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## Mediations 30.2, Summer 2017

### Post-Humanisms Reconsidered

#### Essays: Planerity

- 1 Sandeep Banerjee: Beyond the Intimations of Mortality: Chakrabarty, Anthropocene, and the Politics of the (Im)Possible
- 15 Auritro Majumder: Gayatri Spivak, Planerity, and the Labor of Imagining Internationalism<sup>1</sup>

#### Roundtable: Althusser

- 29 Caren Irr: Introduction: An Althusser for the Twenty-First Century
- 37 Matthew Flisfeder: Morality or Enjoyment? On Althusser's Ideological Supplement of the Law
- 45 Eli Jelly-Schapiro: Historicizing Repression and Ideology
- 51 Carolyn Lesjak: Althusser and the University Today
- 57 Promise Li: Althusser's Clinamen: Aleatory Materialism and Revolutionary Politics
- 63 Warren Montag: Althusser's Empty Signifier: What is the Meaning of the Word "Interpellation"?
- 69 Oded Nir: Althusser, or The System
- 75 Jason Read: Ideology as Individuation, Individuating Ideology
- 83 Imre Szeman: On Ideology in Althusser's ***On the Reproduction of Capitalism***
- 89 Phillip E. Wegner: On Althusser's Not Un-Usefulness (Notes Toward an Investigation)

#### Reviews: Futures

- 99 Mitch Murray: On Imagined and Science Fictional Futures
- 111 Davis Smith-Brecheisen: The Limits of Art
- 123 Contributors



## **Beyond the Intimations of Mortality: Chakrabarty, Anthropocene, and the Politics of the (Im)Possible**

**Sandeep Banerjee**

The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise... is sufficient to change the whole experience of practice and, by the same token, its logic.<sup>1</sup>

The simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise is something in which there is depressingly little belief at present.<sup>2</sup>

In the concluding remarks of his *Representing Capital*, Fredric Jameson invokes a set of oppositions, delineated by Louis Althusser, between domination and exploitation. He notes that the mode of production is organized by the relations of production, or the structure of exploitation and domination is the effect of this structure, the means through which exploitation — the capitalist mode of production — reproduces itself. Jameson proceeds to develop this into an analytical and interpretive strategy, suggesting that an emphasis on exploitation is a socialist — utopian — program, while a focus on domination is a democratic one, a “program and language only too easily coopted by the capitalist state.” Through this he outlines an analytical strategy suggesting a possible change “in theory and in practice.”<sup>3</sup> Jameson’s comments provide an important intervention in resituating the question of “exploitation” at the heart of critique, especially for engaging with social processes engendered by the capitalist mode of production. This is especially relevant for thinking about, and against, the contemporary turn to the post- and non-human in the academe that posits a non-hierarchical world, and is incurious about either capitalist exploitation, or transformative politics.

In this essay, drawing on Jameson’s “reading” strategy, I critically interrogate Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” which is symptomatic of this apolitical thrust of the post-/non-human. Chakrabarty situates the crisis of climate change as a function of the Anthropocene, that is, a human-dominated geological epoch. He contends that this has resulted in the collapse of the distinction

between natural and human history, which, in turn, qualifies notions of modernity, globalization, and human freedom. Stressing the need to put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history of humans, Chakrabarty probes the limits of historical understanding in his essay. I argue that Chakrabarty, despite his claim, resists the collapse between natural and human histories and, more crucially, between nature and history. Positing the historical materialist thesis of the production of nature — the reciprocal transformation of man and nature mediated through the labor process — against the idea of the Anthropocene, I posit the latter as representation of alienation, and alienated labor, from the perspective of capital. I read the climate crisis, not as an effect of domination but as the exploitation of external nature and human beings in contemporary capitalism. Subsequently, I examine Chakrabarty's anti-utopian politics of strategic fatalism, arguing it is a continuation of the politics of despair from *Provincializing Europe*. Finally, I read his idea of the emergent “negative universal history” against the grain, and argue that it, despite his assertions, gestures towards an (im)possible utopian — and planetary — future, and consciousness.

### **That “Thing” Called Labor**

In his essay, Chakrabarty tells us the age of the Anthropocene — the era where human beings have become geological agents — attributes “to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species.”<sup>4</sup> He notes:

There was no point in human history when humans were not biological agents. But we can become geological agents only historically and collectively... when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself.<sup>5</sup>

This assertion presents certain conceptual difficulties. Foremost, we need to remind ourselves that external nature does not present itself to us separated out into biology and geology. Those categories are human disciplinary formations that allow us, through the use of human reason, to examine, understand, and command external nature. To speak of human beings as biological or geological agents is, then, to turn socially constructed distinctions into natural ones.

Further, Chakrabarty tells us that anthropogenic explanations of climate change have *collapsed* the distinction between human history and natural history.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on the work of Alfred Crosby Jr., he notes that environmental history “has much to do with biology and geography but hardly ever imagined human impact on the planet on a geological scale. It was... as vision of man ‘as a prisoner of climate’... not of man as a maker of it.”<sup>7</sup> It must be pointed out that this question has been taken up extensively by scholars, across disciplines, within the critical tradition of historical materialism. Taking up Marx's speculations on the production of nature that are scattered across

his oeuvre, they — this includes, but is not limited to, Theodore Adorno, Raymond Williams, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Neil Smith — have expanded upon and extended Marx's observations to produce some of the most significant critical analyses of humans' productive, and reciprocal, relationship with their environments.<sup>8</sup> Chakrabarty notes that "Croce and Collingwood would... enfold human history and nature, to the extent that the latter could be said to have history, into purposive human action."<sup>9</sup> This omits a crucial, dialectical, aspect of the historical materialist exposition of the production of nature thesis: that we transform external nature with our labor, and in so doing transform ourselves. Marx's comment is instructive in this regard:

Labour is... a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her forces, setting in motion... the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.<sup>10</sup>

It provides a useful gloss to Chakrabarty's assertion that the distinction between human and natural history has collapsed. Indeed, it suggests we need to think not just about the two *histories* but the broader question of humans' relation to nature. If human beings are agents in the transformation of nature, we need to think about, necessarily, the question of the human production of nature, that is, the historicity of nature itself.

But let us examine Chakrabarty's contention about the *collapse* of human and natural history closely. Despite his assertions of a collapse, he nevertheless weighs in on the side of natural history, and a rather absolute conception of external nature. Take, for instance, his comment about the agricultural revolution. He writes that it was

*not just an expression of human inventiveness... [but was] made possible by certain changes in the... atmosphere, a certain stability of the climate... things over which human beings had no control... Without this 'extraordinary' 'fluke' of nature... our industrial-agricultural way of life would not have been possible.*<sup>11</sup>

Chakrabarty tells us that external nature structures the *origin* of the agrarian way of life. How are we to understand his comment, "not just human inventiveness"? "Human inventiveness" here appears to stand in for human labor, and the above extract can be usefully read in light of Marx's explanation of use value in *Capital*:

Use-values... are combinations of two elements — matter and labour. If we take away the useful labour... a material substratum is always left, which is furnished by Nature without the help of man. The latter can only work as Nature does, that is by changing the form of matter... in this work... he is constantly helped by natural forces.<sup>12</sup>

However, it is not enough to simply think about the *origin* of agriculture but conceptualize it as an evolving social practice with consequences for the natural world. This is crucial, as the development of agriculture has transformed the *space* of our planet. One can only gesture in passing towards this long history: the clearing of forests across the world as human beings moved from a nomadic-pastoral to a settled agrarian life; the development of irrigation and farming techniques that transformed the shape of the land and founded civilizations; the emergence of urban centers and the attendant distinction between the country and the city; of local, trans-regional and global trade which have transformed the world materially. In addition, agriculture has also transformed external nature across the globe. Think, for instance, of the development of new varieties of agricultural products through the centuries, ranging from new strains of food grains, vegetables, and fruit, all the way to toxic BT cotton and pesticides.

An acknowledgement of these historical facts illuminates Chakrabarty's comment about the collapse of natural history and human history in a new way. By situating labor at the heart of this collapse — as the mediating category between humans and nature — I am suggesting that we think of nature not as something that is simply “out there” that determines our existence, but acknowledge that human beings actively shape the evolving, reciprocal, and historically conditioned, human-nature interaction. It is for precisely this reason that Raymond Williams notes that “the idea of nature contains, though unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history.”<sup>13</sup>

To think of labor is also to think about the conditions under which it is expended, and for what purpose. Human beings work on external nature to produce the means for satisfying their needs and, collectively, produce their material life. In so doing, however, human beings also transform themselves. This structures the production of consciousness, which is a natural and historical product of productive human activity. In addition, as human beings produce their material life, their productive labor begins to be differentiated. This division of labor produces “a systematic division of social experiences upon which human nature is constantly shaped and reshaped” leading to the development of classes in society.<sup>14</sup>

One of the divisions of labor which develops alongside production is “the division between manual and mental labor... [which] opens up... new vistas for the human production of consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> In this regard, it is salutary to remind ourselves that natural history is profoundly social, predicated on labor, physical and mental, of human beings.<sup>16</sup> The disciplines of geology, archaeology, and paleontology are



themselves significantly labor-intensive, requiring people to materially intervene in the physical landscape to constitute their “archives.” Moreover, paleontology and archaeology are historical narrativizations of our past, emerging as disciplines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They are structured by their conditions of possibilities, namely, mercantile, industrial, and colonial capital over past centuries, and to a large extent by the military-industrial complex in the present moment. I want to make clear that I am not here gesturing towards a non-committal relativism regarding knowledge production but simply underlining that these disciplinary formations are social products.

The social division of labor, moreover, shapes definite forms of social organization that lead, through various mutations, to the contemporary capitalist mode of production.<sup>17</sup> One of the key features of this historical trajectory is the transformation of the production process, into production for exchange rather than direct use. Under capitalism, production is governed by the rule of “accumulation for accumulation’s sake,” which becomes a socially imposed necessity. This has key consequences for the production of nature. As Neil Smith notes:

Under dictate from the accumulation process, capitalism as a mode of production must expand continuously if it is to survive... nature becomes a *universal means of production* in the sense that it not only provides the subjects, objects, and instruments of production, but is also in its totality an appendage to the production process... Under capitalism the appropriation of nature and its transformation into means of production occur for the first time at a world scale.<sup>18</sup>

Smith here is articulating the advent of capitalist modernity — singular and uneven — that structures our contemporary moment in decisive ways. It bears repeating that the modernity we know is capitalist, linked as it is to the emergence, expansion, and deepening of the capitalist relations of production; the global hegemony of capitalism as a mode of production; and the consequent restructuring of social relations and external nature across the globe in profoundly uneven ways.<sup>19</sup> In other words, modernity is not something that “happens — or even... happens *first* — in the ‘the West’... to which others [the ‘Rest’] can subsequently gain access.”<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, such a conception understands our world as, simultaneously, *one and unequal*, that is, a singular world that is hierarchically structured and experienced. The advantage of such a formulation is that it *pluralizes the category of difference* through the inscription of *hierarchy*, rescuing it from ahistorical essentialism. Moreover, it allows us to think of the global south and the minority world of the global north dialectically; and of capital, without losing sight of its conditions of possibility, human beings as vectors of labor-power; and make sense of the uneven spatio-temporalities across scales. In short, it re-inscribes the question of exploitation at the heart of the critical enterprise.

The crisis of climate change should therefore be understood, not simply as humans transforming nature to the detriment of themselves, but a consequence of capital's relentless drive to expand; its systemic compulsion to accumulate for its own sake; and in so doing inflecting the productive process in a way that exploits nature, external nature and human beings, without any sense of consequence for either, until it takes the form of a global crisis.<sup>21</sup> I am suggesting here, then, that the climate crisis is a crisis of capital: it is brought about by capital, and, insofar as it intimates human extinction, poses a barrier to its relentless drive to accumulate.

What does this do to our understanding of the Anthropocene? Examined from this vantage, the notion of the Anthropocene appears to be a representation of labor, the mediating category between humans and external nature, and the pre-eminent commodity in the capitalist mode of production. By equating labor to a geological force — an unthinking physical force, unmoored from its societal context — these theorists provide a fetishized representation of it.<sup>22</sup> Further, this dehumanization of labor also dehumanizes human beings, reducing them to the level of mere matter, obfuscating social hierarchies.<sup>23</sup> The category of the Anthropocene, then, conceptualizes and represents living labor (and the human subject) from the perspective of capital, as an object or thing. It is the representational form of alienation, and alienated labor. To think of labor as a thing or matter is then to disavow questions of exploitation, positing a sense of domination in its stead. Such a move also, necessarily, denies the possibility of a politics of utopian social transformation. I will now examine the figuration of politics in Chakrabarty's essay.

### **The (Im)Possible Figure of Politics**

To think about transformative politics is to think of possible futures in relation to the present. We need to then assess how the present is delineated in Chakrabarty. He writes that the Anthropocene requires us to put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history of humans. This is necessary because “only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged.”<sup>24</sup> Chakrabarty justifies this claim by championing historical contingency, noting that it shaped “the transition from wood to coal... [just as] Coincidences and historical accidents... litter the stories of the ‘discovery’ of oil, of the oil tycoons, and of the automobile industry.”<sup>25</sup>

The world that Chakrabarty delineates for us, then, is a world that is structured by contingency alone. This underlined by his use of evocative descriptors for human action. He tells us that “human beings have *tumbled* into being a geological agent.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise we are told that there is nothing “inherent to the human species that has pushed us... into the Anthropocene. We have *stumbled* into it.”<sup>27</sup> And again, in speaking of the industrial way of life, he writes: “we have *slid* into a state of things.”<sup>28</sup> He also tells us that the human choice of fuels (“the transition from wood to coal”) and, eventually, fossil fuels (“the ‘discovery’ of oil, of the oil tycoons, and of the automobile

industry”), were contingent decisions.

Several issues need to be highlighted here, all consequences of this view of a contingent world. First, such an exposition of history does away with human beings as purposive agents. Second, by making no distinction in the move from wood to coal to fossil fuels, it undermines any sense of historical periodization. Take his reduction, for instance, of the history of the automobile industry to coincidences and historical accidents. Its long history — which straddles Henry Ford and his Model T, Fordism, the working-class movements, the outsourcing of automobile manufacturing to Asian countries, and the decline of Detroit as an urban space — is presented as the function of an extraordinary fluke. It severely undermines any question of historicity and transformation, let alone questions of justice, environmental or otherwise. The consequence of this is telling: in effect, we are presented with a social world without social cause or social consequence.

And it is precisely for this reason that Chakrabarty can characterize climate change as “an *unintended* consequence of human actions and shows, only through scientific analysis, the effects of our *actions as a species*... [where] there are no lifeboats... for the rich and privileged... [as shown by] the drought in Australia or... fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California.”<sup>29</sup> He is careful in delineating his understanding of the term “species,” noting that it is “the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change.”<sup>30</sup> While it is undoubtedly accurate that the crisis affects everyone, it is also true that it affects different classes of people, in our one and unequal world, differentially. There are indeed “no lifeboats for the rich and privileged” in the context of the climate crisis. However, it is nevertheless also true that “lifeboats” have very different resonances for the Syrian refugees negotiating the Mediterranean Sea to seek refuge in Europe and, say, the President of the United States of America. Furthermore, to speak of climate change as an “unintended consequence” in the age of the Anthropocene is to also disavow questions of accountability and, simultaneously, socialize culpability. In other words, global warming is the result of our action as a *species*, where no distinction is made between Volkswagen cars emitting nitrogen dioxide and the Bangladeshi housewife cooking her meal using firewood.

But let us consider how he engages the idea of “species” a little more closely. Chakrabarty tells us that the category of species is a “placeholder of an *emergent, new history* of humans that flashes up in the moment of... climate change” — it does not precede but is activated by the climate crisis. Yet, in speaking of the constitutive dimension of the crisis, he nevertheless descends into an awkward circularity, and presentism, in suggesting that the climate crisis is the “effects of our actions as a *species*.” Let me rephrase the problematic for the sake of greater clarity. In Chakrabarty’s formulation, the climate crisis calls into being a social whole (species) which he, simultaneously, claims is also the source of the crisis, an untenable proposition by his own logic. How are we to understand this paradoxical claim, which locates the

constitution of the crisis on to a category (“species”) that emerges *ex post facto*? This paradox can be understood as pointing towards the absent category of labor — more specifically, the social (and international) division of labor — that constitutes the exploitative class character of the capitalist mode of production, which, as a spectral presence, haunts Chakrabarty’s theorizations.<sup>31</sup>

Let me now turn to the explicit references to human freedom and politics in Chakrabarty’s essay. He writes that idea of the Anthropocene “severely qualifies humanist histories of Modernity/Globalization,” which is linked to another qualification that is equally, if not more, important: regarding human freedom. He writes: “Is the Anthropocene a critique of the narratives of freedom? Is the geological agency of humans the price we pay for the pursuit of freedom? *In some ways, yes.*”<sup>32</sup> While Chakrabarty suggests that “any way out of our current predicament cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in global, collective life,” he is nevertheless swift in undercutting this possibility:

There is one consideration though that qualifies this optimism about the role of reason and that has to do with the most common shape that freedom takes in human societies: politics. *Politics has never been based on reason alone. And politics in the age of the masses and in a world already complicated by sharp inequalities between and inside nations is something no one can control.*<sup>33</sup>

This is supported by his citation of Mark Maslin’s “gloomy thoughts”: “It is unlikely that global politics will solve global warming... [because it] requires nations and regions to plan for the next 50 years, something that most societies are unable to do... we must prepare for the worst and adapt.”<sup>34</sup>

Some of the claims of this passage about politics bear noting: it is *not* a function of reason alone, and, in our contemporary moment of intense global inequalities, is beyond human control. Not only does this formulation seem incurious about the historical constitution of the “sharp inequalities between and inside nations,” it also delinks politics from any utopian project of social transformation — the ability to imagine, and actualize, better and just futures — gesturing instead towards a pessimism of the intellect that trumps, quite decisively, the optimism of the will. Crucially, by stressing human *inability* to think and act in a utopian manner, Chakrabarty implicitly suggests a unidirectional future where human destiny is marked by the impending telos of human extinction, what one commentator has called “a collective, planetary, being-toward-death.”<sup>35</sup> In short, it removes the dialectical armature of history, reworking the “barbarism or socialism” thesis of Left-Hegelian thought into a strategic fatalism where human beings can only “prepare for the worst and adapt.”

Chakrabarty’s notion of politics in this essay — which I am calling a strategic fatalism — is a continuation of his ideas that he inaugurated in *Provincializing Europe*.

Readers will recall that in that text he proposes a two-fold conception of history — the two histories of capital, to be precise — characterized by him as History 1 (H-1) and History 2 (H-2). H-1 is the logic internal to capital itself — the past posited by capital as its own precondition. Chakrabarty understands H-1 as the driving force of capital, one that shapes its own universal and necessary history. Besides H-1, he also discerns in Marx a delineation of others histories of capital, H-2s that capital encounters as antecedents that are not established by itself, or as forms of its own life-process. H-1, in Chakrabarty’s schema, must constantly attempt to destroy or subjugate these H-2s while, in turn, H-2s “inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic.”<sup>36</sup> To put this another way, H-1 is that which produces notions of sameness across the globe as part of capital’s universalizing drive, while H-2 — which Chakrabarty invests with the *political* task of interrupting and resisting capital’s universalizing drive — remains the motor for the production of difference in our world, and signals the myriad ways of being in the world. The central problem with such a theorization, besides its inability to engage with how H-1 is implicated in the production of hierarchical difference, is its consequence for a transformative politics, of any kind. Chakrabarty locates politics in the arena of a counterfactual, possible past. Politics, then, becomes not a question of *what could be*, but *what might have been*. It moves the idea of transformative politics from imagining and shaping possible futures to the domain of contemplating possible pasts, a politics of despair. This anti-utopianism is restated as a strategic fatalism in his essay.

Furthermore, speaking of the parametric conditions of human existence, Chakrabarty states:

we cannot afford to destabilize conditions... that work like boundary parameters of human existence. These parameters are *independent* of capitalism or socialism... we have now ourselves become a geological agent *disturbing* these parametric conditions needed for our own existence.<sup>37</sup>

Significantly, for him, these conditions “hold *irrespective* of our political choices.”<sup>38</sup> These claims require careful examination. On one hand, in what seems eerily similar to claims of environmental determinism, he claims that the parametric conditions of human existence are “independent of capitalism or socialism,” and hold “irrespective of our political choices.” I take the terms “capitalism” and “socialism” to be conceptual shorthand for different forms (and conceptions) of social organization of life, as well as different political choices. Restated, this statement posits that our existence and its limits are not determined (“independent of”; “irrespective”) by social being as lived, thought, and practised. Yet, Chakrabarty also claims the human beings are “disturbing” these parametric conditions, that is, these conditions are *historical*, structured and determined by human choices and actions. What we are presented with, then, is another paradoxical proposition — the performative contradiction, if

you will — that the parametric conditions of human existence are both determined and not determined by human action.

This illuminates in Chakrabarty an (im)possible figuration of practical politics. It acknowledges that in spite of itself the parametric conditions of our existence are historical and follow from the “collapse” of not just natural and human histories, but from the simultaneous historicization of nature and naturalization of history.<sup>39</sup> More pertinent to my point about politics, this paradox actually opens up the possibility of a transformative politics — a struggle over the historically constituted parametric conditions of our existence in the present for the sake of the future.

This figuration of an (im)possible politics is also evident in Chakrabarty’s delineation of a negative universal history. Moving away decisively from his earlier position (in *Provincializing Europe*) that condemned any form of unifying social temporality as totalizing and historicist, he now posits an emergent, universal, species-history of humanity: a “negative universal history.”<sup>40</sup> But this universal, he notes, is something we can never understand because

one *never* experiences being a concept... [we] may not experience ourselves as a geological agent... we appear to have become one at the level of species. And without that knowledge that *defies* historical understanding there is no making sense of the current [climate] crisis.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, such an easy and firm separation of percepts (experience) from concepts is incurious about history, and actual historical struggles. Chakrabarty himself lists a range of struggles from the past:

the struggle against slavery; the Russian and Chinese revolutions; the resistance to Nazism and Fascism; the decolonization movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the revolutions in Cuba and Vietnam; the evolution and explosion of the rights discourse; the fight for civil rights for African Americans, indigenous peoples, Indian *Dalits*...<sup>42</sup>

These struggles for emancipation were — and continue to be — predicated on actual experiences of socially constructed notions of inferiority (concepts), and the deployment of reason in resistance against them to actualize a better and just future. When someone is lynched in India for eating a certain kind of meat, or shot dead in the United States for being of a certain skin color, they *do* indeed experience themselves as concepts. It is important, then, to restate that we become self-aware and constitute ourselves as subjects — experience ourselves as concepts — relationally, that is, in our relations with other human beings, in society. To be human, as Spivak notes, “is to be intended toward the other.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Chakrabarty’s scepticism is tenable if, and only if, we assume that the contemporary world is constituted by monadic individuals, a

difficult proposition to justify.

