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Rethinking state theory gramsci and contemporary

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant aspects of Antonio Gramsci's social theory is his analysis of political strategy, particularly his distinction between "war of maneuver" and "war of position." Gramsci argued that the classical model of revolution through military insurrection (war of maneuver) has been replaced by a much longer and more complex cultural struggle within advanced capitalism (war of position). Despite the importance of these concepts for contemporary Marxism, they have received relatively little attention. These terms have a history rooted in both military theory and Marxism, predating Gramsci's prison notebooks, as reflected in the writings of Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky, which offer different perspectives on political strategy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Antonio Gramsci, often regarded as the most significant Marxist thinker after Karl Marx, made profound contributions to leftist thought. His key ideas, particularly his theory of hegemony, are central to his influential works such as *Prison Notebooks* and *The Modern Prince*. Gramsci's theory of hegemony revolutionized the understanding of social change, highlighting the role of cultural and ideological struggles alongside political action.Gramsci's distinction between war of maneuver (direct insurrection) and war of position (cultural and ideological struggle) reflects a shift in revolutionary strategy within advanced capitalism. While scholars often attribute these concepts solely to Gramsci, they have roots in classical Marxist and military theory. Thinkers like Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky offer alternative interpretations that further contextualize these strategies. Gramsci's ideas have redefined notions of class, power, and domination, influencing sociology, political philosophy, and cultural studies. His work remains a cornerstone of neo-Marxist thought, shaping contemporary debates on cultural and political struggles in advanced capitalist societies.

Antonio Gramsci's theories were shaped by his experiences and observations of Italy's socio-political conditions during his lifetime. His time in Turin exposed him to the sharp divide between the industrialized North and the rural South, as well as the struggles of the working class. Influenced by these conditions, Gramsci actively participated in labor activism and founded *L'Ordine Nuovo*, a publication advocating for militant workers' movements.The post-World War I economic collapse and rise of fascism under Mussolini deeply impacted Gramsci's thinking. Appointed as leader of the Italian Communist Party in 1924, Gramsci was later imprisoned in 1926 during Mussolini's crackdown on leftist opposition. During his incarceration, Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony, emphasizing

the interplay of ideological and cultural struggles in maintaining class dominance.Gramsci argued that the ruling class secures power not only through coercion but also by gaining active consent via cultural, ideological, and institutional means. He believed the proletariat could only challenge this dominance by achieving counter-hegemony, requiring both internal organization and a shift in consciousness. His ideas, captured in the *Prison Notebooks*, remain a cornerstone of Marxist thought and revolutionary theory.

Gramsci's use of the military metaphor highlights the interconnectedness of war and politics, emphasizing the strategic elements of revolutionary struggles. He viewed political action as requiring both offensive and defensive strategies, akin to a military campaign, but warned against over-relying on military models, arguing that political strategy must take precedence. Gramsci's concepts of war of maneuver and war of position illustrate the need for context-specific strategies: in the East, with weak civil society, direct confrontation (war of maneuver) was necessary, while in the West, a protracted ideological struggle (war of position) was more effective. Gramsci critiqued economic determinism, asserting that revolutionary change requires ideological clarity, organizational preparation, and gradual erosion of the existing social order. He distinguished earlier revolutionary strategies like Trotsky's frontal attacks, which often led to failure, from Lenin's adaptive strategies that integrated political and cultural approaches through the United Front. Gramsci argued that modern democracies, with their robust civil societies, demand a strategic focus on cultural and ideological transformation before decisive confrontations with state power. This evolution mirrored the shift in military strategy from fluid war of movement to entrenched war of position, highlighting the growing complexity of revolutionary politics.

