

Title:

The Madman and the Iraqi War

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Summary:

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Keywords:

Article Body:

It is the war of the sated against the famished, the obese against the emaciated, the affluent against the impoverished, the democracies against tyranny, perhaps Christianity against Islam and definitely the West against the Orient. It is the ultimate metaphor, replete with "mass destruction", "collateral damage", and the "will of the international community".

In this euphemistic Bedlam, Louis Althusser would have felt at home.

With the exception of Nietzsche, no other madman has contributed so much to human sanity as has Louis Althusser. He is mentioned twice in the Encyclopaedia Britannica merely as a teacher. Yet for two important decades (the 1960s and the 1970s), Althusser was at the eye of all the important cultural storms. He fathered quite a few of them.

Althusser observed that society consists of practices: economic, political and ideological. He defines a practice as:

"Any process of transformation of a determinate product, affected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means (of production)."

The economic practice (the historically specific mode of production, currently capitalism) transforms raw materials to finished products deploying human labour and other means of production in interactive webs. The political practice does the same using social relations as raw materials.

Finally, ideology is the transformation of the way that a subject relates to his real-life conditions of existence. The very being and reproduction of the social base (not merely its expression) is dependent upon a social superstructure. The superstructure is "relatively autonomous" and ideology has a central part in it.

America's social superstructure, for instance, is highly ideological. The elite regards itself as the global guardian and defender of liberal-democratic and capitalistic values (labeled "good") against alternative moral and thought systems (labeled "evil"). This self-assigned mission is suffused with belligerent religiosity in confluence with malignant forms of individualism (mutated to narcissism) and progress (turned materialism).

Althusser's conception of ideology is especially applicable to America's demonisation of Saddam Hussein (admittedly, not a tough job) and its subsequent attempt to justify violence as the only efficacious form of exorcism.

People relate to the conditions of existence through the practice of ideology. It smoothes over contradictions and offers false (though seemingly true) solutions to real problems. Thus, ideology has a realistic attribute - and a dimension of representations (myths, concepts, ideas, images). There is harsh, conflicting reality - and the way that we represent it both to ourselves and to others.

"This applies to both dominant and subordinate groups and classes; ideologies do not just convince oppressed groups and classes that all is well (more or less) with the world, they also reassure dominant groups and classes that what others might call exploitation and oppression is in fact something quite different: the operations and processes of universal necessity"

(Guide to Modern Literary and Cultural Theorists, ed. Stuart Sim, Prentice-Hall, 1995, p. 10)

To achieve the above, ideology must not be seen to err or, worse, remain speechless. It, therefore, confronts and poses (to itself) only questions it can answer. This way, it is confined to a fabulous, fantastic, contradiction-free domain. It ignores other types of queries altogether. It is a closed, solipsistic, autistic, self-consistent, and intolerant thought system. Hence the United States' adamant refusal to countenance any alternative points of view or solutions to the Iraqi crisis.

Althusser introduced the concept of "The Problematic":

"The objective internal reference ... the system of questions commanding the

answers given."

The Problematic determines which issues, questions and answers are part of the narrative - and which are overlooked. It is a structure of theory (ideology), a framework and the repertoire of discourses which - ultimately - yield a text or a practice. All the rest is excluded.

It is, therefore, clear that what is omitted is of no less importance than what is included in a text, or a practice. What the United States declines or neglects to incorporate in the resolutions of the Security Council, in its own statements, in the debate with its allies and, ultimately, in its decisions and actions, teaches us about America and its motives, its worldview and cultural-social milieu, its past and present, its mentality and its practices. We learn from its omissions as much as we do from its commissions.

The problematic of a text reveals its historical context ("moment") by incorporating both inclusions and omissions, presences and absences, the overt and the hidden, the carefully included and the deliberately excluded. The problematic of the text generates answers to posed questions - and "defective" answers to excluded ones.

Althusser contrasts the manifest text with a latent text which is the result of the lapses, distortions, silences and absences in the manifest text. The latent text is the "diary of the struggle" of the un-posed question to be posed and answered.

Such a deconstructive or symptomatic reading of recent American texts reveals, as in a palimpsest, layers of 19th century-like colonialist, mercantilist and even imperialist mores and values: "the white man's burden", the mission of civilizing and liberating lesser nation, the implicit right to manage the natural resources of other polities and to benefit from them, and other eerie echoes of Napoleonic "Old Europe".

