From Karl Marx to Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser

Bob Jessop

Introduction

This chapter explores the work on language, ideology, and politics of Karl Marx (1818–1883), Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), and Louis Althusser (1918–1990). While only the first two explicitly considered language, all three adopted a totalising approach, forcefully critiqued ideologies and domination, and stressed the unity of social theory and political practice. I first address Marx’s ideas on language and consciousness, ideology and its critique, and political struggle and domination. Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) is included both for his work with Marx and his own contributions. Second, I review Gramsci’s pre-prison writings and prison notes on language, economic base-superstructure relations, the state and intellectuals and link them to his university studies in philology. Third, I examine Althusser’s views on ideology, the state and politics. In all cases, I relate these topics to their broader theoretical and strategic views.

Karl Marx

Five remarks will help to situate Marx’s analyses of language and politics. First, a critical understanding of philology was central to university education in Marx’s youth – thanks in part to Hegel’s effort to get ‘philosophy to speak German’, not Latin, to help build a German nation; second, Marx and Engels aimed to demystify not only religion, as did other Young Hegelians, but also, unlike them, the secular language of the ruling class, including bourgeois morality, bourgeois ‘theory’, and the ideas of leading German intellectuals (Cook 1982; Williams 1977, pp. 21–26); third, Marx wanted to help the masses to develop their own language, their own ‘poetry’ or political imaginary to better express their own needs and demands; consequently, fourth, he engaged in ‘translational’ work to turn mystifying speculation into more prosaic language suited for articulating a scientific socialist programme; and, fifth, Marx himself used language skilfully for political as well as scientific effect (Marx 1979, pp. 14–16).

I begin with a disparate set of manuscripts drafted by Marx and Engels in 1845–1846. Although consigned to ‘the gnawing criticism of the mice’ (Marx 1987b, p. 264), these
drafts were later compiled into one text, *Die deutsche Ideologie (The German ideology)*, first published in Russian in 1924 and then in various versions in other languages (on this history, see Carver 2010). Part one introduces, *inter alia*, the authors’ views on language, political economy, and ideology. Later parts illustrate how they critique specific intellectuals and ideological currents. Marx and Engels argue that a materialist conception of history must begin with living human individuals, not abstract man, analysing how they organise material life to satisfy their changing needs and to propagate the species. These activities form humankind’s material mode of production and underpin a definite mode of life. The need to co-ordinate interaction with nature and/or other people gives rise to language, which, in its plain, ordinary or everyday form, they write, can be understood as practical consciousness. This consciousness exists for other people as well as the speaker. The unity of hand, larynx and brain as the biological foundation of language is matched on the social level by the unity of labour/production, language and consciousness (Höppe 1982, p. 28; Marx & Engels 1976, pp. 36, 44; cf. Engels 1987). Thus, Marx and Engels treat language both as an *intellectual* force of production that arises from and enables social co-operation and as a necessary, constitutive part of any mode of life (Marx & Engels 1976, pp. 51–60; cf. Marx 1975, pp. 298–299, 304; Marx 1987a, pp. 538–540, 548–549; Höppe 1982, p. 55).

The pair add that social development involves a growing division between mental and manual labour. Moreover, the more autonomous mental labour becomes, the more do people tend to treat ideas as lacking foundations in material life, almost as if ideas descend from heaven. This generates the ‘pure’, even esoteric, language of ideologists in fields such as theology, metaphysics and ethics, which are far removed from material production, and, they note, it also inclines intellectuals to explain events and practices in terms of free-floating ideas, cut loose from reality (Marx & Engels 1976, pp. 44–45, 55–56, 92; Engels 1990, pp. 392–394; on intellectuals, see also pp. 35–37). This view also appears implicitly in Marx’s critiques of Hegel on the state and of Feuerbach on religion. An analogous division of manual–mental labour occurs within the ruling class itself – it contains not only practical ‘men of affairs’, but also specialists in ideas (*ibidem*, p. 60).

Building on such arguments, Marx and Engels suggest that the state is an independent social form standing above and outside society and acting in the name of its (necessarily illusory!) collective interests (*ibidem*, p. 90). They also interpret political struggles as the illusory forms in which the real struggles of different classes are fought out. They posit that every class struggling for domination must first gain political power in order to represent its interest as the general interest (*ibidem*, p. 90). Language is the medium in and through which interests are articulated and, hence, a crucial medium of political struggle too (see below). Furthermore, ‘the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class that is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force’ (*ibidem*, p. 59, italics in original). This is grounded, in part, on the ruling class’ control over the means of mental as well as material production. This invites, one might add, reflection on changing modes of mental production, such as writing, print media, radio, television and social media. These comments were intended for self-clarification rather than publication (Marx 1987b, p. 262) and, in more elaborate forms, can be discerned in the later work of both Marx and Engels.

