



Gramsci

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci—a name that lights up the world of Neo-Marxism.

Gramsci was **born in 1891 and died in 1937**, but his influence outlived him in a big way. He is **often called the Father of Neo-Marxism**, because he did something bold:

He *challenged* the **crude economic determinism** of classical Marxism.

You see, classical Marxism claimed that economics alone—what Marx called the "base"—determines everything in society, from politics to culture. But Gramsci noticed something strange...

He was a **leader of the Communist Party of Italy**, deeply committed to the Marxist cause. But here's the big question that troubled him: **Why didn't revolution occur in advanced capitalist countries like Britain or Germany, even though Marx had predicted it would?**

Gramsci looked around and saw that **people weren't rising up**—even when exploited. That pushed him to go beyond Marx's economic base theory. He realized there was more at play than just material conditions.

And here's where it gets profound.

While **imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime**, Gramsci did his most important thinking—under extreme physical and emotional hardship.

But instead of giving up, he wrote furiously in jail.

These writings became the famous: **"Prison Notebooks."**

These notebooks are gold. This is where Gramsci introduced groundbreaking ideas like *hegemony*, *civil society*, and *war of position*—concepts that would forever reshape Marxist thought.

The Essence

Gramsci took Marxism and **infused it with cultural depth**.

He taught us that **ideas, values, education, and institutions** play just as big a role as the economy in maintaining power.

And that's why he's not just a Neo-Marxist—he's a **revolution in Marxism himself**.

Why Revolution Did Not Happen?

So, the big question Gramsci asked was:

"Why didn't the revolution happen in the advanced capitalist countries like Marx predicted?"

Marx said when the *base* (economy) changes, the *superstructure* (state, law, ideology) will also collapse—and boom! Revolution.

But that **didn't happen**. The workers in Western Europe **did not rise up**, even though they were being exploited. Why?

Here comes **Gramsci's genius**.

He was influenced by **Benedetto Croce**, a liberal Italian philosopher, who argued that **culture, values, and ideas also shape history**—not just economics.

So Gramsci **expanded the idea of the superstructure**.

He said:

"It's not just a passive reflection of the economic base. It's an active battlefield."

That means even **if** the economy is ready for revolution, the people won't fight—**unless their minds, their ideas, their common sense have also been liberated**.

There has to be a **revolution in consciousness**.

That's why **changing just the economy isn't enough**. You must win the battle in the **superstructure**—in the schools, media, churches,



families, civil society.

And that requires a different strategy...

Two Types of Revolution, according to Gramsci:

1. War of Manoeuvre

- Think of this as the **direct, immediate attack** on the state.
- Like the **Russian Revolution**—armed rebellion, workers seize power overnight.
- But this works only when the **state is weak and civil society is thin**.

2. War of Position (This is Gramsci's big contribution!)

- This is a **slow, strategic, ideological struggle**.
- It's fought not in the streets, but in **universities, newspapers, cinema, literature, religion**.
- It's about **challenging dominant ideas**, building **counter-hegemony**, and **educating people over time**.
- You don't take power by storm—you **undermine the cultural foundations** first.

Gramsci believed: "Before storming the fortress, you must win over the trenches."

And in modern societies, the trenches are **ideas, norms, and beliefs**.

So, why didn't the revolution happen?

Because the **bourgeoisie had already won the war of position**—they controlled the minds of the people, even the working class!

The workers didn't feel oppressed—they thought the system was natural. That's **hegemony**.

The Essence

Economic exploitation alone won't bring revolution.

You need a revolution of ideas. A cultural

awakening.

And that is the **war of position** Gramsci wants us to fight.

Civil Society and Integral State

Let's start with a big question:

Why do people in democracies obey—even when they're being exploited?

Why don't they revolt?

Gramsci gives a chilling answer:

Because the dominant class doesn't just control your work—they control your mind.

CIVIL SOCIETY & INTEGRAL STATE

Gramsci flips classical Marxism on its head.

He says:

"It's not just the state (police, army, laws) that keeps power in place.

It's also **civil society**—the soft, invisible power of everyday life."

