of hegemony

L&M’s reformulation of hegemony around the logic of contingency constitutes an important theoretical contribution. While one cannot understate the intellectual impact of their work among left-leaning academics, there is a lingering impression that their reflection on hegemony does not quite manage to cast off the spell of necessity they criticized so cogently in their book. How does this happen and why would it matter? This is what we have to assess. I want to address these questions from two angles.

The first one refers to the slippage between ontology and the ontic. Necessity appears in this post-Gramscian depiction of hegemony through an unspoken assumption about the relation between hegemony and politics: the hegemonic form of politics is hegemonic and necessary. It is hegemonic because the production of equivalence and frontier effects constitutes the analogical model for democratic politics, and it is necessary because more than a form of politics, it is the paradigmatic form of politics. While the former is a historical and descriptive statement open to contestation (and I will present some reservations about this claim below), the implicit claim concerning the necessity of hegemony is more problematic in that it shields hegemony from the test of its own contingency. This is because of L&M’s ambivalence with regard to the status of this politics. They conceive hegemony as a typically modern phenomenon and an offspring of the democratic revolution, but also as the universal form of politics. To put it in Heideggerese, their take on hegemony is located less in the difference between the ontic and the ontological than in the oscillation between one and the other.

They first present us with an incremental account of the emergence of hegemony. L&M say that hegemony ‘is, quite simply, a political type of relation, a form, if one wishes, of politics’, in which case they locate it strictly at the level of the ontic: hegemony is a form of politics amongst other possible forms. What is the historical scope of this form? The authors give us the answer:
The hegemonic form of politics only expands as the open, non-sutured dimension of the social increases. In a medieval peasant community the area open to differential articulation is minimal and, thus, there are no hegemonic forms of articulation [...] That is why the hegemonic form of politics only becomes dominant at the beginning of modern times, when the reproduction of the different social areas takes place in permanently changing conditions which constantly require the construction of new systems of differences.4

While it is clear that for them hegemony cannot apply to pre-modern situations, a specific timeline is not the decisive criterion as there are a number of contemporary experiences of religious, racial, ethnic or even more conventionally ‘political’ codes like totalitarianism or dictatorship that equally forestall hegemonic politics. These experiences, some of them modern while others are revivals of pre-modern codes, aim to close off the possibility of questioning the legitimacy of authority or of recasting the prevailing way of thinking the relation between command and obedience. To go back to the passage quoted above, what really matters for L&M is that hegemony does not work in a scenario where ‘the area open for differential articulation is minimal’. They do not specify the threshold of differential articulation required for the enactment of the hegemonic form of politics, so we have no way of determining how minimal the requisite condition of this minimal area is. All they say is that there is a need of a space for articulation for hegemony to come forth.

However, we do know—because we are told so—that the dominance of hegemonic articulations begins with modernity and gets a boost from the democratic revolution. To use a language borrowed from Lefort, modernity becomes decisive because it conceives order as a politically instituted artifice, whereas democracy expands this trope by conceiving this institution as a continual process. L&M also suggest that the best is still to come: their own project of radical democracy seeks to provide the conditions for the blossoming of hegemony. Here their argument draws from Tocqueville, particularly a reference he makes to the ‘democratic revolution’ in the introduction to Democracy in America. Hegemony, L&M claim, ‘can come to constitute a fundamental tool for political analysis on the left’ under conditions that ‘arise originally in the field of what we have termed the “democratic revolution”, but they are maximised in all their deconstructive effects in the project for a radical democracy’.5 This might seem self-serving but it is not illegitimate. The democratic revolution operates as a condition of possibility for hegemony and their political project of radical democracy is the condition for a true realization of hegemony’s potential. Radical democracy would simply accentuate what L&M already see as a tendency. Yet given this progression from less hegemony to more hegemony, it is reasonable to ask whether an incremental account such as this might not imply a veiled telos of intensity. I mention it because the authors have already told us that the dominance of this historical form of politics has expanded continually throughout modernity. If this expansion is then turbocharged by radical democracy, then hegemony and politics will begin to converge asymptotically, at least as long as we remain within a democratic setting. I am not saying—or at least I am not saying yet—that for L&M politics and hegemony become indistinguishable but rather that the gap between them begins to close as we move towards radical democracy. This reduction of the
distance between one and the other hinders the possibility of an outside of hegemony (more on this below).

Their second account of the status of hegemony—based on the relation between the latter and explanation—moves away from the ontic level in which they anchored the incremental approach to hegemony. A parallel with Lefort is instructive here. Lefort conceived democracy as the truly historical society because it acknowledges the contingency of its own foundations. It erects an institutional stage where the conflicts about the norms, nature and form of the community are played out in front of all, granting visibility to the political institution of order or objectivity as a continuous, never-ending process. L&M rework this argument. Instead of speaking of democracy as the historical form of society, they suggest that hegemony is the historical form of politics par excellence because it makes us aware of the precarious and contingent status of all objectivity and power arrangements. Like in a correspondence theory of truth, hegemony provides us with a better fit with actual politics, or at least with modern politics and particularly its democratic variant, in which case the hegemonic form cannot be challenged, or can be challenged only by failing to recognize this fact. In the closing paragraph of their book they take this a step further by saying that the field of the political is the field of a game called hegemony. This is why one has to conclude that hegemony, a form of politics, morphs into politics proper: hegemony becomes the universal form of the political or at least of democratic politics. This universalism is not a problem for someone like Carl Schmitt, who was interested in the basic traits of the political—which he famously describes as an invariable code built around friend–enemy oppositions—and not in this or that particular form of politics. L&M, however, claim to be discussing a form of politics instead of politics or even the political as such, but end up conflating one with the other. Hegemonic articulations may be contingent, but the hegemonic form ends up being necessary. The authors have thus moved the concept and the practice from the ontic to the ontological level: hegemony has to do with the being of politics.

Laclau goes further in his solo work by affirming that hegemony is constitutive of the being of things. The hegemonic logic ‘is the very logic of the construction of the social’, and ‘hegemony is, in the final instance, an inherent dimension to all social practice’. Here hegemony ceases to be a type of relation or a form of politics and becomes instead the ontological kernel or basic predicate of all social being. To say it quickly and provocatively, which means saying it at the risk of being somewhat unfair to Laclau by not addressing the many subtleties of his argument, the hegemonic form of politics is a fact and cannot be falsified.

