

Gramscian Notions: Helpful for Research into Digital and Tech Corporations?

Written by Giuliano Catalano

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GIULIANO CATALANO, FEB 26 2022

The *digital revolution* – or third industrial revolution – starting in the 1950s marked a radical change from analogue to digital electronics. And since the inventions of the internet in the 1970s and of the world wide web in the 1990s, humans have succumbed to digitalization. Today, we cannot imagine a world without big tech[1]. As a result, they emerged as the big winners of the revolution: their technological innovations yielded them colossal economic gains, which turned into economic power and later let them wander into the realms of the political. These developments have turned big tech into the biggest companies in the world with unprecedented amounts of power, money, and range. This is problematic seeing that the digital realm is still to a large extent unregulated. Big tech can therefore freely operate in hegemonic, monopolistic practices. Some conceptual notions that should help give more insights into these developments are Gramsci's notions on *cultural hegemony* and the *transnational capitalist class (TCC)*, and the Neo-Gramscian approach's transmission to the international realm. They should answer the following research question: Which aspects of Gramscian and Neo-Gramscian theory are useful for the contemporary study of the Global Political Economy (GPE)? And how can these be of any use to the investigation of the digital sphere and big tech?

The framework suggested by Germain and Kenny (1998) should act as a guiding scheme. The first step is to "acknowledge the interpretative difficulties surrounding not only the appropriation but also the application of Gramsci's work" (ibid.). This paper presents the difficulties in line with the philosophical modes of inquiry at the very beginning. These should help locate Gramsci's thoughts and their limits of application. The second step is to "question just how far Gramsci's concepts can be adapted for use in the international domain" (ibid.). This paper both presents Neo-Gramscian considerations and reflects on them critically. And according to the last step it is necessary to "establish a more critical engagement with Gramsci's method" (ibid.), which is done by choosing concepts out of Gramsci's writings and the Neo-Gramscian approach to prepare for a conceptual framework helpful to research into the digital realm, big tech, and its socio-political influence. Thereby, a Gramscian way of thinking is elaborated that takes economic objects as a base of study and investigates them for their social construction with a focus on historical specificity and embeddedness in social relations.

Global Political Economy: A Cultural Turn

If GPE deals with the interplay between politics and economy, the role of *Cultural Political Economy (CPE)* is to add a cultural aspect to the equation. It finds its *modus vivendi* "in the particular and in difference" (Blaney & Inayatullah, 2010), and "combines the analysis of sense- and meaning-making with the analysis of instituted economic and political relations" (Jessop & Sum, 2013).

Philosophical Modes of Inquiry

The cultural turn in CPE can be considered from four different modes of philosophical inquiry: *epistemology*, *ontology*, *methodology*, and *ethics*. First, CPE's greatest achievement comes with its intervention into the field of knowledge production: it brings afore an *epistemological* critique existentially challenging the universalistic nature of

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the orthodox political economy and its tendency to naturalize theoretical objects. CPE considers its *epistemology* to always be partial, provisional, and incomplete. Second, the *ontology* of CPE is concerned with the nature of being or existence and the structures of reality and meaning. Thus, it aims for complexity reduction in terms of the political economy through semiosis and structuration. The former addresses sense- and meaning-making, whereas the second considers the “limiting compossible of social relations” (Jessop & Sum, 2013). And lastly, *methodological* considerations set up rules for gaining and testing knowledge – in this case, it is bound to a pluralistic approach favoring contextuality and historicity (Jessop & Sum, 2006; Jessop, 2010), whereas *ethics* investigates that which should be – essentially the nature of the good. These four modes of philosophical inquiry will guide the following elaborations on the importance and interpretative difficulties of Gramscian thought for the international contemporary. But before this paper attempts such a theoretical task, some basic information and elaborations on Gramsci and some key definitions are given to simplify general understanding.

Antonio Gramsci: A Rara Avis in Times of Orthodox Marxism

The “proto-cultural political economist” (Jessop & Sum, 2013) *Antonio Gramsci* was one of the most influential writers when it comes to the intellectual fusion of cultural, power, and social relations of production. In fact, all the aforementioned works or schools of CPE follow Gramsci in “examining the state in its inclusive sense [...] as a social relation” (Jessop & Sum, 2006). The Italian philosopher and ex-leader of the *Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI)* [2] was influenced by the writings of *Karl Marx* on class dynamics and akin to the German political philosopher, Gramsci’s writings “aimed at uncovering and making explicit a social ontology” (Rupert, 1993) that made “possible the capitalist mode of production” (ibid.). This critique of the status quo at the time emerged out of disaccords with the “idealist currents in Italian philosophy” (Rupert, 1993) and materialist and economic interpretations from orthodox Marxists lacking sophistication. As a result, Gramsci’s views on how a world order came into being and how change might occur, framed an (up until then) unprecedented way of explaining political events and developments (Farrands & Worth, 2005). To better understand his viewpoint, some basic concepts need further explanation.

