The meaning of resistance: Hezbollah’s media strategies and the articulation of a people

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SUMMARY

In my dissertation I suggest an understanding of resistance as a hegemonic practice where what is at stake is the articulation of new meanings and new political subjects. By looking at the specific case of Hezbollah, a Lebanese political movement engaged in the ongoing conflict with Israel, I propose a model in which resistance is carried out by various means including media and discursive practices.

When I speak about Hezbollah as a resistance movement, it is the very definition of resistance that is at stake – the meaning of resistance. In this sense resistance as a category can involve any movement, whether it is the extreme right or progressive queer movements. Each of these movements lays down strategies to challenge an established power in order to advance meanings in a contested space.

Following the discourse theoretical approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in which politics is understood as a process of hegemonic contestation (Laclau and Mouffe 2000) and Laclau’s theory on populism as a form of hegemony (Laclau 2007a), I argue that Hezbollah’s resistance strategies are part of a hegemonic discourse that aims at articulating a “people of resistance” around a number of scattered demands. Hegemony and resistance are in a constant dialectic relation in all Hezbollah’s discursive practices and strategies, and the boundaries of the “people” will shift according to the changing political context.

In the first chapter, “From Nasser to Nasrallah: a historical context,” I present a historical context to the emergence of Hezbollah's political Islam as a discourse that is part of a genealogy of liberation movements in the Arab world. I present a critical historical analysis that aims at understanding Hezbollah as a movement that builds on a long cultural memory of Arab nationalism, anti-colonialism and liberation struggles. Looking at this part of history is essential for understanding Hezbollah's media discourse and its complex cultural, social and political context. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and the advent of colonialism, the Arab world was met with a crisis of identity. Colonial divisions created new political identities based on agreements between the British and French governments to divide their influence over the Arab areas of the former Ottoman Empire. This fundamental event is still at the root of many conflicts in the Middle East.

I describe the conditions of emergence of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Arab nationalism, its subsequent failure, and the rise of Islam as an alternative political force. Understanding the conditions of the rise and fall of Nasser's Arab nationalist discourse is essential for understanding Hezbollah's political Islam which as it will appear in the analysis of their media often builds on and re-articulates some of the imagery of the Arab nationalist epoch. By describing the conditions of the emergence of Hezbollah I place the movement’s official birth in 1985 in its historical, social, cultural and political context relating it to the transformations that occurred in the region leading most importantly to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Israeli invasion of 1982.

In the second chapter, “Resistance and hegemony: space, meaning, and the articulation of a people,” I present a theory of resistance in relation to the concepts of hegemony and populism in order to place Hezbollah’s discourse on theoretical grounds. The Lacanian framework that Laclau and Mouffe employ in their political theory establishes political
identification as a constant act of articulation that aims at partially fixing meanings in order to fill an unbridgeable lack that is constitutive of the social (Laclau and Mouffe 2000). I argue that this concept of hegemony and populism as defined by Laclau (Laclau 2007a) provide relevant tools for the analysis of power relations and political identity formation in conflicts beyond the binary division of domination and resistance. Therefore I argue that resistance cannot be taken as an act that is not hegemonic in essence. This will guide my analysis of Hezbollah's media as strategies that aim to construct a people by articulating and re-articulating meanings around empty signifiers. In this context, liberation, occupation, space and self-representation play an essential role in the process of political identification. I take resistance to mean an attempt at articulating one’s self by acquiring a voice, but also as a spatial act, where space itself, as a discursive construct, is a mode of resistance.

The analysis of Hezbollah’s media productions and strategies takes in consideration the complexity of analyzing the reception of these media texts, because they are addressed to a dual public: on the one hand a sympathetic public of supporters or potential supporters (in Lebanon and the Arab world), and on the other hand an unsympathetic public of opponents or others (the Israeli public and to a lesser extent the western publics). In this framework, the mechanisms of power in conflict and war will be understood as a contestation of the discursive field, as struggles over narratives and meanings but also, following Virilio, as taking place in the field of perception where media technologies allow for strategies of showing to become part of the military power struggle (Virilio 1989).

In the third chapter, “Nasrallah on the screen: name and voice of the resistance,” I analyze the televised speeches of Hassan Nasrallah, the General Secretary of Hezbollah. I focus on the representation of self and other in three forms of speeches: religious sermons, political speeches, and the speeches delivered during the 2006 war. My analysis shows the articulation of a specific political identity in the language of Nasrallah and the form and content of the messages he is conveying. In order to do so I have investigated the social and cultural roles of these speeches in the preaching of a system of values and a representation of a self and an other that is at the centre of Hezbollah’s strategy. I compare Nasrallah’s televised speeches to Nasser’s radio transmitted speeches as two historical forms of collective events that construct a political group around a shared experience and a shared symbol or charismatic leader. I argue that satellite television broadcasting allowed Nasrallah to become a transnational icon for Arab audiences making his speeches regional events just as radio had done for Nasser in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

I focus on the articulation of victory, promise and empowerment as essential aspects of Nasrallah’s narrative in addition to exposing his exceptional oratory and rhetorical skills. Furthermore, the war speeches are analyzed as spectacles that contribute to the military effort by both boosting the morale of Hezbollah’s supporters and destroying that of the Israeli public, while at the same time taking over the power to narrate the war and impose Hezbollah’s reading of the events.

