

This article was downloaded by: [University of Washington Libraries]

On: 22 September 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 907059896]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## New Political Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713439578>

## Hegemony and Difference in Political Movements: Articulating Networks of Equivalence

Mark Purcell<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Washington, USA,

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2009

**To cite this Article** Purcell, Mark(2009)'Hegemony and Difference in Political Movements: Articulating Networks of Equivalence',New Political Science,31:3,291 — 317

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/07393140903105959

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07393140903105959>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Hegemony and Difference in Political Movements: Articulating Networks of Equivalence

Mark Purcell  
*University of Washington, USA*

**Abstract** *This article argues that in the context of the tension between Old Left reductionism and the political fragmentation associated with many postmodern and post-structuralist alternatives, one fruitful way to conceive of contemporary political movements is to imagine them as counter-hegemonic articulations of differentiated but equivalent popular struggles, a formation I call “networks of equivalence.” The article also explores the related dilemma between centralization and decentralization in debates about how those networks should be organized. In order to flesh out how such counter-hegemonic movements might look, and to suggest something of their potential, the article sketches a brief case study of a political movement in Seattle that has had some success building networks of equivalence.*

### Introduction

This article is an attempt to confront two related challenges. The first is that given that politics and policy in contemporary American cities are dominated by a neoliberal logic, how might we conceive and build counter-movements that can both undermine the dominance of neoliberalism and construct concrete alternatives to it?<sup>1</sup> Second, given that most in Left political theory have abandoned essentialist and class-reductionist approaches to political movements, how might we now conceive of broad urban movements that can bring about a radical transformation of contemporary power relations? The article presents a series of arguments about political movements that I think offer a way to begin to answer both questions. Those arguments grow out of a directed engagement with specific political and social theorists, the primary points of reference being Antonio Gramsci,<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault,<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I hope the article can point beyond that problem as well, to suggest how we might begin to connect anti-neoliberal urban movements to other kinds of movements, such as anti-racist, feminist, LGBT, and ecological movements. Similarly, I hope it can suggest how we can connect American urban movements with those in other urban places, as well as with non-urban movements around the world.

<sup>2</sup> Especially Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, D. Forgacs (ed.) (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979[1975]); Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, Colin Gordon (ed.) (New York: Pantheon, 1980); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990[1976]).

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987[1980]).

and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.<sup>5</sup> Those familiar with Laclau and Mouffe's work will recognize their particular influence here. My engagement with this theory has been "directed" in the sense that I have examined it in search of a way forward for contemporary urban movements. More specifically, I have sought a way to conceive of political movements that makes sense for two specific movements: 1) the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition, an alliance of various popular groups in Seattle struggling to increase popular control over a long-term Superfund cleanup of the city's main river, and 2) The Right to the City Alliance, an emerging network of urban movements across the United States who are using the idea of the right to the city as a basis for coming together. My argument about political movements is constructed out of a lively and continually developing dialogue between those concrete struggles and my engagement with the theorists above.

The bulk of the paper is taken up by a theoretical argument. I argue that a particularly fruitful way to imagine contemporary political movements is to think of them as counter-hegemonic articulations of differentiated but equivalent popular struggles, a formation I call "networks of equivalence." I imagine those networks to be articulated into structures that are partly rhizomatic and partly centered. In the last part of the paper I try to flesh out that theoretical argument some by sketching the case of the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition. The sketch is primarily intended to give just one concrete suggestion of what networks of equivalence might look like in practice. Even if such networks appear quite challenging to construct, nevertheless activists are in fact building fledgling networks whose structure and politics resonate strongly with the kind of movements I advocate. And these networks are making an impact. Movements like the one on the Duwamish remind us that another city is possible, but only if we can develop creative and incisive new strategies for political mobilization.

### Political Theory and Hegemonic Movements

To make the case for social movements as counter-hegemonic articulations, I need to begin with an old debate in political theory. There is no question that Marxism is one of the richest and most enduring traditions in the theorization of political mobilization. However, scholars on the Left have been grappling for some years now with the limits that Marxist approaches tend to introduce to the theorization of political movements. Those limits have to do mostly with the insistence by many Marxists on the working class as a privileged category of analysis and agent of political change. Marxist conceptions of mobilization often assume that capitalism is the primary social formation to be resisted and that *only the working class*—an assertion repeated all too often<sup>6</sup>—is capable of leading the political transformation the world needs.

Marxism offers a class-centered conception of political movements, but it is possible to generalize from that approach to speak about any conception of political movements that imagines a *privileged core* that must anchor, organize, and

<sup>5</sup> Primarily Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 154.

lead the movement, a central hub around which all other elements must gather, from whom other elements must take their cue. Such approaches imagine something essential about a particular group that makes its leadership *necessary* if the movement is to succeed. Other groups, while they may have an important role to play, are imagined to be contingent: useful but not necessary support for the movement. Against that idea, the so-called “new social movements” of the 1960s solidified the realization (which had been emerging for a long time) that movements could arise from and be carried forward by multiple subject positions. Colonialism, patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, war, nativism, and ecological destruction, to name a few, took their place alongside capitalism as crucial targets of opposition. It became increasingly clear to many observers that class and economy were just two among many important referents for resistance and mobilization. In that context, post-Marxists, post-structuralists, and postmodernists began to build their political theory on the assumption that radical pluralism was the unavoidable character of the political landscape. That new assumption among “post” scholars was crystallized by Foucault, who in the *History of Sexuality* argued we can no longer assume any “locus of great refusal, no soul of Revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary.”<sup>7</sup>

However, despite the growing theoretical destabilization of a class-core or other-primary-core concept of political movements, in practice it is common for theorists, organizers, and activists to fall back into imagining both a primary opponent and a primary identity for a political movement. It is not so easy to abandon the long-held assumption that there must be an essential anchor to politics, that, for example, the working class must play a *foundational* role or that anti-capitalism must form the *primary* agenda of the movement. Letting go of such anchors presents great challenges. Those challenges are daunting enough that they commonly cause theorists and practitioners alike to drift back to the solid ground that “a locus of great refusal” offers. So I want to stress that even if there is a growing group of contemporary political theorists who accept the need to be very critical of, if not abandon, a “privileged-core” approach to political movements, nevertheless we should remember that a desire to think and act without a privileged core is not the same thing as actually doing it. Foucault’s declaration leaves us in something of a wilderness, a shifting terrain without familiar landmarks, in which it is difficult to know just how to think, or how to proceed.

That lack of solid ground is intensified by the fact that Marxism is not nearly so homogenous a thing as my characterization above makes it seem. As Laclau and Mouffe’s careful examination reveals, there is distinct pluralism in the body of Marxist thought.<sup>8</sup> It is wrong to assume (as some do) that there is nothing to recover from the tradition because it is uniformly economist, reductionist, determinist, or essentialist. It is self-defeating to think that Marxism has been *superseded* by declarations like Foucault’s. A post-Marxist approach, for Laclau and Mouffe,<sup>9</sup> does not at all mean abandoning Marxism. Rather it calls for a rigorous critical analysis of the central tenets of Marxism, a project that should

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 2000), pp. vii–xix.

always be based on a thorough understanding of Marxist thought. That understanding should enable us to draw on its multiplicity, address its faults, and revive its promise.<sup>10</sup> In that vein, this paper rejects *particular elements* of the complex body of Marxist thought, especially the relatively more reductionist, economist, essentialist, and determinist ones. However, it also draws great inspiration from Marxist scholarship. In particular, I think, with Laclau and Mouffe, that there is immense promise in a critical reexamination of the work of Antonio Gramsci as a way to proceed in the wake of the new pluralist common sense. Gramsci's ideas are themselves derived in important ways from the innovations of Marxist thinkers before him, including Lenin, Otto Bauer, Eduard Bernstein, and Georges Sorel.

