

Althusser and the University Today

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The matter of timing would seem to be a perennial issue when it comes to Althusser. In a 1987 review of a new book on Althusser, Joseph McCarney writes that Gregory Elliott's *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* "appears at a time when the reputation of its subject seems near to total eclipse."¹ Referring to Althusser as "practically a 'dead dog'" in France, McCarney goes on to agree with Elliott's claim that for precisely this reason it is a good time to reassess Althusser. For Elliott, Althusser's lack of influence in 1987 allows for "the resurrection of Althusser's intellectual and political career *as history*."² In the current North American context, I will suggest, it is not so much "as history" that Althusser's work can once again be reconsidered in a "more equitable" (Elliott's term) manner but rather *for the present* in its implicit challenge to the contemporary turn against ideology critique and the concomitant neoliberalization of the university. In short, it is a fitting time, once again, to return to Althusser with theory and the university, to borrow Bill Reading's apt description, in ruins.

The newly released *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* emphasizes the Scholastic Ideological State Apparatus — otherwise known as the education system — as the dominant ISA under capitalism, and one so important to understanding the functioning and reproduction of capitalism that it was to be the focus of a second companion volume. While that work never came to fruition, the pervasiveness and power of schools is felt throughout this new volume of essays — both as a site for the reproduction of capitalism *and* as a site of revolution. It is the concept of revolution more generally that had gone missing when we only had the 1970 ISA piece, which is so effective in capturing the totalizing work of the ISAs that there seemed no room for air, let alone revolution. So, on one hand, this new collection allows us to see Althusser as strategist: in the thick of May 1968 and its aftermath, he stresses the twinned and temporal nature of structure and change — or, as Balibar characterizes this movement between constancy and transformation, Althusser's theory is still "a single theory, but a theory with double entries: reproduction and revolution."³ On the other hand, these essays also illuminate the "old Althusser" in

new, critically important ways that seem especially timely in light of our current moment of crisis — in the university and beyond. I will focus here specifically on two issues in Althusser more central than ever, I think, for understanding the current conjuncture: (1) the crucial distinction Althusser underscores between repression and exploitation; and (2) his insistence on that which is obvious, on that which seems self-evident, as the most ideological of positions. On both these counts, new critical orthodoxies — from surface and distant reading to the digital humanities and sensory ethnography — will be shown wanting, unified as they are by the language of immediacy and transparency and the jettisoning of ideological critique.⁴

The shift from an emphasis on relations of exploitation to relations of domination or repression buttresses contemporary claims about the newly visible nature of political and social violence, and the fact that we no longer need to go below the surface to understand the repressive nature of our social world. It is all “there for the taking,” as Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best would have it.⁵ This move, essentially from a Marxist to a Foucauldian perspective (and beyond), uncannily echoes the very battle Althusser was waging in 1969 with anarchists (among others) over just who the real enemy was: the state or capitalism. The catchphrase of the then “new social movements,” “Get rid of the cop in your head!,” exemplifies for Althusser everything that is wrong with an anarchist/Foucauldian vision of how society work given its replacement of ideas with the cop, its mistaking of “the role of subjection played by bourgeois ideology with the repressive role played by the police.”⁶ Against this misperception regarding the centrality of repression, Althusser insists that the “material basis...for the existence of every capitalist social formation is *economic exploitation*, not *repression*,” something, he adds, that needs to be said “over and over again in a day and age in which certain dreamers are once again spouting the old anarchist refrain that reduces the capitalist mode of production to repression, or, still worse to ‘authority.’”⁷ The same can be said today: the obviousness of repression — the recent police violence against black lives being but one example — in no way mitigates the need to interpret its causes, and, most importantly, to understand the political complacency that accompanies it. In short, the ability “to make us go all by ourselves” (*fait marcher*) that designates ideology’s work for Althusser continues apace to make us go.

Provocatively, in a recent interview, Daniel Zamora reads in Foucault’s late work and its emphasis on repression rather than exploitation a sympathy for and a complicity with neoliberalism. In the context of assessing Foucault’s anti-statist position and his advocacy, as a result, of a negative income tax in place of a social security system, Zamora argues that while social security aims to eliminate class disparities and hence capitalist inequality by addressing relative poverty (a socialist program), a negative income tax policy seeks instead to raise those on the bottom of the social scale out of absolute poverty without fundamentally changing the system (a liberal program). At stake in Foucault’s endorsement of the latter, and, with it, the consequent shift away from an analysis of the structural mechanisms of capitalist

exploitation is, Zamora concludes, the question of “acceptance of capitalism as the dominant economic form, or not.”⁸ The problem for us now is thus not only the loss of the language of exploitation in the turn away from ideology critique, but the fact that leftist projects unintentionally reproduce and entrench the very mechanisms of exploitation. If anything, Althusser’s view of our subjection to bourgeois ideology in this context is too tame to account for the situation we are in today.

