

The reproduction of control: Notes on Althusser's notion of ideological State apparatuses (ISAs) and the use of Machiavelli

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In the constant need to ward things off, you can become so weak that you are unable to protect yourself any more.

— Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*¹

Encore – a brief interlude

Autour des nomes, la vengeance rôde. Est-ce à jamais?

— Lyotard, *Le différend*²

In this paper first I will briefly address Louis Althusser's notions of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), ideology and their interplay in the formation of a subjugated subjectivity, and then I focus my attention on his Marxist reading of Niccolò Machiavelli to cast light on ideological control, its alteration and limits. When one approaches ideology on a theoretical ground, that is, ideology as a specific category, every kind of approach, whatever it might be called, poses manifold problems. Raising questions about the very existence and definition of ideology, the self-positioning of the inquirer and to what extent these are already political questions that deal consciously or unconsciously with ideology — these are problematic subjects in themselves. However, the degree by which those *spontaneous* questions are *also* ideological is one of the by-products that this paper tries to provide. In this sense, my choice of both Althusser's analyses on ISAs and Machiavelli reveals here its deeply partisan rationale, as it were, its political and theoretical presuppositions.

Since Marx, the turning point in critical thinking about ideology can be located in Althusser because it is mainly with him that ideology gains a *positive* and nontranscendable content, a *plan d'immanence* against Marx's illusionary *bricolage*. In Althusser, via and thanks to Gramsci, ideology ceases to have only negative features (as in Marx and Horkheimer-Adorno, just to cite

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 95.

² "In and around names, vengeance is on the prowl. Forever?", Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend*, (Paris: Minuit, 1983): 90.

the most important grandfathers of *negative* ideology), and it starts to be extensively theorised as both autonomous and as a new field of critique.³ Nonetheless, the notion of ideology remains as difficult as ever: its transformation into positive content has not facilitated greater understanding. Slavoj Žižek, a Lacanian leftist philosopher, explains the epistemological challenge of thinking about ideology in his introduction to *Mapping ideology*.⁴ In sum, Žižek claims that “the actuality of the notion of ideology” resides in the short-circuits between necessity and contingency both in inner life and its externalisations, a kind of short-circuit that must be wrought to “point towards the system’s antagonistic character, and thus ‘ estrange’ us to the self-evidence of its established identity”.⁵ Although I agree with the antagonistic role that a critique of ideology must always undertake, with Žižek we have already positioned ourselves in the Lacanian paradigm, which is currently the dominant mode of engagement with Althusser’s work on ideology. The *fantastic* uses and misuses of such approaches have effectively subsumed the political force of his thinking on ISAs.

So much for this brief overture. Let’s see now how Althusser, *still* the father figure in current discussions on ideology and related questions, discusses both the formation and functioning of ideological apparatuses.⁶

“Always-already”: reproduction and imaginary relations at work

Thus what it asserts to be *alien* to consciousness, it directly declares to be *the inmost nature of consciousness itself*.

— Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*⁷

In Althusser, ideology becomes a site of conflicting practices, and not only

³ Fredric Jameson, in his introduction to the English edition of Althusser’s *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001): xiv; writes that “Althusser’s theory of ideology... offers us one of the most stimulating ‘solutions’ to the dilemma of the incommensurability of individual and collective yet proposed in recent philosophy”.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “The spectre of ideology”, in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping ideology* (London/New York: Verso, 1994): 1-33 [3-4].

⁵ *Ibid.* 7.

⁶ Judith Butler, in *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative* (New York-London: Routledge, 1997): 154; recognizes that “Although Althusser’s own account of interpellation does not suffice to account for the discursive constitution of the subject, it sets the scene for the misappropriation of interpolating performatives that is central to any project of the subversive territorialisation and resignification of dominant social orders”.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 335.

ideas and beliefs,⁸ in a way that he claims to ameliorate and supplement Gramsci's insights on hegemony and civil society.⁹ Althusser's general approach is best epitomised by his long article called *Ideology and ideological State apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)*. In a slightly different form,¹⁰ this article was part of a manuscript dated 1969 and named *Sur la reproduction*, and soon after, in 1970, Althusser published it in a collection titled *Lénine et la philosophie*.