The crisis of climate change, by virtue of pointing us towards species-level extinction that is caused by a specific exploitative social organization of labor and productive forces, namely the capitalist mode of production, also gestures towards the planet as site of struggle, at a planetary scale; and gestures towards an emergent planetary consciousness, if only as a utopian possibility, a structure of feeling. Read from this vantage, the fundamentally anti-utopian proposition of a negative universal history that we supposedly can never know loses its inherent scepticism regarding human's capacity for reason. Instead, it challenges, and reinvigorates the human imagination, "responsible, responsive, answerable," to imagine the (im)possible planetary future of a better and just tomorrow.<sup>44</sup>

### Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1980) 99.
2. Peter Osborne, "The Politics of Time," *Literature and The Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, ed. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks. (New York: Routledge, 1999) 36.
3. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011) 149-50.
4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Thesis," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 207.
5. Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History" 206-07.
6. "The Climate of History" 201.
7. "The Climate of History" 206.
8. See Theodore Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History" in Robert Hullot Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodore Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press) 252-304; Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1973); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Culture, and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990). Also see Friedrich Engels, *The Dialectics of Nature*. [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/EngelsDialectics\\_of\\_Nature\\_part.pdf](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/EngelsDialectics_of_Nature_part.pdf).
9. "The Climate of History" 203.
10. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Volume 1: The Process of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 173.
11. "The Climate of History" 217-18, emphasis added.
12. Marx, *Capital* 50.
13. Williams, "Ideas of Nature" 67.
14. Smith, *Uneven Development* 57.
15. *Uneven Development* 62.
16. See, for my argument about coolie labor being the condition of possibility of colonial expedition of the Himalaya, Sandeep Banerjee, "'Not Altogether Unpicturesque': Samuel Bourne and the Landscaping of the Victorian Himalaya," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42.3 (2014) 351-68.
17. On this, see Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology: Part 1 and Selections from Parts 2 and 3* (New York: International Publishers, 1970).
18. *Uneven Development* 70.
19. See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002) and Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) 54-80.
20. Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015) 13.
21. For more on the question of crisis, see Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation*



- of *Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015). Also see, Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
22. For a different critique of the Anthropocene, also from a historical materialist vantage, see Daniel Cunha, "The Anthropocene as Fetishism," *Mediations* 28.2 (2015) 65-77. For a recent engagement with the Anthropocene from the perspective of the "production of nature" thesis, see Susan Millar and Don Mitchell, "The Tight Dialectic: Anthropocene and the Capitalist Production of Nature," *Antipode* 49.51 (2017): 75-93.
  23. For a critique of Bruno Latour, see Crystal Bartolovich, "Is the post in posthuman the post in postmedieval?," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 1.1-2 (2010) 19-31. Also see the section "Posthumanism as Imperialism" in Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light Volume I: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
  24. "The Climate of History" 212.
  25. "The Climate of History" 216.
  26. "The Climate of History" 210, emphasis added.
  27. "The Climate of History" 217.
  28. "The Climate of History" 217.
  29. "The Climate of History" 221, emphasis added.
  30. "The Climate of History" 221-22.
  31. It is instructive to remind ourselves of Gayatri Spivak's critique of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze along the same lines. See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds., Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 271- 316.
  32. "The Climate of History" 210, my italics.
  33. "The Climate of History" 210-11, emphasis added.
  34. "The Climate of History" 211-12.
  35. Ian Baucom, "History 40: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.1 (2014) 140. See also Ian Baucom, "The Human Shore: Postcolonial Studies in an Age of Natural Science," *History of the Present*, 2.1 (2012) 1-13.
  36. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 62-66.
  37. "The Climate of History" 218, emphasis added.
  38. "The Climate of History" 219, emphasis added.
  39. On this, see Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History" 252-260.
  40. "The Climate of History" 222. For his critique of historicism see *Provincializing Europe*.
  41. "The Climate of History" 220-21, emphasis added.
  42. "The Climate of History" 208.
  43. Gayatri C. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2003) 73.
  44. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 102.



## Gayatri Spivak, Planetaryity, and the Labor of Imagining Internationalism<sup>1</sup>

Auritro Majumder

As Hegel defines it: "Thinking is, indeed, essentially the negation of that which is immediately before us."<sup>2</sup>

I've... looked for the unknown in the midst of the known.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I want to discuss three concepts deployed by the cultural theorist Gayatri Spivak, namely "planetarity," "imagination," and the "figure of the impossible."<sup>4</sup> I argue that these concepts owe their origin, philosophically, to Left-Hegelian thought and specifically to the Hegelian-Marxist theorization of the human as laboring subject. While Spivak remains one of the few non-European female intellectuals whose work has achieved institutional status, her engagement with the tradition of Left-Hegelian dialectical materialism and twentieth-century socialism is often neglected.

That this has been so is not surprising. Spivak has not written extensively on socialism. Further, her work has been produced, circulated, and interpreted in an US milieu that is historically indifferent, if not hostile, to organized Marxism. This means that her politico-intellectual affiliations have often been glossed over or interpreted in antithetical ways. Spivak's best-known essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" for example, mounts a Marxist critique of the French post-Marxist philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze on account of the latter's "disavowal" and "neglect" of the "international division of labor, a gesture that often marks poststructuralist political theory."<sup>5</sup> Despite its outlining of such a fundamental point of critique, Spivak's essay continues to be read largely in a poststructuralist register, one that divorces the notion of aesthetic representation from the international division of labor. On the other hand, Spivak complains in a 2009 interview, that she "ha[s] never been taken seriously within the tradition of Western Marxism," even as she describes her thought as emerging from the communist traditions of the global south and the non-European American peripheries — from India, China, and Cuba.<sup>6</sup> In both instances, Spivak

enables, to use her words, a “wrenching [of] Marx from his European provenance,” thereby pointing to a more nuanced engagement than contemporary trends will allow.<sup>7</sup>

In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak compares “planetarity” to “socialism at its best”; elsewhere, she notes its derivation from “original Marxist” notions of “value.”<sup>8</sup> More recently, Spivak turns to questions of the imagination, humanist education, and ethical consciousness, explicitly borrowing from Friedrich Schiller’s eighteenth-century conceptual framework.<sup>9</sup> What material, political-economic or ideological contexts do such shifts indicate, away from postmodernist and poststructuralist anti-humanism, textual indeterminacy, and the like? I argue that such ideas have their basis in real world antagonisms. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly at stake in these conversations is the humanist tradition of Hegelian-Marxism. What Spivak’s intervention signals is the desire, arising from the contemporary conjuncture of global capitalist crisis, to reclaim creative human agency. Rather than traditional liberal humanism, I argue that this move places Spivak in alignment with the Hegelian-Marxist theorization of the human as laboring subject, and labor itself as purposive, creative activity. Such an affinity, moreover, is in opposition to significant current trends in theory, namely post-Marxism. As the post-Cold War liberal-capitalist triumphalism about the “end of history” fades further into the horizon, and a new series of imperialist misadventures and economic recession cycles bring focus to the persistent question of human emancipation, contemporary theory has demonstrated a strange turn away from the human. Whether in cyborg theory, new ecology, post-humanism, network theory, object-oriented ontology, or systems theory, a series of intellectual currents have sought to erase the key problematic of labor from the realm of ideas. I will suggest in this essay that such strands repeat century-old discourses of positivism and phenomenology. In doing so, the present age of globalization resembles, ideationally, an earlier twentieth-century epoch of imperialism.

My discussion of Spivak seeks to decenter her work from the familiar confines of a postmodernism-inflected postcolonial theory, onto a longer, and more politically charged, trajectory of modern intellectual history. The crucial place of Left-Hegelianism in twentieth-century anti-colonialist discourse has been recently demonstrated in Timothy Brennan’s path-breaking study, *Borrowed Light*. During the interwar era, as Brennan argues, Left-Hegelian thought specifically sought to contest the downgrading of human agency. Ranged against the anti-humanism of scientific positivism and idealist phenomenology, dialectics – and especially the Hegelian concept of negation – emerged as important tools for conceptualizing emancipatory politics.<sup>10</sup> This is especially true for such European thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse; and for anti-colonial intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore and Aimé Césaire, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In these conversations a key point of focus is human experience; while experience provides a mediated, negative sense of the world, it is through the negation of the negation, an act of human labor in the

fullest sense, that the impossible could be imagined. I suggest that such analysis is rooted in the political understanding of anti-imperialism as described by Lenin. As I illustrate through my discussion of Spivak, these continue to be key questions for a twenty-first-century socialist and proletarian internationalism.

In her Welles Library lectures, subsequently published as *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak sees the term “global” as produced by the convergence of multinational finance, media, and information technology. These are symptomatic of capital’s tendency to homogenize and assimilate. “Globalization,” Spivak says, “is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike much of contemporary cultural theory, Spivak does not valorize globalization as a positive outcome whereby the sweeping tides of cultural exchange transform peripheral subjects into cosmopolitan global citizens. Globalization, or so the celebratory version of it goes, is supposedly an epistemic break from the past, freeing its subjects from their narrow prejudices and provincial affiliations toward new, decentered and even nonhuman horizons.<sup>12</sup> Spivak’s assessment is far more sober: “in the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball [the globe] covered in latitudes and longitudes... now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems,” is how she links the capitalist production of the globe.<sup>13</sup>

Spivak’s understanding of globalization as not simply cultural cosmopolitanism or post-humanism, but as the alienation of labor, internationally, is rooted in older Marxist analysis. It is to be found in Vladimir Lenin’s 1916 text, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. The comparison of globalization to imperialism, and between Spivak and Lenin, might strike a contemporary reader as odd. That is precisely because globalization carries a value-neutral if not altogether positive valence in theoretical discourse as opposed to the entirely negative connotations of the term imperialism. Further, as I noted above, globalization is often viewed as a fundamentally “new” form of capitalism where older categories of analysis do not hold. Still, as a concept, imperialism as the globalization of capital has an older, if less discussed, history. Lenin did not coin the term imperialism. Other thinkers such as the liberal J.A. Hobson and Marxists of various persuasions such as Rudolph Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg, and Nikolai Bukharin were deploying the concept in the early decades of the twentieth-century. However, it is Lenin who systematically analyzed imperialism’s departure from the “classical” paradigm of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, and its reconfiguration into more globalized forms. In this regard, the title of his widely known pamphlet is misleading. As Hobsbawm has reminded us, imperialism is defined in Lenin’s original title as the “latest” stage — rather than highest, with all its stage-ist implications — of capitalism, only to be changed after his death.<sup>14</sup>

Emerging since the 1870s imperialism or globalized capital demonstrates distinct characteristics. These include the financialization of capital, the export of capital rather than commodities, the creation of transnational monopolies, and finally, the imperial struggle for territories and human and natural resources abroad. Imperialism

divided the world into opposing camps of “oppressor” and “oppressed” nations, thereby providing a new and displaced form to the struggle between capital and labor. In our own era, these aspects of “fictitious” capital, whether speculative, virtual, or electronic have been accelerated — but not, I would argue, qualitatively transformed. For Lenin, it necessitated the strategic aligning of proletarian struggles in the imperial core with the national liberation movements in the colonial peripheries. Such was the particular configuration of Leninist internationalism.

While such a view of imperialism is still common in the more critical studies of globalization today, what is largely bracketed is the legacy of Lenin, or what Neil Larsen correctly terms “the genealogical centrality of [Lenin’s] thought in relation to postcolonial studies.”<sup>15</sup> To describe present-day globalization as the continuation of imperialism by other means, as I am suggesting, appears to many in the metropolitan left as anachronistic or even suspect. This is owing to two main reasons. One, imperialism and colonization are often relegated to be outdated matters, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century sequence of modernity that has been left behind; it is affirmed that the new age of capital is fundamentally different, more complex and diffuse than traditional imperialism. For nation-states in the global south, however, such conflation between economic and political sovereignty is inaccurate, if somewhat pervasive, in dominant discourse, as they (as well as subaltern groups within the core imperialist countries) continue to be haunted by imperial and sub-imperial domination and exploitation. Second, and this is a more narrow cause flowing from the previous, the work of radical intellectual-activists of the periphery such as C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and others has been “domesticated” within academic boundaries. Today one speaks, politely, of cultural difference and Eurocentrism, not imperialism and the resistance to it. Institutionalized academic theory has steadily appropriated, effaced and declared obsolete Lenin’s legacy of emancipatory thought.

Yet it is undeniable that the Leninist framework of imperialism provides a critical materialist theorization of several key aspects of the postcolonial condition. To phrase this in contemporary vocabulary, it is Leninism that provides the earliest comprehensive critique of European civilizational and teleological claims of progress, liberal-capitalist democracy, “First World” and white worker privilege, nationalist essentialism and chauvinism, the intersectionality of racialized, gendered forms of oppression/domination with economic class exploitation, and finally, the importance of third-world struggles in world-historical and non-identitarian terms. World-historical that is, in their own right, rather than belated versions of European history. These were key points in Lenin’s theoretical break with the Second International and the evolutionary logic of Social Democratic Marxists such as Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein.<sup>16</sup> In historical terms, the Leninist Bolshevik experiment, which ended the absolutist Tsarist Empire, was the actualization of a materialist-postcolonial vision in a multi-ethnic, semi-developed periphery of Europe. It is perhaps needless to add that the shortcomings of actually existing socialism in, for example, the Soviet Union,

as well as China, Vietnam, Korea, Cuba, do not render irrelevant the genuine insights of materialist thought. Yet, that is often the thrust of Anglo-American post-Marxist and postmodern criticism. If anything, the current “latest stage” of imperialism calls for an even greater engagement with materialist and dialectical critique.

In Marxist terms, the globalization of capital deepens (displaces) existing inequalities between social classes, and between nations, even as it homogenizes across these categories. Homogenization and differentiation are the social effects of globalizing capital, involving the sublation [*Aufhebung*] of various social formations and their discrete relations into an overarching global mode of production. Social differences of race, gender, ethnicity, and location, as well as culturally distinct ways of living in the world are progressively obliterated, so as to produce an equivalent relation between different forms of laboring subjectivities. Such equivalence is achieved through the commodity, and by extension, through money, which represent human labor in its absolutely alienated form. In cultural terms, one could describe this process as the proliferation of *similitude*. Not only do increasing numbers of people the world over buy the same consumer products, they also experience structurally similar kinds of feeling, the same aspirations and ambitions on one hand and alienation and crisis on the other.

At the same time, it is through this mediated similitude that capital produces a spatio-temporal disequilibrium in the realm of experience. This is the schism, to rephrase in older philosophical terms, between “appearance” and “essence.” Things appear to us as discrete experiences and concrete sensations whose underlying causes and structures are invisible, and rendered progressively inscrutable. Such a gap between phenomenal appearance and its noumenal essence within human consciousness, concretely embodied in the form of the commodity, corresponds to the alienated perception of the world. Fredric Jameson, borrowing from Adorno, has succinctly summarized the spatio-temporal displacement thus: “The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life.”<sup>17</sup> The spatio-temporal gap between metropole and periphery produced by capital thereby mediates subjective forms of knowing. It is the task of a properly materialist and dialectical criticism to bridge the gap, so as to illuminate, as Adorno puts it, the “totality” behind “every” discrete event and object.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the persistence of imperialism and the metropole-periphery distinction means that subjective experience is calibrated by a fundamentally unequal and uneven world-system. The world-system here is the engine of *difference*.

Jameson, mentioned above, is of course an exception among contemporary theorists in his fidelity to dialectical categories of analysis. Among other things, it is thanks to Jameson’s interventions that the most influential Hegelian Marxist theorists of the interwar era, such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and György Lukács (and “Western Marxism” in general), have enjoyed a degree of popularity in

the Anglo-American theory canon. However, such institutionalization comes at a price. Much of post-Althusserian theory, including Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, as well as postwar recuperations of Nietzsche and Heidegger, has consistently sought to discount Hegelian conceptions of totality, negation, and dialectics, that is, Critical Theory itself.<sup>19</sup> Postmodernism sits uneasily with Hegel, even when postmodern philosophers such as Derrida have turned to such Hegelian thinkers as Benjamin. Postmodernism has sought, to quote Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, to “wage a war on totality... [to] be witnesses to the unrepresentable.”<sup>20</sup>

This includes the refutation of two basic Hegelian premises: first, that sensory perception is mediation between the self and the world, and second, that subjective sensation is a means to grasp what is empirically unverifiable.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, the postmodern notions of unrepresentability, undecidability, ambivalence, and in-betweenness point to the impossibility of knowledge. Instead we have a discursive construction of reality better known as “truth-effects” or “linguistic games.” In practical terms, postmodern thought labels any effort at knowing, and transforming, reality to be illusory if not impossible: the postmodern critique of historicism ends up discarding the category of history from theoretical analysis. To translate such philosophical abstractions into political positions, postmodern theory is deeply status-quoist as it systematically delegitimizes any and every attempt at transformative thought. Postmodernism is moreover, intellectually eclectic; it chooses at will, retaining or rejecting philosophical concepts that are most convenient for its purpose.

A consideration of Spivak’s late concept of planetarity then is vital, I would argue, in differentiating and reclaiming Left-Hegelian thought from such eclectic appropriations. Such a gesture, I think, is in keeping with Spivak’s persistent critique of the Eurocentrism of contemporary theory. Planetarity as Spivak seeks to deploy it is squared against the “global”; in other words, in Marxist terms it is the *negation* of the alienation produced by capital. Let us examine a relevant passage from her text. Planetarity, Spivak writes, invokes a relationship between the human and the natural worlds that is “in excess” of capitalist globalization:

The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say ‘the planet, on the other hand.’ When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition.... Planet-thought opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of such names, including but not identical with the whole range of human universals.... If we imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away.<sup>22</sup>



To be sure, Spivak chooses deconstruction over dialectics in her reading. Borrowing from Derrida, she says the figure of the impossible is a “spectral” one. It involves imagining from a distance, and aimed for a future that is yet to come, “calling on *teleopoiesis* rather than *istoria*.”<sup>23</sup> I would suggest that the genealogical antecedent of this formulation is somewhat more complex than Spivak allows here. The idea of the negative in particular, a key component of Hegel’s dialectic in the *Phenomenology*, anticipates Derridean deconstruction.<sup>24</sup> In thinking of planetaryity negatively, as an “experience of the impossible” working through the “imagination” that “contains us as much as it flings us away,” Spivak is — in fact — drawing on dialectical philosophy.

In a later passage, she defines her position further: “the planetaryity of which I have been speaking... is perhaps best imagined from the pre-capitalist cultures of the planet.”<sup>25</sup> Such planetaryity is to be located in the future and is as yet “mysterious and discontinuous, an experience of the impossible.”<sup>26</sup> The immediate resonance of Spivak’s formulation is not only with the “weak messianism” of Walter Benjamin (“On the Concept of History,” 1940) — but also with Ernst Bloch (*The Principle of Hope*, written in the 1940s but published in 1954), Georg Lukács (*The Young Hegel*, 1938), and Herbert Marcuse (*Reason and Revolution*, 1941).<sup>27</sup> I mention a host of these names, and their work all written between the 1930s and 1940s, for a specific reason. The tendency in current theory has been to single out Benjamin, as a theorist who advocated a history without teleology and without class struggle; in short, he is supposedly the postmodernist before postmodernism, a “dissident” against “totalitarian” Marxism. Such an interpellation not only ignores Benjamin’s historical materialism in favor of messianic theology — which is debatable — it also ignores the decidedly Leftist constellation and the particular history of anti-fascist struggle within which Benjamin’s work is properly situated.<sup>28</sup>

Imagination in the Benjaminian sense, that is, imaginative “empathy” (*Einfühlung*) and “distance” (*Abstand*), is derived from German Romanticism, specifically the progressive tradition of Hegel, Goethe, and Schiller, and is channeled through the philosophical work of interwar-era Marxism. Nor is this simply a “Western” notion; a good number of anti-colonial intellectuals in this period, such as Rabindranath Tagore who I quote in the epigraph to this essay, were at work on a similar terrain. Tagore’s negative notion of seeking for the unknown in the midst of the known (*janar majhe ajanare*), demonstrates a similar dialectical understanding of the human imagination as creative labor.<sup>29</sup>

To chart such a genealogy for the concept of the human imagination, in the mode of progressive materialist-dialectical thought, is to immediately risk several charges. First of these is the imputation of intellectual naiveté and epistemic adherence to “reflectionism,” where the social world is reflected in the human mind. A reflection theory of knowledge, however, presupposes that the human mind is capable of having unmediated, transparent access to the real, precisely what the dialectical tradition disputes. Yet thanks to the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion, dialectical Left-

Hegelian thought is said to be implicated in several things at once, including an Enlightenment project of the “tyranny of reason,” the prioritizing of the mind over body, colonialist constructions of the self-coherent humanist subject, and so on.

None of these objections in fact holds true. One does not have to be a colonial European male to affirm the importance of the imagination. (By that logic, Spivak would be one.) Instead, what I am outlining is this — the imagination takes its place within a non-hierarchical constellation of sensory perceptions. To invoke the negativity of the dialectic: it is through the imagination that the human subject objectively and historically experiences sensations of the “unknowable,” as well as the “not present.” “The forming of the five senses is a *labor* of the entire history of the world down to the present,” as Marx notes.<sup>30</sup> Such negative knowledge clearly meditates against the positivist emphasis on “facts,” as well as any transparent access to the outside world. Equally, and this is where dialectics departs from, and is indeed superior to, deconstruction, it opposes the phenomenological view of the world where sensations are all that can be known in a world that does not reveal itself in essence.

This brings us to a second related point on the importance of locating the notion of planetarity within the Left-Hegelian tradition. Human imaginative reason, I am suggesting, is not quite the same thing as scientific-positivist reason. Quite the opposite: negative knowledge of the impossible is incommensurable with the scientific-positivist knowledge of the world. Indeed one of the signal achievements of Left-Hegelian thought was to posit the dialectical method against positivist science and phenomenological ontology. To invoke the 1930s debate here: as Adorno pointed out in “The Idea of Natural History,” dialectics challenged the phenomenological and ahistorical view of human consciousness, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, for example. Adorno writes, “Even though history is acknowledged to be a fundamental phenomenon... it is transfigured directly into ontology. This is the case for Heidegger for whom history, understood as an all embracing structure of being, is equivalent to his own ontology.”<sup>31</sup> What unites positivism and phenomenology, despite their seemingly disparate positions, is the shared belief in the impossibility of transformation: the first on the scientific basis of facts beyond human control, and the second by reducing history to the question of ontological being (*Dasein*).

As Adorno, as well as Lukács and Marcuse, noted, the combination of positivism and phenomenology represented in abstraction the ideas of capitalist ruling classes in Europe, in the interwar era as well as the postwar period. The reactionary character of this combination, with their rejection of the human potential for transformation, becomes clearer once we concretely situate these philosophical disputes within the material conditions from which they arose. Positivism and phenomenology served as twin philosophical vehicles for reaction: the first for liberal-capitalist democracy and the second for fascism in the interwar era. Dialectics, on the contrary, provided a revolutionary framework of proletarian internationalism. Between the two world wars, it is dialectics that articulated the expressive struggle of the workers and the

peasantry against an internally divided, crisis-ridden regime of global capital and its liberal-imperial and fascist political camps.

