

# Althusser's Best Tricks

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### **Abstract:**

This essay deals with the importance of Louis Althusser's project for our situation, placing it vis-a-vis two fronts: against neoliberal politics of our era, as well as against its double, postmodern relativism in philosophy. It situates his work in relation to his contemporaries (Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan) as well as in relation to past and contemporary thinkers, demonstrating his significance for our contemporary situation.

### **Keywords:**

Althusser, Marxism, Ideology, Kant, postmodernism

### **01 Discovering Althusser - The Revealing Symptom**

To read Louis Althusser's texts during the mid-1980s meant for my friends and me, at this time students of philosophy in Berlin and Vienna, a double breakthrough: On the one hand, this reading proved to us that the newly emerging postmodernist philosophical *jeunesse dorée* that mostly delighted in paraphrasing Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault or Lacan was wrong in assuming that it was not anymore necessary to consider Marxist theory at all. On the other hand, we finally found something that was not part of that all-too-familiar arrogant tiresome kind of Marxism, both orthodox as well as Frankfurt school inspired, which at that time either pretended that Marxism already had an answer to every question or limited itself to complaints about the dominance of "instrumental reason"; suffocating (in both cases) every theoretical curiosity, for example, by assuring that things had to be seen "dialectically". Here, in the Althusserian texts was, finally, a marxist theory that came up with questions instead of smothering us (and itself) with pre-fabricated answers. Finally, somebody admitted that it was all but easy to be Marxist in philosophy! Althusser's theory re-established our trust, not only in theory, but in rationality as such. It was a philosophy that attempted to speak in both elegant and understandable words about the questions that matter - a fact that put it into fierce opposition maybe not to Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault or Lacan themselves but certainly to their delirious and kitschy postmodern adepts.

The aggressive despise or ignorance by which, at that time, most Marxists were treating Althusser's theory, as well as the silence by which postmodernist philosophers tried to pass over it (of course with Marxism altogether), could for us, young Althusserians of the time, only be read as a *symptom*. This silence was the crucial, telltaling point within the philo-

sophical discourse of the epoch. Insisting on this point meant to reveal the ideological nature of the whole alleged opposition between a fading Marxist orthodoxy and a prospering, fashionable postmodernist philosophical pseudo-poetry. Due to their profound anti-rationalist stance, both had to be seen as epistemological "twins", or accomplices - just in the way Althusser himself had designated theoretical-humanist Marxism and Stalinism as accomplices.

This is the reason why, for us, it was not important whether Althusser had interpreted Marx correctly or not - the question by which most of his marxist critics got stuck, falsely reading Althusser's texts only as a kind of secondary literature on Marx. Althusser (under whose name we subsumed the whole group of disciples as well) was for us an original philosopher, just like the aforementioned icons, one of the brilliant key heads of the 'French moment' in the 1960s and 70s; even if Althusser, as opposed to most of his colleagues, always modestly tried to hide away the originality of his approach, by covering almost every new concept he introduced under a kind of traditional marxist reference.<sup>1</sup> We did not care whether that Marx which Althusser spoke about did really exist. Was it really the worst case if Althusser had invented him? We cared for the best Marx, and not so much for the true Marx. Maybe some critics were right to emphasize that the famous "Introduction" from 1857 had never been published and could therefore not be seen as a reliable source of philological interpretation. Yet: was Althusser not right to point out the amazing theoretical richness of this text? And, furthermore: Was Althusser not right to underline, in "Capital", Marx' own perspicuous method of "symptomatic reading" of the classical texts by Smith and Ricardo - as well as Engels' most refined epistemological remarks on this?<sup>2</sup> Which other marxist theorist had ever read Marx and Engels in such a careful and subtle way, and developed their epistemology? What we cared about was the fact that this Marx that Althusser presented was definitely worth reading and thinking about - not only in a historical sense and with regard to the well-known matters of marxist theory, but also as a tool for tackling new questions, and as a weapon for a contemporary critique of postmodern ideology. Thus we approached the all but easy task to be Althusserians in philosophy. For the struggles at the epoch of neoliberalism and

1 For this Problem of Althusser's "camouflage strategy" see Elliott: "(Althusser) attempted to cover himself against the charge of importing non-Marxist elements into Marxism by representing Marx and Engels as Bachelardians avant la lettre (...)" (Elliott 1987, p. 66); see also Pfaller 1997, pp. 14ff.

