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Gramscian Theories of Hegemony: Class Politics Eclipsed?

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ABSTRACT

Gramsci's concept of hegemony remains a highly contested topic, sparking a diverse body of literature that debates its historical, political, and theoretical relevance. This paper focuses on the theoretical debates surrounding hegemony, examining three key Gramscian frameworks: dominant ideology, discourse theory, and the neo-Gramscian approach in International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE). The central concern is how class and class struggle, central to Gramsci's original concept, have been marginalized or eclipsed in these interpretations. The paper argues that class struggle is often substituted with ideology, culture, and discourse in both theoretical frameworks and concrete analyses of hegemony, which limits the understanding of contemporary politics despite claims to the contrary. This shift toward the ideational and consensual aspects of hegemony results in a limited theorization, offering a one-sided and partial view that leaves aside its structural, material, and coercive dimensions. By critically engaging with these approaches, the paper highlights the need to reintegrate class struggle into contemporary Gramscian theories, allowing a comprehensive understanding of hegemony to address the evolving, structural and class-based dynamics of politics in both national and global contexts.

Keywords: Gramsci, Hegemony, Class, Dominant Ideology, Discourse Theory, Neo-Gramscian Approach, Political Theory, International Relations Theory, International Political Economy.

JEL Classification Codes: B24, D74, Z13, P16, H11

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of hegemony, as articulated by Antonio Gramsci, has emerged as one of the most influential and widely debated theoretical tools for understanding politics, power dynamics, ideology, and social relations in both historical and contemporary contexts. Over time, Gramsci's notion of hegemony has been variously interpreted and adapted, leading to a rich and diverse body of literature that seeks to apply his insights across political, social, and cultural domains. This paper aims to explore key Gramscian theories of hegemony—dominant ideology, discourse theory and neo-Gramscian International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) approach—while also demonstrating how they have marginalized or overlooked the central role of class and class struggle in establishing and contesting hegemony.

This paper argues that contemporary Gramscian theories of hegemony have largely abstracted the notions of class and class struggle as key analytical categories. It advocates for a reintegration of class struggle into the theories of hegemony. Gramsci's notion of hegemony, when examined in its most abstract and theoretical form, is intrinsically linked to capitalist relations of production. It refers to the unstable equilibrium of class powers and politics and concerns the specificity of the political in reproducing fundamental class relations. To fully appreciate the explanatory power of Gramsci's concept in understanding political change, it is essential to position class struggle at the heart of hegemony, integrating it with a theoretical framework that emphasizes its contested, coercive, and structural features.

This paper proceeds as follows. It begins with outlining the main bones of contention surrounding the interpretation and application of Gramsci's ideas, with a focus on his concept of hegemony. It highlights ongoing discussions about its historical, political, and theoretical status and relevance. The historical perspective emphasizes the context-specific nature of Gramsci's work; the political interpretation links his thought to broader Marxist traditions; and more theoretical approaches seek to refine and extend his concept of hegemony. The second and more substantial section critically evaluates contemporary Gramscian theories of hegemony, demonstrating how class politics/struggle

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is often underrepresented or sometimes almost non-existent in these frameworks. The final section critiques interpretations of hegemony that focus primarily on ideology and discourse, proposing that a more class-conscious approach is necessary to unlock the full potential of Gramsci's concept.

READING GRAMSCI and DEBATING HEGEMONY

The writings of Gramsci have been extensively analyzed for their profound insights into understanding politics of contemporary societies, as well as for their potential to overcome the limitations, particularly 'economism' and 'epiphenomenalist' or 'reductionist' views of politics and ideology, inherent in traditional Marxist orthodoxy (Sassoon, 1987; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Bieler & Morton, 2018: 14-20). Gramsci's works primarily engage with the superstructures, areas often neglected in the classical Marxist tradition, focusing on human agency and consciousness and the cultural and ideological dimensions of political life (Femia, 1981). Theoretically, his conceptual innovations and concrete analyses lay the foundation for distinctive perspectives on, among others, politics, power, and ideology at national and global levels (Poulantzas, 1973; Cox, 1983; Burawoy, 2003; Bieler and Morton, 2018). Central to Gramsci's work is the concept of hegemony—a 'philosophical linchpin' (Martin 2023) and a unifying thread that connects his diverse concepts, historical-concrete analyses and proposed political strategies. As such, any engagement with Gramsci's political thought entails examining the meaning and theoretical implications of hegemony within and beyond his reconstruction of historical materialism.

Gramsci's intellectual legacy, particularly his concept of hegemony, is both rich and diverse, yet highly contested. Existing interpretations of hegemony involve significant political and intellectual controversies, which include concerns over the 'political manipulation' of Gramsci's writings within the context of Italian political parties (Mouffe and Sassoon, 1977; Fontana, 1993; Morton, 2003, 2007) and the ongoing debate regarding the novelty and distinctiveness of Gramsci's use of hegemony in comparison to Lenin's (Anderson, 1976-77: 26-27; Femia, 1981; Mouffe, 1979; Bobbio, 1979). Scholars also raise questions about the meta-theoretical cohesion of the concept of hegemony and its ontological and epistemological openness and limits (Bieler & Morton, 2018; Joseph, 2002), its lack of a fully developed theoretical framework (Poulantzas, 1973; Buci-Glucksmann, 1980), and its empirical applicability (Scott, 1985, 1990). There is also considerable debate about the contemporary relevance of Gramsci's ideas for addressing issues that may seem far removed from his specific historical and socio-political context (Hall, 1988b, 1996; Morton, 2003; Bieler and Morton, 2006; Germain and Kenny, 1998). Related to this, discussions arise over whether Gramsci's concept of hegemony, along with his other key concepts, can be effectively 'internationalized,' as suggested especially by neo-Gramscians in IR/IPE (Cox, 1983; Rupert, 2003; Ives & Short, 2013; cf. Germain and Kenny, 1998; Femia, 2005, 2009).

Gramsci's writings and his concept of hegemony are open to diverse interpretations, with no single, uncontested understanding or universally agreed-upon methodology (Thomas, 2013). Rather than diminishing the significance of his work, these debates affirm its relevance and ongoing impact. Gramsci's ideas and concept of hegemony can be viewed through three key perspectives—historical, political, and theoretical—each offering distinct readings and revealing the complexity of his intellectual legacy.

The first perspective focuses on 'historicizing' Gramsci's writings, aiming to contextualize his concepts and analyses within the specific political, economic, and social conditions of his time and place. In this view, Gramsci is primarily seen as a national theorist, with his central concern being the political and social challenges confronting Italy during his lifetime. This approach cautions against the uncritical application of Gramsci's ideas to different contexts, highlighting the need for adaptation. It emphasizes the importance of understanding his work as deeply rooted in the particularities of his historical and social context, suggesting that any attempt to directly transplant his concepts or political strategies to other political contexts may require substantial modifications. Scholars such as Richard Bellamy (1990, 2001), Bellamy and Darrow Schecter (1993), Benedetto Fontana (1993), and Randall Germain and Michael Kenny (1998) have been prominent proponents of this approach, urging consideration of the contextual limitations of Gramsci's insights when extending them beyond the Italian case.

A second line of interpretation situates Gramsci within the orthodox Marxist tradition, emphasizing the significant influence of Lenin on his thought. From this perspective, Gramsci's concept of hegemony is largely seen as derived from his Marxist predecessors, albeit with distinct amendments reflecting his political and social context (Anderson, 1976-77: 18-27). Often referred to as the 'Leninist school', this interpretation positions Gramsci as the Italian counterpart to Lenin, asserting

that he adapted the Bolshevik experience in Russia to the specific conditions of Italy (Fontana, 1993: 2). Within this framework, readings of hegemony are often politically instrumental, with Gramsci's concept primarily understood through the lens of the historical-political struggles of the Italian working-class movement. This approach emphasizes the way in which Gramsci's ideas were deeply embedded in the political party debates in Italy, where his work was frequently invoked to justify a range of political positions (Mouffe and Sassoon, 1977: 35). This interpretation highlights the strategic and politically engaged use of Gramsci's thought within and beyond the context of Italian political movements and struggles.

