Ideology Without Dupes: Althusser's Materialist Theory of Ideology

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Abstract: I begin this essay by explaining several problems with ideology critique. First, it has a tendency to conflict with or undercut the goals of critical theory (Robin Celikates calls these "political-strategic" problems). Second, the theory of ideology rests on problematic ontological commitments and empirical assumptions. These charges, I argue, offer compelling reasons to reject ideology critique as a component of any emancipatory critical theory. And yet, there continues to be a distinct *need* for something like ideology critique within any critical social theory; we recognize many instances in which the oppressed seem to work "all by themselves" (i.e., without the direct oversight of an armed slave master) in support of (or at least in harmony with) the status quo. Critical theory seems faced with an impossible choice, then: Either take up an elitist, empirically suspect theory of ideology, or forego an essential critical tool. In the second part of my essay, I diagnose the root of this dilemma: Critical theory in its various radical forms has attempted to supplement a *materialist* critique of society with an *idealist* account of social reproduction (the theory of ideology). In order to overcome the contradiction at the heart of (would-be) egalitarian critical social theory, I suggest, we need to move past the idealist account of ideology. This essay argues that, in his work from the mid-1970s on, Althusser sketches out the foundations of just such a materialist theory of ideology. By filling in (and building upon) the foundations left by Althusser, I argue, we can rehabilitate ideology critique as a part of a more radically egalitarian critical theory.

Keywords: Ideology; Louis Althusser; Ideological State Apparatuses; Critical Theory; Materialism.

1. Introduction

In addition to a broadly shared sense of purpose, and despite widely divergent traditions and philosophical approaches, critical theories show significant overlap at the level of method. Surveying the field of critical theories, David Sholle argues that they are "a group of theories that […] take their direction and acquire their force from an historical materialist problematic"[1]. The term "historical materialist" should be understood here

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[1] Sholle (1988, 17).

in opposition to the idealist critical theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which aimed at the reform of reason and knowledge, the diagnosis of systematic epistemological biases, and the distinguishing of truth from error[2]. This epistemological project takes priority over political reform: In Kant's famous *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* he argues that the attempt to overthrow social and political authorities *before* humanity has achieved full rational "maturity" is putting the cart before the horse:

> Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking masses[3].

By contrast, as Herbert Marcuse has put it, critical theory's essential materialism consists of "two basic elements": a "concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence"[4].

Given this broadly shared materialism, it is perhaps surprising that, in Raymond Geuss's words, "the very heart of the critical theory of society is its criticism of ideology"[5]. Terry Eagleton calls our attention to the tension:

> Most theories of ideology have arisen from within the materialist tradition of thought, and it belongs to such materialism to be skeptical of assigning any very high priority to 'consciousness' within social life. Certainly, for a materialist theory, consciousness alone cannot initiate any epochal change in history; and there may therefore be thought to be something self-contradictory about such materialism doggedly devoting itself to an inquiry into signs, meanings and values[6].

In response, Eagleton argues that critical theory *needs* ideology critique, that this activity has a vital role to play within a critical theory of society. In short: It seems strange for a materialist theory to rely so heavily on an idealist project like ideology critique, but we cannot get by without it.

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2 See, e.g., Beiser (2006) who suggests that scientific naturalism and rational criticism were the "fundamental principles of the Enlightenment" (21), and argues that German Idealism in all of its forms – from Kant through to Hegel – was an attempt "to preserve the legacy of the Enlightenment" (22).

3 Kant (1983, 42).

4 Marcuse (1989, 59).

5 Geuss (1981, 2-3).

6 Eagleton (1991, 33).

I want to explore this tension at the heart of progressive critical theories. In the next section, I will lay out several compelling criticisms of ideology critique. However, it is clear that there is still a need for something like ideology critique within critical theory. I will then turn to Louis Althusser's argument that the concept of ideology has remained too idealist, and that what critical theory needs is to develop a materialist theory of ideology. I will conclude the essay by reconstructing an outline of the (unfinished) materialist theory of ideology that Althusser started to develop in the 1970s.

