

# In the shadows of the dialectic method: Building a framework upon the thoughts of Adorno and Gramsci<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In the afterword of *Capital* Marx argued that his method had been little understood. In fact, Marx never really fully explained his method in one place and, moreover, Engels' attempts to elucidate Marx's method led to a fruitless dogmatism. Adorno claimed that science following Hegel's death science moved into two directions: (a) a clear methodology and (b) a philosophy, disrobed of the empirical content on wish - according to Hegel - the intellect had to test itself. The aim of this article is to bridge this gap, and the dialectical method is seen as a significant point of consideration. The goal of the article is not to overcome existing problems in readings of Marx, but to approach International Political Economy (IPE) from the basis of certain neo-Gramscian approaches. In doing so, the article attempts to unpack how this can enrich the existing literature on Marx's dialectic, including the interpretations of Adorno and Hegel. The article contains three parts. First, it provides an account of the theoretical background of neo-Gramscian IPE. The second section brings theoretical and methodological ideas together to develop a useable dialectic framework for empirical research. Last, the framework will be applied to an empirical case in politics.

**Keywords:** Ontological Framework, Antonio Gramsci, Dialectic, Research Design

## Introduction

The neo-Gramscian approach in International Relations (IR) is one of the most interesting and challenging we have in IR theory. The (maybe provoking) hypothesis of this article is, that neo-Gramscian theorists have so far failed in developing an appropriate theoretical and ontological framework, which could be applied for empirical research. Influential neo-Gramscian thinkers like Robert W. Cox and Susan Strange,<sup>2</sup> do not show their readers a way to apply their highly interesting work to empirical oriented research.<sup>3</sup> To

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<sup>1</sup>This is an updated version of a previous paper titled "A dialectic approach to International Relations: bridging philosophy and methods in neo-Gramscian IPE" that was presented at the Spectrum Conference (Spectrum Journal of Global Studies), November 2-3 2012, Middle East Technical University Ankara.

<sup>2</sup>I am aware of the criticism that Susan Strange is not a neo-Gramscian thinker (Ulrich Hamenstädt, *Der Staat in der Globalisierung* (Marburg: Tectum, 2007)). Maybe it is more precise to use the category of "pioneers of heterodox IPE" (Hans-Jürgen Bieling, *Internationale Politische Ökonomie. Eine Einführung* (Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, 2011), p. 50) for Cox and Strange. However, my argument in this article is, even if I take Susan Strange into consideration as a critical or even neo-Gramscian IPE thinker, it is hard to figure out what the/her method is and how someone can apply it.

<sup>3</sup>Robert W. Cox for example focuses mostly on important terms that could be used as 'frameworks' or keystones for research (1981, 1993). But he describes more the connection between these terms and leaves it to the interested reader to work with his 'frameworks' on his own. Susan Strange applies her

come up with a framework that could be applied to empirical research is the goal of this article. This means, the ambition of the article can be also distinguished from 'synthesis projects' like, for example, Adler and Pouliot's book about International Practices.<sup>4</sup> Adler and Pouliot offer Practices as an overarching term for different research perspectives in IR. In contrast, this article aims to outline one specific approach for researchers who are already familiar with neo-Gramscian thinking, and the goal is to produce a pragmatic framework for empirical research. However, this article tries to tackle a central problem in the discipline, because there is a twofold movement in political science: a theory driven approach on the one hand, and problem driven, on the other. Theory driven approaches focus more on epistemological and ontological questions,<sup>5</sup> whilst problem-solving theories focus on the creation of models on the base of axioms and the (technical) use of methods by looking at causal relations between variables.<sup>6</sup> As Adorno pointed the advance of the scientific intellect has moved into two directions after Hegel: (a) a clear methodology and (b) a philosophy, disrobed of the empirical content on which - according to Hegel - the intellect has to test itself.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this article is then to tackle the problem that theoretical and methodological viewpoints may fall apart. The underlying hypothesis therefore is that the method - methods in general, and the dialectic approach in particular, as it will be argued in this article - is the key to bridge the gap between theoretical and empirical research. Therefore the article is going to introduce a theoretical framework rooted in the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. The main part of this article will discuss this approach. This part aims to transfer the theoretical framework into a practical framework to give a blueprint of how to overcome the gap between theoretical and empirical research. Two Frameworks will be presented in the second section: First, a conceptual framework introduced by Robert W. Cox world order theory linked back to Gramsci's work. Second, a framework for analysing social relations based on the work of Adorno on the dialectic of Hegel. The article gives a brief outlook on how the frameworks

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'power framework' from *States and Markets* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) in her later book *The retreat of the state* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1996). She uses the empirical work mostly to illustrate that her theoretical assumptions are true, but she does not use the structural method that she introduced before (ibid., p. 42).

<sup>4</sup> Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (Eds.), *International Practices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> David Owen, "Re-orienting International Relations: on Pragmatism, Pluralism and Practical Reasoning", *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* (2002, 31), p. 653.