In this paper I accept, with Foucault, that the political field is now irreducibly plural, and the proliferation of identities, agendas, and movements that exploded out of the 1960s cannot and should not be put back in the bottle. We cannot retain a privileged (class) core approach to political movements. We must move beyond a vision that sees all politics as ultimately class politics, that forges unity by reducing political identity to class identity and political agendas to objective economic interests. Foucault rightly stresses that we should celebrate and learn from local struggles,<sup>11</sup> and from "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" that lie outside and challenge common sense.<sup>12</sup> We should not see these particular struggles and knowledges as raw material that exists only to be subsumed into a wider movement. He insists we must value the autonomy and particularity of each struggle. At the same time, I don't think we should read him as *proscribing* all coordination among movements. On this point I think he remains neutral: he acknowledges that such coordination does happen, and it produces wider "hegemonic effects," as he calls them, but he does not explicitly call for such coordination as a concrete political strategy, or in any case he does not describe how he thinks it should unfold.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Foucault, I make an explicit argument that a proliferation of unconnected local struggles is not enough. We on the Left should consciously seek ways to coordinate those struggles, to bring them together to pursue a wide-ranging transformation of the current relations of power. However, that coordination cannot involve melting local struggles down into a uniform whole, or the reduction or subordination of some struggles to others. Each must remain partly distinct and autonomous, even as it makes common cause with others. What Gramsci offers us is a very promising starting point from which we can begin to both get past a reductionist and essentialist approach to political movements and still pursue a collective and coordinated struggle to transform existing power relations.<sup>14</sup> That collective struggle can construct a political program that is different from and wider than the program of each local movement, but one that does not subsume or subordinate them. It is Gramsci's elaboration of the concept of *hegemony* that inspires Laclau and Mouffe's argument for how connections among movements can be made and maintained.

---

<sup>10</sup> See also, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994[1993]).

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), *op. cit.*

Before I develop the implications of hegemony, it is important to set out some important orientations that pervade Laclau and Mouffe's argument, orientations I adopt as well. They affirm the irreducible pluralism of political life. As a result, they argue that any notion of totality (as in "one people" or "one nation"), while it is often claimed, can never in fact be achieved. That is, all political projects are necessarily partial; they can never fully encompass all of social life, suturing it into an embodied whole. All such projects are in fact attempts by one part of the social whole to *represent* its particular agenda as universal. Also false, for Laclau and Mouffe, are assertions about transcendental qualities (of subjects, interests, or relations) that underlie and unify what appears to be disjointed. Such claims are attempts to establish an anchor for the political, a fixed point of reference that is eternal when all else appears in flux. Those anchors are often used to ascribe priority to particular categories, identities, and modes of analysis, as for example when the relations of economic production are seen to transcend other social relations, and classes become privileged agents for political struggle. Laclau and Mouffe reject transcendental anchors, and affirm instead a political field that is always subject to flux. Political relations can never be stabilized into a final end-state. Nor can a political body be sutured; it cannot be closed up into a single whole. Political identities and interests cannot be traced back to transcendental principles or relations. It is in that sense that Laclau and Mouffe call their pluralism *radical*: all of the many subject positions in the political field are ultimately unfixed and open to contestation and reformulation. Observed differences are not merely superficial deviations from an underlying, primary, and constitutive unity. Diversity is, rather, constitutive of political life.<sup>15</sup> Coherence, organization, and sameness are not the originary condition out of which difference emerges; rather such coherence is always actively *forged*, by means of political struggle, out of difference. Without a transcendental logic, without any original state from which current political arrangements have emerged, we must abandon notions of privileged subject positions. All political concentrations, centers, fixed points, relations, and alignments are always contingent, always partial, always temporary, and always contested.

It is that radical pluralist understanding of the political that makes Gramsci's concept of hegemony so key for Laclau and Mouffe. Gramsci's arguments about hegemony are one way he struggles with the problem of social fragmentation. Unlike many Marxist theorists before him, Gramsci argued that the social field is too fragmented for one class (or, more generally, one group) to rule on its own.<sup>16</sup> Rather, in order to become dominant in society, a group must form alliances that

---

<sup>15</sup> To my mind, their ontology, which so insists on difference as primary, resonates quite strongly with Deleuze's concept of difference-in-itself, elaborated in G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994[1968]) and Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, op. cit.* Surprisingly, Laclau and Mouffe do not engage Deleuze explicitly.

<sup>16</sup> See Gramsci, "Notes on Italian History," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks, op. cit.*, pp. 52–120. Gramsci's analysis was always firmly grounded in Italian society. His arguments about fragmentation were often about Italian society in particular, rather than about society in general. However, he concluded based on his close reading of other European Marxists that other European national societies were similarly fragmented. Much of his argument about how a hegemonic class must partner with other groups, for example, is rooted in the experience of the French bourgeoisie during the French Revolution.

can bring together a large enough bloc to consolidate sufficient power. Each group must therefore conceive of and pursue more than just its narrow self-interest. For Gramsci it must “widen itself out towards a whole social grouping,”<sup>17</sup> progressively “propagating itself throughout society,” broadening its political identity to incorporate the perspective and interests of other groups.<sup>18</sup> For Gramsci the very definition of *hegemony* denotes that process of a class transcending its narrow interests to weld together multiple social groups into a new force that can establish a generalized social control.

But for Gramsci such hegemonic alliances do not involve simple absorption. He imagines a proletarian hegemony that does not involve workers dissolving other elements of society (peasants, artisans, petty bourgeois, soldiers) into “one big union.” Rather the interests of other groups would be “welded” to those of the working class, an image Gramsci uses often. The implication is that each element remains distinct, but it is connected firmly to the others to form a new whole. Gramsci’s phrasing is that “two ‘similar’ forces” can be “welded into a new organism”<sup>19</sup> and “a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world.”<sup>20</sup> For Gramsci such welding is carried out through ideological, cultural, and educational struggle. Ideology, in this light, is the intellectual and moral assumptions that hold a hegemonic formation together. It is the “common sense” of the hegemonic alliance. When managed and shaped, that ideology becomes a “hegemonic principle” that forms the basis of the “collective will” of the hegemonic formation. Education, conceived by Gramsci in the broadest sense, serves to develop the existing consciousness of people toward a new collective will, a process that aims to produce nothing short of a new psychology, a new way of thinking and feeling proper not just to a specific class, but to the wider hegemonic group.<sup>21</sup> For Gramsci education thus entails the active and conscious production of particular types of subjects, ones whose way of thinking and being resonate with the wider logics of the new hegemonic formation.<sup>22</sup>

For Gramsci the process of “welding” together disparate interests, what Laclau and Mouffe develop more fully as a process of “articulation,” is not merely the linking up of one self-contained entity with others. Each social group is not a discrete thing that remains the same as it joins with others or separates from them. Rather, for Gramsci the process of coming together to form a specifically *hegemonic* force involves each group being partly transformed. Each is transformed because it increasingly takes on broad elements of the

<sup>17</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

<sup>18</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> There is a striking and I think very close connection here between Gramsci’s thought and Foucault’s notion of positive bio-power (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *op. cit.*). For Foucault, as for Gramsci, positive power produces subjects and inculcates desires and norms, rather than repressing existing energies and passions. Moreover, power for Gramsci need not be centralized, sovereign power. Just one tantalizing example is Gramsci’s contrast between insurrection and “the ‘diffused’ and capillary form of indirect pressure.” (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, *op. cit.*, p. 110).

agenda and identity of other groups, and it comes to partly adopt the interests of others as its own. However, that does not mean that each group dissolves into a homogenous unity. Rather each group also remains distinct and partly autonomous while at the same time being partly remade by the process of coming together. The individual will of each group is partly reshaped by the wills of other groups, and a *new* will, a collective one, is forged by the groups as they join together. For Gramsci the key example is the northern Italian industrial proletariat joining with the southern peasantry. He argues that the workers cannot merely add the peasantry as a strategic and temporary ally, as a reluctant partner that will help them realize proletarian goals. He argues instead that the concept of

hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed—in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.<sup>23</sup>

He is saying here that the workers must adopt, to an extent, the identity and agenda of the peasants; they must decide to see the peasants' struggle as equivalent to and joined with their own. In doing so workers must make some sacrifices of their narrow self-interest (what Gramsci calls "economic-corporate" interests in the quote). The peasants must reciprocate, as must all groups who join the hegemonic formation. Their joining produces a larger, and entirely new, collective will that urges the emerging hegemonic formation forward and guides its struggle for a counter-hegemonic alternative.<sup>24</sup>

A modern example of this kind of relationship, in which both groups are partly transformed by their coming together, is given by Gihan Perera, a leader in the Right to the City Alliance. Speaking about his work as executive director of the Miami Workers Center, he says

we're trying to build this environmental/labor/community coalition, [and] there is a low road and a high road to that coalition. The low road is labor wants jobs; the environmentalists want green buildings; the community wants houses. Traditional organizing theory is, "Just match up those self-interests and there you've got your coalition." But I feel like we are at the end of being able to operate at that low level of self-interest because if we don't *adopt each other on a higher plane*, the coalition is going to be limited to that self interest. So, for example, if the environmentalists are happy that they are building green houses but don't understand the importance of supporting the African American community's political power, it will not be a solid coalition. Once that project is over, if the threat to the African American community still continues, those concerned about environmental issues may not be there with support. So our job is to keep the conversation going. Yes, you're here for green buildings, but you also have to be doing this to actually build the power of a black community...That has to be central to their consciousness as environmentalists.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Connie Heller and Gihan Perera, "The Right to the City: Reclaiming Our Urban Centers, Reframing Human Rights, and Redefining Citizenship", Report (San Francisco: Tides Foundation, 2007), pp. 24–25, emphasis added.

