**Culture and Philosophy after the Humanist Controversy,** review of Jonathan Fardy’s *Ideology and Interpellation: Anti-Humanism to Non-Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2024)

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**Ideology through Detour**

Louis Althusser remarked that the practise of materialist philosophy necessitates the taking of long detours, as materialist philosophers “know that they can become philosophers only gradually, modestly, and that their philosophy will come to them *from outside*” (2017, 23). It was for this reason that Althusser insisted on reading Marx alongside those who occupied this ‘outside’ for which Marx grasped in the development of his own materialism: Hegel, Feuerbach, Spinoza, Machiavelli, and Montesquieu, to name a few. Jonathan Fardy’s work follows in the footsteps of those such as Warren Montag (2013), in applying this standard to Althusser himself and reconstructing Althusser’s philosophy through outside detours. Fardy demonstrates the truth of the claim that “Althusser makes sense and remains relevant only in light of a contextual determination of his thought, one that places it alongside other tendencies and developments in French philosophy” (Peden 2014, 12). Fardy reconstructs Althusser’s materialist theory of ideology from a series of important detours through authors who have produced their own tendencies and developments in the French philosophical tradition of which Althusser was an important part, but whose problematic is quite different to that of Althusser: Jacques Rancière, Jean Baudrillard, and François Laurelle.

Fardy’s text is a timely and necessary contribution to a growing field of contemporary reconstructions of Althusser’s thought (see Backer 2022; Nesbitt 2024; Read 2022; Romé 2021; Sotiris 2021). More than this, it contains a refreshing use of the ‘cultural’ and cultural form as a way of correcting the reading of Althusser that stays within the tradition of French philosophy and does not deviate through psychoanalysis or cultural studies (see Žižek 2008). There is certainly affinity between Althusser’s approach and that of Jacques Lacan within the field of psychoanalysis. Althusser describes Lacan’s “great discovery” which shows that “what precedes the becoming-human of the little human being isn’t psychology, it’s not the psychological subject” but “it’s the action of culture, constantly, on a little being other than culture itself, which culture transforms into a human being” (2016, 59-60). But as Althusser sets out quite clearly in *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences*, there are two “mooring points” in thinking about this problem of theoretical humanism: “The first...is the theoretical consequences of the problematic inaugurated by Marx, but that’s something else”; “And the other is the work of someone who has nothing directly to do with Marx and who says…[there] is the possibility of a consistent, rigorous, valid, theoretical definition of psychoanalysis: that’s what Lacan gives us” (2016, 44). What separates Althusser’s anti-humanism from that of Lacan is its devotion to the scientific problematic introduced by Marx and all of its political and social consequences: at its most limited, an explanation of the history of human societies; at its most ambitious, the inauguration of a new period in this history defined by the eradication of class struggle.

It is only by using this mooring point in the Marxist problematic that the concept of ‘ideology’— as opposed to the psychoanalytic notion of the ‘unconscious’— becomes available. Through Althusser, and in a detour through other thinkers with whom it is possible to reconstruct Althusser’s theory of ideology, Fardy moors the reader firmly back upon this Marxist scientific problematic and invites them to take it up once again. As Fardy (2024, 5) explains in the introduction to the book, the aim of the text is: “To show what the stakes and demands are for any theory of ideology that dispenses with the humanist subject and its cognate concepts—consciousness above all else—and to show how those stakes and demands can be brought into sharper focus by this constellation of thinkers.” In confronting the problem of ideology today, progressive and often ‘Marxist’ theories continue to find refuge in the human subject and its capacity for consciousness, reason and for action upon an ethical injunction. What goes unacknowledged is the fact that these constructs are of the same ideological genus as the very logic of capitalism these accounts so often attempt to critique. Perhaps the most unfashionable and controversial element of Althusser’s thinking, Fardy therefore makes a compelling case for the necessity of returning to theoretical anti-humanism in order to think properly—and perhaps, even, scientifically—about the problem of ideology today.

