



Hegemony and counter-hegemony in the narrative of nickel downstreaming in Indonesia: A critical theory study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Nickel downstreaming policy represents Indonesia's national development ambition in response to the global energy transition discourse. The state deploys political strategies through legal regulations and ideological strategies through dominant narratives to sustain the nickel downstreaming project. The emergence of counter-narratives articulated by subordinate groups indicates an ongoing struggle over the meaning of development within the nickel downstreaming agenda. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through documentation and literature review. Data were analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. **Finding:** The findings reveal that within a hegemonic system, the state functions as the *organizer of consent*, acting as an extension of capitalist interests to disseminate capitalist logic through mass media. Economic and development narratives are predominantly employed by the state to construct public consent. Conversely, subordinate groups, organized by organic intellectuals, resist and challenge the state's dominant narratives by advancing social and ecological narratives. These counter-narratives seek to generate new forms of consent by offering alternative interpretations of nickel downstreaming as a destructive and exploitative practice. **Conclusion:** Mass media, as a communication institution, has become a key arena for the contestation between hegemony and counter-hegemony through narrative struggles between ruling groups and subordinate groups. This contestation reflects a crisis of state hegemony, wherein the ideological legitimacy of development is challenged by counter-narratives that demand social and ecological justice. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The originality of this article lies in its application of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyze narrative struggles surrounding nickel downstreaming in Indonesian mass media.

KEYWORDS: counter-hegemony; critical theory; hegemony; nickel downstreaming.

1. Introduction

Nickel downstreaming is claimed to be a strategic step in realizing the global energy transition agenda through zero-emission electric vehicles. In an effort to capture a continuously growing global market share, Indonesia has leveraged its vast nickel reserves as raw materials for electric vehicle (EV) batteries through nickel downstreaming (Salomon et al., 2025). A report by the Geological Agency (2020) published in a booklet by the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) entitled "*Indonesia's Nickel Investment Opportunities*" notes that Indonesia's nickel reserves reach 72 million tons of Ni (nickel), or 52% of the world's total nickel reserves of 139,419,000 tons of Ni. Approximately 90% of Indonesia's nickel ore reserves are located in Central Sulawesi, South Sulawesi, Southeast Sulawesi, and North Maluku. Nickel downstreaming can be understood as an effort to

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process low-grade nickel ore into pure nickel metal in order to increase value added (Kementerian ESDM, 2020b). The government continues to encourage mining companies to build domestic processing plants by producing value-added mineral products rather than exporting raw materials (Chung, 2025). This governmental commitment is demonstrated by the enactment of Minister of ESDM Regulation No. 11 of 2019, which prohibits the export of nickel ore with grades below 1.7% and has been in force since January 2020 (Haddad et al., 2022).

The state not only supports the continuity of nickel downstreaming projects through a set of legal regulations, but also actively conducts media campaigns highlighting the benefits of these projects for national development. In various official statements, the Indonesian government portrays the nickel downstreaming policy as a national strategic project and a crucial instrument for boosting the national economy, whether through tax revenues, foreign exchange earnings, foreign direct investment, or job creation (Dwinh & Sari, 2024; Kementerian ESDM, 2020b; Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2024; Savitri & Firdaus, 2025; Shiddiq, 2025). In contrast to these elite state narratives, several media outlets and civil society organizations have reported socio-cultural and environmental impacts of nickel downstreaming practices, such as deforestation, environmental pollution, human rights violations, and conflicts over living space that lead to the criminalization of local communities (Fajriadi, 2025; Greenpeace Indonesia, 2025; Intan, 2024; JATAM, 2025; Project Multatuli, 2023). These contradictory narratives of nickel downstreaming indicate a tension between the official state narrative, which focuses on development economics, and counter-narratives advanced by civil society organizations that highlight injustice and resource exploitation. In this context, the media not only play a role in disseminating information but also function as arenas for the production of ideologically charged discourse (Altheide, 2015; Suhardi, 2024). Narratives of nickel downstreaming circulating in the mass media have become sites of contestation over meaning and legitimacy among various actors seeking to frame their respective interests. Douglas Kellner views mass media as arenas of conflict among intersecting economic, political, social, and cultural forces (Ritzer, 2012).

