



Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

Louis Althusser

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Louis Althusser's renowned short text 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' radically transformed the concept of the subject, the understanding of the state and even the very frameworks of cultural, political and literary theory. The text has influenced thinkers such as Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek.

The piece is, in fact, an extract from a much longer book, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, until now unavailable in English. Its publication makes possible a reappraisal of seminal Althusserian texts already available in English, their place in Althusser's oeuvre and the relevance of his ideas for contemporary theory. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* develops Althusser's conception of historical materialism, outlining the conditions of reproduction in capitalist society and the revolutionary struggle for its overthrow.

Written in the afterglow of May 1968, the text addresses a question that continues to haunt us today: in a society that proclaims its attachment to the ideals of liberty and equality, why do we witness the ever-renewed reproduction of relations of domination? Both a conceptually innovative text and a key theoretical tool for activists, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is an essential addition to the corpus of the twentieth-century Left.

Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses Details

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From Reader Review Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses for online ebook

Danni says

Interesting read; creates a tautology.

Jack Waters says

Some of my favorite passages:

“Althusser here explains, in systematic fashion, his conception of historical materialism, the conditions for the reproduction of capitalist society, and the revolutionary struggle that seeks to put an end to it. His propositions about ideology and the ‘apparatuses’, put back in the overall framework of his project and the context of his political thought, reveal their object and presuppositions.”

“It confronts us with a question that is today less than ever possible to dismiss as obsolete: under what conditions, in a society that proclaims its devotion to the ideals of freedom and equality, is the domination of some people over others endlessly reproduced?”

“it calls for a reading at several levels: it is a political text that bears witness to its period; an introduction to the Althusserian categories for the analysis of capitalism; and a (novel) theory of the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ and ideological ‘interpellation’.

“founded on the idea of a march towards socialism by way of a gradual, legal process of public appropriation of the major means of production.”

“the first chapter introduces Althusser’s thesis about philosophy as a form that presupposes social conflict and scientific work, and about the history of philosophy as a sequence of conjunctures in which novelty arises at the conjunction of decisive ‘political-economic and scientific’ ‘events.’

“Every ‘social formation’ is characterized by a ‘dominant mode of production.’” “In the model as a whole, the base, not the superstructure (Law, State, Ideologies), is ‘determinant in the last instance.’”

“it tends to show the constant conditions in which variation occurs, and eventually puts an end to those constant conditions.”

“single theory, but a theory with double entries: reproduction and revolution.”

“power is exercised by the dominant class. The struggle of the dominated class has, to be sure, an impact on society. Only the dominant class, however, exercises ‘power.’ Power = the ‘excess’ of this class’s force over that of the dominated class: ‘class domination does indeed find itself sanctioned in and by the state, in that only the Force of the dominant class enters into it and is recognized there. What is more, this Force is the sole “motor” of the state, the only energy to be transformed into power, right, laws and norms in the state.’ Law, far from countering domination, is simply a moment of domination.”

Revolution consists of a practical, common 'appropriation' by freely associated men and women.

"interpretations of society as penetrated or saturated by class relations and subject to a class power that is exercised through the whole set of institutions."

"civil society also provides the terrain on which the progressive struggle of ascendant class, the proletariat, is played out, and, therefore, the terrain on which is played out the revolutionary process itself." "ensemble of institutions as elements of the state machinery thanks to which the bourgeoisie secures its domination."

"a war for the subjection of one class to another, by way of a mobilization of commodity relations and law, which 'sanctions' these relations."

"ideology does not have 'an ideal, idea-dependent, or spiritual existence, but a material one', for 'an ideology always exists in an apparatus' and Ideological State Apparatuses are the site of a 'realization' of ideology." "every ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" [concrete individuals as] subjects."

interpellation of "the free" is actually the opposite: "a lure, an injunction to conform to the social order based on commodity exchange, to the legal forms that rule it, the representations that justify it, and the practices that they call for."

"imperative to show clearly what sort of system ensures the reproduction of the conditions of capitalist production - production being nothing but a means to the end of capitalist exploitation, since, under the capitalist regime, the production of consumer goods obeys the law of profit alone, and thus the law of exploitation."

"the time is ripe because we need to take stock of things and are capable of taking stock of things." failures at a certain point teach more than a victory, said Lenin, "since its consequences force us to go to the bottom of things."

"Let there be no mistake: we need only become aware of the unprecedented crisis into which imperialism, beleaguered by its contradictions and its victims and assailed by the people, has now plunged, in order to conclude that it will not survive it."