Stato Integrale [3]

In bringing forward his definition of the state, Gramsci differentiated between two “superstructural” (Gramsci et al., 1971) levels in society: the civil and the political. The former presents what he referred to as an “ensemble of organisms commonly called private” (ibid.), and the latter as the political apparatus of the state. According to Gramsci then civil society plus political society equals the integral state. The former rules through consent, whereas the latter rules through force. The reason why these two superstructures have importance is the fact that they are enabling forces of hegemony: the civil society’s consent provides the ideological and cultural capital needed for the dominating political society’s mode of production securing hegemony.

Egemonia [4]

Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony was not solely through coercive means of force. Rather, capitalism secured survival through a combination of economic and political coercion, and ideological consent. In his view, the bourgeoisie’s propaganda created a commonsense culture, which made the Proletariat uphold the status quo, rather than revolt against it.

Blocco Storico [5]

The unification or ensemble of social relations needed to claim hegemony is called a historic bloc. This unification is seen as a “dialectical activity and a process of distinction among the different instances of the social whole” (Sotiris, 2018). A historic bloc is a necessary pre-condition for hegemony and a period in which a new social alliance can achieve hegemony.

The Gravity of Gramsci: Only Interpretative Difficulties?

Now, what a Gramscian approach provides is a revolutionary framework for change. This does not mean that it has

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no importance for the contemporary, on the contrary: some of his key texts help unpack complex developments in the real world. However, one cannot neglect the interpretative difficulties – in terms of appropriation and application that arise in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Accordingly, "applying Gramsci to today's problems [...] means paying far greater attention to the problems of meaning and interpretation" (Germain & Kenny, 1998). The following section will showcase limitations and interpretative difficulties – that simultaneously act as signifiers of Gramsci's importance to the contemporary international – by structuring them according to the four modes of philosophical inquiry. This will heavily rely on Neo-Gramscian considerations found in the text of Gill (1993a): *Epistemology, Ontology and the 'Italian School'*.

Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

Gramsci's approach goes beyond the "limitations of positivism" (Germain & Kenny, 1998) found in orthodox political economy (Gill, 2008). His epistemological (theory of knowledge) and ontological critique is a form of "non-structuralist historicism" (Gill, 1993a) constituted by consciousness. In fact, Gramsci's metaphysical thoughts yield that consciousness has "an enlarged role in the construction of identities" (Germain & Kenny, 1998). That came out of his mental battle with the question of "how our consciousness can grasp any kind of reality critically, if we are gripped by structural conditions" (Farrands & Worth, 2005). According to him a critical understanding of the world was not automatic, yet all men were "potentially in the sense of having an intellect and using it" (Gramsci et al., 1971). Accordingly, the humanist perspective is essential. In contrast to structuralism, Gramsci emphasizes that "historical change is understood as, to a substantial degree, the consequence of collective human activity" (Gill, 1993a), which is also why he "broke from Crocean[6] theory in his rejection of strongly teleological forms of thinking" (Germain & Kenny, 1998). This emphasis on historicism is what is at the epicenter of Gramsci's positivism-disapproving stance. Now, the reason why this is crucial is because of the immediate importance it has on the concept of cultural hegemony. These transient, historical, and metaphysical considerations when not considered properly, make the adaptation and appropriation of Gramscian thought fallible to wrongdoings.

Methodological Considerations

The Gramscian approach critiques "methodological individualism, and methodological reductionism" (Gill, 1993a). This stems from his conceptual belief that the "ensemble of social relations configured by social structures ('the situation') [...] is the basic unit of analysis" (Gill, 1993a). Attempts at explaining phenomena in terms of smaller entities, or individual motivation, rather than in terms of class or group dynamics are categorically dismissed by Gramsci. So, one always needs to take on a perspective that holistically favors historicity. Take the struggle for hegemony as an example. It can be equated with the formation of a historical bloc (Sotiris, 2018), which is described as a "contingent and unpredictable sequence of developments" (Germain & Kenny, 1998). Accordingly, both the struggle for hegemony and the contiguous historical bloc are highly complex development and must be considered with regard to historical significance. What this means in sum is that the importance of a Gramscian approach in terms of methodological aspects is its ability to provide a "historicist understanding of social class, institutions and power of ideas" (Germain & Kenny, 1998). At the same time, it makes the incorporation of his theoretical framework – when gaining and testing knowledge – extremely sensitive to maladaptation.