Perera's "high road" on which allied groups "adopt each other on a higher plane," on which each group moves beyond narrow self-interest and partly transforms its consciousness by joining with others, resonates strongly with Gramsci's notion of a truly *hegemonic* politics. And it resonates even more fully with Laclau and Mouffe's particular reading of Gramsci. A hegemonic politics, they write, "requires that an ensemble of 'ideas' and 'values' be shared by a number of sectors . . . Intellectual and moral leadership constitutes, according to Gramsci, a higher synthesis, a 'collective will,' which, through ideology, becomes the organic cement unifying a 'historical bloc'."<sup>26</sup>

Despite the many benefits of Gramsci's vision, there is at least one important point of concern. As we can begin to see in his long quote above, Gramsci imagines a particular relation between the elements of the hegemonic formation. While each must partly be remade by the others, and each must genuinely "adopt" a measure of the others' agendas, nevertheless in Gramsci's imagination the working class is prioritized over the other groups. Even if workers must sacrifice their self-interest to some extent, nevertheless they are, for Gramsci, "the *leading* group," a position that casts the others to the role of followers. Even though Gramsci argued one class was not able to *rule* society on its own, he retained the idea that one class can and should be *leading* in a hegemonic formation. The privileged role Gramsci assigns the working class is certainly born of his life-long involvement in socialist and communist struggles. In his pre-prison writings, which were closer to traditional Marxism, he privileged the working class more nakedly. In the Lyons Theses, for example, he argues "in the capitalist countries, the only class which can accomplish a real, deep social transformation is the working class."<sup>27</sup> The working class is "a class which aims to lead the peasants and intellectuals." It can only win "if it is aided and followed by the great majority of these social strata."<sup>28</sup> Such language appears less frequently in the *Prison Notebooks*, written later in his life, although even there he makes statements like "the combination of national forces which the international class [the proletariat] will have to lead and develop."<sup>29</sup> A hegemonic class, he explains, "leads the classes which are its allies, and dominates those which are its enemies."<sup>30</sup> While he maintains that the proletariat absolutely must ally with other groups to achieve a wider transformation of society, nevertheless Gramsci consistently sees the former as "the leading class."<sup>31</sup> I think it is reasonable to conclude that these leader/follower roles stem from a deeper conviction in Gramsci that the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are the two "fundamental productive classes"<sup>32</sup> in society, an idea sometimes rendered as "essential social group" or "fundamental social group."<sup>33</sup> They are fundamental for Gramsci because they are constituted at the level of the relations of production. He emphasizes that although the working class must make economic-corporate compromises in building hegemony, there is "no doubt that such . . . compromises cannot touch the essential; for though

<sup>26</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), *op. cit.*, pp. 66–67.

<sup>27</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity."<sup>34</sup> For Gramsci, therefore, a hegemonic formation *must* be led by one of the fundamental classes. In the French Revolution, which Gramsci studied very closely, the bourgeoisie was the leading class. In the transformation to come, he imagined the proletariat would take up that role.

As a result, the collective will that organizes the hegemonic formation must derive from the fundamental class. While other elements must help construct the collective will, in doing so they take their lead from the fundamental class. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, for Gramsci "there must always be a *single* unifying principle in every hegemonic formation, and this can only be a fundamental class."<sup>35</sup> Thus despite his extremely supple and complex theorization of hegemonic formations, despite how seriously he takes the existence of non-proletarian groups and the key role they must play, despite his acknowledgement that the consciousness of the fundamental classes must be altered by their alliance with other groups, nevertheless Gramsci does not imagine the relations among the elements of the hegemonic formation to be equal. Ultimately—we might even say "in the last instance"—for Gramsci the fundamental class is *more important* than other elements in the hegemonic formation; for him its vision and interests should be "decisive." Thus Gramsci defends, in Laclau and Mouffe's words, this "last redoubt of essentialism."<sup>36</sup>

To lay siege to that redoubt, Laclau and Mouffe turn to Louis Althusser's concept of overdetermination.<sup>37</sup> They offer what they call a "radicalization of the concept of overdetermination,"<sup>38</sup> which begins from the radical pluralist position we saw before: all social groups lack any essence, they are not fixed to any transcendental reality. Rather the identity, character, and interests of each group are constantly being (re)developed in the context of their political engagements. A hegemonic formation cannot therefore be conceived as just "the linkage of dissimilar and fully constituted elements." The elements do not link up and separate without undergoing significant transformation. As each element engages in a hegemonic formation, it is partly reconstituted by its engagement with all the others. In other words, each member of a hegemonic formation is overdetermined by the other groups; or better, each member is overdetermined by the multiple political engagements that constitute participation in the hegemonic formation. As a result, Laclau and Mouffe affirm "the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity . . . the presence of some objects in others prevents any of their identities from being fixed."<sup>39</sup> Subjects are constituted by their contingent engagements with other subjects, not by their position with respect to a transcendental logic, and so each necessarily must engage other groups in the hegemonic formation "on an equal footing" with those groups.<sup>40</sup> Thus Laclau and Mouffe leave aside Gramsci's "fundamental" classes, derived from "the decisive nucleus of economic activity," and they reject the assumption

<sup>34</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, op. cit., pp. 211–212.

<sup>35</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> They rely primarily on Althusser's *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 2005 [1969]).

<sup>38</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87, emphasis in original.

that such groups must play a leading role in the hegemonic formation. As a result, when they speak of a hegemonic formation, Laclau and Mouffe do not mean a formation in which the working class exercises hegemony over other allied elements (as Gramsci sometimes did). Rather they mean something probably better termed a *counter-hegemonic formation*: a coalitional group that struggles against the current hegemony in society and seeks to institute its own counter-hegemonic values as the reigning values in society.<sup>41</sup>

Laclau and Mouffe use the term *articulation* to capture how groups join together into a counter-hegemonic formation. Each group articulates with the others, in part remaking itself in a complex negotiation of values and interests. Each group is “widening itself out” to incorporate parts of society beyond itself. Unlike in Gramsci, however, that widening does not have any primary origin in a “fundamental class.” Rather it flows from multiple points, as many different groups simultaneously are consciously seeking to articulate themselves to other groups. The counter-hegemonic articulation is the product of many groups acting together. Together they co-construct a collective will that is distinctly different from, and yet rooted in, the individual wills of the groups. That new political understanding is forged around what Gramsci called a hegemonic principle, or what Mouffe calls an articulating principle.<sup>42</sup> Although Gramsci and Mouffe both use the singular term “principle,” they both describe something that is much more complex: a hegemonic/articulating principle connotes a complex world-view, an interlocking system of values that organizes one’s way of understanding the world and conducting oneself in it. The articulating principle, for Mouffe, is not derived from the experience and agenda of a privileged element of the formation. Rather it is the creative product of collaboration among the many groups. Moreover, an articulating principle is not a pre-existing entity that must be discovered; it is not a collective unconscious or primordial essence that all groups have always shared but have been unaware of. Rather it is the result of an intentional act of creation. It is *produced* by groups who willfully decide to construct a shared common sense, a collective way of both seeing the world and moving forward together.

While the act of articulation partly remakes each group, it does not *entirely* remake them so that their character is fully determined by their new connections. None is being *absorbed* into the counter-hegemonic formation. The individual will of each does not dissolve completely into the collective will. While each group is partly constituted by the counter-hegemonic formation, at the same time it also remains partly autonomous. Each group is also constituted by a variety of engagements both beyond and before the counter-hegemonic formation. But at the same time a given group can never be fully autonomous from the formation, because it is always partly determined by the formation, always overdetermined by its multiple associations with the other groups. Each element of a counter-hegemonic formation, then, is simultaneously dependent and autonomous, and each of those conditions continually prevents the other from being fully realized.

---

<sup>41</sup> Gramsci also used the term hegemony in these two senses as well, both as the hegemony of one element of a coalition over the others, and as the broader societal hegemony of one collection of groups over the wider society.

<sup>42</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci,” in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 193.

