

# Althusser and the Problem of Historical Individuality

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### Abstract:

Louis Althusser once raised an important theoretical problem for Marxists of how to understand “the historical forms of the existence of individuality,” but he failed to provide an adequate solution to this problem. By contrast, fellow French communist philosopher Lucien Sève has criticized Althusser’s approach and provided a full-fledged and compelling theory of historical individuality, which helps to shore up a major weakness in Althusser’s famous formulation that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.” By trying to understand what an individual is, Marxists can better reclaim the concrete individuals who are subject to, and subjected by, the process of interpellation, and thereby more successfully disrupt this process. I test this claim by investigating the case of the first-century historical individual Simeon bar Yonah (better known as Simon Peter).

### Keywords:

Louis Althusser, Lucien Sève, ideology, interpellation, Marxist theories of individuality

“We are discussing living water which has not yet flowed away.”<sup>1</sup>  
– Louis Althusser

Louis Althusser’s well-known formulation that “ideology interpellates individuals as subjects”<sup>2</sup> has long concealed a key problem that Althusser himself once posed but quickly dropped and never resolved: What is an individual? An answer to this simple – but exceedingly difficult – question would go a long way to explain not only the limits of the interpellation of subjects as *individuals* but also how resistance to oppressive social structures and institutions is possible. As a point of departure for our investigation, let us first consider two brief references by Althusser to this problem in texts from 1965-1966.

### 1. The historical forms of the existence of individuality

In *Reading Capital* Althusser addresses the question of individual-

1 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 33. Althusser doubtless alludes here to a passage in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus cries out in the Jerusalem temple courtyard, “Let anyone who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water!’” (Jn 7.37-8).

2 Althusser 2014, pp. 188-94, 261-6.

ity in the context of his outline of a Marxist “concept of historical time,” which he opposes to a “Hegelian concept of history” that has two “essential characteristics”: “homogeneous continuity” and “contemporaneity.”<sup>3</sup> For Althusser this Hegelian approach allows for an ‘essential section’ (*coupe d’essence*), i.e. an intellectual operation in which a *vertical break* is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the elements of the whole revealed by this section are in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence.<sup>4</sup>

According to this “ideological” and “empiricist” approach to historical time, we may envisage history as a linear sequence of homogeneous stages or “moments,” any one of which could easily be segmented from the rest (as indicated below):

... / PAST / ... / PRESENT / ... / FUTURE / ...

Althusser argues that this conception is inadequate to the task of accounting for the complex unity of different rates and rhythms by which the historical process unfolds. It also gives rise to a number of “conceptual confusions and false problems,” of which Althusser discusses three: “the classical oppositions: essence/phenomena, necessity/contingency, and the ‘problem’ of the action of the individual in history.”<sup>5</sup> Allow me to bypass the first two problems in order to focus on the third.

Althusser notes that the so-called “problem” of the “role of the individual in history”<sup>6</sup> is a tragic argument which consists of a comparison between the theoretical part or knowledge of a determinate object (e.g., the economy) which represents the essence of which the other objects (the political, the ideological, etc.) are regarded as the phenomena – and that fiendishly important (politically!) empirical reality, individual action.

For Althusser, this is more than a “tragic problem”; it is a *false* problem, because it is “unbalanced, theoretically ‘hybrid,’ since it compares the theory of one object with the empirical existence of another.” In other words, the problem of the “role of the individual in history” commits a serious category mistake by confusing two distinct theoretical levels of analysis. Yet Althusser readily admits that this false problem of the ‘role

3 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 104.

4 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 105.

5 Althusser and Balibar 2009, p. 123.

6 Althusser is referring here to the title of a famous essay published in 1898 by the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov; see Plekhanov 1969, pp. 139-77.

of the individual in history’ is nevertheless an index to a true problem, one which arises by right in the theory of history: the problem of the concept of the *historical forms of existence of individuality*.

What is more, it is precisely *Capital* that allows this problem to be properly posed. This is because Marx’s text defines for the capitalist mode of production the different forms of individuality required and produced by that mode according to functions, of which the individuals are “supports” (*Träger*), in the division of labour, in the different “levels” of the structure.

Yet caution is in order, for we should be careful not to align or match individuals as they are theoretically construed with individuals as they are empirically encountered and described. This is because the mode of historical existence of individuality in a given mode of production is not legible to the naked eye in “history”; its concept, too, must therefore be *constructed*, and like every concept it contains a number of surprises, the most striking of which is the fact that it is nothing like the false obviousnesses of the “given” – which is merely the mask of the current ideology.