Ethics

When reading Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, it becomes clear that he worked on the premise of an ethical ascendancy. Accordingly, Gramsci's writing insisted "upon an ethical dimension to analysis (Gill, 1993a). In fact, his theoretical ideas did not focus on "political economy per se" (Gill, 1993b) resulting in an "anti-economistic philosophy of praxis" (Jessop & Sum, 2006). Rather, Gramsci's concern was with the elaboration of a solution for the very "fundamental problem of political philosophy: the nature of the good society" (Gill, 1993a).

Concluding Remarks

The four philosophical modes of inquiry in terms of Gramsci's theoretical ideas can be broken down as follow: first, Gramsci's epistemological position challenges positivism through an emphasis on historicity; second, Gramsci is

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strongly concerned with ontology and metaphysics when he thematizes consciousness and its influence on historical movements; third, methodological individualism and reductionism is categorically denied; and at last, Gramsci's theory bears an ethical dimension. Therefore, one should not blindly apply Gramscian theory. Rather, the Gramscian way of thinking acts as a conceptual toolbox that leads the critical endeavor of "evaluating contemporary society" (Sayer, 2001).

Basics of Neo-Gramscian Interpretations

Gramsci's thoughts were first introduced to the study of IR with *Robert W. Cox's* influential articles *Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations* (Cox, 1981) and *Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method* (Cox, 1983). As the title of the second article suggests, it was an attempt of creating a methodological framework evincing the possibility of inserting Gramscian theory into IR to enrich the understanding of problems of (economic) world order. The Neo-Gramscian approach generally departs from an understanding of, first, "the grounding of class hegemony in political, intellectual, and moral leadership, albeit with a decisive economic nucleus, with the role of coercion confined to a last resort" (Jessop & Sum, 2006), second, on Gramsci's "interpretation of power blocs as long term strategic alliances of economic and political forces" (ibid.), and at last, his "analysis of the relation between economic base and ethico-political superstructure in terms of a relatively stable, mutually constituting historical bloc" (ibid.). The decisive difference of the Neo-Gramscian approach becomes evident when Cox takes Gramsci's philological-materialist study of hegemony, adapts it, and expands it to the International. He does that by replacing production and social forces, in the Gramscian sense, with states and inter-state relations. Thereby, he claims that "order is maintained (and produced) internationally or globally through the operation of hegemony" (Saurin, 2008). According to Cox states' importance does not diminish. However, with globalization and increasing interdependence, a transnational economic system has arisen. As states are subjugated to this transnational economic system, their relative power decreases. Therefore, according to Neo-Gramscian thought increasing importance needs to be given to the TCC. To be a bit more concrete, the TCC includes institutions such as the *World Bank*, the *World Trade Organization (WTO)*, and the *International Monetary Fund (IMF)*, but also private companies. In the 1980s these included petroleum companies such as *Exxon Mobil*, and *Texaco* (Fortune 500, s.a.). Today, these include big tech (PwC, 2021). This TCC represents a transnational historic bloc driven by liberal principles and supporting the dominant mode of production, which is "the expanding logic of capitalism" (Jessop & Sum, 2013). Neo-Gramscian thought recognized the possibility of a counterhegemonic movement through war of position and war of movement, but the main part rests on an explanation of how the current economic system is sustained by analyzing power structures – another theory explaining the status quo.

Locating Neo-Gramscian Thought: An Approach Worth Forgetting?

The basic reflections of Neo-Gramscian thought sound straightforward and clear-cut. However, if analyzed more in-depth one sees that the Neo-Gramscian approach is inherently flawed. Therefore, the points of critique expressed over the years need to be examined. This section will not list all of them, rather the purpose is to present the most important aspects to consider when working with Neo-Gramscian theory. This chapter will then be concluded with an assessment of the usefulness of the Gramscian approach for the contemporary international.

First, to pick up where I left off in the last section: the Neo-Gramscian approach is another theory that explains the status quo. It does not have the strong actionable character found in Gramsci's writings. In fact, his "politico-intellectual work was dedicated to explaining the conditions and processes under which revolutionary change could be orchestrated and secured" (Saurin, 2008). Thus, Neo-Gramscian writers focus more on how capitalism endures than how a counterhegemony might develop and bring about social change (Cohn, 2014). This can be evinced with the following example. The very irony of Gill (1993a) talking about a non-structuralist Gramsci when Neo-Gramscian theory shows structuralist aspects is mind-baffling. Neo-Gramscian thought focuses on the *hegemony of production*, which – as expanded on in the previous section – focuses on the "relative dominance of a given production [...] in structuring a social formation and to the structural mechanisms that secure its relative dominance in a historical bloc" (Jessop & Sum, 2006). Rather, to guarantee a non-structuralist view on things, the focus should be on the *production of hegemony*, which – as I will try to elaborate later in this paper – "involves the processes and mechanisms through which 'political, intellectual, and moral leadership' is secured [...] across civil society and is successfully articulated