<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory", *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* (No. 10, June 1981), pp. 126-155; Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, "Theoretical and Methodological challenges of neo-Gramscian Perspectives to International Political Economy", *International Gramsci Society online Article* (2003); Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton, "A critical theory route hegemony, world order and historical change: neo-Gramscian perspectives in International Relations", *Capital & Class* (2004 28: 85).

<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie, Drei Studien zu Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), p. 253

could be applied to empirical research in the third section. In the last section, attention will be paid to political research in the field of electricity saving politics for private households; a very dynamic field of research in the intermediate range between science and practical politics. To meet the Kyoto targets and the ambitious goals of the European Climate package “20/20 by 2020”, most industrialised countries are looking for good practices to implement into their own political set of regulative instruments. Research grants were given to political scientists in order to come up with practical advice for policy makers. The final section will look at some of these political advice and take them into question by offering a broader view on the topic by taking the theoretical and methodological approach into account. The goal of this illustration is to show the additional benefits of the approached developed in this article, and how it could be applied and added to existing research.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this article is based on the ideas of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. In the Prison Notebooks (*Quaderni del Carcere*), Gramsci focused on the question why the revolution in the aftermath of the Great War was unsuccessful in in so many western countries, while at the same time the Russian revolution did happen in a “low industrialist” country. According to the economy oriented Marxist theories of social development, this process should have occurred the other way around. To explain these phenomena, Gramsci takes a broader view on the idea of historical development, by taking the *hegemonic* structure of the civil society and the ability to build a *historic bloc* (both terms – hegemony and historic bloc - will be explained later). Gramsci comes to the conclusion that:

“In Russia the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous: in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was once revealed.”<sup>8</sup>

From this historical few point Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony:

“The “normal” exercise of hegemony on the new classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterised by combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent.”<sup>9</sup>

If this hegemony proves to be stable over a certain time in a society, it can be called a *historic bloc*. The key term is in this article the *integral state*

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<sup>8</sup>Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p.283.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

that was also coined by Gramsci. The term describes the relation between civil society and state by taking several moments (economic, political, and military) into account. At this point, Gramsci stays in the tradition of historical materialism by focusing on the modes of production and historical changes in society. Research in historical materialism starts mostly by looking at the mode of production within a given society. Production therefore must be understood in a broader sense, by taking the production of ideas and thoughts into account. Production is a highly social process, it always contains labour. Therefore labour reflects the given terms of production within a society as well as its power relations. So most research in historical materialism is not guided by more abstract concepts of ideas, but rather by the study of physical objects and their process of production and allocation of objects. Gramsci breaks with this tradition in one way by taking ideas as a social product much more into account. At the same time he stays in the tradition of historical materialism as well. However, Gramsci's combination of two different starting points for an analytical framework, a subjectivist and an objectivist view, makes his ideas so interesting.<sup>10</sup> This viewpoint will be shared by working out the methodological framework in the next section. Two perspectives of Gramsci's thinking should be mentioned before going on to the methodological frameworks: the historical and logical view on social processes.

A dialectic theory of history is not only concerned with the past but with the continual process of history.<sup>11</sup> This means that from dialectic viewpoints an argumentation has to start by taking a closer look at the process and not on the "ontological necessity" of a given social formation. Critical theory for Robert W. Cox, one of the most prominent neo-Gramscian thinkers "...does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and whether they might be in the process of changing"<sup>12</sup>. So it is the historical development that stays in the focus of the analytical attention of Gramscian thinking. Under the term 'world order' neo-Gramscian analysis focuses on how dominant ideas, norms, institutions, and practices are established. Most scholars from this field don't stop at the point of analysis and understand the identification of those underlying forces as a starting point to build an emancipatory project. The normative drive of those scholars is shared in this article, too. In the view of this article the process of industrialization is the historical key moment to

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<sup>10</sup>There is another for neo-Gramscian analysis in the interplay between rulers and ruled and the class struggles for hegemony (Kees van der Pijl, *Transnational Class and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1998)). Such view can be very helpful e.g. for understanding of policy towards the "Third World" (Enrico Augelli and Craig Murphy, *America's Quest for Supremacy and the Third World, A Gramscian Analysis* (London: Pinter, 1988)), but in this article we do not necessarily have to go beyond material interests to analyse politics toward electricity savings in private households. But it is worth to mention that especially in post-colonial studies the ideas of Gramsci leading to an approach that differs from the one in this article.

<sup>11</sup>Bieler and Morton, *op.cit.* in note 6, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup>Cox, *op.cit.* in note 6, p. 129.

explain the dependence of industrialized countries for energy. The overconsumption of energy<sup>13</sup> in industrialized countries leads to serious problems on the world level. At the same time, problems induced by technical “development” seem to have a low chance to be solved by innovations without producing new problems.<sup>14</sup> For example, the public discussion of the factor four hypothesis,<sup>15</sup> which was widely recognised and broadly discussed in Germany, or better security technologies for atomic energy production are not seen as proper solutions for the underlying problem; it is the idea of trying to solve problems, that are introduced by technologies, with new technologies. The point of view in this article is that we have to dig deeper, and that political philosophy has to offer a fresh angle on the very technology-driven debate on electricity consumption.

