

On Althusser's Not Un-Usefulness (Notes Toward an Investigation)

Phillip E. Wegner

The long-awaited English translation of Louis Althusser's unfinished manuscript, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* — first published in France in 1995 and which Fredric Jameson characterizes as "the fullest and most satisfying statement of Althusser's position and life work" — will hopefully change a few things in the discussion of one of the most influential, debated, and contested essays in Marxist critical theory produced in the last half century, Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), as well as the larger event of structuralism of which it remains such a vital document.¹ If nothing else, this volume can contribute to changing the tenor of the discussion by forcing us to pay more attention both to Althusser's original subtitle, ("Notes toward an Investigation"), and the essay's opening footnote: "This text is made up of two extracts from an ongoing study. The subtitle 'Notes towards an Investigation' is the author's own. The ideas expounded should not be regarded as more than the introduction to a discussion."² I also would like to suggest that the publication of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, as well as the even more recent first complete translation of the astounding collective endeavor, *Reading Capital*, might encourage us to return to Althusser's project engaging in the hard work of deep listening, translation, and reframing — this time with the aim neither to praise nor bury it, but to explore what might be not un-useful in it for grasping our current situation — including, as I will suggest in my closing comments, the ongoing crisis in the university, the humanities, and social sciences — and thereby, as Althusser requests of us, continuing the dialogue he hoped it would inaugurate.

Two things that become apparent when re-encountering his ideas in the context of the longer text is both the unity, even in its unfinished state, of its form indeed, there is a deep narrative energy in the longer text not evident in the 1970 essay — and what I would venture to characterize as its deeply dialectical mode of exposition. Such a claim is in no way meant to undermine the importance of Althusser's critique in *Reading Capital* and elsewhere of a closed idealist dialectic and expressive causality;

rather, it underscores Warren Montag's observation in his superb 2013 study, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War*, that "Althusser's relationship to Hegel... is more complicated than has been suspected up to now and that might prove a productive area for further research."³ Some of these dialectical aspects include Althusser's careful attention to the presentation (*Darstellung*) of the material, as well as a repeated underscoring of the need to move from "description" to "theory." In fact, Althusser presents this last pair as forming a contradiction:

For the term *theory* is partially "at odds" with the adjective "*descriptive*" attached to it. This means, to be very precise, 1) that the "descriptive theory" really is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the irreversible commencement of theory; but 2) that the "descriptive" form in which the theory is presented *requires*, precisely as an effect of this "contradiction", a development of the theory that goes beyond the form of "description."⁴

Might we not find in this formulation Althusser's version of the classical dialectical movement of the universal, particular, and concrete?

This passage also highlights the most significant dialectical aspect of Althusser's presentation: the unfolding of his narrative by way of the production of binary oppositions. This gives further support to Jameson's observation in *Valences of the Dialectic* that structuralism's formulation of the "binary opposition" marks "that breakthrough, with which... unbeknownst to the structuralists themselves, dialectical thought was able to reinvent itself in our time."⁵ Althusser begins with the binary opposition, or apparent contradiction, in Marx's model of the mode of production between the forces (raw materials, machinery, and labor power) and relations of production, while also stressing that "in every social formation, there exists more than one mode of production: at least two and often many more."⁶ This line of exposition culminates in an axiom that has great relevance for how we think, as we shall see shortly, about the contemporary university: "all the *forms* in which the putatively 'technical' functions of the division of labor are carried out are direct or indirect effects of the dominant relations of production."⁷ Althusser then turns his attention to the topological binary opposition of the base and superstructure, or the economic and the "legal-political" or "law-state."⁸ Each of these last two conjoined terms are addressed in turn, the first in a significant chapter excised from the essay where Althusser produces another binary between what he calls the formalism of law and "legal ideology," a binary supplemented in turn by "moral ideology."⁹ The hyphen in the term "law-state" itself suggests another potential modification of our understanding of the discussion of the state in the 1970 essay, the law now we are told providing the mediating link, or "*the specific apparatus articulating the superstructure upon and within the base.*"¹⁰

In his subsequent chapter dealing with "The State," Althusser first distinguishes

between state power and state apparatuses, the latter then further bifurcating into one of the conceptual inventions for which the essay is most well-known, that of the repressive and ideological state apparatuses, or RSAs and ISAs. Crucially, Althusser stresses the inseparability, or what Montag refers to as the “consubstantiality” of each term with and in the other.¹¹ This confirms Jameson’s point that “in process-oriented thought it is the relationship that comes first.”¹² Ideology, on the other hand, in the moralizing fashion described by Nietzsche, privileges the first term in each pair and dismisses or even suppresses the other.

