Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Literature, Language, and Culture Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.35081

Ideology, Subject and Reproduction ——A Study of Althusser's Ideological Theory

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Abstract. Althusser's ideological theory occupies an important position in the critical theory of ideology. Facing the reality that the mode of modern capitalist domination has shifted from external coercion to subject identification, he takes "ideology has no history" and "ideology is material" as theoretical foundations, defines ideology as the structural condition of the existence of subjects, and reveals the generation mechanism of subjects through the theory of "interpellation" to explain the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. This theory deepens the Marxist understanding of the subject issue and state theory, and provides a new perspective for analyzing the mechanism of modern capitalist domination. However, while emphasizing the structural power of ideology, his structuralist stance weakens the historical generation process of ideology, compresses the practical agency of subjects, and deviates to a certain extent from the fundamental logic of social development in historical materialism. Therefore, the investigation of ideology still needs to return to Marx's view of practice and the perspective of historical materialism, and understand the formation of subjects and the possibility of their transcendence of capitalist social relations in the movement of social contradictions and real practice.

Keywords: subject, ideology, reproduction, historical materialism

1. Introduction

After World War II, Western capitalist countries gradually entered a stage of development based on the Fordist mode of production. With the maturity of the mass production system, the expansion of consumer society and the establishment of the welfare state system, profound changes have taken place in the mode of capitalist domination. Capitalism increasingly shapes individual concepts through ideological control to realize the continuous reproduction of relations of production. The capitalist labor process has shifted from "extracting results through coercion and fear" to "extracting results through the organization of consent" [1]. This reality has promoted the continuous attention of Western Marxism to the issue of ideology. From Lukács to the Frankfurt School, many thinkers have tried to explain why the proletarian revolution failed to occur as scheduled from the cultural and ideological levels. However, early Western Marxism often focused on the critical function of ideology, emphasizing its obscuring effect on reality, but rarely explained in detail how ideology specifically acts on individuals and shapes their subjectivity. Thus, a more fundamental question was

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.35081

raised: why do individuals in capitalist society not only obey the existing order, but also confirm themselves in obedience and take this order for granted?

It is under this problematic consciousness that Althusser attempts to reconstruct Marxist ideological theory. From the perspective of social reproduction, he understands ideology as a practical system with material forms of existence, and reveals the internal mechanism of subject formation through the concept of "interpellation". Ideology is no longer just false ideas, but constantly produces subjects through specific institutions and practices, making individuals actively assume their positions in established social relations. Thus, the reproduction of capitalist relations of production is not only an economic process, but also a process of subject production. Examining the theoretical logic of Althusser's theory of ideology and subject construction not only helps to understand the generation mechanism of "voluntary obedience" in modern capitalism, but also further reflects on its development and limitations of Marx's reproduction theory, so as to re-grasp the significance of the issue of ideology in Marxist critical theory.

2. The mode of existence of ideology

Compared with traditional Marxism which mainly understands ideology as a reflection of real relations, Althusser attempts to redefine the mode of existence of ideology, and thus explains why the acceptance of subjects is possible in capitalist society. His two propositions, "ideology has no history" and "ideology is material", constitute an important theoretical foundation for the theory of Ideological State Apparatuses.

Althusser believes that "ideology has no history" was first put forward by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. Morality, religion and other ideologies "have no history, no development" [2]. Ideology depends on the material life process connected with "real individuals", and there is no pure ideology divorced from material premises. Therefore, ideology has no independent history of its own, and ideology with independent history is just an illusion. This is the original context of Marx's proposition that "ideology has no history" mentioned by Althusser. Marx used the proposition "ideology has no history" in a negative sense, but Althusser tries to understand it in a positive sense. In his view, ideology is not an accidental historical phenomenon, but a universal structure that runs through the entire human history.

With the help of Freud's theory of "the unconscious", he analogizes "ideology in general" to "the unconscious", and points out: "Ideology is eternal, just like the unconscious" [3]. Since the unconscious always accompanies human existence, it has no history; similarly, ideology "is endowed with a structure and function such that it becomes an ahistorical reality, that is, a reality omnipresent in history" [3]. Thus, ideology is no longer just a certain idea, but becomes an inescapable structural condition for the existence of subjects. Individuals are always in ideology from birth, and understand their relationship with the world through ideology.