### **The dialectic method**

After a brief overview on some of Gramsci’s theoretical key terms the article now aims to build a methodological framework. The term “method” and the way it is used in this article, could be easily misleading. According to most textbooks in political science, methodology is mostly used to describe techniques of qualitative or quantitative research. This article uses a widerdefinition of the term and aims to build “a bridge in no-man’s-land”: as it is used in this article, the term method has to bridge (to use Adorno’s words) the land between clear methodologies on the one hand, where social science has to follow the example of the “hard” natural sciences, and thick descriptions of political problems, on the other.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the term ‘theory’, as it is used here, does not connote a way to map reality merely as a more parsimonious model of reality. The aim is to give a bigger picture of the research problem, and not to limit, reality for the researcher. This point is central to this article and aims to bring (neo-)Gramscian terms of analysis together with some of the Frankfurt Schoolideas, notablyAdorno’s thoughts on Hegel, which focus on the relation between subject and object.

This section, firstly, gives an overview on the heuristic covering philosophical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological questions. Second, the levels or spheres of activity from (neo-)Gramscianism will be

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<sup>13</sup>The OECD countries account for about 80 per cent of the world’s energy demand. The idea that China or India will reach the same level of individual energy consumption that is accomplished in industrialized countries is synonymous to a collapsing world.

<sup>14</sup>Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Cultural Memory of the Present* (Stanford University Press, 1947/2002).

<sup>15</sup>Factor four means to double the wealth by dividing the use of natural resources into half and was the title of a memorandum by the Club of Rome in 1995. To increase quality of life by lowering the energy consumption at the same time is based on the idea that we can reach this goal by becoming four times more efficient in our energy use.

<sup>16</sup>Bernhard Kittel, “Eine Disziplin auf der Suche nach Wissenschaftlichkeit: Entwicklung und Stand der Methoden in der Deutschen Politikwissenschaft”, *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* (Vol. 50, No. 3, September 2009).

combined with the logic of language, the way for example Benjamin and Adorno have structured their work. Then a second methodological framework will be introduced to analyse the relation between subject and object to analyse on the different levels or spheres the moments and elements, as they are called by (neo-)Gramscian thinkers.

### **Heuristic**

Heuristic is often defined as a procedural method. This procedural method aims to produce new knowledge without reflecting on its underlying assumptions.<sup>17</sup> By this definition, heuristic fosters technical, problem solving strategy,<sup>18</sup> one way to characterise this is as providing a 'blueprint' for a research proposal without reflecting the theoretical problems provoked by underlying axioms. This article relies on a different notion of heuristic. The word heuristic corresponds to the meaning of the Latin expression "arsinveniendi", which can be translated as the art of conception.<sup>19</sup> But how can an overall conception bridge the different points of view on a specific topic? And in addition, what are the theoretical backgrounds and the methodological implications of this concept?

In this article, heuristic can be understood as a multi-level house. Constructed with four floors, the heuristic builds the rooftop or the walls to unite the different empirical viewpoints of this section. On the four floors of our house we have to ask ourselves different questions;<sup>20</sup> these are philosophical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological questions.

*The philosophical level:* This article applies to a concept that keeps the idea and aims to give a bigger picture of the problems under research, on the one hand. On the other, above all, the article aims to show a systematic interconnection of the micro and the macro level. But what could be the theoretical starting point for an analysis? The starting point – from the theoretical perspective of the Philosophers this article refers to – is to look on the mode of production and allocation within its historically changing formation of capital. From this viewpoint, nature can never be understood as a "natural existence", but has to be understood as a product of the labour process.<sup>21</sup>

*The methodological level:* This level puts the emphasis on the need for a clear order of analysis and presentation of the results. This does not mean a

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<sup>17</sup> Kuno Lorenz, Heuristik, in: *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*. (Mannheim/Wien/Zürich: Bibliographisches Institut, 1984), pp. 99-100; Heinrich Schepers, „Heuristik, heuristisch“, in Joachim Ritter (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), pp. 1115-1120.

<sup>18</sup> Cox, op.cit. in note 6.

<sup>19</sup> Volker Peckhaus, „Abduktion und Heuristik“, *Perspektiven der Analytischen Philosophie* (23, 1999), pp. 833–841.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher J. Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital* (Leiden, Koninklijke Brill, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, op.cit. in note 7, p. 270.

linear historical reconstruction of the case, but a systematic analysis of interconnections between the different levels and sectors. The methodological level takes into account that historical and social process can be also understood as antagonistic and inconsistent. These are the key ideas of what is called dialectic approach in this article and the antagonism is seen as the mainspring for human history.<sup>22</sup>The method also includes the idea of a rise from the specific or concrete to the universal stages of analysis, while the presentation method can be different and can turn this approach upside down; starting from the macro level by going on to the single case.

*The epistemological level:* Epistemological knowledge in this article is understood as a time-related concept. The scientist is always related to a historical context in which (s)he works and has to reflect constantly on this circumstance. Even the way and the reason for choosing an object of research must be put into question by the researcher, according to Walter Benjamin.<sup>23</sup>The subject-object relations also need careful reflection, by looking at the underlying assumptions on the theoretical side and the categories in use at the empirical level. The historical conditions and the logic as well must be taken into consideration by switching between the different levels of abstraction from the case under study.

