

## The Educational History of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses: Rancière's Frustration

David Backer

*West Chester University*

The French communist philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatus (or ISA for short) is a landmark of Marxist philosophy of education. An ideological state apparatus is a system of institutions and organizations that form part of the state, or superstructures in Marxist theory. The system of institutions is an apparatus because groups (like ruling class blocs, working class blocs, and other coalitions) can make interventions in and with it. The ISA is ideological because this state apparatus does not predominantly involve violence, but rather ideology, in its interventions. Ideology is an imagined relation to real conditions which apparatuses in the state help to maintain over time or reproduce. To reproduce ideology, for Althusser, is to reproduce relations of production: the very heart of a society. Ideological state apparatuses, in this theory, reproduce these relations of production. This reproduction happens in the context of a conflict between classes, traditionally between the working class and the capitalist class, each making interventions to secure their interests.

Assuming that capitalists are dominant in a society, then it will tend to happen that educational institutions, from childcare to schools to consultants, form part of a system that reproduces dominant relations of production for that ruling class bloc. Reproducing a relation of production for a ruling class means recruiting subjects to dominant ideologies. These ideologies, for Althusser, orient people to material life according to the dominant mode of production. The ideology itself, in this theory, is an imagined relation to real conditions. Ideology as a relation means that it is ideology-in-practice, rather than

exclusively stuff in the head. Furthermore, the imagined relation to real conditions is anchored in specific gestures, movements, protocols, routines, habits, and other stuff of everyday life. The ideology is not in the head, but in the material practice. And such practices that recruit for a dominant imagined relation to real conditions Althusser famously called interpellations, which happen in institutions that form the apparatus. Tracking systems, taking attendance, cubbies, undergraduate admissions, doctoral defenses, and educational policy advocacy and beyond all contain interpellations: practices that recruit subjects to dominant relations of production.

Althusser is famous for this theory of ideology. And he is famous for claiming that education is the most efficient and powerful ideological state apparatus in modern societies. This claim made Marxists think about education in a very different way than previous generations of organizers and scholars. Yet while the tradition has come to associate Althusser with the ISAs concept, his student Jacques Rancière made a significant contribution to the theory that goes largely unrecognized. This contribution came out of French student organizing before and after the massive French general strike started by students in May 1968. This paper tracks Rancière's critique of Althusser's concept of ideology through 1968, which— if Rancière is to be believed— was taken as a constructive critique by Althusser in 1969 as he was writing the first major articulation of the ISAs theory: "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation" in 1969-1970, where he first proposed the ISAs and interpellation as described above.<sup>1</sup> Rancière's critique of Althusser's thinking through 1968 was actually rooted in student movement debates, specifically the political status of science classes. The concept of the ISAs was therefore the result of a multi-layered educational process: between student movement and officials; between student and teacher; between schools

and capitalism. Revisiting this intellectual history, and showing how the concept emerged out of education, sheds new light on how we should understand Althusser's philosophy of education today.

Rancière was one of Althusser's top students and a co-author of the original edition of the collectively written *Reading Capital*. But his first full-length book was actually a political, polemical, and philosophical rejection of his teacher called *Althusser's Lesson* (1974), and it's in the 2011 English translation of this book that we find Rancière reflecting on his contribution to the ISAs.<sup>2</sup>

Rancière admits in the Preface that his book is not an objective account weighing the positives and negatives of Althusserian theory, but rather a personal account of the events of May 1968, Althusser's conflicted role in them, and the role Althusserianism played during and after those events.<sup>3</sup> A text rooted in its time and place, his arguments against Althusser rely on specific movement groups, the dynamics of which are not within the scope of our purposes here. However the book is notable as a concrete rebuke to Althusser's supposedly concrete thinking about education. Rancière reflects on the French University system, its leftist student movements, and the intellectual debates teeming within them with a powerful clarity—basically depicting the actual life of institutions within the scholastic ISA as a gesture towards a refutation of the theory of the ISAs.

The book is an early exercise in Rancière's general project of abandoning "the field of theory . . . to study instead, the multiple ways thought assumes form and produces effects on the social body."<sup>4</sup> Althusser's "theoreticism" is therefore a focus of his critique, but on educational grounds. Althusserianism, for Rancière, presumes "the idea that the dominated are dominated because they are ignorant of the laws of domination. This simplistic view at first assigns to those who

adopt it the exalted task of bringing their science to the blind masses... My book [*AL*] declared war on the theory of the inequality of intelligences at the heart of supposed critiques of domination.”<sup>5</sup> (Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* contains the pedagogical theory associated with this rejection of inequality of intelligence.) Rancière, writing in 2010, is ultimately concerned with “the thesis that there is no theory of subversion that cannot also serve the cause of oppression.”<sup>6</sup> To Rancière, Althusser’s is a paradigm case. The book is a declaration of war against it.

