

LOUIS ALTHUSSER

1918–1990

One of the most influential and distinctive Marxist thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century, Louis Althusser came to prominence in the volatile 1960s. His work combined the new, scientifically oriented methods of structuralism developed by CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, JACQUES LACAN, and others with a commitment to political engagement and social transformation, laying the groundwork for a revolution in theory that affected fields ranging from literary criticism and cultural studies to history and politics. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" (1970), his most influential essay and our second selection, analyzes how dominant social systems enforce their control—subtly molding human subjects through ideology—and how they reproduce themselves. "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre" (1966), though less widely known, succinctly explores the relation of art to ideology.

Born in French-held Algeria, Louis Althusser was educated in Marseilles and at the Lycée du Parc in Lyons. In 1939 he was admitted to the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris, but his academic career was delayed when he was drafted into the military during the early days of World War II. Captured in 1940 and held for five years in a German prisoner-of-war camp, he returned to the École Normale after the war, completing a master's thesis on the philosopher G. W. F. HEGEL (1770–1831) in 1948. He then joined the faculty at the school, also doing doctoral work under the supervision of the celebrated Hegelian philosopher Jean Hyppolite. His membership in the French Communist Party from 1948 on was also decisive for his future work. His relations with the Party hierarchy were never easy, and his writings were often attacked by official Communist philosophers—he was almost expelled in 1966 in a dispute over China's Cultural Revolution—but Althusser remained a life-long member. In *For Marx* (1965; trans. 1969), he encapsulates his intellectual career and how he became, in a famous phrase, "a Marxist in philosophy," noting three coordinates: the underdevelopment of Marxist theory within French communism, the impoverishment of French philosophy since the Enlightenment, and the political situation of the international communist movement in the post-Stalin era. Also formative were the political events in France during his lifetime, which he called "the terrible education of deeds"; these included the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the cold war that followed.

Publishing little before the 1960s, Althusser undertook during the 1950s a long march through both the Marxist classics and KARL MARX's influences (notably Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach, 1804–1872). His research culminated in a series of important texts, gathered in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* (the latter coauthored with his student Étienne Balibar, 1965; trans. 1970), both of which quickly captured the attention of French and later British intellectuals. Althusser's interventions changed the face of Western Marxist theory, shattering the pieties of Stalinist dogmatism and the newer Marxist humanism, which, influenced by Hegel and the twentieth-century philosophers GYÖRGY LUKÁCS and JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, saw Marxism as an effort to recover an alienated humanity. Elevating the individual as its center of concern, humanism generally stresses human freedom and self-determination; in contrast, many structuralist thinkers argue that freedom of thought and action is limited by linguistic, psychological, or socioeconomic systems. Propounding an "antihumanism," Althusser emphasizes the scientific aspects of Marxism, in particular its investigation of how societal structures determine lived experience. His critique of humanism continues to help shape postmodern and poststructuralist theory.

Following Marx and FRIEDRICH ENGELS's central claim in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; see above) that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history

of class struggles," Althusser held that philosophy was bound by political obligations and that the task of the philosopher was to "represent the class struggle in theory," taking the side of the oppressed in ongoing ideological struggles with representatives of the ruling class. His injunction inspired the participants in the May 1968 student and worker uprising in France; but Althusser himself was absent during the turbulent events of May, recuperating in a sanatorium from a recurrence of the clinical depression that had plagued him following his experiences in World War II. After recovering he embarked on an ambitious new theoretical project addressing two questions: how a society achieves stability over time by reproducing its dominant relations of production and what conditions make social revolution possible. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" stems from this larger project, which was never completed. Althusser would continue to teach and to write throughout the 1970s, but his illness worsened, and in 1980 he murdered his wife in a manic fit of rage. Declared mentally incompetent, he was sentenced to house arrest under psychiatric care and isolated from all but a few friends. At the time of his death a decade later, Althusser's reputation had reached a low point.

