

## **ALTHUSSER'S CONCEPTION OF IDEOLOGY : A CRITICAL EXPOSITION\***

In the framework of Sociological Marxism, where Marxism is interpreted as a conventional Sociological theory, ideology is the false representation of the reality. It is a fundamental assumption of this framework of interpretation that human beings in a social whole are divided into different classes; they view reality in different perspectives which are biased towards their respective class-interests. Precisely, ideology is said to be this biased view, the partial/false representation of the reality. No knowledge is free from ideology in so far as every knower belongs to a specific class and has class-interest which determines his mode of perception and thus the content of his knowledge.

The thesis that ideology is the false representation of reality implies the representational concept of knowledge, i.e., the idea that knowledge is the representation of reality. That is, the concept of false representation is possible only when it is assumed that the process of knowing is the process of representation. As Paul Hirst says, in order to defend the thesis that ideology is a distorted recognition of reality, it must be argued that the process of knowledge described by empiricism is a real process<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, to accept the sociologist thesis of ideology is to accept empiricism. Louis Althusser stands for a non-sociological school of Marxism. His whole programme, in the course of his 'scientific' interpretation of Marxism, is to construct a theoretical scheme which is methodologically free from sociologism. The construction of such

---

\* The central theme of this paper has been taken from the third chapter of the thesis entitled "Knowledge and Ideology : Towards a Non-Positivist Reconstruction of the Epistemological Scheme of Marxism" submitted by me to the Department of Philosophy University of Hyderabad for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

I am grateful to Dr. Amitabha Dasgupta, my research supervisor, for his help in formulating the ideas discussed in this paper.

a theoretical scheme, in view of the above account, must be based on the rejection of the empiricist thesis, more specifically, on the rejection of the representational theory of knowledge. Precisely, this is the task which Althusser undertakes before proceeding to his constructive enterprise.

In the first section of this paper I attempt to show how Althusser rejects the representational theory of knowledge. That is, I try to highlight Althusser's assumptions regarding the 'materiality' of ideas which provides the ground for his non-representational epistemological scheme. In the second section I come to a brief exposition of Althusser's view of ideology which is supposed to be based on the thesis of the materiality of ideas. Third section embodies a methodological critique of Althusser's view. Note that I would not attempt here to criticise Althusser's scheme in a general perspective. Rather, my aim would be just to show that there is a methodological contradiction involved in Althusser's scheme, i.e., to show precisely that his theory of ideology, at the epistemological level, does involve the empiricist framework which he originally wishes to dismiss by advancing the thesis of the materiality of ideas.

## I

In his celebrated essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' Althusser advances the thesis of the 'materiality of ideology' which clearly implies the refusal of the representational theory. Ideology, according to this thesis, is not to be understood in terms of the category of representation; it is not 'ideal' or 'spiritual' but 'material'. Ideology does not consist of ideas as opposed to matter, precisely because, ideas are not something which belong to a spiritual realm separated from the material realm. They are material in the sense that they are fully expressed in the objective social forms; they are to be understood as the concrete forms of social practices and social relations.

To put it in Althusser's own words, "... 'ideas' or 'representations', etc., which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal (*ideale* or *ideelle*) or spiritual existence, but a material existence"<sup>3</sup>. Here, the two expressions, i.e., 'ideal existence' and 'material existence' need to be elaborated. Althusser seems to believe that 'ideal' is of the nature of something pure, isolated from the social practices and social relations. In other words, it is of the nature of 'representation' which 'exists' as

an abstract realm. The term 'material' obviously refers to the objective social practices and social relations, in other words, to the concrete social phenomena. The thesis of the materiality of ideology discards the possibility for a radical separation between ideal and material; it advances the idea that the so called 'ideal' is expressed in the concrete social practices and has a kind of materiality.

