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Althusser against functionalism. Towards the concept of ‘overinterpellation’

Abstract: *This article re-reads Althusser’s theory of ideology based on the original manuscript from which the famous 1970 essay on Ideology was culled. It aims to counter the standard critique of functionalism levelled against Althusser, and it does so by arguing that Althusser’s theory of ideology is better grasped through the concept of ‘overinterpellation’.*

Keywords: *Althusser, interpellation, ideology, class struggle, overinterpellation.*

It is well-known that Althusser’s highly original and innovative theory of ideology has largely been criticized from many sides. One of Althusser’s most important scholars, G. Elliott, comments on the notorious 1970 ideology essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ in the following manner:

The unremittingly mystifying effects of ideology meant that it constituted a ‘social cement’ ensuring cohesion and reproduction. Ideology was both an invariable component of any society and invariant in its structure [...] The upshot of his adoption of the ‘point of view of reproduction’ was a reworked theory of ideology still dependent on Lacan and Spinoza, and whose functionalism undermined its likely Maoist ambition to found the paramountcy of class struggle [...] Althusser’s theory peremptorily inverts humanism, equating subjectification/subjectivity with subjection and ascribing to the structural/systemic level

the agency denied to that of the subject/individual. (Elliott, 2009, 211)

Although this passage is taken from a book written several decades ago (it was originally published in 1987), it usefully sums up the many criticisms that have dominated the reception of Althusser’s attempt to move beyond a classical Marxist conception of ideology by resorting to other materials drawn from sources external to the standard Marxist canon. It is no exaggeration, I think, to say that these criticisms still largely dominate the current image of Althusser’s theory of ideology, especially for those who, for one reason or another, have not followed with particular interest the publication of Althusser’s posthumous writings over the past three decades, i.e., what I have elsewhere called the ‘second reception’ of Althusser’s thought. Just to make an example, one can take the recent book by J. Rehmman, *Theories of Ideology*, whose chapter on Althusser, while reconstructing in a rich and precise manner the so called ‘debate on functionalism’ that followed the publication of Althusser’s essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’¹ in 1970 (2014, 152), makes practically no references to the recent debates initiated by the discovery of a large amount of texts and notes by Althusser – some of which (and not the least important ones) related precisely to his theory of ideology. In the wake of this debate (which involved such names as Poulantzas, Bourdieu, Hall, Eagleton, Hirst, Haug as well as others) (152), Rehmman argues against Althusser and



his ISA essay that ‘ideology-theories’ such as his ‘run the risk of being transformed back into functionalist theories of legitimacy’ (2014, 7).

It is no mystery, indeed, that it was the issue of functionalism that was regarded, from the very beginning, as the crux and the main flaw of Althusser’s theory – to the extent that the critique of functionalism can be considered the ‘mother of all criticisms’ and the origin of all problems. Of course, to this criticism others have been associated: the more ‘humanist’ one pointing out that in Althusser’s theory ‘subjects’ were totally deprived of any agency; or the Marxist (and Maoist) one criticizing the reduction of ideology to ‘dominant’ ideology, thus leaving no space for any dominated and oppositional ideology.² Closely related to this critique is also another one, which concerns the ‘order of exposition’ of the 1970 essay: Althusser only introduced the concept of class struggle at the end, with the effect of making it appear as a *deus ex machina* which would miraculously explain the transformation of the social whole. It is well-known, indeed, that the ISA essay – as the above-mentioned passage from Elliott remarks – takes as its point of departure the ‘point of view of reproduction’, and that ‘class struggle’ is only referred to in the ‘Postscript’ (which dates April 1970, while the main body of the essay is dated April-January 1969),³ with the result of creating *après-coup* what for Elliott is an unstable, and ultimately contradictory, synthesis of functionalism and Maoism.

In his recent and detailed analyses of Althusser’s theory of ideology, Warren Montag – today arguably the most important scholar on Althusser in the Anglophone world – voices the same concerns. It is undeniable that, as it is presented in the 1970 essay, Althusser’s notion of interpellation, which turns the modern concept of subject upside down, moving it from a constitutive to a constituted position, ‘move readers to ask how [...] there could be something like resistance to domination. Had not Althusser with his apparatuses, practices and rituals turned human beings into machines?’ (Montag, 2013, 159). However, Montag also notes that Althusser himself protested such a reading. In a ‘Note on

the ISAs’, published in 1976⁴ in response to his critics, Althusser writes:

The most frequent criticism directed at my essay of 1969-70 on the ISAs was that of ‘functionalism’. My theoretical sketch was seen as an attempt to claim for Marxism an interpretation which defined organs by their immediate functions alone, thus fixing society in the ideological institutions charged with exercising the function of subjection: at the limit a non-dialectical interpretation whose fundamental logic excluded any possibility of class struggle. [...] [The critics] did not read with sufficient care the postscript to this essay which emphasized the ‘abstract’ character of my analysis, and explicitly placed my conception of the class struggle at the centre. (quoted in Montag, 2013, 159)

As any reader of the ISA essay knows, it is true that the ‘Postscript’ introduces the element of class struggle (2008, 57-58). It is also true that Althusser presented his essay as ‘notes towards an investigation’ (which is, indeed, the subtitle of the essay) and warned of the ‘abstract’ character of what was supposed to be only a ‘theoretical sketch’ which needed further research. But it is surely an overstatement to say, as does Althusser in this ‘Note’, that class struggle was placed ‘at the centre’, given the irrefutable fact that ‘class struggle’ is practically absent from the greater part of the essay, which instead insists on the necessity of taking up the ‘point of view of reproduction’.⁵ Thus, Montag is quite right in joining Elliott’s criticism: ‘to present class struggle’, writes Montag, ‘conceived as an antidote to functionalism, in a postscript and therefore outside the development of his argument is to render it superfluous, nothing more than an afterthought’ (Montag, 2013, 159).

