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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Solidarity and the Gramscian Subaltern Politics of the Multitude

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Abstract

This article engages with the theoretical-practical debate of contemporary political thought on collective subjectivation, political action, and social transformation at present. Firstly, it discusses the contributions of the contending paradigms of the politics of hegemony vis-à-vis the autonomous politics of the multitude and then explores their shortcomings for identifying potentially converging grounds. It then puts forward theoretical possibilities aiming to reconcile these approaches towards a critical conceptualization of prefigurative politics and the subjectivation of multiple social forces into an emerging political subject, building from the development of constituent subaltern politics through grassroots radical agency within local arenas. In this scenario, social solidarity emerges as a two-sided element possibly allowing for an alternative understanding of the constituent collective subject of our times and the radical democratic politics it brings into play for creating a new social order from local spaces. Lastly, potential research roads to examine these theoretical claims are indicated.

Keywords: Social solidarity; Hegemony; Multitude; Grassroots radical agency; Subaltern politics

Introduction

The successive crises of the neoliberal hegemonic order have unfolded over multiple dimensions of human life throughout the past decades. Most recently, society has endured the Great Recession in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, migration flows have increased dramatically due to civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and systematic human rights violations, the drastic socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic still linger, and international conflicts have broken out here and there, let alone the climate crisis that threatens us all. Altogether, these and other issues of the neoliberal order have produced an overwhelming toll on (collective) social well-being, which, arguably, is but a collateral effect of a crisis-ridden world order wherein the neoliberal governing project "reinvents itself in times of trouble" (Brodie, 2015, p. 48).

Notwithstanding these aggravating and intertwining crises that put the neoliberal capitalist order into a critical juncture of global organic crisis (Gill, 2015), grassroots social forces have responded through autonomous and radical collective action, inaugurating a new cycle of counter-hegemonic resistance and alternatives (Satgar, 2020), as it has been witnessed in different struggles from below – e.g., street protests, social movements, communal alliances and assemblies, citizens organisations, individual and group activism. Accordingly, a wide constellation of independent and horizontal loci of grassroots agency has surfaced in civil society across the globe, enacting radical democratic politics to address these multiple issues of the world order to secure individual and collective livelihood while

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resisting the failures of neoliberalism. Furthermore, alternative forms of social life have also emerged (beyond – and often in opposition to – the state and market) on account of grassroots agency, gestating emancipated and egalitarian socio-spatial arrangements in local arenas through new democratic politics. Thus, as Holloway points out, the struggle of the exploited and oppressed social forces against neoliberal capitalism is prefigurative as well, for "we shall live the world we want to create, we shall organise and act in a manner that corresponds to that world" (Holloway, 2014, p. xv).

In this current conjuncture, a common element throughout these multiple loci of grassroots radical agency is the social solidarity that has manifested with notable strength recently and embodies the response of the grassroots to the organic crisis of the neoliberal order, binding together these multiple oppressed social subjects and unleashing their transformative potential to produce alternative social realities. These are, in fact, two faces of the same coin – that of social solidarity – as collective subjectivation and prefigurative politics altogether constitute the foundations of a new social order that, paradoxically, is already experimented in emancipated socio-spatial entanglements at the local level and has yet to emerge towards wider scales. This article elaborates on a historically specific understanding of social solidarity as a two-sided element that, at the same time, allows for an alternative conceptualization of new prefigurative politics and the subjectivation process of multiple oppressed social forces into an emerging political subject. It draws upon different strands of contemporary political thought reflecting on collective movements, political action, and social change to put forward theoretical possibilities seeking to reconcile the contending paradigms of the autonomous politics of M. Hardt and A. Negri's multitude and A. Gramsci's politics of hegemony (and its more radical discursive interpretation from E. Laclau and C. Mouffe) towards a critical approach to grassroots agency and new forms of politics at present. Grounding such conceptualisation on social solidarity as the theoretical-practical element that combines key categories of both paradigms allows for the reconfiguration of the conceptual apparatuses underpinning each approach, hence envisaging the entanglement of the multitude's horizontal and autonomous modes of being and acting into the broad Gramscian (counter-) hegemonic project towards social transformation and emancipation. It argues that this encounter takes place precisely at socio-spatial entanglements within local universes transformed and generated by grassroots radical agency.

This article is divided in two parts. The first part engages with the theoretical debate on popular power, collective agency, political practice, and social change, addressing mainly the contributions and shortcomings of the conflicting paradigms – the autonomous politics of the multitude and the politics of hegemony and revolution – to lay the groundwork for the theoretical possibilities to follow. The second part expands on these possibilities, building upon a conjunctural and contingent understanding of social solidarity for accommodating autonomous and hegemonic conceptual attributes underpinning grassroots radical agency and new prefigurative politics, in order to grasp better the subjectivation process of the emerging collective social subject of our times and the potential of the radical democratic politics it brings into play for creating a new social order from local spaces. The concluding section indicates potential roads for research to examine these theoretical possibilities against concrete evidence.

The Politics of Hegemony and (or Versus?) the Autonomous Politics of the Multitude

The theoretical-practical debate on new modes of subjectivation and political action and the potential of the grassroots agency for social transformation has animated contemporary political thought for the past decades, as it gains traction on account of the emergence of new socio-political developments, e.g., social movements, popular protests, collective

resistances, democratic experiments, and so on (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2014). And these have been more than just a few in recent years. This debate has permeated different social science fields (e.g., political theory, international relations, social theory, social movements studies), articulating multi-disciplinary perspectives onto two (apparently) contending feuds, usually inspired by classic and contemporary Marxist thought and post-Marxist reflections. Apart from a handful of notable exceptions (to whom this article will return later), the theoretical perspectives and practical claims have traditionally revolved around the paradigms of hegemony and autonomy, which are informed mainly by the works of Gramsci and Hardt and Negri, respectively.

