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DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

Working Paper

Ideological State Apparatuses, Consumerism, and U.S. Capitalism: Lessons for the Left

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"Ideological State Apparatuses, Consumerism, and U.S. Capitalism: Lessons for the Left"

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Abstract:

Althusser's pioneering concept of "ideological state apparatuses" is extended to the unique role of consumerism as a particular ideology enabling and supporting U.S. capitalism. It is argued that rising levels of worker consumption have functioned effectively to compensate workers for (and thereby allow) rising rates of exploitation and their negative social effects. For such compensation to succeed requires that workers embrace an ideology stressing the importance of consumption, namely consumerism. It is argued that the weakness of the US left (in labor unions, parties, and movements) stems in part from having endorsed this consumerism rather than undermining it within the framework of an anti-capitalist politics.

Key words:

Exploitation, Consumerism, Ideology, Althusser

JEL classification: **E-11, E-21, N-12**

Ideological State Apparatuses, Consumerism, and U.S. Capitalism: Lessons for the Left[*]

By Richard D. Wolff

In 1969, reflecting on France's challenge to capitalism the year before, Louis Althusser published "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation" (IISA).[1] Like Marx's and Lenin's earlier assessments of the Paris Commune, Althusser's article aimed to build upon - by drawing lessons from - the successes and failures of an historic anti-capitalist uprising. Because those lessons are important yet remain widely underappreciated, we review Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses in this paper's first part. Those lessons enable new insights into the reproduction of capitalism in the United States. Thus, the second part below examines (1) how the particular ideology of consumerism has been crucial to sustaining the US capitalist class structure, (2) how ISAs have promoted that ideology, and (3) how its failure to understand and intervene in ISAs to counter that ideology helps to explain the US left's weakness.

I. Althusser and Ideological State Apparatuses

Althusser, like Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks sought to explain and thereby to help overcome the organized working class's inability to transform the recurring crises of capitalism into successful transitions to communism. Like Gramsci, Althusser turned to the realm of ideology to develop, as he put it, what Marx had only initiated (1995, 20).[2] While Capital had begun to show how capitalism's forces and relations of production

[*] This article incorporates many insights from Stephen Resnick through years of our collaboration. It has also benefited significantly from the criticisms of Stephen Cullenberg and David Ruccio.

were reproduced, much still remained to be done. This was especially true in the realm of culture and ideology. In undertaking a theory of ideology, Althusser's object was to explain how workers and others imagined their relationship to economy and society. He chose that object because ideology – or, more concretely, the multiple ideologies coexisting in contradiction within any society – could operate so as to preclude a capitalist crisis from becoming a transition to communism. Althusser's 1969 essay analyzed how such ideologies operate in capitalist society and what institutions ("apparatuses") enable their operation. As he stressed later to his critics, a Marxist politics governed his project (1995, 253-267). Exposing how certain ideologies and their apparatuses supported the class structure of capitalist societies could make future Marxist interventions more successful in transforming capitalist crises into transitions to communism (1976, 130; see also Resnick and Wolff, 1987, 81-108).

Althusser began his argument by citing Marx's strong insistence that the capitalist mode of production could never survive unless its social conditions were reproduced. While the general term "mode of production" was taken from Marx and used in deference to its great popularity in much Marxist literature, Althusser usually meant something much more narrowly precise and specific than the broader, more inclusive definition of mode of production in that literature. He spoke repeatedly of capitalist "exploitation" or "extortion" – which referred to the appropriation by capitalists of a surplus value produced by others, namely productive workers.[3] This essay will refer mostly to this narrower, economic notion of the exploitative capitalist class structure rather than the broader, less focused "mode of production," since that seems more consistent with Althusser's argument.

For him, the other, non-class aspects of the society in which capitalist class structures prevail comprise the conditions of those structures' existence. Without the reproduction of those non-class aspects – and he was especially interested in the ideological conditions – capitalist class structures of production would collapse. Moreover, Althusser insisted that nothing guarantees the reproduction of capitalism's ideological conditions of existence. That is, the capitalist class structure does not automatically or necessarily succeed in reproducing its non-class conditions of existence. Therein lies a key vulnerability of capitalism's survival. The ideological (as also the political) conditions of capitalist class structures of production are always more or less a problem for capitalism and capitalists. The latter seek to shape and control them such that they provide the needed supports. However, they do so against contradictory social influences – for example, oppositional struggles of exploited classes - that can make politics and ideology undermine more than they support capitalism (1995, 254).

