

LOUIS ALTHUSSER was born in Algeria in 1918 and died in France in 1990. He taught philosophy for many years at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and was a leading intellectual in the French Communist Party. His books include *For Marx*; *Reading Capital* (with Etienne Balibar); *On Ideology*; *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx*; *Machiavelli and Us*; and *The Spectre of Hegel*.

On the Reproduction of Capitalism

Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

LOUIS ALTHUSSER

PREFACE BY ETIENNE BALIBAR

INTRODUCTION BY JACQUES BIDET

TRANSLATED BY G. M. GOSHGARIAN


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FOREWORD

Althusser and the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’

Etienne Balibar

Jacques Bidet and the Presses Universitaires de France have invited me to contribute an additional introduction to the second edition of Althusser’s posthumously published book Sur la reproduction, which they first published in 1995. Since then, there has been steady demand for the book. I am touched and honoured by their invitation, and am very happy that they have accepted, by way of a contribution to their enterprise, a text that is not absolutely new, because it was written some time ago and has already been published, albeit not in French. It is the preface that I wrote for Ariella Azoulay’s Hebrew translation of the chapter from Althusser’s text entitled ‘On Ideology’.¹ I do not wish to modify it. The reason is that I was already trying to formulate the questions that I myself have about the construction and implications of an ensemble the most striking part of which is, like it or not, the discussion of the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, even as I was doing my best to recall and reconstruct the circumstances of the text’s composition and partial publication; for it so happens that I was rather closely associated with both. I also welcome the opportunity to associate our readings of Althusser with a colleague whose own work (which bears, in particular, on the ‘mode of production’ of the visual arts) holds an important place in the field of contemporary ‘theory’, and whose fight for justice at the side of the Palestinian people, oppressed by the state of Israel, is in my view quite admirable. That certain of Althusser’s works, produced in a very different context that is, by now, forty years behind us, should seem to people here and in other places across the globe to be an intellectual, moral and political resource is, I think, a lovely lesson of history, truly.²

In the present brief preface, I do not want to make a detailed commentary on Althusser’s text about Ideological State Apparatuses [ISAs], now translated into Hebrew for the first time. In response to a request from Ariella Azoulay, whom I very warmly thank for soliciting a contribution from me and then waiting patiently for it, I would simply like to offer a few remarks about the text’s status and the conditions under which it was produced.

I believe it can be said that this text has become, and will remain, one of its

author's major works. It is one of those that serve as a reference point when it is a question of characterizing his thought; one mobilizing concept that bears his 'personal signature' and is immediately recognizable as his (here, 'Ideological State Apparatuses' and 'ideological interpellation'; elsewhere, 'the epistemological break', 'symptomatic reading', and so on); finally, one that contemporary philosophy in the structuralist or post-structuralist line continues to work on.³ Yet its status – even when it is considered in the context of a fragmentary, unfinished and largely posthumous text – is altogether paradoxical.

To begin with, which text are we talking about? Given the modalities of its release and re-release, it is impossible to assign it a unique identity today or to trace its boundaries with certainty. On the contrary: we have to recall its history and inscribe it in various, partially competing ensembles so as to understand how it is that the commentaries it has elicited, which today accompany it or prescribe the way it is read, can be so divergent. The text translated into Hebrew comprises [Chapter 12](#), titled 'On Ideology', of the posthumous volume that Jacques Bidet edited and issued in 1995, five years after Althusser's death. This is a reasonable choice, since it gives the reader access to a version, both coherent and complete, of Althusser's autonomous discussion of, specifically, ideology. Yet it was not at all in this form that the text was initially released before being reprinted, translated into various languages, and read and discussed. The first edition, which initially appeared as a contribution to the journal *La Pensée* (no. 151, June 1970) and then as a chapter in the book *Positions* (Paris, Editions Sociales, 1976), under the title 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'Etat (Notes pour une recherche)', was both longer, inasmuch as it prefaced the theory of the 'mechanism of ideology' with an argument about 'the reproduction of the conditions of production', and, at the same time, an abridged version of its own argument. It was presented as 'made up of two extracts from an ongoing study' that were being submitted to others for discussion. Since the ongoing study was never finished and was not published in its author's lifetime, while the debate occasioned by the extracts was very lively and substantial in a number of different countries, it is safe to assume that most commentators will continue to refer to this 'historic' version. I shall, therefore, say something about the circumstances and causes of this imbroglio.

