

Marxism-Leninism: The Ideology of Twentieth Century Communism: A Philosophical Reading from Gramscian Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores Antonio Gramsci's philosophy to examine Marxism-Leninism, the predominant ideology of communism in the 20th century. This research re-examines the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of Marxism-Leninism by analysing Gramsci's critique of hegemony, state power, and cultural control. Gramsci's viewpoint offers a critical evaluation of the ways in which centralized authority and Leninist vanguardism both adhered to and deviated from traditional Marxist theory. The article explores the conflicts that exist between Gramsci's more complex theories of class conflict, civil society, and cultural hegemony and Leninist revolutionism, emphasizing the implications for revolutionary practice. This Gramscian interpretation enables a reevaluation of the merits and drawbacks of Marxism-Leninism, especially with regard to its capacity to tackle the ideological and cultural obstacles of preserving socialist nations in the 20th century. In the end, the study makes the case that Gramsci's observations provide insightful refutations of Marxism-Leninism's dogmas as well as new avenues for considering communist ideology in the context of modern politics.

Keywords: political society, communism, socialism, materialism, alienation, hegemony, and imperialism.

Introduction

Marxism is a social, economic, and political theory that examines how the ruling class affects the working class and how this leads to an unequal distribution of advantages and riches in society. Marxism addresses socialism's theory and application. It encourages the development of a society without classes. Rather of being privately owned, the means of production, distribution, and trade should belong to the community as a whole. Marxism studies the conflict between the working class and the capitalists.

Leninism is a political philosophy created by Russian Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. It suggests that the construction of a proletarian dictatorship headed by a revolutionary vanguard party should occur before communism is established.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) was a Marxist theory of political and cultural dominance in "developed" capitalism who had a significant impact. But rather than being a practicing philosopher, his career was as a radical journalist and revolutionary organizer. Gramsci was an Italian socialist activist, cultural critic, and eventually the head of the communist party.

Many ideas for implementing Marxism and socialism have been put out by Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, and others; all of these ideas are grounded in scientific knowledge. From their vantage point, they examine what has to be done by individuals to achieve social justice and equality in an exploitation-free world. The

link between their theories and practice is, thus, the subject of this essay. What concepts do they put out, and how will this result in societal transformation?

Marxism and its foundational ideas

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels created the social, political, and economic theory known as Marxism in the middle of the 1800s. In addition to offering a classless society where the means of production are jointly held, it aims to comprehend and critique the capitalist system.

Important Marxist components include:

1. ***Class struggle:*** Marxism sees history as a sequence of conflicts between various socioeconomic classes. The proletariat, or working class, and the bourgeoisie, or capital-owning class, are the main parties at odds in capitalist countries. Marx maintained that the bourgeoisie takes advantage of the proletariat's labour for financial gain.
2. ***Historical materialism:*** Marxism employs historical materialism to analyse society, emphasizing the role of labour, economic conditions, and technology as the main forces behind material conditions as the catalysts for social change. Marx held that the economic foundation shapes society structures, including politics, culture, and the law.
3. ***Alienation:*** Marx said that under capitalism, labour is commodified and exploited for profit, resulting in workers' alienation from their fellow workers, the results of their labour, and the act of production itself.
4. ***Surplus Value:*** According to Marx's labour theory of value, a product's value is determined by the number of hours of labour that were required by society to produce it. Capitalists make money from surplus value, which is the difference between what employees are paid and the value of the goods they produce.
5. ***Revolution:*** Marx thought that as the tensions between capital and labour grew more pronounced, capitalism would ultimately lead to its own destruction. A proletarian revolution would result from the working class being aware of their rights, rising up, and overthrowing the bourgeoisie.
6. ***Communism:*** Marxism predicts the development of a classless, stateless society known as communism, in which the means of production are jointly held and the distribution of goods and services is determined by need. By doing this, exploitation would end and a society where people are free to reach their full potential would be established.

Since the 19th century, Marxism has impacted a great deal of political movements, revolutions, and intellectuals. It is still a fundamental idea in discussions of socialism and communism as well as critiques of capitalism.

Leninism and its fundamental ideas

Vladimir Lenin created Leninism, a political philosophy and methodology that expanded upon Marxism's principles and modified them to fit the unique circumstances of early 20th-century Russia. A revolutionary reading of Marxism known as Leninism places a strong emphasis on the necessity of a vanguard party to guide the working class in the destruction of capitalism and the foundation of a socialist state.