Part I of *The German ideology*, together with the 1859 preface to the *Contribution to the critique of political economy* (Marx 1987b) are often invoked to justify the claim that Marx had a reductionist model in which an economic base generates a matching juridico-political superstructure, forms of life, and social consciousness. In early work, this base-superstructure model had a diacritical role. In some ways, it shifted attention from an *idealist critique of...*
religion and theology to a materialist critique of law and politics, and, in others, in treating language as practical consciousness, its materialism excluded any claim that the social world can exist prior to thought. Viewed substantively, however, this metaphor does injustice to the richness of Marx’s critique of political economy as well as his and Engels’ historical analyses.

Further remarks on Marx’s work on language and ideology are hindered by its disparate, unfinished nature. But it is possible to contrast his approach positively with the usual linguistics approach to the social character of language. For, as Norman Fairclough and Phil Graham note, the usual approach involves a double movement:

[...] first abstracting language from its material interconnectedness with the rest of social life, treating language as an ‘ideal’ and non-material entity, and then construing the sociality of language as relations ‘between’ language [...] and society, as if these were two separately constituted realities which subsequently, or even accidentally, come into contact with each other.

(Fairclough & Graham 2002, p. 187, italics added)

In contrast, Fairclough and Graham continue, Marx emphasised:

the dialectical interconnectivity of language and other elements of the social and can therefore do full justice to [the] social power of language in [...] capitalism without reducing social life to language, removing language from material existence, or reifying language.

(Fairclough & Graham 2002, p. 187)

To support this claim, they give many examples of Marx’s anticipation of what would now count as Critical Discourse Analysis and/or argumentation analysis, ranging from the early 1840s to the late 1870s (see below on The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte).

Although Marx’s later work was less directly concerned with language, he still explored its nature as practical consciousness and examined the semantics and pragmatics of political language. Marx and Engels also considered how ideologies differ from other sets of ideas insofar as they serve the interests of power and domination, and, relatedly, how ideological effects emerge – consciously or not – from language use in diverse contexts. So, their later, more or less systematic efforts at Ideologiekritik were directed against specific ideologies – technological paradigms, economic doctrines, legal systems, political imaginaries, party programmes, religious-belief systems, philosophies and general systems of ideas – in terms of how they obscured, mystified and legitimised social relations of exploitation and domination (cf. McCarney 1980, pp. 10–11). An example is the degeneration of classical political economy, with its real scientific achievements, into mere bourgeois apologetics as the working-class movement grows stronger and challenges the logic of capital (Marx 1967, pp. 23–26).

Marx and Engels also recognised that the most powerful ideological effects may be sedimented in language, language use, practical consciousness and other forms of signification. In this regard, they both noted: the class character of language; its implicit value judgements; its role in generalising bourgeois mentality through turns of phrase, figures of speech and commercial language; the status of economic categories as objective forms of thought (Gedankenformen); and the mystifying effects of commodity fetishism and the juridical world-view (Engels 1976; Marx 1967, pp. 29, 49; Marx 1987a, pp. 538–541, 547–550; Marx & Engels 1976, pp. 102–103, 231; for many further examples, see Höppe 1982, pp. 97–105, 199–203, 222–247).
Finally, although Marx starts from the social relations of production, he argues that social transformation is mediated through the political sphere. Indeed, he emphasises the primacy of the political over the economic. For example, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, written in 1851, Marx noted that, while ‘men make their own history; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves’ (1979, p. 103). He then remarked that it was hard for revolutionaries to develop new political practices because the available political lexicon limits their ability to represent their own class interests and voice new demands. Thus, he refers to limits rooted in ‘the tradition of all the dead generations’, ‘superstition about the past’, and ‘an entire superstructure of different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life’ (1979, pp. 103, 106, 128). This suggests, as James Martin noted, that Marx recognised ‘the “performative” character of politics, that is, the manner in which the symbolic is not simply some secondary “level” perched upon the hard rock of property relations but is itself integral to the materialisation of class power’ (Martin 2002, pp. 132–3).