2 See Althusser [1965] pp. 19ff.; pp. 145ff.

its ideology, postmodernism, we armed ourselves with a philosophical toolbox containing what we called Althusser's best tricks.

## 02 The Uses Of Althusser's Tools In Neoliberal Postmodernity

For me, as a philosopher, since the early 1990s mostly engaged at universities of art, and in the corresponding ideological struggles, in the first place Althusser's notions of the "philosophy in practical state" (philosophie en état pratique)<sup>3</sup> as well as of the "spontaneous philosophy of the scientists" proved to be of particular usefulness. Not only the scientists, but equally the artists were in danger of misrecognizing their own discoveries and covering them up under a layer of "borrowed-language"-philosophies. This danger was even bigger due to the fact that artists since the 1980s were more and more surrounded by "prompters" - like curators, theorists and critics - who imposed fashionable theoretical discourses upon the artist's understanding of their own practice. Due to the more and more predominant position of the curators, and due to the newly emerging policies concerning "artistic research", it was beneficial for the artists to explain their own works in the borrowed language of the curators and to try to impress those who had to decide upon artistic research funds by feeding their illusions about a kind of scientific "funding" of artistic practice as well as about the predictability of its results. Thus it became advantageous to use a language that was highly impregnated by the predominant ideology of the time.

To give one example for this, since the beginning of the 90s, artists could gain recognition and prestige if they declared their works "interactive" - thus boarding a highly ideological discourse with more than questionable assumptions both on the political as well as the aesthetic side. Were observers more emancipated if they had to contribute to the accomplishment of the artwork? Is being "active" (e.g. involved) always better than remaining at a distance? And did it really produce more aesthetic pleasure if the observers had to produce and observe their own impact instead of observing an independent artwork? Did interactive installations really tackle, as sometimes promised, the difference between artists and observers?

A good couple of sceptical questions of this kind, together with a

3 Althusser [1965] pp. 32.

sound Althusserian mistrust in the hailing of "activity" within the interactivity discourse,<sup>4</sup> prepared me to discover, within a number of apparently "interactive" artworks of the nineties, a totally different "philosophy at practical state": What should we say, for example, when performances by Ruth Kaaserer, Astrid Benzer or Martin Kerschbaumsteiner brought up the question of whether you really wanted to meet your friends at a bar or rather preferred to send the artist in your place; or whether one could stand the artist's suggestion to be paid for observing the artist digging a hole in the ground?<sup>5</sup> And, on the side of observers, what should we think when Slavoj Žižek declared that he liked the canned laughter in Sit-Coms since it laughed in his place so that after a while he could feel "objectively amused"?<sup>6</sup> - Did these instances not reveal the uncanny fact that people - against all assumptions of "interactivity theory" - did not only not want to become actively involved but even tried to escape their passive involvement? Did these phenomena not show that enjoyment and consumption are all but easy things, and that people sometimes actually try to delegate their enjoyment to vicarious agents, such as other people, or machines, or pets? Along these lines of thought, the uncanny phenomena of "interpassivity" were discovered and became the subject of a first conference at Linz University of the Arts in October 1996.<sup>7</sup>

The strange and funny phenomena of interpassivity then revealed a more general structure: not only pleasure can be delegated, but also illusions. When an intellectual delights in photocopying hundreds of pages of a book in a library - who is then supposed to believe that the machine was reading in his place? Beliefs without believers, anonymous illusions, deceptions without deceived, illusions without owners - this strange finding turned out to be the underlying structure not only of interpassive rituals or of sexual fetishism but of the most basic cultural practices such

4 For the Althusserian mistrust in "activity" see below, section 03.

5 See for this Pfaller (ed.) 2000. The brilliant two videos of Kerschbaumsteiner's performance can be observed on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYABLSEyz5I> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv24iFXD9L4> (accessed: 2015-09-30).

6 See for this Žižek 1989, p. 35: "... the Other – embodied in the television set ... is laughing instead of us. So even if, tired from a hard day's stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that, objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time."

7 Conference "Die Dinge Lachen an unserer Stelle. Interpassive Medien - die Schattenseite der Interaktivität", Kunstuniversität Linz, Austria, October 8-10, 1996 (participants, amongst others: Mladen Dolar, Helmut Draxler, Susanne Lummerding, Stella Rollig, Slavoj Žižek. For the results see Pfaller (ed.) 2000). For the notion of interpassivity see Pfaller 2014, chapter 1.

as rituals and games, as well as of politeness and elegance. Moreover, it could be described as the source of pleasure within these practices, i. e. the "pleasure principle in culture" (Pfaller 2014).