Jacques Bidet, in his critical and philological introduction, says that there exist two versions of the complete manuscript of 'De la superstructure' from which these extracts were taken. Both are unfinished. The first, approximately 150 pages long, was written in March–April 1969. The second, some 200 pages long, is undated; it revises and augments the first. The 1970 *Pensée* piece, made up of extracts from [Chapter 3](#) ('The Reproduction of the Conditions of Production'), [Chapter 4](#) ('Base and Superstructure'), [Chapter 6](#) ('The State'), [Chapter 9](#) ('The Reproduction of the Relations of Production') and [Chapter 12](#) ('On Ideology'), lies, Bidet surmises, 'somewhere between the two versions', independently of the cuts, condensations and addenda that

mark it. All this is incomprehensible if we do not explain what led Althusser to release such a partial montage rather than a text that was ‘complete’, but unfinished – and, in fact, unfinishable.

To explain that, we have to go back to the way Althusser’s illness (which the psychiatrists called a ‘manic-depressive psychosis’) was bound up with the political circumstances of the day. In May–June 1968, at the time of the ‘events’ that Althusser himself described, after the fact, as an ‘ideological revolt of the masses of young people in the school system’),⁴ he found himself, doubtless not by accident, in a clinic in a Paris suburb, where he was undergoing treatment for a depressive episode. During the treatment, he was cut off from the world outside. In the months that followed, after taking the measure of the significant changes in the social situation and political atmosphere in France and abroad, and trying to interpret their meaning in the course of sometimes difficult discussions with a number of his friends and students, some of whom had taken a more or less active part in the movement, Althusser proposed to make a contribution of his own to a work then in progress by returning to questions of Marxist theory bearing on the relations between ‘base and superstructure’. A group to which I, too, belonged (along with Pierre Macherey, Roger Establet, Christian Baudelot, and Michel Tort) had, setting out from notes and public interventions from the preceding period, undertaken to produce a collective work (according to the plan, it was to be voluminous) on the theory of the school system in capitalist society (the capitalist ‘mode of production’). In particular, we had decided to use a terminology that included the notions of ‘scholastic form’ (patterned after ‘commodity form’ in the first part of *Capital*) and ‘scholastic apparatus’ (patterned after ‘state apparatus’ in Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and his other ‘political works’). It was agreed that these two elaborations (ours and Althusser’s) would be confronted. A common doctrine was supposed to emerge from the confrontation. It was our sense that we comprised something like an original school of thought within ‘Western’ Marxism. The strikes and the mass social movements of 1968 and the following months had spread the idea on the Marxist Left that we were entering a new revolutionary cycle that could bring on fundamental changes. When compared with the classical models, however, a certain number of differences leapt to the eye. (They put ‘orthodox’ Marxists such as Althusser, convinced of the primacy of class struggle and the politically organized workers’ movement, in a ticklish situation.) Not only were the 1968 struggles affecting the countries of the ‘socialist camp’ and the ‘capitalist camp’ alike, from China through Czechoslovakia, France, Germany and Italy to Poland, from the United States to Brazil; they also assigned or, at least, seemed to assign, a leading role to ‘new social movements’, including the student movement (even secondary school students had mobilized), in relation with the overt crisis of major ‘authoritarian’ institutions such as the schools and the family. From his first widely debated essays on,⁵ Althusser had attached great importance to developing the ‘Marxist’ theory of ideology or even producing a

theory from scratch, with a view to refounding or reconstructing historical materialism. This, to be sure, gave him the impression that he could account for the novelty of the political phenomena of his day. At the same time, however, it presented him (and us as well) with a challenge it was not easy to take up in an intellectual environment increasingly strained by the proliferating division into irreconcilable tendencies of political organizations all claiming to be Marxist, at a time when many 'critical' theorists were increasingly taking their distance from references to Marx.⁶

None of these plans was to be realized as originally envisaged. Althusser, working in a state of great excitement, as he always did after a depressive phase, had in a few weeks produced a manuscript which, albeit incomplete, already took the form of a book. He sent it to the 'group working on the schools', which had set to work earlier than he had and independently of him, but was progressing more slowly, amid critical readings of Bourdieu, Durkheim, Freinet and Krupskaya, as well as statistical tables on the primary and secondary school experiences of bourgeois and working-class children. The question at this point was how to make the 'suture' between the analyses of the scholastic apparatus that we had arrived at, for our part, and the general idea, elaborated by Althusser, of 'Ideological State Apparatuses' and their function in reproducing capitalist relations of production. Despite the similarity of our ideas and terminologies, we were unable to reach agreement. The result was general paralysis. It was exacerbated by political tensions which originated in the fact that some of us felt closer to Maoist groups (the Union des Jeunesses communistes Marxist-Léninistes and, subsequently, the Gauche Prolétarienne), whereas others, including Althusser himself, deemed it necessary to stay 'inside the Party' (that is, the official Communist Party).⁷ The 'autonomy of theory' was falling to pieces ... Althusser, for his part, soon fell ill again. This was perhaps not just a reaction to these tensions and, more generally, the ordeal to which he was subjected because of his attachment to the party (which charged him with being the master thinker behind the radical leftists, at a time when many of his close disciples had become dissidents and demanded that he join them, before going on to accuse him of revisionism and treason). It was also due to a general weakening of his physical state that had deep roots and only got worse as the years wore on. The upshot was that all the work all of us had done was broken off and never finished.⁸ Althusser's manuscript *Sur la reproduction* ended up joining a series of other texts in various states of completion that he turned out between 1968 and 1980. These often took the form of 'treatises' or 'popularized' essays written on the model of the classical Marxist introductions to historical materialism; he worked on them when his illness was in remission and left them unfinished. Some have now been published in collections of his posthumous works.