Hegemony has no outside: a mode of articulation becomes articulation as such

The second way of looking at the assumption of necessity refers to the status of ‘articulation’ in the work of L&M. The success of any hegemonic project hinges on how effectively it can construct a chain of equivalence between different demands, subject positions and forces that already exist or remain to be created—or more accurately, whose being will be modified through their articulation into a particular chain of equivalence. This, of course, is a tautological statement since the hegemonic form of politics revolves around the production of such
chains. If politics consists of the production of equivalences and frontier effects around antagonism, then the absence of either would entail an absence of politics. L&M close off the conceptual space for non-hegemonic politics. The hegemonic form of politics has no ‘beyond’ and therefore no outside. The absence of a beyond troubles the theory by depriving hegemony of an outside to define it, or, alternatively, in L&M’s account hegemony knows of no outside except by the one afforded by competing hegemonic projects. This reiterates the circularity of the argument: in the absence of a ‘true’ outside that would set limits to this form, all politics become variants of the hegemonic form.

Proponents of the theory of hegemony could retort that politics is about articulation or, if one prefers, about linking, as Lyotard calls it. In The Differend, Lyotard accepts the incommensurability of regimes of phrases or genres of discourse by saying that one cannot apply the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges to those of the judged genre without the risk of causing a wrong and creating a victim. This does not entail a celebration of discursive monads or self-referential regimes of phrases to avoid such a risk: for Lyotard the linkage between phrases of heterogeneous regimes is the unavoidable problem of politics. In fact, by saying that ‘to link is necessary; how to link is contingent’ he coined a minimal definition of politics as a practice that deals with the contingency of links between incommensurables. The necessity of linking—the sole independent variable in Lyotard’s discourse—is not in question as it has the status of an axiom. The part about how to link is more interesting for us because much of what is at stake in the discussion about the hegemonic form of politics revolves around the way one reads the phrase.

One way of doing so is to focus on the contingency of the link and therefore to describe Lyotard’s phrase as an explicit rebuttal of claims about the necessity of certain links. Necessity is a suspect notion in politics because it functions as an equivalent of the pundit’s claim to know how things will play out. Its formula is the smug ‘I told you so’. In the case of the mechanical determinism of the Second International that L&M criticize, this ‘I told you so’ takes the shape of a theory that claims to have uncovered the laws of history: its superior understanding of society and its transformations allows historical materialists to know where history is taking us. Contingency breaks with this determinism. In many ways, contingency is another way of speaking of the singularity of the event, of that which escapes calculation while living off it: things are not aleatory but they could have turned out differently if other decisions had been made in a given juncture. Contingency is actually a vindication of political inventiveness in the face of a seemingly inescapable iron cage of structural determinations. L&M reconstruct the Marxist tradition and build their case for hegemony around the political advantages of this possibility. As mentioned above, they identify a tension between the logic of necessity and the logic of contingency, between the adherence to the determinist ‘laws of motion’ of capitalism postulated by historical materialism and the vindication of political reasoning as a practice of articulation that cannot foresee or guarantee a given outcome. Invariably, necessity prevails in this tradition, especially from the Second International onward, and makes things go badly for Marxism in the west. L&M want to counteract the decline of socialist politics, so they are happy to go along with the label of ‘post-Marxism’ as a means to break with essentialism. To do so they invoke hegemony—a political form that embraces contingency and accepts the incompleteness of any
totality—as a practice of articulation that transforms the identity of that which it articulates. This is why they see hegemony as a mode of institution of objectivity: objectivity or the being of things is an effect of a hegemonic articulation and all institution is by nature precarious and incomplete. This avoids necessity, opens itself to the possibility of the event, and prevents the closure of political history.

A second reading of Lyotard’s utterance shifts the focus away from the contingency of the link to the contingency of the how, as in ‘how to link’. The axiom—to link is necessary—remains unchallenged, and so does the claim about the contingency of all links. Yet in stating that the way we link—how we link or articulate—is also contingent, Lyotard is indicating that there is more than one mode of linking or of instituting objectivity. L&M are ambiguous about the contingency of the ‘how’ and in fact undermine it through an epistemological move reminiscent of the one Roustang detects in Freud. Freud initially described the unconscious as a working hypothesis to explain psychic phenomena that escape consciousness—lapses, failed acts, compulsion to repetition, and so on. Yet he then turned it into an object of knowledge, says Roustang, as if the hypothesis proved the existence of the phenomena.14 He calls this an epistemological blunder, ‘a tautology because the theoretical instrument is always already equivalent to the facts from which it derives’.15 We find something similar in L&M’s take on hegemony. They begin by presenting hegemony as a mode of articulation—one amongst others—and end up conceiving it as the practice of articulation as such, which reiterates the ambivalent status of hegemony, at times ontic and at times ontological. That is why ‘how to link’ is never a serious issue; the authors already know the answer beforehand through the circular argument that states that hegemony is a practice of articulation and that hegemony is ‘an inherent dimension to all social practice’, in which case there can be no practice outside the hegemonic form of articulation. The category of ‘being’, as that of politics, is unthinkable outside of hegemony. This is what leads them to propose an isomorphism between politics and hegemony, a semantic overlap between one and the other.

The very idea of general equivalence that leads to the fetishism of the commodity-form is then transferred to hegemony.16 While labour-power functions as the lingua franca that enables commodity exchange by focusing on value rather than on any positive attributes of commodities, hegemony functions as a universal translator or Esperanto of politics by presenting politics as a practice of articulation that builds an equivalence between different struggles, groups and demands. Yet unlike labour-power, which is the sole commodity that breaks the law of equivalence because it is exchanged under par, hegemony turns out to be a universal without a symptom because it construes all politics as hegemonic politics. It becomes, as it were, a perfect form.

Post-hegemony I: posing the question

The next step is to see whether one can speak of an outside of the hegemonic form. Many find it difficult to imagine non-hegemonic politics at the level of the state, particularly within the setting of democratic institutions and the electoral politics that govern much of what happens there. The same applies—maybe even more so—to classical revolutionary politics in its pursuit of regime change. It would seem that in these cases hegemony rules and any discussion of an outside is
misplaced. On scrutiny, its presumed rule is not so clear, especially if one focuses on the activity of contesting the given instead of on what some might call the moment of domination—the existing institutional settings and the prevailing common sense.

