

Althusser's Empty Signifier: What is the Meaning of the Word "Interpellation"?

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If there is a single word that captures both the originality and the difficulty of the theory of ideology articulated for the first time in Althusser's "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses," it would be "interpellation."¹ If we are honest with ourselves, moreover, we will have to admit that we — that is, we readers of the English version of the essay, or even the recent English translation of the full manuscript from which it was extracted, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* — do not know precisely what this central term, the center of his "central thesis" ("ideology interpellates individuals as subjects"), actually means.² The difficulty that readers of the English version face becomes clear if we compare Althusser's French with Ben Brewster's translation: in the first, ideology « transforme » les individus en sujets (*elle les transforme tous*) par cette opération très précise que nous appelons l'interpellation, qu'on peut se représenter sur le type même de la plus banale interpellation policière (ou non) de tous les jours : «hé, vous, là-bas!»;³ in the second, ideology "transforms" the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation or hailing*, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace every day police (or other) *hailing*: 'Hey, you there!'⁴ Brewster's translation is about as literal as it could be (while remaining not only readable but elegant), except for the interpolation or addition of a word, here, the word "hailing," in order to suggest the meaning of (and therefore in some measure translate) the untranslated term "interpellation" which is retained here in the form of the phrase "interpellation or hailing." The effect of this interpolation was enormous: it was as if Brewster were giving us the means of understanding an unfamiliar term without having to define it in any formal sense or mark the question of its meaning as a problem (perhaps in French as well as in translation). Brewster simply elides the difficulties that attend the concept as well as the word itself as Althusser uses it: to interpellate someone is to hail that person.

But even if this is true, to say that we do not know the meaning of "interpellation" risks appearing as a piece of sophistry in the worst sense: an argument whose aim

is to take what seems obvious, an idea that no one thinks to question, and prove it unfounded, as if its status were a matter of an unacknowledged agreement not to question it and knowledge itself nothing more than the point at which an infinite sequence of questions is suspended. How can I ask what “interpellation” means when it is defined in the ISA essay, preserved from French and introduced into English (where its frequency continues to increase) as the equivalent of “hail?” I say that “hail” is interpolated or added by the translator, not only because the French verb, *héler* (“to hail someone”), never appears in the original version of the essay or anywhere else where Althusser discusses interpellation, but also because where Althusser says only “ideology interpellates,” Brewster’s translation reads “ideology interpellates or hails.” We must therefore ask the simple question of whether “hail” adequately translates “*interpeller*” in general, and in the ISA essay in particular. A simple glance at the entry either for the noun *interpellation* or the verb *interpeller* in *La Trésor de la Langue Française* reveals that in either of its forms the term has a number of distinct meanings in French, few, if any, of which are captured by the English “hail.” This fact in turn forces us to ask a question so obvious that no one, to my knowledge, has asked it: why did Ben Brewster (who, by the way, I regard as a superb translator, capable of doing what few translators can do, produce the effect of a writer’s style, in this case, Althusser’s style, from within the English language), not translate the word “interpellation” into English?

With this question we find ourselves in a strange circle: at the time of Brewster’s translation of Althusser’s essay, the word “*interpellate*” was extremely rare in English, its use restricted to the lexicon of parliamentary actions (and used almost exclusively to describe the action of interpellation in parliamentary bodies other than in Britain or the US: a formal demand made by a member of a legislative body for an explanation of some action undertaken by representative of the government). After the publication of Brewster’s translation of the ISA essay, the use of interpellation increased threefold, with the vast majority of occurrences referring back to Althusser. Brewster’s translation or rather his decision to preserve the French word, *interpellation* as “*interpellation*,” and thus without italics marking it as a foreign term, tells us that *interpellation* means or signifies “*interpellation*,” a term that was, however, introduced/recalled into English only by the translation itself, and thus leaves the reader oscillating between *interpellation* and *interpellation*.

