

Althusser: Ideology & Ideological State Apparatuses

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", Althusser examines the role of the superstructure in social reproduction, developing both a concept of ideological state apparatuses and a novel theory of ideology. His work lies at the intersection of multiple philosophical currents, including Marxism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis. This paper will outline Althusser's argument and seek to situate it within this broader theoretical context.

In the first portion of his essay, Althusser lays out a theory of the function and operation of the ideological state apparatuses. Althusser conceives of social formation as a structure, comprised of distinct levels, each with its own logic and 'effectivity'. Although he concedes that the superstructure is determined "in the last instance" by the economic base (1971: 135), Althusser rejects a narrow economic determinism, arguing that the superstructure is "relatively autonomous" with respect to the base and that there is a "reciprocal action" of the superstructure on the base. It is the superstructure, according to Althusser, which largely secures the reproduction of the relations of production - through the reproduction of subjection to the ruling ideology and submission to the rules of the established order - that is essential to the continued existence of the capitalist social formation.

Althusser begins with the traditional Marxist theory of the state as a repressive apparatus that enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class and continued extraction of surplus-value, but goes further. He distinguishes between the Repressive State Apparatus (e.g., the government, administration, army, police, courts, prisons) and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (e.g., educational, religious, family, political, trade union, communications, cultural). The repressive state apparatus operates primarily by violence and repression, unified and centralized beneath the command of those in possession of State power. It acts as a shield, creating the political conditions for the operation of the ideological state apparatuses, which largely secure the reproduction of the relations of production. The ISAs (the majority of which are in the private domain) function primarily by ideology and their unity is secured by the ruling ideology (i.e., the ideology of the ruling class). It is in the installation of the ISAs that the ideology of the ruling class "is realized and realizes itself" and becomes the ruling ideology (Althusser 1971: 185). "No class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses." (Althusser 1971: 146)

Thus, Althusser argues, the reproduction of the relations of production occurs (for the most part) through the legal-political and ideological superstructure, secured through the exercise of State power in the repressive and ideological state apparatuses. Althusser identifies the educational system as the dominant ideological state apparatus under capitalism. It takes individuals at their most vulnerable (as children) and drums into them a certain amount of skills or know-how, but "in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or mastery of its practice." (Althusser 1971: 133) It then ejects them at different stages inculcated with the ideology to suit its role in class society and ready to perform their tasks conscientiously. Althusser also opens up the possibility that in addition to being the

stake, the ISAs can also be the site of class struggle. Not only are the former ruling classes able to retain strong positions in the ISAs for a considerable amount of time, he indicates, but "the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle." (Althusser 1971: 147)

In the second part of the essay, Althusser turns toward an analysis of ideology, which he defines as "the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group." (Althusser 1971: 158) He distinguishes between ideology in general, and particular ideologies. While ideologies may take different forms and have their own histories (determined in the last instance by the class struggle), he contends that ideology has no history. He likens the structure, or system, of ideology to the unconscious, arguing that it is "eternal", immutable and omnipresent throughout history (that is, he adds, the history of class societies) (Althusser 1971: 161-2). In this way, he suggests that ideology is something inseparable from human life, and that although its contents may vary, its structure and operation remain the same.

According to Althusser, ideology is a 'representation' of the 'imaginary' relationship of individuals to the 'real' conditions of their existence. This formulation necessarily contains the possibility for misrepresentation (Althusser 1971: 183). He stresses that ideology is supported, reinforced and reproduced within institutions and their associated practices. "An ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material." (Althusser 1971: 166) He also indicates, though, that "there is no ideology except for concrete subjects" (Althusser 1971: 170). Althusser argues that ideology 'hails' or 'interpellates' individuals and constitutes them as 'subjects'. Yet, we are 'always-already' subjects. Ideological formations (which like language and kinship structures are part of the Law of Culture) lie in wait for each individual, even before its birth, seizing and assigning it a place and role, a fixed destination. He contends that the 'obviousness' and 'naturalness' of the conception of ourselves as free, ethical subjects is in fact an 'ideological effect' (Althusser 1971: 172). Individuals, Althusser argues, constantly practice the rituals of 'ideological recognition': ideology speaks to individuals, calling them by their names and obtaining from them the "recognition that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world... 'It really is me, I am here, a worker, a boss or a soldier!'" (Althusser 1971: 178). He indicates, though, that this presupposes the existence of an Absolute Subject, in whose name the ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects. To be a subject, one must subject themselves to the Subject. According to Althusser, the structure of ideology is that of a 'mirror-structure', centered around an Absolute Subject, involving a mirror recognition of the Subject and the individuals interpellated as subjects, and a guarantee given by the Subject to the subjects if they freely accept their subjection to the Subjects 'commandments'.

The result of ideology and the system of interpellation, he maintains, is that (with the exception of the 'bad subjects' who occasionally provoke the intervention of the repressive state apparatus) subjects accept their role within the social formation:

"the subjects 'work', they 'work by themselves' in the vast majority of cases... i.e., by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs. They 'recognize' the existing state of affairs, that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise', and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt 'love thy neighbour as thyself', etc. Their concrete, material behaviour is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: 'Amen - So be it'." (Althusser 1971: 181)

The mystery of this effect lies, he indicates, in the ambiguity and dual meaning of the term 'subject', both: "(1) a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission." (Althusser 1971: 182) Althusser contends that "the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e., in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself'. There are no subjects except by and for their subjection." (Althusser 1971: 182) For Althusser, it is this (mis)recognition, this subjection of subjects, that serves as the basis for the reproductive of the social formation.