Using Octave Mannoni's brilliant distinction between "beliefs" (illusions without owners) and "faith" (illusions with proud owners),<sup>8</sup> one could start to distinguish between different "subject-effects": when beliefs produced pleasure, faith produced self-esteem. And self-esteem sometimes proved to be hostile against pleasure: Whenever people who are proud of their own illusions observe others who happily indulge in illusions which are not their own (for example, in magic rituals, or in glamorous appearance, in charming or polite behavior), they tend to take these others as stupid and to renounce their practices as well as the pleasure these practices bring about. The analysis of this perspective-based illusion, the profound misperception of the happy other as a stupid other, and the subsequent hostility against pleasure, allowed us to tackle a next problem: the stunning ascetism typical for postmodern and neoliberal ideology. Is it not striking that, since the 1990s in the Western world, all of a sudden, people started to hate things and practices such as smoking, drinking alcohol, driving cars, wearing furs and perfume, using adult language, being polite, giving a compliment etc.? Could we not say that neoliberalism, depriving millions of people of a good part of their good lives, on the ideological level cunningly succeeded in making them hate their pleasures on their own? Was this not the most prominent "subject-effect" of neoliberal ideology?<sup>9</sup>

These questions led me to investigate the double-faced character of cultural pleasure as something that can be loved as much as it can be hated or feared - just as the ambivalent "holy" or "sacred", according to Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim.<sup>10</sup> Everything that made life worth living could now, due to its ambivalent dimension, be described as a "sacred of everyday life"<sup>11</sup>; the typical postmodern confrontation appeared to be one between a "filthy sacred" and a "pure reason"<sup>12</sup> - an

8 See Mannoni 2003.

9 These questions have been the subject of my study "What Life Is Worth Living For. Elements of Materialist Philosophy" (in German, Fischer Verlag, 2011). Althusser's definitions of materialism played a crucial role for this endeavour.

10 See for this Freud [1912-13], Durkheim [1915]; cf. Pfaller 2008.

11 See for this notion Leiris 1978.

12 See for this Pfaller 2008.

alleged reason, of course, that indulged in fantasies of its own purity (in terms of hygienic and moral cleanliness, as well as with regard to its apparently unconditional rationality). Now, if every cultural pleasure bears some ambivalent dimension, then it is clear that human beings are not spontaneous hedonists, or pleasure-seeking animals - as idealist anthropology tends to assume. Much worse, they are all too ready to sacrifice their lives for whatever stupid idea, as Michel de Montaigne once wittily remarked. Yet they tend to fear pleasure and the good life, due to the ambivalent dimension that even the most innocent pleasures contain (for example, even going for a walk or listening to music can be perceived as a waste of time and therefore requires one to transcend one's usual time budgetting).<sup>13</sup> Pleasures are feared in the first instance - this finding also made clear that it is not prohibition (as other idealist explanations, like the famous one given by St. Paul,<sup>14</sup> assume) that makes us interested in the prohibited things which we otherwise would have passed over with indifference. When pleasures are first feared, and not just ignored, what then, is the role of prohibition? - Following a few hints of psychoanalytic theory, the answer became possible: *prohibition is a cultural trick that allows individuals to perceive their internal hindrances against pleasure as mere impositions from outside.*<sup>15</sup> This became quite obvious in the case of "sexual liberation" that turned so amazingly fast into the predominant feeling of "sexual harrassment" (see below). Yet this is not the only trick culture can use in order to reconcile human beings with their ambivalent pleasures. The most important cultural trick is the collective injunction to the individual to transgress his or her usual boundaries. For example, when people say to their hesitating friend: 'Don't be a spoilsport! Dance with us!' Or, when people encourage their elder relatives who pretend not to be hungry to eat, by eating together with them. This interpellation is not always explicit. It can also be materialized (since, as Althusser taught, ideology has got a material existence) for example, in a certain architecture: When, for example, I enter a bar where elegant atmosphere, decent light and cool jazz prevail, I can hear the voice of culture telling me, 'Don't behave like a child now. Don't order a juice.' It is culture that can give individuals this support, this encouragement to transgress their "econo-

13 In this sense, it can be stated that pleasure is always "beyond the pleasure principle".

14 See Romans, 7,7: "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet.""

15 See for this explanation Grunberger 2003: 73. For an analogous account of the oedipal prohibition as a support for pleasure and an injunction to generosity, see Bataille 1993, pp. 39ff.