Althusser concludes with a scathing joke:

So long as the real theoretical problem has not been posed (the problem of the forms of historical existence of individuality), we shall be beating about in the dark – like Plekhanov, who ransacked Louis XV’s bed to prove that the secrets of the fall of the *Ancien Régime* were not hidden there. As a general rule, concepts are not hidden in beds.

Althusser’s jest about Plekhanov’s theoretical naiveté arguably overlooks what is really at stake in the latter’s essay, namely, the usefulness of counterfactual statements and arguments in historical explanation.<sup>7</sup> But I set this matter aside.<sup>8</sup>

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Althusser returns to the question of “forms of historical existence of individuality” in a lecture he delivered at the École normale supérieure in the early summer of 1966, which serves as an occasion for him to reflect on the “philosophical conjuncture.”<sup>9</sup> After addressing such mat-

7 By a “counterfactual” argument, I mean wondering whether or not, by imaginatively altering the actual historical conditions, an event (e.g., the American, French, or Russian Revolutions) would have turned out the way it did, or at all. An example of a counterfactual statement is: “If Lenin had not been allowed to travel from Zurich through Germany to Russia on a sealed train in the spring of 1917, then the October Revolution would not have occurred.”

8 For a fine introduction to the problem of “historical counterfactuals,” see Evans 2013 (on pp. 40, 43 there is even a brief discussion of Plekhanov).

9 “The Philosophical Conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research,” in Althusser 2003, pp.

ters as how a *philosophical* differs from a *political* conjuncture and distinguishing the internally uneven and combined elements of the former, Althusser launches into an analysis of the three “sedimented historical layers or elements” – what Althusser (and Pierre Macherey) would later call philosophical “tendencies”<sup>10</sup> – in the history of French philosophy: the “religious-spiritualist,” the “rationalist-idealist,” and the “rationalist-empiricist.” Althusser further proposes that the intervention of Marxists into contemporary French philosophy should operate on “two fronts”: first, against the spiritualism of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and phenomenology; second, against the critical, rationalist idealism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Martial Guérout, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and structuralism.

The first task of Marxists in philosophy is to define Marxist theory itself and to distinguish the theoretical status of historical materialism as a science from dialectical materialism as a philosophy. Then arises a series of key “strategic questions” in both dialectical and historical materialism. My concern is with the last three (out of seven) strategic questions that, according to Althusser, have to be addressed in the field of dialectical materialism, namely, to develop theories of the following: ideology, the subject or “subjectivity-effect,” and the “historical forms of individuality (including the social formation).” As is well known, Althusser’s famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” which was published in 1970 as an extract from a much longer 1969 manuscript “On the Reproduction of Capitalism,” brings together the first two strategic questions and formulates both a Marxist ideology of ideology and of subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> However, as I have already suggested, in those texts, and subsequently, Althusser never fully worked out his theory of individuality.

## 2. Sève’s critique

However, in the late 1960s Lucien Sève (a fellow philosopher and member of the French Communist Party) also proposed that a non-reductive version of historical materialism would require a theory of historical forms of individuality. The fruit of Sève’s theoretical activity during that period was published as *Marxisme et théorie de la personnalité*.<sup>12</sup> Recently,

he has summarized his lifelong research into this problem:

Historical materialism is not ..., as a mutilated Marxism has dramatically believed, the key to understanding human *societies* alone but is also inseparably the key to understanding *individualities*. After having created its own foundations, every social formation includes a related “individual formation”; this is indeed why communism could not be the emancipation of the human species without ensuring the free development of all individuals. Marxist anthropology thus gives the lie to a double illusion: substantialist (“humans” *have a nature*) and existentialist (“humans” *have no essence*). In so far as they are socially evolved beings, human individuals have neither a nature nor a metaphysical essence, but indeed always concrete *historical presuppositions* from which we can make abstraction only in the imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Sève continues to agree with Althusser’s “theoretical anti-humanism” to the extent that “humanism” is rooted in a commitment to some conception of “the human.” However, Sève stresses that theoretical anti-humanism is merely the “critical preamble for a *materialist anthropology* that for ‘the human’ would substitute the dialectic of the human individual and human species that has at long last been untangled.”<sup>14</sup> To reject entirely such an anthropological dimension to historical materialism would be to lose sight of Marx’s ultimate aim of social emancipation, namely, to expand and enrich human capabilities by surpassing capitalism and by realizing a less oppressive, exploitative, and alienated society.<sup>15</sup>

Although this is not the place to develop at length a much-needed appreciation of Sève’s work and its critical relationship to Althusser, it is worth noting that Sève himself has acknowledged the influence of Althusser’s passing remarks in *Reading Capital* on ‘the historical forms of existence of individuality.’<sup>16</sup> However, Sève has offered a compelling criticism of Althusser’s non-dialectical approach to individuality. In Sève’s view, Althusser has in mind the *general figures of individuality* that underpin a social formation of a given type and of which singular individuals become *supports* – for example, the capitalist and wage laborer in the capitalist mode of production.<sup>17</sup>

1-18.

