



Lost in Conflation: An Argument for the Ambivalence of Hegemony in Educational Studies¹

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Introduction

The relationship between emancipation and oppression is one of the central pre-occupations of educational studies. Questions regarding the status of the oppressed within an oppressive system and their role in maintaining that system, as well as exploring theories and practices of emancipation in light of these systems are just some of the entry points educational researchers have made into this relationship. Given the interest in how it is that the oppressed contribute to their own oppression, it should come as no surprise that the concept of hegemony has found a home within this field.

Educational researchers, particularly those of the critical ilk, use hegemony as a way of naming oppression and analyzing many of the micro-level operations that serve systems of oppression. While this naming fits within the general topography of the concept of hegemony, it draws only half the map. The genealogy of this concept shows that hegemony is far more ambivalent in its critical uses.² By overlooking this ambivalence, what is often missed is the reworking of agency performed by the concept of hegemony. Moreover, critiques in educational studies may well offer a hegemonic solution to the problem of hegemony, offering one hegemony in place of another, and unknowingly fall victim to their own criticism of hegemony as a mode of oppression.

Through a consideration of uses of hegemony in educational studies research, this paper argues that by narrowing the scope of hegemony to oppression, educational studies scholars are at risk of mirroring hegemonic agency in a theory of ideology founded on a true/false consciousness binary, thus placing the agent of change in a privileged position of truth.³ Moreover, when hegemony is conflated with ideology in educational studies, the broader sense of agency that hegemony entails becomes unavailable as a mode of emancipation from identified oppressions. However, if we attend to the ambivalence of hegemony, new forms of agency open up that do not entail the occupation of some privileged truth position, and educational studies can offer a

¹ I express my gratitude to the *CQIE* reviewers, as well as Rahna Carusi and John Lowther, all of whom offered thoughtful and substantial comments to earlier versions of this manuscript.

² I use ambivalence here in its etymological meaning of “both strengths.” This is to emphasize that hegemony is not tied exclusively to oppression (monovalence) but is equally “strong” for emancipatory projects.

³ This is not to say that all concepts of ideology reinforce the true/false consciousness split. Ideology has undergone such a wide diversity of theorization, the single term elides the careful consideration it has received within critical theory and beyond. However, the half-uses of hegemony this paper highlights shore up with a particular version of ideology that relies upon the true/false consciousness split. As such, this paper confines its use of ideology to this sense of the term. For examples of more nuanced conceptualizations of ideology, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London, UK: Verso, 2007) and *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London, UK: Verso, 2012).

coherent theory of political action to describe and organize resistance to oppressions across the spectrum of education policies and practices.⁴

The first part of this paper, then, offers a review of some of the half-uses of hegemony within educational studies, uses that rely on a hegemony allied exclusively with oppression. The second section shows the underlying conceptual problems that arise when hegemony, understood in its narrow sense, is conflated with a theory of ideology that requires a privileged agent of change. The third section of this paper offers a brief conceptual development of hegemony to highlight the sense of political agency directed toward social change that is frequently overlooked within educational studies. This development concludes with an ambivalent hegemony that generates a contingent agency directed toward an ethical break from a normative system. With the concept of hegemony explored, the final part of this paper considers a new set of axiological issues that arise in light of an ambivalent hegemony and offers an example of the sorts of questions and formations educational studies can analyze, critique, and organize across and between hegemonies.

The Half-use of Hegemony in Educational Research

The beginning premise of this paper is that educational researchers too often understand and use the concept of hegemony as a synonym for any organization of power that achieves domination over some oppressed group in such a way that the oppressed group consents to its own oppression. More often than not, hegemony is used casually as a shorthand for structures and practices of oppression. Take for instance the following use whereby hegemony marks “the way in which [children] actually experience the different modalities of power and powerlessness as an empirical reality within particular class and racial formations marked by deep inequalities of power.”⁵ Through this rendering, hegemony masks as empirical fact children’s experience of oppression structured through class and race where some groups have power and others do not. Another example views hegemony as the foil for Critical Race Theory (CRT), claiming that hegemony must be analyzed and critiqued by CRT in order to address issues of racial inequality and the oppressive practices that follow from hegemony.⁶ While these senses of hegemony are capable of highlighting the agencies that go in to such oppressive structuring, absent are the ways in which the contingency of these structures open opportunities for other hegemonic formations to upset the power inequalities each example cites. Elsewhere, Null describes a hegemony exercised through the domination of the “social control interpretation of social efficiency” at the expense of other interpretations of social efficiency, revealing the ways that hegemony makes mas-

⁴ This paper does not take up the concept of posthegemony as articulated by Jon Beasley-Murray in *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). This is because the concern of posthegemony is the mobilization of power outside and beyond the purview of the State. This concept potentially holds promise for non-Statist forms of education, e.g., deschooling, that do not require the authorization or legitimation of State agencies. However, because of my interest in resistance efforts directed against the State, namely resistance against current, neoliberal education policies and practices promoted through State-run institutions of education, posthegemony falls outside of my scope here.

⁵ Henry Giroux, “Betraying the Intellectual Tradition: Public Intellectuals and the Crisis of Youth,” *Language and Intercultural Communication* 3, no. 3 (December 1, 2003): 172-186, 183.