Placing himself firmly in the Marxist tradition and trying at the same time to improve it, Althusser focuses his attention on the reproductive need of every mode of production: "The ultimate condition of production is therefore the production of the conditions of production".¹¹ Therefore, the means of production must be foremost and must always be replicated and this feature is the essential precondition for a dominant social formation to remain dominant. Althusser is very clear on what he calls the founding "mechanism" of capitalism: "the existence of the necessity of the reproduction of the material conditions of production".¹² What I want to stress here is the adamant bond between capitalism, reproduction and conditions of production; I will move to consideration of their political consequences later in this paper. However, "conditions of production" is only a label that links up labour power and means of production, where the latter is simply an agglomeration of lifeless machines unless labour power uses it. Althusser's tactic, so far very close to Marx's, is an functionalist understanding of the mechanism of reproduction: How does capitalism achieve a silent and perpetual reproduction of its labour power?¹³ It is here that Althusser's contribution reveals its originality: the State and its ideological apparatuses are central cogs of the reproduction mechanism. And, more specifically, in capitalism labour power is *created* outside the production structure, mostly by the education system: both dominated and dominant learn how to be exploited and exploit. Schooling in Althusser is thus a chiasmus that hides in

⁸ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London/New York: Verso, 1996): 231-237.

⁹ Althusser blames a lack of theorisation in Gramsci on ideology and apparatuses: "Unfortunately, Gramsci did not systematise his institutions, which remained in the state of acute but fragmentary notes". See Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy*, 95, no. 7.

¹⁰ See Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (New York: Palgrave, 2003): 156; to understand the political reasons that led Althusser to make some changes in the original article collected in his *Sur la reproduction*.

¹¹ Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy*, 85.

¹² *Ibid.* 87.

¹³ Michel Pêcheux points out that "[i]n reality, the reproduction, just as much as the transformation, of the relations of reproduction is an *objective process* whose mystery must be penetrated, and not just a state of fact only to be observed". See Pêcheux's brilliant article, which has a kind of quality often lacking in Althusser's studies on ideology, "The mechanism of ideological (mis)recognition", now in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping ideology*, 141-151 [145].

its centre ideology and subjugation as pumping heart. Skills, know-how and rules, these are what the school apparatus provides on a large scale — a kind of scale that ranges from basic learning for “manual workers” to PhD programs for “the agents of exploitation and repression”.

It emerges that Althusser wants to explain the reproduction of labour power and, since this mechanism happens in the social context, he is forced to address the most important social institution, that is, the State. It is not by chance that the State in Marx has been discussed only in a *negative* form; within Marxism it has clearly been difficult to theorize otherwise. In Althusser, however, we find a full critique of what he considers to be Marx’s poorly sketched version of the State as repressive institution. Using the Marxist dual *topique* (infrastructure-superstructure), Althusser declares that in his analysis he will use the point of view of reproduction. But before any discussion of how he introduces ISAs, what they are and how they operate, it will be useful to follow his *diaeresis* of the superstructure, from the genus State to specific ISAs, a kind of *diaeresis* that operates from the point of view of reproduction: the State and *how* it lasts, *how* “the mechanisms of the State” reproduce themselves. The State is first split by Althusser into State power (the site of political struggle) and State apparatus. Since the reproduction of conditions of production is what matters here, the State apparatus “may survive political events which effect the possession of State power”.¹⁴ The State apparatus is made of repressive State apparatuses (RSAs) and ideological State apparatuses (ISAs). RSAs are those apparatuses that function primarily by both violence and repression, and only loosely by ideology. In Althusser’s own terms RSAs are “the Government, the Administrative, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.”; ISAs, on the other, include:

the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA (the political system, including the different Parties), the trade union ISA, the communication ISA (press, radio and television, etc.), the cultural ISA (Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.).¹⁵

ISAs are consequently run and fuelled by ideology and only vaguely by violence and repression. But, what is ideology? My position, following Althusser, is that ideology is the controlled site where the reproduction of the means of production *and* imaginary relations meet — and that site is subjectivity, that site is *us*. When I use the phrase “controlled site” I condense the task RSAs undertake to secure the reproduction of reproduction. As Althusser explains:

¹⁴ Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy*, 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 96.

