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Part IV. Sociology without the Will

2. Althusser's Structuralism

Louis Althusser is one of the most influential Marxists of the post-World War Two period, and a philosophical opponent of humanism, denying any role in the world for the human Will. I shall summarise Althusser's Structuralism and show that it is internally inconsistent and implausible. Far from providing a critique of capitalism, Althusser's theory refutes the possibility of any political response to capitalism and is itself a reactionary product of modern capitalist labour process.

The context of Althusser's most significant writings of the 1960s is Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and the rise of 'socialist humanism', especially among dissidents in Eastern Europe. Althusser cast the ideas of the socialist humanists as 'ideology', as opposed to Marxist 'science', and supported the political line of the Chinese Communist Party, minimising the significance of Stalin's crimes. According to Althusser, the USSR was at the stage of ending the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and opening up a new historical stage of the 'withering away of the state'. Changing historical tasks were accompanied by changing ideology among the masses, reflected in the writings of the socialist humanists, which were not to be credited with any claim to validity. As to the capitalist world, Althusser denounced every alternative at a time when vast social movements were just getting underway.

Althusser's polemic against the subject is the vehicle for his denial of the Will, individual or collective. So it is the concept of the *subject* as the bearer of a Will that I must defend here.

Relations of Production, Apparatus, Ideology, and Subject

Althusser's concept of the *subject* flows from his concept of *ideology*:

> ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning.
>
> Althusser, 1971a

Ideology and subjectivity are in turn inseparable from *practice*:

> 1. There is no practice except by and in an ideology;
> 2. There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects.
>
> Althusser, 1971a

Practice and ideology are to be understood in turn via his conception of the institutions in which practice takes place, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) – institutions constituted by ideology – in which people's activity is constituted as social practice.

The state, in the orthodox Marxist sense of the term, he calls the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), the organisation of violence used by a (capitalist) ruling class in order to maintain conditions for the production and reproduction of the (capitalist) relations of production. The RSA and the ISAs are both instruments wielded by the state power, i.e., the dominant social *class* (the bourgeoisie).

Both function by means of both ideology and violence, violence acting as a last resort, but the RSA is predominantly violent, while the ISAs are predominantly ideological in their functioning.

What are the ISAs? The church, the family, the law, the political system, including the various political parties, the trade unions, the media, the 'Cultural ISA' (including artists and the various institutions that publish, teach, fund, display literature and art, etc.), and, according to Althusser, the dominant ISA – the education system.

Subjects

Althusser tells us that he borrowed the concept of 'subject' from legal theory, so when he uses the word, he means simply an individual person who is responsible for their own actions in the legal sense. As will be seen, Althusser rejects the concept of a collective subject and therefore of a collective Will.

In his conception, it is *classes* whose interests, consciousness, and power are at work in society and history, but classes are not 'subjects'; there are *no* subjects acting in history at all; history is a process without a subject. In *Marxism and Humanism* (1964) he claims that in "the Marxist theory of history … the 'subjects' of history are *given human societies*." But Althusser signals that he does not share even this conception by placing quotation marks around the word 'subject'. He takes Marx's use of the term *Träger* (bearer) in *Capital* in the sense of people being 'bearers' of economic relations "… personified and endowed with a consciousness and a will" (Marx, 1867, v. 1, ch. 4) to be evidence that Marx regarded economic relations to be the true 'subjects' of capitalism.

Althusser refuted the idea that History is the work of a Hegelian Spirit or of a subject, Man, an idea that he ascribed to the 'Young Marx' – perhaps before 1846, when Marx said:

> *History* does *nothing*, it 'possesses *no* immense wealth', it 'wages *no* battles'. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; 'history' is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims;
>
> Marx, 1846

If History is not to be the work of a singular *Subject*, then apparently there can be *no* subjects acting in history at all, excluding the crucial possibility of *many* subjects by sleight of hand.

Institutions, such as the state apparatus, are instruments *used* by the class that is the state power; classes wield power, struggle against one another, and make alliances. Class struggle is a central concept for Althusser: "Ideologies always express *class* positions" (1970a). But Althusser does not hold that a class acting as "a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions" warrants its being called a 'subject'. Nevertheless, he talks of classes *as if* they were subjects, struggling, having interests, a Will, and consciousness.