⁶ David Stovall, “Forging Community in Race and Class: Critical Race Theory and the Quest for Social Justice in Education,” *Race, Ethnicity & Education* 9, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 243-259, 248.

ters at the hermeneutic level as well.⁷ Additionally, educational studies scholars show world history textbooks' participation in hegemony, summarizing that hegemony occurs when "socially marginalized groups adopt a concept that is not their own but is borrowed from the dominant group."⁸ With this narrow sense of hegemony, marginal groups direct their agency toward and through the master's tools, so to speak, thus consenting to the very concepts that oppress them.

There are myriad examples of this narrow use of hegemony in educational studies, and it is not my intent to offer a comprehensive index. Nor is it my intent to critique these uses wholesale since in the examples included above, the authors offer in their own ways very good evidence of the dominance of hegemonies and their oppressive consequences. However, each of these uses raises the question of what might be done instead. For instance, what should students of world history do to combat the operations of U.S. hegemony in their textbooks? The authors call "for students to review, deconstruct, and challenge current Eurocentric, colonial, and patriarchal perspectives that have been incorporated and institutionalized explicitly and implicitly in textbooks and educational practices."⁹ In short, students should critique hegemony. This is a common response from those in educational studies, and it speaks to the field's enduring and valuable engagement with critical theory. Yet, by suggesting critique as an end point, readers are left with a circle of critique that may urge alternative visions but does little in the way of enacting their construction.

Alternatively, there are a number of examples of educational studies research that do envision political projects that might supplant a dominant hegemony. These projects are frequently oriented in the emancipatory language of social justice contrasted against an oppressive hegemony.¹⁰ This is not to say there is a uniform definition of social justice across education, or even educational studies, but that it is common to find researchers espousing social justice as an anti-hegemonic alternative.¹¹ Consider, for example, Balderrama's suggestion that robust engagement with and enactment of social justice projects will counter the oppressive hegemonies found in classroom discourses.¹² She describes "hegemonic ideology" as "resulting in unequal distribution of educational attainment, wealth, and power"¹³ and examines her own encounters with White supremacist hegemonic ideologies in the classes she teaches. Offering an "ideology of social jus-

⁷ J. Wesley Null, "Social Efficiency Splintered: Multiple Meanings Instead of the Hegemony of One," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 19, no. 2 (December 1, 2004): 99-124.

⁸ Young Chun Kim, Seungho Moon, & Jaehong Joo, "Elusive Images of the Other: A Postcolonial Analysis of South Korean World History Textbooks," *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 49, no. 3 (2013): 213-246, 216.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁰ See, for example, Angelina E. Castagno, "I Don't Want to Hear That!": Legitimizing Whiteness through Silence in Schools," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2008): 314-333; Lindsay Pérez Huber, "Discourses of Racist Nativism in California Public Education: English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions," *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 47, no. 4 (2011): 379-401; and Stovall, "Forging Community in Race and Class."

¹¹ For a sense of the differing definitions of social justice and the consequences of those differences in education, see Deron Boyles, Tony Carusi, and Dennis Attick, "Historical and Critical Interpretations of Social Justice," in *Handbook of Social Justice in Education*, edited by William Ayers, Theresa Quinn, and David Stovall (New York: Routledge, 2009): 30-42.

¹² María Balderrama, "Shooting the Messenger: The Consequences of Practicing an Ideology of Social Justice," in *Ideologies in Education: Unmasking the Trap of Teacher Neutrality*, ed. Lilia I. Bartolomé (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008): 29-45).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39.

tice” in place of hegemonic ideologies, she defines an alternative “social justice curriculum [that] names and deals with oppression and social structural inequality based on social class, gender, and race. It also *strongly* encourages teachers to be agents of change and reform in their classrooms, schools, and communities.”¹⁴ Social justice stands as an abbreviation for both the resistance to hegemony and a localized agency. With resistance and agency located through a social justice curriculum, a number of questions arise regarding what follows from it. Who are the agents of change and reform a social justice curriculum is directed toward? What do agents of change and reform do in their local settings? Does this curriculum extend beyond individual students learning to critique hegemonic ideologies? If so, how do these individuals organize themselves and others in order to effect the sorts of change and reform demanded within the scope of social justice?

These questions remain unanswered, and, given the exclusively oppressive register of hegemony, they may not be answerable. However, such questions are paramount to the task of organizing agents of change and reform and, I argue, can be answered successfully when one maintains the ambivalence of hegemony, capable of describing both oppressive and emancipatory political agencies. To make a case for an ambivalent hegemony, I now turn to some conceptual concerns subtending the narrower version of hegemony that only describes oppressive political formations. These concerns emanate from a critique of the true/false consciousness binary that founds some theories of ideology, a binary that educational studies researchers risk importing when tying hegemony to oppressive formations.

Agency Lost: The Conflation of Hegemony with Ideology

Taking as an example the theme of social justice above, how does one know that social justice combats hegemony, how does one come by that knowledge, and what position must one hold in order to reveal this knowledge to those who consent to their own, presumably hegemonic and non-socially just oppression? These questions emphasize the problems that arise when one critiques hegemony outright and then offers another path in its stead. First, if hegemony is removed from the realm of possible political acts as necessarily oppressive, it is confusing, if not contradictory, to seek consent and action directed toward another political vision, e.g., social justice. In other words, after arguing for a robust critique and dismantling of hegemony it makes little sense to suggest a new path that is itself hegemonic.