The former builds on Gramsci's theory of hegemony and more recent takes on his thought, as in E. Laclau's (and his work with C. Mouffe as well) populist-discursive approach to hegemony. Irrespective of taking a cue from Gramsci or contemporary post-Marxists, the politics of hegemony entails the convergence of multiple subordinate social subjects under an emerging political body (the Modern Prince for Gramsci or other configurations of the political subject according to the post-Marxist tradition), which will rise against the dominant forces in a given hegemonic formation. Bearing the counter-hegemonic political endeavour, this emerging political subject embodies the national popular will and comes to act politically by occupying the integral (or extended) state, as Gramsci understood the amalgamation of the political and civil societies (Gramsci, 1971). Therein, subordinated social forces cohere around the revolutionary political body, thence acquiring discipline and political form (Gramsci, 1919a), for contending for hegemony with the dominant classes of the existing order. Besides striving to dislodge these conservative forces of the hegemonic establishment, a revolutionary political project must necessarily build up the alternative institutions and intellectual resources to underpin the development of a new social order, this time egalitarian and emancipated from capitalist domination, eventually emerging from the shell of the old one (Gramsci, 1971; Cox, 1993).

In this regard, Gramsci drew attention to the subjective dimension of dominance and subordination, as he insisted on the consensual aspect of power for configuring social relations enabling hegemony to prevail (Cox, 1993) – and so does the post-Marxist tradition, as Laclau and Mouffe emphasised the aggregative potential of discursive practices for cohering a disparate social majority around universalist emancipatory projects (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2014). An alternative commonsense – one that instigates the revolutionary praxis and communist consciousness among the subalterns – must pervade the social fabric to provide the organised mobilisation and active politicisation of the working class and other oppressed groups (Gramsci, 1919a). Hence, it allows for the counter-hegemonic project to expand over and entangle every dimension of human life (social, cultural, economic-productive, political, and so on) in order to transform it ultimately. Therefore, following Gramsci's politics of hegemony, social transformation (i.e., revolution) is only brought about through the political action of an emerging political subject that guides and elevates subordinated social forces into the political realm for waging an antagonistic confrontation with the dominant classes in the struggle for hegemony.

Laclau and Mouffe (2014) have expanded on Gramsci's thought, incorporating a more radicalized and vertical conceptual apparatus, while moving away from key categories of traditional Marxism (e.g., the notion of class struggle, the working-class identity, the triad of the economic, the political, and the ideological levels) for putting forward a populist-discursive approach to the construction of hegemony and the political subject. In this regard, their post-Marxist interpretation of Gramsci's politics of hegemony elevates vertical dynamics of representation and leadership, unity and universality, and antagonistic relations as fundamental for accounting for the political articulation of disparate social forces towards the construction of a unified political subject that is itself capable of

establishing an alternative social order (Laclau, 2001). Elaborating on the understanding of hegemony as constitutively political and the logic of equivalence inescapable to political articulation, they envisaged distinct struggles coalescing into a collective will – consisting of 'empty signifiers' that universalize the particularism of these struggles – through which the emerging political subject represents the community as a whole against existing forms of power (and in the quest for hegemony) (Laclau, 2001).

In Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic logic, discursive mediation – through equivalential chains – is of paramount importance for constructing the hegemonic representation of a totality, hence inscribing this collective will within a more universal new social imaginary (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Therefore, in this discursive construction of hegemony, and the universalist emancipatory project more broadly, political subjectivation and action necessarily presuppose representation and antagonism, for eventually enacting a subjective transformation of the social relations towards the political constitution of a hegemonic political subject that rises as the leading force within the community and challenges the antagonistic pole:

> Its very condition is that a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it. Such a form of 'hegemonic universality' is the only one that a political community can reach. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. x)

As Laclau (2000) puts it, "there is no way of emancipating a constellation of social forces except by creating a new power around a hegemonic centre" (p. 208), hence representation, understood as a system of mediations, "is essentially inherent to the hegemonic link" (p. 211).

On the other hand, the paradigm of autonomy rejects these social and political processes of antagonism, convergence, hierarchy, and representation, as it builds up from the horizontal and absolute democratic politics for being and acting of the multitude. Hardt and Negri (2004; 2009) have theorised the political subjectivation of the multitude as the process of becoming of multiple subjectivities into a collective social subject that associates, interacts, and organises loosely and horizontally through a dynamic network of independent loci of human agency. Most importantly, in this process of subjectivation, the plurality and autonomy of the social elements entangling into this rhizomatic network are preserved, hence enabling the expansive potential of this new collective social subject, since the multitude incorporates "a polyphonic composition of them, and a general enrichment of each through this common constitution" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 211).