Antonio Gramsci, as a socialist, was deeply influenced by the political thought of Marx and Engels, particularly their concept of economism, which views political institutions as reflections of economic structures. Gramsci criticized this perspective for fostering a passive approach, relying on capitalism's collapse without proactive political initiatives. He argued that this viewpoint contributed to the failure of the Italian Socialist Party to incite a workers' revolution (1912–1920) and to their inadequate response to the rise of fascism in Italy. These experiences profoundly shaped Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which emphasized the interplay between coercion and consent in maintaining class dominance.Gramsci built upon Lenin's concept of hegemony, expanding it to include not only alliances between classes but also a national-popular dimension, requiring the ruling class to address broader societal struggles beyond class interests. For Gramsci, effective hegemony necessitated engaging with cultural and ideological forces alongside political power. The Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce also influenced Gramsci's thought, particularly his idealist emphasis on the role of human consciousness in history. While rejecting Croce's speculative philosophy, Gramsci integrated aspects of Croce's ideas with dialectical materialism, highlighting both material conditions and the active role of human consciousness in transforming society. Gramsci believed society could control its historical trajectory through informed, concrete political action, rooted in a deep understanding of economic, political, and military realities.

Antonio Gramsci, born on January 22, 1891, in Ales, Sardinia, into a poor family, faced significant challenges early in life. His father's imprisonment led to severe poverty, and a childhood illness caused a spinal deformity, resulting in chronic pain. Despite these hardships, Gramsci displayed exceptional intellect and developed an early interest in literature, philosophy, and politics. Influenced by his brother Gennaro, a militant socialist, Gramsci began high school in Cagliari in 1908 and later won a scholarship to the University of Turin, where he became deeply involved in socialist politics. In 1913, he joined the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and gained recognition as an editor and columnist, eventually leading *L'Ordine Nuovo*, a prominent socialist publication. Gramsci's political journey included serving on the Communist International's Executive Committee in Moscow (1922) and advocating democratic principles in socialism. Returning to Italy in 1924, he became leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and sought to ground the party in mass movements. However, in 1926, Mussolini's fascist regime arrested him, sentencing him to over 20 years in prison. During his incarceration, Gramsci wrote extensively, producing 34 notebooks that explored concepts like

hegemony, the state, and civil society. These *Prison Notebooks* became foundational to Marxist theory. Joseph Femia identifies four phases in Gramsci's intellectual development: the formative years (1914–1919), when he focused on raising worker consciousness; the labor movement phase (1919–1920), marked by Gramsci's involvement in the Factory Council movement; his rise within the PCI (1921–1925); and his imprisonment (1926–1937), during which he developed his most influential ideas. This final phase was crucial in shaping Gramsci's legacy as a leading Marxist thinker.

Gramsci, a socialist, was heavily influenced by the political thoughts of Marx and Engels, particularly their classical Marxism, which sees political institutions as reflections of economic structures. However, Gramsci criticized the economism within classical Marxism, which limited the understanding of capitalist domination and revolution. Economism posits that political changes are secondary to economic developments, with history progressing automatically towards a proletarian revolution. Gramsci referred to this as mechanical determinism, which he believed promoted a passive attitude. He argued that this view led to the failure of the Italian Socialist Party to spark a workers' revolution and contributed to a passive response to fascism.Building on Lenin's concept of hegemony, Gramsci expanded it to include the role of the capitalist class in both seizing and maintaining state power. He added a national-popular dimension, stating that a class cannot achieve hegemony if it only focuses on its own interests; it must also address the broader demands of the people. Gramsci was influenced by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, who emphasized the role of human consciousness in shaping history. While Gramsci accepted Croce's view on consciousness, he critiqued his speculative philosophy and argued for a dialectical materialist approach, integrating human consciousness into practical, political action. Gramsci stressed that political movements must understand economic, political, and military conditions before acting to avoid futile efforts and ensure effectiveness.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a literature study by reviewing 35 journals related to rethinking state theory Gramsci and Contemporary. The results of various literature studies will be used to identify the main challenges for contemporary socialist political theorists and philosophers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Critical comments on Gramsci's military metaphor have been limited to specific statements made by Gramsci and have not addressed the core argument. Both Anderson (1976) and Saccarelli (2008), for example, point out that Gramsci's identification of Trotsky as the political theorist of frontal attack ignored Trotsky's more nuanced discussion of the relationship between war of maneuver and war of position. In the military debates that followed the rise of Soviet Russia, it was military theorists such as Frunze (Gareev, 1988), not Trotsky, who presented a unified military doctrine based on a strategy of maneuver as a proletarian strategy. It is noteworthy that Trotsky, whose theory of permanent revolution came to be criticized by Stalin for speeding the process of world revolution along and ignoring the more protracted struggle of creating 'socialism in one country, was arguing for a military strategy of position in post-revolutionary Russia, while those military theorists advocating a revolutionary war of maneuver were associated with Stalin's political strategy of position.

