

# *Neo-Gramscianism*

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## 20 Neo-Gramscianism and Climate Governance

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### List of Acronyms

CDM	Clean Development Mechanism
EU ETS	European Union emissions trading system
NGOs	non-governmental organizations

### Definitions

Neo-Gramscianism is a theoretical approach rooted in the Marxist political thought. The idea originated from Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist theoretician and politician who was a founding member and one-time leader of the Communist Party of Italy. Most of his influential works were not outlined as a coherent system of thought but rather come in the form of fragmentary (and sometimes contradictory) notes written during his time of imprisonment by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. Nonetheless, Gramsci managed to articulate important concepts which have proved useful for an enriched understanding and analysis of politics and relations of power not only in capitalist societies but also in the context of international relations and global governance (Bieler 2005; Bieler and Morton 2014; Cox 1981, 1983, 1996; Gill 1993).

Like for Marxism, the starting point of Gramscianism is the idea that the analysis of politics and political struggle is best situated within the context of class formation and social relations of production (Marx 2000). The critical point of departure from Marxism is the Gramscian articulation of the concept of cultural hegemony, which describes how ruling elites in Western capitalist states use a combination of idea, organizational, and discursive practices to build and maintain societal relations of power (Gramsci 1971). Hence, contrary to a classical Marxist formulation where the relationship between the dominant class and the subordinate class is characterized in terms of continual struggle and dominion, a Gramscian account posits a far more dialectical, complex and largely stable relationship in which capitalism and control are maintained as much through *idea* as through the coercive and bureaucratic apparatus of the state. By stressing the role of idea in maintaining control, Gramsci advances an understanding of power that is not solely economic or coercive but also derives from institutional and discursive forces (see also CONSTRUCTIVISM AND SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONALISM; GOVERNMENTALITY). Gramsci, to be clear, does not deny the importance of coercive power but he insists that moral and intellectual leadership is the basic form of authority and tool for domination in any hegemonic social structure (Cox 1983, p. 137; Lee 1995, p. 150; Levy and Newell 2005, p. 49-50).

The key intent and manifestation of cultural hegemony is that the social order which reproduces the dominant position of the ruling class is widely accepted as the consensus and common sense value for all people. The result of this consensus -- which by the way should not be misunderstood as either unity or harmony -- is a common social and moral language which erodes the legitimacy of radical alternatives and works to forge an inter-subjective identity throughout the CIVIL SOCIETY in ways that support

the prevailing order. Gramsci suggests that the key to entrenchment and survival of the hegemony is that the dominant class is able to link its interests with those of the subordinate classes in the pursuit of a social order that reproduces its own dominant position (Gramsci 1971, p. 181). It also entails that the ruling class is able to fabricate and promote discourses that conceal contradictions while creating a sense of accord that transcends class divides.

Gramsci noted that hegemonic stability is rooted in the institutions of civil society, including the school, the council, the media and the church all of which, to the extent that the hegemony has been successfully established, become the key sites for ideological reproduction, providing legitimacy through the assertion of moral and intellectual leadership. This conception of social relations led Gramsci to formulate a far more elastic and less bounded meaning for both the STATE and the civil society (Jessop 1990). On this view, the state is conceived not as just as the administrative, executive and coercive apparatus of government but also ‘the underpinnings of the political structure of the civil society’ (Gill 1993, p. 51). In short the civil society is seen an ‘extended state’.

Similarly, the civil society and social institutions, for their part also have a dual existence. These sites are at once both crucial for maintaining hegemony through intellectual leadership and for counter-hegemonic struggles. In other words, a complex and dialectical relationship is posed where the civil society becomes as Ford (2003, p. 132) puts it, ‘simultaneously a site for the maintenance of, as well as the challenge, to the hegemony’.

