Philosophical and Practical Dimensions of Gramsci's Conjunctural Analysis:

A Contribution to Case Study Research

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Abstract

Purpose

This article employs interpretive conceptual analysis to provide a coherent research philosophy and practical insights for conjunctural analysis as a Marxist alternative to traditional case study methods. How can Gramsci's writings inform our understanding of research philosophy? How does this philosophy shape his own method as applied to the case of the French Revolution?

Design/methodology/approach

Gramsci's methodology is based on a dynamic and agentive understanding of what he calls "organized matter," which is supplemented with a historicist epistemology. His philosophy brings to the fore the notion of "reciprocity" rather than mere causation and prioritizes the study of "regularities," as opposed to fixed and universal laws. It incorporates both structural forces and human agency as valid sources of knowledge.

Findings

Using the French Revolution as a case study, Gramsci applies these principles to conjunctural analysis by examining socioeconomic convulsions as pivotal moments that elucidate the interaction between organic movements – indicative of profound, long-term structural changes such as the ascent of the bourgeoisie, the consolidation of their political power, industrialization, capitalist development and the emergence of the modern nation-state – and conjunctural periods, which are triggered by immediate, specific events precipitating these extensive structural transformations.

Originality/value

This article fills an important gap in the literature, considering that previous research has not systematically addressed Gramsci's contributions to research philosophy and his study of the French Revolution using conjunctural analysis.

Keywords: case study; conjunctural analysis; critical sociology; French Revolution; philosophy of praxis; research philosophy

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Introduction

Case study research has played a pivotal role in enhancing our understanding of human societies. It has been a foundational method of social inquiry, particularly in addressing qualitative "why" or "how" questions in social research (Bromley, 1990; Robson and McCartan, 2016; Valsiner, 1986; Yin, 2014). A case can be loosely defined as a phenomenon defined by specific spatial and temporal boundaries, holding theoretical and/or empirical importance. Consequently, a case study involves an intensive study of one or more such cases (Gerring, 2017). The main strength of the case study approach lies in its thorough examination of phenomena in their real-life contexts, drawing on diverse sources of evidence. This strategy not only facilitates a richer understanding of the subject matter but also generates valuable insights and practical solutions to intricate problems (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

In this introduction, we outline the conventional case study methodologies and suggest that a significant, Gramsci-inspired Marxist contender has been overlooked, particularly in terms of formalizing its ontological and epistemological foundations. Our aim here is to bridge this gap by engaging deeply with Gramsci's seminal writings to elucidate his contributions to conjunctural analysis.

Qualitative case studies are dominated by three fundamental methodological approaches: process tracing, structured focused comparison, and congruence analysis (Ruffa, 2020). Process tracing, as the most commonly used method in small-N studies (Henne, 2021; Mahoney, 2012;

Ruffa, 2020), is "an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence—often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena" (Collier, 2011: 823). Originating in the positivist tradition of cognitive psychology in the 1960s, process tracing employs Bayesian testing techniques and draws upon positivist causal explanation theories, including scientific realism and pragmatism (Checkel and Bennett, 2015; Pickering, 2022). In this context, positivism is broadly understood as a social science tradition modelled on the natural sciences, emphasizing objectivity and variable-driven research (Cox, 1996; Morton, 2003; Riley, 2007; Wolff, 1989).

Therefore, process tracing is applied to elucidate the chronological progression of events or phenomena, underpinned by hypotheses generation and the development of variables (Collier, 2011; Pickering, 2022). As originally conceived, it claims to explain causality by reference to causal mechanisms, or "unobserved entit[ies] that—when activated—generate[s] an outcome of interest" (Mahoney, 2001: 580–581), which are to be validated through Bayesian tests, understood as heuristic devices by which "a hypothesis is inductively confirmed if the probability of it being true is higher after the diagnostic evidence is known than its probability of being true prior to collecting the evidence (Kay and Baker, 2015: 15)". However, a major shortcoming of process tracing is that both causal mechanisms and Bayesian tests suffer from a level of ambiguity that challenges the clarity, uniformity and precision sought by positivistic traditions (Beach, 2017; Punton and Welle, 2015; Shaffer, 2015).

The structured-focused comparison method uses standardized questions across cases to ensure consistency while concentrating only on specific aspects relevant to the research objectives (George and Bennett, 2005: 67). This approach gained traction in the early 1980s through the work of scholars like Peter Evans, Michael Mann, Dietrich Reuschemeyer, Theda

Skocpol, and Charles Tilly. The original state-centric tradition represented by these pivotal figures in historical sociology was later integrated with historical institutionalism during the 1980s and 1990s (Wood and Williamson, 2007). In this period, structured-focused comparison put forward the concept of "path dependency" (Wood and Williamson, 2007), which James Mahoney, also a significant contributor to process tracing, defines as "historical sequences where contingent events initiate institutional patterns or chains of events that exhibit deterministic qualities" (Mahoney, 2000: 507).

Worthy of note here is that while structured-focused comparison is deeply influenced by Max Weber's interpretive sociology, its variable-oriented variants and historical institutionalism draw from the positivistic methodologies of process tracing. The latter studies events step by step to figure out how one thing leads to another. It includes the use of ambiguous conceptual tools with varying interpretations, such as causal mechanisms (how causes produce effects) and path dependency (how earlier decisions shape later ones) (Kay, 2005; Ruffa, 2020; Saylor, 2020; Wood and Williamson, 2007). Similarly, congruence theory assesses whether outcomes align with the expectations of specific theories, and is "often considered important to complement process tracing" (Ruffa, 2020: 1144). Congruence theory checks if the outcomes of a case match the predictions made by specific theories. While it is often combined with process tracing, it has been criticized for being overly focused on theories rather than practical realities.

