
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NEO-GRAMSCIAN HEGEMONY

Indira Thalia Cader, Dwi Ardhanariswari Sundrijo
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: indiracdr@gmail.com, riris.sundrijo@ui.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present a critical analysis of Neo-Gramscianism, a theoretical framework rooted in the works of Antonio Gramsci, especially regarding its understanding of hegemony. This paper uses critical theory by Frankfurt School as a foundation in criticizing the concept of hegemony argued by Robert Cox. While Neo-Gramscianism offers valuable insights, this study seeks to unveil its inherent limitations. Departing from the question of, “Do the concepts provided by Neo-Gramscian about Hegemony solve the problem of marginalized communities?” and using Frankfurt School’s critical theory as the analytical framework, the analysis highlights several key flaws. Firstly, the epistemological failure it reflects, the overemphasis on two-way hegemony or by consent has overlooked a significant factor, which is the inevitable resistance of subaltern class. This movement would presumably trigger the elite class to force their power onto the subaltern class, which would engage the two classes in a series of material and ideological struggles, and eventually will result in the persistence of domination. Secondly, this critical analysis also assesses the internal fallacies of Neo-Gramscian with Horkheimer’s criteria on Critical Theory. This paper concludes that the promised two-way hegemony initiated by Robert Cox fails to solve the problem of marginalized communities, since it is inherently not a Critical Theory, by its utilization of power relations, top-down approach, and most importantly, centralization of power.

KEYWORDS *neo-gramscian; hegemony; critical theory; world order; historical change*



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INTRODUCTION

In International Relations, traditional paradigms and theories have dominated the concept of power in global politics, where they are used as a basis for solving problems and explaining state behaviors in the international system. We might recognize those traditional approaches as realism, liberalism, and structuralism which are classified as problem-solving theories in International Relations. These

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theories assume that the basic characteristics of the international system are constant. For example, realism argues that the state is the primary actor driven by hunger of power and domination due to the insecurity in an anarchical international system; liberalism considers the state as an actor who utilizes institutions to pursue their interests; and structuralism sees human behavior as the outcome of the existing social structure — it sees human beings as a product of social conditions. These theories have one thing in common: they claim to see international structure as it is; they claim that states behave in reaction to the political shift, be it from the international or national structure.

Traditional approaches have been widely circulated and known in international relations; one of the most notable among them is the concept of hegemonic power. When talking about hegemonic power, one must find the definition of it is closely related to the process of domination, where actors ‘coerce’ their views into others by exerting their military or economic capabilities, and where the hierarchical power structure prevails. This definition of hegemonic power has become a common view, from societal to international relations, that the great power possessed by an actor provides the necessary instrument to dominate others. This hegemony conception — that has been accepted by global politics — is the realist theory of hegemony; more specifically, it is the hegemonic explanation by offensive realism proposed by Mearsheimer. Offensive realism sees that the structure of the international system provides an incentive for states to try to gain more power at the expense of weaker actors, given that the benefits in such a situation outweigh the costs. Therefore, the main goal of the state is to become the only major force in the international system, i.e. a hegemonic power (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca, 2017).

The aforementioned explanation provides an illustration of how the concept of hegemony has been portrayed in global politics for a long time, that hegemony is a level that must be reached to ensure state’s national security by creating a ‘threat’ for other states, thus creating a hostile international structure. Consequently, in real practice, this act of domination sacrifices ‘the other group’ by design. As a result, these traditional approaches tend to take the pre-existing social and power relations for granted, it does not diligently question how and whether they might be in the process of changing, and it surely does not pay attention to the ‘other’ that has been sacrificed in this predetermined power relations (Cox, 1989).