In 1970, however, when Althusser returned to active life, friends of his, notably Marcel Cornu, editor of the review *La Pensée*, invited him to share some of his work in progress with the public. It now seemed to Althusser that

an elaboration of his views on ideology could spark another round in a discussion that, he hoped, would help him get back to work. This is what motivated the ‘montage’ of extracts that he published under the title ‘Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’Etat’ [Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses]. Destiny was to convert this stopgap solution into something with definitive or, at any rate, long-term status. For it was on the faith of impressions spawned by the conjunction of two fundamentally discontinuous series of arguments – one centred on the question of the ‘reproduction of the relations of production’, the other on the ‘ideological’ mechanism of interpellation, recognition and guarantee – that the commentaries, utilizations and critiques were to be based. At the point of aporetic encounter between the two lay the notion, or cabbalistic expression, ‘ISAs’.⁹

In the original edition (by which I mean the 1970 piece), dotted lines were inserted between the extracts after they had been reworked. These lines, especially those separating two major developments, have taken on an unforeseen function: they materialize an absence (a ‘void’, to use a word highlighted by one of Althusser’s best commentators and editors, François Matheron, who thus puts one of the philosopher’s favourite expressions in play and *en abîme*)¹⁰ that is also the site of very important, very forbidding problems. I have always felt that the fecundity of Althusser’s text has, precisely, to do with this suspension of the argument in the vicinity of the decisive articulation – signposted and simultaneously spirited away – which is materialized by the dotted line. Readers were led to look for the ‘solution’ to the problem themselves, either because they imagined that Althusser himself was in possession of it but, for some mysterious reason, would not or could not reveal it, or because they had understood that he was not, in fact, in possession of it, and so tried to find a way to develop and transform each available sketch of a solution in hopes of coming up with one themselves. What they could not have known, obviously, and what publication of the manuscript in its entirety shows us today, is that which forms the ‘missing link’ in Althusser’s text. Essentially, it is a discussion of *law* and of *revolution*, separated by a suggestion to ‘extend’ the ‘classical’ Marxist concept of the ‘state’.

In his discussion of law, Althusser sets out from theses that are basically quite close to those of the positive law tradition (and, underlying it, the Kantian definition of law and its difference from morality), in order to insist on the ‘repressive’ nature of the law. His conclusion is that law is by itself incapable of guaranteeing the reproduction or stabilization of the dominant social relations; whence, he says, the ‘functional’ necessity of an ideological supplement of effectivity. In his discussion of the state, he endeavours to explain (while sounding cautionary notes in profusion) how one can simultaneously think the perpetuation of the conditions of exploitation and the necessity of their interruption. This is the usual crux in Marxist attempts to articulate theory and practice. The most interesting aspect of Althusser’s text is doubtless its reconsideration of his earlier discussion of the *difference in*

the temporalities of the political struggle: a ‘short’ temporality, that of the class struggles that unfold in the public sphere, with, as their stakes, possession of state power; and a ‘long’ temporality, that of the class struggles which, riding roughshod over the border between public and private, unfold in the *materiality of ideology*.¹¹ This sketch of a solution, however, merely highlights (by way of the embarrassment betrayed in the writing itself) the aporia that Althusser encounters: the ‘ideological class struggle’ on which the effectivity of the political struggle itself depends, since it prepares the conditions for the political struggle and mobilizes its bearers (the ‘revolutionary class’), cannot itself be the historical ‘last instance’ of the political. Its own effectivity is referred back to the enigmatic short circuit of two heterogeneous ‘materialities’.¹² ‘It is the infrastructure that is determinant in the last instance.’ Thus the fact that contemporary readers now have access to Althusser’s intervening arguments will by no means diminish their perplexity. On the other hand, it will paralyze their theoretical imaginations by replacing a glaring void with an apparent fullness. That is why, notwithstanding the depressing and even – in the end – tragic consequences to which it is due, I consider it an extraordinary ‘objective fluke’ that Althusser was forced to publish his essay in the form, not of a (pseudo-)treatise on historical materialism, but, rather, as a collage of two heterogeneous propositions ‘open’ to the unknown.