Second, by endorsing a political project that will work to dismantle hegemony, educational studies scholars risk taking a position of privileged knowledge. This second point is particularly salient in discussions of hegemony due to the consent given by those taking part in a hegemony. In order to critique a particular hegemony as oppressive, one must show the consent of those under the hegemony as given under false pretense, perhaps due to simple wrongheadedness or because of more insidious motives. Regardless of the reasons, the critic of hegemony positions himself as knowing what those consenting to a hegemony do not, and the task for the critic then becomes one of revelation; i.e., the critic must now reveal the true oppression that lies behind the wrongheaded consent. Here the narrow use of hegemony aligns itself with a traditional Marxist theory of ideology founded upon a true/false consciousness dichotomy. Those who consent to the very processes that produce their oppression operate within false consciousness, mistaking their oppression for “the natural order of things,” for example. The critic of hegemony stands within true consciousness, demystifying the oppressive order for what it *really* is and,

¹⁴ Ibid., fn. 8. Emphasis in original.

subsequently, takes on the task of revealing to those in false consciousness the truth of their oppression in order to emancipate them from it. The true/false consciousness split entailed by the conflation of hegemony with ideology of this sort raises a number of concerns pertaining to the privileged position of the agent of true consciousness.

When authors recommend a critical engagement with a narrow form of hegemony in order to reveal the underlying mechanisms that work towards some oppressive end one may assume that a successful critique, with its power of demystification, will urge action to oppose hegemony once its surreptitious ways are exposed, and, subsequently, emancipate those populations who were initially misguided in giving their consent. As Jacques Rancière points out, models of emancipation that require some master emancipator to reveal or explain to the yet-to-be-emancipated the conditions and techniques of their escape from oppression do not, in fact, emancipate but, instead, replace one register of oppression for another.¹⁵ Gert Biesta highlights Rancière's problematic further:

[t]he “predicament of ideology” lies in the suggestion that it is precisely because of the way in which power works upon our consciousness that we are unable to see how power works upon our consciousness. This not only implies that in order to free ourselves from the workings of power we need to expose how power works on our consciousness; it also means that in order for us to achieve emancipation, *someone else*, whose consciousness is not subjected to the workings of power, needs to provide us with an account of our objective condition.¹⁶

Within traditional Marxist terminology, this *someone else* is the agent of true consciousness. Whether that agent be the proletariat class or individuals sympathetic to some oppressed other, Rancière's problem remains regarding the existence of some *true* consciousness that is only deliverable via that person or class who already knows the difference. The conflation of hegemony with a traditional Marxist concept of ideology and its attendant binary of true and false consciousness smuggles into the concept of hegemony the very pitfalls Rancière's critique highlights. In other words, by conflating hegemony with ideology in this way, agency remains in the realm of the privileged, to be imported to those whose consent has blinded them to their oppression.

Hegemony conflated with ideology of this sort also imports essentialist assumptions as demonstrated by Ernesto Laclau's critical engagement with Slavoj Žižek.¹⁷ Briefly, Laclau argues that Žižek's politics rely upon the immanent structuring of the political, i.e., an essential and present truth is accessible through—is immanent to—the political and can be revealed by “authentic” political actions. This sort of immanence establishes the conditions according to which the true/false consciousness dichotomy operates, i.e., some political agency may take up the position of true consciousness and expose the false consciousness promoted by other politics. It seems that we are left in a similar predicament to Rancière's in that there must be some privi-

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Gert Biesta, “A New Logic of Emancipation: The Methodology of Jacques Rancière,” *Educational Theory* 60, no. 1 (2010): 39-60, 44.

¹⁷ The full exchange occurs across the following articles: Slavoj Žižek, “Against the Populist Temptation,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 551-74; Ernesto Laclau, “Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 646-80; and Slavoj Žižek, “Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 185-211.

leged agent operating from true consciousness in order to revert the false consciousness produced by ideological inversion. However, Laclau's critique highlights the essentialist assumptions contained in the true/false consciousness binary. This dualism only makes sense if one assumes there is some kernel of truth papered over by false consciousness; and, if we follow this logic, the task of the emancipatory agent is to reveal what the truth, in essence, *really is*. For traditional Marxists, this revelation is the (true) proletariat unmasking of (false) bourgeois ideology.

For those who conflate hegemony with ideology, this revelation requires the (true) unmasking of the consent of the oppressed to the (false) structures and practices of oppression. With hegemony understood in an essentialist manner, it becomes quite difficult to argue for political change beyond what is "true" due to the immutability of the essence upon which hegemony is based. Thus political agency is delimited to what is "true," the proletariat or agents of social justice. Other forms of agency that exist outside of that delimitation with other sets of demands, e.g., the lumpenproletariat or agents of antisocial justice, are *a priori* false and to be saved or ignored.

The conflation of hegemony and ideology based on true/false consciousness determines the political in such a way that agency operates toward a single, privileged trajectory, a classless society or a just society, for example. What becomes lost in this conflation, are the ways in which the political is underdetermined, that it is always "up for grabs," and that, while oppression can certainly be an outcome of hegemony, this narrow interpretation misses its mark at least by half. The simple identification of hegemony with different modes of oppression and domination ignores the conceptual and contextual development of hegemony as a mode of emancipatory politics. When acknowledging this context, hegemony offers a complete reworking of the role of agency in politics, one which does not occur from some privileged agent but occurs in response to the inevitable failure of any articulation of power to address completely the demands of its constituents. More directly, while it is hegemony that brings particular constellations of oppression into power, it is also hegemony that resists and disintegrates such constellations. By relying only on the former, we become mired in the problems of privileged agency, but, when emphasizing the latter, political agency is loosed from its ideological constraints and capable of recognizing its own contingent, rather than essential, position while still enacting political change.