Consequently, the identity and subjectivity of each element of a counter-hegemonic formation is simultaneously the same as and different from the other elements. In Laclau and Mouffe's phrasing, each element is never entirely interior or exterior to the formation, and a particular element is never entirely interior or exterior to any other. Sameness and difference enter into a relation of irresolvable tension. Every element bleeds into all the others and yet remains distinct. That condition of simultaneous sameness-and-difference is what I have called "equivalence," drawing on Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>43</sup> To be equivalent, two things cannot be entirely different, for the term clearly denotes significant similarity. At the same time, equivalent means something distinctly less than "identical," and so it also denotes some measure of difference. The concept resonates strongly with Gramsci's notion of "democratic centralism," which for him involves "the critical pursuit of what is identical in seeming diversity of form and on the other hand of what is distinct and even opposed in apparent uniformity, in order to organize and interconnect closely that which is similar."<sup>44</sup> The idea of equivalence also resonates with Michael Hardt's prescription for how the various groups on the global Left should engage each other. The encounter among groups, he says, should

reveal and address not only the common projects and desires, but also the differences of those involved—differences of material conditions and political orientation. The various movements across the globe cannot simply connect to each other as they are, but must rather be transformed by the encounter through a kind of mutual adequation . . . not to become the same, or even to unite, but to link together in an expanding common network.<sup>45</sup>

I argue that this notion of equivalence, or mutual adequation, is a useful way to imagine the relations among elements of a counter-hegemonic formation. It is a concept that evokes relations of simultaneous interdependence and autonomy, obligation and freedom, unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference.

## Networks

This vision—in which political movements together construct articulated counter-hegemonic formations where each element imagines itself to be equivalent to all the others—clearly implies some form of network structure for its organization.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore worth considering seriously the kind of network would make the most sense for such counter-hegemonic formations. Generally, networks can be either centered or distributed, and, relatedly, hierarchical or not (see Figure 1). When we reject a privileged-core conceptualization of political movements, then it follows (to an extent) that we should favor a relatively more decentered

<sup>43</sup> Mark Purcell, *Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Hardt, "Today's Bandung?," in Tom Mertes (ed.), *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 232.

<sup>46</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Ash Amin, "Spatialities of Globalization," *Environment and Planning A* 34:3 (2002), pp. 385–399; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

or distributed network. One leading and particularly evocative way to think about such distributed networks is Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a rhizome.<sup>47</sup> They draw on the botanical fact that rhizomes are plants that do not have an "arborescent" (that is, tree-like) structure in which all nutrients flow through a single trunk. Rather they have a horizontal network of interconnected underground roots, and they can shoot up stems from multiple points. Deleuze and Guattari use the metaphor primarily as a way to imagine the heritage of philosophy. They argue against an arborescent imagination in which all ideas flow first through a single source, and then up to the limbs, branches, and leaves (for example, the branches of psychoanalysis all emerge from the trunk of Freud). Rather they propose that we should imagine ideas and traditions of thought as having sprung up from multiple points in the social body, as complex products of many people and many contingent interactions. They argue, drawing on Pierre Rosenstiehl and Jean Petitot,<sup>48</sup> that arborescent systems are hierarchical, such that each element "has only one active neighbor, his or her hierarchical superior."<sup>49</sup> A rhizome, on the contrary, "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows." It "is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton . . . [It is] defined solely by the circulation of states."<sup>50</sup> In their book they leave latent how the rhizome concept might be applied to political movements, but anyone who has ever tried to excise an actual rhizome (like bamboo or mint) from their garden can see the connection. Rhizomes cannot be pulled out by their stem, once and for all. Each shoot is only a small part of a vast underground structure. For very well developed rhizomes, excising them means tearing out the whole garden. They are everywhere, integrated finely into the fabric of their habitat. A rhizomatic political movement, then, would be a well-developed network without a central trunk, without a core through which every entry and exit, every decision and value, must pass. Every element of the rhizome would be equivalent to all the others, such that the network is non-hierarchical. It would lack a central point that is functionally more important than all the others. Moreover, the movement would be flexible and complex. Each element would be connected to every other element. One could enter and exit at any of many points. Any manifestation of the movement (a demonstration, an institution, a campaign) while it would be connected to everything else in the network, would be relatively independent from it, as when one pulls a shoot and the rhizome's root system is largely unaffected. And unlike a real rhizome, the most supple of rhizomatic movements could restructure itself radically, disarticulating and recombining its system strategically to adapt to changing political conditions.

Despite the innovation and promise of that rhizomatic vision, however, we must confront a real difficulty in abandoning centralization and hierarchy. What I would call a relatively more Gramscian network, somewhere between the centered one on the left of Figure 1 and the nodal one in the middle, would

<sup>47</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–25.

<sup>48</sup> Pierre Rosenstiehl and Jean Petitot, "Automate asocial et systemes acentres," *Communications* 22 (1974), pp. 45–62.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

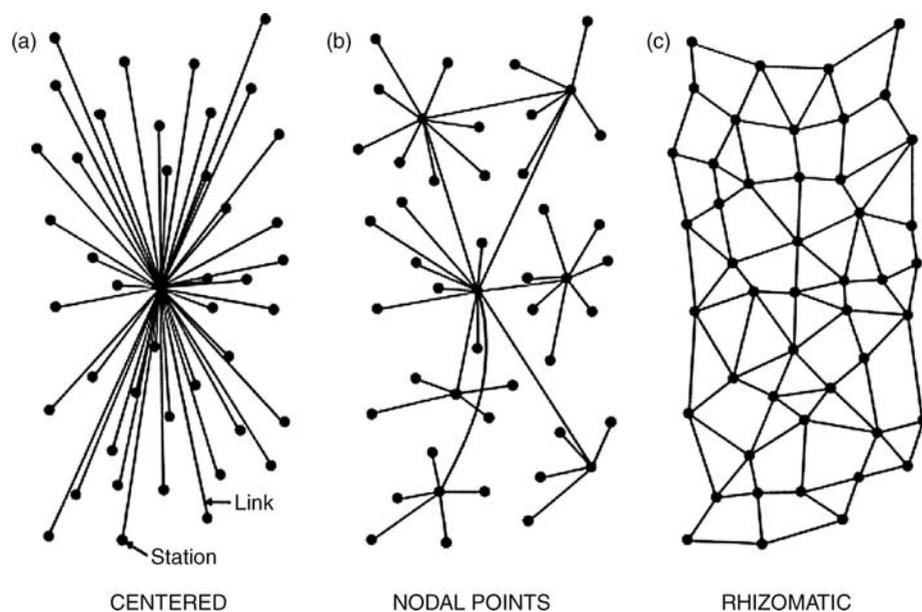


Figure 1. Different Network Forms.

organize by means of a centralized hub, a nerve center of sorts that coordinates the various elements of the network. Gramsci, especially in his earlier, more politically concrete work, imagines this center to be the political party. He argued that the political terrain is always shifting, and opportunities for counter-hegemonic action are continually opening and closing. As a result, he maintained that what is required is a political party, a “permanently organized and long prepared force” that is ready to act when opportunities arise. The party must be “formed, developed, and rendered ever more homogenous, compact, and self-aware.”<sup>51</sup> This conviction was in part inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution, in which a highly organized party pushed through a communist revolution in a society where capitalism was at best fledgling. Also central to this vision was Gramsci’s first-hand experience in the 1920 uprisings in Milan and Turin, during which unions and workers’ councils occupied factories but failed in the end, Gramsci felt, largely because they did not receive effective party assistance or leadership. That failure solidified Gramsci’s conviction that a disciplined party was necessary to organize and give direction to the spontaneous movement of the masses.<sup>52</sup>

However, Gramsci very much opposed the more vanguardist view of his colleague Amadeo Bordiga, who favored a small but ideologically pure party that takes its cue from its own rigorous analysis, not from the will of the masses. Gramsci’s experience in organizing workers’ councils and soviet-style democratic

<sup>51</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>52</sup> For a useful account of that era, in Italy, see Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, “Introduction,” in Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, op. cit., p. 129. See also Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., pp. 152–153.

<sup>54</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, op. cit., pp. 188–189.

structures led him to take very seriously the spontaneous movement and intelligence of the masses. He stressed that it is critically important for the party to be constantly grounded, always connected to the masses through a dialectical process “in which the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organizing and directing will of the center converge.”<sup>53</sup> His notion of

democratic centralism [is] a continual adaptation of the [party] organization to the real movement, a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience.<sup>54</sup>

However, even if he took the masses seriously, what Gramsci offers is still democratic *centralism*. He insisted on the “organizing will of the center,” on the “solid framework of the leadership apparatus.” He would not have accepted Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic network structure with no general, no political party in a central role. The party, or “the Modern Prince” as he called it, is necessary to ensure the counter-hegemonic formation will be able to act quickly and effectively. Without that center, he fears, the movement will lack organization and discipline, and it will be unable to *move* when the time is right.