Throughout *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx explores the language and other symbols in and through which the class content of politics gets represented or, more commonly, misrepresented. He dissects the semiotic forms, genres, and tropes through which political forces articulate their identities, interests and beliefs. He reveals the articulation between: (1) the phrases and tropes of language and custom borrowed from the past or recontextualised through intertextual weaving in the present; and (2) current political and social realities, such that old phrases sometimes lead to spirited revolutionary action but, more often, prove to be empty signifiers open to manipulation for political or economic advantage (Marx 1979, pp. 103–112, 126–131, 142–146, 148–150, 190–193 and *passim*). Here and elsewhere, Marx also reflects on the type of political language in which the proletariat might formulate its demands, arguing that it must develop its own novel, political language rather than draw, as did earlier revolutions, on the ‘poetry of the past’ (Marx 1979, p. 106). In short, this and other texts can be read as contributions to the critique of *semiotic* economy, that is, to an account of how language and symbolism are involved in the imaginary (mis)recognition and (mis)representation of class interests.

**Antonio Gramsci**

In terms of the all-too-familiar base-superstructure metaphor, Gramsci is often regarded as a *theorist of the superstructures* (especially politics, civil society and culture) rather than of the material base (the forces and social relations of production) (for an important, more nuanced dispute along these lines between Norberto Bobbio and Jacques Texier, respectively, see the texts reprinted in Mouffe 1979, pp. 21–79). Another misleading interpretation sees Gramsci as pioneering a Marxist approach to cultural criticism, or cultural studies, as if he saw culture as separate from the economy, politics, law, or other fields. Yet, Gramsci explicitly rejected the validity of an *ontological* distinction between base and superstructure (while conceding its *analytical* or methodological value) and sought to transcend it by exploring the interpenetration and co-evolution of these allegedly separate social spheres. This is especially clear in his discussion of Americanism and Fordism (see below). Among other reasons for his rejection of the metaphor, one might be the difficulties of locating language within this schema. Thus, to cite Peter Ives, Gramsci regarded language as ‘material, albeit historically material. […] Language is rooted in the materiality of the production of words’ (Ives 2004, p. 34). Although this recalls arguments in *The German ideology*, Gramsci was unaware of this text, given its publication history (see above). His arguments were, in this regard, his own.
As Italian commentators have noted for many decades (see especially Lo Piparo 1979 and Carlucci 2013; and, for illustrative Italian work, contributions to Ives & Lacorte 2011) and anglophone scholars have begun to argue more recently (e.g. Ives 2004), Gramsci’s whole approach was inspired by his university studies in philology under the direction of Matteo Bartoli, who initiated an approach called neo-linguistics (in opposition to the German neogrammarian school, which had affinities with Saussure’s semiology) and later known, more substantively, as linguistica spaziale (spatial linguistics). This approach was rooted in the idealism of the Italian philosopher and organic intellectual, Benedetto Croce, modified by broadly contemporaneous work in linguistic geography and historical linguistics. Neo-linguistics emphasised that language is an evolving human creation and that linguistic innovation is normal.

Significantly, Bartoli argued that language diffuses geographically and socially in regular ways mediated through relations of prestige and power (Bartoli 1925; also Ives 2004b, pp. 44–55). He explored ‘how a dominant speech community exerted prestige over contiguous, subordinate communities: the city over the surrounding countryside, the “standard” language over the dialect, the dominant socio-cultural group over the subordinate one’ (Forgacs & Smith 1985, p. 164). He also charted how innovations flowed from the prestigious langue to the receiving one, such that ‘earlier linguistic forms would be found in a peripheral rather than central area, an isolated rather than an accessible area, a larger rather than a smaller area’ (Brandist 1996, pp. 94–95). This is reflected in Gramsci’s comments on the stratification of language use (e.g. how countryfolk copy urban manners, how subaltern groups imitate the upper classes, how peasants speak when they move to the cities, etc.) (Gramsci 1985, pp. 180–181; in Gramsci 1975, the Italian critical edition of the prison notebooks, this corresponds to Quaderno, or notebook, Q29, §2, pp. 2342–2343). This comparative historical and spatial linguistics strongly influenced Gramsci’s ideas on hegemony before he met the term in Lenin’s analysis of party and class alliances. In contrast to its conventional meaning in international relations and Marxist-Leninist alliance theory, Gramsci redefined hegemony to denote the formation and organisation of consent (see below).

