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The Lacanian-Althusserian Paradigm: An Intertextual Study of Subjectivity

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Abstract

Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser have written extensively on the idea of subjectivity and identity formation. Lacan's account of the *subject* is rooted in the principles of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Althusser has conceptualized the topic in structural Marxist terms, embedding subjectivity in a mesh of ideology and social structures. Although different in approach, their arguments demonstrate elements of likeness, giving rise to what is generally addressed as the Lacanian-Althusserian paradigm. A theoretical complex of subjectivity that combines the psychosexual with the psychosocial. By way of this paradigm, this paper intends to conduct an intertextual and intersectional study of subjectivity between the writings of Lacan and Althusser.

Overlapping factors emerge at the theoretical level with structuralism and semiotics providing the fundamental framework of analysis to the paradigm. Furthermore, Lacan's theory reveals an affinity to Marx, while Althusser's idea of subjectivity as a social construct derives much from Lacanian psychoanalysis. On the conceptual level, the *subject*, loses its Cartesian agency, freedom and individuality. The Lacanian-Althusserian *self* is fragmented, alienated, marginalized and exiled from the real of the *real*.

This paper has utilized the eponymous paradigm of subjectivity in order to juxtapose Lacanian linguistic alienation against Althusserian ideological interpellation.

Keywords: Lacanian, Althusserian, Paradigm, Subjectivity, Intertextual.

The writings of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, have elements of correspondence, allowing for an intertextual comparative study. Firstly, both of them belong to the school of Structuralism, albeit, making use of the structuralist theory in distinctly different ways. Secondly, they both held anti-Cartesian views and expressed a shared sense of skepticism of the idea of 'cogito, ergo sum.' The *individual* or

the *self*, for both Lacan and Althusser, was not as free and liberated as it had been assumed to be in Western philosophy. Thirdly, and most importantly from the point of view of this paper, both Lacan and Althusser attempted to expound on the process of identity formation and the concept of the *subject*. Their approaches, however, are different, with Lacan focusing on the role of language while Althusser's theory revolves around ideology and concludes with the irrevocable exile of the individual from the realm of the *real*. By way of a theoretical paradigm of subjectivity, this paper intends to bring out elements of intersectionality between Lacanian linguistic alienation and Althusserian ideological interpellation.

The idea of the *subject* became a polysemous and highly problematic dialectic in modernist and postmodernist schools of thought. The 20th century saw increased efforts to define and redefine the concept of the *subject* across social, political, cultural, psychological, legal, linguistic and feminist discourses. In his book, *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (2004), Julian Wolfreys remarks,

Regardless of its function within particular discourses, it has to be admitted that the idea of the subject is immediately complicated, irreconcilably doubled in any initial utterance, if one acknowledges that by this word one indicates either oneself or another (singly or collectively) ... It is possible, for example, to speak of the psychoanalytic subject, the individual subject, the subject before the law (and by which laws one becomes subjected), or the national, supposedly collective subject. (Wolfreys 232)

Across the exciting academic landscape of the 20th century, interpretation of the *subject* not only changes from one discipline to another but also within a discipline. In the area of psychoanalysis, for instance, its understanding is not unanimously shared by the field's representatives. Similarly, while situating it in socio-political and economic narratives, its fundamentals transform depending on the ideological framework. Furthermore, the historical status of the *subject*, both in theory and practice, has always been highly contingent upon its spatiotemporal context.

What this paper views as the 'Lacanian-Althusserian paradigm,' provides us with a framework to analyze the concept of the *subject* and the process of identity formation in both psychoanalytic and structural Marxist terms. This gives us a more multifaceted understanding of the origin, development, dynamics and functional aspects of the *subject* from its inception to the final stage. It combines the psychosocial with the psychosexual attributes of subjectivity. The Lacanian-Althusserian complex, perceives the individual self in the light of its relation to both language and ideology. As adherents of structuralism, Lacan and Althusser, in their reanalysis of psychoanalytic and Marxist principles respectively, share the role of language in

the process of subjectivity. In the book, *Modern British and Irish Criticism and Theory* (2006), Leigh Wilson recognizes the significance of language to both Althusser and Lacan. She writes:

What both Lacan and Althusser focus on their structuralist readings of Freud and Marx is the determining function of language in creation of the subject. (Wilson 170)