Because Gramsci saw the party as occupying that center, it is tempting to lump together his lingering class reductionism with his relatively more centered imagination of political movements. But the two are distinct. It is possible to imagine a centered network that does not place a privileged political subject in that center. In other words, the center of a centered network need not be a class center, or one associated with any privileged subject position. Therefore, a non-essentialist rejection of a privileged core for the counter-hegemonic articulation does not necessitate a rejection of all centralization in the network. We should, with Gramsci, take seriously the real benefits of network centralization. Moreover, we must confront the shortcomings of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome. Because it lacks any center, questions remain about where in a rhizome the coordination and direction would come from. And, I think troublingly, their rhizome metaphor leads us in the direction of a naturalistic answer. Since an actual rhizome is a single organism, it possesses a unifying coherence that coordinates its actions toward survival. But a rhizomatic political movement is of course not a single organism. It is made up of many organisms and even many collections of organisms (movements, institutions, and the like). We therefore cannot assume that an organic, organismic unifying logic will somehow direct a rhizomatic political movement. It is safer to assume that such coordination must be intentional, the result of conscious initiative on the part of concrete actors. But if the network lacks an organizational center, it is hard to know who will take the initiative and what they will do. Deleuze and Guattari offer an answer that is indefinite: “Is a general necessary for *n* individuals to manage to fire in unison? The solution without a

<sup>53</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Hardt, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>57</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>58</sup> As do Hardt and Negri, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Deleuze and Guattari.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 257–308. See also Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, *op. cit.*

General is to be found in an acentered multiplicity possessing a finite number of states with signals to indicate corresponding speeds . . . without any copying of a central order."<sup>55</sup> Michael Hardt, whose work is much inspired by Deleuze, offers a similar vision, although instead of a rhizome he uses the metaphor of the ocean.<sup>56</sup> Speaking of contemporary networks against neoliberal globalization, he says "they displace contradictions and operate instead a kind of alchemy, or rather a sea-change, the flow of movements transforming the traditional fixed positions; networks imposing their force through a kind of irresistible undertow." A similar kind of indeterminacy on this point can often be seen in Foucault's work. In *Power/Knowledge*, after a discussion of militant political practice, an interviewer asks Foucault "who or what is it that co-ordinates the activities of agents of the political body?" He replies that the political body is "a highly intricate mosaic" and that "during certain periods there appear agents of liaison."<sup>57</sup> He is of course keen to avoid defining an *a priori* coordinating center, the way Gramsci is ready to do. But that doesn't mean he doesn't think one is necessary. Throughout his work Foucault strongly implies that there is a political battle to be joined and won, that there is much at stake,<sup>58</sup> and that coordinated action is essential.<sup>59</sup> But he declines to discuss how to organize and mobilize the necessary forces. We are left without a clear way to proceed. Beyond relying on Deleuze and Guattari's "signals to indicate corresponding speeds," being swept up in Hardt's "irresistible undertow," or waiting for Foucault's "agents of liaison" to appear, it is difficult to know how a rhizomatic movement will be able to move at all, much less take coordinated and strategic action that shifting political opportunities demand.

Despite this indeterminacy, of course the rhizome offers critical benefits as well. My distinction above between a privileged political subject and a centered network is too facile. While they are analytically distinct, in practice a centralized core is all too easily occupied by a privileged group. For example, whatever remaining class reductionism is present in Gramsci can be seen most clearly when he discusses the Communist Party and its need to be disciplined, to be "homogenous, compact, and self-aware." So it is not enough to split the two analytically and be done with it. There remains a very real danger that the delicate relation of equivalence will be hard to maintain in the face of a centered network. Moreover, rhizomatic networks offer a very real positive potential for holding together difference without reducing it. Hardt's desire for movements to be "transformed by [their] encounter through a kind of mutual adequation," a process I think is very close to equivalence, is best realized in a network. The multiple connections in a network displace contradictions because "one of the basic characteristics of the network form is that no two nodes face each other in contradiction; rather, they are always triangulated by a third, and then and fourth, and then by an indefinite number of others in the web."<sup>60</sup> The potential for difference to crystallize into intractable contradiction is lessened by the ceaseless encounter of new others in the network, and by the mutual adequation—the

<sup>60</sup> Hardt, *op. cit.*, pp. 235–236.

<sup>61</sup> One possibility for truly resolving the dilemma, suggested by Hardt and Negri, *op. cit.*, is a "swarm intelligence" whereby every individual, each on an equal footing, contributes to the intelligence of the larger "hive." While it is a promising area for further inquiry, the concept still retains a naturalistic cast that it seems to me is subject to the same doubts I raise about the rhizome.

<sup>62</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), *op. cit.*, pp. 112–113.

partial transformation of each group's identity and interests—that network connections engender.

The question of network structure therefore presents a genuine dilemma. The elements of an articulated hegemonic network must be on an equal footing with each other; they must co-construct the movement together. And yet there remains a real need for a center, for a more important part of the network, even if that center is likely to undermine the relation of equal footing. One way to navigate the dilemma, though it cannot resolve it,<sup>61</sup> is to consciously build a network that is in-between a rhizome and a centered network. The case of the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition suggests that such a compromise approach may be practicable. The coalition, as we will see, has created a network that is partly centralized, but the centers relate to each other on equal footing. These partial centers are analogous to what Laclau and Mouffe, following Lacan, call “nodal points” (see Figure 1).<sup>62</sup> Such points “partially fix meaning” in a discourse, and they create political privileged points whose privilege is always temporary and never necessary. That vision is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe's view of politics more generally, as a ceaseless process of fixing, unfixing, and re-fixing meaning and relationships, of creating fixity that can never be total or transcendental. In a network, such fixity would manifest as partial centers: never a single, permanent center (like Gramsci's party) but a continual process of creating partial and temporary centers that can, together, organize and mobilize the network. While that structure does not overcome the dilemma, it may nevertheless provide a manageable way forward for concrete political practice.

### **The Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition**

The concept of articulated counter-hegemonic networks of equivalence helps us navigate around and beyond some of the difficult problems in Left political theory, but of course the value of the idea also depends on how practicable it is. To what extent can actual movements build such networks and achieve political results? On this question, I argue that the case of the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition (DRCC) offers us cause for guarded optimism. The DRCC has had some success articulating dissimilar groups into a relation of equivalence, and they have assembled a partly centered network that is able to move effectively and produce some meaningful results. While those successes have been modest, still the DRCC's experience gives us reason to think that counter-hegemonic mobilization through articulated networks may be possible. To be clear, however, the DRCC case is a suggestive example, not an exhaustive confirmation of the potential of networks of equivalence. It is a local-scale network that in no sense constitutes a generalized counter-hegemonic alternative to neoliberal globalization. Clearly such large-scale mobilization is also important, and the DRCC has explored linkages to regional and national networks that advocate for environmental justice

---

<sup>63</sup> My narrative of the DRCC is drawn from data collected for an ongoing research project that began in 2004. The project has gathered mostly qualitative data—formal interviews with key actors, observations at public meetings, numerous informal conversations with participants, and archival sources (unpublished documents produced by participating organizations, as well as published media accounts). Any information whose source is not cited in the text is drawn from field notes from these various sources.



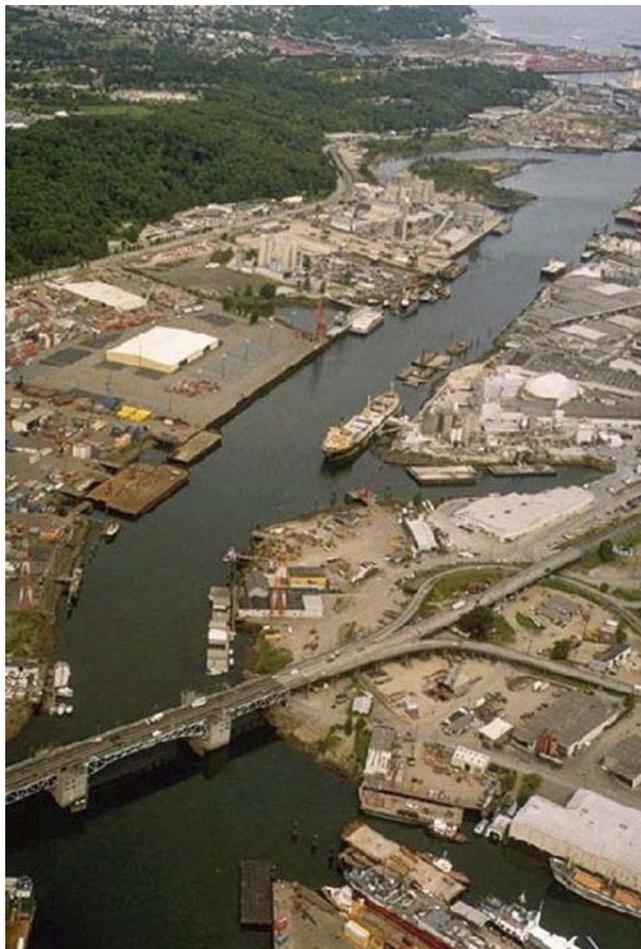
Figure 2. Map of the Duwamish River.

and ecological sustainability. They understand the importance of broadening out their political agenda by allying with other groups in other places. But their particular success has not yet been in constructing larger-scale networks. Instead, their story offers us guidance more fully on how we might hold together different groups in a partly centered network, and how such a network might mobilize to both unsettle a hegemonic common sense and advance a counter-hegemonic alternative.<sup>63</sup>

In the early part of the 20th century, the last five miles of Seattle main river, the Duwamish, were straightened and channelized, and that stretch of the river has long been home to the largest concentration of industrial activity in the Pacific Northwest (see Figures 2 and 3). That industry includes cement production, food

<sup>64</sup> Port of Seattle, *Partnership Forms to Study Lower Duwamish River* (Seattle, WA: Port of Seattle, 2000).