Against this backdrop, our article offers a Marxist alternative to traditional, or process tracing-guided, case study approaches based on the method of conjunctural analysis. This method, rooted in the Gramscian tradition of case study, has found limited application in social research (e.g., Clarke, 2010; Ege and Springer, 2023; Hall, 1978; Lehtonen, 2016). Its use has often proceeded without establishing a solid philosophical foundation and offering a systematic

exposition of research procedures. This oversight greatly contributed to the method of conjunctural analysis not achieving widespread recognition as a viable alternative to traditional case study methodologies. Importantly, previous research has not systematically addressed Gramsci's own contributions to research philosophy and his study of the French Revolution, where he originally applied his philosophical and methodological insights. This article seeks to fill a significant gap in the existing literature by offering a coherent research philosophy and procedural insights for conjunctural analysis, grounded in a meticulous examination of Antonio Gramsci's writings.

While conjunctural analysis originates in Gramsci's ideas, its contemporary interpretations have been influenced by the works of key figures such as Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall (Spielman, 2018). Althusser's approach emphasizes that general trends, historical tendencies, and structural contradictions do not operate as abstract, isolated forces but are always embedded in concrete conjunctures. This approach is encapsulated in his concept of overdetermination, which highlights how social contradictions are shaped by and, in turn, shape the broader structure of the social whole (Sotiris, 2014). For Althusser (2005: 98), contradictions at different levels (economic, political, cultural) coexist and interact in complex ways, creating what he terms a "ruptural unity". These contradictions are not merely expressions of a general, abstract contradiction (e.g., between capital and labor); they have their own material existence and effectivity (Althusser, 2005: 98–100).

Overdetermination thus refers to the interconnectedness and mutual conditioning of these contradictions, where each gains its specific form and weight within a given conjuncture. Althusser's concept of structure in dominance further explains the unity of a social formation without relying on a central essence. Here, dominance reflects the hierarchical effectivity of

different levels within the social structure, determined "in the last instance" by the economic, while this determination is never mechanistic or direct. For instance, while economic conditions set the foundational framework, ideological and political elements can gain varying degrees of autonomy and effectivity within specific conjunctures (Althusser, 2005: 98–99, 101, 113, 205).

A key example Althusser provides is Lenin's analysis of the Russian Revolution, where Lenin acted not on the general contradiction of imperialism but on the specific contradictions of the Russian conjuncture. According to Althusser, Lenin's method demonstrated the importance of analyzing the "current situation" in its concrete particularity, identifying its strategic nodes and paradoxical unity. This underscores Althusser's insistence that revolutionary practice must address the specificities of a conjuncture rather than abstract generalities (Althusser, 2005: 178–179; Sotiris, 2014).

In turn, Williams (1977) introduces the concepts of dominant, residual, and emergent elements to frame conjunctural analysis. Dominant elements define the prevailing trends and forces of the current conjuncture, while residual elements represent legacies from past conjunctures that persist in new or altered forms. Emergent elements, by contrast, are new forces or practices that challenge or reshape the dominant order. To illustrate these dynamics, Williams cites examples such as the rural community, which he views as a residual concept in capitalist societies, reimagined within urban industrial capitalism as either an idealized notion or a leisure setting aligned with the dominant bourgeois culture. Similarly, the monarchy, while historically significant, has been incorporated into early forms of capitalism without fundamentally opposing it. On the other hand, the rise of the working class in 19th-century England exemplifies an emergent element, characterized by the creation of new cultural practices and institutions such as trade unions, working-class political parties, and distinctive lifestyles (Williams, 1977: 121–

124). Ultimately, Williams' conjunctural analysis weaves together past legacies, present realities, and future possibilities, allowing for a nuanced understanding of societal dynamics. By articulating the interplay between dominant, residual, and emergent elements within specific temporal and spatial contexts, his method provides a comprehensive tool for analyzing complex socio-political and cultural phenomena.

In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State, and Law and Order*, Stuart Hall (1978) and his co-authors apply conjunctural analysis to explore the sociopolitical shifts in Britain during the 1970s. This landmark work examines the moral panic surrounding "mugging", a term sensationalized by the British press to describe crimes purportedly committed by young Black men against white victims. Despite a lack of statistical evidence for any significant rise in such crimes, the issue was amplified into a national debate on immigration, racial integration, and law and order. Hall (1978) interprets this moral panic as symptomatic of a deeper, systemic crisis within the British social formation, marking the breakdown of the post-war consensus. This consensus had been built on a mixed economy, expansive welfare state, and gradual social liberalization. By the 1970s, however, political, economic, and social pressures destabilized these foundations, creating fertile ground for the emergence of Thatcherism, neoliberal globalization, and the law-and-order state (Hall, 1978).

Hall's analysis reveals how the moral panic over mugging was not an isolated phenomenon but a cultural and ideological response to this broader conjunctural shift. The book identifies this response as part of the development of a new "common sense"—a set of widely accepted ideas and assumptions shaping societal perceptions. This emergent common sense reframed the social crises of the time, attributing rising unemployment to trade union "greed" and individual failure rather than structural economic changes, while emphasizing a perceived

breakdown in law and order. The propagation of these ideas through popular media and tabloids played a critical role in reshaping public opinion and aligning it with the agenda of the New Right, paving the way for Thatcherism (Hall, 1978; Danewid, 2022; Gilbert, 2019).

This article, however, exclusively focuses on Gramsci's original formulation of what later became known as conjunctural analysis. What are Gramsci's ontological and epistemological views on society and politics, and how do these views shape his method of conjunctural analysis? What approach does Gramsci take to applying conjunctural analysis to real-world situations? In answering these questions, the article uses the method of interpretive conceptual analysis.

