

Consciousness and Ideology:
Reading Althusser Through Marx

By
James Cameron

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Approved by: Dr. S. Gaon

Professor of Political Science

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Abstract

In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser criticizes the ideology-theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology*. Althusser characterizes their ideology-theory as “non-Marxist” on the grounds that it operates with an empiricist epistemology incompatible with the principles of historical materialism. He therefore also attempts to develop an ideology-theory of his own, where ideology in *general* is understood as a process of interpellating individuals as subjects. I argue that Althusser’s characterization of Marx and Engel’s ideology-theory as betraying an empiricist epistemology is not supported by their work, and that his corresponding ideology-theory fails as a properly Marxist account of ideology in *general*. In its attempt to account for the subjective side of consciousness it slips into an idealist account of ideology, while simultaneously employing a structural account of the ideological subject, thereby creating a contradiction. A by-product of this project, however, is the development of a properly Marxian theory of ideology, which is ultimately compatible with Althusser’s theory of ideology in *particular*. Thus, the merit of Althusser’s undertaking is that it provides an accurate assessment of the dissemination and functional role of particular ideologies in society, notwithstanding the shortcomings of his reading of Marx and Engels or his theory of ideology in *general*.

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Introduction

In his 1970 essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser makes a formidable attempt to develop a coherent, Marxist, theory of ideology. His motivation for so doing is twofold. On the one hand, his motivation is critical. He is attempting to correct perceived deficiencies in the theory of ideology developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. While Althusser readily acknowledges that there is a coherent theory of ideology discernable in Marx and Engels’ writings, he claims that it is non-Marxist (Althusser, 2014, 253). He bases this claim on a reading of Marx and Engels which situates their theory in a naïve empiricism. Althusser claims they are far too reliant on an epistemology rooted in the belief that knowledge is produced through an imprintation of meaning onto the consciousness of the subject, and that they ignore the subjective side of consciousness (Althusser, 2014, Rehmann, 2013, 23). On the other hand, his motivation is constructive. Althusser aims to formulate a properly Marxist theory of ideology in order to better understand how the conditions of production are reproduced under existing social relations (Althusser, 2014, 232). To accomplish this, he proposes a twofold understanding of ideology. Althusser presents a theory of ideology in particular, that is, a theory of ideology as it functions under capitalist social relations (Althusser, 2014, 236). Additionally, he offers a theory of ideology in general, a theory of what is essential to ideology, regardless of the spatio-temporal context (Althusser, 2014, 253).

The question we must ask is whether or not Althusser’s critique of Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory and his ensuing attempt to construct his own, two-fold, Marxist theory of ideology as the interpellation of individuals as subjects stands up to scrutiny. The answer I intend to support is that Althusser’s critique of Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory is based on a misreading of their thought. Further, I will show that although Althusser’s theory of ideology in

general fails on the grounds that it presents a contradictory account of ideology in its attempt to avoid the naïve empiricism that he misreads in Marx and Engels, his theory of ideology in particular is, nonetheless, still valuable as a tool for understanding the dissemination of ideology under capitalist social relations. Thus, Althusser's theory is valuable notwithstanding its shortcomings.

The argument will be developed in four steps. The first of these involves developing an understanding of what Althusser's critique of Marx and Engels' ideology-theory entails. To accomplish this, an exploration of Althusser's text "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" will be conducted. In the next step I will identify the errors that Althusser has made in his reading of Marx and Engels. To do so, I undertake an alternative reading of the works of Marx and Engels. I argue on that basis that his critique cannot be said to stand.

The third step of the argument is the examination of Althusser's own theory of ideology, which he developed in response to his (mis)reading of Marx and Engels. I intend to show that Althusser's theory of ideology in general does not accomplish his stated goal of developing a properly Marxist account of ideology on the grounds that, in its attempt to account for the active, subjective side of consciousness, it conceptualizes ideology in a contradictory way (Althusser, 2014, 253). This becomes apparent when Althusser's theory of ideology in general is compared to Marx and Engels' own works on ideology. Finally, I highlight the merits of Althusser's theory of ideology in particular; I argue that his theory of the ideological state apparatus, specifically, should be appreciated as a powerful tool for understanding the reproduction of the submission to the ruling ideology under capitalist social relations (Althusser, 2014, 236). This is shown through a comparison of the ideology-theory of Marx and Engels and Althusser's theory of ideology in particular. I demonstrate that the two are compatible, and indeed, that the latter explains the

practical, concrete actualization of the former. Thus, while Althusser's theory cannot be said to stand in toto, it is nonetheless valuable to a limited extent.

The compatibility between Althusser's theory of ideology in *particular* and the ideology-theory I discern from Marx and Engels' work allows us to develop a richer understanding of the role that ideology plays in society. By sketching a conception of the essence of ideology and utilizing Althusser's theory to highlight its functional and reproductive role in society, I am able to shed light on the fundamentally important role that ideology has played and continues to play in the unfolding of world-history.

Section I: Althusser On Ideology

Because the argument being put forward is that Althusser's critique of Marx and Engels' ideology-theory is misguided and based on a misreading of Marx and Engels, a solid understanding of this critique is needed. Althusser was motivated to develop the ideology-theory found in his 1970 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" chiefly because of the deficiencies he perceived in Marx and Engels' formulations on the topic. Understanding Althusser's critique of Marx and Engels' supposed non-Marxist conception of ideology is also vital for understanding his own conception of ideology, because his theory is based on his critique (Althusser, 2014, 253).

In his most extensive exploration of this question, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser writes that his aim is to develop a conception of ideology that helps explain how the conditions of production are reproduced under the capitalist mode of production, from the "*point of view of reproduction*" (2014, 232-3). This is necessary because, as Althusser writes, paraphrasing Marx in a letter to Louis Kugelmann, "Every child knows that a social

formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year” (2014, 232). In other words, a society must not only continually engage in production, but it must also continuously reproduce its conditions in order to safeguard and maintain the means of production. If it does not do so, it cannot continue to function properly and will degenerate.

It is from this point of view that Althusser sets out to conceptualize ideology. Moreover, the role of ideology in this process must be examined, because as both Marx and Engels (1994b) and Althusser note, it is not enough to explain reproduction on a material level (2014, 235, 242-3). There is also a certain “know-how” that is necessary in order to reproduce the conditions of production (and in particular, to reproduce labour-power), a “know-how” which must itself be reproduced (Althusser, 2014, 235). Because know-how contains a mental component in addition to a physical component, and because ideology is linked to consciousness, a theory of ideology and its role in society must be developed (Althusser, 2014, 236). We thus read in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” that “[t]he reproduction of labour-power thus reveals as its *sine qua non* not only the reproduction of its ‘skills’ but also the reproduction of its subjection to the ruling ideology or of the ‘practice’ of ideology” (Althusser, 2014, 236). This ruling ideology, then, must be accounted for.