The role of the repressive State apparatus, insofar as it is a repressive apparatus, consists essentially in securing by force (physical or otherwise) the political conditions of the reproduction of relations of production, which are in the last resort *relations of exploitation*. Not only does the State apparatus contribute generously to its own reproduction (the capitalist State contains political dynasties, military dynasties, etc.), but also and above all, the State apparatus secures by repression (from the most brutal force, via mere administrative commands and interdictions, to open and tacit censorship) the political conditions for the action of the ideological State apparatuses.¹⁶

The existence of RSAs serves to secure the safe reproduction of ISAs within the capitalist mode of production. Violence and repression come on stage mostly to fill a lack of ideological fluid in the mechanism of reproduction. It is as if, in Althusser's rhetorical economy, the more ideology supplies the reproduction with its *spontaneous* reliability the less violence and repression need to be invoked to regulate the reproductive mechanism. Althusser's example of schooling as the leading ISA in modern societies, the best and most *natural* maker of control, reveals here the interplay between RSAs, ISAs and reproduction. Modern capitalism secured its reproduction when it won its ideological struggle against feudal aristocracy, when it succeeded in replacing the Church with the School ISA and, finally, when it achieved the "ideological hegemony indispensable to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production".¹⁷ The "educational ideological apparatus" is the real "dominant ideological State apparatus", not the political ISA, and the reason, once again, resides in the point of view of reproduction. Had the bourgeoisie only taken control over the political ISA, it would have only meant a temporary victory and it would not have secured the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. But the separation between RSAs and ISAs, is only an apparent one since they mutually constitute one another. The educational ISA happily receives raw material to be informed generation by generation: on the one hand with basic skills in the case of workers, and on the other hand with know-how and intellectual knowledge in the case of "technicians... agents of exploitation... repression... and professional ideologists".¹⁸ The educational ISA teaches the ruling ideology that replicates in itself while it functions and, most important, it does so in a completely hidden way:

The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist

¹⁶ Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy*, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 105.

regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology: an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology, where teachers respectful of the 'conscience' and 'freedom' of the children who are entrusted to them (in complete confidence) by their 'parents' (who are free, too, *i.e.* the owners of their children) open up for them the path to the freedom, morality and responsibility of adults by their own example, by knowledge, literature and their 'liberating' virtues.¹⁹

There is in Althusser an oscillation between definitions of ideology and its different facets.²⁰ The "ruling ideology", that is the ideology of the ruling class, is what unifies ISAs and their specific ideological dynamics. But there are also "regional" ideologies which have particular histories and this dispersion leads Althusser to propose "a theory of ideology in general".

There are also several remarks in Althusser's article about ideology "in general" and the fact that this general ideology "has no history". The reason why general ideology lacks history resides in its specificity, in its permanent functioning in class societies: Althusser characterises this permanent lack of history as "eternal", relating this feature to the same permanent lack of history that Freud ascribed to the unconscious. The function of general ideology is to provide human beings an "imaginary relation" between themselves and the conditions of production of their society. The relationship is subtle as much as it is essential: ideology is not a relationship between subjects and the real conditions of production/exploitation, on the contrary, ideology is the link between subjects and how they *eternally* imagine those real conditions of production. Something must be added here as a brief digression: if there is a hole in Althusser's rhetorical economy it is in the passage from the theoretical form of general ideology to its material and regional content, which is a leap of faith. Althusser asks the reader to suspend her critical approach when it comes to justifying the "affirmative form" of the "material existence of 'ideas or other 'representation' "²¹ as regional ideologies. In addition to that, there is a lack of theorisation about the different material forms ideologies take (Althusser simply cites Aristotle's *pollachôs legesthai* regarding matter modalities).

But what matters here are Althusser's reflections on specific ISAs and their material grip on subjects, the ways in which ISAs and imaginary relations

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 105-106.