In an extended footnote to the chapter on “Law,” Althusser focuses on one especially fraught example of the such a privileging of “the productive forces over the relations of production,” that found in an ideology of *planning*, understood as the very negation of the anarchy of the market where reigns the freedom of each individual to buy and sell labor power, but which is in reality, Althusser earlier underscores, no more than the freedom to exploit and be exploited¹³—exploitation and *not* state repression, he repeats in Chapter 8, being “what is determinate in the last instance,” an argument Jameson reiterates more recently in the closing pages of *Representing Capital*.¹⁴ Planning is thus “assigned sole responsibility, or the main responsibility, for solving this gigantic problem” of creating “socialist relations of production, the celebrated relations of real appropriation.” Althusser continues

This politics is false in its very principle and at odds with Lenin’s famous slogan: “Socialism is the Soviets plus electrification”. With this pithy phrase, Lenin states an accurate, fundamental thesis. Neglecting it always has fatal consequences. Lenin affirms, with this phrase, the primacy of the Soviets over electrification, and thereby, the political primacy of the problems of the relations of production over the productive forces. I say the *political* primacy. For the Soviets are the masses’ political organizations, and socialist relations of production will not be established as a side effect of the planning of productive forces (here symbolized by electrification), but, rather, by *the political intervention of the masses* (here, the Soviets).¹⁵

What all of this points toward is an underappreciated figurative dimension of Althusser’s intervention, the way in which it blocks out the unrepresentable void of global capitalism’s situation and an opening beyond the impasse of the present.

All of this raises a further dialectical question concerning the necessity in Althusser’s particular moment for such a re-presentation of Marxist theory. Althusser points toward an answer in one more chapter not included in the essay, and which inaugurates his dialectical narrative, a chapter entitled “What is Philosophy?” In the final section of the chapter, Althusser offers another of his fundamental axioms:

We observe, perhaps to our surprise, that all great transformations in philosophy intervene at moments in history *either* when noteworthy modifications occur in class relations and the state or when major events occur in the history of the sciences: with the additional stipulation that the noteworthy modifications in the class struggle and the major events in the history of the sciences appear, most of the time, to reinforce each other in their encounter in order to produce prominent effects in Philosophy.¹⁶

This proposition bears a striking resemblance to Perry Anderson's conjunctural model of any modernism (and in *Periodizing Jameson*, I characterize Althusser's intervention itself as a "untimely modernism"¹⁷) defined by the coordinates of a disorienting development of new industrial, communicational, and transportation technologies and the "imaginative proximity of social revolution."¹⁸ (Anderson's third coordinate, the existence of a "highly formalized academicism" to react against, also finds ready analogies in the histories of philosophy and Marxism.) Althusser then presents a table of some past crucial conjunctures — for example, the political events of the "rise of the bourgeoisie" and "French Revolution," along with the scientific event of the "new foundation of physics by Newton," produce the situation in which Kant's "important modifications of the previous conjuncture" of philosophy occur.¹⁹ The last two entries in Althusser's chart are the conjuncture of "crisis of imperialism," "developments in technology," and "Heidegger;" and a final entry with only the words, "And so on..." Althusser, I am convinced, expects his readers (and especially those who accept the structuralist understanding of Sartrean existentialism as the adaptation in the French context of Heidegger's breakthrough) to provide content to these empty slots with respectively, (1) the global political developments of the 1960s, and May '68 in France in particular; (2) the "scientific" event of structuralism; and (3) the intervention emerging from this conjuncture, that of Althusser himself.