<sup>65</sup> To be sure, there is also a sincere desire on the part of the federal government to make the Superfund process more democratic, a desire that traces its roots to the Great Society-era surge of federal participation rules that were a response to the disasters of urban renewal in the 1950s and 60s.



**Figure 3.** Industry along the River.

processing, aerospace manufacturing, paper and metals fabrication, and boat-building and repair. The stretch is also the site of the Port of Seattle, one of the largest ports on the west coast. As one might expect with a heavily industrialized river, the Duwamish is extremely polluted. Chemical pollutants from industry include high levels of hazardous materials in water, sediment, and soil near the river, including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), phthalates, and mercury and other metals. In addition, over 100 storm drains carry a variety of pollutants from pavement into the river. As a result of that intense pollution, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) listed the final five-mile stretch of the Duwamish as a federal Superfund site in 2001. The declaration began a very complex scientific, engineering, and political project that will last many years. Under Superfund law, those who polluted the site, if they can be definitively identified, are legally liable for the cost of cleaning it up. In this case, four such polluters were readily identifiable: Boeing, King County, the City of Seattle, and the Port of Seattle. Knowing they would be found liable, the four formed a public-private partnership (called the Lower Duwamish

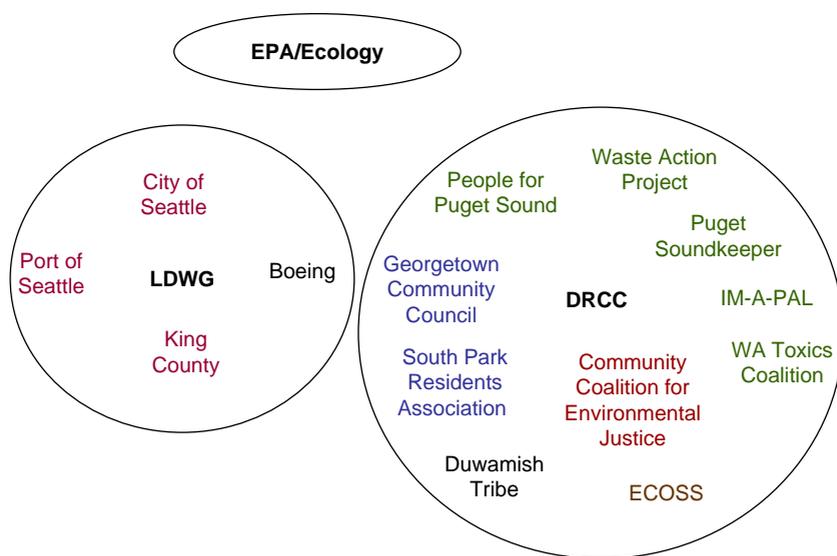


Figure 4. Governance Structure for the Duwamish Superfund Site.

Waterway Group (LDWG)) and entered into an agreement with EPA to study the pollution, plan and conduct the cleanup, and largely fund the process.<sup>64</sup> The EPA, jointly with the Washington State Department of Ecology, oversees LDWG's work (See Figure 4).

To most it seemed a clear case of the fox guarding the henhouse to have those who polluted the river and who were paying for the cleanup decide how much it would cost. That concern partly spurred the creation of the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition (DRCC). The DRCC is an alliance among ecological groups, a Native American tribe, neighborhood associations, anti-pollution activists, small businesses, and environmental justice advocates. Their mission is to ensure that the cleanup is accepted by and benefits "the community." That term is of course quite elastic, but generally the DRCC's sense of it refers to the multiple inhabitants of the river's watershed, both human and non-human. They also often define the term negatively to mean "not the polluters" and "not the federal and state government." To a significant extent, they see "the community" as a popular entity, as a mobilization of "the people," in contrast to the institutionalized powers-that-be. Importantly, however, there is also a more formal, legal sense in which "the community" is understood. The DRCC serves as the EPA's "Community Advisory Group," an official designation which means that as the EPA regulates the actions of LDWG, the DRCC provides the EPA with the official community response to what LDWG is proposing. To a degree, this structure is a way for the EPA to contain and control popular participation by setting formal limits on it,<sup>65</sup> and the DRCC understands that danger. But they feel the danger is outweighed by the opportunities the formal designation provides. They have taken advantage of those institutional opportunities, but they are continuously aware they are doing so. They have decided to play the game, but they play it in order to rework it. To use a river metaphor, while the formal channels of the Superfund process can contain and limit their participation, they can also help the

DRCC build volume and momentum. If that volume and momentum remains in the channel and is carried to the mouth of the river where EPA expects it to go, then the DRCC is tamed. But if the DRCC can, metaphorically, overspill the banks, flood the basin, and remake the structure of the process, the volume and momentum they built in the channel will only increase their impact. Thus far the DRCC has used this double-edged sword quite effectively: they have used the formal opportunities that come with being the community advisory group to generate new openings. As a result, they currently play a much greater and more autonomous role than the EPA expected.

Part of the struggle the DRCC faces is to define who they are and what their agenda should be. Although the scope of the movement is fairly small (a watershed within a metropolitan area), nevertheless there is considerable dissimilarity within their coalition. While there can be synergy among the agendas of native, neighborhood, ecological, small business, and justice movements, they often contradict each other in multiple ways. The many elements of the DRCC are therefore distinct and often conflict. And yet they all have a real need to think and act in concert. To that end, they have constructed together a collective vision for the river that guides their activism. While that vision is always developing, it is nevertheless fairly well defined. Its core can be seen in the names of the two main groups: the Duwamish *River* Cleanup Coalition and the Lower Duwamish *Waterway* Group. The DRCC works to construct an image of the Duwamish as a *river*—a riverine ecosystem that is inhabited by many species. They seek a watershed that can be a productive habitat for both its human and non-human inhabitants. They do not claim that the river can or should be restored to its pre-industrial state, because that would re-introduce periodic floods into the front yards of neighborhood residents. Instead, their insistence on the Duwamish as a river is a way to actively keep alive that history, to remember the river as it once was, so that the current industrialized waterway does not become the only imaginable landscape. Figure 5 shows two images from the DRCC website, the first showing the Duwamish in 1854, with its meandering course and floodplain. The second image shows the straightened Duwamish as it is today, with multiple sources of pollution lining its banks. The DRCC resists the notion that the Duwamish is merely a channel to move goods. It did not used to be a waterway, they claim, and it can be much more than that in the future. They argue that the cleanup can be, if we want, a much more extensive *restoration* of the river's ecology, and a rehabilitation of the river as a *river*. Some members also talk of "healing" the river, of reviving its former health as a living river, at least to the extent possible.

