

Antonio Gramsci

I. Introduction: Recasting Marxism in the Modern Era

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), an Italian Marxist philosopher, political theorist, and revolutionary, remains one of the most influential thinkers of 20th-century political thought.

A founding member of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci offered a critical extension of Marxist theory by shifting the emphasis from economic determinism to the domain of **ideology, culture, civil society, and consent**.

His major contributions were developed during his imprisonment under Mussolini's fascist regime, where he composed the **Prison Notebooks**—a body of reflections that transformed Marxist theory to suit complex modern democracies.

II. Cultural Hegemony: Domination through Consent

Gramsci's signature contribution is the concept of "**cultural hegemony**", which reorients classical Marxism's understanding of domination.

While traditional Marxists emphasized state coercion and control over the means of production, Gramsci argued that the **bourgeoisie maintains dominance by manufacturing ideological consent** within civil society.

- **Hegemony** refers to the process by which the ruling class's worldview becomes accepted as "common sense" or the natural order of things by subordinate classes.
- Through institutions such as **education, religion, media, and family**, dominant ideologies are internalized without the need for overt repression.
- As a result, the working class consents to its subordination, often blaming personal failure for systemic inequality.

III. War of Position and War of Manoeuvre: Strategy of Revolutionary Change

Gramsci proposed two distinct strategic models of political struggle to explain how revolutionary change unfolds differently across socio-political contexts:

War of Manoeuvre refers to a **direct, frontal assault on the state**, typically through armed insurrection or sudden seizure of power.

- This model is effective in societies where the **state wields concentrated coercive power** and **civil society is underdeveloped** or absent.

- *Example:* The **Russian Revolution of 1917** exemplifies this strategy. The Bolsheviks capitalized on a weak civil society and a collapsing autocratic regime to stage a swift and violent overthrow of state power.

War of Position, on the other hand, involves a **protracted, ideological struggle within civil society**.

- In societies with robust institutions—media, education systems, churches, unions—the dominant class secures power through consent, not merely force.
- In such contexts, revolution must begin by **contesting hegemonic ideas and building cultural-political alliances**.
- *Example:* The **Italian Communist Party under Togliatti** in the 1940s–50s adopted this approach by focusing on cultural work & alliances with social institutions rather than insurrection.

IV. Organic vs. Traditional Intellectuals: Recasting the Role of Knowledge

Challenging the **elitist and hierarchical notions of knowledge**, Antonio Gramsci radically redefined the term *intellectual* to include not only scholars or professionals but also those rooted in everyday social struggles.

He made a critical distinction between two types:

Traditional Intellectuals are individuals—such as clergy, philosophers, academics, or legal experts—who often **perceive themselves as neutral, autonomous, and above class struggle**.

- However, Gramsci argued that these intellectuals usually serve the **interests of the dominant class**, consciously or not, by reproducing existing ideologies and legitimizing the status quo through culture, religion, and education.

Organic Intellectuals, by contrast, **emerge from within specific social classes**, particularly subordinate or oppressed groups. They are directly connected to the class's lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations.

- Their role is to **articulate the worldview of their class**, translate its collective grievances into political consciousness, and contribute to the formation of a new **counter-hegemonic narrative**.
- These may include **union leaders, folk artists, community organizers, teachers in underprivileged areas, or even activist filmmakers and independent media voices**.

Example: In the Indian context, **B.R. Ambedkar** can be seen as an organic intellectual of the Dalit community—grounded in its experiences, yet articulating a sophisticated political critique and vision that challenged dominant caste-based hegemony.

V. Civil Society vs. Political Society: Dual Arenas of Power

Gramsci reconceptualized the **modern state** as a dual structure composed of two interrelated spheres:

- **Political Society** refers to the institutions of **direct coercion and formal authority**, including the **military, police, courts, and the legal system**.
- **Civil Society** includes institutions such as **schools, religious organizations, media, family structures, and cultural spaces** that shape public opinion, norms, and values.

While **classical Marxists** like Marx and Lenin primarily emphasized **political society** as the site of state power and class domination, Gramsci brought attention to the **hegemonic role of civil society**.

Through civil society, the dominant class **normalizes its worldview**, making it appear as “natural” to the masses—even to those it exploits.

For him, **political transformation** required a prolonged ideological struggle to **dislodge ruling-class hegemony within civil society**—a process he called the **war of position**.