Whilst I agree with this criticism levelled against Althusser’s essay, I think that his 1976 remarks were not totally unjustified. At the time, of course, readers could not know the content of the longer manuscript on reproduction from which, as we know today, the essay had been culled. However, the longer manuscript now available as *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*

(2014a)⁶ contains a series of elements that, I contend, enable us to re-read Althusser's whole theory of ideology in a very different way; and it does so precisely because in it the notion of 'class struggle' plays a much more central role. To anticipate: I believe that turning to the now available *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* makes it possible to counter the standard criticism of functionalism, insofar as it allows us to revise Althusser's theory of ideology at least in two respects. First, (1) this text opens up the possibility to reconceptualize the relationship between reproduction and class struggle, which are effectively only juxtaposed in the ISA essay; (2) secondly, and consequently, it enables a re-reading of the concept of interpellation according to the point of view not of 'reproduction' alone, but of 'reproduction and class struggle'. As Montag has noted, it is quite striking today to read certain passages of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, because it becomes evident that Althusser carefully removed, during the preparation of his ISA essay for publication, all references to 'class struggle, resistance to domination, but even more importantly, every passage that furnished the means to theorize revolt and resistance without recourse to a philosophy of consciousness' (Montag, 2013, 159). Why did Althusser decide to do so? One way⁷ to explain such a move is to argue that Althusser wanted to insist on the increasing difficulty of breaking the endless circle of reproduction of capitalism. By showing that the ideological state apparatuses posit their subjective presuppositions in the form of complying subjects, his essay was highlighting the practical problems the communist movement was facing at the time. This reading is surely plausible, given that Althusser was not foreign to the practice of 'bending the stick', which he himself conceptualized as part and parcel of a Marxist practice of philosophy (Althusser, 2008, 171). But I think that there are intrinsic theoretical problems that can explain the differences between the ISA essay and the long manuscript *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. The main reason – as I hope will be clearer later on – is that the concept of interpellation needed to be further developed and refined, if it was to be able to account for the antagonistic

complexity of reproduction that emerges from the pages of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, and that Althusser had not done so when he decided to publish the essay.

Thus, my aim in this article is to show that Althusser's theory of ideology is not necessarily functionalist, even though a clear functionalist tendency can be detected in his way of approaching the problem, especially at early stages (section 1). I shall argue that Althusser, in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* offers a more (compared to the ISA essay) complex account of the ideological constitution of subjectivity, one that allows him to avoid the pitfalls of functionalism (section 2), thus opening up the possibility of thinking the process of subjectification in a less monolithic way than it is usually assumed by the most common readings of his theory of ideology. However, I will also argue (section 3) that in order to grasp what Althusser attempted to conceptualize it is necessary to introduce a new concept capable of accounting for such a more complex process, which I will call 'overinterpellation'.

1. The concept of 'interpellation' and the functionalist threat

The concept of 'interpellation' is first introduced by Althusser in some notes exchanged with his collaborators, in the context of the elaboration of a 'theory of discourses' that was to serve as a first stepping stone towards an ambitious book to be titled 'Elements of Dialectical Materialism' (Corpet and Matheron, 2003, 34). In these notes, written in 1966, Althusser's reflections are heavily marked by the confrontation with Lacan, whose theory is for Althusser unable to properly establish the scientificity of psychoanalysis. According to Althusser, to attain this status, psychoanalysis needed to be grounded in a 'general theory' that is nothing else than 'Historical Materialism', although aptly reformulated through the concept of 'discourse' (Althusser, 2003, 45-46). The project will never be completed, and the book will remain one of the many works that Althusser never managed

to carry forward. However, these notes will prove paramount in the immediately following years, as it is here that Althusser takes up again the question of ideology, which he had already confronted in *For Marx* (2005, 232-233),⁸ now putting forth the innovative idea (which will then occupy the centre-stage in the notes themselves) that the function of ideology is to ‘interpellate’ individuals through the category of ‘subject’.

