

Meiji Restoration and Modernization: The Role of Intellectuals in The Context of Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Dr. Yasemin Yazici
Erciyes University, Turkey

[Doi:10.19044/esj.2025.v21n11p1](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2025.v21n11p1)

Submitted: 25 February 2025

Accepted: 18 April 2025

Published: 30 April 2025

Copyright 2025 Author(s)

Under Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0

OPEN ACCESS

Cite As:

Yazici Y. (2025). *Meiji Restoration and Modernization: The Role of Intellectuals in The Context of Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 21 (11), 1. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2025.v21n11p1>

Abstract

The Meiji Era (1868-1912) was a crucial period in Japan's modernization, marked by profound social and political transformations under Western influence. Japanese intellectuals played a key role in reconciling traditional values with modern Western ideas. Inspired by Western science, technology, and administrative systems, the Meiji government sought to reshape Japan into a global power. Intellectuals explored concepts such as freedom, democracy, and individualism, integrating them into Japanese society while maintaining cultural identity.

This study examines the impact of Meiji intellectual movements on Japan's modernization. The central questions include: How did Japanese intellectuals interpret Western thought? What proposals did they offer for modernization? How did their views on "civilization" and "enlightenment" influence state policies? What tensions arose between traditional values and Western modernization ideas? Addressing these questions, this study explores the intellectual foundation of Japan's transformation into a modern nation-state. Additionally, using Gramsci's hegemony theory and ideology analysis, it investigates how the ruling class employed ideological tools to shape modernization.

Findings reveal that Meiji intellectuals sought a balance between tradition and modernization. They aimed to preserve Japan's national identity while embracing scientific and technological advancements. This dual

approach aligned with Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which stresses obtaining societal consent for change. Ultimately, the Meiji intellectual movements shaped Japan's policies, fostering a unique modernization process that blended Western influences with indigenous traditions. This dynamic balance allowed Japan to emerge as a strong, modernized state while maintaining its cultural heritage.

Keywords: Meiji period, modernization, Meiji intellectuals, Meiji ideology, theory of hegemony, counter-hegemony

Introduction

The term "ideology" possesses a dual meaning: it aims to propel people forward and foster change while also encompassing conservatism against narrow and specific viewpoints. In this context, according to figures such as Alvin Gouldner, ideology is an "-ism" that describes a new social structure and a new societal ideal; whereas, according to individuals like Talcott Parsons, it is viewed as dominant ideas within a specific social formation (Oskay, 2014: 292-293). Carol Gluck has noted that ideology provides "maps of problematic social reality" through the prescriptions it presents (Gluck, 1985: 7). According to Mardin, "an intellectual is an ideology producer because he/she works with ideas" (Mardin, 2007: 26). For Gramsci, on whom the theoretical approach of this study is based, the most important tasks of intellectuals are to present a new worldview, to reveal existing hegemonies, and to advocate solutions to these issues, thereby enabling society to metaphorically "shed its skin" and "acquire a new personality" (Dural, 2007: 61).

The Meiji Era (1868-1912) represents a critical period in which Japan transitioned from the feudal Tokugawa shogunate to a centralized nation-state. During this period, Japan entered a serious transformation process in many areas, such as economy, technology, social structure, and education, to resist the colonial threats of the West and to achieve national unity. In this process, modernization ideas taken from the West were synthesized with traditional Japanese values in line with the idea of "Japanese spirit, Western science – wakonyōsai (和魂洋才)". This transformation brought about profound changes not only in the political and economic spheres but also in social and intellectual life. Japan's rapid efforts to ascend to the level of Western powers were among the most distinctive features of this period. Additionally, during this modernization process, not only were political centralization, economic development, and social reforms significant, but reason and thought were also crucial, leading to the conscious emergence of ideology (Gluck, 1985: 3). In the modernization process, Japanese intellectuals played a vital role in facilitating the introduction of Western science, technology, and thought

systems into society, integrating these new understandings into local culture, and simultaneously creating the "state, society, and citizens" (Gluck, 1985: 8). Esenbel states that the Japanese used the East-West approach in a "dualistic" way during the modernization process, but that this dual identity adaptation was not easy (Esenbel, 2000: 19). This study examines the impact and role of Meiji Era intellectuals in Japan's modernization process through the lens of the period's leading intellectual figures.