A third approach is notably more ambitious, aiming to expand and refine Gramsci's ideas by developing analytical and theoretical frameworks. This line of inquiry is particularly relevant to the focus of this paper, as the latter seeks to explore whether and how class and class struggle are incorporated into Gramscian theories of hegemony. Our analysis concentrates on three distinct attempts to theorize hegemony: the dominant ideology theory of hegemony, the discourse theory of hegemony, and the neo-Gramscian IR/IPE approach. A critical review of these frameworks is presented here to demonstrate how they appropriate Gramsci's concept of hegemony and its relationship to class and class politics.

THEORIZING HEGEMONY and FORGETTING CLASS

This section explores three foremost Gramscian theories of hegemony, highlighting how contemporary capitalism's specificities and the role of class struggle are often overshadowed by an overemphasis on ideologies and discourses, and the consensual aspect of hegemony. While a full discussion of why class struggle plays a diminished role or is nearly absent in these frameworks falls beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that this oversight can be seen as symptomatic of the broader decline of class analysis in social and political research (Chibber, 2006). Some scholars attribute this neglect to shifting inter-disciplinary intellectual trends—particularly the upsurge of poststructuralist and postmodern thought—within academia, as well as to the changing politics of theory in Western Marxism, where class struggle as both a theoretical category and a driving force of historical change has lost much of its erstwhile prominence (Wood, 1983, 1995, 1998). Some others—more philosophically-minded ones—point to Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' or 'humanism', which put the accent on ideas, identities, and discourses, sometimes at the expense of focusing on objective structures. In its most problematic form, praxis/humanist Marxism tends to obscure the material and deep structural realities underpinning the ontological status of classes and class struggle and setting the conditions of possibility for hegemony (Joseph, 2002). At its best, Gramsci's diverse scholarship involves either tensions, ambiguities, and alternative models (Anderson, 1976-77; Martin, 1998), or irreconcilable—idealist/intersubjective vs. realist/structural—ontologies (Joseph, 2008: 111-14), which allow for competing interpretations of hegemony, some of which downplay or even discard the role of class.

Another reason for the neglect of class struggle is that hegemony theorists have often interpreted Gramsci's insights in ways that advance the agendas of their respective research fields, offering innovative contributions but often at the expense of his historical materialist roots and revolutionary commitments. For instance, neo-Gramscian IR/IPE students have found in Gramsci's work and concept of hegemony valuable philosophical (Cox, 1981, 1983; Bieler and Morton, 2018), methodological/meta-theoretical (Gill, 1993) and theoretical resources (Cox, 1987; van der Pijl, 1998, 2012; Morton, 2007) for building historically and normatively oriented critical theories, often in opposition to the positivist and overly structuralist mainstream theories in IR/IPE. Crucially, scholars have turned to Gramsci's hegemony not only to rethink and theorize contemporary politics in Western societies but also to envision a more encompassing leftist-democratic political strategy beyond the confines of traditional class divisions. Hegemony has thus been applied to analyze a wide range of themes in contemporary societies, including populist ideologies, politics of consent, 'radical democracy', new social movements, or identity politics. Theorizing hegemony is closely tied to moving beyond the economic reductionist Marxist theory and the traditional (socialist) political strategy of class struggle over given (often narrowly construed) material interests.

Regardless of the underlying cause, the issue seems to be more theoretical than anything else. As will be demonstrated below, many Gramscian theories of hegemony obscure the class-divided nature of contemporary societies, the contested nature of hegemonic ideologies, and the class struggle as a driving force of social and political change. However, there are valuable opportunities for further conceptual and theoretical-methodological development of Gramsci's hegemony. The core conceptual elements and theoretical assumptions for such a framework can be found in

Gramsci's own writings, as well as in some Gramscian approaches to hegemony, which engage more explicitly and theoretically with the relationship between capitalist relations, class struggle and state than other versions (e.g., Thompson, 1966, 1978; Poulantzas, 2000; Jessop, 1982, 1985, 2002; Wood, 1995; Panitch, 1994, 2000; Panitch and Gindin, 2005; Bieler and Morton, 2018).

Dominant Ideology Theory of Hegemony

Most Gramscians acknowledge that Gramsci made a profound contribution to Marxist tradition and political thought by emphasizing the moral and intellectual leadership and the element of consent in his conceptualization of hegemony, while downplaying the role of coercion and domination. For instance, Martin Carnoy argued that for Gramsci, hegemony referred to 'the ideological predominance of the dominant classes in civil society over the subordinate' (1984: 68). Giuseppe Fiori similarly noted that hegemony is rooted 'in the acceptance by the ruled of a "conception of the world" which belongs to the rulers' (1970: 238). Fontana interpreted Gramsci's notion of hegemony through the lens of Machiavelli's political thought, conceptualizing it as 'the unity of knowledge and action, ethics and politics, where such a unity, through its proliferation and concretization throughout society, becomes both the way of life and the practice of the masses' (1993: 5). Chantall Mouffe provided a more refined interpretation, arguing that Gramsci's politics, and his conception of hegemony, went beyond Lenin's strategy of 'class alliances' to emphasize 'the indissoluble union of political leadership and intellectual and moral leadership' (1979: 179). In her view, Gramsci's hegemony was not merely about a simple political alliance but about the fusion of economic, political, and moral values and objectives (1979: 181). As a result, the Leninist conception of working-class hegemony was not only extended to the dominant capitalist classes, but also reworked to include a moral and intellectual dimension, which Norbert Bobbio (1979: 39) referred to as 'cultural leadership'.

Some interpretations of Gramsci's concept of hegemony have taken a more explicitly cultural direction, contrasting his ideas with both classical Marxist and Leninist thought. Joseph Femia, for example, argued that the 'key *cultural* emphasis' of the term hegemony in Gramsci's treatment 'has no place in Lenin's theory of revolution' (1981: 25). For Gramsci viewed hegemony 'purely in terms of ideological leadership,' positioning it in contrast to 'the moment of force.' Even when referring to 'political hegemony' or 'political leadership,' Femia contended that Gramsci 'undoubtedly means the *consensual aspect* of political control' (1981: 25, emphasis in original). In this interpretation, hegemony is understood as the predominance achieved through 'consent', rather than just through the 'force' of one class or group over others. It is considered a 'superstructural phenomenon,' with its essential source of influence rooted in civil society (Femia, 1981: 29). According to this widely accepted reading, the distinctiveness of Gramsci's conception of hegemony lies in his emphasis on ethical and moral leadership within civil society, as opposed to the force and domination associated with the coercive power of the state. While hegemony does not exclude the role of force and domination, it privileges its ideological, cultural and consensual dimensions, integrating both kinds of elements into a more complex and comprehensive framework of power.