Broadly understood as "mental constructs or images developed to symbolize ideas, persons, things, or events" (Monette et al., 2013: 30), concepts help us to think, communicate and cooperate. Interpretive conceptual analysis aims to interpret the meaning of concepts and understand the relationship between them. As a method of textual analysis, it focuses on identifying, organizing and interpreting concepts in textual data (Takala and Lämsä, 2004). Our analysis of Gramsci's writings identifies several key concepts underpinning the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of conjunctural analysis, including positivism, organized matter, scientific truths, objectivity versus subjectivity, reciprocity versus causality, regularity versus universal laws, historicism versus ideologism and economism, organic versus conjunctural, and crises, or convulsions.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: The first section delves into Gramsci's social ontology. This is followed by a discussion of his epistemological framework in the second section. The final section is dedicated to exploring his methodological framework, with a specific focus on its application to the case of the French Revolution.

Gramsci's Social Ontology: Towards A Critical Conception of Reality and Causality

Any discussion on methodology necessitates an engagement with research philosophy, from which conjunctural analysis is not exempt. Gramsci's ontological perspective emphasizes the interweaving of historical consciousness and subjective engagement with reality, which also inevitably intersects with his epistemology of truth. This perspective thus underpins his conjunctural analysis by highlighting the importance of understanding the historical context and cultural dynamics that shape social situations. Unlike positivism, which tends to neglect the historically peculiar and creative dimensions of social practices, Gramsci asserted that objective reality is not merely something pre-existing and out there but should rather be understood from the perspective of culture and subjectivity at the intersection of the ontology of reality and epistemology of truth.

Gramsci's stance reflects a significant philosophical lineage, drawing from Karl Marx's critique of unmediated realism. For Marx, as for Gramsci, social reality is not a static, directly apprehensible given; rather, it is a historical construct, shaped by the relations and contradictions of human praxis:

> "Bourgeois economists, who consider capital to be an eternal, natural (and not historical) form of production, are always seeking to justify it, in that they portray the conditions of its formation as the conditions of its present realisation... On the other hand, and this is much more important for us, our method shows the points where the historical approach must be introduced, and where the bourgeois economy, as a purely historical aspect of the production process, is related to

historically earlier means of production. Therefore it is not necessary, in order to analyse the laws of the bourgeois economy, to write the true history of production relationships. But the correct approach to them and deduction of them as historically developed relationships always lead us to draw comparisons based on the past history of this system as, for example, with the empirical figures of natural science. These illusions, together with a correct grasp of the present day, thus also offer a key to the understanding of the past (Marx, 1972: 107–108)."

It follows that this reality is not a passive reflection of the external world but is mediated by thought processes, ideological frameworks, and historico-cultural forms. Even the natural sciences do not have to be empiricist, assuming that reality can be apprehended directly and unfiltered from sensory experience. For instance, physicists Stephen Hawkin and Lenard Mlodinov have answered the question about how to know reality in much the same way that Marx did in 1859 (in *The Grundrisse*): knowledge depends on thought processes or what the physicists call models. If the models hold up to empirical testing, they are regarded as reality and true. This is called "model-dependent" realism: "our brains interpret the input from our sensory organs by making a model of the world (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010: 6)". But more than one model can explain reality or the same physical situation. We can "use whichever model is most convenient" (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010: 6).

Gramsci advances this ontological and epistemological tradition by emphasizing that the "truth" of reality is always bound up with cultural hegemony and subjective activity, where material conditions are interpreted and contested within historically situated struggles. Thus, the ontology of reality in Gramsci's view is inseparable from the dynamic processes of epistemological engagement, where knowing is an active, creative, and situated endeavor.

In the social sciences, research philosophy corresponds to the theoretical frameworks essential for understanding the origins, nature, and development of scientific knowledge. It significantly shapes our choice of the methods used for data collection and analysis, as well as the formulation of research questions. This field is anchored in two distinct, but intersecting areas: ontology and epistemology. Ontology, as the foundational layer of research philosophy, offers philosophical assumptions about social reality and its existence, questioning the nature of reality and its comprehensibility. In social ontology, researchers question the foundational elements that constitute society, whether social phenomena exist independently of individual perceptions, and the underlying forces and processes that catalyze transformation within society. Based on this ontological framework, social epistemology examines acceptable forms of knowledge about society and its development, seeking to identify the most reliable sources of information (Clark et al., 2021).

Conjunctural analysis, as a Gramscian method, proceeds from Gramsci's philosophical thinking. Gramsci himself was preoccupied with fundamental ontological questions of reality and causality. His social ontology is firmly grounded in materialism, where he refers to "organised matter" (Gramsci, 1996: 177). According to him, matter extends beyond physical entities and includes "concrete human activity (history): namely activity concerning a certain organised 'matter' (material forces of production) and the 'nature' transformed by man" (Gramsci, 1996: 177). His conception of matter is dynamic and agentive, emphasizing the "philosophy of the act (praxis)… that is, the real–act, in the secular sense of the word" (Gramsci, 1996: 177). Thus, he asserts that "in historical materialism thought cannot be separated from being, man from nature, activity (history) from matter, subject from object: such a separation would be a fall into empty talk, meaningless abstraction" (Gramsci, 1996: 190).

In this dynamic framework, reality and objectivity cannot be examined in isolation and therefore intersect ontology and epistemology. In the remainder of this section, therefore, our discussions are centered on Gramsci's ontology of reality (and its objective existence), albeit inevitably intersecting with some epistemological considerations. In this framework, Gramsci's perspective on the relationship between reality and objectivity challenges the conventional understanding of *objectivity* as an *external reality* that is universally ascertainable and independent of any individual or collective standpoint:

> "One thus establishes what is common to everyone, what everyone can control in the same way, one independently of another, as long as each has observed to an equal degree the technical conditions of ascertainment. Objective means this and only this: that one asserts to be objective, to be objective reality, that reality which is ascertained by all, which is independent of any merely particular or group standpoint. But, basically, this too is a particular conception of the world, an ideology (Gramsci, 1995: 291)."