Economic, policy, and technological studies that emphasize the benefits of national development dominate the scholarly discourse on nickel downstreaming in Indonesia (Herawan & Susilo, 2024; Lahadalia et al., 2024; Putra & Samputra, 2023; Randrikasari et al., 2025; Riady, 2024; Tangkudung & Kaseger, 2024). These studies provide ideological legitimacy to the state and its policies by presenting nickel downstreaming as an appropriate pathway toward progress and prosperity. More critical studies have emerged as counterbalances in the downstreaming discourse, ranging from analyses of socio-environmental impacts, examinations of political-economic contradictions within downstreaming policies, to comparative studies of the framing of nickel downstreaming discourse in Chinese and Indonesian media (Jordy, 2025; Rynaldi et al., 2024; Setiawan & Maudy Noor Fadlhia, 2025; Tela & Yu, 2025). These studies view nickel downstreaming from opposing perspectives: as a profitable commodity on the one hand, and as an environmentally destructive activity on the other. From this emerges a recurring pattern in which nickel downstreaming narratives create pro and contra camps in both popular mass media and academic publications. This pattern opens a gap for examining a “narrative war” surrounding the continuation of nickel downstreaming projects in Indonesia. This study focuses on the contestation of narratives within online mass media discourse on nickel downstreaming.

Antonio Gramsci defines hegemony as cultural leadership exercised by the ruling class to secure mass consent (Ritzer, 2012). Drawing from Marxist theory, Gramsci's concept of the historical bloc views the economy, political society, and civil society as a unified system of hegemony that mutually supports one another (Baeg, 1991). In this framework, political society operates through legal regulations, while civil society functions through social institutions that bind and reinforce economic domination in order to construct a stable hegemonic system. However, Gramsci also understands the historical bloc as a complex, contradictory, and not fully harmonious system between the structural base (economy) and

its superstructures (political society and civil society) (Baeg, 1991; Femia, 1975). Civil society becomes the arena in which values and ideas are both constructed and contested. This arena constitutes the “battlefield of hegemony,” where hegemonic narratives produced by the ruling group are simultaneously challenged by subordinate groups through counter-narratives as forms of counter-hegemony within the discourse of nickel downstreaming. Counter-hegemony can be understood as efforts to resist a dominant hegemonic agenda (Baeg, 1991; Carroll, 2009; Carroll & Ratner, 2010). Through Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, this study advances the main argument that dominant narratives represent state hegemony produced to maintain public legitimacy and belief in nickel downstreaming projects, while counter-narratives constitute forms of public resistance that operate as counter-hegemony against the state’s dominant discourse.

The objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics of hegemonic contestation within narratives of nickel downstreaming in Indonesia. Using Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as an analytical lens, this research seeks to uncover how ruling groups construct hegemony through pro-nickel downstreaming narratives in mass media, as well as how subordinate groups articulate counter-narratives as counter-hegemonic efforts to challenge and oppose the dominant narratives of the ruling elite.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design and data collection

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. This perspective is used to understand how power operates through narratives, media representations, and public consent in the discourse surrounding nickel downstreaming in Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of ideological contestation and the construction of meaning within public debates. The study relies on secondary data collected through documentation techniques and literature review. Documentation was conducted by examining news articles, opinion pieces, official statements, and reports published between 2020 and 2025. The sources include mainstream media outlets such as Kompas, Tempo, Antara News, and VOA Indonesia; official government platforms including presiden.go.id, esdm.go.id, mpr.go.id, kemenperin.go.id, and nikel.co.id; as well as alternative media and civil society organizations such as Project Multatuli, Greenpeace Indonesia, and JATAM. These empirical data were complemented by an extensive review of scholarly literature concerning Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, media discourse studies, and research on nickel downstreaming policies and development in Indonesia.

2.2 Data analysis

Data analysis followed the qualitative analysis framework proposed by Miles et al. (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, and categorizing the collected materials according to two analytical categories: dominant narratives and counter-narratives. Dominant narratives refer to statements and discourses that support and legitimize nickel downstreaming policies, whereas counter-narratives encompass critiques and oppositional perspectives toward such policies. The categorized data were subsequently displayed through comparative matrices to identify patterns of ideological contradiction between dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses. In addition, the findings were presented in a narrative-descriptive form to facilitate the interpretation of the data through Gramsci’s theoretical framework. Conclusions were drawn by examining how development narratives function as instruments of hegemony and how counter-narratives emerge as forms of resistance. To ensure analytical consistency and credibility, verification was conducted reflexively throughout the research process by

repeatedly revisiting the empirical materials and the results of data condensation, thereby ensuring that interpretations remained closely aligned with the context of the data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Dominant narratives vs. counter-narratives in Indonesia's nickel downstreaming agenda

Following the policy banning the export of raw nickel ore, which came into effect in January 2020, the government has increasingly intensified the development of nickel downstreaming projects through investment in the construction of smelter facilities (Randrikasari et al., 2025). Over the five-year period (2020–2025) since the policy was implemented, the government has also actively constructed positive and optimistic narratives regarding the continuity and benefits of nickel downstreaming projects. The state and its political forces—through the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM), the Ministry of Investment/Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM), the Ministry of Industry (Kemenperin), and even the President—have played an active role in framing nickel downstreaming as a symbol of national economic sovereignty. Official statements by state elites as the ruling group have been widely disseminated through press releases on official ministerial websites. Mainstream media outlets such as *Kompas* and Antara News have also contributed to the positive framing of nickel downstreaming. Narratives such as “national development,” “economic growth,” “value added,” “energy transition,” and “electric vehicles” are frequently employed in official statements by state actors as well as in news texts published by mainstream media.