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within a specific economic configuration and system” (Jessop & Sum, 2006). What is connected to this determination is the observation of Jessop and Sum (2006) that the Neo-Gramscian approach demonstrates a “residual ‘economism’ because it neglected the specific discursive processes and mechanisms involved in securing the dominance of a given economic order and historical bloc.” To be fair to Neo-Gramscian writers such as Cox and Gill, deducing the reason for this structuralist theory of the status quo is understandable: in contrast to Gramsci’s writings, Neo-Gramscian theory was not developed as a political strategy but in the study halls of universities (Saurin, 2008). It is questionable that Neo-Gramscian thought can claim to adapt his thoughts when they change the very basic purpose of his writings: to be a theory of social change.

Second, Saurin (2008) critiques that there is no real “*differentia specifica*” within Neo-Gramscian thought. To get to the bottom of that, he asks several questions. Two of these are: what kind of problems of international relations and global political economy do Neo-Gramscian writers seek to address; and what are the unique claims in International Relations (IR) of a Neo-Gramscian analysis (Saurin, 2008). On the one hand, there is no real problem that connects the major Neo-Gramscian writers such as *Robert W. Cox, Bob Jessop, Stephen Gill, Adam Morton, Mark Rupert*, etc. [7] They “share a broad pluri-disciplinary research program, but do not form a tight bloc” (ibid.). Bearing in mind that another difficulty with Neo-Gramscian thought “stems from the assumptions of theoretical coherence and interpretative clarity which they attribute to his work” (Germain & Kenny, 1998) renders this a bit ironic. On the other hand, Saurin (2008) criticized the problematic emphasis on historicity. He does not see any strength in the widely appraised historical necessity of Gramscian thought, but only a “substitution of the process of individualizing observation for a generalizing view of human forces in history” (Meinecke, 1998 in Saurin, 2008).

Third, the Neo-Gramscian approach does still evince a very “top-down, state-centric approach” (Germain & Kenny, 1998). This is mainly because Cox (1983) argued that Gramsci did not diminish the state’s importance, but rather emphasizes that it is where hegemonies can be built. This, however, also means that the Neo-Gramscian approach fails “to develop the full implications of Gramsci’s concern with civil society and its role in constituting power and hegemony” (Jessop & Sum, 2006). And to go even further – in line with the critique of Germain and Kenny (1998) – who is to say that there is an a priori reason for why one should restrict considerations of social formations to the state and civil society? Akin to the limitations of the state-centricity, there are some limitations on the transnational view, which is important because the Neo-Gramscian approach ascribes the move from the national to the international to a transnational block. According to van Apeldoorn (2004), the Neo-Gramscian approach driven by Cox misses a full elaboration of the transnational.

Concluding Remarks

The Neo-Gramscian approach evinces some very useful insights for the contemporary international. Especially, Cox’s first writings on how hegemony is sustained in the realm of the international and the contiguous transnational perspective are of high importance. However, it is necessary to consider the limitations and major shortcomings of Neo-Gramscian thought as well. Consequently, this paper will not just apply the Neo-Gramscian approach to a real-world problem. An attempt will be made to pick a mixture of Gramscian and Neo-Gramscian concepts to provide a strong framework for future avenues of research.

Crucial Concepts

Followingly the concepts of cultural hegemony and its connecting notions on coercion and consent, and common sense will be presented. Additionally, the chapter will expand on the concept of the TCC. All concepts showcase both inputs from the traditional Gramscian writings as well as from Neo-Gramscian works.

Cultural Hegemony

Hegemony in its most basic sense refers to the “persistence of specific social and economic structures that systematically advantage certain groups” (Levy & Newell, 2002). Now, conventional IR has a “statolatry” (Gramsci et al., 1971) view that equates solely with prevailing state dominance. A critical theory of hegemony, however, questions the prevailing world order and does not take the status quo for granted (Bieler & Morton, 2004). With the

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purpose of this paper, there are two critical theories other than Gramsci's notion that deserve mentioning: Marx's materialist and *Michel Foucault's* ideological theory. The former explains the forms social structures take due to economic dynamics, whereas the latter examines mechanisms of control and their influence on individuals' behavior. Gramsci was "unwilling to embrace the more mechanical and economic interpretations of Marx" (Rupert, 2003). What Gramsci does, is to provide an intersection between the two (Sau, 2021). In Gramsci's sense, hegemony then refers more to an "articulation of and justification of a particular set of interests as general interests" (Morton, 2007). Therefore, Gramsci's notions on hegemony provide an "insightful supplement to purely materialist arguments" (Keohane, 1984) and are referred to as the "the gravamen of the philosophy of praxis" (Morton, 2007). In concrete terms, he asks "how an inherently unstable and conflictual social formation acquires a certain degree of social order through the continuing achievement of unstable equilibria of compromise" (Jessop & Sum, 2006). To some extent, it shows "subjective awareness of the benefits of accepting the hegemony of one state" (Joseph, 2008a). The following considerations expand on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony.