For Gramsci, therefore, what is termed "objective" is essentially the *reality* that can be materially perceived and verified by all, provided they adhere to the same technical conditions of observation and verification. In the meantime, however, Gramsci underscores that this notion of objectivity is itself bound by a particular worldview or ideology, which pertains to the foundational ontological discussion of whether social reality, or social phenomena exist independently of human perceptions. He goes on to emphasize that historical materialism's measure lay not only in the immediate empirical "truth" of its propositions but also in its cultural and political dimensions, pointing at the entrenchment of subjective practices in reality and objective conditions within the realm of ontology (Hart, 2024).

Elsewhere, Gramsci likens the conventional conception of objectivity to "common sense", which posits the objectivity of the real as a divine creation, existing independently of humanity: "Common sense asserts the objectivity of the real in so far as reality, the world, has been created by God independently of and before humanity; reality is, therefore, an expression of the mythological conception of the world" (Gramsci, 1995: 291). He then provocatively questions the finality of scientific truths, arguing that if scientific truths were absolute, science would cease to evolve. Instead, he sees science as a historical practice, constantly in flux, and emphasizes that scientific inquiry does not confront an ultimate unknowable but rather an empirical "not yet known" (Gramsci, 1995: 402) that is ontologically contingent on technological and historical progress:

> "If scientific truths were conclusive, science would have ceased to exist as such, as research, as new experiments, and scientific activity would be reduced to popularising what has already been discovered. Fortunately for science this is not true. But if scientific truths themselves are not conclusive and unchallengeable, then science too is a historical category, a movement in continual development. Only that science does not lay down any form of metaphysical 'unknowable,' but reduces what humanity does not know to an empirical 'not knowledge' which does not exclude the possibility of its being known, but makes it conditional on the development of physical instrumental elements and on the development of the historical understanding of single scientists. If this is so, what is of interest to science is then not so much the objectivity of the real, but humanity forging its methods of research, continually correcting those of its material instruments which reinforce sensory organs and logical instruments of discrimination and

ascertainment (which include mathematics): in other words culture, the

conception of the world, the relationship between humanity and reality as

mediated by technology (Gramsci, 1995: 292)."

For Gramsci, therefore, the essence of scientific pursuit is not the external objectivity of reality

but rather the development of research methods, the refinement of tools that augment human

senses, and the cultivation of logical instruments compatible with the entrenched character of

reality, objectivity, and truth.

According to Adam Morton (2003), Gramsci places greater importance on "a given,

particular truth" over the concept of an "absolute truth" (Gramsci, 1988: 185), which rather

speaks to the ontological nature of reality and existence. Gramsci argues that, in human history,

the ontological existence of truth is rooted in human action, and truth can become a motivating

force in people's thoughts and actions as part of social reality, i.e., as an ontological rather than

merely epistemological element, given that it holds the potential to catalyze social change. This

perspective ties the concepts of reality and truth to praxis, suggesting a shift towards a more

dynamic understanding of truth as something constructed through human activity rather than a

fixed, external standard. Such an approach, which Gramsci refers to as the "philosophy of praxis"

(a code term for Marxism, used to avoid censors in prison), advocates for viewing history as an

amalgamation of theory and collective practice, where truth is not an abstract entity but a product

of human engagement and interpretation that can shape social reality itself (Morton, 2003).

Gramsci's ontological discussions of reality and its existence also extend to the realm of

causality. Certainly, causality pertains to both ontology and epistemology. Our discussion here is

centered on the ontology of what causality is and how it operates in the world rather than how

valid and reliable knowledge about causality can be obtained. Gramsci offers an alternative to

cause and effect logic based on the notions of "reciprocity" and "ensemble of relations" (Wolff 1989). He posits that events do not happen in isolation but are part of a complex web of interactions, where each event influences and is influenced by countless others. This idea of "reciprocity" (Gramsci, 1971: 366) and being part of an "ensemble of relations" (Gramsci, 1971: 352) means that to understand any event, one must consider its role in a vast network of interrelated causes and effects. For Gramsci, this approach is essential to Marxist analysis, which should focus on mapping the intricate relationships that continually shape and reshape events.

By way of example, Gramsci critiques the simplistic notion of economic determinism, prevalent in some Marxist perspectives, which attributes societal dynamics primarily or exclusively to economic factors. Gramsci thereby argues against reducing societal complexity to straightforward cause-and-effect dichotomies, advocating for a more comprehensive analysis that captures the multifaceted interdependencies of events (Gramsci, 1971: 437; Wolff, 1989). To illustrate reciprocity, Gramsci would argue that the development and outcomes of social-class mobilization, for instance, cannot be understood solely by looking at economic strains. Instead, such strains should be seen as part of a broader network of relations that spring from the mutual interactions of several factors, including historical labor laws, various geographical and ethnic configurations, the political ideologies at play, state policies, public sentiment, and media representation, among others.

Gramsci's Social Epistemology: Historicism and the Study of Regularities

A *historicist* epistemology of studying *regularities* is what Gramsci's approach can best be called. In it, "reciprocity" and "ensembles of relations", as discussed above, underpin the

"organized matter" and will be further examined in this section. Gramsci calls for a critical examination of the reciprocal interplay between structure and agency, which implies that political actions and ideological formations, including human agency, errors, and strategic calculations, can provide researchers with valid and reliable knowledge about society and its development:

> "The claim, presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented and expounded as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism… One may be dealing with an individual impulse based on mistaken calculations or equally it may be a manifestation of the attempts of specific groups or sects to take over hegemony within the directive grouping, attempts which may well be unsuccessful (Gramsci, 1971: 407–408)."