2. Problems of False Consciousness

The most widely-discussed problem of ideology theory is the vantage point from which ideological consciousness can be diagnosed[7]. The problem is that critical theory must be carried out *within* a socio-historical context, but if *that context itself* gives rise to a false understanding of genuine needs and a distorted picture of human flourishing, then how can a critical theorist claim to have some "correct" understanding of human flourishing in a way that doesn't fall into epistemological authoritarianism?[8] Most theories of ideology respond to the epistemological question in some way – but the invocation of epistemic privilege is closely connected with the tendency to slip into paternalism; calling someone's beliefs "ideological" is often a way of saying that *you know better than they do* what is really in their best interests. That theories of false consciousness are so often used to criticize beliefs among the poor and oppressed means that the critique of ideology has much of the time been linked to a rather pernicious intellectual elitism among social theorists. I therefore want to argue that a more significant set of problems for a progressive critical theory of society with respect to ideology critique are what Robin Celikates calls "political-strategic" problems[9]. In his *Critique as Social Practice*, Celikates identifies what he calls "two problems of political strategy" for critical theories; we can call these problems "authoritarianism"

[7] For example, Ernesto Laclau (1996, 202) writes, "In the case of ideology as a 'system of ideas', the unity of that system depends on the possibility of finding a point external to itself from which a critique of ideology could proceed". This is the same objection that Foucault (1980, 118) raises when he warns that, "like it or not, [ideology] always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth". Slavoj Žižek (1994, 10) puts the matter even more simply: "the step out of ideology is […] ideology *par excellence*". In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Paul Ricoeur (1986, 157) calls this "Mannheim's Paradox", after social theorist Karl Mannheim.

[8] See, e.g., Cooke (2006), who frames this issue in terms of the need for a "context-transcending validity" that doesn't violate a commitment to "situated rationality".

[9] Celikates (2018, 47).

and "self-defeating critique". Celikates's two "political-strategic" problems can each be elaborated into at least two "sub-problems":

2.1.Authoritarianism[10]

a) Epistemological authoritarianism exempts critical theory and political practice from outside critique in a way that Celikates warns "degenerates from an instrument of critique into a means of legitimating one's own standpoint and of sealing oneself off from alternative perspectives and interpretations".

b) The critical theorist who draws upon ideology critique to explain how the oppressed accept and tolerate their own oppression suggests, in Lenin's turn of phrase, that correct consciousness can be brought to the oppressed "*only from without*"[11]. This cannot but reaffirm a hierarchy between intellectuals and the oppressed, with the critical theorist taking up a necessary leadership position[12]. This issue is not confined to the "Eastern Marxism" of Marxism-Leninism; recall that Lukács, in his 1967 preface, explains that his concept of "imputed" class-consciousness in *History and Class Consciousness* "meant the same thing as Lenin […] when he maintained that socialist class consciousness […] would be implanted in the workers 'from outside'"[13]. As Jan Rehmann has shown, Lukács's "elitist concept would influence Western critical theory in a manner that was not so dissimilar to the way Lenin's implanting 'from without' influenced the Marxist-Leninist tradition in the East"[14].

2.2. Self-Defeating Critique[15]

a) Celikates warns that, by diagnosing a situation "based on rigid laws that are operative behind the agents' backs", critical theory loses its useful-

[10] Celikates (2018, 47).

[11] Lenin (1969, 31).

[12] This is especially problematic, given Marx's (1976, 44-45) claim that the "first form of ideologists" (namely, priests) is "coincident" with the "division of material and mental labor" (this division being the first true starting point of the division of labor as such).

[13] Lukács (1971, xviii).

[14] Rehmann (2014, 83).

[15] Celikates (2018, 48): "If the agents are understood as being trapped inside the prevailing social conditions, critical social science loses its addressees and its practical relevance."

ness for the oppressed themselves; it cannot address its concerns to them, and so it condemns itself to sit on the sidelines[16]. Recall Adorno's pessimism about the contemporary possibilities for political action, the "pseudoactivity" which "deceives about the debilitation of a praxis presupposing a free and autonomous agent that no longer exists"[17].

b) The diagnosis of false consciousness by critical theory is also a way of saying that the oppressed are *unable* to liberate themselves. As Jacques Rancière has extensively argued, this position has the ironic effect of demonstrating that the oppressed *must* be oppressed:

> In short, the argument on the mechanism of ideology reads: they are where they are because they don't know why they are where they are. And they don't know why they are where they are because they are where they are […]. This matter of *incapacity* must be stripped of its "scientific" disguise[18].

These four objections can be called "political-strategic objections" inasmuch as they present problems for a progressive critical theory in a way that they would not for a conservative critical theory. Conservative critical theory can, without contradiction, deploy authoritarian, elitist, antiegalitarian, or otherwise hierarchizing theories; it can offer theoretical justifications of domination; and it can try to theoretically demonstrate the impossibility or futility of progressive change. But a progressive critical theory of society cannot do any of these things without running into contradictions with its own stated goals.

A further set of objections to ideology critique can be brought together under the broad umbrella of "contentious background beliefs". These issues are problems for *any* use of ideology theory, not just progressive critical theories; they are therefore not simply "political-strategic" problems. There are three interrelated issues:

1) Michael Rosen has argued that the theory of ideology seems to rely upon the belief that "society is a self-maintaining system"[19]. This contentious ontological issue represents an additional front in the battle over

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16 Celikates (2018, 48).

