



THE SUBALTERN and the State

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For Hugo Achúgar and Juan Antonio Hernández

Some years ago Ileana Rodríguez posed bluntly what she felt was at stake in subaltern studies as follows: “[O]ur choice as intellectuals is to make a declaration either in support of statism (the nation-state and party politics) or on behalf of the subaltern. We chose the subaltern.”³ I will argue that this way of looking at the relation between the subaltern and the state (which is broadly characteristic of postmodernist social theory generally) is too one-sided, and that we are in need of a new paradigm. To be more concrete, what happens when, as has been the case in recent years with many of the governments of the *marea rosada* in Latin America, subaltern or, to use the expression more in favor today,

¹This text is based on a talk I presented at the Brown University Global Humanities Institute, June 1-3, 2009. My thanks to Tony Bagues for hosting me and to the participants, young scholars in the humanities drawn from the countries of the Global South, for whom this issue is more than an academic one. I should note that, based on his own experiences in the Manley government in Jamaica, Tony is skeptical about my argument here.

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³Ileana Rodríguez, “Between Cynicism and Despair: Constructing the Generic/Specifying the Particular,” in Michael Piazza and Marc Zimmerman eds., *New World (Dis)Orders & Peripheral Strains. Specifying Cultural Dimensions in Latin American and Latino Studies* (Chicago: Marcha/Abrazo Press, 1992), 229-42.

subaltern-popular social movements originating well outside the parameters of the state and formal politics (including the traditional parties of the left), have “become the state,” to borrow Ernesto Laclau’s characterization, or have lent themselves to political projects seeking to occupy the state?⁴

There are at least two ready answers to this question: one, the subaltern is a “site” essentially outside the logic of the state; two, subaltern agency necessarily must at some point or other pass through the state, and in doing so will modify it. José Rabasa offers a version of the first in a recent essay, where he argues from the perspective of subaltern studies that “It makes little sense to beg the question of a new kind of state (kind, benevolent, democratic) when the state cannot be conceived outside its role of protecting and administering capital, whether in the mode of safeguarding international finance or in the mode of a socialist administration of capital?”⁵ I would like to suggest here an alternative that is *post*-subalternist, in the sense that it displaces the subalternist paradigm but is also a *consequence* of that paradigm in that it involves rethinking the nature of the state and of the “national-popular” from the perspectives opened up by subaltern studies.

Subaltern studies are or at least began as a form of Marxism, but it originated precisely in the context of the crisis of “actually existing” socialism and revolutionary nationalism in the 1980s. It would not be too much to say, I think, that the collapse of Communism was, in turn, itself part of a more general loss of confidence in the efficacy of the state to order human life that also affected political thinking in the capitalist world. The most consequential expression of that loss of belief in the state was, of course, neoliberalism. But it could also be said to have had “left” forms (it is enough to mention the names of Foucault and Deleuze in this regard). Among these could be counted subaltern studies.

Like other forms of postmodernist social thought, subaltern studies privileges the activity of “social movements” functioning outside the parameters of the state and formal politics. The space or territoriality of that activity is sometimes said to be “civil society”; at other times, the idea of civil society itself, linked as it is to forms of colonial modernity, is problematized. The subaltern is conceptualized as that which is not only outside the state, but also constitutively *opposed* to the state in some sense or other. To the extent that the state and modernity are bound up with one another, subaltern agency is not only anti-statist but also anti-*modern*, interruptive of the developmental narrative of the formation, evolution, and perfection of the state and civil society. If hegemony is understood, to recall Gramsci’s definition, as the “moral and intellectual leadership of the nation”—that is, as a power that both interpellates and emanates from the state-- then the

⁴ *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007), 261 n.27. Laclau means to distinguish “becoming the state,” an idea he takes from Gramsci, from “taking state power.”

⁵ José Rabasa, “Exception to the Political,” *Without History. Subaltern Studies, the Zapatista Insurgency, and the Specter of History* (Pittsburgh: UPittsburghP, 2010), 251.

subaltern must by definition be something like what Derrida means by the “supplement”: a “remainder” that is left out of, or escapes from, hegemonic articulation. This is the basis for assuming a kind of “elective affinity” between subaltern studies and deconstruction that I discussed in chapter 4 apropos Alberto Moreiras’ *The Exhaustion of Difference*. In a recent discussion of the relation between Latinamericanism and deconstruction that takes its inspiration partly from Moreiras, Gareth Williams restates the point as follows : “What deconstruction wants is precisely to interrupt the constitution of hegemony—which is not that of the subaltern—in the name of a politics that is different from the relation hegemony-subalternity, constructed with the sole purpose of subordination.”⁶