Althusser explains this with the help of some examples. An individual who believes in God behaves in certain ways, adopts certain corresponding practical attitudes; he goes to church to attend Mass, kneels, prays etc., and does follow certain conventions. Similarly, an individual who believes in justice, Althusser observes, will submit himself unconditionally to the rules of law and acts according to them. In both the cases, individual's belief is expressed 'objectively' in certain practices. The practical attitude an individual adopts is not a matter of his voluntary choice but is the necessary condition of his belief. Believing in God is following certain conventions practically. Similarly, to believe in justice is to act 'according to the idea of justice'. If one does not act according to the idea he has, it is because he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims, and that he acts according to these other ideas, as man who is either 'inconsistent' or cynical, or perverse.<sup>4</sup>

Ideas exist in actions. What is an action? Althusser insists that an action is not to be understood in individualistic terms, in isolation from the collective praxis of the society. That is, an action is determined by the behavioural patterns, modes of activities of the people in a given society; it is to be conceived as being inserted into social practices. Ideas, thus, cease to be 'private' and turn to be 'public', the objective social practices.

Althusser makes his position regarding the objectivity of ideas some more clear by further arguing that practices, into which ideas are inserted, exist in rituals. It simply means that a definite form of life is associated with every practice, that there are certain rules and conventions to be followed in the case of every practice. To be precise, every practice is inscribed into a form of life, a ritual and also is governed by it. The same example of the believer can be pointed out here. A believer who belongs to a particular religion does perform the actions according to the conventions followed by other members of his religion. In other words, he acts according to the rules and conventions of the particular religion to which he belongs.

Religion, here, is the form of life, the ritual which governs his actions.

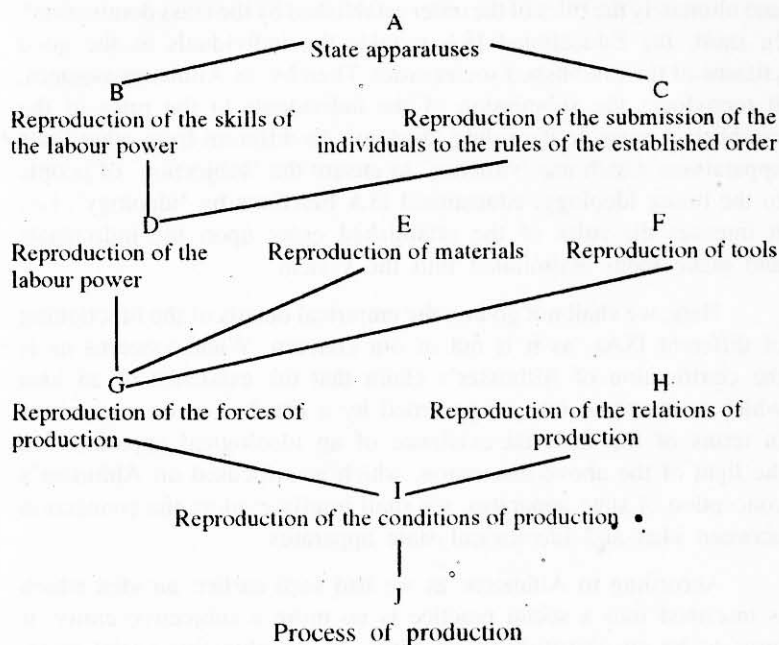
By all means, the practices inscribed into rituals are objective social forms. They are no way abstract, but concrete. They have 'materiality'. Their materiality, Althusser maintains, is to be conceived in terms of the 'material existence of different ideological apparatuses'. To put it in concrete terms, the materiality of social practice is to be perceived at the fundamental level of its existence as the instance of a ideological apparatus.