17 Adorno (2005, 270). And so critical theory sits on the sidelines, cultivating the truth and waiting for the right moment. Remember, too, Horkheimer's (1972, 241) claim: "In the general historical upheaval the truth may reside with numerically small groups of men. History teaches us that such groups, hardly noticed even by those opposed to the status quo, outlawed by imperturbably, may at the decisive moment become the leaders because of their deeper insight". The concern raised here is not necessarily at odds with the authoritarian worries above.

18 Rancière (2009, 275).

19 Rosen (1996, 258).

ideology theory, and when it is not acknowledged and backed up by argument, it can result in a question-begging account of "necessary false consciousness".

2) As Robin Celikates notes, "The assumption that modern societies rest on the acceptance of certain beliefs and values, that is, on a kind of ideological consensus […] is […] extremely questionable empirically"[20]. Furthermore, Joseph Heath notes that "simply persuading people to change their beliefs has no tendency to change the underlying mechanism through which the practices are reproduced"[21]. Ideology critique does not seem to work; this fact alone might lead us to question the assumption that false consciousness is really propping up the status quo.

3) Finally, Heath and Rosen both argue that *collective action problems* can successfully explain many or even most of the problems attributed to ideology[22]. But if problems of coordination and collective action are able to successfully explain these issues, then there are some very compelling reasons to prefer it to the theory of ideology. Heath reminds us that the principle of charity "is not a methodological assumption, it is a constitutive principle. To interpret someone is to interpret that person charitably – if you are not interpreting them charitably, then what you are doing simply does not count as interpretation"[23]. Charitable interpretation, of course, involves the assumption of rationality. Therefore, when critical theory assumes that behavior derives from false consciousness, the critical theorist doesn't offer a bad interpretation so much as what he is doing simply doesn't count as interpretation at all.

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[20] Celikates (2018, 55).

[21] Heath (2000, 364).

[22] Rosen (1996, 261-262) uses the example of a bunch of people held hostage by a gunman; if they attacked together, they could overpower the gunman. Furthermore, it is in each of their interests to do so. And so it is clearly rational for the group to overpower the gunman. And yet, while *the group* is sure to be successful, there is still a risk to each *individual* (the gunman might very well kill one or even several of the hostages during the struggle); and furthermore, the group is likely to be successful even if *most* of the hostages attack instead of *all* of them. And so, for each *individual* in the group, the *most rational* preference is for *everybody else* to attack the gunman, so that the individual gets the benefits of overpowering the gunman without taking on the same risks. "The possibility of 'free riders'", Rosen writes, "changes the calculation facing each individual drastically" (261). It is not at all irrational to passively submit under such circumstances; in fact, it seems to require a certain amount of irrational faith to voluntarily act in a case like this! "If individuals were to act purely from narrow self-interest", Rosen says, "then the process of initiating dissent is very likely to be irrational" (262).

[23] Heath (2000, 365).

Taken together, we have some fairly compelling reasons to abandon the theory of ideology altogether. And indeed, Rosen and Heath are among the theorists who suggest we do exactly that. "But the problems that the theory of ideology addresses remain real, even if we are skeptical about the solutions it offers," Rosen writes at the end of *On Voluntary Servitude*[24]. Heath likewise soft-pedals his conclusion; greater attention to collective action problems, he says, "*reduces* the need for a theory of ideology"[25]. Other major critics of ideology – including Celikates and Maeve Cooke – have offered their sharp criticisms of ideology theory as a preface for a more elaborate defense of ideology critique. Rahel Jaeggi, in her *Rethinking Ideology*, seems to have put it most succinctly when she writes, "there are still certain social circumstances, certain forms of social domination that require a critique of ideology"[26]. Indeed, Jaeggi notes, the critique of ideology seems to be so central to critical theory that we find it at least *in practice* even in many theorists who avoid (or even reject) the term[27].

The project of a critical theory of society seems to require something like ideology critique. And yet, for a progressive critical theory, ideology critique threatens to undermine the very project that necessitated its invention. Returning to the tension I flagged in the introduction, I want to argue that these problems of ideology critique are problems of its origins.

3. The Idealism of Ideology Critique

Horkheimer writes that "critical theory is the heir not only of German idealism but of philosophy as such"[28]. In her careful exegesis of Horkheimer's claim, Karen Ng traces this inheritance of German idealism into the critique of ideology in particular. Kant initiates a project in which "the form and capacity of reason itself" is put on trial *by* reason[29]. And though with Hegel, the critique of reason turns to consider the ways in which reason is "embedded in social, historical reality", Ng demonstrates that

[24] Rosen (1996, 272).

[25] Heath (2000, 366; emphasis added).

[26] Jaeggi (2009, 63).

