

“Like Water to the Fish”

**Louis Althusser’s “Lenin and Philosophy” and Other Essays**  
**Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects**

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm#n8>

**Step 1:**

To Althusser, you consist as a body and a subject that happens to be glued to your body, so essentially, that subject exists within the ideology. This ideology is designed to always be right and to construct a world that makes sense according to the ideology.

DK: very concise and potent summary. It’s a pretty bold view that takes you back a little bit. It’s a troublesome way to look at life, especially when we all depend on the current structure we live within, that shelters or threatens us, but at least it is familiar, knowable. That’s ideology: it provides a structure that determines our options in life.

So, what is “Ideology”?

- Althusser explains that a subject is what an ideology makes of it. Essentially, the ideology must come from a solid subject by the subject itself. Therefore, “concrete individuals” qualify as subjects as well. Ideology functions based on the presence of what is functioning. As individuals, we must decide what ideology functions in our own obvious existences. Without you, the ideology cannot exist. **And ideology gives you your options, narratives with roles to play.** There is no thing without an observer, there is no world without seeing and knowing there is a world. If there is no subject (and ideology) to know, then there would be nothing to know at all. **This is a challenging claim, and it asks us to test the limit of what is knowable. What happens to “me” when “I” go there?**
- How is the reproduction of the ideology secured?
  - By the system itself - schools, religion, politics, etc.
    - People spend their lives within the ideology, not even realizing that they are within one. “The way life goes” is a good phrase for this because the ideology that we live inside of is something that we have been accustomed to for generations, without recognition.
- How can you study an ideology without being a subject in it?
  - By relinquishing the point of view that you are stuck in- you can see that the real conditions are different than how you are imagining them to be.
- What happens when bodies don't want to conform to what the controlling ideology says?
  - This can be expected when one is aware of being within the ideology.

When Althusser explains, “I only wish to point out that you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects.”

DK: what a provocative sentence! Here’s another way into this: Pretend that I am playing a role so long I’ve forgotten it is a role, and so have forgotten that there is a difference between the real conditions and my imaginary relationship to those conditions. This is the akin to that wonderful talk by Adichie “The Danger of a Single Story.” And so I am always and already an “ideal narrative audience” for some particular narrative (controlled by a value) in a given moment of

time. I can switch between narratives but, it's complicated. It begins with self-consciousness. To become self-conscious, however, seems to require taking on perspectives critical of the taken for granted everyday ways of living (customary world-disclosure). To become self conscious means going against the tide, so to speak. To be different from "you" or the "other." But isn't that just another "ideal narrative audience role"?

Also--That seems like an interesting place to look for the source of identity: an attachment to a set of practices and the sense of self that goes with those practices. I'm wondering if Althusser is liberatory, or taken to be that way from within the world of Queer Theory--I have no clue, just an interesting question.

- How do we differentiate ourselves from others? What makes us different, or stand out?

FB: I think that I was trying to find the source of identity through Althusser, but it just made me realize further that by breaking through to find another identity, one is in another set of shackles. So, to put it in a positive light, people should transcend their own boundaries no matter what.

DK: Why? What life does that give?

FB: I feel like most people won't even realize that they're in an ideology anyways. And even if they do, they're going to be in another one anyways. I guess the life that it would give would be to just live unapologetically. There are always going to be conventions within an ideology, which have been there for so long people don't even realize it. Knowing what I know now, it just makes me feel like I should do what I want because the ideology expects me to (one way or another). It gives me a sense of clarity and freedom (maybe I'm predestined to be the way that I am anyways, what difference does it even make, right?)

## **Step 2: Purpose, Context, and Controlling/Contrasting Values**

Althusser states, "ideology recruits subjects among individuals" or "transforms individuals into subjects" Althusser says you're just a cog in the wheel of this vast productive system which leaves you either exploited or the one whos doing the exploiting When you exist inside a controlling ideology of our culture it has already programmed and ready to deal with conflict or resistance - it is built into this controlling ideology - resistances may come from your body or other discourses , but the controlling ideology will find some kind of way to recontextualize things that could be avoided.

Ideology itself is a controlling value because it is the system and the ideas which dominate/control the mind of a man or a social group. Ideology "has no history of its own" because you are essentially waking up into the ideology that you are in, it's invisible, but it gives you what you see and what shows up in your consciousness.

Althusser critiques the current system of state apparatuses (the school, the church, politics, etc) that are designed to just repeat the way things are (the saying "the way life goes"), and if you see that, you may become free from the structures that keep you in your role such that you are allowed to invent new possibilities that don't fit in the state apparatuses. To break an ideology is noticing that you don't usually see it, but calling it something, comes from another controlling value (you cant see something until you can become a member of something else that

opposes it). Which means the controlling ideology already has plans, the ideology has all means to deal with the critiques/the people who try to remove themselves from the ideology itself. This gives you the options on how to be and act in the world and you don't know it- it happens before you are even born. So, even resisting sexual orientation reinforces the sexual orientation - you are putting yourself into another box by resisting your gender or your sexual orientation.

