

A Materialist Social Theory of the Idea

Erwin James Casareno

Series in Sociology



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Dedications

For Hegel. This is my reply.

Thank you for your encouragement, Prof. David Long

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Preface

This book began with a question: how do ideas shape the world? That question first took hold of me during my undergraduate studies in International Studies at York University. It emerged when I encountered the Idealist–Materialist debate in Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*, whose title structure influenced my own. I found myself aligning with the Idealist tradition, specifically with Hegel’s insistence that thought is real and consequential. I did not yet have a theory. But I had an intuition that ideas were not immaterial shadows or cultural epiphenomena. Over the course of a two-decade inquiry, that intuition ultimately led me to a biological answer, a destination I had not anticipated when the journey began. Perhaps I could be forgiven, considering my social science origins. Grounding the social in biology was not obvious to me then. It is clear to me now that human social phenomena are both similar to and different from organized animal societies such as ants. In both cases, patterns of behavior emerge from biology. The relevant difference is that the behavior-generating, or social-coordinating, organ is more advanced in humans.

Nevertheless, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, particularly in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of History*, was the original inspiration for this book, which is why I dedicate this book to him. Hegel inspired me to personally undertake a generation-spanning one-man research program to borrow a term from Lakatos. I would like to declare that I received no funding for this research. That would have been nice! Anyway, dedicating a work to a philosopher who died nearly two centuries ago may seem an odd choice, but I conceive this project as a response in the same spirit that Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia once engaged René Descartes: a reply across time. It may therefore come as no surprise that I once considered myself an Idealist. Hegel’s insistence that thought participates in the movement of history first compelled me to take the problem of ideas seriously. I was determined to pursue it. Yet over time, my own investigations carried these reflections into new terrain, beyond the conceptual architecture from which they began.

That inquiry remained with me during my graduate studies at Carleton University’s Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. I specialized in International Economic Policy, where I studied international trade, global finance, exchange rate regimes, and the behavior of multinational firms in a

globalized economy. But alongside that formal training, I remained preoccupied with the broader question that had taken root years earlier: how do ideas shape the world? Not economic models or financial systems, but ideas themselves: what they are, how they move, how they become authoritative, and how they come to organize social behavior. These were not academic requirements. I wasn't pursuing a thesis on ideation, nor was I working under supervision to develop a theory. But the inquiry persisted. Quietly, in parallel, it continued.

By this time, I had already been researching and theorizing the subject informally for years. I wasn't trying to become a sociologist in title, and I wasn't embedded in any sociology department. But I was deeply engaged in sociological questions, especially those that concern how thought becomes structure, how the internal becomes external, and how ideational content finds material expression.

Then came a rupture. During my PhD studies, I experienced my first psychotic episode and was subsequently diagnosed with schizophrenia in 2016. It ended my formal academic path. I did not complete my doctorate. I became a PhD dropout. But I did not stop thinking. I did not stop theorizing. My research, philosophizing, and theorizing of the idea continued. My life moved on. I spent time in recovery and pursued another career path. Yet, the project did not dissolve. There was no moving on from the project.

Later, in 2024, I experienced my second psychotic episode. In the aftermath, during the long process of recovery, I finally found the time to write this book. What had been a nearly twenty-year inquiry was brought together, not in an academic dissertation, but in this work: a theoretical synthesis, a sociological framework, and a philosophical intervention. The project draws on sociology, philosophy, political theory, and economics, integrating these disciplines into a unified analytical whole. One reader suggested that I had constructed a grand unified theory of the social sciences. If that is how the book is received, it was not my conscious intention. Perhaps it is or could be. Once knowledge is released, its use is no longer for the inventor to decide. The scope of the work emerged from the demands of the inquiry itself. Once the problem of ideation was pursued from neural instantiation through social and material organization, its implications necessarily extended across multiple domains. The ambition of the book is therefore a consequence of the project itself, not a personal attempt at grandiosity. I would have preferred to write a shorter book.