So what is **civil society**?

It includes **churches, schools, media, literature, families, pop culture**—basically, all the institutions that shape your thoughts, values, and "common sense."

Together with the state, **civil society forms the "integral state"**.

The **integral state** =

1. **Political society** (the hard power: laws, police, courts)
2. **Civil society** (the soft power: ideas, culture, norms)

Now here's the **radical insight**:

In capitalist societies, civil society is not neutral. It **functions as a tool of the ruling class**, helping them **maintain ideological control** without using force.



This is **hegemony** in action—making people **consent** to their own domination.

TWO TYPES OF STATES

Gramsci gives a brilliant classification:

1. Transparent States

(E.g., **Russia, China**, under authoritarian regimes)

- Civil society is **absent or suppressed**.
- Power is visible and crude—repression, censorship, fear.
- You can see who's in charge and how they control.

2. Opaque States

(E.g., **Western democracies**)

- Civil society **exists** and even celebrates **freedom and rights**.
- But it still **serves the ruling class**—by shaping how people think, what they believe, and how they behave.

In these states, power is **hidden in plain sight**.

It's not the police baton—it's the **schoolbook**, the **TV anchor**, the **Hollywood movie**, the **pulpit sermon**.

They normalize inequality.

They make capitalism feel **natural**, even **moral**.

Civil Society as Shock Absorber

Gramsci says civil society plays **two roles**:

1. **Instrument of dominance** – It keeps the ruling class in power through consent.
2. **Shock observer** – It cushions social discontent.

Example:

When the economy crashes, it's not just the government that responds.

Media runs patriotic stories, churches preach

patience, schools blame individuals, not the system.

That's how civil society **cushions the anger of the masses**, preventing revolution.

But when civil society **fails to manage dissent**—what happens?

The **state steps in with coercion**—police, prisons, emergency laws.

Because behind every “freedom-loving” democracy, there's a **shadow of force**.

The Essence

Civil society may seem far from the economic base—but in reality, it's **closer to the base than we think**.

It protects the base by controlling how people think about it.

So, if you want real revolution—not just political change, but a **new consciousness**—you have to **challenge civil society first**.

As Gramsci would say:

“Change the common sense, and you change the world.”

From Coercion to Hegemony

From Coercion to Hegemony – Gramsci's Big Reveal

Karl Marx focused on **coercion**—the **hard power** of the state: police, courts, military.

People obey because they **fear** punishment.

But Gramsci said:

“That's not how modern capitalist societies stay in power.”

“They use something **far more dangerous** than fear—they use **love, admiration, and voluntary participation**.”

Let's break that down.



Coercion (Hard Power)

- It's **one-way**.
- The ruling class dominates through **force**.
- The **masses are passive**. They obey because they have no choice.
Think of **dictatorships** or **colonial rule**.

But here's the problem with coercion:

It's unstable. It creates resentment. It can't last forever.

So, the ruling class needs a **smarter strategy**.

Hegemony – The Soft Power of Consent

Gramsci says:

"In the modern world, **real power is hegemonic**—when the masses agree to their own subordination."

Hegemony is when the ruling class doesn't just rule the economy or the state...

They **rule our minds**.

- People **love their leaders**.
- They **see the system as fair** or at least the best possible.
- They **actively participate**—voting, working hard, following the rules—**willingly**.

This is **voluntary obedience**, manufactured through culture, education, media, religion, and family.

How is Hegemony Built?

1. **The bourgeoisie (ruling class)** doesn't rule alone.
2. They **manufacture consent**:
 - Offer **partial benefits** to the working class. (e.g., welfare schemes, jobs, elections)
 - Create **shared symbols and values** (e.g., nationalism, family, "middle-class dreams")

3. They build **coalitions** with other classes—especially **intellectuals**.
 - These alliances **don't have identical aims**, but they **align on common goals** like stability, progress, or cultural identity.
 - Intellectuals help **translate bourgeois values** into everyday "common sense."