The emphasis and repeated use of the term “economy” reflect the government’s effort to instill public confidence that nickel downstreaming represents an appropriate strategy for achieving national economic growth through energy sovereignty. Aspirations to occupy a strategic position in the global arena by participating in the realization of the global energy transition discourse through green energy further reinforce the government’s commitment to pursuing nickel downstreaming projects. These ambitions are subsequently articulated in official statements by government elites and consolidated into a dominant narrative within the discourse on nickel downstreaming.

In response to official state narratives, various civil society organizations have articulated their arguments as counter-narratives. Organizations such as Greenpeace Indonesia, WALHI (Indonesian Forum for the Environment), JATAM (Mining Advocacy Network), KIARA (People’s Coalition for Fisheries Justice), and Climate Rights International (CRI) have emerged as key actors in voicing concerns over the environmental and socio-cultural conditions affecting impacted communities and Indigenous peoples. These counter-narratives are further amplified by mainstream media outlets such as *Tempo* and VOA Indonesia, as well as by alternative media such as Project Multatuli, which provide space for critical and oppositional voices challenging the claims and dominance of state elites. Through investigative reporting and in-depth coverage, narratives such as “environmental destruction,” “deforestation,” “land conflicts,” “human rights violations,” and “climate crisis” are repeatedly employed by critical and alternative media to highlight the destructive effects of nickel downstreaming projects.

Counter-narratives focus on the realities of injustice and environmental burden by unpacking the social and ecological dimensions that are marginalized or ignored within the state’s dominant narrative. Civil society organizations, through critical and alternative media, seek to expose various forms of human rights violations experienced by Indigenous and local communities, ranging from the loss of rights to living spaces due to land-use conversion, to intimidation and even criminalization by law enforcement authorities collaborating with corporate actors. Water, air, and soil pollution resulting from mining activities also constitute central themes within counter-narratives. These socio-ecological issues serve as the primary discursive resources for subordinate groups to challenge and confront the government’s dominant narrative, which is oriented primarily toward economic profit.

Table 1. Forms of dominant and counter-narratives in the discourse on nickel downstreaming (2020–2025)

Narrative Type	Actor	Media	Year	Keywords
Dominant Narrative	Ridwan Djamaluddin (Director General of Minerals and Coal)	<i>Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) Website</i>	2020	National economy; value-added production; safeguarding commodities; price volatility
	Eko Budi Lelono (Head of the Geological Agency, Ministry of ESDM)			Production self-sufficiency; value-added production
	Joko Widodo (7th President of the Republic of Indonesia)	<i>MPR Website</i>	2023	Public welfare; investment growth; employment opportunities; commodities
		<i>Presiden RI Website</i>	2024	National economic growth; taxation; state revenue; increased export value
	Febri Hendri Antoni Arif (Spokesperson, Ministry of Industry)	<i>Ministry of Industry (Kemenperin) Website</i>	2023	National economy; investment; economic value added; national development
	Tina Talisa (Special Staff, Ministry of Investment / Investment Coordinating Board – BKPM)	<i>BKPM Website</i>	2024	Value added; investment; battery cell producers; employment
	Bahlil Lahadalia (Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources)	<i>Nikel.id Website</i>	2025	Economic growth; employment; value added; energy resilience; energy sovereignty
		<i>Antara News</i>	2024	<i>Critical minerals; green energy; energy transition; electric vehicles; global EV battery ecosystem; national economy</i>
	Anggawira (Chairman, Indonesian Association of Mineral and Coal Energy Suppliers)	<i>Kompas</i>	2024	State foreign exchange earnings; trade balance; industrial strengthening; state revenue; employment; investment
	Putra Adhiguna (Managing Director Energy Shift Institute)			Industrialized state; global interests