This theoretical turn also means that ideology in general can be discussed and is valuable. Althusser interprets ideology in general by analyzing the understanding of ideology in the historically existing theories of "political deception" and "philosophical alienation". Mechanism tends to understand ideology as the ideological indoctrination of the ruling class to the ruled class, while the alienation theory of the theological-philosophical school emphasizes that the deceptiveness of ideology stems from philosophical alienation, and the alienation of real living conditions leads to the alienated imaginary relationship. But in Althusser's view, both theories still remain at the level of "individuals and their living conditions" and fail to touch the core of ideology — the imaginary relationship. Therefore, he proposes: "What 'people' represent to themselves in ideology is not their real living conditions, their real world; on the contrary, what is first represented

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to them there is their relationship with these living conditions" [3]. Thus, ideology is defined as a kind of "imaginary relationship", which is not a direct reflection of the real world, but the imaginary relationship of relations of production and their derived relations, and the relationship of the relationship between people and their real living conditions. The falsity of ideology therefore no longer stems from simple deception, but from the distortion of real relations by the subject in imagination.

At the same time, Althusser further emphasizes that ideology has "materiality". The traditional Marxist view holds that ideology is a kind of "idea", which, although requiring a material carrier, is spiritual in essence. Althusser argues that "an ideology always exists in a certain apparatus, in the practice or practices of this apparatus. This existence is a material existence" [3]. In his view, ideology is not a spiritual phenomenon that simply exists in ideas, but exists in institutions, rituals and practical activities, and people's imaginary relationship with the real world is a material existence. To demonstrate this, Althusser borrows Pascal's famous saying: "Kneel down, pray aloud, and you will believe" [3]. That is to say, it is not that the subject first has the idea of faith and then prays; but that the subject is truly constructed as a believer in the material practice of kneeling and praying, and the subject's faith and ideas are rooted in the material ideological apparatus. Therefore, individuals do not first exist as free subjects and then accept ideological influence; on the contrary, subjects are constantly constructed in these material practices. Ideology is not an idea suspended in the air, but a real social practice structure with material attributes.

Althusser's exposition on the materiality of ideology actually dissolves the priority of "ideas" in speculative philosophy. Ideology is no longer understood as simply thoughts or beliefs in the subject's mind, but a material mechanism existing in various institutions, rituals and practices. Individual ideas and behaviors are not formed independently, but are shaped and organized in the operation of ideological apparatuses. Therefore, the issue of ideology no longer first appears as an issue of ideas, but as an issue of how subjects are constructed. In this theoretical turn, "subject" becomes the core category of ideological theory. Althusser points out: "There is no ideology that does not exist by means of subjects and for these subjects" [3], which means that ideology always functions through subjects and at the same time constantly shapes specific individuals into subjects. The subject is both the bearer of the role of ideology and the condition for the existence of ideology. Thus, a relationship of interdependence is formed between the subject and ideology. The subject is not a free individual existing prior to social relations, but a result constructed in a specific ideological structure. Although the subject seems to have autonomy, it is actually always under the regulation of ideology.

3. The construction of the subject: the interpellation mechanism of ideology

On the basis of the analysis of "ideology has no history" and "ideology is material", Althusser further advances the issue to the level of the subject construction mechanism. For Althusser, the existence of subjects constitutes the content of ideology, and ideology confirms this existence by "interpellating" specific individuals as subjects.

Althusser summarizes the process of how ideology shapes individuals into subjects as the "call" or "interpellation" of individuals by ideology. He points out: "The existence of ideology and the interpellation of individuals as subjects are exactly the same thing" [3]. Ideology summons individuals as subjects through specific social norms and discourse systems, and subjects are formed in the process of responding to ideological summons. At the same time, this interpellation is coercive. Luke Ferret points out that the French word *interpeller* not only means daily calling, but also carries the meaning of interrogation in the legal and social order sense [4]. Thus, Althusser

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further puts forward the proposition that "individuals have always been subjects" [3]. Individuals do not have some "pure state" divorced from ideology; on the contrary, people enter the ideological structure even before birth. The family's naming of the child, gender expectations, and identity positioning are themselves the process of ideology constructing the subject. Subsequently, Ideological State Apparatuses such as schools, families and the media continue to play their roles, enabling individuals to gradually grow into "qualified subjects" required by capitalist society [5]. Therefore, the subject is not a free and self-sufficient existence, but a product of social relations and ideological practice.