I want to be transparent about what this book is and what it is not. This book is primarily a work of theoretical sociology. It offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how ideas emerge, circulate, materialize, and reproduce within society. It advances a theory of ideational generation, transmission, and terraformation, grounded in the brain but attentive to the structural, social, and historical consequences of thought. It is not a work of empirical sociology in the strict academic sense. It does not present original datasets or statistical testing. It is, rather, a systematic theoretical treatise.

I write with awareness of intellectual history and the philosophy of science, and with recognition that criticism is part of the scholarly process. I accept this. I understand that serious work is subject to trial by fire. What worries me is not disagreement, but indifference. Your consideration alone is what I seek.

The case studies included in this book are not intended as definitive empirical proof. They are illustrative, designed to show how the theory might be applied, not to meet the standards of rigorous sociological fieldwork or data collection. At this stage in my life, I lack the institutional access, resources, and methodological tools to conduct that kind of empirical validation. I have no institutional affiliation. I write from outside the academy. Yet, I hope the work is worthy of inclusion within it. What I can offer is a coherent, integrative theoretical framework, refined over two decades of independent inquiry.

There are many conceptual moves. The primary one, however, is straightforward. Classical Idealist ontology is replaced with neuroscience. That substitution is then formalized as a recursive feedback loop between brain and external reality, from which social phenomena are subsequently derived. To situate the framework in the present, I apply it to a range of contemporary culture-war controversies for illustrative purposes. The book also includes a chapter on economic value. While there are subsidiary lines of inquiry throughout, each remains analytically connected to the central argument.

The citations in this book are primarily continental and are used as conceptual anchoring. They serve to situate the historical problem of ideas, not to bind the analysis to any particular tradition. This approach grants greater theoretical maneuverability in the articulation of the project.

Furthermore, I did not write this book merely out of intellectual interest. I wrote it because of what was happening in the world. In fact, I anticipated nearly twenty years ago that we would arrive at this moment. I knew then that this project might be of use. I hope it is. To the best of my knowledge, no one asked for this project. Nevertheless, it was undertaken out of the belief that it

would be needed. We live in a time of intensifying conflict, not only between nations, but between worldviews, symbols, values, and truths. This is not just a political struggle. It is an ideational one. And to understand it, we must understand how ideas function, not as disembodied doctrines, but as material forces that shape cognition, identity, behavior, and institutional order.

This book is my personal contribution to that understanding. It offers a lens—a framework—for thinking about the role of ideas in history, in peace, in conflict, and in transformation. It is my hope that it will help the reader see more clearly what is at stake, what is possible, and what is already unfolding in the ideational terrain beneath our feet. Should this treatise prove useful, I can only hope it will be applied in ways that contribute constructively rather than destructively. It has been a labor of love for humanity's sake.

I am also indebted to Vernon Press, which, to my surprise, judged my book worthy of publication. Their willingness to support an independent theorist writing outside institutional structures made this book possible. I am grateful as well for the encouragement of Prof. David Long from Carleton University, who encouraged me to write my book. He was my professor during my master's degree and during my time as a PhD student at Carleton University. It has been nearly a decade since I last saw him in person, but he continues to reply to my emails. Finally, let me assure the peer reviewers that I took nothing personally, especially Reviewer 2. At no time did I develop ill will. Your feedback was received with nothing but appreciation and amusement. You certainly lived up to your reputation. I sincerely thank both of you for the baptism. My only regret is that I could not incorporate the literature recommended by Reviewer 2.

Should the book contain errors, all errors are my own. I can always blame it on my schizophrenia. Now, reader, let me tell you what I think the Idealist philosophers have been circling for 2,450 years.