An extended view of the state (the integral state) is needed – as mentioned earlier in this paper. Such a view is a precondition of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Without the integral state perception, which Morton (2007) refers to as one of the most common mistakes in politics, the concept of hegemony is useless. It is within this integral state (political society + civil society) where hegemony and the dominating mode of production (capitalism) are enacted. According to Lukes (2005), Gramsci's theory, in which class rule is secured by consent, is constituted by culture and ideology (Lukes, 2005). In other words, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is an expression of understanding-based consent. What is meant therein is that the acceptance of ideological content is supported by material resources – a so-called "material structure of ideology" (Gramsci et al., 1971). Gramsci describes this dynamic as the dualism of *coercion and consent*, which balance each other reciprocally without coercion taking on a dominant role (Morton, 2007). This dualism seen in the struggle for hegemony (or formation of a historic bloc) – whether dominant or emergent – "revolves around shaping intersubjective forms of *consciousness* in civil society" (Morton, 2007). Gramsci thereby refers to three different types of *consciousness*: "the economico-corporative, which is aware of the specific interests of a particular group, the solidarity or class *consciousness*, which extends to a whole social class but remains at a purely economic level; and the hegemonic, which brings the interests of the leading class into harmony with those of subordinate classes and incorporates these other interests into an ideology expressed in universal terms" (Jessop & Sum, 2006). However, this *consciousness* is inherently unstable, contingent, and incomplete. This makes it very vulnerable to crises within the hegemonic bloc. Therefore, the stability of hegemony rests on the ability to "absorb alternative meanings and marginalize resistances" (Jessop & Sum, 2006). So, hegemony is transmitted "organically" (Gramsci et al., 1971) through the "underpinnings of the political structure in civil society" (Cox, 1983). These are schools, the press, or the church – a kind of "capillary power" (Morton, 2007) which helps to "create in people certain modes of behavior and expectations consistent with the hegemonic social order" (Cox, 1983). Accordingly, this structural power cannot be reproduced at voluntary instances mechanically but is dependent on the "prosais of everyday life" (Jessop & Sum, 2006). More importantly, "these hidden forms of domination, which are embedded in everyday activities and experiences, are reflected in [...] *common sense*" (Jessop & Sum, 2006).

Coercion and Consent

In Gramscian writings, the dominant class rules "with and over, rather than against" (Germain & Kenny, 1998) the dominated class. It cannot just rule through *coercive* means, as such their power is not pervasive in society and thus not hegemonic and can simply be overthrown by physical force. Rather, Gramsci suggests, the active *consent* of the dominated needs to be sought through ideological means (Cohn, 2014). To visualize that, Gramsci uses the dual nature of *Machiavelli's* analogy of a Centaur: half-animal, half-human, which for Germain and Kenny (1998) is the most significant of all his legacies. Accordingly, "they are the levels of force and *consent*, authority and hegemony" (Gramsci et al., 1971). Hegemony prevails as long as *consent* is at the forefront, the role of *coercion* is only a latent one – meaning that it is only applied in "marginal, deviant cases" (Cox, 1983). Gramsci calls this "hegemony protected by the armor of *coercion*" (Gramsci et al., 1971). What the Machiavellian dualism does for the Neo-Gramscian perspective, is to free the concept of power from historical specificity and give it wider applicability such as world dominance (Cox, 1983). Essentially, hegemony through *coercion* and *consent* is the domination of a social structure. For such structures to exist, however, "human beings must accept them and act on their own volition to

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reproduce them” (Sau, 2021). In fact, a recurring theme in the writings of Gramsci is the notion of will – the basis for all political action. It only takes on significant meaning when it is the will of the many or the collective will [8]. Now, the will represents the collective’s “interpretation and understanding of the rules of conduct they encounter” (Sau, 2021), which, however, “does not entail that they must also embrace said structures and rules on a conceptual level, without reservation and criticism” (ibid.). Therefore, in the process of turning the necessary *consent* into collective will, the integral state must from a Gramscian viewpoint, try to influence the *common sense* to naturalize coercive duties.

