



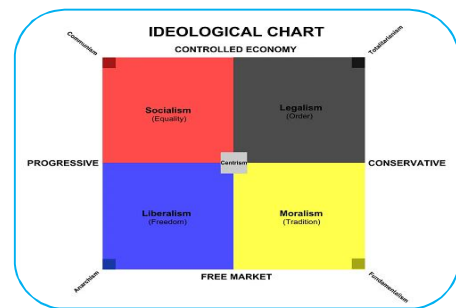
ALTHUSSER'S MATERIALIST THEORY OF IDEOLOGY AND STATE APPARATUSES: A VIEW

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ABSTRACT:

Louis Althusser, a prominent French communist philosopher, reinterpreted Marxism by foregrounding the significance of "Later Marx," whose mature writings offered a more rigorous and thoroughly materialist analysis of history and political economy. Through influential works Althusser advanced a scientific, structurally oriented model of Marxist theory that moved away from traditional philosophical abstraction. His seminal essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," examines the material functioning of ideology and the mechanisms through which it is produced, sustained, and embedded within social institutions. By distinguishing between repressive and ideological state apparatuses, Althusser demonstrates how these structures reproduce the conditions and relations of production necessary for the persistence of class power. Through analyses of institutions such as the church and the school, and concepts such as ritual, subject formation, and ideological misrecognition, Althusser offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of ideology in maintaining social order and state authority.



KEY WORDS: Ideological subjection; reproduction of labor power; Ideology has no history; interpellation; Subjects; state apparatus.

LOUIS ALTHUSSER : AN OVERVIEW

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) was born in Algeria. A French communist and philosopher, initially interested in Christianity, he joined the army, fought during the Second World War and was taken prisoner of war. He was released later and he moved towards left politics, joining the communist party, and working out a new model for contemporary Marxism based on readings of 'Later Marx'. Althusser became popular in the 1960s with the publications of his books, *For Marx* (1965), *Reading Capital* (1965) and *Lenin and Philosophy*. The categories of "Early Marx" and "Later Marx" had gained currency in Althusser's time. He advocated that "Later Marx" was of greater relevance because writings of Marx's mature phase were comprehensively materialistic and his assessments of history and political economy sharper. It is from this phase that Althusser picks up for further elaboration Marx's idea of social formations and **structural explanations** of forces and relations of production. A pioneer in separating theory from philosophy and creating a **scientific** method of analysis in place of philosophical surmises, Althusser brought theory closer to materialism and took it away from vague abstractions that had become a norm in philosophical analyses. His work on **ideological structures** facilitated a thorough understanding of state structures and brought in fresh insights on the working of state

apparatuses. Althusser thus built up a mode of analysis where all levels of social reality could be viewed in terms of structures.

In his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", Althusser takes up for analysis questions on Ideology and how it functions in life; how ideology is produced and evolves, sustained as it is through apparatuses. Further, What are state apparatuses? The significance of the word "apparatus" here makes ideology material and real. Althusser goes on to discuss the nature of repressive and ideological state apparatuses focusing on reproduction of conditions of existence (where a particular class rules) alongside reproduction of relations of production. How ideology works in this reproduction of conditions and how reproduction of subjection to the ruling ideology takes place become the central points in the essay. There is reproduction of labor power as well. Althusser's theory of ideology includes discussion on state, state apparatuses and state power; church and school; rituals; Christian religious ideology; subjects (small s) and Subject (God/ruling group) relationship and Ideology as misrecognition.

I

On the Reproduction of the Conditions of Production

Production for Althusser takes place under specific social relations. In these social relations there are two classes always in conflict with one another –the working class or the proletariat and the resource owning class, the bourgeois. The social relation between these two classes is one of exploitation. The capitalist group exploits the labor of the proletariat and builds surplus profit without sharing it with the actual producers. It also ensures that this relation is maintained and sustained through active efforts.

According to Althusser it is important for the bourgeoisie to build a system through which these social relations can be sustained. Conditions of production that exist today (where the bourgeois exploits the proletariat) must be reproduced and renewed each day so that the ruling class maintains its supremacy even in the future. Just as the means of production need to be reproduced /replenished for production to take place consistently, the conditions of production too need to be reproduced. If you don't simultaneously reproduce conditions that were in place, the system would fail—you have to reproduce exactly the previous conditions of production to maintain efficacy. To go one step further, you would have to expand and refine the conditions, better them to maintain the status quo.