my" of everyday life in order to become generous, elegant and happy. Only due to this cultural interpellation individuals can, for certain moments, as Georges Bataille put it, stop being servants and become "sovereign". This finding was of particular importance with regard to the postmodern ideological condition: Since in postmodernity, people were constantly encouraged to feel weak and vulnerable and to perceive the other's pleasure as a threat to themselves.<sup>16</sup> This ideology inevitably led to hatred against pleasure and de-solidarization within society. Yet, as we could show, the other's pleasure is not necessarily the cause of my misfortune. On the contrary, pleasure, just as freedom and dignity, is by its very essence social: it can and must be shared in solidarity, since only due to the other, and together with him or her, I become able to experience the ambivalent goods of the "sacred of everyday life" as pleasures.

The difference became obvious between a postmodern ideology that interpellated individuals as vulnerable and presented pleasure as a threat (or, as a theft by the other), and a modern ideology that interpellated individuals as adults and pleasure as something that is, if at all, only taken away from us by historical circumstances that have to be changed. The difference between these ideologies led me to conceive of different types of interpellation and accordingly different subject-effects - a point that Althusser, by focussing only on Christian religious ideology, may have left to explore.<sup>17</sup>

Having used Althusser's theory for a whole series of interconnected purposes with regard to contemporary ideology critique, I want to show in the following what appears to me to be one of Althusser's best philosophical "tricks".<sup>18</sup> It is a theoretical tool that can be used for discerning the underlying ideological matrix of a good part of contemporary

16 It is interesting to see how postmodern ideology used the figure of the other analogously as the aforementioned Paulinian "prohibition theory" in order to conceal internal hindrance with regard to pleasure. In postmodern ideology the other was presented as the "thief of enjoyment" (cf. Zizek 1993: 203): If I have trouble to enjoy, then it is due to the fact that the other has taken enjoyment for himself. The other, as it were, is the cause of my castration. In prohibition theory, prohibition is presented as this cause. Yet of course with opposed outcomes: In postmodern ideology, pleasure is thus presented as a threat, a trap by the other that has to be avoided. Prohibition theory on the contrary presents pleasure as something essentially unproblematic and something to be appropriated; all problems are luckily transposed to the side of the other.

17 See for this Pfaller 2016.

18 For a more extensive elaboration of the philosophical backgrounds of this, see Pfaller 1997, pp. 98ff.

postmodernist attitudes and even allegedly emancipatory theories. This tool is to be found in Althusser's concept of ideological misrecognition. Already in *Reading Capital*, Althusser has claimed that ideology always produces a "fullness" (French: "plein"<sup>19</sup>), not an absence, or void or lack.<sup>20</sup> If there happens to be something like a void, we therefore have to be prepared to find it covered up by a fullness. The existence of the void is overdetermined by its cover up. For the "lonely hour of the last instance" never comes, not even for voids. This has important consequences to the problem of human bondage or freedom. What Althusser, following Spinoza, claims here is the primacy of the appearance of oneness over the appearance of foreignness.

### 03 Appearance Of Oneness, Appearance Of Foreignness. Two opposed concepts of ideological misrecognition

"Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things that look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from *King Lear*: 'I'll show you differences.' [laughing:] The remark, 'You'd be surprised' wouldn't be a bad motto either."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1948)<sup>21</sup>

Just like Ludwig Wittgenstein in the quotation above, Louis Althusser is a philosopher who aims at revealing significant differences. Following Lenin (as well as Bachelard) in this point, Louis Althusser has emphasized that philosophy has to draw "demarcation lines".<sup>22</sup> In the following, I want to show how an Althusserian demarcation line can be drawn against a large philosophical system whose matrix today – mostly

19 See Althusser [1965], p. 143.

20 See for example Althusser [1965], pp. 29f.: "A conceptual omission that has not been divulged, but on the contrary, consecrated as a non-omission, and proclaimed as a fullness, may, in certain circumstances, seriously hinder the development of a science or of certain of its branches."

21 Remark to M. O'C. Drury, 1948. Reported in Drury, *The Danger of Words & Writings on Wittgenstein* (1996), p. 157.

22 See Althusser 1990, p. 75. Gaston Bachelard uses the notion exactly in the same sense; see Bachelard 1953, p. 207.

unnoticed – determines most of the partisanship in the cultural sciences, cultural studies and gender studies, as well as in art. The underlying matrix here is that of a certain philosophical *idealism*, namely *theoretical humanism*. By drawing the demarcation line, I want to show the detrimental consequences of this apparently emancipatory matrix.