[27] Jaeggi (2009, 81 n. 4): "There are practical critiques of ideology, or ideology-critical practices, by a variety of writers from Guy Debord to Judith Butler […]. And it is obvious that one can understand Bourdieu's analysis of *habitus* and *doxa* as regards its actual content as a contribution to the critique of ideology, even though Bourdieu distances himself from the vocabulary linked to the concept of ideology".

[28] Horkheimer (1972, 245).

[29] Ng (2015, 393).

the critique of ideology is a continuation of idealism, the self-critique of a form of reason. And so one possible response to the many problems of ideology critique is to argue that we need to continue the "materialization" of the project of critical theory. This, in essence, is the argument Althusser started to put forward in the mid-1970s. It is well known that earlier in his career, Althusser and his circle had looked to Marx's late works – and especially *Capital* – for the true, scientific Marxism. But by the 1970s, Althusser rejects this approach; and by his 1978 essay *Marx in his Limits*, he now sees Marx's entire oeuvre as a protracted struggle to overcome idealism and establish a new materialist basis for critical theory. This is a project that Marx never fully succeeds in at all – Althusser argues that a "latent, or manifest idealism" not only haunts *The German Ideology*, but also "haunts *Capital* itself"[30]. The "limits" of the essay's title are the boundaries of a materialism that Marx is able to approach but not always to cross over into[31].

Nowhere are these "limits" separating an erstwhile idealism from a new materialism more evident than in the theory of ideology:

> It may be safely said that Marx basically never abandoned the conviction that *ideology consists of ideas*. […] Although he manifestly believed that the ideologies bear a relation to practice, or 'the interests' of groups or classes, Marx never crossed 'the absolute limit' of the material existence of ideologies, of their material existence in the materiality of class struggle[32].

Althusser suggests that his own *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* essay was an attempt – "in many respects inept – to cross this 'limit'"[33]. Althusser indicates repeatedly in his 1978 essay that the arguments put forward in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* need to be "rectified" or "extended"[34]. It is a project that Althusser continued to develop over the 1970s and 1980s, and one that he never finished; however, he has taken the first steps across the "absolute limit" of materialism.

4. Althusser's Materialist Theory of Ideology

First and foremost, the "materialism" of Althusser's late work on ideology is a matter of his famous "ideological apparatuses", those "distinct and

30 Althusser (2006, 37-38).
31 Althusser (2006, 43).
32 Althusser (2006, 137-138).
33 Althusser (2006, 138).
34 E.g., Althusser (2006, 99).

specialized institutions"[35]. Althusser argues that "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material"[36]. He is at great pains to stress the material nature of ideology in his essay:

> I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject[37].

Althusser therefore wants to *drop* the term "ideas" out of our understanding of ideology completely, "to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus"[38]. In order to explain his point, Althusser refers to §680 of Pascal's *Pensées*[39], a passage which Althusser glosses, "Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe"[40]. But of course Althusser is not trying to teach us how to believe; *nor* is his point that our practices end up determining our ideological beliefs (the more traditional "reflection" model of base and superstructure). As Warren Montag explains, "Words may remain (e.g., 'belief', 'consciousness'), but Althusser has effectively banished any notion of interiority"[41]. The point Althusser is trying to make is that *beliefs don't matter*. As long as people behave according to certain values and standards, it simply doesn't matter whether or not they "believe in" what they are doing. I take it that Jacques Rancière is making a very similar point when he argues that inequality doesn't need the workers to believe in it; "It is enough […] that they use their arms, their eyes, and their minds *as if* it were true"[42].

This first point is essential; it takes ideology "out of the head" and puts it into the world. This move will allow Althusser's theory of ideology to

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35 Althusser (2001, 96).
36 Althusser (2001, 112).
37 Althusser (2001, 114).
38 Althusser (2001, 115).
39 Pascal (1995, 155-156): "You want to find faith and you do not know the way? You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for the remedies? Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions".
40 Althusser (2001, 114).
41 Montag (2013, 154).
42 Rancière (2016, 137).

avoid both the authoritarianism and the self-defeating method of idealist critiques of "necessary false consciousness." But the nature of Althusser's materialist transformation has been missed or misinterpreted by many readers. From a field of many possibilities, let me take just three prominent examples. Here is John B. Thompson:

> The concept of ideology directs our attention towards processes whereby consciousness is constituted […]. There can be little doubt that Althusser's analysis of these processes is over-simplified and excessively deterministic; his view that 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects' leaves no room for the autonomous *action* of subjects who may decide to contravene the imperatives of reproduction[43].

And here is Jan Rehmann:

> However, one fundamental question is how Althusser can explain resistance and struggles if he considers human beings as completely entangled in, and formed by, ideological practices, rituals, and […] 'interpellations' constituting individuals as subjects[44].

