Aune's Leadership: Hegemony and the Rhetorical Perspective on Argumentation

Ronald Walter Greene, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
Alexander Hiland, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
AUNE'S LEADERSHIP: HEGEMONY AND THE RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ARGUMENTATION

Ronald Walter Greene and Alexander Hiland

At the heart of James Arnt Aune's approach to rhetorical theory and criticism was John Dewey's (1927) project of improving the "methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion" (as cited by Aune, 2001, p. 146). Aune was hopeful that learning how to improve the ways and means of argument might help "left leaning coalitions" overcome their "recent fragmentation" (2011, p. xiv). As such, Aune advocated a "red rhetoric" (1994, pp. 143–149), a mixture of Marxist critique and classical republicanism, in an effort to leverage a spirit of "constant vigilance and free spaces for deliberation, discussion, and debate" as an antidote to the "corrupting influence of centralized power and a taste for it" (Aune, 1994, p. 146). The rhetorical in rhetorical argumentation was embedded in a humanist process of self-fashioning and a political process of cultivating the virtues of moral and political leadership.

Aune's red rhetoric imagined arguments as more than effective or ineffective devices for persuading audiences, but imagined the art of rhetoric as making one's participation in debate and discussion a creative practice that had the power to (re)invent the ethico-political resources of a community in order to bring a wider transformation in the political community. Aune's red rhetoric blended the instrumental, the constitutive, and the critical dimensions of argument (Greene, 1998) into a potent force for enhancing a common life. Arguments are ways to build a common life because they require interlocutors, points of stasis, and shared points of reference. One such conceptual point of stasis and shared point of reference for critical scholars interested in the rhetorical perspective on argumentation is the concept of hegemony. Reading Gramsci (2011) in light of the intellectual tendency of Marxist theory to displace the rhetorical tradition, Aune isolates hegemony as a bridge that can productively create a red rhetoric. To do so, we will argue, entails a strong defense of rhetorical practice as a positive form of mediation suspended between structure and struggle. As a positive mediation, Aune imagines rhetoric participating in a form of hegemony that challenges the dominant structures of power (positive) by cultivating a moral and political leadership worthy of consent.

The purpose of this paper is to learn from Aune's leadership about the positive character of hegemony. Yet, we will argue that the concept of hegemony will need to be less tied to mediation. As we will argue, the problem of mediation limits our rhetorical understanding of hegemony to an epistemological-political horizon that inadvertently fails to appreciate how hegemony may work in affective and technological ways. This broader dimension of hegemony suggests that to participate in the argumentative process can be independent of what one argues for or against. As such, we should attend more to how debate generates sensations and perceptions to better account for argument as a method and condition of revolutionary change.
ARGUMENTATION AND ADVOCACY

HEGEMONY AS THE STRUGGLE FOR MORAL AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Aune (1994) turns to Gramsci's notion of hegemony within a narrative about the problem of mediation in Marxism after Marx (pp. 46–49). He describes the problem of mediation as the "classical contradiction between structure and struggle" (Aune, 1994, p. 144). The contradiction is that the struggle (revolution) cannot be guaranteed by the structure (the mode of production). Economic precarity and immiseration may make organizing more difficult not less; therefore, any claims to the historical inevitability of socialism must be abandoned. Mediation describes the intervening actors and forces between structure and struggle that make someone align with or challenge the current system. For Aune (1994) "Gramsci's Marxism solves the problem of mediation created by classical Marxism with an emphasis on praxis and creative activity... One of those necessary mediations [to direct life] is the art of rhetoric, an art whose traditions are most compatible with Gramsci's version of Marxism" (p. 74). Nothing is guaranteed by the structure, or in more direct Marxist terms, there is no guarantee that the contradictions of capitalist production will generate its inevitable proletariat revolution. Rhetorical argumentation, as praxis and creative activity, is advanced as an intervening force between structure and struggle that generate the consent necessary for change.

Rhetorical criticism and Marxism is itself mediated by the concept of hegemony. Unfortunately, Aune (1994) argues, hegemony tends to be used as an explanatory concept for how the state, capitalism, and other elements of popular culture manufacture the consent of the population to the power of the state/capitalism. He describes the tendency to assess how cultural forms protect or promote the power of the state and/or capitalism as "negative mediation... rather than a positive one" (Aune, 1994, p. 68). To the question: Why do people not revolt against their economic exploitation? The idea of a negative hegemony answers: because the cultural forms that people engage with influence them to accept as natural and right the status quo. Aune argues that this emphasis on negative hegemony is neither inaccurate nor lacking in utility, but it does not take advantage of the potential hegemony might hold for positive mediation between structure and struggle. In contrast to its negative mediation, Aune (1994) argues hegemony should be approached more positively, that is, as a "political strategy" (p. 69) of different leaders to organize a people to struggle against the economic, political, and environmental harms of capitalism.

