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**Foucault and Althusser: Ideology, Materiality and Power**

The relationship between Marxism and the tradition of thought that has come to be known as poststructuralism has been a troubled one. While this statement seems rather general, the purpose of this essay is not to be an exhaustive study of this tension but rather to be suggestive of certain questions and issues it raises which could be theoretically/politically productive. Our first acknowledgement must be the lack of unity characterizing these two traditions of thought. Again, it would be unrealistic to expect some sort of final analysis here as there are numerous distinctions within as well as between them; however, it would seem productive to revisit some of the contentious issues that often seem to be taken as resolved as well as to explore the delineation of these two approaches as fundamentally separate in the first place. This brings us to the works of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. Of course, the objection could be made that neither of these thinkers is necessarily exemplary of either tradition of thought, a fair and fairly accurate objection. I will clarify again that the intent of this essay is not to provide a detailed and exhaustive study of either thinker or tradition, but instead to attempt to consider the important points of tension and agreement between the two, points that will hopefully prove (and indeed have elsewhere already proven) to be politically/theoretically relevant.

Louis Althusser, while a self-proclaimed Marxist and influencing many within that tradition (as well as Foucault himself to some extent), also introduced certain elements which continue decades later to hold the attention of Marxists and poststructuralists

alike. Michel Foucault, despite having essentially denounced his very early Marxist politics, has also gained the recognition of many on both sides of this sometimes-arbitrary divide. In any case, the important point here is the vehemence with which so many, enthusiasts and critics alike, have taken up the ideas of these two thinkers. Althusser's rather influential break with certain widely held Marxist conceptions (while, of course, retaining others) along with Foucault's numerous and scathing critiques of this tradition (while simultaneously showing a sort of reverence to Marx's primary texts) would seem to justify their work as an appropriate choice for this analysis.

The first point we will explore in relation to these two thinkers is that of the traditional Marxist base/superstructure type of model. Althusser's position on this topic seems somewhat confused at first. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* he spends quite a bit of time discussing ideology or the 'superstructure' while making little mention of the 'base'; however, when he does mention the 'base' it is to state that it is determining "in the last instance" in agreement with most Marxists scholars of the time. This would seem somewhat counter to the rest of his argument in the somewhat famous (or perhaps infamous?) essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)". In this essay Althusser portrays the 'superstructure' and 'reproduction' as essential to Marxism and calls for an analysis of ideology and the mechanisms through which it is practiced. Thus for him to give mere lip service to analysis of the 'base' while stating that it is ultimately determinate seems conflicted. Althusser does not really provide us with an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the 'base' and 'superstructure' in this text but proceeds to give a rather detailed explication of his, now extremely influential, conception of subjectivity as it comes about through 'interpellation', thus taking an important step away from a more Hegelian Marxism.

While Althusser does claim to rely on the traditional Marxist base/superstructure

model, there is something about his approach that attempts to unpack the underlying complexity of this model. Althusser makes this critique through an exploration of the positive and negative aspects/assumptions of the model itself as well as its implications.

It is easy to see that this representation of the structure of every society as an edifice containing a base (infrastructure) on which are erected the two 'floors' of the superstructure, is a metaphor, to be quite precise, a spatial metaphor: the metaphor of a topography (*topique*). Like every metaphor, this metaphor suggests something, makes something visible. What? Precisely this: that the upper floors could not 'stay up' (in the air) alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base... Thus the object of the metaphor of the edifice is to represent above all the 'determination in the last instance' by the economic base. The effect of this spatial metaphor is to endow the base with an index of effectivity known by the famous terms: the determination in the last instance of what happens in the upper 'floors' (of the superstructure) by what happens in the economic base.

According to Althusser the very purpose of this metaphor is to attribute the power of determination to the 'base' and to afford the 'superstructure' a secondary status. He continues to point out the advantages of 'the Marxist topography': "...that it reveals that questions of determination... are crucial; that it reveals that it is the base which in the last instance determines the whole edifice; and that, as a consequence, it obliges us to pose the theoretical problem of the types of 'derivatory' effectivity peculiar to the superstructure, i.e. it obliges us to think what the Marxist tradition calls conjointly the relative autonomy of the superstructure and the reciprocal action of the superstructure on the base." These two issues, neither of which seem necessarily to place the base in a position of primacy over the superstructure as claimed, are quite important to Althusser's move away from the traditional Marxist focus on the base. After rehearsing what he sees as the standard Marxist conception of this relationship of the base and superstructure, Althusser deems it merely "descriptive" and proceeds with his analysis of the "...Law, the State, and Ideology... from the point of view of reproduction".