Gramsci applied historical and spatial linguistics in much of his work, even describing his overall method as philological. He argued that: ‘the whole of language is a continuous process of metaphor, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and civilisations’ (1971, p. 450; Q11, §24, p. 1427). Like Marx and Engels, Gramsci emphasised that language permeates all social relations and secretes a particular view of the world into everyday life and special social fields. He also argued that:

All men are philosophers. Their philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just words grammatically devoid of content; 2. ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’; 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of belief, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting which are collectively bundled together under the name of ‘folklore’.

(Gramsci 1971, p. 323; Q11, §12, p. 1375)

Thus social relations can only be fully understood and explained through the ‘determined notions and concepts’ (Marx’s term for these was ‘categories’) in and through which determinate social practices develop and get institutionalised.

Peter Ives even describes Gramsci’s approach as ‘vernacular materialism’. This applies ‘the tenets of a historical materialist approach to language and [develops] a linguistically
concerned theory of politics and society’ (Ives 2004a, p. 3). A deliberate play on words, this term serves to: (1) oppose vernacular to vulgar materialism; (2) establish the dialectical nature of Gramsci’s work, with its focus on the organic relationship between language and social structures; (3) identify Gramsci’s concern to develop a political programme that would ‘popularise’ culture rather than impose the culture of the dominant class from above, or force the development of a national – or international – culture through the imposition of an official, normative grammar, or resort to an artificial language, such as Esperanto; and (4) promote the historical materialist analysis of society (Ives 2004a, p. 4). It is worth noting the continuities between point two and Marx’s historical materialist analysis of language as practical consciousness and, for point three, the similarities to Hegel’s efforts to make philosophy speak German and Marx’s commitment to developing a plain language with which workers could develop the poetry of the future. Indeed, as Gramsci wrote, Italian unification occurred without a popular revolution or radical social transformation such as that in France. This was reflected in the well-known aphorism from the 1870s: Italia fatta, bisogna fare gli Italiani (loosely translated, ‘now we’ve made Italy, we must make the Italians’). For Gramsci, this required the development of a national-popular collective will grounded in a shared language, shared world-view, and shared hegemonic project that would encompass a new economic and political order.

These claims can be illustrated from Gramsci’s analyses of the articulation of base and superstructure, the relations between political and civil society, and intellectuals’ major and vital role in creating and reproducing these mediations in capitalist societies.

First, to replace the base-superstructure distinction, Gramsci redefined the meaning of base via the concept of mercato determinato (determinate market), which he misattributed to David Ricardo (Potier 1991, p. 87). For Gramsci, this is ‘equivalent to [a] determined relation of social forces in a determined structure of the productive apparatus, this relationship being guaranteed (that is, rendered permanent) by a determined political, moral and juridical superstructure’ (Gramsci 1971, p. 410; Q11, §52, p. 1477). This highlighted the need for an integral (totalising) analysis of historically specific economic regimes, their modes of social regulation, and their contingent, tendential laws of motion. For example, in his famous notes on Americanism and Fordism, Gramsci showed the importance of new economic imaginaries and organic intellectuals in promoting ‘Americanism’ as a mode of growth in response to the crisis of liberal capitalism and also identified how new social and cultural practices helped to consolidate Fordism as a new mode of regulation and societal organisation (1971, pp. 310–313; Q22, §13, pp. 2171–2175). He also noted, in remarks reminiscent of The Eighteenth Brumaire, that it would be hard to implant Fordism in Europe. This is because of the dead-weight of tradition, the incrustations of the past that must be swept away, and the presence of parasitic classes and strata (1971, pp. 281, 285, 317; Q22, §2, pp. 214–247, §15, p. 2179). These arguments put the struggle for political, intellectual and moral leadership at the heart of efforts to build and embed new economic regimes in capitalist societies.

Second, another, broader, concept is that of ‘historical bloc’: rather than redefining the base, this covers base-superstructure relations. Gramsci asked how and why ‘the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production’. He answered that it reflects ‘the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure’ (1971, p. 366; Q8, §182, pp. 1051–1052). This is realised through specific intellectual, moral and political practices. These translate narrow sectoral, professional, or local (in his terms, ‘economic-corporate’) interests into wider ‘ethico-political’ ones. Agreement on the latter not only helps to co-constitute economic
structures (by providing a shared orientation), but also gives them their rationale and legitimacy. Analysing the historical bloc also shows how ‘material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value’ (1971, p. 377; Q7, §21, p. 869).

