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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.¹ 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.²

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.”³ 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.⁴ 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."⁵ 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.⁶ 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."⁷ 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.⁸

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."⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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..."¹² 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ 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.