What is significant here, however, is not that Gramsci was mistaken in his evaluation of Trotsky, but that this mistake is a consequence of a much more significant problem: the problematic nature of Gramsci's military metaphor. In part, this is the result of a considerable degree of confusion in Gramsci's writings about the nature of the relationship between state and civil society (Anderson, 1976). At some points, Gramsci sees the state and civil society as separate:

In this context, Gramsci identifies two major superstructural levels civil society and political society (or the State). Civil society refers to the network of private institutions like family, education, and media, where the dominant group exerts hegemony by shaping beliefs, values, and culture. Political society, or the State, represents the realm of direct domination, where power is exercised through law, government, and coercion. These levels reflect the dual mechanisms of control: cultural

and ideological influence in civil society, and direct political control through the state apparatus (Gramsci, 1971: 12).

In other contexts, Gramsci differentiates between 'political hegemony' and other forms of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971:246). Gramsci distinguishes between political hegemony, which operates within the state, and civil hegemony, which functions within civil society. He argues that hegemony is not simply a balance between consent and coercion, but rather a synthesis of both. This means that the dominant group maintains control not only through consent (shaping beliefs and values) but also through coercion (exercising power through the state and law) (Anderson, 1976: 22). In Gramsci's third conceptualization of the state-civil society relationship, he views civil society as an integral part of the state. He argues that the state is not limited to political society (the government and legal system) but also includes civil society. In this view, state = political society + civil society, with hegemony (the dominance of ideas) being reinforced and protected by the coercive power of the state (Gramsci, 1971: 263). This ambiguity has significant consequences for Gramsci's use of the military metaphor. In some places, the state is only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks (Gramsci,1971: 238).

This imagery of the state aligns with the common interpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where hegemony is viewed as the primary form of class power in advanced capitalism. In this context, a war of maneuver targets "positions that are not decisive," focusing on less crucial areas instead of directly confronting the core power structures (Gramsci, 1971: 239). Elsewhere, however, Gramsci provides a different image of the fortifications associated with bourgeois class power:

In the most advanced states, where civil society has become a complex and resilient structure, it is resistant to sudden economic crises, such as depressions. Gramsci compares this to modern warfare, where artillery might seem to destroy the enemy's defenses, but only the outer perimeter is affected, leaving the core defenses intact. Similarly, in politics, during major economic crises, an attack does not immediately grant the attackers the ability to organize or inspire action. The defenders, despite the crisis, remain resolute and do not lose faith in their strength or future. This highlights the resilience of civil society and the limitations of relying solely on economic crises to bring about political change (Gramsci, 1971: 235).

In this context, civil society, described as a fortress surrounded by the state's trenches, is itself part of the defensive network. Gramsci, in his critique of Trotsky, uses more flexible military imagery, noting that in pre-revolutionary Russia, civil society failed to become a "trench or fortress." This means that civil society was not yet a solid or organized force capable of withstanding external pressure or defending revolutionary change, highlighting its weakness in that specific historical moment (Gramsci, 1971: 236). The distinction between trench and fortress is central to Gramsci's contrast between war of maneuver and war of position. The fact that Gramsci expresses ambivalence about civil society's "military" function is significant because it suggests uncertainty about whether civil society can effectively serve as a solid, defensive force (a fortress) or remains vulnerable like a trench. This reflects Gramsci's complex view of civil society's role in revolutionary strategy, particularly in terms of its capacity to withstand or challenge dominant power structures.

This confusion is evident in interpretations of Gramsci's social theory. For instance, Femia defines hegemony as the "inner fortifications" of class power and argues that the "war of position" should be the fundamental strategy in advanced societies. However, he later expresses ideas that seem to contradict or complicate this view, suggesting an inconsistency in understanding how Gramsci's theory applies to different social and political contexts (Femia, 1987:206). The military aspect of the struggle becomes crucial when the proletariat has successfully taken control of the institutions of civil society and established a new counter-hegemony. At this stage, the focus shifts to the final decisive confrontation with the state, symbolized by an attack on the state's fortress. The "revolution of spirit," or ideological struggle, transitions into a revolution in arms, emphasizing the need for armed action to secure the revolutionary victory (Femia, 1987: 206–207).