Example: In colonial India, nationalist leaders like Gandhi understood the importance of civil society. By engaging with religion, language, symbols, and local institutions, they created an alternative moral universe that helped undermine British hegemony long before political independence was achieved.

VI. Historical Bloc: Unity of Forces, Ideas, and Institutions

Gramsci’s concept of the “**historical bloc**” refers to the **organic and dynamic unity** between three interdependent elements of social order:

- **Material forces** – the economic base, including modes of production, class relations, and the distribution of resources;
- **Institutions** – structures of **civil and political society**, such as schools, media, legal systems, parties, and the state apparatus;
- **Ideology** – the dominant **worldview, cultural norms, values, and beliefs** that shape how people understand their place in society.

Together, these elements form a **coherent and stable configuration** that sustains the dominance of a particular class or social order.

In any given historical period, the ruling class maintains power not merely by controlling the economy or the state, but by ensuring that its material interests,

institutional arrangements, and ideological narratives are **aligned and mutually reinforcing**.

Gramsci argued that **real social transformation requires the creation of a new historical bloc—a reconfiguration of the economic base, institutional structures, and ideological discourse** that reflects the interests and values of a rising social class.

VII. Passive Revolution: Elite-Led Change Without Transformation

Gramsci used the term "**passive revolution**" to describe a specific kind of **top-down, elite-driven reform** that appears to respond to popular demands but **does not fundamentally alter the class structure** or challenge ruling-class dominance.

Unlike a genuine revolution, which emerges through mass mobilization and bottom-up transformation, passive revolution is a **strategic adaptation** by ruling elites who absorb dissent by making superficial or controlled changes, thus **preserving their hegemony**.

In passive revolution, **modernization occurs without democratization**—the economy may be restructured, new policies introduced, or social rhetoric updated, but the basic distribution of power and privilege remains intact.

Key Examples:

- **Italian Unification under Cavour:** Instead of being a grassroots national uprising, the Risorgimento was led by aristocratic elites like Count Cavour, who modernized the state without dismantling traditional ruling-class dominance.
- **Nehruvian State Reforms (India):** Post-independence India under Nehru introduced land reforms, planning, and industrialization, but **left the underlying caste-class power structures largely intact**.
- **Modi's "Garib Kalyan" Rhetoric:** Contemporary Indian politics under Narendra Modi's leadership uses welfare schemes and populist rhetoric about empowering the poor to **neutralize deeper demands for structural change**.

VIII. The Modern Prince: Political Organization as Revolutionary Leadership

Borrowing metaphorically from **Machiavelli's "The Prince"**, Antonio Gramsci reimagined the "**Modern Prince**" as a **collective political agent, either a party or movement** capable of leading the masses in a sustained struggle against hegemonic power.

In the context of the **war of position**—a long-term ideological battle within civil society—the Modern Prince plays a crucial strategic role by performing three essential functions:

- **Ideological Leadership:** It formulates and disseminates a coherent worldview that challenges the dominant ideology.
- **Mass Education:** Through media, literature, grassroots dialogues, and education, it fosters critical awareness and political agency.
- **Political Organization:** It functions as the **coordinating structure** that channels social discontent into disciplined political action. The Modern Prince connects local struggles with national strategy, builds alliances across class fractions, and constructs a new historical bloc.

IX. National-Popular Will: Constructing Collective Identity

Gramsci emphasized the importance of creating a “**national-popular**” **political culture**—a unifying cultural and ideological framework that resonates deeply with the **lived experiences, languages, historical memories, and traditions** of the common people.

For him, political movements cannot succeed purely through abstract theory or imported ideologies; they must engage with the **popular soul** of a nation to build a counter-hegemonic force that is both **organic and inclusive**.

This cultural unification is essential for several reasons:

- **Overcoming Fragmented Subaltern Identities:** Subaltern classes—workers, peasants, Dalits, minorities, and others—often remain divided by region, caste, language, or religion. A national-popular culture **transcends these divisions** by articulating a shared vision and common grievances.
- **Constructing Inclusive Political Movements:** The national-popular approach **anchors mass politics** in symbols, idioms, and experiences that ordinary people recognize as their own.
- **Replacing the Ruling Bloc’s Hegemonic Narrative:** A national-popular culture serves to **contest and replace this hegemonic narrative** with one rooted in justice, dignity, and democratic transformation.