While Althusser was a self-proclaimed Marxist, Lacan too, although in a manner less apparent, was influenced by Karl Marx's writings and expressed a similar distrust of the capitalist regime in his psychosocial interpretation of society. Althusser condemned the capitalist State for using Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to keep the dominant ideology in power, and to reproduce the relations of production in order to ensure a steady supply of labor. Lacan, on the other hand, built his theory of discourses (including the capitalist discourse) on the idea of *objet petit a* or surplus-jouissance that he developed from the Marxian concept of surplus-value inherent in capitalism. This coalition between the psychological and the sociological is also seen in Althusser's use of the Freudian principle of overdetermination. At the root of the Lacanian-Althusserian complex, lies the semiotic perception of the unconscious and society as a structured matrix of signifiers. The unconscious realm plays a pivotal role in the process of identification (or misidentification). Most importantly, both Lacan and Althusser's idea of the *subject* is fundamentally different from its Cartesian conception. The incoherent, uncertain, fragmented and decentered *subject* loses much of its agency and no longer commands the absolute free will that it used to. Terry Eagleton acknowledges the points of correspondence in Lacan and Althusser's theory of subjectivity. He writes,

The relation of an individual "subject" to society as a whole in Althusser's theory is rather like the relation of the small child to his or her mirror image in Lacan's. In both cases, the human subject is supplied with a satisfyingly unified image of selfhood by identifying with an object which reflects this image back to it in a closed, narcissistic circle. In both cases too, the image involves a misrecognition, since it idealizes the subject's real situation. (Eagleton 172-3)

Building upon Freudian concepts with the assistance of Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics, along with Saussurean principles of structuralism, Jacques Lacan, brought the discourse of the *subject* to the forefront of psychoanalysis. In his tripartite envisioning of human perception as comprising of the three registers, the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, and semiotic perception of the unconscious realm as a language-like network of meanings/signifiers, Lacan moved away from the enlightenment ideas of subjectivity that dominated the continental tradition of philosophy. The psychological interaction with language

and culture that leads to individuality and identity formation begins, at what Lacan has called, the ‘mirror stage.’ The infant identifies themselves for the first time as “I” or “me,” when they look in the mirror and recognize themselves in the reflection that they see. This mirror stage involves, what in Lacanian theory, has been termed as ‘*méconnaissance*’ or misrecognition; a process of false self-identification in which the infant idolizes and identifies with the more coherent and unified version of themselves that they perceive in the mirror. The subject in doing so creates a gap between their real self and their idealized perception of self that leads to the formation of ‘ego.’ The child, identifying the ‘self’ through the ‘other,’ consequently, develops a false idea of the ‘self’ and enters the Imaginary order. Lacan calls this stage a “drama” that moves from “insufficiency to anticipation,” and culminates in an “alienating identity” that affects the individual’s “entire mental development” (Lacan 78). The idea of the symbolic, a system of sociocultural symbols and constructs, into which the individual is hailed later further plays a colossal role in the psychosocial development of their identity. Language is inextricably linked to the symbolic order and the alienation of an individual from the *real* in Lacanian psychology.

Louis Althusser, drawing from Lacanian narratives on subjectivity, proposed a Marxist reading of the *subject* that was centered around the individual’s relation to social structures and ideology. In Althusserian thought, the ideological matrix that the individual encounters, form and regulate their sense of identity and subjectivity, challenging anthropocentric concepts of the *subject*. In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser proposes the dual ontological existence of ideology as, both, an abstraction and a concrete object. The dominant ideology in any economic system or mode of production works on ‘concrete’ individuals to churn out ‘concrete’ subjects. In a capitalist society, for instance, the dominant ideology is reproduced through the institutions of Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). ISA is the reinforcing and indoctrinating part of the society consisting of institutions like education, media, culture and religion that produce and reproduce the dominant ideology by churning out *subjects*. RSA, on the other hand, is the repressive machinery of the society comprising of structures like the police, military, censorship and jurisprudence, that use force and fear to maintain the socioeconomic order in power. Working together, these two state apparatuses ensure that the relations of production are maintained, restricting social mobility by keeping the bourgeoisie in power and the proletarian working-class in a state of unconscious servitude. In his essay, Althusser has explained the process by which the *individual* internalizes an ideology and turns into the *subject*. The ineluctable and omnipresent ideology unconsciously gives shape to the *subject’s*

perspectives, beliefs and actions. Speaking about the material existence of ideology, Althusser remarks:

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the 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 apparatuses from which derive the ideas of that subject. (Althusser 114)

Ideologies are imaginary representations of the individual's relation to the real world. They don't depict the real world but define the individual's imaginary relation to the external world. Although theoretical in essence, ideology has a tangible material existence. This existence lies in our actions and practices that bring about a concrete realization of the ideology. For instance, religious ideologies come into existence through material religious practices such as going to Church on Sundays. This is how Althusser explains the material existence of ideology. The role of RSAs and ISAs is crucial according to Althusser in inducting and embedding an individual into ideology. They do not just launch individuals into the dominant ideology and make submissive and obedient subjects out of them but also make sure that the subjects do not transgress the boundaries drawn for them by the State. In other words, the State, writes the script to a play and makes sure the individuals play the role assigned to them and remain in character. Althusser suggests that neither RSA or ISA function absolutely by means of violence or ideology, and both ideological indoctrination and coercive control work hand-in-hand in creating the *subject*. An interesting difference that he points out between RSA and ISA is that RSA exists in the public domain while ISA permeates private structures. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle propose that Althusser has attempted to show how, "ideology is bound up with the constitution of the subject" (Bennett and Royle 173).