*The ontological level:* The starting point is the assumption of an overall totality of the study case. Therefore, again, categories in use must be constantly reflected upon. “Ontological” cannot be understood as something given by nature – or mankind, following the rules of nature – but the dynamics of historical and (il-) logical developments of social formation and they must be analysed more in depth.

### **Levels and spheres**

Coming back to Gramsci and neo-Gramscian thinking,<sup>24</sup> Gramsci himself suggested three *levels* of analysis: the local, the national, and the international level. A very similar framework of *spheres of activity* is suggested by Cox, who looks at social relations of production, forms of state, and the world order, in order of increasing abstraction. In both frameworks the national level or the form of the state is the *centre* of attention. How the function of the state has changed,<sup>25</sup> on a qualitative and quantitative scale in the so-called process of globalisation, and how this affects - and is affected at the same time - by the

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<sup>22</sup>For Hegel the dialectic between wealth of the society and the ambition for more wealth is the dynamic that drives the society beyond itself (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1820/2004), p. 319).

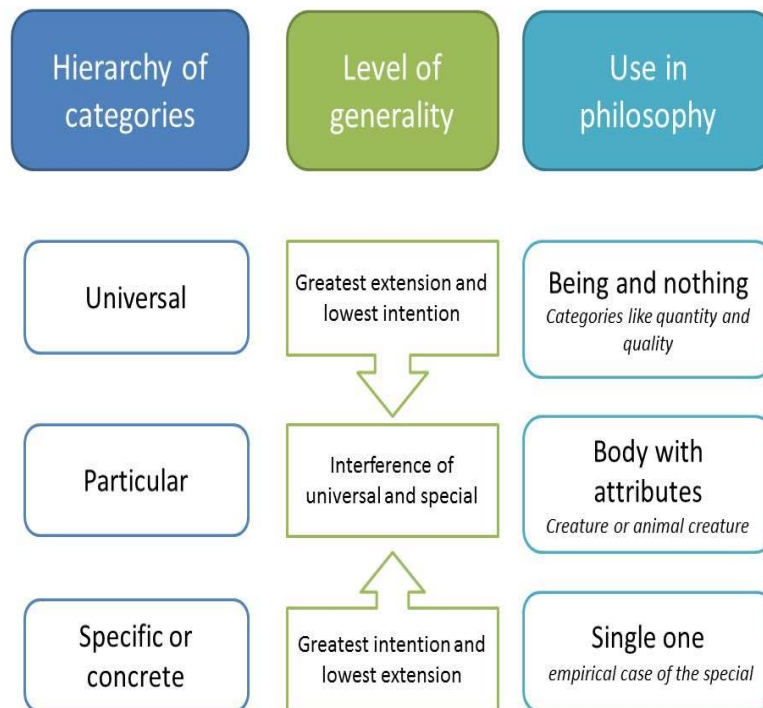
<sup>23</sup>Anca Pusca, “Walter Benjamin, a Methodological Contribution”, *International Political Sociology* (No. 3, 2009).

<sup>24</sup>This article will refer at this point to the ideas of Robert W. Cox, who introduced Gramsci as a source of inspiration to IR studies in the 1980s.

<sup>25</sup>Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1996).

local level of social relations of production, and beyond, by the international level of the world order, is one of the key questions in neo-Gramscian research by looking e.g. on changing power relations.<sup>26</sup> Both authors this article refers to, Gramsci and Cox, leave their audiences with the hint that these levels and spheres are interconnected. They are absolutely right with this advice, but it is of not so much help if somebody wants to apply these frameworks to her or his research. At this point, this article suggests taking a look back to the work of Marx and the Frankfurt School. In their work, a more logical structure is used to structure the thoughts. The following figure explains this structure:

Figure 1: Structure of thoughts



A good example of this framework in action is Marx's *Capital*.<sup>27</sup> The book starts by looking closer on a single commodity, to discover the difference between "use" and "exchange" value and the dialectic relation. The relation between use and exchange value is dialectic because they only can appear

<sup>26</sup>Susan Strange, *States and Markets* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

<sup>27</sup>John Michael Roberts, "Marxism and Critical Realism: The Same, Similar, or Just Plain Different?" *Capital & Class* (No. 68, 1999), pp. 31-33.



together and do not make sense without each other. Nobody could trade a commodity without a use value. From here on, Marx built up more general and particular cases of a higher complexity, but he always goes back to the specific, the single one, to check if he is right. The last step Marx is taking in *Capital*, is to look at the general "laws" of capital production. The laws have a universal aspect in that they do not apply merely to Marx's case, i.e. industrialising England. By combining historical and logical arguments Marx's is going up from the specific or concrete to the universal. Marx method was often misunderstood, as he said in the afterword of the second edition of *Capital*, and he never explained it in detail. This brief interpretation is one way to read *Capital*, and the figure above could be used as a guideline to read *Capital*, as well as for articles and books that are structured like this, in order to analyse at which stage or level the author is developing his or her argument. But it could be also used for structuring one's own writing.