Here, once again, it is useful to invoke Lenin as a philosopher of materialist dialectics. Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), polemicizing against the subjective idealism of the Austrian Ernst Mach and his Russian disciple Alexander Bogdanov, had already made the above point in the early twentieth century. Phenomenology is quietist if not outright reactionary because, as Lenin writes:

The sophism of idealist philosophy consists in the fact that it regards sensation as being not the connection between consciousness and the external world, but a fence, a wall, separating consciousness from the external world — not an image [a mistranslation of the Russian original, *obraz*, which is closer to “figure”] of the external phenomenon corresponding to the sensation, but as the “sole entity.”<sup>32</sup>

Idealism's ontological emphasis, which Lenin decries, is familiar to us. What is less noticed are the conceptual connections that connect these to dominant trends in present day theory. In the postwar era, Mach's ideas about the ahistorical nature of sensation came to inform the schools of phenomenological constructivism, while Bogdanov's *tektology* was the precursor for systems theory. Much of French poststructural theory of the 1960s, with its emphasis on discursive and linguistic constructions of the human, drew directly from these sources. More recently, anti-humanist philosophers such as Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze, and concepts such as “actor-network theory” and “desiring machines,” continue the work of these early idealist figures.<sup>33</sup>

Positivism too continues to thrive; in our own age and time, “scientific research” shapes our lives in inscrutable ways, from macroeconomics to climate change, from high-tech wars to information technology. It is not my contention here to discount scientific knowledge per se, but only to point out that today, more than ever, it is impossible to separate science from capital and the regime of knowledge from the regime of accumulation.

Under such conditions, the very notion of the human is, once again, under duress. To provide a concrete example, one needs to look no further than the situation of the humanities. Humanities research today is under increasing pressure to resemble the sciences in order to justify its precarious existence within the neoliberal university. In the past decade alone, the tendency to work with big data or emulating the natural sciences, as for example, digital and medical humanities, demonstrates the transformative impact that such pressures have had on the humanities. The downgrading of the human is a corollary to this new scientism. It is as if faced with a catastrophic world order that has no room left for human agency, the only response has to be nihilism and pessimism. To be clear, this is an ideological move, refracting

the global maneuvers of capital and discounting the ongoing struggles for human dignity and autonomy. In philosophical terms, such a move has been accomplished under the inverted guise of “radical” theory.<sup>34</sup>

One thinks here not only of postmodern theory in general, whose time has passed, but very specifically of the post-human turn in the humanities. Any number of subversions of this can be found in specialist humanities journals — cybernetics, new materialism, affect, network theory, thing-theory, object-oriented ontology, animals studies, postmodern ecocriticism, and the anthropocene. Here, the anti-humanist phenomenology of Nietzsche and Heidegger, whitewashed of their associations with European imperialism and fascism, makes its reappearance in the theoretical humanities. The point is worth noting in regard to the “nature” debate, particularly in the recent line about humanist arrogance (not capitalism or imperialism) that is held responsible for the destruction of the natural planet. Faced with the untranscendable horizon of capitalism the breathtaking suggestion has been made that we “decenter” the human to the status of the non-human. In the posthuman conception, the human is reduced like everything else in the phenomenal world to just another combination of entities. It is neither in priority to nor distinct from the nonhuman. What happens then to the question of historical change? Who are the actors and under what conditions of possibility do they operate? Such crucial and politically pressing questions are left unanswered in posthuman thought. To compound irony, the quietist ideology of the post-human carries itself under the banner of new materialism; that is, it appropriates and distorts the dialectical and historical materialism of the old.<sup>35</sup>

Simply put, post-humanism carries on the legacy in a different guise and under a different name of earlier traditions of anti-emancipatory, conservative thought. The matter of retracing such an intellectual-philosophical history is not a mere academic exercise in antiquarianism. As I have been arguing in this essay, the philosophical positions represented in the early- to mid-twentieth century by dialectics on one hand and positivism and phenomenology on the other, have political repercussions on how we debate globalization today. In this vein, I want to return to Spivak’s notion of planetarity to note, in conclusion, a few additional points of relevance.

Planetarity is deeply relevant in thinking through the dialectic of the human imagination of the impossible as well as the interplay between the human and the natural. Understood in this materialist sense, planetarity conceptualizes the inseparability of human and natural history and offers an alternative to the anti-historicism, and misanthropy that has come to characterize posthuman thinking on the “nature” question. Rather than disempowering the figure of the human, a properly dialectical investigation into the human-nature relation would chart its way through the uneven, historical geographies of capitalism. This entails recognizing that it is the colonial and semi-colonial peripheries that provided (and continues to provide) “free” natural resources, and “unfree” gendered and racialized human labor for imperialist plunders.<sup>36</sup>

Spivak, it seems to me, is keenly invested in this issue. In connecting and identifying planetary with earlier intellectual traditions, her essay gestures to but does not follow through older, nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-imperial formations. Spivak invokes two figures, Jose Marti and W.E.B. Du Bois. Spivak calls attention to Marti's "rural left-humanism," and the "figure of the land that undergirds it." Just as much, she seeks in Du Bois the desire to "displace the 'primitivism' of the colonizer into the subaltern of the postcolonial."<sup>37</sup> Spivak claims to "reinscribe" these historical figures as "necessarily proleptic choice[s] for a *postcolonial* internationality."<sup>38</sup>

Postcolonial internationality and the resistance provided by pre-capitalist cultures, are as central to the thought of Marti and Du Bois, as they are to the intellectual Spivak does not name — Lenin. Marti's progressive legacy in Latin America is undeniably Leninist and communist; for example informing the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, the Argentinian Ernesto Che Guevara and the Chilean Pablo Neruda, among others. Similarly, Du Bois's neglected essay "The African Roots of War" (1915), published a year before Lenin's *Imperialism*, anticipates in close detail the latter's argument about colonial conquest being the driving force of European imperialism. Politically, it was Du Bois's solidarity with Communist China during the height of the Cold War that was crucial for the Marxist internationalism of the US Black Panther Party. It is a matter of record that post-Marxist theory has largely ignored these crucial episodes of "postcolonial internationalism."<sup>39</sup>

Similarly the categories of the rural, the primitive, and the subaltern offer an antidote to the presentism of post-human theory. Attention to the past is not an exercise in cultural nostalgia, as conservative thought would have it but an attempt to recognize the genuine achievements of humanist reason, and the limits thereof. Given the dialectics of capitalist combined and uneven development, the past not only determines the present. The former also co-exists with the latter. Neither is the past readily available for comprehension, in conceptual terms. Vico understood this problem best when he said that history is only comprehensible to those who make it. In *The New Science*, Vico observes that in order for the intellectual to study the past as well as to trace the development of human thought, it is necessary for her to focus on the imagination: "With the philosophers we must fetch it [the past] from the frogs of Epicurus, from the cicadas of Hobbes, from the simpletons of Grotius ... we ha[ve] to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures."<sup>40</sup> Here are the specific, concrete historical conjunctures where one witnesses human creative activity (labor) at work among the "frogs" and the "cicadas." Significantly, Vico does not present thought as disembodied but as something that is located within the sphere of everyday material life. Thought is conceptualized by "wild and savage natures" in the midst of their sensuous activity. Labor imagines, and thereby defines the material world of which it forms a part. Ranged against the contemporary dehumanizing impact of the "global," a materialist planetary would attend to these human forms of imagining — and changing — the world.

### Notes

1. I want to thank Henry Schwarz (Georgetown University) as well as Sandeep Banerjee (McGill University) for encouraging me to pursue this topic. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous readers of *Mediations* who offered useful comments on previous drafts of the essay.
2. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).
3. Rabindranath Tagore, "The sky full of the sun and stars," *The Essential Tagore*, eds. Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, trans. Amit Chaudhuri (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011) 348.
4. Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
5. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 272.
6. Gayatri Spivak, "Interview with Oscar Guardiola-Rivera," *Naked Punch*, 28 August 2009. <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/21> Accessed January 30 2017.
7. Postcolonial scholars such as Robert J.C. Young continue to insist that Spivak represents, for them, a welcome departure from Marxist analysis since the latter has outlived its purpose. Young goes so far as to claim that, "In a sense, it was Spivak, not [Antonio] Gramsci, who invented the 'subaltern'.... Since Spivak's intervention, the subaltern has been transformed into a new and powerful paradigm for our class-wary times." See Young, "Il Gramsci Meridionale," *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, eds. Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya (London: Routledge, 2011) 31-32. On the other hand, materialist critics, such as Benita Parry, have strongly criticized Spivak for presenting subalternity in existential-ontological, or Heideggerian, terms rather than as a relation shaped by history. Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). My contention here is that Spivak's earlier deconstructive-poststructuralist writings on the gendered, singular subaltern need to be supplemented by her more recent work on the humanist aesthetic imagination, influenced by Coleridge and Schiller. Doing so, particularly, illuminates Spivak's indebtedness to the dialectical tradition. I am closer to Neil Larsen's suggestion when he remarks about the poststructuralist Spivak that, "despite the mystification, some partial truth is run up against," in this mode of concept formation. Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative and Nation in the Americas* (London and New York: Verso, 2001) 79. Whether Spivak is a materialist intellectual, partial or otherwise, is outside our current scope — I leave it to the reader to decide.
8. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* 100; see also Spivak, "Love: A Conversation," *Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, eds. Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) 61.
9. See Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) and Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2004).
10. Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). The book continues Brennan's earlier work on the contradictory roots of contemporary intellectual history, as well as theories of postcolonialism and globalization. See Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
11. *Death of a Discipline* 72.
12. Some influential examples of this post-Marxist approach can be found in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling The Social: An*

*Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

13. *Death of a Discipline* 72.
14. Vladimir Lenin, "Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism," *Selected Works, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971) 667-768. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (New York: Vintage, 1987) 12, and Giovanni Arrighi, *The Geometry of Imperialism: The Limits of Hobson's Paradigm*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1983).
15. Larsen, *Determinations* 10.
16. See in addition to *Imperialism*, Lenin's short essay, "Imperialism and the Split in Socialism," *Collected Works*, vol. 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964) 105-120, and the pamphlet, "On the Slogan for a United States of Europe," *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963) 629-632.
17. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 349.
18. Theodor Adorno, "Society," trans. Fredric Jameson, *Salmagundi* 10/11 (Fall 1969-Winter 1970) 144-153.
19. Critical Theory refers specifically to the work of the Frankfurt school, though the term is loosely, and inaccurately, used to refer to postmodern theory that became popular in the US academy in the 1970s and 1980s. As Horkheimer notes in his 1937 essay, the term is used to distinguish it from "traditional" theory, which claims pure objectivity of knowledge independent of context. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972). For a comprehensive account of the Hegelian legacy of Horkheimer and others, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theory and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
20. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 46.
21. G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
22. *Death of a Discipline* 72-73.
23. *Death of a Discipline* 97.
24. For a useful distinction between dialectics and deconstruction as hermeneutic strategies, see William Desmond, "Hegel, Dialectic and Deconstruction," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 18.4 (1985) 244-63. In addition to Spivak's work, another attempt to incorporate Derridean deconstruction within the dialectical tradition is made by Jameson in *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2010), especially the chapter "Hegel's Contemporary Critics."
25. *Death of a Discipline* 101.
26. *Death of a Discipline* 102.
27. See citation above for Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*; Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 389-411; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 volumes, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Georg Lukács,
28. Two important works that provided a counterpoint to the postmodern Anglo-American reading of Benjamin in the 1980s are Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), and Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London and New York: Verso,

- 1981). Also see the account of “On the Concept of History,” in Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s On the Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2005).
29. Himani Bannerji superbly illustrates Tagore and Marx’s comparative conceptions of the dialectics of human freedom. See Bannerji, “Beyond the Binaries: Notes on Karl Marx’s and Rabindranath Tagore’s Human Capacities and Alienation,” *Marxism With and Beyond Marx*, eds. Amiya K. Bagchi and Amita Chatterjee (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) 25-56.
  30. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Mineola: Dover, 2007) 108, my emphasis.
  31. Theodor Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” trans. Bob Hullot-Kenter, *Telos* 60 (1984) 115.
  32. Vladimir Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, trans. Abraham Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972) 46.
  33. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). On Bogdanov, see McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2015).
  34. On the crisis narrative in the US humanities see Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Sander Gilman, *The Fortunes of the Humanities: Thoughts For After the Year 2000* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and others.
  35. Given the limited scope of this essay I can only point to some of the texts that have come define the posthuman and nonhuman turn. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
  36. There involves an engagement with the substantial Marxist scholarship that exists in both cultural geography and ecological studies. For some prominent examples, see David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (New York: Wiley, 1997); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, 3rd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); as well as John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015).
  37. *Death of a Discipline* 92-93, 96-98.
  38. *Death of a Discipline* 96, original emphasis.
  39. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The African Roots of War,” *Atlantic Monthly* 115.5 (1915) 707-714. For a recent study of his interactions with Maoist China, see Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
  40. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) 100.



## Introduction: An Althusser for the Twenty-First Century

Caren Irr

Ideology, in all its forms, is proliferating in the twenty-first century. Whether we understand ideology as extreme ideas, the disputed content of political discourse, the institutionalized pragmatism of the status quo, or the spontaneous, embodied, and/or habitual practices of everyday life, it is ubiquitous and effective. The present far-right nationalist sentiments that seem everywhere on the rise present only its most obvious face.

Such an abundance of ideology characterizes periods of capitalist transition or crisis. As the neoliberal regime of accumulation and (de)regulation at the capitalist core approaches its apparent limits, a structurally necessary struggle over the means of social reproduction has moved into public view. The status quo desperately seeks stability while political activists from various corners rush forward to claim center stage — each group disseminating its own ideological fantasy. Resulting conflicts between ideologies supplement the exercise of overt class violence (often but not always carried out by the state), but both coercive and consensus-making projects respond to malfunctions in the mechanisms of social reproduction.

In Wolfgang Streeck's assessment, these are the features of an interregnum. Streeck uses this term to describe the situation following the 2008 crisis, a period in which capitalism seems unsteady but no new system has arisen. Streeck describes an increasingly unequal and asocial capitalism severing its mid-century compromise with democracy; this separation prompts a "moral decline" and launches an anarchic proliferation of cultural conflicts, as a capital in the throes of overaccumulation casts about for a new means of reproducing itself.<sup>1</sup> Ideological abundance, in other words, does not trigger systemic change, but it does register the fragility of the capitalist system as a whole during periods of stalled transition.

In universities, analyzing culture and ideology has long been the responsibility of the hermeneutic disciplines. In addition to providing credentials that reproduce the professional middle classes, humanists stabilize, innovate within, and sometimes disrupt the circulation of capitalist ideologies. However, in the first decades of the

twenty-first century, many of the tools necessary for ideology critique in particular have been dismantled in favor of approaches such as surface reading and the critique of critique. Some of this resistance to critical readings of ideology announces itself as anti-rational and anti-political — seeing little remaining to the humanities in a period of social crisis beyond the excavation and appreciation of antiquarian curiosities. Other scholarly approaches restrict the “political” (that is, the ideological) to a narrow set of national or subnational themes having no material basis, while still others find too few cultural spaces sufficiently autonomous from capital to allow the project of critique to flourish.

An abundance of ideology, in other words, arrives at just the moment when the hermeneutic disciplines are least prepared to withstand the onslaught. Having relentlessly critiqued their own disciplines and institutions to the point where every claim to knowledge or authority is demonstrably anxious at the first moment of its articulation, too many hermeneuts have too little to offer to the urgent struggle against manifestly ideological barrages of alternative facts and fake news. Few positive projects unite the hermeneuts, and many are too preoccupied with defenses of existing institutions to envision practices that disrupt the social reproduction of domination. Abandoning the project of critique then leaves the floodgates open to ideologies of the least liberatory variety.

Fortunately, the Marxist tradition provides many resources for those working to find a way out of ideological stalemates, improve comprehension of the systemic functions of ideology generally, and advance a positive ideology in the context of struggle. Decades of debate within Marxist scholarship have honed the terms and alerted participants to crucial fault lines in the discussion of ideology. The dossier of position statements presented in this issue of *Mediations* continues this essential discussion by reconsidering the work of Louis Althusser, the author of several essays that are indisputably central to any approach to ideology and ideology critique.

The initial occasion for this dossier was the publication in English of the full text of Althusser’s *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. This 270-page handbook contains Althusser’s two crucial statements on ideology: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and “On Ideology.” These pieces have a complicated textual history that embeds them in the concerns of the late 1960s. Although apparently drafted in 1969 and appearing in a form that Étienne Balibar describes “a partial montage” in the French press in 1970, they were not published in the context of Althusser’s fuller argument until their posthumous appearance in French in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Reading these essays in this context clarifies the relation between Althusser’s account of ideology and his unfinished theory of the school system; it also underscores the position of the theory of ideology within his treatment of the social reproduction of capitalism more generally.

For Althusser, ideology is a primary means of social reproduction because it stabilizes the inherently chaotic and crisis-ridden system of capitalism. Consequently,

the analysis — or better, the philosophical critique — of ideology provides for Althusser a direct point of entry into the processes of social reproduction. In Althusser's famous formulation, "philosophy is, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory," because philosophy (that is, critique) activates the contradictions that disturb the superficially smooth reproduction of relations based on exploitation and conflict.<sup>3</sup> Critique, Althusser explained in yet another definitive statement on the topic, is a mode of reading that situates an "informed gaze" in a terrain; critique embeds the gaze so that it may be transformed by the terrain.<sup>4</sup> Thus, critique does not involve importing an external viewpoint or supplementing the object of critique with extraneous sociological data; still less does it consist of correcting errors in false consciousness. Instead, the project of critique involves tasks such as identifying the implicit question to which the textual object provides an answer and attending to the blind spots, rhythms, and excesses that organize the text's topography so that its deep structure may be revealed. Critique, in other words, unfolds the immanent contradictions of its object and in so doing constitutes itself as a form of knowledge (which Althusser also calls, somewhat distractingly, "science"). Furthermore, he asserts that "the *object* of knowledge can only exist in the form of ideology at the moment of constitution of the science."<sup>5</sup> Ideology occupies the point of origin of knowledge and science, and critique consists of the patient transformation of ideology into knowledge. To build knowledge, critique directs a new "gaze" and a receptive practice of reading into the space between ideology and knowledge.

This account of reading as struggle-oriented critique carries over into Althusser's theory of ideology. The definition famously offered in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* identifies three components to ideology: representation, imagination, and the real. "Ideology," Althusser proposes, "represents individuals' imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence."<sup>6</sup> Here, ideology is defined by the relations it establishes. Ideology represents a relation to an existence, and that imaginary relation is the locus of the mediation between representation and reality. The imaginary sits at the center of ideology. In his enormously useful study *Althusser and His Contemporaries*, Warren Montag demonstrates how Althusser's concept of the imaginary addressed contemporaneous phenomenological accounts of the image, and Fredric Jameson has famously examined the Lacanian register of Althusser's system, where the imaginary mediates between the symbolic and the real. Other approaches might situate Althusser's treatment in relation to the mass media image that rapidly developed during the 1960s and has taken on digital forms since that moment. All of these accounts, however, treat the imaginary as a *relation*.

The word translated into English as "relation" appears in Althusser's French as "*rapport*." The primary definitions of the word "*rapport*" in French include commercial profit and bureaucratic reports — with overtones of interpersonal accord or sexual intimacy. Ben Brewster's translation of "*rapport*" as "relation" reduces the number of these connotations, emphasizing instead the way *rapport* came to be used in

Francophone Marxist terminology. For the twentieth-century French left, the crucial concept of “relations of production” was commonly expressed as “*rapports de production*.” This is, however, a modern usage. In the 1872-75 French edition of *Capital Volume 1* personally supervised by Marx, the word “relation” appears 284 times and “*rapport*” only eight times.<sup>7</sup> Marx uses *rapport* only to describe the reports filed by factory inspectors and the family relations unsettled by capital. His less technical usage of *rapport* would likely have been familiar to Althusser as an unusually attentive Francophone reader of *Capital*. When Althusser uses *rapport*, then, he perhaps invokes not only its significance within the contemporaneous party jargon but also his and Marx’s shared concern for the ways social relations are reduplicated in bureaucracy and affect. Listening for these additional connotations of *rapport* may also help us extract a more contemporary approach to ideology from the resources provided by Althusser’s analysis.

Retaining a fuller set of connotations for *rapport* illuminates the “imaginary” aspect of Althusser’s theory of ideology, in particular. Listening for *rapport* prompts an understanding of ideology as a report that emphasizes the individual’s harmonious social situation and intimate life. As Imre Szeman stresses in his essay in this dossier, for Althusser ideology returns the crisis-ridden subject to a default setting where she concludes, no matter the evidence, “so be it” or “all is well.” Ideology sends a report of *rapport*, and for this reason it requires a two-step investigation.

First, an Althusserian critique of ideology considers the representation of a social imaginary; Althusser calls this an *illusion*, but we might also call it a reading of the report. Literary critics who focus on the effects of central “ideas,” repeated generic patterns, or social prejudices as these appear in narrative attend to this aspect of ideology; they closely attend to the organization of writing within the ideological report. Following through to the second step, however, is essential to the definition of ideology and the practice of ideology critique. The second step involves decoding an *allusion* to “real conditions of existence” — or the decoding of the apparently eternal story of affective *rapport*. Althusser asserts that the ideological allusion often takes the form of an inversion or transposition of real relations. The key question for Althusser, however, is not *what* is transposed — that is, the critical recovery of some trace of the real — but rather *why* the rapport with the real is imaginary in character. “Why is the representation that individuals make of their (individual) relation [*rapport*] to the social relations [*rapport*] governing their conditions of existence and their individual and collective lives necessarily imaginary?” he asks.<sup>8</sup> Why does the imaginary *rapport* (itself doubled) take on a central role? This is the question that Althusser poses and then postpones by turning to the well-known theory of interpellation. In so doing, he suggests that the imaginary mediation between real and represented conditions occurs because the subject positing its relations to real conditions has already been conscripted by those relations.

As several of the papers in this dossier demonstrate, however, the account of

interpellation may not provide the whole answer to Althusser's question about why ideology travels through the imaginary. As the contributors suggest, the subject's formation may include an affective excess not fully directed toward social reproduction; some apparatuses may establish a relation between representation and the real that bypasses the solitary individual. Or, the concept of interpellation itself may be an effect of linguistic, historical, or colonial conditions.

For these reasons, the papers in this dossier suggest tarrying with Althusser's question a bit longer. What, they ask, makes the report of *rapport* known as ideology necessary to social reproduction? Why do individuals insist so routinely on the desirability of their own exploitation? Why does exploitation require this unceasing report of its supposed necessity? Does the apparent necessity of the report create friction with the apparent happiness of the *rapport*? Or, more simply, perhaps: what would an unmediated representation of the real conditions of existence look like, if such a representation were ever discovered to be possible? Rather than starting with a rationalist assumption about the viability of a project of non-transposed, internally consistent reasoning adequate to the social totality, in other words, Althusser asks why such an account is apparently blocked by ideology and how critical knowledge might develop out of the encounter with ideology.