Narrative Type	Actor	Media	Year	Keywords
Counter-Narrative	Greenpeace	Greenpeace Website	2025	Natural resource exploitation; environmental degradation; community conflicts; climate crisis; human rights violations
	JATAM (Mining Advocacy Network)	JATAM Website	2025	Criminalization of Indigenous communities; human rights violations; ecological criminalization; moral and democratic collapse
			2024	Extractive industry; human rights violations; deforestation; environmental degradation; social conflicts
	Project Multatuli	Project Multatuli Website (#HilirisasiOligarki Series)	2023-2025	Environmental degradation; environmental crimes; dispossession of local communities' living spaces; land-use conversion; deforestation; land conflicts; horizontal conflicts; health impacts; human rights violations
	Susan Herawati (Secretary General, KIARA – People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice)	Tempo	2025	Coastal area degradation; dispossession of fishers' living spaces; socio-cultural impacts
	Aulia Hakim (Head of Advocacy Department, WALHI Central Sulawesi)		2024	Harmful to the public; environmental impacts; workplace accidents
Krista Shennum (Researcher, Climate Rights International – CRI)	VOA Indonesia	2024	Climate crisis; deforestation; environmental degradation; human rights violations	

3.2 State hegemony in the dominant narrative of nickel downstreaming

In his concept of the historical bloc, Gramsci emphasizes the importance of the unity between the economy, political society, and civil society within a hegemonic system (Baeg, 1991). The state does not rely solely on coercive apparatuses within political society, but also incorporates civil society through ideological apparatuses as instruments for producing hegemony. In Gramscian thought, the state is defined as “state = political society + civil society,” whereby it operates through both coercion (political domination) and consent (ideological hegemony) in order to maintain power (Althusser, 2017; Baeg, 1991). In the context of nickel downstreaming narratives, the state plays its role within civil society through mass media as communicative institutions to construct consent. Hegemony is more often achieved through consent than through coercion, with consent being generated through social institutions in civil society that shape the cognitive and affective structures through which individuals understand and evaluate social reality (Femia, 1975). In other

words, hegemony constitutes an ideological force that shapes how society thinks and feels, leading people to voluntarily accept elite domination.

The state functions as the organizer of consent within the hegemonic system by acting as an extension of capitalist interests (Baeg, 1991), in this case represented by nickel mining corporations. Marx and Engels (1848) argued that the executive of the modern state is merely a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie. Peter Lawrence (2019) describes the relationship between the state and corporations as a symbiotic one, in which government policies consistently align with corporate interests. However, the absence of direct capitalist voices in media narratives allows economic power to operate in a concealed manner. Capitalist narratives do not appear explicitly, but instead emerge through state representation in the mass media. The state thus acts as the organizer of consent by actively constructing and maintaining ways of thinking and feeling about the ideas embedded in the nickel downstreaming agenda. Through mass media, the state has effectively become the spokesperson for capitalist interests, representing capitalist logic in the public sphere. Public consent for nickel downstreaming projects is constructed by government elites through official statements delivered in state forums or through interviews covered by mainstream media. These official statements are then disseminated through mass media to be consumed by the wider public.

The formation of public consent by the state is not achieved through direct coercion, but through ideological institutions, one of which is the mass media. This aligns with Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which are employed by the state to maintain power by shaping consciousness and specific value systems. ISAs operate through ideological institutions, including communication institutions such as the press, radio, television, and similar media. Various ideas related to nickel downstreaming—such as “national development,” “economic growth,” “green energy,” and “energy transition”—are produced en masse by government elites through official statements and disseminated to the public via online media platforms. Media and the internet have played a crucial role in spreading and reinforcing hegemonic value ideologies by popularizing nickel downstreaming projects as a national development strategy (Durniev & Nekhaienko, 2023; Sardar, 2024).

As representatives of capitalist interests, the state frequently employs development and economic narratives by emphasizing the term “downstreaming” as a key policy slogan. Downstreaming, understood as the process of processing raw materials, is framed as an appropriate strategy to optimize the domestic value added of nickel commodities (Tangkudung & Kaseger, 2024). This increase in value added is claimed to be the key to economic growth through higher export values, increased per capita income, tax revenues, foreign investment inflows, and job creation for local communities. Economic figures and calculations embedded within development and economic narratives serve as a form of legitimacy for the continuation of nickel downstreaming projects. Within this dominant narrative, the state and corporations view nature as a commodity with high economic value. Below is an excerpt from an official statement by Joko Widodo during his tenure as President of the Republic of Indonesia, published through official government media (mpr.go.id) and mainstream media (Detik.com), regarding calculations of state revenue derived from nickel downstreaming projects.

“If we remain consistent and are able to carry out downstreaming for nickel, copper, bauxite, CPO, and seaweed, based on our calculations, within the next 10 years our per capita income is projected to reach IDR 153 million (USD 10,944). In 15 years, per capita income will reach IDR 217 million (USD 15,860). In 22 years, our per capita income will reach IDR 331 million (USD 25,025). By comparison, in 2022 our per capita income stood at IDR 71 million. This means that within 10 years, the increase could be more than double.”