10 See Stolze 2015 (forthcoming).

11 Both the manuscript and the excerpt are available in Althusser 2014.

12 Sève 1981, available in translation as Sève 1978.

13 Sève 2015, pp. 72-3.

14 Sève 2015, p. 72.

15 See Sève 2012.

16 Sève 2008, pp. 118-21.

17 Sève 2008, p. 119.

As a result, Althusser fails to capture the “immense variety of the *constitutive relations of individuality in detail*, in historical forms of *individuation* in all their diversity.”<sup>18</sup> Speaking in general terms of the Capitalist and the Worker as representative figures of modern individuality falls far short of the fine-grained, concrete analysis that is required in order to show how a given mode of production appropriates human mental and physical capabilities, for instance, by constraining free time or stunting personal development.<sup>19</sup>

Sève has found his inspiration for his conception of historical forms of individuality especially in two sources:<sup>20</sup> Marx’s Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach (on which there also exist brief commentaries by Althusser)<sup>21</sup> and a letter written by Marx in 1846 to his Russian acquaintance Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov. In the first text, Marx observes that the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach had rightly resolved “the religious essence into the human essence.” However, as Marx insisted, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its effective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) it is the ensemble (*das Ensemble*) of the social relations.”<sup>22</sup> In the second text, Marx argues that the social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their material relations are the basis of all their relations. These material relations are only the necessary forms in which their material and individual activity is realized.<sup>23</sup>

In each of these texts, Marx is at pains to emphasize the dialectical interaction of individuals and external social relations. As Sève has argued – employing Spinozist terminology<sup>24</sup> – we should distinguish

18 Sève 2008, p. 120.

19 Sève 2008, p. 120.

20 See Sève 1981, pp. 97-106n.1 (Sève 1978, pp. 161-7n. 27); 2008, pp. 63-68; 2015, pp. 70-73.

21 See especially Althusser 2003, pp. 253-6; Althusser 2005, pp. 242-3.

22 Marx 2000, p. 172. Translation slightly modified.

23 Marx 2000, pp. 209-10.

24 Spinoza famously used “naturing nature” (*natura naturans*) and “natured nature” (*natura naturata*) to express the distinction between God (or substance) in its absolutely infinite *internal* productivity and the *external* infinity of finite modes that follow from that productivity; see the *Ethics*, part 1, note to proposition 29 (Spinoza 1996, pp. 20-21). However, Sève has carried out a materialist reversal of the distinction, since for Marx the ensemble of *external* material and social relations has always already existed prior to, and independent of, human beings, whose individuality only subsequently becomes effectively realized *internally*. With Gilles Deleuze, we could even speak of this external ensemble of relations becoming *folded* to form individuals; see Deleuze 1993, especially pp. 3-13.

between:

The *forming form* of individuality (or “matrix”) that occurs outside of human beings as the “ensemble” of material and social relations; and

The *formed form* of individuality (or “figure”) that is the historical product of this complex process in its “effective reality.”<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, Sève argues, by regarding individuals merely as social “supports” (*Träger*), Althusser fails to address the “historical substance”<sup>26</sup> of how individuation *actually* unfolds and so implies that such support is merely passive.<sup>27</sup> Yet such a perspective turns out to be non-dialectical, for individuals are both “*supports* for structural relations that dominate them and *actors* of social dynamics that make them move.”<sup>28</sup> One might add to Sève’s objection that individuation results from more than an internalized ensemble of – or “support” for an external ensemble of relations; it requires an *active* unification of experience that is a precondition for understanding, acting in, and transforming the world.

### 3. Individuals and subjects

There is much to commend in Sève’s nuanced theory of the historical forms of individuality and his criticisms of Althusser. However, what I would like now to suggest is that his approach lends additional support for Althusser’s materialist position in *Reading Capital* that a real object exists prior to, and independent of, thought about it. For Althusser,

while the production process of a given real object, a given real-concrete totality (e.g., a given historical nation) takes place entirely in the real and is carried out according to the real order of *real* genesis (the order of succession of the moments of *historical* genesis), the production process of the object of knowledge takes place entirely in knowledge and is carried out according to a *different order*, in which the thought categories which ‘reproduce’ the real categories do *not* occupy *the same* place as they do in the order of real historical genesis, but quite different places assigned them by their function in the production process of the object