Against this background, in the early 1980s, inspired by the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his notes written during his prison term in 1971, Gramscian adherents and fans such as Robert Cox began to argue that Gramsci’s general conceptual framework on cultural hegemony, which stresses the use of ideology, rather than coercion by violence and economic force in obtaining hegemonic power, provides an alternative theoretical approach to international relations theories (Lears, 1985). It offered several innovative concepts that could explain the mechanisms of hegemony at the international level, with a different approach from the existing concept of hegemonic power by offensive realism. Through his beliefs, Cox developed a critical theory called neo-Gramscian, a modification of Gramsci’s theory which explains a new worldview of hegemony, world order, and historical change in two articles titled ‘Social Forces, States and

World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory’ in 1981 and ‘Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method’ in 1983. Through this critical theory, Cox “*does not take institutions and social 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*” (Cox, 1989). According to Cox, unlike problem-solving theories, critical theory pays attention to the origins and changes that occur. Hence, the hegemonic critical theory by Cox aims to break down the overtime constituted meaning of realists’ hegemony power.

In *Social Forces, States and World Order*, Cox explains that critical theory has several fundamental premises; (i) actions are not completely independent but are constrained by the framework; (ii) both action and theory are shaped by the problems created by the framework; (iii) the framework may change from time to time; (iv) that framework is a historical structure, a combination of ideas, material conditions, and institutions; and (v) the framework must be looked at not from above (as in problem solving) but from below or from the outside to understand conflicts and possible transformations (Cox, 1989). With these premises, critical theory accepts that the theory is always for someone and for some purpose (Cox, 1989).

Cox’s initial motivation to develop Gramsci’s theory regarding cultural hegemony which take it steps further into international relations critical theory sparks a movement of Gramsci’s adherents in international relations scholars. As many of them believing Gramsci’s concept could bring a structural change to the global politics, a school of thought has emerged in what is now known as the ‘Italian School of International Relations’ which is an academic association which develops Gramsci’s main idea in explaining the international structure today. As Cox incorporated elements of critical theory in the development of Gramsci’s theory, neo-Gramscianism supposedly analyze how the existing world order emerged, and how dominant norms, institutions, and practices were established. It seeks radical transformation of the social world of advanced capitalism that will bring freedom for all from such constraints by exposing the social and political tensions (Patrascu & Wani, 2015). All in all, a neo-Gramscian should reflect on the essence of critical theory, whereas it aims to develop a more just a world order, but the world order ‘it ought to be’.

This article aims to give a broader view of hegemony power by neo-Gramscian theory, to engage critically in cultural hegemony, and to remind that the essence of critical theory is to prioritize the untouchable, thus hopefully, the concept of hegemony by neo-Gramscian does not further intensify the inequalities generated by the concept of hegemony power by neo-realism. Therefore, this article departs from the question of “Do the concepts provided by Neo-Gramscian about Hegemony solve the problem of marginalized communities?” to really look through and analyze hegemony by neo-Gramscian. However, this article shows that despite the enthusiasm by the Italian School of International Relations which promotes Gramscian as the basis of international relations critical theory, the concept offered by neo-Gramscians regarding hegemony exhibits no criteria of critical theory. Thus, this article argue that the concept of hegemony by neo-Gramscianism has further

intensifies the status-quo and the existing hierarchical social structure; hence, it does not, in fact, solve the problem of marginalized communities.

The substance of this article will be divided into two parts. The first part will explain the neo-Gramscian approach to the concept of hegemony developed from Gramsci's writings, to give a background of the neo-Gramscian approach and the loopholes it fails to solve. The second section will criticize the concept of hegemony offered by the academics who developed Gramsci's understanding from the loopholes mentioned in the first part by identifying internal fallacies in the hegemonic concept itself and assessing it from Horkheimer's criteria of critical theory. In closing, this article will provide a conclusion that the efforts made by the Italian School of IR in evolving Gramsci's theory on cultural hegemony as an international relations theory have diminished its essence as a critical theory, by highlighting its inconsistency in prioritizing marginalized communities.