Indian Application: Gramsci’s idea is strikingly relevant in the Indian context. The **Ambedkarite movement** created a cultural-political synthesis of Dalit identity, Buddhist spirituality, constitutionalism, and social justice to unify a historically fragmented group into a powerful collective force.

Gandhian nationalism also used national-popular methods: invoking village life, vernacular languages, religious idioms, and shared suffering under colonialism to mobilize millions.

X. Organic Crisis: When Hegemony Breaks Down

Gramsci used the term “**organic crisis**” to describe a deep and prolonged crisis in which the **ruling class loses its ability to maintain moral, political, and ideological leadership** over society.

Unlike conjunctural crises, which are temporary or issue-specific, an organic crisis signifies a **systemic breakdown of hegemony**—a moment when the legitimacy of the dominant order is fundamentally questioned.

Key Features of an Organic Crisis:

- **Institutions Lose Credibility:** State institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, bureaucracy, and mainstream media **no longer command public trust**. Their failure to respond to social and economic grievances undermines the ideological scaffolding of the ruling bloc.
- **Masses Become Politically Restless:** The population, especially subaltern classes, begins to **reject established parties, ideologies, and leadership**, often turning to alternative movements, protest cultures, or populist figures.

For Gramsci, such moments are not merely signs of collapse—they are **windows of revolutionary possibility**, when **counter-hegemonic forces** have the opportunity to intervene, articulate a new political vision, and **construct a new historical bloc**.

Example: The interwar crisis in Europe (1919–1939) saw the collapse of liberal parliamentary systems, loss of faith in capitalism, and the rise of fascism and communism—each vying to become the new hegemonic force.

XI. Philosophy of Praxis: Reclaiming Human Agency in Marxism

Gramsci envisioned **Marxism not as a closed doctrine**, but as a “**philosophy of praxis**”—a living, evolving, and action-oriented framework that must remain historically grounded and responsive to real social conditions.

Key Components of the Philosophy of Praxis:

- **Rejection of Rigid Economic Determinism:** Gramsci challenged the idea that economic structures alone determine historical outcomes. Instead, he emphasized the **active role of human agency, ideology, and political leadership** in shaping social change.
- **Emphasis on Thought and Political Action:** Praxis, for Gramsci, is the **unity of theory and practice**. True Marxism involves **thinking critically about the**

world and acting to change it—not just interpreting history, but participating in its transformation.

- **Integration of Morality, Will, and Reflection:** Unlike mechanistic or positivist versions of Marxism, Gramsci’s approach integrated **ethical-political judgment, strategic will, and philosophical reflection**. He believed that intellectual clarity must go hand-in-hand with moral purpose.

This understanding gave Marxism an **analytical edge and political flexibility**, allowing it to adapt to **democratic, cultural, and civil society terrains**—especially in Western contexts where direct revolutionary seizure of power was no longer feasible.

Example: In contrast to Lenin’s revolutionary vanguardism in Russia (suited to weak civil society), Gramsci’s Marxism provided the Italian Communist Party with a roadmap for cultural hegemony, long-term ideological work, and engagement with democratic institutions.

XII. Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Legacy

Gramsci’s concept of the “**subaltern**” originally referred to groups excluded from dominant power structures—**those who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized** and lack access to institutional representation.

Unlike the ruling class or even the organized proletariat, subaltern groups often resist silently, sporadically, or in fragmented ways, outside the dominant narrative of history and politics.

This idea became foundational for the **Subaltern Studies School**, a postcolonial historiographical movement that emerged in the 1980s to recover the **voices of peasants, workers, Dalits, Adivasis, and women** in South Asian history.

In Indian Politics, Gramsci’s Subaltern Lens Helps Analyze:

- **Dalit and Tribal Resistance:** Movements led by marginalized caste and tribal communities—such as the **Dalit Panthers, Bhagwan Birsa Munda’s tribal rebellion**, or **contemporary Adivasi land rights movements**—can be understood as **subaltern expressions of dissent**, often outside formal political institutions.
- **Histories Outside Elite Narratives:** The rewriting of Indian history from below, such as **Subaltern Studies’ reinterpretation of the 1857 revolt** or peasant uprisings, reveals **agency among the oppressed**, challenging the dominance of colonial, nationalist, or Marxist-elitist historiography.