The idea of reproduction of the conditions of production was first introduced by Marx in his seminal book *Capital*, vol. 2. Here Marx had claimed that no production is possible unless its reproduction is made possible. Production must make space for reproduction – reproduction of raw materials and labour power that is the means of production. It is "essential to foresee what is needed to replace, what has been used up or worn out in production : raw material, fixed installations (building)" etc. Marx's discussion of reproduction was based on economic reality. He spoke of reproduction in the base from an economic angle. Althusser builds on this idea and includes in his discussion other areas of life where this "reproduction" takes place--he includes the social and cultural spheres that are part of the superstructure to discuss how reproduction of labour power and conditions of production take place here.

For Althusser, "Reproduction of material conditions of production" is a necessity. The material conditions under which production happens today must be ensured so that with equal efficiency production takes place tomorrow. However, unlike the reproduction of means of production that takes place at the firm / industry, the reproduction of material conditions of production takes place outside the firm.

II

Reproduction of Labour Power

Althusser argues that “The reproduction of labour power takes place essentially outside the firm”. The word essentially is important here. Labour power is reproduced not in the factory but outside it. And how does this reproduction take place? It is ensured by giving wages to the workers, with which they can maintain and reproduce themselves. Althusser gives the example of a worker who must pay for housing, food and clothing. The point is that after a long working day the worker should be able to “present himself again at the factory gate the next day” and every day after it. The worker needs to be provided with material means, i.e. wages, so one is in a position to return to work. Interestingly Althusser points out that the proletariat reproduces itself as labour power in the form of “raising and educating” his children who would one day replace the parents in the factory.

Althusser suggests that the bourgeoisie needs to ensure that reproduction of capitalist order takes place by establishing an entire network of living for the wage earner who must return to work. Houses, schools, church buildings would have to be built for the worker so one is able to live in a particular manner and the proletariat's children are also trained to one day take the place of the parent. The proletariat thus needs a “historical variable minimum” to keep going.

III

The Capitalist Education System

Althusser points out that the workers have to be skilled in the use of instruments and machinery and when newer instruments too need to be added and the worker needs to be trained in their use which could take place in the form of apprenticeship etc. However, the capitalist education system ensures that the potential worker learns not just skills but more importantly subjugates oneself to the ideology of the ruling class. The workers learn the know-how, the techniques and knowledge (whether in engineering or management) and at the same time learn the rules of good behavior, “morality, civic and professional conscience” which are ultimately “the rules of the order established by class domination”. This learning is not provided on site in the factory but off site in society. Althusser gives several examples of this on pg 25 of your book.

Thus what is ensured by the capitalist education system is “reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers”—that is “subjection to the ruling ideology”. This is an essential aspect of reproduction of labour power. For the agents of exploitation it is important to reproduce their ability each time to “manipulate the ruling ideology” and pass it off as given, universal truths. These agents must be, says Althusser, “steeped” in the capitalist ideology (they must live it, breathe it, make it a part of themselves) so they can “perform their task conscientiously”.

Thus while skills are produced and reproduced, subjection to ruling ideology is reproduced alongside. Subjection to ruling ideology takes place through “forms”. Forms here refer to social practices and rituals we accept and carry forward. Althusser emphasizes by italicizing the following sentence--“*it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power*”. This takes Althusser to exploring the basic questions—

1. What is ideology?
2. What is a society?

He addresses the question of society first and indirectly discusses ideology. But he devotes an entire section specifically to ideology at the end of the essay. The following headings go on to explain the complex that society is—as consisting of infrastructure and Superstructure; the State: the State's ideological apparatuses. Having explained the nature and the working of the State, Althusser takes up the central question he opened at the beginning of the essay –“on the reproduction of the relations of production”.

Simply put, Althusser argues that for the capitalist class reproducing relations of exploitation is extremely important. The ruling class has to ensure successful production where it is the beneficiary. This successful production must take place every day and every day the ruling class must benefit from it. When production takes place every day in the same manner it is reproduction of conditions of production. To achieve this, the ruling class needs to put certain things in place. It needs to build a system and a network that makes the workers subject to the ruling class ideology—they must willingly accept their unequal position and the authority of the bourgeoisie. Once the system is set, it needs to dynamically take it forward and improve on it. This is the aim of the ruling class. Next, Althusser goes on to explain how that is achieved. This aim is achieved most significantly through the capitalist education system, although other institutions such as the church and army also work towards this end. These produce a good consenting worker who has been morally, educationally and professionally tamed according to the rules that benefit the capitalist class.