But is it inevitable that hegemony involves “subordination”? The subalternity/hegemony distinction seems to involve a confusion between what Gramsci understood by hegemony--that is, “leadership” as a discursively elaborated form of consensus or “persuasion” that can bring together heterogeneous social or class components into a “historical bloc”-- and the more ordinary language sense of hegemony as domination or subordination, in the sense of the coercive imposition of the perspective of a particular class, group, or nation over others, as in, for example, the familiar phrase “US hegemony.” More precisely, the distinction confuses the *form* of hegemony—“moral and intellectual leadership”—with its content (both socialist-feminism and fascism are forms of hegemonic articulation, but obviously with quite different consequences).⁷

Moreover, the distinction governing /governed is not necessarily coterminous with the distinction hegemonic/subaltern. A government based on popular-subaltern hegemony would, it goes without saying, seek to subordinate the social classes or groups that are actually hegemonic and that express their hegemony through their control of both the state and the dominant institutions of civil society (including organized religion and education) and the economy. For example, in the Haitian Revolution the slave-owning planter class became a subordinated group, in the sense that its own identity and interests were coercively negated--its plantations were confiscated, and many of the slave-owners and their families and associates were killed or forced into exile. Does that mean that the former slave-owners became “subaltern”? In a narrow sense, yes, if-- to recall Guha’s definition-- the subaltern is “a name for the general attribute of subordination...whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way,” so that “in any other way” *could* be understood as including having one’s slaves rebel

⁶ “... lo que la deconstrucción quiere es precisamente interrumpir la constitución de la hegemonía (que no es la del subalterno) en nombre de una política *distinta* a la relación hegemonía-subalternidad, construida con el único propósito de la subordinación.” Gareth Williams, “La desconstrucción y los estudios subalternos,” in Hernán Vidal ed., *Trinta años de estudios literarios/culturales latinoamericanistas en los Estados Unidos* (Pittsburgh: IIII, 2008), 241.

⁷ Guha himself goes to some lengths to distinguish hegemony and domination, famously characterizing British rule in India as “domination without hegemony.” Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony. History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

and one's plantations seized. But to insist on that point (rather than, for example, to characterize the former slave-owners as counter-revolutionary émigrés), would seem to distort significantly the meaning and political valence of the idea of the subaltern.⁸

Where, by contrast, one could speak meaningfully about the distinction between the state and the subaltern is in the relations of subordination that developed between the post-revolutionary state created by the Haitian revolution and the population of former slaves that had generated the revolution “from below,” so to speak, particularly around the question of restoring private property and labor discipline in plantation agriculture. Hegemony would represent here the pretension of a newly founded nation-state and its leaders (Toussaint, Dessalines, etc.) over those of its population. That conflict, *within* the revolution, so to speak, is one of the main -- and ongoing contradictions-- of Haitian history.⁹ But it was not inevitable that the post-revolutionary state should have taken the form it did. That it did was the result of a “Thermidorian” reaction in the process of the revolution, which as in the case of the French Thermidor was brought on in part by economic blockade and foreign military threats against the new republic. One could imagine a different sort of state if the interests of the former slaves had prevailed.¹⁰

Is it in the nature of all post-revolutionary states to simply institute a new regime of repression, so that the problem is the state itself (as in the neoliberal argument against historical Communism). Is there always a Thermidor, a conservative reconciliation between the state and revolution? Is the state itself a form of coloniality of power (but then one would have to consider forms of the state that predate European colonialism, and indeed may persist beyond it). On the other hand, it is clear that the (self) emancipation of the slaves required a new state whatever eventual form it might take (republican, monarchic, popular-democratic, “national,” etc.). Without “becoming the state,” the slaves would have remained in slavery.

⁸Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. R. Guha and Gayatri Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35. Which is not to say of course that elements of defeated classes, or of elite classes in decomposition, such as the petty nobility in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, could not migrate in class or status terms to form part of the subaltern sectors of a given society.

⁹This is essentially the argument of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s classic studies, *Haiti: State Against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), and *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

¹⁰I owe this idea to Juan Antonio Hernández, *Hacia una historia de lo imposible: La revolución haitiana y el “Libro de Pinturas” de José Antonio Aponte*. PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2006. The recent bibliography of the debate on this point is extensive, but see besides Trouillot, noted above, e.g. Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: U Tennessee P, 1990); David Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002); Laurent Dubois, *The Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge MA; Harvard UP, 2004); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slaves in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004); and Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2009). Fischer notes the paradox that the idea of Haiti as an autonomous nation-state was initially directed *against* emancipation, in the sense that the slave-owners wanted to become independent from France, which had (briefly) moved to abolish slavery after the revolution.