In the fourth chapter, “Spectacular violence: filming Hezbollah’s military operations,” I analyze the videos of Hezbollah’s military operations. These are videos taken by special units accompanying the fighters during their military operations in Southern Lebanon. They were broadcast on television channels in Lebanon and in Israel during news hours and are now available online, on DVDs and on other media. I focus on three specific videos made in the
period between the end of the Lebanese Civil War and the liberation of Southern Lebanon in 2000 as a representative sample.

I present a genealogy of the Hezbollah video operations and the conditions of their emergence technically, politically and historically. The analysis focuses on the transition in the presentation of the video operations from being broadcast on TV to becoming part of an online archive. I argue that this transition has caused a shift in both the meaning and the function of the videos, adding a new function of identity formation and shared memory to their initial indexical and performative dimensions. I focus on the power relations and the representation of self and other in the three videos and expose the discursive strategies present in them: What are they saying? How do they contribute to the movement's political and social narrative? And how do they contribute to Hezbollah's military effort?

I conclude that the videos are presented to two different audiences, thus presenting two meanings, and two strategies. On the one hand, when addressed to the Israeli public, they operate as Daniel Dayan’s “gaze acts” (Dayan 2006), as means of inverting the power relations and subverting the dominant other. On the other hand, when addressed to the Lebanese public, they provide a sense of empowerment, a shared identity, and a means of appropriating the gaze of power. The videos in this case also become a means of self representation and consolidation of a hegemonic identity. Furthermore, when placed in archives, these videos offer yet another function that pertains to the construction of a shared memory and the fixing of a resistance narrative.

In the fifth chapter, “The music videos: from the sect to the nation,” I analyze and compare six of Hezbollah’s music videos in order to show the transformation in the party’s political discourse and narrative of identity from the 1990’s where we see a primarily Shiite identity, to the aftermath of the 2000 liberation and the 2006 war where the party espouses a Lebanese identity and later incorporates some Arab nationalist dimensions.

I first provide a genealogy of the Hezbollah music videos in relation to Arab nationalist and politically engaged songs and other propaganda practices in sound and image, in addition to the development of the music video as both an entertainment genre and a political tool. I then describe the transformation of the Hezbollah music videos in accordance with the technological, political, and social transformations that took place in the period between the late 1990’s and 2007. I focus on the growing reach and development of Hezbollah’s television station Al Manar which I argue plays an essential role in propagating the videos and shaping their messages. In other words, Al Manar TV’s growing audience and its launching of satellite broadcasting in the year 2000 has contributed to the growing reach of the music videos.

In order to show this transformation, I analyze examples from three main periods of Hezbollah’s development (pre-2000, post-2000, post-2006). In the analysis I shed light on the changing symbols, aesthetics, audience, and aim of these music videos: from the aesthetics of resistance and militancy to the celebration of victory. I also argue that the videos made during and after the 2006 war re-appropriate and re-articulate Arab imagery and symbols from the times of Nasser. Finally, I show the transition in Hezbollah's discourse from militancy and religious aesthetics to a hegemonic discourse where celebration and victory are at the forefront and where national and transnational symbols replace sectarian ones.
In the sixth chapter, “The politics of inhabitation: making space speak,” I discuss Hezbollah’s street media and the politics of inhabitation of space. I analyze the transformation of previously occupied spaces featuring martyr posters, billboards, flags, captured Israeli vehicles, missile replicas, and other elements that are overwhelmingly present in Hezbollah's geographic areas of influence, in addition to a former Israeli detention center transformed by Hezbollah into a museum. I suggest specific examples in order to show the essential role of space in promoting a narrative and a shared memory of the conflict with Israel and the role of space in the construction of a hegemonic discourse. Liberation and occupation are constantly articulated in the way spaces are inhabited and organized.

I argue that occupation, land and identity are fundamental to the Middle Eastern conflict. Politics of appropriation and inhabitation of space form an essential strategy on both sides of the conflict. In this perspective, I look at social spaces as media that expose the transformation of Hezbollah's discourse as seen in the re-appropriation of specific areas after their liberation in the year 2000. I analyze Hezbollah's political advertisement strategies and campaigns and shed light on the constructed image of martyrdom as a Lebanese political commodity. My argument is that Hezbollah’s politics of inhabitation constitute strategies of liberation inasmuch as they transform and re-appropriate these spaces. By doing so, Hezbollah is creating a shared memory and a physical space where resistance is enacted and lived, and a collective memory that is constitutive of the identity of resistance that the movement promotes.

Controlling space, considering that space is itself a discursive construct, is a necessary condition for any movement of resistance to establish its hegemony. Space becomes the media for the mobilization and articulation of the group and for Hezbollah's hegemonic discourse. In other words, the re-appropriation and transformation of space demonstrates the evolution of Hezbollah from transgression to hegemony.

Finally, I trace the connection between Hezbollah’s discourse and the popular uprisings that are taking place in the Arab world since the end of 2010. I suggest a criticism of the movement’s reaction to the events in Syria where the two pillars of Hezbollah’s resistance discourse namely the economic and the geopolitical, are clashing. Can we speak of a line that connects the resistance discourse of Hezbollah to the organic movements that are sweeping the Arab streets? In my concluding thoughts I evaluate the performance of Hezbollah in relation to these movements and suggest a comparison between the two models. Can we understand the events in the Arab world and most notably the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia using the same theoretical framework used to analyze Hezbollah?