Beginning with these observations, a twenty-first-century practice of Althusserian ideology critique seeks the struggles — individual *and* social — that constitute the real conditions of existence, attends to their transposition in the imaginary of the ideological report, and traces their codification through representation. The aim of this critique, to reiterate, is not to destroy *rapport* but rather to examine its apparent necessity and, ultimately, to set it on more solid ground. The task, Althusser writes in an earlier chapter of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, is ultimately “to destroy *and* replace the Ideological State Apparatuses. New ones need to be put in place.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite the centrality of struggle and affirmative projects of social rebuilding to Althusser's conception of critique, the Althusserian theory of ideology has been primarily associated with the appended cadenza of interpellation in the humanistic disciplines of the American university. The drama of interpellation narrates an involuntary and reactive formation of a subject in response to institutional authority; Althusser's memorable illustration involves a police officer calling out to a passerby who then recognizes herself as the object of state power and internalizes that power. This dramatization has inspired some important work. In the 1980s and 1990s, it played a pivotal role in debates in cinema and media studies, gender theory, accounts of citizenship, critical race studies, and narratology. Often these analyses stressed the means by which a particular apparatus contains a presumably mobile individual (the polymorphous infant, the on-screen female body), restricting its movement and diminishing its multiplicities through internalized controls — essentially establishing a system in which the subject performs the system's work without coercion by policing itself. This analysis was important for late-twentieth-century discussions

of the role of state and the effects of state action on individuals and communities imagined to exist outside of or at the periphery of social control. In the context of the anarchistic tendencies of a moment saturated with neoliberal ideology, the concept of interpellation provided an important way to describe the mediations that complicate simplistic oppositions between subjects and power.

In the early twenty-first century, however, our questions are shifting, and interpellation may no longer be the most central or essential aspect of Althusser's theory of ideology. Contributors to this dossier remind us that interpellation constitutes a "concrete" or "special mode of exposition" explaining how ideology functions, but it does not amount to a generalizable theory of ideology as such.<sup>10</sup> Montag, Jelly-Shapiro, and Li suggest a rethinking of Althusser's concept of interpellation in light of both his own intellectual development and contemporary conflicts in the US over policing. Lesjak and Wegner prioritize Althusser's account of the apparatus, returning the question of the school to a central place in the discussion of ideology and asking not only how the school reproduces ideological content but also how its operation as an institution relates to the surrounding capitalist context. Meanwhile, Flisfeder and Szeman investigate the traces of scientific rationalism at play in Althusser's account of ideology, drawing on Slavoj Žižek's more psychoanalytic and affective account of subject formation to build up an analysis of irrationalist tendencies in social media and the energy humanities, respectively. Finally, Read and Nir both sort through the sixties-era individualism lying at the heart of the Althusserian account of ideology in their assessments of the prospects for the emergence of new collective or, in Read's terminology, transindividual subjects.

Together, these passes through the Althusserian corpus invent an Althusser for the twenty-first century. They focus on affective subjects interacting in technologically mediated private networks as well as corporatized educational institutions. These readings pull into the foreground the on-going violence of both state repression and economic exploitation, and they ask not how ideology can be argued away through empiricist rationality but rather how and why ideology continues to function as a social glue. These essays, in short, contribute to an Althusser revival that is bringing this philosopher's core issues back into focus. They renew Althusser's question about ideology in the context of a capitalist interregnum asking why a system that continuously asserts its own inevitability requires a representational supplement and how its subjects continue to file their never-ending reports of rapport with exploitation.

**Notes**

1. Wolfgang Streeck, "How Will Capitalism End?" *New Left Review* 87 (2014) 62.
2. Étienne Balibar, forward to Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014) ix.
3. Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. Grahame Lock (London: NLB, 1976) 37.
4. Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Jacques Rancière and Pierre Machery, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015).
5. Althusser, *Reading Capital* 46.
6. *Reading Capital* 181.
7. I consulted the French edition of *Capital* available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.
8. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 187.
9. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 90, emphasis added.
10. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 190.





## Morality or Enjoyment? On Althusser’s Ideological Supplement of the Law

Matthew Flisfeder

### The Law and Its Moral Supplement

Louis Althusser’s recently translated book, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, is a more detailed treatment of the theory of ideology popularized in his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).” This essay, which is often an entry point for contemporary discussions about ideology and subjectivity, has made a significant mark on critical scholarship since its publication. Critical theorists have applied the concept of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to read and interpret the ways in which ideology contributes to the reproduction of power in society. In Media and Cultural Studies, for instance (my own field), Althusser’s concept of interpellation has provided a cogent model for understanding the reproduction of ideological hegemony in media spectatorship. Althusser famously claims that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, and therefore his theory of ideology is tied together with his structural Marxist conception of subjectivity.

In the new book, Althusser explains further that “subject” is a category of the law, but also of legal ideological discourse.<sup>1</sup> “Subject,” as we know from the original essay, is a strictly ideological category for Althusser, but in the new book he shows how it serves the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production through its inclusion in the form of the bourgeois law *and* by being supplemented in the “moral” code of the legal ideology. For instance, as he puts it, “Law says: individuals are *legal* persons, legally free, equal and bound to honour their obligations *as legal persons*.” Legal ideology, in contrast, states that “men are free and equal *by nature*.” In legal ideology, unlike the law itself, it is *nature* that forms the foundation of freedom, equality, and obligation. But regarding the latter, Althusser extends this claim by registering the existence of a moral ideology, reproduced in and by the ISAs, that supplements and inscribes in the subject a sense of *moral* obligation that binds individuals to the law by hailing them in their senses of obligation towards conscience and duty.<sup>2</sup> The law in practice

is consequently an expression of the capitalist relations of production, but one that functions without ever mentioning them, and through the combination of the legal ideology and its moral supplement, the subject is interpellated as a kind of mediator between the inside and the outside of the legal apparatus, between the formalism of the law and the capitalist relations of production expressed by it in absentia.

I want to focus here on Althusser's theory of the subject and the way that, for him, the *individual* is interpellated as *subject* by ideology and particularly its moral supplement. The problem I have with Althusser's formulation of the subject — a formulation that has received critical attention from Lacanian critical theorists discussed below — is that it fails to conceive or even recognize a subject who *resists* the law's hail, when the ideological edifice begins to break down, where there is *failed* interpellation. It is precisely at the moment of the failure of interpellation, I claim, that the absent cause of the law — the capitalist relations of production and exploitation — may be able to rise to the surface in a more direct and expressive way. Nevertheless, I also claim that we have in recent times witnessed moments of failure or breach in the legal and moral ideology, where in fact such an absent cause has *remained* quite absent, instead expressing itself in symptoms like racialized violence and populist turns to the Right. So it is worth asking whether the moral supplement is enough to maintain the ideological (mis)recognition of the subject in capitalist relations of production. What happens when even the call of the moral supplement towards conscience and duty itself, begins to break down under the continuous revolutionary thrust of the capitalist mode of production — that is, its need to break down its own limits and barriers in the further pursuit of profit?

"Subject" is an ideological category for Althusser because it falls within the formal framework of the (liberal) legal discourse. Because the law does not distinguish between bourgeois and proletarian subjects, the formalism of the law and its application of the category of the subject produces the appearance of formal equality while at the same time reproducing the capitalist relations of production as its "absent cause." In *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, he highlights two noteworthy formal components of the Civil Law that make it an ally in capitalist relations of exploitation and in the continued reproduction of capitalism without even mentioning the relations of production once. First, he writes, "Law only exists as a function of the existing relations of production"; and, second, "Law has the form of law, that is, formal systematicity, only on condition *that the relations of production* as a function of which it exists *are completely absent from law itself.*"<sup>3</sup> He adds in a footnote, that "No article of the law code, however, recognizes the fact that certain subjects (the capitalists) own the means of production, while others (the proletarians) have no means of production at all. This element (the relations of production) is accordingly absent from the law which, at the same time, *guarantees it.*"<sup>4</sup> The law in other words, bourgeois law, has the effect of creating the *appearance* of *formal* equality, while at the same time failing to include the fact of class inequality in the form of ownership

of the means of production (there are some who own and some who do not), and the resulting relations of production (that is, the relations of exploitation). The formalism of the law therefore makes possible the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production without necessarily having to name this as its content. Legally, formally, everyone is entitled to own means of production; it's just that capitalism necessarily requires a great many to be in the position of non-ownership, and therefore positioned as exploitable labor. Liberal ideology conveniently divorces the *political* from the *economic*. The economic mode of production becomes, in other words, the "absent cause" of the political-legal framework and expresses what Althusser previously (in *Reading Capital*) referred to as "structural causality."

*On the Reproduction of Capitalism* provides a clearer picture of how, exactly, the mode of production operates as an absent cause of the legal structure, as a system that supports and reproduces capitalist relations of production without even naming them. Despite this fact, and aside from the structural absence of the mode of production from the form of the law, the proficiency of the law, and hence its applicability in the reproduction of the relations of production, requires an additional ideological supplement, since the law is never just the law — that is, the law can never simply refer to itself as its own justification.

Althusser's approach is noteworthy because of the way that he theorizes the ISAs as those spaces/practices that supply an ideological supplement to the law, which "educates" the subject in the moral ideological support of the law. In order for it to function — that is, in order for it to be obeyed — the law requires an additional ideological supplement. Although the law can be (re-)enforced through violence, or through the Repressive State Apparatus, in order for any form of power to continuously produce and reproduce itself it cannot rely simply on the use of physical force. This, according to Althusser, is where the *moral* ideology of conscience and duty, of obligation towards the dictum of the legal discourse of freedom and equality steps in. What remains insightful about Althusser's model is the way that he conceives the corresponding ISAs, which support the ideology of the state and the law through practices of ideological "training," so to speak. It is in the ISAs that, for him, individuals are *interpellated* as subjects.

### **Interpellation and the New Theory of Structural Causality**

Althusser's theories of structural causality and ideological interpellation have been reworked in recent decades within the Lacanian theoretical edifice. Unlike the Althusserian approach, which theorizes the incorporation of the subject into the legal framework, the Lacanian approach asks about what happens when *gaps* in the structure become apparent and its efficacy encounters a potential moment of dissolution (maybe, even, "dis-illusion"). Mladen Dolar writes that, according to Althusser, "the subject is what makes ideology work; [whereas] for [Lacanian] psychoanalysis, the subject emerges where ideology fails."<sup>5</sup> In the Lacanian conception

set out by Dolar, “subject” names, not merely the agency of ideological breakdown, but also the moment of gap or lack in the ideological edifice. *Resistance* to interpellation, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, is the subject.<sup>5</sup> I’d like to take Dolar’s Lacanian conception of the subject a step further in rethinking the relationship between the subject and the ISAs, particularly the question as to how the subject *internalizes* the moral-legal ideology of the apparatus that Althusser highlights in the chapter on “Law” in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. What appears to be missing in Althusser’s account of interpellation is the *precipitous* move on the part of the subject to resolve the deadlock regarding *its own status* — that is, towards the question of the subject’s own sense of certainty, of being in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Žižek argues instead that “The first thing to do apropos of interpellation in a Lacanian approach is therefore to reverse Althusser’s formula of ideology which ‘interpellates individuals as subjects’: it is never the individual which is interpellated as subject, *into* subject; it is on the contrary the subject itself who is interpellated as x (some specific subject-position, symbolic identity or mandate), thereby eluding the abyss of \$ [the barred subjectivity/lack of being].”<sup>7</sup> In this sense, interpellation always has a kind of *anticipatory* quality to it: I identify as x in order to *evade* the traumatic possibility of non-existence, or “lack.”<sup>8</sup> I cling to the ideological discourse because it protects me from traumatic uncertainty regarding my status as subject. In the Lacanian paradigm, subjectivization does not represent an “internalization of the external contingency” — that is, the ideological conditioning or training of the subject in the ISAs — instead, ideological interpellation “resides in *externalization* of the result of an inner necessity.”<sup>9</sup> Interpellation therefore functions because it is the *subject* who is seeking *external* validation, the source of which is the sublimation of the drive towards *enjoyment*. The subject clings to the source of the ideological hail because it allows her to reconcile her relationship to the inner tension of her desire, the traumatic lack that marks her as subject. “Subject,” therefore, in the Lacanian edifice, as the product of failed interpellation, coincides with the gap in the structure of the law. The emergence of the subject from failed interpellation, in this way, brings to the surface the absent cause of the legal structure, for example, the relations of exploitation in the mode of production.

Bruno Bosteels links this conception of the subject to a “new” theory of structural causality found in recent Lacanian inspired critical theory. In a first move, he explains how theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,<sup>10</sup> argue that the social field, just like the Lacanian Symbolic order, “is articulated around the real of an antagonism, which resists symbolization... The structure is not-all: there is always a gap, a leftover, a remainder — or, if we change the perspective slightly, an excess, a surplus, something that sticks out. A social formation is not only overdetermined but constitutively incomplete.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, according to Laclau and Mouffe, “society” does not exist as a valid object of discourse. Bosteels adds that “The absence, or lack, of an organic society is, then, the point of the real

of politics.”<sup>12</sup> It is at this point that the *class struggle* (the political *at the heart of* the economic mode of production) becomes recognizable as the structural *impossibility* of the social whole. Class struggle, like the Lacanian subject, emerges where society fails. Therefore, in a second move, Bosteels identifies this gap in the social field as the subject herself. “The subject ‘is’ nothing but this gap in the structure.”<sup>13</sup> The subject, then, “is strictly correlative to its own impossibility,”<sup>14</sup> or, as we saw earlier with Dolar, the subject emerges where ideology fails.

Finally, in the last move, ideology is identified as a fantasy formation, a *supplement* that conceals the gap or lack in the field of the social. For Žižek, this supplement is played by the role of enjoyment, or *jouissance*, which ties the subject to the surface level of ideological propositions — that is, the search for certainty through external validation. As we’ve seen, for Althusser, the supplement to ideology exists in the content of the moral ideology, the obligation towards conscience and duty — that is towards liberal assumptions about natural freedom and equality, produced in and through the ISAs; for Žižek, instead, it is the surplus-enjoyment produced by the lack or gap in the social/subject that supplements the surface level of ideological propositions.

### **The Decay of the Moral Supplement and the Obligation to Enjoy**

Reflecting upon the differences between the Althusserian and the Lacanian conceptions of interpellation and subjectivization, I want to, in conclusion, advance one particular reason why the Lacanian version proposed by Dolar and Žižek might seem preferable in the context of twenty-first century capitalism. Partly due to Right/liberal claims about the supposed “end of history” or the “end of ideology,” but equally due to a whole array of critical theory seeking to abandon the Marxist and even Althusserian theory of ideology, as well as the Marxist “metanarrative” of historical materialism — especially in the work of poststructuralist thinkers, from Foucault to Lyotard — it’s possible to claim that we now live in a supposedly post-ideological era. This is a theme expressed by Fredric Jameson’s use of Lacan’s formula for psychosis — as a “breakdown of the signifying chain” — to develop his theory of postmodernism. What such a “breakdown” registers, on the one hand, is the ongoing dissolution of the traditional moral supplement used in the interpellation of subjects in their moral obligation towards their duty, precisely under the auspices of capitalist processes of deterritorialization. Capitalism, and neoliberal capitalism in particular, is anti-Oedipal in exactly the way that Deleuze and Guattari<sup>15</sup> claimed that it was, in that it constantly requires the decoding and deterritorialization of tradition and the status quo. As Mark Fisher puts it, “capitalism brings with it a massive desacralization of culture. It is a system which is no longer governed by any transcendent Law; on the contrary, it dismantles all such codes, only to re-install them on an *ad hoc* basis.”<sup>16</sup> Capitalist processes of accumulation, production, and reproduction, are in a constant state of change and transformation, and therefore require the continued decoding

of established meanings. On the other hand, as a result of two mutually reinforcing discourses developed in the postwar period — the discourse of consumerism and the discourse of anti-Communism — the modern capitalist moral ethic of (patriarchal) prohibition has been transformed into the postmodern obligation towards enjoyment.

The subject is, today, according to Žižek, interpellated by a constant injunction towards enjoyment. In consumer society, so we are told, there is nothing preventing us from fulfilling our desire for pleasure — this is also why we find moral criticisms against consumerism coming from the conservative Right, which it often blames for the disruption of the moral code. As well, we are reminded that, unlike in totalitarianism, as in the case of the former Soviet Union, authority will not block our access to enjoyment. We are, therefore, apparently free to enjoy as we please. The problem, however, is that, from the Lacanian perspective, the kind of enjoyment demanded is a structural impossibility. This is why, if we follow through with this conception of enjoyment, we are constantly doomed to fail. Nevertheless, the injunction towards obligatory enjoyment produces a surplus of libidinal energy requiring an outlet; it requires discharge. This rather asignifying irrational and metonymic pursuit of desire, like the uncertain status of the subject herself, requires external validation in some kind of meaningful apparatus of signification as a means of relief.

Today, we are faced with an assortment of competing signifying discourses charged with relieving the subject of the uncertainty with regards to her status as subject, but also with the discharge of surplus-enjoyment. From the more benign spaces of social media engagement, into which we escape to evade traumatic social existence, to more virulent discourses of extremism and Right-wing populism, and even now with the growing popularity of the so-called “alt-Right” movement in the wake of the electoral victory of Donald Trump, the lack of a meaningful trust in the moral code of the legal ideology seems to correlate with the emergence of new systems of reactionary subjectivity. My point, if I can put it more bluntly, is that today ideological hegemony is kept together less by the moral supplement towards dutiful obligation and respect for the legal ideology. Rather, following from the Lacanian theory of ideology, it is, I claim, tied up with the need to escape the traumatic confrontation with impossible enjoyment. Symptomatically, this means that if it is going to maintain its impact and strength, Althusser’s theory of ideology and the ISAs needs to be reconciled with neoliberal and postmodern processes of interpellation and the role of enjoyment in supporting and supplementing the (class) state authority and its power, in order to make sense of the uncertain times of the post-crisis decay of the liberal bourgeois sense of moral obligation towards duty and conscience, and even in defense of the legal ideology’s penchant towards freedom and equality.

## Notes

1. As he puts it later on, in the chapter on ideology, “only with the advent of bourgeois ideology, legal ideology in particular, the category of the subject... is the category constitutive of all ideology.” Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2014) 188.
2. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 68.
3. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 59.
4. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* 59n2.
5. Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” *Qui parle* 6.2 (1993) 78. Slavoj Žižek, “Postmodernism or Cultural Studies? Yes Please!” in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (New York: Verso, 2000) 115. Cultural studies critiques of the Althusserian conception of interpellation, particularly as it has been used in so-called Screen Theory, resonate for instance in Stuart Hall’s (1980) “Encoding/Decoding” model of media reception, which argues for different types of ideological mis/recognition, such as in his examples of “negotiated” and “counter-hegemonic” readings of mediated content. I take his “counter-hegemonic” position to overlap somewhat with the Lacanian conception of failed interpellation. See Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2nd ed., eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
6. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 73.
7. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* 73-74. On this subject, see also Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, The Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 133-34.
8. As Žižek puts it elsewhere, the problem for psychoanalysis is not “does the world out there exist?”; rather, for the subject of psychoanalysis “is that I myself do not exist.” See Slavoj Žižek, “Connections of the Freudian Field to Philosophy and Popular Culture” *Interrogating the Real*, eds. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, (New York: Continuum, 2005) 57.
9. Slavoj Žižek, “The Spectre of Ideology,” *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994) 4, emphasis added.
10. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985).
11. Bruno Bosteels, “Alain Badiou’s Theory of the Subject: The Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?” *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2006) 128.
12. Bosteels, “Theory of the Subject” 128.
13. “Theory of the Subject” 129.
14. “Theory of the Subject” 129.
15. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
16. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009) 6.





## Historicizing Repression and Ideology

Eli Jelly-Schapiro

"Ideology has no history," Althusser's oft-cited thesis in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" insists. Though ideologies vary across space and time, the form of ideology — and the function of that form — is unchanging. "All ideology," Althusser contends, "interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects." This observation follows Althusser's brief theorization of the structural interrelation of repression and ideology. The Repressive State Apparatus — through force, interdiction, or censorship — provides a "shield" for the Ideological State Apparatuses, which, in the last instance, "largely secure the reproduction specifically of the relations of production."<sup>1</sup>

I am reluctant to emulate both Althusser's appeal to the synchronic constancy of ideology, and his related intimation that the Ideological State Apparatuses always play the foremost role in reproducing the relations of production. Rather than merely refute either assumption, though, I want to follow a route of inquiry that Althusser's essay illuminates without itself pursuing — an examination of the historically contingent and spatially complex "explicit or tacit combinations" of repression and ideology.<sup>2</sup>

Althusser was writing at the close of the 1960s, near the highpoint of the postwar social democratic moment — those ephemeral decades wherein the state sought, to imprecisely summon Marx, "not to do away with two extremes, capital and wage labor, but to weaken their antagonism and transform it into a harmony."<sup>3</sup> More specifically, of course, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" was composed in the immediate aftermath of the tumults of 1968. The events of that May in France brought into relief creeping fractures in the fragile labor-capital compromise. Successive cycles of rapid inflation and enforced deflation — originating in the debt financing of the Algerian War — had culminated in conjoined crises of underemployment and underconsumption. The general strikes that followed the initial student demonstrations, though, won significant wage increases, which restored — if fleetingly — the ideal and reality of working-class consumerism.<sup>4</sup> The capitalist state, in other words, responded to labor protest not with heightened repression but with newly brokered terms of consent.

Born of this conjuncture, Althusser's essay highlighted the forms of unfreedom that define the figures of "free" labor and the "free" subject — even and especially in moments of ostensibly diminished contradiction.

Althusser, that is, was primarily concerned with how violent relations of exploitation are reproduced through primarily non-violent means, what Marx termed the "silent compulsion" of the market. Marx juxtaposed the instance of "silent compulsion" (what we might also term the moment of ideology) to the instance of repression or state violence, which prevails in the time-space of primitive accumulation. "In its embryonic state, in its state of becoming," Marx wrote, "capital cannot yet use the sheer force of economic relations to secure its right to absorb a sufficient quantity of surplus labor, but must be aided by the power of the state." In time, however, "the 'free' worker, owing to the greater development of the capitalist mode of production, makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life."<sup>5</sup> Marx was keenly aware that "[this history] assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs."<sup>6</sup> But his account of capitalism's emergence ultimately privileges the geographically (nationally) bounded sequence of stages, rather than their synchronous global articulation.

In his "Preface" to *Capital Volume I* (1969), Althusser summons Marx's reflections on the "the incredible means used to achieve the 'primitive accumulation' thanks to which capitalism was 'born' and grew in Western societies." Paraphrasing one of Marx's "greatest discoveries," Althusser writes that "capitalism has always used and, in the 'margins' of its metropolitan existence — i.e. in the colonial and ex-colonial countries — is still using well into the twentieth century, *the most brutally violent means.*"<sup>7</sup> Althusser is attentive here to the enduring centrality of primitive accumulation, and to the relationship between the brutal extraction of wealth in the (post)colony and the generation and reproduction of capital in the metropole. Althusser does not, however, bring this world-systems perspective to bear on his theorization of either ideology in itself or the interrelation of repression and ideology.