In substantive terms, the strong emphasis on the ideological and cultural aspects of hegemony was developed into a theoretical framework in British Cultural Studies by Stuart Hall and his colleagues in the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at the University of Birmingham (Hall, Lumley, & McLennan, 1977; Morley & Chen, 1996) and in the journal of the 'revisionist' Left *Marxism Today* (Shock, 2020). Hall's analysis of 'Thatcherism' as a dominant political ideology, especially through his concept of 'authoritarian populism', served as a key example of his ideology-based theory of hegemony, offering a framework for explaining a thorough political-ideological shift and the rise of neoliberalism in the United Kingdom (UK) during the early 1980s (Hall, 1988a, 1988b). This framework placed a central focus on Gramsci's related concepts of 'historical bloc' and 'common sense' and the themes of mass media 'discourse,' populist 'ideology,' and 'civil society' in discussions of hegemony, which also resonated within the discourse theory of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) and some neo-Gramscian studies in IR/IPE (Bruff, 2008). In contrast to Lenin's conception, Gramsci's notion of hegemony expands into the relatively autonomous realm of civil society, acquiring a broader meaning and conception of politics than simply vanguard party and class alliance. Hegemony, therefore, encompasses not only the party but all the ideas, practices and institutions within civil society that elaborate, disseminate, and organize popular 'consent' around the dominant ideology (Bobbio, 1979: 40).

In Hall's (1986: 42) framework, central to the process of hegemony—one 'by which a historical bloc of social forces is constructed and the ascendancy of that bloc secured'—is ideology in Gramsci's sense, serving not

only as a tool for legitimating the ruling class but crucially also as a field for political struggle. Hegemony is, in turn, a political project focused on mastering the ideological terrain (Filippini, 2017: 18). Whereas traditional Marxists tend to view ideology as a reflection of underlying production structures or as disparagingly 'false consciousness'—an inverted and mystifying appearance of capitalist contradictions, Gramsci (1971: 407, 328, 322) conceived of it as 'a conception of the world … manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life', or as ingrained in 'common sense'—'the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world', whether accurate or misguided. Hall, Lumley and McLennan (1977: 49) regarded Gramsci as 'the first Marxist to seriously examine ideology at its "lower levels" as the accumulation of popular "knowledges" and the means of dealing with everyday life.' For Gramsci (1971: 376-77), 'historically organic ideologies', or 'those which are necessary to a given structure', are not mere abstract ideas; as material forces, they '"organize" human masses and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle'.

Gramsci and his concept of hegemony sanctioned Hall's revisionist stance on traditional Marxism.[1] Concerning the base-superstructure relationship, Hall (1986: 31) was also deeply influenced by Louis Althusser's idea of 'overdetermination,' that is social phenomena have multiple interrelated causes, yet he rejected the thesis of economic determination 'in the last instance.' In contrast to the 'theoretical certainty' and closure of orthodox Marxism, Hall challenged economic determinism and the teleological notion of a preordained, privileged role for the working class in historical change. However, his critique aimed to qualify, rather than dismiss, the importance of economy and class struggle. In fact, he saw the economy determining 'in the first instance', that is setting the conditions of possibility for hegemony (1986: 43). As he (1988b: 170) acceded: 'hegemony is not an exclusively ideological phenomenon. There can be no hegemony without the "decisive nucleus of the economic"'. The economy establishes conditions of its existence, sets the boundaries and workings of the ideological terrain and provides the 'raw materials' for thought but hardly determines the precise content and class belonging of ideologies (1986: 42). By doing so, he allowed for relative autonomy for the political-ideological terrain in the formation of hegemony. Even if 'consent is not maintained through the mechanisms of ideology alone', Hall (1986: 29) argued, 'the two cannot be divorced.' In his view, economy does not ensure hegemony; hegemony arises when 'a particular set of ideas comes to dominate the social thinking of a historical bloc … and, thus, helps to unite such a bloc from the inside, and maintain its dominance and leadership in society as a whole (1986: 29).' Ruling class ideological discourses do not achieve hegemony until they are aligned with a historical bloc of social or class forces.

Hall's interpretation of hegemony in ideological terms went beyond mere theoretical inquiry; it was central to developing and advocating a more expansive and inclusive political vision that moved past conventional class-based divisions or alliances. Robin Blackburn (2014: 86) considers him 'a cultural and historical materialist making crucial arguments for a fully political stance.' As he himself acknowledged, 'the decision to focus on politics and ideology was the result of a deliberate strategy … in order to make a more general point about the need to develop a theoretical and political language on the left which rigorously avoids the temptations to economism, reductionism or teleological forms of argument (1988a: 3).' For the British Left, entrenched in orthodox Marxist political culture, failed to grasp both the true, 'organic' nature of the crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, and the significance of Thatcherism as a response to the crisis. Thatcherism as a 'hegemonic project' resisted being understood solely through the lens of traditional class politics. This failure left the Left unable to devise a viable and inclusive political-ideological strategy to counter Thatcherism and to lead British society in a progressive direction.

Hall did not observe that class or class struggle disappeared, nonetheless; rather he argued that 'the underlying social and cultural forces which are bringing the era of organized capitalism to a close, coupled with the vigour of Thatcherite restructuring, have decomposed and fragmented class as a unified political force, fracturing any so-called automatic linkages between economics and politics (Hall, 1988a: 281).' British society underwent such a profound transformation in its class structure, like earlier shifts that had shaped the Labour Party and modern democratic politics, that the

[1] Hall himself explicitly acknowledged the significant influence Gramsci had on his thinking about and theorizing (British) politics: 'He [Gramsci] works, broadly speaking, within a Marxist framework, but in some ways like me, he was not a classical or traditional Marxist at all. … I feel drawn to him, not just intellectually, but temperamentally as well. I've been working with his concepts, trying to expand, trying to do what he's done in relation to lots of old concepts—which is to expand, develop, and apply them, put them to new uses, shift the direction, etc. (Hay, Hall, Grossberg, 2013: 15).'

material foundations and the 'social imagery of class' has been redefined (Hall, 1988a: 5). Class struggle in contemporary Western societies has taken new forms, in which ideological struggle, especially struggles over 'common sense' and 'the national-popular' became more salient in the more general social and political battle for hegemony (1988a: 168).

Yet, Hall (1988a: 4) disputed the idea that classes enter the political and ideological arenas as fully constituted and unitary agents with given ideologies and interests of the mode of production. Instead, ideology consists of diverse and often contradictory discursive elements, with individuals or groups being positioned in different ways within it. A key function of organic ideology is that 'it articulates into a configuration different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect. It constructs a "unity" out of difference (Hall, 1988b: 166).' Therefore, political and ideological levels must be studied in their own right, without reducing them to their material or class base.

Through hegemony, Hall (1988b: 168) embraced an expanded conception of politics, power, and authority. He viewed politics as 'fundamentally contingent and open-ended,' a terrain where 'traditional political identities were collapsing' (1988b: 169), and power and authority are overdetermined (1988b: 170). As the working-class fractured, new social movements and identities, and new points of struggles emerged, shifting the focus from class politics to identity politics, from class struggle to ideological struggle, and from conflicts over material interests to battles over images and representation. Hall's vision of a new politics sought to open the British Left to new social movements and ethnic and racial identities, positioning them as political allies in building a counter-hegemonic project against Thatcherism (Shock, 2020). Because counter-hegemonies in 'hybrid social formations' demand not simply class alliances but 'political identities and principles that combine culture and class in new ways (Blackburn, 2014: 85).'

By emphasizing how ideological discourses are overdetermined and how they constitute class or social group identities and interests, Hall tends to substitute class with ideology. His view of ideology (or culture, or common sense) as neutral and discursively 'productive' ultimately blurs the class-based nature and bias of hegemonic projects. But he does not fully embrace the discursive notion of the 'total free-floatingness of all ideological elements and discourses' (1986: 40). Even so, lacking a classical Marxist negative and critical conception of ideology as a 'distorted idea,' Hall failed to offer a robust critique of Thatcherism, particularly in exposing its nature as a bourgeois ideological project whose primary function is to obscure capitalist contradictions, including class struggle (Larrain, 1991: 23). The term 'authoritarian populism' falls short in capturing the essence of Thatcherism, as it fails to recognize its 'crucial historic novelty' and overlooks its core bourgeois ideological aspect: 'the revival of market fundamentalism' (Blackburn, 2014: 88).