### 04 Humanist idealism: Kant

A classical formulation of humanist idealism stems from Immanuel Kant. It is found in his famous 1784 essay entitled 'Answer to the question: what is enlightenment?' In this notorious text Kant states,

"*Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] "Have courage to use your own understanding!"--that is the motto of enlightenment. Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men, long after nature has released them from alien guidance [...], nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity, and why it is so easy for others to establish themselves as their guardians." (Kant [1784], p. 53; English version)

In these few lines all the central concepts are to be found, in the exact order, that characterize the program of humanist idealism: *separation between what is natural and human, freedom, re-appropriation, re-recognition, one's own responsibility, independent thinking, passive endurance of heteronomy.*

With Kant this program begins with the differentiation between what is human and what is nature: humans are free as far as nature is concerned, (nature has 'released them from alien guidance'), but still they are not: therefore a lack of freedom is not something natural but artificial, induced by humans themselves.

That humans are free as far as nature is concerned, as Kant establishes, does not mean that freedom is something natural for Kant, but rather the contrary: because humans are different from nature, they are not subject to nature. *Freedom* is therefore (like bondage) not natural, but rather *something specifically human*. A split emerges in Kant that divides the world in a seemingly unalterable natural half on the one hand, and a human-historical part on the other.

This separation of the human from the rest of nature opens for Kant the whole problem of constructing a theory of ethical action from the concept of freedom: 'Which actions are free?', 'How must one act in order

to act freely?', 'How does one have to act, when one is free?' – these (not un-paradoxical) questions not only determine Kant's attempt at an answer with his formulation of the so-called 'categorical imperative', but all practical philosophy belonging to the *moral* genre.

From the difference between the natural and the human spheres results the extremely narrow framework that Kant stakes for the problem of bondage: *Humans only lack freedom, because they do not use the freedom given (or, rather: left) to them by nature.* No real heteronomy such as class relations is investigated; rather Kant shifts the problem and makes something else of it – something that each and everyone can and should solve alone for himself. A problem that at first sounded like history and politics (Enlightenment, Liberation) is surprisingly transformed, suddenly and without any causal argumentation into an individual, ahistorical moral (maturing, coming of age) project.

For Kant, lack of freedom is therefore due only to individual negligence. Freedom exists; one needs merely take it. Liberation is conceived of as a movement of re-appropriation. Humans should reclaim that aspect that makes them most human, which they have merely forgotten or left unaware. Connected to the problem of re-appropriation is that of re-recognition: Humans must re-recognize what is most human in themselves; they must recognize that for example it is not because of nature that they lack freedom but because of their own negligence. *What appears foreign to them needs to be seen as their own:* in this main striking feature – this animosity toward everything alien and the preference for one's own-ness – every theoretical humanism reveals its inherent idealism. This idealism cannot bear objects, property, matter; instead it only wants subjects and the fleeting, the processable, the subjective.<sup>23</sup> The decisive theoretical achievement as seen by this idealism is always provided when something that at first appears as 'object' can be made known as in truth something subjective through a theoretical operation. The outcome of this is the fundamental ideological, theoretical position of humanist idealism: Every illusion, every appearance is an *appearance of foreignness*.

If everything in truth belongs to oneself, then clearly at first, also the so foreign seeming heteronomy is in truth something that belongs to oneself – *one's own fault* for not being free: 'due to laziness and cowardice' humans have neglected to claim their freedom. Their whole heteronomy/subjugation is nothing but self inflicted. At this point in Kant there

23 .....  
At this point, philosophical idealism meets with the clinical image of narcissism. See for this Grunberger/Dessuant 1997; cf. Pfaller 2008, pp. 27ff.

is a peculiar consequence, to which all these kinds of philosophical enterprises resort: All philosophies that pronounce humans to be freer than they themselves are aware of come to the conclusion that these same humans are to blame for their misery.

In the end, idealism prescribes to the self inflicted immature the preferred remedy: thinking – independent thinking in fact, 'without alien guidance.' In contrast to the historical tendency of an increased division of labor and specialization, Kant declares books, ministers and doctors for expendable and replaceable by one's own intellectual efforts; he apparently sees enlightened progress moving in the direction of a kind of intellectual economy of self-sufficiency. In any case, thinking makes one free, and Kant seeks freedom primarily in thinking; he does not even consider any other field of action for freedom.