This is, of course, an insufficient explanation of why Althusser believes *he* must develop a theory of ideology, as he freely admits this is something that theorists in the tradition have been grappling with for many decades (Althusser, 2014, 253). In fact, he acknowledges the contribution of Marx himself to the study of ideology, writing that Marx understood ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (Althusser, 2014, 253). However, he goes on to say that the theory of ideology given to

us by Marx (and Engels) in *The German Ideology*, while being an explicit theory of ideology, is “not Marxist” (Althusser, 2014, 253). This is a rather curious accusation, but what is meant by it is that the theory of ideology developed by Marx himself is inconsistent with the principles of “Marxism” as a systematic theory¹. This is Althusser’s point of departure. Althusser will go on, as I show, to identify in *The German Ideology* a conception of ideology which “*has no history*” (Althusser, 2014, 254). It is the identification of this non-historical character of Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory that forms the basis for his insistence on its non-Marxist property.

It is also important to note at this point that Althusser is concerned with developing both a theory of ideologies in *particular*, as well as a theory of ideology in *general*. In other words, he aims to explore not only how particular ideologies function in particular social circumstances and formations, but also, beyond that, what ideology is in *general*, or what is essential about ideology *as ideology* (Althusser, 2014, 254). It is this general conception of ideology that Althusser finds particularly lacking in Marx and Engels. Althusser sees in Marx and Engels’ conception of the essence of ideology an empiricist epistemology which is inconsistent with the principles of Marxism.

Jan Rehmann identifies Althusser as belonging to a camp of critics who attack Marx and Engels’ conception of ideology on the grounds that it represents a “naïve sensuous empiricism” that adheres too strictly to a mechanistic epistemology (Rehmann, 2013, 23). These critics interpret “false consciousness” as betraying a subject-object relation in which an external, objective, material world directly imprints meanings onto the consciousness of people, who then

¹ It is necessary here to draw a distinction between a “Marxist” theory, to which Althusser refers, and a “Marxian” theory. “Marxism” refers to a systematic theory developed out of the works of Marx and Engels that includes contributions (Marxist theories) by other theorists. “Marxian” is to be understood as based on the writings of Marx himself. Althusser, in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” uses the term “non-Marxist,” referring to “Marxism” the systematic theory. I intend to show that Althusser is wrong here, that in fact the “Marxian” ideology-theory (that theory found in the works of Marx) is compatible with “Marxism,” the systematic theory.

behave in accordance with those imprints. This, according to Rehmann, leaves the masses as mere “dupes of history,” passively reacting to external stimuli (Rehmann, 2013, 23). Setting aside for now the question of the validity of this critique, it is necessary to show that Althusser does in fact belong to this camp of critics.

As mentioned above, Althusser characterizes the theory of ideology in general offered in *The German Ideology* as non-Marxist; Althusser describes it as “a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness.” (2014, 254). In other words, the conception of ideology as false consciousness is said to give us a theory of ideology in general that is totally devoid of content beneath its appearance, and to function as a kind of veil, or distorted worldview. This can be explained better using a concrete example. Althusser writes of ideological beliefs that people may hold in things like “God, or Duty, or Justice, etc.” (2014, 259). On Althusser’s reading of Marx and Engels’ conception of ideology, these ideological beliefs are to be understood as nothing more than figments of the imagination, imprints on the consciousness of a person placed there by the societal superstructure, and the result of the distorted perception shaped by this superstructure. A person may hold an ideological belief in God, for instance, but this is only because they have been told to by the priests, just as they may hold an ideological belief in Justice because they have been taught to do so in civics class. The belief is nothing more than an intellectual reflection of the socio-cultural conditions in which one lives (Althusser, 2014, 255).

Althusser goes on to compare this conception of ideology as nothingness to the “theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud... purely imaginary, i.e. null, result of ‘day’s residues’” (2014, 254). Again, we see here an interpretation of Marx and Engels’ theory of ideology that lines up with those of other critics who detect an empiricist bent in the theory. In this model, the empiricist, subject-object knowledge relationship remains intact.

People are characterized as passive subjects with these ideological beliefs implanted onto their consciousness by a material force external to them. There is no place for the “historical-life process” of real, sensuous humans that Marx and Engels elsewhere seems to suggest is the key to understanding consciousness (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 111). This model of ideology, with its sterile and mechanistic epistemology, more closely resembles the Feuerbachian materialism that Marx himself attacks in the “Theses on Feuerbach” than a properly Marxist (or Marxian) ideology-theory (1994b). Indeed, in the “Theses” Marx criticizes Feuerbachian materialism precisely because it does not account for sensuous human activity, does not account for the “active side” of consciousness, and concerns itself only with “the *object or perception*” (Marx, 1994b, 99).

Nonetheless, Althusser sums up his critique of Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory by stating that, for Marx and Engels, “ideology, then, is... constituted by the ‘day’s residues’ from the only full and positive reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence.” It is on this basis that ideology is said to have no history in *The German Ideology*, according to Althusser (2014, 254). He clarifies this by adding that he does not mean that there is “no history in it,” just that it has no history of its *own* (2014, 255). This means that while it is obvious that particular ideologies have history in them, ideology in general has no history. For example, one may hold an ideological belief in “Justice.” This particular “instance” of ideology certainly has history in it, insofar as it develops out of particular social circumstances (the legal system conducive to bourgeois property relations). However, ideology in general has no history of its own because it is “a pure dream,” entirely exterior to “the concrete history of concrete material individuals” (Althusser, 2014, 254).

It is now becoming clearer why Althusser contends that the ideology-theory of Marx and Engels' is non-Marxist. If, as Marx himself highlighted in his formulation of the principles of historical materialism found in "The Eighteenth Brumaire," "Men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past," then a conception of ideology removed or divorced from history is irreconcilable with historical materialism (Marx, 1994a, 188). Additionally, if the history of social formations is the history of class struggle, as Marx and Engels postulate in *The Communist Manifesto*, then to remove ideology from history is to remove it from the class struggle, an equally non-Marxist (and indeed non-Marxian) outcome (Marx & Engels, 1994a, 158). This line of reasoning leads to Althusser's conclusion that the ideology-theory developed in *The German Ideology* is non-Marxist, and that a properly Marxist theory of ideology is therefore required.

We can find support for this interpretation of Althusser's critique elsewhere, both within and outside the Althusserian tradition. Rehmann, for instance, contends that Althusser found Marx and Engels' ideology-theory to be non-Marxist on the grounds that it is "illusory" (2013, 31). "Illusion" here should be understood in much the same way as "nothingness," in the sense that it means the simple imprintation, by an external force, of incorrect knowledge onto the consciousness of the masses, blinding them to legitimate reality. Rehmann also supports the central claim of this paper, namely that Althusser came to this conclusion through a selective reading of *The German Ideology* (Rehmann, 2013, 31).