In Hall's theory of hegemony, class struggle is generally acknowledged and retained within the framework, but it is framed in terms of the discursive articulation of ideological elements at the expense of its economic and structural bases. While he addressed the shifting balance of class powers in the UK under Thatcher, he underestimated the socio-economic changes that preceded her rise to power. By privileging ideological constituents of hegemony, Hall neglected both the socio-economic foundations and coercive aspects of Thatcher's political hegemony. Specifically, his analysis did not account for the changing structural context of the British state and economy in the late 1970s, and, as a result, he failed to explain 'the material conditions of transmission and reception of ideologies' (Jessop *et al*., 1985: 91-92). Furthermore, he overlooked the shifting relationship within the ruling class and between this class and the state, as his focus remained exclusively on the interaction between the dominant and subordinate classes and the production of 'common sense' as hegemony in the UK (Jessop *et al*., 1984). Consequently, his explanation of the changing balance of class powers and relations was only partial, and his framework was better suited to analyzing 'conjunctural' changes at the political-agential level (such as alliances, consent, leadership, common sense) rather than the social structural one (Joseph, 2008: 120-22)—shifts in dominant public/political discourses or strategies or what Poulantzas referred to as the 'political scene'. Despite his stress on ideological discourses, Hall fell short of recasting hegemony purely as a discursive formation, a task later taken up by his friend Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

Discourse Theory of Hegemony

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed a discourse theory of hegemony. They identified Gramsci's primary contribution to political theory as his novel analysis of 'ideology' and, his rejection of 'economism' and class 'essentialism' in Marxist orthodoxy. Although Gramsci did not offer an '"obvious" theory of ideology' (Hall, Lumley and 1977: 71), Mouffe (1979: 178) recognized in his *Prison*

Notebooks 'a radically anti-economistic problematic of ideology'. She argued that the foundation of this theory lies '*in the practical state* in Gramsci's conception of *hegemony*' which provides 'its actual condition of *intelligibility*' (Mouffe, 1979: 178 emphasis original)

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony, like Hall's, builds on Gramsci's insights into the non-reductionist, neutral and productive nature of ideology, but extends them further. Drawing on post-structuralist philosophy, they shift the focus from ideology to discourse, conceptualizing the latter not merely as one aspect of hegemony, but as its principal constitutive structure. This move sets their theory apart from other hegemony theories, which typically treat ideologies as appendages to class positions. In this way, Laclau and Mouffe break with the classical Marxist view of ideology as an 'epiphenomenon' of economic structures or as 'false consciousness', as well as Georg Lukács' (1971) 'humanist' interpretation of ideology as 'class consciousness' within the social totality of capitalist relations. Their key contribution lies in reframing hegemony as a discourse, rather than as a set of ideological assumptions (Laclau, 1977).

Laclau and Mouffe first critiqued the class-ideology coupling or the view that all ideological elements necessarily align with a particular social class. In contrast, they argued that, for Gramsci, 'ideology is not the mystified-mystifying justification of an already constituted class power'; rather, it represents a strategic terrain where ideological struggles unfold, through which 'men acquire consciousness of themselves' (Mouffe, 1979: 196). As such, 'hegemony cannot be reduced to a process of ideological domination' (Mouffe, 1979: 196). By freeing ideologies from their presumed class character, Laclau and Mouffe advocate for a more autonomous and constitutive role for the national-popular ideologies articulated by the masses. Secondly, they contended that ideologies are more fragmented and incoherent than often assumed. Finally, they sought to broaden the notion and domain of politics by incorporating new political subjects and identities constituted by autonomous ideologies. Laclau (1977: 134) observed that in most historicist *and* structuralist views of hegemony, 'the coherence and degree of condensation of the ideologies of the dominant bloc are overestimated while the role of the popular-democratic ideologies is extremely underestimated.' An exclusive focus on dominant classes and their contradictions, Laclau (1977: 131) argued, overlooks the fundamental struggle between the 'people' and the dominant classes in the 'power bloc', as well as 'the specificity and autonomy of the popular-democratic ideologies'. While Hall attributed hegemony primarily to the dominant classes, and both Althusser and Poulantzas highlighted the central role of ideological structures in shaping classes and hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe emphasized, especially in their early works, the more autonomous role of the dominated classes or social movements and their popular-democratic ideologies.

Discourse theorists were neither alone, nor even the first in highlighting the role of ideological discourses in the formation of class subjects and hegemony (see Wood, 1998). Prominent neo-Marxists, Althusser (1971) and Poulantzas (1973, 1975, 2000), had already placed ideological structures at the centre of their theorizations of hegemony. Influenced by Poulantzas' theoretical framework, particularly his concrete analysis of Fascism, Laclau developed his own non-reductionist analysis of ideology and proposed a more autonomous role for it, one where democratic-popular ideologies no longer belong strictly to specific classes. Laclau (1977: 109) argued that Poulantzas, operating still within an orthodox class-reductionist framework, 'ignored the autonomous domain of the popular-democratic struggle and tried to find a class belonging in every ideological element.' Despite his critiques, Laclau, in his early works, retained the concepts of class and class struggle, while seeking to expand the domain of politics to include democratic-popular struggles, often waged by the 'middle classes,' 'intermediary strata,' or the 'people' more broadly, rather than fundamental classes (1977: 114). As he observed, politics is increasingly shaped by manifold and varying identities that transcend traditional class categories. Laclau (1977: 114) argued that 'the identity of people plays a much more important role than the identity as class,' and that 'popular democratic interpellations are much more significant than their specific class interpellations in determining the overall ideological structure.' Rejecting the idea that all political subjects are class subjects, Laclau and Mouffe claimed to advocate for a more inclusive conception of politics—'radical democracy'—one that embraces broader political participation and struggles for the recognition of diverse, especially suppressed identities. The existence of various forms of political struggle are acknowledged but they cannot be strictly categorized as 'class struggle'. Ultimately, they substituted class struggle with hegemony as a discursive formation, whereby various 'subject positions' or political identities beyond classes are formed.

Discourse theorists understand hegemony as a process of discursive articulations and disarticulations that constitute political subjects or identities. They move it beyond any form of class struggle rooted in capitalist relations of production. While Laclau and Mouffe claimed to transcend Gramsci, arguing that he remained trapped in the economism and class essentialism he sought to confront, some other post-structuralists, such as Peter Ives (2004), found in Gramsci's work an expansive conception of language, which plays a central role in forming hegemony by shaping key elements like 'common sense', 'popular philosophies' or conceptions of the world, or collective will of 'the national-popular'. Even though Gramsci is taken as rejecting the traditional material-ideational, state-civil society, and force-consent dichotomies, the heavy focus on the linguistic aspects of hegemony tends to reduce the concept to merely organizing and securing consent. However, many Gramscian theorists have resisted such abstraction, emphasizing the connection between hegemony, social classes, and relations of production, much like neo-Gramscian scholars in IR and IPE.

Neo-Gramscian IR/IPE Theory of Hegemony

It was Robert Cox (1981, 1983, 1987) who introduced Gramsci to IR/IPE, advancing a distinct conception of hegemony in world politics to challenge its narrow and imprecise uses within mainstream, especially (neo)realist and (neo)liberal institutionalist, IR theories. In developing a 'critical theory' of 'world orders' that was both explanatory and critical-normative, Cox, alongside other neo-Gramscian scholars in IR/IPE, sought to uncover the historically specific structures of 'social forces', 'institutions', and 'ideas', as constitutive of hegemony at the international level, while also posing questions about the dynamics of historical change (Cox, 1981, 1987, 1996, 1999; Gill and Mittelman, 1997). Central to their research agenda has been this inquiry into the constitution and transformation of hegemonic world orders.