I don't mean to minimize the distance that separates subalternity and the state (and the sphere of formal politics, parties, parliament, trade unions, etc.), because it is *precisely in the space* created by that distance those new, and newly effective, forms of radical politics appear. As I noted before, the need for a criticism/ self-criticism of leftist statism—including the countries of “actually-existing” socialism and the modern states that originated from in anti-colonial struggles—was one of the driving forces behind the emergence of subaltern studies, which in a future direction was oriented to the possibility of new forms of radical political practice.¹¹ But, as I noted in my discussion of the relation between Latinamericanism and deconstruction, the “deconstructive” articulation of subaltern studies involves in effect a rejection of the political as such, and therefore of the possibility of political agency and creativity from subaltern–popular positions. In a sense, in the very act of enunciating subaltern positionality and declaring solidarity with it, it resubalternizes the political agency of the subaltern. To put this somewhat differently, to make the claim that deconstruction is on the side of the subaltern, whereas “hegemony” is on the side of domination is precisely not to deconstruct the binary that grounds that claim in the first place.

The state itself is, of course, not “one” thing, but a shifting and complex field of relations.¹² So what it means to “have” state power is not always clear. How “sovereign” is even a highly centralized, authoritarian-populist government like Chávez's, when it does not exercise a monopoly on the means of violence, when the urban *turbas* that have been key supporters of the Bolivarian project are both inside and outside the state, and when Venezuela's economy continues to be crucially dependent on oil exports, and the space between the state and private enterprise is riddled with complex flows of national and international capital involving among other things narcotraffic and “deals” and corruption at all levels?¹³

¹¹ “[Machiavelli] revealed that what was needed, if Italian unity was to be achieved, was for a nobody starting with nothing and from nowhere in particular, but outside the framework of an established State, to bring together the fragmented elements of a divided country, without any preconceived notion of unity which might have been formulated in terms of existing political concepts (all of which were bad).” Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever* (New York: The New Press, 1993), 220.

¹² It would be useful to take up again in this regard the work of Poulantzas on the nature of the state: e.g. his *State, Power, Socialism* (London: New Left Books, 1978). For a thorough, although in some ways now dated overview see Bob Jessop, *Nicos Poulantzas. Marxist Theory and Political Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985).

¹³ My friend Julio Ramos offers the following description of the situation in Venezuela today: “Creo que... hay una tendencia a un error al pensar a Chávez como sinónimo del estado venezolano. A pesar del impulso centralizador del autoritarismo, legitimado por pactos populistas cada vez más frágiles, el estado venezolano es un estado muy dividido y disperso. Es una máquina incapaz de ejercer el monopolio sobre la violencia ni de controlar centralmente los flujos tan complejos del capital, administrado por nuevas manos mediadoras. De modo previsible, la saturación ideológica y discursiva funciona en parte como una zona de sutura del caos ideológico en el país. Y a la vez, la saturación ideológica, muy notable, tanto en los medios visuales como ‘letrados’ más tradicionales, es una gran INDUSTRIA de la opinión, una industria en el riñon mismo de los flujos de una aparatosa economía de servicio promovida por el estado. Creo que sería un error pensar la producción de la ‘opinión’ o de la cultura meramente como una zona de elaboración simbólica: es una zona que genera muchos, muchos, empleos...” Julio Ramos, personal communication (20 Jan 2010).

But that does not mean that it is *nothing* at all to have state power. Corruption, cronyism, and ideological confusion are nothing new in Venezuela, and it seems that it is better to have problems of this sort than a continuation of the kind. To think otherwise would mean that the alternative would be “progressive” (or not) social movements operating outside the state versus a state (and a public sphere, including the media) controlled essentially by the right and the ruling class—in other words, something like Venezuela was under a succession of governments beholden to neoliberal “structural adjustment” before Chávez. Despite the rhetoric of “Twentieth Century Socialism,” Chávez’s Venezuela is not socialism in any customary sense of that word. But it does keep alive the idea of socialism as the possibility of a post-capitalist order, and it does so in a way that still involves, by most accounts, an active relation including elections and referenda, between the subaltern-popular sectors and the state. Globalization has undoubtedly weakened in some ways the sovereignty of individual nation-states, and neoliberal policies have weakened in turn the bond between populations and states; but it is also now generally understood that the state continues to serve a necessary if (in some people’s minds) transitional function within globalization.

Saskia Sassen has noted in this regard: “The nation-state remains the prevalent organizational source of authority and to variable extents the dominant one. But ... critical components of authority deployed in the making of the territorial state are shifting toward becoming strong capabilities for detaching that authority from its exclusive territory and onto multiple bordering systems. Insofar as these systems are operating inside the nation-state, they may be obscuring the fact that a significant switch has happened.”¹⁴ Sassen speaks in particular of the “growing distance between the state and the citizen” induced by globalization, population diasporas, cybernetic networking, and privatization under neoliberal auspices, as entailing “the emergence of a new type of political subject that does not quite correspond to the notion of a formal political subject that is the voting and jury-serving citizen”: for example, indigenous movements that “go directly to international fora and bypass the nation-state” or legal cases based on international human rights law. “The multiplying of informal political subjects,” she suggests, in seeming coincidence with subaltern studies, “points to the possibility that the excluded (in this case from the formal political apparatus) also can make history, thereby signaling the complexity of powerlessness” (321).

