

Stolen Valor: *Kleos*, the Simple, and the Latent Praxis in Social Distinction

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Abstract

This paper explores the modern struggle for meaningful self-definition under capitalist cultural hegemony by drawing on the ancient Greek concept of *kleos* and Antonio Gramsci's notion of "the simple." It argues that *kleos*, when reinterpreted as a communal and socially formative striving rather than aristocratic individualism, offers a pre-capitalist model of recognition rooted in shared intuitive experience, analogous to Gramsci's "simple" – the pre-theoretical, affective ground of subaltern consciousness. The paper examines how capitalist structures distort value into commodified forms of fame or prestige, creating scarcity in symbolic capital and fostering alienation, particularly among youth seeking identity and purpose. By critically juxtaposing this reified capitalist notion of status with a rearticulated *kleos* and Gramsci's "simple," the paper discloses both the contemporary existential restlessness and the latent potential for a transformative praxis. It suggests that reclaiming social meaning as a communal, generative act rooted in "the simple" can contribute to building a new ideological terrain and fostering the self-organization and leadership of subaltern groups. The paper highlights the philosophical and political relevance of this rethinking, engaging with Gramsci's philosophy of praxis and the formation of critical consciousness. It proposes areas for further research, including comparative analysis with other pre-capitalist models of esteem, empirical investigation of contemporary youth culture, and the intersection of social recognition with concepts like redistribution. Ultimately, the paper contends that recognizing the intuitive striving for meaningful being-in-the-world inherent in "the simple" and reflected in the communal aspects of *kleos* uncovers a latent potential for a more authentic, collective form of self-realization, offering hope and inspiring action towards a more just and humane society.

*“The welcome Fate!
Tis true I perish, yet I perish great:
Yet in a mighty deed I shall expire,
Let future ages hear it, and admire!”* (Homer 1996)

“If each of us were to confess his most secret desire, the one that inspires all his plans, all his actions, he would say: ‘I want to be praised’.” (Cioran 1970)

I. Introduction

Among the more romantic remains that vividly resurrect for us the ancient past, is an epitaph written by a Roman centurion sometime in the 2nd century AD:

*“I wished to hold the Dacians slain – I held them.
I wished to sit on a throne of peace – I sat.
I wished to follow in glorious triumphs – It was done.
I wished for the full rewards of a chief centurion – I had them.
I wished to see naked nymphs – I saw them.”* (Inscription Database)¹

Although the example may be objected to as an endorsement of violence and bellicosity – along with its source being Roman rather than Greek – it nevertheless provides a palpable historical example of an impulse that we have all felt at one point or another in our lives, especially when young: the desire to leave the confines of our little worlds and expand our potential into the greater one in the hopes of attaining some merit in the eyes of others. But, as the Marxist intellectual tradition reminds us, what we can *be* is often immediately constrained by the material conditions that allow us to *do*. And now, perhaps more than ever, what we can do is increasingly less and less (Kang and Park 2024; Fromm and Marx).

However, this has been no impediment for the rising generation who, taking their opinions largely from social media (Stocking, et al.), have enthusiastically adopted the political right’s views (Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics 1), unknowingly, of their oppressors. In an earlier age, and for similar reasons (Terekhov 2017), the work of Oswald Spengler caught on in large part due to a mood of adolescent nihilism that suggested that the world was teleologically determined towards decline and annihilation and thus, could not be changed or altered in its course. In a poetic passage that contrasts with the epitaph cited above and that, at least in part, inspired the writing of this article, Spengler conjures up the romantic image of: *“that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, died at his post because they forgot to relieve him. That is greatness* (Spengler 2015).” This is a choice of passive resignation, of obedience to the “common sense” of that dominant class that would eschew reason and demand that one give even their very life to a system completely unconcerned about the friends and family that that

¹ Translation mine.

soldier's death would leave heartbroken, if not destitute. But, earlier in the same passage, Spengler unwittingly advocates for a contradictory stance, that of the "Choice of Achilles,"² a choice in action rather than the Roman soldier's self-perceived lack of choice, of acquiescence to a fate dictated to him, not by those he cares most concretely about but an abstract institution, the masters of which he may never have even encountered in the flesh. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that self-sacrifice is irrational, only that those who are asked to sacrifice are often compelled by unexamined irrational ends. A quality of that "common sense" that I will elaborate upon further at the end.

The modern struggle for meaningful distinction occurs under capitalist cultural hegemony. Within a Marxist framework, understanding hegemony requires interrogating the class composition and mode of production of the society being investigated (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Hegemony is not a generic theory of social power, but always describes the consolidation of power by one class over at least another (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This process involves a varying percentage of coercion and consent (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021), which are seen as counterbalancing elements in unity with a precise, "unbalanced" equilibrium where force must not appear to predominate too much over consent (Thomas 2009). Domination is conceived as including hegemony as one of its necessary moments (Thomas 2009). This dynamic operates within the context of the integral state (Thomas 2009). Political society and civil society, often seen as distinct, are in Gramsci's conception understood as attributes of the integral state, functionally rather than spatially separated (Thomas 2009). The ideological structure that supports the dominant class possesses a material organization (Gramsci 2011). This material structure of ideology includes a range of institutions and practices such as the press in general (publishing houses, political newspapers, reviews, various periodicals down to parish bulletins), libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, and even architecture and the layout and names of streets (Gramsci 2011). The dominant class's ideological structure is materially organized to maintain, defend, and develop its theoretical or ideological "front" (Gramsci 2011).