Finally, here is Terry Eagleton:

> The political bleakness of Althusser's theory is apparent in his very conception of how the subject emerges into being […]. Once we have 'internalized' this Law, made it thoroughly our own, we begin to act it out spontaneously and unquestioningly. We come to work, as Althusser comments, "all by ourselves", without need of constant coercive supervision; and it is this lamentable condition that we misrecognize as our freedom[45].

In each of these cases, the author reinscribes Althusser's account of ideology within consciousness and then reads Althusser's theory of interpellation as completely constituting agents as mindless functionaries of a totalizing ideology. On this basis, each author judges that Althusser's theory is too pessimistic, as it leaves no room for independent agency. There are, I think, three major reasons why critics misread Althusser in this way.

First, those who misread Althusser's work on "ideological state apparatuses" almost always do so (at least in part) on the basis of things he says in his earlier work (especially *For Marx*). Thompson introduces the term "ideological state apparatuses", and then proceeds to summarize points from the essay intermixed with ideas from *For Marx*[46]. Likewise, Rehmann

[43] Thompson (1984, 95).
[44] Rehmann (2014, 153).
[45] Eagleton (1991, 145-146).
[46] Thompson (1984, 90).

writes that Althusser "had already developed" the "entire concept of ideology in general" at work in the ISAs essay in *For Marx*[47]. Eagleton makes the same claim.[48] The problem is that Althusser's work in the 1960s is still continuous with the idealist tradition of ideology, treating ideology as an unconscious "discourse" which produces a "subject-effect"[49]. By the end of the 1960s, however (and coinciding with the composition of the "Ideological State Apparatuses" essay), Althusser critically rejects his own "theoreticist" early work. Thus, as I have previously argued, the position put forward in the ISAs essay ought to be read as a *criticism* of that early work, not as continuous with it[50]. More important, however, is that looking to this earlier work for help interpreting what Althusser says about ideological apparatuses will seriously mislead the reader.

Second, readers also have a tendency to look to Lacan for help interpreting Althusser. Eagleton, for example, asserts that Althusser derives his theory of ideology "from a combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the less obviously historicist features of Gramsci's work", and then spends two full pages explaining how "Althusser's theory of ideology involves at least two crucial misreadings of the psychoanalytic writings of Jacques Lacan"[51]. Readers who first come to Althusser's work through secondary sources like this might be very surprised to discover that the name Lacan does not appear at all in the "Ideological State Apparatuses" essay! It is true that Althusser's 1964 essay *Freud and Lacan* also appears in *Lenin and Philosophy* (the book that saw the publication of the English translation of Althusser's essay on ideological state apparatuses), but – as Warren Montag shows – this essay is by far the least critical thing Althusser ever published about Lacan, and is an excerpt from a lecture series which offers "a more critical reading of Lacan"[52]. The tendency to read Lacan *into* Althusser's work on interpellation has the effect of making ideology *psychological*, and making interpellation something "unconscious" instead of merely *not*-conscious. (It is significant that Althusser never uses the term "unconscious" in his ideological state apparatuses essay to explain or illustrate how ideology functions. Rather, he *compares* his comments about ideology being "eter-

47 Rehmann (2014, 158).
48 Eagleton (1991, 137).
49 See, e.g., Althusser (2003b).
50 Lampert (2015, 131).
51 Eagleton (1991, 136, 144).
52 Montag (2013, 119).

nal" or "having no history" with "Freud's proposition that the *unconscious is eternal*, i.e., that it has no history"[53]).

There is a third significant source of misunderstanding between Althusser and his readers: the category of the "subject". Ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects", but the term "subject" makes its appearance in Althusser's essay without definition or exaplanation. Althusser simply "observes" that individuals have beliefs deriving "from the ideas of the individual concerned, i.e. from him as a subject with a consciousness which contains the ideas of his belief"[54]. However, this passage leads directly into Althusser's critical demolition of the "ideological representation of ideology", in which the term "ideas" will be dropped, and the concepts of "belief" and "consciousness" will be radically reworked. Consequently, I want to suggest that Althusser will use the term "subject" to link subjection to *subjecthood*. His critics, however, will misread him as connecting subjection to *subjectivity*. If subjectivity involves the first-person perspective and interiority (the Cartesian "I think"), subject*hood* is merely the grammatical notion involving the ascription of actions. A "subject" in this sense need not have interiority; it simply something to which verbs and predicates can be ascribed[55].