RESEARCH METHOD

As a post-positivist analysis, this article will use critical theory by Frankfurt School as a foundation in criticizing the concept of hegemony argued by Robert Cox. Critical theory emerged in the 1920s and early 1930s as a reaction to the renowned ideas of reasoning, individualism, and science promoted by the Enlightenment period in the late 17th to 18th century. The intellectual movement of Enlightenment gave birth to social theories aiming to explain social orders in a scientific fashion; it takes the world as it is, and seeks to explain how it works by fixing issues within existing social order. Despite the global praise, the Frankfurt School sees something that has been forgotten; it sees a form of ongoing domination, and it seeks to bring it out to light in order to facilitate human emancipation (Bohman, 2005).

Frankfurt School began as a group of scholars who still embraced Marx's theory of communism even after a failed revolution in Germany. The group's idea is deeply rooted in Marx's argument which stated, "*men make their history, but they do make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past*". By this, the critical theory by Frankfurt School drew from Marx's analysis of inequalities and aiming for the same goal as him, which is to eradicate exploitation of any kind. Therefore, at the heart of the theory, lies a concern with emancipatory politics-bringing about fundamental changes for the least advantaged groups within societies by removing hierarchical social structures (Patrascu & Wani, 2015). Critical theory has a very specific practical purpose, it prioritizes human 'emancipation from slavery', by liberating humankind in circumstances of domination and oppression (Horkheimer, 1972).

It is important to note that critical theory rose as a reaction of contemporary social theory abounds with competing theories and paradigms. As each is in competition to prove something in the most scientific way, every theory started to reject its rivals for its incompetencies in achieving its main principle and their inadequate formulation of how to solve problems. Against this background, the founding father of Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer started to see an underlying political motives in this never-ending debate of traditional theories, which reflects

in the constant efforts of the development of traditional theories in fixing issues within existing social orders (while as we know it, social orders continuously change), and he offers a different perspective in seeing the world.

As a stepping-stone, in his early essay, Horkheimer clearly demarcates traditional theory and critical theory. He argues that first, critical theory did not pretend to be ‘value-free’; it firmly stated that social theories are undoubtedly unseparated from political motivations, unlike traditional theory which seeks to explain social order in an objective lens. Secondly, critical theory put itself on the forefront of analyzing societal contradictions, as it sought to become a ‘force within it to stimulate change’. Third, critical theory has a different function than traditional theory, because critical theory revolves around unmasking the existing society, it seeks to show *‘the idea of a reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community, [is] immanent in human work but [is] not correctly grasped by individuals or by the common mind’* (Horkheimer, 1972). Accordingly, critical theory emancipates critical consciousness in the masses which cannot afford to align themselves with any class.

Horkheimer offers a perspective in seeing the establishment of critical theory, which later was adopted as the main purpose of critical theory. He argues that, even though critical theory rose to the occasion by criticizing traditional theories, it does not necessarily eliminate nor abuse the theory, it merely analyzes the underlying social structures, to comprehend how these hierarchical structures become the “socially-created” constraints upon the freedom of human, and finally, how to completely eradicate that (Horkheimer, 1972). Besides criticizing traditional theory, Horkheimer also wrote arguments regarding criticizing concept that came with traditional theory, saying that *“a concept cannot be accepted as the measure of truth if the ideal of truth that it serves in itself presupposes social processes that thinking cannot escape as ultimates”* (Horkheimer, 1972). Though Horkheimer kind of blurred out the claim of truth in social theories, he maintains a crystal-clear baseline for critical theory he developed, he argues that a critical theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2005).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Neo-Gramscian approach regarding hegemony, world order and historical change

Gramsci certainly did not move away from Marxian pattern of production relations. However, the conception adopted by Gramsci and eventually developed by Neo-Gramscian like Robert Cox is that production *“to be understood in the broadest sense. It is not confined to the production of physical goods used or consumed. It covers the production and reproduction of knowledge and of the social relations, morals and institutions that are prerequisites to the production of physical goods”* (Cox, 1989). The pattern of production relations serves as the starting point in analyzing the operations and mechanisms of hegemony. These patterns are referred to as modes of social relations of production, which

encapsulate the configuration of social forces involved in the production process. By distinguishing different modes of social relations of production, the idea to consider how changes in relations of production give rise to certain social forces that form the basis of power within and across states will be feasible. The reciprocal relationship between production and power is paramount. Hence, to examine this relationship, a framework is developed which focuses on how power in the social relations of production can give rise to certain social forces, how these social forces can become the basis of power in the form of states, and how these forms of power have the ability to shape world order. This framework revolves around the social ontology of historical structures (Morton, 2003).