To take up first the second term in Althusser's schema, there are two aspects of the structuralist scientific revolution worth underscoring here. In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, Althusser maintains, "that an author, insofar as he writes the lines of a discourse which claims to be scientific, is completely absent as a 'subject' from 'his' scientific discourse (for all scientific discourse is by definition a discourse without a subject . . .)."²⁰ Early in *Representing Capital*, Jameson parses this definition in this way: "a discourse without a subject (that is to say, without doxa or opinions)."²¹ A discourse without a subject then is first and foremost one that suspends ethical evaluation, which, as Jameson elsewhere has it, "is the ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination."²² This assault on ethics, and especially the ethical category of the binary opposition, is at the very center of the structuralist program of reconstituting the human sciences, a program inaugurated by Claude Lévi-Strauss's assault on the western imperial ideological opposition "between the so-called primitive mind and scientific thought."²³ At the same time, Althusser maintains

in *Reading Capital*, “A science is a systematic theory which embraces the totality of its object and seizes the ‘internal connection’ which links together the ‘reduced’ essences of *all* economic phenomenon.”²⁴ With the stress on the systematic articulation of axioms or absolute presuppositions, the rejection of phenomenal appearances in favor of inner determinations, and the placement of any particular phenomenon within a complex network of overdetermined relationships, scientific structuralism follows the path pioneered by Marx himself, and effects a dramatic epistemological break with the ideological practices of humanism (famously according to Althusser and the other contributors to *Reading Capital* still characteristic of the works of Marx’s early “transitional” phase), empiricism, and idealist Hegelianism.²⁵

In the opening note to *On the Reproduction of Capital*, Althusser characterizes the political situation of his moment in this fashion: “We are entering an age that will see the triumph of socialism across the globe. We need only take note of the irresistible course of popular struggles in order to conclude that in a relatively near future, despite all the possible twists and turns, the very serious crisis of the international communist movement included, *the revolution is already on the agenda.*”²⁶ From our position of retrospection, of course, the situation looks very different, May ’68 signaling not so much the opening of a new period of global struggle as the conclusion of this vital political sequence, as well as the closure of the most productive period of structuralism. In his 1984 essay, “Periodizing the ‘60s,” Jameson notes, “Yet this sense of freedom and possibility — which is for the course of the 60s a momentarily objective reality, as well as (from the hindsight of the 80s) a historical illusion — can perhaps best be explained in terms of the superstructural movement and play enabled by the transition from one infrastructural or systemic stage of capitalism to another.”²⁷ Such an infrastructural or systemic stage is what Ernst Mandel names “late capitalism” and whose “cultural logic” Jameson so famously describes in another of his essays first published in the banner year of 1984.

Thus, one further implication of reading Althusser’s narrative as a dialectical unity, or as not-unfinished, lies precisely in the way it develops a figuration, in Louis Marin’s specific sense, of the transitional moment between a late-modernist welfare state or Fordist capitalism — Giovanni Arrighi’s short “long twentieth century” — and what later will be characterized as post-Fordism or neo-liberalism; or between what Yannis Varoufakis has most recently characterized as the shift from the Era of the Global Plan to that of the Global Minotaur (while the latter suggesting as well the possibility that the 2008 economic crisis signaled a movement beyond the latter situation).²⁸ Perhaps too it is his recognition of this imminent restructuring of global capitalism, and the immense political challenges that it raises, that accounts for Althusser’s abandonment of his original, more ambitious, and more hopeful project. A formal presentation of the situation of the text’s production would appear as in the following figure.²⁹