Third, in his best-known concept, Gramsci related hegemony (egemonia) to the capacity of dominant groups to establish and maintain political, intellectual and moral leadership and secure the ‘broad-based consent’ of allied and subordinate groups to the prevailing relations of economic and political domination. Just as he studied the economy in its integral sense as a determined market, Gramsci studied the state in its integral sense. He defined it as ‘political society + civil society’ and examined state power, in liberal democracies based on mass politics, as ‘hegemony protected by the armour of coercion’ (1971, p. 263; Q6, §88, pp. 763–765). His analysis of hegemony–consent–persuasion is not restricted to civil society, but extends into what are conventionally regarded as economic and political spheres. Paraphrasing, effective hegemony depends on the capacity of dominant groups to suture the identities, interests, emotions and values of key sectors of subordinate classes and other subaltern groups into a hegemonic vision and embed this in institutions and policies – leading in turn to their translation into ‘good’ common sense. At the same time, reflecting the ‘material’ as well as the discursive moment of social practice, hegemony depends on material concessions to subaltern groups, and this means that it must rest on ‘a decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity’ (Gramsci 1971, p. 161; Q 13, §18, p. 1591).

For Gramsci, just as the moment of force is institutionalised in a system of coercive apparatuses (that may not always coincide with the state’s formal juridico-political boundaries), hegemony is crystallised and mediated through a complex system of ideological (or hegemonic) apparatuses located throughout the social formation. While present in the juridico-political apparatuses, hegemonic practices are largely concentrated in normal circumstances in civil society (i.e. the ‘ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”’)) (Gramsci 1971, p. 12; Q8, §182, p. 1518). Relevant ‘hegemonic apparatuses’ include the Church, trade unions, schools, the mass media, or political parties (Gramsci 1971, pp. 10–14, 155, 210, 243, 261, 267; Q12, §1, pp. 1518–1524; Q13, §23, pp. 1602–1603; Q13, §27, pp. 1619–1620; Q26, §6; pp. 2302–2303; Q17, §51, pp. 1947–1948).

Fourth, Gramsci’s interest in the determined market, historical blocs, and state power was closely related to his studies of intellectuals (also broadly defined). He observed that, while everyone is an intellectual, not everyone in society has the function of an intellectual (Gramsci 1971, p. 9; Q12, §1, p. 1516). This claim has a dual significance. It rejects an elitist or vanguard role for intellectuals, stressing the need for hegemony to be rooted in everyday practices and interests. At the same time, those with the function of intellectuals are regarded as the creators and mediators of hegemony, as crucial bridges between economic, political and ideological domination, and as active agents in linking culture (especially common sense, or everyday knowledge, passions, feelings and customs) and subjectivity in the production of hegemony. Specifically, Gramsci saw hegemony as being anchored in the activities of traditional and/or organic intellectuals whose specialised function in the division of labour is to elaborate ideologies, educate the people, organise and unify social forces, and secure the hegemony of the dominant group (Gramsci 1971, pp. 5–23; Q12, §1–3, pp. 1511–1552; for an excellent review of intellectuals’ role in this regard, especially in forming a historical bloc, see Portelli 1972). Thus, the task of organic intellectuals is to promote and consolidate a conception of the world that gives homogeneity and awareness to a fundamental class in the economic, political and social fields; this, in turn, becomes the basis for efforts to
create hegemony within the wider society (Gramsci 1971, p. 5; Q12, §1, p. 1513; cf. Althusser 1990, p. 258). Whereas organic intellectuals identify with the dominant classes, or at least, have roles coeval with the specific forms of their economic, political and ideological domination, traditional intellectuals have roles dating from earlier modes of production, or ways of life (e.g. priests) and have weaker ties to the currently dominant classes.

**Louis Althusser**

Louis Althusser was a Marxist philosopher and member of the French Communist Party who criticised Stalinist doctrines and party practices. He researched political theory, wrote some major essays on Marx’s philosophical and theoretical development and, with four students, presented an influential structuralist reading of Marx’s *Capital* (Althusser et al., 1968; cf. Althusser & Balibar 1970). Here I focus on his views on language, ideology and politics. In contrast to Marx and Gramsci, Althusser did not study language, as such. Instead, he focused on ideology, which he regarded as ‘a “representation” of the imaginary relationship of individuals [members of social classes in class societies] to their real conditions of existence’ (1971b, p. 162; cf. 1971a, p. 241; 1990, p. 25). This definition draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss’ notion of *culture*, that is, the languages, the unconscious categories, through which people give meaning to experience (Althusser 1971a, p. 241). Another direct influence was Jacques Lacan (whose work he would later reject), who, inspired by de Saussure, wanted to reorientate psychoanalysis on the assumption that the unconscious is structured like a language (e.g. Lacan 1993, 166–67). Nonetheless, while there are cultural and linguistic influences in Althusser’s work, language is not, for him, a crucial topic.