25 Sève 2008, pp. 112-3.

26 Sève 2008, p. 120.

27 Sève 2008, pp. 120-1.

28 Sève 2008, p. 121.

of knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Let me propose, then, that there exists a counterpart to Althusser's distinction between the *real object* and the *object in thought*, namely, a distinction between the *concrete individual* and the *subjected individual*. Indeed, each has its own "genesis." Although Althusser himself does not indicate as much (nor, for that matter, does Sève), we should equally insist on the materialist position that every concrete individual is prior to, and independent of, the same individual who has undergone interpellation as a subject. It may well be true, as Althusser insists, that even a newborn always already undergoes interpellation through the expectations of others regarding the infant's name, gender, future social position, and so forth.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, every individual-in-process is born at a precise conjuncture of world history, enjoying specific opportunities and confronted by specific material and ideological obstacles. As human beings in our individual composition, each of us strives to persist in our being and to increase our capacities to flourish. As a result, each of us in our own singularity always threatens to act as what could be called a "counter friction" to disrupt the smooth operation of the interpellative machine.<sup>31</sup> Again using Spinozist language, Sève envisions constructing a "science of the singular" that would help one to identify and open up an emancipatory path along which all of humanity may journey together.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. An example from Christian religious ideology: Simon Peter

In order to appreciate how tension can arise between historical forms of individuality and the process of subjective interpellation, consider the following historical-theological case. In his chapter on ideology in *The Reproduction of Capitalism*, Althusser proposes that

29 Althusser p. 44.

30 Althusser 2014, pp. 192-3. As we shall see below, there is a serious problem regarding personal names. Althusser is rightly concerned with the ideological implications of assuming one's "father's name." However, personal names also denote reference to *this*, as opposed to some other, individual who has been, or is about to be, born. The dual nature of personal names registers a deeper division between historical forms of individuality and interpellation of such individuals as subjects.

31 See Thoreau 1996, p. 9.

32 Sève 1987, pp. 244-6. For Spinoza's famous distinction among three kinds of knowledge – (1) from "random experience," hearsay, opinion, or imagination (2) by reasoning based on "common notions," and (3) by "intuition" of a singular thing in itself – see the *Ethics*, part 2, note 2 to proposition 40 (Spinoza 1996, p. 57).

Christian religious ideology ... says: I address myself to you, a human individual called Peter (every individual is *called* by his name, in the passive sense, it is never the individual who gives *himself* his own name), in order to tell you that God exists and that you are answerable to Him. It adds: it is God who is addressing you through my voice (since Scripture has collected the Word of God, tradition has transmitted it, and papal infallibility has fixed it for ever on "ticklish" points, such as Mary's virginity or ... papal infallibility itself). It says: This is who you are; you are Peter! This is your origin: you were created by God from all eternity, although you were born in 1928 Anno Domini! This is your place in the world! This is what you must do! In exchange, if you observe the "law of love," you will be saved, you, Peter, and will become part of the Glorious Body of Christ! And so on . . .<sup>33</sup>

As Judith Butler has cautioned, religious ideology may not be the most useful illustration of the everyday operation of interpellation.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, it remains, as I hope to demonstrate, an interesting example in its own right. In addition, although Althusser is clearly not discussing "the historical Simon Peter," for purpose of illustration, it is worth considering the latter's concrete existence as an *individual* prior to, and independent of, becoming a subject.

According to the Gospel according to Mark, shortly after the arrest of John the Baptizer by order of Herod Antipas (the Roman-appointed "tetrarch" of Galilee and Perea), Jesus announces his own mission based on "good news" to the poor, journeys to the fishing village of Capernaum, and at some later point "hails" two fisherman, Simon (Hebrew: Simeon), and his brother Andrew, to leave behind the tools of their trade and become disciples in order to "fish for people."<sup>35</sup> Simon is soon given the nickname "Peter" (Greek: *Petros*) and becomes Jesus's leading disciple.<sup>36</sup> However, in keeping with the narrative's recurrent reversals

33 Althusser 2014, p. 194. This passage also appeared in Althusser's extracted essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (p. 266).

34 Butler 1997, pp. 109-12.

35 Mk 1.16. Luke's retelling of this episode (5.1-10) adds a parabolic flourish: Peter and his companions, upon Jesus's directive, are able to catch so many fish that their nets cannot contain them!