“Which amounts to saying, very prosaically, if we agree to drop the ‘sentiments’, i.e. the forms of family ideology (paternal/maternal conjugal/fraternal) in which the unborn child is expected: it is certain in advance that it will bear its Father’s Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable....Before its birth, the child is therefore always-already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is ‘expected’ once it has been conceived. I hardly need add that this familial ideological configuration is, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and that it is in this implacable and more or less ‘pathological’ (presupposing that any meaning can be assigned to that term) structure that the former subject to-be will have to ‘find’ ‘its’ place, i.e. ‘become’ the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance. It is clear that this ideological constraint and pre-appointment, and all the rituals of rearing and then education in the family, have some relationship with what Freud studied in the forms of the pre-genital and genital ‘stages’ of sexuality, i.e. in the ‘grip’ of what Freud registered by its effects as being the unconscious” (Althusser).

So, through birth, humans have an unconscious bias of gender, of identity before one is even born. Expectations before one is born are instilled. This is another way a child is born into bias, they are born into a tradition they may or may not want to follow. These traditions may not overrule what the child wants, but this is what the ideology allows for. A child is given a piece of their identity (their name) without their consent- a name, a gender, and a sexual orientation that they may or may not coincide with. This is not the only piece of an identity that people deem as irreplaceable to a child, even though the child themselves may disagree with this part of their identity. Althusser explains, “individuals are ‘abstract’ with respect to the subjects which they always already are.” A child has expectations that they are not aware of, that they are born into, and that they are expected to follow with little say. As children these individuals are sexualized, whether they like it or not, and are not allowed to just exist as children and be able to express themselves the way they want or feel. These children are put into a box at a young age (Freud does a great job at putting age ranges in boxes with little exception and blames it on the children being “unconscious” to their natural behaviors) Children are expected to “find their place” within an ideology in a specific way, there is not much movement allowed for them to be able to explore different places, rather than just one place.

As a member of society, an individual is expected to follow specific social conventions in order to comply with societal standards, whether they realize it or not. These are conventions that are deemed as “normal” in society. Althusser even calls them “elementary” because they are simple interactions that are established during adolescence, something that children must learn how to do in order to read the room and not become casted out by society. However, as Althusser states, there are different interactions within cultures as well. What qualifies as a normal interaction? Althusser explains these as, “the rituals of ideological recognition”. This is defined and instilled in individuals throughout their development in order to instill conformity.

CC: Reading this made me think of interactions even with my own parents. When I leave, my mom gives me a hug and my dad shakes my hand. There are these neat little boxes that society has introduced where the norm is a mother should be affectionate with their child and a father should be formal, a little distanced. I recognized this pretty early on as a kid myself and swore I wouldn't have that emotional distance with my own son when he was born. Breaking societal norms is hard and requires a lot of self awareness.

- One's identity is identifiable through themselves -> Identity must coincide with society
- A child is given an identity before they are even born in order for them to fit in with society -> A child is restricted by their own identity that was given to them

“man is an ideological animal by nature”

- The need to be liked/fit in -> The need to be a “unique individual”

CC: Feels like there has always been this idea that there is survival in numbers and as a result, being unique rather than fitting in, lowers your chances for survival. Odd that in thousands of years of evolution, we still haven't fully moved past that.

### Step 3:

Althusser claims, “that an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all.” This is what I mean when I say we are born into the ideology. We are born into a society, whether we enjoy it or not, that may or may not accept us for who we consider ourselves to be (who we define our individual self as).

When Althusser explains this “obviousness” interpolating the reader, to recognize we are subjects and we function in these elementary rituals, calling someone by their name, the controlling value is always proving itself right. The controlling value is the recognition to know what you already know is true over and over and over again. This reasserts its rightness (the subject) in the face of any threat. People will try to silence the threat but you cannot do it because the controlling ideology won't just go away.

Humans usually cope by using “Imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of their existence” (Althusser) So, what is the “truth?” You could believe in God, etc. It is important to examine ideology the same way that people examine myths or superstitions of our society. When you see a controlling value as a controlling value, it's like studying the myth of a primitive society (like a superstition). However, there are some people who live within a superstition, and someone is so deeply involved in that superstition that they don't even think that there is a possibility of it even being fake.

“I might add: what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: 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 (the general case): I was in ideology” (Althusser)

So how do you get out of an ideology? If you say that you are in one, it disempowers the ideology. If you see “the truth”, it unmask another “not truth” within another ideology. Whatever it is that you know to be true, even at the deepest level, is another mask of ideology. This is why individuals cannot define themselves as one certain entity. It is important to stress this way of thinking to children. They must understand the conventions and certain roles that they are surrounded by (gender roles) in order to be aware. However, by no means do they have to have a concrete definition of “who they are”. It should be more like “what they have” instead. They can think about what they may be “categorized” into, but they do not necessarily have to follow these standards by any means because the ideological character is created by the individual who is able to identify and define their own ideology, without having to be in the same realm as others.