Warren Montag, in *Althusser and his Contemporaries*, also identifies Althusser's critique of Marx and Engels, but unlike Rehmann he agrees with Althusser about its supposedly non-Marxist character. He concurs with Althusser's understanding of Marx and Engels' ideology-

theory as naïvely empiricist and as conceiving of consciousness as malleable and as formed solely by external inputs of false information. Writing about *The German Ideology*, Montag says “There, ideology has no reality; it consists of mere “echoes” of real life, the phantoms and illusions whose only truth lies in the reality external to them and on which they depend. Ideology arises and disappears with the real history of which it is the phantasm” (2013, 107). This further supports the claim advanced here, that Althusser understands Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory in terms of a simple veil or distorted worldview that is imprinted onto our consciousness, and through which external reality is perceived. Divorced from history, says Althusser and, hence, from the class struggle (as these two are synonymous) as well as from sensuous human activity, this model of ideology can hardly be called Marxist.

It suffices to say, then, that Althusser’s critique of Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory amounts to an interpretation of their work (*The German Ideology* in particular) as an exercise in empiricist epistemology. According to Althusser, Marx and Engels’ account of ideology as “false consciousness” takes consciousness to be shaped entirely by an external reality acting upon it, with no activity by the subject, the conscious being itself, playing a role. When Marx and Engels describe ideology as false or inverted consciousness, then, Althusser interprets this to mean a simple matter of incorrect or inverted information being imprinted onto consciousness by the external forces that form and shape it. This imprintation then mediates future perceptions, functioning as a veil which reproduces distortions and inversions. This is non-Marxist because it fails to account for the sensuous, subjective aspect of consciousness that an historical-materialist analysis requires. The next section will show that Althusser has in fact misread and misinterpreted Marx and Engels’ ideology-theory, and his charge that the theory is non-Marxist is therefore misinformed.

Section II: Answering the Critique

As suggested earlier, there is an error in Althusser's reading of Marx and Engels' ideology-theory. Specifically, the currents of an empiricist epistemology that Althusser identifies as running through their ideology-theory are not in fact present. To demonstrate this, I begin by elaborating on the function of consciousness in Marx and Engels' ideology-theory, to reveal that consciousness for them does in fact account for the active, subjective side of human activity (Marx, 1994b, 99). Second, I explain how the idea of ideology as a "camera-obscura" relates to consciousness in a way that exceeds the empiricist framework through which Althusser reads it (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 111). Finally, I draw on Michael Heinrich's (2004) analysis to explore what Marx's theory of the commodity fetish tells us about the practical function of ideology in society; this further concretizes the practical side of their ideology-theory. This reading of Marx and Engels' ideology-theory demonstrates that Althusser's view of their work is too narrow, and that his charge of a naïve empiricist epistemology is, therefore, not apt.

First, it is necessary to address a potential source of the confusion around the question of ideology in Marx and Engels' writings. Nowhere do they offer a succinct and clear definition of the term; instead, it is used throughout their writings on *ad hoc* basis (Rehmann, 2013, 21). This does not mean, however, that Marx and Engels use the term arbitrarily, or that we cannot pull from their writings a coherent understanding of the concept. From narratives about false or inverted consciousness, to discussions of ideology as a "camera-obscura," to the ideology-critique that proceeds from the theory of the fetishization of the commodity and the so-called "trinity formula," the term "ideology" may appear, superficially, to mean many different things depending on the context in which it is employed. Nonetheless, by reading several of the *ad hoc* uses of the term in light of the general themes of the works as a whole, it is possible to construct

a rough outline of a coherent ideology-theory drawn from several of Marx and Engels' texts.

This reading challenges Althusser's critique.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels write that "all ideology amounts to either a distorted interpretation of . . . history or a complete abstraction from it" (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 107). The use of the word "distortion" here is important. Taken by itself, it strongly suggests that ideology is a kind of worldview that misrepresents or falsifies reality. To be in ideology, therefore, would be to use this inverted worldview as a tool for analyzing reality, and to conclude that the analysis conducted by way of this "distortion" leads to genuine knowledge. Based on this understanding of ideology as a simple distortion, it follows that in order to produce genuine knowledge, we must use a method of analysis that is not distorted.

Later in *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels offer an example of this of distortion by way of a critique of Max Stirner's conception of history. Marx and Engels accuse the thought of Stirner (whom they consider to be a premiere ideologist) of distorting history, saying "Blessed Max Stirner, who does not know a thing about real history. . . sees history as a mere tale of 'knights,' 'robbers,' and 'ghosts'" (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 126). In other words, Stirner's mistake is that his historical analysis is rooted in a distorted, partial, and therefore ideological, worldview; thus, the historical "knowledge" that it produces has no meaningful connection to "real history." This model of ideology as distortion, however, must not be read as "mere" distortion. This is the mistake identifiable in Althusser's reading. It is imperative that a Marxian conception of ideology account for their works on ideology in a holistic way. As shown above, distortion plays a prominent role in the ideology-theory of Marx and Engels, but a wider reading of their work shows that for them distortion is understood a specific way, not as "mere" distortion.

The understanding of ideology as mere false consciousness rests on a highly mechanistic epistemology and subject-object relation. While this is deducible from a narrow reading of *The German Ideology*, this empiricist epistemology is precisely what Marx criticizes in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, a text whose goal is to expose the idealist nature of Feuerbach's naïve empiricism (Marx, 1994b, 99-101). Specifically, Marx writes that "The chief defect of all previous materialism (including Feuerbach's) is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the *object or perception*, but not as *sensuousness human activity, practice [Praxis]*, not subjectively" (Marx, 1994b, 99, italics in original). In other words, previous materialisms do not concern themselves with the actual life practice of humans; they are focused solely on objective, external forces acting on humans, who are depicted as mere passive spectators. Such materialism's fail to account for the subjective and conscious aspect of existence. It is on precisely the same grounds that we can criticize any conception of ideology as *mere false consciousness*, because it reduces the human subject to a mere spectator of reality, without agency.

The question then becomes, are Marx and Engels guilty of developing a conception of ideology that evidences this kind of Feuerbachian materialism, as Althusser suggests? Have they violated their own principles? We can answer this question by examining some other passages from *The German Ideology*. When read in the context of Marx's critique of Feuerbachian empiricist materialism, a conception of ideology in line with the principles of historical materialism becomes easier to discern.