Common Sense

The “*consciousness* of being part of a particular hegemonic force” (Gramsci et al., 1971) is the most important conscious achievement for humans because it “is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness” (ibid.). Part of what constitutes this *consciousness* is language. In line with this consideration, the Gramscian notion of hegemony is an “opinion-molding activity” (Morton, 2007). Hence, importance needs to be given to “how intersubjective meanings [...] shape reality” (ibid.). Accordingly, the focus is on the language part of *consciousness*. As the subaltern dismiss a universal *consciousness* (a universal language), they need a distinct version of it. Thus, their preferred linguistic apparatus is *common sense* (Pasha, 2008). *Common sense* is essentially “an uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world” (Gramsci et al., 1971) that inculcates ideas and thus normalizes hegemony (Lacher, 2008). Simultaneously, it has a very fragmentary and contradictory character. This refers to the fact that there is the possibility of a multiplicity of *common senses* “open to multiple interpretations and potentially supportive of very different kinds of social visions and political projects” (Rupert, 2003). Patnaik (1988) discusses this in detail in his theory on subaltern *consciousness*. For the subaltern to escape this *commonsense* state of *consciousness*, intellectuals step in (Pasha, 2008). Gramsci, as an intellectual, does that by propagating the enlightenment of the subaltern. He states that they have the ability of being philosophers themselves and having a critical worldview. In his opinion, this would be achieved by the very use of *common sense* to enable the subjugated to acquire a critical stance on *common sense* (having a critical view on prevailing unconscious activities). In fact, Gramsci suggests that the philosophy of praxis must be a critique of *common sense* (Gramsci et al., 1971). Now, as *common sense* constitutes the “limits of the possible” (Gramsci et al., 1971), change needs to emerge within to overcome this ideological struggle. This is where one, in the writings of Gramsci, finds the notions on “war of position” (Gramsci et al., 1971). It is according to Cox (1983) the only way that brings about structural change in the long run by “building up the socio-political base for change through the creation of new historical blocs.” In other words, the development of a more critical self-understanding is what leads to the self-conscious determination of own activities necessary for the formation of historic blocs. Accordingly, common sense is a very central concept to the functioning of cultural hegemony. In sum, it can be said that the intersubjective *commonsensical* state of *consciousness* “is as much or more an area of political struggle as control of the forces of production” (Carnoy, 1984).

Transnational[9] Capitalist Class (TCC)

One of the main emancipatory features of the Neo-Gramscian approach is a foundation on “the promotion of liberal transnational structures of solidarity” (Ayers, 2008). They identify the emergence of a transnational formation (the TCC) with “shared interests and *consciousness*” (Joseph, 2008b) as the main driver for the materialization of *cultural hegemony* globally, rather than nationally. Ever since the increase in globalization and interdependence, this transnational formation has risen in importance. And according to Robinson and Harris (2000), the emergence of this transnational formation can be analyzed using the dialectical drivers of globalization: structure and agency.

The structural level is what constitutes the material basis for the TCC seen in the trans-nationalization of capital. Globalization driving the “expansion of capital across national borders” (van Apeldoorn, 2004) morphed the nation-state phase of capitalism into a transnational state of capitalism. Productive structures that were based nationally in the past, have seen transnational integration. With this international allocation of resources, the TCC can exert authority across national boundaries. And it is this exact territorial “fragmentation of sovereignty” (van Apeldoorn, 2004) that makes transnational capitalist relations flourish. However, the problematic cannot be reduced to globalization, rather it is a “panoply of socio-political relations” (Carroll, 2010). What needs further investigation is “how the powerful have been able to keep their distance from the rest of the community and consolidate their

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privileged position over time” (van der Pijl, 1998). In other, words the agential level must be looked at.

The agential level showcases the inherently exploitative nature of capitalist social relations that are “bound up with an unequal distribution of material capabilities resulting from an unequal control over the means of production” (van Apeldoorn, 2004). Since the transformation from a national context into “several national contexts simultaneously” (van Apeldoorn, 2004), a global class dynamic has emerged. A global bourgeoisie and global proletariat have formed that further split the global gap between the subaltern and the hegemonic forces (Robinson & Harris, 2000). As a result, the TCC’s structural power has risen incrementally (Morton, 2007) turning the TCC into “important vectors of contemporary global politics” (van Apeldoorn, 2004). In fact, the TCC is self-aware of this fact, which explains their interest in pursuing a class project of capitalist globalization through neo-liberalization. In other words, they pursue a transnational hegemonic project.

There have been attempts by international institutions to hold the TCC’s power at bay. This has often only ended “without imposing many compensating responsibilities” (Sklair, 2002), which is not far-fetched from, bearing in mind that international institutions – such as the *IMF*, the *WTO*, and the *Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)* – were instrumentalizations by the TCC (Robinson & Harris, 2000). Nevertheless, van Apeldoorn (2004) has suggested that “at the international level, the bargaining power of transnational corporations would be reduced if most governments were able to co-ordinate their regulations and financial concessions.”