What is an ideological apparatus?. To answer this question we have to go little deep into Althusser's theory of state apparatuses. In line with Marx's analysis of social formations, Althusser argues that the process of production of every social system presupposes the process of the reproduction of the conditions of production. That is, every social system, for its existence, has to reproduce its conditions of production at the same time as it produces. What are the conditions to be reproduced? Althusser answers: One is the forces of production and the other is the relations of production. 'Forces of production' refers to the combination of three elements namely, labour, the material which is worked by the labourer and the tools which are used for the labour. So, the reproduction of the forces of production means 1) the reproduction of the labour power, 2) the reproduction of the materials, and 3) the reproduction of the tools. What does the 'reproduction of the labour power' mean? Althusser would say that it primarily means the reproduction of the skills of the labour power, i.e., keeping labour power 'skilled' in order to be suitable enough for the process of production. The development of every system (of production) depends primarily on the development of the capacity of the labour to work or, rather, on the efficiency of the available labour power. Every system, therefore, necessarily reproduces its conditions of production; it keeps the available labour power competent enough; or, in other words, it reproduces the skills of the labour power. Althusser's observation is that this process of reproduction of the skills is internally related to another process i.e., the reproduction of the relation of the labourers to the existing system of production.

This is to say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills but also, at the same time, reproduction of its relation to the established order. The relation that the labour power requires to have to the existing order is the relation of submission; the labour power should be submissive to the established order, (labourers

should be ready to work according to the rules of the established order). So, a reproduction of the relation of the labour power to the established order means, in Althusser's language, "a reproduction of its submissions to the rules of the established order"<sup>5</sup>. Submission to the rules of the established order is the submission to ruling ideology. Every system reproduces this submission; it ensures through different institutions such as schools, church, army etc., the submission of the individuals to the ruling ideology. All the individuals must be 'steeped' in the ruling ideology; to put it in Althusser's own words, "all the agents of production, exploitation and repression... must in one way or another be steeped in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously' —the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), of the exploiters (the capitalists), of the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), or the high priests of the ruling ideology (its 'functionaries'), etc."<sup>6</sup>.

The institutions, through which the reproduction of the submission of the individuals to the rules of the established order is carried out are state apparatuses. For a better understanding of Althusser's theory of state apparatuses we shall illustrate the whole idea discussed above as follows :



[ 'A' refers to the institutions through which 'B' and 'C' take place. 'B' plus 'C' is equal to 'D'. 'D' along with 'E' and 'F' constitutes 'G'. 'I' follows from 'G' and 'H'. 'I' is the ultimate condition of every 'J'. ]

Althusser argues further that there are two kinds of apparatuses: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). RSA contains the institutions such as Government, administration, army, police, courts, prisons etc., which function by force to guarantee the submission of the individuals to the rules of the established social order. ISA contains different religious, legal, political, educational, cultural institutions which function not by force but by 'ideology'<sup>7</sup>.

What does Althusser mean by saying that ISAs function by ideology? Let us follow his example: children at school learn different techniques and knowledges. In learning them they also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour, i.e., the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he 'destined' for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience which actually means the rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by the class domination<sup>8</sup>. In short, the Educational ISA moulds the individuals as the good citizens of the established social order. Thereby, as Althusser assumes, it reproduces the submission of the individuals to the rules of the established order, to the ruling ideology. As different from other State apparatuses which use 'violence' to ensure the 'subjection' of people to the ruling ideology, educational ISA functions by 'ideology', i.e., it imposes the rules of the established order upon the individuals and make them assimilated into the system.

Here, we shall not go into the empirical details of the functioning of different ISAs, as it is out of our concern. What concerns us is the clarification of Althusser's claim that the existence of an idea which is inscribed into or governed by a ritual is to be conceived in terms of the material existence of an ideological apparatus. In the light of the above discussion, which was focused on Althusser's conception of state apparatus, we shall briefly explore the connection between idea and ideological state apparatus.

According to Althusser, as we had seen earlier, an idea which is inscribed into a social practice is no more a subjective entity, it turns to be an objective social form. As an objective social form,

it has 'material' existence within the framework of a particular ideological apparatus, that, it exists materially as the instance of a particular ideological apparatus. Idea, thus becomes 'material'. For clarifying this point, let us take the same example of the believer. An individual's belief in God is inscribed into certain practices which are governed by a 'form of life', i.e., a religion. Religion, in Althusser's accounts is an ISA; it functions as an ideological instrument of the state to ensure the 'subjection' of the individuals to the established order. So, to say that belief is inscribed into the 'form of life' called religion is to say that it has a material existence as the instance of religious ISA. This is precisely to say that belief ceases to be subjective; it becomes 'material'.

