

REVIEW ESSAY

**HEGEMONY AND HETERONORMATIVITY:  
REVISITING 'THE POLITICAL' IN QUEER POLITICS**  
Edited by **María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan and Antke Engel**  
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Ashley Tellis\*

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**H***egemony and Heteronormativity: Revisiting 'The Political' in Queer Politics* (henceforth *HH*) offers the promise of a very timely and important critique. At a time when 'queer' has received international acceptance and indeed hegemony, it is important to question its complicity with hegemony (following Gramsci) and its frequent replication of structures of the heteronormative (following Duggan, Edelman and Puar, to take the most significant critiques that have emerged). It is with great excitement that one turns to *HH* for insights into the baffling present and the urgent future.

However, from the get-go, *HH* turns out to be a bit of a shimmering mirage. Part of a series published by Ashgate entitled "Queer Interventions" edited by Michael O'Rourke, the Series Editor's introduction bears the imprint of the disappointments to come. Entitled "X" (drawing from Berlant and Warner's first inflated account of 'queer' in the essay "What Does Queer Theory Teach us About X?") and following their idea that queer cannot be programmatic or have a stable referent, O'Rourke claims this book does just that and argues that neither hegemony nor queer is stable. He speaks of the impossibility of the closure of the political and maintains that critiques of the hegemonic are also hegemonic (positions that will repeat themselves through the essays in the book) which makes one wonder what the point of the book is at all and indeed what the point of any oppositional politics might be. Shouldn't we just fold up and die if there is no space outside hegemony and heteronormativity?

The first and overarching problem with the book is that it circulates in the rarefied realm of ill-digested, poststructuralism-influenced theory

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\* Associate Professor, Jindal Global Law School and Managing Editor, Academic Journals and Law Reviews, O.P. Jindal Global University, India <atellis@jgu.edu.in>.

and appears to forget that structures in the world are not willed away by invoking relentlessly dapper destabilisations and ab-fab agonism. It is telling that most essays and the overwhelming focus of the book in dealing with hegemony do not invoke Gramsci as much as the inflationary Laclau and Mouffe and critiques of heteronormativity begin with Butler, Berlant and Warner and not earlier lesbian-feminist critiques of it, even if this earlier body of work is quickly referred to (Rich, Rubin, Alexander) and dismissed on the grounds that they did not use the word and were not Foucauldian enough. It is clear, then, that U.S.-style poststructuralism-influenced theory is the realm of the book with all its attendant disappointments. The main disappointment is the evacuation of the empirical almost altogether (even when empirical texts and practices are used, they are merely aligned with, outpace or fall short of the sexy claims of theory).

Second, the book emerges from the German academic context and makes it clear that the hegemony of U.S. theory has thoroughly permeated sexuality studies there. What is conspicuously missing is any account of that hegemony. Neither the editors nor any essayist locates the term 'queer' in its historical (from the streets of New York) and institutional contexts (mainly U.S. academia) and global political economy (where it circulates in many Third World countries as the lingo in which sexuality is spoken of at all in the contexts of global governance and HIV/AIDS funding), despite some Spivak-influenced noises about the international division of labour.

Third, these are German scholars who strangely do not refer to any Adorno or Horkheimer or Arendt and Habermas and function implicitly and sometimes explicitly with a theory/practice binary that some elementary Horkheimer would have put right. Most essays inhabit some rather unfortunate realm of 'pure theory' where they turn all the solid monsters of the world into strawmen and knock them down with the unwieldy sabre of taxingly poor theoretical sentences. If only social change and radical politics were so simple!

Lisa Duggan's foreword is characteristically more structural and sobering as she talks about the global political economy but all the salutary questions she asks appear to have not been read by the contributors and she certainly does not appear to have read any of the essays at all herself, even cursorily let alone very closely (despite emptily signposting some essays) or she might have withdrawn her foreword and fled the

field! The blurb, the foreword and the Series Editor's Introduction as hegemonic academic conventions need some analysis too, which is sadly missing.

