

Althusser, or The System

Oded Nir

The publication of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* provides us with a unique opportunity to reconsider Althusser's significance for us. We can describe the volume as performing a certain estrangement of the way in which we tend to read Althusser's ideology essays.¹ For here suddenly we see the strong connection of these essays of "grand theory" to texts that surely seem from our vantage point to emphasize the most irrelevant, historically specific, or even embarrassingly idiosyncratic dimensions of Althusser's writing. It is the "useless" Althusser that emerges from these texts — which we have not yet defined clearly — that constitutes a good starting point for breaking with two unsatisfactory and oppositional ways of reading Althusser today. The first keeps refining our understanding of Althusser's writing as timeless philosophy or theory, one that can be "applied" to our own problems. It is not so much the timeless status of theory that is problematic in this position, but rather that it seems stuck in the late 1980s, when the new, vibrant field of Cultural Studies that was taking over the humanities was invested in defining Althusserian "principles" for its own intellectual project. To keep reading Althusser in this way is thus to commit implicitly to a temporality that is non-contemporaneous (to use Althusser's term) with the changed temporality of the cultural field, in which no collective project is thriving anymore in the academic humanities, to say the least (which is of course not to say that "theory" has become — or has always been — unnecessary).²

The other way of reading Althusser today condemns his writing for precisely everything that seems ridiculous or even irrational about it, such as the definition of Marxism as a rigorous science, of which we are quickly informed by contemporary writers that we can "remain skeptical," in a way that betrays a belief in some kind of inverted narrative of progress that leads away from science.³ To that we can add the related division of society into specific "levels" (the political, the ideological, the legal, etc.), which from today's vantage point, one that is so much more chained to immediacy by capitalism's development, seems quaint if not arbitrary. How, for example, can there be no "cultural" level? A simple slippage allows movement from

these criticisms to Althusser's politics. Althusser's emphasis on Marxism as a science and Marxist philosophy as an important form of class struggle (rather than extolling "activism") seem here to constitute nothing but justification for his loyalty to the French Communist Party and his reservations about the student movement of 1968. What is missing here is of course a historicization of Althusser's writing, something briefly attempted in what follows.

The moment of truth of this second position is that it is very sensitive precisely to what resists our immediate understanding in Althusser, that "useless" Althusser that we have invoked above, one that is so strongly articulated in *On the Reproduction*. Here, Althusser's scientific drive seems from today's perspective to generate at times moments of pure ornamental excess or personal fancy. For instance, during his discussion of the reproduction of labor-power, Althusser comments that the worker's wages are of course "indispensable for raising and educating his children as well, in whom the proletariat reproduces himself as labor-power (in n copies, where $n = 0, 1, 2,$ and so on)." ⁴ The "scientific" parenthetical addition is of course completely superfluous here. This apparently scientific ornamentation should be seen as part of a much broader tendency towards systematization in Althusser's writing; it is strongly conspicuous throughout the first half of *On the Reproduction of Capital*, and the purpose and meaning of this systematizing activity is initially opaque. The division into levels and the "index of effectivity" of each level; that ideologies fit into, or are "inserted into," practices and larger institutional structures, the clear hierarchization of the relatively autonomous ideologies themselves, the clear role of schools, churches, and the army in the reproduction of social relations — all of which can now be seen as part of an all-encompassing drive in Althusser to present all of reality as one big synchronic system. ⁵ The dramatic inclusion of ideology itself as a reality, as a functioning element of this system rather than some mere expression of the economic base, is a result of this drive towards systematization "from the perspective of reproduction," as Althusser emphasizes. ⁶ It is important for our purposes that the functioning of all these elements together, the mere fact that they work together, towards reproduction, is not natural or self-evident. It is the state itself in Althusser's analysis that is in charge of keeping the system working harmoniously, making sure that successful reproduction happens — a coordinating instance that stays outside the purview of any individual capitalist enterprise.

This drive towards systematization and its accompanying scientism seems superfluous to us today. Reproduction is so strongly systematized in his work because Althusser was writing against the backdrop of postwar French centralized economic planning, in which the state takes on the "responsibility" of taking care of stable reproduction. The scientific language has rather a different source, which has to do with the tensions of Althusser's political affiliations: it is clearly an attempt to appropriate the scientific discourse not only of Stalinism, against which Althusser was writing, but also of the French Communist Party, in whose internal debates he

was very much engaged.⁷ Indeed, a proper understanding of Althusser's political position would require something like a realist novel, in which an intellectual's position towards the Communist Party would constitute a particular strategy for dealing with the following situation: either work outside the party, which means having no history (a situation that seems natural to us) and thus condemn oneself to ineffectiveness in the abstract hope of creating something new; or work inside the party, inheriting its strengths — a concrete revolutionary horizon and agency — but also necessarily become entangled in its reified internal debates and struggles. Ideally, an intellectual's libidinal investment in writing to a community of conversants is unified with an investment in radical historical transformation. Only reconstructed in this way does the particular pain of history reveal itself as forcing a choice between these two not very promising options.