As the title of the notes indicates, Althusser’s research is premised upon the introduction of the notion of ‘discourse’. In the first of the three notes (probably written in September 1966), he argues that the introduction of such a concept is necessary in order to explore the way in which ‘every discourse produces a subject-effect’, to which he adds the specification that ‘the subject-position produced or induced by the discourse *vis-à-vis* that discourse varies’. Such a (perhaps unnecessarily sophisticated) formulation means that there are different types of discourses (Althusser mentions four: scientific, aesthetic, ideological, unconscious) that possess different structures and different elements, which in turn entail a different subject-effect each (Althusser, 2003, 48). Throughout the ‘Three Notes’, however, Althusser’s position changes: by the third note (October 1966⁹), he attributes the subject-effect to the ideological discourse only. This discourse, argues Althusser, is not reducible to language only; its elements are ‘gestures, modes of behaviours, feeling, words’. These form the material of the signifiers of the ideological discourse (2003, 50). As far as the ideological discourse is concerned,¹⁰ the problem that Althusser addresses is immediately two-fold. On the one hand, the question is to clarify the specific structure of the ideological discourse; on the other, the problem is to understand its function within the social structure, i.e., the articulation of the ideological discourse onto other levels of the social formation.¹¹ In order to clarify how the ideological discourse works and is articulated, Althusser turns to the notion of *Träger*, which was introduced in *Reading Capital* (Althusser *et al.*, 2015, 334). In every social formation, he argues, the base requires that the *Träger*-function be filled, as it is ‘a function to be occupied in the social and technical division of work’. If considered from

the point of view of the base, such a ‘request’ remains unspecified. It is at this point that ideology intervenes in a decisive way and that the notion of ‘interpellation’ is introduced for the first time:

The question of who must assume and carry out this function, and how the assumption of it might come about, is a matter of perfect indifference to the structure (base or super-structure) that defines these functions: it ‘doesn’t want to know anything about it’ (as in the army). It is ideology which performs the function of designating the subject (in general) that is to occupy this function, and to that end it has to interpellate it as a subject, providing it with the reasons-of-subject for assuming the function. Ideology interpellates the individual, turning it into a subject (ideological subject: hence subject of its discourse), and providing it with the reasons-of-subject (interpellated as a subject) for assuming the functions defined by the structure as *Träger*-functions. [...] In order for the individual to be constituted as an interpellated subject, it must recognise itself as subject in the ideological discourse, it must figure in it. (Althusser, 2003, 51-52, trans. mod.)

Two things are worthy of attention here. The first (and we shall see later why this is important) is that, according to this formulation, ideology, in its material and singular instances, *does not* operate at an unconscious level. Althusser does not say that it is ‘profoundly unconscious’, as he maintained in *For Marx* (Althusser, 2005, 233); rather, he argues that it is a discourse that contains both the subject (the signifier of the subject is included in its discourse¹²) and, at the same time, what he calls the ‘reasons-of-subject’. What is required by ideology, according to Althusser, is a two-fold operation: that the individual recognizes itself as/in the ‘signifier’ of the ideological discourse and accepts the reasons-of-subject. Althusser in fact insists on this point: interpellation is not ‘pure and simple injunction, but an enterprise of conviction-persuasion’ (2003, 52). It follows that the ideological discourse is a structure that must guarantee itself in some way.

Indeed, who provides the above-mentioned reasons-of-subject? For Althusser, it is necessary that the ideological discourse be structured around a 'doubling' of the subject (s), i.e., that it contains a dual structure whereby the reasons-of-subject (rs) are provided by another subject (S), which represents the *guarantee* of the reasons themselves, their 'ground' (2003, 52). Any ideological formation, then, is only such insofar as it possesses the following basic structure: s – rs – S. A crucial consequence of this threefold structure is that the recognition which produces the subject also involves a cognitive operation of acceptance of the middle term (an aspect that is too often downplayed in the readings of Althusser's theory of ideology). This in turn implies that the constituted subject could *also* call these reasons into question, thus renegotiating its own subjection. This aspect is not explored further here, yet it is a consequence of the threefold structure itself, otherwise the middle term 'rs' would not have any specific function, nor would the term S, since there would be no need to 'guarantee' anything if the acceptance of one's place were always already granted.

The second thing to notice is the way in which Althusser thinks the articulation of ideology and the base. The least that can be said about the way in which Althusser conceives of ideology in these notes is that it is a *highly* functionalist account. It is true that these are notes and must be taken as such, but in them it is evident that Althusser's initial conception of interpellation tended to grasp the articulation of the economic level and ideology in functionalist terms, as the recurrence of the term 'function' in these pages abundantly attests. The subject-effect is what ensures the reproduction and the functioning of the 'structure', in which Althusser includes sometimes also the 'political or ideological superstructure': in sum, it is what makes things 'work' by fashioning human beings in such a way that its own requirements are met. In this sense, one can certainly agree that Althusser seems to grant to the 'structure the agency that he denies individuals', as Elliott remarked in the passage quoted above. However, one should also note that Althusser is careful enough to say that the ideological discourse is not a pure injunction,

but an operation of persuasion-conviction. If he insists that the ideological discourse must 'guarantee itself' (via a doubling of its own subject into a Subject), it is obviously because the operation of turning individuals into subjects is always at risk of failing, and in this sense it is possible to say that Althusser *does not* regard individual as totally and forever subjected to the ideological interpellation. It remains true, however, that in these notes, 'ideology' is implicitly equated with the 'dominant ideology'; that there is no consideration of the possible frictions within a certain social formation between different ideologies; and that the notion of 'class struggle' is totally absent.