For instance, Rancière critiques Althusser for “the *superimposition* of two functions of ideology (the preservation of social cohesion in general, or the exercise of class domination),” which implies a dubious union of two antagonistic frameworks.<sup>7</sup> Althusser’s account of ideology up until that point welcomed “the *coexistence* of two heterogeneous conceptual systems: historical materialism and Durkheimian bourgeois sociology.”<sup>8</sup> Going back further than Durkheim, and into the history of political theory, Rancière also proposes that Althusser’s account “could very well be a renewal of the myth of an ideological state of nature.”<sup>9</sup> This move to detect in Althusser “a sociology of the Comtian or Durkheimian sort which actually does concern itself with the systems of representation that ensure or disrupt the cohesion of the social group,” as well as the history of political thought about social order from Hobbes to Locke and the state of nature, therefore begins with Rancière.<sup>10</sup> That Althusser imports non-Marxist tendencies, specifically those of bourgeois sociologies and political theories of social order, would become a trend in later interpretations. Bringing in such sociologies was more than just a matter of textual consistency, but intellectually. To Rancière, Althusser’s “philosophy of order... served to distance us from the uprisings which were then shaking the bourgeois order to its core.”<sup>11</sup> The goals of May 1968 were at stake.

When it came to Althusser and the movement itself, in an admiring tone, Rancière calls the ISAs essay “a mockery of the Party’s academic policy,”<sup>12</sup> but then claims that in Althusser’s own thinking and actions, “*May 68 did not exist.*”<sup>12</sup> To Rancière, Althusser’s armchair pontifications about school and the ISAs were contrary to the movement and illegitimate. “It is only by denying the existence of May 68 and of the anti-authoritarian revolt that Althusser is able to credit the heroic investigations of the solitary theoretician with the distinction of having discovered, amid the general blindness and deafness of the population, the political role of the school.”<sup>13</sup> Althusser is guilty of a kind of tenured Marxism that subordinates the student movement and champions its own book-writing as class struggle. “He is free...to proclaim the primacy of the class struggle, provided he does not bother himself with any of the class struggles happening today.”<sup>14</sup>

But more than impotent, chit-chatty armchair Marxism, Althusser’s subordination of the student movement is a “political and theoretical cancellation...that separates a theoretical problematic from its political base and singularizes discovery (the ‘risky hypotheses’ in which the solitary scholar ‘takes the risk’ of advancing ideas that are already running in the streets).”<sup>15</sup> Althusser’s cancellation of the student movement is a lazy appropriation without any political stakes attached to it. The risk is in the barricaded street, not the published article. That abrogation of activism, particularly student activism, is a sticking point for Rancière.

The impetus Rancière reports for writing the book is relevant for the historical context of Althusser’s thinking about education. Not only is Rancière frustrated with Althusser’s bourgeois theory and supposed cancellation of the student movements of 1968, he’s also frustrated as a student who has contributed to his teacher’s thinking in

a meaningful way—perhaps without due recognition. From the outset, Rancière’s perspective on Althusser’s orientation to 1968 was somewhat different than other accounts. Étienne Balibar, in the Preface to the newly translated edition of Althusser’s *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (the book from which the ISAs essay was originally excerpted), explains Althusser’s absence from the student movement by citing his mental health. Balibar’s take is that the ISAs essay was an attempt to understand the movement Althusser missed because he had a nervous breakdown for which he spent two months in the hospital.

Rancière has a very different and less charitable take. He writes that “Althusser misled us” and for that reason “[w]e had declared Althusserianism dead and buried in May 1968.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than an attempt of an ill communist to understand the events of 1968, Rancière sees Althusser “struggling, somewhat pitifully, to reconcile his old ideas with the lessons offered up by the events themselves.”<sup>17</sup> Further, Rancière claims that it was his own essay critiquing Althusser’s thinking about ideology circa 1967, that Rancière wrote in 1969, which then pushed Althusser to articulate what would become his famous theory of ISAs and ideology as interpellation. Rancière included the 1969 essay, translated into English, as an addendum to the 2010 edition of *Althusser’s Lesson*, giving readers the opportunity to see for themselves.

The essay, titled “On the Theory of Ideology: Althusser’s Politics,” was a write-up of a course Rancière taught at an autonomous student-led university born out of the events of May 1968 in June of that year. The course was meant “primarily to comment on Marx’s texts on ideology” but “quite quickly became the instrument for reflection on . . . the Althusserian theory of the battle of science against ideology.”<sup>18</sup> Rancière gives a brief history of the piece.

