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De-essentializing hegemony, with Gramsci, Williams, and Hall

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Abstract: Departing from the temptation of treating the concept of hegemony as a singular, essentialized regime, or as a term synonymous with domination, the article invites attention to its dynamic and multilayered meaning. A more nuanced treatment of the concept brings forward its plural and contested connotations. In the analysis presented here I foreground the benefits of using the concept in processual terms, as well as the internal differentiation between Gramscian-inspired approaches. I consider the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, as representative of a distinctively British reading of Gramsci. To the degree that a narrow and singularized use of hegemony can lead to flat and unexciting conceptualization of power, Gramscian-inspired uses capture the fluidity, complexity, and materiality of power articulations and our proximity to them.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci, culturalism(s), hegemony, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall

Hegemony can only be conceived as a historical process, not as a thing achieved
—Stuart Hall, "For a Marxism without guarantees"

In practice, . . . hegemony can never be singular
—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature*

Hegemony is an awe-inspiring analytical concept. The possibilities it engenders for social analysis are limitless. Yet, often, the term is used in a rather constraining and static manner to photograph one or another specific regime treated as undifferentiated hegemony in general. Such reifying, essentializing conceptualizations can hide from view the complexity and dynamism of what the concept affords analytically. Far from being a finished project, a hegemonic regime may adapt continuously to its opposition; it may constrain, harass, or even enable those who seek to oppose it (or, think about it in alternative terms). Thus, when hegemony is openly and processually conceived—as, for example, in Gramscian terms—its use may signal a number of analytical affordances—such as, among many, (a) an awareness of the limits (and shifting nature) of power and our proximity to it, (b) the unsettling of reductive binaries (e.g., domination–opposition), and (c) the acknowledgment of alternative counter-hegemonic visions and our productive involvement in them.

Such an impressive array of analytical benefits deserves attention and invites us to use hegemony more critically and analytically; that is, not merely in terms of its dictionary definition (as equivalent to undifferentiated dominance), but as a multilevel historical and material process integral to the maintenance and inversion of power. Antonio Gramsci (1971) was the first to unravel the complex analytical overtures of this older concept, which was used before him (mostly) in a flat sense to refer to the exercise of power. Gramsci developed a more processual and multilayered understanding of hegemony, which emerged not as an intellectual exercise, but through his struggle to solve concrete political problems of his time (see Crehan 2002; Smith 2004). In his writing, hegemony evolved beyond the confines of a closed category (or definition) to engender "a way of thinking about consent and coercion" and the dynamics of power (Crehan 2002: 101, 165; see also Anderson 2022). Rather than using hegemony to refer to a specific form of ideology or domination, Gramsci redirected the analytical lens of the concept to shed light on the workings of power but also the labor of leadership required to overturn it. Although contemporary scholarship recognizes Gramsci's influence in shaping the meaning of the concept, not all uses of the term give credit to the sophistication of Gramsci's thinking, treating it superficially (as synonymous to one or another power regime) or sanitizing it from its Marxist referents.

A quarter of the way into the twenty-first century, the concept seems as timely as before. It is its Marxist resonances that invite attention, following a decade—the 2010s—of local protest movements and their eventual compromise. In response to such compromising effects, a resurgent Marxist anthropology attempts to provide insights on "how capitalist logics seep into people's struggles," while "the most intimate terrains, which tend to feel more 'authentic,' or 'our own,' are already implicated, usurped, and enclosed by capitalist logics" (Kalb and Mollona 2018; Neveling and Steur 2018: 2). It is this type of alienating processes that "hegemony"

(conceived as an analytical tool) makes visible. More explicitly than other terms in the Marxist conceptual arsenal, it reveals the non-directly visible work of power, including, when the concept is applied carefully, the inseparably material-and-ideological constitution of that power.

In this article, I attempt to rekindle the discussion on the precise meaning of hegemony. I draw extensively from the appraisals of three anthropologists, Donald Kurtz (1996), Kate Crehan (2002, 2016), and Gavin Smith (2004), who have defended the original Gramscian connotations of the term and identified (idealistic, culturalist) diversions from it. I also draw from, and built upon, the productive appropriation of the term by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, which is indicative of a distinctively British Marxist view, often referred to as "culturalist"—a term that conceals, rather confusingly, the historical materialist commitment of these scholars. More indirectly, I rely on insights from a particular strand of the anthropology of resistance that uses hegemony—not to single out a particular regime of power, but—as a complicated, potentially compromising, and unremitting process (Ciavolella 2018; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Gledhill [1994] 2000, 2012; Gutmann 1996; Keesing 1992; Ortner 1995; Roseberry 1991; Theodossopoulos 2015).

A secondary objective of this article is to encourage a more explicit recognition of the multilayered complexity of hegemonic processes. This recognition can be easily achieved by signaling—while using the term—an awareness of hegemony's non-singular and volatile nature. There is usually more than one competing—and continuously readapting to opposition—*hegemony* at play: global, bourgeois, monetary (Hardt and Negri 2001); expansive or selective (see Smith 2011), neoliberal, cosmopolitan, and mercantilist (see Kalb 2023); or, that of dominant assumptions about reason (Kapferer 2002). There are also hegemonic practices, models, strategies (Gledhill 2015), internal hegemonies—hegemonic American culture (Ortner 2006)—even power foci within a discipline, such as hegemonic anthropological projects (Fabian 1983)

and hegemonic anthropologies (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). The use of such multiple adjectives signals a strong anti-essentializing message by bringing forward the concept's conjunctural—to use Stuart Hall's favorite concept—dimension, instead of treating hegemony as a finished project. I will explore hegemony's conceptual incompleteness and diversity in what follows.