2. Class struggle in the ISAs

As paradoxical as it may appear to those who regard Althusser's theory of ideology as functionalist, it is by reflecting further on the problem of reproduction that, in the following years (especially 1969-1970) Althusser provides a correction to his own functionalism. And this correction interests us insofar as it produces a modification –left largely untheorized by Althusser himself– of the concept of interpellation, hence of the subject.

As is well-known, the basic question posed by Althusser's further work on reproduction can be briefly summarized in this way: where and how are the conditions of the reproduction of production secured? To address this problem, which stands at the centre of Althusser's whole theory of reproduction, he introduces the famous concept of Ideological State Apparatus, clearly drawing it from Gramsci. As I have already mentioned, in the ISA article (which is, I recall, Althusser's only work on reproduction published during his life) the concept of class struggle is quite marginal, and Althusser insists on it forcefully only in the 'Postscript'. But when we turn to the long manuscript on reproduction from which the article was culled, the situation changes considerably: *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* is *entirely* written from the point of view of class struggle. In the opening chapters, in fact, Althusser immediately raises the problem

of the relationship between reproduction and class struggle, which indicates, at the very least, that he was aware of the risk of being accused of functionalism, or of having simply neglected one of the most important elements of Marxist theory.

At this point, it is important to remark that Althusser's initial project, as it is presented by Althusser himself at the beginning of the manuscript (that is, of what is today published as *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*) was to write two volumes. The first volume would deal with 'the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production', while the second would investigate 'class struggle in capitalist social formations'. The second volume of this ambitious project will never be born, the volume on reproduction being the only one to be completed, or at least the only one at our disposal today. Surely, this sharp separation between reproduction and class struggle put in place by Althusser could only reinforce the above-mentioned critique about the (alleged) externality of reproduction and class struggle, their sheer juxtaposition, in lieu of an intimate, conceptual relationship. However, Althusser is acutely aware of the theoretical problems posed by this 'division of work'. In the preface, he writes:

Since the analyses in Volume 1 depend in certain cases, on principles to be worked out in Volume 2, I ask readers to grant me a kind of theoretical and political 'credit'. I shall try to honour the obligation thus incurred in Volume 2, in which I shall broach the problem of the class struggle in capitalist social formations. (Althusser, 2014a, 2)

The minimum we can say is that Althusser, when embarking on the study of the superstructures and ideology, was aware that the notion of class struggle could not be overlooked, and its effects would need to be considered in the very conceptualization of reproduction itself. A few pages later he adds:

I wish to warn readers from the outset, *solemnly*, as it were, in order to avoid all misunderstanding, all confusion and all unfounded criticism, that the order of exposition I have adopted has a serious

disadvantage, one no other order of exposition can overcome. It is that the present volume proposes to discuss, above all, the mode of functioning of the superstructure (the state, the state apparatuses) as reproduction of the relations of production. It is, however, impossible to talk about the state, law and ideology without bringing class struggle into play. Proper logic would therefore seem to indicate that I should have adopted the opposite order of exposition, and began by talking about the class struggle before talking about the state, law and ideology. The latter order of exposition, however, would have run into the same difficulty, the other way around: for it is impossible to talk about classes and class struggle without first talking about the state, law and ideology. Thus, we are caught in a circle, since we would have to *talk about everything at once* [...] The *class struggle* will therefore constantly come into play after a certain –very early– point in our analyses. It will do so by way of a whole series of effects that remain unintelligible unless we refer to its reality and presence *outside* the objects we analyze, but inside them as well [...] we shall constantly have to bring its effects into play without first having provided a thorough explanation of their causes. (Althusser, 2014a, 9)

Overall, this methodological awareness (however debatable Althusser's solution may be) makes *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* more attentive to the internal dynamics of the Ideological State Apparatuses with respect to the ISA article, as the 'class struggle' appears in it through its effects – as a veritable 'absent cause' whose nature is not investigated as such, but whose effects are visible and present in the conceptualization of the objects under scrutiny. Indeed, not only does Althusser pay great attention to the process of the *constitution* of a State Ideology following the seizure of power by a determinate class; he also stresses the internal differences in terms of temporality between the seizure of power and the construction, or the re-adjustment, of an adequate ensemble of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which requires a long and constant class struggle (Althusser, 2014a, 88-92). A key aspect of Althusser's analyses is that the

ISAs are thought of as a heterogeneity and not as a simple unity. Whilst the Repressive Apparatus (the State in the strict sense) can be thought of according to the metaphor of the One, the Ideological State Apparatuses are of the order of the Many, but not only in a static sense (as one may think by reading the ISA essay), but rather in a dynamic sense. It follows from these premises that Althusser regards the unity of the State Ideology itself as problematic, or, better, as only ever *tendential* and as a result of class struggle in the domain of ideology. Returning, a few years later, precisely on this point, Althusser insists that it is ‘class struggle’ that renders the unification of the dominant ideology problematic:

there is multiplicity in the materiality of ideologies, a multiplicity that, because it could not be totally unified in the ancient dominant ideology, neither can it be reabsorbed in the unity of the new dominant ideology. This is why it seems only fair to recognise in principle the dialectics of this process of unification by inscribing this recognition in the open plurality of the ideological state apparatuses. Open, because one can never say in advance what the development of class struggle will be. (Althusser, 2014b, 238)