The usual outside of hegemony

The formation of a collective will, be it in everyday politics or in revolutionary endeavours, is not necessarily—and perhaps not even primarily—about the ‘metaphorical surplus’ authorizing equivalence between formally different groups. This is because politics at the state level is not always about creating a superordinate identity of the type envisioned by the theory of hegemony. In the case of elections, it often consists of something more mundane like the aggregation of disparate special interest groups, the expression of people’s disenchantment with ruling groups and existing policies or simply a whim. Supporters of the theory can retort by saying that hegemony is a project of identity or will-formation and not a hard referential reality, so it is unfair to claim that either there is a fully-fledged superordinate identity or there is no hegemony. This is true, but then they would have to concede that its way of piecing together a coalition operates alongside other ways of articulation that do not require or demand a surplus signification for relations of equivalence among groups or struggles. One only needs to think of ad hoc and short-lived electoral alliances between political parties or of various combinations of these alliances together with movements and interest groups: they rarely bother about generating a new identity that exceeds the identity of its parts. Like when a character in an old science fiction movie gazes at the stars and utters the trademark line ‘we are not alone’, hegemony operates in a crowded field where it is one way of doing politics among others.

Moreover, whether it is successful or fizzles out as a misfire, hegemony in the strong sense of the word is a fleeting experience verified in liminal junctures when politics seems to dominate our existence. It is during these tumultuous times of upheavals when the stakes are high and people find it hard not to take sides that one might actually visualize the metaphoric surplus of particular struggles and how this surplus seems to allow us to experience a superordinate identity. L&M seem to realize this. They ultimately criticize Rosa Luxemburg, but it is not by chance that they write sympathetically about her views of the revolutionary mass strike as a device designed to trigger the coalescence of dispersed struggles and create the revolutionary political subject. May 1968 in France or the Argentinean mobilizations of 2001 (more on this below) are other examples of liminal junctures when politics captures people’s imagination and desires. In both cases a heterogeneous mass of groups and claims coalesced briefly around a particular demand—whether the rejection of bourgeois norms or the disgust with the corruption and incompetence of politicians—that functioned as a universal demand for those involved and that might—or might not—have created a novel political subjectivity. Barring these extraordinary junctures that come closer to a collective carpe diem than to the manifestation of the day-to-day travails of piecing together a counter-hegemony, people go on with their lives by striking for better wages, seeking a promotion, attending classes, complaining about the quality of public services or discussing politics and thinking of ways to
change the world. This occurs without the demiurge of the metaphoric surplus required for a common identity, or at least without its being present in any obvious way. It also happens while other, non-hegemonic political performances are at work, from militant apathy to the old and tested representative government that absolves many of the burden of even bothering about politics.

All this questions the conflation of hegemony with politics and, by implication, reminds post-Marxists sympathetic to their work that there are ways of thinking and doing politics that are non-, extra- or post-hegemonic. Articulation remains a task of politics—we have seen that it is indeed the task of politics—but how to do so can adopt the hegemonic format of chains of equivalence as well as many others that do not depend on such chains. What we need to do now is show not only that here is an outside of hegemony but also that there are modes of political articulation that authorize us to speak of post-hegemony.

**A post-hegemony outside**

Two examples can help us introduce the theme of post-hegemony. The first one is ‘historical’. It focuses on the political crisis and mobilizations of December 2001 that brought down the government of President Fernando de la Rúa in Argentina. The country’s economic and financial free fall, combined with the erratic behaviour of the government and the apparent lack of concern of the central authorities and Congress for the fate of the underclass, prompted an improbable range of protesters that took to the streets. ‘Coalition’ would be too strong a word to describe this collection of people, unless one uses it with some reservations and accepts the fortuitous nature of their coming together. They ranged from unemployed and extremely impoverished people from the urban periphery of Buenos Aires and the countryside, angry at their dead-end prospects after more than a decade of strict neo-liberal economic policies, to the equally enraged middle class trying to come to terms with the government’s virtual confiscation of their savings by blocking access to their accounts and suspending the parity between the local currency and the US dollar. Protesters included collectives such as the Asambleas de Barrios or autonomous neighbourhood assemblies that emerged spontaneously in major cities and the groups of unemployed piqueteros named after their tactic of cutting off roads, traditional Peronistas of the labour movement and a variety of radical leftist parties from the ideological fringe. This heterogeneous mixture of people and organizations shared their opposition to a ‘political class’ of career politicians who had mismanaged the country during the 15 years or so that followed the return to democratic rule and were still trying to put the spin on a situation that was already out of control. The iconic chant of those days—*Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*, ‘All of them must go, not a single one can stay’—reflected this anger against politicians.

These mobilizations were political, at least in the Schmittian sense of the word: participants proved capable of distinguishing their friends from their enemies, and they were prepared to confront their designated enemies in some kind of contest. Yet is this enough to claim that their politics followed the hegemonic format? Was the ensemble of individuals, groups and demands directed against the ‘political class’ a sign of the disintegration of the hegemony of the nineties in Argentina, one strongly imbued with the spirit of the Washington Consensus and IMF policies? Was it an indication of a new counter-hegemonic project
in the making, even if in the end this project misfired? Those sympathetic towards
the theory of hegemony would probably respond affirmatively by pointing out
that there were a number of heterogeneous demands coming together: for jobs,
punishment of corrupt politicians and business people or access to one's
savings and honouring the existing monetary policy of parity between those
savings and US dollars. They might also say that the actions of groups voicing
them signified their own particularity and a surplus meaning or metaphorical
excess whereby each demand expressed something common to all of them—for
example, the distrust of career politicians and the common perception of the
failure of politics to address social demands. They would add that this second
meaning subverted the differential character of the first, in which case these
demands would be articulated with one another, they would coalesce in a chain
of equivalence.

The problem with this narrative is that it confuses the desire to identify the
hegemonic form of politics with its verification. The proof depends largely on
anecdotal evidence about the ad hoc articulation of demands during the protests
of 2001. Even if one allows for what I mentioned above, namely that hegemony
tends to be verified in liminal moments, if it happened at all in the Argentinean
case it was a fleeting and accidental occurrence. The coming together of the
various groups in the streets, neighbourhoods and occupied factories was not
the result of an explicit practice of articulation, there was not agency of articula-
tion and not even a project whereby one could speak of an effort to forge a relation
of equivalence between them. If there was such and equivalence it was mostly
circumstantial and we could equally describe the dynamics of the protests as an
indication of the making of a 'multitude', which Virno defines succinctly as a plur-
arity that persists as such in the public sphere without converging into a One.18
This is not because the multitude negates the One but because it seeks a form of
unity 'which allows for the political-social existence of the many seen as being
many'.19 It is obvious, of course, that the unity of these many requires some articu-
lation to come about, but this articulation is not conceived in terms of relations of
equivalence because this would harm or at least dilute the singularities that make
up the multitude. We will see something about this type of unity below. For the
time being, let us say simply that the way in which the Asambleas de Barrio,
groups of piqueteros, the takeovers of factories, the unemployed and the middle
classes coalesced in 2001 can illustrate the multitude in action, the political and
social existence of the many inasmuch as they are many.

