

Introduction: An Althusser for the Twenty-First Century

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Ideology, in all its forms, is proliferating in the twenty-first century. Whether we understand ideology as extreme ideas, the disputed content of political discourse, the institutionalized pragmatism of the status quo, or the spontaneous, embodied, and/or habitual practices of everyday life, it is ubiquitous and effective. The present far-right nationalist sentiments that seem everywhere on the rise present only its most obvious face.

Such an abundance of ideology characterizes periods of capitalist transition or crisis. As the neoliberal regime of accumulation and (de)regulation at the capitalist core approaches its apparent limits, a structurally necessary struggle over the means of social reproduction has moved into public view. The status quo desperately seeks stability while political activists from various corners rush forward to claim center stage — each group disseminating its own ideological fantasy. Resulting conflicts between ideologies supplement the exercise of overt class violence (often but not always carried out by the state), but both coercive and consensus-making projects respond to malfunctions in the mechanisms of social reproduction.

In Wolfgang Streeck's assessment, these are the features of an interregnum. Streeck uses this term to describe the situation following the 2008 crisis, a period in which capitalism seems unsteady but no new system has arisen. Streeck describes an increasingly unequal and asocial capitalism severing its mid-century compromise with democracy; this separation prompts a "moral decline" and launches an anarchic proliferation of cultural conflicts, as a capital in the throes of overaccumulation casts about for a new means of reproducing itself.¹ Ideological abundance, in other words, does not trigger systemic change, but it does register the fragility of the capitalist system as a whole during periods of stalled transition.

In universities, analyzing culture and ideology has long been the responsibility of the hermeneutic disciplines. In addition to providing credentials that reproduce the professional middle classes, humanists stabilize, innovate within, and sometimes disrupt the circulation of capitalist ideologies. However, in the first decades of the

twenty-first century, many of the tools necessary for ideology critique in particular have been dismantled in favor of approaches such as surface reading and the critique of critique. Some of this resistance to critical readings of ideology announces itself as anti-rational and anti-political — seeing little remaining to the humanities in a period of social crisis beyond the excavation and appreciation of antiquarian curiosities. Other scholarly approaches restrict the “political” (that is, the ideological) to a narrow set of national or subnational themes having no material basis, while still others find too few cultural spaces sufficiently autonomous from capital to allow the project of critique to flourish.

An abundance of ideology, in other words, arrives at just the moment when the hermeneutic disciplines are least prepared to withstand the onslaught. Having relentlessly critiqued their own disciplines and institutions to the point where every claim to knowledge or authority is demonstrably anxious at the first moment of its articulation, too many hermeneuts have too little to offer to the urgent struggle against manifestly ideological barrages of alternative facts and fake news. Few positive projects unite the hermeneuts, and many are too preoccupied with defenses of existing institutions to envision practices that disrupt the social reproduction of domination. Abandoning the project of critique then leaves the floodgates open to ideologies of the least liberatory variety.

Fortunately, the Marxist tradition provides many resources for those working to find a way out of ideological stalemates, improve comprehension of the systemic functions of ideology generally, and advance a positive ideology in the context of struggle. Decades of debate within Marxist scholarship have honed the terms and alerted participants to crucial fault lines in the discussion of ideology. The dossier of position statements presented in this issue of *Mediations* continues this essential discussion by reconsidering the work of Louis Althusser, the author of several essays that are indisputably central to any approach to ideology and ideology critique.

The initial occasion for this dossier was the publication in English of the full text of Althusser’s *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. This 270-page handbook contains Althusser’s two crucial statements on ideology: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and “On Ideology.” These pieces have a complicated textual history that embeds them in the concerns of the late 1960s. Although apparently drafted in 1969 and appearing in a form that Étienne Balibar describes “a partial montage” in the French press in 1970, they were not published in the context of Althusser’s fuller argument until their posthumous appearance in French in 1995.² Reading these essays in this context clarifies the relation between Althusser’s account of ideology and his unfinished theory of the school system; it also underscores the position of the theory of ideology within his treatment of the social reproduction of capitalism more generally.

For Althusser, ideology is a primary means of social reproduction because it stabilizes the inherently chaotic and crisis-ridden system of capitalism. Consequently,

the analysis — or better, the philosophical critique — of ideology provides for Althusser a direct point of entry into the processes of social reproduction. In Althusser's famous formulation, "philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory," because philosophy (that is, critique) activates the contradictions that disturb the superficially smooth reproduction of relations based on exploitation and conflict.³ Critique, Althusser explained in yet another definitive statement on the topic, is a mode of reading that situates an "informed gaze" in a terrain; critique embeds the gaze so that it may be transformed by the terrain.⁴ Thus, critique does not involve importing an external viewpoint or supplementing the object of critique with extraneous sociological data; still less does it consist of correcting errors in false consciousness. Instead, the project of critique involves tasks such as identifying the implicit question to which the textual object provides an answer and attending to the blind spots, rhythms, and excesses that organize the text's topography so that its deep structure may be revealed. Critique, in other words, unfolds the immanent contradictions of its object and in so doing constitutes itself as a form of knowledge (which Althusser also calls, somewhat distractingly, "science"). Furthermore, he asserts that "the *object* of knowledge can only exist in the form of ideology at the moment of constitution of the science."⁵ Ideology occupies the point of origin of knowledge and science, and critique consists of the patient transformation of ideology into knowledge. To build knowledge, critique directs a new "gaze" and a receptive practice of reading into the space between ideology and knowledge.