In respect of these latter capabilities of hegemony, reorienting the concept of hegemony toward a more ambivalent use not only captures the oppressive characteristics that previous examples successfully point to in their own ways, but also allows for emancipatory practices to occur through hegemony. In order to understand hegemony in this more ambivalent sense, I now turn to a brief genealogy of the concept of hegemony which shows the versatility afforded to the concept by Antonio Gramsci and, later, Laclau. By paying close attention to the conceptual development of hegemony, I will show a much more robust version of hegemony that does not found itself upon the true/false consciousness binary as its more narrow uses do. Instead, hegemony offers a form of political agency that operates without consideration of the oppressive or emancipatory trajectory of a political formation. While this introduces a need for deeper axiological inquiry into the concept of hegemony, something I'll address in the final section of this paper, it also offers avenues to enact the political projects that emanate from the field of educational studies in a way that does not require the demystifying revelations of a privileged agency.

A Brief Conceptual Development of an Ambivalent Hegemony: Gramsci and Laclau

Gramsci's concept of hegemony develops in part as a response to the proletariat revolution that never came. In accounting for the failed arrival of the revolution as a function of consent, Gramsci highlights a problem in Marx's base/superstructure model. According to this model, the base is comprised primarily by the division of labor, the means of production, and the material relations between workers and the owners of the means of production. The superstructure is the effect of the base, comprised of legal and political systems, aesthetics, etc.¹⁸ Marx's model sets the base as the material foundation of the superstructure and establishes the determination of the superstructure by the base. As a consequence, revolutionary change must be located in the base due to its constitution of the superstructure. Or, conversely, any change in the superstructure is incapable of altering the base due to the base's status as cause and the superstructure's as effect.

Gramsci reconfigures the base/superstructure model such that each is capable of determining the other by situating it within an historical bloc. When the base/superstructure relationship is viewed through an historical bloc "precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely indicative value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces."¹⁹ Gramsci regards the material (base) and ideologies (superstructure) as mutually entailed such that one would be inconceivable or fantastical without the other. The concept of the historical bloc, then, changes the relationship between base and superstructure such that they enter a reciprocal, even dialectical, process of constitution with one another. He argues that the superstructure and base share a "necessary reciprocity... [that is] the real dialectical process."²⁰ Consequently, the base no longer serves as the causal element of society but is in a reciprocal relationship with the superstructure, a relationship whereby each domain constitutes the other.

This shift in understanding the dialectic of base/superstructure leads Gramsci to consider the operations not exclusively located in the base through which political struggle can form, and from these considerations emerges his use of hegemony. Hegemony, for Gramsci, consists in the consent given by a ruled group to those who rule. When the ruling group is the state and the state is formed through the consent of the ruled to the capitalist interests of the owners of the means of production, hegemony looks very similar to Marx's base/superstructure topography. However, Gramsci's hegemony is more flexible in that consent can be given across a variety of contexts and take shape in a number of ways. In a revolutionary context, consent of different groups, peasants, intellectuals, and workers to name three, can be given "universally" to the proletariat leadership to produce a hegemony capable of overthrowing capitalism. In order for this to take place, Gramsci identifies three "moments" of relations of political forces that lead to the formation of a hegemony. The first moment operates at the "economic-corporate level," when individuals stand in solidarity with similarly occupied individuals. Gramsci gives the example of

¹⁸ For more detail on the base/superstructure model, see Karl Marx, "Preface," *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), available at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm (accessed 6 December, 2013).

¹⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 200.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

tradesmen “feeling obliged” toward one another, but not sharing that feeling toward manufacturers. In the second moment, “consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of the social group—but still in the purely economic field.”²¹ Here, a social group merely seeks equality with the ruling group, e.g., seeking legal redress in a system of law that privileges and assumes the bourgeoisie as its paragon and, subsequently, remains within the current structure of domination. At the third moment, the social group recognizes its interests beyond their corporate limits as an economic group. This new recognition “marks the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of complex superstructures”²² in which a political party is formed

to propagate itself over the whole social area—bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a “*universal*” plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups.²³

The new ability of the superstructure to change the base through hegemonic intervention becomes clear at this point. Through its universalization of economic, political, intellectual, and moral aims, hegemony creates a social group capable of encompassing a broad set of interests and taking up political struggle to upset a ruling group.

Hegemony, then, collapses the hard line between base and superstructure by placing class struggle and its outcome within the interests of a social group “universalizing” those interests and exercising that universalization over subordinate groups to garner their consent. This leads to a group formation that extends beyond the economic realm and poses a threat to the current ruling hegemony. A hegemony at its most successful will rupture the norms and practices that uphold the base/superstructure rather than merely replacing its leaders and leaving the structures of privilege and oppression intact.²⁴ For Gramsci, this means that through the operation of hegemony the proletariat could universalize their struggle to a number of other classes and, thereby, unseat the capitalist interests that held power in his milieu. However, another, perhaps unintended consequence of his concept of hegemony is that political agency is opened up to a more general process of universalizing particular interests to upset ruling political formations no matter their alignment. In other words, hegemony operates ambivalently. It has no ties to the oppressed or the oppressor, but, instead, is directed toward the political as such. This is the consequence picked up by Laclau’s concern for hegemony.