But it would be the promise of new forms of politics precisely to find ways to bring such a “new type of political subject” *into* politics. By the same token, the appeal beyond the nation-state to “international fora” has to have, at some point, both political support and concrete policy consequences within the nation-state. So the question of who controls the state—to the extent it means something to control the state—remains crucial to people’s

¹⁴Saskia Sassen, *Territory. Authority. Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 419.

lives. At one level, this is simply a matter of saying that the Greens were wrong, it does make difference whether you have a good cop or a bad cop, Obama or Bush. But, since most of us would agree that both Bush and Obama leave intact the status quo in terms of the distribution of both class and geopolitical power and wealth, for our concerns here, which are those of the politics of the “excluded,” to recall Sassen’s characterization above, the question of the state involves what one might call its “transformative” possibility. That possibility has a double dimension: how the state itself can be radicalized and modified as a consequence of bringing into it demands, values, experiences from the popular-subaltern sectors (which would require a prior process of hegemonic articulation of a new political bloc capable of addressing the state), and how, in turn, *from* the state, society itself can be remade in a more redistributive, egalitarian, culturally diverse way (how hegemony might be constructed from the state, in other words).

What would it mean to simply renounce this double possibility on the assumption that the state is wholly bound up with domination. Let me consider the case of the Zapatistas, who were one of the social movements that the project of Latin American subaltern studies was most closely aligned with (Rabasa’s book, cited earlier, is among other things a defense of the both the Zapatista insurgency and its present political stance). It is well known that the Zapatistas, while they were willing to challenge the state militarily refused, unlike the guerrilla movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, to bid for state power, claiming that the space of their intervention was Mexican “civil society,” and that they would “rule by obeying.” True to that principle, they decided to stay out of the 2006 presidential elections in Mexico rather than give support to the campaign of the center-left political formation, the PRD, which promised something like a Mexican variant of the *marea rosada*, and which attracted, initially at least, widespread support and expectations. In retrospect, it seems clear that this decision contributed at least in some measure, in a way similar to what happened with the Greens in the 2000 election in the United States, to the PRD’s failure to achieve an electoral majority —or, more probably to producing a majority vote in favor of the PRD but one narrow enough to allow the election results to be manipulated so as to give the election to the PAN (as in the Florida results in 2000 in the United States). The Zapatista argument was that it was more important to further radicalize “civil society” in the direction of more fundamental change than to encourage people to participate in an election that involved what they considered a flawed reformist party--the PRD--and a deeply corrupt and repressive state apparatus.

Like the Greens apropos Gore, the Zapatistas did not expect or even *want* the PRD to lose. They looked rather to being an extra-parliamentary “left opposition” to what would have been an inevitably highly contradictory center-left state project. As those contradictions developed, so would the force of the more radical position they represented. But the result did not leave the playing field the same as it was before the election, even for the Zapatistas. The PRD’s loss left progressive forces in Mexico in

general, whether they supported the PRD or not, discouraged and disoriented, since what had been expected, given the debilitating effects of neoliberal policies on the popular sectors in Mexico, was a PRD victory, and instead the country continued to be governed by a party, the PAN, identified more or less explicitly with neoliberalism. And it was not just a matter of the PAN's winning (or stealing) the election; once it was returned to power, it could also organize politically from the state against organizations of "civil society," most spectacularly if so far unsuccessfully against the drug cartels, of course, but also against trade unions, social movements, indigenous groups, and in many cases local activists of the PRD itself (as we have seen in the prolonged struggles in Oaxaca and Guerrero). The government could portray itself in a society increasingly threatened --because of the very neoliberal policies the PAN propagated--by economic and social decomposition and organized crime as the defender of law and order.

As is well-known, the result has been a drop in electoral support for the PRD in the years following the 2006 elections, since it is no longer seen as a hegemonic alternative to the neoliberal state, and deep internal tensions within the party. But it was not that the Zapatistas *gained* political authority or expanded their following in the meantime. It is rather the old, discredited, PRI—the party of the pre-neoliberal Mexican state--that has come to occupy the vacuum created by the PRD's unexpected loss and decline and the continued anti-popular policies of the PAN. As in the case of the Greens in 2000, the Zapatistas' calculation that sitting out the election would strengthen the case for a radical alternative to the status quo turned against them too. The US Greens have all but disappeared; the Zapatistas have not, but their influence and authority has certainly been contained. The PRD, deeply divided and far from enjoying anything close to a possible electoral majority, entered into a pact with the PAN to prevent a PRI landslide in the regional elections for state governors this (2010) summer by agreeing to support each other's candidates against the PRI candidate in some races. At the moment, the PRI is overwhelmingly favored to win the presidential election scheduled in 2012.