The mutuality of colonial and metropolitan accumulation — and the interplay of repression and ideology therein — was evinced with a particular clarity by Frantz Fanon. In the metropole, Fanon observed in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961),

The educational system... the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary honesty of workers who are given a medal after fifty years of good and loyal service... all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably.... In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence

and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge.<sup>8</sup>

Fanon accented the heightened importance, in the space of the colony, of crude state violence, and the concomitant insignificance of the ideological state apparatuses. But he was not simply drawing a contrast between the forms of governance that obtain in the metropole and the colony; he was also gesturing toward the ways in which “the structure of moral reflexes” in the metropole is conditioned by, dialectically entangled with, the repressive violence of colonial relations. This is true in multiple senses.

The advent of Fordism in France — and the corresponding development of the ideological state apparatuses, including the welfare state — was enabled by the deprecation of labor and raw materials within, and captive markets of, the colonies. In Algeria — to keep with the specific settler-colonial context that animated Fanon’s account — the expropriation of arable land, and the exploitation of indigenous labor thereon, provided the textile mills of northern France with cheap supplies of cotton. The extraction of petroleum and natural gas, following its discovery in the Algerian Sahara in the 1950s, met and catalyzed a heightened demand for fossil fuels within the metropole. And the settler population of Algeria — as well as the native bourgeoisie — was a major consumer market for French manufactures; for periods of the twentieth century, fifty percent of French exports were bound for Algeria.

In the moment of decolonization, meanwhile, more than one million low-wage workers migrated to France from the west and north of Africa and from the Caribbean. By 1965, over 500,000 Algerians were living in France, many of them in *bidonvilles* that were subject to heightened levels of police repression. The super-exploitation of colonial or postcolonial subjects within the metropole, in the construction and manufacturing sectors especially, fueled the accelerated economic development of the postwar decades, and contributed to the innovation and maturation of the social democratic state — the ideological apparatuses of which guided Althusser’s account.

Finally, the consent of the white working class in France was enabled by the salve of superiority colonial forms of racial thinking provided, during and in the aftermath of the imperial era. Fanon is again instructive here. Published nearly two decades prior to “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) anticipated some of Althusser’s core theoretical concerns — the question, most fundamentally, of how the subject is ideologically “hailed” by particular structures of domination. If Althusser’s metaphor “Hey, you there!” describes the constitution of the subject by the capitalist state, Fanon’s “Look, a nigger!” imagines a different relation — not the encounter between a subject and the state, but between two subjects; not the constitution of a subject in general, but specific (raced) subjects. The words “Look, a nigger!” belong to a white child; their object is a black man. The black man sees himself, as “a nigger,” through the gaze of the white child. And the white child, in turn, regards the naturalized assumption of his own racially endowed superiority through

the eyes of a black man.<sup>9</sup> Althusser's theorization of the "subject" captures the two-fold meaning of that term — the subject as an ostensibly autonomous actor within the field of social relations, and the subject as that which is subjected by (the object of) a particular structure of dominance. Fanon helps us see how these two moments obtain, not merely within any given individual, but in the moment of intersubjective confrontation. The sense of autonomy and belonging felt by the "free" white subject is made possible in part by the subjection of the colonized.

The dialogue between Althusser and Fanon has been generatively elaborated by Pierre Macherey (a student of Althusser's). As Macherey notes, Althusser privileges — in a Foucauldian spirit — the "vertical, transcendent" process through which power in the abstract recruits, and thus forms, the subject.<sup>10</sup> For Fanon, by contrast, the formation of the subject is always — in the Hegelian sense — the result of an intersubjective encounter, which is, additionally, always *located* in space and time. Fanon's account, Macherey observes, accords with Sartre's concept of "situation" — "a complex ensemble of relations that confront people with one another in a [particular] context and... according to a certain order or responding to certain norms."<sup>11</sup> Importantly, this contingent "ensemble of relations" clarifies ideology's differential effects. If the ideological operation interpellates *all* individuals as concrete subjects, as Althusser insisted, it does not do so indiscriminately. As Fanon's colonial example enacts, the constitution of the self is often joined to the negative inscription (*qua* repression) of an other.

Though absent from or only implicit to "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," the theoretical tools that might examine the "explicit and tacit combinations" of repression and ideology through an historical and geographical lens are present, and vitally so, in Althusser's broader oeuvre. In *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, Althusser invoked and developed the concept of "articulation." "Articulation" signifies, for Althusser, a joining that is not a synthesis — an interrelation wherein the constitutive elements maintain their relative difference. Althusser deployed the term, most basically, to rescue the notion of "complex unity" from Marx's more "vulgar" materialist readers — and to demonstrate how the myriad contradictions that comprise capitalist social order, which are not reducible to one another, combine — like the "ensemble of relations" in a "situation" — in different ways in different spaces and times.<sup>12</sup> Though concordant with Althusser's structuralism, the idea of articulation gestures toward an understanding of ideology as always historical, precisely because the *form* taken by the articulation of repression and ideology is mutable.

Today, in the perpetual twilight of the neoliberal moment, the interrelation of repression and ideology continues to mutate in pace with the exigencies of accumulation. The historiography of neoliberalism, as authored by scholars such as David Harvey and Daniel Stedman Jones, traces how the calculated circulation throughout civil society of the "free market" gospel of Hayek, von Mises, Friedman,

and others created a foundation of popular consent for the construction of neoliberal order.<sup>13</sup> But as Naomi Klein amongst others (including Harvey) is keen to highlight the implementation of neoliberal policy has been conditioned not just by ideological assimilation but also by state violence. As dispossession displaces expanded reproduction as the paradigmatic mode of accumulation, repression displaces ideology as the paradigmatic mode of governance. In the advanced capitalist world, the privatization of the social commons has coincided with the militarization of public and private police and rise — in the United States in particular — of mass incarceration. The declension of the welfare state and deepening of the police state are reciprocal processes. And when crises of accumulation provoke crises of consent, the threat or enactment of state violence moves yet further into the governmental foreground. As the authors of *Policing the Crisis*, writing at the neoliberal end of the 1970s, put it: In the moment of crisis, “the masks of liberal consent and popular consensus slip to reveal the reserves of coercion and force on which the cohesion of the state and its legal authority depends.”<sup>14</sup>

Even as we identify repression as the increasingly paradigmatic mode of late-neoliberal governance, though, we must simultaneously examine how repression and ideology are today articulated — across and within different geographic scales. The “reserves of coercion and force” are unevenly distributed. And it is precisely this uneven distribution that today lends the “structure of moral reflexes” its particular, if less than universal, force. As the economic security of the “white working class” is diminished, the appeal of the latter toward “law and order” is amplified — and the militarization of borders, violent occupation of poor communities of color, and aerial bombardment of foreign lands appear as plausible forms of redress. But if this resurgent nativism is one expression of capitalist ideology, it is also symptomatic of its crisis. And as the compulsion of the market becomes yet less compelling and yet more audible, new political possibilities — the positive determination of a planetary rather than nationalistic precariat — might come into view. The realization of the latter will demand that we do not simply wait for the contradictions to deepen — for the continuing displacement of ideology by repression — but create and nurture political spaces wherein the intersubjective situation evinced by Fanon dramatizes not alienation or domination but the recognition of solidarity.

### Notes

1. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001) 161, 150.
2. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 145-146
3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Saul K. Padover (New York: International Publishers, 1975) 50
4. The abrupt rise in oil prices in 1974 exacerbated already declining rates of growth France. The Keynesian attempt to stimulate demand failed to redress the crisis, and by the end of the 1970s stagflation had set in and wages were depressed.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1990) 382.
6. Marx, *Capital* 876.
7. Louis Althusser, "Preface to *Capital Volume One*" (1969), trans. Ben Brewster, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1969/preface-capital.htm>, accessed on August 5, 2016.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1963 [1961], 38.
9. I am drawing here from Pierre Macherey's illuminating comparative reading of Althusser and Fanon. See Pierre Macherey, "Figures of Interpellation in Althusser and Fanon," *Radical Philosophy* 173 (2012) 14-17.
10. Macherey, "Figures of Interpellation" 19.
11. "Figures of Interpellation" 18.
12. Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980) 323-24.
13. See, for example, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 40.
14. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1978) 217.

## Althusser and the University Today

Carolyn Lesjak

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."<sup>1</sup> 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*."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.’”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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’).<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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.

## Althusser's Clinamen: Aleatory Materialism and Revolutionary Politics

Promise Li

Since the posthumous publication of Althusser's *Philosophy of the Encounter*, scholars have grappled with what appears to be a discontinuity between the earlier Althusser of "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (hereafter referred to as "ISA essay") and *Reading Capital*, and the later Althusser who turns to Lucretius for a "philosophy of the encounter" or an "aleatory materialism." Antonio Negri characterizes the moment when Althusser explicitly turns to Machiavelli and Lucretius as a "Kehre," or turn, describing it as the point in which "the structural framework of Althusser's previous theoretical analysis is completely reversed."<sup>1</sup> Others, however, have attempted to stress the contrary, arguing that the two Althusser's cannot be so neatly separated. In this paper, I examine the concept of the "clinamen," as Althusser uses it in his later writings, to emphasize neither the continuity or discontinuity of Althusser's system explicitly, but rather the non-linearity of its function. This clinamen as "encounter," urges us to revisit his momentous ISA essay to find gestures toward revolutionary engagement, and it offers a new perspective on his oeuvre beyond the arguments of continuity and discontinuity.

Althusser's late work closes in on an important aspect of this encounter: the seeming arbitrariness, or, as he calls it, "aleatory" nature, of this swerve. This clinamen, as a primal encounter that is the "first cause" or origin of all things in Lucretius' Epicurean cosmology, comes prior to and serves as the "basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason."<sup>2</sup> The Epicurean world presumes "the idea that the origin of every world, and therefore of all reality and all meaning, is due to a swerve, and that swerve, not Reason or Cause, is the origin of the world."<sup>3</sup> In this conception, Epicurus and Lucretius believed that "atoms, as their own weight bears them down / Plumb through the void, at scarce determined times."<sup>4</sup> As Lucretius puts it, this motion eventually "mere changed trend" — a slight swerve, revolution, turn, which ultimately creates matter. Althusser notes that this swerve is completely aleatory in its occurrence — it "hath not a fixed necessity within."<sup>5</sup> The clinamen

must be the original inclination and action of the falling atoms; it marks the “the impossibility of thinking an origin.”<sup>6</sup> In similar terms, Lacan later describes his theory of the Real as a “missed encounter.” He posits the Real order as “beyond the automaton, the return, the coming back,”<sup>7</sup> that is to say, beyond and before the originary swerve that lies before language and “reality,” since “the clinamen [for Lucretius] marks “the birth of things and the appearance of language.”<sup>8</sup> Althusser sets the ground for his philosophy of the encounter by postulating that, following Lucretius’s reasoning, this originary swerve “may not take place, just as it may take place... no principle of decision determines this alternative in advance; it is of the order of a game of dice.”<sup>9</sup> Althusser aligns himself with Lucretius’ narrative for a philosophical renunciation of any strains of teleology in both the realms of philosophy and of the class struggle.

Althusser’s “aleatory materialism” develops this concept not simply to re-examine the question of political praxis, but also to emphasize a certain philosophical and political ethos. This strategic conception of Marxist materialism blends Machiavellian political theory and Lucretian cosmology, a connection that has been discussed in depth in a recent collection edited by Filippo del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino.<sup>10</sup> Mikko Lahtinen explains that Althusser “outlines a notion of an ‘aleatory Machiavelli’ and, with the help of the Epicurean tradition, a theory of materialist politics that opens up a view of politics as an action occurring in a conjuncture where each actor aims to organize and govern the effective truth.”<sup>11</sup> The political field, for Althusser, adopts the quality of the Machiavellian-Lucretian world — it is a perpetual state of disorder and, to use Marxist language, of struggle. There is no underlying guarantee of victory or any sort of political revolution, “even every ‘fixed’ political form of organization rests on an uncertain aleatory foundation.”<sup>12</sup>

The clinamen gestures towards the missing concepts that are not explicitly stated but play an integral role in Althusser’s thought since *Reading Capital*. The clinamen allows one to think Althusser’s thought as a “Machiavellian” philosophy, one that embraces the non-continuity of conceptual thought to emphatically pose it by means of its “effectual truth.” For Machiavelli, the effectual truth is different from ideal truths that have no place in reality. Effectual truth elicits concrete reactions and shifts paradigms, rather than naming unarmed concepts and dictums, just as the publication of *Reading Capital* has generated overwhelming effects and reactions in its conjuncture. To use Althusser’s own metaphor, if one wants to straighten a bent stick, one cannot merely bring about that change by bending the stick to its original verticality. One must bend it toward the other direction in order to straighten the stick.

As Machiavelli would have recognized, the politics of theory operate similarly. For one, a common criticism of the ISA essay is the seeming impossibility of any room for action and engagement in Althusser’s highly controlled world. But as Foucault pithily stated, in every system, “where there is power, there is resistance.”<sup>13</sup> Foucault describes these “spaces of multifold resistance” in *The History of Sexuality*, speaking

of “points of resistance [that] are present everywhere in the power network.” For Althusser, the aleatory “encounter,” first posed by Epicurean philosophy, is the philosophical elaboration of these points of resistance. As the recent publication of the full manuscript of the ISA essay confirms, Althusser consciously deleted all references to these “points of resistance” in the essay’s original publication in order to “effectually” stress the difficulty of revolutionary action in the wake of the failure of May 1968.<sup>14</sup> While this may have ultimately shown to be a flawed strategy, the ISA essay can be seen as enacting in practice what Althusser has later articulated as the philosophical basis for revolt through the *clinamen*. Michel Pêcheux describes the ISA essay as “a philosophical detour imposed by the class struggle, to dispossess Marxism-Leninism of its operating assumptions, to deprive it of them in the most radical way, and it is precisely this that is unpardonable in the eyes of some.”<sup>15</sup> This claim that the ISA essay can challenge traditions of Marxist intervention to occasion a new theory of struggle and revolt can be counter-intuitive. But, to expand on Althusser’s reference to Pascal to emphasize the ritualistic and, more importantly, the bodily, nature of ideology (“Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe”), these practices are predicated on the fact that “there is no ritual without break, failure, and cracking.”<sup>16</sup>

Pêcheux elaborates on this in “Ideology: Stronghold or Paradoxical Space?” The theses in the ISA essay must be “understood to mean that the processes of ideological reproduction are also conceived as spaces of multifold resistance where the unexpected continually appears. For any ideological rituals constantly run up against flaws, unsuccessful acts, and lapses of various kinds which befall and disrupt the ‘eternity’ of reproduction.”<sup>17</sup> Against those who criticize Althusser for illustrating a world without agency or room for change, Pêcheux writes that ideology “does not comprise a fortress, but a paradoxical space.” It is significant to understand and develop the idea that ideology, even in the ISA essay, functions as a “paradoxical space.” It has become too common to treat ideology as an antithesis to revolutionary action, as a tight-knit apparatus that is impossible to subvert. Foucault has given us a strong critique against this rigidity of structure, but Pêcheux’s characterization of it as a “paradoxical space” expresses an even more nuanced point. Ideology, being paradoxical, is the breeding ground for real contradictions. It is a material space that only appears to generate an image of coherent structure; as Althusser writes in “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” it is one that is characterized by “a fusion of accumulation of contradictions” that gives it the form of being a “ruptural unity.”<sup>18</sup> Pêcheux reminds us that “the dominant ideology never dominates without contradictions.”<sup>19</sup> In Althusser’s later thought, by the time of *Machiavelli and Us* and *Philosophy of the Encounter*, the ruptural and revolutionary potential of this “paradoxical space” becomes the focal point of his research. Going beyond Foucault, Althusser’s *clinamen* attempts to philosophically explore the possibilities of these “encounters,” the system’s symptoms. The task to study the nuances of a new politics

of resistance led to an examination of philosophical practice itself.

Althusser's *Philosophy of the Encounter*, despite being published posthumously, delineates a certain political gesture that informed the undercurrents of his theoretical project throughout the course of his oeuvre. The publication of *Philosophy of the Encounter* made it "possible, if not inevitable", as Warren Montag puts it, "to see in such [earlier] works as "Contradiction and Overdetermination" and "Lenin and Philosophy" a philosophy of the conjuncture, according to which history... is the site of an infinity of encounters between heterogeneous forces the outcome of which could never be predicted."<sup>20</sup> This explicit turn towards Lucretian naturalism is a theoretical intervention — a political intervention, in fact — into the developments of Marxism in his contemporary French political and intellectual scene. Confronted with the rise of Stalinism and the failure of the May '68 protests, Althusser sought to re-examine the tenets of orthodox Marxism held by the dominant Marxist intellectuals of the day. What he discovered was a central tension in even the more progressive and theoretically rigorous Marxist movements — between the inevitable realization of the immanent complexity of the social conjuncture and the refusal to abandon a deterministic model of Marxism. Culminating in his explicit espousal of Epicurean philosophy and Machiavellian politics, Althusser in fact returns to Marx in order to show a more radical theory of political action through his theories of ideology and aleatory materialism. The *clinamen* elaborates the connection between ideology and aleatory materialism, testifying to the contingency and unpredictability of the moment of political transformation without sacrificing its "revolutionary" potential.

The concept develops an understanding of Marxism's revolutionary potential by the very emphasis on its necessity and creative possibilities. In other words, while various theorists tend to obscure the role of a revolutionary break in their attention on other phenomena, like hegemony or ideology, Althusser's engagement with these concepts led him back to reconsider the question of revolution in its full force. The moment of revolution is a groundbreaking act of creation and re-creation; Althusser's turn to Lucretius toward the end of his life signifies his total commitment to this central philosophy of Marxist praxis and revolution that has been increasingly obscured by the various forms of "post-Marxism" throughout the years. But, as Althusser is fully aware, the physical motion of the *clinamen* as a "swerve" or "deviation" indicates that inscribed in the very possibility of revolution is also a potential for error. As Althusser writes, "The possibility of such errors, just like the possibility of deviations, is written into the contradictory relations dominating the class struggle." The concept of the *clinamen* thus is an "error without truth and deviation without a norm" — as the *clinamen* itself is a contingent deviation from the beginning, without precedent. He describes the *clinamen* as "an unmastered fault, a hesitation, aberration... which slowly develops or suddenly gapes in the midst of reality, a reality without truth or norm."<sup>21</sup> Its movement is revolutionary because of the radical abruptness of its becoming; it is an uncontrolled force of change because it has no and can have no



precedent or “norm.” The clinamen has a revolutionary form precisely because of the unpredictability of its appearance.

In a very material sense, the physical motion of atoms swerving and deviating, whether as the smallest gesture or historical revolution, reminds us of the capacity for change in ideological systems. I quote here at length a passage from Robert Linhart’s autobiographical narrative *The Assembly Line*, where he recounts his experience of working in a Citroen factory in Paris:

“And suppose... that you need only get used to making the same movements in the same way in the same period of time, aspiring to no more than the placid perfection of a machine? But life kicks against it and resists. The organism resists. The muscles resist. The nerves resist... Life shows itself in more rapid movement, an arm lowered at the wrong time, a slower step, a second’s irregularity, an awkward gesture, getting ahead, slipping back, tactics at the station; everything, in the wretched square of resistance against the empty eternity that is the work station, indicates that there are still human incidents, even if they’re minute. This clumsiness, this unnecessary movement away from routine...”<sup>22</sup>

The potential for error is also the potential to disrupt repetition; the swerve constitutes the very capacity for revolutionary transformation, as breaks in the system. The clinamen is a worker’s wrong gesture or the masses’ descent into societal disruption, functioning as a new language that is incomprehensible to the dominant ideology. Unprecedented and revolutionary, the smallest swerve can threaten to create all matter anew.

As Lucretius’ concept shows, the ideological “fortress” is at the end a “paradoxical space,” with immanent contradictions and aleatory sites of resistance. Pêcheux writes that the “unprecedented” swerve or revolution “constitutes the tendential fusion of the revolutionary practices of the workers’ movement with the scientific theory of class struggle.”<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, Althusser’s own oeuvre shows that the theoretical effects produced from his thought do not come linearly. Rather than attempting to offer different interpretations of the “narrative” of his work, we must instead, as the clinamen indicates, learn to cultivate different manners of reading. This essay is not to show that the philosophy of the encounter and the clinamen have always been there throughout Althusser’s oeuvre, as a hidden or esoteric truth to be uncovered. As the clinamen poses as the philosophical basis for resistance, it also serves as a reminder to consider the breadth of Althusser’s thought as one of aleatory potential. By reading him differently — thinking the non-linear points of resonance and dissonance of the text against the narrative, dwelling on the cracks and symptoms of the narrative — one may discover a creative multiplicity of thought. As Pêcheux suggests, “the spaces of multifold resistance” and of revolutionary change are sites “where the unexpected

continually appears.”

### Notes

1. Antonio Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser,” *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory* (Middletown: Wesleyan, 1996) 54.
2. Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006) xxxv.
3. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter* 169.
4. Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A. E. Stallings (New York: Penguin, 2007) 66.
5. Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*.
6. Hanjo Berressem. “Incerto Tempore Incertisque Locis: The Logic of the Clinamen and the Birth of Physics,” *Mapping Michael Serres* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 57.
7. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Routledge, 1998) 53.
8. Berressem, “Incerto Tempore Incertisque Locis” 65.
9. *Philosophy of the Encounter* 174.
10. *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*. eds. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015)
11. Mikko Lahtinen, “Machiavelli Was Not a Republicanist, Or Monarchist: On Louis Althusser’s ‘Aleatory’ Interpretation of *The Prince*,” *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*. ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, Fabio Frosini, and Vittorio Morfino (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015) 403.
12. Lahtinen, “Machiavelli Was Not a Republicanist, Or Monarchist” 403
13. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 95.
14. Warren Montag. *Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013) 159.
15. Michel Pêcheux, “Dare to Think and Dare to Rebel! Ideology, Marxism, Resistance, Class Struggle” *Décalages* 1.4 (2014) 16.
16. Pêcheux, “Dare to Think” 18.
17. Michel Pêcheux, “Ideology: Stronghold or Paradoxical Space?” *Minnesota Review* 23 (1984) 161.
18. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 1996) 99.
19. Pêcheux, “Dare to Think” 17.
20. Montag, *Althusser and His Contemporaries* 16.
21. Louis Althusser, “Unfinished History’ in *Proletarian Science* by Dominique Lecourt” (London: NLB, 1977) 10.
22. Robert Linhart, *The Assembly Line* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 17.
23. “Dare to Think” 12.
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## Althusser's Empty Signifier: What is the Meaning of the Word "Interpellation"?