36 Mk 3.16. Simon's nickname in Aramaic is Kēphā, which means "the Rock." Jesus also gives nicknames to – in effect, *interpellates* – two other fishermen who along with Simon became leading disciples: John and James, the sons of Zebedee, were called in Aramaic *Boanerges*, which has been badly transliterated into Greek and is then translated by Mark as "Sons of Thunder" (Aramaic: *benē re'em* -> Greek: *huioi brontēs*); see Mk 3.17. For a discussion of the complexities involved in understanding the meaning of such Aramaic nicknames, see Casey 2010, pp. 186-92.

of expectations,<sup>37</sup> Simon Peter's persistent failure to understand – and act in accordance with – Jesus's messianic mission of sacrifice for the well-being of others appears to be all the more tragic. Indeed, at a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Mark's story, Jesus rebukes Simon Peter for his misunderstanding: "Get behind me, Satan!"<sup>38</sup> A dramatic interpellative reversal has occurred: Simon Peter's previous hailing of Jesus – "You are the "Messiah"<sup>39</sup> – has turned out to be a *misrecognition*, for it incorrectly presumed a conventional hierarchical model of power. Simon Peter, according to Jesus, has wrongly set "his mind not on divine things but on human things."<sup>40</sup> As a result, by means of a corrective *counter-interpellation*, Jesus rejects this model – and presumably so should listeners/readers of the gospel.<sup>41</sup>

Yet apart from this orally transmitted and then narratively embedded remembrance, Simon Peter was a complex embodied individual who lived in a specific region of the world during a precise conjuncture: at the height of Roman Imperial power,<sup>42</sup> he was probably an illiterate (or marginally literate)<sup>43</sup> peasant fisherman, the son of Yonah,<sup>44</sup> grew up in Bethsaida<sup>45</sup> and later moved to Capernaum on the eastern periphery of the Empire,<sup>46</sup> eked out a living from the Sea of Galilee, and spoke a local dialect.<sup>47</sup> Simon Peter encountered Jesus and decided to follow him not simply as a result of Jesus's charismatic presence but was probably

37 Here I follow especially Myers 2002; 2008.

38 Mk 8.33.

39 Mk 8.30.

40 Mk 8.33.

41 In the Gospel according to Mark, the only genuine interpellations of Jesus as a messiah who will be killed for his egalitarian vision of the "reign of God" turn out to be Bartimaeus ("son of Timaeus"), a blind beggar, who calls out to Jesus from the roadside during the latter's march to Jerusalem (10.46-52), and an unnamed woman in Bethany, who anoints Jesus with oil to affirm his messianic status – but as a prelude to his death and burial (Mk 14.3-9).

42 For an introduction to the dynamics of first-century Roman imperial power, see Carter 2006.

43 In Acts 4.13 Simon Peter is described as "illiterate" (*agrammatos*) and "unsophisticated" (*idiōtēs*).

44 See Mt 16.17.

45 Only John's gospel provides this biographical information (see Jn 1.44).

46 An inference based on Mk 1.21, 29.

47 Presumably, this is how, after Jesus's arrest, bystanders in the courtyard of the high priest are able to identify Simon Peter's accent when he denies that he is a follower of Jesus (Mk 14.71; Lk 22.59).

inspired by the latter's message of "theological-economic" hope of debt forgiveness in a restored nation of Israel.<sup>48</sup> He evidently betrayed Jesus after the latter's arrest,<sup>49</sup> returned – or fled – to Galilee for a time.<sup>50</sup> Eventually he returned to Jerusalem and served as one of the three main leaders or "pillars" (*styloi*) in the assembly of Jesus followers located there.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most moving episodes in the New Testament is a post-resurrection dialogue between Jesus and Peter that occurs in the Gospel according to John. Peter and several other disciples have gone fishing in the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee (another name for the Sea of Galilee), but they have returned to shore with an empty net. Just after daybreak Jesus appears on the beach as a stranger and directs them to cast their net to the right side of the boat – with miraculous success. Subsequently, they all sit down to cook and eat a breakfast of fish and bread.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."<sup>52</sup>

What exactly is going on in this mutually interpellative question-and-response between Master and student, between absent/present

48 On Jesus's central economic teaching debt-forgiveness (and tax-resistance), see Oakman 2014.

49 Mk 14:66-72; Mt 26.69-75; Lk 22.54-62; Jn 18.25-27.

50 Peter's return to Galilee is assumed by the two earliest Gospels, Mark and Matthew (Mk 14.28-29, 16.7; Mt 26.32-33, 28.10, 16). The Galilean setting for post-Resurrection appearances is not shared by Luke-Acts, for which Jerusalem provides the hub of activity of an (improbably) unbroken and continuous Jesus movement. John 21 also provides a post-crucifixion Galilean context for Simon Peter, who has evidently returned to his previous life as a fisherman.

51 At any rate, this is indicated in the opening sections of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and is confirmed by Paul's letters.