Let me explore Lacan’s influence. He distinguished three registers of analysis. The *imaginary* is the restricted, superficial, non-psychoanalytic level of everyday lived experience. It denotes, he wrote, my imagined relation to myself, to my feelings, to others, to others’ perceptions of me, and to the real world. For Althusser, ideology is so pervasive in individuals’ thoughts and deeds that it is ‘indistinguishable from their lived experience’ (1990, p. 25, italics in original). These imaginary relations, which have real effects, are structured and overdetermined by the *symbolic* order. This register comprises sociolinguistic structures, rules and dynamics, and the wider moral and institutional order (cf. Althusser 1990, p. 26). The third register is the Real, which is less relevant here, because Althusser does not discuss reality in Lacanian terms (see Johnson 2013; on Freud and Lacan, Althusser 1971a; for the wider Althusser–Lacan connection, Resch 1992, pp. 208–213).

Althusser argued that, because individuals’ lived experience of real conditions is always mediated through language and/or practice, it is not possible to equate ideology with false consciousness of the real world, for our reliance on language to construe the world traps us permanently inside *ideology in general*. However, we can compare *particular ideologies*, that is, different imaginary representations of our relationship to that world. Indeed, one task of science is to test the practical adequacy of different ideologies, to separate good and bad ideological thinking – Gramsci writes here of organic versus arbitrary, rationalistic and willed ideologies (1971, pp. 376–377; Q7, §19, p. 868). Another task of science is to identify what is possible in specific conjunctures – although, for Althusser (1990), even scientific practices are also shaped by ideological concepts, metaphors, and so on, as regards their presentation, reception and effects.

Furthermore, against a purely ideational account of ideology as comprising only ideas or representations, Althusser claims that ideology has a material existence (1971b, pp. 165, 169–170). It ‘always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices’ (1971b, p. 166).
Thus, ideology has real effects. One of these is *interpellation*. Specifically, Althusser suggests that ‘all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects’ (1971b, p. 115). Language has a key role here: indeed, Althusser’s example is the hailing of a pedestrian by a police officer with the phrase, ‘hey, you!’ This also illustrates how, in acting towards others as subjects, we also reproduce institutions, here the police apparatus (Althusser 1971b, pp. 167–168, 170–171, 173). Furthermore, ‘individuals are always-already subjects’ (1971b, pp. 175–176) because they are interpellated even in the womb thanks to naming and other practices that occur in ‘the specific familial ideological configuration’ (1971b, p. 176). This *assujettissement* (or process of subjectivation) is the crucial ideological mechanism because it forms our reality and makes it appear natural, true, or self-evident. Indeed, a key ideological effect ‘is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology’ (1971b, p. 175).

In contrast to his direct references to Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, Althusser does not mention Marx or Gramsci in his remarks on ideology as lived experience, or how it is structured like a language. While generally supportive of Marx’s later, scientific work (in contrast to his youthful humanism), Althusser was hostile to Gramsci’s allegedly unscientific philosophy of praxis (for reasons noted in my conclusions). But he did recognise the latter’s major contributions to political analysis and ranked him next to Marx and Lenin in this regard. In particular, he praised Gramsci’s innovative notion of hegemony, broad concept of intellectuals and recognition of how civil society helped to reproduce class domination (see 1969, pp. 114, 114n, 105n, respectively). That said, Althusser did not engage seriously with these insights because he read them through the Marxism-Leninist optic that Gramsci aimed to overturn (Thomas 2009, pp. 26–35). So, profound differences remained in their respective studies of ideology and politics.