This struggle unfolds within a cultural world profoundly shaped by existing thought, including dominant forms of consciousness, ideologies, and classificatory schemes that organize the idea of the social world in people's minds (Bourdieu 1984). Within this cultural context, the whole system of superstructures itself can be viewed as a system of political distinctions (Gramsci 2011). Here, symbolic struggles for the appropriation of distinctive signs and the imposition of the legitimate lifestyle are central to how "distinction" or "class" is constructed and contested (Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, under capitalism, the very nature of products is complicated; their enigmatic character arises directly from their commodity form (Žižek 2009), adding a specific dimension to how value, prestige, and consequently, distinction, are understood and pursued within this struggle (Bourdieu 1984).

As agents in this struggle, youth are particularly vulnerable and dynamic sites of hegemonic absorption and resistance. This dual nature stems from their position within society, their developmental stage, and the inherent processes of cultural transmission and challenge. The "older" generation typically carries out the education of the "young," which can involve restraint and potential conflict, though these conflicts are often superficial unless youth from the ruling class actively switch allegiance to a progressive class (Gramsci 2011).

² This choice is first explicitly mentioned in the *Iliad* in the so-called Embassy Scene (Book IX), where Achilles is speaking to Phoenix, Odysseus, and Ajax (IX 410-416) (Nagy 2020).

When open class interference isn't present, the "question of the young" becomes more chaotic, marked by a permanent state of rebellion because the underlying causes persist but cannot be analyzed or overcome historically (Gramsci 2011). In such situations, the "elders" dominate but may be unable to effectively educate or prepare the young to take over, leading to an inability to satisfy new needs and resulting in "morbid forms" such as mysticism, sensualism, moral indifference, and pathological deprivations (Gramsci 2011). This inability to address the needs of the young, like unemployment for intellectuals, removes "open horizons" (Gramsci 2011).

This situation is also linked to a "crisis of authority" of the old generation, where those capable of leadership among the youth are barred from their mission (Gramsci 2011). Public institutions play a role in this vulnerability. "Adultcentrism" is identified as a hegemony that places young people in a peripheral position within institutional politics and policies (Soler-i-Martí and Ballesté-Isern 2024). Youth's perceptions and discourses are shaped by their interaction with institutions and reflect their reaction to this marginal position (Soler-i-Martí and Ballesté-Isern 2024).

Changes in the mode of domination can involve substituting seduction for repression and advertising for authority, seeking the symbolic integration of dominated classes by imposing needs rather than inculcating norms (Bourdieu 1984). These strategies can particularly target youth, who are in a phase of identity formation. Education systems can function as instruments to integrate young people into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity (Freire 1970). Young people are often standardized at home and school to accept what awaits them, with their minds drilled to prevent them from questioning their pre-arranged future as employees (Bloch 1995). Trainers aim to make them tolerate what will be done to them later (Bloch 1995).

Societal norms and classificatory systems, like the opposition between age groups, are areas of struggle (Bourdieu 1984). Young people can accept the definition offered by their elders, enjoying temporary license and irresponsibility in exchange for renouncing greater responsibility (Bourdieu 1984). Even youth movements, especially those with blurred, emotional bases and utopian goals disconnected from class realities, can be susceptible to manipulation or capture by dominant or rising hegemonic forces, as seen in how some youth movements were easily combined with or absorbed by fascist movements (Bloch 1995). This can involve replacing one form of oppressive authority (e.g., the Father-Ego) with another (e.g., the figurehead leader of a totalitarian movement) (Bloch 1995).

Dynamic Sites of Resistance

Youth embodies a "fresh strength" that inherently contains and moves toward the "New" (Bloch 1995). Young people often feel a hidden power within them, a sense of dawning and expectation, a "voice of tomorrow" calling them to something happening internally that can "overhaul what has previously become, the adult world" (Bloch 1995). Bold youth imagines having "wings" and believes that what is right can only be established or set free by them (Bloch 1995). They see an "open field" ahead that seems accessible and visible primarily to the young (Bloch 1995).

Youth is a key site for the "Not-Yet-Conscious," a feeling of not being fully defined and a drive to bring their inner potential outwards (Bloch 1995). Intellectual productivity and creativity are particularly full of this "Not-Yet-Conscious" material, showing youth as

constantly active in creative work that stands peculiarly within a state of “dawning” (Bloch 1995). Young people are increasingly aware of their “new bondage” due to technology and the erosion of old concepts of authority (Freire 1970). They perceive that their right to “say their own word” has been stolen and view the current educational system as an “enemy” (Freire 1970).

Current youth rebellion manifests a fundamental preoccupation with their existence in the world, challenging consumer civilization, denouncing bureaucracies, demanding transformation of institutions like universities, and attacking old orders to affirm themselves as subjects of decision (Freire 1970). This rebellion against unjust domination is not merely a traditional difference between generations but a symptom of a deeper historical climate (Freire 1970).

Education can also become the “practice of freedom,” enabling individuals to engage critically and creatively with reality and participate in transforming their world (Freire 1970). This path inevitably leads to tension and conflict but contributes to forming a “new man” and potentially marking a new era (Freire 1970). Youth activism can forge “oppositional consciousness” through the constant negotiation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas drawn from lived experience (Negron-Gonzales 2009).