While it is not necessary that we rehearse Althusser's well-known discussion of

‘interpellation’ in its entirety, the somewhat unusual brand of materialism he suggests in this discussion is relevant to our exploration. “[T]he ‘ideas’ or ‘representations’...which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal (*ideale* or *ideelle*) or spiritual existence, but a material existence.” This positing of the materiality of ideology is at odds with traditional Hegelian Marxism and seems to erase, or at the very least problematize, a divide (materiality versus ideality) which is essential to this tradition. At first it seems that Althusser is merely accepting of the standard base/superstructure model, yet now he seems to be attempting a rather serious critique; however, we will soon find that this may not be the case and our initial suspicions were perhaps warranted.

In arguing for the materiality of ideology Althusser makes several telling statements. The first statement we will discuss is related to matter itself:

Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle. But, at the risk of being taken for a Neo-Aristotelian...I shall say that ‘matter is discussed in many senses’, or rather that it exists in different modalities, *all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter.* (emphasis added)

Thus, while destabilizing the traditional Marxist split between ‘idea’ and ‘matter’, Althusser seems to reinstall this division through grounding these different ‘modalities’ (quite possibly referring to Spinoza) essentially in “...‘physical’ matter...” An ambiguity arises in his conception, as he refers to *different* ‘modalities’ of matter yet maintains that these ‘modalities’ can all be referred back to a unified physicality, an approach which does *not* seem to escape the traditional Marxist division. If there were, indeed, different ‘modalities’ of matter which are all rooted in ‘physicality’, then wouldn’t it follow that they are all subject to an economic analysis in the traditional Marxist sense? That they could all be considered part of the base or, at the very least, that the distinction between base and superstructure would be collapsed? Yet, in Althusser’s framework a distinction

remains, otherwise there would not be a necessity for *different* modalities, but only one; rather than placing materiality and ideality on the same plane, he only moves them to a different location, maintaining their heterogeneity.

The second statement Althusser makes in arguing for the materiality of ideology is somewhat more practical (i.e. less philosophical), and while obscuring the abovementioned division of the material versus the ideal, also does not escape it.

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of his ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which we derive the ideas of that subject.* (emphasis in original)

Althusser makes an extensive argument regarding this point, one which, although adding several levels to the model (all, of course, described as ‘material’), seems to again derive from some sort of dominant level in a particular topography. In a section entitled *Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects*, Althusser discusses the relationship between levels rather succinctly:

This thesis is simply a matter of making my last proposition explicit: there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects. Meaning, there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject: meaning, *by the category of the subject* and its functioning. (emphasis in the original)

Despite the somewhat confusing causality he posits between ideology and subject, Althusser seems to have described a thoroughly (almost exhaustively) materialist conception, one without the ideality of which he is so critical; however, this statement is haunted by a sort of transcendental element: “...*the category of the subject*...” Althusser does continue to critique the subject as an effect of ideology (as ‘interpellated’), but the category itself is given a transcendental status, one which, although it becomes manifest in material practice through material rituals, seems to have its origin in some sort of ideality.

(It is perhaps tempting to label this a neo-Kantian or even structuralist move but to do so would require a much more in-depth discussion.) It appears that Althusser stays consistently loyal to his own (or maybe Spinoza's) brand of materialism yet must resort to the transcendental or ideal 'category' in order to justify what he sees as the universality of the 'ideological apparatus'.

These two statements regarding the materiality of ideology, while effecting an interesting rearrangement of the traditional Marxist topography with some added complexity, each end up in a sort of reinstallation of the base/superstructure model. The first statement, regarding matter itself, resorts to 'physical' matter and seems to move back in the direction of a base; the second statement regarding the various material levels (ideology, subject, ritual, practice), resorts to the 'category', which seems transcendental/ideal in origin and then acts on materiality. This reinstallation of something like the base/superstructure model, in addition to being counter to Althusser's intentions, has an interesting correlate when we explore the issue of power in this text.

This connection between Althusser's model and his ideas about power seems apparent in his conception of the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' and their relation to the 'Repressive State Apparatus'. Althusser outlines their difference quite clearly: "What distinguishes the ISAs from the (Repressive) State Apparatus is the following basic difference: the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence', whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses *function 'by ideology'*." He continues to clarify that any State Apparatus must function by both the repressive and the ideological elements, the important distinction being which one is more prevalent in a particular given situation.