However, where the effects of the ‘absent cause’ of class struggle are most evident is in the following analyses of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, where Althusser introduces a distinction that is surprisingly –at least for us today, for the potential theoretical consequences it may have had– absent from the ISA essay. After explaining that the Ideological Apparatuses ‘realise’ the State Ideology (i.e. the dominant ideology, the ideology of the dominant class), which has the task of securing the reproduction of the relations of production, he points out that the total process of reproduction, traversed by class struggle, has specific effects on the functioning of the ensemble of the ISAs. He conceptualizes these effects as an internal subversion of the ideology that is supposed to ‘realise’ itself in the ISAs:

We must distinguish between, on the one hand, the determinate elements of the State Ideology that are realised in, and exist in,

a determinate apparatus and its practices, and, on the other, the ideology that is ‘produced’ in this apparatus by its practices. To mark this distinction terminologically, we will call the former ideology the ‘Primary Ideology’, and the latter –a by-product of the practice in which the Primary Ideology is realised– the ‘secondary or subordinated ideology’ [...] these secondary ideologies are produced by a conjunction of complex causes, among which figure, alongside the practice in question, the effects of other external practices, of exterior ideologies; and in the last instance, however dissimulated, the distant effects, which are actually very close, of class struggle. (Althusser, 2014a, 83)

What we have here is precisely the conceptualization of the ‘effects’ of class struggle which Althusser mentioned in the passage previously quoted. In fact, it is important to notice that the ‘secondary ideology’ is not understandable as a ‘reaction’ to the State Ideology produced by practices in a spontaneous way, but as the effect of something external to the ISA in question, i.e. ‘class struggle’. Or, to be more precise, they are to be understood as the effect of the specific configuration of the struggle between classes at a given moment in a given social formation.

Therefore, from this point of view, Althusser can hardly be accused of functionalism, as what is introduced here is precisely the problem of a relation of forces (between struggling classes) *within* the reproduction of the conditions of production. If the State Ideology realises itself in the ISAs, and if their task is to ‘inculcate’ the dominant ideology, this process is not at all a smooth one –on the contrary: Althusser clearly recognises that the functioning of the Ideological State Apparatuses cannot be conceptualised in isolation from the other elements of the social formation. The theoretical effect of this point of view is the coming to the fore of the notion of ‘secondary or subordinated ideologies’, which are produced in contrast with, or against, the Primary Ideology. Althusser writes: ‘that this does not take place without “contradictions”, and that, in particular, the ideological sub-formations “produced” in the apparatuses by their own

practices should sometimes ‘make the gears grate and grind’ is inevitable’ (2014a, 88), adding in a note that this is so ‘for good reason, if we recall the effects of the class struggle that operate in them [the ISAs] to “produce” these ideological sub-formations’ (2014a, 88, fn. 32). So, here Althusser does not reduce ideology to the dominant ideology (which is, as mentioned earlier, a classical criticism of Althusser), but locates in the ideological reproduction –i.e., in the moment of the constitution of the individuals as subject– the very possibility of a subversion of the dominant ideology, or its transformation.

If the introduction of this perspective, which, as we have seen, is present in Althusser’s writings from the beginning of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, renders null the allegation of functionalism, it nonetheless forces us to ask whether the very concept of interpellation is adequate to describe the dynamics –understood very much etymologically, as *dynamis*, force-relation– in which individuals are caught. One of the problems seems to be that Althusser elaborated the notion of interpellation *before* introducing, in the 1968 study, the perspective of class struggle and of the multiplicity of the Ideological State Apparatuses (as I pointed out, in fact, the question of the class struggle was absent from the 1966 notes on the theory of discourse; the notion of interpellation originates in a highly functionalist context), and kept this notion intact even after introducing the crucial idea of a plurality of ideologies in the ISAs, or of the existence of a non-totalisable plurality of ideologies in the social formation. After having dealt at length with the plurality of the ISAs in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, in fact, Althusser introduces his theory of ideology based on the notion of interpellation elaborated in the ‘Three Notes’ (1966). But he stops at the theory of ideology ‘in general’ (Althusser, 2014a, 174 – recall that the second volume on the class struggle in capitalist formations was foreseen, but was never written), leaving *de facto* the aspect of the *concrete* and *material* constitution of the subject unresolved. Thus, he leaves unexplored the fact that ideology *never* exists in general, but always in concrete and determinate formations, which are always class

or regional ideologies. Therefore, the question that one should ask here is the following: what are the consequences of the (non-functionalist) perspective presented in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* on the conceptualisation of the interpellation of the subject?

3. Towards the concept of ‘overinterpellation’

My thesis is that not only does such a perspective allow us to reject the criticism of functionalism levelled against Althusser, but also that it forces us to supplement the notion of interpellation by introducing another concept, which I will call ‘overinterpellation’. By this term I mean to highlight that, in the very analyses put forth by Althusser, the underlying principle is that individuals are never interpellated as subject, but always as subjects – that is, that individuals are always constituted as subjects not by one interpellation, but by manifold and sometimes contradictory interpellations. The schema of interpellation remains the same, but one of the consequences of the idea of the open plurality of the ISAs, or of the production of different ideologies within the ISAs themselves, is that the individual is caught in a network of ‘central signifiers’, that is, in a network of different ideological discourses in which the imaginary recognition takes place.

