Review Articles


Each of the three monographs Jan Rehmann has published so far has intervened into the respective field in a way that has redefined the field itself. His first book (Die Kirchen im NS-Staat. Untersuchung zur Interaktion ideologischer Mächte, published in 1986) explores the many struggles during German Nazism about and within the main Christian churches, the Catholic and the Protestant. The investigation emerged from the Ideology Research Group at the Freie Universität Berlin (Projekt Ideologietheorie – PTT), which modified the approaches of Gramsci and Althusser by re-articulating them with Marx's and Engel's critical concept of ideology as alienated socialisation from above. It started from the following working definition: 'By the ideological we mean the operative network of ideal [i.e., mental] socialisation from above.' This historical-materialist approach, whose works have not been sufficiently received yet in the Anglo-American world, enabled Rehmann to lay bare the contradictory interactions between and within ideological powers. For instance, he was able to demonstrate in what areas Nazi attempts to control the churches were successful, and where and why they failed.

Rehmann's second book (Max Weber: Modernisierung als passive Revolution, which appeared in 1998) investigates Weber's political and theoretical writings from a Gramscian perspective, thus revealing a specific project of bourgeois hegemony as the hidden centre-piece of his sociology. Weber, who engaged in a sightseeing tour at the Stock Yards in Chicago in 1904 and was enthusiastic about the recklessness of American capitalism, studied the first indications of a Fordist-Taylorist revolution in the US in order to enhance a modern Fordist class constellation and, most notably, a strategic alliance between bourgeoisie and 'labour aristocracy' in the German Reich. Rehmann shows that it is this simultaneously economic and ethico-political perspective that informs Weber's sociological ideal types. The Protestant Ethic is thus interpreted as a hegemonic project that opposes the 'capitalist spirit' of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism (Calvinism, Methodism, and other sects) to the 'traditional' ideologies (Lutheran and Catholic) of the feudal-capitalist power-bloc in Germany. The way Weber's modernisation is analysed as a specific variety of 'passive revolution' (Gramsci) also shows the preparation of German fascism in a completely different light.

Rehmann's third and most recent book applies the analytical tools of a critical theory of ideology to a highly influential phenomenon of today's intellectual landscape: 'leftist Nietzscheanism' and its constitutive role for postmodernist theories. Looking at the ideological field the book intervenes in, one has to consider that postmodernist theory in


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Germany is, to a large degree, the result of a complex genealogy that proceeds from France to the US and then back again to Europe. As François Cusset has demonstrated, ‘French theory’ is, by and large, a product fabricated in the academia of the United States by way of a de-contextualising appropriation. As soon as it became predominant in the American Humanities and Literature departments, it lost its influence in France. At the same time, however, it was re-exported from the US to Germany (among many other countries) where it succeeded in pushing the academic positions of Marxism and critical theory to the sidelines. Against this backdrop, Rehmann’s book reveals itself as a vital antidote against a predominantly decontextualised and fashionable theory consumption. Going back to the 1960s and 1970s in France, he deciphers the attempts by Deleuze and Foucault to superannuate Marxism by means of a Nietzsche-turned-‘leftist’ and reconstructs the foundational frontlines that have been efficiently repressed.

To be sure, the fact that postmodernist theories emerged from left-wing interpretations of Nietzsche is in itself neither new nor disputed. Habermas already treated Nietzsche as the decisive entry point into postmodernism. According to Manfred Frank, neo-structuralism overthrows structuralism by means of a philosophical thesis ‘attained through a reconsideration of Nietzsche’s overcoming of metaphysics’. As Resch observes, ‘the Nietzschean left was postmodernism avant la lettre’. According to Geoff Waite, poststructuralism must be defined as an ‘overwhelmingly positive, assimilative embrace of Nietzsche. And it is as such that it persists today’.

What was still lacking in the debates, however, was the question of how Deleuze and Foucault succeeded in turning Nietzsche into an appealing reference point for leftist and alternative milieus. Not only Deleuzians like Ansell Pearson or Foucauldians like Dreyfus/Rabinow, but also those highly critical of today’s neo-Nietzscheanism, like Habermas or Ferry/Renaut, tend to take postmodernist readings of Nietzsche for granted, without confronting them with the original texts.

What is new and specific in Rehmann’s new book is that he examines postmodernist neo-Nietzscheanism as an ideological construct that is to be ‘deconstructed’, thus applying one of the postmodernist key concepts to postmodernism itself. Methodically speaking, he proceeds in two steps. First, he starts with the philological question of how Deleuze and Foucault ‘read’ Nietzsche and thereby transform his writings into a set of interpretations that perfectly fitted into the mood of a generation disappointed by the failures of 1968. Secondly, he evaluates the theoretical question of how this kind of reading and transvaluating of Nietzsche affects their own theory, most notably the claim of a subversive critique of Western power relations. He comes to the conclusion that postmodernist theories, in so far as they founded themselves on a watered-down Nietzscheanism, have generated a hyper-radical rhetoric while diluting the analytical foundations of a critique of class and gender domination. The perspective of Rehmann’s critique is therefore the exact opposite to the attack on postmodernism by right-wing ‘humanists’ à la Ferry/Renaut or Richard Wolin, who contend themselves to raging against a subversive deconstruction of

2. See Cusset 2003, p. 22.