

Althusser's Mirror

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My attempt to read Althusser in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis is based on the premise that Marxism should give more consideration to the individual's need for recognition and its question of identity than orthodox Marxism was willing to concede—a belief commonly held by most leftist intellectuals today. As Easthope pointed out, this shift of emphasis has been one of the major achievements of Althusser's work, and Althusser himself acknowledged his indebtedness to psychoanalysis.¹ In his essay "Freud and Lacan," he praises Lacan for having defined "as rigorously as it is possible" ("Freud" 156) the object of psychoanalysis (the unconscious), thus elevating psychoanalysis to the rank of a science—a statement clearly intended to parallel Lacan's achievements in regard to psychoanalysis (his return to Freud) with Althusser's understanding of his own merits in regard to Marxism (the return to Marx). In the following, I shall try to examine Lacan's influence on Althusser's work with respect to ideology and the subject, which I believe to greatly exceed that of a parallel or an occasional "borrowing" of concepts.² However, the objective of such a confrontation is not merely to enlist all obvious differences between the source and its interpretation, but rather to concentrate on the positive potential of any appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis for the understanding of ideology.

Where I Think, I Am Not

In his famous Essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser claims that ideology represents "the imaginary relation of . . . individuals to the real relations in which they live" ("Ideology" 39). Contrary to the common understanding of ideology as 'false consciousness', where ideology is believed to distort or in any way mis-represent reality (i.e., the real relations of any given society, its relations of production), Althusser asserts that ideology is "above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production" ("Ideology" 39). Ideology is thus "a second degree relation" (*For Marx* 233), for it does not primarily aim at the real relations of production (first degree relation); rather, it expresses the imaginary, but nonetheless "lived" relation between individuals and these relations of production (second degree relation).³

Ideology maintains this “imaginary” relation through the process of interpellation—it interpellates individuals as subjects. Interpellation works through a specular recognition-process between the individual (the “subject-to-be”) and an Absolute Subject that functions as the “center” of each ideology, let us say God.⁴ The voice of God calls the individual by its name and thus defines him/her as a free subject. By acknowledging its position, the individual also recognizes the superiority of the Absolute Subject that called it by its name (i.e., God). Hereby, the individual is “subjectivized” in a double sense: it is interpellated as a subject, but at the same time subjected to the Absolute Subject and thus active in history only in order to reproduce the existing relations of production. It is this mutual recognition between subjects and Subject that Althusser calls the “duplicate mirror-structure of ideology” (“Ideology” 54). This insight into how interpellation works can only be sustained with the help of science:

ideology never says, ‘I am ideological.’ It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (general case): I was in ideology. As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist . . .). (“Ideology” 49)

It is obvious that the “quite exceptional case” Althusser mentions above presents itself in the form of a logical contradiction: Marxists know themselves to be inside ideology, but for this knowledge to exist, they must have already been in the realm of science and thus outside of ideology. Althusser acknowledges this paradox, claiming that he as a “subject” necessarily remains trapped in ideology, whereas “his” discourse analyzes ideology from the outside. This can only mean that scientific discourse is a “subject-less discourse” (“Ideology” 45); scientists as “subjects” are always absent from “their” discourse. This idea seems to mirror Lacan’s account of the alienation between Subject and Other (the Symbolic Order). Lacan asserts that meaning emerges in the field of the Other that always excludes Being (the subject) (*Four Fundamental Concepts*, 211). Thus, Althusser concludes:

it is literally no longer the eye (the mind’s eye) of a subject which sees what exists in the field defined by a theoretical problematic: it is this field itself which sees itself in the objects or problems it defines. (*Reading Capital* 25)

It is clear that Althusser's "field" and Lacan's "Other" are not quite the same, but it is more important here to realize that in Althusser's version, language has been assigned a key-role in the self-reflection process of a structural field when at the very same time it has been denied this function for human subjects.⁵ Critics have argued that the repressed subjectivity of human individuals reappears as the subjectivity of a structural field—"the return of the repressed" (Frank 128).⁶ The argument is well taken, I think. According to Hindess and Hirst, Althusser calls his field "an 'eternity' in the Spinozist sense of the word: it is the cause of itself, it is infinite in its kind, and as itself it must necessarily exist"—this definition comes very close to the classical understanding of subjectivity (312). Althusser almost admits this himself when he states:

[t]he true subjects (in the sense of the constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants and functionaries, are not . . . "concrete individuals", "real men"—but the definition and distribution of these places and functions. The true "subjects" are these definers and distributors: the relations of production (and political and ideological social relations). (*Reading Capital* 180)

He continues by saying that "these are relations" and therefore "cannot be thought within the category subject" (*Reading Capital* 180). This explanation is hardly satisfactory, but it is indispensable for Althusser in order to distinguish radically between science and ideology.

