

Antonio Francesco Gramsci (1891-1937)



Introduction

Antonio Francesco Gramsci was an Italian Marxist philosopher, journalist, linguist, writer and politician. He wrote on philosophy, political theory, sociology, history and linguistics. He was a founding member and one-time leader of the Communist Party of Italy and was imprisoned by Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime.

*Gramsci's **Prison Notebooks** are considered a highly original contribution to 20th-century Marxist political theory. Gramsci drew insights from varying sources as Niccolò Machiavelli, Vilfredo Pareto, Georges Sorel and Benedetto Croce including Marxist scholars. The notebooks cover a wide range of topics, including Italian history and nationalism, the French Revolution, fascism, Taylorism and Fordism, civil society, folklore, religion and high and popular culture.*

*Gramsci is best known for his **theory of cultural hegemony**, which describes how the state and ruling capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. The bourgeoisie, in Gramsci's view, develops a hegemonic culture using ideology rather than violence, economic force, or coercion. Hegemonic culture propagates its own values and norms so that they become the "common sense" values of all and thus maintain the status quo. Cultural hegemony is therefore used to maintain consent to the capitalist order, rather than the use of force to maintain order. This cultural hegemony is produced and reproduced by the dominant class through the institutions that form the superstructure.*

Gramsci also attempted to break from the economic determinism of traditional Marxist thought, and so is sometimes described as a neo-Marxist. He held a humanistic understanding of Marxism, seeing it as a "philosophy of praxis" and a comprehensive theory of history.

He emphasised on the need for popular workers' education to encourage development of intellectuals from the working class.

Concept of hegemony

Hegemony was a term previously used by Russian Marxists such as Vladimir Lenin to denote the political leadership of the working class in a democratic revolution. Gramsci greatly expanded

this concept, developing an acute analysis of how the ruling capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – establishes and maintains its control.

Orthodox Marxism had predicted that socialist revolution was inevitable in capitalist societies. By the early 20th century, no such revolution had occurred in the most advanced nations. Rather, capitalism seemed more entrenched than ever. Capitalism, Gramsci suggested, maintained control not just through violence and political and economic coercion, but also through ideology. The bourgeoisie developed a hegemonic culture, which propagated its own values and norms so that they became the "common sense" values of all. People in the working class (and other classes) identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie and helped to maintain the status quo rather than revolting.

*To counter the notion that bourgeois values represented natural or normal values for society, the working class needed to develop a culture of its own. For Gramsci, culture was fundamental to the attainment of power and that cultural hegemony to be achieved first. In Gramsci's view, a class cannot dominate in modern conditions by merely advancing its own narrow economic interests; neither can it dominate purely through force and coercion. Rather, it must exert **intellectual and moral leadership**, and make alliances and compromises with a variety of forces. Gramsci calls this union of social forces a "**historic bloc**", taking a term from Georges Sorel. This bloc forms the basis of consent to a certain social order, which produces and re-produces the hegemony of the dominant class through a nexus of institutions, social relations, and ideas. In this way, Gramsci's theory emphasized the importance of the political and ideological superstructure in both maintaining and fracturing relations of the economic base. Since he emphasised on role of superstructures, he is also as the theoretician of superstructure.*

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Gramsci stated that bourgeois cultural values were tied to folklore, popular culture and religion, and therefore much of his analysis of hegemonic culture is aimed at these.

For Gramsci, Marxism could supersede religion only if it met people's spiritual needs, and to do so people would have to think of it as an expression of their own experience.

Gramsci on Intellectuals

*Gramsci discussed and redefined the position of artists and intellectuals and their influence on readers as well as their importance in society and political power. Gramsci was a Marxist philosopher but, unlike the orthodox Marxists, he thought that **economic interests are only part***

of the structure of the social system. Values, commitments, beliefs and, more generally, cultural factors are also decisive.

Gramsci criticized the Italian fascist regime and, more generally, the capitalist political system in Western states. He observed that the **state exerts its political power by means of government and control**. But this power is not just provided by the force of the army and police. It relies on a **mix of coercion and consent**. Hegemony is a general consent on which dominance is based. Actually, the hegemony of the ruling class binds society together without the use of force. Consent is provided by the hegemony of a ruling group over the rest of society. The group of a few individuals determines the political and cultural direction of the masses of individuals. This dominance is granted by different, formally private institutions of civil society such as schools, universities, religious institutions, corporations, trade-unions, newspapers. **The origin of political hegemony is to be found in civil society, not only in the political power of the government.**

Traditional intellectuals have usually been considered as a self-sufficient group of scholars, philosophers, writers, and poets speaking to a small number of learned readers and a relatively small audience. They were concerned with issues like art and literature, philosophy and culture, subjects generally considered of little political importance. Now, according to Gramsci, a social group which wishes to become a class, acquire political power, and become the leader of a state must, first of all, learn how to create consent and how to impose its hegemony. Since political power is based on intellectual and moral leadership, the group aiming to become a ruling class must create a new profile of the intellectual.

According to Gramsci, **the new intellectual** should not only be, like the traditional one, a specialist in his subject but rather **a cultural and political leader with a specific function**. The function of the intellectual has to be defined according to **the needs of a specific society; he must create cultural and political hegemony**. The intellectual must be recognized by its organic nature. Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.