In Neo-Gramsci's theory, there are three areas of activities that can form a historical structure. First is social relations of production, which includes the social relations in material, institutional and discursive forms which give rise to certain social forces. Second is forms of the state, consisting of historically embedded or unified complexes of the state or even civil society. Lastly is world order, which not only represents phases of stability and conflict, but also allows scope of possibilities about how alternative forms of world order might emerge. If observed dialectically, especially in relation to one another, the historical process can be represented through a special configuration of these structures (Cox, 1989).

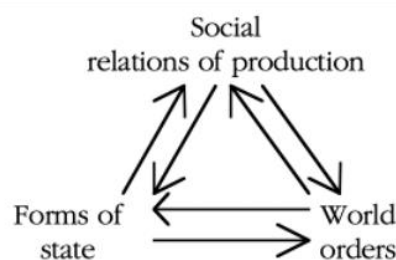


Figure 1. Dialectical relations of power

Within each of the three main areas, there are three categories of elements that interact reciprocally and coalesce to form historical structure, i.e., material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. *Material capabilities* generate productive or destructive potential. In its more dynamic form, it can also be considered as the ability to transform natural resources, which includes both technological and organizational capabilities. *Ideas* are of two types, i.e., first, intersubjective meanings, which refers to some shared ideas about the nature of social relations that tend to perpetuate behavioral habits and expectations (commonly seen in historical structures and serve as a common basis for social discourse); and second, collective images of social order by different groups, which refers to some ideas that may conflict with the historical structure.

The last element of the three is *institutions*. *Institutions* tend to reflect, stabilize, and perpetuate the usual order and power relations. In the context of hegemony, the purpose of institutions is to manage conflict and minimize the use of force. Although every power relationship contains enforcement potential, the use of force is not necessary when the weak voluntarily accept the dominance of the

strong as legitimate (Cox, 1989). The aim is to break down the historical structure that has occurred continuously from time to time, which confirms the pattern of social relations of production, the form of the state, and the world order that reflects the capitalist system of production. In this sense, Cox's point of departure is the world order, and it is at this stage that the discrete idea of hegemony begins to play a role in the overall conceptual framework.

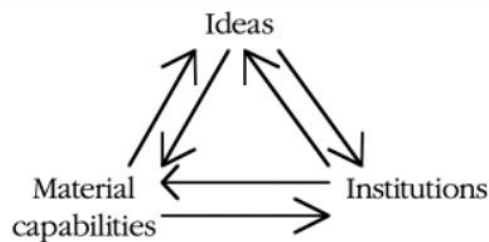


Figure 2. Elements of Hegemony

Instead of reducing hegemony to a single dimension of domination based on the ability of the state, the neo-Gramscian perspective developed by Cox broadens the scope of hegemonic power. It is done by rejecting the state as an institutional category that has been given or formed by the collective reference towards historical constructions from various state forms and contexts (social and political struggle). Therefore, a broader conception of the state emerges within this framework, considering cross-country relations or civil society as a form of historical bloc. Overall, this relationship is referred to as the state complex or known more as civil society. This is the idea that has been prompted by Gramsci, due to his arguments of state, in which he considers state as way beyond political society, public figures, and leaders, but more as “... *the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules*”. By that, the realm of politics and civil society in a modern state is inseparable because they simultaneously produce the idea of an integral state (Morton, 2003).