Laclau brings new attention to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to emphasize the relationship between the particular and universal in political formations. His theorization of hegemony

²¹ Ibid., 205.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. Emphasis added.

²⁴ The radical change of hegemony can be juxtaposed to Gramsci’s notion of the passive revolution, according to which socio-political change is obtained through gradual and incremental displacement of one social group in favour of another. The sort of change that arrives through passive revolution generally maintains systems of privilege and oppression, but replaces those who benefit by it. Passive revolution offers a strong theoretical tool for the analysis of the neoliberal domination of education reform across thirty years and the series of leadership changes that have maintained a neoliberal model while altering its beneficiaries. For more, on Gramsci’s use of passive revolution, see Ibid., 246-299.

ony extends beyond Gramsci's use of the term by folding concepts from post-structuralism into a model that accounts for the formation of a "people." He argues that taking the formation of a "people" as a political category designates "an act of institution that *creates a new agency* out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements."²⁵ The primary focus for *On Populist Reason* is how the institution of a "people" is precisely the activity of hegemony. Important for my current argument is how hegemony is capable of creating new agency, but in order to arrive at that point, some details on Laclau's theory of hegemony are needed.

For Laclau, hegemony is "the kind of relation inherent to the political as such,"²⁶ and he defines it as the "operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification."²⁷ However, Laclau's theory of hegemony relies on a number of moves that these simple formulations elide. Hegemony operates in Laclau's framework in terms of demands rather than groups.²⁸ In brief, a set of unanswered demands establish an antagonistic frontier on the other side of which stand those demands that structure a ruling hegemony. Should a ruling hegemony, say a government, remain inconsiderate to the demands of those it governs, or should demands be lodged that are incapable of being incorporated by the government, i.e., demands that are radically heterogeneous, those demands accumulate and in their shared status as unincorporable enter into an equivalential relation with one another, thus establishing the other side of the frontier.²⁹ In short, the frontier demarcates a set of antagonisms between an "us and a them."³⁰ The "us" links these demands into a chain of equivalences, i.e., a heterogeneous array of demands, race, class, and gender equity, for instance, chain together in order to seek redress from the entity designated as "them."³¹ This chain continues to grow as demands are formed and the articulation of some particular demand eventually becomes the signifier for all the individual demands. Subsequently, all the particular demands are reconstituted into a universal demand, social justice, for example.

Laclau describes this signifier that universalizes particular demands as empty. It can be a word, an object, an image, or most anything that universally signifies some set of heterogeneous demands in a particular spatio-temporal context. Moreover, an empty signifier through its emptiness is radically contingent in that it is filled with demands developed against a specific time and place, and in a specific socio-political climate. As such, an empty signifier is incapable of being determined through any *a priori* and ahistorical substrate. As an example of the contingent for-

²⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005): 224. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Ernesto Laclau, "Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics," 650.

²⁷ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70.

²⁸ Laclau justifies this shift on account of the "stable and positive configuration" connoted by a group. Instead, a demand, he argues, accounts for the heterogeneous makeup of groups and can stand both inside and outside an established order due to its ability to make claims to that order. *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁹ This is not to say that the establishing of an antagonistic frontier is always successful or necessarily results in the formation of another hegemony. However, when successful, an antagonistic frontier entails the constitution of a hegemony's enemy and its own identity.

³⁰ Important to the constitution of the frontier is that the "us" and "them" are not dialectically incorporated into a larger historical process, as would be the case in a Hegelian encounter. Were the Hegelian variant operative here, then the metanarrative of history would re-establish the very problems Laclau seeks to avoid, such as a privileged historical actor that can access the truth of history and lead the masses out of their oppression. For more on this point see Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 84-85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

mation of a universal demand that signifies an array of particular demands, Laclau uses one of the slogans of the 1917 Russian Revolution, “Bread, Peace, Land.” These three words do very little to address each individual’s particular demands in all their refinement; yet, neither do they rely on some essential truth that existed prior to and beyond their articulation. Instead, the chaining together of many heterogeneous and contingent demands gives rise to a universal demand that consolidates a “people” along an antagonistic frontier. Further emphasizing the radical sense of contingency of the empty signifier, Laclau points out that “[particular] grievances which had nothing to do with those three demands nevertheless expressed themselves through them.”³² Thus, an empty signifier’s universalization contingently incorporates a heterogeneous set of demands and, recalling the above definition of a particular attaining the status of a universal, hegemony is born.³³

This universal demand is an empty signifier because it has no content in itself and includes heterogeneous demands; yet, there are limits to its inclusion, and through these limits a hegemony consolidates demands into a system. Consider public education as an empty signifier. Public education includes a number of particular, often contradictory, even irrelevant, demands. As an empty signifier it contains demands for better environmental practice, better citizens, higher status position, acquiring a job in a globally competitive economy, and equal opportunity, among many others. As the demands increase, the emptier the signifier must become in order to house more and more diverse and contradictory demands. As long as the empty signifier is capable of emptying itself more, hegemony can represent its demands, contradictory as they may be, against an antagonistic frontier and signify its status as a system, i.e., its systematicity. Laclau writes, “any system of signification is structured around an empty place resulting from the impossibility of producing an object which, none the less, is required by the systematicity of the system.”³⁴ While the production of public education’s object(s), e.g., the perfectly educated student, is impossible, the emptiness of public education arranges a diverse yet systematic network around its impossible object(s), viz., schools, policies, teachers, teacher educators, administrators, tests, textbooks, etc. More directly, the hegemony of public education is the public education system.³⁵ However, public education also shows us the limits of an empty signifier to the degree that other demands set themselves against and as an alternative to public education, e.g., private education and homeschooling. These alternatives further show the ambivalence of hegemony. Through Laclau’s framework, the articulation of an empty signifier that establishes an antagonistic frontier is itself hegemonic as well. Therefore, private education, homeschooling,

³² Ibid., 97-98.

