

# Review: Louis Althusser & Academic Marxism

Friday 7 November 2014, by [MILLS Nathaniel](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2014).

***Louis Althusser, On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.* Edited by Jacques Bidet. Translated by G.M. Goshgarian. London: Verso, 2014, 288 pages, \$29.95 paperback.**

***Althusser and His Contemporaries: Philosophy's Perpetual War.* By Warren Montag. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, 256 pages, \$23.95 paperback.**

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WHEN TEACHING MARXIST theory in a university, one sometimes encounters impatience among students otherwise favorably disposed to the subject. Why, they ask, are we philosophizing in the ivory tower rather than agitating in the streets? Isn't the point — to paraphrase Marx himself — to change the world, not philosophize about it?

Academic Marxism can seem a contradiction in terms, even a bourgeois sterilization of Marxism. If Marx is read in the confines of the classroom as merely another entry in Western intellectual history, isn't the revolutionary purpose of his work contained?

Paradoxically, it is the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-90), who has often been charged with transposing Marxism into an academic pursuit removed from actual workers' struggles, who furnishes two rejoinders to this impatience with Marxist philosophy: that the school as an institution isn't only not removed from capitalism, but is essential to it; and that struggles over philosophical matters within the school are not merely "academic," but struggles over capitalism's reproduction.

Althusser was an academic Marxist, though not in the dismissive way the term is often meant — that as a philosophy professor invested in complex matters of epistemology, he was only an armchair or seminar-room revolutionary. Rather, thinking of Althusser as an academic Marxist calls attention to his contention that Marxist concerns — the reproduction and disruption of capitalism, the struggle for materialist critique against idealist obfuscation— are at stake within the academy and academic work as well as outside it.

To deny that reality would be to assume that educational institutions play no part in economic exploitation and state domination; it would be to adopt the liberal Enlightenment fantasy of the university as a free space beyond the workings of power, the utterly non-Marxist and non-dialectical view that exploitation happens only in the factory, and that the state functions only through its police forces.

Over the course of his career, Althusser explored various definitions of the task of Marxist theory as an intervention within the discipline of philosophy: a struggle, in the name of materialism and revolutionary knowledge, against idealist mystifications of the status quo. Being an academic Marxist means not retreating from class struggle to the ivory tower, but recognizing one's intellectual work as already aligned in that struggle.

Thinkers don't make the revolution — Althusser was adamant on classical Marxism's ascription of revolution to the proletariat — but Marxist thinkers can help make it possible.

## **Ideological State Apparatuses**

Althusser's most well-known work is the essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation" (1970). It has long been taught in college courses as one of the essential texts of "critical theory," the set of methods for the study of literature, culture, and society derived largely from 1960s French philosophy and, until relatively recently, hegemonic in English departments.

In this essay, Althusser seeks to explicate how social institutions like the university play a fundamental role in the reproduction of capitalist exploitation and are thus significant sites of class struggle. To analyze the social reproduction of economic relations, Althusser provides a stylistically-elegant and conceptually-original discussion of ideology, though one that often raises more questions than it answers.

This essay weighs in on a puzzle that has long frustrated Marxism: if capitalism's sole object is to create profits for a ruling minority at the expense of the majority, why isn't mass resistance more common? How does capitalist exploitation get normalized and justified, even for those it exploits? Althusser addresses these problems by examining the role of the state in reproducing — reinforcing, naturalizing, and securing — capitalist relations of production.

For Althusser, understanding that role means understanding the state in a very broad sense. It's a basic Marxist tenet that the state, as a set of repressive apparatuses, functions to protect ruling-class economic interests. Althusser extends this definition by introducing a distinction between "Repressive State Apparatuses" (RSAs) — the penal system, police and military — and "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs), or social, cultural and political networks such as the family, education, religion, arts and culture, systems of political parties, popular media and so on. Both secure ruling-class domination, although only the former does so by explicit force. One of many scandalous insights of the essay is Althusser's designation of the diverse spheres of modern social life as, like the courts or army, "state apparatuses": going to school, practicing a religion, having a family, or consuming culture ensure one's subjugation to capitalism. But how? If RSAs function through force, ISAs compel by ideology.

Althusser presents an unusual theory of ideology. Within occasionally uneven and self-contradictory argumentative turns, Althusser tries to define ideology as both reflecting and securing ruling-class domination — but not as merely false consciousness, brainwashing, or bourgeois illusion. Nor is ideology, strictly speaking, ideas, something one consciously thinks or believes.