When the established order or “order of successions” is threatened, young people may refuse to remain confined to the state of “youth” (irresponsibility) and instead challenge the “old,” seeking to redefine the socially complete person to include characteristics associated with youth, thus pushing their predecessors into social irrelevance (Bourdieu 1984). Youth-led struggles accumulate into a shared memory, shaping collective resistance against long-standing grievances like inequality and political exclusion (*GoFor* 2025). Such collective memories challenge portrayals of youth as passive and render them political subjects despite attempts to silence them (*GoFor* 2025).

In contrast to movements that see youth as a separate class, proletarian youth can identify with their class, seeing it as “young and futurist,” contributing an unbroken impetus towards the common class goal (Bloch 1995). The dynamic nature of youth means they are not simply passive recipients of hegemonic influence. A lived hegemony is always a process that must be continually renewed and defended, and it is also continually resisted, limited, altered, and challenged (Williams 1977). Alternative or oppositional politics and culture exist alongside the dominant hegemony (Williams 1977). The hegemonic process must be alert and responsive to these alternatives and opposition (Williams 1977), and in complex societies, cultural analysis must grasp the hegemonic in its active, formative, and transformational processes (Williams 1977). Youth, through their inherent drive for the new and their position within societal reproduction and potential transformation, are key actors in this ongoing struggle between hegemonic power and resistance.

Kleos and The Simple

Applying theoretical categories to a different historical context, such as the ancient world, requires creativity and careful adaptation of concepts (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Analyzing concepts from ancient literature can involve providing historical and sociological explanations for their context and meaning (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This approach allows for a deeper understanding of ancient phenomena through a modern theoretical lens.

One such concept originating in the ancient world is *kleos*. To understand *kleos* through a Gramscian lens, it is helpful to introduce Antonio Gramsci's concept of "the simple" (*il semplice*) (Green 2018). Gramsci developed this category to examine how common people and peasants were viewed, particularly by institutions like the Catholic Church, which saw them as "simple and sincere souls" (Green 2018). This paternalistic view contributed to reinforcing the conditions of subalternity (Green 2018).

It is necessary to define "the simple" and distinguish it from "common sense" (Green 2018). Gramsci used "common sense" to refer to the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that is prevalent in a given epoch (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). It is an aggregated set of beliefs that is not systematic or coherent, reflecting what most people believe, and is often intrinsically fragmentary and inconsistent (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). In contrast, "good sense" is a more practical, though not necessarily rational or scientific, attitude (Gramsci 1971). For Gramsci, common sense tends to be absorbed uncritically by subaltern groups, sometimes perceived erroneously as more consistent or true than it is (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). "The simple" are the people who primarily operate within this framework of common sense (Green 2018).

Gramsci argues that a philosophy of praxis must initially present itself as a critique of "common sense" (Green 2018). However, before critiquing it, it must first base itself on common sense to demonstrate that "everyone" is a philosopher (Gramsci 2019). The goal is not to introduce a totally new form of knowledge from scratch but to revitalize an already existing activity and make it "critical" (Gramsci 2019). The history of philosophy, in this view, can be seen as the "high points" of the progress made by common sense, or at least the common sense of the more educated strata of society, and through them, of the people (Gramsci 2019).

Applying Gramsci's concept of "the simple" to *kleos* offers a potential reinterpretation. This approach suggests using the perspective of "the simple" as a lens for understanding *kleos*, potentially shifting its focus from purely individual fame, often associated with elite narratives and heroic figures, to something else. The knowledge and understanding that emerge from the day-to-day experience of living in a given subaltern location form the "implicit philosophy" or "naive form in popular common sense" of subalterns (Crehan 2016). This knowledge is often fragmented and distorted (Crehan 2016). The philosophy of praxis aims to address the concerns of the "simple" from their existing common sense to empower them and allow them to play a predominant role in the direction of their political lives and in creating a new hegemony (Green 2018). It seeks to make the "simple" intellectually independent of the governed and demonstrate that their conditions are not divine or natural (Green 2018).

This reinterpretation seeks to offer a different form of distinction – one potentially rooted in pre-capitalist, communal contexts, contrasting with hegemonic forms of distinction implicitly tied to the capitalist system. Gramsci, like Marx, viewed *homo oeconomicus*, tied to bourgeois society, as a peculiar historical product that cannot be applied to other realities (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Different social groups coming into existence create their own organic intellectuals on the terrain of economic production (Crehan 2016). Organic intellectuals are crucial for elaborating the implicit knowledge of a social group into a coherent explicit philosophy (Crehan 2016). This knowledge is rooted in the specific location and experience of that group (Crehan 2016). The reinterpretation of *kleos* through "the simple" could explore forms of distinction recognized and valued within ancient communities by the masses, potentially related to collective well-being, social contributions, or communal values, rather than solely individual achievement or economic success associated with later, capitalist

forms of distinction. Early Greek poetry, for example, drew on a shared set of values and tropes reflecting the community's common sense (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This collective expression offers a glimpse into pre-capitalist communal understandings.

