

Key Arguments in Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

The capitalist state requires not only a realistic mechanistic means of reproducing goods (machinery and workers to operate it), but also a reliable means of reproducing the labour-power that produces the goods)

Schools teach children the rules of good behaviour that allow them to become reliable sources of labour-power by teaching them obedience and subjection to the "ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice"

The State is composed of an infrastructure (an economic base) and a superstructure (RSA and ISA)

The State is a repressive apparatus which enables the ruling class to keep ruling and the subjected class to keep being subjected

The State is equated with power, which means "the possession (seizure and conservation) of State power by a certain class or an alliance between classes or class fractions"

The two parts of the State Superstructure are the (Repressive) State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses (134-139)

- RSA function primarily through repression and violence (and secondarily through ideology) (138 & 142)
- ISAs function primarily through ideology (and secondarily through repression and violence) (138 & 142)
- RSA belongs to the public domain (137)
- ISAs for the most part belong to the private domain (137)

The dominant ISA in modern society is the Educational ISA (as opposed to the Religious ISA in previous cultures) (145-148)

ISAs contribute to "the reproduction of the relations of production" (stable, predictable social relations based on exploitation of a subjected class by a ruling class) (146)

What we think happens outside of ideology actually happens within it (and vice versa) which proves that ideology is really hidden (163-4)

Ideas about Ideology:

1. Ideology and ISAs are hidden –even from the agents of the institution (148, 161, 163-4)
2. Ideology expresses class positions (150)
3. Ideology has no history (150-1)
4. Ideology is determined by class struggle (151)
5. Ideology is eternal (transhistorical, not ahistorical) (151-2)
6. Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence (153-4)
7. Ideology has a material existence (155-6)
8. Ideology relies on obviousnesses (claims that we understand as natural, "of course" statements) which is why it remains hidden so easily (161, 163-4)

Ideas about the Subject:

1. Individuals are “always-already subjects” (161-165)
2. Ideology interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects (162)
3. Ideology acts to recruit and transform subjects through the process of interpellation (163)
4. Subjects freely accept ideology and are then compelled to act according to the ideology they adopt (157)
5. Subjects almost always recognize when they are hailed (163)
6. Individuals are always-already subjects (even before birth) (164-5)
7. Subjectivity requires a mirror-structure (specularly subjectivity) (168)
8. Subjects “work by themselves” to freely accept ideology and their position as subjects” (169)

Key ideas relating Ideology and the Subject:

1. There is no ideology except for concrete subjects and yet ideology creates subjects (chicken-egg) (160)

Important Quotes from Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

"Productive practices are so integrated into our everyday 'consciousness' that it is extremely hard, not to say impossible, to raise oneself to the point of view of reproduction." (123)

"Every social formation arises from a dominant mode of production" (124)

"Every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce" (124)

"the reproduction of the skills of labour power is achieved more and more outside production: by the capitalist education system, and by other instances and institutions" (127)

"Children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour...which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination" (127).

"the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order" (127).

"In other words, the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how,' but in forms which ensure subjections to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (128)

"All the agents of production must be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'—the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), or the exploiters (the capitalists), of the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its 'functionaries'), etc." (128).

"Every society [is] constituted by 'levels' or 'instances' articulated by a specific determination: the infrastructure, or economic base (the 'unity of the productive forces and the relations of production) and the superstructure, which itself contains two 'levels' or 'instances': the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc.)" (129).

"The State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus. The State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus value extortion (i.e. to capitalist exploitation)" (131).

"The State has no meaning except as a function of State power. The whole of the political class struggle revolves around the State. By which I mean around the possession, i.e. the seizure and conservation of State power by a certain class or by an alliance between classes or class fractions" (134).

The (Repressive) State Apparatus contains:

- Government
- Administration
- Army
- Police
- Courts
- Prisons

The Ideological State Apparatuses include:

Religious ISA
Educational ISA
Family ISA
Legal ISA
Political ISA (including political parties)
Trade-union ISA
Communications ISA (press, TV, radio)
Cultural ISA (literature, arts, sports)

“The unity that constitutes the plurality of ISAs as a body is not immediately visible” (137).

“(Repressive) State Apparatus belongs entirely to the public domain, much the larger part of the Ideological State Apparatuses (in their apparent dispersion) are part, on the contrary, of the private domain” (137)

“The Repressive State Apparatus functions ‘by violence’, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function ‘by ideology’” (138)

“No class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over an in the State Ideological Apparatuses” (139)

“The role of the RSA, insofar as it is a repressive apparatus, consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production which are in the last resort relations of exploitation” (142)

“The RSA secures by repressions (from the most brutal physical force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the ISAs” (142).

“I believe that the ISA which has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ISA (the church) is the educational ISA” (145).

“The School-Family couple has replaced the Church-Family couple” (146).

“One ISA certainly has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School” (146).

“It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable’, squeezed between the family ISA and the educational ISA, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of know-how wrapped in the ruling ideology or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state...each mass ejected *en route* is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfil in class society” (147).

"The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology: an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology where teachers respectful of the 'conscience' and 'freedom' of the children who are entrusted to them by their 'parents' open up for them the path to the freedom, morality, and responsibility of adults by their own example, by knowledge, literature and their 'liberating' virtues" (148).