The framework presented here is often described as the "Process of Abstraction"<sup>28</sup> with quotations from Marx's work. In this article it is more presented as a way to organize thinking and also as a method to present it. So it "...is a matter of where and how one draws boundaries and establishes units (the dialectical term is "abstract") in which to think about the world."<sup>29</sup> However, this does not mean that someone could take a more sophisticated framework with more levels of generality, and make use of it not only for ordering and presenting thoughts, but for analysis as well.<sup>30</sup> At this point of the article, this structure is presented to give a first impression of how such a framework of abstractions could be applied to one's own work.

At this point the article has to come back to neo-Gramscian thinking. Gramsci and Cox introduced terms, elements and moments, for analysing each step at the different levels or spheres. Gramsci means with moments the combination of economic, political, and military forces<sup>31</sup> and their relation to the social base that must be reflected on each level of the analysis.<sup>32</sup> Cox talks about different elements (or dialectical moments of hegemony) to describe ideas, institutions, and capabilities that form each sphere of activity.<sup>33</sup> Both, Gramsci and Cox give a description of the terms and of the underlying dependent relationship (the dialectic relation) of these moments or elements. It remains largely unclear how these categories could be properly analysed. To

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<sup>28</sup>E.g. Bertell Ollmann, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 2003.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, pp. 86.

<sup>31</sup>Military force might not be a central moment for analysis nowadays. Gramsci's thought is located in the political discussions of the 1920<sup>th</sup> and therefore highly related to the Marxist discussions on imperialism where the use of military force was central to the understanding of the politics of the imperial powers in Western Europe.

<sup>32</sup>Micheal Burawoy, "For a Sociological Marxism: The Complementary Convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi", *Politics & Society* (2003 31: 193) p. 239.

<sup>33</sup>Cox, op.cit.in note 6, p. 136.

come up with a proposal of how to overcome this problem, the article goes back to the Frankfurt School in the 1960s, and then offers a pragmatic and application oriented framework of Adorno's essays on Hegel's dialectic, which are more theoretical. By looking closer on the relation between subject and object, and notably the doubling of these levels within the thinking process, we can find starting points and a guideline for analysing these terms on each level or within each sphere of the research process.

### **Subject and Object**

The relation between the subject and object is a substantial philosophical problem. To think this as a relation between dependent and independent variables can lead to serious problems. Gramsci instead offers us a dialectical view on this relation. He distinguishes the traditional intellectual from a so called "organic" intellectual.<sup>34</sup> An organic intellectual is an advocate for the interests of his class; on the one hand, the organic intellectual is a product of her or his class by absorbing the interests that occur on an objective level while at the same time (s)he is organising the class consensus. This new class consensus in society forms a new social objectivity for the individual, too. So the "organic" intellectual is part of a dialectic process on which the individual, on the level of the subject, is forming a real existing social world, on the level of the object, which the individual has to face. The absorption is a case of illustration for Gramsci, into how an individual is influenced by the objective existence of social relation patterns, and these patterns are reformed or stabilised by the action of the subject. This basic idea can be enlarged by the thinking of Adorno. He focuses on the doubling on the subjective and objective level. Doubling means, that there is often a 'subtext' in the use of language or a theory behind the things we observe. To give a short example, if you meet someone and (s)he says "Hello. How are you?" you know that this is not a question but a phrase. Or a sign at a pub tell you "We serve breakfast at any time." does not mean that you can order traditional breakfasts from ancient Greek. There must be always a social shared understanding of language. This simple notion can be a real challenge in research. What Adorno and Benjamin describe mostly theoretical in their work is illustrated in the next figure and described in detail afterwards.

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<sup>34</sup>Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers,2010), p. 5.