By his rejection of the concept of a *singular* Subject at work in history (God, Man or Spirit), Althusser sees himself as having done with all notions of a *collective* subject, whether it be a 'scientific' conception of *collective* subjects (such as nations, social movements, institutions or social classes) or 'spiritual'

conceptions such as he attributed to Hegel. For Althusser, just as for Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, subjects are morally responsible individuals; the question is only what it means to be such a subject.

What Althusser has left out is any consideration of whether, by combining together in some form of voluntary collectivity – some self-conscious system of activity or social movement – people can rise to a level where they are capable of becoming collectively – "a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions" and become subjects in their own lives, collectively, that is, wielding a collective Will as envisaged by Rousseau and Hegel. Categorical ensembles, like 'Man' or 'Society', can only be understood as subjects if one adopts a spiritualistic conception. Lukács' conception of the working class as a subject in history, for example, depended on the Communist International being the actual leadership of an international workers' movement, a movement in which millions of individuals saw themselves as communists, actively looked to the Comintern for leadership, and transmitted that commitment to those around them. That reality proved to be transitory but not entirely illusory.

All sorts of corporate entities, from nations to companies, *do* act as subjects embodying a collective Will, as well as more diffuse social movements, whose collective Will is still in the process of formation. Isn't there room for a concept of subjects that lies *between* the mysticism of "Geist" and the idealism of the Kantian transcendental subject, *between* the Romanticism of "Man" and the Positivism of the isolated individual? This is territory into which Althusser does not venture. It is presumed in advance that all institutions and movements are already captured by ideology.

Apparatuses

Although all social institutions are called Ideological *State* Apparatuses, they may be public or private, formal or informal, because they are deemed to function to reproduce the capitalist relations of production and therefore serve the interests of the capitalist class; thus they are deemed *state* apparatuses. Althusser was writing in France in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when the Keynesian welfare capitalist state rested to a large degree on the trade unions, and in which there was a high degree of social integration (notwithstanding the war in Algeria). The Marshall Plan suppressed popular discontent in Europe following the Second World War. This brought a kind of peace and prosperity to the masses that made capitalism appear homogeneous – the same situation that had prompted Herbert Marcuse to write *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). As a Maoist, Althusser included the trade unions as an Ideological State Apparatus, as part of the system of ideological domination by the bourgeoisie. Under Khrushchev's policy of 'peaceful co-existence', the French Communist Party and the PCF-controlled CGT could be included in that characterisation. The idea that the family is the bedrock of capitalist society is still widespread, but the inclusion of the arts as a "cultural ideological state apparatus" makes it clear enough that *any* institution to be found in capitalist society is *ipso facto* an apparatus by means of which the bourgeoisie maintain bourgeois relations of production. 'The system' not only pervades everything, but all these institutions are *instruments* of 'the system'.

This is the point, really. Is it reasonable to paint a picture of modern society that is utterly closed to criticism, so homogeneous, so impenetrable? Is absolutely every route to change closed in advance?

Ideology

Just as a 'discourse' constitutes an institution, for Althusser, each of the institutions he refers to as ISAs corresponds to an *ideology*, a religious, ethical, legal, political or other ideology. The material existence of these ideologies is the rituals and practices of the corresponding ISA, organised around a concept such as God, Law, or Art. An ideology expresses a class position through a specific regular form of material practice (ISA) that functions ideologically to ensure the reproduction of capitalism, and is backed up by violence, either internally or through the RSA.

But – and this is a virtue of Althusser's approach – all the ISAs are *relatively autonomous* with respect to one another. Each apparatus has its own logic and operates to some degree independently of the others. Although each serves to facilitate the reproduction of elements of the capitalist relations of production, they are not purely and simply products of the capitalist mode of production, understood as an 'expressive totality'.

Each ISA, with its various rituals and characteristic forms of practice, constitutes the material existence of the relevant ideology. Art (the ideology of art) is materially constituted by the practices of the art world – its methods of evaluation, control, distribution, and production, and so forth. The objective material actions of individuals performing these (or other) practices constitute the ideas that make up this ideology.