"someone who, confronted with a painful occurrence, 'takes things philosophically' is someone who takes a step back, gets the better of her immediate reaction, and conducts herself in a rational way: she understands the event affecting her and acknowledges its necessity."

"it is not a good method to chop things in half and keep only what suits us. We have to take every aspect of the popular conception of philosophy into account."

"the philosopher 'circulates' in a 'world different' from that of spontaneous popular consciousness."

Every concrete social formation is based on a dominant mode of production. The immediate implication is that, in every social formation, there exists more than one mode of production: at least two and often many more.

In the base, which, in the last instance, determines everything that happens in the superstructure -- in the base, that is, in the unity productive forces/relations of production -- the relations of production are

determinant, on the basis of the existing productive forces and within the material limits they set.

A mode of production is, as its name indicates, a way or manner (a mode) of producing. Of producing what? The material goods indispensable to the material existence of the men, women and children living in a given social formation.

A way of tackling nature in order to obtain goods is not a state of mind, a behavioral style, or a mood. It is a set of labour processes that together form a system constituting the production process of a particular mode of production.

Technical level of agents of a labor process is always determined by the nature of the instruments of labor and, more generally, by the existing means of production.

Some argue: "We have understood what a mode of production is: productive forces set in motion in certain labour processes by agents with special skills."

From the foregoing, a good many 'experts' will conclude: 1) that Marx invented nothing new, since all this is blindingly obvious (w/o) suspecting that it has only been blindingly obvious since Marx); and, above all, 2) that we have to do, in all this, with nothing more than technology pure and simple: material technology (tools, machines), technical training of the workforce, and technical organization of the labour process. The experts will feel reassured, and their 'spontaneous' tendency, which is technicist or technocratic, will be reinforced.

In fact, we must squarely rebut them. The productive forces do not suffice to account for a mode of production, since they are just one of its elements. The other is represented by the relations of production.

Marx effectively shows in Capital that the mobilization of the productive forces (means of production + labour-power) is incomprehensible unless we understand that it takes place under the aegis of definite relations of production, which play the determinant role in the unity productive forces/relations of production.

Amirsaman says

הכלכלה היא לא רק תוצר של יצרניות אלא גם תוצר של יצרניות (תוצר ו יצרניות) היא תוצר של יצרניות. זה לא הכלכלה היא לא רק תוצר של יצרניות אלא גם תוצר של יצרניות (תוצר ו יצרניות) היא תוצר של יצרניות. הכלכלה היא לא רק תוצר של יצרניות אלא גם תוצר של יצרניות (תוצר ו יצרניות) היא תוצר של יצרניות.

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Elias Vasilis Kontaxakis says

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.

Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, by Louis Althusser, is my first foray into Marxism and I gotta say I enjoyed myself. I don't pretend to be an expert on economic systems, nor can I claim that socialism is superior or inferior to other systems. But what I like is how complete Marxism seems as a world view; almost all of human culture and civilization can be viewed under its lens. Louis Althusser, an important Marxist of the last century, wrote this work to define and describe what he called 'Ideological State Apparatuses', or ISA. These are distinct from traditional State Apparatuses, such as government, the police, and the army, which he redefined as Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA). The difference being that where RSAs rule through violence, ISAs rule through ideology. The institutions of the latter are church, school, family, science, law, and most surprisingly for me: art. Let's run through the argument.

If a society can exist because of its economy, or 'modes of production', then it needs to reproduce those modes to continue to survive. To accomplish this the State constructs apparatuses to perpetuate the modes of production irrespective of who's in charge. The eternal thing is the State; humans come and go. (An example is the concept of wages: workers receive currency for their work so they may eat and reproduce more workers.) The created apparatuses can be divided into two camps: infrastructure and superstructure, where the former is the operating economy (ex. capitalism) and the latter are the ISAs and RSAs. Both of these systems are the source of State Power. Now the reason State superstructure needs both an RSA and ISA is because the State cannot rule on force or ideology alone—both are needed (and preferably married). RSAs are part of the public sphere (falsely perceived to be 'accountable') and the ISAs are part of the private one (falsely perceived to be 'autonomous'). While it's true ISAs can challenge RSAs, they for the most part are in alliance, as the ISA receives support and shielding from the RSA while the RSA receives legitimization from the ISA. It's worth noting that while the Church was classically the most powerful ISA, today it is Acadamia.