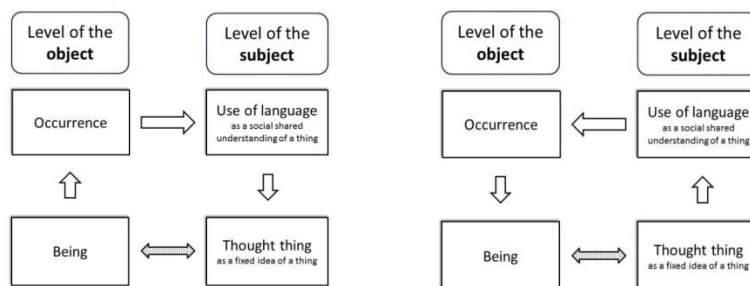


Figure 2: Object – subject relation

There are two starting points in the diagrams: the metaphysical speculation about the “true nature” of empirical cases that occur to us, and the way we fix an idea of a specific thing or an artefact.<sup>35</sup> Starting the analysis of ideas or institutions e.g. by looking at the level of the object, we have to face the dialectic of being and occurrence of the object; which is one of the essential problems in logic.<sup>36</sup> The occurrence is like a reflection on a lake. It could be that the reflection on the lake tells us the truth about our speculation about the being of an object, but it could also be untrue or even the opposite of what we are seeing - we have to dive into the lake to find out. The dipping can only be done by permanent (self-)reflection; to come back to the empirical case at each step of the analysis and also looking closely on the level of the subject (the double-headed arrow in the figure above). At the level of the subject we have to face the doubling of it into the way we are fixing ideas of specific things or artefacts and the use of language. At this step it is important to keep in mind that even when we have a fixed idea in our thoughts and a name for it that is recognised by other people in the society, it does not mean that this thing has to exist; there is no objective correspondent to the Easter bunny, for example. This notion might sound funny, but Walter Benjamin reminded us that the definition of a research question in science stands at the end of a process that should be reflected within the process,<sup>37</sup> or as Adorno put it, the misery of philosophy is that the intellect already knows what should not be known.<sup>38</sup> We will come back to this point in the next section, but before we have to link this framework back to the neo-Gramscian terms introduced in this article.

<sup>35</sup>The terms occurrence and being might be surprising for the reader. They are the German terms for “Erscheinung” and “Wesen”. In the existing literature this terms are sometimes also translated as appearance (instead of occurrence), and essence or reality (instead of being). (Richard Gunn, “Marxism and philosophy: a critique of critical realism”, *Capital & Class* (13: 87, 1989), p. 88) But this article aims to underline the subjectivity of the researcher, and therefore these terms are translated in a different way.

<sup>36</sup>Adorno, op.cit.in note 7, p. 257.

<sup>37</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>38</sup>Adorno, op.cit.in note 7, p. 272.

To analyse moments or elements like ideas or institutions we can start from the level of the object and from the level of the subject as well. Three things are of importance: first, the doubling of both levels should be kept in mind, and this means that elements of the analysis are mostly visible on the upper level (occurrence and use of language), but there is always a level beneath that must be included into the analysis. Second, the circle in the figure above must be thought through from both directions. And last, the interaction between the levels of subject and object must be taken into account (double-headed arrows).

This second methodological framework can be seen as a useful tool added to the first. How this frameworks and the heuristic could be used in empirical research will be illustrated in the next section. The focus will be set on the question of how the dialectic approach can contribute to existing research. The chosen field of research in this article are policy instruments for electricity savings in private households. The next section applies the frameworks to existing research in that field to illustrate the gains of the dialectic approach.

### **Applications**

The dialectic method can only be developed by applying it to empirical cases. In this final section of the article an application of the theoretical and methodological frameworks is illustrated. This section focuses on research on the politics of electricity saving in Germany. The electricity consumption of private households is steadily rising in most industrialised countries. At the same time the price for electricity is rising, too. According to the assumption that people act rationally, this is a paradox. However, the hope that more efficient electrical appliances will solve the problem in the long run is not a viable prospect, because household appliances already became much more efficient in the last years, but this did not solve the problem of a steadily rising electricity consumption in private households. There are in fact different reasons for the rise of electricity consumption in private households: more single households, higher equipment rates of electricity consuming household appliances, and so on.<sup>39</sup>

This section of the article will start by looking at the common use of language about this topic, and the possible barriers that can arise from the not-correspondent objective level; i.e. language is not always giving us the possibility to express oneself and it can be sometimes misleading too.<sup>40</sup> From this more general thought in a second step the section lines out some trends in environmental research in Germany to discuss possible starting points to include the frameworks into further research. Last, an example from the

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<sup>39</sup> Veit Bürger, "Identifikation, Quantifizierung und Systematisierung technischer und verhaltensbedingter Stromeinsparpotenziale privater Haushalte", *TRANSPOSE Working Paper No3* (Freiburg, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1926/1967).

existing research on environmental Politics in Germany will be discussed to illustrate how heuristic and objective levels of analyses can contribute to the field.

### **Use of language**

The words “natural catastrophe” or “natural disaster” are very difficult notions. What they do is turn the subject into an object at the level where it comes to the level of a shared social understanding of the notion.<sup>41</sup> The words characterise a catastrophe that happens to people, and where nature is the acting subject. The way we use the word, in our social shared understanding of the thing in language, natural catastrophe turns nature into something objective; the language no longer reflects the occurrence.

For many years, energy consumption rose in direct proportion to economic growth. To illustrate the point, many German politicians in the 1950s did not use the GDP as an indicator for economic growth, but rather the time that was needed to double the energy consumption in the country.<sup>42</sup> The idea of economic growth and a better life is still connected with a higher level of consumption. This could be seen by turning to the opposite of higher consumption: lower consumption, or ‘saving’. The word saving in this context is often connected with the idea of renouncement. If this understanding could be changed into an idea of preventing households from the waste of energy, politics on the individual level of the consumer might be more effective. It might be worth for further research to take a closer look on how policy makers talk about the need of lower energy consumption and put this into the framework to analyse ideas, capabilities, and institutions more in detail.