52 John 21:15-19.

Shepherd and caretaker shepherd?<sup>53</sup>

At first glance, Simon Peter seems to have redeemed himself. After having previously denied Jesus three times in the aftermath of his arrest, and returned to his ordinary life as a Galilean fisherman, in this exchange Simon Peter three times expresses his trust in, and devotion to, Jesus and his cause. This trust and devotion will, Jesus forewarns, result in Simon Peter's own arrest and death; for genuine love for Jesus requires action, namely, to "feed his lambs" and "tend his sheep." Yet such action is fraught with risk – *to be taken where you do not wish to go*. Has Simon Peter understood, and committed himself to, the demands of radical discipleship? Listeners/readers of John's narrative would doubtless have already known about Simon Peter's ultimate fate, which is not explicitly mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament but to which the narrator parenthetically refers here: he was probably executed (along with Paul and other Jesus followers) in Rome as a victim of the persecution initiated by the Emperor Nero following the fire that broke out in Rome in 64.<sup>54</sup> Simon Peter appears, then, to become a model disciple who will comply with Jesus's request to "follow me," no matter the risk.

Yet several ambiguities destabilize the dialogue. First of all, when Jesus asks, "Do you love me more than these?" it is unclear where in the sentence the emphasis (in English or Greek) lies. Two readings are possible:

"Do *you* [Simon Peter] love me more than these [other disciples do]?"

Do you love me more than [you love] *these* [other disciples]?

Simon Peter's reply is not to the first question (for how could he know the answer?) but to the second question. Thus, Simon Peter assures Jesus that, yes, he loves *him* more than he loves the other disciples. Yet the listener/reader cannot simply evade the first question, which hauntingly concerns the depth of one's commitment to Jesus and his cause.

Thus, another ambiguity arises: the first two times that Jesus asks Simon Peter "Do you love me?" he uses the Greek verb *agapao*, which connotes unconditional "fidelity." However, when Simon Peter responds each time "You know that I love you," he uses the weaker Greek verb *phileo*, which connotes conditional "fondness or friendship." On the third questioning, Jesus deliberately switches to *phileo*, as if to meet Simon

53 My reading is indebted to Howard-Brook 2003, pp. 475-9.

54 See Dunn 2009, pp. 1071-74.

Peter on his own terms. Again, the listener/reader is invited to reflect on whether or not his or her loyalty to Jesus and his cause is conditional or unconditional.

As a final ambiguity, note that, according to Jesus, Simon Peter will be taken *where he does not wish to go*; in other words, *unwillingly*. Yet early in John's narrative, Jesus has already announced that he is the "good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11). In other word, the model life of an Authentic Shepherd requires that one sacrifice, and even be willing to die *willingly* out of unconditional love for others. By contrast, Simon Peter's death will indeed "glorify God," but he will prove to be a reluctant martyr and a less-than-authentic shepherd.

Over generations, from conjuncture to conjuncture, of course, the degree of such loyalty fluctuated. It is worth noting that there are two letters in the New Testament attributed to Simon Peter - 1 and 2 Peter - that indicate waning commitment by Jesus followers to Jesus's egalitarian vision. Both letters express a second-century perspective of Jesus followers who looked back to Simon Peter's life as exemplary and formed a kind of "Petrine circle."<sup>55</sup>

In particular, the earlier 1 Peter retains a powerful ethos of solidarity to include and care for those who had been rendered homeless and marginalized by Roman imperial rule; and such an ethical commitment can be traced back to the historical figures of Jesus and Simon Peter. Yet 1 Peter contains passages that are sharply at odds with the practice of Jesus and the earliest Jesus followers. Indeed, these passages indicate a new conjuncture of increasing accommodation to Roman imperial norms ("Honor the emperor."),<sup>56</sup> to slavery ("Slaves, accept the authority of your masters ..."),<sup>57</sup> and to unequal gender roles ("Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands ...").<sup>58</sup> Simon Peter's authority as a disciple is being used to encourage conformity to the status quo instead of supporting critical inquiry into the continuing demands of radical discipleship.

55 Elliott 2005. For a commentary on both of these so-called "Catholic Epistles," see Nienhuis and Wall 2013, pp. 95-156.

56 1 Peter 2.17.

57 1 Peter 2.18.

58 1 Peter 3.1.