Initially, Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to explain the dynamics of power and resistance which is reflected by modern bourgeois society and revolutionary efforts by comparing Machiavelli's famous metaphor of centaur (half-human and half-animal being). Centaurs are a combination of both human and animal, just like Gramsci's idea of hegemonic power, which is a combination of coercion and consent. The idea of hegemony is expanded and developed more fully than the conventional approaches in international relations. Besides state hierarchy, hegemony was also seen as a form of class rule, where class is seen as a historical category and used in a heuristic and dynamic way. Gramsci's work to expand the understanding is not only successful in providing a revolutionary science of hegemony, but is also seen as very promising, in a way that, for example, the Gramscian-inspired International Political Economy (IPE) overcoming the subject-object dualism of positivist social science debates. However, this notable act of giving spotlight to the soft parts of hegemony that somehow provide a safe passage

for marginalized communities by acceptance of one's hegemonic power, as we argue in this article, is actually a mere promise.

Neo-Gramscian epistemological fallacy

As noted above, neo-Gramscian began its adventure with Gramsci's ideas, therefore, it is necessary to first elaborate the story behind the construction of his ideas. It all began with Gramsci's interest in proving Marx's prediction on revolution. Marx's idea was that transition towards socialism was bound to happen in advanced capitalist societies. Interestingly, his findings showed that the revolution and socialism failed in Western Europe, yet they were actually founded in Russia, which was a not-so-advanced capitalist society. By that premise, Gramsci started his investigation (Hobden & Jones, 2022). Gramsci was drawn into how the working class was able to self-organize in achieving hegemony within a state. He was also particularly interested in analyzing the nature of bourgeois hegemony in the West, where he wanted to prove Marx's prediction on revolution in capitalist societies. Later on, Gramsci found these working classes constituted their power through the combination of 'force and consent' (Howson & Smith, 2008). According to Gramsci, the consent is a result from the ideas they were able to construct, which successfully reached the majority consensus through compromise and persuasion or '*by combining the interests of various social forces around particular populist causes*' (Engel, 2008).

Gramsci's ideas open up opportunities for theoretical development. Neo-Gramscian took the steps in explaining hegemony in an international structure. However, in our research, we found some epistemological fallacy in the concept of hegemony and historical change it tries to offer. This article argues that neo-Gramscian's concept of hegemony, instead of offering something more liberating, is still stuck with realist traditional understanding of hegemonic power. This concurrently draws away from elements of critical theory, and simultaneously preserve the existing power relations.

This happens within the context in which we were led to believe that, just like any critical theory, neo-Gramscian theory would provide a critical perspective towards realism, especially on its given definition of hegemonic power. Realist understanding of hegemony power as we have mentioned in the introduction is poured into offensive realism, where they argue that states should always be looking for opportunities to gain more power and should do so whenever it seems feasible to guarantee survival (Dunne et al., 2021). Realists guarantee their survival by achieving hegemony, where they limit the concept of hegemony to 'a single dimension of dominance based on the economic and military capability of states' (Bieler et al., 2006). The single dimension of dominance mentioned was associated with hard power by Joseph Nye, which includes military and economic capabilities of a state. Towards this conception of hegemony, a group (or a state) needs an element of coercion to succeed in disseminating its power.

On the other hand, Nye (2002) has established a term of soft power, where it acts as a crucial element of hegemony. He argues that instead of using its military and economic capabilities as hard power, a country may obtain desirable outcomes because other states 'want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example,

aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness'. Following Gramsci's idea of cultural leadership, he emphasizes that an attractive culture, ideology, and institutions can serve as power maximizers (Brivio et al., 2021) to maintain domination through culture and ideology, which are intended to prolong the hegemonic power (Nye Jr, 2002). The idea of offering another dimension of power through consent in constructing hegemony was then adopted in neo-Gramscianism, where domination through ideas is as equally important as material capabilities and institutions in constructing hegemony (Cox, 1981).

