

Historicizing Repression and Ideology

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"Ideology has no history," Althusser's oft-cited thesis in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" insists. Though ideologies vary across space and time, the form of ideology — and the function of that form — is unchanging. "All ideology," Althusser contends, "interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects." This observation follows Althusser's brief theorization of the structural interrelation of repression and ideology. The Repressive State Apparatus — through force, interdiction, or censorship — provides a "shield" for the Ideological State Apparatuses, which, in the last instance, "largely secure the reproduction specifically of the relations of production."¹

I am reluctant to emulate both Althusser's appeal to the synchronic constancy of ideology, and his related intimation that the Ideological State Apparatuses always play the foremost role in reproducing the relations of production. Rather than merely refute either assumption, though, I want to follow a route of inquiry that Althusser's essay illuminates without itself pursuing — an examination of the historically contingent and spatially complex "explicit or tacit combinations" of repression and ideology.²

Althusser was writing at the close of the 1960s, near the highpoint of the postwar social democratic moment — those ephemeral decades wherein the state sought, to imprecisely summon Marx, "not to do away with two extremes, capital and wage labor, but to weaken their antagonism and transform it into a harmony."³ More specifically, of course, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" was composed in the immediate aftermath of the tumults of 1968. The events of that May in France brought into relief creeping fractures in the fragile labor-capital compromise. Successive cycles of rapid inflation and enforced deflation — originating in the debt financing of the Algerian War — had culminated in conjoined crises of underemployment and underconsumption. The general strikes that followed the initial student demonstrations, though, won significant wage increases, which restored — if fleetingly — the ideal and reality of working-class consumerism.⁴ The capitalist state, in other words, responded to labor protest not with heightened repression but with newly brokered terms of consent.

Born of this conjuncture, Althusser's essay highlighted the forms of unfreedom that define the figures of "free" labor and the "free" subject — even and especially in moments of ostensibly diminished contradiction.

Althusser, that is, was primarily concerned with how violent relations of exploitation are reproduced through primarily non-violent means, what Marx termed the "silent compulsion" of the market. Marx juxtaposed the instance of "silent compulsion" (what we might also term the moment of ideology) to the instance of repression or state violence, which prevails in the time-space of primitive accumulation. "In its embryonic state, in its state of becoming," Marx wrote, "capital cannot yet use the sheer force of economic relations to secure its right to absorb a sufficient quantity of surplus labor, but must be aided by the power of the state." In time, however, "the 'free' worker, owing to the greater development of the capitalist mode of production, makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life."⁵ Marx was keenly aware that "[this history] assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs."⁶ But his account of capitalism's emergence ultimately privileges the geographically (nationally) bounded sequence of stages, rather than their synchronous global articulation.

In his "Preface" to *Capital Volume I* (1969), Althusser summons Marx's reflections on the "the incredible means used to achieve the 'primitive accumulation' thanks to which capitalism was 'born' and grew in Western societies." Paraphrasing one of Marx's "greatest discoveries," Althusser writes that "capitalism has always used and, in the 'margins' of its metropolitan existence — i.e. in the colonial and ex-colonial countries — is still using well into the twentieth century, *the most brutally violent means.*"⁷ Althusser is attentive here to the enduring centrality of primitive accumulation, and to the relationship between the brutal extraction of wealth in the (post)colony and the generation and reproduction of capital in the metropole. Althusser does not, however, bring this world-systems perspective to bear on his theorization of either ideology in itself or the interrelation of repression and ideology.

The mutuality of colonial and metropolitan accumulation — and the interplay of repression and ideology therein — was evinced with a particular clarity by Frantz Fanon. In the metropole, Fanon observed in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961),

The educational system... the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary honesty of workers who are given a medal after fifty years of good and loyal service... all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably.... In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence

and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge.⁸

Fanon accented the heightened importance, in the space of the colony, of crude state violence, and the concomitant insignificance of the ideological state apparatuses. But he was not simply drawing a contrast between the forms of governance that obtain in the metropole and the colony; he was also gesturing toward the ways in which “the structure of moral reflexes” in the metropole is conditioned by, dialectically entangled with, the repressive violence of colonial relations. This is true in multiple senses.