Althusser does indeed maintain this binary opposition throughout most of his writings and contends that truth can only be sustained through the logical coherence of the argument within a scientific discourse.⁷ Ideology, however, is not simply "false," since the "imaginary" always comprises elements of the "real" (*For Marx* 233-34). Rather, ideology "is distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge)" (*For Marx* 231). The primary function of ideology is to interpellate individuals as subjects, and as such ideology "is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence" (*For Marx* 235).⁸ For Althusser, epistemological categories primarily apply to science and are of secondary importance in regard to ideology. Hirst goes even further than that. For him, the imaginary "cannot be false since it is not an idea or conception of things, but . . . a part of social relations." It follows that ideology "may derive from

forms of the imaginary, but it is not false” (Hirst 38). Hirst presents ideology strictly as a matter of “lived relations” and his view is supported by Althusser’s claim that ideology has a material existence. But ideology is material only because Althusser fully equates the belief in subjectivity with the action resulting from this belief:

the existence of the ideas of his [the subject’s] belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject. (“Ideology” 43)

This materiality of ideology cannot of course be falsified. But one must not forget that the belief in something that does not exist (subjectivity) can have effects, but it cannot actually cause the existence of what is believed in. Humans are active in history but “considered as agents, human individuals are not ‘free’ and ‘constitutive’ subjects in the philosophical sense of the term” (“Reply” 134). For Althusser, originating subjects do not exist, and to believe in them is false in an epistemological sense. Eagleton, therefore, claims that besides his “positivist” view of ideology, Althusser equally endorses a “rationalist” view which “relegates ideology to the false ‘other’ of true knowledge” (153) and charges Hirst with collapsing the epistemological question into the ontological one: although it is true that people actually believe in subjectivity and live accordingly, it is nonetheless false to believe in it, because subjectivity itself does not exist (153). In other words: it is crucial to distinguish between the epistemologically “false” belief in subjectivity and the actual existence and consequences of such false beliefs.

Strictly speaking, this can only mean that the subjective view-point is not “false,” but simply impossible, because its agent (*Träger*), the originating subject, does not really exist. What does exist are subject-agents of ideology, who try to occupy the impossible position of subjectivity by acting “as if” they were subjects. So Eagleton’s conclusion that the “subject-centered view of reality” is “bound to get things wrong” can only be understood in the following way: a true “subject-centered view of reality” is impossible, so that everybody who believes him or herself to maintain this perspective occupies “some deceptively ‘centered’ standpoint” and thus inevitably “gets things wrong” (152). Hence, as far as Eagleton is concerned, the falsity of ideology ultimately consists in its effects: “The imaginary mappings of ideological fictions are false . . . in the sense that they actually get

society wrong," whereas Althusser continuously tries to emphasize the actual cause for these misperceptions of reality, which is the humanist belief in something that does not exist (subjectivity) (152). Eager to show that Althusser also held a "rationalist" view of ideology, Eagleton is forced to present a reading in which ideology again comes very close to the traditional notion of "false consciousness," explicitly opposed by Althusser. This problematic is indeed inherent in Althusser's work. Ideology is constituted through the belief in the category of the subject, and albeit this belief is material in the sense that it exists and is lived by acting "subjects," it is nonetheless false on the content-level since its signified does not correspond to reality. Ideology has no referent, it simply creates its own. This means that ideology "has no outside (for itself), but at the same time . . . it is nothing but outside (for science and reality)" ("Ideology" 49). The "falsity" of ideology is merely a matter of perspective, and since the scientist Althusser lived in ideology but "was spoken" from the outside, he does not so much "oscillate" (Eagleton 152) between the different views of ideology as try to emphasize their interconnectedness, the fact that both must exist simultaneously.

