

8-2-2018

## Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection. By Jan Rehmann.

Robert Carley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique>

---

### Recommended Citation

Carley, Robert (2018) "Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection. By Jan Rehmann.," *Democratic Communiqué*. Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/democratic-communique.178>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communique/vol27/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

## Book Review

*Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection.* By Jan Rehmann. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014, 344 pp. (paperback) ISBN 1 60846 408 1. US List: \$28.00.

---

Jan Rehmann's *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection* is a study of the concept of ideology rooted in the Marxist tradition. The book also includes several interlocutions, outside of the Marxist tradition, such as Austrian economic theories and their forms of neoliberal expression, Michel Foucault's concept of "biopower" and "governmentality," as well as Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and symbolic violence. It also includes a critical appraisal of the *Projekt Ideologietheorie* (PIT) with which Rehmann is associated. Rehmann's book is meticulously researched. He situates ideology theory's key schools and thinkers historiographically, through the logic of argumentation, and empirically. Rehmann approaches ideology theory through a critical lens; his evaluative framework considers how and to what extent theories of ideology foreclose the possibility of revolutionary transformation.

Underlying Rehmann's argument is Engels' concept of "ideological powers" and PIT's reconceptualization of it. Ideological powers operate in the interrelation of ideas and action through the means of group socialization. Specifically, socialization (or collective organization) requires a shared understanding and outlook that guides communities' practices (especially in the absence of the durability of the state and associated institutions). Ideology, then, is substantively reconceived of as indispensable to a political group's core meanings and organizational structure.

After an introduction, Rehmann's argument is developed across eleven chapters, each focusing on the theoretical contributions of a key individual or group of thinkers. Rehmann evaluates how each contributor demonstrates, conceptually and empirically, the means by which groups might challenge ideological forms of domination—not just critically but also socially and organizationally.

Chapter nine, which discusses *PIT*, is most central to Rehmann's theory and argument. Begun by W.F. Haug in 1977, *PIT* marks the contributions of several scholars to a critical framework for the analysis of ideology as *ideological powers*—human relations that determine practices and consciousness. *PIT* begins from the premise that the analysis of ideology must distinguish between ideological powers functioning in a context of domination and in a context of power. Although power is a necessary condition of domination, the reverse is not true. *PIT* also takes the methodological standpoint that any critical analysis of ideology must ask if there would be ideology and what role would it take in a socialist context, absent of capitalism. This chapter introduces English-speaking readers to the various contributions to *PIT*, and it puts those contributions in dialogue with other major theories of ideology introduced in the preceding chapters.

Chapters one and two introduce ideology and Marx's substantial transformations to the concept. Rehmann begins with Destutt de Tracy's coining of the term in 1796. For Tracy, ideology served a proto-structural-functionalist impulse, which had taken root in French social thought. Rehmann then connects Marx's section on commodity fetishism in *Capital* to his earlier discussions of religion, law, society, and alienation, as well as his critique of political economy. This forms the basis of a robust ideological-theoretical lens, and it leads readers toward the discussion of *PIT* in chapter nine. Rehmann also demonstrates an "implicit coherence" in Marx's work that gives rise to core tendencies in ideology theory: a critical approach, a neutral approach, and an institutional-practice and praxis-based approach (including theories of language).

Chapters three and four address the limitations of both neutral and top-down theoretical perspectives—a theme carried through the book. Lenin reduced Marx's (and Engels') conception of ideology to both religious and bourgeois instrumentalism. Lenin's concerns about ideology followed from the idea that it was a political instrument; as such, he was primarily concerned with distinguishing socialist ideology from bourgeois ideology. Socialist ideology relates both to objective truth and the scientific analysis of society, and it also marks the organizational and ethical guidepost of an industrializing labor force. But Rehmann demonstrates that this perspective adds little theory and arrests critique. Lenin's vanguard brings socialist ideology to a modernizing proletariat from both *without* and *above*. As Rehmann concludes, "this dichotomizing approach of 'Marxism-Leninism' missed the constitution of ideological forms and mystified their determinateness ... Therefore, no theory of it could be developed" (75).