Leninism's essential components include:

1. ***Vanguard Party:*** Lenin proposed the idea of a small, well-organized cadre of professional revolutionaries leading the working class as the vanguard party. He felt that the working class, left to its own devices, would not create a revolutionary consciousness intended to overturn capitalism, but

rather a "trade union consciousness" focused on short-term financial advantages. It was the vanguard party's responsibility to organize and inform the labor force in support of this revolutionary cause.

2. **Democratic Centralism:** Democratic centralism is a theory of party organization in which all members engage in free discussion and debate but are expected to support and carry out decisions made by the central leadership without additional opposition. It was intended to guarantee cohesion and effectiveness in action, especially during revolutionary conflict.
3. **Imperialism:** The argument put forth by Lenin in "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" (1917) was that capitalism had developed into imperialism, a worldwide system in which capitalist nations exploited colonies or weaker states while exporting money. This led to tensions and worldwide disparities that Lenin predicted would spark conflicts and wars between capitalist countries, providing opportunities for revolution.
4. **Revolution in a Backward Country:** Unlike Western Europe, Russia had not yet reached industrialization, thus Lenin tailored Marxism to fit its needs. He thought that as long as the vanguard party and the revolutionary peasantry had strong leadership, revolution could start in a comparatively impoverished nation like Russia, where the working class was a minority.
5. **The Dictatorship of the Proletariat:** According to Lenin's vision, the working class will take control of the state and put an end to any counterrevolutionary forces under the leadership of the vanguard party following the revolution. This was viewed as an essential first step toward safeguarding the revolution's gains and starting the process of tearing down the capitalist system and establishing socialism.
6. **New Economic Policy (NEP):** Lenin instituted the New Economic Policy in 1921 following the Russian Civil War, permitting the restricted reinstatement of market mechanisms and small-scale private enterprise. Lenin understood that complete socialism could not be imposed until the economy had stabilized. Although it was thought to be a brief pullback from strict socialism, this was required to keep the economy stable.
7. **International Revolution:** According to Lenin, a socialist revolution cannot endure on its own. International revolutions were necessary for socialism to succeed. Through the Comintern (Communist International), Lenin and the Bolsheviks provided support to revolutionary movements overseas in an effort to promote socialist revolutions around the world.

The Bolshevik Party, which spearheaded the 1917 Russian Revolution and created the Soviet Union, was founded on Leninism. Lenin's theories served as the cornerstone for the Soviet Union's political system and policies. Later, they evolved into Marxism-Leninism, which was adopted by Joseph Stalin and other communist governments around the world as the official philosophy of the USSR.

Antonio Gramsci and its fundamental ideas

Italian Marxist philosopher and political theorist Antonio Gramsci is well-known for his views on ideology, cultural hegemony, and the influence of intellectuals on social and political movements. His theories expanded upon and altered the notions of classical Marxist philosophy by emphasizing the role that civil society, culture, and ideology play both in upholding and renouncing authority. Among Gramsci's fundamental ideas are the following:

1. **Cultural Hegemony:** One of the greatest contributions made by Gramsci is the concept of cultural hegemony. He maintained that the ruling class controls society's culture and ideologies in addition to using institutions of coercion like the military and police to hold onto power. By endorsing particular

ideas, standards, and behaviours, the ruling class shapes the public's perspective in a way that upholds and validates the capitalist system. Instead of relying only on force, this method makes the ruling class's dominance seem normal and acceptable to the subordinate classes, resulting in the agreement of the governed.

According to Gramsci, the bourgeois ideals that are propagated and taught in schools, churches, the media, and other social settings contribute to the ruling class's cultural as well as economic domination.

2. **War of Maneuver vs. War of Position:** Gramsci distinguished between two tactics used in revolutionary warfare:

The direct, frontal attack on state authority known as a "war of maneuver" frequently takes the form of a bloody revolution or revolt. Gramsci connected this to classic Marxist revolutionary strategies, such as those used during the 1917 Russian Revolution.

War of Position: Within civil society, this is a slower, more nuanced struggle for cultural and intellectual domination. According to Gramsci, direct confrontation is insufficient for a revolution to succeed in sophisticated capitalist society with robust civil institutions (such as the media, school system, and religious organizations). Rather, it was imperative to establish a counter-hegemony of alternative values and ideas that subvert the worldview of the ruling class in order to win over people's hearts and minds.

3. **Role of Intellectuals:** According to Gramsci, intellectuals were essential to the establishment and upkeep of hegemony. He made a distinction between organic intellectuals and traditional intellectuals.
4. **Traditional Intellectuals:** These are people who believe they are separate from society and class concerns, but they frequently unintentionally support the status quo.
5. **Organic Intellectuals:** Intellectuals that are born out of the working class or other subaltern groups are known as organic intellectuals, and they actively participate in directing and forming the ideological and cultural conflicts within their class. They generate concepts and actions that subvert the status quo social structure, contributing to the development of counter-hegemony.
6. **Political Society and Civil Society:** According to Gramsci, society is comprised of two primary domains: political society and civil society.

Institutions like as schools, churches, the media, and other cultural groups are considered to be part of the civil society. It is the place where hegemony is created and sustained by agreement.

Political society is the state, the government, and its branches (military, police, and court), which use force and coercion as required.

According to Gramsci, political power the state needs the backing of a robust civil society in order to sustain its control, which aims to match the values and beliefs of the populace with those of the ruling class.

7. **Subaltern Groups:** Gramsci also investigated the function of social groups that are marginalized or oppressed and do not belong to the dominant political or cultural power structures. These groupings are known as subaltern groups. He highlighted the significance of offering these people a voice in creating a counter-hegemony and worked to understand how these groups could organize and rise against the ruling classes.
8. **Prison Notebooks:** During his imprisonment by the Italian Fascist state (1926–1937), Gramsci developed many of his major ideas. His ideas about intellectuals, civil society, and hegemony were outlined in his Prison Notebooks. Understanding how ideas, culture, and ideology support capitalist societies and thwart revolutionary transformation is made possible in large part because to their texts.

9. *Passive Revolution*: Gramsci coined the term "passive revolution" to characterize circumstances in which notable social transformation takes place in the absence of a direct, popular revolution. Instead, the ruling class frequently introduces changes gradually and from above in order to stifle revolutionary uprisings and hold onto power by caving in to some of the demands for reform.

Political theory, critical theory, cultural studies, and Marxist thinking have all been greatly influenced by Gramsci's writings. His theories on the function of culture and ideology have influenced discussions regarding the mechanisms of social change, especially in those countries where it is less practical to directly challenge the authority of the state. He is regarded as one of the 20th century's most important Marxist intellectuals.

A complex explanation of power is offered by Gramsci's emphasis on hegemony, intellectual leadership, and the importance of culture. It demonstrates that ruling classes uphold their control not only through economic or political methods but also by their ideological domination in day-to-day affairs.

Examining Marxism and Leninism via the Gramscian perspective

Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony sheds light on the advantages and disadvantages of conventional Marxist tactics. Specifically, Gramsci's approach offers a deeper comprehension of power dynamics by highlighting the function played by culture, ideology, and civil society in upholding or contesting current dominance structures. The examination of Marxism and Leninism in the context of Gramsci's theories is presented here, along with a discussion of their applicability today.

1. Marxism and the Concept of Cultural Hegemony in Gramsci

Traditional Marxism primarily concentrates on economic systems and the struggle between capital owners, or bourgeoisie, and working class people, or proletariat. Marx foresaw that the proletariat would rise up, destroy capitalism, and create a society without classes as soon as the material conditions were favourable. The realization that economic dominance on its own cannot sustain capitalist rule is Gramsci's contribution to this paradigm. He maintained that the ruling class's ability to rule is made possible by cultural hegemony, which is the control of society norms, values, beliefs, and ideas. In addition to overt economic tyranny, capitalism spreads by fostering a mind-set that portrays capitalism as inevitable, fair, and natural. Gramsci highlighted that the economic basis (capitalism) depends heavily on the superstructure, which includes institutions like the media, schools, and culture and ideology. Marxist movements must therefore concentrate on subverting the prevailing worldview via civil society and culture in addition to modifying economic relations.

Contemporary Relevance:

In modern capitalism, advertising, education systems, internet platforms, mass media, and other cultural tools that support consumerism, individualism, and neoliberalism are frequently used to hold onto power. Political movements that stick to focusing on economic matters and avoid becoming involved in conflicts based on culture and ideology find it difficult to win over the general public.