Althusser claims that along with reproduction of means of production, social relations too need to be reproduced (that is the relation of exploitation needs to be reproduced) each time so they continue to exist tomorrow. This he calls “reproduction of the relations of production”. The school is a “dominant ideological state apparatus” which has replaced the church in the present. From among other ideological activities such as religious preaching, worship, mass media, the parliament, the school has been chosen as the most abiding instrument of producing ruling class ideology by the bourgeois class.

The basic function of Ideology is “recognition”—the realization of “me” that is consciousness of the self, one’s identity. Who I am that is who I imagine I am and what society wants me to imagine who I am.

Interpellation—which means calling out ‘you there! You have been recognized and called’ is the very moment ideology calls out to the individual and the individual responds spontaneously. At this moment, reminds Althusser, the individual has turned into a (small s) subject. God the Subject *interpellates* ordinary individuals and makes them through rituals and practices.

IV

Infrastructure and Superstructure

Althusser reminds us of the basic division Marx had conceived of the structure of every society that is constituted by ‘levels’—“the infrastructure or economic base (the unity of the productive forces and 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.)”. Althusser admits that such a model is theoretic and didactic but lucid as it simplifies things for understanding. At the same time the theoretical apparatus gives us an idea of ‘effectivity’ of each level. The metaphor from topography or the spatial metaphor –the representation of structure of society as edifice with a base on which are erected two ‘floors’ of the superstructure—makes the concept visible and clear. It can be easily understood that “the upper floors could not ‘stay up’ (in the air) alone if they did not rest precisely on their base”. This explains Marx’s point which Althusser uses for his elaboration that “determination in the last instance” happens by the economic base. There may be variations in the superstructure but all developments that take place in the superstructure are finally determined by the ruling class in the economic base. According to Althusser, the spatial metaphor is crucial in understanding this fact. The metaphor endows the base with an “index of effectivity”. This index also helps us better understand the ‘effectivity’ of the floors of the superstructure. The floor model thus helps us see that the “floors of the superstructure are clearly endowed with different indices of effectivity”. This means some floors are more effective than others in creating consent and establishing order. But they are all in the last instance determined by the base which is most effective.

However Althusser explores the descriptive model of Marx further. He devotes a large chunk of the essay to probing “What characterizes the essential of the existence and nature of the superstructure *on the basis of reproduction*”. Thus Althusser begins his thesis from the point of view of reproduction. It

is one thing to look at superstructure—its existence and nature but it is another when one looks at the superstructure from the point of view of reproduction (of productive forces and relation of production that are necessary for the capitalist order to go on). Viewed from the angle of “reproduction” (as the mainstay on which depends the smooth functioning of an order) the narrative receives additional meaning and insight. Thus Althusser’s basic thesis in the essay depends entirely on looking at superstructure from the “point of view of reproduction”. To this end, he takes up for analysis categories of the State, Law and ideology specifically from the point of view of “reproduction”.

V

The State

The State is an ‘apparatus’ a specialized apparatus. In Marxism as Althusser explains -- “the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus”. Its function is as follows-- “The State is a machine of repression, which enables the ruling class (in the nineteenth century the bourgeois class and the ‘class’ of big landowners) 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. capitalist exploitation)”. Thus the State works like a machine in the hands of the ruling class. It assists the class in power to maintain its control over the working class and continue its exploitation over it.

Althusser digresses to include a discussion on “From Descriptive Theory to Theory as such”. The point he wishes to make here is that by looking at the State in terms of the ‘floor’ or edifice metaphor we gain a greater understanding of how society functions. By viewing society and the State in this manner the whole thing becomes descriptive and visual—i.e. “descriptive conceptions”. This “descriptive theory” of the state can become a solid ground on which a “theory as such” (which is by nature abstract) can be made. Concepts must be made descriptive so they are understood before they can be taken to the level of pure theory. Thus descriptive theory notes Althusser is the “beginning of theory” and finally it is left behind as theory evolves. The development of theory then “goes beyond the form of description”. Thus by representing the state as an apparatus (by making it descriptive) we become aware of the various levels, “orders of repression”, that exist in that apparatus—as Althusser notes “It casts light on that subtle everyday domination”.

Althusser explains the idea of the State in Marxian terms, “The State (and its existence in its apparatus) has no meaning except as a function of *State power*”. The State cannot exist without State power. What is the difference between the two? State power constitutes the “seizure and conservation of State power by a certain class”. When the dominant class gains control of the State and makes it an instrument of its interests then it is referred to as State power. The State by nature is always in the hands of the ruling class. The *State apparatus* (that is its various operational wings and offices where laws are carried out) may survive revolutions and political turmoil but *State power* inevitably depends on a particular class to give it direction. Hence, the difference between State apparatus and State power. Refer to p. 33 of your book (first paragraph) to see the Marxist theory on State—that it is repressive; State power and State apparatus must be distinguished; Class struggle primarily concerns itself with State power and later with the use of the State apparatus; and finally that the proletariat must seize State power, and destroy the bourgeois state apparatus, and set in motion the destruction of the very idea of the State.