A second example of post-hegemony is more 'theoretical' and does not involve
a critical juncture. It refers to the 'New International', the image of thought that
Derrida develops in Specters of Marx as a way to conceive supra-state politics
and solidarity in the twenty-first century. He describes the New International as
an untimely link, without status, without title, and without name, barely
public even if it is not clandestine, without contract, 'out of joint', without
coordination, without party, without country, without national commu-
nity (International before, across, and beyond any national determi-
nation), without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class.20

It is an International or community 'to come', a political project in the making that
implicates, he says, all those who suffer and those who are not insensitive to
the impact of these urgent problems, yet has no boss or central co-ordination.21
The lack of central co-ordination amongst those who are part of this imagined community—to use Benedict Anderson’s felicitous expression—might be an obstacle for generating the sweeping consensus necessary for carrying out major global transformations. This is true, but only to a certain extent, for its informality does not forestall the creation of ad hoc networks around specific themes, as we will see in the discussion of viral politics. The new internationalists are putting on stage the themes of equality and justice, the statute of frontiers in relation to immigrants coming from the periphery of advanced capitalism, child labour, AIDS, sexual mutilation, and so on. As in the case of the Argentineans chanting ‘All of them must go, not a single one can stay’ and coming together as singularities to create a multiplicity confronting a named enemy, it is difficult to imagine how the politics of this International can be said to be modelled around the chains of equivalence of the hegemonic form of politics. The mode of articulation of this international comes closer to that of either the ‘multitude’ or a network of networks like the ‘movement of movements’ of global activists who share the belief that ‘another world is possible’. Yet this is not an obstacle for them eventually to go for another politics based on elections, or on hegemonic or counter-hegemonic projects and initiatives either.

These examples give us a taste of what post-hegemony might be about. Two of the intellectual sources that inform its development are Deleuze and Guattari’s work on rhizomes and nomads and Deleuze’s brief yet intriguing piece on post-disciplinary or post-Fordist societies. Each gives rise to a broad strand of thought about resistance to capitalism and about politics generally.

One strand, more concerned with post-Fordism and the limits of both sovereignty and state-based politics, introduces notions such as empire, multitude and exodus that seek to mark a distance with arborescent models of politics by questioning the links between sovereignty and its concomitant reference to ‘the people’. Hardt and Negri’s Empire as well as the work of Virno and others coming from or inspired by the Italian autonomista movement is emblematic here. So is the work of others like Hakim Bey, who draws loosely from Deleuze and Guattari (hereafter D&G) to develop the notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), and perhaps John Holloway, who looks at the Zapatista experience and speaks of changing the world without invoking the Jacobin and Leninist trope of seizing power. The other strand of post-hegemony privileges what I call viral politics or a mode of action based on informal networks. Viral initiatives come to life and spread without requiring central co-ordination and without always taking the form of a people versus the state even when they do not exclude this occurrence either. Electronic civil disobedience (ECD) and ‘hacktivism’ are viral possibilities in the ‘cool’ medium of cyberspace, but there are others in the ‘hot’ politics of the streets. I will now look at these strands in more detail.

**Post-hegemony II: multitude, exodus and the state**

Let me begin with exodus and its relation to multitude. Advocates of the multitude invite us to reassess the canon of modernity by extolling the virtues of Spinoza’s defence of plurality over Hobbes’ support for the oneness of sovereignty, or the multitude over the people. It is not a mechanical retrieval of Spinoza but rather an iteration of his gesture. As Virno put it, the multitude
of the seventeenth century represented a conservative violence understood in the noble sense of the word as a *jus resistentiae* prior to the state. It aimed to validate the prerogatives of an individual or a local community vis-à-vis central power or to safeguard forms of life already rooted in society. In contrast, the contemporary multitude refuses to seize state power and defends forms of non-representative democracy. What remains unchanged, though, is the opposition between people and multitude.

This is by no means a settled question. Bull offers a compelling critique of the way in which Hardt, Negri, Virno, *et al.* construe the people/multitude opposition. He shows that Hobbes did not oppose the multitude but only ‘a multitude that thinks it is a people when it is not’ and that Spinoza assigns a positive political role to the multitude only ‘when it is a people in all but name’. We must also bear in mind that, as with many other writers, their ‘Spinoza’ has to be a *selective* Spinoza given that he himself entertained some troubling thoughts that are at odds with the celebration of the political energies of the multitude. It is true that he advocates democracy, but he also tries to demonstrate that women by nature are not equal to men and therefore have no right to rule. This, of course, suspends equality in the public sphere. We may add in passing that ‘the right to vote in the supreme council and to fill public offices’ that Spinoza describes as a sign of democracy is actually a defence of representation and therefore of a state-centred politics. This seems strange in the light of the critique of statal politics and representative democracy so popular among advocates of the multitude.

Yet many people do invoke the Spinozian trope of the multitude and try to connect it with the critique of representation that appears regularly in the discussion about post-hegemony. Beasley-Murray was one of the first to popularize the term ‘post-hegemony’ and propose a link with the multitude. He maintains that we are witnessing the rise of the autopoietic multitude, which he describes as ‘a collection of singularities, with a tendency always to add more singularities towards the goal of uniting all singularities in a relation of continuous variation’. He also speaks of ‘the closure of an era of (pseudo)hegemonic and inevitably failed (because inevitably debilitating) groupings organized in terms of equivalence’. This remark introduces the theme of post-hegemony without ambiguity, even when one can dispute his claim that the era of hegemony is ending.

*Multitude and the absence of a superordinate ‘+1’*

The polemic about whether the ‘multitude’ has, will, or should replace the ‘people’ or demos as the decisive category of politics is not over, as one can see, for example, by looking at Rancière’s brief but sharp defence of demos over multitude. This is partly because those who are suspicious of the notion of the multitude argue that its immanence cannot really explain the negativity involved in politics and thus think that its advocates have not developed an actual politics to go with it. Enthusiasm for the multitude as a political concept or project then depends mostly on the evocative force of the term. Indeed, very little is said about how to accomplish what Beasley-Murray describes as ‘the goal of unifying all singularities in a relation of continuous variation’ to render the multitude an operational political category. Perhaps one of the problems lies in the qualifier *all*, as in the utterance ‘uniting all singularities’, for this insinuates a strong
notion of totality that is inconsistent with the notion of multitude. Things are different if the ‘all’ refers only to those who resist and seek to interrupt an existing constellation of power. This would introduce negativity and therefore dispel the criticism that the multitude is pure immanence, but uniting all the singularities of resistance has its problems too, if only because one starts to suspect that counter-hegemony—and therefore equivalence—enters into the multitude through the back door, as it were.