It remains to ask, before leaving the readers to confront Althusser’s words on their own, how we are to think the effects of that heterogeneity today. It seems to me that one can advance two hypotheses here. First, history (political, social, intellectual) has completely shattered the unity, even the problematic unity, of the two discourses that Althusser’s ‘structural Marxism’ sought to combine in such a way that each would help sustain the other; it has relegated them to contexts that hardly communicate now. This is not to say that history thereby flags the absurdity of the attempt: for that attempt has a great deal to teach us about the theoretical demands of its day, and testifies to a remarkable seriousness (or ‘sense of responsibility for the consequences of one’s discourse’) whose lesson has not been lost. Second, the divorce between the contexts in question testifies, in its fashion, to the omnipresence of a multiform question: that of the subject and, indissolubly bound up with it, that of political ‘subjectivation’, which, clearly, always has its place within several different intellectual horizons at the same time.

Althusser’s discussions of the ‘reproduction of the relations of production’ are based on a concept of structure which, it has been said, is essentially ‘functionalist’; he had constantly to defend himself against that charge.¹³ But it is a question, rather, of inscribing the possibility or even necessity of a *break* with the dominant capitalist system at the precise point of this system’s constitutional ‘fragility’ (that is, in a sense, its point of ‘contingency’, as Althusser would later put it). The Althusserian reading of Marx’s texts suggests that we should identify this point with an extended conception of social ‘reproduction’. In these discussions, which all remain more or less

unfinished and are all heavily marked by the traditional terminology of 'historical materialism', Althusser accordingly endeavours strategically to bring to bear on this one point all the elements of the structure's *retroactive action* on itself, in order to make them the privileged sites and objects of the class struggle. We might say that his inspiration is ultra-Leninist, in the sense that he does not content himself with defining the objective of the organized class struggle as 'state power' and the 'state apparatus', but redoubles the latter notion in such a way as to be able to include in it both 'ideological domination' and the latent centralization of ideological practices and representations on the basis of a 'State Ideology' (which, in the bourgeois epoch, is probably *legal* ideology in his view). Thus it is as if Althusser were trying to *reinforce* and accentuate the 'totalitarian' image of bourgeois domination and the obscure power of the state, in order ultimately to arrive, by an oxymoron, at the possibility of overthrowing it. The 'strongest link' is also, potentially, 'the weakest'. This also grounds his disagreement with Gramsci: it is crystallized in Althusser's rejection of the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' and in his insistence on the *exteriority* of the revolutionary *party* (or movement) to the whole system of bourgeois 'superstructures', the correlative of its interiority or critical immanence to the practices of the popular masses and the working class. But this merely displaces the problem. And the idea of an organization external to ideological forms of organization, which are obviously apparatus-forms in their turn, is, it will be agreed, quite enigmatic.¹⁴

The other aspect of Althusser's work on ideology in fact belongs to a completely different context. The idea that ideology has a 'structure in general' is not only not traceable to the Marxist tradition, even if Althusser demonstrates its kinship with certain remarks by Marx, particularly in *The German Ideology* ('ideology has no history of its own'), which he read 'symptomatically'. (This simply proves that Marx and Marxism are not the same thing.) That idea in fact refers us to a different concept of 'structure'. In question here, as far as Althusser's own work is concerned, is a series of texts stretching from the 1964 essay 'Freud and Lacan' (republished in *Positions* in 1976) through, notably, two essays collected in *For Marx* ('The "Piccolo Teatro": Bertolazzi and Brecht' [1962] and 'Marxism and Humanism' [1963]) to the 1976 or 1977 text 'On Marx and Freud' (published in the *Proceedings of the Psychoanalytic Congress of Tbilisi*).¹⁵ In these writings, Althusser pursues a study of the *imaginary constitution of the subject* as the fundamental 'ideological effect', or, better, as an *effect of the structure of ideology*. (Obviously, however, there is an element of circularity here, for the effect of the structure of ideology par excellence is, precisely, to constitute 'subjects' – to which we may add that, if the essential goal of the structuralist movement, in which Althusser participated in his way,¹⁶ was to conceptualize the *constitution of the subject* in place of 'the constitutive subject' of the classic transcendental philosophies, ideology here becomes simply another name for structure.) Althusser develops his study (as appears, in particular, at the moment of the