By contrast, LDWG sees the Duwamish primarily as a waterway, as a conduit functional for the regional economy. In this vision, the banks of the river are conceived not primarily as floodplain habitat, but as owned property. Currently much of that property is brownfield that cannot be sold on the market. LDWG's main imperative is therefore *cleanup*: bringing pollution down to maximum legal levels so that riverbank property can re-enter the market and again be economically productive. Of course the whole picture is more complex than this account can relate. There are many different actors with different values and priorities in the two groups, and those actors enter and exit quite often. I have simplified the differences between the two groups to an extent in order to capture the heart of each agenda, the central imperative that takes precedence over other considerations. The DRCC acknowledges the economic function of the river, and

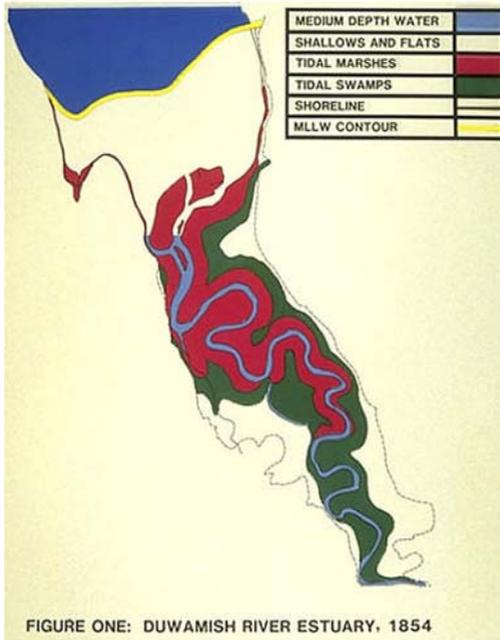


FIGURE ONE: DUWAMISH RIVER ESTUARY, 1854

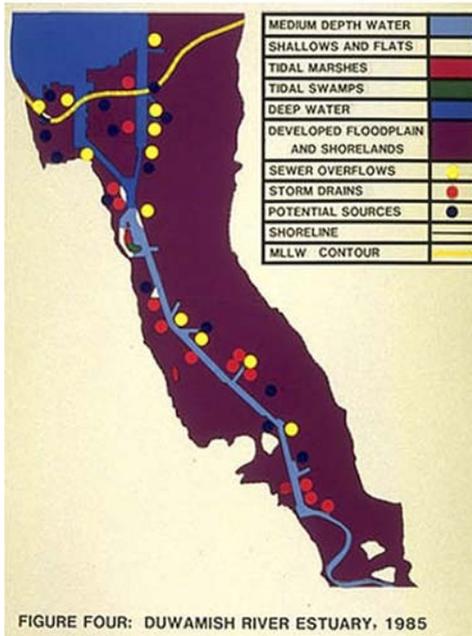


FIGURE FOUR: DUWAMISH RIVER ESTUARY, 1985

Figure 5. Remembering the Former River. Source: DRCC website: <<http://www.duwamishcleanup.org/>>

<sup>66</sup>See for example Erik Swyngedouw, Frank Moulaert, and Arantxa Rodriguez, "Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe: Large-Scale Urban Development Projects and the New Urban Policy," *Antipode* 34:3 (2002), pp. 542-577.

LDWG is not blind to the importance of ecological restoration. But the core visions of the two groups—waterway and river—are distinctly different.

The DRCC's vision of the Duwamish as a river is important for them because it serves as an articulating principle for their coalition. The river idea can be seen in Gramsci's terms as a "collective will" that has been actively created together by the DRCC's member groups. While that will is collective, at the same time each group in the DRCC interprets it in a partly different way. For the neighborhood groups, restoring the river's watershed as habitat means things like reducing the risk of cancer from PCBs, or building a waterfront park on a cleaned-up site. For the ecological groups, it means constructing sand bars that aid salmon migration, or bringing a denuded tributary back to ecological health. For the Duwamish Tribe, rehabilitating the watershed as habitat means restoring cultural sites as well as salmon runs, and it takes on a dimension of historical justice, as a (very partial) reparation for a history of colonization. The vision of the Duwamish as a river is, in other words, constructed by DRCC members as *equivalent*: it is simultaneously the same and different, unified and multiple. The coalition must continually honor each of these different ways to conceive of the Duwamish as a river, these different casts on their collective will. They must continually rework and reinforce their vision of the Duwamish as a river, but they must also avoid reducing it such that one approach dominates the others. So far, they have been largely successful in achieving that balance.

Striking that balance requires that as each group articulates itself to the coalition, it is partly remade in the process. Each group must "adopt" the others on a higher plane, to recall Gihan Perera's phrase. For example, neighborhood groups, to an extent, come to see pollution not just as a threat to human health but through their engagement with the ecological groups and the Duwamish Tribe, also as a threat to salmon and to the sustainability of the ecosystem. Each group must consciously (and continually) choose to expand and rework their understanding of their own interests to incorporate the interests of other DRCC members. To a large extent, the various elements of the DRCC have been able to do this successfully. They have worked out an effective balance such that they have achieved a measure of simultaneous interdependence and autonomy, unity and differentiation. That balance can never be achieved permanently; it must be continually renewed and reconfigured. But it *can* be achieved, at least to an extent and in the short term. So the DRCC is a useful case because it offers a concrete example of how the abstract concept of equivalence might look in practice.

But there are continual challenges. One is external: their adversaries can work to drive the coalition apart. On one occasion, for example, LDWG presented several different plans for the cleanup of a particular hotspot on the river. The first two offered greater habitat restoration in the river and public access on the banks, but planned a less comprehensive removal of pollutants. The second two offered a more comprehensive removal, but less habitat and public access. Forced to choose between habitat/access and pollution removal, most of the DRCC advocated the former, although there were a significant minority who preferred the latter. That second (smaller) group agreed to defer in this case to the larger group, so the

---

<sup>68</sup> On this point I am inspired by, but not identical to, Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

DRCC could present a united front. At the public meeting, however, the DRCC coordinator did acknowledge the existence of the minority group. Of course, should those within the DRCC that advocate more comprehensive removal of pollutants begin to feel they are being continually subordinated to a habitat/access alliance, they would begin to question their membership in the coalition. The temporary deference that took place in this case cannot become permanent.

Another challenge is relatively more internal: there is quite a lot of synergy between the ecological groups and the Duwamish Tribe, as each are deeply concerned with ecology and non-human species. Similarly, there is synergy between the environmental justice group and the neighborhood groups because both neighborhoods along the river have long been victims of environmental injustice. Such synergies threaten to form progressively more distinct camps as groups are drawn to some of their peers and not to others. For example, while the interests of human inhabitants and non-human ones are often in concert, they can often conflict in the everyday politics of the cleanup (for example, when there is not enough money for *both* sand bars for salmon and public riverfront access for neighbors). If either group perceives an imbalance that favors some over others, or a devaluing of what *they* think is most important, a marginalization of their particular way of understanding the Duwamish as a river, the coalition could falter.

A third challenge has to do with inclusion. South Park, one of the neighborhood groups in the coalition, has a very high proportion of Latino residents (in the 2000 census: 37% compared to 5.3% citywide). The DRCC has struggled to find a way to draw that population into the coalition. To the extent that a language barrier exists, they have worked to lower it. But few Latino residents have participated in the coalition. Almost all active participants from South Park have been English-speaking Anglo residents. So even though the DRCC has made conscious efforts, the exclusion of Latino residents remains. Any such exclusion, intentional or not, reduces the breadth and diversity of the coalition. While that can help reduce discord, it also has a long-term corrosive effect because a group of people very clearly affected by pollution in the Duwamish are not actively acting in concert with the coalition.

In terms of its organizational structure, the DRCC is closest to the “nodal points” network in Figure 1, and it leans more toward the centered model than the rhizomatic one. The DRCC is not a purely rhizomatic network, because each member group has an organized leadership that stands for the group and carries out its everyday business. Those leaders—rather than the whole membership of each group—are the primary actors in the coalition. Nor is the DRCC’s network

<sup>69</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968); Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>70</sup> Heller and Perera, *op. cit.*; Right to the City Alliance, “Right to the City: Notes from the Inaugural Convening,” Los Angeles: Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader, op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170; Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks, op. cit.*, pp. 34, 80.

<sup>73</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, op. cit.*, and *Power/Knowledge, op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, op. cit.*, pp. 135–228.

entirely centered, as each group constitutes an equal and relatively autonomous center in the network. There is no authority that stands above the will of each member group. Decisions are taken by the consensus of the member groups, and so each member must agree for the coalition to move forward. However, the DRCC does have a measure of *organizational* centralization in the form of a coordinator who conducts much of the everyday business of the DRCC. While communication and decisions do not have to flow through her, in practice they generally do. She organizes the members, she applies for grants, she talks to the press. She also distributes those tasks to member groups when they are willing and better able to carry them out. But the coordinator does not hold greater *formal* authority than any of the member groups. While the DRCC takes seriously the need for coordination and organization, they do not achieve that through formal hierarchy. In some sense, one could speak of a "hierarchy of practice" whereby the coordinator has more practical influence because she is so much more involved in everyday tasks. However, that influence is balanced by a commitment (both on her part and on the part of the other leaders) to a relationship of equality and collective control among the member groups. So far, member groups feel she is striking the right balance between getting things done and involving them in decisions. While the DRCC's structure does not eliminate the need to strike that balance, it does offer a model for effectively maintaining it. Moreover, it suggests that some form of hybrid network structure, between centered and rhizomatic, can be a workable strategy for negotiating the tension between the imperatives of effective coordination and decentered, non-hierarchical relations.