Gramsci thereby points out that many political acts stem from internal organizational needs or the aim to maintain coherence within a party, group, or society. He uses the example of ideological struggles within the Catholic Church to illustrate how conflicts often arise from internal sectarian and organizational necessities rather than direct economic motivations. Gramsci argues that the essence of historical problems lies in the principles of "distinction and conflict" (Gramsci, 1971: 409) driving ideological and political struggles, rather than in the specific positions taken by different sides. This perspective underscores the importance of examining the underlying reasons for ideological and political conflicts, beyond the immediate claims made by the conflicting parties:

> "The two Churches, whose existence and whose conflict is dependent on the structure and on the whole of history, posed questions which are principles of

distinction and internal cohesion for each side, but it could have happened that

either of the Churches could have argued what in fact was argued by the other.

The principle of distinction and conflict would have been upheld all the same, and

it is this problem of distinction and conflict that constitutes the historical problem,

and not the banner that happened to be hoisted by one side or the other (Gramsci,

1971: 409).”

In Gramsci's social ontology, therefore, truths operate as subjective forces shaping social

reality: both causality and objectivity are (re)produced through human agency. One could thus

deduce that his reciprocal approach to social epistemology accords higher importance to the

historical study of political praxis. Besides the configuration and perspectives of collective

agents, such as the Catholic Church, the historical role of ideas should not be ruled out as the

most dependable sources of information and knowledge. For instance, Gramsci discusses the

concepts of East and West, pointing out that these geographical terms, while reflecting real

relationships, do not possess inherent meaning outside of human civilization and its historical

developments:

“What would North-South or East-West mean without man? They are real

relationships and yet they would not exist without man and without the

development of civilisation. Obviously East and West are arbitrary and

conventional, that is historical, constructions, since outside of real history every

point on the earth is East and West at the same time (Gramsci, 1971: 447).”

Gramsci thereby argues that East and West are not fixed, objective realities but rather historical

constructions shaped by the cultural and political hegemony of European societies. This

hegemony has led to the widespread adoption of a European-centric perspective, influencing how different cultures and civilizations are categorized and understood.

By way of example, the characterization of Morocco as an "Eastern" country by Italians, based on its Muslim and Arab civilization, highlights how geographical terms acquire specific cultural and political meanings beyond their literal sense (Gramsci, 1971: 447–448). Such characterizations are rooted in historical interactions and power dynamics, reflecting a broader understanding of how human agency and historical context shape our perception of the world via social narratives as an acceptable form of knowledge, among others. This example demonstrates Gramsci's materialist-constructivist view that knowledge and truth are not merely the result of observing an objective reality but are deeply intertwined with human history, cultural practices, and political power relations. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the historical and social conditions that give rise to certain ideas, perceptions, and terminologies.

In this context, Gramsci introduces what he calls "historicism" as part of his social epistemology. If so-called "truths" shift with each historical era, we must approach each situation by examining its distinct historical context, rather than applying broad, universal principles. From the perspective of the philosophy praxis (i.e., Marxism), this understanding of historicism leads Gramsci to call for a "total liberation from any form of abstract 'ideologism'" (Gramsci, 1971: 399) rooted in theoretical reductionisms and "cut-price popular science" (Gramsci, 1994: 76). The most effective way of understanding social phenomena thereby lies in exploring their historical development and the specific social contexts in which they arise rather than relying on overly theory-driven efforts (Morton, 2003), which may also include congruence analysis. Adam Morton (2003) has highlighted that Gramsci's philosophy recognizes the significant influence of past intellectual traditions and historical circumstances in forming later ideas and current social

relationships, while taking into account the peculiarities of historical periods and cultural conditions: "In other words, we must stick closer to the present, which we ourselves have helped create, while conscious of the past and its continuation (and revival)" (Gramsci, 1992: 234).

In his social epistemology, Gramsci also advocates moving away from the positivist tradition by shifting the focus of knowledge sources from strict laws to patterns of regularity:

> "It is from these considerations that one must start in order to establish what is meant by 'regularity', 'law', 'automatism' in historical facts. It is not a question of 'discovering' a metaphysical law of 'determinism', or even of establishing a 'general' law of causality. It is a question of bringing out how in historical evolution relatively permanent forces are constituted which operate with a certain regularity and automatism. Even the law of large numbers, although very useful as a model of comparison, cannot be assumed as the 'law' of historical events (Gramsci, 1971: 412)."

In the final analysis, Gramsci's social ontology and epistemology stress the importance of critically examining the reciprocal interplay between structure and agency, considering that political and ideological practices also stem from internal organizational needs and historical contexts rather than mere deterministic laws. In this framework, Gramsci underscores the necessity of understanding knowledge as deeply intertwined with human history, cultural practices, and historically contingent power relations beyond overly theoretical frameworks. The following section will examine the practical implications of this framework for research methodology based on Gramsci's conjunctural analysis of a historical case study.

Gramsci's Methodology: Conjunctural Analysis of the French Revolution

In explaining his "historical methodology" (Gramsci, 2000: 201), Gramsci points to the distinction between "organic" and "conjunctural" phenomena or situational events in historico-political analysis, critiquing common errors that arise from misinterpreting the relationship between the two. Organic movements refer to "incurable structural contradictions [that] have revealed themselves (reached maturity)… [and made] possible the accomplishment of certain historical tasks," whereas the conjunctural terrain concerns "incessant and persistent efforts" by which "the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure" the systemic contradictions and "the forces of opposition organize" (Gramsci, 2000: 201) to subvert them. Gramsci identifies a tendency to either overemphasize the direct impact of underlying structural/economic conditions ("economism") or to attribute too much significance to immediate, voluntary actions ("ideologism") (Gramsci, 2000: 202). For Gramsci, understanding historical events requires recognizing the reciprocal interplay between enduring, longer-term structural forces and specific, temporary circumstances where the actual political struggles take place. Consequently, he argues against simplistic interpretations that either reduce complex historical dynamics to mechanical causality or overstate the role of human agency:

> "A common error in historico-political analysis consists in an inability to find the correct relation between what is organic and what is conjunctural. This leads to presenting causes as immediately operative which in fact only operate indirectly, or to asserting that the immediate causes are the only effective ones. In the first case there is an excess of 'economism', or doctrinaire pedantry; in the second, an excess of 'ideologism'. In the first case there is an overestimation of mechanical

causes, in the second an exaggeration of the voluntarist and individual element (Gramsci, 2000: 201–202).”