II. Gramsci's Concept of the Simple and Cultural Hegemony

Defining the Simple and Common Sense

Gramsci suggests that everyone is a philosopher at some level, possessing a “spontaneous philosophy” (Green 2018). This spontaneous philosophy is found in language, common sense, good sense, and folklore (Lears 1985). In his notes, Gramsci distinguishes between “the simple” and “common sense” (Green 2018). While “common sense” is often described as a collection of beliefs and opinions that are not systematic or coherent, but reflect what most people believe (Lears 1985), “the simple” appears to refer to a more fundamental, pre-theoretical ground of experience.

Common sense is intrinsically fragmentary and inconsistent, even within an individual's mind (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). However, it holds significant power as a basis for popular morality and informs people's decisions and life choices within a social system (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Engaging with common sense is considered a starting point for any attempt at social transformation (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021).

The distinction between “the simple” and “common sense” is crucial. While common sense represents the aggregated, often contradictory, received beliefs, “the simple” suggests a more elementary, perhaps affective or intuitive, engagement with reality. A philosophy of praxis must initially adopt a polemical stance, presenting itself as a critique of common sense, but only after grounding itself in common sense initially (Green 2018). This process requires taking “the simple” into account to ascertain the issues needing study and resolution (Green 2018).

Cultural Hegemony and the Subaltern

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is arguably his most important (Forlenza 2019). While not solely his invention, having roots in Russian social democratic and Bolshevik thought, Gramsci's contribution significantly shaped its later developments (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Hegemony is not easily confined to a single definition, being a dynamic process involving a differentiated percentage of coercion and consent, depending on the practical situation power faces (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021).

Hegemony is often described as the “cultural, moral, and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups” (Forlenza 2019). It is based significantly on the “spontaneous consent” given by subaltern masses to the general direction imposed by dominant fundamental groups (Forlenza 2019). However, defining hegemony solely as consent organized by civil society, as opposed to the state's coercive power, is an overly schematic description. Instead, hegemony is a dialectical process resolved in what Gramsci called the “integral state” (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Civil and political societies are distinct only methodologically, both pertaining to the state (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This means coercion and consent are always present, though rarely evenly balanced (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). The ruling class selects the most suitable form of control for different political phases (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). The integral state is the entire complex of activities by which the ruling class justifies

and maintains dominance and wins the active consent of those it rules (Crehan 2002). Gramsci's analysis shows that the relationship between consent and coercion is dialectical, not oppositional (Thomas 2009). Political leadership becomes an aspect of domination, uniting hegemony with domination, and consent with coercion (Thomas 2009).

The concept of hegemony is also intertwined with the role of intellectuals (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Intellectuals, defined broadly as those whose role involves organizing, administering, directing, educating, or leading others (like managers, teachers, clergy, etc.) (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021), function to benefit the ruling class (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). The production of organic intellectuals from the dominant group is the quickest way to secure hegemony, but assimilating and conquering intellectuals from subaltern groups ideologically is the most important step (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This transforms potential resisters into allies who become "deputies" exercising social hegemony and political government functions (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021).

Hegemony operates fundamentally in relation to subaltern social groups (Crehan 2002). The consciousness of the subaltern can be "impoverished and unsystematic" due to their relative powerlessness (Crehan 2002). Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony to explore these power relationships and how they are lived (Crehan 2002). The struggle for social transformation involves the subaltern classes seeking to develop their own conception of the world and educate themselves in the art of government (Forcas 1999). Hegemony, for Gramsci, involves "practical activity" and social relations that produce inequality, as well as the ideas that justify it (Crehan 2002).

From the Simple to Critical Consciousness

The goal for subaltern groups, and a key task for a transformative political project, is to move beyond the fragmented understanding found in common sense and the elementary awareness of "the simple" towards a critical and coherent conception of the world (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci refers to this process as the development of the philosophy of praxis, his term for Marxism (Green 2018).

The philosophy of praxis initially critiques common sense (Green 2018). It is not an instrument for dominant groups to gain consent but an expression of subaltern classes seeking to educate themselves in the art of government (Forcas 1999). The development of the simple into critical consciousness is a philosophical battle to transform the popular mentality (Crehan 2016). This involves elaborating philosophical innovations that become historically and socially universal as they are concretely applied (Crehan 2016).

This move from an instinctive feeling of independence to the real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world is a fundamental part of the historical process and represents a significant philosophical and politico-practical advance (Gramsci 1971). The realization of a hegemonic apparatus creates a new ideological terrain and determines a reform of consciousness and methods of knowledge; it is a "philosophical fact" (Gramsci 1971). Realized hegemony signifies the real critique of a philosophy (Thomas 2009).

Gramsci's concept of philosophy, particularly the philosophy of praxis, is deeply intertwined with politics and history (Thomas 2009). It recognizes the class constitution and efficacy of philosophy, emphasizing its role not just for society as a whole but within specific class projects (Thomas 2009). Moving from an economic-corporative phase to a hegemonic

one involves a class's transition from "ideology" to "philosophy" (Thomas 2009). The philosophy of praxis is the theoretical moment in the practice of proletarian hegemony (Thomas 2009).

Developing critical consciousness involves overcoming the limitations of fragmented common sense and achieving a coherent understanding of the world, integrating theory and practice (Gramsci 1971). This process is crucial for subaltern classes to emerge from subalternity and assume social and political leadership (Thomas 2009).

