

## On Ideology in Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*

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In "The Spectre of Ideology," Slavoj Žižek identifies three axes around which the term ideology has been mobilized: first, "ideology as a complex of ideas (theories, convictions, beliefs, argumentative procedures)"; second, ideology in its material form, in institutions, structures, and even bodily practices; and finally, what Žižek calls "the most elusive domain, the 'spontaneous' ideology at work at the heart of social 'reality' itself."<sup>1</sup> As an example of the second — ideology in its material form — Žižek offers an example of what he means right away, as soon as he names the axis: Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), those set of institutions, coordinated by the State, in which ideology is manifested materially, via the practice or practices of that apparatus. With respect to the third — "spontaneous" understandings of ideology — instead of an example he provides a cautionary note: "it is highly questionable if the term 'ideology' is at all appropriate to designate this domain — here it is exemplary that, apropos of commodity fetishism, Marx never used the term 'ideology.'"<sup>2</sup>

Althusser's *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is a detour of a book, bookended by a desire named at the outset and a conclusion (of sorts) reached in the final chapter. We are told in the introduction that the overall aim of the book is to outline "a *scientific* definition of philosophy"; to reach that goal, there first needs to be a long analysis of how the superstructure functions to reproduce relations of production.<sup>3</sup> Žižek might associate Althusser's ISAs with the materiality of ideology, and the core part of this newly translated book certainly confirms this view. But by the time we make it to the concluding chapter, "On Ideology," it's clear that the careful work of materializing ideology has, at least in part, been undertaken in order to figure its *spontaneous* operations. At the core of the various articulations that Althusser offers of ideology (with all of their tricky and at times inconsistent metaphors), of its links (at least structurally) to psychoanalysis, of its constitution of subjects — even of the very need for subjects in a discussion of ISAs — is a fascination with a single problem. How is it that subjects "go" — or rather: how is it that they manage to "go

all by themselves,” without a cop standing behind them, without (for the most part) the need of Repressive State Apparatuses? How is it that a society constantly riven by the contradictions of a foundationally unequal division of labor, still manages to operate? How does it continue to operate even today, when the division of wealth is more akin to the robber baron era of the late nineteenth century than the moment in which Althusser is writing, when Keynesian ideas held sway (even if they were being slowly undercut by the forms and forces that we would come to name neoliberalism)? Althusser writes in “On Ideology,” almost as if in surprise:

[t]he subjects ‘go’: they recognize that ‘it’s really true’, that ‘this is the way it is’, not some other way, that they have to obey God, the priest, De Gaulle, the boss, the engineer, and love their neighbor, and so on. The subjects go, since they have recognized that ‘all is well’ (the way it is), and they say, for good measure: *So be it!*<sup>4</sup>

It’s possible to raise all kinds of questions about Althusser’s framing of the concept of ideology, beginning with many of the apparently unsustainable or shaky epistemic demands it makes. And Althusser’s analysis — with his frequent uses of descriptors such as “distortion,” or indeed his very appeal to a *scientific* philosophy — tends to reinforce a sense that ideology is mainly about getting it wrong, about failing to see the larger social forest for the quotidian phenomenology of the trees — in other words, more like Žižek’s first category than his third. But I don’t really think this is the right place to put pressure on Althusser’s articulation of ideology: he’s well aware of the fact, for instance, that “reality” can never be directly itself, that it can only come to us via symbolization. This is why there will always be ideology, even after capitalism has come to an end — a frustrating conclusion for some Marxists who see ideology as Žižek so efficiently characterizes it: “an effect that exists only in order to efface the causes of its own existence, an effect that in a way resists its own cause.”<sup>5</sup> What I think is more important to consider is the account of the reproduction of capital that Althusser offers us at the level of subjects — those subjects whom he insists are *one and the same as* ideology (“The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpretation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing,” he writes).<sup>6</sup> Ideology names the processes by which individuals are made into subjects, reproducing the relations of production; at one and the same time, it is also the mechanism by which the Real constituted by the processes of social antagonism is covered over, which leads workers to side with God, or perhaps worse, De Gaulle (or even worse, Trump!). Subjects recognize that “all is well,” that there is no social antagonism that they need to be alert to, that what is just is the way it is; they get it wrong, and were they to uncover this processes by which experience is drained of its history, they would no longer accede to it — or so the story goes. It’s a familiar one to those whose intellectual work has led them to try to understand why the motives and rationale of the masses seem

out of step with what they would expect given the injustices — political, economic, social — of the systems they inhabit.

One of the benefits of encountering anew Althusser's exploration of the reproduction of the relations of production and the fundamental role of systems of belief that make subjects "go" when they are trapped in a "triple system of subjection, universal recognition, and absolute guarantee," is that it makes me wonder whether we fully understand the processes of reproduction, or whether this is a place where there still needs to be significant work in left thinking.<sup>7</sup> This isn't only because of the expansion of mechanisms that help make things "go" — codes and practices that help us to say "all is well" even as they insist that the real is being supplanted by the virtual, and insist, too, that one can no longer know enough of the social to say with confidence: *So be it!* (and yet expect that we will do so anyway). Althusser wants to understand more fully the processes by which the division of labor remains not just misunderstood, but accepted as what "is." For Marx, there was less mystery to this process. "Each new class, which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it," he writes in *The German Ideology*, "is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interests of all of the members of society."<sup>8</sup> What Marx lacks is what Althusser intends to provide, which are the mechanisms by which this "common interest" is produced, and by grounding it in the operations of the ISAs he materializes Marx's perhaps too easy appeal to "ruling ideas" and its lingering sense of the conspiratorial construction of ideology by the 1% at an annual meeting like Davos.

