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Interpellation

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For Althusser, ideology is not a static set of ideas imposed upon the subordinate by the dominant classes but rather a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice – that is, in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society.¹ He rejects the old idea that the economic base of society determines the entire cultural superstructure. He replaces this base/superstructure model with his theory of overdetermination, which not only allows the superstructure to influence the base but also produces a model of the relationship between ideology and culture that is not determined solely by economic relations. At the heart of this theory is the notion of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), by which he means social institutions such as the family, the educational system, language, the media, the political system, and so on. These institutions produce in people the tendency to behave and think in socially acceptable ways (as opposed to repressive state apparatuses such as the police force or the law, which coerce people into behaving according to the social norms). The social norms, or that which is socially acceptable, are of course neither neutral nor objective; they have developed in the interests of those with social power, and they ~~work~~ to maintain their sites of power by naturalizing them into the common-sense – the only – social positions for power. Social norms are ideologically slanted in favor of a particular class or group of classes but are accepted as natural by other classes, even when the interests of those other classes are directly opposed by the ideology reproduced by living life according to those norms.

Social norms are realized in the day-to-day workings of the ideological state apparatuses. Each one of these institutions is “relatively autonomous,” according to Althusser, and there are no overt connections between it and any of the others – the legal system is not explicitly connected to the school system nor to the media, for example – yet they all perform similar ideological work. They are all patriarchal; they are all concerned with the getting and keeping of wealth and possessions; and they all endorse individualism and competition between individuals. But the most significant feature of ISAs is that they all present themselves as socially neutral, as not favoring one particular class over any other. Each presents itself as a principled institutionalization of equality: the law, the media, and education all claim, loudly and often, to treat all individuals

equally and fairly. The fact that the norms used to define equality and fairness are those derived from the interests of the white, male, middle classes is more or less adequately disguised by these claims of principle, though feminists and those working for racial and class harmony may claim that this disguise can be torn off with relative ease.

Althusser's theory of overdetermination explains this congruence between the “relatively autonomous” institutions by looking not to their roots in a common, determining economic base but to an overdetermining network of ideological interrelationships among all of them. The institutions appear autonomous only at the official level of stated policy, though the belief in this “autonomy” is essential for their ideological work. At the unstated level of ideology, however, each institution is related to all the others by an unspoken web of ideological interconnections, so that the operation of any one of them is “overdetermined” by its complex, invisible network of interrelationships with all the others. Thus the educational system, for example, cannot tell a story about the nature of the individual different from those told by the legal system, the political system, the family, and so on.

Ideology is not, then, a static set of ideas through which we view the world but a dynamic social practice, constantly in process, constantly reproducing itself in the ordinary workings of these apparatuses. It also works at the micro-level of the individual. To understand this we need to replace the idea of the individual with that of the subject. The individual is produced by nature, the subject by culture. Theories of the individual concentrate on differences between people and explain these differences as natural. Theories of the subject, on the other hand, concentrate on people's common experiences in a society as being the most productive way of explaining who (we think) we are. Althusser believes that we are all constituted as subjects-in-ideology by the ISAs, that the ideological norms naturalized in their practices constitute not only the sense of the world for us, but also our sense of ourselves, our sense of identity, and our sense of our relations to other people and to society in general. Thus we are each of us constituted as a subject in, and subject to, ideology. The subject, therefore, is a social construction, not a natural one. A biological female can have a masculine subjectivity (that is, she can make sense of the world and of her self and her place in, that world through patriarchal ideology). Similarly, a black person can have a white subjectivity and a member of the working classes a middle-class one.

The ideological theory of the subject differs in emphasis, though not fundamentally, from that developed in psychoanalysis by placing greater emphasis on social and historical conditions, particularly those of class. Althusser drew upon Freudian theory to develop his idea of the subject. As Ann Kaplan notes, feminists too have used psychoanalytic theory, though much more sophisticatedly, to theorize the gendered subject. This gendered subject is more rooted in psychological processes, the ideological subject of Althusser in historical and social ones.

But both theories stress the role played by the media and language in this constant construction of the subject, by which we mean the constant reproduction of ideology in people. Althusser uses the words *interpellation* and *hailing* to describe this work of the media. These terms derive from the idea that any language, whether it be verbal, visual, tactile, or whatever, is part of social relations and that in communicating with someone we are reproducing social relationships.

*Originally published as “British Cultural Studies and Television,” pp. 284–326 from *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. R. C. Allen (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press). © 1992 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

In communicating with people, our first job is to "hail" them, almost as if hailing a cab. To answer, they have to recognize that it is to them, and not to someone else, that we are talking. This recognition derives from signs, carried in our language, of whom we think they are. We will hail a child differently from an adult, a male differently from a female, someone whose status is lower than ours differently from someone in a higher social position. In responding to our hail, the addressees recognize the social position the language has constructed, and if their response is cooperative, they adopt this same position. Hailing is the process by which language identifies and constructs a social position for the addressee. Interpellation is the larger process whereby language constructs social relations for both parties in an act of communication and thus locates them in the broader map of social relations in general.