**The Problem of Culture and Althusser’s Theory of Ideology**

Fardy dedicates the opening two chapters to Althusser’s use and development of the concept of ideology, between his earlier ‘theoreticist’ works (*For Marx, Reading Capital*) and the later texts, specifically his essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) from *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. Althusser is useful for Fardy to the extent that he provides a materialist grounding for the theory of ideology, established through his attempt to integrate it into the science of historical materialism and produce a theory of ideology in general. As Fardy (2024, 10) argues, “Althusser seeks a theory of ideology likewise rooted in material conditions and therefore amenable to scientific formalization.” For Fardy, the most important component of this enterprise is Althusser’s theoretical anti-humanism. As Fardy (2024, 19-20) continues: “Althusser reconstructs theory (or philosophy) as a *process of knowledge production without a subject.* The production of knowledge is framed as an intra-conceptual process governed by (à la Cavaillès) axiomatic rules internal to the process of conceptual production itself.” This process of conceptual production, as Fardy (2024, 28) elaborates, “is subject to something else that is not properly a subject: a movement, the motor of which is ‘class struggle.’” A scientific theory of ideology cannot, therefore, begin with the notion of a ‘knowing subject’ or of human consciousness. “‘Man’ would only be an infrastructural (or superstructural) effect of this materialist base. Any inquiry that begins with *man* or the *human subject* starts from a nonmaterialist standpoint that by definition is unscientific and thus ideological” (Fardy 2024, 28).

A complication emerges when Althusser is confronted with the problem of the superstructural in relation to the movement of the masses. Althusser’s theory of ideology develops against the backdrop of the events of May 1968 in France and the upsurge of the Maoist insistence on practice and Cultural Revolution. Fardy shows how Maoism reorients the site of class struggle onto the terrain of culture and superstructure—typically the terrain of ‘Man’ and the ‘subject’—in a way that Althusser inherits, but can never quite reconcile. Maoism shows that “a socialist economy does not itself secure socialist society. ‘Base’ does not determine ‘superstructure’ and hence the need for Cultural Revolution” (Fardy 2024, 34). As a result, Fardy (2024, 35) suggests that Althusser “slyly moves from a patronizing gesture of praise for the practice of the Cultural Revolution to a call to construct a general theory of ‘cultural revolution.’” This move, however, prompts a vacillation in Althusser’s theory of ideology in which he moves between theory and practice in an often-incomplete way. Despite the fact that the Maoist moment made necessary the imperative to prioritise the role of practice over theory—and despite Althusser “having given up his earlier theoreticist project” (Fardy 2024, 45) as a result of this moment—Fardy (2024, 45) argues that Althusser nonetheless “appears to revert to a theoreticist orientation in which ideology is an object of knowledge for theory or science”, in which “the Maoist moment has been historically and theoretically suppressed in the name of theoretical science.” Fardy here troubles the insistence on the break between the earlier and later works of Althusser (de Ípola 2018) showing how the problem of culture complicates the severity and success of this break in Althusser’s theory of ideology.

This vacillation in Althusser’s theory suggests to Fardy that this problem of culture cannot be solved through his work alone. This problem of culture therefore needs to be solved, *for* Althusser, by virtue of a detour through the works of those who, inspired by the anti-humanist project he started, are better able to think the problem of culture in its relation to ideology. In the service of this endeavour, Fardy mobilises the instantiations of cultural forms within the works of the authors through which the book detours—Rancière, Baudrillard and Laurelle—in order to supplement the scientific and materialist theory of ideology found in Althusser with the elements that it lacks, without the need to fall back on any theoretically humanist or subjectivist assumptions. In this way, Fardy, by virtue of this very reconstruction, simultaneously *practises* the operation of theoretical anti-humanism, evacuating cultural concepts and their attendant forms of any subjectivist assumptions.