(Source: mpr.go.id, 2023)

"I have stated that the state cannot operate like a private company. State income or revenue comes from taxes, export duties, and non-tax state revenues (PNBP). I have explained that the state does not directly earn profits from these activities, but it receives revenue from corporate income tax, employee income tax, royalties, non-tax state revenues, and dividends. There are many sources," Jokowi explained. "From there, the state budget (APBN) is used for village funds, infrastructure development, and social assistance," Jokowi added.
(Source: Detik.com, 2024)

The organization of consent by the state in the narratives above is carried out through economic compromise by accommodating certain interests of subordinate classes (village funds, infrastructure development, and social assistance) in order to construct belief and consent that the continuation of nickel downstreaming projects serves public interests. Gramsci indeed views the economy as the structural base of the historical bloc, forming the primary foundation of power relations. Meanwhile, political and ideological superstructures function to maintain the form of economic compromise upon which this power rests (Baeg, 1991). In the dominant narrative articulated by Joko Widodo, the economy serves as the material source of power, which is then legitimized through political policies and constructed and maintained through media narratives to convince the public that nickel downstreaming is a "beneficial" project. Beyond economic arguments, the state also employs "green" rhetoric in its campaign for nickel downstreaming projects, as illustrated below:

"Going forward, we will push downstreaming properly—downstreaming that is truly green and acceptable internationally," Bahlil stated during a press conference at the Presidential Office, Presidential Palace Complex, Jakarta, on Tuesday.

"Nickel has now entered the category of critical minerals and is part of the raw materials needed to move toward green energy, one of which is electric vehicles," Bahlil said at the BNI Investor Daily Summit 2024 in Jakarta.
(Source: Antara News, 2024)

The text above is an excerpt from a press report published by the mainstream media outlet *Antara News* (2024), quoting statements by the Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources, Bahlil Lahadalia, regarding nickel downstreaming. The state borrows and adopts the narrative of "green justice" to ideologically frame nickel downstreaming as a sustainable development project, while in practice continuing to uphold the logic of extractive capitalism. The "green" narrative employed by government elites functions to obscure extractivist practices embedded in nickel downstreaming projects. Extractivism refers to an economic-political practice rooted in the large-scale appropriation of natural resources, carried out within contexts of unequal power relations and capital accumulation (Chagnon et al., 2022; Soe'oed, 2024). The benefits of extractive industries are concentrated among dominant actors, while Indigenous peoples bear the social and ecological burdens (Setiawan & Maudy Noor Fadlhia, 2025). Within hegemonic narratives, these realities are concealed by green rhetoric used by government elites as a form of legitimacy. Such narratives mask the social and ecological dimensions of extractivism through the imagery of sustainable development, thereby shifting public attention away from destructive effects toward promises of economic welfare and energy sovereignty.

Still operating within green narratives, extractivist practices in nickel downstreaming projects are shielded by the discourse of green energy to secure public consent and support, for—as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe observed—when an idea fails, words become particularly useful (quoted in Cornwall, 2010). Green energy thus becomes a buzzword repeatedly invoked to emphasize the notion that through green energy "tomorrow's life will be better." As a buzzword, green narratives not only obscure meaning but also act performatively by producing specific social effects (Cornwall, 2010), whereby extractivist

practices within nickel downstreaming projects come to appear legitimate, inclusive, and morally justified.

The dominant ideas disseminated through media campaigns on nickel downstreaming have become instruments of the state for controlling public consciousness. Within the dominant narrative of nickel downstreaming, media function as state tools that produce false consciousness by shielding society from the realities of oppression and exploitation (Hutagalung, 2004; Setiawan & Maudy Noor Fadlhia, 2025). Through narratives of economic growth, development, and green energy, media construct reality as positive and progressive in order to obscure unequal power relations between corporations, the state, and civil society. In critical theory, media as products of the culture industry are viewed as false commodities that generate calming, oppressive, and disorienting effects on the public (Ritzer, 2012). Dominant narratives are also saturated with jargon that serves as the basis for legitimizing the continuation of nickel downstreaming projects. Jürgen Habermas conceptualizes legitimacy as a set of ideas that “obscure” political systems by rendering unclear what is actually taking place (Ritzer, 2012). Through this strategy, public discourse in the media is not directed toward rational and logical dialogue, but rather manipulated to manufacture public consent in the interests of the ruling elite (Happer & Philo, 2013).