The system against which Althusser is writing is therefore a historical one: that of the postwar French welfare state. This differs from our own historical situation. Our neoliberal age is defined precisely by the dissolution of that ideological-institutional system. The reproduction of our labor-power and social relations is not guaranteed anymore by learning the necessary skills and adopting the "right" attitude through the guidance of schools, the church, and the army — those points that ground Althusser's interest in ideology. If anything, our own reality seems to be dominated by an intensification and multiplication of all these superstructural beliefs and practices, an intensification that nonetheless does not guarantee us a place in the system's reproductive cycles and therefore makes these "ideologies" seem divorced or abstracted from their own "base." We will come back to this intensification below; for now, we need only register the chasm separating us from Althusser's position. The system of relatively harmoniously-functioning base and superstructure against which he was writing has dropped out of existence. It is for this reason that it sometimes seems somewhat useless today to expose ideology as a lie, to make visible its supposed role in reproduction, and generally to find the cracks and gaps in what pretends to be seamless — to recall one of Althusser's definitions for the operation of ideology.

We must read this "useless" Althusser differently today, if his thinking is going to speak to our moment. There is a paradox that is constitutive of the system that dominates Althusser's writing, one that rears its head everywhere: the synchronic system's "absent cause" or that the "cause is immanent in its effects." The absent cause is usually read as a Spinozist principle, one that mirrors, for example, the necessary absenting from the law of the social relations of which the law itself is a function.⁸ To these more synchronic absences we should add the diachronic paradox that constitutes the core of ideology's material existence according to Althusser: that it is not ideas that precede and cause acts, but rather acts that generate ideas that then retroactively appear as if they were the acts' origin and cause — a reversal of an idealist notion of action that is similar to the Foucauldian one, as Warren Montag argues.⁹ Ideology thus entails the absenting of the originary status of the act itself. Another well-known

diachronic example of this constitutive absence is the Althusserian thesis according to which ideology has no history, which is usually read as theorizing ideology to be a constant feature of human society, part of some eternal human nature.

The Althusserian system thus stands or falls with these constitutive absences. Against their usual interpretations we can argue, first, that it seems strange that Althusser would express the simple notion of ideology is a constant of human nature through the rather cryptic “ideology has no history.” Secondly, and more importantly, we can here suggest a different interpretation for this thesis, one whose strength is that it explains not only Althusser’s other theses on ideology (that ideology has no outside, for example) but also the rest of what we called the Althusserian “constitutive absences.” That ideology has no history and that the cause is immanent in its effects can be read as the traces of what Slavoj Žižek calls the “missing link” or the vanishing mediator, following Fredric Jameson’s use of the term.¹¹ In Žižek’s generalization of Jameson’s schema, the closed nature of synchronic systems, the absence of an essential cause beyond the effects themselves, is the result of the vanishing of subjective agency or of the contingent act that founded the system from the perspective of the system itself. Having no history here means that one cannot trace seamlessly the genesis of a synchronic system without falling into the temporal paradox of Lacanian fantasy. The imagined origin of the system has the same structure as the relation between practice and belief for Althusser: the system seems always already to exist at the point of origin; practice always already exists at the moment of belief. The contingency of the subjective intervention that brought about the system’s existence in the first place — that of Protestantism or the Jacobins, to quote the well-known examples — always disappears in hindsight, resulting in a “missing link,” or in a system that seems to have no history or cause.¹² (We will not be able to explore Althusser’s later aleatory materialism here, but it should at least be noted that the becoming-necessary of contingencies so central to it can easily be seen as a moment in the Žižekian “missing link” logic, in which the vanishing of the contingent mediator is constitutive of the necessity that follows it).

Thus, Althusser’s systematizing analyses always expose the traces of the vanishing mediator — those paradoxes whose secret is subjective molding of history — whose vanishing is the sure sign of its success, in a kind of “winners-lose” logic. We should not however come to the conclusion that Althusser’s only importance for us today is in demonstrating the appearance of irrelevance. Instead, this brief analysis proposes reading Althusser against the grain (or at least against the grain of his common 1980s reading as a Lacanian, Spinozist, or structuralist critic of ideology and its material coordinates) — as a repository for a renewed utopian thinking or a radical restarting of the historical imagination. The dictum according to which ideology has no outside can be thus rethought as a demand to imagine communist ideology and its position as a vanishing mediator. This is a quick example of how we might read Althusser as an unsuspecting utopian. Perhaps less obvious is how we can, for instance,

reread Althusser's ingenious demonstration that there could be no socialist law as something other than a vicious critique of any social-democratic reformism — as a call to conceive of a social form in which law as such withers away, maybe through its becoming immanent to collective structure of desire.¹³ To read Althusser as an unsuspecting utopian: this is how his writing once again becomes relevant for us.

Notes

1. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2013)
2. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (New York: Pantheon, 1970).
3. McKenzie Wark, "Althusserians Anonymous (the Relapse)," February 26, 2016, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/02/aa/>.
4. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*
5. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 48-59, 70-103, 184-87
6. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 52
7. William Lewis, *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005) 159-62; Michael Sprinker, "The Legacies of Althusser," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995) 208
8. For examples of this Spinozist reading see Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital* 189; Sprinker, "The Legacies of Althusser" 204; Jason Read, "The Althusser Effect: Philosophy, History, and Temporality," *Borderlands* 4.2 (2005) 25; see also, Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 59.
9. Warren Montag, "'The Soul Is the Prison of the Body': Althusser and Foucault, 1970-1975," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995) 66.
10. Jason Read, "The Althusser Effect: Philosophy, History, and Temporality" 29; Sprinker, "The Legacies of Althusser" 204.
11. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 1991) 179-227; Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 2008) 309-44.
12. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do* 189-90
13. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 59-61