The contrast between the realist idea of hegemony and Gramscian idea of hegemony lies in the way the power is being transferred. For realists, the powerful one could dominate others, even those who do not want to, yet domination is necessary to ensure states' survivability. Realists see the transfer of power as one-way, from the powerful to the powerless even through coercive means. For Gramscians, the power should be accepted by others, it should have consent from those who are being ruled, hence it emphasizes domination through culture and ideology, a two-way power relationship where the powerful and the powerless are engaged in debate, until they finally reach a consensus.

Though it may sound very righteous and just, neo-Gramscianism left out some of the ugly truth that consented hegemony will always do. The idea of consented hegemony in international structure by Robert Cox was meant to bring a two-way power relationship by elite transnational class. However, Cox does not necessarily think it through; the two-way power relationship that could bring an accepted hegemon is a false pretense. In Cox's conception, hegemony is formed by the elite transnational class through their own way of manifestation of ideas, material capabilities and institutions. Afterwards, the subaltern class, which is the subordinate of the elite transnational class, either accept it or refuse to do so. If accepted, then the hegemonic power could work for the elite transnational class, but if the subaltern class resists, they could initiate a frontal attack. This movement would presumably trigger the elite class to force their power onto the subaltern class, which would engage the two classes in a series of material and ideological struggles. This would change the very nature of the terrain under contestation. Neo-Gramscianism described the transfer of power should be conducted not through coercive means but through persuasion, however, this statement justifies that the dominant class 'should' eventually rule out subaltern classes in their way. They have to do so, even if it means diminishing the material and ideologies subaltern class believed in, to finally alter it in the kind of material and ideologies this elite transnational class supports.

This kind of relationship has an uncanny resemblance to the power relations suggested by realism, where domination through coercive means is expected. This shows how, while neo-Gramscian and realism might seem different in their paradigmatic nature, neo-Gramscian's concept of hegemonic power indeed submitted to the traditional understanding of power relations, steering it away from critical theory.

The concept of historical change adapted by neo-Gramscianism also contains similar misleading interpretations. Robert Cox modifies the concept of historical change, where initially, the concept of historical change by Gramsci is captured as

collective and individual actions, which are always open to changes. Meanwhile, historical changes in neo-Gramscianism are often represented in a 'given' parameter, such as by a situation of political economy, namely the relationship between class forces at certain times (Germain & Kenny, 1998). According to Gill (1993), *'Gramsci's approach stands in contrast to abstract "structuralism" in so far as it has a human(ist) aspect: historical change is understood as, to a substantial degree, the consequence of collective human activity'*. In particular, neo-Gramscian adherents argue that this commitment to historicism addresses the problem of determinism inherent in so many structuralist thoughts. Sure enough, neo-Gramscian theory might sound very attractive to scholars. In theoretical terms, the main attraction of Gramsci's theory can be seen in several of his works which provide a non-deterministic ontological and epistemological basis in its construction of change (unlike neorealists or neoliberalists). At the same time, it still provides a structural basis which allows the theory to be structurally grounded.

Despite the enthusiasm, the concept of historical change understood in neo-Gramsci theory is often oversimplified and represented in a predetermined (given) parameter, such as by political economy, i.e. the relationship of class power at certain times (Germain & Kenny, 1998). This, unfortunately, works as a boomerang for the neo-Gramscians as their intention to explain international structures to some extent minimizes the room for changes to occur. The internal fallacies founded in neo-Gramscianism precisely shows how the status-quo in international structure continues. This theory does not bring systematic change in the ongoing structure as it is supposed to be as a critical theory; on the contrary, it has the tendency to reflect a deterministic nature from problem-solving theory. From the explanation of a fleeting delusion of consented hegemonic power and predetermined historical change, the idea of neo-Gramscianism as a critical theory is still trapped in the soul of traditional theory where it still utilizes power relations. Thus, with its inherent traditional characters, could neo-Gramscianism really be classified as a critical theory that could empower the marginalized, the social movement, and overthrow the existing international structure?

Is Neo-Gramscianism really a Critical Theory?