Writing on the topic of consciousness and knowledge production, for example, Marx and Engels say, "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is directly interwoven with the material activity and the material relationships of men; it is the language of actual life"

(1994b, 111). In other words, consciousness derives from what we do, sensuously and materially. Compare this with the Feuerbachian notion of consciousness as an imprint of the external, objective world onto the minds of humans. It follows from Marx and Engels' conception of consciousness that "if men appear upside down in all ideology as in a camera-obscura, this phenomenon is caused by their historical life-process" (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 111). Ideology, then, is indeed conceived of as a kind of inversion, but the inversion is itself rooted in the historical and material concrete activity of human beings.

The difference between the empiricist conception of consciousness and Marx and Engels' conception of consciousness as rooted in sensuous material activity, together with the two models of ideology that are derivable from them, is made clearer if we expand on the distinction between two different conceptions of consciousness. Returning to the *Theses*, we can detect in Marx's writing a certain admiration for the purely idealist conception of consciousness, in that it focuses on the subjective side of conscious activity. "[I]n opposition to materialism the *active* side was developed by idealism -- but only abstractly since idealism naturally does not know actual, sensuous activity as such" (Marx, 1994b, 99). The challenge, then, is to develop a conception of consciousness that accounts for both the "active" side and the "sensuous" side, without diminishing one or the other.

Marx and Engels accomplish this in *The German Ideology*. They lay out a five-point map of social activity and its role in production of consciousness. The first condition necessary for social activity is the production of the means to satisfy basic needs. From this follows the production of new needs which arise as a result of basic production. We then come to the production of new people, or procreation, which is necessary in order to reproduce social activity. These three then come together in the development of "productive force," whereby the

first three are themselves produced (1994b, 115-6). Finally, they underline the role of consciousness in social activity, which is itself determined in the same way as the first four aspects of social life, namely by “their physical organization” (1994b, 117). Because our consciousness develops out of our physical organization, it cannot be understood as “pure” or in an ideal sense; it is imbued with the same practical activity as are all other aspects of social life (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 117).

It now becomes easier to see how consciousness and ideology as “false” consciousness cannot be understood merely through the objective empiricist process that Althusser describes. For Marx and Engels, consciousness and ideology are imbued with a decidedly social and material character. Additionally, they account for the active, subjective, side of consciousness without reducing it to purity or ideality. What Marx and Engels accomplish with this conception of consciousness and ideology is a recognition of both the material character and the “active” side of these phenomena. They thereby satisfy an understanding of the subjective function of ideology. The subject of ideology is accounted for insofar as its consciousness is formed by its social, practical, material life. We are still left, however, with the problem of how to understand the “false,” “inverted,” or “distorted” character of this consciousness. Marx’s theory of the fetishized commodity may help to make this clearer.

In a dedicated chapter of his *Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx’s Capital*, Michael Heinrich (2004) offers a succinct analysis of the concept of fetishism as it is developed in Marx’s later thought. According to Heinrich, the concept of the fetish was originally used to refer to practices in so-called “primitive” societies, the members of which would deify or worship a manmade object such as an idol, or a piece of cloth (Heinrich, 2004, 179). This primitive practice was contrasted to the (supposedly) enlightened and rational practices of

bourgeois society, which had allegedly done away with these kinds of veils or illusions. The nature of reality in the modern bourgeois world had become raw and explicit (Heinrich, 2004, 180). What Marx realized, however, was that rather than doing away with illusion entirely, bourgeois rationalism had actually fetishized capital and “reified” its own social relations. In effect, the social relations appear, through their fetishization, to be natural and not the result of particular material conditions. As Heinrich writes, “[t]hrough such a naturalization of social relationships, it appears as if *things* have the properties and autonomies of *subjects*” (2004, 34).

Marx identified one instance of this false naturalization in the so-called “trinity formula” (Heinrich, 2004, 181), whereby the members of the social body misidentify the sources of value derived from capital, land rent, and wages (Heinrich, 2004, 183-4). The reified nature of capitalist social relations cause us to misidentify these as sources of value in and of themselves, and thereby to understand the process of surplus value extraction as natural, as opposed to occurring as a result of the particular method of capitalist organization. While capital, land rent, and wages are all sources of *income*, they are all only such insofar as they are means appropriating the *value* created by the employment of labour-power. Capital extracts its *income* from the surplus *value* of labour-power, land rent from the portion of this surplus value it charges the capitalist, and labour from the portion of value returned to it in the form of a wage (Heinrich, 2004, 182). The *value* contained in the *income* derived from these is not distinct in each case, it is found in the labour-power expropriated to produce these incomes.

The entirety of the relations of production in bourgeois society have thus become “reified.” “[I]t is no longer apparent that these [reified relations of production] are specific historical relations between people. Rather, these seem to have an objective foundation in the fact that production occurs at all” writes Heinrich (2004, 184). In other words, these relations are

identified correctly as relations, but they are misidentified in so far as their origin is attributed to production *itself* and not the particulars of our social organization, the unfolding of world-history (Marx & Engels, 1994b, 141). This reification leads us to conclude, based solely on misrepresented appearances, that our social relations (and by extension, capital) are imbued with a kind of mystical property and that they are natural, when in fact no such property is present and they are specific to the capitalist mode of production. This characterization of something concrete (the relations of production) as something abstract (“natural,” occurring because of production *as* production) constitutes an aspect of the fetishization of the commodity. Everyone in society, members of both classes, operate within this fetishism, which manifests as an “objective form of thought.” Our perception is structured by these reified social relations, thereby reproducing the fetish character of the commodity for those in the social body. The fetishized structure of perception is always present, says Heinrich, but it is penetrable on “the basis of experience and reflection” (Heinrich, 2004, 185).

The relevance of the theory of the commodity-fetish to the project of Marxist ideology-theory more generally is found in the way that our conscious experience of the commodity fetish functions. The belief in the commodity’s value is an inverted or false consciousness, but it is also a consciousness that corresponds to reality. This may seem contradictory on the surface, but further analysis reveals this to not be the case. The consciousness of the commodity-fetish corresponds to reality insofar as it corresponds to the reality of existing bourgeois social relations and conditions of production. This is why the value of the commodity-fetish is understood as an “objective form of thought.” It represents the material reality of bourgeois society and capitalist production. The structures of this society and mode of production are genuine structures, and the perceptual effect they have on the members of the social body are their result. It is only when we

take a step back and examine these structures *at the level of structures* and on a dialectical basis that the entirely unnatural naturalness and falseness of the entire system becomes evident (Rehmann, 2013, 42-3). Because of the nature of these structures, this can only be accomplished *post hoc*, because the reified processes operate behind the backs of all those whose perception is structured by them (Rehmann, 2013, 41).