Closed vs. open understandings of hegemony: Etymological reflections

It is not surprising that such a useful analytical concept—"hegemony"—is widely appropriated. The appropriations generate confusion but also demonstrate that hegemony encompasses—to use the words of a well-disposed appropriator—lived and felt meanings (Williams 1977), indicative of how people think about power. As a result, vernacular and academic understandings of the term often merge, generating overwhelming complexity. The resulting polysemy may invite ethnographically inclined social scientists to take the meanings of hegemony seriously.

Non-academic uses of the term often focus and reproduce one particular meaning of hegemony; that is, how hegemonic power is perceived in a given political context. In most cases, this may capture a singular phenomenon or regime. Such uses proliferate in non-academic contexts but often infiltrate into popularizing academic writing—although often without sinister intentions. A good example of a well-intentioned but non-nuanced use is Noam Chomsky's *Hegemony or survival* (2003), where the word "hegemony" (despite being visible in the title) is used as a synonym of global hegemony as exercised by the United States, with little suggestion of other competing hegemonies within (or beyond) the United States in the particular conjuncture. In such simplified use, hegemony is stripped of its analytical properties and treated as synonymous to domination. It is, thus, simultaneously reduced (to a specific regime of power) and generalized (as dominance par excellence).

Such reductive and generalized uses of the term are based on understandings of hegemony that focus on one or another power regime, perceived as fairly stable and identifiable. Applications of the term with such specific properties focus on one's ability to rule other people or nations. For example, the Greek etymology takes us back to classical antiquity, a time when sovereign city states competed for dominance, extending their reach of power or sometimes extending too much. In the context of an alliance of independent states, one of them would assume leadership over its symbolically equal allies, claiming a hegemonic position in a league (Anderson 2022). The Athenian hegemony (fifth century BC) is a very good example of this. Despite its support for democratic principles, Athens took advantage of its leadership at the expense of allied city states. The resentment of the latter triggered organized opposition, leading to the Peloponnesian war, and the eventual collapse of the Athenian regime.

Thucydides, the renowned historian of that period, communicated with the term hegemony a "nuanced understanding of political authority," which included "ideology as much as it does material capability" (Lebow and Kelly 2001: 593), such as economic influence and war technology. Perry Anderson credits Thucydides with making an important distinction—that between coercion and persuasion, two notions that often coexist interchangeably in the use of the term "hegemony" by other ancient historians (2022: 1–6). In certain passages, Thucydides uses hegemony (ἡγεμονία) to underline the "persuasion" element in power negotiations, thus differentiating its meaning from explicit or coercive control (*arkhé*, ἀρχή). Furthermore, in his narrative, the reception of the Athenian hegemony by its allies is presented as shifting throughout the Peloponnesian war—a shift that, in my view, indicates a processual understanding of hegemony as leadership affected by notions of justice, fear, honor, self-interest, and authority. Thucydides (himself an Athenian) reflected self-critically about why Athenians felt (in the process of exercising power) that the

people of other states hated them:[1] "Exercising this leadership, we developed, from the necessity of things, our hegemony to the point it is today, at first out of fear, then for honor, and later for our own interest" (my translation, Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian war* 1.75.3).[2]

With Thucydides in mind, Marshall Sahlins (2004) finds similarities between ancient Athens and the nineteenth-century kingdom of Bau. Both regimes exercised hegemony without sovereignty, he remarks. The societies upon which Athens and Bau imposed their authority remained nominally independent. This was hegemony achieved—not by direct conquest—but by exhibiting power and grandeur in strategic displays of awe and fear (Sahlins 2004: 7, 103–105). Sahlins's vision of "hegemony without sovereignty" contains the Gramscian understanding of ruling by persuasion, and is, by all means processual and nuanced. Disappointingly, Sahlins underplays the sophistication of the Gramscian approach (Sahlins 2004: 146) led by his admiration for an idealist notion of culture (as existing fairly independently of power). In the following sections, I will reflect upon this culturalist tendency, which is common in anthropology.

Allow me at this point to return to my semiological reflections regarding hegemony. In modern Greek, the term hegemony (*ηγεμονία*) conveys an understanding of power as domination, the ability to subjugate others. Interestingly, Machiavelli's book, *The Prince*, translates into Greek as "The Hegemon" (Ο *Ηγεμών*), which communicates in modern usage a sinister quality of imposition through the machinations of power. In Western imperial history, hegemony has been closely associated with supreme, sovereign rulers and their absolutism, a use that—unlike the multilayered treatment of authors such as Thucydides or Sahlins—can lead to a simplified, static, and potentially reified understanding of the concept: a static identification of hegemony with the source of domination—for example, US or Russian imperialism reduced as a singular and undifferentiated agent.