transition from the first to the second and third moments of the 'constitution of the subject': hailing, recognition, guarantee) by working on theoretical models borrowed from Hegel, Freud, Feuerbach and Spinoza (under the general aegis of Spinoza, credited with having inaugurated a critical philosophy of the imaginary and its social effectivity). It is certainly not a 'complete' theory (but does it make any sense to demand that a theory be complete?). One of the keys to its interpretation (which one may consider extrinsic, but which does also point to the circulation of problems and concepts in the conjuncture of the period) resides, manifestly, in a latent controversy with Lacan (a controversy about which students today are often curious) around the question of the 'symbolic'. Althusser basically takes the signifiers of the symbolic from the discourse of monotheism, especially with his two references to its Mosaic refoundation ('I am your servant Moses') and its repetition/transformation in the New Testament ('Thou art Peter'). In this connection, we may say that Althusser very unceremoniously pulls the Lacanian symbolic back into the field of the imaginary and the specular relation characteristic of it, in order to make it a 'function' internal to the imaginary. By the same token, obviously, he implicitly asks how we should think the 'real', which, in the well-known Lacanian scheme, forms the third pillar of the explanation of the unconscious. All indications would seem to be that Althusser refuses to identify the 'real', as Lacan does, with the *negative* function of an impossible or a traumatic event that is unrepresentable because it cannot be symbolized: in short, a transcendental 'thing-in-itself'. What, then, constitutes the *positivity* of the real, the correlate of the *materiality* of the imaginary? The suggestion is made on the text's horizon, but, here too, in very enigmatic fashion, that this question can probably not be divorced from the question of the 'bad subject', the one who does not manage to 'go all by herself' or who resists interpellation. We might also say that it is a question of the subject's *excessive power*, the result of her very *weakness*, with respect to the circuit of interpellation, which, nevertheless, constitutes her or confers her 'form' on her. Yet one notes (this has often been noted) something of a strange reservation on Althusser's part here. It has, moreover, often been interpreted as a form of resistance or denial ...

I cannot, obviously, pursue an introduction and a discussion that would, if taken any further, sow the illusion of accomplished knowledge. I prefer to leave the reader with questions; it will be understood that they were not really posed for the first time today. However, when I look back on this presentation of the materiality characteristic of Althusser's writing, which I have just attempted to make at Ariella's invitation, I see that I have voluntarily or involuntarily suggested, after all, that the two divorced 'halves' whose combination I have described have the same vanishing point: let us call it the question of practice, a possible common name for the idea of an 'organization without organization' that would make the revolution conceivable; and also for the idea of a 'counter-interpellation of the subject' capable of manifesting, in the very forms of the imaginary, the externality (or

positivity) with which it finds itself in a constitutive relationship unawares. To be honest, this suggestion smacks of the impenitent ‘May 68er’ I have certainly continued to be; and, as it does no more than name something, it resolves nothing. One can only wish that contemporary readers of Althusser’s text, in one or another of its configurations, will find other keys capable of investing it with meaning.

1 Tel Aviv, Resling, 2003.

2 See esp., by Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York, Zone Books, 2008; *Atto di Stato. Palestina-Israele, 1967–2007: Storia fotografica dell’occupazione*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2008; and the poem ‘Nous sommes tous des palestiniens’ [We are all Palestinians], written when Israel invaded Gaza in 2008–9, available at mediapart.fr/club/blog/ariella-azoulay.

3 See, for example, Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, New York, Routledge, 1997.

4 Louis Althusser, ‘A propos de l’article de Michel Verret sur Mai étudiant’, *La Pensée*, no. 145, June 1969. See also Althusser’s letters to Maria-Antonietta Macchiocchi, which Macchiocchi published in *Lettere dall’interno del PCI a Louis Althusser*, Rome, Feltrinelli, 1969. These letters were not reproduced in the French or English editions of the same work.

5 Above all, *For Marx* (London, Allen Lane, 1969), a collection of essays written from 1961 to 1965 that was first published in book form in French in 1965.

6 Michel Foucault’s evolution is typical in this regard. It had brought him to unequivocally anti-Marxist formulations by the 1970s. See, for example, his 1976 *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Random House, 1978, as well as the course he gave the same year, now available as *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2003, which contains a transparent critique of the notions of ideology, apparatus, and ideological apparatus). Today, however, it is possible, not to relativize, but to situate the question of Foucault’s relation to Marxism in a longer, more complex evolution. His relationship with Althusser, at once personal, intellectual and institutional, did not by itself determine this evolution, but certainly helped determine it from first to last.

7 Althusser, in his 1984 ‘autobiography’, published posthumously in 1992 (*The Future Lasts a Long Time*, in ‘*The Future Lasts a Long Time*’ and ‘*The Facts*’, trans. Richard Veasey, London, Chatto and Windus, 1993), puts a conspiratorial face on this ‘tactic’. I do not subscribe to his presentation of things, but it is certain that it eventually proved impossible to maintain the cohesion of a working group which, because it was made up of intellectuals loyal to rival organizations, had to remain secret. (In retrospect, I find this ridiculous.)

8 In the following period, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet ‘salvaged’ part of the collective manuscript on the schools, completed it in line with their own views, and released it as a book: *L’Ecole capitaliste en France*, Paris, Maspero, 1971. Michel Tort published, in counterpoint, *Le Q.I.* [The intellectual quotient], Paris, Maspero, 1974.