The Zapatistas might say about this latest development "I told you so." But the truth of that prophecy is a self-fulfilling one. Instead of making pacts with the PAN, the PRD should have been negotiating from the state with the Zapatistas, who would be putting pressure on the PRD to live up to its electoral promises. That would have been a situation in which the "exteriority" of the Zapatistas would have had some force; now that exteriority is relatively meaningless, and in any case easily contained by state and paramilitary counter-insurgency forces.

I would argue that there is a double theoretical error in the Zapatista decision to sit out the 2006 election that is similar to the error involved in the deconstructivist articulation of subaltern studies: 1) imagining that the state as such is, because of its historically material ties to colonialism and capitalism, outside the range of what counts as the exploited or subaltern or "the poor"; 2) imagining that civil society is a space

separate from the state and electoral politics, not seeing their relationship dialectically. This theoretical error, in turn, also resulted in a strategic *political* error, an error that was unwittingly complicit with the weakening of the left in Mexico, the militarization of Mexican society, and the perpetuation of right-wing rule for the near future.¹⁵

Let me try to expand on what I think is involved here by contrasting two different formulations of the nature of the subaltern and of its political agency, or lack thereof. The first is from a 1993 essay by Gayatri Spivak that is representative, I think, of the anti-statist articulation of subaltern studies I am concerned with. Spivak is writing here about the subaltern as a kind of limit of the nationalist project of postcolonial State:

Especially in a critique of metropolitan culture, the event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand between colony and decolonization as an unexamined good that operates a reversal. But the political goals of the new nation are supposedly determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony, with its interests reversed: secularism, democracy, socialism, nationalist identity, and capitalist development. Whatever the face of this supposition, it must be admitted that there is always a space in the new nation that cannot share in the energy of this reversal. This space has no established agency of traffic with imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organized labor, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the subproletariat or the subaltern.¹⁶

The second formulation of the relation of the subaltern and the state is from an essay by Alvaro García Linera, “State Crisis and Popular Power, published in translation in 2006 in the *New Left Review*, just after he took office as vice president in the MAS (Movement towards Socialism) government in Bolivia (although the writing of the essay both predates and anticipates the MAS victory by some years). García Linera writes

The important thing to note about these popular groupings, hitherto excluded from decision making [García Linera is referring to indigenous communities, retirees, coca-growing peasants, unemployed miners or *relocalizados*, among other new social movements in Bolivia]— is that the demands they raise immediately seek to modify economic relations. Thus their recognition as a collective political force necessarily

¹⁵ I’m not aware if the Zapatistas have made a self-criticism of their miscalculation; I suspect not. Rabasa makes the case for the Zapatista position in general in *Without History*, but does not take up in particular their decision to sit out the 2006 elections and its consequences, which, it seems to me at least, have been clearly negative. Barbara Epstein— speaking in a recent interview about the links between the libertarian tendencies of the US New Left and the rise of cultural studies, which also privileged an anti-statist paradigm, puts the problem succinctly: “This anarchist streak made a certain amount of sense in that historical context [the ‘60s]. It was true that the liberals running the state were a large part of the problem. But I think that in the wake of the ‘60s, particularly in the ‘80s and ‘90s, the anarchist critique and the attack of the academic left on the liberal state has in fact strengthened the right. The project of the right has been to destroy the New Deal and the idea that the state has a responsibility for social welfare. Basically what you’ve had is the academic left backing that up. They’re clearly not conservatives, but I do think that they have unwittingly colluded with and strengthened the right.” Victor Cohen, “Interview with Barbara Epstein,” *Works and Days* 55/56 (2010), 260. ¹⁶ Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 78.

implies a radical transformation of the dominant state form, built on the marginalization and atomization of the urban and rural working classes. Moreover—and this is a crucial aspect of the current reconfiguration—the leaderships of these new forces are predominantly indigenous, and uphold a specific cultural and political project. In contrast to the period that opened with the 1930s when the social movements were articulated around a labour unionism that held to the ideal of *mestizaje*—or racial-cultural mixing—and was the result of an economic modernization carried out by business elites, today the social movements with the greatest power to interrogate the political order have an indigenous social base, and spring from agrarian zones excluded from or marginalized by the processes of economic modernization.¹⁷