This reading of Marx and Engels' ideology-theory repudiates the critique levelled against it by Althusser. Taken together, the role of consciousness, the relationship between conscious activity and practical activity discernable in the theory of the "camera-obscura," and the theory of the commodity fetish allow us to sketch a theory of ideology that is far removed from Althusser's critique, which focuses solely on the epistemological character of ideology as false consciousness. While not abandoning the notion that ideology represents false consciousness, the expanded understanding of consciousness and the model of illusion that the theory of the commodity fetish offers allows us to move beyond empiricist epistemology. Instead, we can identify an ideology-theory that corresponds to the principles of historical materialism, and which is therefore invulnerable to Althusser's claim that it is reductively empiricist and therefore non-Marxist.

Section III: Ideology in General

The demonstration that Althusser's critique of Marx and Engels' ideology-theory is unfounded does not immediately invalidate the ideology-theory that Althusser develops out of his critique. In this section I examine Althusser's alternate theory of ideology in general to show that it does not accomplish his stated goal of developing a properly Marxist account of ideology. This is because Althusser's theory demonstrates an internal contradiction. On the one hand, in its

attempt to account for the active, subjective side of consciousness it slips into idealism, by way of a psychological essentialism. On the other, his conception of ideology as the “interpellation of individuals as subjects” suggests an external, structural explanation of the function of ideology (Althusser, 2014, 261).

As discussed above, Althusser’s conception of ideology can be broken down into two distinct components. The first of these is his conception of ideology in *particular*. When theorizing about ideology in particular, Althusser is referring to the specific, historical ways in which ideologies are manifest. For instance, the ideology or ideologies that function under capitalism to reproduce the conditions of production are *particular* ideologies (Althusser, 2014, 253). Althusser’s conception of ideology in *general*, on the other hand, concerns what is essential about ideology itself, regardless of the specific circumstances in which it plays out or the particular form that it takes. He will conclude that ideology in general is an eternal, omni-historical phenomenon whereby the imaginary relationship of an individual’s real conditions of existence are represented to them and by them, and that ideology “interpellates” individuals into subjecthood (Althusser, 2014, 255-6, 261).

Althusser’s theory of ideology in *general* begins from the point of view of reproduction in general (i.e. reproduction under *any* system of social relations) (Althusser, 2014, 232). He notes that the conditions of production require that both the forces and the relations of production are reproduced, and that the reproduction of the forces of production require the reproduction of labour-power (Althusser, 2014, 233-4). The reproduction of labour-power requires not only the reproduction of workers themselves, but the reproduction of the skills necessary for labour-power (to be effective). As we read in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” “labour-power has to be (diversely) skilled and therefore reproduced as such” (Althusser, 2014, 235).

These skills involve not only the “know-how” required for their execution, moreover, but also the “‘rules’ of good behaviour” that are required to successfully fulfil one’s role in a class society (Althusser, 2014, 235). These rules involve conventional morality, professionalism, and “ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination” (Althusser, 2014, 236).

Althusser goes on to conclude that learning this know-how and rules of good behaviour are what constitute “*subjection to the ruling ideology*” (Althusser, 2014, 236). This is the same subjection that Marx and Engels discuss in *The German Ideology* when they say “The class having the means of material production has also control over the means of intellectual production... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships... which make the one class ruling one and therefore the ideas of its domination.” (1994b, 129). Having established that subjection to the ruling ideology must be reproduced in order for the conditions of production themselves to be reproduced and maintained, Althusser goes on to explain what a “ruling ideology” means in a general, universal sense (Althusser, 2014, 256).

The first aspect of ideology in general that Althusser explains is its “eternal” or “omni-historical” characteristic (Althusser, 2014, 255). In the essay on ideology, we read that “the peculiarity of ideology is that it is endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, i.e. an *omni-historical* reality” (Althusser, 2014, 255). He compares ideology’s omni-historical and eternal character to the eternal character of the unconscious that is explicated by Freud. Althusser argues, “If eternal means, not transcendent to all (temporal) history, but omni-present, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history, I shall adopt Freud’s expression word for word, and write *ideology is eternal*, exactly like the unconscious.” (2014, 255).

This is a rather curious claim to make, given that much of his critique of Marx and Engels' account of ideology rests on his understanding of this account as having no history, or being removed from history. The difference between these two assertions, though, is that Althusser views the non-historical nature of Marx and Engels ideology-theory as a "purely negative thesis," whereas the historical position of his conception of ideology is understood in a "purely positive sense" (2014, 254). He writes that his "positive" conception of an eternal ideology is "immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history" (Althusser, 2014, 255). This, apparently, solves the problem Althusser identifies in Marx and Engels' non-Marxist conception of ideology, namely that their conception of ideology is separated from history, and from the class struggle specifically, which makes it irreconcilable with the principles of historical materialism. Althusser's "positive" omni-historical character of ideology apparently allows us to detect its presence throughout history, understood as "the history of class struggles, i.e. the history of class societies," but does not tie it to any *particular* history (Althusser, 2014, 255). Marx and Engels, on the other hand, remove ideology from concrete history entirely and it becomes nothing more than a negative "inverted reflection of real history" (Althusser, 2014, 255).

This seems to me to be a rather dubious distinction. More specifically, the reference to the "positive" and Freudian, non-historical characteristic of ideology suggests that the consciousness of an individual (and by extension, their ideology) is essential to their make-up and not determined by their historical development. Jeremiah Conway, in his article "The Retreat from History," offers a summary of the standard Marxist critique of the Freudian conception of consciousness, which is that "the basic ideological motif of Freudianism is that a person's consciousness is shaped not by his/her historical existence but by his/her biological being"

(Conway, 1983 104). When we compare this to Marx and Engels' account of consciousness offered above, we can see how Althusser's removal of ideology from the historical life-process (through his conceptualization of ideology as "eternal") disregards historical materialism, and is therefore disconnected from a solidly Marxian analysis. It appears that, in trying to account for the "active" side of consciousness, Althusser himself slips into a kind of introspective idealism, and therefore fails to arrive at a properly Marxian conception of ideology.

Recall from the previous section that Marx and Engels' ground their conception of consciousness, whether false or otherwise, in the historical unfolding of social activity. There is a clear causal link between material and intellectual production. What Althusser has done is to sever this link, to remove the role of social activity from consciousness production and to ground the latter in some kind of inner psychological essence that resides in the subject. Far from satisfying a Marxist account of ideology, Althusser has abandoned the principles of historical materialism and removed any role for practical human activity from his ideology-theory, relying solely on the "active" side of consciousness.