We may contrast, in turn, closed and singular conceptualizations of hegemony (which capture a specific configuration of power, perceived as unchanging) with non-static alternatives (which focus on the process of accumulating and maintaining power and the leadership that is invested in achieving this). In fact, "leadership" is at the root of hegemony's etymology (verb: *ἡγέομαι/ ἡγοῦμαι*; to lead). We may also agree that leadership requires other peoples' consent: it never lasts forever, and it is frequently challenged, as Pierre Clastres (1989) has so compellingly made clear with reference to societies that refuse to organize themselves under a central government. The acknowledgment that leadership can be volatile and is usually a more-than-one person affair encourages us to see hegemony as a fundamentally open process: one that involves challenges, opposition, competing claims, alliances, and counter-transformations.

From stasis to Gramsci: Beyond confining definitions

I feel compelled to start this section with an acknowledgment of intellectual debt: most contemporary fluid and processual uses of the term "hegemony" have a common origin. They relate, in some respect or another, to Gramsci's dynamic perspective. His development of the concept was more sophisticated than most previous uses (see Crehan 2002; Hall 1986b, 2016; Thomas 2013). In this respect, his treatment of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* (1971) contrasts with non-Marxist uses of the term (that photograph singular or static loci of domination) but also with previous Marxist uses that emerged in preparation for the Bolshevik Revolution; see, for example, the notion of the "hegemony of the proletariat" as articulated by Pavel Axelrod, Georgi Plekhanov, and Vladimir Lenin (Anderson 2022; Sinoviev 1923). Following the Revolution—such as, in the context of the Third International, which Gramsci attended—uses of hegemony were "significantly renovated" to account for bourgeois domination outside Russia (Anderson 1976; Thomas 2013). Although the rise of a new revolutionary hegemony from the

bottom-up remains aspirational for Gramsci, his view of hegemony was adapted to the conditions of Western Europe, where intellectuals, civil society and the bourgeoisie had consolidated their position in relation to power (Anderson 2022; Smith 2004). In this respect, Marx and Engels's critical attention to the mystifying work of ruling ideologies—see, for example, *The German ideology* (1998: 67–68)—remained inspirational for Gramsci.

Thinking from within a Western European political context, Gramsci was forced to see hegemony from at least two different angles: the bottom-up project of constituting a revolutionary hegemony (or counter-hegemony in today's academic parlance) and the top-down imposition of authority (by dominant blocs) as a material-*and*-intellectual force. The particular challenge, in my view, inspired a more flexible and "plural" view of the term hegemony, versatile enough to accommodate the multilayered coexistence of competing hegemonies in the same ideological terrain. This more complicated view contrasts sharply with singularized uses of hegemony to describe either (a) the force we may choose to oppose or (b) the project of substituting the ruling class. What we see in Gramsci is an emerging dialectic between (a) and (b). Peter Thomas identifies another dialectical step in Gramsci that follows from the one I identified above: a step between (b) establishing a position of dominance and (c) maintaining that position (which makes the work of revolutionary intellectuals even more important) (2013: 163). The temporal and dialectic unraveling of such possibilities provides us with a glimpse of the truly processual and multidimensional qualities of the Gramscian position. Elements of this dynamic conception of hegemony—as shifting in time—are visible in the work of Williams and Hall who I examine in the following sections.

I must underline here one important point: although Gramsci relates his use of hegemony to the activity of intellectuals (including the handling by intellectuals of superstructural ideological elements), he does not confine hegemony to ideology or divest the concept of its inherent materiality. Many scholars concerned with Gramsci's work underline this observation (Crehan 2002; Eagleton 1991; Hall 1986b, 2016; Kurtz 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Williams 1977, 1983). The length of this parenthesis is indicative of the degree of scholarly agreement on this issue: hegemony for Gramsci is not merely an ideological issue. His appreciation of social–economic relationships in shaping ideological productions—as this is inspired by Marx—remains a strong element in the Gramscian interpretation. It is reinforced by an equal appreciation of the dynamic process by which power is often perpetuated. The latter is not static or pre-determined and may not last forever—a non-deterministic view that opens the way for flexible strategizing.

Gramsci added depth to the meaning of hegemony. He transformed it into a truly analytical and emancipatory concept. His use in the *Prison Notebooks*, remains close to the etymological roots of the original concept—that is, "leadership," but geared not toward outlining a finalized leadership product but to the process of realizing and perpetuating "intellectual and moral leadership" (Gramsci 1971: 57). Such an open conception facilitates a dual purpose: it can be used to issue warnings against the operation of power (the power we may want to oppose), but also, inspire hope in the possibility of generating social change through effective leadership. More importantly, Gramsci does not forget that actual people (and their choices) are constituent elements of processes that question and develop competing visions of leadership. In fact, his interest in the sense-making narratives of marginalized people conveys an ethnographic sensibility, which Crehan (2018, 2022) compares with that of Gramsci's contemporary, Bronisław Malinowski. In this respect, his writing anticipates present-day debates in the social sciences about agency and individual strategies, and carry, in this respect, strong anthropological and sociological overtones.

There is an additional radically reflexive dimension in Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony: the process by which a hegemonic

regime succeeds or fails (in maintaining leadership) can be achieved by manifold means—for example, by hiding or blurring its ideological or material constitution or even by co-opting its opposition. There is a great deal of openness in this view, which makes hegemony such a flexible concept for the analysis of power-related phenomena, while at the same time, it encourages self-reflection with respect to our own relationship with the workings of power. Inspired by Gramsci, Marxist anthropologists who are not afraid of reflexivity can bring their interrogation closer to home and investigate—in concrete ethnographic cases—how real people give consent to their own domination as well as how they (or we) accept the authority to lead others (for example, when anti-systemic leadership is pursued with programmatic counter-hegemonic self-awareness; see Mouffe 2018).