Youth as a Site of Hegemonic Absorption and Resistance

As discussed above, Gramsci's ideas on transforming popular mentality and achieving a coherent conception of the world through the philosophy of praxis (Gramsci 1971) can be applied to understanding the challenges faced by groups susceptible to hegemonic influence, most notably the young. The philosophical stakes of developing the simple into critical consciousness (Crehan 2002) are particularly high for such groups, as it involves moving from a state of disorganic consciousness towards a more unified and active understanding of their place in the world. I suggest that youth represents a dynamic and vulnerable site for the absorption of hegemonic ideas and, simultaneously, a potential source of resistance and transformative praxis, particularly given their engagement with cultural production and the formation of identity. The principles outlined by Gramsci regarding the cultural battle to transform popular mentality (Crehan 2016) and the necessity for subaltern groups to develop their own intellectual and political leadership (Crehan 2002) provide a theoretical basis for analyzing the potential role of youth in challenging and transforming existing hegemonic landscapes.

III. The Classical Concept of Kleos: From Individual Glory to Communal Meaning

In ancient Greek culture, the concept of kleos is fundamentally tied to the poet's voice and the act of being heard and remembered (Goldhill 2024). Etymologically and semantically related to the verb *kluo*, meaning "I hear," kleos is defined as "that which is heard," "a report," "rumour," and ultimately evolves to signify "fame," "glory," or "renown" (Goldhill 2024). It is the primary medium through which the concept of the hero is communicated in ancient Greek song culture (Nagy 2020). Individuals, objects like Nestor's shield, and even places acquire kleos as stories are told about them, establishing their identity in the human world (Goldhill 2024). Poetry is understood as conferring this glory, making the kleos destined never to perish (Nagy 1979). The word itself functions within epic poetry to express the very notion of the genre, often contrasted with *penthos* or *akhos* ("grief"), highlighting the theme of *mnemosune* ("memory") inherent in kleos (Nagy 1979). The name Patroklos/Patrokles, meaning the "glory" (kleos) of the "ancestors" (*pateres*), explicitly connects fame to lineage and historical memory (Nagy 1979). The inherited semantic range of kleos extends beyond epic to praise poetry in general, with praise being an integral element, for instance, within lamentation (Nagy 1979). Heroes like Hektor, facing death, desire kleos for their actions so that future generations will hear about them (Nagy 1979).

While kleos is often understood in terms of heroic fame and legacy associated with figures like Achilles, who chooses eternal kleos over a safe return (Nagy 2020), traditional interpretations tend to frame it solely as aristocratic individualism. However, the sources suggest a more complex, socially embedded understanding of kleos. Texts exploring ancient Greek heroism are useful for interpreting the social and communal elements alongside

individual achievement. The language of honor, *timē*, which is a key notion throughout Greek political, social, and everyday life, is closely related to concepts like *kleos* (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). *Timē* involves a reciprocal and mutual mechanism of recognition (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This indicates that the attainment of *kleos* is not merely a self-declaration of status but relies on the recognition and validation of the community.

This points towards a reinterpretation of *kleos* as a socially formative process. It involves communal recognition and contributes to moral development within the community. Poets, whose identity is integral to the ethical case they make (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021), engage with how social norms are upheld and how they affect different groups (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). The morality presented in poetry becomes a “battleground” for negotiating social values (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). For example, Archilochus aligns himself with accepted “common sense” values to justify his attacks and gain the audience’s sympathy, presenting his enemies as having breached community norms (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). This highlights the role of communal judgment in determining reputation and honor. The public nature of storytelling and poetic performance is crucial; reading out loud (*ana-gignōskō*) is a public act, a speech act, and the recognition it entails takes place in the minds of both the performer and the audience (Nagy 1990). The desire for *kleos* thus involves a striving for recognition within the shared social and ethical framework of the community (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021).

Exploring parallels with Gramsci’s concept of the simple can further illuminate this communal dimension. Gramsci describes the simple as the “pre-theoretical, affective ground of subaltern experience,” a “shared, intuitive striving toward meaningful being-in-the-world.” This intuitive striving resonates with the fundamental human desire for recognition and value, particularly as it manifests within a community. Gramscian “common sense” is an aggregated, often inconsistent, set of beliefs and values that reflects what most people believe and forms the backdrop for their lives, serving as a powerful seat of popular morality (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Early Greek poetry, the medium through which *kleos* is achieved and disseminated, offers a “rich collective expression” of society’s “common sense” (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021).

The pursuit of *kleos*, therefore, can be seen not merely as an aristocratic quest for individual glory divorced from the collective, but as a deeply social act rooted in the community’s shared values and desire for meaning. It is a process where individual actions are measured against and validated by the community’s “common sense” and ethical standards, often shaped and reinforced by the very poetry that confers *kleos* (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). The striving for *kleos*, which involves recognition and remembrance, reflects a fundamental human need for validation and a lasting place within the collective memory, echoing the simple’s intuitive drive toward a meaningful existence within the shared social fabric. This striving when recognized and celebrated by the community through the medium of poetry and public performance, transforms individual actions into shared cultural memory and contributes to the ongoing formation of communal identity and values (Goldhill 2024).