But ideology does not consist merely of texts.

"(It is a) lived, material practice - rituals, customs, patterns of behavior, ways of thinking taking practical form - reproduced through the practices and productions of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs): education, organized religion, the family, organized politics, the media, the cultural industries..." (ibid, p.12)

Althusser said that "All ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constructing' concrete individuals as subjects".

Subjects to what? The answer is: to the material practices of the ideology, such as consumption, or warfare. This (the creation of subjects) is done by acts of "hailing" or "interpellation". These attract attention (hailing) and force the individuals to generate meaning (interpretation) and, thus, make the subjects partake in the practice.

The application of this framework is equally revealing when one tackles not only the American administration but also the uniformly "patriotic" (read: nationalistic) media in the United States.

The press uses self-censored "news", "commentary" and outright propaganda to transform individuals to subjects, i.e. to supporters of the war. It interpellates them and limits them to a specific discourse (of armed conflict). The barrage of soundbites, slogans, clips, edited and breaking news and carefully selected commentary and advocacy attract attention, force people to infuse the information with meaning and, consequently, to conform and participate in the practice (e.g., support the war, or fight in it).

The explicit and implicit messages are: "People like you - liberal, courageous, selfless, sharp, resilient, entrepreneurial, just, patriotic, and magnanimous - (buy this or do that)"; "People like you go to war, selflessly, to defend not only their nearest and dearest but an ungrateful world as well"; "People like you do not allow a monster like Saddam Hussein to prevail"; "People like you are missionaries, bringing democracy and a better life to all corners of the globe". "People like you are clever and won't wait till it is too late and Saddam possesses or, worse, uses weapons of mass destruction"; "People like you contrast with others (the French, the Germans) who ungratefully shirk their responsibilities and wallow in cowardice."

The reader / viewer is interpellated both as an individual ("you") and as a member of a group ("people like you..."). S/he occupies the empty (imaginary) slot, represented by the "you" in the media campaign. It is a form of mass flattery. The media caters to the narcissistic impulse to believe that it addresses us personally, as unique individuals. Thus, the reader or viewer is transformed into the subject of (and is being subjected to) the material practice of the ideology (war, in this case).

Still, not all is lost. Althusser refrains from tackling the possibilities of ideological failure, conflict, struggle, or resistance. His own problematic may not have allowed him to respond to these two deceptively simple questions:

What is the ultimate goal and purpose of the ideological practice beyond self-

perpetuation?

What happens in a pluralistic environment rich in competing ideologies and, thus, in contradictory interpellations?

There are incompatible ideological strands even in the strictest authoritarian regimes, let alone in the Western democracies. Currently, IASs within the same social formation in the USA are offering competing ideologies: political parties, the Church, the family, the military, the media, the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy completely fail to agree and cohere around a single doctrine. As far as the Iraqi conflict goes, subjects have been exposed to parallel and mutually-exclusive interpellations since day one.

Moreover, as opposed to Althusser's narrow and paranoid view, interpellation is rarely about converting subjects to a specific - and invariably transient - ideological practice. It is concerned mostly with the establishment of a consensual space in which opinions, information, goods and services can be exchanged subject to agreed rules.

Interpellation, therefore, is about convincing people not to opt out, not to tune out, not to drop out - and not to rebel. When it encourages subjects to act - for instance, to consume, or to support a war, or to fight in it, or to vote - it does so in order to preserve the social treaty, the social order and society at large.

The business concern, the church, the political party, the family, the media, the culture industries, the educational system, the military, the civil service - are all interested in securing influence over, or at least access to, potential subjects. Thus, interpellation is used mainly to safeguard future ability to interpellate. Its ultimate aim is to preserve the cohesion of the pool of subjects and to augment it with new potential ones.

In other words, interpellation can never be successfully coercive, lest it alienates present and future subjects. The Bush administration and its supporters can interpellate Americans and people around the world and hope to move them to adopt their ideology and its praxis. But they cannot force anyone to do so because if they do, they are no different to Saddam and, consequently, they undermine the very ideology that caused them to interpellate in the first place.

How ironic that Althusser, the brilliant thinker, did not grasp the cyclical nature of his own teachings (that ideologies interpellate in order to be able to interpellate in future). This oversight and his dogmatic approach (insisting that ideologies never fail) doomed his otherwise challenging observations to obscurity. The hope that resistance is not futile and that even the most

consummate and powerful interpellators are not above the rules - has thus revived.