Again, this conception seems to resonate with the base/superstructure model. The "plurality" of ISAs can be seen as occupying a superstructural position, while the single RSA in its use of force on and through materiality can be seen as rooted in some

conception of a base. This correspondence is, of course, an indirect one as Althusser has already posited the materiality of all levels of his model; however, this does not solve the problem which he himself poses, that of ideality versus materiality. For Althusser, in appealing to the different “modalities” of matter while maintaining that they are all rooted in physicality, has merely imported the “Marxist topography” still intact. The same can be said of his aforementioned use of the “category” of the subject. By positing the materiality of ideology Althusser is attempting a new brand of materialism which escapes what he sees as the problems of Hegelianism; however, rather than collapsing the problematic distinction of ideality versus physicality, he transfers the entire construction to the level of ideology. Here we are left with an ideological base and an ideological superstructure, so to speak, a conception which necessarily refers to the assumed materiality of ideology. But what does this mean in terms of power? What are the consequences of such a model for Althusser’s particular conception of power, a topic he spent quite some time discussing? Unfortunately, we must restrict ourselves to a few aspects of this question as Althusser’s excellent book on Machiavelli, where he discusses power extensively, deserves its own discussion.

One revealing aspect of this problem has to do with the status of knowledge and scientificity in the ISAs essay, which also seems an opportune place to introduce some of Foucault’s ideas and their radical discontinuity with Althusser. After outlining the model we have been discussing thus far, Althusser begins to suggest possibilities for resistance, namely a search for a scientific knowledge of the ideological mechanism by which we are recognized as subjects. He states, “Now it is this knowledge that we have to reach...while speaking in ideology, and from within ideology we have to outline a discourse which tries to break with ideology, in order to dare to be the beginning of a scientific (i.e. subjectless) discourse on ideology.” Once again we are confronted with

Althusser's unclear causality but I would like to focus on his reliance on a Marxist science. He continues this point, adding:

[W]hat thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological'. *It is necessary to be outside ideology, i.e. in scientific knowledge, to be able to say: I am in ideology...or...I was in ideology.* (emphasis added)

This call for a scientific knowledge of the mechanism of subjective recognition (or interpellation) is linked here to our previous discussion. When Althusser refers to 'outside ideology...in the street', he is falling back on the concrete, or materiality, or the base. Once again his positing of the materiality of ideology is an important justification for ideology as an object of scientific investigation rather than being pure ideality or imagination which is often seen by Marxism as not worthy of analysis. Despite his praise of Althusser's critique of the phenomenological elements of French Marxism of the time, Foucault comments on such appeals to the supposed link between scientific objectivity and liberation in numerous texts and interviews. To summarize briefly, Althusser's call for the founding of a new Marxist science falls within the bounds of Foucault's well-known thesis regarding the inextricability of power and knowledge. This Nietzschean approach is the impetus behind the great majority of Foucault's historical analyses of different formations of claims to truth and their respective web of power relations. In a 1973 lecture in Brazil Foucault provides us with an extended discussion of this aspect of Nietzsche's thought, pointing out (in contrast to Kant) the heterogeneity between knowledge and the world to be known. The assumed transparency of the world to be known through knowledge is essential to Althusser's model and fuels his conception

of liberation as stemming from scientific (meaning outside of ideology) analysis of ideology and its mechanisms. Foucault accuses Marxism of, "...assuming that the human subject, the subject of knowledge, and forms of knowledge themselves are somehow given beforehand and definitively, and that economic, social, and political conditions of existence are merely laid or imprinted on this definitively given subject." Thus, Althusser's appeal to a Marxist science of ideology is a claim to the truth of the interpellation of subjects through Ideological State Apparatuses, one which, while questioning the givenness of the subject, does *not* question the givenness of the category of 'subject' itself. Basically, while Althusser outlines the formation of subjects rather than simply assuming them, he does not acknowledge the genealogy (to use Foucault's term) of the very category, the very concept of the subject itself in all its variability, a topic which Foucault spends quite a bit of effort exploring.