Furthermore, in order achieve hegemony; Gramsci says the ruling elite will tend to move away from its narrow economic-corporate interest to form alliances with a

variety of other forces. Although this alliance -- which Gramsci sometimes referred to as a historic bloc -- has an inner core, the specific configuration is often contingent and frequently under assault. To maintain hegemony the historic bloc will often engage in astute bargaining and ideological contestation, while making a series of non-core threatening compromises (Simon 1982, p. 37) to neutralize the radical other.

Utilizing the language of military science, Gramsci described the strategic moves by the subordinate classes and the ruling elite to change and preserve hegemony as ‘the war of position’ and ‘passive revolution’, respectively. A war of position is a process of alliance formation and discursive practices by the subordinate class designed to gain influence within cultural institutions while avoiding direct confrontation. Passive revolution refers to ‘a process of reformist change from above, which entails some concessions by the historic bloc in an effort to preserve the essential aspects of social structure’ (Levy and Egan 2003, p. 807). Hence a very broad view of agency is recognized without diminishing the importance of structural constraints. In sum, social struggle and change are far less dependent on violence and radicalism but more on ideological contestations and accommodations.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Overview of Role in Global Environmental Governance***

Gramscian concepts have been utilized by scholars to analyze and illuminate various aspects of GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE. A foremost application of neo-Gramscianism to the scholarship on global environmental governance has been in challenging the basic premise of orthodox regime theory that international

environmental rule-making is the exclusive preserve of state actors (see also NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM; REGIMES). In one of the first explicit offerings, Levy and Newell (2002) used Gramscian concepts to explain not only the significant role of business actors in international environmental negotiation but also their influence on state positions in international climate diplomacy. Although there had been prior recognition of the role of the non-state actors in global environmental politics (cf. Wapner 1995), the appeal to Gramscianism enabled Levy and Newell (2002) to offer a rich articulation that illuminates a number of interesting aspects to this phenomenon. Their account revealed the intimate and dialectical connection between states and business, the role of strategic alliance formation between state and non-state actors, and how the corporate sector deploys this alliance and contingent discursive and organizational practices to develop and protect their core interests (see also TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS; PRIVATE SECTOR).

Other scholars such as Ford (2003), Newell (2008) and Okereke et al. (2009) have subsequently deployed the Gramscian theory to analyze the proliferation and strategic impact of social movements, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other non-state actors in global environmental governance. Drawing from Gramscian insights Ford (2003) calls for the need to avoid treating all civil society actors as a homogenous group. Instead, one has to recognize their various positions in and relationship within the existing 'hegemonic constellation' (p. 129). This, she argues, allows for a more nuanced reading that reveals when civil society groups are acting to truly challenge or reproduce the status quo. Okereke et al. (2009) advance a similar argument noting that, inasmuch as the civil society in Gramscian terms is 'an extended state', a far more cautious view on the much vaunted power and authority shift from the

state to non-state actors as well as their critical ability to change things is warranted. They called for more research into how certain sections of the civil society may be complementing the disciplinary forces of the capitalist state and transnational hegemonic bloc.

In highlighting the agency of the civil society and other non-state actors through the prism of Gramscianism, scholars have noted the need to pay attention to the multi-dimensional nature of power and the various forms through which power is manifested in global environmental governance. In this regard, particular attention has been paid to the role of discursive and organizational power. Bernstein (2001, 2002) attempted to combine a Gramscian approach with constructivism and subsequently deployed the resultant 'socio-evolutionary' approach to account for the prevalence of particular norms in global environmental governance. He argued that these hegemonic or field-shaping norms are generally legitimized through organizational and discursive practices (see also LIBERAL ENVIRONMENTALISM). Invoking Gramscian concepts, Okereke (2008) sought to demonstrate the importance and use of discursive power in global environmental regimes suggesting that 'framing, presentation and style of argumentation do impact the chances for the internalization of equity norms' (p. 34).