3.3 War of position and organic intellectuals in counter-narratives of nickel downstreaming

Counter-hegemony entails a struggle to dismantle the unity of the ruling class’s historical bloc within the hegemonic system (Baeg, 1991). It is important to note that regardless of how powerful a hegemony may be, a historical bloc remains a complex, contradictory, and non-harmonious formation (Baeg, 1991). These internal contradictions within the historical bloc create openings for the emergence of counter-hegemony at the discursive (ideological) level within the arena of civil society. Civil society—particularly the mass media—serves as a site for the production and contestation of hegemony, where hegemonic narratives are simultaneously produced and challenged by opposing hegemonies (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). In the discourse on nickel downstreaming, civil society becomes the space in which subordinate groups engage in resistance by constructing counter-hegemony through counter-narratives (Siswati, 2018).

Counter-narratives represent the initial step in exercising counter-hegemony within the arena of civil society, functioning as ideological instruments to build new forms of consent through the media (Belolon, 2024; Cox & Schilthuis, 2012). These narratives operate within the realm of ideas and discourse to seize public common sense from the influence of dominant narratives by creating an alternative common sense (Liguori, 2021). Counter-narratives are presented in stark contrast to the dominant narratives of state elites, with the aim of cultivating alternative awareness and power under conditions of domination. They introduce alternative ideas regarding nickel downstreaming practices that are largely extractive and exploitative.

From a Gramscian perspective, struggles within civil society to capture public consciousness and consent can be categorized as a war of position (Baeg, 1991; Carroll & Ratner, 2010). A war of position refers to a long-term struggle in civil society to contest ideology, morality, and values as the foundation of moral and intellectual leadership (Baeg, 1991; Carroll & Ratner, 2010). Actors engaged in wars of position tend to rely on critical and independent media to disseminate messages and information aimed at weakening hegemonic systems (Cox & Schilthuis, 2012). Chantal Mouffe conceptualizes journalists in critical and independent media as gate-openers who create space for argumentation and plural perspectives, rather than gatekeepers who silence dissenting voices (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006).

Actors who help articulate the suffering of Indigenous peoples as subordinate groups include civil society organizations composed of activists, academics/researchers, and journalists from critical and independent media. These actors function as organic intellectuals within civil society (Baeg, 1991; Siswati, 2018; Sousa, 2022). Organic intellectuals play a crucial role as organizers in producing counter-narratives that foster

public critical consciousness regarding nickel downstreaming projects. They utilize critical and independent media as sites of meaning production by reframing nickel downstreaming as a destructive extractivist practice. Alternative communication spaces become venues for independently producing and disseminating meanings of nickel downstreaming without capitalist filters that often dominate official and mainstream media (Carroll & Ratner, 2010).

In constructing counter-narratives, subordinate groups supported by organic intellectuals engage in delegitimizing the interests of dominant groups that are framed as collective or national interests. Counter-narratives, as expressions of counter-hegemony, embody the struggle of subordinate groups to reject and challenge state-defined narratives of development and national prosperity. These narratives foreground social and ecological dimensions as central lenses for confronting hegemonic development and economic discourses. Through critical and alternative media, counter-narratives have accommodated marginalized voices by exposing the lived realities of Indigenous communities surrounding mining areas. Below is a statement from a local community member as a counter-narrative highlighting the impacts of nickel mining on Kabaena Island, Southeast Sulawesi:

“Nickel waste and dust have destroyed seaweed cultivation. Fish have become increasingly scarce in coastal fishing areas accessible by small boats. Bajo fishers are forced to search for fish in deeper and more distant waters, even though their boats are inadequate for such conditions.”

“It is now increasingly difficult to find small fish because the mangroves have been damaged by nickel dust,” said Muhali. Mangroves serve as habitats for diverse marine species that provide food sources and sustain coastal livelihoods.
(Source: Project Multatuli, 2024)

The investigative report produced by journalists from Project Multatuli (2024) represents a form of counter-narrative within independent media. The excerpt above presents a narrative that contrasts sharply with the economic narratives advanced by state elites. The economic compromise promoted by the state in dominant narratives is challenged by subordinate groups through the exposure of lived realities of oppression and injustice. Communities surrounding nickel mining areas become the first to bear ecological burdens, which generate cascading effects on socio-cultural life, particularly livelihoods. While both the state and Indigenous communities depend on nature as an economic space, they differ fundamentally in ideological and moral interpretations and modes of management. The state perceives nature as a commodity and productive asset oriented toward profit accumulation and national growth through exploitative extractive practices. In contrast, Indigenous communities view nature as a living space and social identity that sustains livelihoods and community continuity through principles of coexistence and mutual care. Through counter-narratives, capitalist economic logic is contested by the concrete experiences of Indigenous peoples who have lost traditional sources of livelihood due to nickel mining activities. Rather than delivering prosperity, nickel industrialization produces ecological impoverishment manifested in ecosystem pollution, declining natural yields, and the loss of living spaces.