This account of reading as struggle-oriented critique carries over into Althusser's theory of ideology. The definition famously offered in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* identifies three components to ideology: representation, imagination, and the real. "Ideology," Althusser proposes, "represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence."⁶ Here, ideology is defined by the relations it establishes. Ideology represents a relation to an existence, and that imaginary relation is the locus of the mediation between representation and reality. The imaginary sits at the center of ideology. In his enormously useful study *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Warren Montag demonstrates how Althusser's concept of the imaginary addressed contemporaneous phenomenological accounts of the image, and Fredric Jameson has famously examined the Lacanian register of Althusser's system, where the imaginary mediates between the symbolic and the real. Other approaches might situate Althusser's treatment in relation to the mass media image that rapidly developed during the 1960s and has taken on digital forms since that moment. All of these accounts, however, treat the imaginary as a *relation*.

The word translated into English as "relation" appears in Althusser's French as "*rapport*." The primary definitions of the word "*rapport*" in French include commercial profit and bureaucratic reports — with overtones of interpersonal accord or sexual intimacy. Ben Brewster's translation of "*rapport*" as "relation" reduces the number of these connotations, emphasizing instead the way *rapport* came to be used in

Francophone Marxist terminology. For the twentieth-century French left, the crucial concept of “relations of production” was commonly expressed as “*rapports de production*.” This is, however, a modern usage. In the 1872-75 French edition of *Capital Volume 1* personally supervised by Marx, the word “relation” appears 284 times and “*rapport*” only eight times.⁷ Marx uses *rapport* only to describe the reports filed by factory inspectors and the family relations unsettled by capital. His less technical usage of *rapport* would likely have been familiar to Althusser as an unusually attentive Francophone reader of *Capital*. When Althusser uses *rapport*, then, he perhaps invokes not only its significance within the contemporaneous party jargon but also his and Marx’s shared concern for the ways social relations are reduplicated in bureaucracy and affect. Listening for these additional connotations of *rapport* may also help us extract a more contemporary approach to ideology from the resources provided by Althusser’s analysis.

Retaining a fuller set of connotations for *rapport* illuminates the “imaginary” aspect of Althusser’s theory of ideology, in particular. Listening for *rapport* prompts an understanding of ideology as a report that emphasizes the individual’s harmonious social situation and intimate life. As Imre Szeman stresses in his essay in this dossier, for Althusser ideology returns the crisis-ridden subject to a default setting where she concludes, no matter the evidence, “so be it” or “all is well.” Ideology sends a report of *rapport*, and for this reason it requires a two-step investigation.

First, an Althusserian critique of ideology considers the representation of a social imaginary; Althusser calls this an *illusion*, but we might also call it a reading of the report. Literary critics who focus on the effects of central “ideas,” repeated generic patterns, or social prejudices as these appear in narrative attend to this aspect of ideology; they closely attend to the organization of writing within the ideological report. Following through to the second step, however, is essential to the definition of ideology and the practice of ideology critique. The second step involves decoding an *allusion* to “real conditions of existence” — or the decoding of the apparently eternal story of affective *rapport*. Althusser asserts that the ideological allusion often takes the form of an inversion or transposition of real relations. The key question for Althusser, however, is not *what* is transposed — that is, the critical recovery of some trace of the real — but rather *why* the rapport with the real is imaginary in character. “Why is the representation that individuals make of their (individual) relation [*rapport*] to the social relations [*rapport*] governing their conditions of existence and their individual and collective lives necessarily imaginary?” he asks.⁸ Why does the imaginary *rapport* (itself doubled) take on a central role? This is the question that Althusser poses and then postpones by turning to the well-known theory of interpellation. In so doing, he suggests that the imaginary mediation between real and represented conditions occurs because the subject positing its relations to real conditions has already been conscripted by those relations.

As several of the papers in this dossier demonstrate, however, the account of

interpellation may not provide the whole answer to Althusser's question about why ideology travels through the imaginary. As the contributors suggest, the subject's formation may include an affective excess not fully directed toward social reproduction; some apparatuses may establish a relation between representation and the real that bypasses the solitary individual. Or, the concept of interpellation itself may be an effect of linguistic, historical, or colonial conditions.