Rather, ideology exists in material practices, performed within the distinct bounds of particular ISAs, that themselves make the individual a subject who "freely" acts in ways conducive to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. As the social "glue" that creates subjects who, in their very individuality and agency, act in a manner that subjects them to the mode of production, ideology is ahistorical, an essential component of all social systems, past, present and future.

Even communist society will be ideological, as subjectivity will be constructed in such a way as to reproduce a collective, rather than exploitative, order.

Under capitalism, the education system is the primary ISA, where students learn the knowledges that distinguish workers from exploiters, as well as to internalize “the freedom, morality and responsibility of adults” [1] — standards of conduct that normalize bourgeois mystifications of capitalist productive relations. Althusser the Marxist professor recognizes that, rather than an ivory tower, the academy is actually essential to capitalism’s functioning and endurance.

## An Unfinished Work

Despite Althusser’s insistence that ISAs are riven by internal struggles determined by economic class conflict, many readers have seen the main arguments of the essay as effectively theorizing away the possibility of revolutionary agency. After all, Althusser renders capitalist society as a set of institutions that reproduce capitalism by programming the very nature of individual subjectivity to conform to ruling-class ideology.

If to be a subject — a distinct, conscious and acting individual — is already to be determined or shaped by capitalist ideology, then where can resistance, let alone revolution, come from? Is one’s personal identity nothing more than a ruling-class fiction? How does class struggle happen, if ruling-class ideology is not merely a set of lies to be vanquished through collective agency, but the very contours of subjectivity and agency themselves?

The suggestive yet unfinished nature of the essay’s arguments in part accounts for their continued appeal. As its subtitle indicates, it was excerpted from a larger work in progress that has now been published in English as *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. This longer text doesn’t resolve all the points of indeterminacy in Althusser’s essay, but it does augment our understanding of the earlier text.

The book was never finished by Althusser; the French edition was published in 1995. According to editor Jacques Bidet, there are two manuscript drafts for the book, the second of which is represented by the Verso volume. It appears that the project dates from the late ’60s and early ’70s but that Althusser also returned to it at various points.

*On the Reproduction of Capitalism* provides fuller considerations of class struggle. For instance, Althusser distinguishes the “Primary,” ruling-class ideology of an ISA from the “secondary, subordinate ideology” it produces as “a by-product of the practice in which the Primary Ideology is realized.”

For example, Althusser discusses how the Catholic Church primarily reproduces state ideology: the subject it creates through its rituals and rites deports him or herself in ways conducive to state rule. Yet the Church’s practices can incite other ideologies and modes of subjectivity not conducive to domination: practicing orthodox theology can lead to practicing liberation theology, charity can become working-class activism, and so forth. Secondary ideologies arise from the “conjunction” of an institution’s practices with “the effects — however veiled — of the class struggle.” (*On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 83)

Similarly, the political ISA obviously reproduces state ideology, but can also include radical workers’ parties. The existence of such parties is an outcome, registered within the political ISA, of economic class conflict: ISAs do not cancel resistance, but reflect and serve as grounds for the class struggle that is “external” to them.

Proletarian parties thus realize “the proletarian ideology of class struggle” that is subordinated to bourgeois state ideology but nonetheless “radically opposed to” it. They conduct a “limited” form of struggle within the political ISA — parliamentary politics won’t make the revolution — but they challenge the political ISA’s seamless reproduction of state power. (95-6)

Within ISAs, secondary ideologies are dominated and partially determined by primary ideology, but are distinct and reveal an ISA’s relative ideological heterogeneity and internal lines of class conflict. They produce subjects that can act against ruling-class ideology, and without their emergence “neither revolt nor the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness nor revolution would be possible.” (187) Struggles within individual ISAs are “‘antecedents’ of any social revolution,” destabilizing state ideology so as to prepare the way for the proletariat’s seizure of the state and subsequent creation of the ideology and ISAs of a new and just society. (161)

## Law and Ideology

As an accessible overview of Althusser’s interpretation of some central Marxist precepts, the volume offers many valuable analyses. Its discussion of law is especially illuminating. The law, for Althusser, is the very heart of bourgeois ideology. Its codes formalize capitalist exploitation by designating “free” individuals whose interactions are governed by private property and thus take the form of commodity exchanges.