> [A subject's] 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.
>
> Althusser, 1970a

Discourse is the medium of ideology, and consciousness is internal verbal discourse. Thus consciousness is an internalisation of the material practices of the ISAs in which a person participates, language being the principal transmission mechanism of this process of internalisation.

Science

This surely leads to a difficulty? How is it possible to distinguish Science from Ideology? By definition:

> Ideology represents the imaginary **relationship** of individuals to their real conditions of existence.
>
> op. cit.

All ideologies are 'myths' that "do not correspond to reality" and are 'illusions'. Althusser *counterposes* Ideology to *Science*, which he says is *not* ideology. "Religious ideology, ethical ideology, legal ideology, political ideology" are "timeless … world outlooks." We should look at our own society in the same way anthropologists look at ancient societies:

> assuming that we do not live one of these ideologies as the truth (e.g. 'believe' in God, Duty, Justice, etc.…), we admit that the ideology we are discussing from a critical point of view, examining it as the ethnologist examines the myths of a 'primitive society', that these 'world outlooks' are largely imaginary, i.e., do not 'correspond to reality'.
>
> op. cit.

Science provides us with a means of knowing things because it presents a true representation of our relationship to our conditions of existence, whereas ideology can describe things, but only by means of a false relationship to our conditions:

> An ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society. … ideology, as a system of representations, is distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge).
>
> op. cit.

Surely the only possible way of making sense of this is to allow that Science, just as Education, Politics, Literature, and so on, are forms of practice or activities oriented around the realisation of some ideal; the concrete concept of that ideal is constituted in some kind of 'apparatus' or institution. How can Science be any different in this respect? Science is also constituted in regular, institutionalised forms of practice with their own scientific discourse.

According to Althusser, Ideology is the 'lived' relation between people and their world, an *unconscious* relation that may or may not be reflected in the form of a systematic 'philosophy'. Ideology is distinguished from a science by the fact that the work of *reproduction of the relations of production* predominates in it over *theoretical practice*, over knowledge production. Each science arises out of the pre-scientific world of ideas, out of ideology, by means of what Althusser calls the *epistemological break*, a 'leap' that entails a radical break from the previous frame of reference and the construction of a new 'problematic'. Ideology then lives alongside Science as an element of the social formation.

Althusser sees (scientific) theoretical practice as a fourth practice alongside the economic, political, and ideological practices that together constitute a social formation. The work of theoretical practice is to transform ideology into knowledge, criticising conceptions of ideology that indicate objects but fail to open them to understanding.

However, for Althusser, just as wage workers are not 'subjects' of their own labour, they are nothing more than factors of production organised by capital, which is responsible for the process of production. Science, on the other hand, is a *subjectless* process that brings together and activates all the components and conditions of scientific practice. The individuals who actually perform the work cannot claim to be 'subjects' of their scientific production, any more than wage workers are subjects of economic production. In both cases the individuals are mere bearers (*Träger*) or *agents* of a social process.

Surely this only makes sense if we consider that systematic thought *in general* (and not just myths) – thought that brings to light the *real* relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence (as opposed to fantasies), thought that is not timeless and impervious to history but, on the contrary, is *historical*, *scientific* thought, must *also* be understood as constituted in certain, relatively autonomous, regular forms of practice, with their own 'scientific world outlook'?

Althusser designates Science as a practice (like economics, politics, and ideology) but it is entirely unclear how scientific discourse and scientific practice, carried out by individuals who are *not subjects* – authors of and responsible for their own actions – can not but be subsumed under the definition of Ideology? It seems that Science, which discloses the real relation of people to their conditions of existence, is just as much tied up with class relations as ideology that "always expresses *class* positions" (1970c). But Althusser makes no suggestion that a proletarian class interest detracts from the scientific character of a theoretical work. In order to be *objective*, it seems that science must entail beliefs and actions *without subjects*, a subjectless discourse and a subjectless practice. So the author of scientific work, who is an individual person and a member of a certain class, and therefore a subject, and therefore ideological, "is completely absent as a 'subject' from 'his' scientific discourse" (op. cit.). The individual scientist is just an unwitting cog in the machinery of science.