Althusser asserts that while the distinction between State apparatus and State power is important, it is equally important to understand that State apparatus is not a monolithic unit and in fact consists of two broad and distinct categories. These include--repressive State apparatus and ideological State apparatuses. He thus introduces the concept of State Ideological Apparatuses or ISA and offers a systematic outline of this theory. This is Althusser’s main contribution to Marxist theory and the central point of the present essay. He explains: “What are the ideological State apparatuses (ISAs)?”

1. They must not be confused with repressive State apparatus (RSA) which is a repressive unit of the state constituting the government, administration, army, police, prison, courts etc. This apparatus "functions by violence" primarily.
2. Ideological State Apparatuses are a "number of realities which present themselves" to an ordinary observer as "distinct and specialized institutions". These are all the superstructure institutions which we discussed in class with the metaphor of the building. Althusser provides a detailed list. See p. 34 of your book. These include – the religious ISA (Gramsci's essay on the role played by them comes to mind); the educational ISA (all public/ private schools and higher education institutions); the family ISA ; the legal ISA (note that legal interestingly works very well in both RSA and ISA it is equally repressive physically as it is ideologically); Political ISA (the political parties, parliament, electoral system, the government when seen as political unit); trade union ISA; communications ISA (mass media, print journalism and in our context social media); cultural ISA (literature, arts, music, sports etc.).
3. Althusser brings out the differences between ISAs and RSA—

ISA	RSA
● Plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses. Even when all these institutions are interconnected their unity is not immediately visible ● Remains in Private domain (small groups -- family, schools, churches, cultural events) hence private institutions. They function privately. This point Gramsci had outlined in the essay in your course. ● Fundamental difference –ISAs function by ideology. ● The Class in power "cannot lay down the law in the ISA as easily". It is a complex unit. ● The former ruling class is able to retain the space of the ISAs for a long time even after having lost politically and economically to the new class. ● The ISAs provides space, occasion and means to the exploited classes to express their resistance here, even if it remains subdued or goes unheard. In ISA contradictions are ever active.	● One Repressive State Apparatus—a singular unit ● Belongs entirely to the Public domain (law courts; prisons) ● RSA functions by violence ● Clearly laid out laws and decrees in RSA ● With the change of State power the ruling class immediately takes control of the State apparatus, the RSA. ● No space for dissension and debate in RSA.

Althusser adds that "every State apparatus, whether Repressive or Ideological, 'functions' both by violence and by ideology". The difference is in their degree and their predominant function. Thus RSA functions "massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology". There is, he emphasizes "no such thing as purely repressive apparatus". For instance, the Army which is a part of RSA is constantly fed with nationalist discourse and given "values" to fight for the country. The army is ideologically controlled while it works as a repressive unit of the state.

The same is true of ISA. There is no such thing as purely ideological apparatus. ISAs work "massively and predominantly by ideology" but "secondarily by repression" as well. Take the case of schools and disciplinary action against students. All kinds of punishments at home, school and churches.

Thus, the ISAs and the RSA are unified in their functions at some level and even as we see the differences between them we should be aware of their unifying features. Just as the ISAs, in spite of their disparities, have the common function of establishing domination by ideology. They are unified in their function.

The ruling class has at its disposal the State power and thus the RSA. The same ruling class is also "active" in the ISAs because it is ultimately the ruling class ideology which is being parceled to us through the various institutions of school, church, family etc.

Having outlined the significance and complexity of the Ideological State Apparatuses, Althusser brings out his central thesis. To quote: "To my knowledge, *no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses*". He further adds, "Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle". Two important points here. One, for Althusser the ruling class must hegemonize through the ideological apparatuses in order to maintain hold over the State power for a long period of time. Physical repression is not enough for it to maintain its position. It must create tacit consent through the ideological apparatuses of the State which are crucial in maintaining power over society. Social institutions primarily work through ideological domination. Two, Ideological state Apparatuses can in fact become the "site" of bitter contestation or class struggle. It may not just remain a part of the larger picture—a projection of what happens in the economic base. In fact, class struggles can take place in the Ideological State apparatuses.