The current research framework for energy saving in Germany by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research is called “From knowledge to action”.<sup>43</sup> The title already implies that at first a lot of scientific knowledge has been produced about the topic. In fact a survey of the existing literature of environmental politics comes to the conclusion that while “...there is agreement on a lot of factors, the role of environmental attitudes and environmental behaviour remains uncertain.”<sup>44</sup> More important is the fact that the Federal Ministry wants to underline by the title that the consumers already know a lot, but this does not help to change their actions as much as it is expected. It also sheds light on the aspect that governments from EU countries have to learn from each other when they identify a problem. For electricity consumption

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<sup>41</sup>Harald Welzer, *Klimakriege. Wofür im 21. Jahrhundert getötet wird* (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung: Band 703, 2008).

<sup>42</sup>The growth of the GDP to measure the growing wealth within a society is also highly disputed.

<sup>43</sup>Accessed on 18 October 2012, <http://www.sozial-oekologische-forschung.org/en/947.php>

<sup>44</sup>Bettina Brohmann, Stefanie Heinzle, Klaus Rennings, Joachim Schleich and Rolf Wüstenhagen, “What’s Driving Sustainable Energy Consumption? A Survey of the Empirical Literature” EEDAL Working Paper 09, Nr. 013 (EEDAL, 2009).

"targets and goals with appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks [are identified], but it has to take into account national and regional variations. The idea is that states take responsibility for these goals and try to learn from one another through monitoring, evaluation and peer review. Rather than imposing collective discipline, these procedures can be promoted as a means to disseminate good practice,..."<sup>45</sup> This is the best discretion for these kind of projects. Therefore it is not surprising how many research projects under this heading "From knowledge to action" focus on better information for the consumer; teaching materials for schools (Blink), information campaigns for offices (Change), or web information tools for smart metering in German households (Intelliekon). The focus of many projects running into the serious risk to narrow down the problem to the level of the consumer - therefore this article wants to present an approach of how to take the bigger picture of the problem into consideration. The argument of the article is not to say that the individual level of the consumer is of no importance for sustainable consumption, but that the perspective could hardly be limited to it. It seems to be easy to give the message that the consumer (and voter) has to change his or her behaviour so that things go right, but the whole system must be taken into consideration too. To rethink a system of steadily economic growth in a limed world of resources those are already misallocated between the citizens of the world is worth doing from a global perspective.<sup>46</sup> On the local and national level questions must be taking more into consideration why policy makers still have a hard time to talk about lower levels of consumptions or "sacrifice" which we have to face in a nearby further even faster when we don't chance individual and systematic patterns of consumption.<sup>47</sup> The question why scientific practical advice focus more on the market also belongs to this sphere, e.g. the claim that the EU energy label should be dynamic and not static and more household appliance should have it have been ignored or went unheard for many years.<sup>48</sup> The claim of this article is therefore that all these "chaotic single cases" must be thought together, and as social scientists we have to "dig deeper" on the level of the subject and the object as well. To give an illustration of how this could look like the next part of this section is going to analyse an existing study on the topic of energy consumption and environmental politics in deep.

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<sup>45</sup>Jonathan Joseph, *The Social in the Global, Social Theory, Governmentality and Global Politics* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>46</sup>Irmi Seidl and Angelika Zahrnt, *Postwachstumsgesellschaft. Konzepte für die Zukunft* (Metropolis Verlag, 2010)

<sup>47</sup>Michael F. Maniates and John M. Meyer, *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice* (The MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>48</sup>Ulrich Hamenstädt, *Die Logik des politikwissenschaftlichen Experiments: Methodenentwicklung und Praxisbeispiel* (Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag, 2012); Stefanie Heinzle and Rolf Wüstenhagen, "Disimproving the European Energy Label's value for consumers? Results from a consumer survey" *IWOe-HSG* (University of St. Gallen, 2010).

## Heuristic and objective level

Most of the existing political instruments for the regulation of private household's energy consumption were introduced during the oil crisis in the 1970s. The most rigorous instruments were introduced in Italy at this time. These instruments are of particular interest in comparative politics in terms of why some instruments were introduced in some countries and not in others, and whether such instruments could be successfully transferred to other countries. This question was asked within the scope of a research project, located and founded in Germany.

In a paper about the Italian energy tariff system for private households, which is unique in Europe because of the so called "progressive" structure of the tariff,<sup>49</sup> Dehmel tries to explain why such rigorous instruments were introduced in Italy but not in other European countries at this time<sup>50</sup>. Dehmel offersthe reader two general lines of explanation. First, he argues that in the early seventies the communist and the socialist parties were governing the country. So they were willing to intervene much more into the economy than other, "more democratic," European countries would do. For a second explanation, Dehmel takes the geographical location of Italy into account. Italy's economy at the time was highly dependenton cheap oil from North Africa. Therefore the Italian government took more political regulations into account, in order to deal with the problem according to Dehmel's explanation.