A review of the literature reveals that Masaaki's work, *Japanese Culture in the Meiji Era Vol IX: Thought* (Masaaki, 1958), addresses the intellectual structure of the Meiji period starting from the Edo period's intellectual roots. Additionally, the edited volume by Jansen, *Changing Japanese Attitude towards Modernization* (Jansen, 1972), provides detailed information on the ideological origins of Meiji modernization through its numerous articles. Among these studies, *Modernization and the Japanese Intellectual: Some Comparative Observations* (Passin, 1972) and *Japanese Writers and Modernization* (Katō, 1972) offer significant data for this research. Jo Sam Sang's article, *Identity Crisis and Ideology: The Case of Meiji Japan* (Sam-Sang, 2011), examines the identity dilemma of Westernization and maintaining Asian identity within the context of pan-Asianism during the Meiji period. Cemil Aydın, drawing from Pan-Asian thought, focuses on the anti-Western sentiments in Japan (Aydın, 2002). In Japanese literature, the work written by Shigeru (Shigeru, 1958) is seen to address the ideas of freedom and liberalism, especially through the important thinkers of the Meiji Period, Nakae Chōmin, Kotoku Shusui, and Yoshino Sakuzo. In his work, Yonehara (Yonehara, 1986) also examined the Meiji Period ideas around Nakae Chōmin and Fukuzawa Yukichi. While examining the intellectual world of Nakae Chōmin, who is one of the pioneers of liberalism in Japan and known as a journalist, writer, and politician, it is especially emphasized how he was influenced by the French Enlightenment. While this paper draws upon all these studies, it will analyze the ideological infrastructure of Meiji modernization through Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony explains how the ruling class in a society can maintain power not only through coercion but also by constructing ideological consent. In this context, Meiji modernization can be regarded as the process of establishing a new hegemonic order in Japan. Therefore, the present study will focus on the ideological contributions to the modernization process through Gramsci's concepts of "consent," "hegemony," and "organic and traditional intellectuals."

The main purpose of the study is to understand how Japan put forward a unique modernization program against the West, how the intellectuals adopted Western thought structures, and how the people were integrated into this enlightenment and modernization program. In this direction, Gramsci's

theory of hegemony provides an important theoretical framework for analyzing the ideological transformation in the Meiji Period.

Methods

Gramsci's Theory Of Hegemony

According to Gramsci, ideology functions as a mechanism of social power and control, with intellectual groups contributing to the dominance of ruling powers through ideological arrangements (Oskay, 2014: 316). The concept of hegemony, originally used in Ancient Greece to mean "the guiding dominance exerted by an individual, social group, or state over other groups or states" is reinterpreted by Gramsci to focus not on questioning ideologies themselves but on their functional role within the concept of hegemony (Aksoy & Can, 2016: 62, 65). Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to explain how class power is maintained not solely through coercion but also through cultural and ideological consent. He argues that the state establishes hegemony by relying on "coercion" within the political sphere and "consent" within the civil sphere (Aksoy & Can, 2016: 65). His framework builds upon contrasts such as "hegemony-counter-hegemony" "organic-traditional intellectuals" "organic-conjunctural crisis" and "civil society-political society" (Dural, 2007: 58).

For Gramsci, hegemony signifies the dominance of the ruling class not only through state apparatuses but also via ideological leadership permeating all areas of social life. In this context, consent is achieved when the public, consciously or unconsciously, accepts and internalizes the dominant ideology. From the perspective of the ruling class, hegemony implies a superior structural and ideological position within the superstructure, influencing subordinate classes to strengthen their own legitimacy through consent. However, counter-hegemonic forces are structurally disadvantaged in this regard (Dural, 2007: 59-60).