Referring to the state as a "fortress" seems to contradict the idea of hegemony as the "inner fortifications." It implies a peculiar strategy where the inner defenses are targeted before the outer

ones. Adamson similarly reflects this confusion, defining the war of position as a new revolutionary theory where the dictatorship of the proletariat shifts from its Leninist meaning to a majoritarian form, emerging as a historical bloc ascending to state power (Adamson, 1980: 225). he then adds that if the war of movement is still relevant at all, it is somehow preliminary; the only decisive battles are those in the war of position (Adamson, 1980: 226). Adamson views the state as the outer fortifications that must be breached before reaching the hegemonic core, but this challenges the idea that the decisive struggle lies in the prolonged battle against the hegemonic core, followed by a supplementary war of maneuver. Buci Glucksmann, however, frames the war of position as a strategic approach to revolutionary change.

This approach to class struggle begins by targeting the buttresses of the state its organizational reserves, such as institutions and networks that support its power. It relies on the massive structures of modern democracies, which Gramsci describes as the trenches and fortifications in the war of position. These structures represent the deep-rooted cultural and institutional defenses that revolutionaries must engage with and transform to achieve lasting change (Buci-Glucksmann, 1980: 281). She goes on to say that there may be conditions in which a supplementary war of maneuver is necessary, but only after the successful completion of the war of position:

In this view, the state must still be "smashed" to achieve revolutionary change, but the process differs under modern conditions. By the time the state is dismantled, it will already have been transformed and weakened. Its historical foundations will be eroded, and its mechanisms and hegemonic apparatuses undermined by a shift in the balance of forces strongly favoring the people. This highlights the importance of building counter-hegemony and gradually destabilizing the state's structures before its final overthrow (Buci-Glucksmann, 1980: 281).

The distinction between war of maneuver and war of position is central to Gramsci's revolutionary strategy in advanced capitalism, where political struggles targeting the state require one strategy and those addressing cultural hegemony require another. However, the ambiguity in Gramsci's discussion of the state-civil society relationship makes it unclear how subordinate classes should choose between these strategies. Boggs contrasts these approaches, suggesting that the war of maneuver aligns with the Leninist model of a "minority revolution," which imposes change from above and risks becoming mechanistic and elitist, unlike the broader, grassroots focus of the war of position (Boggs, 1976: 115). and a model of revolution which he labels 'Gramscian' which is'infinitely more complex and multi-dimensional, with more of a popular or consensual basis' (Boggs, 1976: 115). Femia likewise identifies Gramsci's analysis of revolution as 'the abandon ment of the hallowed Bolshevik model' (Femia, 1987: 53). If the war of maneuver/war of position dichotomy is called into question, the dramatic counter position of a revolution led by a vanguard party and one based on a Gramscian counter-hegemony becomes less significant. How can the war of maneuver be 'consigned to a relatively subordinate place' and the war of position elevated to 'a fundamental principle, not merely a contingent, tactical necessity' (Showstack Sassoon, 1987: 197, 200) without there being sufficient clarity about the strategic aims of each form of war?

There is a significant body of Marxist literature on war that predates Gramsci and explicitly uses concepts like war of maneuver and war of position, suggesting that Gramsci's contribution cannot be credited solely to the novelty of these ideas. This literature, influenced by Clausewitz and Jomini, ties the modern war of maneuver to complexity, unlike the pre-modern war of position, which was more limited in scope. In pre-Napoleonic warfare, battles were constrained to fortresses and prepared positions, with war functioning as a self-contained process within the state, slowly depleting resources and efforts (Von Clausewitz, 1982: 383). Unlike the war of position, which relied on rigid troop formations suited for open fields, the war of maneuver allowed for more flexible troop organization and effective use of uneven terrain. Modern war of maneuver, exemplified by citizen armies like the *levée en masse*, represents "total war." It integrates military strategy with a prolonged effort to build consent across multiple bases of power, emphasizing both military and societal dimensions of conflict. War had become a total national effort, where every individual, in a nation of thirty million people, viewed themselves as a citizen of the state. This mass participation, rather than relying solely on a

cabinet and army, brought the full weight of the nation into the conflict. As a result, the means and efforts available for conducting the war were limitless, and the intensity with which the war could be fought became immense, significantly increasing the threat to the adversary (Von Clausewitz, 1982: 384–385).