A key element in promoting hegemony as a rhetorical-political strategy is the ability to cultivate a form of moral and political leadership to organize for social struggle. The political and moral leadership embedded in hegemonic rhetoric is put to work to generate an historic bloc as a political body that is not reducible to the modes of production (as merely economic) but includes all those that grant their consent to the historic bloc to rule. Intellectuals play a key social role in the hegemonic tendencies of an historic bloc. Aune (1994) argues that Gramsci (2011) describes intellectuals as serving an "organizational function" (p. 70) in allowing groups with distinct democratic demands and economic conditions to coalesce to form a historical bloc. Aune accepts Gramsci's premise that all persons are imbued with an intellectual instinct and follows Gramsci's distinction between two types of intellectuals: the traditional and the organic. The traditional intellectual is tied to the pre-existing historic bloc and is associated with the construction of the dominant hegemonic order. In contrast, the organic intellectual is tied to the creation of a new historic bloc that negates the hegemony of the dominant bloc by affirming an oppositional and alternative common sense. The organic intellectual is a rhetorical agent creating, sustaining and popularizing a new positive
hegemony. Yet, one should not draw the line between traditional and organic intellectuals too sharply. According to Aune (1994): “the principle of legitimacy for Gramscian communicative practice is the same as that of liberalism: the narrative of human evolution through learning to cooperation” (p. 73). The emphasis on social learning blurs the line between organic and traditional intellectuals as both provide access to the cultural traditions that make a communal change possible.

For Aune, hegemony is the key conceptual innovation of Gramsci for creating a red rhetoric. It does so by providing insight into how mediating actors and institutions translate the problems of structure into a persuasive message for the consent of an audience to the struggle against the structure. Three reasons support the attachment of hegemony to a positive notion of mediation: 1) moral and political leadership is a mediating force required to transform the problems of structure into a struggle; 2) This moral and political leadership requires the persuasion (or consent) of fragmented groups (audience) to a new common sense; and 3) to gain this consent, the cultural traditions of a people are isolated as the primary inventional resources for cultivating the moral and political leadership to promote change.

**HEGEMONY AFTER MEDIATION**

One of the difficulties of reading hegemony as positive or negative is the emphasis on hegemony as a concept of mediation. Based on our reconstruction of Aune’s argument, the most important mediating factor for generating a positive hegemony is the rhetorical cultivation of a moral and political leadership. Aune (1994) keeps the idea of moral and political leadership closely tied to a political force like a vanguard party to distance himself from those cultural critics who tended to embrace a positive notion of hegemony by fixating on “most tawdry products of the capitalist culture industry and among political theorists who reject any form of party organization” (p. 74). At the same time, this moral and political leadership is advanced as a social pedagogy to organize an audience to the importance and value of its cultural traditions that support struggle. We want to hold to a positive notion of hegemony, but offer a view of hegemony that is less attached to mediation. The emphasis on moral and political leadership and social learning treats mediation as an epistemological-political problem of better and worse knowledge represented by better or worse leaders. This epistemological horizon limits our understanding of argumentation as a method and conditions by which argumentation can participate in a positive hegemony.

What then is the problem of mediation? Raymond Williams (1977) notes how “some sense of separate and pre-existent areas or orders of reality, between which the mediating process occurs whether independently or as determined by their prior natures” (p. 99) underwrites the notion of mediation. Aune’s notion of hegemony as a mediating concept requires two different orders of reality; he renders these different domains of reality as structure and struggle. For Williams (1977), “reflections, mediations, or typifications” (p. 111) are understood epistemologically as providing more positive (better knowledge) and negative (worse knowledge) influences on our understanding of reality. In Aune’s terms, moral and political leaders can teach (argue) in better or worse ways. To put rhetorical argumentation in the sphere of mediation is to determine its value and import as a negative or positive form of political representation. As Greene (2004) argues, the problem of mediation’s epistemological-political couplet is that it transforms the rhetorical critic into a moral entrepreneur scolding advocates of social change for failing to embody a proper revolutionary rhetoric.
A rhetorical perspective on argumentation might begin to ask itself whether debate is a useful technique of scientific creation and/or dissemination. Gramsci provides us with a way to think of argument as a technique and, as such, whether or not it is appropriate to its means. What we are suggesting is more than decorum (appropriateness) governs the quality of an argument. Gramsci seems to be suggesting that argumentation as technique (as practice) may be less or more appropriate for a specific hegemonic challenge.

To this point, Jodi Dean (2009) provides the provocative diagnosis that the increasing technological infrastructure of network communication, what she calls “communicative capitalism” (p. 19) transforms argumentative practice into a “vehicle for the circulation of affects” (pp. 34–35). The conditions under which debate takes place contains how one might better argue to gain another’s consent. From a Gramscian perspective, one should no longer assume that argumentation can disseminate better or worse reasons for an audience to consent to the moral leadership of a particular person/party. It should be approached as a technique that may or may not be appropriate. If hegemony works on affective registers and the conditions of debate are being incorporated into the logics of communicative capitalism, then argumentation scholars need to re-think how argument as a practice might sustain a positive hegemony beyond whether or not one is making better or worse arguments.

