



Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Intellectuals: A Critical Study

Dr. Dhaneswar Baishya

Associate Professor, Barbhag College, Kalag, Nalbari, Assam, India

Received: 10.09.2026; Accepted: 29.09.2026; Available online: 30.09.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

Antonio Gramsci's idea of the intellectual is an important part of his explanation of power and social change. He did not use the word intellectual only for university teachers, writers, philosophers, or other educated professionals. In his point of view the role of intellectuals depends on the role does play a person in organising ideas, guiding a group, spreading knowledge, and shaping social consciousness. From this point of view, intellectual activity is a social function. This paper explains Gramsci's theory in simple terms and examines his distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. It also discusses the connection of intellectuals with hegemony, civil society, education, political organisation, and the idea of the new intellectual. The study is based mainly on a reading of Gramsci's Selections from the Prison Notebooks and selected secondary works. The paper argues that Gramsci's main contribution is to connect knowledge with social organisation and power. His ideas remain useful for studying education, media, digital communication, culture, and the production of social knowledge.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci; intellectuals; organic intellectuals; traditional intellectuals; hegemony; civil society; education; political organisation.

The word "intellectual" is generally used for a person who is involved in activities such as teaching, writing, research, philosophy, science, or other forms of knowledge production. Antonio Gramsci gave this idea a wider meaning. According to him that intellectuals are not those people whom are involved in intellectual or mental labour as the those who are done physical labour are called labourers. Instead of looking only at a person's profession, he asked what that person actually does in society. For Gramsci, intellectual work is connected with thinking, organising, communicating, educating, and providing direction to a social group (Gramsci; selection from the Prison Notebooks 3-23). This broader understanding is important for studying political power. A social group needs people who can explain its experiences, organise its interests, communicate its ideas, and help it understand its place in society. In this sense, intellectuals are connected with political and cultural leadership. Their work is related to education, civil society, hegemony, political organisation, and the development of collective consciousness (Femia; p. 130). Gramsci's theory therefore cannot be understood separately from his wider theory of power. Ideas do not become influential simply because they are good or convincing. They become powerful when they are carried through institutions, organisations, everyday practices, and forms of communication. Intellectuals have an important role in this process. They can support an existing social

order, but they can also help a subordinate group develop an alternative understanding of society.

Research Objectives:

- To explain Gramsci's understanding of the intellectual as a social function.
- To examine the meaning of traditional and organic intellectuals.
- To understand the relationship between intellectuals, civil society, and hegemony.
- To discuss the role of education and political organisation in the development of intellectuals.
- To explain Gramsci's idea of the new intellectual.
- To examine the relevance and limitations of Gramsci's theory in contemporary society.

Research Methodology:

The paper follows a qualitative and descriptive-analytical method. The main primary source is Antonio Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, especially the sections dealing with intellectuals, education, civil society, and political organisation. Secondary works by Joseph V. Femia, Steven Jones, E. M. S. Namboodiripad and P. Govinda Pillai, and other listed authors are used to explain and place Gramsci's arguments in context. It mainly studies and interprets the ideas found in the selected texts. Direct quotations are kept with proper acknowledgement, while the remaining discussion is expressed in the researcher's own words.

Antonio Gramsci was born on 22 January 1891 at Ales in Sardinia. Sardinia was economically less developed than the industrial parts of northern Italy. His early experience of regional inequality influenced his understanding of social and economic differences. In 1911 he went to Turin on a scholarship to study at the university. Turin was a major industrial city, and there he came into close contact with industrial workers, socialist politics, and the labour movement.

Gramsci became involved in journalism and political activity. In 1919 he helped establish *L'Ordine Nuovo*, (New Order) a publication that discussed workers' councils and working-class organisation. He later played an important role in the formation of the Communist Party of Italy and also entered parliamentary politics. In 1926, under Mussolini's Fascist government, he was arrested and imprisoned. During his imprisonment he wrote the notes that were later collected and published as the *Prison Notebooks*. These writings dealt with philosophy, history, culture, education, civil society, political organisation, and intellectuals. They later became important works in political and social theory (Jones).

In the beginning of the chapter 'Intellectuals', Gramsci put a question: "Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialized category of intellectuals?" (*Prison Notebooks*, p. 5) According to Gramsci, this was a complex question. He pointed out that for the historical processes which produce intellectuals of different classes are diverse. Each Social group of the society produces one or more types of intellectuals in relation to its different stages of the growth. These intellectuals provide the group with its identity and unity. Each social group comes to understand its role in the social and political spheres through its own intellectuals. He gave some instances- the entrepreneurs of capitalist society produce, along with their emergence and growth, the technologists, economists, the organisers of the new culture, and

the legal system. The entrepreneur represents the system in the higher realms of social activity. (Prison Notebooks, p - 5-6)

Gramsci's understanding of the intellectual is different from the common idea that only highly educated people are intellectuals. His famous statement makes this point clearly: "All men are intellectuals, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (Prison Notebooks,9). This statement does not mean that everyone performs the same intellectual work. Rather, it means that human beings have the capacity to think, judge, learn, and understand their surroundings, while some people perform special social functions connected with intellectual activity. For Gramsci, therefore, the important question is not simply whether a person has an intellectual profession. The important question is whether that person plays a continuing role in organising ideas, educating others, communicating knowledge, providing leadership, or helping a social group understand its interests. A person who works in a practical occupation can perform an important intellectual function, while a person with a highly respected profession may not necessarily play such a social role (Prison Notebooks, 3-23).