In short, Ideological State Institutions manufacture and institutionalize ideologies necessary for the State to operate. Scary stuff. Thus Althusser argues that ideology is both imaginary and unconscious: it does not reflect reality and is not actively chosen by us. This is the key point, as ideology is traditionally portrayed as a world-view that people actively choose themselves. But instead what's happening is that people, who are forced to labor in alienated conditions, accommodate their surroundings with ideological justification (ex. individualism in a capitalism society, honor is a warrior society, etc.). In turn the ISA's take hold and propound these ideologies so the gears can keep turning. Now, when Althusser called ideologies imaginary he meant that they do not accurately reflect a person's relationship with their environment. We see ourselves as autonomous and empowered individuals, when they are in fact oppressed subjects. Ironically, he also argues that ideology is fundamentally material, in that it manifests in rituals/custom/routine/everyday action. So we don't just think these fictions, we give them substance by playing them out. This is a self-reinforcing system that is difficult to break and harder to perceive.

One effect produced by all these is the transformation of all individuals into State subjects. But because we are born into this system at (and in many ways before) birth, all individuals are always-already subjects.

Althusser even claims that those in charge are subjects to the same State Apparatuses, which make them 'The Subject,' to which the rest of us are subject. It gets even crazier when we apply these terms to other power dynamics: for example, in Christian religion all Christians are subjects to God, who is (in this system) the Subject. Suggesting God is ultimately subordinate to the theological apparatus he created. You may ask why anyone would join this system, even unconsciously, but the important thing is that the State Apparatus allows people to self-dictate within the system. In other words, it's a structure that people can 'work by themselves' (hence it is self-reproducing). The illusion of freedom combined with stability is tempting enough, even when it entails class oppression.

Of course the classic Marxist conclusion to all this is that the proletariat must overthrow these systems: both State power and the State Apparatuses. At this point, though Althusser only briefly and mechanically prescribed this antidote, I smelled a hint of fear in his writing. He mentions how Lenin, when leading his revolution, could dismantle both the State power and RSAs, but tormented over the ISAs, which are ingrained in both the culture and people's psyches. It's because society doesn't exist merely in institutions, but in people's history, in their imaginations, and in their hearts. Old roots run deep. Anyways, while all this was interesting enough, the ramification in art is what interests me most. How art has embedded in it cultural axioms that I should be aware of, both as clichés, but also as potentially oppressive elements. Sexism, racism, class insensitivity; you know the drill. Not completely unknown to me, but seeing it here in this Marxist framework was important. I shall do my part to overthrow the capitalist oppressors, one book review at a time.

xDEAD ENDx says

This is really great in what it says about ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (in contrast to Repressive State Apparatuses). There's a lot that precedes and works in tandem with Foucault's thought, which obviously goes beyond in talking about apparatuses as productive forces.

The biggest barrier to this being great (and I'm being generous with 4 stars) is Althusser's ridiculous Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and exceptionalism. As obvious as it is that when you start reading and writing and thinking like a Marxist, all the processes of thinking become Marxist in structure. Althusser is straightforward in admitting that Marxism is an ideology, but quickly falls back on it being a *different kind* of ideology that (somehow!) cannot exist as a state apparatus, a gross distortion of history if I've ever seen one! Anyways, this would be great if it wasn't so set on insisting that communism is somehow outside the scope of the things he is critiquing.

libprop says

Salah satu pemikir penting abad 20. Althusser memandang ideologi secara netral. Menurutnya ideologi bisa digunakan untuk menggerakkan massa dan mengemansipasinya atau membiusnyanya. Saya sering mengutip gagasan Louis Althusser dari buku ini.

Evan Cvitanovic says

"In this preliminary remark and these concrete illustrations, I only wish to point out that you and I are always

already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects. The writing I am currently executing and the reading you are currently[17] performing are also in this respect rituals of ideological recognition, including the 'obviousness' with which the 'truth' or 'error' of my reflections may impose itself on you.

But to recognize that we are subjects and that we function in the practical rituals of the most elementary everyday life (the hand-shake, the fact of calling you by your name, the fact of knowing, even if I do not know what it is, that you 'have' a name of your own, which means that you are recognized as a unique subject, etc.) – this recognition only gives us the 'consciousness' of our incessant (eternal) practice of ideological recognition – its consciousness, i.e. its recognition – but in no sense does it give us the (scientific) knowledge of the mechanism of this recognition. Now it is this knowledge that we have to reach, if you will, while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subject-less) discourse on ideology.

