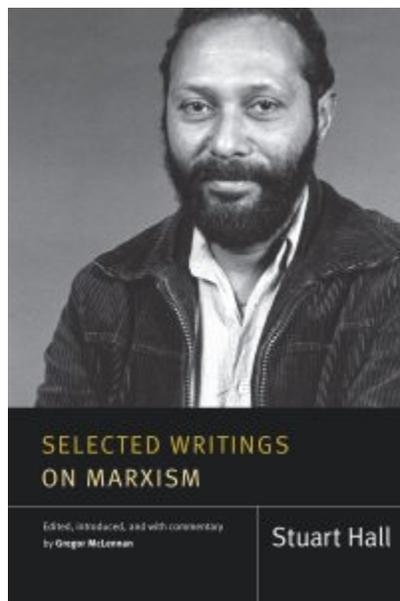


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'Selected Writings on Marxism' by Stuart Hall reviewed by Christian Lotz

Stuart Hall Selected Writings on Marxism

14-17 minutes



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About the reviewer

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This volume within the series *Selected Writings of Stuart Hall*,

which Duke University Press has published over the last years, is a much needed and welcoming addition to the already existing volumes that include editions on the popular arts, media, politics, race and difference, identity and diaspora, the foundations of cultural studies, as well as on Hall's auto-biography *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, in which Hall describes his life and 'diasporic self' as 'inserted into history' somewhere between the Caribbean and Great Britain. The published volumes present Hall as one of the most important and brilliant left intellectuals of the last 50 years, especially as his work comprises a broad range and mixture of general cultural and societal issues, compelling interventions into politics and extremely careful abstract theoretical reflections. In addition, the series reveals the intellectual unity and development of a fascinating writer and mind who, throughout his lifetime, stayed uncannily close to the intellectual heartbeats of his time, society and historical conjunctures. Undoubtedly, this was at least in part due both to his influential editorial work for *The New Left Review* and to his involvement in the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at the University of Birmingham. Hall's position *between* structuralist Marxism and cultural studies, which is the focus of this volume, makes him interesting (again) for our contemporary debates, since we can learn from Hall how to avoid the pitfalls of either doing too much Marxist theorizing or doing too much cultural interpretation. In the spirit of Kant's dictum that concepts without intuitions remain empty and intuitions without concepts remain blind, we might say that a critical theory of society without cultural studies remains empty, and cultural studies without a Marxist theory of society remains blind.

This edition contains twelve essays that were written between 1974 and 1996 and is divided into three parts. The first part contains four theoretical essays in which Hall develops the Marxian core of his thinking in two main respects: first, on the basis of Althusser, Gramsci and the Marx of the *Grundrisse*, Hall tries to further develop the problem of social knowledge and ideology in order to escape reductive Marxist economist positions. Already in this section it becomes clear that, following Althusser, Hall rejects the image of a society divided by base and superstructure and that instead, he conceives it as an articulated unity that includes base and superstructure. Second, this theoretical groundwork comes to its coherent conclusion in the third part of the volume in which, on the one hand, Hall tries to defend theory against reductive empiricisms and, on the other, introduces the concept of culture as a primary concept that can help overcome century long Marxist struggles with the base-superstructure image. This is achieved via a concept of culture that is used for both the substantive core of society as well as its epistemological self-reflection. The concept of culture, we might say, gives us access to both an ontology of capitalist society as well as its ideological self-knowledge. Between part one and three; i.e. between Hall's reflections on basic Marxian concepts and his reflections on culture, the reader finds essays on class, crime and liberalism in which Hall 'applies' his theory of ideology to the issues of his time (such as youth culture) and explains how to understand liberalism as an ideology that is both a mental framework and an articulation of economic structures. Overall, between the first essay of this edition, which offers a meticulous reading of the introduction of the *Grundrisse*, and the last essay entitled 'The Centrality of Culture', the main arch of Hall's thinking

emerges as a dense, intellectually challenging, theoretical move from structural Marxism towards a new (Marxist) cultural science that ultimately replaces the outdated and at times one-dimensional Marxism(s), particularly in regard to knowledge, discourse and ideology. As Hall finally argues in the 1990s, this means 'that the discursive or meaning dimension is one of the constitutive conditions for the operation of the economy' (332). In one of his helpful comments (which are placed after each section of the book), the editor of the volume suggests that in the late 1990s, Hall went through a transition from '*neo-Marxism* to *post-Marxism*' (344) that pushed him away 'from his previous bottom-line commitment to Marxist problem-formation' (349) towards discourse, Derridean post-structuralism and the concept of identity.

Mirroring an Althusserian approach presented in his *Reading Capital*, Hall turns *reading* into the central force of his thinking by developing it *through* an ethos of paying meticulous attention to details, which allows him to sharpen fizzy passages and glitches that the author was unable to control. In this way, writing becomes both thinking and reading. In an age in which many of us, buried, as we are, in multitasking and constant attention shifting, have lost the ability to meditate *patiently* on text, Hall's ethos of writing as reading reminds us of intellectual virtues that seem to be faint echoes of a lost past. Hall's writing, despite its complexities and despite its hermeneutic openness and curiosity towards the material, is both lucid and elegant. Even the very dense commentary on the introduction to Marx's *Grundrisse* is a joy to read.