And just as the multitude comes to exist by producing new subjectivities through autonomous politics, it is also through this networked model of association and organisation that it acts politically, insofar as Hardt and Negri (2009) conceive the political act in a post-hegemonic order as the very organisation of social life in common, encompassing every aspect of human life – i.e., nature and society. Given this current biopolitical context of the production of the common, the multiplicity of singularities forming the multitude acts together politically in social production, as politics (and the political capacity of the multitude accordingly) "has (...) never really been separable from the realm of needs and life" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 175). Thus, "horizontally organised multiplicities are capable of political action" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 173) since, as the multitude comes into being autonomously, it organically bears "the power to organise itself through the conflictual and cooperative interactions of singularities in the common" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 175). In this post-hegemonic order, the multitude's horizontal and autonomous politics for being and acting are recursive, as one recognises "how its

productive activity is also a political act of self-making" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 175). Consequently, in contrast to the vertical hegemonic understanding of political subjectivation as the constitution of "a hegemonic power standing above the plural social field" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 169), the horizontal and autonomous paradigm envisages "a theory of organisation based on the freedom of singularities that converge in the production of the common" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 211).

Most recently, Hardt and Negri (2017) have tried to accommodate – to some extent – a tactical leadership to the politics of the multitude, in order to advance decision-making and assembly of this emerging collective social subject for creating new democratic political possibilities. By inverting the "the political relationship that constitutes" (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. xv) leadership, they attempt to subsume it to the strategic role of the multitude itself, thereby reverting the hierarchical logic of vertical leadership inherent to Laclau's construction of hegemony. These key functions of leadership – decision-making and assembly – can be, nonetheless, "accomplished together by the multitude, democratically" (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. xiv). Having that said, the multitude remains capable of organising itself, setting its own terms for cooperation and action and, even if incorporating some dynamics of tactical leadership, the production of subjectivity necessarily remains autonomous by means of the democratic entrepreneurship of the multitude (Hardt & Negri, 2017). Thus, cooperation, singularity, freedom, equality and autonomy are the very ontology of the multitude and the radical democratic politics it enacts.

The debate goes on, delving deeper into the contradictions of the different modes of political subjectivation and the political capacity of the emerging collective social subject in each perspective, and the conceptual apparatuses underpinning them. A detailed study of the particularities of each paradigm is beyond the scope of this article – it has already been done aptly elsewhere[1]. This section will focus instead on the shortcomings of these approaches to identify possible grounds for productive tensions to emerge.

Gramsci had traditionally put a great emphasis on the agency and self-determination of the working class, and on the new class consciousness that arose, from the workshops to the trenches, in the years of war (Davidson, 2016), as decisive for the subjective emergence of the worker and the communist subject (Modonesi, 2014) – itself a political subject capable of producing counter-hegemonic resistance and transformation. Moreover, in this context, he was particularly interested "in the role of spontaneous workers' organisations" (Davidson, 2016, p. 124), elevating "the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class" (Gramsci, 1919a, p. 79) as the cornerstone of the workers' democracy, inasmuch as these institutions bore the potential of progressing "towards socialism and its realisation" (Gramsci, 1919, as cited in Davidson, 2016, p. 125). Nonetheless, Gramsci would, throughout his further reflections, insist on the need of attributing discipline and political organisation to the working class, thence emphasizing the leading role of a new form of democratic organisation – the Modern Prince in his Prison Notebooks). Especially concerned with the defeat of the factory councils movement in Italy in the early 1920s, he then drew attention to the decisive role of the centralising and disciplining leadership of the revolutionary party for co-ordinating and ordering the working class and other subaltern groups, "leading them towards the ultimate goal" (Gramsci 1919a, p. 80). Otherwise, lacking discipline and communist education, these social forces would remain "highly susceptible to cooptation and [their] goals can easily be integrated into the [...] politics of restoration and renormalisation of emerging or ruling elites." (Fonseca, 2016, pp. 8-9).

[1] See, for instance, Kioupkiolis, A. & Katsambekis, G. (Eds.), 2014. *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today: The Biopolitics of the Multitude Versus the Hegemony of the People*. Routledge.

At this moment, it became paramount for Gramsci to give a permanent political form to the autonomy and agency of the working class by subsuming it under "a highly centralised hierarchy of competences and powers" (Gramsci, 1919a, p. 79), hence elevating the party as the leading subject in the quest for hegemony, as autonomy becomes a "synonym of the political independence of class rather than as process and experience of emancipation" (Modonesi, 2014, p. 12). And this vertical dynamic of incorporating leadership and representative relations at the expense of autonomy gains an even more fundamental dimension in the post-Marxist interpretation of hegemony. For Laclau's (2001) hegemonic logic, the construction of the hegemonic subject necessarily requires "a set of subjective transformations" (p. 8) "between actual political subjects and the community as a whole" (p. 6), allowing for a particular constituent of the community of struggle to emerge as its leading force (Kioupkiolis, 2014), ultimately giving rise to a new hegemonic centre. Accordingly, the hegemonic subject only becomes hegemonic inasmuch as it incarnates the political representation of the other social actors of a community, subjectively transforming their identities altogether (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Even though the historical context had understandably led Gramsci to insist on the driving force of the party for organising and disciplining the subaltern classes, reducing grassroots autonomy and agency under a hierarchical power that rises as the leading subject in a social community, as in the post-Marxist take on hegemonic politics, only does harm to the constituent potential of the multiple social subjectivities exploited and oppressed under capitalism. As Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 166) have pointed out, traditional forms of political organisation and action that are inherent to these vertical and representative relations inherent to the politics of hegemony, "based on unity, central leadership, and hierarchy are neither desirable nor effective" when it comes to grassroots agency and its autonomous political capacity nowadays. The emerging (counter-) hegemonic social subject, acting as a political body that elevates over the social forces it represents, risks eventually being entrapped into the power dynamics of the hegemonic order, exhausting the transformative potential of grassroots agency within its political representative institutions, and inevitably reproducing capitalist relations of power and dominance.