It is here that Brewster attempts to move beyond the emptiness of tautological definition by inserting a second term, an equivalent of which is not found in the French version of Althusser’s text. Thus, as we have seen, *ideologie interpelle* becomes “ideology interpellates or hails” and although at certain points Althusser will substitute for *interpeller* other verbs which have English cognates, such as “constitute” and “recruit” (neither of which, however, are exactly synonyms of *interpellation*), it is “hail” that emerges as the definition of interpellation in the English version, the meaning attached to the empty signifier. In the example of what Althusser has just

called *la plus banale interpellation policière*, Brewster simply replaces “interpellation” with “hailing.” In the “theoretical scene” in which the police officer yells out “Hey, you there!” the hailed individual will turn around (*l’individu interpellé se retourne*). By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him (*l’interpellation s’adressait « bien » à lui*), and that “it was really him who was hailed” (*c’était bien lui qui était interpellé*) (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed (*les télécommunications pratiques de l’interpellation sont telles, que l’interpellation ne rate pratiquement jamais son homme: appel verbal, ou coup de sifflet, l’interpellé reconnaît toujours que c’était bien lui qu’on interpellait*).⁵

The most revealing and indeed extravagant instance of the use of hail, which appears as both a verb and a noun (the hail, a hailing) is Brewster’s rendering of the phrase *l’interpellation policière* as “police hailing” (the famous example, *hé, vous la bas*, or “hey, you there!”). First, the use of the verb “hail” in conjunction with the activity of the police is quite rare, at least according to the record of written English, and the few examples of police hailing a suspect are perhaps less frequent than those of police hailing a cab. Further, most occur before 1925, after which time the idea of police hailing a suspect (a phrase that appears in the record of a case heard before the Virginia Supreme court of Appeals in 1922) disappears.⁶ This use derives from the verb “hail” understood as calling “to someone from a distance, in order to attract attention,” a use that originated in a nautical context, namely that of hailing other ships. To say “the policeman hailed the suspect” is no different, although far less common, than a phrase like “the policeman called out to the suspect to stop,” which would suggest that means that “hail” is no more or less expressive of the meaning of interpellation than the phrase “to call out” (to someone). Moreover, even if the term “hail” can be understood as a calling out to someone, it is typically a calling out in the sense of the Latin *ave*, which is usually rendered in English as “hail, a salutation, as in *Ave Ceasar, morituri te salutant* or “Hail Ceasar, those who are about to die salute you.” “Hail” (like the German *heil*) is a gesture of respect, even reverence, (*ave Maria* or “hail Mary,” or more recently, “Hail Trump”) and can mark the subjection of the individual who hails, to the one who is hailed, (e.g., the Emperor or the Mother of God).

The inequality of force at work in the noun *interpellation* or the verb *interpeller*, however, moves in exactly the opposite direction: if to be hailed is to be called or praised, to be *interpellé* or interpellated is to be spoken to in a “brusque manner,” to be insulted or to be the object of a demand. Indeed, such verbal forms of sexual harassment as the catcall are referred to as “*interpellations*.” Similarly, *interpeller* can mean “to demand attention,” as in an urgent problem that demands our attention. But perhaps most relevant to Althusser’s use of the term are the legal meanings of the term. The first is that to which his use of the phrase *l’interpellation policière*

alludes: in penal law, to interpellate is to take someone into custody or interrogate someone who is in police custody, to arrest, detain or stop (as in a “traffic stop”) an individual. A recent example would be the headline “*Violences et interpellations lors de la manifestation contre la Loi travail*” (“Violence and arrests at a demonstration against the labor law”). In civil law, *interpeller* or “to interpellate” is to issue a legal summons to someone, that is, to summon them to appear before a magistrate, an order that cannot be refused without consequence.

It is perhaps to explore this constellation of meanings that Althusser proposes the example of “Christian religious ideology.” He makes this ideology speak in the first person, and it says “I address myself to you,” even as it adds, “God addresses himself to you through my voice”; it interpellates individuals “who are free to obey or disobey the call (*l’appel*, which Brewster strangely translates as “appeal”), that is, God’s commandments (*aux ordres de dieu*).”⁷ The example of Christian religious ideology which, we should keep in mind, does not consist simply of the ideas contained in the two Testaments or the discourses that surround them, but also those incarnate “in its practices, its rituals, its ceremonies and its sacraments,” does not contain anything that could conceivably be understood as “hailing.” Instead, Althusser repeatedly invokes the efficacy of the notion of the call (*appel, appeler*) in the sense of the Greek verb, *kaleo*, and the Latin *voco* (*vocatio*), to call out and to be called out, to name or to call out a name, to be summoned before a court (in modern French, “*appel en justice*” is a subpoena). Thus, the individual free to obey or disobey such a call will nevertheless inescapably be held accountable and subject to judgment, as if his freedom were the necessary and retroactive effect of his accountability, a freedom that renders him liable to judgment and punishment. Thus, in Romans 1:1, Paul’s slavery to Jesus Christ is a being called out and separated from others as an apostle or messenger who in turn calls upon others, bearing the summons to judgment (otherwise known as the Good News) from which he himself is not exempt. Althusser cites the example of “Moses, interpellated-called (*interpellé-appelé*) by his Name.”⁸ The call or the interpellation is thus an imputation of freedom that is itself an effect of subjection: Moses “recognizes that he is a subject, a subject of God, a subject subjected to God,” a subject who has freely subjected himself.⁹