Such thoughts inspire us to see Gramsci's hegemony as a process of solidifying, justifying, and perpetuating leadership and the overall conditions that keep it in place. Although my last sentence above reads suspiciously like a definition, I remain reluctant to define hegemony in narrow terms or provide a definitive Gramscian interpretation. The hegemonies we encounter in the world change as fast as the definitions we ascribe to them, often adapting to the very challenges we set against them. Arguing from such a processual perspective, we may say that "hegemony is about how effective will can arise within the context of existing fields of power, thereby re-constituting the possibilities of history" (Smith 2004: 106). The last formulation captures the sense of temporality and conjunctural meaningfulness that is so characteristic of Gramscian perspectives, without confining the concept.

In fact, most academics who are fascinated by the notion of hegemony would not easily agree on a closed and authoritative definition, and for a good reason: the articulation of any given sociopolitical power is so capricious that it will be reductive to imprison it in "fixity," as Raymond Williams (1977) would cautiously advice. Crehan, drawing from Joseph Buttigieg

(1990), encourages us to see the non-definitive fragmentariness of Gramsci's work as an advantage: "an innovative approach to the understanding of history" that moves beyond prescribed meanings to open radical possibilities for change (Crehan 2022: 39; see also 2002: 30, 101). From this perspective, and as Crehan suggests, we may be tempted to see Gramsci's use of hegemony as outlining a methodology for analyzing power phenomena, not a prescriptive category that fits all cases.

Raymond Williams and "cultural" [*sic*] hegemony

Raymond Williams contributed greatly to developing Gramsci's nuanced view of hegemony, adding his own analytical flavor. He accentuated some of Gramsci's previous insights, such as the processual and plural dimension of hegemony, its ability to evade stasis and generate a sense of reality that is experienced but still confining (Williams 1977: 108–114; 1980: 37–40; 1983: 117–118). Although such potentialities can be recognized in the treatment of the concept by Gramsci, Williams made them visible for a late twentieth-century academic readership interested not in charting the course of a revolution but in analyzing and understanding the workings of power from a (safer) intellectualist stance. Such a development of Gramsci's original position (regarding hegemony) can be seen as incrementally depoliticizing the concept yet adding significantly to its academic impact and widespread application.

Williams describes hegemony as "experienced reality" and as "a lived process" (Williams 1977: 110, 112) that continually recreates, readjusts, and reinvents itself in the face of opposition. This is clearly a Gramscian insight but Williams chooses to stress the evolving elements of hegemonic expressions, which may take softer forms—for example, through artistic expression. Even such softer (not fully articulated or programmatic) opposition can bring about social transformation, although not always. Wil-

liams is aware that the word "experience" cannot always relate to the fluidity and dynamism of not-fully-self-aware understandings of change, which he captures by introducing the term "structures of feeling." Each generation shares felt and lived experiences, which may not be fully separated from dominant conventions, but may entail unconventional understandings not thoroughly registered by dominant hegemonic ideology (Williams and Orrom 1954; Williams 1977, 1979). Here the word "felt"—rather than "experienced"—resonates much better with the shifting and transforming understandings that Williams wants to describe; which explains, in turn, his preference for the term "structures of feeling" (see Pina-Cabral and Theodossopoulos 2023). When such "felt" understandings of social change become eventually more clearly articulated and prescribed they lose their dynamism and become static forms to be replaced by newer ones—in a manner that resembles the interplay of succeeding hegemonies in the political sphere.

William's interest in cultural productions contributed to spreading a Gramscian infused view of hegemony in late twentieth anthropology, despite the fact that Williams is not a systematic reviewer of Gramsci (see Kurtz 1996). In fact, many anthropologists that use the term "hegemony" rely more heavily, as Kate Crehan aptly observes, on Williams than Gramsci. This tendency has led to a certain degree of misrepresentation: a focus on cultural aspects—beliefs, meaning, and values—at the expense of "the hard realities that lie outside the realm of discourse" (Crehan 2002: 173, 174). This lighter use of hegemony—or "hegemony *lite*" in Crehan's words—reflects to a certain degree a preoccupation with the concept of culture: it may lead the careless reader of Williams to understand hegemony not as "the whole field of power," but as merely "the domain of beliefs and ideas," a use that departs from the original Gramscian conception (Crehan 2002: 172). In such cases, Crehan emphatically underlines, hegemony is reduced to ideology—a reduction that goes against the spirit of Williams's materialist perspective.

Crehan's clarification is important. It provides a critical framework to evaluate (first) Williams's use of Gramsci, and (second) how anthropologists understand Williams's conceptualization of hegemony (and/or conflate it with that of Gramsci). I will return to her second contribution in the following sections, and use it as a productive critical provocation. Here, I would like to remain focused on Williams and underline that his creative appropriation of Gramsci does not completely depart from the Gramscian problematic: one that liberates the analysis of superstructural elements from binary, mechanistic, and one-directional deduction to the determining power of an economic base. Williams's saw the latter as formative, yet not absolute or one-directional, paving the way for nuanced Marxist interpretations that favor complexity.