Warren Montag

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."<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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! »;<sup>3</sup> 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!'"<sup>4</sup> 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 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*).<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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*).”<sup>7</sup> 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*, *appeller*) 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 tranquillizers 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is 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, (Richmard, 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).



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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)."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> (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.<sup>13</sup> 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



## **Ideology as Individuation, Individuating Ideology**

**Jason Read**

In the recently published *Crowds and Party* Jodi Dean suggests that Althusser's famous dictum "Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" should be inverted to "Ideology interpellates subjects as individuals." Her attempt to set this thesis on its head, as it were, is framed towards grasping the centrality of the individual, and individuality, in contemporary ideology.<sup>1</sup> The necessary corollary of her statement would be that subjectivity, or subjects, are not necessarily individual, or that it must be necessary to posit a collective dimension of subjectivity as the other side of ideology. As much as Dean's statement functions as a pithy formulation of the centrality and problem of the individual in contemporary ideology and politics, it can also serve as a provocation in terms of examining the question of the individual and collectivity in Althusser's thought.

Dean's formulation has primarily heuristic or polemical function, underscoring the centrality of the individual, the imperative to be an individual in contemporary culture and ideology. Althusser's text does not have any commitment to the individual as something that would pre-exist ideology or ideological interpellation. As much as the term, "interpellates concrete individuals as subjects" would seem to place some kind of individual, perhaps biological, prior to ideological interpellation as a subject, Althusser has no real commitment to such a logic. This is in part because the linear succession is later undermined by Althusser's assertion that "individuals are always already subjects." The category of the subject is not only co-originary with that of the individual, but in some sense precedes it, as Althusser's discussion of the example of the infant makes clear. We are subjected prior to, and along with, becoming an individual. Moreover, it would be incorrect to suggest that Althusser is not aware of the ideological function of the individual, ideological interpellation is in some sense an individuation. To see oneself, or be seen, as a subject is to be something other than the sum total of one's class, national, and other position. Subjection and individuation are two sides of the same proverbial coin. Althusser's subject is partially indebted to Spinoza's idea of the fundamental error of seeing oneself as a "kingdom within in

kingdom,” and as in Spinoza it is both the originary position of human consciousness and the fundamental basis for its subjection. Althusser’s concept of ideology subjection is already, or always already, a concept of individuation. However, Althusser does not explicitly develop the question of the collective, either in terms of a collective consciousness opposed to ideology, class consciousness, or in terms of collectives such as nation (and even race) which are integral to the functioning of ideology. As Étienne Balibar argues with respect to the limits of Althusser’s formulation:

The basic imaginary mechanisms refer to the individual (this is what the notion of subject ultimately indicates: even a “collective subject” is no more than individuals who identify their subjective experiences), but the symbolic patterns (e.g., God, the law, the nation, the revolution, etc.) that “interpellate subjects” and cast their practices into institutional structures are collective.<sup>2</sup>

Or to put it more bluntly, subjects are always already individuals, and vice versa. Ideology is, in some sense, the mutually reinforcing notion of subjects and individuals.

The publication of the full text of *Sur la Reproduction* further underscores Althusser’s examination of the ideological dimension of the individual. In the posthumously published manuscript, Althusser moves beyond the essay’s focus on the school as the dominant ideological state apparatus to focus on the centrality of the legal/moral ideology. As Althusser argues, law as a system of obligation requires a supplement in order to guarantee subjection. There is no law compelling people to obey the law, and even if there were, such a law would require an additional law, and so on, in an infinite regress: “Law is a formal, systematized, non-contradictory, (tendentally) comprehensive system that cannot exist by itself.” Of course, obedience could always be guaranteed by the police, by repression, but this is not sufficient. Law, and legal obedience, functions by a supplement: “Legal ideology plus the little supplement of moral ideology.”<sup>3</sup> Althusser then sets up what could be considered a system of supplements; law is supplemented by legal ideology, legal ideology by moral ideology. All of these supplements, reinforce and intersect around the same idea of individuality, responsibility, and morality. What Althusser presents in *Sur la Reproduction* is in some sense a logic of supplementarity, in which each practice, from law, to legal ideology, to morality, requires an additional practice or discourse in order to sustain itself. While such an assertion is well in line with Althusser’s thesis that ideological state apparatuses function by ideology, in other words reproduce existing relations of production without repression or violence, it is at odds with his well-known, and perhaps post-1968 identification of the school, and education, as the dominant ideological state apparatus. In a manuscript written five years later, *Initiation à la Philosophie pour les Non-Philosophes*, Althusser returns to the question of legal ideology, only now it is framed less as supplement than an intermediary; the legal ideology



is the intermediary between state and morality. In this later text, it is precisely the legal ideology's ability to mediate between the state and the law, morality and the law, and religion and the law that makes it all pervasive.<sup>4</sup> Thus, to risk stitching together these two texts with one of Althusser's own concepts, we could say that it is less a matter of the way a particular ideology, or ideological apparatus, is determined as dominant, as in the case of education, and more of the overdetermination of ideology. The legal ideology's centrality is defined by its intersection with, as a supplement and an intermediary, other discourses, practices, and ideology. It is less the foundational ideologies that makes all others possible than the point where all other ideologies converge and transform each other. The practical mediations of the legal ideology are doubled by its theoretical mediations. The legal ideology of individual responsibility can easily shift from original sin to the work ethic, from Eden to the state of nature. On the terrain of ideas, the legal idea of the individual offers a reconciliation of the abstract and concrete, functioning in multiple discourses, from the quotidian to the cosmological, while simultaneously appearing to be grounded in concrete reality.

Althusser's description of legal ideology comes closer to what he calls a spontaneous philosophy, the spontaneity of which stems from the way it relates to existing social and political relations. What appears spontaneous, natural, as the fundamental starting point of consciousness, must be thought as the effect of practices and relations. As Pierre Macherey writes, "The spontaneous is never but spontaneous in scare quotes, that is to say a false spontaneity which is in reality the result of a manipulation, an artifice, an editing."<sup>5</sup> The very act of selling one's labor, of working in a capitalist enterprise, carries with it multiple ideological dimensions. First, and perhaps most importantly, is the fact that the wage itself appears as the "fair price" for labor, obscuring the division between necessary and surplus labor, the very fact of exploitation. Second, as Althusser indicates, the very division of labor, between workers and managers, appears as a purely technical division of labor, obscuring the capitalist relations of production of production. Everything in the labor relation, from the wage, to the integration of surveillance and control into the technological conditions of productions, exists to simultaneously depoliticize and individuate the labor relation.<sup>6</sup> What Marx identified as "freedom, equality, and Bentham," the spontaneous ideology of the sphere of circulation is produced not by some ideologist, not by a dominant class and their ruling ideas, but by the very quotidian structures of capitalist society. Dean writes, "Just as the commodity is a form for value, so is the individual a form for subjectivity."<sup>7</sup> The individual is not just an analogy of the commodity form; it is its consequence and corollary. Just as the isolation and separation of producers gives rise to the commodity fetish, to its appearance as possessing value, the isolation and separation of producers, of workers, produces the very image of individuals as isolated and responsible. Or, to push the point one step further, the more value appears to be an attribute of things and not a product of social relations, the more individuals can also see themselves as separate

from social relations. Commodity fetishism and legal individuation, the spontaneous ideologies of capital are produced by its very structures.

At this point a reading of Althusser, however symptomatic it might be, filling in blanks with concepts, comes very close to Evgeny Pashukanis' *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*, and perhaps more obliquely Lukács and Adorno, to traditions of Marxist thought that turned to the opening of *Capital*, to the commodity form, to elucidate a critical perspective on subjectivity in capitalism. In such a reading the opening pages of *Capital* are as much about the constitution of a particular kind of subject, abstract, isolated, and interchangeable, as they are of constituting a particular kind of object, understood as possessing value as an intrinsic property. As Pashukanis writes, bringing together the commodity form and the legal subject:

Just as in the commodity, the multiplicity of use-values natural to a product appears simple as the shell of value, and the concrete types of human labor are dissolved into abstract human labor as the creator of value, so also the concrete multiplicity of the relations between man and objects manifests itself as the abstract will of the owner. All concrete peculiarities which distinguish one representative of the *genus homo sapiens* from another dissolve into the abstraction of man in general, man as a legal subject.<sup>8</sup>

As it is well known, Althusser advised readers of *Capital* to postpone those sections on the commodity form, taking up the chapters on the labor process first, and one could argue that Althusser's own reading of commodity fetishism was forever postponed, delayed by the humanist residue that forever marred the concept, despite the fact that his own reflections on the spontaneous ideology of legal subject are closer to Marx's thoughts on fetishism, to the fetish of the subject, than a theory of "the ruling ideas" being the ideas of the "ruling class." This point of proximity is also a point of difference. The attempt to think the legal subject through the commodity, to think the individual through the commodity form, often leads to seeing the former as an expression of the latter, if not expressive causality. As Lukács writes, "at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back... to the riddle of commodity-structure."<sup>9</sup> Althusser's avoidance of the commodity form, his detour through the spontaneous ideology of the legal contract, retains the materiality of the commodity while dispensing with its expressive causality, understanding everything in capital as an effect of the commodity. In each case, the ruling ideas do not belong to the ruling class, but the ruling class structure. Ideology exists as Althusser argues, in practices and apparatuses, and these practices include, perhaps even in the last instance, the practices of selling one's labor power, of work. Ideology is simultaneously exterior to the scene of production, functioning as its condition and guarantee, but is also interior to it, as the latter forms the basis of a spontaneous

ideology of individuality, subjection, and moral responsibility.

As much as Althusser's positing of the legal and moral ideology makes it possible to understand the spontaneous nature of ideology, linking ideology to the practices and apparatuses of society, it also exposes ideology to an irreducible historical dimension. Far from being *omni-historical*, the legal and moral ideology is tied to the rise of law, and contracts, as the primary force of socialization. The theorization of the legal ideology opens up the question of not only the history of different ideologies, but also what Balibar refers to as the "history of different forms of individuality." This is in some sense internal to the legal ideology's overlapping senses of religion, law, and morality, which in their overdetermination suggest a history of their different articulations. There is also the question as to what extent forms of individuality exceed the legal subject of responsibility. Dean's recent book offers a sketch of the shift of the general parameters of individuality, focusing on the role of "communicative capitalism" as the new individual is defined less by legal responsibility than the capacity and demand to communicate and express itself. Communication replaces responsibility as the matrix of individuation. It is possible to argue that the different theorizations of the subject of ideology post-Althusser — Foucault's concept of subjection through power/knowledge, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of machinic enslavement and social subjection, as well as the recent turn to the *dividual* in the work of Maurizio Lazzarato and Gerald Raunig — are less philosophical objections to Althusser's concept of subjection than an attempt to update, tracing the different changes of capital, and its spontaneous ideology, from individuation in and through the legal contract to individuation through knowledge, including self-knowledge, and self-expression.<sup>10</sup> Any historicization, any critical discussion of the individual, must also clarify its relation to collectivity. Althusser eschews any real discussion of collectivity, obliquely mentioning its ideological function in the case of the nation, and the nationalist dimension of education, but avoiding the question of its affirmative dimension, of what could be called class consciousness. Althusser avoids any attempt to think collectivity through a concept of the universal, species being, or the human essence. These concepts are thrown out as ideological bathwater, but what remains, constituting something of the baby, is the idea of relations. This begins with Althusser's attempt to frame "relations of production" as something other than society, or intersubjectivity, to think then in their materiality. Materialism, even in this early stage, means recognizing that the relations that constitute the "relations of production" always exceed relations between individuals, are something more than intersubjectivity, comprising technological, legal, and ideological relations.<sup>11</sup> History is as much about conditions as it is the men who supposedly make it. This early insight is developed further, expounding, its ontological basis, in Althusser's work on aleatory materialism; as much as this work is identified with the figure of the event, of chance and transformation, it also asserts the primacy of relations to terms. As Althusser writes in the essay on aleatory materialism, "the whole that results from the 'taking-

hold' of the encounter does not precede the taking hold of its elements, but follows it..."<sup>12</sup> The whole, the mode of production, social formation, or even the individual, must be seen as not the cause, the origin, but the effect, of relations which not only precede it but exceed it. This is especially true when it comes to the individual, or subject, which does not perceive itself as historical, or caused as Spinoza would say, but instead sees itself as self-caused, as initiating its desires.

Following Balibar, it might be worthwhile to think of Althusser's thought as developing a notion of "transindividuality."<sup>13</sup> Transindividual refers to the sense that the individual is not primary, but is secondary to the relations that constitute it. These relations are not intersubjectivity, are not the relations of recognition or alienation that pass between individuals, but relations constitutive of individuality itself. In this way, it might be useful to think of Althusser's own theorizing about the legal ideology to be a tracing of the aspects of individuation, what Simondon called the "preindividual"; "responsibility" as a theme underlying religion, morality, and law, would then be preindividual in that it forms the inchoate basis for individuation. It is perhaps because responsibility functions less as the foundation for a particular discourse than as the intersection amongst multiple practices, that it constitutes a basis for individuation. It crosses the terrain of theology, morality, law, and politics, taking on different senses, different articulations in each. To borrow another term from Simondon the very theme of responsibility can be considered "metastable," as an inchoate set of themes and ideas that individuate, and are individuating, only in relation to specific interpellations. Reading Althusser as a thinker of transindividuality makes it possible to shift his account of ideology beyond the rigid Marxist opposition in which the individual is seen as nothing other than an effect of ideology and the collective, class belonging, or identity, is the truth. As much as the individual or subject is seen as the core of ideology in Althusser, this is not opposed to some class, or generic human essence, but to the specific practices and relations that constitute, and are obscured by, individuality. As Balibar writes, "The materialist critique of ideology, for its part, corresponds to the analysis of the real as relation, as a structure of practical relations."<sup>14</sup> Lastly, reading Althusser this way makes it possible to historicize his own remarks on ideology, to theorize different grounds for individuation than the legal and moral basis he critically examined in his courses and lectures. The overdetermination of ideology, its shifting and conflicting spontaneous ideologies, is always changing with developments of the productive forces and the class struggle, containing residues of past ideologies as well as emerging ideological structures. It is not a matter of being opposed to the individual, but of understanding its constitution in and through the practices and relations that exceed it. Grasping the different grounds for individuation is also a matter of grasping the different grounds of transformation, for seeing the aleatory difference that produces the conditions for revolution. All politics takes place in and through ideology, through its tactical polyvalence, and just as legal responsibility has historically been both the

grounds for subjection and subversion, as Marx's own chapter on the struggle over the ten-hour working day in *Capital* illustrates, the current imperatives and ideologies of communication have their elements of subjection and subversion. Althusser remarked that only a Spinozist or a Marxist would say that they were "in ideology" This could perhaps mean that the fundamental axiom underlying both philosophers is that it is only by understanding in what way one is determined — determined by historical conditions that exceeds one's intentions — that it becomes possible to act, to transform one's conditions. The aleatory and the overdetermined conditions of ideology may undermine any fantasy of the subject acting as a "kingdom within a kingdom," but it is only in grasping the ideological conditions of one's individuation that it becomes possible to not only change it, but change the underlying conditions as well.

### Notes

1. Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016) 79.
2. Etienne Balibar, "The Non-Contemporaneity of Althusser," *The Althusserian Legacy*, eds. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1993) 12.
3. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, (New York: Verso, 2014) 68.
4. Louis Althusser, *Initiation à la Philosophie Pour Les Non-Philosophes* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 2014) 357.
5. Pierre Macherey, "Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists," trans. Robin Mackay, *Parrhesia* 6 (2009) 16.
6. Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, pg. 42.
7. Dean, *Crowds and Party* 74
8. Evrny B. Pashukanis, *The General Theory of Law and Marxism*, trans. Barabara Einhorn (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2003) 113.
9. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT, 1971) 83.
10. For more on this point see Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality* (New York: Haymarket, 2016).
11. Louis Althusser, "The Object of Capital," *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*. trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (New York: Verso) 291.
12. Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006) 197.
13. For more on "transindividuality" see Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality*. The concept has also been developed with respect to Althusser by Vittorio Morfino, see Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser*, trans. and ed. Jason Smith (New York: Haymarket, 2015).
14. Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994) 97.

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

Imre Szeman

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.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.*"<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> This confirms Jameson’s point that “in process-oriented thought it is the relationship that comes first.”<sup>12</sup> 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 exploited<sup>13</sup>—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*.<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup>

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"<sup>17</sup>) defined by the coordinates of a disorienting development of new industrial, communicational, and transportation technologies and the "imaginative proximity of social revolution."<sup>18</sup> (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.<sup>19</sup> 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 . . .)."<sup>20</sup> Early in *Representing Capital*, Jameson parses this definition in this way: "a discourse without a subject (that is to say, without doxa or opinions)."<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.*”<sup>26</sup> 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.”<sup>27</sup> 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).<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

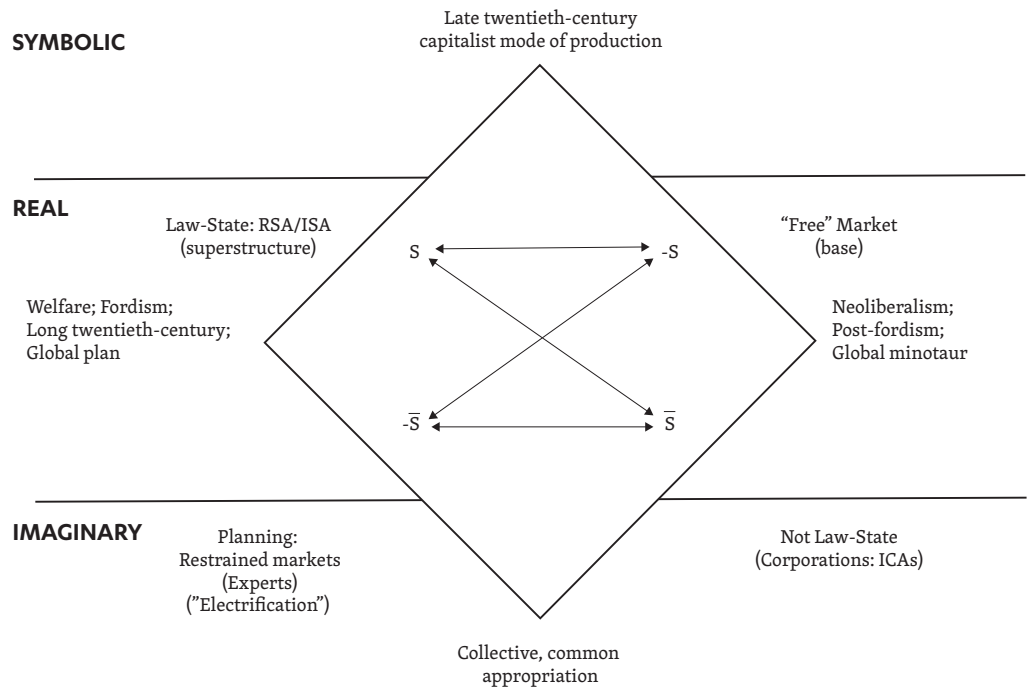


Figure 1

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."<sup>30</sup>

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."<sup>31</sup> 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.”<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup>

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,”<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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)<sup>38</sup> — 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.

Mitch Murray. "On Imagined and Science Fictional Futures." *Mediations* 30.2 (Summer 2017) 99-110.  
[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/Fictional\\_Futures](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/Fictional_Futures)

*Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*

Jens Beckert

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*Four Futures: Life after Capitalism*

Peter Frase

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## On Imagined and Science Fictional Futures

Mitch Murray

### Present-Imagined

William Gibson famously imagined "cyberspace" in *Neuromancer* (1984), his first novel, as a "consensual hallucination" that represents a global aggregate of multinational banking information, "rich fields of data" that Gibson's hacker-protagonist, Case, jubilantly pilfers for his employers.<sup>1</sup> But any excitement that came with the "bodiless exultation of cyberspace" dissipates in Gibson's latest, and markedly post-2008 novel, *The Peripheral* (2014).<sup>2</sup> This quasi-time travel narrative depicts a dystopian autumn of the capitalist system in which the future exploits the present: using a glut of new technologies, financial speculators in the future can "game the markets, here" in the present.<sup>3</sup> In classic time travel narratives à la Bradbury we are warned to not alter the past lest our actions change the future. In Gibson's novel, conversely, the future determines the present. Once the future takes what it wants from the past, the past splits off in an unknown direction, no longer a part of that future's timeline. In effect, the future in Gibson is imagined in spatial terms as an alternate universe. Just as *Neuromancer* gave narrative expression to the emergence of finance capital,

*The Peripheral* attempts to narrate the mind-boggling operations of contemporary finance by registering how its masters live, for all intents and purposes, in alternate universes to which the rest of us are barred. In what follows, I discuss Jens Beckert's *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* and Peter Frase's *Four Futures: Life after Capitalism*. Both make valuable contributions to our understanding of contemporary capitalism and, moreover, help to elaborate what I will call a science-fictional Marxist cultural studies.

A bleak understanding of *The Peripheral* is the idea that we have no future ahead of us because we do not determine the future through our actions; rather, the future determines us. Similarly, Beckert aims to show the extent to which the supposed future plays a role, not only in the present, but as a driving engine of all stages of the capitalist mode of production. Situating himself in Euro-American economic sociology, historical institutionalism, and political science of the past thirty years, Beckert argues that scholars of the capitalist economy in these disciplines have not sufficiently grasped the full importance of capitalism's temporal order, nor, in particular, the many ways in which the intersubjective and therefore social phenomena of daily life project the innumerable instantiations of futurity required to maintain an "endless striving to renew capitalism's principle of gain."<sup>4</sup> In this methodical volume, Beckert demonstrates how an orientation to the future permeates capitalism's five "building blocks" (money, credit, investment, innovation, and consumption) as well as its "instruments of imagination" (forecasting and economic theory).

To many *Mediations* readers, I expect, Beckert's *Imagined Futures* will most valuably offer something of a primer on the emergence of neoliberalism and the ascent of finance capital since the 1970s (how capitalism's building blocks are caught up in the ideological shift away from Keynesian economics) and the enabling theories, or narratives, that facilitated this transition. Beckert's explanations of some of the latter, in my opinion, make up some of the more interesting segments of the book. Take two dominant theories of contemporary economics: general equilibrium theory and rational expectations theory. Legitimizing itself through the language of Newtonian physics, general equilibrium theory claims to know not just the future, but *every conceivable* future. Each commodity, under whatever conditions — for example, "umbrellas supplied during a rain shower in Paris on May 18, 2064" — has its specific market. This faith — not blind because backed by a lot of data — in such predetermined futures is how equilibrium theory "extinguishes time": these models bring the future into the present because they "den[y] that anything may be unknown or unknowable."<sup>5</sup>

Readers are likely familiar in some way with rational expectations theory, which similarly believes that the future is easy to read: a "rational expectation" is "based on the observation of the statistical distribution of events in the past using all presently available information."<sup>6</sup> In this theory, "The 'true' model of the economy is assumed to be historically constant."<sup>7</sup> Rational expectations theory basically deploys the same



logic as the old diptych of Hanna-Barbera cartoons, *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*. Whether prehistorical or far future, the world reliably was and will be as it is now. According to rational expectations theory, discrepancies or shocks — like the crisis of 2007-2008 — “will eventually be overcome, and the system brought back to its predicted path.”<sup>8</sup> Since the 1970s, rational expectations were thus among the most significant ordinance deployed against Keynesian intervention, arguing that the free market was the best way to ensure “prices that correspond to an asset’s fundamental value.” That is, rational expectations theory reduces individual people, agencies, and government policy to “passive executors of rules based on a fully predetermined economic model.”<sup>9</sup>

Beckert argues early on that what distinguishes capitalism from previous modes of production is the “temporal disposition of economic actors toward the future, and the capability to fill this future with counterfactual economic imaginaries.”<sup>10</sup> In brief, and in a move unlikely to shock readers of *Mediations*, Beckert’s overarching claim is, “‘history matters,’ but the future matters just as much.”<sup>11</sup> More specifically, Beckert argues, capitalism depends on the “evocative overload of fictional expectations.”<sup>12</sup> Under conditions of “uncertainty,” control over the future depends on the most believable — or even just affectively resonant — fictions. These fictional expectations, or imagined futures (Beckert borrows his title, of course, from Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities*), are no less real or consequential just because they are imagined.