²⁰ The best distinction between ideology in general, dominant ideology and ISAs can be found in Pêcheux, "The mechanism of ideological (mis)recognition", 146.

²¹ Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy*, 112.

structure subjectivity. Here, in the nexus ISAs/subjectivity we have another *diaeresis* (from apparatus to belief) in Althusser. A supposedly free subject, who acts according to his own free will and beliefs, follows his inner *ideas* that will produce *actions* themselves included into a series of *practices* whose context is a *ritual* always happening in the reign of a specific ideological apparatus: “ideology talks of actions”.²² What drives subjects, right from the beginning to the end, is (the materiality of) the specific ISA in which they are *living*:

It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he acted by the following system (set out in order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief.²³

The main thesis, although counterintuitive, is clear: ideology produces subjects and the more produced subjects perceive themselves as free agents the better ideology is disguised. Althusser talks of a “double constitution”, the primary law of the nexus ideology-subjectivity: “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects”. We are reaching the crucial point in Althusser’s theory of ideology: subjectivity as *effect* of ideology. The natural *évidence* of being a subject is an ideological effect that, once it is worked out, leads to “ideological recognition”, itself being one of the two “functions of ideology as such”, that is the couple recognition-misrecognition (*reconnaissance-méconnaissance*). What is at work here, in the most elementary structure of subjectivity, what makes an individual being a subject, is the reproduction of ideology in its material facade called “concrete subject”. And this mechanism is activated “always-already” (*toujours-déjà*) by “interpellation” or “hailing” — it does not matter whether the interpellation comes from social or private contexts. Individuals obtain their subjectivity (their most *obvious* extra-ideological nature) from ideology via interpellation. Judith Butler, one of the few thinkers to have analyzed this counterintuitive dynamic outside of the Lacanian paradigm, explains that: “the act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence”.²⁴ Subjectivity becomes an *effect* of an already reproductive

²² *Ibid.* 114.

²³ *Ibid.* 115.

²⁴ Butler, *Excitable speech*, 25. Butler’s main thesis is that the body, that is a bodily performativity, is the only way to reconfigure Althusser’s theory of ideology beyond the constraints of inherited foreclosures and authoritarian interpellations. The body in Butler’s text plays this role but it can do this only through a living performance of an

force (ideology as ISAs) that is constantly replicated to produce the *evidence* of being a (free) subject. More clearly, ISAs secure their social reproduction producing “always-already” subjugated subjects: subjectivity is *reproduction*² (the first time, a *real* reproduction since it comes from the reproduction of the conditions of production through RSA plus ISAs, the second is *imaginary* as it is the reproduction that comes from ISAs through individuals). My thesis is that the *always* of the conditions of exploitation and the *already* of subjugated subjectivity mark the rhetorical rhythm of Althusser’s theoretical strategy. The controlled site to which I referred earlier, where ideology and subjectivity meet, the controlled site that is us, is marked by the reproduction that *always already* produces replicated effects that are *always already* caught in ideological apparatuses. The hypothesis that I want to elucidate in the concluding section is that it is in his reflections on Machiavelli that Althusser gives us insight on how to break into the seeming impenetrability of ISAs and to change them.

Political practices against ISAs

Ideology is very much more, here, than the ideas and beliefs of particular classes or groups. It is in effect, *with only limited exceptions*, the condition of all conscious life.
— Raymond Williams²⁵

I would like to end this paper with the challenge that I perceive within Althusser’s philosophy to the golden cage that ISAs represent. In *For Marx* Althusser clearly declares that in “non-theoretical ideologies” it is possible to produce “ruptures and breaks”, and these are “*political* (effects of political practice, of great revolutionary events) and not ‘epistemological’ ”.²⁶ It is precisely here that I connect Althusser’s Marxist *reading (lecture)* of Machiavelli’s “theory of the New Prince” with the possibility of producing a

actual speech — in fact her analysis fails to address the reproduction of a nonsubjugated writing (*Ibid.* 151), a kind of practice and difficulty that simply disappears in the concluding pages of the book. Therefore, it is not by chance that throughout her text the Althusserian *toujours-déjà* is replaced by a recurring “always and only”. It must also be pointed out that in *Excitable speech*, Butler’s use of Derrida in the most strategic junctions of her reasoning is restricted to only two of Derrida’s influential articles, “Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences” and “Signature, event, context”. There is no mention in her book of *Of grammatology*, Derrida’s most materialistic approach on *écriture*.

