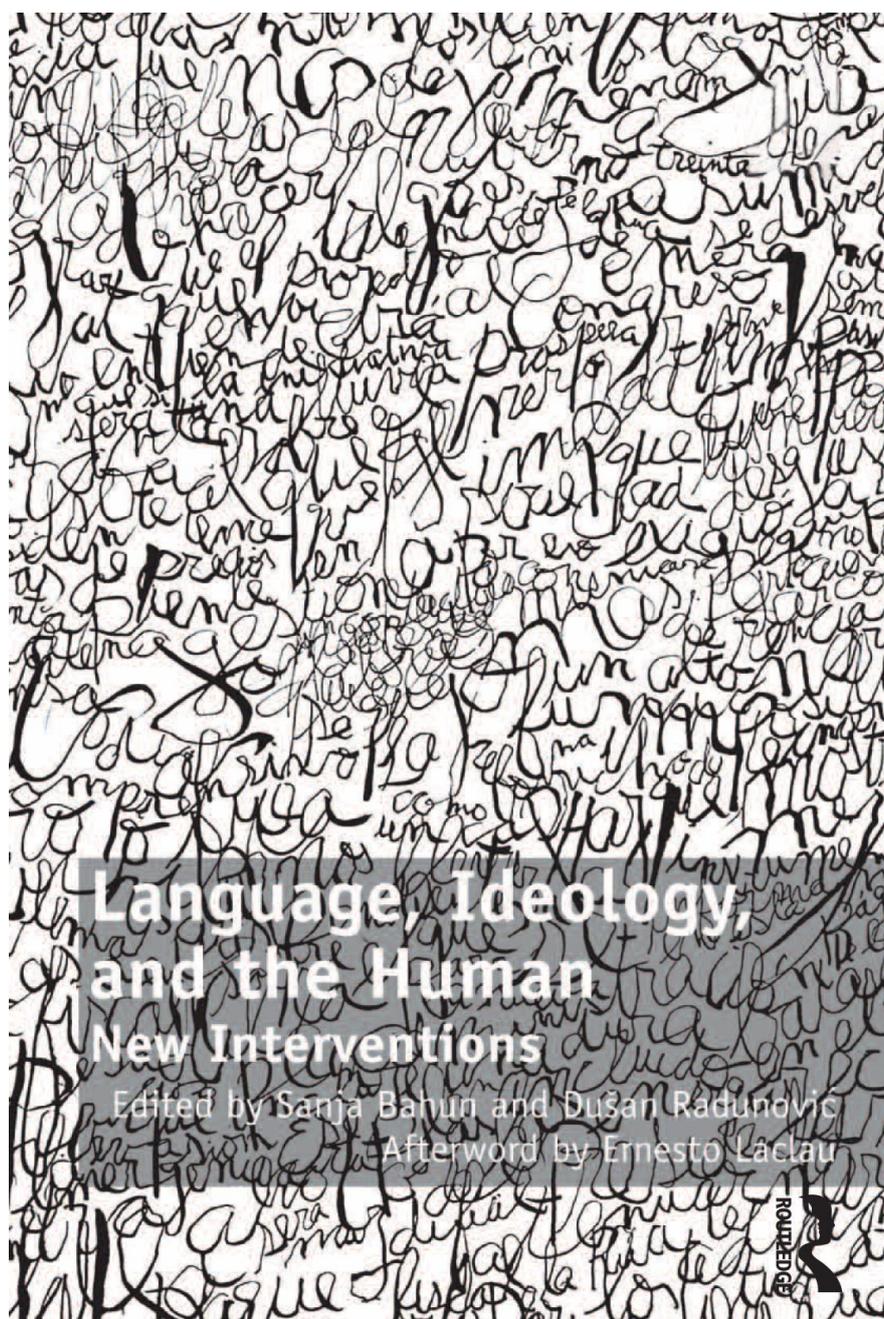


**BAHUN, Sanja; RADUNOVIC, Dusan (Eds.). *Language, Ideology, and the Human: New Interventions*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012. 250 p.**

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This collection of articles has some outstanding qualities, yet I found it difficult to review. I shall try to explain why. In their introduction (entitled “Introducing, Intervening, and Introspecting”), Sanja Bahun and Dusan Radunovic, the editors of the collection, state that the challenge they gave their invited contributors was to explore and navigate “the orifices” and “the interstices between language, ideology, and their human producer and re-negotiator” (p.1). The editors describe the diversity of approaches used by the contributors and then point out candidly that: “[...] the discussions comprising *Language, Ideology, and the Human* are markedly heterogeneous” (p.8). This description of the twelve chapters corresponds well to my impression, after a first reading. I had noted that the heterogeneous nature of the collection manifests itself both on the level of theories discussed and with regard to the objects of study chosen by the contributors. For example, Part I of the collection (Revisiting), which is primarily theoretical and philosophical in scope, contains six studies that engage, to varying degrees and in very interesting ways, with the ideas of Kierkegaard, Plato, Nietzsche, Saussure, Wittgenstein, Searle, Chomsky, Kant, Zelinskii, Derrida and Carl Schmitt. In Part II (In the World, Prospecting), there are five stimulating chapters in which the contributors carry out more concrete and specific analyses of a variety of phenomena that are located in different geographical/cultural locations: the teaching of the Portuguese language in East Timor, customary law in South Africa, the discursive turn and the body, cosmopolitanism in modern European societies, and the theme of forgiveness in a South Korean film and the thought of Arendt. Ernesto Laclau’s *Afterward* makes a compelling and provocative argument for the need to create a new way of thinking about ideology, language and the human.