**Rancière, Baudrillard, Laurelle**

Firstly, through the work of Jacques Rancière, Fardy adds the concept of history*,* not in its Althusserian understanding as a ‘continent of knowledge’ (Althusser 1971, 15), but as a cultural form. Fardy dispenses with humanist cultural understandings of history, from those who have dominated this field, such as E.P. Thompson (1991), following instead Rancière’s analysis of history and culture found in works such as *Proletarian Nights.* Rather than a romanticism of culture, Fardy finds in Rancière a theoretically anti-humanist understanding of culture, where aesthetic production is positioned as a dialectical form of resistance that necessarily emerges in response to the interpellative call of the ideology of the factory and society, the call upon the proletarian ‘to work’. Fardy effectively draws out the distinction between Thompson’s humanist analysis of worker’s revolt and that of Rancière: *Proletarian Nights* does not analyse revolt as a noble call to arms initiated by a class of ‘free-born Englishmen’; rather, it begins its analysis of revolt in the contradiction that emerges between the division of labour in society and the ideological forms that it produces. As Fardy (2024, 71) points out, “workers’ aesthetic and philosophic work disturbed the social order according to which workers work, artists create, philosophers think, and the bosses rule.” Rancière’s insight was to reveal how revolt was tied to this aesthetic production, where aesthetic production was itself the outcome of ideological failure, the failure of the ideology diffused from the division of labour in society to effectively interpellate workers into their dedicated social positions. Fardy (2024, 76) develops this line further:

Were the mass revolts and insurrections of the 1840s and 1871 prepared for in advance by workers who had sought their dignity and autonomy through intellectual and aesthetic production in the 1830s? Yes this indeed seems to be his point. The insurrections were logically prepared for in advance by the workers who refused the interpellative call *to work.* The insurrections were strikes not against working conditions alone. They were militant offensives against the very idea of waged work.

Fardy locates an affinity between Rancière’s theoretical approach here and that found in the Italian ‘Operaismo’tradition. On the one hand, both Rancière and the theorists in this Italian tradition—Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti among others—place value on the voices of workers themselves and sought an inductive approach to revolutionary political theory that learned directly from the workers: “Rancière’s logic parallels the political convictions of the autonomous movements in its affirmation of the political and intellectual autonomy of workers” (Fardy 2024, 86). But more importantly, Fardy highlights how both Rancière’s and the autonomists’ views of history rely on a similar, dialectical and theoretically anti-humanist operation. Rancière sees the refusal of work through workers’ aesthetic production not as a matter of subjective will, but as an outcome of a contradiction between the division of labour in society and the ideologies produced therefrom, which fail to completely interpellate the workers as subjects. Mario Tronti (2019), one of the founding thinkers of the Operaismo tradition, sees the refusal of work by workers who strike and revolt, again not as a moment of subjective choice but as the outcome of a contradiction between the forces and relations of production in which the development of technology and the capitalist labour process fails to fully command and control the labour-power it puts to work.

Fardy deals with a second concept that is often important to the understanding of cultural form: that of the *object.* Once more, Fardy chooses to circumvent the traditional bases of Marxist understandings of culture and objectivity. Critical Theory has tended to have a hegemonic role within this field, deriving its critique of culture from its reading of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis of ‘the culture industry’ is the leading example here, where cultural objects come to dominate the logic of the interaction between subjects within a society: “The paradise offered by the culture industry is the same old drudgery (2016, 142). Both escape and elopement are pre-designed to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help forget.” However, there is a reason why Althusser was not satisfied with Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, or at least advised readers to read it only after having read the rest of the first volume of *Capital*: namely, the chance that these readers “will have understood something quite different from what there was to be understood”, a humanist theory of alienation which sees in capitalism the problem of human beings dominated by commodities and consumer goods (1971, 81). Fardy seeks a different direction, and in doing so looks towards the theory of Jean Baudrillard for a more satisfactory and theoretically anti-humanist analysis of this problem.

Fardy locates in Baudrillard’s work not simply the traditional humanist formula of an analysis of the objective in relation to the subjective. Rather, Fardy argues that Baudrillard shifts the epistemological centre of theoretical production itself, observing theoretical production not as a problem of representation, but as one of *simulation.* As Fardy (2024, 95) explains, “this condition demands a break with the subject (knower) to object (representation). It requires a form of thinking that takes the effacement of the line between the imaginary and the real—and with it the classical epistemological subject—as a point of departure.” Fardy relies on Baudrillard to forward a new method of ideology critique that dispenses with the traditional humanist versions of it, which see ideology as the ‘representation,’ often in cultural forms, of a distorted or alienated version of the social life of human beings. In shifting from representation to simulation, Baudrillard develops the idea, described by Fardy (2024, 94) that “in simulacral societies reality has become ‘hyperreal’: a condition in which the line between image and the real is obscured.” Baudrillard relies on cultural forms and cultural objects as a way of demonstrating this reality. In contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer’s (2016, 138) critique of cultural forms such as Disneyland—the representative idea that “Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment”—Baudrillard gives a critique of Disneyland as simulation, where it is “is not an equivalent representation of something else. It presents itself as a utopia—a no-place—where Disney’s imagery and imaginary are realized” (Fardy 2024, 94).