Under these circumstances, there is for Kant in the end only one answer to the question of the structure of human bondage: it consists of 'accomodativeness,' the *passive acceptance of heteronomy*. Bondage is here nothing but a lack of activity. However, as soon as people would become active and begin for example to think, then they would already begin to overcome their immaturity - and their bondage.

## 05 Anti-humanist materialism: Spinoza

A whole other concept, the materialism of a theoretical anti-humanism, is to be found in Benedict de Spinoza's 1677 posthumously published work 'Ethics according to a geometric method.' The decisive differences emerge in the following central points: *the unity of nature, happiness, misrecognition, rationalization, active struggle of the repressed for their repression*.

First, Spinoza emphasizes that there is only one nature. Humans are also part of it. However they like to delude themselves about this status, in that they imagine being something completely different – equal to an empire unto themselves within the empire of nature:

They appear to conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom... (Spinoza 1955, p. 128. English version: <http://home.earthlink.net/~tneff/index3.htm>)

However, the fact that everything is part of nature does not mean

that there is no freedom. There is just not a split with nature on one side and freedom on the other. Each thing in nature can – to differing degrees – be free: namely to the degree that this thing follows the necessity that lies within its own nature (and not a foreign one).

According to this unity of nature, it follows that the aim of Spinoza's philosophical thought is the question of happiness. While for Kant the theme of happiness only appears in the ignoble 'accommodativeness' of the immature and hence as the opposite of freedom,<sup>24</sup> for Spinoza happiness is identical with freedom (see Spinoza 1955, p. 244). One is happy and free when one pursues the necessities of one's *own* nature. The result of this position is a discipline of practical philosophy: *ethics*, which is a genre strictly distinguishable from *morals*. Ethics investigates the necessities of one's own nature. Because it inquires into the requirements of happiness, it is descriptive like medicine or schools of nutrition; there are no prescriptions that operate with imperatives as does morality, that inquire into the conditions of free, moral acts. The findings in ethics are dealt with within the contrasting pair 'good – bad;' morality in contrast operates between the values 'good – evil' (s. Deleuze 1988, p. 23).

In this connection happiness becomes a philosophical shibboleth: The idealistic philosophies see happiness in opposition to freedom, and as a consequence interest themselves only in freedom while forgetting happiness. In contrast Spinoza is able to understand freedom in unity with happiness. Since then therefore one can only call a philosophy materialistic if it makes happiness its watchword; as soon as freedom is placed in the foreground, this signals that happiness is conceived as an opposite and as something to be neglected.

In contrast to idealism, which places the concepts of re-appropriation and re-recognition at the center, Spinoza operates with the concept of the *imaginatio*, the misrecognition (or: over-recognition). The problem is not that humans do not recognize their own nature, but rather the opposite: *The problem is that they see much more to be their own nature than is actually the case.* They have the curious tendency to see themselves and their freedom in everything they do:

However, unless such persons had proved by experience that we do many things which we afterwards repent of, and again that we often, when assailed by contrary emotions, see the better and follow the worse,

24 Cf. also Kant's famous formula "Eigene Vollkommenheit - fremde Glückseligkeit" (Kant [1797], p. 515.

there would be nothing to prevent their believing that we are free in all things. Thus an infant believes that of its own free will it desires milk, an angry child believes that it freely desires vengeance, a timid child believes that it freely desires to run away; further, a drunken man believes that he utters from the free decision of his mind words which, when he is sober, he would willingly have withheld..." (Spinoza 1955, pp. 133-4)

Spinoza's theory is not a theory of re-appropriation. On the contrary: *What appears to humans to be their own nature, they must learn to acknowledge as foreign.* In fact they must in order to become free: because it is where they believe themselves to be free that they are not. Where they speak of freedom, they fail to recognize the cause of their actions and disguise this ignorance with 'words without meaning' (Spinoza, *ibid.*)<sup>25</sup>

Spinoza as does Kant knows the facts of a matter well, in which something appears as an object that in truth is of subjective nature. His complete theory of the 'knowledge of the first kind' deals with such phenomena.<sup>26</sup> When for example humans conceive themselves to be free, then the following structure is present: they do not perceive an objective fact, although they believe to, but instead only something subjective – namely the wish to be free. In this case, the appearance to be overcome is one of foreignness.