It is quite ironic that neo-Gramscian theory which supposedly be a critical theory still have an ingrained character of traditional theory, from the power relations, and pre-determined historical changes. The internal fallacies reflected above strengthen the main argument this article seeks to uphold, that neo-Gramscianism is inherently not a critical theory, which can be affirmed by assessing Horkheimer's criteria of critical theory.

As a framework, critical theory shares a concern with emancipatory politics — to bring about fundamental changes for the least advantaged groups within societies by removing hierarchical social structures. It proposes a radical transformation of the social world of advanced capitalism that will bring freedom for all from such constraints. Critical theory does not merely seek to provide the means to achieve some independent goal, but rather it seeks for 'human emancipation' in circumstances of domination and oppression. As the father of critical theory, Horkheimer stated the definition of critical theory is adequate only

if it meets three criteria: *it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation* (Bohman, 2005)

To be considered as a critical theory, Cox's neo-Gramscian theory, should first be explanatory. The term explanatory generates various meanings in theories of international relations. For example, from traditional theory, Waltz (1979) claimed that explanatory is subjected to '*contrive explanations from which hypotheses can then be inferred and tested*', then Moravcsik (1997) sees '*any non-tautological social scientific theory must be grounded in a set of positive assumptions from which arguments, explanations, and predictions can be derived*'. Traditional theorists generate the same pattern on 'explanatory', they argue that explanatory in a theory means it should be able to be tested empirically to predict the future. Unlike Waltz and Moravcsik, critical theorists see explanatory as something else, for instance, Honneth (2004) suggests that the element of explanatory should be utilized in the critique of social injustice, precisely in the explanation of the process that obscures those injustices. He affirms that only by explanatory analysis that critical theorists could address the wrongfulness of the social conditions.

When applied to neo-Gramscianism as a critical theory, neo-Gramscianism does provide an explanation regarding an ongoing oppression by the existing power structure, especially in the accepted traditional definition of hegemony which is domination through every means (including coercive means) provided by realism. Robert Cox then adopted Gramsci's cultural hegemony as the base of his theory. In his essay, Cox also mentioned how this 'given' structure explained by traditional theories leave no room for changes to occur. Therefore, Cox offers a softer definition of hegemony power by adopting Gramsci's cultural hegemony, which is categorized into international relations Critical Theory. Conclusively, the neo-Gramscian concept offers an explanation about what is wrong with current social reality, of how the 'acceptable' definition of hegemony clearly results in a marginalization of certain communities that has been oppressed by the more powerful, and how this international structure has been going on for decades.

Moving on to the second criteria, according to Horkheimer, critical theory should be practical. Practicality has been a goal in critical theory ever since the foundation of the Frankfurt School, as Jurgen Habermas intends his theory must have practical political relevance and he emphasizes that '*theories . . . only prove their worth by making a contribution to the explanation of concrete historical processes*' (Ruane & Todd, 1988). From Habermas' statement, it is clear that though critical theory might be influential only as a theory and therefore cannot solve concrete issues, critical theory still should be practical, it should provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.

We argue that Cox' neo-Gramscianis fails to meet the expectation of providing achievable practical goals for social transformations. As mentioned above, the idea of accepted norms by the ruling power actually elongates oppression, though it might seem acceptable on the surface-level, but the imposed norms cannot be adopted just by everyone. Moreover, the idea of historical change

proposed by neo-Gramscianism is pre-determined; it is represented in a 'given' parameter, such as by a situation of political economy and the relationship between class forces at certain times. This determined situation of power relations rather minimizes the chance of social transformations to happen. It oversimplifies international structure, where there will be an elite transnational class and subaltern class constantly involved in a struggle of power. In the end, the domination would then be held by the elite transnational class over again.

Lastly, Horkheimer argues critical theory should be normative. The implications of normative in international relations are mainly defined as '*that body of work ... addresses the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation by the discipline*' (Brown, 1993). By Brown's definition, normative in a critical theory addresses how things should be, or how it ought to be, for global politics, it focuses on the issues of social justices and obligations where the issue of war and aggression are being put into question.