Once again, Fardy utilises this critique of cultural form to add flesh to Althusser’s materialist critique of ideology. Fardy uses Baudrillard to correct the reading of Althusser’s (2014, 181) initial definition of ideology as “individuals’ imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence”, from which certain, guilty readings have inferred a subject-object relationship. Baudrillard’s ‘objectal’ theory demonstrates the autonomy of ideology as a self-referential object, which certainly has interpellative qualities, but is not necessarily dependent upon recognition or consciousness on the part of a subject. Ideology emerges within the boundaries and coordinates of theory itself, is itself a problem *of theory*: “The theoretical field is an object immanently governed by its own theoretico-logical structures and not by the theorist or any other individual subject” (Fardy 2024, 112). From here, Althusser’s theory of ideology can be reconstructed along similar lines, as one that implies an “immanent relation between two objects—the theoretical field of a given problematic and *its* objects—and not that between a subject of knowledge and the object of that knowledge” (Fardy 2024, 112).

Fardy’s reconstruction of Althusser’s theory of ideology concludes with a final detour, through the ‘non philosophy’ of François Laurelle. Laurelle’s non-philosophy, expounded in texts such as *Theory of Identities,* does not seek to advance a particular philosophical position, but rather seeks to develop a science of philosophical positions themselves, conceptualising the production of the very materials of philosophy. As Fardy (2024, 142) explains, “Non-philosophical practice releases itself from the grip of philosophical concerns for the ‘real’ and deals instead with the logic and effects of philosophical materials.” Laurelle’s non-philosophy “*images philosophical imaging* itself. He tries to *show philosophical showing* without indexing anything visual or otherwise capturable which would only operationalize and affirm philosophical capture” (Fardy 2024, 143).

In order to develop this idea, another cultural form comes to the forefront of Fardy’s work: that of the photograph. Laurelle problematises what is described as a ‘photographism’ that persists throughout philosophical decision-making, where imagery is mobilised to represent a conceptual reality. This presents a problem, insofar as this use of imagery fails in its distinction between the object of reality itself and an image of this objective reality, as it may be presented in, say, a photograph. The non-philosophical operation is the one that attempts to think philosophy and its framing independently from one another in order to better analyse the latter, in the same way as one can only study photography by studying the reality represented in the photograph separately from the photograph as an object which frames and shows this reality: “The photograph and that which it represents are fundamentally different. They belong to different orders” (Fardy 2024, 129). Althusser (2017a, 17) famously wrote that “[materialist] philosophy has no absolute beginning and, that it can and even should begin with just anything”, meaning that, in a sense, “materialist philosophies always board a moving train” (18). This might be true, but this metaphor implies the existence of the train and the window which frames the vista through which materialist philosophy observes that which exists. According to Fardy, Laurelle’s theory helps to make sense of this, treating philosophy as not simply a reflection of that which exists, but an image and a frame of that which exists, which act mutually upon one another to produce theory itself: in the same way that a photograph is not simply a reflection of an image but an object that confers meaning on that which it represents through its autonomous existence. Non-philosophy is the operation that separates the frame from the reality that it frames, allowing for the isolation and analysis of the way that philosophy *shows.*

There is an affinity between the operation that Laurelle puts to work in developing this non-philosophy and that which Pierre Macherey puts to work in his theory of literary production. In texts such as *The Object of Literature,* Macherey (1995) relies on literary objects in order demonstrate the ways in which acts of literary production, as distinctly non-philosophical objects, nonetheless work upon and produce concepts in a philosophical way, by virtue of the constellation of themes, scenes, problems and contradictions that exist within the frame of reality provided by the literary object. As Macherey (1995, 16) explains, “a philosophical argument can play the role of a real formal operator with respect to the literary text; this is what happens when it sketches the character of a protagonist, organizes the overall shape of a narrative, sets the scene for it, or structures the mode of its narration.” Laurelle attempts a similar operation with regards to philosophy itself. In the same way that Macherey (1995, 9) sets out to “listen…to literature talking about philosophy”, it may be possible to argue that Laurelle sets out to ‘listen to philosophy talking about philosophy’.