For these reasons, the papers in this dossier suggest tarrying with Althusser's question a bit longer. What, they ask, makes the report of *rapport* known as ideology necessary to social reproduction? Why do individuals insist so routinely on the desirability of their own exploitation? Why does exploitation require this unceasing report of its supposed necessity? Does the apparent necessity of the report create friction with the apparent happiness of the *rapport*? Or, more simply, perhaps: what would an unmediated representation of the real conditions of existence look like, if such a representation were ever discovered to be possible? Rather than starting with a rationalist assumption about the viability of a project of non-transposed, internally consistent reasoning adequate to the social totality, in other words, Althusser asks why such an account is apparently blocked by ideology and how critical knowledge might develop out of the encounter with ideology.

Beginning with these observations, a twenty-first-century practice of Althusserian ideology critique seeks the struggles — individual *and* social — that constitute the real conditions of existence, attends to their transposition in the imaginary of the ideological report, and traces their codification through representation. The aim of this critique, to reiterate, is not to destroy *rapport* but rather to examine its apparent necessity and, ultimately, to set it on more solid ground. The task, Althusser writes in an earlier chapter of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, is ultimately “to destroy *and* replace the Ideological State Apparatuses. New ones need to be put in place.”⁹

Despite the centrality of struggle and affirmative projects of social rebuilding to Althusser's conception of critique, the Althusserian theory of ideology has been primarily associated with the appended cadenza of interpellation in the humanistic disciplines of the American university. The drama of interpellation narrates an involuntary and reactive formation of a subject in response to institutional authority; Althusser's memorable illustration involves a police officer calling out to a passerby who then recognizes herself as the object of state power and internalizes that power. This dramatization has inspired some important work. In the 1980s and 1990s, it played a pivotal role in debates in cinema and media studies, gender theory, accounts of citizenship, critical race studies, and narratology. Often these analyses stressed the means by which a particular apparatus contains a presumably mobile individual (the polymorphous infant, the on-screen female body), restricting its movement and diminishing its multiplicities through internalized controls — essentially establishing a system in which the subject performs the system's work without coercion by policing itself. This analysis was important for late-twentieth-century discussions

of the role of state and the effects of state action on individuals and communities imagined to exist outside of or at the periphery of social control. In the context of the anarchistic tendencies of a moment saturated with neoliberal ideology, the concept of interpellation provided an important way to describe the mediations that complicate simplistic oppositions between subjects and power.

In the early twenty-first century, however, our questions are shifting, and interpellation may no longer be the most central or essential aspect of Althusser's theory of ideology. Contributors to this dossier remind us that interpellation constitutes a "concrete" or "special mode of exposition" explaining how ideology functions, but it does not amount to a generalizable a theory of ideology as such.¹⁰ Montag, Jelly-Shapiro, and Li suggest a rethinking of Althusser's concept of interpellation in light of both his own intellectual development and contemporary conflicts in the US over policing. Lesjak and Wegner prioritize Althusser's account of the apparatus, returning the question of the school to a central place in the discussion of ideology and asking not only how the school reproduces ideological content but also how its operation as an institution relates to the surrounding capitalist context. Meanwhile, Flisfeder and Szeman investigate the traces of scientific rationalism at play in Althusser's account of ideology, drawing on Slavoj Žižek's more psychoanalytic and affective account of subject formation to build up an analysis of irrationalist tendencies in social media and the energy humanities, respectively. Finally, Read and Nir both sort through the sixties-era individualism lying at the heart of the Althusserian account of ideology in their assessments of the prospects for the emergence of new collective or, in Read's terminology, transindividual subjects.

Together, these passes through the Althusserian corpus invent an Althusser for the twenty-first century. They focus on affective subjects interacting in technologically mediated private networks as well as corporatized educational institutions. These readings pull into the foreground the on-going violence of both state repression and economic exploitation, and they ask not how ideology can be argued away through empiricist rationality but rather how and why ideology continues to function as a social glue. These essays, in short, contribute to an Althusser revival that is bringing this philosopher's core issues back into focus. They renew Althusser's question about ideology in the context of a capitalist interregnum asking why a system that continuously asserts its own inevitability requires a representational supplement and how its subjects continue to file their never-ending reports of rapport with exploitation.

Notes

1. Wolfgang Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?" *New Left Review* 87 (2014) 62.
2. Étienne Balibar, forward to Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014) ix.
3. Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: NLB, 1976) 37.
4. Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Jacques Rancière and Pierre Machery, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015).
5. Althusser, *Reading Capital* 46.
6. *Reading Capital* 181.
7. I consulted the French edition of *Capital* available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.
8. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 187.
9. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 90, emphasis added.
10. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 190.

