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Review of On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology

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On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology.
By Michael Rosen. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.
Pp. xi+289. \$35.00.

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Michael Rosen brings intoxicating erudition and an elegant if elusive prose style to crack—or pulverize—one of the most venerable chestnuts of social theory, the theory of ideology. For Rosen, the two central elements of that theory are (1) that societies are self-maintaining systems and (2) that they produce false consciousness in their members precisely because it helps to maintain society. And for Rosen, the theory is, well, a spectacular mess. Despite the efforts of such analytical Marxists as G. A. Cohen, he urges, no such view can be reconstructed in ways that begin to comport with our ordinary standards for reasonable scientific explanation.

Much of the book is a sort of prehistory of ideology. I say *prehistory* advisedly: Rosen writes as though Whig history never got a bad name or at least never deserved one. Just as Leszek Kolakowski decided to return to Plotinus to unearth the seeds that sprouted in Marxist error, so

Rosen begins a dazzling tour through intellectual history with Plato and Augustine. No teleologist, Rosen does not credit Rousseau or Hume or Smith with a covert intention of laying the ground for Marx's views. But every time he examines an author, he is ruthlessly forward looking. He wants to know how he helped lay those grounds. A prissier historian might groan at the future-directed perspective, but my view is that for Rosen's purposes this is just fine. What is more, and better, he is a perceptive, even gifted, reader of canonical (and less canonical) texts. Instead of rounding up the usual suspects and producing peremptory citations from them, he digs in and does great work.

Less historically minded social theorists will want to skip straight to chapter 6, where Rosen credits Marx with five (largely incompatible) models of ideology. Rosen speaks of *models*, not theories, because he thinks in every case Marx has evocative but only sketchy gestures that omit crucial explanatory mechanisms; Marx fails to offer fully realized arguments. Along the way, Rosen urges that Cohen's account of functionalist explanation is too lax: the genius of evolutionary biology is to supply efficient causation to underlie functionalist stories, but social theory has no parallel account. (More generally one might note that facile gestures toward evolution in the social sciences—consider, e.g., the “evolution of norms”—remain irritating in the absence of any compelling account of selection and transmission mechanisms.) An ensuing chapter on the quasi-Kantian apparatus of critical theory, with its efforts to cast society as an agent imposing fundamental categories of perception on its members, is just as assiduously and appropriately skeptical.

Rosen is so desperately well read that sometimes the thread of his argument gets lost. (Call this the Berlin effect, after Sir Isaiah.) Or, put differently, sometimes he writes promissory notes himself instead of cashing them out with cogent arguments. Given his considerable analytic skills, this is a shame. I wonder, for instance, precisely what he has against what he calls the “rationalist tradition” of the West, with its emphasis on putting reason in charge of the self. Not that that view is unobjectionable: just that so put it is so invidiously abstract that it is hard to know what to say about it one way or the other. I wonder, too, precisely what he finds attractive in Walter Benjamin's exceedingly obscure account of the aura. Rosen begins to work up an explication, turning partly to prior continental aesthetics, but I cannot report that I had a clear grasp of the matter when he let it drop.

Finally, alas, the book ends with a whimper instead of a bang. Rosen notices some straightforward possibilities that retain some of the core insights people have wanted from the theory of ideology while junking the two premises he finds faulty. He canvasses coordination dilemmas and prisoners' dilemmas (I think he jumbles these two together a bit), wishful thinking, and more, so reminding us that there are plenty of other ways to see how people might come to accept forms of domination that are bad for them—quite so. But then one wonders just how many Marxists and others really do resolutely insist on society as a self-maintaining sys-

tem and on odd functionalist explanations. Rosen obviously believes there are lots of them out there. I do tend to think of social science as a living museum of curiosities better preserved in amber, but his target is a specimen I do not often encounter. Those who stumble across his specimen more often and those who wish to enjoy the company of a thoughtful and literate mind will enjoy this volume.