As someone who has just negotiated a first collective agreement after a rousing certification drive at my home institution of Simon Fraser University, this situation and these stakes have become only too clear — and Althusser’s particular iteration of them more useful than ever. What Althusser helps to parse are the multiple and conflicting determinations that coalesce in one event — without losing sight of the determination of the economic in the last instance. (The new essays, in particular, unpack the complexity of this controversial phrase in a well-nigh dialectical fashion, I would add.) My version of such an event involves trying to construct a salary proposal as part of a new collective agreement that does not simply accept market-driven forces as a given. During our certification drive, the STEM and humanities faculty came together in a way they have not at other universities. But once we were actually bargaining a contract, notions of equity and of the desire to ameliorate disciplinary inequities went by the wayside, replaced by a free-market mentality.⁹ In other words, those of us who believe in equity and fought for a union to get it have helped organize a union that is not only further entrenching but actively enshrining the current intricacies of exploitation. Not surprisingly, the divide, in large part, reproduces the split between the humanities and market-oriented disciplines; the sciences and business fit well with the profit motive and the need to train and reproduce workers and capitalist relations of production, while the humanities seem increasingly superfluous in this regard.

Needless to say, this debate is a proxy battle for larger social and political issues, with market differentials an allegory for the need, in all things, to hew to the market, its dictates, and its measurement of social value. The obviousness of the market and the unquestioned goods that accompany it — skills-training, practical knowledge, quantitative rather than qualitative assessment, and so on — is such that it no longer appears as something to be conformed to; it simply is. When the premier of British Columbia can have as a plank in her re-election platform the creation of a “seamless path for people from kindergarten to work,” things are indeed at their most ideological — or, as Althusser puts it, “it is characteristic of ideology to impose self-evident facts as self-evident facts” (without in the last seeming to, since they are ‘self-evident’).¹⁰ In this sense, we could say that the state — whose key role is the reproduction of capitalist relations — is much more palpably felt than perhaps ever before in the scholastic ISA, giving the lie to the university’s claims of intellectual neutrality. In other words, the school or university as enclave is no longer supportable ideologically or materially. As Michael Rothberg shows, in the context of parsing the Steven Salaita

“event” as overdetermined, Althusser’s concept of overdetermination not only explains how contradictory and uneven social phenomena are, but also illuminates “how interwoven the politics of higher education has become — or perhaps always was — with the most pressing political, economic, and cultural contradictions of our times.”¹¹

If, in 1968, one of the problems was “how to make the ‘suture’ between the analyses of the scholastic apparatus... and the general idea, elaborated by Althusser, of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’” (as Balibar characterizes the split between the working group on schools and Althusser), the problem today would seem to be how to combat the givenness of that suture, and the fact that it is so obvious as to be obvious. In this regard, I would hazard we are anything but post-ideological.¹² Perhaps then what is finally most useful for us in Althusser is his *plumpes Denken*, or “crude thinking,” to borrow Brecht’s phrase: namely, the way he crystallizes the basics — the fact that “capitalist relations of production are simultaneously relations of capitalist exploitation,” and that what seems most obvious is most ideological — at a moment when the reigning ideology is one of disavowal.¹³ Lest this seem too grim a note to end on — but, after all, it is grim — Althusser also recalls for us, in the context of May 1968, the “objective grating and grinding between different ideological apparatuses” that always has the potential to shake things up.¹⁴