To abandon hegemony’s relationship to mediation should not come at the cost of abandoning the importance of political organization. What Williams (1977) suggests is that hegemony should not be used to privilege one struggle over another, but instead imagine the practical connections between struggles:

The creation of an alternative hegemony, by the practical connection of many different forms of struggle, including those not easily recognizable as and indeed not primarily ‘political’ and ‘economic’, thus leads to a much more profound and more active sense of revolutionary activity” (pp. 110–111).

Our gambit is that the means and conditions of argument are likely ways in which practical connections can be made between different forms of struggle. This is not to analytically privilege one mode of struggle over another, but to privilege rhetorical argumentation as a practice that affirms or negates an “active sense of revolutionary activity” without presupposing we know the political criteria that will determine whether or not the ways and means of arguing under investigation can sustain a struggle. The point is Gramsci’s, we need a more sober analysis of whether the means and conditions of argument are appropriate to their hegemonic means.

This essay has affirmed Aune’s leadership by consenting to the claim that hegemony is a key concept for approaching the role of rhetoric in the organization of struggle. It is written, however, with the sadness that our primary interlocutor is unable to respond. For that reason, this paper may seem to have missed its moment. However, arguments speak to and for the tradition as much as they speak to and for particular persons. In this case, it is the tradition of a red rhetoric we affirm to keep alive. In so doing, we have affirmed a red rhetoric without allowing rhetorical argumentation to be suspended between structure and struggle mediating the proper relationship between the two to avoid smuggling in a privileged view of the proper political criteria for assessing revolutionary activity. As an alterna-
be sure, Aune (1994) was aware of the problem of Marxist theory to override the contingencies of rhetorical and political practice when he noted that “the tendency of Marxism to label as reformist and opportunistic any part or movement to the right of itself is perhaps the worst legacy of its system thinking” (pp. 146–147). Yet, Aune, against his own preferences, generates the critical conditions for just such an unfortunate tendency by coupling hegemony and mediation into an epistemological-political problem of good or bad political representation. Since any rhetorical practice is suspended between structure and struggle, the critic is put in the place of either affirming or negating the quality of the argument in terms of the critic's political system. Thus creating the critical space for a critic to constantly reproduce a criticism for the political value of a rhetorical practice based on its effectiveness at generating a proper form of struggle.

In contrast, it is possible to approach structure and struggle as methods and conditions of rhetorical argumentation. Raymond Williams (1977) provides a provocative re-reading of hegemony as “a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living; our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping of perceptions of ourselves and our world” (p. 110). Hegemony does not mediate; it is experienced over the whole of our living. Hegemony is as affective as epistemological because it stretches beyond the epistemological registers “of our perceptions of ourselves and our world” to the sensations and energies that traverse a “whole body of practices and expectations.” This more affective approach to hegemony provides a wider scope of the available means of persuasion than might be available to articulate a new common sense or consent for the constitution of a new moral and political leadership. It puts rhetorical argumentation in conversation with bodies and sensations and opens argumentation to the possibility of being a body of practices capable of creating alternative ways of living.

The point we want to emphasize at this point is that argumentation should not be reduced to the better or worse reasons for promoting a particulate vision of struggle. Nor are we saying that arguments have affective (pathos) dimensions as well as rational (logos) and ethos dimensions. Our point is that a broader notion of hegemony allows us to imagine rhetorical argumentation as a body of practices with sensations and energies. To make an argument is not to merely to advocate for one or another kind of common sense, it is to orient oneself to the practice of arguing. To appreciate the ways in which debate and persuasion participate in hegemonic processes (positive or negative) is to begin to account for how the art of argumentation generates its own sensations and energies for social struggle on the body of those that argue and consent.

**Conclusion**

To assess the revolutionary potential of argument will require closer attention to whether the act of arguing can provide the means to constitute an alternative (positive) hegemony without recourse to a particular common sense argued for or against. This is to imagine argument as a creative and rhetorical practice that works affectively (sensations and energies) as much as it does epistemologically (perceptions) and one that re-imagines the whole body of practices that might be open to re-specification as arguments. But in so doing, argument might be as much a part of structure as struggle. That is to say, one has to assess whether conditions that embed the method of argument have rendered argument part of the structure. However, when discussing the role of debate, discussion and persuasion in the creation of a positive hegemony, we might take a lesson from Gramsci (2011):
tive, we provided an affective notion of hegemony that allows a richer understanding of the means and condition of argumentation than the epistemological register mediation allows. The advantage of this more affective approach to hegemony is that it allows the possibility of debate to be envisioned as a technique or practice that produces new affects (sensations) and connections between struggles. In so doing, we may be in a stronger position to assess the appropriateness of argumentation as a hegemonic technique in an age of communicative capitalism.

REFERENCES