The Introduction by the book's editors, María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan and Antke Engel repeat all the noises about instability, indeterminacy, complicity and articulation (showing the direct jump to Laclau and Mouffe without any real engagement with Gramsci) in their Introduction, with no account of what ground they stand on to offer such a definition of the queer (how are they outside the instabilities that seem to mark everything and what is the ground of counter-hegemony and counter-heteronormativity?). It is all very well to talk about "the irreducible simultaneity of complicity and subversion"<sup>1</sup> and "non-identitarian positionality"<sup>2</sup> but how exactly do these perform in the world of politics which, sorry to say, is full of essentialist institutions, structures and psychic formations? Internal inconsistencies are not paid any attention: heteronormativity is both "a regime that organises sex, gender and sexuality,"<sup>3</sup> yet also utterly cool and contingent. Everything is caught up in complicity so where is the critique to come from? What is offered at the end is "possibilities for making visible the fissures in the formation, while at the same time enabling open-ended and experimental alliance politics."<sup>4</sup>

Offering no historical account of any of the terms of their title, no real engagement with Gramsci, Althusser, the Marxist tradition in Western or Eastern Europe or Russia, bouncing the queer miraculously both inside and outside the hegemonic and the heteronormative, it is not at all clear why queer is given pride of possibility at the end. These indeed are some of the problems that plague most essays in the book.

Randi Gressgård's essay "Revisiting Contingency, Hegemony and Universality" revisits the engagement between Laclau, Žižek and Butler in the book by the same name and offers a critique of Butler's critique of Laclau to recuperate the latter's understanding of the ontological as contingent and, more importantly, as political. Laclauian hegemony then can enrich queer theory's critique of heteronormativity and hegemony may benefit from queer theories of subversion. Written in

1. HEGEMONY AND HETERONORMATIVITY: REVISITING 'THE POLITICAL' IN QUEER POLITICS 11 (María do Mar Castro Varela et. al. eds., 2011).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 20.

high theoreticalese, one is not quite sure who this essay is aimed at or what its little victories at the level of philosophising actually mean. Do we really need all these theoretical hijinks to know that ontology is not extra-political?

Gundula Ludwig's 'From the "Heterosexual Matrix" to a "Heteronormative Hegemony": Initiating a Dialogue between Judith Butler and Antonio Gramsci about Queer Theory and Politics,' sounds promising as the first attempt to engage with Gramsci, though subjecting the latter to an anachronistic engagement with 'queer' makes one feel sorry for his bones. However, what the essay ends up as is an atrocious attempt at trying to jazz up Gramsci (as if that were needed) by bringing him up to scratch with Butler. The absurdity of the project might have been less apparent were it not based on a systematic misreading of Gramsci's idea of hegemony as "solely pertaining to class."<sup>5</sup> Less egregious is her rather illiterate critique of Butler accusing her of not theorising how the heterosexual matrix gains its power and of being too abstract, among other things. Ludwig's idea of "heterosexual hegemony," she claims, offers a corrective to both Gramsci and Butler, but particularly of Gramsci who is read as a cis, class-obsessed git. The chapter ends on the same empty noises about co-constitution, complicity, non-binaries, constantly transforming fields.

Antke Engel's "Tender Tensions – Antagonistic Struggles – Becoming Bird: Queer Political Interventions and Neoliberal Hegemony" opens with a series of very important questions about counter-hegemonies and dominant forces appropriating difference before she lapses into Deleuzian drivel about desiring machines and queer irreducibility and unintelligibility. Focusing on an avant-garde video (Pauline Boudry's and Renate Lorenz's *Charming for the Revolution*), Engel uses it to show up Laclau and Mouffe who do not, to her mind, account for speculative figuration. Introducing the concept of "projective integration," which Engel characterises as a hinge between hegemony and heteronormativity involving 'flexible normalisations' and both 'tender tensions' and 'antagonistic struggles' and, most importantly, 'becoming bird' or "an identity imperceptible to certain regimes of representation."<sup>6</sup> The essay puts too much pressure on a perfectly ghastly-sounding video and on poor birds! Huge claims are made about an individuality that simultaneously is not collective, not neoliberal-individualist and not inimical to alliance-

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5. *Id.* at 44.