In the second part of their introduction, Bahun and Radunovic explain in considerable detail the similarities in their authors’ approaches and methodologies: “All of these approaches imply [...] that there exists an intimate link between ideology and language, and, specifically, between an ideology within which an individual operates and his or her view of language” (p.3). The collection is underpinned by “a covert drive” – a desire to question “the viability of disciplinary boundaries” and to bring to light “problems with the model of scholarship based on disciplinary division” (p.9). The collection is also described in the following way by the editors: “This urge to address pluralism without promoting either irreconcilability or assimilation to a benign

collectivity emerges powerfully from the pages of this volume” (p.10). The question of “how and why we do scholarship” is another general topic that is present implicitly in all of the articles, again according to the editors. In addition to these broadly defined similarities that are said to characterize (covertly or implicitly) all of the articles in the collection, the editors identify some sub-themes that characterize some of the articles – for example: “The question whether truth remains the central value in meaningful utterances informs a range of chapters in this volume [...]” (p.11); “[...] both contributions [Jean-Claude Monod and Rey Chow] specifically address the question of subjectivity and the importance of its relational, and/or unstable contribution in the social sphere” (p.11).

The difficulty for me, as reviewer, comes when I try to understand the opposing claims made by the editors who state, on the one hand, that “the discussions” in this collection lack coherence, while, on the other hand, making the claim that the articles manifest several important commonalities. The editors, perhaps unwittingly, create a situation in which readers will be tempted, as I was, to ask what relative weight should be given to each option. After reading the volume carefully several times, my conclusion is that I see the volume as being made up of twelve articles with little in common. It is not that the editors are mistaken in mentioning some threads that run (implicitly or covertly) through some of the articles. Rather, my sense is that these threads are so general that they would apply to almost any collection of articles that purports to be interdisciplinary. In other words, not only did the editors’ argument for the coherence of the collection end up being somewhat of a distraction, but it also nudged me into noticing a few other inconsistencies and incoherencies which I will come back to, at the end of my review.

Several articles in this collection appear to me to be especially substantial and original. Leonardo F. Lisi’s article (The Politics of Madness: Kierkegaard’s Anthropology Revisited) presents lucidly Kierkegaard’s definition of “the human” (a synthesis of the infinite and the finite and of freedom and necessity) and shows how God functions ultimately as a radical alterity. This alterity both prevents ideological closure and makes it necessary to seek closure. What is productive in Kierkegaard’s thinking (that is, its “implications for politics”, p.24) is that the contradiction between thought and experience (that is, the basic conflict for humans) can result in a “failure to

grasp meaning” (p.34). The article closes with the cautiously optimistic suggestion that uncertainty, ambiguity, and failure can “spell the end of politics or its re-imagination in a new form” (p.36). Craig Brandists’s impressive article (Rhetoric, Agitation and Propaganda: Reflections on the Discourse of Democracy (with some Lessons from Early Soviet Russia)) focuses on how propaganda worked during the crisis of democracy in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, when the Party discourse became a monologic (i.e., ideological) discourse par excellence. Aurora Donzelli’s well-crafted article (The Fetish of Verbal Inflection: Lusophonic Fantasies and Ideologies of Linguistic and Racial Purity in Postcolonial East Timor) demonstrates concretely how the transmission of an abstract system of grammatical rules can simultaneously be an instrument of assimilation and the marker of racial and social distinction (p.151). The context is East Timor when the Portuguese language was being taught in the classroom. Galin Tihanov (Cosmopolitanism: Legitimation, Opposition and Domains of Articulation), while exploring the distinction between legality and legitimacy, quotes Schmitt: “Through blind reliance on legality, Schmitt’s argument goes, society ‘disables itself from recognizing the tyrant who comes to power by legal means’” [...] (p.194). Tihanov suggests that: “legitimacy has to be understood as something deferred, as something that can be agreed to prospectively” (p.196). Tihanov’s article is thought provoking and potentially very useful in helping us to understand how some present-day authoritarian discourses function.