For instance, the political trajectory of the populist radical Left in Southern Europe in the wake of the early 2010s anti-austerity campaign, that has widely been read through the lenses of this populist-discursive construct of hegemony (see Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis Eds., 2019), makes the case against the unified vertical organisation as a necessary condition for acting politically. The journey of Podemos and SYRIZA from the squares to parliaments in Spain and Greece, respectively, is instructive of the limits of subjecting grassroots autonomy and agency to a representative and hierarchical political leadership (Kioupkiolis, 2019). These movement-parties, closely associated with the grassroots campaign against austerity that shook the European periphery in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Della Porta et al., 2017), promised to institutionalise the new common sense and radical democratic politics cultivated in the popular encampments in public squares into the political realm. Despite considerable electoral success (Podemos became the junior coalition member of the Spanish government as of 2020; SYRIZA won the 2015 Greek national election, being in government for four years), these movement-parties attained but a few social policies and are now found on the defensive, whether in power or opposition, struggling to halt the far-Right that advances towards national parliaments across Europe. The flawed revolutionary political endeavour of the radical populist Left hence substantiates the inadequacy of the vertical politics of hegemony as the orienting framework for political organisation and action, corroborating that hierarchy, leadership and representative relations can only disrupt the emancipatory potential of grassroots radical agency.

Moreover, the hegemonic understanding of political constitution through unified hierarchical organisation also entails the need for concentration and cohesion of a wide social multiplicity behind the programmatic unity advanced by the emerging hegemonic political subject, thereby legitimising its role as the bearer of the national popular will. Gramsci (1971) envisaged the formation of a counter-hegemonic historical bloc (i.e., the unity of structures and superstructures), wherein multiple struggles and social subjectivities cohere towards the working-class struggle and identity embodied by the party (as the Modern Prince), as a fundamental stage for the revolutionary political project to thrive eventually. Laclau (2000) was even more energetic upon the need to supersede the dichotomy universality/particularity in favour of the former, as he insisted that a hegemonic social subject must necessarily assume the universal representation of particular struggles within the social community through the constitution of a new social imaginary, inscribing the collective will within the universalist emancipatory project. Nonetheless, since the social field is radically heterogeneous (and the expansive potential of grassroots radical agency stems exactly from the continuing plurality of its elements), reducing the autonomy and singularities of the converging social subjects will only arouse vertical and centralising tendencies of the counter-hegemonic leading actor. Arguably, by elevating certain ideological and programmatic orientations over an irreducibly heterogeneous social formation, the vertical constitution of a hegemonic unified command threatens to undermine the very creative potential of those multiple social forces coming together, which relies precisely upon "the full expression of autonomy and difference of each" and the "powerful articulation of all" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 87) through democratic organisation and common constitution.

Likewise, the autonomous and horizontal politics of the multitude have also been subject to theoretical and practical critiques from different standpoints, which unfold mainly over two complementary lines of objection, namely the absence of antagonism for producing political subjectivation and the very immanent nature of the multitude's political act. Rather than coming into existence as a response to the multiple crises of neoliberal capitalism, the multitude is spontaneously formed on the plane of immanence, i.e., it emerges out of the natural propensity of social subjects to come together and act in the production of the common in a post-hegemonic world (Hardt & Negri, 2009). As such, the multitude cannot be submitted to a process of articulation into an antagonistic political subject for challenging the established order. Instead of giving form to the multitude, the antagonist politics of counter-hegemony would disrupt and undermine the very becoming political of this emerging collective social subject, reducing the multitude's existence to a mere agent in opposing political relations at play.

Nevertheless, the hegemony of capital over human life fundamentally defines the existing order and, as witnessed in various manifestations of grassroots radical agency in the recent cycle of counter-hegemonic struggles (Satgar, 2020), its successive crises have pushed the exploited and oppressed social forces to rise against its social and political structuring processes of dominance and subordination. Antagonism is, therefore, an organic condition – lying at the very nature of political subjectivation – for the constitution of an emerging political subject that resists the failures of neoliberal capitalism and challenges its hegemony. Gramsci, for instance, elevated the central "dimension of political struggle as rupture – antagonism" (Modonesi, 2014, p. 12). Accordingly, the post-Marxist tradition acknowledges the centrality of "antagonism – and its corollary, which is radical social division" (Laclau, 2001, p. 5) for politics (and for the political synthesis of diverse social forces around the revolutionary political subject that emerges as hegemonic, as a consequence). As Laclau (2001, p. 6) states, the multitude is necessarily "constructed through political action – which presupposes antagonism and hegemony.".