Counter-narratives also appear in mainstream media such as *VOA Indonesia* (2024), which reports on the socio-ecological impacts of nickel mining activities. These narratives are articulated by researchers from Climate Rights International (CRI), who highlight forms of injustice borne by both ecosystems and local communities. Statements by CRI researchers provide scientific legitimacy to counter-narratives, as community testimonies documented by Project Multatuli (2024) are validated through data-driven findings and academic analysis. Researchers, as organic intellectuals, seek to articulate the interests of subordinate groups and assist them in challenging state hegemony through credible and rational discourse. This aligns with Jürgen Habermas’s view that the validity of a narrative depends on the speaker or the source of the statement (Ritzer, 2012). When a speaker’s claims are comprehensible, reliable, truthful, and grounded in principles of justice, the

narrative gains validity (Cukier et al., 2004; Ritzer, 2012). In *VOA Indonesia* (2024), CRI researchers not only present research findings on socio-ecological damage but also contribute to exposing state hegemonic structures and conceptualizing empirical realities as forms of ideological resistance. The following excerpt is taken from a *VOA Indonesia* report quoting a CRI researcher during the presentation of research findings on the impacts of nickel industrialization:

“Our report found serious impacts, including human rights violations against local communities. In addition, these industrial activities have damaged the environment, contributing to the climate crisis,” stated CRI researcher Krista Shennum in Jakarta on Wednesday (17/1), during the presentation of CRI’s research report entitled ‘Nickel Extracted: The Impact of Indonesia’s Nickel Industry on People and Climate Change.’ (Source: VOA Indonesia, 2024)

JATAM, as a non-governmental organization, not only engages in policy advocacy and community assistance for victims of the mining industry, but also actively issues press releases addressing injustices arising from mining practices. In one such press release entitled *“The Conviction of 11 Maba Sangaji Residents: Police and Corporations Collude, the State Legitimizes the Criminalization of Environmental Defenders”* (JATAM, 2025), JATAM introduces new interpretations regarding power relations between corporations, the state, and civil society within extractivist contexts. JATAM effectively articulates how the state constructs and maintains a hegemonic system through repressive state apparatuses such as the police, courts, and prisons (Althusser, 2017). Through JATAM’s counter-narratives, it becomes evident that the state not only manufactures consent through communication institutions but also enforces coercion through policing and judicial systems. Gramsci interprets this as state domination aimed at safeguarding capitalist interests from crises through coercive apparatuses (Baeg, 1991). When public consent begins to erode—either actively or passively—the state intervenes directly through coercive power to suppress opposition groups and preserve the existing power structure. In other words, when hegemony enters a crisis, persuasion is replaced by repression—a condition encapsulated within JATAM’s counter-narratives.

Greenpeace Indonesia activists also function as organic intellectuals actively constructing counter-narratives through their media platforms. Greenpeace is known not only for utilizing mass media to advance environmental agendas, but also for practicing a politics of signification (Carroll & Ratner, 2010) by conducting non-violent direct actions, such as staging peaceful protests at international nickel conferences in Jakarta (Greenpeace Indonesia, 2025a). These dramatic visual actions aim to attract public attention to the environmental consequences of nickel industrialization through messages displayed on banners reading “What’s the True Cost of Your Nickel,” “Nickel Mines Destroy Lives,” and “Save Raja Ampat, the Last Paradise.” This politics of signification represents Greenpeace’s effort to compel the public to interpret the realities of nickel industrialization as a matter of ecological morality.

Ideological struggles conducted through media by Greenpeace have successfully drawn public attention and fostered critical awareness of the destructive impacts of nickel downstreaming projects. This public consent is evidenced by widespread participation in hashtag activism such as #SaveRajaAmpat and the signing of petitions opposing nickel mining in Raja Ampat (Greenpeace Indonesia, 2025b). Digital hashtag activism has been employed to popularize social and ecological issues related to nickel industrialization in order to raise public awareness, mobilize support, and encourage policy change (Das, 1981; Goswami, 2018; Indainanto et al., 2024). Symbolic actions through hashtags and petitions mark the initial rupture of the prevailing common sense surrounding nickel downstreaming, subsequently influencing dominant political and ideological power structures. Although such actions are largely symbolic and performative, the ideological pressure generated through digital activism has been sufficiently effective in disrupting political stability and policy legitimacy, compelling the state to revoke mining permits for

several companies (Wijaya, 2025). The emergence of symbolic and performative public actions via hashtags and petitions within digital media demonstrates concrete struggles within civil society—particularly communication institutions—to contest the state’s dominant ideas on nickel downstreaming. These actions challenge state narratives and signal fractures in ideological consensus within the historical bloc of the ruling class. Symbolic movements may also indicate the failure of state elites to secure broad mass consent, leading segments of the population to disengage from dominant ideologies (Baeg, 1991).