These two very different meanings of "subject" present us with a confusion that is by no means unique. Compare the term "person". Originating in the Greek πρόσωπον ("face" or "countenance"), the Latin *persona* will refer to a mask worn by actors – a role. As Gadamer notes, "from here there developed the concept of person in legal terminology"[56]; a legal person, of course, need not have any "interiority" at all. As Peter French explains:

> Following many writers on jurisprudence, a juristic person may be defined as any entity that is a subject of a right […]. In effect, in Roman legal tradition persons are creations, artifacts, of the law itself, i.e., of the legislature that enacts the law, and are not considered to have, or only have incidentally, existence of any kind outside the legal sphere[57].

French and Gadamer both point to a decisive turning point for the term "person": Boethius's definition of the person as *naturae rationalis in-*

[53] Althusser (2001, 109).
[54] Althusser (2001, 113).
[55] Furthermore, it is clear that *this* is Althusser's (2001, 123) intended meaning of subject, when he calls the subject "a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions".
[56] Gadamer (2000, 285).
[57] French (1979, 208).

dividua substantia. It is now entirely commonplace to find analyses of "personhood" like the following, from Charles Taylor:

> A person is a being who has a sense of self, has a notion of the future and the past, can hold values, make choices; in short, can adopt life-plans. […] Running through all this we can identify a necessary (but not sufficient) condition. A person must be a being with his own point of view on things[58].

So strongly has this newer notion of "person" taken hold, that when Harry Frankfurt complains that "what philosophers have lately come to accept as analysis of the concept of a person is not actually analysis of *that* concept at all", he's actually complaining that too many analyses of "personhood" (Frankfurt cites Stawson) fail to pick out what separates humans from animals – the "structure of a person's will"[59].

It seems to me that both the concepts "subject" and "person" carry this ambiguity; there is a strictly exterior sense (subject as the doer of an action, person as the bearer of a right) and an interior sense (the *I think* of the subject, the "second-order desire" of the person). And this ambiguity provides ample ground to cover exactly the sort of mis-readings of Althusser that I have been discussing.

But what, then, *does* it mean to say that ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects"? Althusser's sole example is actually helpful: the Christian religious ideology[60]. Religious ideology, writes Althusser, is "addressed to individuals, in order to 'transform them into subjects', by interpellating the individual, Peter, in order to make him a subject, free to obey or disobey the appeal, i.e. God's commandments"[61]. Here we have Peter constituted *as the kind of subject* who can obey or disobey God's commandments: someone *subjected to* God's laws. Now – only now – is Peter capable of "sinning," even though he would certainly still have been able to *decide* and *act* without Christian religious ideology. What changes is not Peter's ability to take action, but rather the ability of his actions to *count as* certain kinds of activities. Before, Peter could eat meat on the Friday before the first full moon after the vernal equinox; but only now can Peter's action *count as a sin*.

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[58] Taylor (1985, 97).

[59] Frankfurt (1971, 5, 6).

[60] Note that the famous scene of the police officer saying "Hey, you!" is an allegory and *not* an example. The reference to this scene as an "example" is another symptomatic sign of a mis-reading of Althusser; Jan Rehmann and Judith Butler are both prominent examples of this tendency.

[61] Althusser (2001, 121).

As this language of "counting as" indicates, an ideological apparatus is an institution. As Searle puts it, "An institution is any system of constitutive rules of the form *X counts as Y in C*," where *C* is a certain context, and *Y* assigns a "status function"[62]. A status function is "a special kind of assignment of function where the object or person to whom the function is assigned cannot perform the function just in virtue of its physical structure, but rather can perform the function only in virtue of the fact that there is a collective assignment of a certain *status*"[63]. The "interpellation" performed by an apparatus is this "assignment of status", a "counting as". Furthermore, this is a matter of *recognition*: the "count as" mechanism is a way of recognizing certain things and actions (and duties and obligations) in the world; "That person is the President", or "She just scored a touchdown". This is why Althusser writes that "the ideological *recognition* function […] is one of the two functions of ideology as such"[64].

Interpellations therefore confer identities, and each of these identities brings with it what Searle calls "deontic powers":

> The essential role of human institutions and the purpose of having institutions is not to constrain people as such, but, rather, to create new sorts of power relationships. Human institutions are, above all, *enabling*, because they create power, but it is a special kind of power. It is the power that is marked by such terms as: rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions, empowerments, requirements, and certifications. I call these *deontic powers*[65].

This account of power should not surprise anyone already familiar with Foucault. Interpellation is both constraining *and* productive; it grants abilities and privileges, but also *regulates* the use of these. And this brings us to one of the essential points about ideological apparatuses *qua* institutions: Searle shows that "institutional structures create desire-independent reasons for action"[66]. To put this another way, institutions make certain behaviors *reasonable*. Reich has suggested that the need for a theory of ideology comes "when human thinking and acting *contradict* the economic situation, when, in other words, they are *irrational*"[67]. But we might instead say: We turn to a (materialist) theory of ideology in order to explain

62 Searle (2005, 10).
63 Searle (2005, 7).
64 Althusser (2001, 116).
65 Searle (2005, 10).
66 Searle (2005, 11).
67 Reich (1946, 15).

how actions "contradicting the economic situation" become *rational* for the actors nonetheless.

If ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects" in the way I have just suggested, then it should be clear that Althusser's critics seriously misread him when they suggest that this interpellation is totalizing, completely internalized, without room for human autonomy. My interpellation as a subject by no means determines in "top-down" fashion the entire content of my psyche and personality, and I can still take up various psychological perspectives on both my society and my place within it. But at any given time, my interpellation as a subject will grant me certain powers to aid me, but also constrain the ways in which I can legitimately use those powers – I am free to choose my actions, even if I am not free to determine what those actions will "count as," and whether they will mark me as a "good subject" or a "bad subject".

If ideological apparatuses are institutions, however, recall that they are "distinct and specialized institutions"[68]. And so we cannot leave the point here. There are two other essential aspects to Althusser's materialism; the first is ideology's relationship with force and violence. Too many critical theorists seem to think that a theory of ideology needs to explain acceptance of exploitative or oppressive conditions in a way that completely obviates the need for force. This is Althusser's main criticism of Gramsci; "in Gramsci, the 'moment' of Force is ultimately swallowed up by the moment of hegemony"[69]. This, charges Althusser, is "an astoundingly idealist notion"[70]. Already in the essay on "ideological state apparatuses", Althusser had written that the ideological state apparatuses "function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression", adding that "there is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus"[71].

To detach ideology from violence is to fundamentally misunderstand the role of ideology. An idealist theory of ideology acts as if ideology can work all by itself; hence, ideology must be deeply rooted in the consciousness of agents, who must truly believe in the legitimacy of the status quo. But to place ideology back into its proper context is to see how it functions as part of what Althusser calls the "machine" of the state. The state takes the energy of *violence*, and transforms it into *power*[72]. Althusser says that

[68] Althusser (2001, 96).
[69] Althusser (2006, 141).
[70] Althusser (2006, 145).
[71] Althusser (2001, 98; emphasis removed).
[72] Althusser (2006, 105).

we can call the state a "violence engine," in the way we talk about "steam engines" or "petrol engines"[73]:

> Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction […] but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (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 Ideological State Apparatuses[74].

So the "deontic powers" are created, conferred, and regulated by the ideological state apparatuses "behind the shield" of the repressive apparatus; that is, with force always available to back up the institutions' functions.

While I have already responded to a number of criticisms (and misreadings) of Althusser, it may seem as though I have not said anything to answer the most common objection to his theory of ideological apparatuses: *functionalism*. W.F. Haug charges that Althusser's ISAs are "a static, functionalist fixation of […] phenomena" which in reality are "constantly shifting on account of the relations of forces determining them"[75]. Jan Rehmann adds (citing Bourdieu's concurring analysis) that Althusser neglects to account for *resistance*, and so disregards "the actual contradictions and struggles in social institutions in favor of considering their function for the stabilization of domination"[76]. There are already indications from the original 1969 text of Althusser's "apparatuses" essay that this is a misinterpretation – most particularly in his references to "contradictions" within the apparatuses[77] – but it is also a misunderstanding that he begins to address explicitly in his 1970 postscript to the essay: Althusser writes that his presentation is "still abstract, insofar as it has not adopted the point of view of class struggle"[78]. He clarifies the issue even further in his 1978 essay, arguing that "Force and Violence are relative, not absolute concepts":

> But what we mean here is something else entirely: class struggle, where one class

[73] Althusser (2006, 107).
[74] Althusser (2001, 101).
[75] Haug (1987, 63); most of this passage is also quoted in Rehmann (2014, 152).
[76] Rehmann (2014, 152).
[77] See, e.g., Althusser (2001, 98): Althusser writes that "the ruling ideology […] is realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses, *precisely in its contradictions*" (emphasis added). Sentences like this ought to lead us to re-think what we suppose Althusser means by "the ruling ideology," even without looking to post-1969 texts.
[78] Althusser (2001, 101).

is powerful and violent only because it is the dominant class […] exercises its force and violence upon another class (which is also a force) that it must, in a never-ending struggle, hold in check if it is to maintain the upper hand over it. The relatively stable resultant (reproduced in its stability by the state) of this *confrontation* of forces […] is that *what counts is the dynamic excess of force* maintained by the dominant class in the class struggle. It is *this excess of conflictual force* […] which is subsequently transformed into power by the state-machine: *transformed into right, laws and norms*[79].