Gramsci's theory places particular emphasis on the role of intellectuals in societal transformations. Gramsci touched upon the role of intellectuals in transferring hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies to society with the statements "intellectuals also work in this civil society" and "a certain society is symbolized more by the average of intellectuals and therefore by average people" (Gramsci, 1986: 75, 282). He categorizes intellectuals into two types: **traditional intellectuals** and **organic intellectuals**. Traditional intellectuals are perceived as independent of class structures and appear neutral in social transformations due to their historical status. In contrast, organic intellectuals represent the interests of a specific social group or class and actively work to disseminate and legitimize that class's ideology. Organic intellectuals are deeply tied to the social class they represent, while traditional intellectuals are

remnants of prior systems of production (Dural, 2007: 63-64). This classification provides a valuable tool for analyzing Meiji Era intellectuals.

Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals is particularly useful for understanding the intellectual movements of the Meiji Era. Intellectuals occupy an "organizing" position by assuming ideological roles crucial for the establishment of hegemony. Gramsci, therefore, refers to intellectuals as "superstructural agents" (Dural, 2007: 61). During the modernization of Japan, Meiji intellectuals led the transformation of society and played a pivotal role in constructing social consent as Western ideas were integrated into Japanese thought.

Among these intellectuals, Fukuzawa Yukichi stands out as a prominent figure. Fukuzawa was a key advocate for Western scientific and technological advancements and encouraged the Japanese people to embrace modernization. His renowned work, *Gakumon no Susume (An Encouragement of Learning)*, praised Western thought systems and argued that Japan must keep pace with global developments. Fukuzawa and his contemporaries emphasized the importance of adapting Western modernization processes while preserving Japan's unique identity rather than merely imitating the West. Stating that Meiji thinkers adopted the "East-West synthesis" model in their modernization program, Esenbel emphasizes Fukuzawa's words: "Japan will be the West of the East" (Esenbel, 2015:117). In this sense, the intellectuals of the Meiji Era, who can be defined as Gramsci's organic intellectuals, ideologically constructed Japan's new hegemonic order.

Discussion

Meiji Era And Intellectual Pursuits: A Hegemonic Restructuring

The intellectual frameworks of the Meiji could be categorized into three main phases: an era of Western liberal ideas, a nationalist period emphasizing the importance of the state from a conservative perspective, and a phase in which individual rights (*minken*) and national sovereignty (*kokken*) were considered together. Tetsuo Najita identifies three categories of political thought in the Meiji Era:

- **Materialist Liberalism** represented by Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nishi Amane.
- **Natural Rights Theory** advocated by Ueki Emori and Nakae Chōmin.
- **Idealist Social Evolution Theory** supported by Katō Hiroyuki and Nishimura Shigeaki (Najita, 1980: 87).

The Meiji Restoration began as a comprehensive reform movement aimed at countering the military and economic dominance of the West. During this period, not only technological and scientific knowledge but also political and social ideas from the West attracted intense interest from intellectuals.

Western philosophical movements, systems of governance, and educational models were meticulously studied by Meiji intellectuals and adapted for Japanese society. These intellectuals sought not merely to imitate the West but to construct a new modernity rooted in Japan's cultural foundations. At the same time, they played a key role in promoting patriotism, questioning socialism, and fostering a developed sense of national identity (Gluck, 1985: 10).

The role of Meiji thinkers was critical in garnering public support and consent for Japan's modernization. By providing the ideological foundations for social reforms, they introduced Western thought to the public while attempting to synthesize traditional Japanese values with Western modernity. These intellectuals perceived Westernization not as an obligation in itself but as a necessary means to preserve Japan's independence and dignity. The key concepts of the period were "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika* 文明開化). In the modernization process, the fundamental principle of intellectuals was shaped around the concepts of *wa* and *yo*, meaning "Japanese spirit Western technique" (和魂洋才) (Esenbel, 2015:119). Additionally, figures associated with movements like *sonno joi* (revere the emperor, expel the barbarians) and the Freedom and People's Rights Movement helped construct the ideological foundations of the Meiji reforms.