Obviously, the epistemological thrust of Althusser's thesis of materiality is to reject the conception of the subjectivity of ideas, i.e., to dismiss the empiricist hypothesis that knowledge is the subjective representation of the reality. This rejection provides the methodological foundation for a non-representational view of knowledge in which ideas are not to be understood in terms of the category of representation, but as the concrete instances of different material ideological apparatuses.

## II

To accept such a non-representational conception is to reject the sociologist mode of interpretation of ideology. That is, if idea is not the representation of the reality, then ideology can never be the distorted representation of the reality. Then, what is ideology? Althusser answers by putting forth a new theory according to which ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence<sup>9</sup>. This theory, in its depth, is highly complex and thus, the assumptions implied in it need to be analysed thoroughly.

For the sake of convenience we shall break the above thesis into two premisses. Premiss (1): Ideology represents the relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence. Premiss (2): The relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence is 'imaginary'. In considering the first, a fundamental question arises, namely, what is the difference between (A) 'the representation of the reality' and (B) 'the representation of the relationship of individuals



to their conditions of existence'? To be sure, Althusser would answer by saying that both of them are mutually exclusive, that (A) implies the sociologist hypothesis i.e., idea is the reflection of the reality, whereas, (B) presupposes the 'materiality of ideas'.

Against the sociologist hypothesis Althusser argues: "Ideology is not the (false) representation of the reality. It represents not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them) but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that are derived from them, that it represents not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but individual's, relation to the real relations in which they live"<sup>10</sup> To express the whole idea implied here in strict epistemological terms, ideology is not of the form of a (false) representation of reality but of a representation of the relationship of the individuals to the reality.

The relationship of the individuals to reality, according to Althusser, is not abstract. Individuals are related to the relations of production not in an abstract manner but in the concrete realm of their practical life process. To borrow the term from Paul Hirst, it is a 'lived relationship'<sup>11</sup> To proceed from there on it is necessary for us to have a distinct view of this 'lived relationship'.

1. Lived relationship is not in the mode of 'reflection of the real', it is a real relationship;
2. It is not false or distorted, since it is a concrete form of individual's existence in a society.

We shall reflect upon each of the above points. The first one precisely says that 'lived relationship' is the real relationship. Obviously, the expression 'real' refers to concreteness, that which is not abstract. Individuals' relationship to the relations of production is not an abstract one. It is a relationship in which they live. Individuals do not merely represent the reality; they 'live' the reality. In other words, individuals and the relations of production are mediated through life in a concrete manner. Consequently, as the second point says, the question of falsity or distortion does not arise at all in such a relationship. X can be false or distorted in relation to Y only when there exists a possibility for X to represent Y. In other words, the question of distortion arises only in a relation where X is the representation of Y. The relationship



of the individuals to the relations of production is not that of an abstract form in which the former represents the latter, but that of a concrete necessity. For example, in a society where capitalistic relations of production exist, an individual can live only by involving himself in it. More clearly, living in a capitalist society without being involved in wage-labour (which is the real relation) is virtually impossible. It is a concrete necessity for each individual to have a 'lived relationship' to the existing relations of production. Ideology for Althusser, represents this lived relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence.

A question naturally arises, namely, is it the case that the relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence is a real relationship and thus the ideology in which it is represented is positive, no way negative, that the question of distortion even in the slightest degree does not arise at all in the case of ideological representation? Certainly Althusser does not give an affirmative answer to this question. Because, such an answer would definitely result in rejecting the whole Marxist problematic of ideology. Rather, he tackles this problem in a different, but surely not in a convincing manner. He introduces the concept of 'imaginariness', according to which the relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence is necessarily 'imaginary'. Althusser is not very precise on this point and therefore the doctrine of 'imaginariness' remains a little obscure. We shall try to have a close look on it and see the implications behind this concept.