IV. Capitalism and the Distortion of Distinction

The impulse for social distinction, a concept with roots in historical notions like the ancient Greek *kleos*, faces significant distortion under capitalist cultural hegemony. Capitalist structures fundamentally alter the nature of distinction transforming it into a commodified and often inaccessible form, leading to widespread alienation, particularly among those seeking

identity and purpose, such as youth. Capitalist hegemony operates through various mechanisms, including the control of media and cultural production, to propagate ruling-class ideology and shape consciousness (Berger 2012). The general process of producing meanings and ideas is influenced by this system (Williams 1977). In capitalist nations, popular culture and mass-mediated culture serve a mythologizing function (Berger 2012). Owned and controlled by the ruling class, the media are used to generate what is referred to in Marxist terms as “false consciousness” in the masses, or proletariat (Berger 2012). People are generally unaware that they hold ideological beliefs because they seem natural and pervasive, shaping their thinking and behavior (Berger 2012). This suggests a commodification of concepts like fame, influence, and prestige, which become mediated and presented in ways that serve the dominant ideology (Berger 2012).

Capitalist structures inherently create scarcity in symbolic capital, making authentic distinction difficult for the majority. Pierre Bourdieu’s work is central to analyzing social distinction as symbolic capital. In opposition to the “anxious tension of the challengers,” the value placed on casualness and distance from self manifests the possession of large capital (linguistic or other) and freedom from necessity, affirming power over possessions (Bourdieu 1984). This power dynamic, a variant of the master-slave dialectic, allows the possessors to further distance themselves from the dispossessed (Bourdieu 1984). The aristocratic ideology of disinterestedness, for example, underlies some condemnations of “consumer society,” forgetting that such condemnation is itself a consumer’s idea (Bourdieu 1984). Capitalism commodifies distinction, presenting it as fame, influence, and prestige that are often tied to material or symbolic capital. Access to the means of achieving widely recognized distinction is limited by the economic structure, rendering it inaccessible to most within the system of production. Even within the cultural production sector, individuals occupying dominated positions, like new cultural intermediaries, experience a “quasi alienation” despite their potential sympathy with challenges to the cultural order (Bourdieu 1984). They are often condemned to an ambiguity between their potentially subversive dispositions and the manipulative or conservative functions of their jobs (Bourdieu 1984).

This distortion and scarcity of distinction under capitalism breed alienation. Georg Lukács’s work, particularly *History and Class Consciousness*, provides a classic Marxist account of reification and false consciousness. Reification, the process by which human creations become alien, objective entities that dominate people, is a basic structure found in all social forms of modern capitalism (Lukács 1999). Lukács argues that while reification penetrates deeply, it is primarily in the work situation of the proletariat that the splitting off of one’s achievement from the total personality becomes fully conscious (Lukács 1999). In other forms of work, this is hidden behind façades like “mental labour” or “responsibility,” concealing the commodity form of labor. As reification penetrates deeper, appearances become more deceptive. The worker, while dehumanized by reification, still has their humanity and souls that are not turned into commodities, allowing for conscious rebellion (Lukács 1999). In contrast, someone reified in a bureaucracy, for instance, is mechanized and reified in the very faculties that might enable them to rebel, with even their thoughts and feelings becoming reified (Lukács 1999). The pervasive nature of ideology and false consciousness under capitalism means that people may not recognize the ideologies that shape their thinking and behavior, contributing to alienation (Berger 2012).

The distortion of distinction particularly affects youth seeking purpose and identity. Capitalism’s presentation of commodified distinction, coupled with the structural limitations on achieving it, can exacerbate the existential restlessness and anxiety described as

characteristic of contemporary youth. Adorno's work on the culture industry analyzes how capitalism shapes desire and recognition. The culture industry contributes to the pervasive ideology, promoting a specific, commodified form of distinction that can feel hollow or unattainable for many (Berger 2012). Ernst Bloch notes that in periods of class society, ideology, while sometimes highlighting things, often serves an apologetic function to reconcile the subject with what exists, surrounded by "smoke or incense of false consciousness" (Bloch 1995). While some figures in ideology might condense or perfect what exists, potentially containing a distorted utopian function, this often lacks a "dialectically explosive and real way" of anticipating a better world (Bloch 1995). This suggests that the forms of distinction offered under capitalist ideology are inauthentic or displaced versions of a genuine striving for meaning and recognition (Bloch 1995). The new cultural intermediaries, often younger, who experience a discrepancy between their aspirations and the reality of their function, are predisposed to intensely experience the existential mood of an intellectual generation seeking narcissistic self-absorption as a substitute for changing or understanding the social world (Bourdieu 1984).

Thus, capitalist hegemony distorts distinction by commodifying it and embedding it within structures that limit access to authentic forms of recognition. This process is intertwined with the production and propagation of ideology and false consciousness through institutions like the media (Berger 2012). Drawing on Marx, Lukács, and Adorno, this critique highlights how the reifying effects of capitalism and the manipulative function of the culture industry contribute to the alienation experienced when distinction becomes primarily a function of accumulated capital or a mediated spectacle rather than a communal or developmental expression.

V. Toward a Transformative Praxis Rooted in the Simple

Building upon the critique of capitalist forms of distinction and the reinterpretation of kleos, this section explores the potential for a transformative praxis rooted in Gramsci's concept of the "simple" (Green 2018). We contend that rearticulating pre-capitalist notions of communal recognition can help awaken the affective and pre-theoretical ground of subaltern experience in a counter-hegemonic direction, paving the way for the growth and development of the simple into a coherent philosophical and political praxis (Green 2018).