In developing his theory of 'world orders', Cox turned to Gramsci's hegemony, supplemented by a constellation of conceptual and methodological tools drawn from his writings. Successive neo-Gramscians have largely followed him, Stephen Gill (1990, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2000) and Herman Van der Pijl (1998, 2012) in interpreting Gramsci's concepts in a flexible manner, adapting them to the international level. The concept of hegemony has been reinterpreted within the context of a supposedly global 'civil society', with transnational hegemonic projects being linked to the practices of an emergent 'transnational capitalist class' (Van der Pijl, 1998, 2012). Unlike structuralist and discourse theorists of hegemony, neo-Gramscians have been less committed to constructing a definitive theoretical framework and have instead applied Gramsci's concepts and insights to explore issues related to contemporary global transformations.

The substantive issues addressed by neo-Gramscians include, but are by no means limited to, transformations in international institutions and the global political economy (Cox, 1987; Gill, 1990; Germain, 1997), the formation of the 'transnational capitalist class' and its 'structural power' (Van der Pijl, 1984, 1998; Robinson and Harris, 2000; Robinson, 2004; Gill and Law, 1988; Rupert, 2005; Jessop & Overbeek, 2019), and the rise of neoliberal globalization and its contestation (Gill, 1995, 2000, 2002; Rupert, 2000). Neo-Gramscians examined the crucial role of the US in global hegemony of neoliberalism (Rupert, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Augelli and Murphy, 1988), and explored the processes of European integration (Gill, 1998; Bieler, 2002; Van Apeldoorn, 2003) and, more recently the crisis of the liberal international order (Babic, 2020).

From the perspective of IR/IPE theory, the neo-Gramscian contributions are invaluable. The neo-Gramscian approach has provided IR/IPE students with a fresh perspective, along with conceptual and methodological tools to analyze the rise and decline of world orders, as well as the associated transformations in social forces, state forms, ideas and ideologies. The origins of the neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony and its primary contributions are rooted in key debates and questions within IR/IPE theory. These contributions can be organized into three key areas: the methodological critiques of positivist IR/IPE, the re-conceptualisation of power and structure in IR/IPE, and a political-normative interest in explaining historical change.

First, neo-Gramscians have primarily advanced methodological or meta-theoretical critiques of mainstream IR theory. They have been drawn to Gramsci's ideas, especially his 'historicism,' which they argue provides 'an epistemological and ontological critique of the empiricism and positivism which underpin the prevailing theorizations' in IR/IPE (Gill, 1993: 22). For many, as Germain and Kenny (1998: 6) observed, 'getting beyond the limitations of positivism constitutes one of the most compelling reasons to deploy a Gramscian approach within IR theory'. While there is no doubt that the methodological tools and theorizations of hegemony developed by neo-Gramscians are inspired by Gramsci's own writings and methodologies, it is also evident that

their interpretation of Gramsci has been shaped by their primary goal: to present a fundamental critique of the overly structuralist and status-quo oriented mainstream IR/IPE theories and their positivist methodological conventions. In this context, neo-Gramscians argue that the concept of hegemony has the potential to overcome structural statis and determinism by incorporating agency, politics and ideology into the construction and transformation of hegemonic world orders (Gill, 1993; Rupert, 1995).

Second, the neo-Gramscian theory has re-conceptualized 'hegemony,' 'power,' and 'structure' in IR theory, moving beyond the realist focus on military and economic power or the liberal-rationalist emphasis on institutions. In line with the broader Gramscian tradition, neo-Gramscians have framed hegemony as a new form of power—'structural power'—which incorporates intellectual and moral dimensions, extending beyond the conventional compulsory, institutional, and relational conceptions of power (see Barnett and Duvall, 2005). When hegemony is applied at the global level, neo-Gramscians have highlighted an emergent 'historical bloc' on a global scale, with their key contribution being the identification of the underlying bases of its 'structural power' (see Lukes, 2005). According to Stephen Gill and David Law (1988: 78, 74), the structural dimension of power pertains both to the 'economic and ideological' or 'material and normative' aspects of international life. Its concrete bases are found not only in market or production structures, the relative mobility of capital, the fragmentation of political authority in the international system and the growing dominance of transnational capital over labour (Gill and Law, 1993: 105-113), but also in the 'shared values, ideas, and material interests of both ruling and subordinate classes' (Gill and Law, 1988: 78). The concept suggests that the interests, ideas, and institutions embedded in the intellectual framework of politically and economically dominant groups come to be seen as natural and legitimate (Gill and Law, 1988: 78). Similarly, Cox (1983, 1987: 4) revisited the concept of structure in IR theory, emphasizing its historical and mutable nature. He introduced the concept of 'historical structures,' which he defined as comprising three interacting categories: 'material capabilities, ideas, and institutions.'

Third, as 'critical' theorists of 'historical structures' underpinning world orders (Cox, 1981, 1996: 89), neo-Gramscians have engaged with the theoretical and normative issue of historical change, bringing it to the agenda of a discipline often seen as oriented toward the status-quo (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1993; Bieler and Morton, 2004). Unlike mainstream IR theory which tend to be 'problem-solving' in nature and explain mainly systemic continuity, critical theory, as Cox (1996: 89) defined, 'does not take institutions and social power relations for granted but calls them into question by examining their origins and whether and how they might be in the process of changing.' Cox himself has explained the rise and fall of historical structures at the global level, using the concept of hegemony as a 'fit between power, ideas, and institutions' (1996: 104). He (1987) examined the shift from the post-war hegemony of *Pax Americana*, which replaced the preceding *Pax Britannica*, illustrating how structural changes can be traced within these hegemonic transitions in world orders.

Despite their significant contributions to IR/IPE, neo-Gramscian attempts to internationalize Gramsci's concepts, particularly hegemony, reveal several theoretical limitations and analytical silences, especially in explaining historical and contemporary changes. One major challenge for neo-Gramscians has been incorporating class, class struggle, and the capitalist state—with its institutional specificity—into their theories of world hegemony. These gaps are particularly evident in their insufficient attention to the mode of production, its contradictions, and the dynamic and specific character class struggles take within it. Absent analyses of '"free" wage labour', 'exploitation', 'uneven development', 'competitive accumulation' or incessant production 'crises' as inalienable constituents of capitalism, neo-Gramscian accounts of hegemony are bound to 'produce a shallow or conjunctural historicism that tends to naturalize capitalism and render it invisible (Budd, 2013: 7, also 87-116).' There has also been inadequate focus on the geopolitical structure and power of the capitalist state and its specific institutions, especially the distinct institutional characteristics of liberal-democracies, in shaping the political hegemony of capital (Jessop, 1982, 2002). These omissions limit the ability of neo-Gramscian frameworks to fully account for the material structures and class relations that underpin the exercise of power in capitalist societies and world politics.

Neo-Gramscians have fallen short in providing a sufficiently radical challenge to mainstream IR/IPE theories, primarily because their conception of hegemony remains rooted in a state-centric ontology. As William Robinson (2005: 560) points out, ne-Gramscians conceive of hegemony as the combination of 'some preeminent state power in the world system with the

more specific sense of the construction of consent or ideological leadership around a particular historic project.' This formulation reduces hegemony to a process orchestrated by dominant states, which claim moral and ethical leadership over the world order. In doing so, neo-Gramscians obscure the essentially class-based nature of hegemony—the idea that dominant classes establish and maintain their rule through consensual political projects. Instead of foregrounding class relations, the neo-Gramscian approach tends to relegate them to secondary or derivative roles.

