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E303D

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Prompt: What is the significance of Althusser's assertion that "ideology has no history"? (532 words)

In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser's claim that "ideology has no history" seems puzzling at first, since we tend to believe that ideas evolve with time. But Althusser isn't saying that specific ideologies, like religious beliefs or political structures, stay static. Instead, he argues that ideology, as an underlying structure, remains consistent across class-based societies. It's a bold claim that attempts to explain how power establishes itself across generations.

Karl Marx previously dismissed ideology as a "pure dream" (pg. 20), a superficial generalization of reality. Althusser's view, though inspired from Marx, isn't quite the same. Instead of suggesting that ideology is insignificant, Althusser asserts that its fundamental structure doesn't change. Particular ideologies—say, feudal sermons or capitalist slogans—change with time, sure. But ideology itself remains "eternal", "exactly like the unconscious" (pg. 21). Drawing inspiration from Freud, he suggests that ideology is a permanent concept, always present in societies with class divisions and shaping how we see ourselves and our place in society.

Why does this matter? Althusser ties it to ideology's primary role: creating "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (pg. 22). Ideology often hides the unfiltered, harsh truth of economic realities, like low wages or poor working conditions. Instead, it offers comforting illusions that make the existing social order feel completely natural or even inevitable. This is what Althusser means: Ideology's function doesn't age or change—it's consistent throughout history. His idea of "interpellation" (pg. 29) represents this: ideology calls out, "Hey, you there!", and the moment you respond, recognizing yourself as the one who was called, you become a subject integrated into the existing system. It's a subtle but timeless process that shows how people internalize ideologies they are exposed to.

This abstract example quickly turns concrete through "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs)—institutions like schools, churches, families, media, politics, and more (pg. 11). These are places where ideology becomes tangible through daily events such as attending church services, repeating slogans, or following classroom rules. Through ISAs, ideology turns from something abstract into something real or "material" that shapes our daily routines. As Althusser says, "subjects 'work by themselves'" (pg. 33, 34), meaning that people willingly accept their roles in society, from workers to managers to citizens, without being coerced. In this way, ideology can subtly perpetuate class structures by making inequality feel normal.

This perspective is politically charged. In Althusser's view, the ruling class depends heavily on ISAs to maintain power—schools produce obedient workers, media and TV perpetuate the idea that hard work pays off, etc. However, because ideology is everywhere, it can also be resisted. Althusser cites Lenin as one who understood ideology as a crucial component of power, when he tried to reshape education after the 1917 revolution (pg. 13). Lenin knew education wasn't neutral; it could either reinforce or challenge the status quo. This shows how ISAs are not

only areas where ideology controls but also areas for ideological struggle, where dominant power structures can be contested.

Thus, Althusser's assertion that ideology "has no history" is about the persistent, structural power of ideology. When uncontested, it perpetuates class divisions and makes one's spot in the social hierarchy feel natural, often dangerously so.