To flesh out the idea of overinterpellation, let us consider chapter XII of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (‘On Ideology’). Here Althusser introduces the thesis according to which ‘ideology has no history’ (2014a, 174), which does not mean –as it did for Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*– that it has no history because it is sheer illusion, but that it is trans-historical. For this reason, for Althusser, it is possible to propose a theory of ideology ‘in general’ (174). Althusser argues, following the ‘Three Notes’, that ideology has a definite structure, i.e., that it functions by the category of ‘subject’: ideology interpellates individuals as subjects, and ‘the category of the subject is constitutive of any

ideology only insofar as every ideology has the function, which defines it, of “constituting” concrete subjects’ (2014a, 188).

The notion of interpellation is formal: it only states that individuals are constituted through a recognition, which is also a misrecognition, of themselves as free, as the origin of certain deeds and thoughts, by means of which they also accept the performativity expressed by the determinate ideological discourse itself, thus acquiring specific historical determinations. For example, if I am interpellated as a citizen, I will behave according to the prescriptions (rights and duties) attached to such a category, etc., and I will think, very likely, that the political freedom that I enjoy as a citizen is the most important value of all, and so forth. (This is also true for a Communist militant, who recognizes himself or herself in the discourses of Communist apparatuses).¹³ Shortly afterwards, Althusser introduces the thesis of the material existence of ideology, which was presupposed by the theory of the Ideological State Apparatuses expounded in the previous chapters, and formulates the order of ‘real determination’ of ideology upon individuals:

The subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices regulated by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material acts of a subject acting in all good conscience in accordance with his belief. (2014a, 187)

What about, at this point, what Althusser called ‘secondary ideology’? In another passage (again absent from the ISA essay) Althusser links it to the problem of the concrete constitution of the subject, thus connecting (implicitly) the issue of primary and secondary ideology to what we might call, by analogy, the primary and secondary interpellation:

It may be objected that the subject in question could act differently; let us recall that we said that the ritual practices in which a primary ideology is realised can ‘produce’ (in the form of by-products) a ‘secondary’

ideology – thank God, since otherwise neither revolt nor the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness nor revolution would be possible. (2014a, 187)

Let us notice, first of all, that Althusser is referring to the same subject. This means, evidently, that the same individual is interpellated at the same time by two different ideologies. It is true that here Althusser refers to the situation in which different interpellations are active as a peculiar situation. Yet, considering what we saw earlier, this is actually the ‘normal’ situation (primary ideology, or State ideology, is only *tendentally* a totality), and what varies is, actually, only the relation of force between different interpellations. Therefore, Althusser’s theory highlights the existence of multiple interpellations, or what I propose to call ‘overinterpellation’, even if this concept is present only in a ‘practical’ state; and it also brings to the fore the fact that the ‘acquisition of a revolutionary consciousness’ finds its condition of possibility in a conflict of interpellations. Now, the passage from ‘interpellation’, as the central concept of the theory of ideology ‘in general’, to ‘overinterpellation’, is clearly the passage from the trans-historical domain (concept of ideology in general) to the historical domain – a shift that Althusser does not completely spell out. It is, indeed, ‘overinterpellation’ that accounts for what occurs in the *material complexity* of the social whole, much like ‘overdetermination’ accounted for the ‘normal’ state of the contradiction, which is never simple and originary (Althusser, 2005, 113).

One could perhaps object, at this point, that the sole distinction between primary and secondary ideology is still too simplistic. This is quite true, but the concept of ‘overinterpellation’ needs not be confined to this distinction only. It is Althusser himself that provides an interesting illustration of the fate of the subject in its historical and concrete existence. One of the passages in which Althusser puts the concept of ‘overinterpellation’ to work most clearly is an autobiographical one.

Here Althusser attributes a crucial importance to the ‘open plurality’ of interpellations:

What do we mean when we say that ideology in general has always-already interpellated as subjects individuals who are always-already subjects? [...] this means, concretely, the following: when religious ideology begins to function directly by interpellating the little child Louis as a subject, little Louis is already-subject – not yet religious, but familial-subject. When legal ideology (later, let us suppose) begins to interpellate little Louis by talking to him about, not Mama and Papa now, or God and the little Lord Jesus, but Justice, he was already a subject, familial, religious, scholastic, and so on [...] when later, thanks to auto-heterobiographical circumstances of the type of the Popular Front, Spanish Civil War, Hitler, 1940 Defeat, captivity, encounter with a communist, and so on, political ideology (in its differential forms) begins to interpellate the now adult Louis as a subject, he has already long been, always already been, a familial, religious, moral, scholastic and legal subject [...] and is now, lo and behold, a political subject! This political subject begins, once back from captivity, to make the transition from traditional Catholic activism to advanced –semi-heretical– Catholic activism, then begins reading Marx, then joins the Communist Party, and so on. So life goes. Ideologies never stop interpellating subjects as subjects, never stop ‘recruiting’ individuals who are always-already subjects. The play of ideologies is superposed, criss-crossed, contradicts itself on the same subject: the same individual always-already (several times) subject. Let him figure things out, if he can. (2014a, 193-194)