³³ While beyond the scope of this paper, Laclau further emphasizes the contingency of empty signifiers by considering their co-optation by competing hegemonies. Empty signifiers are capable of being “floated” across an antagonistic frontier by an opposing hegemony as a way of depoliticizing antagonisms; “You want social justice? Well we have social justice!” For more on floating signifiers, see Ibid., 129-138.

³⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996): 40.

³⁵ For confirmation of this one need only look at the volumes of research on “the public education system” that reach diametrically opposed conclusions yet refer to and assume at the outset the presence of “the public education system” or a facet therein. This is not to say such research necessarily isn’t valid or valuable, but that it is “structured around an empty place” and engages in a hegemonic move through its universalization of particular demands into the presumed public education system. In light of the empty signifier, researchers can acknowledge that research is an activity that contributes to the structuring of the very system under study and, as such, does not study a system that exists entirely prior to or independently of that research, thus avoiding the natural status arbitrary systems obtain when researched as separate entities, substantially existing “out there.”

and de-/un-schooling are hegemonic enterprises set against the hegemony of public education, i.e., the public education system.

The limitations and delimitations of the empty signifier and the contingency from which a hegemony arises provide the conditions for the sort of agency that is lost in hegemony's conflation with ideology detailed above. In consideration of the former, empty signifiers proliferate across socio-political struggles, and there is no one empty signifier that is capable of resolving those struggles in such a way as to create a smooth space for a single hegemony to gain uniform dominance. In fact, due to the antagonism inherent to the formation of hegemony vis-à-vis the demarcation of an antagonistic frontier, hegemony always requires another hegemony in order to set itself against a frontier, i.e., the "us" needs a "them" in order to be the "us" in the first place. As such the limits of empty signifiers are always under duress—a persistent hegemony always needing to reaffirm its own systematicity to maintain its position, an emerging hegemony pointing to the failure of another hegemony's ability to answer its demands. This requires the continued formation of empty signifiers, and subsequently, necessitates a proliferation of agency to articulate heterogeneous sets of demands. In other words, the formation of demands occurs through the exercise of agency, an agency which attends to those whose demands go unregistered by or are radically heterogeneous to another hegemony and manifests in the organization of a "people" structured around an empty signifier. This alone, however, is still susceptible to the pitfalls of the true/false consciousness binary mentioned above to the degree that the proliferation of empty signifiers by itself could be directed toward a better and better approximation of the true hegemony, i.e., the formation of empty signifiers as asymptotic and ever approximating a closer resemblance to the true political formation. This is why the latter point of contingency is needed.

Due to the contingent status of empty signifiers and the lack of *a priori* status such contingency entails, there can be no essential substance to be taken up by an empty signifier. There is no foundation from which an empty signifier can arise that is not particular to that signifier. Nor are there steadfast rules that govern what empty signifier makes a better hegemony. While this may aggravate current calls for ethical reform, it opens up such calls to an agency that does not maintain a privileged position of articulation. Instead, the contingency of empty signifiers produces hegemonies as much as it undoes them, and the agency required to articulate demands develops according to the contingencies of an empty signifier.

The contingency of empty signifiers results in a relatively open socio-political field in which multiple agencies are and will continue to be directed toward the maintenance, dissolution, and creation of hegemony. As hegemony holds no particular allegiance to oppressor or oppressed, nor do its agencies. This ambivalence frees up critical projects to adopt hegemonic strategies in ways that seek the formation of new empty signifiers around heterogeneous sets of demands. For instance, when supporters of social justice identify current education policies and practices as ethically bankrupt and abhorrent, they are making demands in turn that are radically heterogeneous to a hegemony that entrenches divisions in race, class, gender, etc. The language of emancipation becomes particularly salient when set against a system of public education that maintains and promotes a social order that privileges and oppresses on the basis of race, class, and gender and other arbitrary categories of difference. However, when this argument is made with its language of oppression and emancipation, the "them" of public education and "us" of social justice, one cannot further argue that this political change is not itself hegemonic. In fact, due to the agency made available through hegemony, it behooves critical groups to adopt hegemony as a mode of resistance. When hegemony is taken as "inherent to the political as such," social justice advocates are able to universalize their demands around empty signifiers particular

to their contexts and set against a ruling hegemony. In other words, through both Gramsci and Laclau's work, hegemony can oppress as well as emancipate.