Hardt, Negri and Virno invoke the ‘general intellect’ as a way of thinking the unity of the multitude. Marx discusses the term briefly in the Grundrisse—in three pages or less—and uses it to indicate the possibility that ‘social knowledge has become a direct form of production’.

There is, of course, evidence to support the argument about the creative force of the general intellect. This ranges from intriguing experiences like YouTube or MySpace, for example, to collective endeavours in continual becoming like Linux, Firefox and Wikipedia. However, this intellect or potential faculty to think that Virno sees as the foundation of social co-operation does not seem enough to create the commonality of the multitude as a political force. Linux et al. are signposts of purely intellectual labour and of the collaborative potential of singularities that never add up to the superordinate ‘þ 1’ of chains of equivalences (see below), but it is difficult to see in what way their collaboration begets a politics.

Having said this, the discussion around the promise of the multitude is relevant for us because of its vindication of singularity and action outside the format of chains of equivalence. To examine this we can return to the example of the Argentinean mobilizations of 2001. We have seen how equivalence works in the case of hegemony. For L&M, different struggles, groups or demands enter into relations of equivalence by expressing their own particularity—for better wages, gender equality, asylum rights or what have you—as well as by having a metaphoric surplus or supplementary common meaning like the vindication of a more genuine democracy or the indictment of a corrupt political class. Like in Marx’s labour theory of value, which establishes relations of equivalence between different use values by taking into account only the exchange value of commodities, L&M’s theory of hegemony builds equivalence by focusing on the shared surplus meaning that ignores rather than cancels out the singularity of each element that enters into the relation. But this meaning also creates what D&G call a supplementary dimension above the number of semiotic chains, social struggles, organizations of power or other ‘lines’ in a rhizomatic system. This is the supplement of order, the +1 of the One. D&G propose a polemical counterpoint to this One by asking whether a General is necessary for n individuals to fire in unison. Clearly, the General is a metaphor for the +1 that suspends the singularity of each of the n soldiers and turns them into equivalences within the One. In many cases this ‘unison’ is clearly the making of a General, yet when forged without such instance of co-ordination external to the n, what we have is a multiplicity like the one characterizing a rhizome. That is, a systemic n that functions without the imposition of the +1 of the One, or perhaps even an n – 1 as it is a system that does not require a supplementary principle of unity and from which the One of identity is subtracted. This is precisely what defines the multitude: the many as many (Virno) that enter into the commonality of an n without any superordinate category or +1. Negri and Virno actually saw the doings of the piqueteros and people in the Asamblea de Barrios as part of a
laboratory for political initiatives of the multitude, for collective action without the supernumerary +1. There was unison without equivalence and political protest and invention without counter-hegemony.

**Virno’s exodus**

Some might argue that this reconstructs the politics of the multitude retroactively—at least in its expressive aspects, as neither Negri nor Virno specify what a project of the multitude would look like or even whether it is pertinent in this case—by drawing from circumstantial evidence and leaning heavily on the evocative force of the term. One can agree or disagree on this but at least Negri et al. try to show that it is possible to conceptualize the way in which linking took place during the Argentinean mobilizations without appealing to the hegemonic format of politics. Their account of that juncture suggests proximity between the notion of multitude and a series of themes addressed by D&G. I am thinking of the vindication of rhizome, ‘becoming-minoritarian’ and nomadic singularities as a polemical counterpoint to consensus, over-coding and arborescent units of political analysis. The notions of radical civil disobedience and especially defection or exit are good examples of this and provide us with a more promising angle to infer what a politics of the multitude might look like.

Virno describes radical civil disobedience as the exact reverse of Hobbes’ principle of obedience. According to Hobbes, we obey a law even before we know what we will be ordered to do because obedience precedes the enactment of civil laws. Radical civil disobedience is not simply a transgression of a particular law because it questions the very validity of laws. It actually precedes civil laws and questions the capacity of the state to issue commands. Exit—an expression he borrows from Albert Hirschman and describes as exodus or defection—also refers to the state, or rather to the refusal to seize state power which Virno sees as one of the forms of political action of the multitude based on the general intellect. He calls this defection from statal politics an invention that alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary off balance; it is also a way of preventing the transfer of surplus knowledge and communication to the state or the capitalist enterprise. Virno illustrates this by reference to poor immigrants arriving into the USA in the mid-nineteenth century; many defected from factory discipline by moving to colonize territories as the frontier moved to the west. Yet he says little more about this—plus his example of a physical migration limits the political purchase of defection—so we must look elsewhere to find a more elaborate account of exodus.

**Can exodus change the world without seizing the state?**

Holloway does not talk about exodus, or at least not explicitly, but he proposes something that is not altogether different from a politics of defection in his critique of state-centred politics. It is possible, he says, to change the world without seizing power by multiplying and expanding the cracks/refusals that appear in the texture of domination. One could read his un-Jacobin and un-Leninist thesis of changing the world without seizing power against the backdrop of
becoming-minoritarian (see below), a gesture that eschews the classical view of revolution as insurrection and overthrow of the state.

He sees the refusal to seize power as part of a revolutionary agenda seeking to abolish relations of power. This abolition sounds naïve and outdated in the light of Foucault’s work on power—power is a relation and not a property, it is not simply the ‘no’ of prohibition because it also has a productive dimension and the state is not the sole locus of power relations because these are disseminated in society. Holloway is aware of this but underlines that his call to abolish power refers only to ‘power-over’ and not ‘power-to’. The liberation of power-to from the throes of power-over is the goal of revolutionary politics. Its pursuit does not call for a counter-power, as is customary in state-centred politics or in the case of hegemony. Instead, for Holloway we must strive to build an anti-power in opposition—and as a resistance—to power-over. Later on he links power-over to commodity fetishism, which suggests a more restricted sense of power tied to capitalist domination, despite his assurances that this does not bestow any ex-ante primacy to the economy or to the experience of class domination.