To conclude, it can be said that the power dynamics in the global economy are a one-directional power relationship, in which “hegemony is fashioned by this elite transnational class on its own terms and then forced or imposed on subaltern classes” (Germain & Kenny, 1998), who “in turn either resist such frontal assaults as best they can or capitulate” (ibid.).

Potential Avenues of Research

The first section of this paper introduced CPE with a heavy focus on Gramscian notions. Thereby, some limitations were touched upon seen from the four philosophical modes of inquiry. The second section of the paper explored Neo-Gramscian notions and assessed their potential relevance. The third section collected the most important and useful conceptions. What this last section will do, is to unite the considerations and conceptions of all the foregoing chapters to present some potential avenues of research with regard to the *Knowledge Based Economy (KBE)* (Jessop, 2005).

The Emergence of a Techno-Historic Bloc

It may be helpful to recapitulate some of the observations so far: *cultural hegemony* is an understanding-based dualism of *coercion* and *consent* that tries to shape intersubjective forms of *consciousness* using *common sense*. The *TCC* is a formation that has a shared *consciousness* and will to achieve *cultural hegemony* on a global basis. The *TCC* focused on in this paper is an ensemble of large technology corporations led by ‘the big five’[10] of big tech. This ensemble has attained a hegemonic character due to “the rising structural power of internationally-mobile capital” (Gill & Law, 1993). Accordingly, it can be seen as a new historic bloc – here referred to as a techno-historic bloc. This is observable on three levels: economically, technologically, and politically. First, their economic power has risen drastically in the last couple of years, which makes sense because their goal is first and foremost economic gain. Currently, their combined yearly revenue is said to be around 1.2 trillion USD. But during the coronavirus pandemic, these tech corporations have just grown even stronger. Their services were what let people stay in touch, be entertained, or shop for essentials. Accordingly, *Facebook’s* profit margins, for example, are higher now than before the pandemic (Ovide, 2021). Second, they have achieved a kind of monopolistic type of technological power. The fact that technology and capitalism intertwine is nothing new: they reciprocally accelerate each other. What is new, however, is the fact that tech-corporations “have grown into behemoths by establishing themselves both as purveyors of their own products and, and as the hosts of ‘platforms’ that circumscribe, and profit from, the activities of other organizations” (Atal, 2021) What this means is that they “are at once product companies, service companies, and infrastructure companies; players in the market and markets of the marketplace; private platforms and public spheres” (ibid.). And lastly, the political power seen in the ability to influence governments through lobbying and an unforeseen highly active customer base has turned them into political powerhouses.

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Now, why is this problematic? These tech corporations operate in a rather new field: the digital sphere. This digital field can be said to be a transnational arena. However, the distinct difference to a physical transnational arena in which natural resources companies or financial institutions engage, the digital transnational arena has an unregulated and uncontrolled nature. The TCC under focus can exploit this exact fact. It has all the tools necessary to achieve and enact *cultural hegemony*, and it already did to a certain extent. The TCC shares a *consciousness* that favors a capitalist mode of production (observable in their business models). After a first economic goldrush in the tech industry in the 1990s, they soon started to inculcate a *common sense* in civil society, that sees technology as only a helpful tool of everyday activities. Coined the *Californian Ideology* akin to *Fordism* or *Americanism* Bartlett (2018) explains that the tech industry has driven one of the best modern marketing campaigns of all time: “even though they are massive multi-billion-dollar corporations with huge PR teams, they pitch themselves as anti-establishment; even though they are built on a model of data extraction and surveillance capitalism, they purport to be promoting exciting and liberating technology, even though they are dominated by rich white guys, they talk of social justice and equality.” Since then, it is a shared belief that technology is what drives innovation and what drives human emancipation – the level of *consent*. Again: one of the best marketing campaigns ever created. This has given them unreasonable amounts of power, which simultaneously blessed them with a *coercive force*. In line with their uncontrolled and unregulated nature, this is both unprecedented and problematic. The tech corporations have risen to enormous power so fast (last couple of decades), that nation-states are struggling to keep up with big tech’s engagement in monopolistic and hegemonic activities. In fact, the current technological development is so high paced that the slow bureaucratic processes have no chance of keeping track. Therefore, research into regulative approaches needs to be given more importance.