While neo-Gramscians acknowledge the role of social classes, they still place the state at the forefront as the primary agent of world hegemonic leadership. Cox (1983: 171) contends that world hegemony begins as an outward expansion of the internal (national) hegemony established by specific social forces. Andreas Bieler and Adam Morton (2004: 93), further developing Cox's idea, argue that once domestic hegemony is firmly in place, it can transcend the national social order and expand globally, becoming embedded in the world order. However, critics contend that in this theoretical framework, classes and social forces are incorporated only as agents of national hegemonies, after which their agency is absorbed by states and international organizations.

Despite the emphasis on the state in the theory of world orders, neo-Gramscians have not developed a distinct understanding of it—particularly the capitalist state—that departs from the state-as-actor models dominant in IR/IPE. Instead, by implicitly accepting the state as a corporate actor, they have grounded their theories of hegemonic world orders and advanced accounts of hegemonic transitions within a state-centric framework of world politics (Robinson, 2005). Even when neo-Gramscians attempted to explore the state and its transformation, especially within the context of the 'state-society complex,' they have largely treated the state as an aggregation of institutions—an approach that mirrors some mainstream perspectives in IR/IPE and political theory (Burnham, 1991; Cammack, 1990). As institutional subjects, states primarily function as 'transmission belts' between the global and national political-economic spheres, particularly in the context of hegemonic projects like neoliberal globalization (Cox, 1992: 31). This framework, despite claims to the contrary, fails to dismantle the 'great divide' between the internal (state) and external (global) realms in the discourse on globalization and the state in IR/IPE theory and reinforces the internal-external binary (Clark, 1999).

By maintaining this framework, neo-Gramscians are unable to overcome the limitations of traditional state-centric models in their analysis of global power relations. They have also struggled to properly conceptualize state power. Instead of viewing the state as a social relation, or a site of class struggle and considering its 'institutional materiality'—including its territoriality, institutional specificity and juridical-coercive powers—just as Poulantzas (2000) did, they categorize states according to some 'ideal types' derived from Weberian methodology (Cox, 1993). By denying states any agency in the formation of world orders (see Panitch, 1994, 2000; Panitch & Gindin, 2005) and overlooking the materiality of their institutional structures (see Poulantzas, 2000), which are rooted in capitalist relations of production, they fail to recognize the class-biased nature, active role and strategic interventions of the capitalist state in the formation of hegemony (Jessop, 2002). As a result, they discount the importance of legal frameworks and the role of individual rights in securing consent to a constitutional order (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 19). This failure to fully grasp the state's active involvement in hegemonic processes limits their theoretical capacity to understand the dynamics of power and consent within capitalist societies.

However, Cox also invoked the term 'internationalization of the state,' originally coined by Nicos Poulantzas in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1975: 37-88), to explain the changing form of the state and its institutions. Cox (1996: 107-109) and other neo-Gramscians have since argued persuasively that the global political economy has not been characterized by 'the retreat of the state,' as suggested in mainstream IR/IPE (e.g., Strange, 1996), but rather by 'state restructuring' since the early 1970s (Cox, 1993, 1996; Shields, 2004, 2012). Their focus has largely remained at the global level nonetheless, and the internal sources of state transformation are often overlooked or treated with insufficient theoretical specificity. In studies of neoliberal globalization, for instance, the constitution of neoliberal practices within states is frequently sidelined, with national processes being depicted merely as a reflection of transnational hegemonic forces. This framework conceptualizes hegemony as originating at the global level, with national dynamics considered secondary or derivative. Cox's perspective on this process is particularly revealing, as it highlights the way in which states are conceptualized and abstracted from social classes and class struggles, thereby obscuring the role of domestic forces and conflicts in the formation of hegemony.

> 'First, there is a process of interstate consensus formation regarding the needs or requirements of the world economy that takes place within a common ideological framework. Second, participation in this consensus formation is hierarchically structured. Third, the internal structures of states are adjusted so that each can best transform the global consensus into national policy and practice, taking account of the specific kinds of obstacles likely to arise in countries occupying the differently hierarchically arranged positions in the world economy (Cox, 1987: 254).'

Lacking a distinct, class-based conception of the state and its institutions, neo-Gramscians interpret the 'internationalization of the state' as little more than a restructuring of state institutions in response to external or global structural pressures. This top-down approach often leads to a one-sided conception of hegemony, in which it is formed globally and imposed from above. As Leo Panitch (1994) argued, neo-Gramscians, particularly Cox and his followers, operate within an 'outside-in' theoretical-methodological framework when explaining state transformation. This approach begins with international consensus formation and the accompanying agreements and obligations, to which internal state structures are subsequently adjusted (Panitch, 1994: 69). By excluding class struggle from their frameworks, this mode of explanation tends to echo structuralist-functionalist approaches, which overlook the dynamic and contested nature of political power, especially at the domestic level.[2]

A critique by Germain and Kenny (1998), and Femia (2005, 2009) of the neo-Gramscian IR theory of global hegemony questions the historical validity and theoretical legitimacy of internationalizing Gramsci's concepts. They argue that interpretations of Gramsci's concepts should be more closely aligned with his original text and context. However, the key issue here is not so much the process of internationalizing Gramsci's concepts, but rather the way in which hegemony is often theorized in abstracting from the underlying relations of production and class struggles occurring both at the national and global levels. In much of the neo-Gramscian substantive research, hegemony is portrayed as a form of ideological domination by an emergent transnational capitalist class over national capitalists, the working class, and other subordinate classes. This depiction treats the transnational capitalist class as a unitary entity, free from internal struggles and contradictions, and overlooks the contestation of its hegemonic ideology by subordinate classes. For instance, in his conceptualization of neoliberal globalization as a hegemonic 'new constitutionalist' project of 'disciplinary neoliberalism' in Gramscian-cum-Foucauldian terms, Gill and Law (1989), and Gill (1995) have overstated the power of neoliberal ideas, practices and institutions. As a result, Gill and other neo-Gramscians have been charged with 'totalizing hegemony and inadequately addressing the nature of counter-hegemonic resistance' (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 18).

Neo-Gramscians have favoured historical theorizing and the development of explanatory frameworks tailored to specific periods, rather than grounding their theories in abstract templates. Cox (1996: 87) himself has emphasized the need to build theory based on 'changing practice and empirical-historical study'. However, their frameworks often overlook crucial questions, such as the theoretical status of class, state, and the explanatory role of class struggle. While they have recognized (Augelli and Murphy, 1993: 129, 141-146; Rupert, 1995) how Gramsci fundamentally reconceptualized the state, particularly in terms of stressing its 'integral-extended' and 'ethical' character, they have not fully engaged with the logical and theoretical implications of this recognition when internationalizing the concept. Not only has the Gramscian conception of the state—along with its capitalist nature and class bias—been overlooked, but the question of class struggle has also been analytically side-lined in favour of institutional-discursive analyses (Burnham, 1991; Cammack, 1990). As one critic noted, 'by attributing explanatory power to hegemony at the level of world order, Cox finds it necessary to first evacuate the historical specificity of the correlation of social forces in Gramsci's conception of hegemony' (Shilliam, 2004: 82).