In the foreword to a collection of his writings, Althusser claimed that "The struggle for Marxist science and Marxist philosophy is today, as it was yesterday, a form of political and ideological class struggle" (1970b). But Science, it seems, remains subjectless even while it serves the class struggle, and is permeated with a class position, that of the industrial proletariat. Both cannot be true.

The identification of Science with proletarian class struggle was still uncontroversial in Althusser's day, but that has long since ceased to be the case, thanks in some measure to the 'socialist humanists' who were Althusser's chief target.

Althusser sees *Capital* as a work of science (as did Marx), but by making an absolute out of science, Althusser himself has fallen prey to Ideology. All knowledge is *for something*; knowledge arises only in connection with certain forms of activity and not others. But the practice of Science is necessarily tied up with Ethics, Economics, as well as what anyone would characterise as class interests. 'Proletarian science' is ideology.

Ideology

For Althusser, being a subject, 'believing in' an ideology, and participating in the rituals and practices of an Ideological Apparatus are all one and the same:

> The decisive central term on which everything else depends is the notion of the *subject*. ... the category of subject ... is the constitutive category of all ideology, ... only ... insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning.
>
> Althusser, 1970a

‘Subjects’ in Althusser’s understanding, far from really being free, responsible agents, are *subjected* beings. ‘Subjects’ are individual human beings, not classes or nations:

> The individual … behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject. … and freely accepts, must ‘*act* according to his ideas’, must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. … these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*.
>
> op. cit.

Only a concrete individual person can be a subject, but to be a subject, the individual must be taken up by forms of practice constituted by *timeless* ideologies, ideologies for which there is ‘no outside’, constituting an imaginary relationship of the individual to their real conditions of existence and functionally determined as ideological apparatuses for the maintenance of the dominant capitalist mode of production.

Despite the relative independence of the various ideological and repressive apparatuses, they form a closed universe in which no consciousness is possible other than an illusory, functionally prescribed, bourgeois consciousness. The individual subject’s belief that they act of their own Free Will is an illusion. At birth, they are destined to bear their father’s name; their role is determined before they know it themselves – their gender, their abilities, their family, etc. – the subject is always-already the subject they come to know themselves as, when they are called and ‘find their place’ in society by being inserted into a position in an Ideological State Apparatus. This is the process that Althusser calls ‘interpellation’ – the individual’s recognition of themselves as answering to an identity ascribed to them by the Ideological State Apparatus, materially – the insertion or subsumption of their activity into practices constituting the ISA.

Althusser takes Christianity as an example of an ideology, claiming that “the same demonstration can be produced for ethical, political, aesthetic ideology, etc.” (op. cit.), and then goes on to make points about religion that are claimed without demonstration to be also applicable to (for example) Ethics. So “there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e., God” (op. cit.). So we have each ISA as constituted by a Principle – God in the Christian Church – to which subjects are subjected when they are socialised into practices and rituals within the given ISA. Through the subjects’ recognition of the ‘Subject’ (capital-S, i.e., God or Law, or Art, etc.) and each other, individuals come to recognise themselves as subjects. On this basis, with the absolute certainty of a closed world, the subjects are free to “work by themselves” (op. cit.), unsupervised.

The question has to be asked, though, is the fact (if we take it to be a fact) that a person operates within a shared system of ideals, that they are ipso facto incapable of being the morally responsible initiator of their actions and incapable in exercising rational control over their destiny?

The Subjected Subject

Althusser can cap off his 'proof' of the subjected character of the self-deluded subject with an archetypal sleight of hand of the kind so popular among French Structuralists:

> … The whole mystery of this effect lies … in the ambiguity of the term *subject*. In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) **a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions**; (2) **a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority**, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. … the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*, …

The two opposite meanings of the word 'subject' have distinct genealogies. Descartes used the Latin translation of Aristotle's *υποκειμενον* (*hypokeimenon*), *subjectum*, to mean the substance (*substantia*) to which all attributes adhered, i.e., (for Descartes) the individual self-consciousness and cogito. This meaning persisted in philosophical discourse. 'Subject' entered the English language in the 14th century in the sense of someone under the dominion of or owing allegiance to a sovereign power, being *subject* to its laws and enjoying its protection. In ordinary usage, 'subject' retained this passive meaning, and took on further usages, such as being the subject of a poem or an accusation, or being subjected to taxes, and so on, while in philosophical discourse it followed Descartes, Kant, and Hegel with the contrary *active* meaning.