Yet, the difference between Jameson’s and Beckert’s insistences on history is that, when Beckert says the future matters, he means that the ways in which the future can be made contemporaneous with a given present are integral to the proliferation of that present. General equilibrium and rational expectations theories proclaim that the future is now and, moreover, here to stay. When Beckert talks about capitalism as “anchored in the unique human ability to imagine future states of the world that are different from the present,” he is talking about a variation on the theme of capitalist inequality, not qualitatively different futures.<sup>13</sup> Beckert understands that capitalism thrives on difference and that it

must be continually “animated” by novelty. It thus depends on the creativity and imaginary power of actors, which sometimes articulates itself as a resistance to capitalism itself. But in the end, none of that creativity ever sweeps away the principle of accumulation itself. Ultimately, imagined futures are all reincorporated into the inner logic of capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

It is impossible, we’ve so often been told, to imagine a future as difference except in the most superficial sense of innovative tweaks to the present.

Admittedly, it was this feeling of capitalism’s inevitability that posed the greatest

challenge to my reading. Beckert's epigraph to his concluding chapter, from Karen Russell's story "from Children's Reminiscences of Westward Migration," perhaps best captures this abyss: "And are you happy... with our life here? Have you stopped hoping for anything better?" But to be clear and fair, Beckert is making a disciplinary intervention in economic sociology, not regurgitating neoliberal slogans about making the future. Indeed, he concludes the book with his diagnosis of the "demonic" enclosure of human creativity by capitalist modernity.<sup>15</sup> Not from a lack of imagination on Beckert's part, the gauntlet generously thrown down in *Imagined Futures*, which I hope to have taken up in the same spirit, is a challenge to cross a disciplinary rift (I speak from my own niche in literary criticism). Beckert extends some much-appreciated bridges to those in literary fields, asserting that the narrative dimensions of economic forecasts, innovations and breakthroughs, projected earnings, and so on, all contribute to capitalism's reservation of the future and, therefore, to its grip on the present.

In an attempt to construct further bridges across the disciplinary rifts between sociologists and literary critics — especially those in science fiction studies — reading Beckert alongside Peter Frase's little book of futures becomes most productive. Beckert comprehensively charts the future's colonization of the present. Yet, surely all futures, capitalist or otherwise, must follow Beckert's logic and invoke imaginaries, or narratives, with which the present can stabilize itself. Alternate modes of production like socialism and communism, then, are not written out of the future, but rather stand as antagonistic figures: unimagined futures that are for all that not unimaginable.

### **Not-Unimaginable**

Beckert goes to some lengths to tell his sociologist audience that literary studies has a lot to offer their discipline. In a historical gloss, he suggests that the uncertainty, and hence openness, of the future can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation and the seizing of futurity from religious predetermination. Enlightenment theories of progress likewise play their role. But, more interestingly, he also links major changes in human cognition and its apprehension of the future back to the science fiction — and time travel narratives in particular — of H. G. Wells and Edward Bellamy. For Beckert, science fiction is analogous to fictional expectations under capitalism; the former has a compelling explanatory power for how capitalist narratives act on present ideas of what will be. Beckert does not cite scholarship in science fiction studies — and that's okay since his own goals seem achievable by simply likening finance to science fiction — but Frase offers an attempt to connect the study of science fiction and popular culture to the praxis of imagining post-capitalist futures.

To proceed in the spirit of Frase's *Four Futures*, I want to distinguish science fiction from futurology, a genre of prognostication. Such prophesying would deliver us right back to the kind of predeterminations Beckert maintains were undone by the Reformation and Enlightenment, except with capital as God. Indeed, one of Beckert's

great insights is that capitalism relies on just such prognostications of future growth, technological achievement, development, modernization, happiness, fairness, and so on. Capitalism's imagined futures are conditional, but they must appear in the indicative mood to be viable. In Beckert's account, that is, one of the fundamental problems with fictional expectations is that their fictions are understood as oracular even though they very well might not pan out. In his contribution to Verso's *Jacobin* series, Frase — himself a *Jacobin* editorial board member — upholds the magazine's commitment to understanding popular culture as the expression of a kind of socialist unconscious. Moreover, he understands the risk of conflating science fiction with mere futurological prognostications.<sup>16</sup> Rather, Frase's futures explore the many possibilities that might sprout from the concrete conditions of the present.

To my mind, one of the most valuable contributions of Beckert's book is his notion of "expectation overload" and the prospects this term has for narrativizing the future rather than accepting it as scripted, as certain genres of economics would have it. Frase's slim and approachable volume picks up and runs with the implications of Beckert's thinking on fictional futures. In a move that mirrors literature of the late nineteenth century as well as much contemporary literature, Frase supplements the descriptive practices of sociology — its representation or *Darstellung* — with the speculative or figurative practice of the genre of science fiction — its *Vorstellung*, or picture-thinking.<sup>17</sup> The task of sociology, according to Frase, is not just to show the world as it is but to tell how it might be otherwise by drawing out its figurations of better futures. That is, we might consider Beckert's and Frase's books as versions of realist and science fictional sociology, respectively.

Frase himself describes his method as "social science fiction," part description of the world that already is (sociology) and part speculation on worlds that might be (science fiction). *Four Futures* is organized according to what Frase considers the most pressing double-edged crisis of the present: that of climate change and the political struggles over automation. This crisis is worsened by the fact that the interests of capitalism are not the interests of common sense sustainability and by the fact that our technologies far outpace our will to use them for the common good. In addition, this twin dilemma arises from two major contradictions: between abundance (the possibilities for a future without work, and a *Star Trek*-like replication of necessities and goods via technologies like 3D printing) and scarcity (the imminent catastrophes of climate change and their sure depletion of natural resources) and between hierarchy and equality. If automation and climate change appear sometimes as major, and other times as minor characters throughout Frase's narrative, he is at least interested in keeping them *both* on the table in any discussion of how the world can be made better.

Frase invokes an old and well-known crossroads to organize his book around "two socialisms and two barbarisms": communism (equality/abundance), socialism (equality/scarcity), on the one hand, and rentism (abundance/hierarchy) and exterminism (scarcity/hierarchy) on the other.<sup>18</sup> In Frase's presentation, we move

first through communism, rentism, socialism, and then exterminism, a Cold War-era term he borrows from E. P. Thompson to name “these characteristics of a society — expressed, in varying degrees, within its economy, its polity, and its ideology — which thrust it in a direction whose outcome must be the extermination of multitudes.”<sup>19</sup> Frase encounters a dilemma akin to that of Borges’s narrator upon encountering the Aleph, that of the failure of linear language to communicate the experience of the simultaneous. It might seem that Frase’s book tends toward an apocalyptic future, but it is important to remember that elements of *all four* futures manifest in the present and that there remain options to organize around non-extremist futures (as I hope to bear out here, this remains a key animus of Marxist literary and cultural studies).

Frase’s post-capitalist barbarisms hinge on the elimination of labor. In a rentist future, for example, we see inequality widen in a world “based on the extraction of rents rather than the accumulation of capital through production.”<sup>20</sup> This tendency is already clearly present in contemporary capitalism, and indeed Frase traces it further back to the enclosure of the commons after medieval times. In a fully automated future where goods can be replicated via 3-D printers, “Who owns the robots... owns the world.”<sup>21</sup> Enclosure thus spreads further into the realm of intellectual property and, moreover, to “the copying of patterns”: “Those who control the most copyrights and patents become the new ruling class.”<sup>22</sup> In this rentist model, the key economic problem becomes how to ensure that everyone has enough money to afford the rental fees. The problem, in turn, becomes its own solution: “even capitalist self-interest will require some redistribution of wealth downward in order to support demand.”<sup>23</sup> Frase hinges this chapter on the idea that this need will then be satisfied by a universal basic income and an eventual slide into communism.

While it’s not 100 percent clear how climate change factors into this rentist future, we can at least know that sustainability is not one of its main interests. Referring to *Frankenstein*, Frase suggests that socialism would be one way to “better love our monsters,” that is, to better harness our technological advances and become conscientious shapers of society along ecologically sustainable lines.<sup>24</sup> Rather than abandoning our creations like Frankenstein did, we can embrace automation where it makes sense to do so (robot bees, for instance, could pollinate plants and mitigate human damage to the natural world rather than being used for military surveillance). Additionally, the proliferation of new production technologies in this socialist thought experiment mean that socialists will not need to plan production, but rather regulate consumption. Frase suggests the universal basic income again, retooled as “the ration card that gives you access to your share of all that is scarce in the world” with the pricing mechanism of “the market... to protect against overuse.”<sup>25</sup> Socialism, in Frase’s future, thus separates markets from capitalism to even out “the distribution of the means of payment,” making a “world of freedom” out of a “world of limits.”<sup>26</sup>

One would like to see “perfect automation” deliver a world of freedom without limits, but a further possibility is a state in which, first, human labor can be

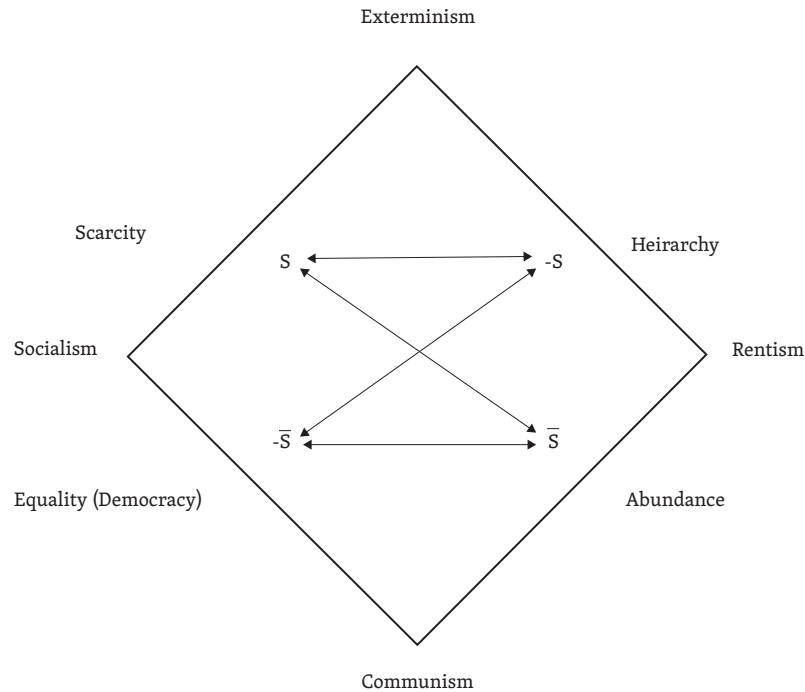
exterminated.<sup>27</sup> In this scenario, once “the masses are dangerous but no longer a working class, and hence of no value to the rulers,” the masses themselves can simply be murdered in bulk.<sup>28</sup> This in fact is not far off from what happens in *The Peripheral*. Throughout the mid-twenty-first century, a confluence of crises — notably climate-related — kill off 80% of the human population. Those left alive are the super-rich, those with the adequate wealth and resources to survive. Much like one tendency in contemporary science fiction, Frase concludes his book with apocalypse. Indeed, one cannot read this exterminist future without acknowledging Donald Trump’s presidency: rather than mere possibility, the present already terrifyingly resembles exterminism. For instance, Trump’s moves to ban refugees’ entry to the US puts lives at risk, and the GOP’s intention to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act would leave millions unable to afford health insurance. And Trump’s almost immediate approval of two fossil fuel pipelines signals his commitment to ignore climate change, the effects of which will be disproportionately meted out on the poor. Frase’s exterminism and Trump’s administration call to my mind William Davies’ provocative term “punitive neoliberalism,” under which “economic dependency and moral failure become entangled in the form of debt, producing a melancholic condition in which governments and societies unleash hatred and violence upon members of their own populations.”<sup>29</sup>

Frase, however, is nothing if not a utopian in the Jamesonian sense. He consistently makes the effort to find expressions of utopia in even the worst situations. For this reason, exterminism must not be understood as apocalypse, even if Frase does envision it as a sort of *Terminator* scenario in which the automation that might have led to life without work leads instead to mass executions. Rather, Frase speculates, once the excess population has been dispensed with the rich can “settle into a life of equality and abundance — in other words, into communism.”<sup>30</sup> That is, I would add, if they haven’t today already achieved a communism of the 1%. It goes without saying that we should not cheer for this; that this is not a proposal. Far from it, it is instead an insistence on the undying tendency of everything toward utopia.

Considering the resonances exterminism strikes with the present, it would be better to follow Raymond Williams and think in terms of dominant, residual, and emergent futures. In this light, *Four Futures* compels us to persevere in the spirit of Frase’s work, to understand the exterminist dystopia of the present with the goal of extracting resources to build futures that could, should, and must be otherwise.

Frase’s proliferation of futures (the magic number here being four) invokes A. J. Greimas’s semiotic rectangle, famously adapted and employed by Jameson, for whom four is the dialectically superior number (three always calling to mind some happy synthesis of opposites). Considering *Jacobin*’s socialist mission, it would be a tempting to accept socialism as a third term: not capitalism, but not communism either, and hence more palatable. Frase in fact delivers the antinomies needed to produce a Greimasian semiotic rectangle (hierarchy/equality and scarcity/abundance), which

would appear as follows:



**Figure 1. Four Futures' Futures**

Jameson understands the semiotic square as an antidote to ideological closure, the bottommost (neutral) term becoming a productive site to force the appearance of the radically new. In Frase's thought experiment, he ends up becoming more Marxist than he professes (presumably — not wanting to scare off potential converts to the Left — this understatement is strategic). The contradictions Frase puts into play do not just entertain, but demand, his fourth term: communism. Though it is the first future in Frase's presentation, it is a communist future that takes the position of prime interest in our Greimasian square and toward which these three other futures tend.

Frase likens socialism at one point to the ecotopian future of *Pacific Edge* (1990), the third novel in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Californias* trilogy, an experiment — like the *Mars* trilogy after it and like Frase's own — in proliferating futures. Importantly, the sequence of Robinson's novels also enacts a similar reversal to the one I'm enacting on Frase's book: Robinson begins with the post-apocalyptic *The Wild Shore* (1984), which is followed by the dystopia of *The Gold Coast* (1988), and then ends the trilogy with the socialism of *Pacific Edge*. Indeed, Robinson's novels demonstrate the importance of such narrative presentations. Since in Frase's rentist and exterminist futures, the outcome is ultimately communism, and since socialism — as Marx had it — is the transitional state between capitalism and communism, Frase's book can be understood

as three futures' tendency toward a fourth. Each of Frase's futures manifest in the present, but the implicit narrative drawn out here is deeply communist.

According to our square, communism would usher in both a material abundance enabled by the technological developments of the twenty-first century and their equitable distribution. As in his rentism and socialism chapters, Frase stakes a lot on a universal basic income, along with a compelling understanding of the welfare state as the "decommodification" of labor. The transition to communism is enabled by phasing out undesirable work through automation. Workers, that is, won't have to stoop to certain menial labor if they have a basic income that lets them get by without that labor. Eventually, since automation can replace waged work in the production of most necessities, GDP and basic income would fall. Frase maintains that such a drop in GDP would not signal a crisis but rather a lower cost of living.<sup>31</sup> Frase isn't foolish enough to believe that everyone will get along — or that things will be equal — under communism. Instead, "reputational economies" — think of the "ambiguous utopia" of Ursula K. Le Guin's masterwork, *The Dispossessed* (1974) — will establish hierarchies of all sorts.<sup>32</sup> But at least the struggles and inequalities would no longer be those between wage workers and capitalists. Frase himself invokes the well known communist slogan "From each according to his means, to each according to his needs."<sup>33</sup> Once we accept this as a general guiding definition, equality gets thrown out the window, and this is why, in the figure above, I prefer to substitute "equality" with "democracy."<sup>34</sup>

The audiences, and reading experiences, of these two books could not be more different. While Beckert helps us understand that the rise of neoliberalism in the past forty years was likewise the success of its constitutive narratives, Frase uses science fiction narratives to think from the perspective of what Phillip E. Wegner calls Marxism's "permanent scandal," namely "the consciousness of the proletariat and revolution, Utopia and love, or communism."<sup>35</sup> Beckert explains how imagined futures — "consensual hallucinations" — are geared toward capitalism's perpetuation, to the making real of its own fictions. But even such futures, we must acknowledge, are social and therefore collective enterprises. By opening up *the* future to *multiple* radically different futures, Frase teaches us that not all collectives need be organized around capitalist progress. Futures for the common good, while unimagined, are not unimaginable — a point that must be tirelessly reiterated as a counterpoint to actually existing exterminism. To invoke contemporary fiction once more, we see an increased interest in science fiction when authors like Junot Díaz, Ruth Ozeki, or Charles Yu "do" genre in otherwise realist narratives. In this sense, the speculative or figurative dimension of science fiction is well ahead of much theoretical praxis. Frase's "social science fiction" is a timely nudge to scholars of properly Marxist literary and cultural studies to join our colleagues in literature and start thinking science fictionally.

### Notes

1. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 2000) 5.
2. Gibson, *Neuromancer* 6. See also Fredric Jameson's essay on *Neuromancer* and financialization, "A Global Neuromancer." *The Ancients and the Postmoderns: On the Historicity of Forms* (London: Verso, 2014) 221-237.
3. William Gibson, *The Peripheral* (New York: Putnam, 2014) 192.
4. Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) 285.
5. Beckert, *Imagined Futures* 38.
6. *Imagined Futures* 39.
7. *Imagined Futures* 39.
8. *Imagined Futures* 40.
9. *Imagined Futures* 40.
10. *Imagined Futures* 2.
11. *Imagined Futures* 6.
12. *Imagined Futures* 13.
13. *Imagined Futures* 2.
14. *Imagined Futures* 285.
15. *Imagined Futures* 285.
16. See [https://www.versobooks.com/series\\_collections/112-jacobin](https://www.versobooks.com/series_collections/112-jacobin) for a list of titles in the *Jacobin* series.
17. Fredric Jameson devotes significant space to a discussion of *Vorstellung* in Hegel's thinking in *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Verso, 2010) 116-129.
18. Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2016) 27.
19. Frase, *Four Futures* 125.
20. *Four Futures* 71.
21. *Four Futures* 70.
22. *Four Futures* 71.
23. *Four Futures* 80.
24. *Four Futures* 106.
25. *Four Futures* 113.
26. *Four Futures* 118.
27. *Four Futures* 29.
28. *Four Futures* 124.
29. William Davies, "The New Neoliberalism," *New Left Review* 101 (2016) 130. Davies periodizes three stages of neoliberalism: combative (1979-1989), normative (1989-2008), and punitive (2008-?).
30. *Four Futures* 149.
31. *Four Futures* 57.
32. *Four Futures* 67.
33. Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 531
34. I am thinking of Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012).



Democracy, in Badiou, always sits between scare quotes: it refers to “the ‘democracy’ of the executives of Capital’s power” (59). When Badiou himself says democracy, he means “popular dictatorship” or “mass democracy” — which “imposes on everything outside it the dictatorship of its decisions *as if they were those of a general will*” or “*a truth*” (60) — if not communism itself.

35. Phillip E. Wegner, *Periodizing Jameson: Dialectics, The University, and the Desire for Narrative* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2014), 138.



Davis Smith-Brecheisen. "The Limits of Art." *Mediations* 30.2 (Summer 2017) 111-122.  
www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/Limits

*Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture*

Annie McClanahan

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## The Limits of Art

Davis Smith-Brecheisen

Annie McClanahan's *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* makes a convincing case that in a post-2008 world, debt, and not credit, is "the defining feature of economic life" (1). The book, which takes its title from the French *mortgage*, begins with the argument that while debt and credit entail each other, there is a crucial difference between the two. The difference matters more than ever, she argues, because the dead pledge brings us "face-to-face with everything that is strange and violent about the most taken-for-granted aspects of our economic system: investments and liabilities, owing and ownership, repayment and default" (2). What makes the dead pledge so horrifying — horror features prominently in McClanahan's account of how debt circulates culturally — is that it has a way of exhuming the contradictions of credit, in particular its expansion during the 1970s. Building on recent scholarship on debt, sociality, and subjectivity from David Graeber, Mauricio Lazzarato, and Richard Dienst, among others, McClanahan contends that in a moment when "the smooth circulation of credit has demonstrated its ability to stall out," we must "take stock of an entirely new relationship between economic and cultural form" (4). The difference between debt and credit is crucial, then, because debt, the dead pledge, marks an interruption in the promise of the credit economy, giving form to the contradictions deferred in the promise of credit. As McClanahan describes it: "If credit is the economic form of the boom time... debt — as a figure for credit that is unpaid, defaulted, foreclosed, bankrupted, written off, unredeemed — is the economic form of crisis" (15). This economic trajectory finds a parallel shift in cultural forms. As the contradictions of credit are reanimated as crisis in the form of debt, "the standard modes for representing credit and debt have likewise been

altered” (4). *Dead Pledges* tells this story in two parts. Part One of the book focuses on subjectivity — for example, on the relationship between persons and credit scoring — and Part Two focuses on property — the social form that “most explicitly mediates our relationship to debt” (16).

In telling this history of credit and debt, of expansion and crisis, McClanahan is most interested in the particular ways in which “cultural expression” mediates crisis through “unresolved and sometimes even contradictory responses” (16) to debt while at the same time mediating lived experience of debt and its social forms. Debt, in this account, is a “ubiquitous, yet elusive social form” most clearly understood by “looking at how our culture has sought to represent it” (2). And cultural forms cast social and economic thought in a new light here, showing its limits and reimagining alternative social and economic forms. McClanahan moves deftly from the popular — Sam Rami’s film, *Drag Me to Hell* and Jonathan Dee’s novel, *The Privileges* — to the experimental — Timothy Donnelly’s book of poetry, *The Cloud Corporation* — formulating an argument that traces the aesthetic and political contours of contemporary debt from foreclosure and credit scoring to microeconomic theory and anti-eviction activism in order to provide “an aesthetics of contemporary indebtedness as well as an account of the theoretical and political consequences of debt: how it affects our ideas of personhood and moral character; how it changes our understanding of rationality and responsibility; how it transforms our relationship to property and possession” (2).