The next aspect of Althusser's ideology-theory to be examined is the claim that ideology is a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2014, 256). What Althusser means by this is that, while ideology quite obviously is made up of imaginary or illusory beliefs, thoughts, and ideas, these do bear some correspondence to reality. The example he uses to illustrate this is the dissemination of the ideological belief in God under the feudal mode of production. In this particular manifestation of ideology, "God is the imaginary representation of the real King" (Althusser, 2014, 256). Put another way, this aspect of ideology accounts for both the illusory aspect of the ideological belief, as well as for its practical function, which requires some allusion to concrete reality. It is

not so much the connection between the imaginary (God) and the concrete (the King) that suggests an idealist conception of ideology, but rather the way that Althusser imagines the “imaginary” as something cut off from sensuous activity.

Althusser utilizes the “imaginary” here in a way that Rehmann describes as containing an “unhistorical-anthropological essence” (Rehmann, 2013, 159). The implication is that Althusser has once again rooted his conception of ideology in something essential about humans, something “eternal” and entirely removed from the events of history. Althusser writes, for instance, that “‘man is an ideological animal by nature’,” implying that something within us, naturally, predisposes us to live in ideology, a decidedly idealist position. Further, he roots his conception of the “imaginary” in a Spinozian understanding of consciousness and imagination, whereby the inner life, the subjective side of consciousness, is the final determinant. He writes, drawing from Spinoza, that “ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time *that it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality)” (Althusser, 2014, 265). In other words, the subject of ideology, in virtue of being a subject, is always in ideology, despite the non-ideological nature of the external, objective, physical world. This strongly implies an ideology which is *not* the product of social activity (insofar as we are definitionally severed from our social activity by this model) and is instead something purely ideal and biologically essential, ever present and independent of our historical life.

The final aspect of Althusser’s conception of ideology in general that illuminates how it functions is the claim that “*Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects*” (Althusser, 2014, 261). Althusser tells us that only a subject can be the “destination” of ideology and that the subject is the “constitutive category of all ideology” (Althusser, 2014, 261-2). This means, in essence, that to be subjected to ideology is to have become a subject; it means that ideology

makes us subjects. The eternal character of ideology, however, makes it impossible for us to understand this in a temporally linear fashion, whereby we pass from the category of individual to the category of subject, with a definitive before and after point. In fact, we are “*always already* subjects” due to the omni-historical nature of ideology (Althusser, 2014, 263). Insofar as we are “always already subjects,” then, we are always interpellated into ideology.

Nonetheless, Althusser explains the process of subjection by claiming that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. “Individual” here is understood as that abstract category of person who is outside of ideology and lives in scientific knowledge instead, for there is no “Subject of science” (Althusser, 2014, 262). This distinction between “science” and “ideology” (and, hence, between “individual and subject”) is important for Althusser. He simultaneously claims that we are always already interpellated into ideology as subjects, and that there is an external, objective world without ideology that “individuals” know scientifically (Althusser, 2014, 262). This creates a logical problem: he leaves open the possibility of analyzing reality outside the confines of ideology while simultaneously claiming this to be impossible. This logical problem, when taken to its natural conclusion, creates a contradiction in his theory of ideology in *general*. Althusser’s characterization of ideology as a system of eternal, imaginary representations suggests that it is a purely ideal phenomenon, occurring only in our subjective conscious and totally cut off from material reality. His model of “interpellation,” however, requires a structural explanation, where an external ideology acts on us and “interpellates” us into subjecthood. Althusser makes no further comment on this paradox, other than to say that he “shall leave [it] on one side for the moment” (2014, 262).

Instead, he goes on to develop the notion of interpellation, which is described as a kind of “hailing” whereby ideology “‘recruits’ subjects among individuals” (Althusser, 2014, 264).

He offers a concrete example of this process by imagining a person shouting to another person “Hey, you there!” on the street. The person being hailed recognizes that they are the “you” and responds by turning around to face the hailer. By so doing, the hailed becomes a subject because “he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was *really him* who was hailed” (Althusser, 2014, 264). Similarly, a material instance of ideology, such as a *particular* ideological practice, or ritual (such as religious practices which allude to the reality of “God”), hails the individual and as such interpellates them into subjecthood. This implies that ideology is not, in fact, a purely internal phenomenon, and is instead a structural process. However, the omni-present nature of ideology ensures that this process is always and everywhere present, and so we are “*always-already subjects*” and, therefore, always-already in an ideology, further complicating the matter (Althusser, 2014, 265).

The inconsistency apparent in Althusser’s employment of both the category of the “individual” and of the “subject” evidences the contradictory nature of his conception of ideology. The eternality of ideology, the “*always-already*,” has been critiqued as ideal above, but Althusser’s conception of the subject demonstrates an emphasis on the practical side of consciousness and ideology which is absent in his explanation of its eternal and imaginary aspects as discussed above. Recall from the previous section that the subjective aspect of consciousness, for Marx and Engels, develops out of and is produced (and reproduced) by social activity. This conception of subjective agency is absent in Althusser; instead, he imagines subjecthood as an essential element present in all humans, detached from the material conditions of historical life (Rehmann, 2013, 172, Althusser, 2014, 262). Althusser writes in “Ideology,” for instance, that “an individual is always-already a subject, *even before he is born*” (2014, 265, italics mine). So, while we can understand “interpellation” (at least theoretically) as an external,

social, and structural process, the eternal nature of ideology (into which we are “hailed) prevents us from situating it within the unfolding of world-history. Insofar as the process of interpellation is structural, it contradicts the ideal aspects of his theory (ideology as an “imaginary representation”). However, it is still non-Marxist because it is not situated within the class struggle, rather, it is an external input that interpellates us into subjecthood from some place other than the class struggle.

While this demonstrates that Althusser’s theory of ideology in general fails to satisfy even his own criteria for a properly Marxist ideology-theory, there are nonetheless some merits to his theory of ideology in *particular* and to the function of the ideological state apparatus. These will be explored in the following section.

Section IV: The Ideological State Apparatus

As I have just indicated, there is merit to Althusser’s theory of ideology in particular, specifically regarding his theory of the ideological state apparatus (ISA). In fact, the latter can be seen as a powerful tool for understanding the reproduction of the submission to the ruling ideology under existing social relations (Althusser, 2014, 236). This requires comparing the ideology-theory of Marx and Engels to Althusser’s theory of ideology in particular, in order to show that the two are compatible and, indeed, that the latter explains the practical, concrete actualization of the former.

More specifically, I argue that the ideological state apparatuses function as vehicles for reproducing the fetish character of the commodity which symptomizes reified consciousness, itself a result of our social relations, of capital. Althusser writes that the ideological state apparatuses are those “distinct and specialized institutions” which serve to reproduce the conditions of production by instilling the “rules of good behaviour” and reproducing “submission

to the ruling ideology” in the members of the social body (Althusser, 2014, 243, 236).