Gramsci describes Traditional Intellectuals as the first major category of intellectuals. Traditional intellectuals usually consider themselves independent and free from any particular social class. They often believe that their social position comes from a long historical tradition and continuity. Gramsci gives clergymen or ecclesiastics as an important example of traditional intellectuals. Historically, clergymen had significant authority in areas such as religion, education, morality, culture, and social life. (Prison Notebooks; p. 7) However, according to Gramsci, they cannot be considered completely neutral or independent. Their social position and institutions are connected with particular historical and social structures. Therefore, even when intellectuals consider themselves neutral, it is important to examine their social role and historical connections to understand their actual position in society.

The most important idea in Gramsci's theory of intellectuals is the Organic Intellectual. According to Gramsci, as a major social class develops historically, it develops its own group of intellectuals. These intellectuals express the class's ideas, organization, leadership, language, and view of the world. These people are called the "Organic Intellectuals" of that social class.

The work of organic intellectuals is not limited to producing knowledge. They also:

- express the ideas and values of their social class;
- organize and represent the interests of the class;
- create social and political awareness;
- organize people;
- provide leadership;
- play a role in production and management; and
- help develop an alternative view of society and the world.

In modern capitalist society, organic intellectuals may be found among business organizers, technicians, administrators, journalists, political thinkers, and other organizers. According to Gramsci, an organic intellectual is not defined mainly by their profession or job. Rather, they are defined by their social role and their relationship with a particular social group. In other words, what makes a person an organic intellectual is the way they help a social group develop its ideas, organize itself, create political awareness, and exercise leadership.

Thus, according to Gramsci organic intellectuals are those who identify with the interests and perspectives of the class, section or alliances which take the lead in or support society's march forward. As opposed to it, the traditional intellectuals are those who support the status quo and the class or sections which want to sustain it. The competition and war between the organic and traditional intellectuals are key elements in the revolutionary struggle or class war. (Namboodripad and Pillai: p-79) Gramsci wrote in his Prison Notebooks, "One of the most important characteristics of any group that is developing towards dominance is its struggle to assimilate and to conquer 'ideologically' the traditional intellectuals, but this assimilation and conquest is made quicker and more efficacious the more group in question succeeds in simultaneously elaborating its own organic intellectuals. (Prison Notebooks; p. 10)

Gramsci's theory of intellectuals is closely connected with his idea of Hegemony or cultural domination. According to Gramsci, the ruling class does not maintain its power over society only through force or the repressive machinery of the state. It also establishes its leadership by gaining the consent of the people. (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p. 12.) This consent is created through various areas of social life, such as education, religion, the mass media, culture, morality, common sense, family, and different social institutions and organizations. In this process, intellectuals play a very important role. According to Gramsci, intellectuals are important mediators who organize and shape the ideas and social consciousness of society. In modern interpretations, they are also seen as important agents who help organize consent between civil society and systems of political rule. Therefore, it is difficult to fully understand the nature of cultural hegemony without understanding the relationship between intellectuals, culture, and power. (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p. 238)

Gramsci's idea of civil society is closely connected with his theory of intellectuals. He broadly examines the superstructure of society through two major levels: civil society and political society or the State. Civil society includes various institutions and organizations that exist outside the formal machinery of the State. These may include educational institutions, religious organizations, newspapers and other media, cultural organizations, professional associations, families, and voluntary organizations. Through these institutions, ideas, values, morality, and social norms are developed and spread in society. As a result, civil society becomes an important area through which the ruling group exercises and maintains its hegemony. Gramsci explains that civil society is connected with the function of hegemony, while political society or the State is connected with direct domination and command (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p. 12-13). However, civil society is not only a means of maintaining existing hegemony. Civil society is not merely an arena in which the dominant group maintains hegemony; it can also become an important arena of struggle in which subordinate groups develop alternative intellectual and cultural leadership and challenge the existing hegemonic order (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 238-39).

In Antonio Gramsci's ideas about intellectuals, the social role of rural and urban intellectuals is an important subject. According to Gramsci, intellectuals are not a separate group living apart from society. Their role is closely connected with the particular social and economic system in which they live. Urban intellectuals generally develop along with the growth of industrial society. However, their activities are not completely independent. In a capitalist society, industries and systems of production are often controlled by powerful economic groups or leaders. Urban intellectuals frequently help to meet the administrative,

organisational and intellectual needs of these systems. In this way, they become closely connected with the structure and functioning of industrial society. (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks; p. 14-15)

Rural intellectuals, on the other hand, have a closer relationship with peasants and the general rural population. People such as priests, teachers, lawyers, doctors and government employees in villages do more than perform their professional duties. They also have social and political influence in rural society. They maintain relationships not only with peasants but also with the small bourgeoisie and middle-class groups in towns. As a result, they can also act as a kind of social link between the village and the town.