²⁵ Raymond Williams, “Crisis in English studies”, in *The Raymond Williams reader* (Oxford-Malden: Blackwell, 2001): 262; my emphasis.

²⁶ Althusser, *For Marx*, 13.

collective rupture into ISAs. I shall restrict my reading to Althusser's manuscript published in English as *Machiavelli and us*.²⁷

Although I cannot analyze Althusser's book in detail here, I hope that a brief sketch of his views on Machiavelli will illustrate my point. In Althusser Machiavelli becomes the theorist of political *beginnings* as *ruptures*. Althusser's reading of Machiavelli's reflections on renaissance Italy as a fractured land in need of a national state form, as well as the conditions for the emergence of a figure capable of unifying Italian monarchist states ("the New Prince"), points to "aleatory conditions" as the fundamental features that make Machiavelli's thinking "gripping, but elusive, and thus strange".²⁸ One of the features of Machiavelli's *dispositif* is the necessity of a contingent *encounter* between "the New Prince" and the rest of his political adventure (*virtù* plus fortune). Another is the kind of political practice that has to be thought *from the present* and then acted out in the future. The last feature of Machiavelli's *dispositif* is a theory that is "condemned to thinking the possible at the boundary of the impossible".²⁹ All these three general features concur to make Machiavelli, in Althusser's eyes, "the first theorist of the conjuncture".³⁰

What I term here the *Machiavelli conjuncture* is a revolutionary political practice that can break the panoptical dimension of ISAs. In order to do so, the revolutionary group, "the New Prince", must achieve the following material goals: a) the new political formation must not be related to an already established party; b) it must raise an independent militia, an operation that, while it takes place, will produce the seeds for a set of counterISAs;³¹ c) the new political formation must act following what Althusser terms the "people point of view" to restrain dominant groups and their relative ISAs;³² d) the final taking of control and manipulation of ISAs, including the use of "fraud", will both consolidate and enlarge the "political base".³³ This materialist practice, begun in the *theoretical absence* of the current ideological configuration, is also "located in the social space in which it intervenes"³⁴ and ends in a deconstruction of ISAs — Althusser is fully aware that even in a classless society there will always be ISAs.

If there is no way to escape ideology from a subjective point of view,³⁵

²⁷ Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and us* (London-New York: Verso, 1999).

²⁸ *Ibid.* 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

³¹ *Ibid.* 83-89.

³² *Ibid.* 59-60.

³³ *Ibid.* 90-102.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 127.

³⁵ The individualistic dead-locks in which Lacanian thinkers are stuck when they try to read Althusser only through specific Lacanian notions inevitably block these thinkers

there is still a way to break through ISAs and then produce a better configuration of them. This path is only practicable via a collective, political rupture and *Machiavelli and us*, if it is read as a political program against ISAs and the theses of Eurocommunism, shows how that is possible. In this sense, *Machiavelli and Us* is Althusser's *Communist Manifesto*.³⁶

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to consider ISAs as ideological sites for political struggle, that is collective practices. See Mladen Dolar, "Beyond interpellation", *Qui Parle* 6, 2 (1993): 75-96; Rastko Močnik, "Ideology and fantasy", in E. A. Kaplan and M. Spinker, eds., *The Althusserian legacy* (New York: Verso, 1993): 139-156; Grahame Lock, "Subject, interpellation, and ideology", in A. Callari and D. F. Ruccio, eds., *Postmodern materialism and the future of Marxist theory: Essay in the Althusserian tradition* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996): 69-90; and Robert Pfaller "Negation and its reliabilities: An empty subject for ideology?", in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Cogito and the unconscious* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 225-246.

³⁶ Althusser, *Machiavelli and us*, 127-130.