Lukács' perspective follows that of Lenin's. His layered hermeneutic of reification imputes class consciousness "from without," leaving little room for practices and dialectics. There is, for example, little room for a politics that might first seize upon contradictions introduced alongside labor rationalization, leading into successive worker mobilizations and responsive and adaptive forms of political organizational (i.e. praxis). In many ways, Horkheimer and Adorno mirror and amplify these tendencies by linking ideology and mass culture to production and consumption; modern mass culture becomes merely an extension of work through ideology. Rehmann notes that Marcuse looked for an alternative to the instrumentalization of reason for economic ends. However, Habermas ultimately sides with Adorno and Horkheimer, introducing a conceptually problematic distinction between instrumental reason and communicative reason. With the exception of Marcuse, Rehmann's evaluative framework finds Lenin, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School lacking in any substantive challenge to ideological domination.

In Chapters five and six, Rehmann outlines the theoretical contributions of Gramsci and Althusser on the role of the state and civil society in ideology theory. Both offer important avenues to imagine forms of socialization apart from ideological domination; however, Gramsci's neutral conception of ideology differs significantly from Althusser's, and it is indispensable for understanding political power and class struggle. For Gramsci, politics is not merely expressive of class but is connected to practices and is an essential part of struggle in hegemony. In this vein, Gramsci put no stock in either determinism or vanguardism. Following Adorno and the Frankfurt School, Rehmann does critique Gramsci's failure to entreat Marx's conception of fetishism in relationship to the development of a robust consumer culture.

Chapter six examines Althusser's work, specifically his concept of "ideological state-apparatuses" (ISA). For Althusser, ideology operates unconsciously, limiting each person's ability to resist as a group while, at the same time, giving each person the sense that they are uniquely powerful and powerful in their uniqueness. This is the basis for Althusser's "subject theory." Ideological domination is imputed through overlapping institutions (ISAs), such as churches, the school, the family, and the media ensuring the effects of ideology. Though this explains the persistence of ideology in capitalism, it does not leave room for struggle, as Gramsci does. Rehmann cites Ashwin Desai's 2002 book, *We are the Poors*, to underscore this point. In it, a collective of non-compliant or "bad" subjects located themselves outside of the ISAs, generating an identity that could not be contained within the ISA frame. Rehmann concludes that, "we need to presume that the subjects are not mere 'effects' of ideological interpolation ... But contain other levels of practice and experience as well" (178).

At times, Rehmann's intensively focused critique of authors and schools limits opportunities for drawing substantive connections across chapters. For example,

Rehmann spends little time on Gramsci's concept of "historically organic ideology" (HOI), which is a substantial addition to the Marxist literature on ideology. Had he done so, Rehmann may have found some affinity between HOI and *PIT*. HOI also raises questions about the relationship between praxis, the formation of a revolutionary party, and the role of both civil society and ideology. In this vein, Gramsci's shift of focus from factory councils to the political party raises several important questions about ideological models of socialization and organization.

Also, Rehmann's critique of Lukács moves into a discussion of the Frankfurt School and Habermas. This lineage follows both thematically and in the way that both Lukács and the Frankfurt School similarly adopted concepts in the Marxist tradition. Rehman's discussion of Habermas is consistent with his discussion of Weber, specifically his characterization of reason and his essays on vocations. However, the intellectual historiography of The Budapest School (Mészáros, Heller, Fehér, and Marcus) receives no attention. These last two criticisms are matters of omission, though, and should be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, the virtues of this important book outweigh any small criticism.

Rehmann's erudition is matched by the intellectual excitement that comes from reading *Theories of Ideology*. Advanced students of ideology theory and ideology critique will find an accessible text that invites them to tarry with evocative and important connections and rethink their perspective on the concept's historiography.

Robert Carley  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio