

Reclaiming Utopia, Contesting Hegemony: A Conversation

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Living through a global pandemic, as well as the politics of a so-called populist (and powerful) right-wing government, this paper documents a conversation between university students and lecturers based in Brazil, one of the epicentres of this double-sword crisis reverberating around the world. The paper shows the development of the discussion as the group elects the issue of hegemony, and tries to work out ways to think, act, and lead a counter-hegemonic, collective future. The reflections in this paper are relevant to anyone interested in enacting change.

INTRODUCTION

Following the invitation from the call to discuss the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic in making seemingly radical ideas seem possible, I invited a group of Latin American scholars in different stages of their career to consider possible solutions. On the week we met online, Latin America was alight; Peruvians, Guatemalans, Chileans, and Bolivians were out protesting. Though each held different concerns, protesters shared an eagerness for change and upholding democracy amidst death, impoverishment, lack of governmental support, and rising repression. While protesters were

hit with choking teargas and were violently dispersed by the police, the group sat outside these events. In the United Kingdom, where Daniel and I were, as well as in Brazil, where the rest of the group was, things were disturbingly quiet. It is in this context that the group considered the main issue behind all the maladies we seemed to be living – i.e., pandemic, authoritarianism, conservatism, and apathy. The paper follows the development of this discussion by first identifying hegemonic discourse that privileges individualism as the core issue, followed by considerations on how to create counter-hegemonic values that promote collective thinking and organizing.

As a reflection paper, some notes are necessary. First, for simplification first names are used throughout the text, and I use 'we'/'us' to refer to the group of scholars. Second, and importantly, given the nature of the interview, views were expressed colloquially and therefore are to be considered as simplifications of the participants' thoughts. The conversation took place in Portuguese and I am responsible for the translation.

27 November 2020

We started our conversation around Covid-19's effect

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on our lives. Moreover, the group was frustrated with the unrealized potential for change that the pandemic exposed. It is from this frustration that the group arrived at the core issue traversing our conversation: the need to transpose hegemonic discourse that upholds capitalism – as described below.

PART I: THINKING COLLECTIVELY

Daniel: I am a bit frustrated that this [pandemic] does not have the effect that it could have. If you think about it, it is a crisis like a war – people cannot leave their homes, they cannot interact, your relatives die, and you cannot get together. Yet, despite all of that, it is 'business as usual'. [...] Regardless of the impact Covid has had, people will continue to respect authority and will continue to be subservient to a government that is authoritarian. Covid has shown that people are quite flexible if that means sticking to the status quo. [...] hegemony is so strong that even if your grandparents die, you will still support Bolsonaro.

Sofia: I want to add to what Daniel said. We discuss that liberalism is not an ideology, it is a rationality, and I believe the pandemic has really shown that. [...] What is keeping it [capitalism] is not something external, it is something that comes from us. [...] we are effectively responding with emotions (original, *afectos*¹) that are shaped by right wing ideology.

The mention of 'hegemony' requires explanation. The group used the word as framed by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. To put it simply, Gramsci² argued that hegemony was a way of thinking (a 'rationality') that is portrayed as common sense, thus maintains capitalism in an imperceptible way because people accept hegemonic discourses as the norm. Thus, for the group, the core problem in the world is capitalism. The general feeling of dissatisfaction arose from the perception that despite the pandemic's potential to generate a mass critique of capitalism, the group kept observing hegemonic thinking – an overall acceptance that people need to remain productive despite the pandemic, hyper-individualism, and the belief that the economy cannot work in a different

way. It was from here that the group began to consider the need for new values that can guide new forms of thinking and acting.

Henrique: Gramsci's answer is counter-hegemony – meaning, the construction of alternative values to the ones of the elites. Yet, this is hard. There is one very simple mechanism: organization – people organizing to do things. People have unlearned to work collectively. This pandemic reinforces the sense of hyper-individualism. To start off, we need to shatter this [individualist] paradigm and work together. It does not have to be revolutionary work. We need to gather people to talk about the world. [...] Any type of organizing creates a new relationship between the individual and the world. [...] all problems in society are collective. Even if I have a disease, which is apparently my individual issue, I need hospitals, transportation, I need society! This type of understanding that all solutions are necessarily collective is an effective way of enacting change and building alternative values.

Henrique's intervention enticed the group to think about the need for actions, and the need for framing solutions as "necessarily collective". It is worth expanding on the later. As mentioned, hegemony upholds capitalism by framing this economic system as common sense. As Henrique implies above, individualism is considered one of the constitutive values of capitalism; thus, it is pervasive and organic of hegemonic thinking. Because it is so pervasive, individualism can start to direct efforts that seem essentially collective.