A Focus on Regulative Approaches

As discussed above, a global transnational bourgeoisie of big tech has formed in the last couple of decades, governed by the economic gains of private companies, rather than the collective good of the broader society. One that can take on dangerous turns, as this TCC has the ability to transform economic power into ideational “through controlling the ideas and assumptions available to the public” (Bartlett, 2018), and has done so before. Therefore, honoring the Gramscian tradition in inciting meaningful change, what is needed is research into ways to change the status quo, rather than explaining its maintenance. A sustainable way of regulating big tech is long overdue. Questions like what the right way is to regulate big tech and how modes of good governance can be incorporated into the digital sphere need answering. I suggest three avenues of research.

The first and probably most researched avenue is that of *platform governance*. Currently, there is still a lot of self-regulation going on in the tech industry due to the low level of governmental restrictions. Ethical considerations are largely governed by the private tech corporations themselves, which however work according to a business model striving for economic gain. This is problematic. There are already a variety of qualitative studies that have been conducted with regard to how notions of good governance can be implemented into the governance of platforms – e.g., Gorwa (2019) and CIGI (2019). These include the examination of content policies, data policies, or competition policies, and possible routes of amelioration. This trend needs to continue and focus on a global governance perspective. Simultaneously, a coordinated approach is needed because the digital sphere does not bow to national borders.

A second avenue of research concerns *algorithmic governance*. This is a more quantitative approach focusing on the business models of tech corporations and their cash cows: the well-concealed algorithms. Algorithmic governance focuses on the problem that “digital technologies structure the social in particular ways” (Katzenbach, 2019). Here issues such as hidden persuasion, which refers to the problem that “data analysts or algorithms understand us better than we do, they can manipulate or control us in ways we can’t understand or uncover” (Bartlett, 2018) or a consequence of algorithms, digital disinformation, are investigated. One could argue that they act as modern tools used in the production of hegemony. Therefore, more academic research is needed into algorithmic governance.

A third avenue of research that is surely the least investigated is *platform socialism*. Platform socialism is the most appropriate avenue of research when the theoretical basis is in Gramscian notions of hegemony. It sets big tech into the role of a powerful bourgeoisie that owns the digital infrastructure of the 21st century. By masquerading

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themselves as “global community builders, these companies have developed sophisticated new techniques for extracting wealth from their users” (Muldoon, 2022). Accordingly, the users take on the role of the proletariat. The irony in this is mind-boggling: the users using the platform have become objects of usage by the platforms. As these tech corporations are reluctant to change, this avenue of research investigates how grassroots communities and transnational social movements can take back control in a counter-hegemonic fashion.

Conclusion

This paper should have shown that both the Gramscian notions found in the *Prison Notebooks* and the Neo-Gramscian approach have some major limitations. Yet, they both have useful considerations for the contemporary International. The purpose of this paper, however, was to work out a theoretical framework that can be helpful to an academic investigation into exploitative dynamics found in the current global political economy. Therefore, what this paper suggests is that a Gramscian way of thinking should be accustomed that takes inspiration from some crucial Gramscian and Neo-Gramscian concepts, but should not just blindly adopt Gramscian theories to contemporary problematics. What the last chapter provided was an introduction to such a current exploitative dynamic: the problematic of the digital sphere and transnational class formations constituted by big tech. The big issue is that big tech is innovating at a speed, which makes it hard for regulatory authorities to keep up. So, maybe regulation is not the right way? Maybe what needs further research are more radical approaches like platform socialism? In other words, system-changing approaches – to honor a Gramscian way of thinking – need to be given increasing importance. According to Gramsci then, what this situation asks for is *pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will*.

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[1] Refers to big tech-corporations such as *Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Facebook, and Microsoft*.

[2] The Italian Communist Party which existed from 1921 to 1991 (Gramsci et al., 1971).

[3] Gramsci's notion of the integral state (Gramsci et al., 1971).

[4] Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Gramsci et al., 1971). See chapter 3.1.

[5] Gramsci's notion of a historic bloc (Gramsci et al., 1971).

[6] Benedetto Croce was a liberal and an idealist philosopher (Gramsci et al., 1971).

[7] As a side note, emphasis must be laid on the fundamentally wrong-named *Italian School*. The definition has not been used throughout this paper on purpose. Why is the Neo-Gramscian approach so often referred to as *the Italian School* if there is no obvious relation beyond the fact that Gramsci was Italian? There is no clear answer.

[8] Bearing Gramsci's emphasis on historicism in mind, this would mean that will would be the "operative awareness of historical necessity" (Daldal, 2014). Essentially, history is a result of willful human actions.

[9] The *intemational* in the realm of the political refers to nation-state system engaging in relations between states and class formations within a nation-state, whereas the *transnational* in the realm of the political refers to relations and class formations that supersede the national borders of states (Robinson & Harris, 2000).

[10] *Apple, Amazon, Alphabet (Google), Facebook and Microsoft*.