Thus, what is apparently a mere quibble over words (interpellate, hail, call), a translators’ quarrel over terms whose difference is imperceptible except to them, turns out to be decisive. We might recall Althusser’s provocative declaration that “in political, ideological and philosophical struggle,” words can serve as “weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word. Certain words struggle amongst themselves as enemies. Other words are the site of an ambiguity: the stake in a decisive but undecided battle.”¹⁰ At stake in this struggle between words, between translations of untranslatable terms is the very concept of ideology. Interpellation, the simultaneous subjection/subjectivation of individuals, is not a disembodied verbal act,

the recognition of one consciousness by another, or the division of consciousness into a recognition that must recognize itself recognizing in order to supply a guarantee of identity and that thus becomes the subject of its own subjection. Neither is it the pathology of a deceived or false consciousness, a system of false ideas that exists only to reproduce the existing order of domination.

In fact, there is nothing illusory about the means of subjection, the apparatuses, practices, rituals in which the interpellated subject is produced and reproduced. When Althusser wrote, quite early in his career, that “there is no true critique which is not immanent and already real and material before it is conscious,” he is saying in so many words that practice precedes theory and revolt precedes critique. No critique of ideology can change the violence of interpellation; indeed, critique in this sense may well be one of its forms. Althusser’s thesis that ideology has a material existence, consisting of the practices, rituals, and actions of which the apparatuses are composed, is a return to Marx’s critique of any criticism that is not immanent in material force, above all, the material force exercised by the masses in struggle, when they are capable of displacing or fracturing the material forms of the dominant ideology and thereby make it possible to think differently.

It is also a reminder, perhaps, no longer necessary, of the violence of interpellation, a call, but also a summons behind which is the force of law, a recruitment of individuals but also a violent tearing them away from the crowd to confirm the identity that has been imposed upon them. Interpellation cannot be easily separated from arrest, detention, and torture, even if its material forms are often more subtly coercive. The image of the policeman calling out in the formal mode of address (*vous*) to an indeterminate person of interest who remains offstage, has up to the present served as its allegorical expression.¹¹ Perhaps it now time to substitute one image for another: instead of the policeman calling out (in the formal mode of address) to an indeterminate individual off-stage, the cell phone footage of Eric Garner in 2014, surrounded by police, placed in a choke-hold and dragged to the ground until he dies of asphyxiation.

Notes

1. Louis Althusser, « Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état, » *Sur la Reproduction* (Paris: PUF, 1996) 269-314. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014) 232-272.
2. *Sur la Reproduction* and Louis Althusser, “Three Notes on the Theory of the Discourses,” *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 2003).
3. Althusser, “Ideologie” 305.
4. Althusser “Ideology” 264, emphasis added.
5. “Ideologie” 305; “Ideology” 264.
6. “Robert Moore v. Commonwealth, (Richard, March 16, 1922),” *Virginia Appeals: The Earliest Report of All Current Decisions of The Supreme Court of Appeals*, vol. 25 (1922) 406.
7. “Ideologie” 308; “Ideology” 266.
8. “Ideologie” 309; “Ideology” 267.
9. “Ideologie” 309; “Ideology” 267.
10. Louis Althusser, “Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon,” *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 21.
11. See the perceptive analysis of Althusser’s use of “vous” in his illustration of interpellation in Hanan Elsayed, “La Haine: Falling in Slow Motion,” *Balibar and the Citizen Subject*. ed. Warren Montag and Hanan Elsayed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming, 2017).