A Look In The Mirror: Lacan

Althusser's essay on interpellation had to face a major criticism that concerned its temporal structure: when exactly are concrete individuals interpellated as subject-agents of ideology? Althusser's claim that individuals are "always-already" subjects suggests that individuals never really existed and are only a necessary theoretical projection of a scientific discourse that can explain the working of ideology only in the form of a temporal succession, when in fact "these things happen without any succession" ("Ideology" 49). Althusser simply cannot circumvent the necessity of having to narrate in order to explain the way in which subjects are interpellated, but the very form of narration, so he claims, unavoidably distorts the truth. This, however, seems to contradict his previous assertion concerning the specific nature of scientific discourse. If knowledge is to provide its own criteria for verification, it is absolutely essential that we take the argument itself literally—if Althusser does not really mean what he says, how can we evaluate the coherence of what is being argued for? On the level of discourse, the distinction between individuals and subjects must remain valid, even if it might not be real, but only a theoretical abstraction. Without this distinction, concrete individuals would have never existed as such, a consideration that renders interpellation itself and the

discourse talking about it totally superfluous. However, with the distinction upheld, it is incomprehensible how the individual can recognize itself without having already been "a 'subject' prior to ideology" (Hirst 67). Althusser's moment of interpellation through the double mirror-structure of ideology is either an unnecessary fiction or it presupposes an originating subject in order to "produce" a subject-agent of ideology.

It is obvious that Althusser's concept of interpellation rests on the idea of the "mirror-stage" as the founding moment of the "imaginary," a theory which Lacan developed in his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I." In a way, Lacan "avoided" the logical contradiction in Althusser's mirror-structure by fully subscribing to it: on the one hand, the child's identification with its mirror-image (which is an "Ideal-I" functioning as the "Absolute Subject" in Althusser's sense) merely anticipates a wholeness that is yet to come and therefore results in an ambivalent relationship of the individual to its image. Lacan emphasizes that the idealized reflection is loved as much as hated: the separating distance between self and image cannot be entirely overcome, since it is exactly this difference that motivates the identification in the first place. The child can pretend to be "whole," but cannot act accordingly. The failure to control fully the other results in a frustration which causes the child to oscillate between different roles of identity.⁹ On the other hand, the identification retroactively posits whatever precedes the constitution of the ego; that which antedates the ego is a mere fantasy projected back in time after the look in the mirror. There is no original. Gallop shows that the moment of the mirror-stage "is the source not only for what follows but also for what precedes. . . . In other words, the self is constituted through anticipating what it will become, and then this anticipatory model is used for gauging what was before" (80-81).

We must note that in this account the constitution of the ego seems to comprise only self and other without any interference from outside. But Lacan later added an important aspect to his mirror-essay which concerns the "look of the Other" as a desired acknowledgement or verification of the child's recognition process. It consists:

in the gesture by which the child at the mirror, turning around to the person carrying it appeals with a look to the witness who decants, by verifying it, the recognition of the image from the jubilant assumption, in which, to be sure, it [such recognition] already was.

(Cited in Weber 116)

This supplement changes the former dyadic structure of the child's recognition into a "triadic relation in which acknowledgment emanates not from the self-identical ego, but from the 'person who carries it,' that is, from the place of the Other" (Weber 118). Thus, Lacan's subject literally is in question: "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question" (Lacan 86). The subject is "defined in his articulation by the signifier," which "requires another locus—the locus of the Other" (Lacan 303 and 305). But the subject's attempt to express itself in language fails, because the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enounced do not merge. Thus, against the certitude of the Cartesian subject, Lacan insists on a fading subject, for it is only "present" in its own discourse as a lack—it disappears in language. As Žižek puts it: "[T]he subject of the signifier is a retrospective effect of the failure of its own representation" (Žižek *The Sublime* 175). More precisely: it is the anticipation of this failure that retrospectively defines the subject as a void. We encounter here the same temporal structure as in the imaginary (in respect to the constitution of the ego), and Lacan expresses this dialectics in the constitutional process of the subject through the use of the future anterior, "[t]he time of the *écrits*" (Gallop 82). He notes:

What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the past perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming. (Lacan 86)

Althusser, on the contrary, was much more skeptical about any history written in the future anterior, in which he suspected the mere reduction of a scientific problem to its own premises. Since knowledge is a matter of production, a process can only be studied with the help of principles that already presuppose a partially or fully developed theory of that process—this circle is unavoidable. But Althusser nonetheless distinguishes between ideological and scientific principles at work. Having introduced a list of Marxist principles, which he juxtaposed to Hegelian ones, Althusser states: "I should add that these [Marxist] principles, unlike the previous ones, are not in the strict sense ideological principles, but scientific ones: in other words, they are not the truth of the process to be studied (as are all the principles of a history in the 'future anterior')" (*For Marx* 63). This could be read both ways: the principles of a history in the future anterior are scientific, i.e., not the "truth of," or ideological, because they are the "truth of." In another passage, however, Althusser explicitly declares the history in the "future

anterior" inadequate, because it simply projects later developments back in time (finds in the future the "truth of" the past), but does not apply them to what existed before (consider the future the "truth for" the past) (*For Marx* 75). Science must necessarily "borrow" its beginning, since it must start somewhere. But as it develops, it covers its grounds again and transforms them by accounting theoretically for its own genesis as well as for any other historical process. A history in the future anterior, by contrast, cannot explain "other things than itself"; it simply describes a full circle, repeating itself. Which is to say, Althusser would have hardly approved of Lacan's history of the subject had he fully understood its temporal dialectics.