Levy and Newell (2002; 2005), Ford (2003), and Levy and Egan (2003) have all sought to draw attention to the structural and organizational power of various actors in global environmental governance. Stephan (2011) used a Gramscian approach to highlight not just the role of discursive aspects of power but also the agency of individual actors in establishing the European Union emissions trading system (EU ETS) in the early late 1990s. More recently, Bratman (2015) has relied on Gramscian insights on hegemony, passive revolution and wars of position to show how the GREEN

ECONOMY can be used as a discursive tool by states and their business allies to fracture and weaken radical oppositions from social justice and environmental activist alliances campaigning for radical visions of the green economy.

In general Gramscian scholars stress that power is not static, zero sum, or one-dimensional. They underscore the point that power resides not only in the entities and the material resources at their command but also in their strategies, tactics and the unique configuration of alliances and coalitions. This means that in some cases groups with less abundant material resources but astute tactics are able to outmanoeuvre those with superiors' resources.

It is obvious from the foregoing that the Gramscian theory is very sensitive to the role and importance of political contestations, accommodations and compromises, which many have noted as the 'stuff' of environmental governance. Levy and Newell (2002) have emphasized the need to pay more attention to international environmental REGIMES as the 'outcome of a process of bargaining, compromise, and alliance formation at the level of specific regime'. By noting the role of micro processes of bargaining and compromising, they argue, scholars of global environmental governance are better able to explain the inevitable if limited degree of indeterminacy in the outcome of regimes. This view is different from the regime theory which suggests a more totalizing outcome based on economic and military configurations of power. Clearly then neo-Gramscianism is far less deterministic than Marxism. In fact Gale (1998, p. 253) inspired by Gramsci specially characterized international organizations as 'arenas of struggle between global actors over the normative structures that govern (or should govern) specific issue areas'.



Crucially, while a Gramscian analysis is sensitive to the counter-hegemonic potential of the subordinate class and the ever contested and changing contours of power in a social regime, it does not subscribe to the unlimited possibility of outcome. In fact the opposite is the case: while the bargaining process confers a certain level of indeterminacy on outcomes of regimes, it is more likely that regimes being the product of prevailing structures will ‘set boundaries as to what is achievable within a particular social order’ (Okereke 2008, p. 29). This point is crucial for distinguishing Gramsci from other pluralistic or sociological approaches, which highlight the role of normative and discursive contestation but fail to see the deep embeddedness of regimes in pre-existing structures.

Many scholars, e.g. Paterson (2000, 2009), Bernstein (2001), Newell (2008) and Wittneben et al. (2012), have provided detailed accounts of various aspects of the governance on CLIMATE CHANGE which show how the prior commitment to the neoliberal economic order serves to shape debates on what states and non-state actors can and cannot do in response to the threat of climate change. Drawing from Gramsci, Stephan (2011) demonstrates why emissions trading came to be adopted by the EU as their flagship policy. He argues that the implementation of the EU ETS was a form of passive revolution designed to neutralize the more radical idea of a carbon tax. Furthermore, he shows that the understanding of the structural constraints within which environmental decisions are made is critical for explaining why some policies are more likely to succeed while others are ‘met with fierce resistance and fail’.

Similarly, Elah and Okereke (2015) argue on the basis of insights from Gramscianism that ‘the marketisation of key climate governance instruments’ such as the EU ETS and the Kyoto protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) is due

primarily to the hegemony of neoliberalism and the pervasive narrative that there is no alternative to market (Okereke 2006, p. 735) (see also LIBERAL ENVIRONMENTALISM). Görg and Brand (2000, 2006) go even further by questioning the pervasive assumption that international environmental regimes provide veritable platform for states to cooperate to solve environmental problems. Drawing insights from Gramsci, they suggest that states have in fact transformed in both their shape and roles. They became vehicles for the commoditization of environmental resources and rendered such resources more susceptible to global capitalist competition and exploitation.