A moment's reflection will suffice to establish that Spivak and García Linera are talking about the *same* thing here: the social formations left out or only partially incorporated (“excluded from decision making”; “below the attempted reversals of capital logic”) by the postcolonial nation-state's project of modernization and secularization—and in similar ways. That is, the “subaltern” Yet the logic of their arguments are strikingly different. In Spivak, the subaltern is a “space” or “habitat” that is *outside* of the nationalist articulation of the postcolonial state and the sphere of politics or trade union struggle—that is, outside of (or below) hegemony. The subaltern cannot speak. The task of the critical intellectual is to represent, or “read,” to use Spivak's own term, this constitutive dilemma, and to lend one's solidarity in what is essentially an ethical gesture.¹⁸ For García Linera, by contrast, the very logic of the demands of the social movements or “popular groupings” lead them “necessarily”—his own characterization—to pose the question of “a radical transformation of the dominant state form.” Whether those demands take an electoral or an insurrectionary form (or both), they must create a new form of hegemony. The subaltern can not only speak, it can and should govern, and its form of government will be a “*buen gobierno*.”¹⁹

García Linera invokes explicitly Gramsci's definition of hegemony in this regard: “[T] his indigenous-popular pole should consolidate its hegemony, providing intellectual and moral leadership of the country's social majorities. There will be neither electoral triumph nor victorious insurrection without wide-ranging, patient work on the unification of the social movements, and a practical education process to realize the political, moral, cultural and organizational leadership of these forces over Bolivia's popular and middle strata” (83). The task of the “traditional” intellectual—and García Linera is himself one (he was trained as a mathematician—is not to assume the authority to create “intellectual and moral leadership” but to lend himself or herself to a process whose articulating agent is “the indigenous-popular pole.” This involves a *political* rather than, as in Spivak, a primarily *ethical* relation of solidarity between intellectuals and subaltern social classes and groups.

¹⁷Alvaro García Linera, “State Crisis and Popular Power,” *New Left Review* 37 (2006), 75.

¹⁸See e.g. Spivak's essay “Responsibility,” in *Other Asias* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008), 58-96.

¹⁹I invoke here the title of one of the canonic texts of Andean indigenous writing in the colonial period, Huamán Poma's *Primera Corónica y Buen Gobierno*.

García Linera argues for a new form of politics directed taking over the state that in some sense comes *from* the subaltern, but also involves the participation of intellectuals and “theory.” He moves away from the simple binary opposition between the state and the subaltern, to presuppose that hegemony not only can be but needs to be constructed from subaltern positions. This is, of course, not only a theoretical proposition (although it is that). It was implicated in the formation and subsequent activity of the Bolivian MAS. It involves at least four forms of strategic political articulation: 1) an openness to both “insurreccional” and electoral forms of political struggle, or some combination of both at the same time, as was the case in Bolivia in the period between 2000 and the 2005 election (García Linera himself spent several years in jail in the 1990s for “subversive” activities); 2) the identification of an “enemy”: the “dominant state form,” “economic modernization carried out by business elites,” “the ideal of mestizaje”; 3) a “specific” indigenous cultural and political project—that is, the affirmation of an ethnic identity and corresponding forms of language, world-view, and social organization; 4) a sense of the need for “leadership,” but leadership exercised *by* and *from* rather than in the name of the “indigenous-popular pole.” We might, in a kind of short hand, call these forms of articulation “Schmittian.”²⁰

The contrast between these formulations by Spivak and García Linera does not necessarily come down to an either/or choice. They could be seen instead to represent different forms of strategic intervention and ideological articulation that might be relevant in different forms of territoriality or “levels” of the social: one for transnational human rights organizations, NGOs, ecological struggles, the “global” humanities itself; the other in a space still conceived more narrowly as “national,” though not closed to international issues. There will be points of contradiction (for example, between the demands of indigenous movements and the imperatives of territorial sovereignty and economic development). Moreover, the effects of intervention on either level need not always be antithetical, and could instead be mutually reinforcing in some cases.

Spivak has spoken herself of “*reinventing* the state.” For example (this is from a 2004 interview):

The more geopolitical stuff can work *only if* in the global south, we reinvent the state as an abstract structure, as a porous abstract structure, so that states can combine against the deprivations of internationalization through economic

²⁰ By “Schmittian” I refer to Derrida’s sustained critique of Carl Schmitt’s postulation of the friend/enemy distinction as constitutive of the political, which became paradigmatic in some ways for deconstructive approaches to politics: Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997). It could be said of Derrida’s critique of Schmitt what I said earlier about deconstructive subalternism: that it involves a rejection of the political as such. In Derrida’s case, the critique leads to something like an advanced “liberalism” (in the best sense of the word) of “the democracy to come”; in the case of the anti-statist or “post-hegemonic” articulation of subalternism it leads to an ultra-leftism. However, perhaps there is not as much distance between these alternatives as might appear (both are forms of what Hegel called “the beautiful soul”).