At the end of the semester, Saul Karsz, who had at-

tended the course, asked me to write an article based on it for a collection of essays on Althusser to be published in Argentina. It is quite likely that he showed my piece to Althusser and possible also that it might have played a part in Althusser's introduction of the notion of ideological state apparatuses to his thought.<sup>19</sup>

If we believe Rancière, then Althusser read Rancière's essay and composed the ISAs essay with it in mind the following year. Gregory Elliott notes that Althusser started writing the ISAs essay in March 1969, leaving ample time between Rancière's writing and the publication of the ISAs essay for that to be true.<sup>20</sup> And we also know from Balibar's Preface to *On the Reproduction* that Althusser would write very quickly, so it's likely that he put together the ISAs essay in that short window.<sup>21</sup> And reading the ISAs essay and the book from which it was excerpted next to Rancière's critique, Althusser's ideas do sound kind of like a response to Rancière's critiques, or the incorporation of a constructive criticism, providing evidence that the ISAs essay and *On the Reproduction* are, as Rancière says, more a pitiful attempt to reconcile critiques launched at him, rather than a noble attempt to synthesize and digest May 1968.

Before we get to Rancière's actual claims in that essay, some more important context for them. "On the Theory of Ideology" is also written as a direct response to Althusser's 1964 essay "Student Problems," which Warren Montag translated into English only recently.<sup>22</sup> Rancière sets the scene. Althusser's 1964 essay

cut into a conflict that had broken out between the French Communist Party's (PCF)'s position on the university and the position then dominant at the National Union of

French Students (UNEF). The UNEF opposed the purely ‘quantitative’ demands of the Party (more campuses, professors, etc.) with a qualitative questioning of the pedagogical relation, which it saw, through the concept of alienation, as analogous to a class relation.<sup>23</sup>

As a response to these student’s demands for a less alienating pedagogical relation, Althusser recommends putting “the *quality of the knowledge* itself” before the “*form* in which knowledge is either transmitted or absorbed or discovered.”<sup>24</sup> To Althusser in 1964, how we teach matters less than what we teach. Althusser says this because “*the number one strategic point* where class domination [the social division of labor] over the minds of researchers, teachers, and students is at stake is the *nature of the knowledge* taught.”<sup>25</sup> Putting content before form, or curriculum before pedagogy, is a strategic point. Further, we should put content over form because “the pedagogic situation is based on the absolute condition of an *inequality between a knowledge and a lack of knowledge*,” which is a philosophical point.<sup>26</sup>

We should therefore be critical, Althusser says in 1964, of student demands for less hierarchical pedagogies. The university can change its pedagogy to modern methods, or keep the old ones, or some other arbitrary change, and thus students “risk committing themselves to a confusion” that misses how capitalism, via positivism, encourages the researcher to be a “blind operative of fragmented tasks.”<sup>27</sup> When it comes to pedagogy in the university, what should matter to Marxists—says Althusser in 1964—is the content of knowledge rather than the form of its delivery since “it is *content* which is dominant” and teachers are a front line against ideological content. Their knowledge can be “weapons of scientific learning” and they



offer “scientific and critical training” that the “government fears.” Students who insist on “participationist” or “anarcho-democratic” forms of pedagogy might miss these learnings, leading to “half-knowledge,” a “weak knowledge” that makes them “easier to manipulate.”<sup>28</sup> The student movements’ demands for participatory learning leave the door open to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Teachers, as trained experts, can work against this reproduction by passing along their knowledge. But Althusser also insists on the more philosophical point that “*pedagogic equality* between teachers and students” is mistaken because “this does not correspond with the reality of the pedagogical function.”<sup>29</sup>

In his 1969 essay, Rancière understands Althusser’s 1964 text as indicative of the “political consequences of [Althusser’s] theory of ideology” and responds to his teacher, taking aim at Althusser’s distinction between science and ideology.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Rancière’s critique of Althusser’s concept of ideology and science—and the suggestions he makes—looks like the account of the ISAs Althusser would produce later in 1970.