Rather than an ambiguity, what we have is effectively two different words, two different concepts. The connection between the two meanings of 'subject' is *historical*, not logical. It is a Structuralist trick to suggest a necessary connection between *being a subject* (i.e., a self-conscious, knowing author of one's own actions) and *being subjected* to a higher authority. The two meanings, are opposite in their meaning and have different contexts.

Contradictions and Social Change

Like Functionalism, Structuralism easily explains how a social system reproduces itself, how any disturbance in the structure is overcome and normal development is restored. According to Althusser, change also occurs thanks to contradictions inherent in the economic system, as outlined by Marx in *Capital*. Further, modern societies are subject to a multiplicity of determinations over and above the principal contradiction (as Mao has famously explained). The capital-labour contradiction is also determined by:

> the forms of the *superstructure* (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organised movements, and so on); specified by *the internal and external historical situation* which determines it on the one hand as a function of the *national past* (completed or 'relapsed' bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local 'customs' specific national *traditions*, even the 'etiquette' of political struggles and behaviour, etc.), and on the other as functions of the existing *world*

context.

Althusser, 1962

Overdetermination, uneven development, and contradictions across levels – all are sources of social upheaval and change, more so, in fact, than contradictions inherent in the capital-labour conflict underlying the structure. But for Althusser, the changes resulting are still products of structural causality, not of any human Will, individual or collective.

Can even the principal contradiction be adequately conceived as a single integral structure? As the Regulation Theorists (Boyer, 1990) have shown, the variety of national instances of the capitalist system shows that capitalist social formations are characterised by very different assemblies of the wage-labour nexus through unions and a particular wage system, forms of competition with greater or lesser degrees of oligopoly, different monetary and banking systems, welfare states of widely different size and focus and differing degrees of state intervention, with each nation occupying a unique position in the network of international relations.

The image of a social formation entirely determined by 'bourgeois ideology' becomes less and less convincing. To live under capitalism in the USA is a very different thing from living under capitalism in India or Norway.

But Structuralism cannot determine how change comes about, it can only describe how the conditions of social change arise – contradictions of various kinds which disturb the normal working of the system. The human practice that is necessary to utilise these conditions and implement one change or another is an exercise of the human Will, both collective and individual. All the national differences, like those listed above, are the outcome of social struggles in which one or another structural principle is abolished or modified, and another structural principle adopted.

As Leontyev explained in his theory of the personality, ideology rooted in social position is only one part of the personality, the rest is made up of personal experiences shaped through an individual person's life course. There is no such thing as a personality entirely determined by ideology, even jointly by a number of ideologies.

Structure, in its multiplicity of determinations, will still position a person with a greater or lesser capacity to effect social change. Still, crises disrupt the social order, and movements, leaders, and new ideologies arise independently of structural determination. The actualisation of a new social order is always a unique act of Will, and in the variety of capitalist societies, we see the residue of such acts.

Even change that directly arises from a contradiction within the principal axis of the structure still has to be resolved and changes still have to be *implemented*, and classes privileged by the status quo ante have to be overcome. But so long as 'science' is to be the exclusive property of an elite, a revolutionary idea is unlikely to grip the masses.

Agency

Althusser introduced 'agency' into sociological discourse, once again borrowing its meaning from legal discourse, referring to a person acting *on behalf of* an institution:

> The school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'. All the **agents** of production, exploitation and repression ... must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'
>
> Althusser, 1970a

Althusser's solution to the riddle of the subjected subject entails the conception that while he, Althusser, is but a humble subject, nevertheless, as a scientist, he is able to participate in and be the bearer (mouthpiece, vehicle, or agent) of Science. Science in his conception is not an Ideology but *truth*, and as such is a process without a subject; it is a subjectless, objective process. But its truths find their way into print via the pens of humble subjects who should not delude themselves about having made a discovery or having been responsible for creating anything. This is despite the claim that science is only possible "from a proletarian class viewpoint, and with the new practice of philosophy that follows from it" (Althusser, 1970d).