6. *Id.* at 81.

building. It is not clear where this 'politics of subversion' stands or from where it subverts given its putative unintelligibility. It is a charmed world indeed where irreducible otherness is a political force, there is no closure to the political and desire is central to the political! I want to go there as soon as possible!

María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan in their essay "Normative Dilemmas and the Hegemony of Counterhegemony" luckily bring us back to earth in talking about same-sex marriage, largely in the context of Europe. What's more, they actually offer a more sustained account of Gramsci. But just as one is getting excited about this first location in terms of space and engagement, they disappoint by offering no structural critique of marriage as an institution (despite decades of feminist work on the institution, all of which they ignore because they are too busy with the sexy theorists), a perfectly ludicrous reading of same-sex people marrying as a kind of Gramscian proletariat and ending on some politically hollow claims about how same-sex marriage is both conservative and radical, both normative and counternormative, both heteronormative and counter-heteronormative. It is the most appalling case of wanting to have one's cake and eating it too!

Katerina Kolátová's "How Sam Became a Father, Became a Citizen: Scripts of Neoliberal Inclusion of Disability" makes heavy weather of a lightweight film (Jessie Nelson's *I Am Sam*), reading it as domesticating the disabled through a normative, neoliberal form of governance even as, of course, she must also claim that hers is a reading of queer/the film without a referent (yet again!) and yet also working against the neoliberal order of things (of course!). How one manages to do both is beyond me. With her pious (read: entirely uncritical) engagement with crip theory, Kolátová offers an interesting account of the gender politics of the film in relation to the women characters (arguing that the disabled male figure is used to govern them) but little else.

Susanne Lummerding's "Signifying Theory\_Politics/Queer" returns us, alas, to the rarefied realm of theoreticalese reading hegemony as "processual relationalities," powerless positions as involving power, sex and desire as logical impossibilities and queer as an analytic category "pointing out the irresolvable tension between the necessary striving for disambiguation [...] and the inevitable ambiguity."<sup>7</sup> Rejecting minority politics and distributive justice as untenable with this conception of

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7. *Id.* at 166.

hegemony and dismissing sexual identities and positions as incompatible with this conception of queer, Lummerding ends on the idea of the world as a space of relentless antagonism where identities are “perpetually generated and rearticulated in interminable and conflicting processes of negotiation”<sup>8</sup> (mostly antagonistic). Apart from the sheer exhaustion such a world would produce, what is remarkable about this conception of politics and subjects (as with most essays in this vein, in this book and elsewhere) is the complete evacuation of any account of the psychic from the subject. It is as if all of us were free-floating atoms ready for some antagonistic and agonistic re-defining of ourselves all the time.

*HH* ends with Volker Woltersdorff’s “The Pleasures of Compliance: Domination and Compromise Within BDSM Practice” based on some rather slight online ethnography among BDSM practitioners. As if Varela and Dhawan’s characterisation of same-sex marrying couples as the Gramscian proletariat was not bad enough, Woltersdorff’s account of white folk as organic intellectuals is enough to make you laugh, which might make this book worth it after all!

Offering a banal account of how BDSM can be utterly normative and yet also utterly subversive at the same time, Woltersdorff settles for BDSM as extending the political and undoing the hegemonic order but only, as he is at least humble enough to point out, “if we thoroughly modify the concept of the political.”<sup>9</sup> Who this ‘we’ refers to and what these normative demands and injunctions are doing in an essay (indeed this is true of most of the essays) which seeks to break all norms and offer fluid notions of everything is not clear.

All in all, *HH* is a terribly unfortunate missed opportunity. It might have been an important corrective to the global celebration of ‘queer’ and made us re-think its circulation in global political economy and various specific sites outside the U.S., whether in Europe or the Third World. Such work is urgently needed and this book shows us that the need remains.




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8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 185.