This is the third essential aspect of Althusser's materialist account of ideology: *Every* ideological apparatus is constituted through dynamic, ongoing struggle. I therefore think that Rehmann and Haug are right to use the term "compromise-formation" (borrowed from Freud) to describe ideology[80]. But while Freud's "compromise formation" is a *reconciliation* of two opposed forces, and is therefore "supported from both sides," we should be careful not to lose sight of the dynamic struggle that determines – at any given moment – the state and status of the apparatus[81]. We might then think of the "compromise formation" as something like a *line of scrimmage* (or a *front*, in the sense of a war or the weather); the formation is the (current) net result of opposed forces, still locked into an ongoing struggle. The use of the Freudian term "compromise formation" directs our attention to an important feature of the ideological state apparatuses. The ISAs, like their Freudian counterparts, are a *symbolic encapsulation* of the opposing forces they contain. By creating an "institutional reality" within which the struggle plays out, the ISAs function as the "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"[82].

Althusser continues to talk about the dominant ideology, "the ruling ideology," and "the ideology of the current ruling class" throughout the ISAs essay. But if ideology is taken in its materialist sense and the ideological state apparatuses are the result of an ongoing struggle, then the "dominant ideology" is a compromise formation. Because the ruling class has the repressive apparatus and the "special machine" of the state, the ideological apparatuses reproduce the *ruling* ideology – a status quo that favors those who have and exercise power. But this "ruling ideology" is always the result of an encounter of forces on the ground, rather than a form imposed on passive matter.

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79 Althusser (2006, 109).

80 Rehmann (2014, 257).

81 Freud (1966, 446): "The two forces which have fallen out meet once again in the symptom and are reconciled, as it were, by the compromise of the symptom that has been constructed. It is for that reason, too, that they symptom is so resistant: it is supported from both sides."

82 Althusser (2001, 109); Searle (2005, 12).

"The status quo" is *never* a static system perfectly reproducing itself – if it were, then there would be no need for continued struggle and no use for critical theory. Instead, the given conditions of domination and exploitation are "a moving train," which the materialist critical theorist must catch[83]. "Social reproduction" must be thought "from the point of view of struggle": There are hierarchical relations, relations of exploitation and domination, attempting to reproduce themselves (and sometimes at cross-purposes, forced into a "teeth-gritting harmony" by the state) – and this reproduction happens imperfectly, with some groups periodically gaining or losing ground, or being reconstituted entirely. A materialist theory of ideology should be able to satisfactorily answer Rosen's objection, then: we needn't rely on the very un-materialist belief in society as a "self-maintaining system". The "system" here is only a series of encounters seen from above, and the "self-replication" is a dynamic and transforming process.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to argue that the most compelling objections to the use of the concept of ideology turn out to be (very good) objections to idealism. A fully-materialist theory of ideology will avoid the most problematic aspects of traditional ideology critique, and I have tried to show that we find the foundations of just such a theory in Althusser's post-1969 work. I have cautioned from the beginning that it will be necessary not only to build upon the foundations Althusser left us, but also in some cases to criticize and amend that work. Let me close, then, by drawing attention to one area where it will be most necessary to make critical changes Althusser's materialist theory.

Jan Rehmann raises "the problem that different contradictions and struggles tend to be subsumed reductively to 'class-struggle', which prevented the Althusser school from opening itself up to a theoretical elaboration of gender- and race-relations, and their respective connections to class- and state-domination"[84]. I think that this is absolutely correct; for all of Althusser's willingness to criticize and go beyond Marx, in the end even Althusser's late work remains too classically Marxist. More significant work will have to be undertaken in order to rework Althusser's theory to account for other forms to domination and struggle. I believe that this path has already been opened for us by Haug and Rehmann; I think that

[83] Althusser (2006, 290).
[84] Rehmann (2014, 154).

there are ways to productively elaborate *Projekt Ideologie-Theorie*'s concept of *Vergesellschaftung* along the lines of the materialist theory of interpellation. Haug presents the probem of ideological domination as a matter of "vertical socialization" (or *Vergesellschaftung* from above)[85]. In this sense, the progressive struggle within ideology is for "horizontal socialization"[86]. There are potentially interesting ways to elaborate this idea in dialogue with, say, Jacques Rancière's work on "politics" – and recall that Rancière's work has already been an insightful and productive critical force within Althusser's own work on ideology. All of this, however, I leave to the side for now. It is enough, at the moment, to point out that Althusser's "notes towards a theory" of ideology still have to be fundamentally developed, and that this development must not repeat the mistake of seeing all social struggles through the lens of economic class. In the meantime, it is my hope that my responses to some of the more frequent and pressing objections to both the theory of ideology and Althusser's elaboration of that theory have shown the promise of such work for a more robust, progressive, and egalitarian critical theory of society.

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[85] Haug (1987, 92).

[86] Haug (1987, 93).

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