This leads to the absurd and reactionary position that Althusser must teach his students a scientific point of view, namely that history is a process without a subject, but at the same time tell them that the working class can rise only to the level of socialist humanism, an *ideology*, and encourage his readers to keep science to themselves, and propagate ideology to the workers instead.

In *Marxism and Humanism*, Althusser explains that not "even a communist society could ever do without ideology, be it ethics, art, or 'world outlook'":

> "... it is not conceivable that communism, a new mode of production implying determinate forces of production and relations of production, could do without a social organisation of production, and corresponding ideological forms.
> So ideology is ... a structure essential to the historical life of societies.
>
> Althusser, 1964

For Althusser, ideology is somewhat like Plato's 'beautiful lies', the Christianity of Hobbes and Kant, Robespierre's 'Festival of the Supreme Being', or August Comte's 'Religion of Humanity' – popular illusions necessary to maintain the institutions of society. The philosopher does not believe in it, but for practical purposes people have to be persuaded to believe in it, just as people have to believe in the fairness of institutions to ensure compliance and social peace. Althusser accepts that not only is socialist humanism necessary for the proper functioning of the institutions of socialist society, but:

> When I say that the concept of humanism is an ideological concept (not a scientific one), I mean that while it really does *designate a set of existing relations*, unlike a scientific concept, it does not

provide us with a means of knowing them.

op. cit.

Nevertheless, it would seem hard to see why a 'scientific concept' that does 'provide us with a means of knowing' existing relations, cannot also function like ideology as the "relay whereby … the relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all" (op. cit.). Are we "bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society" (Marx, 1845)?

The problem here is that communism is not for Althusser a struggle for self-emancipation, but rather a process without a subject, a process leading from one set of institutions to another, and under such conditions, the very notion of 'emancipation' is meaningless. Not something you're likely to lay down your life for.

Althusser was writing as Jean-Paul Sartre was writing his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), and one can see how Althusser and Sartre confronted similar problems and shared many of the same assumptions, but they came to different conclusions. Sartre is trying to grapple with how mass social movements – 'fused groups' – that are real, living expressions of subjectivity, eventually become transformed into a reactionary and ossified bureaucracy like the USSR. Althusser, on the other hand, believed in the myth of the USSR as en route to socialist society via the withering away of the state, and characterises opponents of the bureaucracy as unscientific ideologues.

One gets a real feeling of discomfort as Sartre wrestles with these problems. Not so with Louis Althusser, who even puts the word 'abuses' in inverted commas in referring to the crimes of the Stalin period – after all, these were just problems in the superstructure, not the real foundations of socialism. Ha! Althusser greeted the student uprisings of May–June 1968 first with silence, later describing them as simply infantile Leftists. Sartre perhaps went a little overboard in his enthusiastic support of the students, but he knew which side of the barricades he stood on.

The idea that every aspect of culture in capitalist societies is completely determined by bourgeois ideology, leaving no room at all for social movements which genuinely challenge capitalism, was a powerful idea in its day – an idea that both *expressed* and *supported* the strength of bourgeois society. The idea that the only threat to capitalism came from an entrenched bureaucracy in the USSR and China was also plausible in its day, being expressive of mainstream bourgeois ideology and an important prop for capitalism. The idea that humanist criticisms of Stalinism and capitalism were just unscientific delusions, while truth was available only thanks to the work of a privileged stratum of 'scientists', expressed the spirit of certain social layers for a time. Nothing could better express the ethos of contemporary capitalism than a theory that explains that individuals are nothing but deluded pawns of the system and that, if there is anything to be done about the situation at all, then it has to be left to the experts.