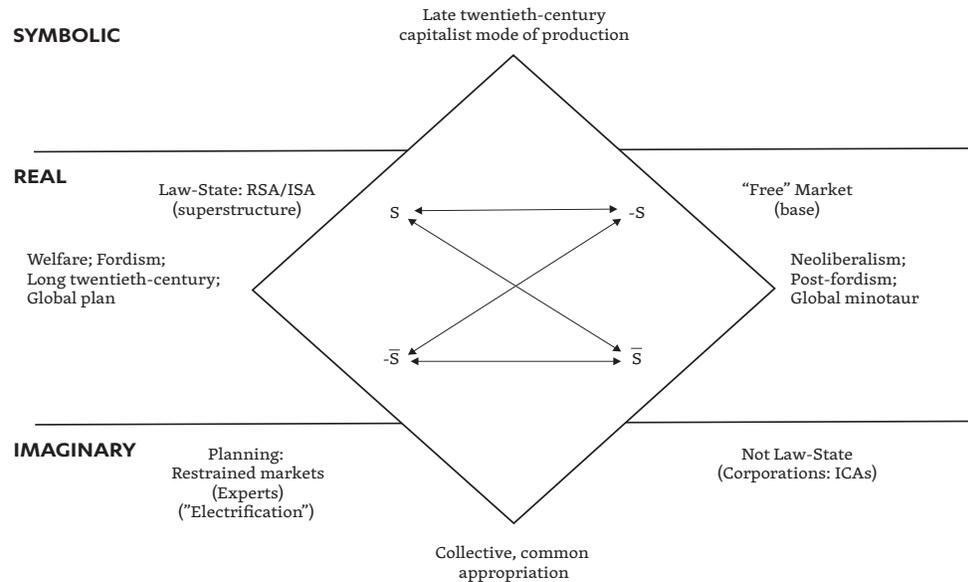


Figure 1

Of course, to historicize Althusser's intervention in this manner in no way calls into question the validity of his scientific breakthrough in these texts: to paraphrase Jameson on the contemporaneous explorations of A.J. Greimas, "That [Althusserian Marxism] should be 'true' in some sense (or at any rate, pragmatically, richly usable and full of practical development) and at the same time stand as a profound historical symptom of the nature of the age I find no difficulty in reconciling: the latter — the structure of the late capitalist global system — constituting something like the conditions of possibility for the conceptualization and articulation of the new theoretical system."³⁰

In *Reading Capital*, Althusser advances the argument that Hegelian philosophy is unable to become a science because within it "the present constitutes the *absolute horizon* of all knowing... the ontological category of the present prevents any anticipation of historical time, any conscious anticipation of the future development of the concept, any *knowledge* of the future."³¹ One of the most useful and productive aspects of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* lies in its anticipation of developments that have come to fruition in our own situation. One such anticipation arises from the famous presentation of the mechanism of subjectification or ideological interpellation

that occurs late in the full text, which now is more effectively understood less as a hailing into a particular set of contents and more as an invitation to form. That is, ideology reproduces the dominant relations of production by working primarily not on our heads but, as Montag bears out, on our bodies; and not through ideas and representations, but through institutions and practices — what Althusser refers to as *apparatuses*. Althusser maintains, “ideology exists in apparatuses and the practices specific to them.”³² Later, in a proposition that is unmodified in the published essay, Althusser again asserts, “an ideology always exists in an apparatus and in the practice or practices of that apparatus. This existence is material.”³³ Montag notes that “the most important word in the phrase ‘the Ideological State Apparatuses function by ideology’ was all but elided from the innumerable critiques and interpretations: namely, the term, ‘apparatuses.’... Critics thus focused on ‘state’ and ‘ideology,’ overlooking the ‘apparatus’ in a way that preserved intact not only previous theories of ideology but all of the oppositions that sustained them: matter and spirit, mind and body, force and consent.”³⁴

Ideological struggle then, which is always already class struggle, is, in the last instance, over the organization and functioning of these institutions. This is one of the most significant lessons that both Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida took each in their own way from Althusser, and it is on the basis of this axiom that Althusser offers in the book’s eighth chapter (another of those completely absent from the 1970 essay), a stirring defense of trade union activism — a defense that has vital lessons for those of us working and struggling in the university today. Against those who find such activities “to be secondary, if not contemptible,”³⁵ Althusser maintains

It is *often easier* to be a member of the Communist Party in France — that is to say, for certain activists to carry a party card in their pockets, hold occasional meetings *outside* the firm, distribute leaflet or the party cell newspaper by mail or in some other discreet way — than to be a genuine trade union activist. For trade union activity can only be carried on *in* the firm [in our case, the university], in the broad light of day, collectively, it is true, but also individually, under the constant, terribly vigilant surveillance of engineers, supervisors and foremen [read here, the central administration], who *in the overwhelming majority of cases are the direct agents*, in forms that are sometimes brutal, but sometimes infinitely subtle, of the *bosses’* [the university’s board of governors] *exploitation and repression....* The economic class struggle, which cannot *by itself* determine the outcome of the decisive battle for the socialist revolution, that is, the battle for state power, is not a *secondary or subordinate* struggle. It is the material basis for the political struggle itself. Without bitter, uninterrupted, day-to-day economic struggle, the political class struggle is impossible or vain.³⁶

To apply this insight to the case of the contemporary university would require acknowledging full on the current reality of the proletarianization of university faculty, not only in terms of teaching, with the shift to flexible part-time labor and the erosion of faculty self-governance, but also in research, as evident in the mushrooming in recent years of university patents and licensing offices. Althusser thus gives us a firm theoretical ground for activist labors in the burgeoning faculty unionization movement as well as interventions in professional organizations such as those undertaken by the MLA Radical Caucus and other similar groups.