Intellectual Leadership in Modernization

Meiji Era intellectuals shaped Japan's modernization not merely as a technical transformation but also as a cultural and ideological process. Their contributions were instrumental in positioning Japan as a significant global actor. For instance, the Meirokusha Society, established in 1873, brought together intellectuals regarded as Japan's true intelligentsia and became a pioneering group for Japan's enlightenment movement (Yazıcı, 2022: 93). Figures such as Nishi Amane and Tsuda Masamichi, associated with Rangaku (Dutch Studies) and Meirokusha, explored fields ranging from law, state theory, and economics to Mill's utilitarianism and Comte's French positivism (Katsuhito, 2016: 11). The Meiroku Society, founded in 1873 under the leadership of Mori Arinori, included important figures in the implementation of the modernization program in Japan. In the Meiroku magazine they founded, important figures such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nishi Amane, Nakamura Masanao, and Tsuda Mamichi put forward enlightenment views in many areas, such as the economy, state structure, the place of women in society, and education. Within this community, figures such as Nishimura Shigeaki and Anishi Amane contributed to Japan's modern development with their significant ideas on the reform of the Japanese writing system and to adoption of the Western alphabet. Similarly, Fukuzawa Yukichi, Mitsukuri Shūhei, Nakamura Masanao, and Mitsukuri Rinshō played a crucial role in

educational reform (Aksoy, 2022: 34, 43-91). However, Fukuzawa engaged in debates with Meiroku members over the issue of intellectual identity and how to understand and accept European civilization. (Yonehara, 1986: 85).

Similarly, thinkers like Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nishi Amane, Mori Arinori, and Uchimura Kanzo sought to modernize Japan without compromising its national identity. While integrating Western scientific and intellectual achievements into Japanese society, they also endeavored to preserve traditional values and create a synthesis of these two elements. Fukuzawa Yukichi, who traveled to Europe and America in 1860, 1862, and 1867 as part of diplomatic delegations, emphasized "Westernizing education and science" as the primary goal of Japan's engagement with the West. Viewing Western science as a fundamental doctrine, Fukuzawa also emphasized the relationship between the independence of the individual and the state sovereignty. His divergence from the government's tendency to overlook individual freedoms for national strength marks a significant point of departure (Katō, 2012: 622-623).

On the other hand, Nakae Chōmin, often referred to as the "Rousseau of the East," was a pioneer of Western liberal ideas in Japan, later integrating them with nationalist thought. Influenced by Rousseau, Nakae focused on social contract theory, freedom and human rights, and self-governance. Liberal ideas emphasized that enlightenment through an educated populace could enhance state power and harmony, asserting that liberalism was not inherently at odds with the imperial system (Scalapino, 1970: 73). It is known that Nakae Chōmin was influenced by the ideas of thinkers such as Rousseau and Voltaire, as well as republican figures such as Jules Barni, Simon, and Naquet, during his stay in France (Yonehara, 1986: 109). A key distinction between Nakae and Fukuzawa is that while Nakae, educated in France, defended Confucian-based education even in his own school, Fukuzawa rejected traditional literature and Confucianism, favoring Western science as the cornerstone of education (Katō, 2012: 627).

The primary concern of these thinkers was to improve the status quo and map out an ideal future for Japan. While their primary aim was modernization, they also sought to understand Western philosophy and integrate it into Japan's intellectual tradition. Dutch Studies, for example, were regarded as "empirical science" in Japan. Ideas such as "self-development" drew on British "personal idealism" and German "absolute idealism," influencing the adoption of constitutional monarchy and self-governance in Japan. At the same time, Meiji intellectuals aimed to refine Eastern thought using concepts derived from Western philosophy (Katsuhito, 2016: 13-20).