On this basis, Althusser further proposes the "mirror-duplication structure" of ideology to explain why subjects obey ideological domination. In his view, ideology always unfolds around a "big Subject", while specific individuals are continuously incorporated into this structure as "small subjects". Taking religious ideology as an example, "God" as the "absolute Subject" constantly summons specific individuals, and individuals confirm their own identity in the process of responding to this summons, and continuously strengthen this identification relationship through ritual practices such as prayer and repentance. Thus, the subject not only obeys ideology, but also continuously reproduces the ideological order through its own practice. Therefore, Althusser points out: "The structure of all ideologies — which interpellates individuals as subjects in the name of a unique and absolute Subject — is reflective, that is, a mirror structure; and it is a double reflective structure" [3]. This "mirror-duplication structure" means that the subject always confirms itself in the reflection of the "big Subject", and completes the process of subjectivation through continuous imitation, identification and obedience. Althusser obviously draws on Lacan's "mirror theory" here, but unlike Lacan who emphasizes the process of the subject's self-identification, Althusser highlights the passivity of the subject to the ideological structure.

Therefore, the reason why ideology can play a stable role for a long time does not mainly depend on violence, but on the subject "functioning by itself". Althusser believes that the process of ideology constructing the subject must ultimately be completed through the subject itself. The subject actively recognizes its position in the order, voluntarily participates in various rituals and practices, and continuously strengthens its identification with the existing order in this process. Therefore, "functioning by itself" constitutes the key to the operation mechanism of ideology, which means that modern capitalist domination no longer mainly relies on external coercion, but realizes the reproduction of domination relations through the active identification of subjects.

Thus, Althusser explains the formation mechanism of "voluntary obedience" in modern capitalist society. Ideology continuously shapes subjects through Ideological State Apparatuses such as schools, families and the media, and makes subjects actively obey the existing order with the help of ritual practice and mirror identification. The fundamental function of ideology lies in ensuring the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Althusser points out: "The reality at stake in this set of mechanisms... is actually the reproduction of relations of production and other relations derived from relations of production" [3]. Therefore, Ideological State Apparatuses constitute the cornerstone of capitalist reproduction. It shapes individuals into subjects through interpellation, and serves the maintenance and continuation of the overall order of capitalist society in a hidden and universal way.

4. The value and limitations of Althusser's ideological theory

Althusser's ideological theory is an important turn in the study of Marxist ideology in the 20th century. Compared with traditional ideological theory which focuses on revealing the falsity of ideas, Althusser shifts the focus of analysis to the operation mechanism of ideology and its subject

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production function. Through propositions such as "ideology has no history" and "ideology is material", he breaks through the framework of understanding ideology as a simple ideological system, and reveals the key role of Ideological State Apparatuses such as schools, families, religions and media in capitalist reproduction. In his view, the long-term maintenance of capitalist domination does not only depend on violence and coercion, but more on the subject's identification with the existing order. It is through daily practice and institutional mechanisms that ideology constantly shapes individuals into subjects, enabling relations of production to obtain conditions for continuous reproduction.

First of all, the important contribution of this theory lies in deepening the Marxist understanding of the subject issue. Althusser believes that the subject does not exist a priori, but is a result constructed in the process of ideological action. Through the theory of "interpellation", he reveals the micro-mechanism of the formation of subject identification, explaining how social order is transformed into the subject's self-identification. As Eagleton puts it, Althusser's analysis of ideological theory "represents one of the major breakthroughs in modern Marxist thought on the issue of the subject" [6]. It makes ideology no longer just an epistemological issue, but an important intermediary for understanding social reproduction.

Secondly, Althusser expands the research horizon of Marxist state theory. Traditional state theory often emphasizes the coercive function of the state, while Althusser further puts forward the concept of "Ideological State Apparatuses", revealing the unique role of ideology in maintaining domination. It is in these seemingly neutral institutions and practices that capitalist society constantly produces workers and social members who meet its requirements. British scholar Perry Anderson once pointed out: "Western Marxism as a whole, when it moves from methodological issues to substantive issues, devotes almost all its efforts to the study of the superstructure" [7]. Althusser is one of the most representative thinkers in this theoretical tradition. His analysis of Ideological State Apparatuses provides an important perspective for understanding the new form of modern capitalist domination [8].