The concept of ‘overinterpellation’ allows us to capture precisely the fact that, in the concrete process of reproduction of the conditions of production, it is always a matter of a multiplicity of interpellations (a variation in terms of regional and class, or fractions of class, etc.). Through such a concept it becomes possible to stress the continuous variation of the ideological interpellations (dependent upon class struggle, whose effects are never foreseeable ‘in advance’ (2014b, 238), i.e., contingent), of the diverse and virtually contradictory constitutions of individuals as

subjects. Therefore, it becomes possible to stress that the subject itself is never of the order of the One, is never a unity, but of the order of the Many – and such a multiplicity must not be considered as a simply given multiplicity, but as a *dynamic* one (in the etymological sense of the word), eventually dependent upon a political relation of forces. It is not entirely correct, then, to state that the subject in Althusser is always of the order of the State, as many have argued (most recently Badiou, 2011, 63), since it is clear that the subject itself is not determined by a single ideology, let alone by the State Ideology in its supposed (but in reality impossible) purity, but rather in and by the very struggle between different interpellations, being but the unstable unity (a unity in dominance, to use Althusser’s formulation) of a plurality of ideological discourses. In fact, we may even say that the concept of ‘overinterpellation’ makes it clear that if it is true that the individual is always abstract with respect to the subject, as Althusser puts it (2014a, 192), the subject is abstract with respect to the *subjects* that a single individual always (already) is. The subject itself is, ultimately, a ‘field’, or better, ‘a process’. In this sense, we can say that for Althusser –re-read based on the concept of ‘overinterpellation’– not only is the subject not a ‘substance’, but is itself but an unstable *process*.

We can ask, at this point, if, for Althusser, the ‘overinterpellation’ of the subjects leaves them a ‘space’ of freedom. This point is particularly dangerous, if anything because of the intrinsic polysemic and philosophically charged, character of the concept of freedom. However, the idea of freedom is introduced by Althusser himself, even if much later, in an unpublished note on ideology. Here he develops the same idea that was present in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* of a multiplicity of interpellations. I quote it in its entirety to make the continuity apparent:

Ideology acts by interpellating the individuals as subjects or rather, as the individuals are always-already subjects, by interpellating the subjects as subjects, i.e., by displacing the point [*en deplacant le lieu*] of their interpellation. So a child, subject of identity (Pierre, Nicolas, etc.), is very early

interpellated as a moral subject (you must do this and not that...), and later as scholastic, juridical, ideological, political, military, scientific etc. [...] I recall that it is an ISA that interpellates it, displacing the point of application of its interpellation as subject. (Althusser, 1985-1986?, unpublished note)

A few lines below, Althusser introduces the idea of an 'objective freedom' due to the multiplicity of the interpellations:

It is sufficient to indicate the multiplicity of the interpellations to immediately make appear, between the different subjects, a play in which the objective freedom of every individual is inscribed. (Althusser, 1985-1986?, unpublished note)

So, it is clear that Althusser came to think that his theory of ideology is compatible with a certain idea of freedom, which he terms 'objective freedom'. Such a freedom would consist of the different interpellations acting on a certain individual (who is already a certain type of subject, historically determined). In this sense, a theory of 'overinterpellation' is indeed a theory of objective freedom, at least in the sense that it implies that individuals are not univocally determined by one ideology, or univocally 'produced' by the State Apparatuses. However, it remains fundamentally anti-humanist: the subject *is* constituted, in a plural, unstable and potentially contradictory way, by the process of 'overinterpellation'. This is another way of saying that our 'identities' are not entirely ours, that human beings find their places in a world that they did not choose. However, this does not mean that human beings are turned into machines, or that ideology is 'profoundly unconscious', as Althusser said in his essay in *For Marx*. It is a fundamental tenet of Althusser's second theory of ideology¹⁴ that ideology has a *certain relationship* with the unconscious, but that it is not itself unconscious.¹⁵ Rather, ideology has to do with effecting a subject-position (which is also an object-position) and to establish a regime of evidence that subjects recognize as their 'world'. But the very structure of ideology, as elaborated by Althusser, betrays its fragility: ideology operates

in such a way as to ground such evidence by doubling itself, that is, by resorting to a double structure of the type S – s. It is important, on this point, to return to what Althusser says in the 'Three Notes'¹⁶: ideology is not pure injunction, but an operation of conviction and persuasion. In that text, he added the fundamental mediation of the 'reasons-of-subject' between 'S' and 's' to account for the fundamental structure of ideology. This is indeed a key component of ideology. No ideology is purely irrational or a-rational, but provides the subject with some sort of 'reasons-of-subject'. Thus, the very idea proposed by Althusser that ideology is a 'discourse' – an idea that, in spite of providing the context for the formulation of the concept of 'interpellation', is not mentioned in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* – must be retrieved: ideology is a matter of practices *and* discourses, understood as two sides of the same *dispositif*. In fact, it is only by retrieving the discursive dimension of ideology that we can think of 'overinterpellation' as an operation of continuous de- and re-centring of subjects, whose subjectivity is constantly re-structured around different central signifiers,¹⁷ to which different practices (can) correspond. Now, it is in relation to the mediation of the 'reasons-of-subject' that Althusser's insistence that the friction between primary and secondary interpellations can produce a revolutionary consciousness should be interpreted.¹⁸ Let us consider again the previously mentioned autobiographical passage. The subject, writes Althusser, is caught in a process of overinterpellation, with multiple interpellations overlapping and sometimes contradicting each other. And he adds: 'Let him figure things out, if he can' ('à lui de se débrouiller').¹⁹ This points towards a capacity of the interpellated individuals to negotiate their own interpellation, i.e., their being a subject. The very expression used by Althusser is interesting here. '*Se débrouiller*', as a verb, stresses the process of 'untying' the knots of the network of interpellations. It is, significantly, a reflexive verb that alludes to an activity upon oneself, and such an activity is rendered by a Latin prefix (de), which indicates a 'moving away'. We should link this idea of 'figuring things out' to the idea that a fundamental part of ideological interpellation is