Reimagining kleos as a communal and developmental expression of distinction, rather than purely aristocratic individualism, offers a potent narrative framework to resonate with the "simple," Gramsci's term for the common people and peasants whose consciousness is shaped by an uncritical "common sense" (Green 2018). As a narrative form that celebrates transformative action, kleos might inspire forms of praxis that seek to create memorable change. As Gramsci emphasized the need for subordinate groups to develop their own "common sense," alternative conceptions of kleos could celebrate actions that challenge rather than reinforce dominant power structures.³ This common sense is often contradictory and reflects imposed principles and traditional popular conceptions of the world, including religion and folklore, which reinforce the conditions of subalternity (Green 2018). Capitalist cultural hegemony further embeds commodified and exclusionary modes of self-differentiation within this common sense, contributing to alienation, particularly among youth. By emphasizing

³ Perhaps the best contemporary example of a form of kleos that celebrates and challenges the dominant power structures of the moment is that of Luigi Mangione, whose alleged actions have helped to demonstrate the power-reinforcing character of the media by the public display of support and affection of the public's perceived view of those alleged actions, and the media's derogatory and condemnatory character in discussions of the same.

shared striving, mutual recognition, and contribution to the collective, a communally rearticulated kleos can provide an alternative value system that challenges the dominant, individualistic, and market-driven metrics of worth. This challenges the existing hegemonic common sense (Green 2018), thereby awakening the simple in a counter-hegemonic direction.⁴ It aims to move beyond the passivity and paternalism often associated with the simple and their absorption of dominant ideologies (Green 2018).

Subaltern classes, including youth, can reclaim distinction as a communal, generative act by consciously developing alternative forms of social recognition rooted in their own experiences and collective efforts (Green 2018). Instead of seeking validation within the dominant hegemonic structures, this involves creating spaces and practices where value is ascribed based on solidarity, collective initiative, shared cultural production, and contributions to the well-being of the subaltern group itself (Green 2018). This process aligns with Gramsci's vision of subaltern groups striving for a higher cultural level and autonomous historical consciousness (Gramsci 1971). Reclaiming distinction communally fosters a sense of collective identity and agency, which is essential for challenging the fragmentation and disorganization that characterize subalternity (Gramsci 1971). The youth, as previously remarked, being a particularly vulnerable and dynamic site of hegemonic absorption and resistance, are crucial in this process, capable of both absorbing dominant norms and generating innovative forms of collective identity and action that resist commodification.

The maturation of the simple into philosophical and political praxis is a long and complex process (Crehan 2016). Gramsci posits that a philosophy of praxis, which is the conception of a subaltern social group (Forcas 1999), must initially present itself as a critique of common sense (Gramsci 2019). This critique is not about imposing a completely new form of knowledge but about revitalizing and making "critical" an already existing activity – the philosophical activity inherent in everyone's understanding of the world (Gramsci 2019). The transition from the implicit "good sense" within common sense to a coherent philosophy requires the development of intellectuals organic to the subaltern group (Crehan 2016). These intellectuals serve as "midwives" (Crehan 2016), elaborating and socializing the raw material of subaltern experience into coherent concepts and a shared philosophy (Green 2018). The philosophical activity is seen as a "cultural battle to transform the popular 'mentality'" (Green 2018), diffusing "historically true" philosophical innovations (Crehan 2016). This movement results in a "renewed common sense" (Green 2018) or "good sense" (Thomas 2009) that contains critical and reflective philosophical foundations, transcending the passivity of traditional common sense and dominant ideologies (Green 2018). The philosophy of praxis is the theoretical terrain where social groups become conscious of their social being, strength, tasks, and becoming (Gramsci 2019). Its development is tied to practical political action and the struggle for hegemony (Green 2018). The unity of theory and practice is central to this process, understood not as a mechanical fact but as a historical development moving towards a single, coherent conception of the world (Gramsci 2019). For the simple to play the predominant role in their political lives and the creation of a new hegemony (Green 2018), the philosophy of praxis must remain in constant contact with them, drawing problems and solutions from their lived reality (Green 2018). This dialectic between intellectuals and the masses is essential for the diffusion of a higher conception of the world (Green 2018).

However, this approach is not without potential tensions and limitations. Recovering concepts like kleos, as previously stated, carries the risk of nostalgia, romanticizing a past

⁴ Again, the case of Mangione is an excellent example of this possibility.

social form without adequately accounting for its historical context and potential exclusionary aspects. Adapting ancient concepts to contemporary needs requires a conscious effort and creativity to avoid missteps (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). Furthermore, the process of developing critical consciousness and intellectual leadership within subaltern groups could potentially lead to elitism if the organic connection between intellectuals and the masses is not maintained (Green 2018). Gramsci emphasizes that the goal is not for intellectuals to impose a new philosophy but to help “the simple” articulate their own autonomous historical consciousness (Green 2018). Creating a new culture is a collective endeavor, not solely the work of individual “geniuses.” The philosophy of praxis must not remain restricted to a narrow intellectual group but must be diffused and rooted in popular consciousness. The simple must be active agents in the process, not merely passive recipients (Green 2018). Navigating these tensions requires constant critical self-reflection and a commitment to the democratic principles inherent in Gramsci’s vision of a philosophy of praxis (Green 2018).