In addition, Althusser's theory has also profoundly influenced the development of contemporary political philosophy and cultural critical theory. From Foucault's analysis of power and discipline, to post-Marxist discussions on subject construction, all inherit Althusser's problematic consciousness to varying degrees. It can be said that Althusser has elevated ideology from traditional ideological criticism to a mechanism of social production, making it an important category for understanding the operation logic of modern society.

However, it is precisely in the emphasis on structural power that Althusser's theory gradually reveals its internal limitations. First of all, he understands ideology as a trans-historical existence. Although it helps to reveal the universal role of ideology, it weakens the historicity of ideology itself to a certain extent. In *The German Ideology*, Marx emphasizes that ideology is ultimately determined by the real material life process, and its content and form change with the changes of social and historical conditions, which is "created by the development level of the mode of production" [9]. Althusser's proposition that "ideology has no history", however, pays more attention to the structural function of ideology and relatively ignores its historical generation process. As Thompson criticized, Althusser strips away the empirical dimension of history, "departs from Marx's own historical method" [10], and fails to see that ideology is a dynamic framework.

Secondly, Althusser's understanding of the subject dissolves the agency of the subject. In his theoretical logic, the subject is mainly understood as the result of ideological "interpellation" and the product of structural action [11]. In this way, the agency of the subject is greatly compressed, and human practical activities are more manifested as the acceptance and repetition of the existing order,

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rather than the reflection and transcendence of real relations. Although the subject is constructed, it is difficult to explain why the subject can resist the existing structure, break through ideological control and form revolutionary practice. For this reason, Althusser can better explain why capitalist society can maintain stability, but cannot fully explain why social change is possible.

More importantly, Althusser's reproduction perspective deviates to a certain extent from the fundamental logic of social development in historical materialism. He focuses his research on the reproduction of subjects and the reproduction of ideology, while relatively ignoring the material production process and its internal contradictory movement. In his theoretical framework, the continuous operation of capitalist society seems to mainly depend on the role of Ideological State Apparatuses, while the real contradiction between capital and labor retreats to a secondary position, and ideology gradually rises from the derivative field of social existence to an almost eternal structural force.

Therefore, the understanding of the issue of ideology still needs to return to the perspective of historical materialism pioneered by Marx. Marx does not deny the important role of ideology, but he always examines ideology in the context of real social relations and the material production process. In Marx's view, man is not only the product of social relations, but also the practical subject who changes social relations, and is "the bearer of certain class relations and interests" [12]. Although ideology affects the formation of subjects, subjects are not completely determined by the structure, but constantly interact with existing social relations in real practice. Precisely because there is always a contradictory movement between capital and labor within capitalist society, the domination of ideology cannot be absolutely stable.

In this sense, Althusser's analysis of the micro-mechanism of ideology undoubtedly deepens the Marxist understanding of the mode of modern capitalist domination, but this analysis can only obtain more complete explanatory power when it is re-incorporated into the theoretical framework of practice, contradiction and class struggle in historical materialism. The investigation of the issue of ideology should not stop at how subjects are constructed, but should further ask how subjects break through the existing structure through real practice and realize the criticism and transcendence of capitalist social relations. This is also the historical dimension and emancipatory dimension that Marx's critical theory of ideology always points to.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, through propositions such as "ideology has no history" and "ideology is material", Althusser puts the study of ideology at the level of subject construction, revealing how Ideological State Apparatuses such as schools, families and media shape individuals into subjects required by capitalist society and realize the reproduction of relations of production. His theory provides an analytical method and problematic consciousness, which not only deepens the Marxist understanding of the subject issue and state theory, but also provides a micro-analytical perspective for the mechanism of modern capitalist domination, and influences contemporary political philosophy and cultural critical research. However, while emphasizing the structure and subject construction mechanism, Althusser weakens the historical generativity of ideology, compresses the practical agency of subjects, and deviates to a certain extent from the fundamental logic of Marxist theory on relations of production and social practice. Therefore, a complete understanding of the issue of ideology still needs to return to the perspective of historical materialism and place subjects in real social relations and practical activities. Only by paying attention to the dynamic process of social contradictions and class struggle can we reveal the possible resistance and transcendence of subjects and realize the criticism and transformation of capitalist social relations.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.35081

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