The advent of Fordism in France — and the corresponding development of the ideological state apparatuses, including the welfare state — was enabled by the deprecation of labor and raw materials within, and captive markets of, the colonies. In Algeria — to keep with the specific settler-colonial context that animated Fanon’s account — the expropriation of arable land, and the exploitation of indigenous labor thereon, provided the textile mills of northern France with cheap supplies of cotton. The extraction of petroleum and natural gas, following its discovery in the Algerian Sahara in the 1950s, met and catalyzed a heightened demand for fossil fuels within the metropole. And the settler population of Algeria — as well as the native bourgeoisie — was a major consumer market for French manufactures; for periods of the twentieth century, fifty percent of French exports were bound for Algeria.

In the moment of decolonization, meanwhile, more than one million low-wage workers migrated to France from the west and north of Africa and from the Caribbean. By 1965, over 500,000 Algerians were living in France, many of them in *bidonvilles* that were subject to heightened levels of police repression. The super-exploitation of colonial or postcolonial subjects within the metropole, in the construction and manufacturing sectors especially, fueled the accelerated economic development of the postwar decades, and contributed to the innovation and maturation of the social democratic state — the ideological apparatuses of which guided Althusser’s account.

Finally, the consent of the white working class in France was enabled by the salve of superiority colonial forms of racial thinking provided, during and in the aftermath of the imperial era. Fanon is again instructive here. Published nearly two decades prior to “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) anticipated some of Althusser’s core theoretical concerns — the question, most fundamentally, of how the subject is ideologically “hailed” by particular structures of domination. If Althusser’s metaphor “Hey, you there!” describes the constitution of the subject by the capitalist state, Fanon’s “Look, a nigger!” imagines a different relation — not the encounter between a subject and the state, but between two subjects; not the constitution of a subject in general, but specific (raced) subjects. The words “Look, a nigger!” belong to a white child; their object is a black man. The black man sees himself, as “a nigger,” through the gaze of the white child. And the white child, in turn, regards the naturalized assumption of his own racially endowed superiority through

the eyes of a black man.⁹ Althusser's theorization of the "subject" captures the two-fold meaning of that term — the subject as an ostensibly autonomous actor within the field of social relations, and the subject as that which is subjected by (the object of) a particular structure of dominance. Fanon helps us see how these two moments obtain, not merely within any given individual, but in the moment of intersubjective confrontation. The sense of autonomy and belonging felt by the "free" white subject is made possible in part by the subjection of the colonized.

The dialogue between Althusser and Fanon has been generatively elaborated by Pierre Macherey (a student of Althusser's). As Macherey notes, Althusser privileges — in a Foucauldian spirit — the "vertical, transcendent" process through which power in the abstract recruits, and thus forms, the subject.¹⁰ For Fanon, by contrast, the formation of the subject is always — in the Hegelian sense — the result of an intersubjective encounter, which is, additionally, always *located* in space and time. Fanon's account, Macherey observes, accords with Sartre's concept of "situation" — "a complex ensemble of relations that confront people with one another in a [particular] context and... according to a certain order or responding to certain norms."¹¹ Importantly, this contingent "ensemble of relations" clarifies ideology's differential effects. If the ideological operation interpellates *all* individuals as concrete subjects, as Althusser insisted, it does not do so indiscriminately. As Fanon's colonial example enacts, the constitution of the self is often joined to the negative inscription (*qua* repression) of an other.