The law is a distortion of reality that serves bourgeois needs, substituting individual rights and obligations toward property in place of class-based economic relations of production and exploitation. For Althusser, “law ‘expresses’ the relations of production while making no mention at all, in the system of its rules, of those relations of production. On the contrary, it makes them disappear.” (59)

The law also gives rise to what Althusser calls “legal ideology” — the unquestioned affirmation, realized in the everyday activity of subjects, of the reality of the law’s fiction of social relations. In other words, we all act as if the law’s representation of society as a set of free and equal individuals with property, rights and obligations were in fact true: we respect private property as if it weren’t the fruit of exploitation, we show up to work as if we freely contracted with our employer.

Althusser thus sees conventional morality as moral ideology, a vital “supplement” to legal ideology. (67) Thus we show up (on time!) to work or school, and fulfill our other obligations, not only because we “freely” agreed to do so, but because it’s the right thing to do.

This analysis offers resources for future study. For one thing, since law is by definition the expression of class exploitation, Althusser holds that it will “[wither] away” under communism. (62) The form of communist society is notoriously under-explored in Marxism, and Althusser here provides a thesis for consideration. Communist society, far from the statist models of historical socialist regimes, will be lawless, its governing ideology secured somewhere other than in legal codes.

Furthermore, Althusser’s work on the law is perhaps especially useful today, given the central role played by the legal system in various political struggles in the United States. If capitalism is the hidden reference point of the law, how might this lead, say, to a Marxist analysis of the Supreme Court and its recent rulings, both reactionary (*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*) as well as progressive (*United States v. Windsor*)?

*On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is, like the “Ideology” essay, unfinished and not free from

contradiction. Just as the essay sometimes wavers between characterizing ideology as institutional practice and as consciousness, Althusser here often describes state ideology as thematic, organized around “values” like nationalism, liberalism, and humanism that would appear to exist outside of or prior to practice. The precise relation between such abstract ideals and institutionally-directed behavior is under-explored.

Althusser also acknowledges that his text leaves unanswered a crucial problem informing its analyses of ISAs: if class struggles in ISAs are determined by those of the economic base, then “what happens in the base . . . that is capable of fostering and then unleashing the class struggle” and eventual revolution? (163)

Readers will find other gaps, but the inconsistency of this text is perhaps, in a paradoxical way, characteristically Althusserian. Michael Sprinker defined Althusserianism as a “research program,” an attempt to identify the theoretical protocols proper to Marxism “that would enable it to continue producing new knowledges.” [2]

Like Althusser’s other work, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* offers no dogmatic explanations, but models the practice of Marxist theory by creating original concepts — such as “Ideological State Apparatuses” — that clarify and modify Marxism, pointing out directions for further analysis and development.

## **An Althusserian Reading**

Althusser scholar Warren Montag values the inconsistency of Althusser’s work in a slightly different, but still faithfully Althusserian, manner.

In *Althusser and his Contemporaries: Philosophy’s Perpetual War*, Montag reads Althusser’s work as Althusser read the writings of other philosophers (especially Marx): not as a finished body of thought, but as riven by internal contradictions and unrecognized problems.

For Althusser, any philosophical project is articulated within a given conjuncture, a discursive terrain of philosophical conflict that itself reflects the broader conjuncture — the specific power arrangements and dynamics of class conflict — of its moment.

What’s actually written on the page of a philosophical text, despite its author’s purpose, is fractured, as the class struggle registers its conflictual positions in philosophy just as it does everywhere else. The coherence of any philosophical argument is always an illusion, and to read as a materialist means, as Montag writes, “to take the side of a text against itself, one of its sides against the other or others, to discern the lines of force that constitute it.” (Althusser and His Contemporaries, 6)

Following these assumptions, Montag embarks on an Althusserian reading of Althusser: “If we apply to Althusser the same protocol of reading that he applied to Marx, we must understand his work as constituted by contradiction and antagonism, and it becomes intelligible on this basis alone. To read Althusser in this way is to draw lines of demarcation within his texts, thus making their conflicts visible.” Montag proposes to thus read for the ways Althusser’s texts “fracture what appears to be solid in order to open a way forward.” (12)

Interpreting Althusser by delineating progressive and materialist insights from his work’s contradictions, Montag challenges some standing assumptions about Althusser. Furthermore, his ability to identify unexpected conceptual openings from a line-by-line analysis is exhilarating to follow. The content of his analyses aside, he provides his reader with an empowering method for

reading theoretical texts, an alternative to the pedantic way Althusser and other critical theorists are often taught in English classrooms.