restructuring... Nobody looks at the possible efficacy of state structures because people have their faith today in everything outside governments. Remember, I'm not talking about national sovereignty, I'm talking about abstract state structures that are porous. I'm talking about critical regionalism, shared laws, shared health, education, and welfare structures, open frontiers rather than only economic organizations... Otherwise, to give accountability over to nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]—I don't think nongovernmental organizations should be abolished—can become a way of letting organizations like the USAID [United States Agency for International Development] into a country.... The World Bank is an NGO after all. Giving over all accountability to this group, which then conspires against the individual states and sees them only as areas of repression is also to take power away from citizens who can after all supposedly *make* the state accountable.²¹

Still, what Spivak means by “reinventing the state” here, despite the point about the “possible efficacy of state structures,” seems quite different than what is entailed in the MAS project of winning national elections and creating a “plurinational” Bolivian state. Spivak puts her remarks under the rubric of a “position without identity,” including national identity: “I’m not talking about national sovereignty” (245). “I know that something has to be counterposed to the main outposts of power. On the other hand, I am deeply troubled by identity politics, so for me it cannot be India, it cannot be Bengal, as a political basis for a problematic” (240). “There is much talk these days of the emergence of subaltern counter-collectivity. I think that is bogus. If you nominate collectivities that are questioning the power of the United States or the power of the West or whatever as immediately a subaltern counter-collectivity, I don't think you really know what it is like where this conflict *can mean* nothing” (247).

The place where “this conflict *can mean nothing*” thus continues to be for Spivak, as in her 1993 comments, the space designated by the subaltern, whereas the kind of “indigenous-popular” political bloc imagined by García Linera is precisely a form of subaltern “counter-collectivity” that involves at its core cultural and national “identity,” both at the group (indigenous cultural affirmation) and the national level (anti-imperialist nationalism).

Spivak's appeal to the state as an “abstract” porous structure paradoxically ends up leaving the character of the existing state mechanisms intact. The MAS project involves not only political control of the state by a popular-subaltern block, but also its transformation. But that project/prospect raises both in theory and practice a number of urgent and difficult questions, some of which we have already anticipated in the previous discussion. For example, in the case of governments like the MAS or the Correa regime in Ecuador that have a strong indigenous and Afro-Latin component, is there the danger of a fracture between the indigenous or Afro-Latin component and the broader hegemonic movement, precisely around “reasons of state” (around issues related to energy policy at

²¹ *Other Asias*, 245-46, 247.

the time of this writing, for example)? How can that fracture be avoided or mediated? What happens to the state—still marked institutionally in many ways by coloniality of power—as the consequence of a subaltern-popular agency within it? What is the place of multiculturalism—or to use the term preferred in Latin America, *interculturalidad*—in the redefinition of the identity of the nation-state (the point of the distinction is to mark to mark an alternative to a sort of “weak” multiculturalism coterminous with neoliberal hegemony)? What new constitutional rights forms of legal and political territoriality are required by a “multinational state”? What should be the relation of formal or informal social movements to the new governments of the *marea rosada* they have helped bring to power? Do the social movements “capture” the state, or are they instead captured by it, limiting the radical force and possibility they carried initially, such that, to recall Antonio Negri’s distinction, they belong to the side of constituted rather than constituent power? Does the possibility of socialism or communism reappear again, after the historical collapse and defeat of communist project in the twentieth century, or are the horizons represented by the new governments of the left in Latin America limited to statist reformist strategies, strategies that respect and leave intact in the last instance the structure of both national and global market capitalism? And what then about the “withering away” of the state?

García Linera responds to this last –and perhaps most decisive – question in the following way:

The general horizon of the era is communist. And this communism will have to be constructed on the basis of society’s self-organizing capacities, of processes for the generation and distribution of communitarian, self-managing wealth. But at the moment it is clear that this is not an immediate horizon, which centers on the conquest of equality, the redistribution of wealth, the broadening of rights.... When I enter into the government, what I do is to validate and begin to operate at the level of the State in function of this reading of the current moment. So then, what about communism? What can be done from the State in function of this communist horizon? To support as much as possible the unfolding of society’s autonomous organizational capacities. This is as far as the possibility can go in terms of what a leftist State, a revolutionary State, can do.²²

With these words, which are both optimistic and cautionary, in mind, let me return to the question I began with: Does the critique of the state in subaltern studies and postmodernist social theory generally rule out in advance the possibility of occupying and transforming the state from subaltern-popular positions? If the answer is yes, this possibility is in fact ruled out, then it seems that two alternatives remain: one is