Althusser's major concepts—"ideological state apparatuses," "interpellation," "imaginary relations," and "overdetermination"—permeate the discourse of contemporary literary and cultural theory, and his theory of ideology has influenced virtually all subsequent serious work on the topic. The problem that Althusser sets out to solve in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"—to determine how a society reproduces its basic social relations, thereby ensuring its continuing existence—is a perennial one in social theory, raised as early as PLATO's *Republic* (ca. 373 B.C.E.). Plato thought that the key to sustaining a just state was controlling the education of its citizens, particularly its ruling class. Althusser concurs, while emphasizing that the dominant values in a society are for the most part endorsed by the majority of its members. Winning their endorsement is the work of ideology, and Althusser employs a structuralist account of the societal mechanisms that inculcate such consent, as well as a psychoanalytic account of how ideology makes individuals "subjects" of the dominant social order. Contrary to its colloquial sense, which suggests a set of ideas or beliefs that one chooses to espouse or reject, ideology for Althusser is not voluntary but the result of structural factors in society; he thus dispenses with the standard humanist notion of free will.

Althusser famously terms the societal mechanisms for creating pliant, obedient citizens who practice dominant values "ideological state apparatuses" (ISAs). Complex, numerous, and differing from one society to another, they are civil institutions that have legal standing (hence their designation as "state" apparatuses), including churches, schools, the family, courts, political parties, unions, the media, sports, and the arts. ISAs differ from "repressive state apparatuses" (RSAs), such as the police, the military, the prison system, and government, in several key ways: they are not unified, they operate primarily in the private sphere, and they attain their power not by means of explicit coercion or force but through implicit consent realized in accepted "practices." One tacitly learns the practice of obedience to authority, for example, in church, in school, at home, or on sports teams. As Althusser notes, a dominant social order would not survive if it relied only on force, and he traces the rising influence of schools as the dominant ISA in modern society. Schools have supplanted the church in this role, instilling in students the habits that will make them productive workers in modern capitalist societies, so that they show up at the factory or office day after day without question.

Althusser's theory revises the standard Marxist definition of ideology as "false consciousness," the explanation of why people willingly participate in the capitalist exploitation seen to undergird modern society. Many Marxists argue that we simply misunderstand what is really going on: believing that the economic system is fair and offers equal opportunity, rather than favoring those who control the means of production and capital, we identify with and emulate the owners and capitalists. Althus-

ser retains the classical Marxist stress on economic causes, which he says are decisive "in the last instance," but his concept of the ISAs presents a fuller explanation of the diverse societal processes of ideology. It also allows for more complexity: ISAs operate with "relative autonomy," sometimes for different and contradictory ends (they are "overdetermined"). His theory thus has affinities with the thought a generation earlier of the Italian Marxist ANTONIO GRAMSCI, whose concept of hegemony explains the flexibility of social dominance and its operation through cultural institutions.

Althusser defines ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." It is here that he turns to a subtle psychoanalytic account, adopting Jacques Lacan's concepts of the imaginary, mirroring, and subject formation. Revising SIGMUND FREUD's concepts of the unconscious, ego, and superego, Lacan posits a three-part structure—the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic—that forms the individual subject. The Imaginary constitutes the preverbal realm in which human beings exist from earliest years; it is not a false but a primordial structure of consciousness. For Althusser, ideology takes the place of the Imaginary, which one is "born into" and which, like the Freudian unconscious, deeply influences how one acts. But unlike Lacan, he sees an individual's subjectivity as generated through social forces. Using Lacan's ideas of mirroring and recognition, Althusser describes how ISAs "interpellate or hail individuals as subjects." A pivotal stage in character development for Lacan is "the mirror stage," when an infant recognizes him- or herself in a mirror. For Althusser, ideology works through our tacit recognition of being hailed, as when we turn around to answer the call, "Hey, you there!"

Though Althusser focused largely on political theory, and his writings on art and literature were unsystematic and occasional, "A Letter on Art" briefly investigates the effect of ideology on artworks. In keeping with the Marxist "reflection" theory of art, held by LEON TROTSKY and to some extent Lukács, Althusser observes that art is formed out of and pictures ideological raw materials; but he also reasons that it maintains a certain distance from the ideologies "to which it alludes." He thus grants "authentic" art a special critical status in "mak[ing] us see" the ideologies "from which it detaches itself," exposing ideology "in some sense from the inside." Other twentieth-century ideas lurking in the background are *defamiliarization*, as defined by the Russian formalists BORIS EICHENBAUM and Victor Shklovsky, and especially *estrangement*, as described by the German Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht. Although Althusser allows art itself a special value, he also recognizes that the arts are embedded in institutions (museums, publishing houses, media, recording companies, Hollywood studios, and so forth) that function as ISAs, shoring up the ideas and values of the ruling class through imaginative representations.