9 This rapid presentation may give the impression that this period in Althusser’s career was a totally sombre one, marked only by intellectual crises and abortive projects. To put things back in proper perspective, we should point out that, in the same years, Althusser was working on another project, in some sense ‘private’, the very admirable result of which we now know, but of which most

of his collaborators were unaware at the time: a projected book on Machiavelli (and, via this detour, on the very concept of the political). See *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London, Verso, 1999. This essay on Machiavelli has been translated into a number of languages, including Italian. It was published in French in *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques*, ed. François Matheron and Olivier Corpet, Paris, Stock/Imec, vol. 2, 1995, and reissued in a paperback edition in 2009 together with two essays by Matheron (*Machiavel et nous*, Paris, Tallandier, 2009, preface by Etienne Balibar).

10 François Matheron, ‘The Recurrence of the Void in Louis Althusser’, trans. Erin A. Post, *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Fall 1998), pp. 22–37. See also Matheron, *Machiavel et nous*.

11 Here Althusser falls back on the eighteenth-century French philosophers whom he knew well, Montesquieu and Rousseau, in order to suggest that we read this materiality, or the ‘practical’ nature of ideology (formalized by the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’), as an equivalent of the classical theory of ‘custom’ [*mœurs*], in opposition to an ‘idealist’ theory of ideology as the reign of ideas or opinion.

12 To be honest, the aporia in question merely reproduces one that is constant in Marx, especially in the famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), with the difference that Marx speaks of the ‘encounter’, in the revolutionary conjuncture, of the materiality of the ‘productive forces’ and the ideality of the ‘forms of social consciousness’. In insisting on the fact that ideology itself is material and – for the most part – unconscious, Althusser attempts to displace this classical philosophical difficulty, without really managing to explain how the same formal concept of the ‘class struggle’ applies from one end of historical materiality to the other. He broaches the same problem in ‘Note on the ISAs’, a text he appended in December 1976 to the German and Spanish translations of his essay. I shall return to the ‘Note’, which Jacques Bidet has included as an appendix to the present volume.

13 Notably in the aforementioned ‘Note on the ISAs’. The ‘Note’ ends with a long discussion of the status of the ‘revolutionary party’, which is at once essentially ‘outside the state’ by virtue of its class base and historical objectives, yet structurally ‘subjected’ to the dominant class by way of the Ideological State Apparatuses. This text contains recurrent allusions to the practice of the European (French and Italian) Communist Parties of its day, which had set out on the ‘Eurocommunist’ parliamentary path in the name of a Gramscian ‘war of position’. It affirms, in transparent fashion, the necessity of ‘breaking’ with this political logic.

14 This idea does not differ much from the Leninist idea of a ‘state’ that is a ‘non-state’ (in *State and Revolution*). In other words, it names the *transition*, anticipating it or ‘putting it back before’ the seizure of power; and it constitutes something like its condition.

15 Louis Althusser, ‘Freud and Lacan’, in *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, ed. François Matheron and Olivier Corpet, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 7–32; ‘The “Piccolo Teatro”’: Bertolazzi and Brecht – Notes on a Materialist Theatre’, in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, Allen Lane, 1969, pp. 129–51; ‘Marxism and Humanism’, in *For Marx*, pp. 219–41; ‘On Marx and Freud’, in *Writings on Psychoanalysis*, pp. 105–24.

16 Like so many others, Althusser moved alternately back and forth between recognizing and repudiating structuralism, approaching it and distancing himself from it. All the structuralists, or almost all of them (Lévi-Strauss is the exception), said, at one moment or another, ‘I am not a structuralist’, or even ‘I am anything but a structuralist.’

INTRODUCTION

An Invitation to Reread Althusser

Jacques Bidet

The present volume contains, at last available to the public, ‘The Reproduction of the Relations of Production’.¹ This is the manuscript from which Althusser extracted his famous text ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, first published in 1970 in the review *La Pensée*.

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.

This text may seem to be coming back to haunt us from another day and age. It does indeed bear witness, in part, to opinions that have become impossible to maintain today. Yet it continues to have, twenty-five years after it was written, a singular capacity for theoretical provocation. 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?

At first sight, Althusser’s manuscript presents itself as a didactic, militant text, and it is, at the same time, the best of introductions to his thought. As it unfolds, however, it gradually reveals that it also contains an original conceptual elaboration. Thus 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’.