In the broader context of the debates that shaped the field of Cultural Studies in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, Williams has been at the receiving end of the label "culturalist." There are two understandings of this label. The first (which is more familiar to a contemporary anthropological audience) is applied as a critical charge against scholars that give too much explanatory credit to the vague notion of culture. The second has more specific theoretical referents rooted in debates among Marxist-inspired scholars in the 1970s. It captures tensions between structuralists views (for example, Althusserian) versus more humanistic—in this context, "culturalist"—perspectives that carve some space for creativity and agency within historical materialism. Williams's attention to feeling and experience (or feeling, capturing the volatility of experience) is indicative of this latter use. It is not surprising that his views are popular in anthropology, a discipline that is leaning toward "culturalism" (in the first sense of the label).

We should not underestimate the relational nature of such theoretical positioning. Gregor McLennan recounts how Stuart Hall, whom I will examine shortly, "could not bring himself to disagree with those who categorized Williams

ultimately—although the disparagement bothered him—as a 'culturalist,'" yet other Marxists have charged Hall with that label too (McLennan 2021: 7). The use of the term "*cultural* hegemony" by many unsuspecting anthropologists can be taken to denote some Marxist inspiration wrapped in Williams's charismatic appropriation of Gramsci. Yet, Gramsci used the adjective "cultural" to qualify hegemony only once in the *Prison Notes* (Gramsci 1971: 258); and this is a specific use. Williams's culturalist application—in the humanistic Marxist sense of the label—can be seen as a readjustment that facilitates the concept's wider use in the social sciences; and in a manner that is less threatening to non-Marxists. His "lighter" use of hegemony, invites an analytical dialectic between culture and power, which, in the final analysis, foregrounds the ideological constitution of the former in the materiality of the latter.

Further developments of the Gramscian perspective by Stuart Hall

Despite addressing so closely so many contemporary anthropological concerns, Stuart Hall is a major social theorist who has been—in contrast to Raymond Williams—underused by sociocultural anthropology. Although Hall's work has been formative for Cultural Studies, and influential in British sociology, he had relatively little impact on mainstream anthropological theory. There are two exceptions to this unfortunate neglect: first, John Clarke, who has consistently communicated Hall's messages to anthropological audiences (see Clarke 2014), and second, David Scott, who has written about Hall's evocative style and inspiring ideas in a creative (epistolary) form (see D. Scott 2017).

With respect to explaining and unpacking the Gramscian perspective (on hegemony and more generally), Stuart Hall makes an impressive contribution that surpasses in clarity and scholarly precision Raymond William's application. Hall generously acknowledges his intellectual debt to Gramsci with frequent references in his text, often addressing multiple Gramscian concepts in sequence. From the mid-1970s, "hegemony" is a leading concept in a great deal of Hall's work. It is used to spearhead his well-known critique of Thatcherism (Hall et al. 1978; Clarke et al. 1976), and occasionally, his critique of reductionist-*cum*-deterministic positions espoused by other leftist perspectives.

Hall's thinking about hegemony (as an analytical concept) is outlined in detail in a lecture delivered in 1983—"Domination and Hegemony"—and published posthumously by Jenifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (see Hall 2016). Hall developed this lecture into a later article—"Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity" (Hall 1986b—republished in Gilroy and Wilson Gilmore 2021; Morley 2019). The two pieces have similar structure and signpost the same arguments, although they are essentially two different articles. The earlier one (Hall 2016) is less precise in scholarly terms, but more spontaneous, and in my opinion, captures Hall's enthusiastic reading of Gramsci to a greater extent. Hall's explicit focus on Gramsci in the 1980s is complemented by his introduction to *The hard road to renewal* (1988), a volume that includes a shorter article, "Gramsci and us"—originally published in *Marxism Today* (1987).

In the essays mentioned above, Hall discusses Gramsci's analytical contributions across the board, where the notion of hegemony is central. It is not a surprise that he takes care to contextualize Gramsci's thinking—in his characteristic conjunctural style and in full acknowledgment of Gramsci's inspiration in shaping his thinking about conjunctures (see Clarke 2017, 2019; Gilbert 2019; Grossberg 2019). Hall also takes every opportunity to juxtapose his flexible reading of Gramsci—which evades literalism, as he says—to more deterministic versions of Marxism, which are not photographed explicitly. In this latter respect, Hall (1986b, 1987, 2016) goes to a great lengths to outline the non-mechanistic, non-instrumental, non-economistic Marxist vision of Gramsci, which echoes a position articulated repeatedly throughout his own work: the

need to revise Marxism flexibly, renovating previous concepts in ways that adapt and relate to new conjunctures—a "sophisticating" of Marxism, as Hall puts it, toward which Gramsci had a great impact (Hall 2016).

Apart from outlining—in the boldest possible manner—the processual character of hegemony, Hall encourages us to see the concept in the widest (and, less reductive) possible manner. Hegemony is encompassing: it includes strategies by more than one class, and more than one historical bloc; that is, not merely the strategies of the ruling regime (which is where many contemporary social theorists singularly focus) or the eventual hegemony of the proletariat (which is what earlier Marxists envisaged, for example, Lenin). The conceptual framing of hegemony allows us to see the tension between coercion and consent, the competitions between economic fields, but also claims over "moral, ethical and intellectual leadership" (1986b: 17).