Holloway privileges the reorganization of work outside of a capitalist framework, direct democracy rather than representation and society over the state. He invokes recent experiences as intimations of the revolution to come. These include the experience of factories recovered and run by their workers in Argentina and the reorganization of communal life in autonomous zones administered by the Zapatistas in the state of Chiapas in south-east Mexico. Political life in these communities follows the ethical injunction of mandar obedeciendo, or of governing by obeying or serving the will of the people instead of ruling over them. ‘Mandar obedeciendo’ is, of course, what one would expect from any democratic government even though this is not always the case, and for Holloway it functions as a polemical counterpoint to power-over. While he distances himself from Negri and others, there is a remarkable family resemblance between the singularities of the multitude on the one hand and, on the other, his examples of liberated zones and the suspicion about state-centred politics. These flesh out the practice of defection, whether from the Argentinean neo-liberal setting or the Mexican state, without developing a counter-hegemonic politics. Will defection from traditional, state-centred strategies be able to function as the basis for a politics of emancipation? Perhaps yes, perhaps not, or as Holloway put it, the only way to find out whether we can change the world without taking power is by actually doing it.

The Temporary Autonomous Zone as defection

Another source for the trope of defection is Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). Like Holloway, Bey shares with Virno and others the belief that a radical, grassroots democracy is possible outside of the state format of representative democracy, although this does not necessarily entail a celebration of an assembly-based direct democracy. Instead, this democracy emphasizes autonomy in the sense of a will to generate decisions and norms through the direct participation of those who are part of a TAZ. The TAZ, he says, ‘is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it’. A metaphor used by
D&G to describe rhizomes conveys the plasticity of the process of formation and dissolution of the TAZ: like an ant colony, you can stomp on it here and there, but the colony regroups elsewhere. Defection through the TAZ dovetails with Virno’s exodus—which he depicts, as seen above, with the example of an exit from factory discipline reminiscent of an industrial-age vision of Escape from New York—in the sense that both seek to elude the command of the state and the capitalist enterprise. Bey’s examples are people who opt for the life of pirates—Turtle Island being the paradigmatic case—or the revolutionary nomadism of anarchists who adhere to the idea of affinity groups and the spirit of the Commune. Defection, though, is not simply and not even primarily a matter of leaving or making a journey to a promised land of freedom and equality outside the state. It stands for resisting capture by the state and codes generally. Home schooling, which withdraws from the formal educational system of the state, or opting for militant apathy by turning the refusal to vote into a political statement, is an example of defection that does not depend on geography.

Let me expand this idea of defection as an activity that does not entail departing, which, like Bey’s TAZ, draws its inspiration from D&G’s peculiar conception of the nomad, particularly their claim that it is ‘false to define the nomad by movement. Toynbee is profoundly right to suggest that the nomad is on the contrary he who does not move’. Nomads do not move but do not remain static either. The nomad is a political figure that stands for a war machine that ‘has as its object not war but the drawing of a creative line of flight’. This is not because there is such a thing as an outside of power or an absolute escape from the grip of codes. One should understand lines of flight as shorthand (1) for the refusal to be over-coded by the existing order, whatever this may be, and (2) for the simultaneous creation of an elsewhere that inevitably posits the scene of a reterritorialization. The radicalism of the TAZ or the lines of flight is not reducible to the familiar trope of a cataclysmic, epoch-changing event depicted in classical views of revolution. This is because its political radicalism has a performative dimension whereby its acts of defection aim to transform the existing world here and now in a process that deterritorializes and reterritorializes or redefines the given without making a tabula rasa of the past and without necessarily requiring the re-foundation of the state. Neither is it restricted to modes of articulation based on equivalence. The various TAZs do not require and do not always seek the metaphoric surplus or superordinate +1 that enables a common identity among resistances. As we will see below, the mode of articulation among TAZ or among lines of flight is closer to that of networks, but in the meantime suffice it to say that their radical politics involves a practice of nomadization that sidesteps the hegemony and counter-hegemony format of politics.

Defection through a politics of space

Exodus can be an attractive proposition, particularly when paired with non-representative forms of democracy and the search for political options in addition to those that revolve around the state. I myself proposed something similar under the name of a ‘politics of space’ as a grammar to think ways of building sociability and practices of reterritorialization in authoritarian contexts marked by demobilization, the disorganization or ban of political parties and the threats of the seemingly ever-present eye of power of the state. The experience of living under
authoritarian regimes triggered this proposal but did not limit it to such contexts. Unlike Clastres and his celebration of stateless societies, the point was to engage in a politics of emancipation despite the state instead of against it.\textsuperscript{42} Strategically, one engages in this politics by contesting the given where such occurrence is not expected because the \textit{mise-en-scène} of this contestation sidesteps conventional arenas of struggle, and by developing and expanding networks of autonomous zones generated through a homoeopathic intervention of society on itself. Initiatives of this type range from alternative research centres to workers’ co-ops, from ad hoc squatter collectives and self-funded employment advisory centres to the communal tenure and exploitation of land, from non-electoral political action committees to independent media initiatives. Autonomy is the watchword here as long as we agree—as I indicated above—that it is not meant as an escape from the influence of others but as the practice of generating norms and relations predominantly through the direct participation of those who will have to live with them. I say ‘predominantly’ because this politics vindicates a self-government that is not allergic to representation or incompatible with it. To borrow freely from Holloway, this type of initiative shows us a way of setting into motion \textit{a potentia} that does not aim to seize state power and become a \textit{potestas}.

The TAZ and the politics of space are proposals of defection; they stand in for an exit that does not require moving from where one is because their aim is to resist over-coding as well as to invent ways of being different without having to seize/smash the state as their default option. This recasts the usual way in which we conceive radical change. I mentioned something about this above. Radical politics acquires a performative dimension that allows it to distance itself from its more conventional, Jacobin-scripted vision of change as a substantial separation of what is from what can be. Its performativity means that it can also designate an activity that is already changing things here and now, either by pursuing what Žižek calls ‘enacted utopia’ or engaging in what I describe as the activity of revolutionizing.\textsuperscript{43}

Yet even when we consider the advantages, proposals such as exodus or a politics of space come with a series of well-known limitations. Holloway says that he doesn’t know how to change the world without taking power but we need to work on the answer.\textsuperscript{44} What I have just said about revolutionizing can certainly help in this respect, as this activity is already engaging in the transformation of the given before and besides the gleam of insurrection or the eventual administration of a state. Holloway is also aware that it is difficult to organize life by relying on Soviet-style grassroots communities alone, but he responds to this objection by saying that there is a lot of experimentation to be done in this respect. His honesty is refreshing and insufficient. Experimentation might work when one is already in the midst of rebellion, when circumstances force one to engage in creative improvisation to keep going, but it is much less appealing when there is a call for action, as people are more reticent to go into the fray motivated by a promise of future experimentation. The shift from a state-centred politics to a state-aversive one might also turn out to be one-sided and close-off options. Derrida put it well: ‘one must fight against that which you call the “dissolution of the state” (for the state can in turn limit the private forces of appropriation, the concentrations of economic power, new rule: here to contest the state, there to consolidate it’).\textsuperscript{45} The state can function to counteract a host of hegemonic designs. As Derrida says, it can
become an indispensable bulwark against certain international powers, certain ideological, religious, or capitalist, indeed linguistic, hegemonies, which, under the cover of liberalism or universalism, would still represent, in a world that would be little more than a market, a rationalization in the service of particular interests.46

This is why it is more productive to speak either of society despite the state or of the appropriateness (or not) of the usefulness of the state, depending on the circumstances and ends at stake.