Suture and Ideology

Althusser's appropriation of Lacan thus implements different meanings of the terms employed. Most importantly, Althusser's subject is reminiscent of the Lacanian "ego" that Lacan defines as an object—"an object which fulfills a certain function that we call the imaginary function" (Cited in Heath 31). As such, the constitution of the ego is merely "the source of secondary identifications" leading to the "disappearance" of the subject (Lacan 2). It is thus crucial to distinguish between the "I" (*Je*) which denotes the split subject of the signifier, and the ego (*moi*) as the imaginary self-identity of the subject. Althusser's concept of interpellation "is not the constitution of the subject . . . but an extreme confirmation of the ego or a fantasy of 'the subject' " (Heath 32). This also explains why "the hailed individual will turn around"—a "strange phenomenon" which Althusser could not account for theoretically and was able to explain only by referring to the "experience" (N.B.!) of practical telecommunication ("Ideology" 48). The "turning round" of hailed individuals does not mean that they actually "become a subject," but that they want to be recognized as an object in the Lacanian sense: they hope to confirm their fantasy of being "whole."

However, the differences between Althusser and Lacan still appear to be merely of a terminological nature: one might argue that Althusser does not believe in a plentitude of the subject either, since for him the originating "Subject" in the philosophical sense does not exist. So, when Althusser claims that hailed individuals become subjects, he means of course their illusion to be an originating subject, a fantasy subject, the subject as the object of ideology. Accordingly, one cannot understand Althusser's interpellation as taking place in the Lacanian "imaginary," how could it, since interpellation works by hailing

individuals and thus needs language in order to function properly? Rather, the concept of interpellation seems "to be intimately related to that of suture," i.e., it always takes place as "the conjunction of imaginary and symbolic transactions" (Silverman 219). Suture, according to Miller, names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse; . . . it figures there as the element which is lacking. Thus, the subject "is not purely and simply absent," but takes the "form of a stand-in" (25f). Miller's findings are based on set-theory. Without attempting to follow his line of argument, it suffices in this context to recall that any true logical system without reference to the real must necessarily conceptualize an object that is not identical with itself and hence does not really exist as a thing.¹⁰ This impossible object, which Miller names the subject, needs to be evoked only in order to be immediately rejected as impossible by the logical discourse. The subject consists of pure negativity, for it literally embodies that which does not exist; it marks the absence of the impossible by "taking its place," erecting itself in the empty space. Logical discourse is constituted on the subject as the vanishing element: "the definition of the subject comes down to the possibility of one signifier more" (Miller 33). The subject, itself meaningless, enables meaning. Suture, thus, names the process by which the subject identifies itself with itself as the nonidentical; it identifies with the lack as the result of its failed representation. As such, the subject is built on the denial of the process that constitutes it.

Since in a way ideology "functions as a discourse" (Zizek, *The Sublime* 124) insofar as it tries to establish a unified totalized field, we can conclude that no attempt to constitute a totality will ever succeed, for there is always one element too much, which is charged with representing nothing. Any totality literally rests on its impossibility; it exists only as sutured in so far as it has to exclude the one element it nonetheless depends upon. This "surplus One which fills out the lack, is the signifier which represents the subject (the void, Zero . . .)" (Zizek, *For They Know* 47). For Zizek, the subject must therefore be "strictly opposed to the effect of subjectivation" (Zizek, *The Sublime* 175). It is not some richness constituted by different modes of interpellation but a lack represented by a signifier.¹¹ However, although interpellation does not constitute the subject, it nonetheless provides the space for it to emerge as a lack and simultaneously tries to cover this lack again: on the one hand, interpellation results in a leftover "which opens the space for desire and makes the Other . . . inconsistent," i.e., enables the subject to function as a "stand-in," while on the other hand subjectivation masks "a lack in the structure, a lack which is the subject" (Zizek, *The*