### ***Overview of Merits and Defects***

Notwithstanding the insights offered by neo-Gramscian ideas, the approach does have some drawbacks. Some of these have been articulated in the literature. Bernstein (2001), for example, acknowledges the utility of the neo-Gramscian approach in identifying the underlying class interests and structural forces that shape international environmental policies. However, he insists that the approach performs less well in explaining the 'actual dynamic processes' through which these interests are legitimized. Similarly, while neo-Gramscian concepts are able to capture the macro-structural factors that determine the end-result of policies, they are less able to account for the constellation of micro socio-cultural dynamics that so often determine how a given policy plays out at the local level. Bernstein (2001) further argues that the neo-Gramscian approach ascribes too much importance to the role of capitalist development and relations of production while ignoring the role of values and norms in the development of environmental institutions.

Okereke (2008) has defended the neo-Gramscian approach by suggesting that economic interests have mattered far more in the development of international environmental and climate policies than critiques admit. He however notes that the overwhelming emphasis on interest and economic calculus make neo-Gramscian analyses less able to grasp the role of moral values and norms in global environmental governance.

Another line of critique on neo-Gramscianism is that despite acknowledging the agency of the civil society, the approach might still be read as being too deterministic. Bernstein (2001, p. 16) worries that the theory might be construed in terms of a passive struggle 'where classes empowered by the current mode of global production ultimately triumph' over the groups with less resources. Moreover, a loose reading of neo-Gramscianism might still convey that there is little if any chance for an environmental regime that does not subordinate environmental concerns to the economic interest of businesses (Levy and Newell 2005).

It is true that the neo-Gramscian approach places emphasis on the top-down structures of governance and on the structural constraints in the path of change. However, a thorough reading as indicated by Levy and Newell (2005, p. 51) makes it clear that Gramsci allows for the 'role of agency and strategy in challenging groups with superior resources'. They draw attention to the fact that Gramsci himself warns explicitly against deterministic structural accounts of history, saying: 'The active politician is a creator, an initiator; but he neither creates from nothing nor does he move in the turbid voice of his own desires and dreams. He bases himself on effective reality... but does so in order to dominate and transcend it' (cited in Levy and Newell 2005, p. 51). Gramsci fully acknowledges that the relationship between the hegemonic

group and the subordinate classes is very active and dynamic consisting in a series of moves and counter-moves intended to negotiate and renegotiate policy forms and ultimately the 'limits of possibility'. Yet, since structure and agency are theorized as having a mutually determining relationship, it is difficult to pinpoint the concrete chains of causation (Uitermark 2005).

## **Outlook**

Given the utility of neo-Gramscian ideas, as demonstrated by the scholarship discussed, it is surprising that the approach has not been deployed more widely in the scholarship on global environmental governance. One reason could lie in Wapner's (1997) observation regarding the difficulties involved in transposing the Gramscian idea of civil society in Western democracies to the global level. Drawing from a range of authors, he noted that the concept of civil society is historically specific such that there are serious conceptual difficulties in speaking of a global civil society.

However, Levy and Newell (2005, p. 54) have noted that while much of Gramsci's writing focused on the national context, he nonetheless recognized that 'capitalism and class consciousness traversed national boundaries' such that the approach does have potent application in analyzing international relations. Moreover, as Wapner (1997, p. 73) himself acknowledges, the concept of the global civil society retains analytical importance 'when it becomes apparent that the same type of space as well as similar affections and relations that define society at the domestic level are prevalent at the global one'.

The historically contingent nature of the global civil society has not been a major challenge to the application of the neo-Gramscian framework. This is evidenced by a

growing list of political theorists and international relations scholars deploying Gramscian concepts to analyze globalization (Robinson 2005), global capitalism and world order (Rupert 2003, 2005). Gramscian concepts of power, hegemony, agency, social relations of production, the extended state and civil society considerably enrich our analysis of global environmental governance. To end on a provocative note, it may in fact be that the reluctance to take Gramsci more seriously reflects a growing theoretical tameness in the field.

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