VI. Relevance in Contemporary Politics and Theory

1. Media Studies

Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony explains how **mainstream media constructs dominant worldviews** that seem like "common sense." It helps critique how **news, advertisements, and entertainment normalize ruling-class ideologies**, from nationalism to consumerism.

Example: The labeling of dissenting voices as "anti-national" during India's **anti-CAA protests** shows how media serves state hegemony. Similarly, corporate control of news in the U.S. during the **Iraq War** framed invasion as patriotism.

2. Education and Pedagogy

Gramsci saw schools as ideological state apparatuses that **legitimize existing hierarchies through curriculum and discipline**. This insight influenced **critical pedagogy**, especially **Paulo Freire's** call for dialogic, liberation-based education.

Example: Movements to **decolonize university syllabi** in India, South Africa, and the UK draw on Gramsci's view that education should question, not reinforce, elite values.

3. Identity Movements and Cultural Politics

Gramsci's ideas inform how **feminist, anti-caste, LGBTQ+, and racial justice movements** challenge ideological domination by creating new cultural narratives and collective identities.

Example: **Ambedkarite festivals, Dalit rap, and queer pride parades** use cultural forms to assert counter-hegemonic presence and visibility.

5. Popular Culture and Resistance

Pop culture becomes a **terrain of ideological struggle**. Gramsci's lens reveals how films, music, and social media can either reinforce or contest dominant norms.

Example: Films like *Article 15* and songs by **Dhasal or KRS-One** show how subaltern voices enter mass culture to **expose injustice and reshape discourse**.

VII. Critiques and Limitations

1. Overemphasis on Superstructure

Gramsci is often criticized by traditional Marxists for focusing too much on ideas and culture, instead of the economic structures that shape class struggle.

Example: Thinkers like Althusser argue that Gramsci treats ideology as too independent, which can lead to ignoring the real, material roots of inequality.

2. Strategic Vagueness of "War of Position"

The idea of a gradual ideological struggle lacks **clear tactical guidance**, especially in authoritarian regimes where civil society is suppressed.

Example: In Pinochet's Chile or contemporary North Korea, **civil spaces for slow ideological contestation barely exist.**

3. Limited Applicability to the Global South

Gramsci's model was tailored to Western democracies with strong civil institutions, making it less applicable where **civil society is weak, dependent, or fragmented.**

Example: In many postcolonial African or South Asian contexts, NGOs, unions, and media are **often state-controlled or elite-dominated.**

4. Ambiguity in Conceptual Categories

Terms like "civil society," "organic intellectual," and "national-popular" are rich but **not rigorously defined**, leaving them open to varied interpretations or misuse.

Example: Populist leaders may claim to represent the "national-popular will" while actually **reinforcing authoritarian nationalism.**

5. Gender and Intersectionality Blind Spots

Gramsci's framework largely omits **gender, sexuality, and intersectional oppression**, which limits its utility for analyzing contemporary identity-based struggles.

Example: Feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser note that **patriarchal power often operates within civil society**, yet is **undertheorized** in Gramsci's work.

PYQ Insights: Antonio Gramsci's Political Thought

1. Cultural hegemony as ideological domination through consent

UPSC examines how Gramsci redefined power not as pure coercion but as domination through cultural leadership and the internalization of ruling class values.

"Examine Gramsci's concept of hegemony. How does it differ from Marx's theory of domination?" (2023)

2. Civil society as the terrain of hegemonic contestation

The exam probes Gramsci's division between political society (coercion) and civil society (consent), focusing on how the latter reproduces ruling class dominance.

"Discuss Gramsci's views on civil society and its role in the perpetuation of class power." (2020)

3. War of position versus war of manoeuvre as revolutionary strategies

UPSC tests the applicability of Gramsci's strategic distinction between immediate revolutionary seizure of the state and long-term ideological struggle in civil society.

"Differentiate between war of manoeuvre and war of position in Gramsci's thought." (2017)

4. Organic intellectuals as agents of counter-hegemony

The exam explores Gramsci's notion of class-based intellectual leadership and its role in creating new hegemonic blocs from below.

"Write a note on the role of organic intellectuals in Gramsci's theory of revolution." (2014)

5. Passive revolution as elite-led change without transformation

UPSC focuses on how ruling classes neutralize revolutionary pressures by adopting reforms that maintain the basic structure of dominance.