The war of position organized by the organic intellectuals discussed above demonstrates equivalence of meaning in the construction of counter-narratives (Carroll & Ratner, 2010). This equivalence of meaning is built by integrating visions of social justice grounded in humanistic concern with ecological visions centered on sustainability (Carroll & Ratner, 2010). Such equivalence may serve as the embryo of a chain of equivalence—that is, a network of symbolic relationships among diverse groups united against a dominant hegemony without losing their respective identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Purcell, 2009). Organic intellectuals drawn from cross-sector civil society organizations define the state and corporations as common adversaries to be challenged by integrating social and ecological demands into a collective struggle against oppression and injustice.

3.4 Fractured domination and fragile resistance

Based on the discussion above, neither the ruling group nor the subordinate group has fully achieved a stable and coherent form of hegemony or counter-hegemony. The dominant narratives challenged and contested by civil society organizations indicate fractures within state hegemony. At the same time, the war of position undertaken by subordinate groups as a form of resistance has ultimately been subject to co-optation by the state. This reflects the condition in which “the old is dying but the new cannot be born” (Baeg, 1991), wherein established narratives gradually lose their persuasive power, while counter-narratives remain ideologically insufficient to consolidate alternative forces.

Although organic intellectuals have produced various counter-narratives as forms of resistance, the state has successfully integrated elements of these counter-narratives through co-optation by absorbing social movements into the existing power structure without providing substantive gains to the movements themselves (Holdo, 2019). In the case of nickel mining in Raja Ampat, the official government website setkab.go.id (2025) published a headline titled “*Four Mining Permits Revoked, Government Reaffirms Commitment to Protect the Raja Ampat Conservation Area.*” The state once again adopted pro-environmental ecological rhetoric—“*commitment to protecting conservation areas*”—to restore social consensus that had begun to enter a state of crisis. In an interview with Carpentier and Cammaerts (2006), Chantal Mouffe argues that strategies of absorbing certain demands can be interpreted as attempts by the state to suppress agonism in order to preserve consensus. Such strategies create the illusion of “public participation” by reconfiguring hegemonic positions and reclaiming moral authority within society. This process constitutes symbolic co-optation as a form of passive revolution, whereby the media function as mechanisms for limited top-down reform aimed at containing conflict without altering underlying power structures (Baeg, 1991; Landy, 2008).

The struggle over meaning within the war of position represents a long-term ideological effort to challenge and erode hegemonic systems. Although the resistance of subordinate groups may be politically defeated through co-optation by ruling elites, a shift in public perception of nickel downstreaming has nonetheless occurred—from being framed as an economically valuable project to being increasingly understood as exploitative and destructive. This transformation of meaning is evidenced by symbolic actions such as hashtags and petitions that mobilized digital activism to oppose mining practices in Raja Ampat (Greenpeace Indonesia, 2025). In this context, subordinate groups may experience political defeat, yet still succeed in transforming subjectivity by reshaping public awareness and interpretations of social reality (Lipsitz, 1988). Such success may serve as an important

resource for future resistance within a war of maneuver, which would require preparedness and the accumulation of economic, political, and ideological power to form a new historical bloc capable of contesting state power (Baeg, 1991; Egan, 2016). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) emphasize the importance and necessity of synchronizing civil society movements with political organizations in order to construct a new hegemony.

4. Conclusion

Civil society has become a battlefield of hegemony, where hegemonic projects are both produced and contested by opposing forces. Mass media, as communication institutions within civil society, function as arenas for narrative struggles over nickel downstreaming between ruling and subordinate groups. Within the hegemonic system, the state operates as the right hand of capital, acting as the organizer of consent to regulate and construct public approval for the ideas embedded in the nickel downstreaming agenda. Consent is produced through the media as an Ideological State Apparatus by generating dominant narratives centered on economic growth and development. Meanwhile, subordinate groups organized by organic intellectuals challenge state domination through counter-narratives disseminated via critical and alternative media that foreground social and ecological dimensions. These counter-narratives constitute a war of position—a long-term counter-hegemonic struggle that confronts and contests state-defined narratives of economic development by exposing lived realities of oppression and injustice. Within the dynamics of hegemonic struggle, both ruling and subordinate groups employ distinct strategies and instruments to defend their respective ideological interests. The contestation of narratives illustrates the dynamics of hegemonic conflict in the discourse on nickel downstreaming in Indonesia, as competing actors struggle to secure public consent over the meaning of development.

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