Montag focuses on three themes of Althusser's thought: philosophical structuralism, the subject and ideology, and the origins and ends of capitalism. In the first section, he situates Althusser's 1960s work within the broader field of conflicts and debates animating French philosophy and its engagement with structuralism. Structuralism was a tendency, influential in 1960s French thought, to seek causal and systematic logics for phenomena often assumed to be significantly non-objective in nature, such as language, culture, knowledge or consciousness.

Althusser is often called a "structural Marxist," and the term is usually intended pejoratively, to indicate that he sought to rationalize the actual complexity and unpredictability of history and society, reducing both to a set of rigid structural laws. Using a variety of published and unpublished writings by Althusser and his philosophical contemporaries, Montag excavates the complexity of both structuralist thought and Althusser's relation to it.

Althusser's engagement with structuralism labors to discard its debts to humanist phenomenology (often, structuralism posited an ahistorical human essence as the perspective that conferred structural unity and coherence to an object) as well as its reductive formulations, and works toward a theory of "decentered structure." (72) To the extent that social reality takes the form of a structure that unifies its various elements, the structure of that structure is conjunctural: historically and socially singular, and unified not by the uniformity of its components, but through their contradiction, inconsistency, and incommensurability.

Althusser's analysis of social formations as discrete, heterogeneous conjunctures thus borrows structuralist analytics while trying — not always successfully — to move away from the idealism of assuming essential, foundational and unifying causes for those formations.

Montag offers an Althusser who sounds more poststructuralist than structuralist, who engaged structuralism not to rationalize and simplify reality, but to account for its diversity and complexity.

## **Reconsidering Ideology**

Montag next turns to Althusser's writings on ideology, with particular attention to the "Ideology" essay. Montag approaches the essay's contradictions by demarcating what is original and materialist in Althusser's theory of ideology and subjectivity from what remains caught in inadequate, idealist assumptions.

He shows how, although Althusser is unable to depart fully from a conception of ideology as (false) ideas and consciously-held beliefs, and from subjectivity as human interiority, he does manage to produce the radically-new definition of ideology as institutionally-supervised practice. In that definition, there is no question of whether subjects "believe in" ruling-class ideology, as their subjection to it is realized nowhere but in the embodied actions they perform within various ISAs.

Althusser thus sidesteps the multiple problems of "false consciousness" that trouble other Marxist approaches to ideology. Montag demonstrates that, at his most materialist, consciousness for Althusser signifies behavior, and ruling-class ideas exist only as they are present in behavior that accords with them.

Ideology then "consists of its immanence in bodies and forces," (155) and power and resistance become questions of the arrangement, control, and policing of bodies within sociopolitical

institutions. Ideology's creation of subjects is a process in which power achieves what Montag calls "a hold over the body" (168): the body that conceives of itself as a "free" subject will deport itself in ways that facilitate the reproduction of capitalism.

Montag thus aligns Althusser with the French theorist Michel Foucault, for whom the history of ideas and intellectual disciplines is indistinguishable from their manifestation in the institutional exercise of power over human bodies. Althusser's essay similarly registers the difficulty of challenging a regime that does not merely trick the oppressed into liking their oppression, but perpetuates itself through social forces and institutions that define and regulate the everyday conduct of human bodies.

Finally, Montag turns to Althusser's late essay "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter." This essay constructs an alternative history of materialist philosophy, arguing that thinkers like Lucretius, Spinoza, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Marx all practiced a radical materialism that presumed the existence of nothing beyond given reality.

For this "materialism of the encounter," reality has no origin or foundation outside of itself, but is the result of a non-necessary, chance (Althusser uses the term "aleatory") encounter of forces. The encounter possesses a structure and duration, but will eventually return to the absence from which it originated. That primary absence is theorized by Althusser as the "void," the radical nothingness from which existence emerges by chance and to which it will necessarily return.

As Montag makes clear, Althusser's main intent is to position capitalism as such an aleatory encounter, a mode of production that came into being by chance and must necessarily disappear eventually: if capitalism didn't have to emerge, then no logic secures its permanence.