—Erwin James Casareno

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Thank you for participating in the creation of *A Materialist Social Theory of the Idea*.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Material Basis of the Idea

This book begins from a foundational claim: every idea, whether abstract, complex, or simple, is a product of brain activity. Processes often regarded as purely mental—thinking, imagining, theorizing, remembering—are grounded in material biological events within the nervous system. In contrast to substance dualism, Platonic and Neoplatonic idealism, strands of German Idealism and phenomenology, and certain forms of theological or spiritual metaphysics that situate ideas in non-material or transcendental domains, neuromaterialism—the theoretical framework advanced in this book—defines ideas as materially instantiated neural phenomena. An idea, on this account, is a pattern of neural activation: a physical configuration produced by the biological mechanisms of the brain. This ontological commitment structures the analysis that follows, as the book formally develops neuromaterialism as a unified theoretical framework and traces its implications across neural, social, institutional, and material domains; the present introduction provides a concise overview of that framework while clarifying its scope and original contributions.

To assert that an idea is fundamentally a brain activity is to firmly anchor all cognitive phenomena within the realm of material reality. This material grounding carries profound implications: ideas, as physical events, operate according to causal laws. They arise from complex brain processes, are communicated and transmitted through language, gesture, and other expressive behaviors, and are continually shaped by the interplay of prior neural states and external environmental influences. Once externalized, these ideas extend beyond individual minds and terraform behavior, social relationships, institutions, and the material environment itself. From this vantage point, ideas cease to be intangible abstractions; they emerge as material phenomena with tangible, observable consequences in the world. This perspective resonates strongly with contemporary findings across neuroscience, sociocultural psychology, and the field of embodied cognition, all of which emphasize that

cognition is not confined within the brain alone but arises from the dynamic, ongoing interaction between body, brain, and environment.¹

To fully grasp this neuromaterialist framework, one must fundamentally reconceive the brain, not as a static container where ideas are stored like inert objects, but as a highly dynamic system in which ideas are instantiated through complex patterns of neural activity. An idea does not simply “reside” passively within the brain; instead, it is continually enacted, rekindled, and reconstituted through synchronized neural processes that interact incessantly with sensory inputs, memories, and environmental affordances.² From this perspective, the brain is far from being a passive repository; it functions as an active constructor and processor of ideational material. Ideas are not preserved like files locked away in a cabinet; rather, they are dynamically reassembled each time they are recalled, rendering them inherently malleable, subject to modulation, reinterpretation, and transformation as time passes.

Material reality undeniably exists, not as a metaphysical assumption, but as a conclusion that arises directly from the workings of the brain itself. When Descartes famously asserted *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”),³ he established proof of the thinking self; however, he overlooked a crucial implication: the very act of thinking presupposes a functioning, material brain. The activity of the brain serves not only as evidence of selfhood but also as a fundamental proof of material reality. Thought is never an isolated phenomenon; it arises from the physical substrate of the nervous system. From this perspective, *cogito ergo sum* can be reinterpreted not as an argument for mind-body dualism, but as a demonstration of matter’s primacy. The Cartesian division between mind and body is therefore fundamentally flawed. Neuromaterialism decisively rejects this dualism and instead embraces materialist monism, the philosophical position that consciousness is an emergent property of physical systems.⁴

¹ Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 8–13; Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 15–20.

² Walter J. Freeman, *How Brains Make Up Their Minds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 42–47.

³ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17; René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), Part IV.

⁴ Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*

Within the neuromaterialist framework, Descartes' fundamental error was not in recognizing that thought confirms existence, but rather in mislocating the ontological foundation of thought itself. Thought does not dwell in a separate, immaterial realm; instead, it emerges from physical processes within the brain. When networks of neurons activate, consciousness arises as an emergent phenomenon, much like how a lightning storm produces light through complex, dynamic interactions of matter and energy. There is no "ghost in the machine,"⁵ only the machine itself: a biological system energized by biochemical currents, naturally generating the experience of thought as an intrinsic product of its operation.