Yet for Spinoza it is decisive that a seemingly objective appearance always covers up a far more important subjective one. When something appears to humans to be an object although it is not, then at the same time they falsely ascribe their own subjectivity to something foreign or objective. There where people regard themselves to be free and take everything to be part of themselves, the theory has to do away with *the appearance of own-ness*, and must reveal to them the causes and forces of what is foreign or alien that are propelling their actions. People must be shown that they are not as free as they think they are.

*Thinking*, or independent thinking, is therefore for Spinoza not an unquestionable cure-all. Since especially when people conceal their heteronomy from themselves, they fall into a certain kind of thinking: they construct inadequate ideas such as their idea of freedom for example. Bondage takes place in subjects in none other than these covered up

25 Of course, this Spinozist notion of "words without meaning" is crucial for Althusser's epistemology as well as for his theory of (theoretical) ideology. "Words without concepts" and "answers without questions" have, according to Althusser, also blocked the development of Marxist theory (see Althusser [1965], pp. 27, 48).

26 See Spinoza 1955, p. 114

forms. Therefore, bondage is always "overdetermined". It never exists in its "naked", Kantian form of pure negligence and sheer lack of activity. On the contrary, it cannot exist but under the cover of an imaginary "fullness", provided by an over-activity of thinking. The cover-ups that thinking can provide thus are a determining factor for the lack of freedom. With this skepticism regarding autonomy and also the liberating power of thinking, Spinoza has outlined those thoughts that are summarized in Sigmund Freud's concept of 'rationalization.' By this operation, Freud states, we explain and justify our actions but are not conscious of their actual motives.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the human lack of freedom, Spinoza arrives at an entirely different structural description from that of Kant. It is not only because of convenience and laziness that humans tolerate their subjugation. On the contrary: Spinoza recognizes that humans contribute actively to it; they "fight for their servitude as if for salvation".<sup>28</sup> Action is not always something liberating; activity can be a spontaneous contribution of the subjugated to their own repression.

## 06 'Construct yourself': re-appropriation today

In case this discussion appears to be a reassuring historical comparison, then one needs to be reminded that within the present culture one of the two described systems is powerfully effective: Almost all the social and cultural emancipation movements in the last decades stand under the massive dominance of humanist idealism. Most of the philosophical decisions and preferences were controlled by the idealistic matrix. Have we not again and again had to do with movements that assured us that something or other was not naturally but humanly caused, and that deduced the conclusion that humans are freer than they think – since everything made by humans can also be disposed of or at least 'deconstructed' by humans? Whether applied to conditions of class, sex, gender or some other 'construct': did one not operate in all these cases with reference to the human constructability of these circumstances? And with these references was not the hope of convertibility deduced? – But with what right? Can natural events not be changed? And are human con-

27 cf. Laplanche/Pontalis 1973, p. 418f.

28 Spinoza 1991, p. 51.

structs always so easy to eliminate?

As can easily be shown, there is nothing to justify the idealistic separation of the world into an unchangeable natural and a variable human substance: Humans can also change things that are not made by humans: they bring about ozone holes where before there were naturally none, and they bring about literacy where before there had been naturally illiteracy. On the other hand it is often very difficult to change things made by humans: for example cement anti-aircraft towers in residential areas are difficult to dispose of (since blowing them off would destroy most of the neighbourhood), and it is also difficult to do away with the illiteracy produced by television in humans who had already been able to read.

Instead of asking whether something is man made ('constructed') or not, it would be more appropriate to ask how much energy it takes for something to maintain its existence, and consequently how much energy it costs to remove it.<sup>29</sup> Decisive is not for example that social gender is a product of a historical construct. Much more important is the question, which occupied the first gender scientists such as Robert Stoller: Why is it easier for many people to change their natural sex than their social one? An operational change is often easier than a construct one. Today's common denotation, apparently found to be more politically correct, of *trans-sexual* as *transgender* belies this critical fact for the question of gender theory.

As Gianni Vattimo established, the paradigm of re-appropriation – the suspension of a merely declared appearance of foreignness in the 'truth' of own-ness – has controlled the whole course of modern philosophy, interrupted by only a few exceptions.<sup>30</sup> In a peculiar rarely questioned over-determination, this paradigm has also molded all of the emancipatory political movements in the last 40 years, particularly the post-modern. It was apparent in the students' neo-Marxism after 1968 in its critique of 'alienation;' in the alternative movement of 'self-fulfillment;' in feminism in the struggle against the 'object-status' of women and the 'fetishization' of the female body. And the idea that matter, and the other, could only make us unfree shaped the recent optimistic talk (even of Marxist theo-

29 Spinoza would have asked this question by saying, "How strong is the *conatus* of this thing, i. e. its *endeavour to persist in its being*?" (cf. Spinoza 1955: 137)

30 See Vattimo 1990, pp. 6, 28, 31.

rists!) about the apparent freedom and creativity of ‘immaterial work.’