Example You See Every Day:

- A factory worker votes for a billionaire politician because they both believe in "hard work and family values."
- Students admire CEOs instead of questioning the system.
- Media glorifies the rich, while blaming the poor for their failures.

That's not coercion.

That's **hegemony**—the **invisible chains that feel like freedom**.

The Essence

Gramsci warns:

"If you want real change, don't just take power. You must **win hearts and minds**. You must build a **counter-hegemony**—a new common sense."

Because power that's loved... is power that lasts.

Role of the Working Class

The Role of the Working Class – Gramsci's Call to Action

Gramsci believed the **working class** wasn't just a victim of capitalism.

It was the **only force capable of defeating it**—but **not through violence alone**.

Not through mere protest.

Not through seizing factories.



But through something **deeper** and **slower**:

**Building a new common sense. A new culture.
A new hegemony.**

Step 1: Establish Counter-Hegemony

What does that mean?

- The bourgeoisie has built a culture—media, schools, religion—that **normalizes inequality**.
- The working class must **challenge that culture** and offer an **alternative worldview**:
 - One based on **equality, solidarity, and justice**.
 - One that **exposes exploitation** and **redefines success**.

This is the war of **position**—an ideological battle.

Step 2: Lead the Subaltern Classes

The working class can't do this alone.

Gramsci uses the term **subaltern** to include all **oppressed groups**:

- Rural peasants
- Women
- Minorities
- Marginalized communities

The working class must become a **moral and intellectual leader**, not just a rebel:

- It must **unite** these groups under a shared vision.
- It must **represent everyone's dreams**, not just its own.

This is a political AND ethical leadership.

Step 3: Produce Organic Intellectuals

The bourgeoisie has its own **traditional intellectuals**—professors, journalists, religious leaders—who preserve the status quo.

Gramsci says the working class must create its **own intellectuals**:

“Organic intellectuals” who rise from the **struggles of the people**, not from elite institutions.

These are:

- Trade union leaders
- Activist teachers
- Grassroots writers
- Conscious workers

They speak in the language of the people.

They **translate theory into real life**.

They shape the new **counter-hegemonic culture**.

Step 4: Win Over Traditional Intellectuals

You don't always need to fight the old thinkers.

Some traditional intellectuals—teachers, artists, lawyers—may **join the working class cause**, especially in times of **crisis or injustice**.

The working class must **inspire**, not just resist.

It must show **moral clarity** and **historical necessity**.

That's how revolutions become **sustainable**—not just emotionally charged.

The Essence

“Revolutions fail not because people aren't angry enough—but because they don't have an **alternative ideology** that people believe in.”

So the role of the working class is not just to **fight the system**...

It is to **build a new world inside the shell of the old one**.

Intellectuals: Organic and Traditional

Gramsci on Intellectuals: Organic vs Traditional

Gramsci flipped the old idea that **intellectuals are only philosophers, writers, or professors**.

He said—**Wait! Every class produces its own thinkers**.



Every class needs people to **explain, justify, organize, and lead**.

So, who are these thinkers? He called them **intellectuals**, and divided them into two types:

Organic Intellectuals – Born from struggle

These are not elite thinkers sitting in ivory towers.

They are **born within a class**, and they speak its language.

For **capitalists**, organic intellectuals include:

- Managers
- Engineers
- Civil servants
- Technocrats

They help maintain capitalist order through knowledge, planning, and governance.

For the **working class**, organic intellectuals could be:

- Factory floor supervisors
- Union leaders
- Community organizers

They **do real work, share lived experience**, and help shape an **alternative vision** for society.

Their job?

Not just to resist.

But to **generate new values, a new way of life, and a new hegemony**.

“They are the *brains of the body* of the working class.”

Traditional Intellectuals – Legacy thinkers

These are the **old-school** intellectuals:

- Priests
- Poets
- Professors

- Artists

They often **see themselves as neutral**, above class struggle.

But Gramsci said—**no one is neutral** in a class-divided society.

Their **alignment** depends on:

- Historical context
- Cultural identity
- Political conscience

Some may **protect the ruling class** (e.g., church siding with monarchy),

Others may **side with the oppressed** (e.g., progressive writers, liberation theologians).