In the neuromaterialist view, the idea operates as a material unit driving social transformation. Although it originates as a neural event within the confines of an individual brain, its influence quickly extends far beyond those physical boundaries. Once externalized—whether through spoken word, written text, or observable behavior—the idea enters the social realm, where it becomes subject to interpretation, evaluation, contestation, or acceptance by other minds. When sufficiently embraced across a population, an idea can become institutionalized, embedding itself within laws, norms, and cultural practices. This process encapsulates a core mechanism: neural activity generates language; language shapes culture; and culture gradually crystallizes into enduring social structures. This progression echoes Émile Durkheim's insights into the social construction of ideas and resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of how symbolic forms are embedded and reproduced within institutional life.⁶

This transformation—from a neural event within the brain to a force embedded in institutions—is not a straightforward, linear process but a recursive one. Once externalized into the world, an idea reshapes the social and material environment that, in turn, conditions future neural activity and ideation. In this manner, the idea does more than simply enter the world; it fundamentally alters the very conditions that enable new ideas to arise. The structures formed through this process act as fertile ground from which subsequent thought and innovation emerge.

(New York: Basic Books, 2009), 1–10.

⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 17.

⁶ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 231–234; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164–168.

Ideation unfolds across neurological and sociological levels. It may begin as neural activation, appear as behavior, reorganize social relations, or crystallize into institutional form. In each case, the idea remains matter in motion. Even communication—commonly romanticized as a mere meeting of minds—is, at its core, a physical phenomenon: the vibrations of air, the coordinated movements of the mouth and vocal cords, muscle contractions that transform into speech or text. Meaning, then, is not some immaterial essence; rather, it is matter intentionally organized and arranged to be received and understood.

This recursive feedback loop serves as the fundamental engine driving historical transformation. It illuminates the process by which ideas actively reshape the material world, and conversely, how changes in the world feedback to reshape human cognition and consciousness. The mind acts on the external reality, and the external reality acts on the mind. This dynamic bears a clear resemblance to the theory of structuration, which posits that social structures are simultaneously the medium and outcome of human agency.⁷ However, the neuromaterialist perspective deepens this understanding by rooting agency firmly within its biological substrate: the brain. By specifying the neural mechanisms underpinning agency, this framework offers a more concrete and scientifically grounded account of social transformation.

The significance of this recursive loop cannot be overstated. It is within this dynamic interplay that power exerts itself, ideology circulates widely, and competing realities are continuously contested. This loop forms the crucible in which new social systems emerge, old orders disintegrate, and revolutions take root, not as sudden metaphysical ruptures, but as profound transformations within the neural and social infrastructures that govern thought and behavior.

Ideas can be wielded as instruments of control precisely because most individuals lack formal training in critical thinking. When the social or cultural environment shifts, the majority tend to adopt the dominant prevailing views without question. This phenomenon is not merely a psychological inclination; it is fundamentally structural. Environments shape the mind by determining which ideas are made visible, which are rewarded or incentivized, and which are marginalized or suppressed. Consequently, the transmission and circulation of ideas become central sites of power. To control the flow and accessibility of ideas is effectively to control the behavior and consciousness of

⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 24–28.

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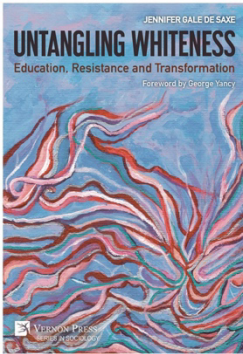
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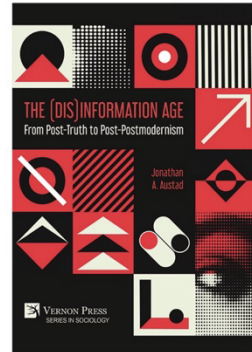
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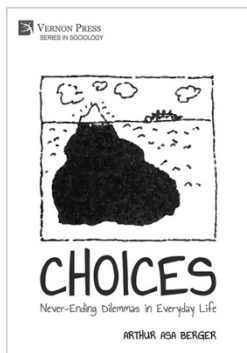
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