In the process of the internationalization of the state, 'class relations,' when recognized at all, are at best incorporated as external forces to the 'process of [state] restructuring' (Burnham, 1999: 39). For some neo-Gramscians, class formation is no longer confined to the nation-state but, in the context of capitalist globalization, has been transnationalized (Van der Pijl, 1998, 2012; Robinson, 2004, 2005). This theoretical shift has been

[2] Cox (1999:12) viewed the role of the state in the following terms: 'There is something that could be called nascent historic bloc consisting of the most powerful corporate economic forces, their allies in government, and the variety of networks that evolve policy guidelines and propagate the ideology of globalisation. States now by and large play the role of agencies of the global political economy, with the task of adjusting national economic policies and practises to be perceived exigencies of global economic liberalism.'

crucial in registering the formation of classes and hegemony at transnational levels, yet the state (Panitch and Gindin, 2005) and political power is abstracted from the process (Montalbano, 2022). Since hegemony is no longer understood as being formed or contested within the state but as effectively transnationalized, national and local social/class forces seem to get omitted from the analytical framework. At best, they are relegated to passive elements, merely responding to external pressures, without any explanatory role in the overall theory. In short, as Peter Burnham (2000: 14) observed, neo-Gramscians have failed to 'develop a coherent theory of the state and its relationship to class.'

It appears that the ideology- and discourse-based conceptions of hegemony have been uncritically appropriated by neo-Gramscians within IR/IPE. Despite invoking production relations and class struggles, neo-Gramscian scholars have often emphasized the ideological discourses and practices of transnationally-oriented dominant classes—predominantly the neoliberal 'transnational capitalist class'—at multiple levels, rendering them susceptible to charges of 'historicism' and 'voluntarism' (Joseph, 2008; Pass, 2018). The notions of the 'power bloc' and 'state' have been internationalized through the concept of the transnational 'historical bloc,' which is understood in Gramsci's (1971: 366) terms as an ensemble of 'structures and superstructures'. However, by neglecting to situate the formation and functioning of this bloc within the structures of capitalist accumulation and associated class relations and struggles, neo-Gramscians focus exclusively on international and transnational elites and institutions. Cox (1999) defines class so broadly as any form of social stratification that it becomes nearly indistinguishable from other markers, such as gender, ethnicity, or race. As Alfredo Saad-Filho and Alison Ayers (2008: 113) argue, this renders class 'a static, positional, ideal-typical, and descriptive category, rather than a dynamic, historically specific relationship that shapes the capitalist system and its evolution.'

The capitalist nature and class bias of the modern state have not also been adequately addressed. While the neo-Gramscian concept of the 'internationalization of the state' offers a useful framework for studying historical and institutional change, particularly in the context of neoliberal globalization, its explanatory purchase remains limited. Neo-Gramscians have failed to develop a clear understanding of the state and its 'institutional materiality' as 'a social relation', distinct from mainstream IR theory (see Poulantzas, 2000). As a result, transnational class power and dominant neoliberal ideologies are seen as external forces rather than as being constituted within the state. This oversight, combined with an exclusive international focus, overlooks the varying patterns of change across nations, despite similar international pressures and transnational capitalist practices.

THE PITFALLS OF SUBSTITUTING CLASS POLITICS WITH IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE

Gramsci's hegemony should be understood as a dynamic and constitutive interplay between 'force' and 'consent' rather than merely their combination. However, for many Gramscians, the focus often falls on the latter—in Gramsci's terms earning 'consent … through the exercise of political, moral, and intellectual leadership' or through a specific political strategy, 'the war of position', within 'civil society', which he defines as encompassing non-economic social relations (1971: 238-9). This emphasis on consent, hailed as the distinctively Gramscian character of the concept of hegemony, has led to a burgeoning body of literature, with theoretical efforts primarily centring on the roles of ideology and discourse in building hegemony.

Some Gramscian theorists, such as Hall (1978, 1986; see Rojek, 2003) and neo-Gramscian scholars in IR/IPE, have retained, albeit somewhat inadequately, class connotations of hegemony, whereas Laclau and Mouffe (2001), by defining hegemony in terms of the articulation of hegemonic discourses, abstracted it both theoretically and methodologically, ultimately moving it beyond its class-based origins. Discourse theorists, as Ellen Meiksins Wood (1986: 151, emphasis original) forcefully argues, 'tend to expel *class struggle* from the concept of hegemony.' As a result, Gramscian theories of hegemony risk undermining some core insights of Gramsci's broader scholarship—especially his 'absolute historicism', his methodology of the subaltern, and his analysis of Fordism–-which situates the foundations of hegemony in specific class relations, practices and institutions within a social formation, ultimately linking them to relations of production (Gramsci, 1971: 465, 279-318; Joseph, 2008: 113-14).

The Gramscian concept of hegemony, as articulated within the theoretical frameworks discussed above, confronts at least three methodological and theoretical challenges. From a methodological-empirical standpoint, questions have been raised regarding the utility of the concept as defined by ideological domination or a cultural/discursive construct. Critics who foreground class struggle in their analyses argue that the consent and

active submission of subordinate classes to hegemonic projects, if it occurs at all, is rarely realized. Any apparent or declared consent is often little more than a façade, concealed under the ruling class' dominant discourse. By closely examining the everyday lives of working-class people and other subordinate groups—including their identity and interest claims, cultural practices, ideological discourses, and political mobilizations—one can reveal and recover their (class) agency and specific forms of struggle, defying would-be hegemonic ideologies (Thompson, 1966:11, 1978). Through his ethnographic research on peasants, James Scott (1985: 322) argued that the seemingly conformist behaviour of subaltern groups does not necessarily reflect their ideological convictions. As he observed (1985: 331), 'subordinate classes—especially the peasantry—are more likely to be radical at the level of ideology than at the level of behaviour, where they are more effectively constrained by the daily exercise of power.'

This suggests that ideologies claiming hegemonic status are frequently and variously contested. Nonetheless, dominant official ideologies often appear hegemonic precisely because resistant or counter-hegemonic ideologies seldom emerge in the public domain, much less gain formal or institutional recognition. These alternative, subaltern ideological discourses and practices form what Scott (1985: 321) terms 'hidden transcripts'—'the insinuations beneath the surface, the discussions outside the context of [overt] power relations, and the anonymous, quiet acts of routine practical resistance that occur daily'—which often evade the notice of researchers. In contrast, what is typically recognized as hegemonic ideology or discourse often consists of 'public transcripts' or 'official stories' propagated by dominant classes. Therefore, an exclusive focus on the public domain and outward appearances can obscure the unofficial or marginal narratives, including folk cultures and local symbols, that might otherwise challenge the more visible discourses, symbols, and values of the dominant classes. What often appears as, or is frequently perceived as, the active 'consent' of the subordinate may, in fact, the expression of the 'public transcript' itself—namely, the official discourses and practices of the ruling classes that mask resistance or alternative discourses (see Scott, 1985, 1990).

Critics of the conceptions of hegemony as consent or ideological domination extend beyond empirical refutations. Identifying counter-hegemonic movements or forms of resistance, even in their subtle expressions, exposes the limitations of theorizing hegemony solely as the active and willing consent of subordinate classes. Such movements underscore the rarity and difficulty of ascertaining instances of 'expansive hegemony,' in which 'a hegemonic group fully adopts the interests of its subalterns, and those subalterns come to "live" the worldview of the hegemonic class as their own' (Jones, 2006: 53). In contrast, historical records more commonly reflect economic, social and political crises and conflicts, clashes over material and symbolic resources, protests, rebellions, revolutions, violence, social antagonisms, and wars. Gramsci's (1971: 109, 106-114) concept of 'passive revolution,' defined as revolution without mass participation, or as 'molecular changes which progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces,' and his analysis of cases such as the Italian *Risorgimento* and *trasformismo* (the gradual incorporation of political elites, both allied and opposed, into the political order), illustrate that hegemony as a fully consensual rule or a thorough socio-cultural domination should be regarded as an exception rather than the rule. At issue here is understanding how political or ideological transformations occur within the dialectical nexus of state formation and class struggle especially in peripheral capitalist formations, without leading to a corresponding shift in the fundamental social relations (Morton, 2010). As Scott (1990: 79) argued, 'If there is a social phenomenon to be explained here, it is the reverse of what theories of hegemony and false consciousness purport to account for.'

