

Summary: Althusser's structuralist Marxism is critiqued both in terms of his theory of ideological superstructures and his interpretation of Marx as an anti-humanist, anti-Hegelian. This essay originally appeared in Logos, Spring 2014

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The Althusserian Cul-de-Sac

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The French philosopher Louis Althusser's structuralist Marxism remains a point of reference for many contemporary schools of radical thought, even for some of those that have moved away from Marxism completely. Moreover, as radical thought has experienced a partial return to Marx after several decades of Nietzschean post-structuralism, the legacy of Althusser lies in wait, offering a version of Marxism that offers an all-too-comfortable transition from the more recent forms of philosophical radicalism. This is because one can embrace Althusser while still rejecting subjectivity, humanism, and even the dialectic.

The possibility of subjectivity in the sense of critique, resistance, or revolt on the part of the subjugated, is closed off almost completely in the work of Althusser. This stance mars his well-known essay on "ideological superstructures," which was indeed a serious attempt to go beyond reductionist arguments concerning ideology's relationship to its material base, and to theorize its place in late twentieth century capitalist society in terms of institutions outside value production like religion and education.

In Althusser's 1969 essay on "Ideology and Ideological Superstructures," almost any notion of subjectivity is illusory, or suspect. As Althusser sees it, that illusion props up the dominant political form developed under modern capitalism, liberal democracy. In short, if one validates the possibility of human creativity and self-

movement within -- or even in struggle against -- existing society, one is at best an idealist dupe, and at worst a propagandist for the capitalist system, part of what Althusser terms the “ideological state apparatuses.” These apparatuses, which include, among others, religious and educational institutions, create and maintain the ideologies through which the system maintains itself in power.

The fact that these apparatuses interact with individual members of society by engaging in “the interpellation of these ‘individuals’ as subjects” is simply part of these individuals’ “subjection to the Subject” with a capital “S,” i.e. the capitalist system. This interpellation is part of the system’s “rituals” of domination (1971, p. 181): “They must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that ‘thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ etc.” (1971, p. 181). Playing on the ambiguity in the term “subject,” wherein it can refer to either a “free subject” or a “subjected being,” Althusser forces these two into a single totality, wherein: “The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e., in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (1971, 182).

Althusser confines his discussion largely to individual rather than collective subjectivities, ignoring the varying forms of collective self-consciousness and resultant collective action for self-liberation that emerges again and again on the part of oppressed classes, genders, nations, ethno-racial groups, and sexual minorities. This is a most problematic omission indeed for a Marxist. But even if one remains on Althusser’s ground, that of the individual subject who is a mere subject of domination, isn’t he creating a false totality here? Where is the possibility of contradictions between these individual subjects and their subjugation? Althusser acknowledges that such a situation may occur, but passes this off as a “bad” subject who is then dealt with by the openly “repressive” state apparatus, i.e., police, prisons, etc. (1971, p. 181).

But what about a rebellious individual subject whose rebellion touches off wide support within an entire subjected group? Consider Rosa Parks getting herself arrested for violating the racial segregation laws on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, for example. Parks’s actions, taken in connection with a large support network, which grew rapidly in the days following her arrest, touched off a decade of radical change today termed the Civil Rights Movement. When such an occurrence comes at the right moment, when historical circumstances are aligned toward liberation, and when the organization of both emancipatory ideas and the means to implement them are present, we have what Dunayevskaya called a

“subjectivity which has absorbed objectivity, that is to say through its struggle for freedom it gets to know and cope with the objectively real” ([1958] 2000, p. 327).

Another problem with Althusser’s ideological superstructures is that they seem to float above the economic structures of society. Here, his surprising, albeit muted, affinity to Maoism is important to note, something that is often missed because Althusser remained a member of the pro-Moscow French Communist Party. Such a focus on culture and ideology as opposed to economic base was also a hallmark of Mao’s theory of contradiction, as well as the underpinning for his “Cultural Revolution” of the late 1960s. That “revolution” was in reality more of a top-down affair in which Mao used Red Guards recruited from among the student youth – supported by one bureaucracy he did not shake up at this time, the military – in order to dislodge some of his fellow leaders, whom he deemed too close to Russia, among other sins. The Maoist Red Guard attacks on forms of “Western culture,” like classical European music or books, supposedly constituted a challenge to global imperialism, this at the very time when Mao was refusing to give much in the way of material aid to Vietnam in its struggle against U.S. imperialism. The whole process ended, not as Mao’s international followers had hoped, in the establishment of a new International to the left of the pro-Moscow Communist parties, but instead with a rapprochement with the United States under Richard Nixon, the butcher of Vietnam.

Another problematic feature of Althusser’s superstructures like religion, and to an extent, education, is that they are not new or unique to capitalism. Despite this, Althusser does not analyze their specifically capitalist character very much. In this sense, his ideological superstructures lack historical development or grounding. More problematically still, his focus on the cultural and superstructural realm obviates any real discussion of the working class, the human subject that is both subjected to and at the same time, in the form of a revolutionary subject, able to resist or even revolt against capital. Althusser implies that real changes have to begin at the level of superstructure, of ideology. This ignores the fact that real changes in consciousness often result when changes in the economic structure of society wrench people out of their customary modes of existence, plunging them into new forms of production and property relations.

Althusser also famously attacked both Hegelianism and humanism as bourgeois, if not reactionary. This was a departure even from orthodox, Engelsian Marxism. Although Engels had conceptualized idealism and materialism as a general dividing line between progressive and reactionary forms of philosophy, he made an

exception for Hegel's idealism, which he regarded as definitely revolutionary. Thus, Engels had always acknowledged Hegel as an important antecedent of Marx's thought. Nor had Engels explicitly repudiated humanism, although he did not make a core category out of it either.