What trips things up, for me at least, is the place that seems to be reserved in "On Ideology" for philosophy not just as an analytic tool, but also as a political one. Even as he insists that his model of ideology demands that there is always ideology (not just under capitalism, but even in the case the social antagonisms proper to it were finally resolved), lurking in the background of Althusser's account is the philosopher's interest in knowing and not knowing, in possessing knowledge and not-possessing it — in a phrase: in getting rid of the wrong things and finally get things right. It is a gesture and a desire rooted in the blunt fantasy of Plato's grasping after an ontology that can never be captured by human epistemological tools, rather than the Aristotelian measure of the given for the lessons it can offer about the shape and form of ethics and politics. Or rather, there is a double gesture in Althusser: the abstract mapping of the given (ISAs, RSAs) is imagined as a mechanism by which one can finally overcome epistemological limits. The philosopher can manage to get things right through the labor of her thought; when it comes to ideology, however, getting things right doesn't dissipate the forces that create it — the analytic work of philosophy does not substitute for the political work of creating new social apparatuses that would generate new forms of ideology.

Social reproduction is a complicated, messy, contradictory affair: it is generated not only by the mechanisms that are framed by Althusser as *epistemic* ones — the

things that are asserted by ISAs and their Subjects are *true!* My belief accords to *reality!* — but by a whole range of social pressures and desires, which have been mapped by thinkers from Sigmund Freud to Pierre Bourdieu to Lauren Berlant, not to mention sociologists and social psychologists who may not be interested in the slightest to (for example) the division of labor as a source of social antagonism *and* a mechanism by which this antagonism is covered up. Even in the complex form that Althusser outlines in *Reproduction*, ideology cannot be only about recognition and misrecognition, about recruitment via a story misrecognized as reality. We do need to understand how subjects “go all by themselves,” since any politics worthy of the name would have to address the mechanisms through which this takes place. But such a politics should not be limited to worries about “distortion,” or be premised on assumption that the reasons we act against our own interests is because we don’t know them; if we are imagining a politics organized around the philosopher — that agent of knowledge, if not of truth — we are favoring elegant solutions instead of putting ourselves to the task of plotting out more difficult ones. Another, different story of institutions generating “consent” is offered, for instance, by Antonio Gramsci; his analyses leads to a difficult, extended “war of position” — a messy political struggle instead of smartly mapped philosophical problematics. Gramsci’s famous slogan, “Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will” has been misread by those inclined to philosophical analyses of ideology as a call for a relentlessly negative critique. It should also be seen as a claim about the limits of philosophy to generate a political outcome. No amount of analysis of ideology will manage to upend its more powerful claim on us — the quotidian demand: *So be it!*

In the same essay that I cited at the beginning, Žižek evocatively speaks about the powerful function of the “and” in Althusser’s essays. In “Ideology *and* Ideological State Apparatuses,” the ISAs constitute the material conditions for ideology — what “ideology itself has to misrecognize in its ‘normal’ functioning.”<sup>9</sup> The “and” doesn’t conjoin two different things, but the “same content in its two modalities,” Žižek tells us. No third term is needed to contain both; either term can act as the common medium of the plurality of the two elements. What might be missing in Althusser’s chapter “On Ideology” is not only a fuller account of the role of ISAs, but this “and” that doesn’t need some third term, even structurally — some Real against which actually existing ideology is formed (and which necessitates that ideology will always be a feature of how a subject is socialized). While the publication of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is to be welcomed, it may well be that we are better served by the version of Althusser’s essay on ideology that most English-language readers will have encountered in *Lenin and Philosophy* — one less likely to speak to our bad habits of imagining ideology as something to be pierced through, or described away, once and for all.

“The subjects go, since they have recognized that ‘all is well’ (the way it is).”<sup>10</sup> One month into the new government of Donald Trump, one might say that a large segment of the US populace is refusing to go, since they no longer recognize that “all is well”;

instead, they are standing up to the government, banding together in protests across the US and around the world. It has been common enough in the wake of the election for journalists and commentators to suggest that many of Trump's supporters, too, felt that all was no longer well and so took a chance on an erratic billionaire to represent them in and against a system of neoliberalism supported by elites across the political spectrum. Despite the distinct character of these political gestures (mass action in the streets, votes cast on election day), and despite their very different repercussions for individuals and groups (e.g., the pre-Trump status quo adhered more closely to the Geneva Convention and its own regulations regarding immigration and refugee claimants), neither fully constitutes a politics that challenges the dominant ideologies and ideological state apparatuses governing our moment. The limit comes when the practice of politics is imagined as in and against the ideology of the other side, hoping to revise these to more closely accord with the forms of spontaneous consent governing left-liberal capitalist subject.

At best, what Althusser's work on ideology helps us to understand is how deep and sedimented processes of social reproduction actually are, and how ideas and material processes are effectively one and the same. One of the promising political developments of the current moment is that the governing myths of bourgeois society (that process that Roland Barthes described as "giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal") *are* being exposed and challenged — or at least some of them are.<sup>11</sup> The political challenge is to use this opening not to reaffirm the institutions that governed the spontaneous consent of liberal society before Trump, but to re-shape those institutions such that we don't feel an obligation to obey anyone (God, De Gaulle, or Trump) and don't ever imagine again that "all is well" the way it is.

**Notes**

1. Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Tim Kaposy (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 233.
2. Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology” 233.
3. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014) 7.
4. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 197.
5. “The Spectre of Ideology” 240.
6. “The Spectre of Ideology” 264.
7. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 197.
8. Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Tim Kaposy (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 169.
9. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 241.
10. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 197.
11. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972) 141.