Furthermore, according to Althusser in 1969, the “dominant” Ideological State Apparatus is the school, having displaced the Church in this role.³⁷ And while this remains an important apparatus, Althusser’s very acknowledgement that its ascendancy is only a recent development raises the question of whether the school remains dominant in global neo-liberal capitalism. Indeed, building further on Althusser’s insights, we could argue that it has been displaced by a corporate mass media, giving rise to new institutions alongside the ISAs that we might call the ICMAAs, the “Ideological Corporate Media Apparatuses.” The acknowledgement of such a shift would help us understand the neo-conservative assault on the state as being motivated in part by the desire to complete the dismantling of what has long been the relatively autonomous, and hence highly conflictual, site of state pedagogy, the public school and especially the state land grant university, and replace it by much more privatized forms of cultural education such as those of Fox News and Breitbart’s proposed “alt-right” internet media empire. The Trump administration’s explicit aims to dismantle the Department of Education and defund and privatize other ISAs such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Voice of America will dramatically further such a transformation. Another consequence of acknowledging the ascent of the ICMAAs would be a clearer recognition of the way conflicts such as those over internet access and net neutrality as also being directly class struggles.

All of these examples bear out that one of the more significant aspects of Althusser’s not-un-useful project lies in this capacity to think its tumultuous present — in a way not unlike Lacan’s contemporary seminar of 1969-70, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (another unfinished text also not published in French until the 1990s, and in English only in the last decade)³⁸ — both in terms of the pseudo-event of modifications *within* global capitalism *and* the real eventual potentiality that lies on the horizon of its, no less than our own, only seemingly sutured present.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (New York: Verso, 2011) 149.
2. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014) 232.
3. Warren Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War* (Durham: Duke UP, 2013) 156.
4. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 71.
5. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009) 16-17.
6. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 19.
7. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 36.
8. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 55.
9. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 68.
10. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 169.
11. *Althusser and His Contemporaries* 155.
12. *Valences of the Dialectic* 17.
13. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 41-4.
14. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 126. For further discussion of Jameson's *Representing Capital*, see my Afterword in Phillip E. Wegner, *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, the University, and the Desire for Narrative* (Chicago: Northwestern UP, 2014) 205-13.
15. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 63.
16. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 14-15.
17. Wegner, *Periodizing Jameson* 52.
18. See Perry Anderson, "Marshall Berman: Modernity and Revolution," *A Zone of Engagement* (New York: Verso, 1992) 25-55.
19. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 15.
20. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 188.
21. *Representing Capital* 3.
22. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: 1981) 114.
23. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Calire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963) 230.
24. Althusser, "The Object of Capital," *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (New York: Verso, 2015) 229.
25. For a useful discussion of this understanding of science, see Jameson, "Science Versus Ideology," *Humanities in Society* 6 (1983) 283-302.
26. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 6.
27. Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Volume 2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 208.
28. See Yanis Varoufakis, *The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the Global Economy* (London: Zed Books, 2015).
29. For my recasting of the Greimasian semiotic square in order to bring into focus its open dialectical possibilities, see *Periodizing Jameson* 81-117.
30. Fredric Jameson, Foreword to *On Meaning: Selected Writing in Semiotic Theory*, by A.J. Greimas, trans. Paul J. Parron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), xxii. For Jacques Rancière's brief

meditation on the conditions of possibility of Marxian science itself, see *Reading Capital* 173-4.

31. *Reading Capital* 242.
32. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 156.
33. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 184; 259.
34. *Althusser and His Contemporaries* 145.
35. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 135.
36. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 129.
37. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 146.
38. For my thoughts on the value of Lacan's seminar for rethinking our pedagogical labors, see "Lacan avec Greimas: Formalization, Theory, and the 'Other Side' of the Study of Culture," *Minnesota Review* 77 (2011) 62-86.