With persuasive and direct prose, Hall highlights what hegemony is not, delineating other concepts that hegemony relates to, but within which it cannot be narrowly confined. For example, hegemony is not just cultural domination, or domination by the state, or domination by the media. Hegemony and domination are not "interchangeable," as hegemony also involves leadership and persuasive skills (Hall 2016: 168, 171). Furthermore, hegemony is not total ideological mystification, considering that oppositional practices against it cannot be separated from the actual process. And if hegemony is a process, "not the thing achieved"—as Hall remarks in the quotation with which I started this article—then we should remember, he adds, that hegemony "is not merely the ongoing maintenance of rule and domination" (Hall 2016: 173). This is because hegemony, in any specific form, has a contingent nature: in its efforts to maintain itself it adapts and changes. Thus, in Hall's words, the actual "moment of hegemony" (for example, the hegemonic moment of a historic bloc or ruling class) has to be specified "empirically" (Hall 2016: 173)—ideally, within the contextual clarity of a defined conjuncture.

The emphasis on the contingency of hegemony is, in my view, one of the most important contributions of Hall's interpretation of Gramsci. Hegemony is not "a state of grace which is installed forever" (1987: 21), Stuart Hall underlines, "it should never be mistaken for a finished or settled project" (1988: 7). His articles contain many such clarifying reminders that encourage us to avoid essentializing or reifying hegemony—as we may do, with the best intentions, in everyday political discourse; for example, treating hegemony as a beast toward which we can point our finger. The beast we may choose to reify—I add, reinterpreting Hall in my turn—is closer to us, inseparable from our experiences and understandings of the world. By the time we learn to avoid or appropriate a given hegemony, this has already been transformed. Hegemony is "always contested, always trying to secure itself, always in 'process'" (Hall 1988: 7).

In much of Stuart Hall's work, we see his persistence in concretizing analysis on historical experience, an element that can make his work particularly agreeable to anthropologists (see Clarke 2014; Pina-Cabral and Theodossopoulos 2022; D. Scott 2017). In this respect, Hall's conjunctural thinking is introduced as a persistent empirical reminder of the fluid, adaptable, and corrosive nature of power. It is, in fact, conjunctural thinking that drives Hall away from Althusser in the 1980s and closer to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Rojek 2003). Interestingly, it is once more Hall's concrete sociotemporal understanding of the over-determined complexity of the conjuncture that will drive Hall further away from Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The latter, as Gianmaria Colpani aptly observes, "locate hegemony at a higher level of abstraction, developing a political ontology increasingly indifferent to any specific conjuncture" (2022: 227). Their style, as David Scott points out, leans toward "generality and abstraction," "scarcely" touching the "stony ground of everyday life" (2017: 91). Hall's initial enthusiasm for Laclau's *Politics and ideology in Marxist theory* (1977) decreased by the time Laclau and Mouffe wrote *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (1985). In

the second book, hegemony is not "thought in a Gramscian way" Stuart Hall later complained: "what I like about Gramsci," Hall added, "is that there is always some concrete instance there, and there is always power" (Hall et al. 1997: 33).

Hegemony, processually conceived, in anthropology

Wiser from digging into the thinking of Gramsci, Williams, and Hall, it is time to consider the value of a processual understanding of hegemony for anthropology specifically. Crehan's (2002) warning about lighter (culturalist) uses of the concept by anthropologists—which have resulted from misreading Williams—provides a lens for analytical precision: it highlights the danger of losing sight of the materiality of the concept, which could be as problematic as reifying it, or using it (in a rather simplistic manner) as a static conceptualization of domination—as Sherry Ortner (1995) and John Gledhill ([1994] 2000) point out. Although anthropologists (in most cases) consider context-specific parameters of power seriously, the subtle theoretical nuances of referring to power constellations with the term "hegemony" deserve attention.

A well-known example of using hegemony anthropologically—which I use here as a comparative point to discuss the theoretical resonances of such uses—is provided by Jean and John Comaroff in *Of revelation and revolution* (1991). The authors apply the concept to reveal the contours of inequality and colonialism in South Africa and attempt to redefine it—or appropriate it (see Kurtz 1996), as much as Williams (1977). Their application of the term has stimulated encouragement in its wider use in anthropology. It has also contributed to spreading what Crehan (2002) describes—see my earlier section on Williams—as a lighter (ideology-focused) use of the term. The Comaroffs redefined hegemony as "that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies—drawn from a historically situated cultural field—that come to be taken-

for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 23). They further qualify their position by explaining the work of hegemony as ideological silencing—a potent metaphor that can help us think critically about the pervasiveness of colonial power. From their perspective, ideology could be understood as hegemony becoming vocal, at which point, it stops being hegemony and becomes a site of struggle (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 23–27).

Read from an orthodox Gramscian point of view, the Comaroffs' adaptation of hegemony to analyze ideological silencing and colonialism in South Africa relies heavily on ideological elements. Its application resembles closely the Gramscian notion of common sense: a worldview about the order of things that remains unarticulated, naturalized and heavily taken for granted. However important common sense is for Gramsci (Crehan 2016), an orthodox Gramscian perspective on hegemony is more complex than its adaptation by the Comaroffs. It addresses the maintenance and reproduction of power (not merely at the ideological level), as well as the potential of developing resourceful counter-hegemonic leadership. Crehan (2002) sees here the danger of losing sight of the degree to which ideas and material realities are intertangled, a blending which is one of the major analytical advantages of the concept. In these respects, as Kurtz (1996) and Crehan (2002) contend, the Comaroffian hegemony is a departure from an orthodox use of Gramsci and dilutes his Marxist message. As Gavin Smith aptly observes, in the analysis of the Comaroffs, "the hidden hand of hegemony comes from its normalness, its everyday-ness, not from the iron demands of surplus extraction and specific possibilities and constraints this gave to the shaping of hegemonic projects" (2004: 111).