The first part of the book is undoubtedly the core of the entire volume, insofar as Hall develops, in those essays, his concepts of

ideology and society.. Hall praises Marx for his 'historical epistemology' (41) within which history, observed through an Althusserian and Foucauldian lens, appears as a 'series of *breaks*' (44). Discontinuity, as Hall argues, is the way in which we learn to see continuity that, in turn, leads to 'Marx's final break with "history"' (45) in a Hegelian fashion, even though it remains, paradoxically, deeply 'anti-historicist' (46). The reading of the *Grundrisse* introduction opening the volume leads straight into the inner core of Hall's thinking, namely, his reworking of the concept of ideology as one that no longer falls into the traps of traditional Marxism(s). This takes place in two major moves: 1.) as Hall argues, superstructures have their own effectivity (71), and 2.) ideological components of social relations are 'articulated *into* a "unity"' (99) in complex ways (75), the consequence of which is that we need to operate (in theory) with the basic 'non-identity' of social elements as well as with a concept of society understood as a 'unity of the diverse' (80) that includes classes and class factions (76). The concept of articulation, then, is the key concept for approaching Hall's thinking, insofar as social unity is *established* as a unity only by maintaining *different* conditions of existence that do not coincide or simply overlap with each other, but, instead, coexist in their contradictions (122). 'The' economy finally disappears behind a theory of a complex social unity understood as articulated unity (or should we say 'meaning'?). This articulated unity is the theoretical springboard for Hall's later theory of society as a theory of culture.

Reading these essays, one wonders whether Hall's rejection of social reality, understood as that which is not *simply* meaning beneath the 'frame' of meaning, is also the main problem of his

overall thinking and transition towards post-Marxism, insofar as he seems to have embraced *too quickly* the post-structuralist 'mood' of his days, most particularly, Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance* and the turn towards language. Although Marx is very much concerned with the concepts of ideology, knowledge and representation, his main insight and thesis in the introduction of the *Grundrisse* that "capital is the all-dominating power in bourgeois society", a point regularly emphasized throughout the manuscript and one that gets sidelined in Hall's attempt to conceive of ideology and economy on one playing field. The consequence of this dismissal is that the concepts of discourse and culture themselves tend to become problematic because they are no longer self-critically reflected and traced back to their own field of emergence in late twentieth century global reality and its intellectual discourse. As the editor points out, it comes as no surprise that for Hall 'social reality is culturally *constituted*' (346). However, this thesis comes at a price, namely, the price of losing sight of the constitution of social reality by capital. Similarly, although the material existence of ideology in technologies and their reproduction through technologies is mentioned from time to time, this is never really developed. Here, Hall follows in the footsteps of Althusser, for whom thinking about the means of production and technologies was simply a form of bourgeois technocratic ideology. This lack of a *material* theory of representation is visible in the main definition of ideology that Hall offers in the essay 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees', within which he writes the following: by 'ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the system of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make

willingness [...] to be hailed by them' (324). As we can see, Hall comes very close to the post-Marxist diffusion not only of the concept of class into the concept of group but also of the concept of class *position* into class *identity*. The concept of identity, then, allows for a more appropriate coverage of a reality that is discursively constituted. In sum, '[n]ot that there is nothing but discourse, but [...] every social practice *has a discursive character*' (331).

It is refreshing to see how Hall's commitment to Marxian basic insights leads him to reject positions that think of theory as unnecessary and replaceable by historicism, empiricism or social science. As he underlines, insofar as praxis becomes intertwined with discourse and since praxis is mediated by concepts (277), interventions into (discursive) praxis without theory are impossible. This is most visible in Hall's rejection of E.P. Thompson's polemic attack on Althusser's overemphasis on science and concepts, which is offered in his essay 'Defense of Theory'. There, Hall rightly points out that without complex and, as such, abstract theorizing, we are in danger of losing the general framework for making sense of societal differences due to uneven development or 'conjunctures (for example, today)' (278). This position can be directly traced back to the first essay in the volume on Marx's method, given that in this essay Hall points out that the dialectical method reveals 'the inner connection between processes and relations in society, which form "a unity" of a distinct type' (29).

Overall, reading these essays is energizing and inspiring, especially in a world in which many contemporary self-declared 'activist academics' as well as Marxist inspired social sciences seem to observe a theory of society with distance and distrust.

Moreover, it is astonishing to see how Hall's move from Althusserian inspired theorizing to cultural studies finds echoes in the development of the Frankfurt School. However, despite similar motives and similar questions, there does not seem to be much intellectual exchange between these groups, most likely because Hall's point of departure hails from French philosophy, which espouses less emphasis not only on central philosophical concepts such as reason, rationality or utopia, but also on a normative critique of mass culture and popular entertainment in the light of truth-oriented aesthetics; in place of these emphases, more sensitivity and attention is given to race, interculturality, identity and class. In the light of the rediscovery of Hall, this relationship between British cultural studies and the Frankfurt School deserves our renewed attention.

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