"Explain the idea of passive revolution in Gramsci's political theory."
(commonly asked in mock and essay contexts)

6. The modern prince as collective revolutionary leadership

The exam probes the role of political organization—especially the party—as a strategic and moral force capable of leading counter-hegemonic struggle.

"What does Gramsci mean by the 'Modern Prince'? Discuss its significance for revolutionary politics." (probable theme)

7. Historical bloc as unity of economic, ideological, and institutional power

Gramsci's theory of historical bloc is assessed in terms of how ruling classes consolidate hegemony through alignment of material and ideological forces.

"What is a historical bloc? How does it help Gramsci explain the stability of capitalist societies?" (probable theme)

8. National-popular will and the formation of collective identity

UPSC may test how subaltern classes must construct a broad-based national-popular cultural narrative to challenge elite hegemony.

"Discuss the significance of Gramsci's concept of 'national-popular' in the process of political mobilization." (probable theme)

9. Organic crisis and the breakdown of ruling class legitimacy

The exam explores how ruling classes lose moral-intellectual leadership, creating openings for alternative hegemonic formations.

"What does Gramsci mean by an 'organic crisis'? Examine its political implications." (probable theme)

10. Philosophy of praxis and Gramsci's reinterpretation of Marxism

UPSC evaluates Gramsci's rejection of deterministic Marxism in favor of a flexible, agency-based, and ethically engaged model of political action.

"Critically assess Gramsci's contribution to Marxist political theory." (2011)

11. Ideological state apparatuses and the manufacture of consent

The exam implicitly tests Gramscian insights when asking about how institutions like media, education, and religion reproduce dominant ideology.

"Explain the role of ideology in sustaining political power in liberal democracies." (repeated theme in GS and PSIR)

12. Gramsci's influence on Subaltern Studies and postcolonial historiography

UPSC may frame questions on Gramsci's concept of the subaltern and how it inspired efforts to re-center marginalized voices in history.

"Examine the contribution of Subaltern Studies in rewriting Indian history." (related, 2018-style)

UGC NET PYQ Insights

1. Cultural hegemony as ideological consent in modern democracies

UGC NET tests how Gramsci explained that ruling classes maintain dominance not by force, but by making their values seem natural and universally accepted.

"Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony explains how dominant classes secure consent."

2. War of position and organic intellectuals as tools of ideological resistance

The exam assesses how Gramsci emphasized ideological struggle within civil society and the emergence of class-conscious intellectuals from oppressed groups.

"Which of the following are features of Gramsci's theory of political strategy?"

3. Civil society as the arena of ideological control and contestation

UGC NET examines how Gramsci redefined civil society as the primary site where ruling-class hegemony is reproduced and challenged.

"Explain Gramsci's views on the role of civil society."

4. Ideological dominance through institutions like media, religion, and education

NET tests how Gramsci argued that civil institutions naturalize elite dominance by shaping mass consciousness and public opinion.

"Gramsci's theory links ideological control to civil society institutions."

5. Role of organic intellectuals in building counter-hegemonic narratives

UGC NET probes Gramsci's redefinition of intellectuals as emerging from social classes and playing a political role in ideological struggle.

"Which of the following best describes organic intellectuals in Gramsci's theory?"

6. The modern prince as a metaphor for revolutionary political organization

NET sometimes examines Gramsci's idea of the party as the collective agent that leads ideological and political transformation in a war of position.

"Gramsci's concept of the Modern Prince refers to which of the following?"

7. Relevance of Gramsci's theory in democratic and postcolonial contexts

UGC NET evaluates Gramsci's continuing relevance in understanding ideological control in democracies, neoliberal societies, and postcolonial states.

"How does Gramsci's theory of hegemony apply to the analysis of democratic political systems?"

Conclusion

Antonio Gramsci's political theory remains central to understanding the subtle and pervasive forms of power in modern societies. By shifting the focus from economic determinism to cultural and ideological consent, he redefined the very grammar of Marxist analysis. His concepts of cultural hegemony, civil society, organic intellectuals, and passive revolution continue to inform critical approaches to politics, education, and mass communication. In liberal democracies, his ideas offer a framework for ideological struggle through peaceful, long-term engagement. In postcolonial contexts like India, Gramsci helps explain the dynamics of caste politics, populist narratives, and subaltern mobilization. His thought bridges classical theory and contemporary issues, making him relevant across academic, activist, and policy domains. As long as power operates through ideas and institutions, Gramsci's legacy will remain indispensable to political science.