VI. Conclusion

This paper has contended that the modern struggle for meaningful self-definition, often commodified and rendered inaccessible under capitalist cultural hegemony, can be profoundly rethought by drawing on the ancient Greek notion of *kleos* and Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “the simple.” Our central argument has been that *kleos*, when reinterpreted not merely as aristocratic individualism but as a communal and socially formative striving, offers a pre-capitalist model of recognition rooted in shared intuitive experience, analogous to Gramsci’s “simple” – the pre-theoretical, affective ground of subaltern experience. We explored how capitalist structures distort value into mere fame or prestige, creating scarcity in symbolic capital and fostering alienation, particularly among youth seeking identity and purpose. By critically juxtaposing this reified capitalist notion of status with a rearticulated *kleos* and Gramsci’s “simple,” we disclose both the contemporary existential restlessness and the latent potential for a transformative praxis.

This rethinking holds significant philosophical and political relevance. Philosophically, it engages with Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, which begins as a critique of common sense and the role of intellectuals (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). By examining how “the simple” can mature into critical consciousness, we align with the praxis-oriented goal of revitalizing existing activity and making it critical (Gramsci 2019), aiming to transform the popular mentality (Crehan 2016). This process is integral to the unity of theory and practice at the heart of Gramsci’s project (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci viewed the political development of the concept of hegemony as a great philosophical advance because it determines a reform of consciousness and methods of knowledge, constituting a “philosophical fact” (Gramsci 1971). Our analysis resonates with this, suggesting how reclaiming social meaning can contribute to forming a coherent conception of the world that goes beyond common sense (Gramsci 1971). By focusing on “the simple” as the ground from which critical self-consciousness emerges, we touch upon the process of creating independent intellectuals or an elite specialized in philosophical elaboration, which is crucial for organization and leadership (Gramsci 2019). This approach offers a lens through which to view philosophy not as abstract speculation, but as a critical and practical instrument for transformation, in contrast to positions like Croce’s, which Gramsci critiqued for abstractness and speculative character (Gramsci 2011). The philosophy of praxis, characterized by absolute historicism, secularization, and humanism, inherently links philosophical transformation with social and political change. Politically, this reinterpretation offers a path toward counter-hegemonic action. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony highlights how dominant groups organize consent through cultural means (Zucchetti and Cimino 2021). By

understanding how recognition is distorted under this hegemony, we can better grasp the instruments of domination (Gramsci 2019) and the potential for subaltern classes to become intellectually independent of their rulers (Gramsci 2019). Reclaiming value as a communal, generative act rooted in “the simple” becomes a way to build a new ideological terrain, a necessary moment in revolutionizing praxis and fostering the self-organization and leadership of subaltern groups (Gramsci 2019). Such efforts align with the formation of a national-popular will and the creation of a new, integral culture and civilization (Thomas 2009).

Looking forward, this study suggests several areas for further research. One clear direction is to compare the concept of kleos and its reinterpretation with other cultural models of esteem or honor found in alternative pre-capitalist traditions. How have other societies conceptualized honor, reputation, or recognition in ways that differ from both ancient Greece and modern capitalism? Furthermore, exploring the intersection of social recognition with concepts like recognition and redistribution could offer valuable insights into systemic critique. Methodologically, further empirical investigation could explore how contemporary youth culture attempts to forge a sense of value or identity, and where elements analogous to the “simple” or communal kleos might be found, perhaps drawing on thinkers who explore alternatives to hegemonic economics or new forms of collective subjectivity. Comparing Gramsci’s “simple” with other philosophical concepts of pre-conscious or affective experience could also enrich our understanding of its potential as a ground for critical consciousness.

Ultimately, the project of reclaiming social meaning offers not just a critique of current societal structures, but a source of hope. By recognizing the intuitive striving for meaningful being-in-the-world inherent in “the simple” and reflected in the communal aspects of kleos, we uncover a latent potential for a more authentic, collective form of self-realization. This vision suggests that social value need not be a zero-sum game of scarce symbolic capital, but can be a generative process of shared recognition and communal flourishing.⁵ Such a realization holds the potential to inspire action and contribute to the ongoing historical process of building a more just and humane society, where knowledge is intimately related to what is coming up, not just what has been (Bloch 1995).

Finally, coming full circle I would like to revisit the image of that abandoned Roman soldier with which we began and finish my thought in Gramscian terms. Instead of the heroic figure who Spengler and many of his right-wing acolytes today (Sedgwick 2019) might interpret him to represent, I would instead like to suggest he is representative of a cog in the machinery of the state rather than a symbol of patriotic duty. Spengler’s romanticized Pompeian sentry, whose unreflective self-sacrifice under a fate dictated by an abstract institution recasts greatness as passive obedience, we can contrast with Achilles, who exemplifies an agentic praxis by consciously electing death to secure his eternal kleos, thereby exercising self-determination rather than acquiescence. Whereas the Pompeian soldier’s exalted endurance serves only to reinforce hegemonic power divorced from communal bonds, Achilles’ fame is inherently social: his kleos depends on reciprocal *timē* and the communal act of storytelling that publicly recognizes and validates heroic action. This contrast illustrates how, by reimagining kleos as a communal and developmental striving, one can awaken Gramsci’s “simple,” and thus point toward a latent, counter-hegemonic potential for transformative praxis rather than mere ideological reproduction.

⁵ E.g., Luigi Mangione’s heroic status among a wide segment of the population, I would argue, provides an excellent illustration of such a communal kleos already emerging in real-world struggle as one could hope to find.

Author

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