The essay is divided into three sections: "On the Reproduction of the Conditions of Production," "Infrastructure and Superstructure" and "On Ideology." In the first section Althusser discusses the process by which means of production are reproduced to maintain a steady supply of commodity in any mode of production. It is in the second section that he begins to develop his concept of ideology. Althusser refers to the Marxist idea of society consisting of an economic base and a superstructure and demonstrates the interaction between the ideological superstructure and economic base. He states,

Marx conceived the structure of every society as constituted by 'levels' or 'instances' articulated by a specific determinism: the infrastructure, or economic base (the 'unity' of the productive forces and the relations of production), and the superstructure, which

itself contains two ‘levels’ or ‘instances’: the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc.). (Althusser 90)

Althusser’s perception of the structural framework of the society was slightly different from Marx’s. For Marx, the economic base dictated the dominant ideology which, for Marx, was always dependent on the economic condition of the society. Ideology for Althusser, is more autonomous. For him, both ideology and the economic base determine each other. Ideology influences the base and is in turn affected by the change it brings to the base. Althusser later on presents two theses that examine the concept of ideology. The first of the theses is “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 109). The proposition that this thesis puts forwards is that of the Marxist belief that ideology depicts a false consciousness. Althusser posits that ideology doesn’t illustrate or depict the real conditions of existence of an individual but rather their imaginary relationship to these conditions. In Marxist terms, he explains it as the imaginary representation, not of the relations of productions, but of the subject’s relationship to the relations of production. Interestingly, for Althusser, science was more theoretical than ideology. The second thesis was more revolutionary and sparked heated discussions in Marxist circles. Althusser proposes that ideology has a material existence. This ‘materialization’ of ideology forms the backbone of the arguments that Althusser has set forth. As Tony Lovell points out in his book, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure* (1980), the essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” is not the first instance where Althusser has developed this concept about the material concept of ideology. He writes:

In his substitution of this ensemble of practices, under the delegatory guidance of the economic, for the base/superstructure hierarchy, Althusser breaks with the dualism of ideas/material forces. What distinguishes one level from another is not its materiality. All levels are constituted by practices, and all practices are material, just as all are informed by ideas...Both the ideological and theoretical redefined as practices which produce particular products and, as such, are as much material forces as are economic and political forces. (Lovell 31)

The last part of the essay deals with the concept of the *subject* and the process involving the development of subjectivity or subjecthood, that results in identity formation of the individual. Ideology constitutes the subject according to Althusser:

I say: the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that 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. (Althusser 116)

In Althusserian philosophy, individuals are born into Ideology and automatically become its *subjects*. They are initiated into ideology through various institutions of Ideological State Apparatuses with the help of practices and rituals. The subject, however, considers the ideas and perspectives of the ideology to be his own. This internalization of the ideology is what results in the subject’s ‘misrecognition,’ a reiteration of the Lacanian concept. Their delusional perception of reality makes them consider themselves as free and liberated individuals with an independent consciousness and upholding views and beliefs of their own. This disillusionment leads to a false idea of selfhood that Lacan has called *misrecognition*. A case of misrecognition that is shared by the Lacanian view of identity formation of an infant during the mirror stage. Althusser gives examples of religious ideologies. A person who is a subject of a religious ideology considers his religion to be the one true religion out of all the faiths that are practiced around the world. This is a result of the individual’s enchainment by the ideology he/she upholds. The process by which an individual is launched into an ideology and turned into concrete subjects is called *interpellation* by Althusser. Explaining the process of interpellation, Althusser writes:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ (Althusser 118)

Thus, Lacan and Althusser demonstrate two divergent, although coinciding, views of what constitutes the *subject*. For Lacan it is language (and other cultural symbols) while, for Althusser it is ideology that initiates subjectivity. Both language and ideology, however, distance and divorce the subject from the *real*. The hailing of the individual into both the semiotic and ideological frameworks leads to misrecognition and gives the subject a false idea of self-hood. The Lacanian-Althusserian paradigm gives us a broader perspective of subjectivity through the concept of alienation and interpellation.

The Lacanian-Althusserian paradigm has been evaluated by major theorists and critics such as Fredric Jameson, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Slavoj Zizek and Judith Butler. Fredric Jameson works demonstrate the problematic position of the subject in psychoanalytic philosophy and Marxism. He juxtaposes and examines the Lacanian notion of the *real* and Althusser’s idea of history. Mouffe, on the other hand, has attempted to merge Lacan’s and

Althusser's concept of identity formation. She worked towards the reconciliation of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, is considered to be an authoritative work on the comparative study of Lacanian and Althusserian ideas of the *subject*.

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