The four articles just mentioned, in addition to their important contributions to scholarship on specific topics, are the very ones that resonate in surprising ways with certain political debates in 2017 and, therefore, have “implications for politics” – to use Lisi’s expression that I quoted in the previous paragraph. In fact, I am tempted to assert that the main value of this collection is that it allows us to engage critically with important questions in the contemporary political arena. I am thinking specifically about the intense political debates concerning the recent decision in the United Kingdom to leave the European Union and the debates on democracy, free speech, and press that are currently taking place, especially in the United States, but also in France and in other European countries. In these contexts, it is particularly depressing to observe the populist and anti-democratic discourses coming from right-wing individuals and political parties. Several articles in this collection have the potential to assist in

deconstructing statements such as the following ones, currently on offer from the White House: “The press is the enemy of the people”; “The fake news does not tell the truth”; “The dishonest media make up one fake story after another”; “We are not going to let the fake news tell us what to do, how to live or what to believe. We are free and independent people, and we will make our own choices.” These utterances are, of course, the kind of ideological discourses that Brandist, Donzelli, Gorman, Parsons, and Laclau mention in their articles. As Lalcau puts it, it is by means of such discourses that “the hegemonic class is able to transform its own particular aims into those of society as a whole” (p.245). In order to understand and counter them, they first need to be understood within the institutional context in which they are produced. It is not helpful to see them solely as the product of a psychotic or chaotic mind.

In the last chapter of *Language, Ideology, and the Human: New Interventions* (Afterword: Language, Discourse, and Rhetoric), Ernest Laclau shows why it is important to have a clear understanding of how “the imbrication between language and human reality is rather more intimate than the notion of language as a regional category suggests” (p.237). Laclau concludes his argument by suggesting two possible directions that we might take in our efforts to deconstruct the kinds of rhetoric like the one that is being produced by the Trump administration. First, it is necessary to understand how signification works: “If objectivity had an ultimate, perspicuous ground, it would be unambiguous: the sign would be a mere representative of something preceding it. [...] (A particular signifier) signifies a totality which makes possible signification, but a totality which is an impossible object. So signification is possible only by signifying its own impossibility” (p.245). When Trump states that: “The leaks are real but the media stories are fake”, he makes a kind of slip that introduces the real as a third (disruptive) term, thus subverting the binary “logic” (true/fake) that informs his other claims (e.g., “The fake news does not tell the truth”). An understanding of how signification works needs, therefore, to be augmented with a call to psychoanalysis. This is what Laclau is proposing when he writes: “Well, we are at the epicenter of an intellectual transformation whose two basic starting points are Saussure’s notion of *langue* and Freud’s discovery of the unconscious” (p.242).

I think I would be remiss if I did not make some critical comments on the ways in which this collection was edited. Most of the chapters appear to have been prepared

and edited according to contemporary scholarly conventions (that is, they are written in a fairly standard/uniform style and they are accompanied by appropriate footnotes and by full and detailed bibliographies), whereas other chapters are characterized by an oral style that suggests they were originally given as conference papers. Some chapters (especially those by Brandist and Tihanov) are admirable because of their “pedagogical” style (by this I mean that care is taken to present a coherent argument and that the basic critical terms used in the arguments are explained and contextualized). Such articles are more easily accessible to an audience of senior undergraduate students and graduate students or to those readers who may not be well grounded in current critical theory debates.

It is clear that the editors made an effort to choose a title for the collection that would accomplish two objectives: create an impression of overall unity for the volume and indicate as accurately as possible its principal themes. A careful examination of the content and arguments of the articles reveals, however, that only four articles (Leonardi F. Lisi, Elizabeth Parsons, Aurora Donzelli, Ernest Laclau) focus in an explicit and substantial way on the three topics mentioned in the title – language, ideology, and the human. Two articles (David Gorman, Craig Brandist) treat the subjects of language and ideology. Two articles (Monina Wittfoth, Galin Tihanov) deal primarily with language. Two articles (Jason Glynos, Rey Chow) focus on language and the human. Two articles (Jean-Claude Monod, Drucilla Cornell) deal with the human but do not engage with questions of ideology or language – at least not explicitly. In other words, there is somewhat of a disconnection between the title of the volume and the focus of some of the articles. A better title might perhaps be: *Language, Rhetoric, and Subjectivity*.

It is distracting to see a large number of typographical errors, especially in the introduction. I provide here only a selection of typical errors (my corrections appear in italics): “In early 2000, *merely* thirty days” (p.1); “not only *the* objectivist view of language” (p.2); “and *the* pre-Socratics” (p.3); “such *an* open definition” (p.3); “informed by *the* belief” (p.4); “revisits precisely (delete “to”) this point” (p.5); “naturally *coexist* with us” (p.7); “frame *through* which” (p.54); “bureaucracy *were* imposed” (p.89); “Schmitt draws *a* distinction” (p.106); “the decision *to choose* as the” (p.138). There are also several awkward sentences in the volume, such as the following ones: “And it still endures in the declarations, in the political literature of *fraternité*, in

the manifestos of French republicanism, and the similar.” (p.105); “It might be that I have the impression, just now, at the time when the markets dictate even the decisions who should be political governors (in Italy or Greece, for instance), that Schmitt’s fear that the liberal “depolitization” in favour of the economic forces would culminate in a “liberalism” which can do without “democracy” has received a new and terrible actuality [...]” (p.111).

All of the articles in this collection are certainly worth reading. Many of them are well argued, substantial, and original. And, as I have tried to indicate, the ideas expressed by some contributors could assist in carrying out the important work of engaging with and deconstructing the essentializing/ideological discourses currently being produced in the public sphere. However, in my view, the collection, as a whole, does not fully live up to the claims made by the editors regarding its overall coherence or its going beyond current theories on the question of the “intimate link” between language and ideology.

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