The critique comes out as a question about what Althusser, as a Marxist, really means by science and knowledge. Rancière takes issue with a Marxist concept of science that casts it as the opposite, or “Other” of ideology, which would be some kind of positivist falsity. Rather, “[k]nowledge is a system whose ‘contents’ cannot be conceived outside their forms of appropriation (acquisition, transmission, control, use). This system is the system of ideological dominance of a class. It is not ‘science’ or ‘ideology.’”<sup>31</sup> Further, there’s a strategic point to consider: “The system of knowledge, like state power, is an object of the class struggle and must, like state power itself, be destroyed.”<sup>32</sup> Rancière illustrates the point that knowledge, like state power, is an

object of class struggle by talking about science instruction in the universities. Specifically, he argues that the reason science classes at the university are reactionary rather than revolutionary

is not because they are positivist in the way they teach science, but because of the very structures within which these courses take place: type of institution, selection mechanisms, relations between students and professors, who not only possess a certain knowledge, but who also belong to a social hierarchy (consider, in medicine, the role of consultants). The domination of the bourgeoisie and its ideology is not expressed in the content of knowledge, but in the configuration of the structures where knowledge is transmitted. The scientific character of knowledge does not affect the class content of the instruction in any way. Rather it exists within institutions and forms of transmission that manifest the bourgeoisie's ideological domination.<sup>33</sup>

What makes the university non-revolutionary, and a site of struggle, is not the content of the course but rather the “structures within which these courses take place.” These structures are the institutions, mechanisms, relations, and hierarchies in the university. Rancière points to consultants as one example.

It is therefore the configurations of structures within the institutions that “manifest” ideology. Readers would be right to see the seeds of Althusser's concept of the ISAs in Rancière's claim here, as he is all but saying that concrete practices provide material support for dominant ideologies, realize these ideologies within modern institutions, and as such reproduce capitalist relations of production. Even more of what Althusser would claim in the ISAs is clearly present in

Rancière:

The ideology of the dominant class is not...expressed in this or that content of knowledge, but in the very division of knowledge, in the forms of its appropriation, and in the university institution as such. Bourgeois ideology is not contained in the discourse of one or another ideologue...but in the division between disciplines, in the examination system and in the organization of departments—all of which realize the bourgeois hierarchy of knowledge...The dominant ideology is a *power* organized in a collection of institutions (the system of knowledge, information, etc.) Althusser misses this point completely.<sup>34</sup>

Rancière says ideology exists within concrete practices like testing, disciplinary divisions, and departmental configurations. He writes that these practices “realize” a bourgeois ideology. He even writes that this dominant ideology is organized in a “collection” or “system” of institutions, which includes the information system. He articulates the idea that ideology is not consciousness but rather practices enacted in institutions. His use of language should sound quite familiar to those familiar with the ISAs essay: “The bourgeoisie’s ideological domination was not the result of a social imaginary wherein individuals spontaneously reflected their relations to the conditions of their existence. It was, instead, the result of the system of material power relations reproduced by different apparatuses.”<sup>35</sup>

Rancière’s overall goal was to first show that his teacher’s concept of ideology “masked class struggle,” and then to center a better concept, one that takes the class struggle seriously. Without a more materialist understanding of ideology, one rooted in structures and

institutions, “in lieu of a concrete analysis, what we find is a lonely repetition of a classical division of metaphysics . . . that serves no other purpose than to make it possible to turn a blind eye to the real sites of class struggle.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, rather than an Althusserian concept, Rancière would write later in the main chapters of *Althusser’s Lesson* that “the concept, a theoretical product of the May movement, of ISAs was fundamentally critical of the Althusserian problematic of ideology.”<sup>3740</sup> The concept of ISAs was therefore a critique of Althusser, not critical to Althusser’s thinking.

We will come back to Rancière’s point about the lonely repetition of metaphysics in a moment. For now it suffices to say that these comments Rancière made in 1969 are basically Althusser’s concept in the ISAs essay: ideology is realized in material practice which people enact in networks of institutions. The school is one such institution, where ideology manifests in the practices enacted at the institution—and in the system of these institutions working together, which are apparatuses. Althusser would go on to name these phenomena as ISAs and interpellation in 1970, building out the idea Rancière gestured toward in 1969.

Thus it is Rancière’s critique of Althusser’s non-materialist concept of ideology, before the ISAs essay, that Althusser absorbs via Saul Karsz in 1969, which then pushes Althusser to make that concept more materialist and thereby fashion the concept of ISAs and its attendant ontology of struggle. But concepts are different than words. Rancière does not call these systems of knowledge appropriation “ideological state apparatuses,” nor the individual process of reproduction and recruitment to those ideologies “interpellation,” but rather readies the ground for such claims. These neologisms and their overall theorization in Marxist theory were Althusser’s unique contribution.

But it's easy to see how Althusser most likely takes Rancière's 1969 critique as a constructive criticism, and even appropriates language from Rancière to articulate the new concepts, failing to cite Rancière in the resulting text.