Hegemony, then, provides a framework through which educational studies can intervene in and hegemonically counter discourses that support other, ruling hegemonies of education without succumbing to the problems of agency introduced by the conflation of hegemony with ideology. By reconceiving the concept of hegemony as ambivalent, researchers shift from a unilateral critique of oppression to an intervention into the formation, degradation, and maintenance of hegemonies as expressions of political agency.³⁶

However, by conceiving of hegemony in this way, rather than conflating it with ideology, we face a different set of axiological concerns, namely, the problem of hegemony's ambivalence toward the kinds of political projects it manifests. We might ask: if hegemony is inherent to the political as such, then how can one distinguish between hegemonies beyond the language of mere difference. (Neither politics is better, they're just different.) What argument can be made for favoring one hegemony over another? Asked differently, what are the ethical and normative considerations that go in to promoting and/or critiquing particular hegemonies? For example, is there a way to ethically critique the hegemony of public education in its current, neoliberal form while promoting a different hegemony which not only seeks the ruling hegemony's abolishment but offers an alternative political project?

The Ethical and Normative Dimensions of an Ambivalent Hegemony

By reorienting hegemony away from its conflation with a theory of ideology that relies upon the true/false consciousness split, educational studies gains an avenue for envisioning new forms of political agency but loses the foundation upon which critics could identify hegemony with oppression. Decoupling hegemony from an exclusively oppressive register produces a need to consider new ways to distinguish the ethical and normative status of particular hegemonies. One attempt at considering the axiological issues of an ambivalent hegemony comes from Celeste Condit, who introduces the concept of concordance as a way to locate the constitutive voices of a given hegemony.³⁷ According to this concept, a hegemony can be analyzed through the amount and kind of voices, or demands, that participate in its formation and establish a spectrum whose poles run from monovocality to polyvocality. In other words, the more open a hegemony is to multiple concerns emanating from multiple interests, the better the outcome of the antagonisms that take place within that hegemony. Concordance is subject to limitations in that a concordant version of hegemony is open specifically to those who have some stake in the issue around which a hegemony forms. As a limit, this means that hegemony is not radically inclusive, i.e., the empty signifiers limit and delimit, and all the uneven relations of power and privilege that can make some voices more important than others are still present. Concordance, then, is a concept that can mitigate, though not eradicate, the privileges of some groups over others to the degree that a hegemony includes multiple voices who are affected by the decisions made when forming that hegemony. To ground her analysis, Condit examines the discourses and events that surrounded the invention of in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and she identifies three major and contentious voices in what led to the availability of IVF: the Catholic Church, feminists, and the medi-

³⁶ This also holds consequences for the term counter-hegemony to the degree that an ambivalent hegemony maintains the ability for something described as counter-hegemonic to be a hegemony itself. Thus, hegemony's ambivalence allows for a positive description of counter-hegemony as a hegemonic articulation with its own empty signifiers and antagonistic frontier. This description goes well beyond the negative sense of counter-hegemony as anything that is simply against hegemony.

cal community. Her attention to the multiple voices that formed multiple compromises is an example of concordance that offers an axiological framework for hegemonic formations, namely, the greater the degree of polyvocality, the better the hegemony and, conversely, the greater the degree of monovocality, the worse.

Condit, though, neglects a criticism brought by both Laclau and Žižek when she overlooks the possibility for polyvocality to devolve into a logic of difference that can be reincorporated by the dominant hegemony thus preventing the more radical change both Laclau and Žižek see as crucial.³⁸ Briefly, Laclau contrasts the logic of difference with the logic of equivalence. The logic of equivalence, as described above in terms of the chain of equivalences, is the operation through which a series of different demands are converted into a single empty signifier. Conversely, the logic of difference is the operation whereby no equivalential links are made between demands, thus demands remain at the level of the individual.³⁹ Were this to happen, polyvocality would be more akin to consumer choice, e.g. a multiplicity of voices whose aim is to establish which soft drink brand should adorn a school's scoreboard or the *best* school-of-choice. The difficulty this kind of polyvocality presents is that it fails to address the larger issues around which a dominant hegemony establishes itself. Said differently, when multiple voices are concerned with the brand of their "choice school," no voices are questioning, for instance, the lack of union representation, the problematic nature of merit pay, or the assumptions embedded in the particular version of "choice" on offer; thus the political change encouraged in the concept of hegemony is not merely overlooked, it is erased from the terms of the concordance. This is not to discount Condit's work, but more to supplement her theory by caveat, acknowledging the potential for any challenging hegemony to be reinscribed, and thereby dissolved, by a dominant one.

Understood as a supplement to a revised notion of concordance, Laclau's distinction between the normative and the ethical adds another axiological dimension to the indeterminate status of hegemony. He argues that a hegemony that subverts the power of a ruling hegemony introduces an ethical break from the normative system established by that ruling hegemony. In order for the ethical dimension of a hegemony to be successful, the chain of equivalences, reconstituted by the empty signifier of a particular hegemony, maintains the antagonistic frontier between themselves and the ruling hegemony, thus preventing their reinscription into the logic of difference that allows the ruling hegemony to continue to operate fundamentally intact.⁴⁰

Given the development of hegemony provided by Laclau, the ethical break from the normative is a result of the failure of a hegemonic system to address and incorporate the heterogeneous demands of a number of groups, demands that link into a chain of equivalences. Addition-

³⁷ Celeste M. Condit, "Hegemony in a Mass-mediated Society: Concordance about Reproductive Technologies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11, no. 3 (September 1994): 205-230.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Against the Populist Temptation; Ernesto Laclau, "Why Constructing a People Is the Main Task of Radical Politics; and Slavoj Žižek, "Schlagend, aber nicht Treffend!" While the two authors fundamentally disagree throughout this series of exchanges, they do both point to, and generally agree on, the problems that the logic of difference entails for democracy, or, as I extend it to Condit, polyvocality.