Montag subjects Althusser's "void" to a penetrating critique. For one, the void is characterized in idealist terms as "the ground and truth of existence," (187) and in eschatological terms as the end of capitalism to come. It also violates the aleatory nature of the encounter to impose the necessity of its disappearance. Althusser poses the void, Montag writes, in order to avoid facing "the fear of the aleatory encounter that once established will persist not for eternity but . . . indefinitely," or the possibility that if capitalism didn't have to come into existence, it also doesn't have to stop existing at any given point. (181)

Montag thus notes the continuity of the void with theology and messianic expectation: it is "an originary and final nothingness" — both pre-capitalist past and post-capitalist future, and works in the text as a "principle of hope." (185)

Insisting on the return of capitalism to the void can obstruct both a materialist analysis of capitalism's longevity, as well as the need to define Marxist praxis within a mode of production that might, on its own, endure indefinitely.

Montag argues that in the first essay he composed for publication, "The International of Decent Feelings," Althusser critiqued the eschatological tendencies that would return in the later text. "The International of Decent Feelings," composed in 1946 when Althusser was influenced by both Catholicism and Marxism, targets an apocalyptic sensibility prevalent among certain Cold War European intellectuals like André Malraux, Albert Camus and Arthur Koestler.

Haunted by the mass destruction of World War II, these figures rejected both global powers of the Cold War and called for the international unity of humanity itself, not against any political opponents, but against the nuclear apocalypse that now threatened universally. Montag explicates Althusser's reliance on Christian theology, particularly St. Paul's distinction of true and false

apocalypses, to critique this sensibility. The future of nuclear devastation feared by these thinkers is actually a false apocalypse: destructive, but not the redemptive apocalypse of Christ. This false apocalypse is described by Althusser, Montag observes, as a void: a future that does not exist, but that leads its fearful adherents to misperceive and delegitimize the immediate political and economic struggles of the present.

Beyond the narrow anticipatory anxieties of what Althusser terms “apocalyptic panic” (201) is the true apocalypse, which is keyed to the present rather than the future, and exists in the everyday poverty and devastation suffered by the proletariat. Unlike these Cold War intellectuals, the proletariat possesses neither a fearful nor hopeful orientation toward the future, but an active and revolutionary agency within the here and now.

Montag is persuasive that this little-known early work is in key ways more materialist and more revolutionary than the self-avowedly materialist “Underground Current” essay. His discussion of “The International of Decent Feelings” models the delineation of materialist insights within discourses other than philosophy, such as theology. It also might prompt Marxist thinkers to appropriate the concept of “apocalyptic panic” in order to identify similar tendencies in our current political and theoretical landscapes. Where and when are the present political needs of the oppressed obstructed, occluded, or delegitimized in the name of higher or future considerations? Where do apparently materialist considerations of capitalism’s negation slip into idealism?

Montag’s volume is intended for an academic audience, and assumes a high level of familiarity with Althusser’s work, as well as with the signature positions of a wide range of European philosophers. Furthermore, Montag’s study is focused on Althusser’s engagements with the philosophical discussions of his moment, and differentiates itself from other studies that contextualized Althusser’s work either within Marxism specifically, or in relation to the politics of French Communism in the period.

Those looking for a general introduction to Althusser would be advised to look elsewhere (as an accessible overview of Althusser’s thought, Gregory Elliott’s *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* is still unsurpassed), but for those generally familiar with Althusser and his contemporaries, Montag provides one of the most original and energizing analyses of Althusser’s body of work.

The stakes of developing Marxist thought in our current 21<sup>st</sup>-century moment — in which capitalism has lasted a long time, Marxism is haunted by the crimes of 20<sup>th</sup>-century socialist regimes, and popular resistance movements continue to take new forms — are high.

Althusser himself insisted on the necessary incompleteness and requisite perpetual innovation of Marxism in his essay “Is it Simple to Be a Marxist in Philosophy?”: “Marxist theory can fall behind history, and even behind itself,” he warns, “if ever it believes that it has arrived.” [3] Althusser’s writings continue to provide fresh resources and new directions for Marxism’s theoretical travels.

**Nathaniel Mills**

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\* Against the Current (#173), November-December 2014. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>



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## Footnotes

[1] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 106.

[2] Michael Sprinker, "The Legacies of Althusser," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 225, 204.

[3] Althusser, "Is it Simple to be a Marxist in Philosophy?" in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (London: Verso, 1990), 230.