We have already seen that, ideology, in Althusser's account, represents the real, lived relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence. This relationship, Althusser argues, is necessarily in an imaginary mode. How can a real relationship be imaginary? Althusser answers that the notion of 'imaginariness' does not in any way imply the 'unreality' of ideology. The relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence is real in the concrete sense of the term; but, at the same time, it is imaginary because it does not reveal the most fundamental nature of that relation. It does not make explicit the real conditions of existence, but does reveal the *relation* of the individuals to their conditions of existence. In Althusser's own words, what is represented in ideology is not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals, to the relations in which they live<sup>12</sup>. That is, in ideology, the real nature of the relations which govern the existence

of individuals is blurred and only the relation of individuals to their conditions of existence is represented.

We shall make this point clear with the help of an example which has been given by Althusser himself. For workers in a capitalist society freedom is a lived relation. They have to believe in freedom because it is a necessary condition for their existence as free labourers. Their existence under capitalist mode of production is dependent on their formal ability to sell their labour power to whoever they choose. Freedom, therefore, is not an 'ideal', but the lived relationship of the worker to his conditions of existence. But this relationship is in an 'imaginary' mode, because it conceals the fact that the labourer has been exploited by the very act of selling his labour-power; or, in other words, it does not reveal the real nature of the relations of production. It is clear here that freedom is both real and imaginary. It is real because, it is the lived relationship of the worker to his conditions of existence. It is imaginary because, the worker lives in relation to his conditions of existence in such a way (imaginary mode) that he can never simply recognise these conditions<sup>13</sup>.

To sum up, ideology, in Althusser's sense, represents individuals' relationship to reality, i.e., to the relations of production. The relationship which is represented in ideology is both real and imaginary. Real, because it is the concrete condition in which individuals live; it is a 'lived' relationship. Imaginary, because it prevents the individuals from recognising the real nature of the relations which govern their existence.

### III

We have seen in the preceding sections that the whole attempt of Althusser is to replace the sociologistic scheme which, at a fundamental level, assume the empiricist conception of ideology with a new scheme which speaks for the materiality of ideology. To put it in concrete terms, all that Althusser wishes to do by his theoretical endeavour is to provide a non-empiricist and a non-sociological framework of interpretation where ideology is not simply the false representation of the reality, but the representation of the 'lived' relationship of the individuals' to the reality. It is beyond dispute that the basic thrust of Althusser's thesis that what is represented in ideology is not the reality but the relationship of the individuals

to the reality as against the simple reflection theory of empiricism which necessarily follows the deterministic thesis, i.e., ideology is determined by the objective reality. But, our question is, does this thesis really alter the whole problematic of object/subject dualism of classical empiricism? Does it really indicate the meaning that ideology (idea) is concretely real in the sense in which the material relations (Matter) are real, that the former is not epi-phenomenal or something always determined by the latter? An affirmative answer to these questions would undoubtedly enable us to agree with Althusser's claim that his scheme is anti-empiricist in the strict sense of the term. But, that is not the case here when we logically analyse Althusser's theoretical system and get realised that, at a basic level, it retains the empiricist framework which entails the classical subject/object structure of knowledge.

When Althusser says that ideology represents the relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence it is assumed here that there is a separation between the process of representation and the thing represented. Assuming such a separation is assuming the possibility for the former to be dependent on the latter and for the latter to be independent of the former—the relativity of the former and the autonomy of the latter. Ideology, understood to be assuming only a relative existence, becomes epiphenomenon; it is only an effect, reality being the source which lies independent of it. In other words, ideology, if it is argued to be merely a form of representation, becomes an appearance determined by the reality which exists outside its domain; it can never become an objective social practice. Thus, by supposing ideology to be a form of recognition Althusser falls back to determinism, to the conception that ideology is determined by the objective reality.