By discarding the fundamentality of antagonism for political subjectivation, the paradigm of autonomous politics consequently fails to conceive an adequate framework for this emerging collective social subject to act politically in a post-hegemonic order, as it relies entirely on the biopolitical context of producing the common nowadays for accounting for the multitude's political act. Even though some of the principles of biopolitical reality are acknowledged here, e.g., "the cooperation of a wide plurality of singularities in a common world (...) and the interminable continuity of the process both based in the common and resulting in the common" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 174), the political capacity of the multitude must necessarily challenge the hegemonic order of neoliberal capitalism. Acting politically "implies a disruptive process of challenging established identities and norms" (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 6), thereby universalising the struggles of concrete social forces into a new social imaginary that expands the emancipatory potential of the new hegemonic centre (Laclau, 2000) towards a new social order wherein human life is freed from the rule of capital. Therefore, the political act of the multiplicity of subordinated social subjects coming together at present cannot rely solely on Hardt and Negri's "immanentist" approach, for, in order to become political, their ideas and practices must evolve "into a collective will that will then become an integral state, in the Gramscian sense" (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2014, p. 216), thence inaugurating a counter-hegemonic political project that is, in fact, a complex social construction (Laclau 2001). Hence, it stands necessarily in opposition to the established structures and processes from which the multitude struggles to overcome and emancipate, rather than emerging from its supposed immanent nature of being-against. Otherwise, relying solely on the innate propensity to act politically that, in turn, stems from the biopolitical production of reality, the multitude is bound to endlessly rise and fizzle out without ever achieving emancipation and genuine social transformation. Antagonism, therefore, besides accounting for political subjectivation, is also the *sine qua non* of the political act of the multitude against the hegemony of capital and towards the production of new social realities.

Despite these contradictions and shortcomings, the paradigms of hegemonic and autonomous politics offer useful conceptual apparatuses and ontologies that, once combined, can potentially lead to a grounded and more accurate understanding of the political subjectivation of the emerging collective constituent subject of our times and the potential of grassroots radical agency for creating alternative social formations. This article, therefore, rejects the established binarisms opposing key categories from both approaches (Katsambekis, 2014; Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2014), as it takes a cue from the theoretical interventions of A. Kioupkiolis and G. Katsambekis (2014; Katsambekis, 2014; Kioupkiolis, 2014; Kioupkiolis, 2019), who explore potentially converging grounds between these two paradigms for thinking grassroots movements and emancipatory struggles in austerity-ridden Southern Europe. They deconstruct the absolute categories of autonomy and hegemony and their subjects, the multitude and the people, thus allowing for mutual contamination between hegemonic and post-hegemonic conceptions of political subjectivation and democratic agency (Katsambekis, 2014), reconfiguring representative functions for envisioning a genuine democratic praxis for the production of the common (Kioupkiolis, 2014).

Nonetheless, rather than bearing on the populist-discursive approach to hegemonic and post-hegemonic politics as they have done, the theoretical possibilities proposed here are founded upon the liminal stage of Gramsci's revolutionary process: the development of constituent subaltern politics. It argues that the constellation of loci of collective radical agency that emerged recently as the grassroots response to the organic crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic order prefigure what Gramsci had envisaged as alternative, bottom-up and autonomous forms of proletarian life, embodying the cornerstone of the workers'

democracy, and yet it takes the form of a multitude of independent and horizontally collaborating social subjectivities. In this attempt to bridge the horizontal and autonomous politics for being and making of the multitude with the Gramscian counter-hegemonic political project for developing an alternative social order emancipated from capital from local universes, social solidarity emerges as a useful theoretical-practical element that can help to reconcile both paradigms, as the next section will elaborate on.

On Constituent Subaltern Politics and Social Solidarity

In his early writings[2], Gramsci focused his political and intellectual efforts to "stimulate thought and action" of the working class and other exploited groups for developing the "critical and active consciousness of the mission of this class", hence inspiring them towards the ultimate goal of creating "a genuine workers' democracy" (Gramsci, 1919a, p. 79). He elaborated at length on

> antagonism and autonomy, that is, on the subjective emergence built from the experiences of insubordination and gestation of areas of independence and emancipation for the working class (...) towards the exaltation of the autonomous formation of the worker and communist subject, its capacity to struggle, and the construction of a new society. (Modonesi, 2014, p. 11)

Tellingly, Gramsci attributed the development of constituent subaltern politics to the working class and other subaltern social subjects, as he understood it precisely as the autonomous and associative experience and action of the entire class put at the service of the proletarian power and revolution, elevating the multiple "centres of proletarian life" (Gramsci, 1919a, p. 80) as the cornerstone of the revolutionary project. Therein, the communist consciousness and the revolutionary praxis are nurtured among the subalterns (Gramsci, 1919b), eventually "developing into the skeleton of the socialist state" (Gramsci, 1919a, p. 79). What is more, within these autonomous and self-determining socio-spatial entanglements gestated by the working-class independence and agency, the counter-hegemonic common sense is embedded within the everyday life of the multiple oppressed social subjects therein converging, which is itself the primary field of emancipatory struggle.

Gramsci insisted on these independent, self-determining, and collectively organised arrangements of working-class social life – as the occupied factories, socialist clubs, and peasant communities that emerged in Italy (mainly in the industrial North) in the early 1920s – as loci of workers' democracy that, altogether, embodied a dawning system of socialist living (Gramsci, 1919a). Accordingly, he would regard the factory councils movement (especially that of Turin) as the most developed expression of a "future communist management of factory and society" due to its "revolutionary conscience and a rebuilding capacity" (Gramsci, 1920, as cited in Santucci, 2010, p. 73), as workers occupied factories and established autonomous self-management – from culture to production – raising as constituent collective agents with the potential for refunding the state (Gramsci, 1919a; Fonseca, 2016). As the movement took over the management of the workspace, emancipating labour from the ruling of capital, it reconfigured relations of production and exchange, as well as social relations within and beyond the factories, forming an alternative

[2] In 1919, Gramsci set up the weekly "*L'Ordine Nuovo*" (The New Order) as an instrument of reflection about workers' revolution and proletarian freedom concentrating mainly on the mobilization of the working class from below. In this regard, the articles "*Workers' Democracy*" (1919), "*Conquest of the State*" (1919), "*To the Workshop Delegates of the Fiat Centro and Brevetti Plants*" (1919), "*Unions and Councils*" (1920), "*The Power of the Revolution*" (1920), "*The Factory Council*" (1920), and "*The Congress of Factory Councils*" (1920) are especially noteworthy.

socio-productive system (albeit incipient and transitory) through the collective and self-determining praxis of the subalterns (Gramsci, 1919b).