Within the framework of his *reciprocal* and *historicist* materialism, Gramsci provides the example of the French Revolution and its progression up to the Paris Commune of 1870-71 and beyond to illustrate the concept of conjunctures. At this point, one should note that Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* are a collection of scattered and fragmented writings produced under the constraints of his imprisonment; this is why his conjunctural analysis of the French Revolution within these writings is not systematic and comprehensive, but it provides crucial insights into how conjunctural analysis works as it was originally conceived. On another note, while Gramsci's analysis of the French Revolution does not fully meet several criteria for qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Byrne, 2001), it is essential that modern applications of conjunctural analysis adhere to these standards to ensure better plausibility and believability.

In his analysis, Gramsci discusses how the entire period from 1789 to 1871 witnessed various significant moments and movements that, while rooted in the broader historical processes initiated by the French Revolution, represented specific, situational events or conjunctures. These conjunctures reflected the dynamic interplay between the structural transformations brought about by the Revolution and the immediate, political, and social challenges of different times (Gramsci, 2000: 203–204). The Paris Commune of 1870-71 was a short-lived but influential revolutionary government in Paris. It emerged during the social and political upheavals following the Franco-Prussian War and the collapse of the Second French Empire. Despite its revolutionary significance, the Commune was brutally suppressed by the national government. Yet, the Commune is often viewed as a culmination of the conditions and

transformations initiated by the French Revolution of 1789. It represented a pivotal moment where the bourgeois class consolidated its power, not only against the old aristocratic order but also against newer radical forces. These radical forces sought to push beyond the framework of the bourgeois revolution, demanding further transformative changes..

Subsequently, Gramsci notes the loss of efficacy of political strategies and tactics that had emerged in 1789 and developed through 1848, which testified to a series of revolutionary uprisings across Europe driven by demands for political freedom, social reform, and national self-determination, resulting in initial successes followed by conservative repression but leaving a lasting legacy on European political development:

> "These methodological criteria will acquire visibly and didactically their full significance if they are applied to the examination of concrete historical facts. This might usefully be done for the events which took place in France from 1789 to 1870. It seems to me that for greater clarity of exposition it is precisely necessary to take in the whole of this period. In fact, it was only in 1870-71, with the attempt of the Commune, that all the germs of 1789 were finally historically exhausted. It was then that the new bourgeois class struggling for power defeated not only the representatives of the old society unwilling to admit that it had been definitively superseded, but also the still newer groups who maintained that the new structure created by the 1789 revolution was itself already outdated; by this victory the bourgeoisie demonstrated its vitality vis-a-vis both the old and the very new. Furthermore, it was in 1870-71 that the body of principles of political strategy and tactics engendered in practice in 1789, and developed ideologically around 1848, lost their efficacy (Gramsci, 2000: 203–204)."

In conjunctural terms, the scattered and fragmented character of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* necessitates a more detailed contextual understanding to fully grasp the depletion of political strategies and tactics post-1848. To begin with, the Thermidorian Reaction was a watershed moment in the French Revolution, leading to the overthrow of the radical revolutionary leadership headed by Maximilien Robespierre and the end of the Reign of Terror in 1794. This reaction not only resulted in the abolition of universal suffrage but also restored property-based electoral qualifications in 1795, with executive power subsequently being transferred to the Directory (Manfred, 1974; Yeliseyeva and Manfred, 1978). Another significant event in this historical sequence was the 18th Brumaire Coup d'État in 1799, during which the Council of the Ancients appointed Napoléon as commander of the armed forces under the pretext of a looming Jacobin conspiracy. Napoléon eventually became Consul for Life in 1802 and Emperor in 1804. These shifts led to the dissolution of the Republic and the loss of many democratic freedoms, with Napoléon's policies primarily favoring the bourgeoisie and landowning peasants.

By 1809, Napoléon's policies had elevated France to its greatest extent, encompassing territories like Belgium, Holland, parts of Italy, Illyria, and Dalmatia. He established puppet regimes across Western and Central Europe, placing family members in strategic positions: his brother Joseph as King of Spain, his brother-in-law Marshal Murat as King of Naples, and his younger brother Jerome as ruler of Westphalia. Additionally, Napoléon led the Confederation of the Rhine, bringing major German states under his influence, and transformed former foes Austria, Prussia, and Saxony into allies.

Despite Napoléon's annexationist and exploitative policies, his early military campaigns against feudal absolutist states in Europe were initially seen as progressive. French troops

abolished archaic feudal practices and introduced modern bourgeois social structures, notably dismantling the Holy Roman Empire and eradicating numerous small, disunited German states, thus advancing German unification. However, Napoléon's aggressive expansion stripped conquered lands of resources, subjugated populations, and threatened the national integrity of European states. Such aggressiveness sparked national liberation movements in these territories, contributing to the eventual decline of his empire. After his catastrophic defeat in Russia in 1812 and his final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the Napoleonic Wars concluded with the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy following the fall of the First French Empire (Manfred, 1974; Yeliseyeva and Manfred, 1978).