Seen from the perspective of mainstream cultural anthropology, Comaroff's reformulation of hegemony succeeded in reinvigorating attention to the concept. This has stimulated a fluid and flexible (albeit heterodox in Gramscian terms) view of hegemony, "one that is good to

think with" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 19). Flexibility here encouraged a wider acceptance of the concept, reconceived in more ideological terms, yet in a manner that is still processual, critical, and dynamic. "The hegemonic is constantly being made—and, by the same token, may be unmade," the Comaroffs remind us and add: hegemony is "intrinsically unstable, always vulnerable" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 25, 27). This is a view that retains, in my opinion, the non-deterministic persuasion of Marx ([1844] 1959) that power systems, as we know them, are historical human creations; they can be thus reconstructed in more egalitarian terms.

Another Gramsci-inspired example of using hegemony anthropologically is provided by Roger Keesing (1992, 1994) whose writing about the Kwaio in the Solomon Islands addressed indirectly another challenge: the relevance of Marxist concepts for the analysis of non-market-based economies. This had been questioned—just about the time Keesing was writing—with powerful arguments that promoted ontological perspectives on personhood to show that Melanesians do not necessarily understand exploitation and inequality by Western referents (see Strathern 1988). Keesing circumnavigated such quandaries with Gramscian-inspired clarity, focusing his analysis on the Kwaio's reactive and partially counter-hegemonic thinking. Instead of superimposing a Westerner's I-know-about-inequality argument, Keesing's analysis is anti-romanticizing and anti-victimizing. Far from depicting the Kwaio as muted subalterns—in abstract postcolonial terms, see Gayatri Spivak (1988)—or passive victims of colonialism, he locates his analysis within local resisting practices to ideological domination.

The sophistication of Keesing's (1992) discussion of Kwaio subalternity invites attention to negations and affirmations—dialectical contradictions—that allow us to see how subalterns are implicated, in classic Gramscian terms, with their domination. The notion of counter-hegemony is instrumental here in outlining the subversive steps taken by powerless local actors—an

element that reminds us of the deeper thinking of Gramsci. The Kwaio, as Keesing shows, apply consciously colonial categories of domination to resist colonial rule, generating an indigenous parody of colonial symbols. Here, "categorical structures of domination may be negated or inverted—hence doubly subverted—as well as reproduced in opposition" (Keesing 1992: 238); for example, through the indigenous mockery (often by imitation) of colonial symbolism. Sometimes, "one must meet the enemy on his own turf," admits Keesing echoing Stuart Hall's thinking about marginalized West Indians in London (Keesing 1992: 236).

Hegemony in Keesing's example is applied with awareness of the total conditions of domination: ideological, material, historical. Not surprisingly, his work is reviewed positively by anthropologists inclined to take Gramsci seriously (see Crehan 2002; Gledhill [1994] 2000; Kurtz 1996). Keesing's down-to-earth position toward counter-hegemonic thinking contrasts with idealizing accounts of local resistance, such as James Scott's well-known analysis in *Weapons of the weak* (1985).[3] Scott's optimistic position—that subalterns know their domination, but they do not tell their dominators—has contributed to reinstating the critical rationality of subaltern subjects. This is undoubtedly a contribution that de-pathologizes local rationality, albeit to an extend that fails to address the implication of subalterns to the wider assemblages of power (Theodossopoulos 2015). Scott's idealization of subaltern resistance is related, in my opinion, to his misreading of Gramsci's notion of hegemony (see J. Scott 1990: 70–90).[4] His idealized treatment of subaltern consciousness has been criticized more widely (see Ciavolella 2018; Crehan 2016; Gledhill [1994] 2000, 2012; Gutmann 1993; Roseberry 1994; Theodossopoulos 2015; Tilley 1991).

The comparison of Keesing's and Scott's analytical approaches alerts us to the value of the Gramscian perspective of hegemony. Both authors are concerned with less dramatic acts of subversion, but while Scott's subalterns (are presented as) resisting through one-dimensional

insubordination (gossiping, stealing, foot-dragging), Keesing's subalterns attempt to parody colonialism using categorical structures saturated by colonialism. The Gramscian nuance of the second approach makes space for tactical agency, yet without disregarding the pervasive and alienating influence of power (conceived as a material historical process). It also reminds us—a reminder that is imperative for critical analysis—that there is no such a thing as a completely autonomous subaltern consciousness (Gledhill [1994] 2000: 68; see also Roseberry 1994).

Scott's idealistic perspective—oblivious (as it can be) to the pervasiveness of hegemony—is representative of an analytical lightness that reduces the study of resistance to simplistic binaries—for example, dominators–dominated (Gledhill [1994] 2000, 2012), a reduction with exoticizing referents (Theodossopoulos 2015). Simplifications such as these have led Sherry Ortner (1995) to criticize the anthropology of resistance as ethnographically thin, oblivious to the complexity and contradictions of local internal politics. A superficial use of hegemony—as a synonym of domination, singularized and uncomplicated—can reproduce the analytical thinness that Ortner detected a quarter of century ago. Conversely, processual and historically informed applications of the concept can—not only overcome the analytical limitations I have just outlined but also provide rich analyses that do justice to the multi-intentional nature of power and the contestation of its meanings in particular conjunctures.