However it is often rather clear and easy to see that emancipation and re-appropriation are not the same thing. For this reason many people in creative areas are prepared to work for very little money, when they are able to identify themselves to a high degree with their work. The struggle against alienation increases the readiness for self-exploitation; it is the perfect means of keeping wages at a minimum.

### 07 The fear of being an object

In a press announcement in the spring of 2006 about an art exhibit on alternative, non-Eurocentric access to Mozart, there was the following sentence:

There are those who write history, and those whom they write about, who enter historiography as mere objects.<sup>31</sup>

There is obviously a lot wrong with this sentence: Are those about whom history is written always ‘mere objects’? Or is it not often the most powerful? Those who ‘write history’ by their actions? Is it, then, better to be a subject? And is one a subject merely by writing?

Clearly this quote is not from a rigorous theoretical text, and one should not analyze too meticulously such a perhaps hastily written announcement by a non-theoretician. Nonetheless, the sentence is still interesting because it is symptomatic. It is in the press release because it is considered plausible; because it is expected to make sense to others (in particular, the supporting cultural politicians). And not unjustifiably – which says a lot about the philosophical leanings of today’s culture. The controlling philosophical matrix of humanist idealism engenders an enormous fear: *of being a mere object*. Driven by this fear people flee into activity, which however in fact rather serves their heteronomy more than its opposite. Subjectivity at any price; becoming a subject to the point of precarious self-exploitation is a typical cultural phenomenon of a neo-liberal economy.

31 <http://remappingmozart.mur.at/joomla>, accessed: 2006-08-04

The longing for subjectivization regularly leads to such reversals. So for example in the discussion of sexual harassment, which since the middle of the 80s has left its mark on many fields of society. This discourse is not just the countermovement and reaction to the previous, since the 60s flourishing discussion on sexual liberation. In fact already ‘sexual liberation’ relied on the principle of a romantic, subjective insistence on one’s own wishes and the effort to assert them vis-à-vis the existent social patterns. Exactly to the extent that one succeeded in asserting and liberating ‘sexuality’ from prevailing ‘alienating’ institutions and rules (like marriage, family, monogamous heterosexuality, etc.), sexuality itself then had to appear as an institution and outside convention – therefore as alienating and harassing. Exactly the romantic ego, that initially identified with its sexuality and experienced the rules of society regarding it as alien and fought them, in a next step then also experienced sexuality itself as something alien, societal and unsettling against which it had to defend itself. What was left over was a pure and totally subjective ego that could no longer tolerate anything alien. Indeed this pure subject had also lost every possibility for action; it was only victim. Also here there was a paradoxical reversal: *precisely the pure subject appealed to itself in the fantasy – apparently charged with pleasure anxiety – of being a passive thing*.

The countless discussions arising from victimization determined to a large extent the emancipation politics of the 90s. The discussion of victims played a very welcome and affirming role for neo-liberal politics: since with each victim one could effectively distract attention from an earlier one – and with all of them together even from the on-going massive re-distribution of societal wealth in favor of a small neo-liberal elite. In accordance to the compulsive innovative logic of their trade, a certain sector of the art world and its curators took on a leading role in the discovery of newer – and conveniently ever increasingly distant victims.

The curious sympathy for the weak is the consequence of forced subjectivism and the corresponding struggle against every form of ‘alienation.’ However this development means simultaneously the moralization and with it the depolitization of politics: because when weakness is not only weak but by being weak is also good, then everything strong – and therefore also each actual successful emancipation – will be bad or even evil. Those who value the weak above all else will always manage to make sure that they remain weak. The increasing awareness and obligingness of post-modern societies for all accusing forms of expression

of the weak, and the increasing spread of its resentment filled world view, is therefore seemingly not a sign of 'pluralistic' liberalization and emancipation, but rather a cheap way of placating; a cunning way to make sure that decisive processes in society remain undiscussed and untouched. If however one does not just want to tearfully lament but also wants to win, then one has to be prepared to develop strength, to demonstrate it, and to make sure that one's own initiative in the reality of society becomes material - and thus takes on an admittedly 'alien' appearance. If we really want to be free, then we must not be afraid of the fact that every real freedom will take on an objective form.

September 2015

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