#### **Step 4:**

The title of this post is called “Like Water to the Fish” for a reason. The ideology that we exist in allows us to rely on the ideology itself. It is all throughout us, we need the ideology in order to exist as a society. We live within it, and even if we tried to escape this, a new ideology would appear for us. It is all around us, and we don’t even realize that we need it in order to survive (just like water to the fish). What reminded me of what Althusser has been trying to convey is the video game “The Sims”, which is a simulation game. Think about The Sims. Their lives are controlled by something, and they do not know that the “something” is you. Every single thing in their lives are predetermined. They are planned out by you. Even if they are not planned by you, (you choose a Sim that has already been within the game), their lives have been predetermined before you even began. Even if the Sim tries to complete a task (without your guidance), there is a reason why they have chosen to attempt this task. Essentially, they become the subject, but the ideology has already created them as the subject.

At first, when I read Althusser’s explanation of our world and the ideology that comes with it, I was really depressed. I felt like I was trapped myself, and even if I try not to be trapped, I just become trapped in something else. If I try to fight the ideology, I end up creating a new ideology of fighting that ideology. What can I do to break that? Then I realized, life is what you make it. No matter what you do in life, do it with passion. Live the way that you want to, without thinking about the ideology that may control you. Control yourself as much as possible. Live the way that you feel you want to live.

To transcend boundaries (my mission statement), you must create a new boundary. To put this all in a “positive” manner, when we live within this ideology, we cannot control it. We are trapped and the bars of the trap are our effort to get out of the trap. What Althusser is not saying is to be a human being is to never escape the imaginary forcefield of the conditions of our existence. What is the opposite of being human? Being post human, which is to be some other kind of being that has a different relationship to the real conditions of existence rather than an imaginary one. You are always going to be operating in some way in response to the imaginary relationship. A good question to ask is your being going to be inherited or are you going to create a new possibility for yourself? If you invent a new possibility, then you create a new possible relationship to the new conditions of your existence so then you give yourself access to being that way rather than your inherited way.

However, when you're in a trap it doesn't have to be terrible, you work with what you got and make the best out of it and try to be as an individual as possible. You got yourself, your

word, and your language. DK: and you have a say about how the world is disclosed (your possibility).

FB: Absolutely, and I feel like you can alter your possibility if you would like to. It's weirdly comforting to me? Maybe I'm just crazy LOL

As soon as it exists in language it already has the nodes and all you can do is follow the path and make it explicit. Every boundary that you have transcended always creates a new boundary because you must have a boundary to always transcend. Transcending boundaries opens up new ways to be in the world and relate. If you constantly are transcending boundaries you are smashing all structures and nothing can be built and everything will fall apart, you will spend your life attempting to do the impossible. Live the way that you would like to live your life, even though maintaining boundaries allows healthy spaces. You can create an ideology from a possibility or borrow ideologies from a possible culture, most people just take what is already there in the culture and that is how they live - blindly. We do live blind. Ideology is not just having an idea, there is nothing that is not rooted in a practice.

“As St Paul admirably put it, it is in the ‘Logos’, meaning in ideology, that we ‘live, move and have our being’. It follows that, for you and for me, the category of the subject is a primary ‘obviousness’ (obviousnesses are always primary): it is clear that you and I are subjects (free, ethical, etc....). Like all obviousnesses, including those that make a word ‘name a thing’ or ‘have a meaning’”

We are obviously individuals, we are concrete and contain our own ideologies. It's obvious that we have meaning because of the complexity of our beings as a subject and the way that we function. We cannot deny our existence, but we can deny what makes us “who we are” if we do not look at the “obvious” (a term Althusser uses). I admire the way Althusser uses the example of St Paul's ‘Logos’ meaning “we live, move, and have our being” because it proves that we have our individuality because we are individuals ourselves within our ideology. From before we are born, we exist. It is up to the individual to decide what they would like to do with having their own being (how they would like to define themselves after birth).

Essentially, as humans, we are expected to follow a certain set of guidelines in order to exist as an individual in a specific society. These aspects include coinciding with societal standards in order to understand how to act around others. However, Althusser stresses that the individual is unique and that all life on earth is born into a system where they function in specific, and unknown to the individual because of how deeply rooted society functions within its ideology. What I had hoped from reading this would be to find a way to see if an individual's “identity” could take forms of multiple “identities”. We are made up of all different kinds of standards in our own minds because of how we perceive our own selves. I enjoyed reading this piece because it stressed the importance of the individual, but talked more about the societal conventions that we are simply born into without having a choice. Even before we are born, we are placed into the system of the ideology and its systems that are born with the ideology.

CC: I'm curious if that bias we are placed into is one constructed from the societal conventions into which we are born based on the area you grow up in geographically speaking or if these biases are also a result of the influence our parents are likely to have in our lives? So much of our

ability to identify ourselves is shaped by the people we surround ourselves with and our parents dictate who can and can't be around us for quite some time as we grow up.