For instance, contemporary companies use the media to exert cultural hegemony, influencing public perceptions of success, work, and consumerism. Because it emphasizes the necessity of cultural counter-hegemony in movements like social justice, workers' rights, and environment action, Gramsci's thought is still very important today.

2. Leninism and Gramsci's theory of Civil Society

Leninism argues that impromptu worker uprisings are insufficient for revolution and instead calls for a

vanguard party to lead the working class in capturing state power. Gramsci criticized this approach in the context of advanced capitalist societies with strong civil institutions, arguing that revolutions in these contexts require a "war of position" rather than a swift, frontal assault. Lenin emphasized the need for a direct, revolutionary assault on state power, which he called a "war of maneuver." Gramsci also recognized that civil society, which includes schools, churches, media, and non-governmental organizations, shapes people's consciousness and must be involved in the revolutionary struggle.

Contemporary Relevance:

Gramsci's "war of position" is still vital for progressive movements today; Lenin's model of revolution might work in some situations where state authority is weak, but direct confrontations with the state are rarely successful in today's heavily institutionalized democracies.

Understanding that cultural victories can precede and support political change, movements such as Black Lives Matter, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights frequently concentrate on changing cultural norms and attitudes. This approach is consistent with Gramsci's vision of gradually constructing counter-hegemonic power through civil society.

A Gramscian strategy is also embodied in digital activism, where alternative narratives and ideologies that challenge prevailing cultural norms are created by activists in an attempt to tip the ideological power balance, with online platforms acting as important arenas for changing public consciousness.

3. Hegemony vs. Dictatorship of the Proletarian

According to Lenin's theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, there would be a transitional period when the working class, led by the vanguard party, would have the ability to use coercion in order to stifle attempts at capitalist counterrevolutions and establish socialist democracy.

While Lenin's strategy heavily relies on force and coercion, Gramsci argued that building moral and intellectual leadership within civil society is necessary for long-term stability and transformation of society; this is not about mere coercion but about establishing cultural and ideological dominance that can sustain the new social order. Gramsci's critique would centre on how this approach overlooks the importance of winning consent from the broader population.

Contemporary Relevance:

Building broad-based coalitions and winning consent from various social groups is a challenge faced by contemporary leftist movements; radical change becomes hard to sustain without ideological work to win over the middle classes, marginalized groups, and even segments of the working class that have internalized capitalist values.

For example, Gramscian insight: in Latin American nations where leftist governments (e.g., Venezuela, Bolivia) have taken power, the governments' ability to stay in power frequently depends not only on governmental authority but also on popular legitimacy within civil society.

4. Role of Intellectual

Although Lenin believed that intellectuals had a crucial role in guiding and instructing the working class, he frequently regarded a centralized vanguard party as the primary source of revolutionary doctrine and tactics.

However, Gramsci saw traditional intellectuals (such as academics or religious leaders) as playing an important role in either upholding or undermining hegemony, and instead focused on "organic intellectuals," people who emerge from the working class or oppressed groups themselves and articulate

their needs, experiences, and future visions.

Contemporary Relevance:

Today, the environmental justice movement is frequently led by people from marginalized communities that are directly impacted by pollution and climate change, rather than by elites or traditional academics. This is an example of how organic intellectuals play a vital role in movements led by members of the communities most affected by systemic oppression.

The emergence of social media influencers, community leaders, and activists as thought leaders in contemporary movements is consistent with Gramsci's focus on organic intellectual's people who craft fresh narratives that subvert conventional wisdom regarding economics, racialization, gender, and the environment.

Conclusion

Modern Challenges and the Gramscian Framework, While Lenin's emphasis on seizing state power is still relevant in some contexts, Gramsci's recognition that cultural and ideological dominance is necessary to sustain any lasting transformation is essential in modern democracies. Gramsci's ideas about cultural hegemony, the role of civil society, and the necessity of counter-hegemonic struggles provide crucial insights for the contemporary relevance of Marxism and Leninism.

Gramsci's framework aids activists in understanding that power is not only held by the state but also permeates everyday cultural practices and beliefs in an era characterized by the dominance of neoliberal ideology, mass media, and digitalization of culture. As such, revolutionary movements must engage in both economic and cultural struggles, focusing not just on state capture but on transforming the ideas and values that shape society.

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