Provoking sharp reaction as well as a devoted following, Althusser's work has had wide-ranging influence. Some have found his reliance on a structural account of society too deterministic; others, most notably E. P. Thompson, the English historian usually considered a founding father of cultural studies, have criticized his lack of attention to empirical history. Despite Thompson's disavowal, Althusser's concept of ideology has been crucial to cultural studies, as recounted in STUART HALL's "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies" (1992; see below) and as evidenced in DICK HEBDIDGE's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979; see below). Althusser's concept of ideology has also been foundational for the leading contemporary Marxist literary critics in Britain and in America, TERRY EAGLETON and FREDRIC JAMESON. Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), for instance, draws heavily on Althusser, though focusing on how art produces ideology rather than how ideology informs art. Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981; see below), perhaps the most sustained consideration of the ideological implications of the modern novel, both elaborates on and critiques Althusser. Less faithfully, the French sociologist PIERRE BOURDIEU shows the influence of Althusser in his focus on education and its formative effect in producing "distinction" and creating "cultural capital"; Bourdieu swerves, however, from traditional Marxist analyses by stressing the

cultural over the economic. Although the breadth of his influence has dissipated some of the Marxist political charge of his social critique, Althusser's theory of ideology remains a touchstone in contemporary criticism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Althusser's major essays are collected in three influential books: *For Marx* (1965; trans. 1969); *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1969; trans. 1971), which contains "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"; and *Reading Capital*, a reconsideration of Marx's masterwork written with his student Étienne Balibar (1968; trans. 1970). Subsequent collections in English, gathering his many essays, are *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx* (1972), which includes the long essay published as his first book, *Montesquieu: Politics and History* (1959); *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1974; trans. 1976); *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists, and Other Essays* (1974; trans. 1990); *Essays on Ideology* (1984); *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan* (1993; trans. 1996); *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings* (1977); and *Machiavelli and Us* (1999). *Journal de captivité: Stalag XA 1940–1945* (1992, *Journal of Captivity*) records Althusser's experiences as a prisoner of war. Written during the mid-1980s, the autobiographical texts collected in *The Future Lasts Forever*, edited by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang (1992; trans. 1993), should be approached with caution, since many passages bear witness to Althusser's mental decline. The definitive biography is Yann Moulier Boutang, *Louis Althusser: Une Biographie (Louis Althusser: A Biography)*; only the first volume, *La Formation du mythe (1918–1956)* (1992, *The Formation of the Myth*) has appeared to date.

¹¹ For early applications of Althusserian theory to literature, see *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966; trans. 1978), by his student Pierre Macherey; Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (1976); and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). The famous critique by the English historian E. P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors" (1978), declared Althusserian theory to be Stalinist. Perry Anderson recuperates Althusser against Thompson's charges in *Arguments within English Marxism* (1980). Of the many accounts of Althusser's use of structuralism, the best is Ted Benton's *Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism* (1984). For a central document in feminist debates over Althusserian Marxism, see Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1984). In *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (1987), the best single critical account, Gregory Elliott helpfully traces the political background that shaped Althusser's work. *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (1987) by Michael Sprinker is an influential treatment of the relation of Althusserian theory to poststructuralist aesthetics. See also Eagleton's overview *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991).

¹² Gregory Elliott also edited an excellent collection of critical essays from a range of political and theoretical perspectives, *Althusser: A Critical Reader* (1994); see especially the essay by Francis Mulhern considering Althusser's impact on literary studies. *The Althusserian Legacy*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (1994), contains several important essays on Althusser's impact across the disciplines, together with a revealing interview with his onetime student Jacques Derrida. Elliott's *Althusser: A Critical Reader* includes a comprehensive bibliography of all Althusser's publications up to 1993.