These successes in holding together difference in a partly centered network have produced very real, although fairly modest, concrete political results. When thinking about these results, it is important to remember the context. The Duwamish cleanup exists in an environment of neoliberal urban governance where democratic control and meaningful public involvement is typically anemic.<sup>66</sup> In the usual Superfund process, community advisory groups do not comment on a cleanup proposal until the EPA and the responsible parties have already agreed on a plan. In the Duwamish process, the DRCC has been able to gain access to and comment on *draft* documents, so that their input helps shape the plan *before* the EPA approves it. This results in only limited influence for the DRCC, yet it is a distinct gain when compared to the usual Superfund process. Similarly, in the usual Superfund process, after the responsible parties and EPA approve a plan, they hold a public meeting to get community input. Commonly at these meetings a panel of experts presents the plan and then individual community members comment at a microphone. The panel then uses their expert knowledge to parry most if not all comments. In the Duwamish process, after the EPA presents the plan, the DRCC is given equal time to present their response, which they organize prior to the meeting. Their presentations are typically equal to if not superior to the EPA's presentation in professional polish and scientific sophistication. In one instance, the DRCC's response prompted the EPA to sample an area they had not yet sampled. They found extremely high concentrations of

<sup>75</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, "Preface to the Second Edition," *op. cit.*, p. xix.

<sup>77</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Confronting Empire," Speech given at the World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2003.

PCBs close to a residential area, and they entirely reorganized the cleanup to address the new discovery.

Another characteristic of neoliberal urban governance is the clear hegemony of economic imperatives over other ones.<sup>67</sup> The currently hegemonic idea of the Duwamish, as a waterway functional for the regional economy, is a powerful guide to decision-making in the cleanup. The DRCC's counter-hegemonic vision, of the Duwamish as an inhabited river, gives rise to a very different set of assumptions that provoke a very different kind of cleanup. On one property, for example, the EPA wanted to reduce PCB concentration to ten parts per million in order to allow the site to return to its previous use, an industrial manufacturing facility. But that level would not have allowed for any other uses, either commercial or residential. The DRCC, angered by such a minimal cleanup, advocated instead for a public park, which could be used far more fully by local residents and which would have required a far more extensive cleanup, down to levels of one part per million. Through a complicated series of tactics, the DRCC won the day, and the current plan is for the more extensive cleanup. While their counter-hegemonic vision is not yet hegemonic, even though it is still subordinate to the dominant idea of the Duwamish as waterway, what the DRCC has been able to do is advance an acknowledged alternative to the reigning common sense about the Duwamish. That common sense is now under scrutiny; it is being challenged by a different common sense, one that insists that the river is not dead, that the Duwamish can be far more than a waterway, and that we can, at least partly, rediscover a living ecosystem that has been with us all along.

## Conclusion

These may seem like modest gains. They are. But they are real gains nonetheless. We should not expect to find counter-hegemonic networks of equivalence, fully formed, on a global scale, poised to overrun the current hegemony. We should instead expect to find more modest examples, ones that suggest that this way of thinking about political movements, this idea of a way forward, holds promise. Articulated counter-hegemonic networks of equivalence, in whatever form, face incredible challenges in the face of a still-dominant neoliberal ideal. Even if neoliberalism seems to be cracking recently, still the idea that economic growth trumps other concerns remains the dominant common sense. Moreover, the hegemony of neoliberalism has been mirrored by disarray on the Left, particularly since 1989. We search for a way to resist neoliberalism, but we cannot fall back on reductionist and essentialist Marxism, or on Keynesianism, or on the flawed socialist societies of the 20th century. As a result, what we have seen has been mostly an uncertain search for new ideas. Theoretically, the struggle to overcome intractable problems has resulted in some exciting but also seemingly chimerical possibilities. Laclau and Mouffe's vision of equivalence, for example, while inspirational in many ways, often prompts concerns about its practicability. How exactly might a movement hold in tension both interdependence and autonomy, unity and multiplicity?

I think we can find many of the answers, and much of the hope, by returning to the ground. Everywhere there are movements whose daily work involves overcoming the difficult problems we face. The DRCC is one of many such movements. They demonstrate that it is possible to build and mobilize something

that resembles the articulated networks of equivalence I advocate above. However, that is not to say that the DRCC is a manifestation of the theoretical ideal I have presented. They are not. Nor should they aim to be. Rather it would make more sense for them to seriously consider my arguments (among many others) and then reflect on if and how they might mobilize them effectively in their particular struggle. Theory should not drive action, it should provide it with a set of analyses and exhortations that can inform how movements make sense of themselves and their context.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, action cannot drive theory. As I mention above, the DRCC experience has helped shape the development of my theoretical argument. But my abstract reflections are also independent of that single experience; I engage other concrete cases and theoretical investigations that collectively shape my argument. Ideally, political practice and theoretical reflection should come together as equal partners in an engagement (and at times struggle) that aims at mutual reconsideration and reconstruction. That engagement can help spur the necessary and ceaseless process of adapting to a changing political environment. In the current economic crisis of 2008, such adaptation is necessary to respond to a particular disarray in the global political economy. But more generally, adaptation, rethinking, and regeneration are necessary tasks for any political movement. No longer can we retain a teleological understanding of politics as a progressive march toward the end of politics, or the end of history. Rather politics is an ongoing process of struggle, temporary stabilization, and ceaseless reconfiguration. That process is never resolved. And so a basic task for any movement is to continually reimagine their agenda and reassess their political opportunities.

There are at least two other points that are critical but that I am not able to address fully in this paper. The first concerns the specific content of articulating principles that can hold a counter-hegemonic formation together. Clearly it is not desirable to try to establish such principles *a priori*. They must emerge from specific movements as multiple groups articulate themselves to each other. However, the Duwamish case hints at what might be one good place for many movements to start: the concept of inhabitance. In many ways, the river-not-waterway vision of the DRCC is a vision *for inhabitance*. It argues that above all other considerations urban space should meet the needs of those who inhabit it. The various groups of the DRCC all inhabit the watershed in some way, even if their particular modes of inhabitance differ. This vision of urban space stands in contrast to a neoliberal view of urban space as property, as a commodity that should be exchanged on the market. The notion of inhabitance is to be found, among other places, in the work of Henri Lefebvre, most clearly when he writes about “the right to the city.”<sup>69</sup> While I cannot develop the argument here, I think the DRCC suggests that inhabitance and the right to the city can be a very useful point from which groups can begin the process of forging an articulating principle for a counter-hegemonic formation. That has been, in fact, precisely the tack taken by the Right to the City Alliance I mention above. While that alliance is just emerging, it has found the right to the city to be a useful “frame” in which a conversation about a shared vision can take place.<sup>70</sup>

The second critical point concerns discipline. Clearly the question of discipline—of ensuring groups choose to remain articulated and act in concert—is a central one for the movements I advocate. Gramsci is almost obsessive on the topic. He is very concerned how the discipline of a

counter-hegemonic formation can be maintained so that it does not disintegrate. Interestingly, his particular use of the term evokes both coercion and consent. He recognizes the value of both preventing groups from leaving,<sup>71</sup> and inspiring in them a desire to stay.<sup>72</sup> Of course Foucault stresses even more fully the idea of a discipline that engenders rather than represses.<sup>73</sup> His account of generative discipline<sup>74</sup> is much more fully elaborated than Gramsci's, albeit mostly in the context of bourgeois hegemony.<sup>75</sup> I think there is reason to believe that developing the concept of discipline, by drawing seriously on both thinkers, can yield a useful set of ideas and practices for holding together a differentiated movement without reducing it to a simple unity. It is at least an important topic worth further investigation.

In their preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe urge the Left "back to the hegemonic struggle."<sup>76</sup> I think mostly what that entails is that we rediscover and redouble the hegemonic struggle that is already underway. There are movements everywhere getting on with the business of resisting neoliberalism and struggling for more just, democratic, and civilized cities. The struggle is always difficult, and it is never-ending, but it must be engaged. And there is much reason for hope. There is great hope in the archives of political theory and history. There is hope in the fact that neoliberalism is beset by contradictions, and it cannot last. And in the long term, there is hope in the innumerable popular movements for democracy, equality, and justice, whether they are successful in the short term or not. Speaking at the World Social Forum, the novelist Arundhati Roy reminded us to hope.<sup>77</sup> "Remember this," she said, "we be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."