Althusser emphasised the importance of *assujettissement* to economic reproduction, which depends on the ‘superstructural ensemble’. Yet, he tried to go beyond the purely descriptive value of the base-superstructure metaphor (1971b, p. 136) to ground it scientifically in the causal power of the superstructure, especially its juridico-political institutions and the ideological field (Althusser 1969, pp. 113–14; cf. 1971b, pp. 134–137). This opens space for a half-hearted rehabilitation of Gramsci, which Althusser attempted in his famous note on ideology and ideological state apparatuses:

Gramsci is the only one who went any distance in the road I am taking. He had the ‘remarkable’ idea that the state could not be reduced to the (Repressive) State Apparatus, but included […] institutions from ‘civil society’: the Church, the Schools, the trade unions, etc. Unfortunately, Gramsci did not systematise his institutions.


In addressing this defect, Althusser even claimed to have completed the Marxist state theory that Marx, Lenin and Gramsci had only sketched in a series of pre-theoretical intuitions. He formulated this account in five theses: (1) the core of the state is its repressive (state) apparatus, or RSA; (2) the state also includes various ideological state apparatuses, or ISAs; (3) each ISA has its own particular ideology and apparatus logic; (4) the state plays a vital role in reproducing the relations of production and intervenes in all areas that bear on their reproduction; and (5) while economic exploitation is foundational, changes in the state form must precede reorganising the economic base. These theses were first published in an extract (Althusser 1971b) from a longer, but incomplete, work, *On reproduction*, published posthumously (see Althusser 2014).
For Althusser, whereas the RSA functions mainly via repression (including physical violence), the ISAs function primarily through ideology (1971b, pp. 144–146, 149). The latter are so diverse, relatively autonomous, and wide-ranging that the entire society becomes saturated by class relations and submitted to a class power that acquires coherence through ‘a certain political configuration […] imposed and maintained by means of material force (that of the State) and of moral power (that of the ideologies)’ (Althusser 1968). What unifies the ISAs is: (1) their common subordination to the ideology of the ruling class (1971b, pp. 146, 149, 154–157); and (2) the RSA’s role in securing the political conditions for the functioning of the ISAs, ‘which largely secure the reproduction specifically of the relations of production, behind a “shield” provided by the repressive State apparatus’ (1971b, p. 150). This last phrase, which recalls Gramsci on ‘hegemony protected by the armour of coercion’, is explained in terms of a ‘logic of the supplement’, whereby something apparently secondary is actually crucial to the existence of what appears original or primary (Derrida 1976, p. 315). As applied here, the relations of production/exploitation determine, in the last instance, the character of the state (RSA + ISAs) that underwrites the political and ideological relations of domination that, in their turn, ensure the reproduction of the social relations of production/exploitation that would otherwise fail or collapse.

Denying that Gramsci’s work on hegemony anticipated his analysis of ISAs, Althusser protested that Gramsci’s ‘answer to the question of the material infrastructure of the ideologies’ was rather mechanistic and economistic, that he never talked about ISAs, but only ‘hegemonic apparatuses’, and that he failed to explain the ‘hegemony-effect’.

Gramsci, in sum, defines his apparatuses in terms of their effect or result, hegemony, which is also poorly conceived. I, for my part, was attempting to define the ISAs in terms of their ‘motor cause’: ideology. Furthermore, Gramsci affirms that the hegemonic apparatuses are part of ‘civil society’ […] on the pretext that they are ‘private’.

(Althusser 2006, pp. 138–139, italics in original)

Althusser claims superiority, quite unfairly, because he can explain the hegemony-effect through the ideological mechanism of interpellation and does not erroneously take the ‘public–private distinction’ as real when it is just one result of bourgeois juridico-political ideology. More generally, in a class society, ideology helps individuals to ‘bear’ their condition, whether this be one of exploitation, or exorbitant privilege (Althusser 1990, p. 25). Moreover, subaltern individuals who reject their condition are disciplined by the RSA as ‘bad’ subjects who reject the dominant ideology (1971b, pp. 137, 149–150, 181). In sum, while hegemony depends on ISAs, the RSA is also needed (cf. Gramsci above). Finally, while ideology is located in the superstructure and has its own logic and effects there vis-à-vis law and the state, it also penetrates the entire social edifice (not the continued use of the base-superstructure metaphor) and provides the cement [sic] that assures the cohesion of subjects in their roles, functions and social relations (1990, p. 25).