Althusser’s theory of the ideological state apparatus explains this reproduction in concrete terms, and as a result it can be reconciled with an account of ideology consistent with the writings of Marx and Engels, because, as I have shown, their ideology-theory deals in concrete terms.

To begin with, Althusser distinguishes the ideological state apparatuses from the repressive state apparatuses. Both of these serve to reproduce existing conditions, but they do so in different ways. The repressive state apparatuses function “massively and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology” (Althusser, 2014, 244). In other words, the repressive state apparatuses function secondarily by ideology in the sense that they themselves require a certain level of ideological submission, for “there is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus” (Althusser, 2014, 244). Repressive state apparatuses are contrasted with ideological state apparatuses insofar as the latter function “massively and predominantly *by ideology*,” while also functioning “secondarily by repression” for “there is no such thing as a purely ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 2014, 244). Important to note here is that no content is added to the term “ideology.” As we have seen, Althusser’s attempt to explain the essence of ideology can be contested, but his theory of the ideological state apparatus is concerned primarily with explaining how *ideologies* function as instruments of reproduction. The distinction between the dissemination of *particular* ideologies through the ideological state apparatuses and ideology in *general* thus requires a few brief words.

Althusser’s theory of ideology in *particular* is not necessarily a theory of the particular ideology (or ideologies) that exist under capitalist social relations (although this particular ideology is an example of ideology in *particular*). Neither is it (quite obviously) a theory of ideology in *general*, or of the essence of ideology. It is, rather, a theory of how particular

ideologies function to accomplish the goal of social reproduction. It is a general theory, insofar as it is applicable to any set of social conditions, but not a theory of ideology in *general* (Althusser, 2014, 254). He notes, for example, how the feudal mode of production contained ideological state apparatuses, which served a similar function to the ideological state apparatuses under bourgeois social relations (i.e. reproduction of the conditions of production), but in feudalism these took a rather different form (Althusser, 2014, 248).

Althusser provides us a list of institutions that he numbers among the ideological state apparatuses, and this list offers some further insight into how these function to reproduce the conditions of production. Specifically, he identifies the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade union ISA, the communications ISA, and the cultural ISA as institutions that function to disseminate the ruling ideology and to reproduce the conditions of production (Althusser, 2014, 243). Despite their obvious diversity, what these institutions have in common is the fact that they function together to spread the ruling ideology, “which is the ideology of ‘the ruling class’” (Althusser, 2014, 245). Because, in a class society, there will be a dominant class which holds state power (in our case this is the bourgeoisie), the state apparatuses belong to this class. Further, its continued status as the dominant class requires that the existing conditions of production be reproduced (which itself requires that the “know-how” necessary for its maintenance is also reproduced). Althusser thus concludes that “*no class can hold state power over a long period of time without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatus*” (Althusser, 2014, 245, italics in original).

Again, it must be noted that this theory of ideological dissemination does not implicate Althusser’s theory of ideology in general. Rather than attempting to explain the essence of ideology, this component of the theory is solely concerned with sketching how, in concrete and

practical terms, submission to the *particular* ruling ideology is accomplished. There is no apparent contradiction between this explanation and the ideology-theory offered by Marx and Engels; on the contrary, Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus lends itself extremely well to Marx and Engels' ideology-theory, despite Althusser's own misgivings in this regard.

It is significant that Althusser identifies the educational ideological state apparatus as the "dominant" one under existing social conditions (2014, 249), because an examination of his rationale for this claim allows for a deeper understanding of his theory of ideology in *particular*, the vehicle of which is the ideological state apparatus. It also sheds further light on the compatibility between the ideological state apparatus and Marx and Engels' ideology-theory. Althusser begins by stating, as remarked earlier, that the function of the ISA is to reproduce the relations of production. He then identifies several of the ways in which various ISAs contribute to this function. The communications apparatus, for instance, does this by "cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc., by means of the press, radio and television" (Althusser, 2014, 250). The content disseminated is the ideology of the ruling class, with all its contradictions and distortions. Because the educational ISA captures the attention of everyone from the time that they are children (and most vulnerable), and because it holds them for a prolonged period of time, it functions more effectively than the other ISAs at teaching the necessary "'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology" that every child must learn to fill their social role in a class society (Althusser, 2014, 250).

It is rather interesting that Althusser describes the "know-how" taught in the educational ISA as being "wrapped in the ruling ideology" (Althusser, 2014, 250). This suggests that it is not overtly ideological content itself which is distilled directly into schoolchildren. It is not a matter

of simply instilling the “correct” ideological values directly. The content learned in schools does reflect the ruling ideology, but it operates indirectly, behind the backs of subjects, through the power of suggestion, ambiguity, and implicitness. This corresponds extremely well to Marx and Engels’ notion that consciousness is the result of physical organization and social practice (Marx & Engels, 1994, 124). In the educational ISA, it is through the “doing” of learning that our consciousness is formed in a way that aligns it with the ruling ideology. It is practical activity, and not merely the imprintation from external stimuli, that brings us into ideology.

This explanation of how ideology functions to reproduce the conditions of production is compatible with Marx and Engels’ ideology theory. Recall that Marx understands that the rationalism of post-enlightenment bourgeois society is said to have done away with the superstitious fetishisms of primitive societies (Heinrich, 2004, 179-180). However, this is not what happened. Instead, bourgeois society has fetishized capital in a similar or even greater way, and as such has reified its own social relations. This is exemplified by the so-called “trinity formula” that Marx lays out whereby the source of the value in capital, labour, and land-rent is reified and appears to be found elsewhere than it actually is. This is because our perception of value is structured by these reified social relations, which creates the fetish character of the commodity, and takes on an “objective thought form” (Heinrich, 2004, 184-5). It only becomes possible for us to recognize this when we examine the entire system in a holistic way; it is “penetrable only on the basis of experience and reflection,” as Heinrich says (2004, 185).

This process of structuring perceptions and the manifestation of the “objective thought form,” which corresponds to reality in a reified way, is ideology in action. It is not that ideology is merely “false consciousness,” then, but rather that it is an inverted view of an objective reality (i.e., the representation in thought of a reified system of social relations) under the capitalist

mode of production. Rehmann makes this connection between Marx's ideology-theory and his theory of the commodity fetish when he writes that Marx,

now combines a term describing thinking (thought-form) and a term referring to 'reality' (objective). As an 'objective thought form', commodity-fetishism is both a form of social life in bourgeois society and a corresponding form of practice and consciousness. . . .