The Second Bourbon Restoration ended with the July Revolution of 1830. This revolution was triggered by King Charles X's restrictive actions, such as dissolving the Chamber of Deputies, suspending press freedom, and excluding the middle class from elections. These measures, combined with economic decline, sparked widespread mobilizations by the working class, which ultimately led to the toppling of his regime. Although the French bourgeoisie facilitated Louis Philippe's ascension to the throne, working-class militancy and underground mobilization gained momentum throughout the 1830s, as evidenced by the Lyons revolts of 1831 and 1834 and the May 1839 insurrection. The 1840s witnessed a severe economic crisis, marked by falling wages and rising unemployment in France.

The French bourgeoisie's demands for electoral reform from Louis Philippe were met with increased state repression, which in turn fueled widespread angst. Eventually, the working class took to the streets and brought down the July Monarchy, leading to the proclamation of the Second French Republic. However, the June 1848 uprising, which erupted in response to plans to close the National Workshops (a social program for the unemployed), was brutally suppressed.

The suppression of the working-class movement ended the revolutionary period in France until 1870 (Manfred, 1974; The Institute of the International Working-Class Movement, 1980; Yeliseyeva and Manfred, 1978).

In September 1870, at the Battle of Sedan, the French Army, led by Napoleon III, surrendered to the Germans. This defeat, combined with a severe economic crisis, marked the end of the Second Empire. On September 4, 1870, the people of Paris, incensed by yet another humiliating defeat, overthrew the government of the Second Empire and proclaimed a republic for the third time. But the subsequent German siege of Paris prompted residents to establish a working-class-led National Guard to defend the city. They demanded military oversight by civil authorities and called for immediate elections to establish a commune. This demand led to the first proletarian revolution in history, although it was short-lived, lasting just over two months before being crushed in May 1871. The Paris Commune profoundly influenced the course of the French Revolution (The Institute of the International Working-Class Movement, 1980; Yeliseyeva and Manfred, 1978; Manfred, 1974).

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) discusses the differing perspectives among historians regarding the timeline and conjunctural phases of the French Revolution: from those who see it as concluding with the Battle of Valmy, which secured the survival of the revolutionary government by stopping the advance of the Prussian and Austrian forces, to others who extend its timeline to include the events of 1830, 1848, 1870, and even up to World War I. This variability in interpretation itself exemplifies the complexity of historical conjunctures, where specific events or periods are seen as pivotal turning points within the broader arc of historical development. At this point, Gramsci points out that the internal contradictions that arose in the aftermath of the Revolution—reflected in the social, political, and economic

structures of French society—were only relatively resolved by the establishment of the Third Republic (1870-1940). This resolution marked the beginning of a period of stable political life in France, following approximately eighty years of turmoil, which he describes as "convulsions at ever longer intervals" (Gramsci, 2000: 203–204), referencing the above-mentioned series of significant conjunctural upheavals that occurred in 1789 (beginning of the French Revolution), 1794 (end of the Reign of Terror), 1799 (18th Brumaire Coup d'État), 1804 (Coronation of Napoleon), 1815 (Battle of Waterloo), 1830 (July Revolution of 1830), 1848 (1848 revolutions), and 1870 (Paris Commune):

> "In reality the internal contradictions which develop after 1789 in the structure of French society are resolved to a relative degree only with the Third Republic; and France has now enjoyed sixty years of stable political life only after eighty years of convulsions at ever longer intervals: 1789, 1794, 1799, 1804, 1815, 1830, 1848, 1870. It is precisely the study of these 'intervals' of varying frequency which enables one to reconstruct the relations on the one hand between structure and superstructure, and on the other between the development of the organic movement and that of the conjunctural movement in the structure (Gramsci, 2000: 203–204)."

Therefore, Gramsci suggests that examining these intervals of "convulsions" and their varying frequency offers valuable insights into the dynamics of societal change. Specifically, this examination allows for an analysis of the relationship between the foundational structures of society (the economic base or structure) and the ideological, cultural, and political aspects (the superstructure). This complex reciprocity between base and superstructure also extends to the ways in which such factors interact with foreign policy and international relations. Moreover, it

aids in understanding the interplay between organic movements, which speak to deep-seated, long-term structural changes (e.g., as the rise of the bourgeoisie and the consolidation of its political power, industrialization and capitalist development, the rise of the modern nation-state), and conjunctural periods, which are triggered by more immediate, situational events leading up to longer-term structural changes (Gramsci, 2000: 202–204).

Before offering our conclusion, let us provide a contemporary example of conjunctural analysis, referred not merely to the national but to the geopolitical sphere. Efe Can Gürcan and Gerardo Otero (2024) employ conjunctural analysis to explore the emergence of multipolarity as a defining feature of the contemporary international system. Their approach seeks to understand the historical and situational factors driving the decline of neoliberal hegemony and the rise of multipolarity, focusing on both grassroots dynamics and inter-state transformations.

At the grassroots level, the failures of neoliberalism have given rise to two contrasting movements: the leftist wave in Latin America (Gürcan et al., 2023) and the global alter-globalization movement on one side, and the rise of far-right populism on the other (Edelman, 2020). Both trends have challenged U.S. hegemony and destabilized the liberal international order. Meanwhile, at the inter-state level, the weakening of global governance frameworks, exemplified by the transformation of the G7 into the G20 after the Great Recession, coincided with the growth of South-South cooperation and alternative governance mechanisms like BRICS and the China-CELAC Forum. These developments reflect the growing interconnectedness of bottom-up and top-down dynamics in shaping multipolarity (Gürcan and Otero, 2024).

Gürcan and Otero (2024) use a three-step conjunctural analysis to examine multipolarity. First, they identify key factors shaping the conjuncture, such as the decline of U.S. unipolar dominance, the rise of South-South cooperation, and grassroots movements challenging

neoliberalism. Second, they analyze the interactions among these elements, focusing on contradictions, power dynamics, and critical moments like the Great Recession. Finally, they synthesize these insights to explore how residual neoliberal structures, emergent multipolar trends, and dominant post-hegemonic dynamics interact to shape a transitional and uncertain global order.