Moreover, Gramsci also emphasised the importance of developing a "network of proletarian institutions" "rooted in the consciousness of the broad masses" for eventually enhancing all its "future growth possibilities." (Gramsci, 1919b, p. 88). By articulating these multiple arrangements of proletarian social life "into a broad and flexible system that is capable of absorbing and disciplining the entire working class" (Gramsci, 1919a, p. 80), this emerging order of socialist living would bind together the multiple oppressed social forces therein associating and interacting, hence accounting for the political subjectivation of the worker and communist collective subject. As Modonesi (2014, p. 12) points out, for Gramsci, "the autonomy of work acquires political shape in the Council: the producer becomes a political subject" that, collectively, can produce an alternative social reality emancipated from capitalist domination.

Therefore, building from his belief in the mass constructive action of the working class and its constituent subaltern politics for the coming-into-being of a wide social multiplicity into a collective constituent social subject capable of political action, Gramsci would espouse the "working-class autonomy and socialist democracy which constituted the most original and powerful aspect of the factory councils movement" (Forgacs, 2000, p. 78) and the workers' democracy more broadly:

> For Gramsci, then, autonomous and rhizomatic forms of proletarian life, as exemplified by socialist circles, peasant communities, shop-floor internal committees and the factory councils themselves, did not simply represent a new form of trade unionism or new forms of tactical organising on the part of a centralised and bureaucratic revolutionary party, but were, in fact, central and defining characteristics of subaltern autonomous politics in their own right, and needed to be kept as such by their own members and participants. *The autonomy, multiplicity, heterogeneity, difference and horizontality of these collectives, their 'revolutionary conscience and rebuilding capacity,' were generated by the logic of organised participants themselves, regardless of political affiliation or party membership*." (Fonseca, 2016, pp. 6-7, italics added)

Not surprisingly, the foundational principles of a new social order, as Hardt and Negri (2012) declared on account of the grassroots anti-austerity movement in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (and other manifestations of radical democratic politics since then) – independence, horizontality, social justice, openness, and collective self-determination – had already been contemplated by Gramsci while envisaging the socialist state to be founded upon the constituent subaltern politics of the working class. Furthermore, the multifarious constellation of loci of grassroots radical agency that have flourished in civil society here and there recently, transforming and generating emancipated and egalitarian socio-spatial entanglements at the local level, in effect, prefigures these very institutions of proletarian social life as in Gramsci's thinking. Notably, in Southern Europe, during the years of austerity and struggle (Hadjimichalis, 2018) social movements have turned towards local communities and neighbourhoods, implementing issue-specific and territory-oriented collective action to produce visible results, embedding the new collective subjectivities and democratic praxis of the movement of the squares within local arenas, therein producing new forms of politics (Nez, 2016).

Following the demobilisation of the popular encampments against austerity in public squares, social movements and other forms of grassroots radical agency – e.g., autonomous citizens organisations, neighbourhoods assemblies, individual and group activism,

(trans)national solidarity networks – have developed a wide array of local-oriented social initiatives striving to alleviate the severe conditions imposed by neoliberal capitalism over collective livelihood, as well as radical democratic spaces fostering people's control over the commons (Hadjimichalis, 2018). For instance, in Greek and Spanish civil societies, grassroots radical agency has enabled collective resistance and a transformative praxis within local universes, representing an important legacy of the movement of the squares (Fernández-Savater & Flesher Fominaya, 2016). It has combined traditional forms of collective action of autonomous citizens' organisations with the innovative democratic politics of the anti-austerity movement, building resilience through the provision of informal welfare services (e.g., social clinics, collective kitchens, squatted social centres, etc.) and the fight against home foreclosures, ethnic profiling, and the precarization of public services (Kousis et al., 2020; Lahusen et al., 2021). Complementary, more generative practices have also been developed for creating democratic spaces paralleling state institutions. For instance, social economy has been experimented with (e.g., barter clubs, time banks, social currencies), multiple public spheres for the collective self-management of the commons have been instituted in local communities and neighbourhoods, and alternative modes of production and distribution have also been envisaged (e.g., workers cooperatives, producer-consumer networks, markets-without-middlemen) (Hadjimichalis, 2018; Kousis et al., 2018).

In this regard, grassroots radical agency has enacted constituent subaltern politics through the autonomous and associative power of the multiple social subjectivities coming together within these new socio-spatial entanglements. Moreover, it has provided these local universes with a twofold contribution: shaping the terrain of struggle and resistance against the hegemony of capital and prefiguring new forms of politics towards alternative social realities. Thus, grassroots autonomy and agency have embedded an alternative commonsense throughout the social fabric of local communities and neighbourhoods, fostering the politicisation of everyday life (Garcés, 2019) and, as a result, giving rising to a collective social subject therein.