Thirdly, the theoretical issue with the hegemonic ideology thesis is its exclusion of class struggle over material interests from the analytical framework. By focusing exclusively on consensual rule at the ideological and discursive levels, this approach risks overlooking economic struggles that may be obscured or yet to be articulated in the political realm. Those who attribute hegemony to the entirety of socio-cultural dominance engage in a totalizing discourse that leaves little space for resistance, conflicts, contradictions, or disjunctions across the political, economic, cultural, or ideological domains. Considering these concerns, one could argue that many Gramscian theorists have effectively 'substituted a kind of ideological determinism for the material determinism they sought to avoid' (Scott, 1985: 317).

Another important challenge for hegemony theories concerns the difficulty in explaining how social change could originate from below, from subordinate classes or groups. Indeed, Gramscian theories, with their overemphasis on ideological or discursive reproduction, are better suited to explaining continuity and stasis

than accounting for change. As Scott (1990: 78) points out, hegemony is often viewed as 'a self-perpetuating equilibrium that can only be disturbed by an external shock.' This perspective, Scott (1990: 78) argues, limits the ability of hegemony theories to explain change without resorting to a "big-bang" theory of disruption. This limitation is evident in both agent-centric or humanist and structuralist interpretations of hegemony. The former, by failing to recognize relative autonomy from ruling class ideology, must either ignore contradictions within the dominant ideology or the influence of subaltern ideologies, or collapse the entire complexity of class struggle into the ideological domain. The latter, by granting ideological structures/discourses a high degree of relative autonomy from their socio-economic contexts, tend to focus exclusively on the discursive reproduction of ideological domination, neglecting the material and social class forces and struggles at play. By collapsing the link between the objective class determinations and the ideological discursive field, hegemony in Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist framework is reduced to a set of purely discursive practices, in which class or any other agency capable of effecting change disappears.

The theory of hegemony as ruling class ideological domination fails to address the material contradictions and conflicts inherent within the content and form of the dominant ideology itself. This perspective is grounded in a 'historicist' view of class, or what could be described as a 'collectivized individual' with its own unified 'consciousness, unity, autonomy, and self-determination' (Eagleton, 1994: 187). The hegemonic ideology is, in this framework, seen as a mere reflection of the material existence of a unitary and autonomous class, primarily expressed through the realization of its consciousness and worldview in the institutions, practices, and discourses that shape and govern society. As Lukács observed, 'For a class to be ripe means that its interests and consciousness enable it to organize the whole society in accordance with those interests' (cited in Eagleton, 1994: 186).

In this voluntarist interpretation of hegemony, as Eagleton (1994: 186) explains, 'each social class has its own peculiar, corporate "world-view," one directly expressive of its material conditions of existence; and ideological dominance then consists in one of these world-views imposing its stamp on the social formation as a whole.' This view seeks 'to locate the "essence" of bourgeois society within the collective subjectivity of the bourgeois class itself.' In his attempt to avoid the mechanical determinism of orthodox Marxist class analysis, Lukács entertains the notion of a 'social totality'; however, as Eagleton (1994: 186) points out, 'this social whole risks becoming a purely "circular" one, where each "level" of social reality is granted equal effectivity'. In this formulation, hegemony as class ideological power dramatically 'simplifies the true unevenness and complexity of the ideological "field" (Eagleton, 1994: 186).'

In restating the hegemony problematic within Poulantzas' (2000) structuralist framework, any single ideological field is not granted autonomy within the social structure. His conception of hegemony challenges the view that ideology can exist independently from the social classes that produce it. Rather than understanding the ideology-class relationship as one of mere correspondence or reflection, Poulantzas views it as more complex, emphasizing that the relationship between class and ideology is shaped by dynamic interactions, rather than a straightforward alignment.

Nonetheless, this perspective also makes change difficult to explain because social and political institutions are seen as mere reflections and mechanisms of a self-autonomous and cohesive hegemonic ideology. In such a framework, social and political relations and institutions appear stable within the discursive structure of hegemony. Structuralist views of hegemony, as a result, tend to minimize the role of class struggle and the potential for change, instead placing undue emphasis on the stability and reproduction of existing ideological-institutional structures. As Peter Willis (1977: 175) noted, 'Structuralist theories of reproduction present the dominant ideology (under which culture is subsumed) as impenetrable. Everything fits too neatly. Ideology always pre-exists and preempts any authentic criticism. There are no cracks in the billiard ball smoothness of the process.' This critique underscores how structuralist approaches to hegemony overlook the contradictions, struggles, and potential for ideological change.

While the concept of hegemony as an amalgam of 'force' and 'consent' has been influential, its focus on ideological domination often neglects the social-material contradictions, complex and coercive class struggles that shape social formations. When hegemony is conceived as a discursive formation, classes and class struggle are effectively substituted by discursive practices. As critiques suggest, these frameworks risk oversimplifying the ideological terrain, portraying dominant ideologies as self-contained and impermeable, while neglecting the agency and resistance of subordinate groups. Moreover, the conceptualization of hegemony as an unchanging, self-perpetuating equilibrium fails to adequately explain

social change, which is often driven by class conflicts and contradictions emanating from underlying capitalist relations of production that are obscured by overly idealistic and discursive interpretations.

The challenges discussed—ranging from empirical issues to theoretical rigidity and full autonomization and oversimplification of the ideological field—underscore the need for a more dynamic, historically and socially-grounded understanding of hegemony. This approach should account for the variability of class relations, political-ideological struggles, while recognizing the potential for counter-hegemonic social/class forces, contradictions and alternatives within the ideological terrain, and the role of class struggle in driving social and political change.

CONCLUSION

This paper argued that Gramscian and neo-Gramscian studies, spanning dominant ideology, discourse theory, and neo-Gramscian approaches in IR/IPE, often emphasize the ideational, ideological, and consensual aspects of hegemony, neglecting its structural, class-based, contested, and coercive dimensions. In discourse theory, the concepts of class and class struggle have become overly abstracted, distancing theorists from class-based political analysis. Those focused on ideational and cultural elements tend to downplay structural and institutional dynamics in hegemony formation, overlooking the connection to capitalist relations of production and ongoing class struggles. Additionally, the role of the capitalist state and its institutions in shaping class and hegemony is often neglected. The failure to incorporate class struggle into hegemony theory limits these frameworks to explaining continuity and stability, while struggling to account for change.

This paper also revealed that, despite differences in their disciplinary or social contexts, all three Gramscian theories of hegemony were shaped by the organic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s and the subsequent neoliberal transformations at both national and global levels. Hegemony became a tool not only for analyzing these transformations but also for rethinking class struggle and revitalizing leftist democratic politics in more pluralistic and inclusive directions within socially transformed, complex Western societies. The diminishing emphasis on class struggle was, in part, a reaction to and correction of traditional Marxist conviction that privileged the labour movement's role in revolutionary change. Hall's ideological interpretation of hegemony arose from his need to understand Thatcherism as a hegemonic project in order to confront it on its own terms. As Blackburn (2014: 75) noted, this 'political impulse' permeated Hall's entire scholarship. Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe's use of hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was driven by their need to reformulate a socialist strategy for 'radical democracy', moving beyond the class-based notions of social democracy at the time (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006: 970). Cox (1999, 2004) also advocated global political and inter-civilizational dialogue for non-exclusionary pluralist world orders. In Gramscian terms, hegemony theorists waged a 'war of position' against both strictly class-centric and neoliberal conceptions of politics. As with Gramsci's work, the theories of Hall, Laclau and Mouffe, and Cox are best understood within their own historical and socio-political contexts.

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