Sublime 175).¹² The inevitable failure of ideological interpellation (inevitable because any totalitarian project is sutured by an element that represents its impossibility) results in a lack. Ideology attempts to mask this lack through a fantasy, which again works through identification. This implies that every ideological edifice (i.e., the idea of Society as an organic Whole) “knows” about its own impossibility (the fact that it will never become real) and thus always invents a fantasy which explains in advance its inevitable failure. Ideology masks the real cause of its impossibility, the lack in its structure, by projecting it onto an external element that can be eliminated. The point is, of course, that without this external reference point, the ideological fantasy would immediately collapse, for it has no consistency in itself and totally depends on its “outside.” Therefore, beyond the “mechanisms of imaginary and symbolic identification” we find in any ideological structure some “pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment” (Zizek, *The Sublime* 124). The last support of ideology is paradoxically the one “element that represents within it its own impossibility,” since it is masked through identification and projected onto some positive presence outside the ideological network (Zizek, *The Sublime* 127). Beyond identification we find—an identification.

It is obvious that this understanding of ideology is at odds with Althusser’s theory, according to which the ideological problematic “is not conscious of itself,” so that everybody—except Marxists—is sunk in ideology (*For Marx* 69, 234). For Zizek, on the contrary, ideology is self-conscious about its falsity which leads him back to the very conspiracy theory Althusser rejected—the idea of Hitler, who knows that the totalitarian project is impossible and thus “constructs a new terrifying subject” (Zizek, *For They Know* 18) in order to “capture our desire” (Zizek, *The Sublime* 126). Of course the question arises as to how it was possible for Hitler not to believe in his own ideological fantasy. Or in general: how can ideology know about its own impossibility in advance? What enables such self-reflective knowledge? If such knowledge existed, one would have to conclude by analogy that the subject knows in advance that its representation in language will fail and therefore erects itself as a coherent subject knowing all along that it is simply a lack—“subjectivity” strikes back. “Enjoyment” is definitely an important factor in the working of ideology, but to determine it as its “last support” consciously exploited by every ideological fantasy simply lets the question of subjectivity reappear in a different context—it lets the process of interpellation reappear in the picture. Smith, therefore, argues that we cannot regard interpellation as simply

lytically informed explanations have to be "implicated back into their socio-historical specificity," and Smith is quite explicit about some of the achievements of Althusserian theory that are useful in this regard (i.e., the concept of interpellation itself, the materiality and the performance of ideology) (Smith 77). No doubt, Althusser has "misread" Lacan, but his misreadings have proven to be indispensable for the necessary modifications of Marxist theory today.

Notes

1. Easthope's remark is taken from a yet unpublished paper presented at a conference in Berkeley in May, 1992.

2. In *For Marx*, for example, Althusser refers to his concept of "overdetermination" as being borrowed from linguistics and psychoanalysis (*For Marx* 206). Accordingly, Benton asserts that the borrowings of Althusser "are of particular concepts . . . and not of the whole philosophical problematic" (35).

3. Althusser uses the expression "second degree ideology" in a slightly different context in order to denote the complex nature of the imaginary relation itself, i.e., the fact that it is not simply opposed to the "real" relation between men and their world, but forms a complex, overdetermined unity with it. I think both applications are justified.

4. This is the example Althusser chose himself, "Ideology" 51ff.

5. The differences between Althusser and Lacan concerning the concept of the 'Other' are traced by Paul Smith, 20ff.

6. See also William Connally, *Appearance and Reality in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981). Connally too argues for an anthropological dimension in theory that structural Marxism is merely able to suppress, but not to eliminate (50).

7. An early exception is the essay "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," where Althusser redefines philosophy (philosophy is not a science, etc.) and renders the relation between ideology and science more problematic. See *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1990) 69-144. For an elaborate critique of Althusser's rejection of empiricism and his understanding of scientific truth, see Steven B. Smith, *Reading Althusser. An Essay on Structural Marxism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984) 108-40; and Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London: Verso, 1987) 102ff.

8. To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to note here that Althusser distinguishes between an “eternal” Ideology in general with its function to transform individuals, and its particular ideologies, i.e., the different practices and apparatuses Ideology employs, which historically can vary depending on social change.

9. Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytical Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject,” *Yale French Studies* 55/56, 338-95.

10. It is crucial here to distinguish between “things” and “objects,” the latter of which are “things” subsumed under a concept of the logical system. The “object” functions as the signifier of the “thing” within the system, “[w]hence you can see the disappearance of the thing which must be effected in order for it to appear as object—which is the thing in so far as it is one” (Miller 27).

11. The position Zizek rejects here is supported by Smith, who argues that “resistance must be regarded as the by-product of contradictions in and among subject-positions” caused through ideological interpellation (25).

12. Zizek uses the terms “interpellation” and “subjectivation” alike (Zizek, *The Sublime* 181).

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