The Kokugaku Movement and Counter-Hegemony

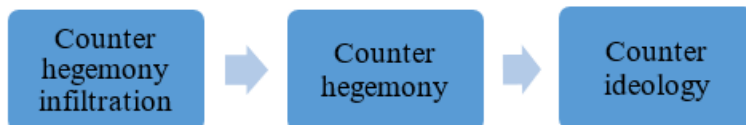
Key concepts like "kokumin 国民" (nation) and "kokka 国家" (state) gained prominence in Meiji Era thought, emphasizing the need to foster national consciousness. Thinkers focused on terms such as "national spirit" "national ideology" "national doctrine" "national essence" and "nationalism" to envision the creation of a new Japan. This emphasis aligns with Fukuzawa Yukichi's observation, "There is a government in Japan, but no nation (*kokumin*)" reflecting intellectuals' central concern: the creation of a nation (*kokumin*) (Gluck, 1985: 23-27). Esenbel explains the idea of "the impotence of the civilization process", which was one of the reasons for the suicide of Mishima Yukio, one of the important legislators and nationalists of the 20th century, as "the problem of East-West civilization" (Esenbel, 2000: 20). At this point, we see that the view of national consciousness seen in Meiji thinkers continued in the following century. Shigeru stated that most of the advocates of the Freedom and Human Rights Movement were advocates of national rights from the beginning. Because since the country opened up to the outside world, there was an understanding in the ruling and intellectual circles that adopted a national administration approach centered on the emperor to protect Japan's independence against the West, and that nationalism and national rights were prioritized rather than individualism (Shigeru, 1958: 3-4).

In the face of a dominant ideology and hegemony, counter-hegemony and alternative ideologies always exist. This dynamic highlights that hegemony is not static but is constantly met with resistance (Aksoy, Can, 2016: 70). This concept aligns with Gramsci's notion of "counter-hegemony" The intellectual movements examined in this study, particularly those advocating for modernization and Westernization during the Meiji Era, were not the sole ideological currents of the period. While there was intense interest in Westernization rather than a singularly dominant official ideology, movements advocating a return to Japan's traditional values also emerged. One such movement, known as Kokugaku, emphasized Japan's unique national values, particularly Shintoism. The Kokugaku movement advocated the presentation of ancient Japanese thought based on classics such as Kojiki and Nihonshoki, and the pioneers of this movement sowed the seeds of Nationalism in the people's memory (Yazıcı, 2022: 91). In line with this movement, Shintoism was declared the "national religion" and a nationalist view was put forward, emphasizing the sacredness of the emperor and shaped around the principles of patriotism and loyalty (Esenbel, 2019: 63-64). This intellectual movement argued for the preservation of Japanese identity rather than full submission to Western values during the modernization process. The Kokugaku concept underscored Japan's distinctive character and presented a conservative perspective. Kokugaku focused on Japanese language, history, literature, and religion rather than Chinese influences. Moreover, philology

served as a foundational element for Kokugaku thought (Mason, Caiger, 1997: 244-247, 295).

The Kokugaku movement can be associated with Gramsci's concept of "counter-hegemony". Counter-hegemony arises as an alternative structure to the dominant class's ideology.

While Kokugaku was not a reaction against Japan's modernization process, it can be seen as an intellectual form of resistance aimed at preserving national values in the face of Western influence.



Conclusions

As a conclusion, the primary goal of the Meiji Restoration was to protect Japan from the colonial pressures of the West and establish it as a strong actor on the international stage. To achieve this, Japan needed to modernize not only its political and economic structures but also its cultural and ideological frameworks. For modernization to succeed during this period, it was essential to secure the voluntary participation of broad segments of society in the reforms and ensure the legitimacy of the new order. Thus, the Meiji modernization was realized not only through political imperatives but also through the ideological and cultural transformation of the populace. In this context, Meiji modernization, when considered with Gramsci's concepts, bears traces of both "hegemony" and "counter-hegemony" processes.