The same applies to hegemony and its chains of equivalence: it would be myopic and ideological—in the pejorative sense of this word—to propose that either there is hegemony or exodus, multitude and radical civil disobedience. The enactment of defection in any of the variants described above is not antithetical to resistances that enter into relations of equivalence that are constitutive of the hegemonic matrix of politics, yet it is not dependent on the occurrence of such relations either. This is why people like D&G might prefer rhizomes rather than arborescent structures, yet they are quite happy to admit that rhizomes often give rise to tree-like centralized structures and that bureaucratic and hierarchical systems can also engender rhizomes.47 Generalized hybridity rules and it makes little sense to propose either defection or the avoidance of state-centred politics.

Post-hegemony III: viral politics

Now I turn to the viral format of post-hegemonic politics. Any talk about this way of doing politics must take for granted that, like any other politics, it involves groups and collective initiatives, and by implication connectivity, linking or articulation among people. Its connectivity follows the pathways of networks—and especially distributed networks—rather than the pattern of hegemony and its chains of equivalence. Their prehistory can be traced to the work of engineers and military strategists who came up with ARPANET—the forerunner of the Internet—and other ‘distributed communications’ networks as a way to secure the survival of military communications systems in the event of enemy attack and a significant loss of nodes. Paul Baran—not the same as the Baran of monopoly capitalism—wrote one of the seminal texts on these networks. He shows that centralized models built along the classical star pattern—with similar architecture to that of Bentham’s Panopticon—are vulnerable because the system could not survive the destruction of the core or main hub. Decentralized or grid models have a better rate of survival after an attack, but not as high as that of distributed networks whose nodes communicate with one another without necessarily passing through a single core or even a series of hubs. In distributed networks

each node will attempt to get rid of its messages by choosing alternate routes if its preferred route is busy or destroyed. Each message is regarded as a ‘hot potato’, and rather than hold a ‘hot potato’, the node tosses the message to its neighbour, who will now try to get rid of the message.48

The metaphor of the ‘hot potato’ is very graphic. It tells us (1) that connectivity in distributed networks—that is, the paths followed by the messages—does not depend on a rigid algorithm of pre-set decisions but on the use of the most
effective passageway between nodes, and (2) that these unanticipated connections reflect the contingency of the actual routes taken by the messages.

We are interested in these networks not because of their usefulness for military communications but because they tell us something about the way viral connections or viral diffusion occurs. Viruses follow unexpected paths and reach surprising points of arrival. Their movement is similar to the one we experience as we jump from one hypertext to another looking for information in the dense mesh of connections of the Web without quite knowing through which paths our navigation will take us. And, like in rhizomes, the connection between the points of the network (nodes, groups, initiatives or demands) creates a system that can be described as ‘a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits’.49 The corollary is that networks link people and individuals and facilitate further links—indepedent initiatives generated by other groups and individuals—without the usual hierarchies or infrastructure of more conventional social and political organizations and without worrying much about a superordinate +1.

Viral nets are not a recent phenomenon at all except in their ‘cool’ or cyberspace variant. Boycotts of Chilean and South African products during Pinochet’s dictatorship and apartheid are examples of ‘hot’ or street-based viral politics. Groups of people would picket supermarkets to persuade managers and customers that it was bad business practice as well as morally wrong to sell or purchase goods coming from those countries. They would also protest in front of Chilean and South African consular offices. The goal in this case was to mobilize public opinion and to put pressure on domestic policy makers to do something about human rights abuses by those regimes. As in all politics, the element of negativity was present in these protests. The groups addressed a wrong and identified an adversary, but they would come together without much in terms of co-ordination or political programme and engage in grassroots direct action rather than in representative politics. What makes their initiatives ‘viral’ rather than, say, part of the chains of equivalence of hegemonic politics, is that they proliferated and linked with one another as dispersed nodes that shared values with other groups/nodes and mobilized for a cause but were unconcerned about a unitary political score or creating the +1 of a common identity.

The more recent variant of viral politics, the ‘cool’ or cyberspace one, usually follows the path of electronic civil disobedience (ECD) theorized by the Critical Art Ensemble; it is a non-violent form of protest that, like classical civil disobedience, draws heavily on the tactic of trespassing and blocking.50 ECD is a form of direct action that bypasses party and electoral politics and operates in the cyberspace of the Internet. Its advocates see the Internet not only as a means of political communications—tapping into e-mail lists and discussion groups, sharing information or disseminating communiqués—but also as a site for staging virtual political action like sit-ins or blockades and setting up ‘hot’ political events in the streets.51 ECD acquired visibility through a host of groups like the Zapatista support network and hacktivist initiatives like the Cult of the Dead Cow that emerged in the mid-nineties. Its more recent—and highly professionalized—incarnations are initiatives such as the political and civic action organization MoveOn (http://www.moveon.org/).

Wray, one of the theorists and activists that set up the Electronic Disturbance Theater to support the Zapatistas, assesses the impact of this networked politics.
The strictly military part of the insurrection of 1 January 1994 lasted only 12 days and then moved into a different phase of grassroots ‘infowar’ through the ad hoc global pro-Zapatista network of solidarity and resistance that emerged in Mexico and many other countries. This network grew spontaneously, without central co-ordination or instructions from the Zapatista leadership. It developed virally and had no interest in seizing power or creating a counter-hegemonic project, yet it was politically effective on many fronts. The reports of repression and human rights abuse by the army forced the Mexican government to exercise restraint; the publicity given to the conditions of misery and oppression in which indigenous people lived gave voice and faces to anonymous communities and the lobbying of other governments put pressure on the Mexican government to negotiate a settlement with the Zapatistas. Their action may or may not have accelerated the democratization of Mexico but they did put its autocratic government on the defensive. Moreover, the Zapatistas ceased to be a local occurrence and turned into a global symbol of struggle, whether for the dignity of indigenous people or, as Olesen says, to overcome oppression, exclusion and exploitation everywhere. Turning the Zapatistas into a global phenomenon is an impressive record for loosely knit nodes in informal networks.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt confirm this assessment. They even coined the notion of ‘social netwar’ to designate initiatives like the Zapatista support network in their studies for the conservative RAND Corporation. As they see it, ‘a traditional guer- rilla insurgency changed into an information-age social netwar’ through a global Zapatista movement that ‘had no formal organization, or headquarters, or leadership, or decision-making body’. This was an unusual type of movement because it consisted of ‘a sprawling, swirling, amorphous collectivity’ whose ‘indefiniteness was part of its strength’. It was very much like the New International proposed by Derrida. Yet the rhizomatic structure of social netwar—one where nodes of groups or individuals operated without a superordinate +1—proved effective for generating political events that modified constellations of power and mobilized public opinion.

