

Ideology: Louis Althusser (1918–1990)

Lecture Notes - Miroslav Imbrisevic, PO201, 9th Oct. 2015

based on his essay from 1970 "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

Althusser's argument is "that regimes or states are able to maintain control by reproducing subjects who believe that their position within the social structure is a natural one." [SEOP entry: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/althusser/>]

Althusser:

"the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they too will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words.' "(132-133)

In order for a society to continue functioning, more or less as it is, we require:

1. Reproduction of material conditions: e.g. workers paid sufficiently to continue working, training in skills to increase profitability; stable property ownership through a certain level of income tax/inheritance tax for example.
2. Reproduction of ideology [a system of ideas and ideals]: acceptance - by all - of the material and social conditions in society

Institutions like the educational system, the media or churches do not just pass on "knowledge", but also to ensure "subjection to the ruling ideology".

MI: IS THIS TRUE?

Myths: the American Dream - anyone can make it: people believe that formal equality of opportunity is the same as fair equality of opportunity. [See Rawls on this distinction].

The British politician Norman Tebbit, famously advised that if you need a job, you just have to "get on you bike!" and you will find one. ("I grew up in the '30s with an unemployed father. He didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it."). The underlying ideological message is: If your are

unemployed, it is your fault for failing to look for work. It is not a systemic fault of the market economies, which are characterised by boom & bust cycles.

For Althusser, just like for Marx society is constituted by two different levels

1. Economic Base (Basis) - this is about the material conditions in society. Base "refers to the forces and relations of production - to all the people, relationships between them, the roles that they play, and the materials and resources involved in producing the things needed by society."

2. Superstructure (Überbau) - this is about the ideas and values within a society. This "includes culture, ideology (world views, ideas, values, and beliefs), norms and expectations, identities that people inhabit, social institutions (education, religion, media, family, among others), the political structure, and the state (the political apparatus that governs society). Marx argued that the superstructure grows out of the base, and reflects the interests of the ruling class that controls the base. As such, it justifies how the base operates, and the power of the ruling class."

[<http://sociology.about.com/od/Key-Theoretical-Concepts/fl/Base-and-Superstructure.htm>]

Althusser, unlike Marx, distinguishes two different instances/types within the Superstructure:

A. the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) = politico-legal (law and the State) and
B. the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA)

A: the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc. = they 'function by violence' – at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms).

B: the religious ISA (the system of the different churches),
 the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'schools'),
 the family ISA,
 the legal ISA,
 the political ISA (the political system, including the different parties),
 the trade-union ISA,
 the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),

the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.).

The ISAs function to secure the same goal as RSAs (that is, the “reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation” [YALE UNIVERSITY RESERVES A THIRD OF ALL PLACES FOR THE CHILDREN OF FORMER ALUMNI - NO FAIR EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY. THIS EXAMPLE ILLUSTRATES HOW PRIVILEGE IS BEING REPRODUCED])

Althusser states that in the pre-capitalist period the dominant ISA was the Church, in “mature capitalist social formations” the dominant ISA is the educational sector. The “School-Family couple has replaced the Church-Family couple” (154)

Q - Althusser:

"It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable,’ squeezed between the family State apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected ‘into production’: these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on . . . it goes somewhat further, until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white-collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit, either to fall into intellectual semi-employment, or to provide, as well as the ‘intellectuals of the collective labourer,’ the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), the agents of repression (soldiers, policemen, politicians, administrators, etc.) and the professional ideologists (priests of all sorts . . .) (155-156)."

IS THE SCHOOL THE DOMINANT ISA?

- 5/6 DAYS A WEEK, 8 HOURS A DAY - FUTURE LITTLE WORKERS?
- WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF EDUCATION/UNIVERSITY?
- ARE WE, STUDENTS AND TEACHERS OF PHILOSOPHY SUCH "PRIESTS"?

Althusser: the function of the educational ISA is: “concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School . . . which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology” (157).

Example: The school day starts with the PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE in the US, written in August 1892 by the Christian (Baptist) socialist minister Francis Bellamy (1855-1931). Bellamy had hoped that the pledge would be used by citizens in any country:

1892

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

in **1923**, the words, "the Flag of the United States of America" were added. At this time it read:

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

In **1954**, in response to the Communist threat of the times, President Eisenhower encouraged Congress to add the words "under God,". Bellamy's daughter objected to this alteration. Today it reads:

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

[MI: A CHILD DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THE WORD 'PLEDGE' NOR THE WORD 'ALLEGIANCE'. BUT OVER TIME IT WILL BE INCULCATED WITH THE VALUES CONTAINED IN THE PLEDGE.]

NOTE THAT THE FOLLOWING IS A FEDERAL LAW

Section 4 of the Flag Code states:

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag (...) should be rendered by standing at attention facing the flag with the right hand over the heart. When not in uniform men should remove any non-religious headdress with their right hand and hold it at the left

shoulder, the hand being over the heart. Persons in uniform should remain silent, face the flag, and render the military salute."

[MI: IN THE EXAMPLE OF THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE BOTH ISAs, THE LAW AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, REINFORCE PATRIOTISM. THE IDEOLOGICAL CONTENT IS COMMUNICATED THROUGH BOTH].

FURTHER ASPECTS:

Hegemony: the dominance or leadership of one social group or nation over others.

American example: The hegemony of the popular kids over the other students means that they determine what is and is not cool - and the others accept it. [THE 'UNCOOL' KIDS ACCEPT THE VALUES OF THE 'COOL' KIDS].

Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist thinker (1891-1937): **Cultural Hegemony**

Gramsci's take on Ideology is broadly similar to Althusser, but Gramsci also introduces something new. The state exercises a coercive domination over its citizens - this is an external way of dominating by force (military, police, courts, prisons, civil service/administration etc.) in the realm of political society. This serves to discipline those who do not consent. Within civil society we find a different form of domination: domination through consent. It is an internalized form of domination (rather than being external as in the political sphere). The ideas, values, view of the ruling class dominate life in civil society - these views are internalized/consented to by individuals.

Bibliography:

Althusser, Louis, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, in: *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, New York 1971, the whole book is here: [http://www.marx2mao.com/Other/LPOE70.html]

Gramsci, Antonio, *The Gramsci Reader*, New York 2000. Available here: [http://ouleft.org/wp-content/uploads/gramsci-reader.pdf]

Lears, T.J. Jackson, *The Concept of Cultural Hegemony*, in: *The American Historical Review*, 1985 Vol. 90/3, pp. 567-593. [this is about Gramsci]

SEOP/Althusser: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/althusser/