Althusser is situated at the juncture of multiple and distinct philosophical currents. In his analysis of ideology and the ideological state apparatuses, he injects social theory from the Marxist tradition with the structuralism emerging from Saussure's linguistics and concepts from Lacan's psychoanalysis. These theorists focus on the structure of social totality and the force that the social exerts on individuals, undercutting the traditional notion of the subject as an autonomous individual.

Althusser rejects the conceptions of history and social change put forward by Hegel and some bodies of Marxism. He criticizes Hegel, Hegelian tendencies within Marxism, and Marxist economism, for seeking to reduce the complexity of a social formation to a single element that is purportedly responsible for the determination all other elements of society as well as the social whole itself. In contrast, Althusser emphasizes the multiplicity of economic, political and ideological structures, their 'relative autonomy' and distinctive logic and effectivity. He argues that reality is irreducibly complex and manifold, subject to multiple contradictions and directions of causality.

Althusser is highly critical of "the Young Marx" (1969: 89) and the idealist, humanist interpretation of Marx put forth by Lukács and the Frankfurt School, which stresses the role of human consciousness and action in social life. Althusser argues that there is no human subject prior to ideology, or interpellation, no pre-social human, and no human essence. He advances a reading of Marx's materialist dialectic of history that seeks to distinguish it from the "speculative philosophy" of Hegel's idealist ("mystical-mystified-mystificatory") dialectic (Althusser 1969: 89-94). His focus is on structures, rather than human agents or a human essence, as the driving force of history. For Althusser (1969: 99-100), historical development and social change results from a complex confluence of circumstances and forces, the

"fusion" of an "accumulation" of historical contradictions into a "ruptural unity". These contradictions are 'overdetermined', which can be interpreted as: determined and determining "in one and the same movement" (Althusser 1969: 101); having multiple causes or determinations, based on the complex interactions of multiple social levels; and, in the Freudian sense, of the condensing of these multiple signifieds (causes) within a single signifier. Althusser rejects the idea that the human subject is the center of history, or even that history has a center, as ideological misrecognition. Instead, he argues that "the human subject is de-centered, constituted by a structure which has no 'center' either, except in the imaginary misrecognition of the 'ego', i.e. in the ideological formations in which it 'recognizes' itself." (Althusser 2001: 149)

Althusser's theory of ideology draws extensively from Freud and Lacan, building particularly on the Lacanian (1977) concepts of the imaginary, the mirror-stage, and misrepresentation, and marks a significant departure from that of Marx. For Marx, ideology is a product of the inverted, alienated nature of productive relations under capitalism. However distorted, its basis is in, and it can be compared to, the real relations that govern the existence of individuals. Althusser (1971: 165), in contrast, argues that "all ideology represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them." He argues against conceiving of ideology as a system of ideas that can be juxtaposed to something called 'truth'. For Althusser, there is no longer a distinction between ideology and 'truth'; one can never in fact claim to have reached 'truth' or to know the Real. According to Althusser, ideology is the very material of social life; human beings cannot live outside of ideology. (Although he expresses a faith that science may provide a means by which to apprehend reality, we cannot, he suggests, live in science.)

Althusser treats ideology (or culture, more broadly) in the same way that Saussure treated language, and Lacan, who merged the tradition of Saussure with the psychoanalytic, treated the unconscious. For Althusser, like Saussure and Lacan, the social transcends and exists outside of every individual. It is a structure, or a system with substantive contents, that pre-exists every individual, awaiting them even before birth, and that they enter in order to become human (Althusser 2001, 1971). Human beings are therefore inseparable from sociality, or social life. In contrast to theorists such as Marx and Hobbes, for Althusser, there is no subject outside of the social. However, unlike Durkheim, who also emphasizes the social whole, Althusser takes seriously social divisions, and maintains Marx's conceptions of class, capitalism, and hierarchy.

Like Hegel, the concept of recognition, and its centrality in the development of subjectivity, is important for Althusser. However, drawing on Lacan, his theory emphasizes misrecognition. In his explication of the mirror-stage, Lacan argues that it is misrecognition, or misapprehension, that is involved in the constitution of the ego. He contends that the idea of the autonomous subject (which forms the basis for "the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity") is an illusion (Lacan 1977: 5-6). Althusser continues this line of thinking,

implying that the creation of the notion of the autonomous subject – that we're free, independent, etc. – is a creation of power, a misrepresentation.

In conclusion, while rooted in the Marxist tradition, Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses is also heavily influenced by structuralism and psychoanalysis, particularly by Saussure and Lacan. In turn, his contribution has been picked-up by Butler (1997), who has sought to develop a post-structuralist interpretation of Althusser that extends his theory of interpellation in order to introduce the possibility of agency in the pre-subject and an interrogation of the Law of Culture.

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1 Althusser adds this caveat, he says, because the relations of production are first reproduced by the materiality of the processes of production and circulation, but ideological relations are present in these same processes.

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