POLITICAL TEXT, THEORETICAL TEXT

The spirit of May 1968 runs through the entire text, that of a May that was as much the workers’ as the students’, a May that witnessed the biggest strike in French history. Communist memory was reinvigorated by the prospect of the radical changes that now seemed to be on the agenda. Althusser passionately

embraced this moment and assigned it its place in the long-term course of the socialist revolution. His field of vision, in this text, encompasses ‘a century of class struggle by the workers’ movement across the face of the earth’ (‘hundreds of thousands of anonymous worker militants’, and so on, [this page](#)). It also encompasses an indubitable future: ‘We are entering an age that will see the triumph of socialism across the globe ... *the Revolution is already on the agenda. One hundred years from now, perhaps only fifty years from now, the face of the world will have changed: the Revolution will have carried the day from one end of the earth to the other*’ ([this page](#)). Althusser has his eye on ‘the many young militants who have flocked or will flock’ to the political struggle ([this page](#)). Indirectly, he is addressing them.

This will not fail to surprise readers who know only Althusser’s philosophical texts. The essential reference, in the conception of the trade union and political struggle under capitalism, the schema for the conquest of power by the ‘proletariat and its allies’, and the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is to Leninism, ‘the Leninism of Maurice Thorez’ ([this page](#)). The reference to Leninism finds expression in a return to the vocabulary of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Third International: ‘the masses’, ‘organized in the trade union’, must be ‘led towards truly revolutionary objectives’ by ‘the party of the vanguard of the proletariat’ ([this page](#)). Althusser expressly places himself in the line of what he calls the ‘classics of Marxism’. ‘Here we shall be advancing cautiously on a terrain on which Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao have long since preceded us, but without systematizing, in theoretical form, the decisive progress that their experiences [*expériences*, which also means ‘experiments’] and procedures implied. Why? Because these experiences and procedures were essentially confined to *the terrain of political practice*’ ([this page](#)). ‘Stalin neglected these questions’ ([this page](#)). One rubs one’s eyes in disbelief. Stalin’s name disappears from the piece published in *La Pensée*. The fact remains that there is something surrealistic in this imaginary repetition of Leninism in an altogether different place and time – in a time, notably, in which the party that Althusser called his was proposing, as if its validity were self-evident, an utterly different strategy, 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.

Yet the political pathos, and the accompanying strain of exaltation, declarations of fidelity or ostentatious allegiance, and defiance of realism, should not prevent us from making our way through the book and noticing that it is also the vehicle of a theoretical investigation of great importance. That is not to say that there is not a close relation between this particular vision of history and the set of concepts it offers for an understanding of the structure and social essence of capitalism. In any case, whatever we make of the emphatic reference to ‘Marxist-Leninist philosophy’ ([this page](#)), ‘our philosophy’ ([this page](#)), it soon becomes clear that, although what is in question here is indeed Marxism and Leninism, Althusser’s thought can by no means be classified as ‘Marxism-Leninism’ in the ordinary sense of an

orthodoxy. It is equally clear that it deserves to be revalued today as an autonomous source of intellectual stimulation.

The great importance of the theoretical intervention makes itself felt every time that Althusser underscores the merely ‘descriptive’ nature of traditional theory: the topography of base and superstructure ([this page–this page](#)); the correspondence between productive forces and relations of production ([this page](#), [this page](#)); or the Marxist ‘theory’ of the state ([this page](#)), law ([this page](#)), or ideology ([this page–this page](#)). On all these subjects, which is to say, the doctrine as a whole, Althusser proposes to go beyond the form of ‘description’ ([this page–this page](#)), a form by nature ‘unstable’, and move towards ‘theory in the full sense’ ([this page–this page](#), [this page](#)). Behind the show of modesty – the author offers us ‘unprecedented clarifications’, but only of ‘certain limited points’ ([this page](#)) – it is a question, ultimately, of producing, where we have nothing more than description, a theory in the true sense of the word.

FOR A REREADING OF THE THEORY OF THE ISAS

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’ (p. xxx). It situates Marx’s contribution in the ‘scientific’ realm: the discovery of the ‘continent of history’ ([this page](#)) and the invention of a theory capable of providing a basis for diverse social sciences.

The following chapters provide – even if they offer, to a certain extent, nothing more than a reprise of ‘classical theses’ ([this page](#)) – an articulated presentation of the major categories commanding Althusser’s interpretation of historical materialism. Every ‘social formation’ is characterized by a ‘dominant mode of production’ ([this page](#)). In the relationship between the relations of production and the productive forces that comprise the base, the former play the determinant role (Althusser develops this point in [Appendix 1](#)). In the model as a whole, the base, not the superstructure (‘Law, State, Ideologies’), is ‘determinant in the last instance’ ([this page](#)).

The specific contribution that this manuscript makes resides, of course, in the argument about ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ and ‘ideology’ developed in [Chapters 5 to 12](#).