Residual elements, such as neoliberal extractivist policies, continue to constrain leftist governments and grassroots movements, particularly in regions like Latin America, where dependence on natural resource extraction often clashes with local communities. At the same time, emergent dynamics, such as South-South cooperation and the rise of alternative development models, represent a growing challenge to the neoliberal order and its U.S.-centric foundations.

These developments are not without contradictions, however. The enduring legacies of neoliberalism and militarism, along with the coercive strategies historically employed during the Cold War, persist under the evolving multipolar framework. This creates ongoing tensions and uncertainties as major powers, including China and Russia, contest U.S. dominance in what is often perceived as a zero-sum struggle. Gürcan and Otero define the dominant character of this conjuncture as a "post-hegemonic" stage in global affairs. In this period, the relative decline of U.S. supremacy, whether perceived or actual, is evident, yet it has not been replaced by a clear alternative power or a coherent system. This post-hegemonic moment of multipolarity reflects an interregnum, characterized by a pluralistic and competitive global landscape where the unipolar order is contested by diverse emerging forces. While the U.S. faces significant challenges to its preeminent status, the transition is marked more by multi-vector foreign policies than direct anti-

U.S. stances, and no unified alternative to neoliberal capitalism has yet materialized (Gürcan and Otero, 2024).

In the meantime, one should note that the practical application of conjunctural analysis presents several challenges due to its focus on the complexity and interconnectedness of social, economic, cultural, and political factors. Researchers must account for historical and spatial dynamics while identifying critical moments and contradictions destabilizing structures, as seen in Hall's (1978) analysis of moral panics and Althusser's (2005) concept of overdetermination. Differentiating and articulating dominant, residual, and emergent elements, as emphasized by Williams (1977) and Gürcan and Otero (2024), add another layer of difficulty, requiring careful assessment of their interplay and effectivity.

Avoiding deterministic interpretations while acknowledging structural constraints and agency is essential, alongside translating abstract theories into actionable research methodologies. Moreover, navigating the inherent uncertainties and contradictions of evolving conjunctures, such as Gürcan and Otero's (2024) description of multipolarity as a "post-hegemonic" stage, demands both adaptability and theoretical rigor, making conjunctural analysis both challenging and indispensable for understanding complex social phenomena. While these challenges underscore the complexity of conjunctural analysis as a method, this article narrowed its focus to Gramsci's original formulation, which laid the groundwork for its later development.

Conclusion

This study strengthens the Marxist research tradition by examining Antonio Gramsci's conjunctural analysis, unpacking its methodology and philosophical underpinnings as outlined in

his *Prison Notebooks*. One important conclusion of this research is that, in his writings, Gramsci presents himself as an intellectual who deliberately addresses methodological questions. He demonstrates this intent by practicing what he preaches through what he refers to as his "historical methodology", akin to a modern-day academic. Additionally, his methodology is built on a sound philosophical foundation. Ontologically, our conceptual analysis reveals that Gramsci's historical materialism is predicated on a dynamic and agentive understanding of "organised matter" emphasizing the transformatory influence of social truths on social reality. Epistemologically, Gramsci's philosophy underscores the idea of "reciprocity" between economic base and political-ideological superstructure rather than mere economic causation. Within this framework, Gramsci further promotes a historicist approach to studying "regularities", as opposed to the positivist search for fixed and universal laws, as revealed in our conceptual analysis. Gramsci's historicist epistemology, anchored in the notion of regularities, emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical patterns of relevant events, ideas, and situations within their specific context. Gramsci rejects a one-size-fits-all approach and advocates for an analysis that considers the unique historical conditions in which events unfold. He also incorporates both structural forces and human agency as reliable and valid sources of knowledge, when they are conceived to be reciprocally connective. Therefore, this approach takes full account of the reciprocal interplay of a multitude of factors and regularities beyond over-simplified and reductionist frames of interpretation.

In this framework, Gramsci applies conjunctural analysis to the case of the French Revolution, which helps explore how what he calls socioeconomic "convulsions", such as those in 1789, 1794, 1799, 1804, 1815, 1830, 1848, and 1870, serve as reference points in revealing the dynamics between organic movements and conjunctural periods. He contends that economic

and political crises are not just moments of breakdown but also of potential transformation. In Gramsci's terminology, organic movements reflect deep, enduring structural shifts, exemplified by the rise of the bourgeoisie, its growing political dominance, the process of industrialization, the expansion of capitalism, and the development of the modern nation-state. Meanwhile, conjunctural periods arise from specific, immediate events that are catalyzed and/or catalyze these broad structural changes. We also demonstrated how conjunctural analysis can be fruitfully deployed to understand the emerging geopolitical multipolarity in the U.S. post-hegemonic moment.

Centrally, Gramsci also highlights the role of collective agents in shaping and interpreting the conjuncture. Intellectuals, for instance, are not just academics but include those who provide leadership in various social groups, communities, and classes, as has been elaborated elsewhere (Otero and Gürcan, 2024). Their collective interpretation of the conjuncture influences how different groups respond to a crisis. Therefore, Gramsci's method is closely linked to political strategy. It involves analyzing the balance of forces in each conjuncture and developing strategies that align with the interests of specific social groups. This strategic approach is essential for both understanding and influencing historical developments. It follows that Gramsci's conjunctural analysis is not a purely theoretical exercise but is closely tied to revolutionary praxis, which aims to enlighten concrete actions geared to transform the existing social order. Considering these observations, we hope that our systematic exposition of Gramsci's social ontology and epistemology, along with their implications for conjunctural analysis, will inspire the strengthening of Marxist research tradition in favor of more effective applications of this methodology and foster a move away from the traditional dominance of

positivistic case study approaches toward a historicist orientation that can better account for the

complexity of social reciprocities and political practice.

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