Since the time of Bonaparte, war has evolved into a total national effort, with both sides fully mobilizing the entire nation. This shift brought war closer to its true nature, reaching a state of "absolute perfection." The means used in warfare became limitless, driven by the energy and enthusiasm of both the government and its citizens. As a result, war, free from conventional restrictions, unleashed its full, natural force (Von Clausewitz, 1982: 386). Gramsci's approach to revolutionary strategy, which emphasizes the greater complexity of a political strategy requiring mass initiative and protracted struggle across multiple bases of power, aligns more with the war of maneuver in a militaristic sense. Gramsci uses the military metaphor more narrowly than classical Marxists. While he links the war of maneuver to military strategy, he redefines the war of position in a non-military sense, focusing on ideology. In Gramsci's framework, war of maneuver is metaphorical, associated with tactics, while war of position is a strategy related to ideology. In contrast, thinkers like Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky maintain a broader, more complex view of war of maneuver, keeping it tied to the original military concepts of Clausewitz and Jomini.

If we accept, as the classical Marxists did, Clausewitz's and Jomini's views on the political nature of war, then the distinction between military strategy (war of maneuver) and political strategy (war of position) becomes problematic. This separation is inappropriate because, for Clausewitz and Jomini, war is inherently political, and both military and political strategies are deeply intertwined. Thus, treating them as entirely separate forms of strategy overlooks the integrated nature of warfare, where political objectives shape and influence military tactics and vice versa. In this view, politics is seen as an organized movement that combines both coercion and consent. The two aspects war of position and war of maneuver are interconnected at every level. Consent is a response to coercion, where the passive aspect of politics involves recognizing existing realities and winning mass support. However, consent also reacts to coercion, countering it, and thus the two moments merge. Without position, maneuver becomes an untenable form of pure coercion. A war of position alone, without maneuver, becomes an overly rigid, mechanical abstraction of consent. In other words, the political struggle requires both elements coercion and consent interacting and supporting each other for effective change (Hoffman, 1984: 148–149).

Hoffman illustrates how Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* discuss both the overthrow of capitalism (war of maneuver) and the long development of democratic changes in capitalism's power (war of position). Anderson (1976) provides a detailed analysis of the role of hegemony in Russian social-democratic strategy from the late 1890s to 1917. In Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* (1969), Lenin stresses the importance of liberating all oppressed classes, not just the working class. This broad-based movement requires combining hegemonic struggle with insurrectionary struggle to establish the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry." Lenin argues that for armed struggle to avoid degenerating into terrorism, military strategy must align with political strategy from the outset. Therefore, military action is not merely a tactical aspect within the broader political-cultural strategy of the war of position; rather, both military and political-cultural actions are inseparable and part of a dialectical process of revolutionary change.

4. CONCLUSION

The military metaphor is central to Gramsci's social theory, particularly in his analysis of war of maneuver and war of position, which have become key concepts in contemporary leftist theory and political strategy. War of maneuver is associated with a straightforward, military insurrection strategy, while war of position represents a more complex approach involving political and cultural transformation. This metaphor contrasts the Gramscian model of revolution with the Leninist model, suggesting that the former is more suited to modern contexts. However, the failure to critically examine the origins and nature of this metaphor has led to key weaknesses in interpreting Gramsci.

Specifically, war of maneuver and war of position have roots in Napoleonic military theory, and applying them without understanding their historical context creates ambiguity in how Gramsci views the state's relationship with civil society. This confusion could undermine the effectiveness of radical political strategies, as misidentifying the nature of power can lead to defeat or co-optation. Furthermore, Gramsci's metaphorical use of war of position in political strategy, while using war of maneuver literally, results in a separation of the two concepts that dilutes the metaphor's power. In contrast, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky offer a more dynamic and dialectical understanding of the relationship between the two types of war, recognizing that strategy can shift between them over time or even within a single conflict. This approach provides a more comprehensive framework for revolutionary theory.

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