What is more, these multiple initiatives and spaces of subaltern social life – when conceived as interacting and associating nodes in a dynamic and expansive network of autonomous and horizontal socio-spatial entanglements of grassroots radical agency – indicate the terrain wherein the multitude comes into being at present (Castells, 2015; Saltzman, 2019). As multiple social subjectivities come together within these local arenas, through their cooperative and inventive agency, they are capable of acting politically in the production of the common within small communities and neighbourhoods, in effect expanding over every aspect of human life therein, just as Hardt and Negri (2004; 2009) have theorised the political capability of the multitude. The radical democratic politics enacted by this emerging collective social subject to produce social reality within these socio-spatial entanglements unfold through public spheres and assemblies and mechanisms of deliberative and participatory decision-making, enabling open, horizontal, and egalitarian processes for the collective production and management of everyday life within these local spaces. The absolute democratic praxis for direct self-governance and production of the common put into effect by the grassroots in local communities and neighbourhoods nowadays are, therefore, consonant with the Gramscian constituent subaltern politics of the exploited and oppressed social classes under capitalism, hence laying the foundations for an alternative social order – one that is egalitarian and frees human life from the hegemony of capital – to eventually emerge bottom-upwards, from these local arenas towards wider social arrangements.

Understanding these many socio-spatial entanglements transformed and generated by the autonomous and associative experience of the grassroots as loci wherein the hegemonic

and autonomous politics intertwine, it is possible to identify social solidarity as a powerful subjective element and a productive concept allowing to think anew the coming-into-being of a collective social subject capable of acting politically by producing constituent subaltern politics at the local level. A historically specific construction of the concept of social solidarity, which is located vis-à-vis the organic crisis of neoliberal capitalism and within the most recent cycle of counter-hegemonic struggles (Satgar, 2020), albeit contingent, allows one to envisage alternative possibilities towards resistance and transformation being developed from below and, moreover, its potential subjective impact for the emergence of a new political subject at present. Assuming a generative and innovative dimension, social solidarity, as Agustín and Jørgensen (2016b, p. 17) perceptively put it, becomes inventive of new alternatives and imaginaries, producing "new configurations of political relations, political subjectivities, and spaces". Albeit reflecting particularly on the role of solidarity for producing civil society alliances in the struggle against hegemonic migration politics, their assertion also holds true for the multiple manifestations of grassroots radical agency against the hegemony of capital in recent years (irrespective of which particular dimension of dominance and subordination is challenged), which have altogether shattered the hegemonic commonsense and developed alternatives (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016b).

It can be thought of social solidarity as a two-sided concept for possibly accommodating vertical and horizontal attributes of political subjectivation, grassroots radical agency and democratic politics, in an attempt to reconfigure key categories of the paradigms of hegemony and autonomy, thereby moving beyond the shortcomings of both theoretical approaches. Firstly, in the current conjuncture, social solidarity potentially indicates the awakening of the ultimate level of the collective political consciousness that brings together diverse subordinate social groups in a hegemonic formation and actualises their possibilities for collectively producing resistance and transformation, as Gramsci had envisaged. The development of a universal class consciousness, which inaugurates a new relation of political forces among the subaltern groups, brings them in unison around the political aims of these social classes as a whole and bonded by intellectual and moral unity (Gramsci, 1971). It thus becomes decisive for "the process of political subjectivation, from the relative autonomy of work towards the self-determination of the worker" (Modonesi, 2014, p. 12), hence allowing for the emergence of a (counter-)hegemonic political subject who can act politically in the construction of a historically concrete set of complex superstructures (Gramsci, 1971). The attainment of this universal class consciousness is, therefore, "the most purely political phase" (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 181-182), and it can be said that social solidarity henceforth acquires a political dimension (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016a) inasmuch as it enacts the self-actualisation of the subalterns' own potential for constituting new social realities by themselves. In this regard, the new collective social subject raising from these horizontal and associating nodes of working-class autonomy and agency becomes itself the constituent political subject of our times, eventually being capable of creating an egalitarian and emancipated new order from these socio-spatial entanglements at the local level. Accordingly, Gramsci had acknowledged the constitutive power of solidarity as such:

> *The principles of combination and solidarity become paramount for the working class; they transform the mentality and way of life of the workers and peasants.* Organs and institutions embodying these principles arise; they are the basis upon which the process of historical development that leads to communism in the means of production and exchange begins. (Gramsci, 1919b, p. 83, italics added)

Besides arousing this universal class consciousness of the subalterns (as in Gramsci's thinking), which in turn indicates to the subjectivation of an emerging constituent political subject, social solidarity has also the potential for embedding the revolutionary praxis within the social fabric of local communities and neighbourhoods. In this critical juncture of the neoliberal order and the grassroots responses to its multiple crises, "the forces of solidarity and the devotion hidden in them only wait for the perspective of great struggles to appear in order to transform into a predominant principle of life" (Pannekoek, 1938, as cited in Modonesi, 2014, p. 90). Social solidarity may, therefore, unite the exploited and oppressed social forces in the struggle against domination and subordination and towards emancipation, and their strength – i.e., the constituent potential of the subalterns – "lies wholly in union and solidarity with his comrades" (Gramsci, 1919c, p. 91).

On this account, a second attribute of social solidarity as a conceptual tool is to endow this new collective social subject with the discipline and organisation required for decisive political action through the organic commitment to alternative social formations – in which human life is emancipated from the hegemony of capital and unfolds autonomously from the state and market. Coming to realise the "continuity between one's own life and life as a common problem" (Garcés, 2019, p. 212), these multiple social subjectivities can together imagine and, moreover, generate – through a radical democratic praxis – egalitarian and emancipated forms of life, as those gestated within the socio-spatial entanglements at local arenas developed by the autonomous and associative agency of the subalterns. As such, social solidarity – as a theoretical-practical element of grassroots radical agency at present – binds together multiple collaborating social subjectivities entangled in this network of independent, horizontal, and self-determining local universes, unleashing their affective and social potential for the collective production and management of the common – which encompass every dimension of human life accordingly. Thus, organically committed to these alternative forms of life that oppose and emancipate from the hegemonic order of neoliberal capitalism, this new collective social subject can act politically, in effect, for its political capacity is thus exercised in producing new social realities.