²² Alvaro García Linera, “El ‘descubrimiento’ del Estado,” in Pablo Stefanoni, Franklin Ramírez and Maristella Svampa, *Las vías de la emancipación: Conversaciones con Alvaro García Linera* (Mexico City: Ocean Sur, 2008), 75, translation by Bruno Bosteels. I am indebted to Bruno Bosteels for bringing this text to my attention in his very insightful discussion of García Linera in an as yet unpublished essay, “The Leftist Hypothesis: Communism in the Age of Terror.”

neoconservative, the other ultra-leftist. As I suggested in chapter 5, the neoconservative alternative points in the direction of a reterritorialization of the field of culture and national identity against what are seen as the debilitating effects of neoliberalism, via a strengthening of the state ideological apparatuses, particularly education (an affirmation the national culture, aesthetic and scientific “value,” the authority of the academic disciplines, the role of the critical intellectual and of professionals, etc.). Hegemony implies here essentially the reassertion of the authority of the educated classes and technical-professional intelligentsia –the contemporary version of Angel Rama’s “lettered city” or *ciudad letrada*-- to govern responsibly in the name of the “people” and in the interests of the “nation” in globalization. As in the case of some forms of US neoconservatism, such a reterritorialization of authority at the level of the cultural and the political is not necessarily be incompatible with a strong Keynesian or social democratic economic policy. In that sense, the neoconservative turn, in the form of a neo-Arielism, could be and in fact often is a component of the new governments of the left. But this is at the risk of reinscribing or deepening a line of difference with the subaltern–popular sectors those governments depend on for their support.

The neoconservative move involves an emphasis on the state *over* the subaltern. The ultra-leftist move is, by contrast, anti-statist and therefore also post-nationalist. Something like that possibility is represented by Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, which we have already considered at some length in chapter 2. But just to recall briefly that argument. For Hardt and Negri, economic globalization represents a new stage of capitalism with its own special characteristics. In this stage, the nation-state, which had been the territorial form that corresponded to the previous stages of capitalism (mercantile, competitive, and monopoly), is now surpassed. The new revolutionary subject—the “multitude”-- is therefore necessarily post-national or trans-national, hybrid, and diasporic. The emergence of the sovereign nation-state in early modernity was already a Hobbesian intrusion on the autonomy of the multitude. Now, the power of the multitude will reassert itself. Indeed, that power is immanent in the very movement of globalization.

Hardt and Negri’s manifesto coincides with the deconstructivist or “posthegemonic” articulation of Latinamericanism. Both in turn might be seen as the exact inversion of the neoconservative position. Paradoxically, however, both also coincide with the neoconservative turn in skepticism about or a rejection of the new governments of the *marea rosada* in Latin America, particularly those with a more “populist” character, such as Chávez in Venezuela. By contrast, in my remarks here I am aligning myself in some ways with those governments. Although the governments of the *marea rosada* are vitally concerned with re-asserting sovereignty, their project involves not simply rearticulating the nation-state as it was prior to globalization and neoliberalism. For one thing, it is not possible for them to delink the question of sovereignty from the “regional” affirmation of Latin America as a transnational entity. That is why the problematic of “Latin

America” appears in the first place. Chávez’s Bolivarian is not only rhetorical. He has on more than one occasion put his money where his mouth is to promote new forms of Latin American unity at both the economic and cultural levels.

The challenge that confronts the *marea rosada* if it is to move forward rather than recede is to generate first the idea and second, the institutional forms of a different state, a state that would, under the conditions of the globalization, embody and express the egalitarian, democratic, multicultural, multiethnic character of the “people”: a people-state, or a state *of* the people. I intend to suggest here a distinction between a *people-state* (whose character would be defined by horizontal relations between state representatives and functionaries and the “people” and by “contradictions among the people”) and a *populist* state (characterized by vertical relation between leaders/the leader and the people and by the suppression of “contradictions among the people” in the name of national “unity”), with the understanding, however, that it is not always easy to hold the two things apart, as in the case of Chávez.

García Linera has spoken famously of “a state that is not a state.”²³ Would this new form of the state continue to be a *nation-state*? That is, a state founded on the idea of a certain shared “national” identity” and a contiguous territoriality that is expressive of that identity? This final question brings to the fore again a problem that has been present since the beginning of this book. Jorge Volpi and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (on nominally opposite sides of the political spectrum) are wrong. The Latin American nation-states and “Latin America” will continue to exist and to exercise a certain “hegemony” over people’s lives. But they will do so in radically new ways, which we have only begun to anticipate and understand.

²³ In his speech at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association in Montreal in 2007. Rabasa offers fairly sharp critique of this speech in particular and the MAS project in general in *Without History*, esp. 271-80.