One example raised by Luana was the historical co-option of 'the family' by conservative politicians and ideologues, who merge a discourse of market-oriented economy ('economic freedom') with ideas about who constitutes the family and how they behave. In this discourse, a man needs to be free to support his family (woman/wife and children) in whatever way he wants. In this necessarily heteronormative family, welfare provision is seen as an external intervention and an attack to the breadwinner's individual freedom. Moreover, state interventions are portrayed as 'Marxist' – therefore, a threat. In Brazil, supporters of left-leaning politics, such as Marxists, have been historically persecuted in defence of this ideal family. This discourse was prominent during the military dictatorship (1964–85) that targeted leftist and community organisations of all kinds – such as indigenous movements. This imagined threat has been updated by current President

1 Colloquially, 'afecto' (Spanish) is used as synonym to emotions, feelings, sentiments, or inclinations. In academia, it can also refer to a combination of ideas, values, objects, and bodily manifestations (Ahmed 2014). Sofia was loosely applying the later. I am choosing 'emotions' for simplification.

2 For more, see Gramsci (1999), and, for an explanation of the term, see Simon (2005).

Jair Bolsonaro (2019-). Today, leftists (they include feminists) have been targeted by the government that has repeatedly stated these groups promote child sex and animalism³, thus further claiming the protection of the family as their realm. Within their narrative, heteronormative families are necessarily conservative, neoliberal entities; something that has mobilised votes and misrepresentations of community-led efforts and progressive politics.

Direct attacks and co-optation of ideas such as 'family' are only two ways of maintaining capitalism, and the

level as part of a broader oppressive structure that affects different people, in different forms. Hegemony shifts our attention to individual acts (of oppression and activism); as Débora frames it, "I think this group needs more rights', or 'I am from this group and I understand that I need to claim my rights'; but I do not think or interact as a collective." Consequently, collective organising and solidarity are marginalised, and the individual becomes the centre of any possible action. As Jéssica summarises, "from the moment we were transformed into a product, it is not surprising that we start to fetishize this product; that we start to

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group also discussed how individualism can be upheld in the essentially collective space of organised action. Organised movements have a powerful potential to provide collective spaces and entice much needed conversations. Yet, especially the ones mobilised around race and gender equality, and protection of the environment are often reframed as individual issues that need individual solutions by popular political discussions (i.e., media, political commentators, etc.). The simpler example of this is how small individual acts, such as using paper bags, are framed as the only possible solution for climate change – moving people away from collective organising against corporations and the economic system.

Race and gender equality organisations are too complex to discuss in this paper, so the discussion below will inevitably be unsatisfactory. Suffice to say that the group identified hegemonic thinking in these organisations as: the framing of problems and solutions from an individual perspective, which does not allow for or see solidarity as possible. Essentially, it is a problem of not seeing issues that manifest in the individual

see ourselves within a 'productive process' instead of a collective." In other words, a type of self-fulfilment becomes the driver of action, not the will for change.

For Henrique, the solution to prevent individualism in collective organising is quite simple: "place problem-solving at the core of the political, or social agenda. So, if people are hungry, well, hunger needs to be combatted and the people who are hungry will follow. If identity is gathering people, then let us politicize identity issues⁴." Or as Sofia summarizes, "people need simple interactions, and that is what 'collective' means."

Covid-19 has the potential to make us reassess the importance of state- and community-driven initiatives as we became aware of the essential (care) work that people around us do – i.e., family, friends, caretakers, cleaners, drivers, shelf-stackers, etc. Within this context, collective organising for collective needs must

⁴ Here it is worth bringing back the initial formulation of the term 'identity politics' by the Combahee River Collective (1977, 1) that stated, "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." This statement illustrates the argument of the group.

³ For some examples, see Leal (2017).

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become the norm, and 'doing politics' must no longer be seen as 'radical', or negative. Tiago highlighted the later, as he described how politics is now seen as synonym of party politics (and corrupt politicians), that drove people away from politics as whole. However, the recent protests in Latin America offers proof that there is hope; the paper now looks at some lessons from current collective organising.

PART II: ORGANIZING COLLECTIVELY

From the start of the conversation, the group identified one worrying trend: right-leaning and conservative voices seem to be excelling at 'doing politics'. They organize physical and online forums to discuss issues, thus creating narratives and mobilizing votes, boycotts, and demonstrations. They are not afraid of collective action or being part of a group. Yet, there is hope for left-leaning and progressive voices, and it comes, unsurprisingly, from the younger generation.

Sofia: In Peru, it was not only Lima, but the whole country; we had 10% of a country out in the street amidst a pandemic. It is huge, and it was organized via TikTok. The 'clans' out in the streets had the goal of defending democracy, even if disagreeing with what that means. And who they were? They were the Pokémon masters, the BTS army, the Dota clubs. So, they have a way of organizing, but we are out of it. Is anyone following Kpop?