Why This Matters:

Gramsci's real insight was this:

“Control over society is not just about guns or money.

It's about **ideas, stories, values**—and who produces them.”

So the **battle for hegemony** is also a **battle of intellectuals**.

If the **working class** wants to lead the future, it must create and support its **own organic intellectuals**—and even **win over the traditional ones**.

That's how **culture becomes a battlefield**, and **education becomes revolution**.

Modern Relevance of Gramsci's Ideas

1. Why Revolution Did Not Happen – Explains Modern Stability

Gramsci's core question—**why revolution failed in advanced capitalist states**—is crucial even today.

In most democracies, **economic inequality** persists, yet **mass revolution is rare**. Why?



Because people are ideologically conditioned to accept the system—through education, media, religion—exactly what Gramsci meant by **superstructure shaping consciousness**.

People don't rebel because they don't always realise they're being dominated.

2. War of Position – The Real Struggle Today

Gramsci's distinction between **War of Manoeuvre** (sudden attack on the state) vs **War of Position** (slow ideological struggle) fits modern protest movements:

Farmers' protests, climate justice, feminist movements, Dalit-Bahujan assertions—these aren't just about policies.

They are fighting at the level of **culture, language, representation**—exactly Gramsci's "war of position".

Ideas win before laws change.

3. Civil Society and Integral State – The Soft Side of Power

Gramsci said civil society (schools, media, NGOs) and the state **together form the "integral state"**.

Today, we see:

- Media narratives shaping elections
- Education promoting certain national identities
- NGOs diffusing anger through symbolic reforms

Even in democracies, these institutions **maintain dominance without using violence**, just like Gramsci predicted.

Repression is replaced by persuasion.

4. From Coercion to Hegemony – Manufacturing Consent

Gramsci's **hegemony** is the ability of elites to rule not by force, but by **consent**.

Political parties co-opt poor communities through **free schemes, symbolic representation, or alliances with religious/cultural leaders**.

Corporates promote **CSR, eco-branding, and inclusive hiring**—not always for justice, but to retain legitimacy.

The ruled often defend their rulers, believing they share the same values. That's hegemony in action.

5. Organic and Traditional Intellectuals – The Battle for Minds

Gramsci's idea that **intellectuals are not neutral**, but serve class interests, is highly visible today:

Organic intellectuals: Dalit thinkers, grassroots leaders, ethical entrepreneurs

Traditional intellectuals: Professors, artists, civil servants—some support status quo, others challenge it

In today's world:

- Social media influencers shape public opinion (organic intellectuals)
- University debates and op-eds remain battlegrounds for ideology

Controlling education, media, and art is as important as controlling the army.

6. Counter-Hegemony – Hope for Transformation

Gramsci's solution wasn't rebellion—it was **building counter-hegemony**:

- A new culture
- New alliances
- New values

Ambedkar's Constitution-making, Gandhi's constructive programmes, or today's rights-based movements are all examples.

Even climate movements, gender rights, LGBTQ+ voices, or tribal assertion are **not just**



demands for policy—they aim to redefine values and identities.

True revolution begins in the mind, not the street.

Final Reflection

“The old is dying, and the new cannot be born. In the interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

— Gramsci

That’s our world today—**polarised, unequal, disillusioned**, yet full of **counter-voices** rising through podcasts, classrooms, protests, and poetry.

Gramsci’s thought shows us **why change is hard**, but also **where it truly begins**.

Previous Year Questions

1. “The Gramscian theory of hegemony provides many valuable insights into the nature of global power.” Comment
2. Comment on: Gramsci’s concept of Hegemony. 2016, 10
3. Explain, as per Gramsci, the distinction between hegemony and domination. 2013, 10
4. Distinguish between the concepts of legitimacy and hegemony. 2012, 15
5. Critically examine Gramsci’s concept of Hegemony. 2008, 60
6. According to Gramsci, hegemony is primarily based on the organisation of consent.’ Comment. 2019,20
7. Discuss Gramsci’s notion of ‘organic intellectuals’. 2015, 15