Hailing is obviously crucial at the start of a "conversation," though its ideological work continues throughout. Look, for instance, at the opening statements of the anchor and reporter on a US network news report in April 1991:

Anchor: There is growing concern tonight about the possible economic impact that a nationwide railroad strike set for midnight tonight poses. The unions and the railroads remain deadlocked. Wyatt Andrews brings us up to date on what President Bush and Congress may do about it.

Reporter: By morning 230,000 rail workers might not be working on the railroad and the strike threatens millions of Americans. Just as thousands of commuters may find no train leaving the station beginning tonight at midnight.

The word *strike* hails us as anti-union, for "striking" is constructed as a negative action by labor unions that "threatens" the nation. By ascribing responsibility to the unions, the word hides the fact that management plays some role, possibly even a greater one, in the dispute. The report opposes the unions not to management plays but to "the railroads" and thus excludes the unions from them. This exclusion of the unions from the railroads allows the unspoken management to become synonymous with them, and ideology continues its work by constructing the railroads not as an industry but as a national resource and so uses them as a metonym for the nation and, by extension, of "us." Recognizing ourselves in the national "us" interpellated here, we participate in the work of ideology by adopting the anti-union, subject position proposed for us. This is subject-as-ideology is developed as the item progresses:

Passenger A: Gas, miles, time. The highways are going to be packed. Not much we can do, though.

Passenger B: I'm going to stay home. I've got an office in my home and I'm going to just stay there and work.

Reporter: But the commuter inconvenience is nothing compared to the impact on freight trains. Up to half a million industrial jobs may be at stake. Whether it's cars in the heartland or chemicals in Kansas City, the railroads still carry more freight than either trucks or airplanes, meaning that the strike would threaten the heart of industrial America in the heart of this recession.

Railroad Official: If we don't get this strike settled quickly a lot more people are going to be out of work, a lot more product is not going to be shipped and this economy's recovery is going to be set back immensely.

Reporter: Negotiations meanwhile seem to be at bedrock bottom, on wages, on health care, and the number of workers per train. Both sides even late today were on opposite tracks. The unions complain the railroads blocked raises and stonewalled the negotiations for three years. The railroads accuse the unions of protecting legions of workers who essentially do nothing.

Railroad Official: The issue with our union is between who works and who watches. That's the issue of whether we have excess people in the cab who don't have anything to do.

The national "we" is constructed as hard-working producers at the personal level by the passengers and at the industrial level by the reporter. The repeated use of the "heart" metaphor not only makes "America" into a living, breathing body (like the one "we" inhabit), but it constructs the unions as a potentially lethal disease, if not a stiletto-wielding assassin! The railroad official continues to conflate "the railroads" (by which he means "the management") with the national subject of the hard-working producer.

So far, the dispute has been cast solely in terms of the bad effects the unions have upon this national "us," and only in the reporter's next segment do we receive a hint that there are causes of the dispute that may both justify it and implicate management in it. These hints are left floating, so we have no way of assessing the reasonableness of the wage claims, for instance. The generalized terms – "on wages, on health care, on the number of workers per train" – contrast with the concrete realities of 230,000 unionists not working and of the million of Americans, thousands of commuters, and up to half a million jobs that are threatened. We might like to think about the ideological practice of not allowing the unions to speak for themselves "live," but of putting their case into the words of the reporter management "us." Unionists would not, for instance, describe their negotiating opponents as "the railroads," nor would they categorize their arguments as mere "complaints" while according management's the stronger status of "accusations."

The news item concludes by continuing the ideological practice that by now seems so natural and familiar:

Reporter: What exactly happens in the morning? If you are a commuter, check locally. Some Amtrak and commuter trains will be operating and some of the unions say they will strike only freight lines and not passenger trains. In Washington, watch Capitol Hill. Tomorrow President Bush is likely to ask Congress to impose a solution: the move, the unions say, plays right into the railroads' hands. The unions have all along warned the railroads would stall the negotiations and force tonight's strike all in the snug belief that Congress would bail them out.

As Mimi White points out . . . this view of ideology as a process constantly at work, constructing people as subjects in an ideology that always serves the interests of the

dominant classes, found powerful theoretical support in Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Originally, *hegemony* referred to the way that one nation could exert ideological and social, rather than military or coercive, power over another. However, cultural theorists tend to use the term to describe the process by which a dominant class wins the willing consent of the subordinate classes to the system that ensures their subordination. This consent must be constantly won and rewon, for people's material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages of subordination and thus poses a constant threat to the dominant class. Like Althusser's theory of ideology, hegemony does not denote a static power relationship but a constant process of struggle in which the big guns belong to the side of those with social power, but in which victory does not denote a static power relationship but a constant process of struggle in which the big guns belong to the side of those with social power, but in which victory does not necessarily go to the big guns – or, at least, in which that victory is not necessarily total. Indeed, the theory of hegemony foregrounds the notion of ideological struggle much more than does Althusser's ideological theory, which at times tends to imply that the power of ideology and the ISAs to form the subject in ways that suit the interests of the dominant class is almost irresistible. Hegemony, on the other hand, posits a constant contradiction between ideology and the social experience of the subordinate that makes this interface into an inevitable site of ideological struggle. In hegemonic theory, ideology is constantly up against forces of resistance. Consequently it is engaged in a constant struggle not just to extend its power but to hold on to the territory it has already colonized.

Note

1. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), pp. 127–86.