Fardy mobilises this non-philosophy—and the centrality of its aesthetic dimension—as a way of correcting Althusser’s theory of ideology on his own terms. Analysing Althusser’s interventions on aesthetic ideology and the distinction between art and science, Fardy applies Laurelle’s thinking to unearth a contradiction in Althusser’s theory. Althusser poses a binary between art as that which “enables us to ‘see’, ‘perceive,’ and ‘feel’” (Fardy 2024, 138), and science that has the ability to “furnish knowledge” (138). But, for Laurelle, the very mobilisation of this distinction, the production of an image in philosophy that stages a separation between art and science in order to make a *decision* regarding the relation between the two, collapses the distinction at the very moment that it is constructed: “The metaphorical dimension of Althusser’s Philosophical Decision troubles the very demarcation he draws” (Fardy 2024, 138). Fardy follows this photographism of Althusser’s theory of ideology elsewhere, particularly to his essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Fardy accuses Althusser of relying heavily on specific imagery as a way of demonstrating the workings of the ISAs, in a way that contradicts the essay’s aims: namely, to produce a *general theory* of ideology. As Fardy (2024, 125-6) writes, “Althusser’s ‘theoretical theatre’ is, I suggest, more like a suite of photographs: the cop, the hailing, the individual who turns (into a subject). These idealized freeze-frame shots present an imaginary image sequence of what is not in ‘reality’ a sequence.” The consequences of this photographism are further elaborated by Fardy (2024, 152), arguing that this reliance on photographic imagery and scenes of interpellation “reveals a desire to capture an image (or instance) of ideology. But this desire betrays the putative aims of the essay, namely not to theorize specific instances of ideology *but ideology in general.*” Fardy therefore critiques Althusser on his own terms, deploying Laurelle’s notion of photographism to show how Althusser’s ambition of providing an explanation for how ideology works in general, is undermined by the fact that his philosophy is constrained within the boundaries of an epistemology of representation: his explanation of ideology goes only as far as its representation in the figure of the hailing police officer and no further.

Through Rancière and Baudrillard, Fardy demonstrates the accuracy of Althusser’s theory and reconstructs it via a detour through the concepts offered by these authors. But with Laurelle, Fardy seeks to apply Althusser to Althusser himself, offering up non-philosophy as a way of further evacuating the subject from the centre of enquiry, in ways that Althusser, as a philosopher, himself could not even account for. Much as it did for Macherey, non-philosophy allows Laurelle to subvert and undermine the traditional theoretical humanism that isolates philosophy as a relationship between subject and object. This non-philosophy does not have a place for the knowing subject. It is not about the subject on the moving train, looking through the window as frame; nor is it about the subject as photographer, capturing the image through the willing opening and closure of the lens. It is about the autonomous interaction between the object and its frame; between the reality and the window or lens.

**Reconstructing Althusser’s Theory of Ideology**

Much like Althusser’s own writings on Marx, Fardy’s text is a work of supportive frustration with Althusser. Fardy inherits an Althusser who has the theoretical space to think about culture and the cultural, but does not have the concepts to deal adequately with it and integrate it effectively into his science of ideology. It is an inadequacy that has left a vacuum in the theory of ideology, which reactionary ideologies of theoretical humanism, locating the appropriate political and social solution to a given problem in the consciousness and ethics of an individual human subject, have rushed to fill. Fardy therefore does the work of detour through Rancière, Baudrillard and Laurelle in order to furnish Althusser’s theory with the concepts that it needs to integrate culture and the cultural form in a materialist way, avoiding and actively advancing against the temptations of a theoretical humanism that would serve only to drag this theory into idealist errors. It is a timely and necessary addition to contemporary scholarship on Althusser and to the ongoing struggle in theory against the ideology of humanism.

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