The next point we will explore moves briefly to Althusser's *Machiavelli and Us* and its approach to power and the state. The aspect of this text which I would like to highlight is its assumption of the category of the state as *a priori* formulated, in a similar fashion to the assumed category of the subject which I've already mentioned. Althusser spends a great deal of time discussing the way that Machiavelli's Prince must insert his image into the ideology of the people and make use of this ideology in order to maintain that public image. Thus, while we are given an extended explication of the ways to maintain a state and popular support, the state form itself is assumed and barely mentioned. If we put this in the context of Marxism (as Althusser does, following Gramsci), it leads us to question the possibility of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Foucault quite explicitly makes this critique: that the state even under proletarian control drags its bourgeois nature along with it, leading to the employment of the former bourgeois technicians of state and the maintenance of the same state form which the

proletariat is supposed to be transforming. Here again we can see the influence of the base/superstructure model which Althusser claims to rearrange. The Prince manages ideology which then acts on the unformed matter of the people in combination with the repression (by the army) of those who cannot be successfully managed through ideology, all in the name of the *maintenance* of the state form (in Machiavelli's case this form is tied up with nationalism), not its transformation. In the terms of the *Lenin and Philosophy* text we can think of the Repressive State Apparatus as the concrete background against which the Ideological State Apparatuses can operate, again both always dragging along an assumed state form.

How can we reconceive this problem of the assumed state form, the assumed subject form and the inevitable link between the two? How, in a different manner, can we approach the problem of the base/superstructure model which Althusser merely rearranges, its appeal to a liberatory scientific analysis, and its inextricability from relations of power and knowledge? An appeal to Foucault as well as Deleuze's explication of Foucault seems appropriate here. First, a fairly straightforward answer: we can make use of Foucault's various histories of the changing conceptions of the subject form (for example, in *The Care of the Self*) as well as his various histories of the changing conceptions of the state form (for example, in various essays and lectures on sovereignty and the concept of governmentality) as well as the complex set of relations that these two forms are inscribed in. Of course, when I refer to Foucault's 'histories', I am not referring to an objective science of historical events which promises liberation through rationality in a linear, progressive time. His histories or genealogies seem to bypass teleological periodization. Rather than making claims of access to the truth of subject/object relations, Foucault is more concerned with the effects of various claims to truth, with the link between different rationalities and practices.

While this first point is a brief one, the second question of reconceiving the base/superstructure model, will require a deeper inquiry. This discussion of materiality in Foucault's works becomes somewhat difficult as he seems unconcerned with ontology, or at least an ontology that assumes essence. Althusser, as we have seen, spends a great deal of time attempting to understand materiality and conceive of it in different ways, hence his frequent but vague references to Spinoza. A certain ontology which is left untheorized is the necessary backdrop to Althusser's approach as we can see in his appeal to a Marxist science. And, although attempting different rearrangements of the classic philosophical model, Althusser seems to end up reinscribing the familiar problematic divisions, sometimes even obscuring these divisions in complexity. Foucault, on the other hand, attempts no complex philosophical rearrangement but circumvents the issue entirely. "Surfaces" and "visibilities" rather than complexes of interiority and exteriority are the focus of his analysis. Deleuze sums up this focus: "...on the one hand each stratum or historical formation implies a distribution of the visible and the articulable which acts upon itself; on the other, from one stratum to the next there is a variation in the distribution, because the visibility itself changes in style, while the statements themselves change their system." *The Birth of the Clinic* is an especially interesting example as in this text Foucault is interested in the designation of a whole new set of "surfaces", which proceeds in a quite different fashion after dissection of cadavers is allowed. Whereas medical perception had been focused on the interpretation of symptoms, this now became linked to a whole new set of possible objects; and what was once the interior of the body (and accessible only via that interpretation of more outward symptoms) became a whole new set of relationships of interiority and exteriority as well as the communication between them. We could even venture to say that what is sometimes seen as a Kantian element of Foucault is actually Nietzschean and posits no

correspondence between knowledge and the world to be known, but instead turns a critical eye to such claims.

I hope this brief exploration of some aspects of Foucault and Althusser have served to highlight some of the important points of tension between them. It is my contention that the points mentioned here are essential, not only in an abstract theoretical way, but in a broadly-defined political way as well. Contemporary thought often links Althusser's particular brand of Marxism to poststructuralism, not an entirely incorrect observation; however, as I hope has been obvious throughout this presentation, there are elements of each which are fundamentally incompatible. The consequences of this incompatibility would seem of little importance except for the fact that the thought of Althusser is often superimposed on that of Foucault. This assemblage appears in a number of places and must be considered as such. I believe that we must continue to question the often unseen influence of Althusser's model on contemporary interpretations of Foucault's work as well as its political implications.