Perhaps already annoyed that his contribution to *Reading Capital* hadn't been widely published several years earlier (only Balibar's had), Rancière had good reason to be even more frustrated with his teacher who, using his ideas, went on to write one of the most cited and talked-about essays on Marxism of that generation. More surprising still, the back and forth between Althusser and Rancière centers on pedagogy. The ISAs idea was born through what we could call oppositional collaboration between teacher and student, in a disagreement over the politics of teaching and learning.

Each of Rancière's critiques about Althusser's bourgeois theory, his position on the student movement, and his lack of respect for the anti-authoritarian critiques in that movement can all be seen through the prism of Rancière's original critiques of the theory of ideology, and the frustration of a student with his teacher during the turbulent transition from Old Left to New Left, a kind of political education. After the ISAs essay came out, Rancière wrote the main chapters of *Althusser's Lesson*, which contain these reflections and other critiques of Althusser's thinking. We can understand his frustrations. First, he had multiple disagreements with Althusser going back to 1964 and students' demands for less top-down pedagogies at the university. Second, he articulated a critique of Althusser's theory of ideology in an essay only published in Spanish, which Althusser got to read. That critique made its way to the heart of Althusser's theory of the ISAs, which made a huge impact on Marxist thinking after 1968. Rancière's contribution to the ISAs concept is largely unknown, and the fact that

it emerged out of a debate— happening in student movements—over the political status of science classes in universities is an even more fascinating detail. We should therefore understand the ISAs essay as Althusser incorporating constructive critique made by a frustrated student after 1968, as part of an ongoing debate about Marxism and the politics of schooling. But in a larger sense, there's good reason to believe that ISAs themselves have a thoroughly educational history: rooted in the dynamics of schooling and capitalism; emerging out of debates between student organizers and older officials across French society; and crafted in an oppositional collaboration between a student and teacher.

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1 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

2 Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (New York: Verso, 2016); Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson* (London: Continuum, 2010).

3 Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, 2010, xiv.

4 Rancière, xv.

5 Rancière, xvi.

6 Rancière, xvii.

7 Rancière, 132.

8 Rancière, 131. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim's first academic position was in a school of education, and he produced a two-volume history of pedagogy in France which has yet to be translated into English. On a cursory search through the French editions of this history, words and terms associated with reproduction do not appear. However Durkheim, in *Suicide* (1897) does claim in *Suicide* that education "is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces [*reproduit*] the

latter in abbreviated form; it does not create it...Besides, even though through some incomprehensible miracle a pedagogical system were constituted in opposition to the social system, this very antagonism would rob it of all effect. If the collective organization whence comes the moral state it is desired to combat, is intact, the child is bound to feel its effect from the moment he first has contact with it. The school's artificial environment can protect him only briefly and weakly. To the extent that real life increasingly takes possession of him, it will come to destroy the work of the teacher. Education, therefore, can be reformed only if society itself is reformed. To do that, the evil from which it suffers must be attacked at its sources." Durkheim, *Suicide*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 340.

9 Rancière, 2010, 134.

10 Rancière, 131.

11 Rancière, xix.

12 Rancière, 72-74.

13 Rancière, 76.

14 Rancière, 112.

15 Rancière, xx.

16 Rancière, 127.

17 Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (New York: Verso, 1987).

18 Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2014).

19 Louis Althusser, "Student Problems," *Radical Philosophy* 170, no. 11 (2011).

20 Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson* (London: Continuum, 2010), 136.

21 Althusser, "Student Problems," 12.

22 Althusser, 14.

23 Rancière, 136.

24 Althusser, 32.

25 Althusser, 15.

26 Althusser, 14.

27 Leonardo interprets Rancière differently. He thinks Rancière is saying that “Althusser cannot have his Marxist cake and eat it too. Either he must believe that ideology maintains its specific distortive function and call himself a Marxist or opt for a general, integrative explanation of it and dissociate this from Marxism.” I disagree with Leonardo’s reading, as Rancière’s main problem with Althusser is the concrete and revolutionary quality of Althusser’s thinking about ideology, not whether or how it is distortive. Leonardo, Zeus. “Through the Multicultural Glass: Althusser, Ideology, and Race Relations in the Post-Civil Rights America.” *Policy Futures in Education* 3, no. 4 (2005): 400-412.

28 Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, (London: Continuum, 2010), 127.

29 Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 143.

30 Rancière, 141.

31 Rancière, 142.

32 Rancière, 74.

33 Rancière, 141.

34 Rancière, 142.

35 Rancière, 142.

36 Rancière, 141.

37 Rancière, 74.