Conclusion: De-essentializing hegemony

The discussion in this article has unraveled some of the multilayered analytical meanings of the notion of hegemony. There is, undoubtedly, a variety of understandings of the term—as Gavin Smith (2004) identified writing in *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, twenty years ago. Some of these are closer or further away from the original Gramscian in-

terpretation. Williams and the Comaroffs, for example, have put too much of their own inspiration in developing the concept, making it more amenable to anthropological audiences. This popularity, I argue, has promoted Marxism in Anthropology, although indirectly. Their use has also, as others observe, diluted Gramsci's original Marxist message (see Ciavolella 2018; Crehan 2002; Kurtz 1996). It is clear, for example, that the hegemony of the Comaroffs is one degree more ideological (see Crehan 2002)—and closer to common-sensical attributes—than Gramsci's original use. In comparison to the Comaroffs, Keesing's use of the concept—with its emphasis on tactics of subversion—feels one degree closer to Gramsci.

Williams and Hall, whom I foregrounded in my analysis, stand emblematic of a particularly British version of Western Marxism. As Crehan (2002) correctly observes, Williams's framing of hegemony in *Marxism and literature* (1977) has influenced anthropology more heavily, but also caused "culturalist" misrepresentations with regard to the orthodox Gramscian perspective. There are three related issues to note here, which I discussed in greater detail in the preceding sections: first, William's understanding of culture is not the same as that used by most anthropologists, as Crehan has exemplified so persuasively (2002, 2018, 2022); second, Williams's overall work remains thoroughly committed to a materialist perspective (see also Smith 2004) (despite potential culturalist misreadings of *Marxism and literature* [1977: 108–114]); and third, the label "culturalist"—as this has been applied to Williams and Hall in debates within Cultural Studies—does not refer to a proclivity to reify culture, as many contemporary anthropologists do. On the contrary, it connotes an (experience-rich) Marxist alternative to structuralism.

Stuart Hall's use of hegemony, like Williams, is fluid, encompassing, dynamic and explicitly processual. It promotes—in an approachable and attractive style—the Gramscian message that hegemony is contingent, not a settled project. Grounded within his conjunctural thinking, hegemony—in his use—captures with elevated

precision complex articulations; for example, between discursive and social formations or conflicting political projects (see Smith 2004). Despite his heavier emphasis on discourse, Hall remains really a Marxist at heart (see Clarke 2014, 2017; D. Scott 2017). He is, however, an unsettled Marxist, ready to question, along his famous critique of Thatcherism, leftist counter-hegemonies and their precise relationship to power.

In those, and many other respects, Williams and Hall have communicated a profoundly Gramscian message: the way we perceive social and political life is never completely uncontaminated by power. Some strands of the anthropology of resistance have benefited from this message (see among many, Ciavolella 2018; Gledhill [1994] 2000, 2012; Roseberry 1994; Theodossopoulos 2015), while others, as Ortner (1995, 2016) reminded us, have not. It is here that the notion of hegemony can provide valuable aid. Its analytical propensity can shed some corrective light on the anthropological proclivity of seeing culture(s) as self-contained. That is, of course, if we use the concept in a non-essentializing manner: not as a synonym for singular forms of domination statically conceived, but with awareness of the multiple layers of contestation within each particular power formation. After all, hegemony is, as William Roseberry (1994: 360) has suggested, a concept for understanding struggle (see also Smith 2004).

The internal variation of hegemony's academic meanings—even among Gramsci-inspired scholars—conveys a strong anti-essentializing message: we live in an interconnected world of competing hegemonies that readapt (more or less successfully) to opposition. If we can make this dialectic of forces visible in our work—by signaling a plural, shifting, contested view of hegemony—we may possibly escape from closed and static explanations. We may relate with clarity to the emancipatory potential of counter-hegemonic work; understand the manifold antagonisms and struggles of the social groups implicated; and/or appreciate the degree to which we are all susceptible to enmesh ourselves with some form of hegemony or another. Using hegemony in a non-essentializing manner can help us recognize our proximity and shared susceptibility to the workings of power. The latter, in all their concreteness and materiality are a human product and as such can be actively reconstituted. Failing to realize this, as Marx ([1844] 1959) insisted a long time ago, generates profound alienation.

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Notes

Epigraphs: Stuart Hall (2016: 173) and Raymond Williams (1977: 112)

1. Thucydides' critical awareness (toward the hegemonic self) is an early precursor of Chomsky's (2015: 83) recognition of the why-do-they-hate-us conundrum, as indicative of the unawareness of US citizens regarding US hegemony as this is perceived globally.

2. Ασκώντας την αρχηγία αυτή, αναπτύξαμε, από την ανάγκη των πραγμάτων, την ηγεμονία μας στο σημείο που βρίσκεται σήμερα, στην αρχή από φόβο, έπειτα για την τιμή και αργότερα για το συμφέρον μας (translation from ancient Greek, Aggelos Vlahos).

3. The book, which is ethnographically inclined, has been very influential in anthropology, although James Scott is a political scientist.

4. As Ciavalolla perceptively notes, Scott misreads Gramsci's use of hegemony as "another version of the German Ideology, seeing every cultural proposition as inevitably at the service of the dominant classes" (Ciavalolla 2018: 51).

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