For his part, Althusser, reacting against both Marxist and existentialist humanism, went on the attack, writing of the "phantom" or "shade of Hegel." He called upon Marxists, as if exorcising a vampire, "to drive this phantom back into the night" ([1965] 1969, p. 116). Althusser was to continue this theme unabated throughout his intellectual career, rallying more orthodox Marxists against the threats posed by Hegelian and humanist versions of Marxism. He carried the debate into Lenin's work as well, attempting to separate Lenin from Hegel, despite clear evidence to the contrary in Lenin's 1914-15 Hegel notebooks.

Althusser also attracted not a few younger intellectuals to an anti-humanist Marxism that, at least on the surface, did not mark a return to the earlier scientific and quasi-positivist philosophical orientation of many earlier Marxists. This earlier scientific orientation, attractive in an age when "progressive" science fought against religion, had been severely undermined during the post-World War II period, when various forms of radical humanism assailed the ravages that had taken place through the use of modern science, most notably the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. But by the time Althusser came onto the scene, in the 1960s, some at least were ripe for an antihumanist counterattack, a sentiment that only grew larger in the wake of the defeats of the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. This was especially the case in France, where the near revolution of 1968 had first raised and then dashed hopes for a profoundly radical revolution inside an industrially developed capitalist society.

Beginning in the early 1960s, Althusser famously dismissed the writings of the early Marx as pre-Marxist, imbued with what he saw as liberal and Hegelian notions of alienation and humanism. These writings were simply not Marxist, he held, because they were humanist. Althusser "knew" what was true Marxism, even when confronted with writings by Marx that did not cooperate with his form of knowing, and any attempt to widen the circle was simply a deviation: "Since the 1930s Marx's Early Works have been a war-horse for petty bourgeois intellectuals in their struggle against Marxism.... Marx, Engels, and Lenin, to refer only to them, ceaselessly struggled against ideological interpretations of an idealist, humanist type that threatened Marxist theory" (Althusser [1965] 1969, pp. 10-11).

Althusser goes further, however, placing antihumanism at the core of Marx's thought despite the lack of textual evidence on this point: "One can and must speak openly of Marx's theoretical anti-humanism" ([1965] 1969, p. 229). The term "speak openly" may have been intended to imply that "real" Marxists "knew" this, but had de-emphasized it in order to gain broader appeal.

The French Hegel scholar Jacques d'Hondt, who, unlike Althusser, was to resign from the French Communist Party in 1968 to protest the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, noted at the time that for generations, Marxists had been at great pains to answer attacks from liberal humanists, who had claimed that Marxism reduced the human being, in dehumanized fashion, to a set of economic categories and forces. Therefore, wrote d'Hondt, the Althusserian attack on humanism amounted to "a type of provocation" that served to delink Marxism from the democratic and anti-fascist traditions to which it had often been allied (1972, p. 225). As against Althusser's rejection of the term "man" or "human being" as a liberal illusion, d'Hondt noted that Marx had used this term when he wrote that the human being "makes history" (1972, p. 225). Moreover, d'Hondt wrote, "One runs the risk of undermining Marxist methodology if its human basis is ignored." From a Marxist standpoint, he added, "the point is [human] liberation" (1972, p. 228).

Althusser's key Marxological notion, pursued more virulently than others who had only hinted at such a thesis, was that Marx made an "epistemological break" in 1845 with his earlier writings, especially the 1844 Manuscripts ([1965] 1969, p. 33). Thus, the German Ideology of 1846, co-authored with Engels, was Marxist, but Marx's 1844 Manuscripts was not.

Initially, Althusser dismissed attempts to tie Capital to Marx's early writings via the psychoanalytic concept of projection: "The whole, fashionable theory of 'reification' depends upon a projection of the theory of alienation found in the early texts, particularly the 1844 Manuscripts, onto the theory of 'fetishism' in Capital" (Althusser [1965] 1969, p. 230).

He also distorts what are often held to be the most important pages in Capital. Ignoring Marx's own language in the fetishism section to the effect that under capitalism, the "social relation" between human beings takes on "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx [1867-75] 1976, p. 165), Althusser declares peremptorily: "In Capital the only social relation that is presented in the form of a thing (this piece of metal) is money" ([1965] 1969, p. 230).

A few years later, in his preface to a widely circulated paperback edition of *Capital*, published in French in 1969, Althusser complains that the entire first part of *Capital* is marked by “a method of presentation” imbued with “Hegelian prejudice” (1971, p. 90). For these and other reasons, Althusser advises the reader to “leave Part I (Commodities and Money) deliberately on one side in a first reading” (1971, p. 88).

By now, Althusser had modified his earlier notion of an 1845 “epistemological break” with Hegel on Marx’s part. Here in 1969, he laments “survivals in Marx’s language and even in his thought of the influence of Hegel’s thought” in *Capital* itself (1971 p. 93). Marx, it seems, did not become fully “Marxist” until nearly a decade after he first published *Capital*, with “Critique of the Gotha Program (1875) as well as the Marginal Notes on Wagner” of 1881, texts that were finally free of the supposed taint of Hegel and humanism (1971, pp. 93-94). In other words, Marx was not really a Marxist until eight years before his death!

At this juncture, Althusser’s argument flirted with an open anti-Marxism, and in no small way anticipated the poststructuralist rejection by Michel Foucault and others of Marx tout court, as an Hegelian humanist whose thought was supposedly marked by the concept of a fixed human essence.

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