According to Gramsci, the attitude of peasants towards intellectuals in rural society is quite complex. Ordinary peasants generally see intellectuals as educated and socially respected people who often enjoy a relatively better standard of living. Therefore, many peasants wish to educate at least one of their children and help them become a teacher, priest, lawyer, doctor or enter another respected profession. They hope that their children's education and social position will improve both the economic condition and the social status of the family.

However, there is also an inner tension behind this respect. Although peasants respect the social position and influence of intellectuals, they may sometimes feel jealousy, dissatisfaction or even disrespect towards them. This is particularly true when intellectuals are closely associated with powerful or influential groups in society. In such situations, ordinary people may see intellectuals as belonging to a special social group that is distant from them. Thus, the relationship between peasants and intellectuals contains two different feelings: on the one hand, respect and dependence, and on the other hand, jealousy and dissatisfaction. This dual relationship is an important feature of the social structure of rural society. From Gramsci's point of view, to understand the political and social life of peasant society, it is necessary to examine the influence of intellectuals and the dependence of peasants on them.

Gramsci's theory of intellectuals is closely connected with his ideas about education. For him, education is not simply a process of giving knowledge; it also shapes people's worldview and social awareness. If education mainly spreads the values of the ruling class, it strengthens the existing system of domination. However, if it develops critical thinking, historical awareness and the ability to organise collectively, it can contribute to the development of counter-hegemony. Therefore, Gramsci considered education and intellectual development important for the liberation of workers and marginalised groups. Political liberation, in his view, involves not only economic change but also a change in people's thinking and consciousness. (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, pp. 26-43)

Gramsci also connected the role of political parties with that of intellectuals. A political party should not be seen only as an organisation that participates in elections; it can also function as a collective intellectual. In the case of the working class, its task is to transform workers' separate experiences and economic demands into a broader political and historical consciousness. It should organise the activities of organic intellectuals and connect workers' immediate economic interests with the wider task of social leadership. (Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, pp. 12-13 and 137-144.)

This also explains the difference between the "corporate" level and hegemony in Gramsci's thought. When a class organises only to protect its own economic interests, it

remains at the corporate level. When it becomes capable of offering a broader political, moral and cultural direction for society, it moves towards a hegemonic role.

Gramsci gave particular importance to the idea of the "new intellectual." Through the weekly newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo* (*The New Order*), which he edited, he promoted the development of a new kind of intellectual and discussed its basic principles. The newspaper gained importance partly because its ideas reflected the hopes and aspirations present in society at that time and were connected with developments in everyday social life. (Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 10)

According to Gramsci, the new intellectual cannot be defined simply by the ability to speak well or deliver impressive speeches. Public speaking may influence people's emotions for a short time, but it is not enough. A new intellectual must actively participate in the practical life of society. Such intellectuals should be builders, organisers and thinkers capable of creating lasting social influence. They should move from technical knowledge to scientific understanding and then towards a humanistic understanding of history. Otherwise, they may remain specialists without becoming people capable of providing wider social direction.

Gramsci's ideas about intellectuals can also be applied to contemporary society. Education, mass media, social media, universities, cultural institutions and social organisations all influence the formation of public ideas and opinions. Information now spreads rapidly, making questions about its interpretation, reliability and social impact increasingly important. Therefore, it is necessary to consider not only how knowledge is produced but also how it is organised, who interprets it, and which interests or worldviews are represented through it.

In this context, Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual provides a useful framework for analysing social organisation, cultural leadership and the development of alternative forms of consciousness. It can be applied to the roles of teachers, journalists, researchers, writers, social workers and members of different social organisations. At the same time, applying Gramsci's ideas to contemporary society requires attention to digital media, diverse social identities and changing forms of communication.

Gramsci's theory of intellectuals forms an important part of his political and cultural thought. For him, intellectuals are not limited to scholars, writers, teachers, philosophers or scientists. Their role is connected with knowledge, organisation, leadership, ideology and the formation of social consciousness. His statement that "everyone is an intellectual in some sense, but not everyone performs the function of an intellectual" challenges the traditional understanding of intellectuals.

His distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals further shows that intellectuals are closely connected with historical class relations. The concept of the organic intellectual suggests that a social class develops its own thinkers, organisers and leaders in order to strengthen its social influence and provide direction to wider social groups. Thus, Gramsci understands intellectual activity not simply as the production of knowledge, but as a part of social organisation and leadership.

References:

1. `Gramsci, Antonio. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
2. Gramsci's Thought. By E.M.S Namboodripad and P. Govinda Pillai
3. Femia, Joseph V. Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.
4. Jones, Steve. Antonio Gramsci. Routledge, 2006.
5. McNally, Mark, ed. Antonio Gramsci. Palgrave Macmillan.
6. আনাতোনিও গ্রামসি—নির্বাচিত রচনা সংগ্রহ (বাংলা) প্রথম খণ্ড; সম্পাদনা আবু অনুবাদ—সৌরীন ভট্টাচার্য ও শমীক বন্দোপাধ্যায়: পার্ল পাব্লিশার্স, কোলকাতা।