³⁹ We can see this operation in the "to me" suffix that frequently concludes claims seeking to avoid confrontation, converting a controversial claim into a matter of personal preference, e.g., "Hegemony is necessarily a form of oppression, to me." By couching claims in terms of preference, antagonism is neutralized as a mere difference of opinion and arguments for political change shift to discussions of taste and decorum.

⁴⁰ See Ernesto Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000): 44-89, especially 80-86; and "Structure, History, and the Political," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London: Verso, 2000): 182-212, especially 183-85.

ally, the ethical break comes through an exercise of political agency such that a new set of empty signifiers emanate from the universalized demand to establish an antagonistic frontier. Any hegemony that is incapable of answering the demands of its constituents through its normative system sets the stage for an ethical break and, subsequently, a hegemonic challenge. This ethical break directs new forms of agency, forms made possible by the new set of relations produced by an empty signifier, toward the displacement of a ruling hegemony's normative system, and the challenging hegemony views their ethical break as entailing the betterment of society. By combining particular demands into a universal demand, like freedom or justice, a worldview emerges that, through the broad coalition of demands, offers a better, e.g. freer or more just, society for those who suffer under the normative system of a ruling hegemony.⁴¹

This ethical/normative distinction, in conjunction with a revised sense of concordance, offers a framework through which the axiological questions raised earlier may be approached. In particular, those critiquing one hegemony in favor of another can consider the groupings of demands, or voices, that go in to the formation of specific hegemonies, i.e., map the polyvocality of hegemonies under consideration, while attending to the antagonism respective hegemonies establish between one another, and evaluating the play between the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference. For instance, what demands are answered in current U.S. education policy initiatives like Race to the Top (RTTT) focusing on the use of large data systems to determine teacher quality based on test scores from teachers' students? Who has voiced those demands and what antagonisms have those demands identified as "them" in setting up their antagonistic frontier? Moreover, what demands are critical of RTTT and from whom are they coming? Do these criticisms espouse a logic of difference, accepting the validity of the empty signifiers deployed in RTTT, or a logic of equivalence, creating new empty signifiers in an effort to upset those promoted by RTTT, thus establishing an antagonistic frontier and hegemony of its own? What kind and degree of polyvocality does this other hegemony entail? What normative system does RTTT support and what ethical break does another hegemony propose? And, finally, what new forms of political agency are made possible through the empty signifiers directed toward an ethical break?

An Ambivalent Hegemony in Educational Studies

Taken together, the above questions offer an example of what sorts of analysis hegemony offers educational studies. Recalling the half-uses of hegemony from the beginning of the paper, educational studies frequently finds itself caught up in identifying hegemony with oppression by conflating it with a form of ideology that relies on a true/false consciousness split. This results in a privileged form of agency according to which those critics ordained by true consciousness exercise true agency in the demystification and revelation of oppression for those oppressed. The agent becomes trapped by delivering emancipation at the cost of emancipation. Thus, other political projects, like those often aligned with the empty signifier of social justice, face theoretical difficulties when explaining how calls for social justice are different from hegemony, which, according to its half-use, is always oppressive. Organizing for political action, resisting an identified hegemonic formation beyond the level of individual resistance, and offering more than cri-

⁴¹ This is not to claim that a hegemony is ethical for time immemorial. Instead, a frontier that constitutes a hegemony as an ethical break is later challenged as a normative system by new antagonisms, some of which develop into full-fledged ethical movements. Any hegemony is always at risk of being subverted, redirected, nullified, or successful. Moreover, the greater the degree of success a hegemony obtains through its ethical break, the closer it comes to converting into a new normative system, thus providing the grounds for another ethical break constituting a new hegemony.

tique and hope for something different become clouded or, worse, entirely unavailable, in the conflation of hegemony with ideology.

However, taking up a more ambivalent concept of hegemony offers both a critical lens and a constructive alternative for educational studies. By understanding hegemony as an ambivalent concept, educational studies scholars can not only identify particular hegemonies as oppressive in great detail, they can analyze, construct, and promote empty signifiers directed toward upsetting a hegemony under critique. Political agency, then, does not require a privileged status that reveals the wrongheadedness of the oppressed. Instead it is something constructed in tandem with the empty signifiers that shape the antagonistic frontier.

This is not to say hegemony formation is an easy or straightforward task. I am not suggesting that all that needs be done is to deploy a few empty signifiers and the rest will take care of itself. Instead, I encourage those of us in educational studies to attend very closely to the array of particular demands that are incapable of being incorporated in an education policy climate that assumes the validity of evaluation based on market mechanisms, data systems, and test scores across all levels of the education system, from state departments of education, to schools, administrators, teachers, and students. Consider ways in which these particular demands are universalizing under empty signifiers such as social justice, eco-justice, anarchism, among others: What antagonistic frontiers are being developed? What forms of agency are enacted under these empty signifiers against those frontiers? What do ethical breaks from the normative systems underpinning education policies entail and how are they manifesting? What hegemony can be formed and directed against a ruling neoliberal hegemony in light of the answers to these questions? Educational studies with its unique commitment to critical theory and political action in education, stands as an area in which these questions can be explored with wide-ranging theoretical and practical expertise. With support from educational studies research, the maintenance and oppression of hegemony has already received a great deal of attention. With an ambivalent hegemony, educational studies may now turn to the formation and emancipation that hegemony also offers.

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