## 5. From naming-using practices to social emancipation

What should we conclude from this thumbnail sketch of Simon Peter's historical individuality – of his biographical life? First of all, we should insist on the extent to which richness of his ordinary Galilean life exceeds our contemporary ability fully to reconstruct through even the best textual, anthropological, folkloric, sociological, and archeological evidence.<sup>59</sup> Let us, for the sake of argument, though, suggest that the name *Simeon bar Yonah* rigidly designates this concrete individual.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, let us reserve *Petros* (or *Kēphā*) for the subsequent linguistic, cultural, theological, indeed, the *interpellative*, shifts in how this individual was remembered and venerated over the decades following his death and the subsequent stages of a movement to whose founding he had vitally contributed.<sup>61</sup>

In this respect, I disagree with Markus Brockmuehl, who has contended that history's Simon Peter, like history's Jesus of Nazareth, is from the start always already embedded in communal memory and interpretation of one kind or another. This apostle, in other words, is always *somebody's* Peter, whether friend or opponent – rather than a neutrally or objectively recoverable figure.<sup>62</sup>

The chief problem with Brockmuehl's historical methodology is that while seeking to reconstruct the transmission of collective memories of an individual – Simon Peter in this case<sup>63</sup> – he fails to distinguish between a memory and the individual of whom there is a more-or-less reliable recollection. A memory is always a memory *of* something or

59 For overviews of the "historical Galilee," see Horsley 1995 and Freyne 2014, pp. 13-51.

60 Saul Kripke has famously defined something as a rigid designator "if in every possible world it designates the same object" (Kripke 1980, p. 48). In other words, a rigid designator picks out the singularity of an individual as compared with others. Moreover, according to Kripke, a (personal) name can best be understood to function as a rigid designator and not as a more-or-less comprehensive collection of definite descriptions of an individual.

61 Although Slavoj Žižek has used Kripke's theory of names to understand the nature of ideology (Žižek 2008, pp. 95-144), he too sharply distinguishes between *descriptivist* (e.g. Russell and Searle) and *antidescriptivist* theories of names (e.g., Kripke), and so fails to appreciate the need for what amounts, in Gregory McCulloch's words, to adopting a "mixed strategy" (McCulloch 1989, p. 308) that incorporates both *descriptivist* and *antidescriptivist* elements, much as I am suggesting that an adequate theory of ideology grounded in "the interpellation of individuals as subjects" has to emphasize the irreducible tension between subjects and (named) individuals.

62 Brockmuehl 2012, p. xv.

63 Strictly speaking, "Simon Peter" is what we ought to call a *hybrid* personal name that combines features designating (a) the historical individual "Simeon bar Yonah" and (b) that individual as interpellated by Jesus and the tradition subsequently associated with him, namely, *Kēphā* -> *Petros* -> "The Rock."

someone; no memory is an entirely autonomous and purely idiosyncratic fiction. In this respect, memories operate, for better or worse, as *intentional* acts of transmission.

Furthermore, we must take care to distinguish between the *production* of a personal name and subsequent name-using practices associated with the *consumption* of that name.<sup>64</sup> *Producers* of personal names are those who have had dealings with an individual *x* and are in a position to recognize *that* individual as having been assigned a name, whether through formal "baptism"<sup>65</sup> or some informal means, and to correction inaccurate information about him or her. By contrast, *consumers* of personal names are not acquainted with the individual – indeed he or she may now be long dead – but have been introduced into a relevant name-using practice by means of which meaningfully to refer to that individual.<sup>66</sup>

We can make a further distinction between *active* and *passive* consumers.<sup>67</sup> Passive consumers of personal names act as mere "mouth-pieces" of the name-using practice; they simply "parrot sentences" and pass along the information to which they have been exposed about how to use the name in question.<sup>68</sup> Active consumers, by contrast, take a genuine interest in acquiring new knowledge and so strive to keep "the light burning" in the name-using practice.<sup>69</sup> For instance, to the extent that they operate as active consumers, biblical scholars may acquire new facts and draw insightful conclusions about Simon Peter that are lacking to ordinary consumers of the name "Simon Peter." In this respect, their knowledge of the historical individual may rival that of the producers of that personal name – those individuals such as his family, Jesus, the other disciples, and other "eyewitnesses" to the events narrated in the gospels.<sup>70</sup>

64 In this paragraph I follow Gareth Evans's discussion of proper names in Evans 1982, pp. 373-404.

65 On "baptism" as the means by which name-using practices are customarily initiated, Kripke writes: "Someone, let's say a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain" (Kripke 1980, p. 91).

66 This process is already at work during Paul's missionary activity in Corinth, where he confronts a variety of factions in the assembly of Jesus followers who identify as "belonging" to Paul, Apollos (about whose life and teachings relatively little is known), Christ, or Cephas. See 1 Cor 1.10-17.