On the downside, some might argue—correctly—that viral initiatives have an inbuilt difficulty to generate consensus or to develop and pursue what Laclau and Mouffe and other post-Gramscians call counter-hegemonic projects. However, this might not be such a bad thing. Viral direct action can function both as an obstacle for large-scale institutional transformations and as an alternative to resource-heavy projects. Instead of aiming to articulate a wide array of forces to re-institute the political order or communal space as a whole, the rhizome setup of viral action connects nodes of local and global initiatives—in cyber or physical space—without a master plan or a central command structure. Groups and individuals can participate and share resources on their own terms quickly, visibly, and cost-effectively by setting up transient virtual communities of action that provide ad hoc modes of participation for people who are neither militants nor committed activists. It is a post-hegemony mode of political action, or at least a mode of intervention that does not fit strictly within the chains of equivalence of the logic of hegemony.

This is precisely what makes viral initiatives so useful. Despite appearances to the contrary, those who stay away from politics are not necessarily apolitical. Many still want to change the world, but not all the time, for they do not conform to Rousseau’s idealized image of virtuous citizens who rush to assemblies when called. They might be unhappy with the available political options yet lack
the time, the resources, or the inclination to build institutional alternatives. This is not so much a proof of depoliticization as it is an indication that dispersed people or loosely organized groups rarely count as political stakeholders. In a way, they live citizenship as functional denizens. The rhizome structure of viral direct action can contribute to counteract this experience of disenfranchisement and open channels for people to act up in the public sphere without the usual risks and the costs—not to mention the complex logistics—associated with collective action.

* * *

We can see, then, that there are ways of doing politics that bypass the neo-Gramscian logic of hegemony and counter-hegemony characteristic of most of what is usually inventoried under the name ‘politics’ today, progressive or otherwise. Hegemony has an outside that ranges from traditional electoral politics to post-hegemony. Three things follow from this and I mention them in quick succession to wrap up the discussion. First, critics might argue that the evidence still suffers from a low signal-to-noise ratio, but even if they are right, post-hegemony—particularly the exodus and viral politics discussed here—are not residual or sub-standard politics but constitute extended modes of political activity. One can argue about whether or not they are effective, but it is more difficult to dismiss them as irrelevant. Second, we should not confuse post-hegemony with the shift from the macro to the micro or with moving from mainstream/institutional settings to alternative forms of politics. What matters is not size or iconoclasm but whether political activity follows the pattern of wide-based consensus pieced together through the usual hegemonic practice of articulating a chain of equivalence between particular groups, struggles and demands through a metaphorical surplus that seeks to create a superordinate identity. Finally, defection and viral politics escape the logic of equivalence characteristic of the superordinate +1 of hegemony without leading to a scenario in which one must necessarily choose between hegemony and post-hegemony. Manichean thinking makes things very clear, but not necessarily right.

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Notes

3. Laclau and Mouffe, _Hegemony and Socialist Strategy_, p. 139.
4. Ibid., p. 138.
5. Ibid., p. 193.
7. Townshend also spots a variant of a correspondence theory of truth in their work. As L&M claim that identities did not correspond to Marx’s theory of class, they are admitting by implication that their own theory presumably would. See Jules Townshend, ‘Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemonic Project: The Story so Far’, Political Studies, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2004, p. 285.
9. Valentine offers a different angle on this theme by saying that L&M take hegemony and modernity as virtual equivalents. ‘Instead of being a particular response to political modernity, hegemony is in fact given as its universal form, thereby erasing the difference between both terms.’ See Valentine, ‘The Hegemony of Hegemony’, p. 90.
11. In his more recent work, the equivalence is no longer between hegemony and politics but between populism and politics. We should not ask, he says, whether a movement is populist but ‘to what extent is a movement populist’. He adds that this is the same as asking ‘to what extent does the logic of equivalence dominate its discourse?’ Laclau also transfers the ontological status of hegemony to populism: he does not leave much to the imagination when he asserts ""populism" is an ontological and not an ontic category’. In the end, what we have is an inflation of the field of ontology with a simultaneous reduction of complexity as hegemony, populism and politics turn out to be equivalent ontological categories. See Ernesto Laclau, ‘Populism: What’s in a Name?’, in Francisco Panizza (ed.), Populism and the Mirror of Democracy, London, 2005, pp. 45, 44. Approaching this question from a different angle, Bowman also contends that there is a slippage between the ontic and the ontological in Laclau. See Bowman’s Post-Marxism versus Cultural Studies, pp. 196–7.
13. Ibid., pp. xiii, 29.
15. Ibid., p. 930.
16. This link between hegemony and the commodity form was suggested by Santiago Carassale.
17. It is quite revealing that virtually all the examples of hegemony that Laclau uses in his solo work focus on extreme cases—from millenarian movements to the critical situation of Italy in the twenties that fascism used as an opening to present itself as the incarnation of the abstract idea of order.
19. Ibid., p. 25.
26. Ibid., p. 385.
33. Ibid., p. 70.
34. Ibid.
38. Holloway, ‘Can we Change the World without Taking Power?’
40. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 381.
41. Ibid., p. 422.
42. Benjamin Arditi, ‘Una gramática posmoderna para pensar lo social’, Zona Abierta, 41–42, Madrid, 1986, pp. 183–206. For a more practical take on this politics see Benjamin Arditi and José Carlos Rodríguez, La sociedad a pesar del Estado. Movimientos sociales y recuperación democrática en el Paraguay, Asunción. For a brief conceptual discussion of the politics of space in English see Santiago Colaós, Postmodernism in Latin America, Durham, NC, 1994, pp. 15–17.
44. How to Change the World without Taking Power, p. 22.
47. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 15.
55. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, ‘The of Netwar (Revisited)’, p. 188.