Maria Julia: [...] It is funny because I do listen to Kpop and I was in some of the groups that organized the boycott of Trump's first electoral event (when they bought all the seats). It happened almost as a joke, 'because we don't like him', and that is how it happened. It is the youngsters; they do not seem to be reflecting.

Sofia: They know how to organize; they just do not know for what [reason]. They do not know they are doing politics. They do not see themselves as doing politics.

Our discussion exposed the potential for organising, and its messiness – various spontaneous collective acts exist around us. In this context, Sofia made an important remark: "politics is not consensus. It is a dispute. [...] We are now at a place where the politically correct is everyone being happy and not arguing". This quotation is essential as it demonstrates that the solidarity highlighted in the previous section does not

entail complete cohesion but a common (collective, societal) goal. The value of dissent is in line with the group's use of hegemony. In Gramscian thought, hegemony entails the creation of a consensus around a certain issue/position, thus, a normalized status quo. Conversely, seeing 'the normal' as something changeable is essential to break with hegemony, and to animate collective action.

Sofia: [...] I think we had lost the notion of fragility - that things can change. This is something that became evident in Peru now. One day you believe you live in a democracy, the next day you are being kicked by the police or being 'disappeared'. Additionally, for over 30 years we heard that the economic system cannot be changed. Today, people are asking, 'why not? Explain to me why not.' We are debating again.

Sofia leaves a positive outlook, one in which fragility and questioning come hand in hand. So far, the group identified hegemony, the traps of individualised thinking, the need for collective organising based on problem-solving, and the new platforms and groups active today. The inclusion of fragility has an immense potential because it opens the possibility of imagining a broader change; one that is truly counter-hegemonic as it questions the way we live. The paper now looks at how collective organising and thinking, as well as utopia need to be recovered from their status of impossibly 'radical' to become common practice.

PART III: BUILD UTOPIAS

The group discussed the need to 'do' politics in terms as simple as having a problem-solving approach, and of seeing solutions as necessarily collective. Indeed, as we grapple with the isolation imposed by COVID-19, the urge to gather seems renewed. Yet, an essential characteristic of this collective organising, one that has the capacity to keep people mobilized, to gather different generations, and create links between ongoing efforts, only came up at the end of the conversation: the ability to imagine that things can be different.

Daniel: You have a very clear vision of the status quo: a vision of 'there is no alternative' from Margaret Thatcher [...] Here is where, I think, considering radical propositions, the anarchist concept of 'prefigurative politics'⁵ is suitable –

5 Prefigurative politics was coined by Boggs (1977) as a directive for social action based on non-hierarchical, decentralised direct

which is that from a small scale, you start to build something new, so you can form what you think can come next. [...] Today, there is no alternative, there is no new world being generated that used to exist in, for example, Latin America in the 1960s. [...] Something that Latin America brings as a lesson, or used to present as a 'hope', is the notion that the collective is broad. The 'collective' is your ancestors, are those people that fought for their causes, it is your surname, your relationship with the environment, with the people around you, with the trees and rivers. Now, being aware of the environment is to follow Greta Thunberg on twitter but you do not need to know or have ever swam in the river by your place. The idea of collective became being a member of an organization, instead of a collective in a prefigurative sense of what can exist in the future – this expansion of the collective. That is what is missing to change embedded values, the need of examples and the exercise of thinking new, possible worlds.

Henrique: [...] translating it, if you allow me, Daniel: we are lacking utopia. [...] The right has a utopia: the world is unequal, but as long as everyone can compete, we are all happy. Some will be richer, others will be poor, but that is fine. This is utopia. A huge utopia that is being sold and bought is that solutions are individual; this is utopia. Utopia in the full sense of the world, of something that we strive for, that moves, that directs.

Hence, the group arrived at a more complete vision of how to organise in a way that incites counter-hegemonic values. Our organising must consider a collective that is much broader than the people we are surrounded by, and, at the same time, it must start with simple, problem-solving actions. It is about keeping an eye on the potential, and constructing solutions that can grow in scale. In sum, it is about transforming what is 'radical', or utopic into possible.

CONCLUSION

This reflective exercise had a life beyond the words on this page. This group of academics and students

or participatory representation; one in which collective movements strive to embody "social relations, decision making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Ibid. 1977, 100). For for history and main debates see Raekstad and Gradin (2020), and Breines (1989) for an emphasizes on the application of the term and its collective/community element.

of different ages and experience enacted a bit of what was discussed. Though we had been meeting for a while for other purposes, this discussion seems to have created a new sense of direction (and collectivity) to our conversations. This piece is an invitation that others too start transgenerational conversations to imagine a new world, or to simply start proposing collective solutions to issues around them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank all the participants as well as the whole network of academics supported and nurtured by Professor Henrique Carlos de O. de Castro and by Professor Sonia Ranincheski (in memoriam).

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