As previously discussed, although Hardt and Negri have appropriately theorised the political action of the multitude as the social production of common life, what they left unsaid is the fundamental need to oppose the multitude to the existing order (Laclau, 2001), for thus enacting its political capacity. Raising the multitude against the hegemonic order of neoliberal capitalism through the concept of social solidarity, as argued here, allows for realising the political act of the multitude in the production of a new order, thereby elevating the antagonist dimension of political struggle (and consequently, of the political act of the multitude) and, more importantly, its generative character (Agustín & Jørgensen 2016b). Furthermore, albeit Hardt and Negri (2017) have recently conceded to some verticalization of the horizontal movements – or, to put it simply, "a dynamic between verticality and horizontality" (p. 18) – their "hypothesis of a democratic entrepreneurship of the multitude" (p. xviii) rests on subjecting vertical leadership to the horizontal politics of the multitude, rather than on the amalgamation of both dimensions. By employing the concept of social solidarity, one possibly envisages a more nuanced intertwining of hegemonic and autonomous politics, inasmuch as this emerging political subject acquires discipline and organisation for exerting its political capacity precisely through its commitment to an alternative social formation wherein human life in common is finally emancipated.

Nonetheless, as in other cycles of counter-hegemonic struggles, social solidarity (and grassroots radical agency, more broadly) comes up against historically specific structural limits that it has yet to overcome, as the very reproduction of different forms of capitalist power in times of crises, the cooptation of radical and transformative imaginaries by

authoritarian and extremist social forces, the institutional restrictions to the building of new forms of mass power for transforming the state, and the still contingent expansion of post-neoliberal imaginaries (Satgar, 2020). Critically, social solidarity as a subjective element and a productive concept has yet to develop both horizontally and vertically, expanding beyond these local universes for eventually encompassing wider social formations, hence building up to a global counter-hegemonic historical bloc around an emancipatory political project upon which a new order is to be founded.

Conclusion

This article has proposed to ground the encounter of the autonomous politics of the multitude with the politics of counter-hegemony and revolution on the constituent subaltern politics of the exploited and oppressed social forces, which is enacted through grassroots radical agency within emancipated and egalitarian socio-spatial entanglements at the local level. In this regard, social solidarity is indicated as a useful conceptual tool for understanding the process of subjectivation of the emerging subaltern political subject at present and how its political capability for producing new social realities is enacted. Furthermore, the article expanded on social solidarity as a historically specific element that emerges vis-à-vis the current conjuncture of neoliberalism and the structural limits the existing order imposes upon grassroots radical agency. Nevertheless, the multiple initiatives and spaces that emerged in civil society during the current cycle of counter-hegemonic alternatives as the grassroots response to the organic crisis of neoliberal hegemonic order suggest the potential of new social formations – wherein human life unfolds autonomously and free from the ruling of capital – to emerge from these local universes on account of grassroots radical agency.

Bearing that in mind, more important than thinking anew when reflecting upon collective subjectivation and the political capacity of the constituent social subject of our times is to ground these alternative conceptualisations on concrete possibilities of emancipation and social transformation, even if – still – restricted to local universes. Albeit not relying on primary sources of empirical data to support the theoretical possibilities advanced here, this article hopes to contribute to the ongoing debate by deconstructing standing categories and concepts of these contending theoretical paradigms, opening the field for further avenues of investigation and reflection. A fruitful line of inquiry might be examining to what extent horizontal modes of organisation and action of grassroots agency concretely oppose the hegemony of capital within these local arenas, i.e., how horizontal politics for being and acting are, in effect, articulated by political antagonism. That can lead to a better understanding of whether and how different dimensions (structuring processes and relations of dominance and subordination) of the existing order are resisted and, more importantly, are transformed actively and purposely by horizontal and autonomous grassroots radical agency. Complementarily, it is of fundamental importance to analyse how grassroots radical agency can be mutually constitutive for those engaged in these socio-spatial entanglements at the local level, irrespective of whether they are in a position of offering or receiving solidarity. Realising how social solidarity can transform these asymmetrical categories into a holistic approach towards social transformation might blur this division, constituting grassroots generative agency for and by those subaltern social subjects altogether. Another possible research framework benefits from shifting the scale of social solidarity from local universes towards wider scales. By investigating national and transnational alliances for grassroots radical agency, one can possibly envisage constituent subaltern politics being reproduced across broader social formations. That can be helpful for theorising and, most importantly, conceiving the practical repercussions of the dialectics

between local particularities and universal principles underpinning a new emancipated and egalitarian social order to emerge.

Thus, although the theoretical possibilities put forward here can potentially indicate the emergence of a constituent collective social subject tied to local particularities that, nevertheless, bears the potential to produce alternative social realities at wider social arrangements eventually, they are yet to be corroborated by grounding this alternative conceptualisation of collective subjectivation and subaltern political agency onto empirical evidence. Furthermore, the organic crisis of the existing order makes it all the more essential to envisage concrete possibilities of emancipation and social transformation.

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