Thus in order to represent why the category of the 'subject' is constitutive of ideology, which only exists by constituting concrete subjects as subjects, I shall employ a special mode of exposition: 'concrete' enough to be recognized, but abstract enough to be thinkable and thought, giving rise to a knowledge.

As a first formulation I shall say: all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.

This is a proposition which entails that we distinguish for the moment between concrete individuals on the one hand and concrete subjects on the other, although at this level concrete subjects only exist insofar as they are supported by a concrete individual.

I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'[18]

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'.

Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theatre I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession. There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that 'it really is he' who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.

I might add: what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place

in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'. It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which, in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality).

Spinoza explained this completely two centuries before Marx, who practised it but without explaining it in detail. But let us leave this point, although it is heavy with consequences, consequences which are not just theoretical, but also directly political, since, for example, the whole theory of criticism and self-criticism, the golden rule of the Marxist-Leninist practice of the class struggle, depends on it.

Thus ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects. As ideology is eternal, I must now suppress the temporal form in which I have presented the functioning of ideology, and say: ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects. Hence individuals are 'abstract' with respect to the subjects which they always already are. This proposition might seem paradoxical.

That an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all. Freud shows that individuals are always 'abstract' with respect to the subjects they always-already are, simply by noting the ideological ritual that surrounds the expectation of a 'birth', that 'happy event'. Everyone knows how much and in what way an unborn child is expected. Which amounts to saying, very prosaically, if we agree to drop the 'sentiments', i.e. the forms of family ideology (paternal/maternal conjugal/fraternal) in which the unborn child is expected: it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father's Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived. I hardly need add that this familial ideological configuration is, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and that it is in this implacable and more or less 'pathological' (presupposing that any meaning can be assigned to that term) structure that the former subject-to-be will have to 'find' 'its' place, i.e. 'become' the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance. It is clear that this ideological constraint and pre-appointment, and all the rituals of rearing and then education in the family, have some relationship with what Freud studied in the forms of the pre-genital and genital 'stages' of sexuality, i.e. in the 'grip' of what Freud registered by its effects as being the unconscious. But let us leave this point, too, on one side."

the rest is a bunch of marxist lingo mumbo jumbo

Ian says

“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”

J. Moufawad-Paul says

Finally published in english in January 2014, I was looking forward to reading the book where Althusser's famous (and masterful) ISA essay was culled from. While there is much to admire in this book it is also troubled by Althusser's inability to break completely PCF orthodoxy, particularly in the wake of May 1968, which is why the book is filled with tangents in which he upholds economism (despite also attacking other aspects of economism, very contradictory) so as to criticize his former students. The book is simultaneously brilliant and erroneous.

Miriam says

I had to consult wikipedia to understand Althusser's point...

Noah says

[9.5/10]

Becky says

The question now is how to rate and review something like this. I can't say that I liked it, but at times I loved it. The overall thesis was a bit troubling, but there are an awful lot of points where he's not wrong. His criticism of capitalism is everything it should be: insightful and true. I just don't buy communism as the best alternative.

It's incredibly dense in places, but considering the scope it's covering it's actually very accessible. It's even funny in places! There are times when Althusser is sarcastic or witty, and I was not expecting that.

Basically if you want to know more about communism and Marxism, or just want a good critique on capitalism, this is actually very readable.

Tea says

mislim ja sam ovo dva puta ?itala u istom mesecu, ne znam, dosta toga mi je na nekom apstraktnom novou, dosta revizije marksa i možda pogrešnog interpretiranja njegovog rada, a i ima nekih (meni omiljenih) delova odustajanja od argumentacije! elem, što više puta ?itam to više razumem, sad sam na nekih 53% razumevanja tek!

Fernanda Vega says

Wow, wow, wow. Althusser has expanded by sources to express the literary canon whilst feeding my Ongoing cognizant process.

Ah, ideological State apparatuses, I can name you fancier!

Donald says

The French Communist theoretician, Louis Althusser, takes on the enormous task of describing how capitalism seeps into all social, cultural and economic structures of power. He describes both formal and cultural forms of capitalist ideological power, and thereby provides a clearer understanding of how it can be defeated.

Although his mental illness made Althusser's life painful and tragic, up to and including the murder of his own wife and beloved partner, his theoretical contributions to Marxism are among the greatest of all time.