The question has to be asked though: at *what point*, coming down from epochal shifts in history, to changes in government, to events in union branches or workplaces, to deciding when to take a lunchbreak, is there room for a Free Will? Surely there is some line below which individual people really do have a say, but

nothing in Althusser makes it possible to find such a dividing line. Given their social position, at what point is a person simply choosing to do what, in any case, they *had to do*, or what their previous actions had inevitably led them to do, and at what point is the agent's well-chosen or mistaken action an original factor in the situation not to be understood in any other way than as the result of their intervention?

There may have been only one road across the Alps but Hannibal still had to find it.

Real Issues

Nevertheless, Althusser raises some real problems. Looked at from a distance, the impact of individuals on the course of history does appear as nothing more than a wiggle on the historical trajectory, so to speak. History does appear to unfold according to laws that can be the object of Science, laws which cannot be altered by the intervention of individual subjects.

History is made by the movement of masses of people, and such movements are constituted by shared systems of belief that could be called 'ideology' inasmuch as their principal function is not theoretical but 'practico-social'. Masses of people, moved by ideology that, from an outsider's point of view, represents only an imaginary relation of people to their conditions of existence make history, and in doing so, such movements more closely resemble tidal movements than they resemble self-conscious, knowing, sovereign actors. But isn't Science also capable of moving masses? And doesn't the project of emancipation require that Science, and not self-deception, be the weapon of choice? In the nineteenth century, it was very difficult to convince people to take vaccines, but by the first decade of the twentieth century, Science had convinced the mass of people to accept vaccination, and millions of lives were saved. Science was used in the 2020s to propagate misinformation and spread anti-vax beliefs. For good or ill, Science is a subject in history, and it takes the commitment of individual scientists to achieve that.

Althusser certainly did expose the naïveté of most of the leaders and members of the Communist Parties of his time. But Althusser's theory also leads to some horrific and counterintuitive conclusions: that scientific ideas are not suitable for general distribution, that *ideology* should instead be promoted for general distribution, that the scientist is as much a creature of ideology as anyone else, and that he or she is not the creator, but a mere bearer of the science she or he produces, that history unfolds as an entirely objective process, with no subjective component at all, or even any openings for subjective intervention. That is, history and society are natural processes that Science can understand and control, but even Science itself develops as a natural process, just like its objects.

The really long march of history does have to be understood independently of the actions of individuals, with the possible exception of a Napoleon or a Genghis Khan. But that is not the point. It *matters* whether Putin continues to make war on Ukraine and whether the Palestinians in Gaza achieve emancipation this year, this decade, or this century, even if the *final* outcome were inevitable.

However, it is not sufficient to respond to Althusser with a conception of individuals as sovereign subjects, answerable only to laws of their own making (Kant, 1785). Nor can we believe in a Communist Party that is not subject to all the same social processes that are present in the broader society and able to stand outside and above it.

Nevertheless, it is in this 'third position', between the World Spirit – mystical extramundane Subjects working behind the backs of human actors – and the Individual Subject known to common sense, that we must find a way forward. Collective subjects do not stand outside society. All social life is animated by the interpenetration and mutual transformation of a multiplicity of social subjects. Collective subjects have consciousness, feeling, Will, and intentions, thanks to those of the individual participants, who are instances of them as social subjects.

Conclusion

Through a critique of the idea of a collective subject, in favour of subjectless processes that could be understood only by an elite class of 'scientists', Althusser expressed the view that became the real nightmare experience of modernity for millions of people in the industrialised world. While learning from everyday experiences that they were individual subjects responsible for their own actions, even casting a vote, they simultaneously became aware that their fate and the fate of the world were being determined by great inhuman processes, insight into which was available only to an elite. It was a world in which everything was already decided, and there was nothing one could do but watch it unfold. The school, the Church, the workplace, even the family, were all in thrall to these processes. Bureaucracies and governments never really changed, whoever won the elections.

It was from this spiritual wasteland that people began to hanker for confirmation that they did indeed have some say in events in their part of the world. This affirmation of one's own self-determination is known as a 'feeling of agency'. Althusser, the writer who most clearly affirmed this nightmare, also introduced the word 'agency' into social science. But what Althusser meant by 'agency' was being an agent of oppressive institutions!

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