Notes

1. Joseph McCarney, "For and Against Althusser" *New Left Review* 176 (1989) 115.
2. McCarney, "For and Against Althusser" 115. More recently Warren Montag also raises the question of timing, beginning his book on *Althusser and His Contemporaries* by noting that "To pose the question, "Why read Althusser Today?" [the title of his introduction] is to admit at the outset that his status as a philosopher remains unclear in a way that is not true of his contemporaries and friends, Foucault and Derrida" (1). Although Montag will focus on the "theoretical conjuncture" within which Althusser read and wrote, he also identifies the contemporary relevance of Althusser's work in its power "not only... to terrify but...to fracture what appears to be solid in order to open a way forward" (12) — with the latter more necessary than ever, I will argue, in the current theoretical conjuncture.
3. Étienne Balibar, "Foreword: Althusser and the 'Ideological State Apparatuses,'" *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, xxii.
4. Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette and David Golumbia specifically address the institutional success of the digital humanities and how it has "for the most part involved the displacement of politically progressive humanities scholarship and activism in favor of the manufacture of digital tools and archives" (n.p.). They place the digital humanities within the larger context of attacks on interpretation itself, seeing its reliance on technical expertise as fundamentally anti-interpretative and "postcritical." For a discussion specifically of Franco Moretti's position vis-à-vis the digital humanities and the politics of big data initiatives, see also Lesjak, "All or Nothing: Reading Franco Moretti Reading," *Historical Materialism* 24.3 (2016) 185-205.
5. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108.1 (2009) 2.
6. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014) 178.
7. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 125, 155.
8. Daniel Zamora, "Can We Criticize Foucault?" *Jacobin Magazine Online*. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/foucault-interview/>
9. The pressing issue of adjunct labor was not part of these negotiations, because adjunct faculty belong to a different bargaining unit on campus, the Teaching Support Staff Union. Obviously, solidarity among and equity for *all* faculty would be the long-term aim and something that a now fully-unionized SFU faculty will be in a position to struggle for in the future.
10. *On the Reproduction of Capital* 189
11. Michael Rothberg, "Reflections in Progress on the Salaita Case: Contradiction, Overdetermination, Mobilization." <http://michaelrothberg.weebly.com/blog/reflections-in-progress-on-the-salaita-case-contradiction-overdetermination-mobilization>. Specifically, Rothberg highlights the efficacy of Althusser's notion of overdetermination for understanding why the University of Illinois' decision to retract Salaita's job offer generated the powerful, international response that it did. He notes that the case "condenses multiple, ongoing crises," from long-term trends in defunding public education and the increasing corporatization of the university, to debates about the nature of Salaita's academic work (indigenous/Palestinian studies) and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict more generally, to relations among new media, scholarship, free speech, and "civility."
12. In this shifting critical and political terrain, the status of ideology for those arguing against the notion

of a post-ideological present is itself shifting, not surprisingly. Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between symptomatic and fetishistic modes of ideology; and Fredric Jameson reflects on Adorno's "desperate attempt to avoid positivities, which he instinctively felt always to be ideological," as "a prophetic but unsatisfying response to our historical situation," and turns to Žižek's fetishistic model of ideology in which individuals "know what they are doing (but they do it anyway)" as a more accurate analysis of our current state. This is a far cry, however, from any claim to being in a post-ideological world and hence jettisoning ideology critique tout court. Knowing what we are doing and doing it anyway is *not* the same thing as knowing what we are really doing when we "know" what we're doing. As I've shown elsewhere, for Žižek the fetish operates in plain sight, but this doesn't make it any less ideological, or any less effective in "[cancelling] the full impact of reality" (quoted in "Reading Dialectically," 251). In this regard, we might hear in both Althusser's and Žižek's emphasis on ideology's obviousness a line of Hegel's in *The Phenomenology* (despite Althusser's overt anti-Hegelianism): "What is familiar and well-known [das Bekannte] as such is not really known [erkannt] for the very reason that it is *familiar and well-known* [bekannt]" (25). In terms of a critical politics, then, ideology critique today remains tasked with the at once representational and political challenge of making the "full impact of reality" known and felt. See Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009); Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," *Criticism* 55.2 (2013) 233-277.

13. In a different but related vein, John Semley's review of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* ends by asking, "Perhaps the more 'immanent' question, though, is to what extent we really *need* Althusser — or any academic Marxism? It seems like these sorts of ideas are dribbling into the mainstream." Yet, he concludes, "even Althusser's unwitting legacy over contemporary attitudes of wearied exasperation at gross economic imbalance is tricky to discount. Althusser offers an economic trickle-down effect theory (or trickle-down effect of theory) that actually seems quantifiable" (n.p.). See John Semley, "On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Where Does Academia Fit in the Modern Discussion of Capitalism?" *The Globe and Mail* 14 February 2014. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/on-the-reproduction-of-capitalism-where-does-academia-fit-in-the-modern-discussion-of-capitalism/article16898603/>
14. *On the Reproduction of Capital* 200.