We shall explain the above point with some more clarity in the following manner. Suppose 'A' is the representational mode, and 'B' is the 'reality'. From the premiss what is represented in 'A' is always 'B', it logically follows that 'A' is nothing but the representation of 'B' and changes in the forms of 'A' ( $A^1$ ,  $A^2$ ,  $A^3$ ) correspond to the changes in the forms of 'B' ( $B^1$ ,  $B^2$ ,  $B^3$ ). (To say that ideology always represents the 'relationships' is to say that different forms of ideology correspond to different forms of relationships). If this necessary and universal relationship of correspondence is admitted, then there is nothing wrong in

assuming that A is determined by 'B'. The only way to avoid the idea of determination is to deny the universality and necessity of the relationship of correspondence. But, rejecting the necessity and the universality of the relationship between 'A' and 'B' amounts to the denial of the premiss itself, i.e., what is represented in 'A' is always 'B'. So, it follows that determinism is the unavoidable consequence of a theory which assumes ideology as a form of recognition.

By assuming a position which cannot be well supported with evidence from Althusser's writings some may argue that both 'A' and 'B' are identical, that, ideology is nothing but the relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence. This position can easily be claimed to be alien to Althusser just by pointing out that the concept of representation, which is explicitly employed in Althusser's theory, is contrary to it. But here, we do not stop with such a claim; rather, we try to show briefly that Althusser's scheme, even if it is claimed to be presupposing such an identity-thesis, cannot escape falling into the representational framework of empiricism. For this, let us assume that both 'A' and 'B' are identical. Obviously, if they are identical and 'A' represents nothing outside itself, then it amounts to saying that 'A' is not representational in the strict sense of the term. That is, when it is assumed that there is no separation between ideology and relationship (of the individuals to their conditions of existence), it is also assumed that the relationship itself is the ideology and it can never be a representational mode. But, in Althusser's formulation, as we have seen before, relationship of the individuals to their conditions of existence is imaginary. The reason for Althusser to call it as imaginary is that it does not represent the most fundamental nature of the relations in which individuals live. That is, relationship is said to be partial; it is of the nature of a partial representation of the reality. Obviously, the position which identifies ideology with imaginary relationship results in the partial representation-thesis of sociologism. And, to defend such a thesis, as we had said earlier, it must be argued that the process of knowing is the process of representation. So, Althusser's scheme, even if it is argued to be based on the assumption that ideology and 'lived relationship' are identical, cannot remain non-empiricist

in the strict epistemological sense.

The consequence of admitting the category of representation is to practically deny the essence of Althusser's concept of the materiality of ideology. The thesis of the materiality of ideology is originally meant to destroy the classical conception of ideology, i.e., as the superstructural phenomenon composed of ideas, images, mental reflections of something 'objectively' real. The so-called ideas, according to this thesis, are claimed to be inscribed into the objective social practices; they are 'material'. A theory of ideology basing on such a conception of ideas is supposed to be one which treats ideology as a concrete social practice, not as a form of recognition determined by an independent reality. But the concept of representation—as it entails the space for a rigid separation between that which represents and that which is represented, and for the former to become a form of recognition which is determined by the latter—leads Althusser to a positivistic mode of theorising which fundamentally contradicts the spirit of his materiality-thesis.

Dept. of Philosophy,  
University of Hyderabad  
Hyderabad-500134.

MADHU T. V.

## NOTES

1. Cf. Hirst, Paul: *On Law and Ideology*, The MacMillan Press, London, 1979, p.23.
2. Althusser, Louis: 'Ideology and Ideological state apparatuses', in *Essays on Ideology*, Verso, Thetford, 1984, p. 1-61.
3. Althusser, Louis : *Essays on Ideology*, p.39.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 42
5. *Ibid.*, p. 6
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. Althusser lists the following institutions as Ideological State

Apparatuses : The religions ISA (the system of the different churches), the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private schools), 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..). Cf. Althusser, Louis : *Essays on Ideology*. p.17.

8. *Ibid.*, p.6
9. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 36
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
11. Cf. Hirst, Paul : *On Law and Ideology*. p. 32.
12. Cf. Althusser, Louis: *Essays on Ideology*. p.39.
13. Cf. Althusser, Louis : *For Marx*. Penguin. Harmondsworth. London. 1969. p. 234.