Althusser develops his theses in various pseudo-dialectical and formalistic ways. For example, he mentions the secondary ideological functions of the RSA, the secondary repressive functions of ISAs, and the possibilities that specific institutions may switch between primarily ideological and primarily repressive functions. But he provides no substantial historical analyses and few clues about how different political and ideological fields are articulated, let alone unified (‘cemented’), apart from the equally formal claim that this occurs when one ISA is dominant. For Althusser, this was currently the school system (1971b, pp. 152–155), although followers, such as Régis Debray (1981) and Nicos
Poulantzas (1978), later claimed that the mass media held this place. Overall, this argument seems quite functionalist. There is no sense that the ISAs may be riven by contradictions and class struggle, that there is a specific role for intellectuals, political forces, and so on, in class struggle, or, indeed, that ideology may also be secreted in the organisation of production (cf. the critiques by Buci-Glucksmann, 1980, pp. 64–67; Poulantzas 1973, pp. 300–305). Later, in a post-script to his famous ISAs essay, Althusser tried to correct its functionalist tenor by insisting on the primacy of class struggle over institutions (2006, p. 112). In contrast to Gramsci, however, he made no effort to produce appropriate concepts to explore the forms, modalities and potential disjunctions of class struggle in and across different fields.

Such reflections prompted a return to another classical political theorist. In Machiavel et nous (1972–1986), Althusser attempted to theorise the state and politics without resort to the deterministic and economically reductionist base-superstructure schema. His proposed replacement is an aleatory materialism that focuses on historical becoming based on the primacy of events or contingent encounters, rather than on the operation of ‘iron laws’, or an inevitable social progress. Althusser (1999) claims that Machiavelli raises the crucial question of how a durable political state emerges ex nihilo. Machiavelli’s answer, he argues, was that, while the prince founds the modern state, it can only be stabilised through a shift from a despotic principality to a modern republic based on the rule of law. Moreover, while Althusser once regarded people as passive subjects to be interpellated and mobilised by the ISAs, and disciplined by the RSA if they resisted, his reading of Machiavelli leads him to see ‘the people’ as the prime source of refusal and struggle against political repression and ideological subjectivation. In these respects, Althusser’s interpretation marks a radical epistemological break with the functionalism of his ISA texts. It grounds social order in the contingent, aleatory historical development and succession of state forms (cf. Vatter 2004). It also marks another shift towards Gramsci’s views insofar as the latter had already updated Machiavelli’s call for ‘a new prince in a new [Italian] principality’ by positing the need for a ‘modern prince’ to create a unified Italian republic. This would not be a dictatorial vanguard party, but a communist party operating as a hegemonic social force, one that is in continuing dialogue with the popular masses and, on this basis, can develop a political, intellectual and moral hegemony that advances the national-popular will.

Conclusions

Marx interpreted language as an expression of practical consciousness and critiqued the effects of the manual–mental division of labour, which inclined intellectuals to believe that ideas were the motor force of history. He engaged in systematic, even symptomatic, critiques of the basic categories that organised capitalist relations of production and corresponding juridico-political, intellectual and philosophical social forms and consciousness. Given that politics, not the development of the productive forces, was the key moment of social development, Marx also paid much attention to the role of language in politics and to the specificities of political struggle, especially to develop and secure support for an illusory account of the general interest.

Gramsci elaborated many of these ideas (on the basis of limited access in prison to key Marxian texts, ignorance of some and over-familiarity with others, notably the 1859 Preface), based on his prior training in historical and spatial linguistics. He also emphasised the need to develop hegemony (political, intellectual and moral leadership) that would articulate a national-popular will as the basis for a revolutionary transformation of society. He was also interested in how intellectuals secured the unity of the power bloc and the
hegemony of the power bloc over the popular classes. Developing a common language grounded in common sense and orientated to good sense was a crucial dimension of the struggle for hegemony (cf. Carlucci 2013).

Althusser cannot be read as the natural successor of Marx and Gramsci. On the contrary, he criticised Marx’s views on ideology and the state as, at best, descriptive and pre-theoretical, and he falsely accused Gramsci’s ‘philosophy of praxis’ of trying to explain historical development through the evolution of consciousness. Yet, Gramsci stressed that concepts, institutions and practices only gain meaning and significance in particular circumstances and that one task of the philosophy of praxis is to explain this historical contingency. While Althusser tended to conflate language with ‘ideology in general’ and his approach also inclined to functionalism, he also noted the role of language in *assujettissement* via interpellation and emphasised the materiality of ideology as expressed in specific apparatuses. Others have done this better. Thus, of the three figures considered above, those interested in Marxist approaches to language and politics would be well advised to start with Marx and Gramsci.

**References**


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