67 McCulloch 1989, pp. 281-4.

68 McCulloch, pp. 268-72, 283.

69 McCulloch, p. 282

70 Richard Bauckham has argued persuasively that the four gospels are ancient "biogra-

Once all name-producers have become unavailable or have died, of course, only name-consumers remain. At this point, in the “last phase” of a name-using practice, it could turn out that everything associated with that personal name is false, because there are no longer name-producers able to correct the inaccuracies.<sup>71</sup> However, such widespread misinformation does not affect the personal name’s referent, which continues to be the original individual *x*.<sup>72</sup> At any rate, the accumulation of falsehoods in the transmission of a personal name can eventually be identified, challenged, and corrected by active consumers of that name.

Let me reiterate, then: theological reassessment of the historical individual Simeon bar Yonah doubtless occurred during the first generations of the Jesus movement, but this does not mean that there never existed an individual *by that name* who underwent subsequent processes of interpellation by those who in various ways modified the name-using practice. Nor does it imply that there is no good reason today to try to reconstruct the life of that individual within his historical conjuncture in as objective and thorough a manner as possible.

Secondly, although individuals are always already interpellated as subjects (even before they are born, as Althusser suggests), it is equally true that naming and reclaiming a concrete individual – Simeon bar Yonah, for instance – can serve to disrupt an interpellated subject – *Petros/Kēphā*) for instance – as much any counter-interpellation has or could. In this sense, although some names are “unnameable,” they must nonetheless be said.<sup>73</sup>

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phies” that can be presumed to rely on eyewitness testimony to the life and times of Jesus. Obviously, there is also creative license involved in the oral transmission and writing of those gospels. But there is equally a more-or-less reliable historical core of information about Jesus and the first-century movement he led that rivals information about any other ancient figure, for example, Socrates or Julius Caesar. Interestingly, much of Bauckham’s argument hinges on the use of personal names, especially for minor characters, in the gospels as rigid designators (not his term) for historical referents, who themselves likely provided eyewitness testimony to help establish either the oral tradition or written narratives. See Bauckham 2006 (on names in the gospel traditions, see pp. 39-66. For dissenting views, see Patterson 2008; Weeden 2008; for Bauckham’s reply, see Bauckham 2008.

71 Evans 1982, pp. 393-6. In New Testament studies, this would constitute the extreme skepticism of what is commonly called the “mythicist” position. For strong criticisms of such skepticism as unwarranted, see Ehrmann 2012 and Casey 2014.

72 Evans 1982, p. 395. The presence of an Aramaic nickname *Kēphā* as preserved in Mark’s gospel and Paul’s letters helps to provide a basis for reasonable confidence not only in the historical Jesus but also in the historical Simon Peter. At the very least, it would suggest a pre-Greek Aramaic background to the traditions associated with the early Jesus movement.

73 On “unnameable names,” see Lazarus 2015, pp. 115-66. Like Althusser, though, Lazarus has pitched his analysis at the general level of collective names like “worker,” whereas there exists a grave political need to name specific individuals in order to address specific injustices. Consider the case of Sandra Bland, an African-American woman who was en route from Naperville, Illinois to

Continuing struggle over how the historical Simon Peter has been remembered and venerated has profound theological and practical impact on the lives of contemporary Catholics in specific (the doctrine of papal infallibility, for instance) and all Christians in general (the egalitarian practice of the Jesus movement<sup>74</sup>). But it equally provides a basis for Christians and non-Christians to agree on the vital role that this individual played in history and may continue to play through solidarity grounded in positive identification and emulation.

If Althusser is right that “concepts are not hidden in beds,” it is equally true that they are not hidden in Galilean fishermen’s boats. And yet there is a world of difference between “ransacking Louis XV’s bed” and carefully reconstructing a vessel used by Galilean peasants as an artifact in order to provide insight into an ancient subsistence fishing economy<sup>75</sup> – this between the decadent reality of social domination from above and the hardscrabble prospect of social emancipation from below.

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a new job at Prairie View A&M University in Texas. Bland was beaten and arrested in Prairie View for a minor traffic infraction on July 10, 2015. She then died under suspicious circumstances in a Waller County, Texas jail on July 13. A key slogan of the Black Lives Matter solidarity movement that has arisen and drawn attention to police misconduct in her – and numerous other cases – is precisely “Say her name!” The slogan contains a double emphasis: not only “Say her *name!*” but also “Say *her* name!” Institutional racism remains unnameable within the confines of the dominant racial ideology – and yet it must be named by anti-racist activists each and every time it occurs. On Sandra Bland’s death in police custody, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Sandra\\_Bland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Sandra_Bland).

74 On the egalitarianism of the Jesus movement, see Horsley 2013.

75 See Wachsmann 2009.

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