Though absent from or only implicit to "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," the theoretical tools that might examine the "explicit and tacit combinations" of repression and ideology through an historical and geographical lens are present, and vitally so, in Althusser's broader oeuvre. In *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, Althusser invoked and developed the concept of "articulation." "Articulation" signifies, for Althusser, a joining that is not a synthesis — an interrelation wherein the constitutive elements maintain their relative difference. Althusser deployed the term, most basically, to rescue the notion of "complex unity" from Marx's more "vulgar" materialist readers — and to demonstrate how the myriad contradictions that comprise capitalist social order, which are not reducible to one another, combine — like the "ensemble of relations" in a "situation" — in different ways in different spaces and times.¹² Though concordant with Althusser's structuralism, the idea of articulation gestures toward an understanding of ideology as always historical, precisely because the *form* taken by the articulation of repression and ideology is mutable.

Today, in the perpetual twilight of the neoliberal moment, the interrelation of repression and ideology continues to mutate in pace with the exigencies of accumulation. The historiography of neoliberalism, as authored by scholars such as David Harvey and Daniel Stedman Jones, traces how the calculated circulation throughout civil society of the "free market" gospel of Hayek, von Mises, Friedman,

and others created a foundation of popular consent for the construction of neoliberal order.¹³ But as Naomi Klein amongst others (including Harvey) is keen to highlight the implementation of neoliberal policy has been conditioned not just by ideological assimilation but also by state violence. As dispossession displaces expanded reproduction as the paradigmatic mode of accumulation, repression displaces ideology as the paradigmatic mode of governance. In the advanced capitalist world, the privatization of the social commons has coincided with the militarization of public and private police and rise — in the United States in particular — of mass incarceration. The declension of the welfare state and deepening of the police state are reciprocal processes. And when crises of accumulation provoke crises of consent, the threat or enactment of state violence moves yet further into the governmental foreground. As the authors of *Policing the Crisis*, writing at the neoliberal end of the 1970s, put it: In the moment of crisis, “the masks of liberal consent and popular consensus slip to reveal the reserves of coercion and force on which the cohesion of the state and its legal authority depends.”¹⁴

Even as we identify repression as the increasingly paradigmatic mode of late-neoliberal governance, though, we must simultaneously examine how repression and ideology are today articulated — across and within different geographic scales. The “reserves of coercion and force” are unevenly distributed. And it is precisely this uneven distribution that today lends the “structure of moral reflexes” its particular, if less than universal, force. As the economic security of the “white working class” is diminished, the appeal of the latter toward “law and order” is amplified — and the militarization of borders, violent occupation of poor communities of color, and aerial bombardment of foreign lands appear as plausible forms of redress. But if this resurgent nativism is one expression of capitalist ideology, it is also symptomatic of its crisis. And as the compulsion of the market becomes yet less compelling and yet more audible, new political possibilities — the positive determination of a planetary rather than nationalistic precariat — might come into view. The realization of the latter will demand that we do not simply wait for the contradictions to deepen — for the continuing displacement of ideology by repression — but create and nurture political spaces wherein the intersubjective situation evinced by Fanon dramatizes not alienation or domination but the recognition of solidarity.

Notes

1. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001) 161, 150.
2. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 145-146
3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Saul K. Padover (New York: International Publishers, 1975) 50
4. The abrupt rise in oil prices in 1974 exacerbated already declining rates of growth France. The Keynesian attempt to stimulate demand failed to redress the crisis, and by the end of the 1970s stagflation had set in and wages were depressed.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 382.
6. Marx, *Capital* 876.
7. Louis Althusser, "Preface to *Capital Volume One*" (1969), trans. Ben Brewster, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1969/preface-capital.htm>, accessed on August 5, 2016.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1963 [1961], 38.
9. I am drawing here from Pierre Macherey's illuminating comparative reading of Althusser and Fanon. See Pierre Macherey, "Figures of Interpellation in Althusser and Fanon," *Radical Philosophy* 173 (2012) 14-17.
10. Macherey, "Figures of Interpellation" 19.
11. "Figures of Interpellation" 18.
12. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980) 323-24.
13. See, for example, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 40.
14. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1978) 217.