Marx is here far from any naïve ideology-critique that claims to get rid of these 'inversions' by mere rational enlightenment (Rehmann, 2013, 43)

Ideology, then, becomes a kind of inverted or false consciousness, but not "merely" false consciousness. Rather, it is consciousness that corresponds to an objective reality and is manifest as an objective thought-form; this accounts for both the "active" and the practical sides of consciousness. So understood, false consciousness corresponds to reality insofar as it is a kind of representation of how objective phenomena appear, but it is false or inverted in the sense that our perception of these phenomena is mediated by the structures of capitalist social relations. These structures produce ideology insofar as our perception of these expressions of reality appear "objective" in a mystified and reified way. In essence, ideology represents a kind of knowledge that is both true and false, but its truth-content only becomes apparent when it is analyzed holistically and in the context of the entire system.

We can understand this Marxian conception of ideology as the essence of the *particular* ideologies that are disseminated through ideological state apparatuses. These objective-thought forms, which we can understand as making up the substance or content of *particular* ideologies, represent those thoughts or ideas which, when aggregated, constitute the ruling ideology of the ruling class. While these *particular* instances of ideology are inverted or false, they simultaneously do correspond to reality, though in a way that only appears to be "objective." The

relevance of the ideological state apparatus in this process comes down to the functional dissemination of these ideologies. Through our interactions with ISAs, these objective-thought forms become part of our consciousness. This is not to say that we simply “learn” the particulars of a given ideology and accept it, but rather that our practical and social activity within these institutions causes us to develop specific ideological beliefs. In this way, the ideological state apparatuses can account for the dissemination of ideology on both a practical and an intellectual level – practical because it comes about as a result of our “doing,” and conscious because it manifests as the ruling ideas that reflect the practical activity of our interaction with the ideological state apparatuses.

This can be made clearer by way of an example. Let us return to Marx’s “trinity formula.” Recall that Marx has discovered that the apparently obvious idea that capital, labour, and land-rent are all sources of value is incorrect. In fact, capital and land-rent are both sources of *income*, but the *value* of income is based on the labour-power they exploit. They only appear to be sources of value due to the way the commodity fetish appears, which itself only appears because of the way our perception is structured by capitalist social relations. We can say, then, that the belief that capital and land-rent are sources of value is an ideological belief. This belief is disseminated through the ideological state apparatuses, within which we learn the various forms of “know-how” which are “wrapped in the ruling ideology.” One may learn in school, for instance, that a rent-cap will have a severe impact the bottom-line of landlords, and as such will have a negative impact on the economy. Implicit in this *particular* piece of knowledge is the idea that value is found in land-rent. The belief really is true, insofar as rent control really will affect the bottom-line of the landlord. But because our perception of this fact is structured by the fetish character of commodities, reproduced in the ISA, we fail to realize that it is distorted, because it

misidentifies the source of value in land-rent and thereby reifies our social relations. The belief in land-rent as a source of value is an expression of the reified social relations that spring forth from the functioning “behind [our] backs” of the commodity fetish (Rehmann, 2013, 41), and it becomes a part of our consciousness through our “physical organization” and our associated practical activity within the ideological state apparatus (the school) (see Marx & Engels, 1994b, 117).

Althusser’s theory of ideology in *particular* thus does provide a valuable map for understanding the way that *particular* ideologies function to reproduce the given conditions of production. While Althusser’s theory of ideology in general fails, as I have shown, the theory of ideology in *particular* is neutral with respect to the essence of ideology. Therefore, we can relate the ideology-theory of Marx and Engels to Althusser’s theory of ideology in *particular* to develop a far richer understanding of the functional aspect of ideology. The major merit of Althusser’s theory of ideology in *particular*, then, is its neutrality on the specific content of the *particular* ideologies, and its general explanatory power regarding the institutions that function to disseminate ideologies and reproduce the conditions of production.

Conclusion

A fascinating by-product of this argument is the Marxian theory of ideology in *general* that I have discerned through a close reading of Marx and Engels’ work on the topic. As we have seen, Althusser’s critique centres on Marx and Engels’ conception of ideology as “false consciousness.” Althusser reads into this definition a naïve empiricist epistemology, whereby the subject of ideology suffers the simple imprintation of incorrect thoughts onto their consciousness by external, objective forces. A close examination of Marx and Engels’ writings has shown that

this critique is unfounded. In the process, however, a coherent, Marxian theory of ideology in *general* has also been developed.

Specifically, my critique of Althusser's critique has been accomplished by examining what exactly Marx and Engels mean when they employ the term "false consciousness." Far from any naïve empiricism, they employ this phrase in a way that is entirely consistent with their wider theory. By examining their understanding of how consciousness production relates to material conditions, I have shown that Althusser's charge of a consciousness formed by objective, external inputs is not apt from a Marxian point of view. Instead, Marx and Engels see consciousness production as both a practical and sensuous process that comes about as a result of our physical organization. Taking the point of view of production, we can see that human consciousness reflects the social relations and material conditions under which we live and produce. Our consciousness is formed as much by our interacting with the external world as it is by the external world acting on us. Our social relations, our relation to production, and our relations to ourselves all serve to form our ideas, thoughts, and beliefs. It is not a question of what is done to us, but rather of what it is that we do in the conditions in which we live.

This map of the role of social relations in consciousness formation relates to ideology insofar as the ideas, thoughts, and beliefs that develop are "false." But we are not to understand "false" here in a naïve way. Instead, we can look to the function of the commodity fetish and its relation to our perceptions of reality, that is, to the reification of our own social relations, in order to understand what Marx and Engels' actually mean by "false" consciousness. It is not that the masses are simply "dupes of history," too unintelligent to tell the difference between genuine and false beliefs. The ideological beliefs that we hold do correspond to reality insofar as they reflect the reified social relations that capitalism requires for its maintenance. When we misidentify the

value behind the incomes derived from capital and land, we are identifying something “objective” insofar as it really does appear to be the case that these things contain value in and of themselves. However, when we penetrate these beliefs on the basis of reflection, we can see that in spite of their “objective” form, they do not correspond to reality on a systematic level. Therefore, we can conclude that false consciousness is not simply a matter of blindness to the truth, but a question of the way our perception of ourselves, one another, and reality is structured.

Finally, it is noteworthy that despite the serious deficiencies in Althusser’s theory of ideology in *general* that have been identified, there is nonetheless merit in his theory of ideology in *particular*. Because his theory of ideology in *particular* demands that we adhere to no particular theory of ideology in *general*, and is instead concerned primarily with understanding how particular ideologies are disseminated in order to reproduce the given conditions of production in class societies, we can apply the Marxian theory of ideology to develop an explanatory device regarding the practical function of this theory of ideology. The ideological state apparatus, which for Althusser is the vehicle of dissemination for particular ideologies, allows us to concretize particular instances of ideology as they develop out bourgeois social relations. The ideological state apparatus becomes, in effect, the materialized “structure” which manipulates our perceptions, in order to reify our own social relations and produce ideology.

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