The Meiji leaders implemented reforms by following a dual strategy, as described in Gramsci's theory of hegemony. On one hand, they enacted laws and reforms to strengthen central authority. On the other hand, intellectuals and educational institutions were employed to cultivate public consent for the new order. This consent was built by presenting modernization ideas borrowed from the West in a manner harmonious with Japan's traditional values, making them acceptable to the public. The ideological transformation of the people and the concept of consent also show that Japanese modernization is a cultural restructuring. In addition, traditionalist movements such as Kokugaku show that there is always an element of resistance against hegemony. It is thought that the counter-hegemony movement in the Meiji Period did not ensure that modernization was entirely Western but rather blended with Japan's own culture. At this point, the Meiji mindset is an important example for analyzing the concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony. As such, Meiji intellectuals, functioning as organic intellectuals, prepared Japanese society for Westernization and contributed ideologically to the modernization process.

Conflict of Interest: The author reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The author did not obtain any funding for this research.

References:

1. Aksoy, İ., & Can, C. (2016). Hegemonya ve Karşı-Hegemonik Sızıntılar: Yeni Bir Kavramsallaştırma Denemesi. PESA Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi, 2(3), 62-76.
2. Aksoy, U. (2022). Meiji Dönemi Japon Eğitim Reformu: Meiroku Cemiyeti, Meiroku Dergisi Ve Kurucuları. Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi.
3. Aydın, C. (2002). Modern Japon Tarihinde Batı Karşıtlığı: Ōkawa Shūmei'nin Asyacılık Düşüncesi: Divan İlmî Araştırmalar sy. 13 107-133.
4. Dural, A. Baran (2007). A. Gramsci Düşüncesinde Tarihsel Blok/Hegemonya/Aydınlar ve Bunalım Süreçleri Kavramları: Trakya Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, Aralık 2007 Cilt 9 Sayı 2 55-68.
5. Esenbel, S. (2000). Türk ve Japon modernleşmesi: 'Uygarlık süreci' Kavramı Açısından Bir Mukayese. *Toplum ve Bilim*, 84(Spring), 18-36.
6. Esenbel, S. (2015), Japon Modernleşmesi ve Osmanlı, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
7. Esenbel, S. (2019). Meiji Restorasyonu Hakkında Düşünceler. *Meiji Japonya'sına 150. Yilinden Bakışlar*, 51.
8. Gluck, C. (1985). Japan's Modern Myths, Ideology in the Late Meiji Period: Princeton University Press.
9. Gramsci, A. (1986). Hapishane Defterleri Seçmeler (çev. Kenan Somer). İstanbul: Onur Yayınları.
10. Jansen, M.B., (1972), Changing Japanese Attitude towards Modernization, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
11. Kato, Ş. (2012). Japon Edebiyatı Tarihi. Çev. Oğuz Baykara, İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınları.
12. Katsuhito, I. (2016). The Philosophical World of Meiji Japan: *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 1 9-30.
13. Mardin, Ş. (2007). İdeoloji: İletişim Yayınları.
14. Masaaki, K., (1958), Japanese Culture in the Meiji Era Vol IX Thought, (çev. David Abosch) Tokyo: Pan-Pasific Press.
15. Mason, R. H. P. Caiger J. G. (1997). A History of Japan, London: Tuttle Publishing.

16. Najita, T. (1980). Japan The Intellectual Foundations of Modern Japanese Politics: The University of Chicago Press.
17. Oskay, Ü. (2014). Tek Kişilik Haçlı Seferleri: İnkılap Yayınları.
18. Passin, H., (1972), “Modernization and the Japanese Intellectual: Some Comparative Observations”, Changing Japanese Attitude towards Modernization (ed. M. B. Jansen), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
19. Sam-Sang, J. (2011). Identity Crisis and Ideology: The Case of Meiji Japan: Northeast Asian Studies (15).
20. Scalapino, R. A., (1970). Environmental and Foreign Contributions, Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey (ed. Ward, Rustow). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
21. Shigeru H. (1958). Kindai Nihon no Shisōka-tachi, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
22. Yazıcı, Y., (2022). Nakae Chōmin’in Eserlerinde Asya Algısı ve Pan-Asyacılık. Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Yayınlanmamış Doktora Tezi.
23. Yonehara, K. (1986). Nihon Kindai Shisō to Nakae Chōmin, Tokyo: Shinhyōron.