the provision of some sort of ‘reasons-of-subject’, which can, in principle, be contested and called into question. If, for Althusser, the human animal is an ‘ideological animal’, as he famously argued (2014a, 188), this is not *all* s/he is. The process of displacement of central signifiers –that is, ‘overinterpellation’– is the very field in which frictions between individuals’ multiple subject-positions manifest themselves, producing both the need and the objective possibility to negotiate one’s own subject-position.

Notes

1. Henceforth: ISA essay.
2. For the first line of criticism, the most thorough attack against Althusser was certainly that of E. P. Thompson (1978). See also Benton (1984), Anderson (1980) and Elliott (2009). The second line often overlaps with the first one, albeit it is logically distinct from it, since it is not ‘humanist’ in itself. It was originally formulated, and most forcefully expressed, in Rancière’s early critique of Althusser (1973) as well as in Badiou’s 1976 work on ideology (2012).
3. See Althusser, 2008, 57-58.
4. This is now in Althusser, 2014, 218-231.
5. In the first pages of the ISA essay, Althusser resolutely writes: ‘I believe that it is possible and necessary to think what characterizes the essential of the existence and nature of the superstructure *on the basis of reproduction*. Once one takes the point of view of reproduction, many of the questions whose existence was indicated by the spatial metaphor of the edifice, but to which it could not give a conceptual answer, are immediately illuminated. My basic thesis is that it is not possible to pose these questions (and therefore to answer them) except from the point of view of reproduction’ (2008, 10).
6. The long manuscript, written in 1969, from which the ISA essay was culled for publication in *La Pensée*, was discovered after Althusser’s death. It was published in 1995 in French with the title *Sur la reproduction*, with an introduction by J. Bidet. It was only translated into English in 2014. Balibar reconstructs the story of the ‘montage’ of the ISA essay from the manuscript on reproduction in his ‘Foreword’ to Althusser, 2014, vii-xviii, where he also draws attention to the fact that in 1970 essay published in *La pensée* Althusser inserted dotted lines to mark the ‘stitches’ of his ‘montage’ (xii). These dotted lines were removed in the English translation of the article.
7. See Montag (2013, 161).
8. For a comprehensive and detailed reconstruction of Althusser’s development of the concept of ideology, from *For Marx* to the ISA essay, see Montag, 2013, 103-170.
9. For the chronology of the three notes written by Althusser, and for details about the collaborative work they initiated, see Corpet and Mathéron, 2003.
10. I will leave the other discourses aside, as they do not directly concern the development of the argument at stake here.
11. There is another big issue addressed by Althusser in these notes, which, again, cannot be discussed here: the problem of how to think the relationship between the unconscious and ideology. For a discussion of this point, which would take too far from the central concern of this article, see the seminal essay by Morfino (2011), and the work by Eyers (2013) and Bruschi (2014). I have addressed this point myself in Pippa (2019).
12. ‘The ideological subject participates in person, is present in person in the ideological discourse, as it is itself a signifier of this discourse [...] the ideological discourse, in which the subject-effect is present in person and is therefore [...] the central signifier of the discourse, possesses a structure of specularly centering.’ (Althusser, 2003, 49-50)
13. This means that there are two levels of misrecognition. One is formal: I am the origin of my deeds and thoughts, and in this sense the theory of interpellation is clearly directed towards the tradition issued by the *ego cogito* et sim. But then there is the misrecognition that pertains to the content of a certain interpellation, which varies according to classes and regions of ideology. The crucial point is that there is no pure formal interpellation because ideology in general simply does not exist (only the *concept* of the structure of ideology in general does).
14. I.e., the one he started elaborating in 1966 with the introduction of the concept of ‘interpellation’, previously absent.
15. As perfectly shown by Morfino (2011). See also Pippa (2019, 116-126).
16. But is absent from *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (and the ISA essay), although it is implied by some passages and ideas, as I shall argue in a moment.

17. See footnote 12 above.
18. Indeed, Althusser is quite clear on this, as for instance when he argues that in order to understand the forms of class struggle within the ISAs one needs to take seriously Marx's phrase that 'it is in ideology that people become conscious of class struggle and fight it out' (Althusser, 2014a, 155).
19. On this specific point, see also Macherey (2014, 97).

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