At first glance this argumentation seems to be logical, but it does not capture the whole story. Regarding the first argument, historians like Eric Hobsbawm describe the political situation in the early 1970s in a totally different way.<sup>51</sup>Hobsbawmpoints out that the Scandinavian countries were not only the role model of perfect democracies, but also of highly regulated countries, too. Meanwhile, Franco's Spain had the most liberal economy in Europe at the time. So the subtext of Dehmel's argument reflects an ideological view on history and politics that was established since the 1980s. This decade is called the time of neo-conservative counter revolution<sup>52</sup> by political scientistssuch as Frank Deppe.<sup>53</sup>Deppe describes in his books on

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<sup>49</sup>Progressive tariffs mean that the price per kWh of consumed electricity increases with the growing amount of electricity consumed. Progressive tariffs on the electricity market belong to a group of market-based interventions that influence consumer behavior through price signals and provide an incentive for keeping consumption levels low.

<sup>50</sup> Christian Dehmel, "Der Einfluss von progressiven Tarifen auf den Stromkonsum in privaten Haushalten in Italien und Kalifornien" *TRANSPOSE Working Paper* Münster No.10, 2011.

<sup>51</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. A History of the World, 1914-1991*. (Vintage Books, 1996).

<sup>52</sup>"Through a Gramscian lens, then, neoliberalism appears to be a "passive revolution" at the global level, a conservative and defensive transformation instigated from above." (Burawoy, op.cit. in note 32, p. 241)

<sup>53</sup>Frank Deppe, *Die Anfänge* (Hamburg: VSA, 1999). Frank Deppe, *Politisches Denken zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Hamburg: VSA, 2003). Frank Deppe, *Politisches Denken im Kalten Krieg. Teil 1: Die Konfrontation der Systeme* (Hamburg: VSA, 2006). Frank Deppe, *Politisches Denken im Kalten Krieg*.

political ideas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the political changes introduced by Reagan and Thatcher and the social dimension of this change in most industrialised countries. So Dehmel's argument mostly repeats the underlying ideological assumptions introduced by neo-conservative organic intellectuals, without acknowledging the historical situation. The second argument of Dehmel is also characterised by important shortcoming. The problem is that geographical determinism draws a curtain over an specific historical viewpoint. By the end of the WW II, the Marshall Plan had aimed to stabilize the situation of scattered European countries. A large amount of money was invested to make the North Italian heavy industry less dependent from coal of the South. The heavy industry of the North has been always seen as a key factor of stabilisation for the country.<sup>54</sup> Introducing oil from Northern Africa as an alternative source of energy in Italy was one of the very cornerstones of the Marshall Plan, to keep the country from following the Yugoslavian example. This seemed to be a serious risk after 1943. So what Dehmel describes as a "natural" determinism of the geographical position of the Italian state, is in fact a specific historical development that only goes back some decades. By taking these historical components into consideration, the introduction of "rigorous" political instruments like progressive tariffs, reflects a change in society. By introducing North African oil as an alternative resource of (industrial) production in the 1940s, it came to a power shift in society. The oil crisis in the 1970s is therefore also a crisis of the historic bloc. The crisis allowed the socialist and communist party in Italy to re-empower the social class they were representing. It was not only a problem of political intervention into economic crisis, but a broader interconnection of social, political and economic interaction. The oil crisis was only a window into the field of energy politics for the social struggle of hegemony between the social classes.

Progressive tariffs in Italy had a high saving effect on private household's electricity consumption. However, Dehmel is surprised in his paper to find out that this was one of the policies that did not address the reduction of electricity consumption in the first place. Progressive tariffs were introduced to make richer households pay for the electricity consumption of low income households.<sup>55</sup> According to the theoretical and analytical framework of this article, this is not surprising but something to be expected.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Starting from questions how a pragmatic approach for neo-Gramscian researchers in IR can look like, the article offers two frameworks. Both

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*Teil 2: Systemkonfrontation, Golden Age, antiimperialistischer Befreiungskampf* (Hamburg: VSA, 2008)

<sup>54</sup>Gramsci, op.cit.in note 8.

<sup>55</sup>The underlying assumption for introducing this political instrument was that the income of households and electricity consumption are highly correlated. However, there is no empirical evidence for this assumption.



frameworks can be useful for researchers and for students in IR as well. The key to a more pragmatic approach for neo-Gramscian research is in this article the operationalization of dialectic as a method. In the course of the article, the ontological point of view from Antonio Gramsci was taken into consideration to come up with a heuristic for empirical research. Considering that the method is the key factor the highly theoretical concepts of (neo-)Gramscian approaches and those of the Frankfurt School were converted into more friendly and pragmatic methodological frameworks. These theoretical assumptions and methodological frameworks were applied to the empirical case from the beginning to illustrate the beneficial aspect of the critical view point, that was operationalized in this article. The key arguments therefore are, that political and economic relations should be analysed in terms of social context by including a historical and logical perspective on the case. Social development in the course of history does not have to be logical; it can be illogical too.

Two further key aspects are of importance for this article. At first, to fulfil the requirement of (self) reflection, the suggested frameworks in this article have to prove their usefulness in empirical research. For this, more research must be undertaken based on the approach. Second, besides the analytical use of the framework, the method of presentation is of importance. This means the presentation of research results on the one hand, what was not discussed in this article, but also the presentation of the approach on the other. The presentation of the approach has to grow with the forthcoming research – first aspect - on which it has to be reflected and developed.

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