Publication of the present volume should offer an occasion to revisit these themes, and also, no doubt, to re-evaluate them. For putting the fragments included in the text published in *La Pensée* back into Althusser’s discourse as a whole brings out the close connection between his thesis on ideology (and its materialization in apparatuses) and his conception of the course of modern history. In and of itself, this is a matter of strict logic. A theory of structural reproduction has, as its corollary, a theory of the transformation of the structure: it tends to show the constant conditions in which variation occurs, and eventually puts an end to those constant conditions. Althusser’s

conception of ongoing variation, like his conception of the transition to socialism, shapes, in its turn, his conception of the conditions for the reproduction of capitalism as well as his idea of the structural constant. Ultimately, it is a question of a single theory, but a theory with double entries: reproduction and revolution. Hence the new light shed by the previously unpublished sections.

It seems to me important to grasp that the pivot of the theoretical dispositive is the question of law, the subject of [Chapters 5](#) and [11](#), and its presumed disappearance, the correlative of the disappearance of commodity relations in the course of the socialist revolution. I would like to suggest that the questions that Althusser has brought out have lost nothing of their contemporary relevance, and have yet to find pertinent answers at the level at which he poses them.

LAW AND THE PREDICTION THAT IT WILL WITHER AWAY

The idea of law, introduced before that of the state, is nevertheless dependent on the theory of the state as an instrument of the dominant class's domination. The state apparatus, far from being 'traversed by the class struggle', is, Althusser repeats, an apparatus of domination in its entirety. What holds for the pre-capitalist modes of production holds for capitalism as well: here, too, 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 is to be understood – as Althusser was to write a little later – as 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'.² Law, far from countering domination, is simply a moment of domination. This is the radical thesis commanding the problematic of the ideological apparatuses: law is produced by the conversion of violence into power in the state machine.

[Chapter 5](#), 'Law', none of which Althusser included in the text he published in *La Pensée*, makes two statements. One is rather classical, but Althusser formulates it with remarkable clarity. It is the idea that the relations of production comprise the law's (absent) content. Yet law, which exists only as a function of class relations, recognizes only individuals ([this page](#)). The relations of production are therefore not legal relations; they are not defined by the mode of 'ownership'. The revolution, for its part, is not a modification of legal relations, a transition from private to collective ownership of the means of production. It consists in a practical, common 'appropriation' by freely associated men and women. This, however, leads Althusser to make a more problematic statement, according to which this revolution signifies, simultaneously, but in a single process, the disappearance of law and the disappearance of commodity exchange: "The withering away of law can only

mean the withering away of *commodity* exchanges, exchanges of goods in the form of commodities ... and their replacement by *non-commodity* exchanges' ([this page](#)).

Here Althusser inscribes himself in the tradition of the communism associated with the Second and Third Internationals, expressing it in all its coherence. To be sure, he rejects the notion that planning can provide an alternative to the market. Rather, he attempts to define a third term, an external term that appears, notably, in the form of 'the intervention of the masses'; planning is only a 'subordinate means' to that end ([this page](#) n. 10). He translates 'the Soviets plus electrification' as political intervention plus the planning of the productive forces (*ibid.*). He fails to take into account, it seems to me, that the planned social order, inasmuch as it opens the way, specifically, to appropriation from the centre, is irreducible to a determination of the 'productive forces' (or of technological rationality), but itself constitutes, like the social order based on commodity exchange, a configuration of the 'relations of production', that is, potentially, of class relations.

Here certain ambiguities of Marx's resurface; they have to do with the relation between the question of law and that of the market. One cannot, Althusser writes (the passage has, admittedly, been crossed out; but that is only further evidence of its author's uncertainty, [this page](#) n.3), speak of socialist law, for 'the law that subsists ... is still *bourgeois law, for the only law there is is based on commodity relations and is thus bourgeois law*. The socialist mode of production will *abolish* all law. Marx understood this perfectly' ([this page](#) n.3). It seems that Althusser here even goes beyond Marx. For he presents the law as, purely and simply, a condition of domination, inasmuch as it puts class relations into play. Similarly, bourgeois democracy is, in his view, merely 'the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in the form of a parliamentary or presidential democratic apparatus' ([this page](#)), with the result that 'the essence of [class struggle] unfolds outside these legal, bourgeois-democratic forms' ([this page](#)).

IDEOLOGY AS APPARATUS AND THE MACHINERY OF THE STATE

A central theme of this text is that the topography, the metaphor of base and superstructure, is insufficient and deceptive. For this metaphor suggests that the economic base determines everything else, whereas, in Althusser's view, it is the social relations of production which characterize a mode of production in the last instance; their reproduction is ensured by the ensemble Repressive State Apparatus plus Ideological State Apparatuses.

The power of the thesis about the Ideological State Apparatuses is due, first of all, to the fact that it flows from an interpretation of society as penetrated or saturated by class relations and subject to a class power that is exercised through the whole set of institutions. This power is not exercised by way of state institutions alone, according to a schema in which those institutions would configure a public sphere that could then be opposed to the private