Given the Marxian tradition's considerable work (and especially Lenin's) on how the "state apparatus" reproduces the legal and political conditions for capitalist exploitation, Althusser took up the term but refocused it instead on how ideological conditions were reproduced. He thus distinguished between two sets of apparatuses. The first set was political and comprised the state and most of its various activities and branches: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). The RSA maintained and wielded a monopoly of the means of force in capitalist societies and applied that monopoly to support capitalist class structures. By repressing the threats to capitalist class structures that it recognized, the state's branches, activities, and officials constituted a Repressive State Apparatus. In Althusser's view, however, a different set of apparatuses – much less

well examined or understood in the Marxist tradition – played a parallel role in sustaining capitalist class structures. He named that set the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to stress a certain parallel to the RSA despite their differences.

Althusser included among state ideological apparatuses the schools, the family, religions and religious institutions, and the mass media. They worked less by power and politics (as did the RSAs) and more by ideology. They inculcated children and adults in specific ways of imagining - thinking about and thus understanding – their places within and relationships to the societies within which they lived.[4] As with the RSAs, capitalists' efforts to shape the functioning of ISAs contested with the often differently directed efforts of others. Capitalists operated in both the RSAs and the ISAs but in each case "precisely in its contradictions" (1978, 146). Althusser found RSAs to be more unified and controlled in targeting and performing the functions that capitalists wanted, whereas the ISAs were more elusive, diverse, and contested terrains where capitalists often had more difficulties in securing their agendas as opposed to others'.

Ideology and ISAs work, in Althusser's view, by "interpellation". That is, institutions such as families, churches, schools, mass media, and so on all "call" individuals in particular ways that prescribe and enforce (a) thinking in specific ways about their identities, relationships with other individuals, and their connections to social institutions, and (b) acting accordingly. In his subtle formulations, Althusser focuses on the "subjectivity" of such interpellated individuals. He sees the ISAs as quite literally imposing very particular subjectivities upon individuals. Had Althusser written later, he might well have used "identity" synonymously with "particular subjectivity." In any case, he argued that ISAs do more than create subjectivities/identities in the individuals whom

they interpellate. They also aim to have such subjects imagine that their subjectivities/identities are internally self-generated.

Modern capitalism presses its ISAs to interpellate and thus to subjectivise/identify individuals in those particular ways that will provide the ideological conditions of existence for capitalist exploitation. ISAs serve capitalism in so far as they effectively interpellate subjects within meaning systems (including definitions of their own and others' identities) that make them at least accept and at best celebrate capitalist exploitation.

This ideology of the subject that ISAs impose on individuals affirms, in an ironic twist, that their subjectivity consists of a quite radical independence and autonomy. That is, individuals are interpellated as free subjects who cause or originate their belief systems, their actions, and their social institutions. The definitional ambiguity of "subject" - as both something/someone "subjected" and something/someone that causes – serves Althusser to highlight the ideological reversal performed by ISAs in capitalist societies today. Individuals are shaped by ISAs to believe that their conformity to the needs of capitalist class structures is something quite different, a life path freely chosen by an independent and autonomous subject. In Althusser's words, the individual within modern capitalist societies is interpellated by ISAs as "free" so that he/she "freely accepts …subjection" (1978, 182).

Althusser elaborates this argument with a deliberate epistemological self-consciousness. He does not imagine or position himself as reasoning from outside the realm of ideology. He accepts - and indeed insists – that all thinking subjects, himself included, are "always, already" interpellated (1978, 176). Althusser admits his own

subjectivity, his own particular subjection to his society's ISAs. While Althusser's is clearly a different notion of subjectivity from those mostly inculcated by the ISAs of his society, all subjectivities are products of that society. For Althusser, the social contradictions working on the ISAs provoke the formation of different and oppositional conceptions of subjectivity that complicate how the ISAs actually function. Althusser's subjectivity emerged from the contradictions of the ISAs important in his life (Althusser 1993). They moved him toward the anti-capitalist traditions of Marxism, socialism, and communism. Althusser's subjectivity contributed to his critique of the different and hegemonic subjectivity imposed by ISAs on most individuals in his society. Althusser attacks that hegemonic ideology of "free subjects" for ignoring/denying its social constitution and, in particular, for supporting capitalist exploitation.

The complex and contradictory modalities whereby ISAs inculcate ideologies are precisely what Althusser wanted Marxists to see as parallel in importance to the modalities of the state in sustaining capitalism. Althusser was, in effect, urging Marxists to correct their past over-attention and emphasis on the state by means of an equivalently serious and sustained attention to the workings of ISAs. His goal was a Marxist program for cultural studies and struggles that would intervene in all ISAs.