According to the conventional view, intellectuals express, interpret and elaborate a pre-existing historical, social and cultural situation. And hence appear autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. Even they think they are autonomous.

The most typical of these categories of intellectuals is that of ecclesiastics, who for a long time held the monopoly of a number of important services: religious ideology, that is the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity, good works, etc. The new intellectual, on the contrary, should be an **organic intellectual**, a specialized

scholar with specific knowledge but who, at the same time, is able to direct and organize people. In other words, he must be aware of the task and responsibility of his position.

Gramsci gave much thought to the role of intellectuals in society. He stated that all men are intellectuals, in that all have intellectual and rational faculties, but not all men have the social function of intellectuals. He saw modern intellectuals as those who are producing the hegemony through ideological apparatuses such as education and the media. Furthermore, he distinguished between a traditional intelligentsia which sees itself (wrongly) as a class apart from society, and the thinking groups which every class produces from its own ranks "organically". Such "organic" intellectuals do not simply describe social life in accordance with scientific rules, but instead articulate, through the language of culture, the feelings and experiences which the masses could not express for themselves. To Gramsci, it was the duty of organic intellectuals to speak from the perspective of subaltern class.

In line with Gramsci's theories of hegemonic power, he argued that capitalist power needed to be challenged by building a counter-hegemony. By this he meant that, as part of the war of position, the organic intellectuals and others within the working-class, need to develop alternative values and an alternative ideology in contrast to bourgeois ideology. He argued that the reason this had not needed to happen in Russia was because the Russian ruling class did not have genuine hegemonic power. So the Bolsheviks were able to see through a war of manoeuvre (the 1917 revolution), relatively easily, because ruling-class hegemony had never been fully achieved. He believed that a final war of manoeuvre was only possible, in the developed and advanced capitalist societies, when the war of position had been won by the organic intellectuals and the working-class building a counter-hegemony.

The need to create a working-class culture and a counter-hegemony relates to Gramsci's call for a kind of education that could develop working-class intellectuals, whose task was not to introduce Marxist ideology into the consciousness of the proletariat as a set of foreign notions but to renovate the existing intellectual activity of the masses.

Gramsci's Key Insights into two kinds of intellectuals :

- *There are no independent intellectuals . All are part of social groups and organic to it*
- *Traditional intellectuals try to separate themselves as autonomous from the dominant class, but they still serve to organise and uphold its ideology. They are those deposited by the previous historical processes and who believes themselves to be above history, economy and politics.*
- *Organic intellectuals are those most connected to a specific class in the sense that they can best articulate the worldview of an emerging, important class of people.*

State and civil society

Gramsci's theory of hegemony is tied to his conception of the capitalist state. Gramsci does not understand the state in the narrow sense of the government. Instead, he divides the state into

- **Political society** (the police, the army, legal system, etc.) – the arena of political institutions and legal constitutional control
- **Civil society** (the family, the education system, trade unions, etc.) – commonly seen as the private or non-state sphere, which mediates between the state and the economy.

However, he stresses that the division is purely conceptual and that the two often overlap in reality. Gramsci claims the capitalist state rules through force as well as consent: political society is the realm of force and civil society is the realm of consent.

Gramsci says that under modern capitalism the bourgeoisie can maintain its economic control by allowing certain demands made by trade unions and mass political parties within civil society to be met by the political sphere. Thus, the bourgeoisie engages in passive revolution by going beyond its immediate economic interests and allowing the forms of its hegemony to change. Gramsci posits that movements such as reformism and fascism, as well as the scientific management and assembly line methods of Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford respectively, are examples of this.

*Drawing from Machiavelli, he argues that The Modern Prince – the revolutionary party – is the force that will allow the working-class to develop organic intellectuals and an counter hegemony within civil society. For Gramsci, the complex nature of modern civil society means that a **war of position**, carried out by revolutionaries through political agitation, the trade unions, advancement of proletarian culture, and other ways to create an opposing civil society was necessary alongside a **war of manoeuvre** – a direct revolution – in order to have a successful revolution without danger of a counter-revolution or degeneration.*

Critique of economic determinism and Critique of materialism

*The anti-scientific and anti-positivist stance of Gramsci was indebted to the influence of **Benedetto Croce**.*

Marx's model of society: Base and superstructure model.

Economic structure is the basic structure. State, Church, Media, Educational institutions are part of superstructure. For Marx superstructure is not a structure in itself but reflection of the base. It means if economic structure changes, superstructure will change automatically. It means only one revolution is required i.e. change in the basic structure or mode of production.

For Gramsci, it is not enough to fight at the level of economic structure. We have to fight at two levels, basic structure and superstructure. It is more challenging to change the superstructure. Basic structure can change in a day, but superstructure may take centuries.

Influences on Gramsci

Gramsci's thought emanates from the organized left, but he has also become an important figure in current academic discussions within cultural studies and critical theory. His influence is particularly strong in contemporary political science. His work also heavily influenced intellectual discourse on popular culture and scholarly popular culture studies in which many have found the potential for political or ideological resistance to dominant government and business interests.

As a socialist, Gramsci's legacy is as a forerunner to Eurocommunism