*Dead Pledges* is remarkable for its economic history, drawing on thinkers from Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and bringing this history of economic thought to bear on the policies and arguments of Alan Greenspan, Ben Bernanke, and Robert Shiller, among others. For its historical framing of the contemporary economic crisis alone, *Dead Pledges* marks an important intervention into contemporary debates about cultural forms and the economy. For those working at the intersection of contemporary literature and economics it is a must-read. In its treatment of the novel, film, or photography, however, *Dead Pledges* does more to amplify current literary debates than directly address them.

McClanahan’s work lives at the intersection of the New Historicism and Marxist literary theory — she owes as much to Mary Poovey and Deidre Lynch, for example, as she does to Fredric Jameson. The New Historicism, argues McClanahan, was the critical mode for the “boom period for contemporary credit” (3), indexing a cultural and economic milieu characterized by credit expansion. “The aesthetic forms surveyed” in *Dead Pledges*, she suggests, differ insofar as they “are the cultural expression” of the period in which “no one can pay” (15). But, even as McClanahan argues that “an entirely new relationship between economic and cultural form” is needed in a moment where “credit has demonstrated its ability to stall out,” *Dead Pledges* turns to New Historicism as a model to describe its own “relation between the credit economy and culture” (3). “Terminal crisis,” writes McClanahan, is “both the ambient context and the manifest content of cultural production, social experience, and economic

life in the United States” (15). The novels in particular, but also photography, “cannot help registering” its logic (33). At the same time, *Dead Pledges* also borrows heavily from a Marxist tradition that runs from Louis Althusser through Jameson. Here, McClanahan’s work dwells on moments of textual interruption and fissure. In this register, what texts do best is fail — texts do not imagine solutions, she writes, but instead “offer their own unresolved and overdetermined response to the unique social and economic contradictions of debt” (16). Toggling between New Historicism and symptomatic reading, *Dead Pledges* turns its historical descriptions into a means of registering a particular kind of failure, one that suggests that a text’s meaning hinges foremost on its ability (or inability) to register the economic and political landscape of contemporary credit crisis.

One way to describe *Dead Pledges* is to say that in McClanahan’s work we get the most compelling aspect of the New Historicism — its careful attention to the ways economic logic circulates in different cultural forms — but also (or because) this history is so convincing, we also see the New Historicism’s greatest limitation — it does not really distinguish between what the novel, or art, means and what other cultural forms do. Here, *Dead Pledges* intensifies debates over two related interpretive problems about, on one hand, the status of art in relation to economic discourses and, on the other, about what we are interpreting when we do political interpretation.

We can begin to get a concise view of the commitment to the New Historicism that runs throughout *Dead Pledges* by looking at its engagement with photography, where documentary photography — foreclosure photographs from *Newsweek* and *Time* — is treated as having the same relation to debt as art photography — John Francis Peters’ *Foreclosed* and Todd Hido’s *Foreclosed Homes*. McClanahan makes the uncontroversial point that both genres of photography share some relationship to debt and foreclosure insofar as the scenes depicted are of foreclosure, but she also never really addresses the fact that the photographs featured in *Newsweek* and *Time* were taken to document or “capture” unfolding events, while Peters’ and Hido’s carefully composed images have a clear aesthetic ambition. That is, art photography of foreclosed homes is composed in a way that while it bears an indexical relationship to the market that produced those foreclosed homes — they are photographs of foreclosure — the meaning of those photographs is irreducible to the market they represent because they emphasize their composition as something made by the artist rather than captured by him. McClanahan begins to suggest this, writing, Hido’s *Foreclosed Homes* are “almost reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s color field paintings, attuned to the rectangular planes of empty walls and floors, surfaces that appear simultaneously flat and deep, at once luminous and muted” (123). In one sense, then, McClanahan describes these photographs in terms of their relationship to art and notes the formal differences from documentary photography. In another sense, however, she imagines they derive their meaning from their representation of the “devaluation of domestic commodities” (125) and the ways each “defamiliarizes domestic space” (127) in much the same way the

“photographic image of forced eviction” registers “dispossession, fear, and domestic precarity” (121). Noting the difference between the two modes of photography, then, she just as quickly abrogates them by arguing that what gives both their meaning is their political content. In other words, though she points to some difference between the genres of photography, for her, art photography is imagined as a technology for documenting a particular instance of class violence in the same way documentary photography is. Which isn’t to say the art photography is not about class violence; it surely is (or can be). But while both documentary photography and art photography are images of foreclosed homes, art photography turns a relationship between the photograph and capital — debt and the police — into a relationship between the photograph and aesthetic ambition. Art photography is about class violence by first asserting its form as a photograph.

If this is putting a rather complicated history of photography too briefly, it does so to demonstrate the interpretive horizon of the New Historicism and with the hope that we can turn, by way of example, to two related questions that will help explain why *Dead Pledges* amplifies current literary debates. The first is this: Why should a novel be judged based on its interest in the economic at all rather than, say, its merit as art? Secondly, why is it that the best a novel can hope to do is fail? This question is, in some ways, a reframing of the first point on evaluative grounds: Why should we evaluate a novel, whether or not it succeeds or fails, on primarily political, rather than on aesthetic grounds?

To highlight what I mean, I would like to turn to one of the strongest readings in *Dead Pledges*, its treatment of Martha McPhee’s *Dear Money*. McPhee’s *Dear Money* is offered as an example of what McClanahan calls a “credit-crisis novel” — the realist novel’s post-2008 inheritor. Like the realist novel, which McClanahan understands to codify and index the logic of credit, the post credit-crisis novel, indexes the logic of debt — its failed promises and discourses of personal responsibility that constellate that failure. All of which is on display in *Dear Money*. It is a Pygmalion story — can a handsome trader convert a merely successful novelist, India Palmer, into a more successful (i.e., productive) trader? The novel, thrusting Palmer into a volatile real estate market, tells two stories. One is the personal tale of Palmer’s transformation and the other is about the depths of the “irrational speculative economy of the stock market” (34). It tells the story, then, of the personal and economic vicissitudes of the market and, as McClanahan notes, draws liberally from its Gilded Age forbearers, notably Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* and Frank Norris’s *The Pit*.

As the financial crisis of 2008 ushered in our current Gilded Age, the nation’s economists and novelists alike began searching for an explanation. Who was to blame? The question, McClanahan rightly argues, is the wrong one, pinning the failures on “greed and folly” (22). The behavioralist economists like Robert Shiller subjectivized the economy, framing a systemic market failure in terms of individual feelings — exuberance and irrationality. Novelists were no different. Like Henry Paulson or

Robert Shiller, these novelists placed plenty of blame on the moral failings of the American consumer instead of the American lender. McClanahan argues that in some instances, the “credit-crisis novel” — novels such as Sam Lypsyte’s *The Ask* and Jess Walters’s *Financial Lives of Poets* — simply repeat the faulty logic of behavioralist economists who understood the crash as “a failure of moral character” (23). Other novelists, however, “fail” more productively by “complicat[ing]” their apparent “embrace of economic ideology” (32). That is, unlike their lesser contemporaries and economic counterparts, these novels — McPhee’s *Dear Money* and Dee’s *The Privileges* — “also reveal what may be most interesting about the behavioralist treatment of the economic subject” and “indicate a deep anxiety about the consequences of this reduction” (33) of the individual to the aggregate. In this reading, while the moral failings of the protagonist in *The Financial Lives of Poets* are mere moral failings, the failings of India Palmer in *Dear Money* represent the failings of behavioralism to explain the crash.

The difference is between a novel that fails because it embodies the logic of behavioralism and a novel that in its failure registers the limits of a particular economic logic. McClanahan notes how, “*Dear Money* often figures the market as a kind of sublime force — the ‘bracing chasm’ whose vastness surpasses the individual and whose power can neither be understood nor controlled” (35). At the same time, the novel hews closely to the narrative first person, insisting “that individual economic actors control and shape the market” (35). Within the interpretive horizon of *Dead Pledges*, “the novel embraces the individual particularity of the first-person voice” primarily “as a way to humanize the economic crisis” (40). Negotiating (or, more accurately, by failing to negotiate) between the two modes of representing a market relation, the novel comes to embody both the logic and limitations of behavioralism. That is, it “cannot convert this into explanation of the relationship” between the individual and economies of any kind of scale. Like the behavioral economist Shiller, the novel comes up short when it is time to “explain why everyone became so individually irrational about houses all at the same time” (40). The novel, in other words, fails for the same reasons the behavioral economists fail. And what, in this account, makes *Dear Money* a better novel than either *The Ask* or *The Financial Lives of Poets* is that rather than blithely avowing Henry Paulson’s moralistic claim that “any homeowner who can afford his mortgage payment but chooses to walk away from an underwater property is simply a speculator,” McPhee’s novel is more “ambivalent” (24).

The difference between the merely moral “credit-crisis novel” — *The Financial Lives of Poets* — and the politically instructive “credit-crisis novel” — *Dear Money* — is that one fails, politically speaking, better than other. McClanahan likes *Dear Money* better than *Financial Lives* because she understands it to have a more complicated or ambivalent relationship to capital. So, where the *The Financial Lives of Poets* fails because, like the former Treasury Secretary, it is not thinking hard enough

about the problem of the relation between the private lives of individual actors and market failures, *Dear Money* fails like the Nobel Prize winning economist, because it simply cannot explain market failure by describing the ways the market appeals to, in Shiller's words, "our heart's deepest desire, to own property" (41). The terms of failure or success are, in other words, purely economic. McClanahan does say that *Dear Money* positions itself within "a long tradition of American realist fiction about the economy," (32) and thus "complicates" its "embrace of economic ideology" (32), but this literary historical point is made too quickly and bears little analytical weight in her reading of the novel. What matters more in her analysis is how the novel, using first-person narration, "follows microeconomics in converting a theory of individual consumption into an account of social totality" (38). Which is to say, what matters more than establishing continuity between the novel and its literary sources — for example, the crucial role the first-person plays in overturning the logic of Naturalism (rather than the role it plays in embracing economism) — is establishing continuity between literary representation and economic thought. So, when McClanahan notes that *Dear Money* "vacillates uneasily between naturalist tropes that characterize the economy as an implacably material force of nature and a rather different language of dreams and imagination," (35) she means to argue that this movement between "material force" and "imagination" affirms the novel's self-avowed continuity between literary imagination and "the 'real-world' imagination of speculative finance" (36). *Dead Pledges* here conflates, not incidentally, market imagination and literary representation by dissolving the distinction between the description of markets by economists and how the novel represents that description. But if the basis for a reading is the novel's expression of the economic structures, Jess Walter is surely no less committed to the continuity between literary and speculative imaginations in *The Financial Lives of Poets* when he writes, "It's all connected, these crises... they are interrelated systems, reliant upon one another, broken, fucked up, ruined systems" (23). On this view, authors — whether McPhee or Walter — and economists — whether Shiller or Paulson — have searched for answers to "these crises" and come up with the same vague explanation, they are "interrelated" and "fucked up."

More important (for now) than the vague economic and literary explanations offered by economists and novelists is the fact that in McClanahan's account, the ground for aesthetic judgment is displaced into political and economic judgements. That is, McClanahan prefers *Dear Money* to *The Financial Lives of Poets* because it has a more politically attractive relation to a particular economic logic and not primarily because it has a more attractive set of literary historical or formal relationships. McClanahan does gesture toward the importance of literary form when she notes in passing that these novels are not "economic treatises or op-eds" (32) and that *Dear Money* is a novel with "a strong awareness of its literary history" (34). But how the novel's relationship to that history might "suggest an uncertainty" about the



behavioralist “belief that the way to understand systems is to look at individuals” (24) is made by an appeal to economic history — that is, what makes the first person narration meaningful or legible as a formal premise is its imbrication with the market logic of behavioralism. In McClanahan’s analysis, when *Dear Money* resorts to Naturalist imagery it does so because it “cannot find another way to describe” (41) the credit crisis. The language of failure here notwithstanding, her point is that the novel derives its significance from its continuity with the economic logic of the market. Rather than describing the ways, for example, that first-person narration is at once a citation and reversal of writers like Norris and Wharton, *Dead Pledges* treats that formal choice as a way of affirming an economic history that runs from Shiller back to Paul Volcker. To be sure, this historical, diagnostic function is deftly handled here and throughout *Dead Pledges*. But, despite, or perhaps because of, these insights about how new modes of debt circulation likewise circulate in the novel, *Dead Pledges* ultimately treats the novel as yet another discursive space within the matrix of capitalist markets and institutions. And as mere discourse, the ontology of the novel, as a work of art, is dissolved.

While we might argue that one novel is better than the other or that one is more politically attractive than the other from the standpoint of the Left, those claims would hinge on a set of formal relations and choices. There is an argument to be made, in other words, that *Dear Money* is a better novel than *The Financial Lives of Poets* (I think it is) but the grounds of that argument are aesthetic. If the novel mediates a set of market relations to represent something like what *Dead Pledges* calls an “aesthetics of contemporary indebtedness” it does so by not only thematizing or embodying that “elusive social form,” but by asserting its ontological difference from it. To reiterate the point above, when McClanahan writes that *Dear Money* stages its own inadequacy as a novel to represent the “bracing chasm” that characterizes something like a market sublime, she highlights the novel’s own “self-abolishing” position where fiction becomes “continuous with the ‘real-world’ imagination of speculative finance” (36). In the world of the novel, this is no doubt the case, as the author, India Palmer, unapologetically accepts the challenge to become a trader. What the novel abolishes is both the novelist — whose self-abolishment is an unwinding of the Pygmalion narrative — and, in McClanahan’s view, the novel itself, which becomes “inadequate” to the task of representing the market. In her view, the novel’s staged self-abolishment would articulate, then, the erosion of the distinction between the imaginative work of the novel and the imaginative work of the market.

But, in fact, what makes that abolishment legible is the fact that erosion didn’t happen. McPhee, who was offered a challenge similar to the one the fictional author accepts, wrote *Dear Money* instead. When *Dear Money* substitutes Naturalist logic — where the economy is an oppressive “material force” — with the belief that “the satisfaction of individual desires as the economy’s driving force” (37), it does not (primarily) do so by adopting a particular economic position, but by adopting a literary

one. By linking the consciousness of its narrator to the economic structures that produced the financial crash, and using the first-person to frame those mechanisms as questions of desire, McPhee, in effect, reverses the logic of Naturalism where characters are disfigured by markets rather than made more complete by them. More precisely, Palmer's personal Pygmalion transformation is the motivating force of the novel and, insofar as the functioning of markets is threaded through her desires, *Dear Money* reimagines a set of economic relations as personal ones. The novel, then, revises Naturalism's character by reconfiguring the relationship between character and the market — where character had been constrained and defined by the market, now the market emanates from character. In its working through a particular history of character, *Dear Money* makes its economic point foremost as a literary one. Articulating its economic point as a formal one, *Dear Money* points to the limit of affirming the continuity between a novel and an economic treatise. Namely, if a novel was to imagine its meaning is dependent upon the economic discourses it represents — if it really were a “laboratory” (30) of economic thought as McClanahan suggests — it would effectively become an economic treatise. The imaginative work of the novelist and trader really would become indistinguishable. *Dear Money* is, in effect, a novel about what one would have to believe in order to imagine that a self-abolishing novel is legible as a novel at all. (Not unlike Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*).

Framed as a problem of the novel's relation to the market, we can begin to see how *Dead Pledges* does more to amplify current debates in literary criticism than it does to address them. These debates, which have animated much of recent scholarship, broadly fall into two categories. Most centrally, *Dead Pledges* raises questions over the ontology of the work of art. And secondarily, it wades into the debates over the status of critique in literary studies. When I began the review by asking why works should be evaluated on primarily political, rather than on aesthetic, grounds I meant to suggest an ontological distinction not drawn by the Marxian-inflected New Historicism that runs throughout *Dead Pledges*. Although there are a number of consequences that follow from this, for our purposes what matters is this: Because *Dead Pledges* does not distinguish between what art means and what politics does, the ontological question it raises (or doesn't raise) about the work of art poses a related question about the limits of critique. We have just seen how the former haunts *Dead Pledges* and I would suggest that although McClanahan does not address the latter directly, her critical assumptions and positions place her work in relation to (if not at the center of) these debates.

If *Dead Pledges* suggests throughout its indifference to the ontological distinction between art and structures of debt, it surely agrees with the idea that novels, photography, and film are capable of both representing a financial system defined by its failed promises and equally capable of articulating alternatives to the financial logic underpinning growing inequality — the book constantly points us to the ways in which novels and art are dialectically predisposed to making visible the moment of

political and economic limits and possibilities. As we have seen, this happens largely by way of failure. This suggests the final pressing interpretive problem amplified by *Dead Pledges*: the relationship between failure and critique. The language of failure permeates *Dead Pledges* and rightly so. It is, after all, a book about forestalled financial circulation, about the failed promise of credit. But what does it mean to argue that a work of art “fails”? It might mean that it fails in aesthetic terms — it does not do what it sets out to do. This is a common critique of formally ambitious works of art, but this is not quite what it means to talk about “failure” in *Dead Pledges*. Failure, in McClanahan’s work, is foremost political: “the forms surveyed in *Dead Pledges* offer their own unresolved and overdetermined responses to the unique social and economic contradictions of debt” (16), she writes. Framed here in the language of symptomatic reading, *Dead Pledges* suggests that the text — in its inability, for example, to mediate between the personal and systemic — fails to adequately represent economic logic of debt. To put it another way, aesthetic forms are inadequate to the already extant economic ones.

As I noted, if a novel like *Dear Money* really were to commit to abolishing its ontological distinction from the market, it would cease to become legible as a novel — it would become simply another economic treatise or op-ed. Here, its failure, as an aesthetic object, would no longer be coherent.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it could fail only politically or economically — discursively — like Paulson and Shiller. Put this way, it is hard to see why, if it were the case the novel fails in the same terms as its economic interlocutors, we need the novel to explain that failure. If the novel is simply a “literary laboratory for working out the problems of scale and historical causality that haunt behavioral economics” (30), would it not be enough to point out, as McClanahan does, that the problems of behaviorist economics lie in the “(mis)perception that aggregate, social economic events follow exactly the same laws as individually modeled economic behavior” (29-30)? One potential answer, the one *Dead Pledges* provides, would be to say that in working through this logic the novel provides a “glimpse” of crisis that is at once “the new status quo of capitalism” and “an immanent condition that threatens to destroy it” (42). But this, we have seen, is primarily achieved through failure. On this view, if art reveals the limit of its political or economic counterpart, it does so despite itself. As Anna Kornbluh puts it, novels (and photography) by this logic are “preoccupied by the right problems... but dogged by their own forms.”<sup>2</sup> Here, the success of a work of art depends on its relation to political or economic parameters rather than on its formal commitments.

Critique here is understood as a way of judging the work based on a set of external relations, a defining feature of the New Historicism and more recent developments in post-critique materialisms, perhaps most fully realized in Rita Felski’s *Limits of Critique*. Nor is Marxist literary criticism, where the success or failure of a work is often defined by its political attractiveness, immune to such tendencies. For example, even a work as universally revered as *The Political Unconscious* — to which *Dead Pledges*

owes much — insists on the inadequacy of novels to politics.<sup>3</sup> There, it is the critic who sees utopia in the failure of the work of art. What *Dead Pledges* shares in common with both *The Political Unconscious* and *The Limits of Critique*, then, is a commitment to the idea that the novel is not quite up to the task of critiquing the horror of the present crisis, much less imagining an alternative to the current systemic class violence. The critic, however, is. For Felski, the alternative is affective; for Jameson it is structural. McClanahan moves between the two modes but always returns to the role of the critic in adducing (producing) the political possibilities of the work.

Readers of *Mediations* will surely argue the priority of political interpretation, and my point is not, of course, to disabuse us of that. My point instead is to suggest that a work of art's politics exist in its formal ambitions and not (or not only) its content. To this end, the line I have been tracing through *Dead Pledges* is twofold: first, it asks what it means when the success or failure of a work is formulated on political grounds. And second, it suggests that such a formulation, insofar as it displaces evaluative judgments about art (about, for example, their ambitions as works of art or the forms that legislate them) into political ones, imagines the distinguishing feature of a work of art to be its politics. But when we judge art (e.g. *Dear Money*) by the same criteria we judge works of political economy (e.g. *Irrational Exuberance*) and we make its meaning dependent on its relation to capitalism, we attenuate the very thing that art has that markets don't: aesthetic form.

Alternatively, a work of art, in its assertion of form independent of the market, might likewise assert an alternative to the market structures within which the work is produced precisely because of its ambition to produce something indifferent to those structures, something contained and defined by its own form. The reason for this is because a work that insists on its ontological separation from the world insists on ways of being read (or seen) that cannot be assimilated into the logic of the market. Art, in this view, is not only indexing systemic class violence or the failed promise of debt. Instead, works of art (especially very good ones such as some by Rachel Kushner and Ben Lerner, but also ambitious ones that fail such as some by Tom McCarthy or Teju Cole) might at once represent capitalist social relations (for example, debt formation) and imagine new collectivities and new forms of social relations (like those alternatives *Dead Pledges* desires in its coda). What art independent from capitalism can do in its mediation of social relations is affirm a political imagination independent of the market.

It is not mere aestheticism, in other words, to claim that a work of art is only political by first being art. More to the point, art is no levee against the tide of inequality and class violence produced by the expansion of the credit economy. It is surely not the case that art since 2008 (or since 1967, for that matter) has done anything to address the structures that both produced the conditions of the economic crisis of 2008 and have enabled its ongoing effects. The force of distinguishing between novels and economic discourse is, of course, to suggest that what art can do is be art. It is also to

suggest that art is not going to do much if we are serious about ending the ways debt functions as a means of enforcing class violence. Where (plausibly) an economist like Robert Shiller could influence policy, it is (extremely) unlikely that Martha McPhee's novel would. Where labor unions can fight against the decline in wages, works of art cannot — or would do so only incidentally. To put a finer point on it, if we are to more “clearly and carefully understand” debt as a social form as McClanahan argues we should (and I agree), we need to look beyond “how our culture has sought to represent it” (2) and instead ask how representation of “it” is legible in the first place.

In a way, this is a strange kind of review to write — to be critical of a book that is largely successful at doing what it sets out to do. But, at a moment when debt, and the logic of market capitalism more generally, has become “ubiquitous,” the questions first of art's legibility, and second of what it means for that legibility to produce something like a critique of — or even an alternative to — the current horrors of unchecked capital, are more pressing than ever.

**Notes**

1. Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age Real Subsumption Under Capital," *Nonsite*, March 13, 2012, Accessed June 05, 2017. <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>
2. Anna Kornbluh, "We Have Never Been Critical," *NOVEL* 50.2 Fall 2017. (Forthcoming).
3. Kornbluh, "We Have Never Been Critical."

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