Coinciding with neo-Gramscian theory, the normative criteria supposedly push neo-Gramscian to be 'the body of work' which tackles the issues of oppression; it inherently has a moral obligation to make the world as it ought to be. This idea seems very promising. However, it simply does not work due to the incompatibility of the forced universal norms the dominant class supports with the norms the subaltern held. There must be material and ideological struggles that occur simultaneously because, following the logic of appropriateness, there is no norm that would be applicable globally, by all states, all groups nor all individuals. As the dominant class will always win the struggles, eventually the whole power struggle on norms would tarnish the norms subaltern classes believe in. This epistemological fallacy in the conception of hegemony by neo-Gramscians does not provide a solution for the troubled social reality, instead, it does exactly the opposite as it further intensifies domination. Instead of empowering the marginalized, it marginalizes them even more. Thus, the conception of hegemony proposed by Cox is merely wishful thinking.

Neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony and historical change creates an even more evil kind of oppression. On the surface level, it seems like the norms should be accepted for good cause. However, looking into the details of it, we find how – as a matter of fact – it elongates oppression; it makes ways for the ruling power to rule in an even greater form; it deepens the status-quo, the existing hierarchical social structure, and the existing marginalized community. Therefore, to answer the question "Is neo-gramscian really a critical theory?", in reference to Horkheimer's definition of critical theory, then the answer is neo-Gramscianism is not a critical theory. It only fulfills one criterion, when critical theory calls for all three criteria to be fulfilled. The epistemological fallacy discussed in this article delineates neo-Gramscianism as inherently not a critical theory, hence, it cannot solve the problem of marginalized communities.

CONCLUSION

Neo-Gramscian theory rose to the occasion of critical theory in international relations realm to give a rather noble concept of hegemony and historical change. It initially aims to deconstruct the long-accepted concept of hegemonic power by

offensive realism through a two-way hegemony, where the use of coercion is changed into the use of persuasion. This hegemonic power which needs consent from every group is expected to empower the marginalized communities that are being sacrificed from the concept of hegemonic power by offensive realism. Though the idea of it seems like an incredible fit to critical theory, however, if we take a magnifying lens, the concept of hegemonic power has some internal fallacies to it that evaded from critical theory and its initial aim.

This article argues that neo-Gramscian theory — unlike how generally people perceive it — is not a critical theory, as it fails to solve the problem of marginalized communities. It is trapped in the soul of traditional theory where it still utilizes power relations, following top-down approach and, most importantly, centralized on power. The reasons behind this critical statement are twofold; first, the epistemological fallacy in the concept of hegemonic power by neo-Gramscianism, especially in the ‘forced two-way hegemony’ which enforce elements of sacrifice from the subaltern classes who does not accept the material and ideological power from the elite transnational class; and second, by assessing criteria of critical theory by Horkheimer, that it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. From those three criteria, neo-Gramscianism only tick one box; it only explains what is wrong with current social reality (explanatory) but did not provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.

All in all, analyzing the development of Marxism today, especially neo-Gramscianism, left a fruitful memento in our academic life. We found the epistemological fallacy which was initiated first by Germain and Kenny to be the main issue for the theory; it eventually evaded neo-Gramscianism away from its origin as a critical theory. Though we must say, upon learning neo-Gramscianism itself, we came across plentiful of opportunities to examine in the future, such as the relations of Gramsci’s condition in writing the Prisoners Notebook and how it affected his theory, as well as Gramsci’s internationalization, which we have not explore in this article since it does not fit our research in critical theory. Moreover, we sincerely feel the need to readdress critical theory in international relations as a crucial contribution for further research. It must be set straight that critical theory reveal itself to alter the world as it ought to be, therefore, the application of critical theory should seek change in the world as we knew it, just like Horkheimer said, “*The task of critical reflection is not merely to understand the various facts in their historical development (...) but also to see through the notion of fact itself, in its development and therefore in its relativity.*”

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