"So little do they [the teachers] suspect it that their own devotion contributes to the maintenance and nourishment of this ideological representation of the School, which makes the school today as 'natural', indispensable-useful and even beneficial for our contemporaries as the Church was 'natural,' indispensable and generous for our ancestors a few centuries ago" (148)

"Ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group" (149)

"The project of a theory of ideology in general, and not a theory of particular ideologies, which, whatever their form, always express class positions" (150)

"Ideology is thus thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud" (150)

"I think it is possible to hold that ideologies have a history of their own (although it is determined in the last instance by the class struggle); and on the other, I think it is possible to hold that ideology in general has no history, not in a negative sense (its history is external to it), but in an absolutely positive sense" (151)

"If eternal means, not transcendent to all (temporal) history, but omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history, I shall adopt Freud's expression word for word, and write *ideology is eternal*, exactly like the unconscious" (152)

"in ideology 'men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form'" (153)

"There is therefore a cause for the imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence: that cause is the existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the 'people' on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imagination" (154) [think Hitler]

"men make themselves an alienated (= imaginary) representation of their conditions of existence because these conditions of existence are themselves alienating" (154)

"What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (155)

"an ideology always exists in an apparatus, an its practice, or practices. This existence is material" (156)

“the ideological representation of ideology is itself forced to recognize that every ‘subject’ endowed with a ‘consciousness’ and believing in the ‘ideas’ that his ‘consciousness’ inspires in him and freely accepts, must ‘act according to his ideas’, must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. If he does not do so, ‘that is wicked’” (or subversive, or pathological, or invert) (157)

“I shall immediately set down two conjoint theses:

1. There is no practice except by and in an ideology;
2. There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (159)

Central thesis: “there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, by the category of the subject and its functioning” (160)

“The category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (160)

“It follows that for you and me, the category of the subject is a primary ‘obviousness’: it is clear that you and I are subjects (free, ethical, etc...). Like all obviousnesses, including those that make a word ‘name a thing’ or ‘have a meaning’, the obviousness that you and I are subjects—and that that does not cause any problems—is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect. It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the “still, small voice of conscience’): That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” (161)

“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” (161-2)

“all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject” (162)

“Ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects from 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...” (163)

“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” (163).

“One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns around, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that ‘it really is he’ who is meant by the hailing” (163)

“what takes 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...ideology never says ‘I am ideological’” (163-4)

“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*” (164)

“Than 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” (164).

“this familial ideological configuration is, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and that it is in this implacable and more or less ‘pathological’ 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” (165)

“The duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures simultaneously:

1. The interpellation of ‘individuals’ as subjects;
2. Their subjection to the Subject;
3. The mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself
4. The absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – ‘so be it’” (168-9)

“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” (169)

“The State and its Apparatuses only have meaning from the point of view of the class struggle, as an apparatus of class struggle ensuring class oppression and guaranteeing the conditions of exploitation and its reproduction” (171)

“ideologies are not ‘born’ in the ISAs but from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experience of the struggle, etc.

Further Reading

Assiter, Alison. *Althusser and feminism*. Pluto Press, 1990. B 2430 A474 A848 1990

Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford UP, 1997. BD 438.5 B88 1997

Whelehan, Imelda. *Modern Feminist Thought: from the Second Wave to "Post-Feminism"* 1995. HQ 1190 W47 1995

Whelehan, Imelda. *Modern Feminist Thought: from the Second Wave to "Post-Feminism"* 1995.
HQ 1190 W47 1995

"Feminists, in order to construct a viable oppositional ideological strategy, have first to recognize that Marxist theories of ideology themselves operate within what Michele Barrett vaguely terms an 'ideology of gender'. The recognition that all Marxist theories of ideology situate ideology as 'determined in the last instance by the class struggle' (Althusser p151 underlined note), prompts feminists to find a new means to conceptualize the effects of a social formation which they perceive as equally determined by the perpetuation of notions of gender and racial difference" (58).

"Perhaps Althusser's concluding thesis is the most engaging for feminists. In his assertion that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects—in other words that our notion of individuality and selfhood is, in fact, socially constructed—in a way that profoundly affects our material existence, he offers a position which echoes that of poststructuralist theories. Ideological processes, in the way they mediate and negotiate the repressive aspects of the State Apparatus are perceived as achieving a 'materiality' of their own. In other words, ideology does not just operate at the level of 'ideals' because ideas exist within and are giving meaning by our actions which insofar as they are 'social actions' are themselves ritualized in ways that are delineated by a particular ISA. We are already 'hailed' or interpellated as subjects by means that allow us to be 'identified' in the social formation by the 'double-mirror effect' of an ISA which implicitly contains at its centre the Subject par excellence to which we are all subjected. We recognize our 'self' reflected in these processes because, it is argued, the notion of the self emanates from the social formation, and not from within the individual" (58-9).

"Althusser's observation of the dual effects of ideology—upon consciousness and as dictating a range of actions—has proved attractive to Marxist feminists who have recognized that a feminist revolution requires not only equal access to material power processes, but also a sustained attack upon dominant ideological mechanisms, by demythologizing their perceived 'naturalness'. From such a perspective the quasi-biological account of patriarchy's 'universality' might be countered, and its success as a dominant ideological force examined and undercut" (59).

"Following Althusser, feminist theorists have rejected the prevailing Marxist notion that ideology constitutes a distortion of reality by the ruling class, or indeed that ideology acts as a direct reflection, in ideas, of the determining economic base. Emphasis shifts instead to the relationship of ideology to lived experience: as a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of their existence. The gendered subject is constructed and reproduced in ideology and 'reality' is therefore perceived as a series of intersubjective social situations and relations" (59).

"The phallogentricity of the Marxist analytical model presents such a difficulty (of not factoring in what Barrett refers to as the "material effects of gender ideology")...In other words, modes of production themselves need to be considered at a macro-level, whence their conditions of existence are perceived to thrive upon a sexual/ethnocentric division of labour, where women and racial outgroups are concentrated in low-paid, low-status jobs in relation to their (white) male counterparts" (60).