What distinguishes Althusser's from other tendencies within cultural studies is its partisan project of linking cultural values, institutions, and contradictions to the capitalist class structures of society with each side of the link serving simultaneously as cause and effect of the other. No determinist or reductionist linking would be acceptable; no old-fashioned Marxist reflection theorizations; no essentialism. Althusser had already staked out his strong preference for "overdetermination", in which *every* cause was also an

effect.[5] Culture was both cause and effect of class. Not only was each constitutive of the other, but all the other aspects of society likewise overdetermined and were overdetermined by class and culture. Out of such complex overdeterminations emerged the contradictions embedded inside class structures, ISAs, and their interactions. And it was these contradictions that Althusser invited Marxists to unravel for revolutionary purposes. Indeed, Althusser's final work was just such an attempt focused on the conscious, unconscious, and intensely contradictory interpellations with which his own family ISA had subjected him.[6]

Althusser's conceptualization of the ISAs can and should be developed further. While his original essay recognized a plural - "modes (sic) of production combined in a social formation" (1978, 158) - he never developed this important point. Yet, since societies (or the preferred Marxist term, "social formations") comprise multiple interacting class structures and never a capitalist class structure alone, Althusser's exclusive focus on capitalism is insufficient. Extending his logic, each different class structure within a society would shape each ISA. The contradictions and tensions *among* as well as *within* the different class structures would flow into the ISAs, thereby further complicating the contradictory interpellations of individuals. In societies where, for example, self-employed persons (Marx's "ancient class structure") coexisted with capitalist class-structured enterprises and feudal class structures inside households, each would exert its specific and likely often incongruent influences upon ISAs.[7] The latter would then have complex, contradictory effects back upon those class structures. Such a more developed and nuanced theorization of ISAs can deepen Marxists' appreciation of the contradictions within individuals' interpellated subjectivities: their multiple, unstable,

and decentered identities. That appreciation can, in turn, enable more successful interventions aimed at transitions from capitalism to communism.

Because Althusser was concerned to stress what he believed others had minimized or ignored - the interdependence of class structures and ideology – he sometimes veered close to determinist arguments despite having so boldly criticized them since his 1963 essay on "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (see footnote 5). Thus, Althusser and especially others associated with him were sometimes read as though they were all "structuralists" who believed that capitalism produced ISAs functional to its reproduction. Thus, for example, Nicos Poulantzas (1974, 314-318), Bob Jessup (1982, 154-156, 167-169, 181-186) and Joachim Hirsch (1980) seemed to render ISAs as determined effects of class structures alone. Such readings revived attacks on "Althusserian structuralism" (despite Althusser's repeated disavowals of the label) for negating any possibility for human agency other than support for an all-determining structure. Paul Hirst attacked Althusser's ISA argument for its economic determinism and functionalism (1979, 68-73). Similarly, Ernesto Laclau faulted Althusser for theorizing ideology as reflecting and functionally reproducing capitalism (1977, 99; see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 97-105).

Critiques from the opposite side argued that Althusser's theory of ideologies and ISAs had lost Marxism's basic recognition of their ultimate dependence on the materialist foundations of capitalist class society (Goran Therborn, 1980, 32, 129-130). E.P. Thompson dismissed Althusser altogether as an idealist who had lost all touch with Marxist materialism (1978, 1-210), while Alex Callinicos (1976, 107-114 and passim) denounced his "unrepentant" theoreticism. Perry Anderson included Althusser among

those “western Marxists” he castigated for “turning” to philosophy from economics since, for Anderson, that turn disconnected (and debilitated) Marxism from genuine engagement with material reality and revolutionary politics (1976, 49-54, 69-74).

As has happened many times, before and after Althusser, discussions of culture and ideology among Marxists revive debate over the relation of “ideology” to the distinction between “truth” and “falsity.” Marx had criticized the prevailing social theories of his time – both those embodied in popular “common sense” notions and those rarified into formal conceptualizations – as ideologies that failed to grasp and change the class dimensions of capitalism. Marx’s phrases and tone could be and often were read as a critique of ideology on the grounds of its “falseness” and an affirmation of his own perspective as “the truth” or as “science.” Since Althusser also flirted with the true (science) versus false (ideology) dichotomy, he invited criticisms that he was merely resurrecting the tired and discredited notion of Marxism as some absolute truth (Therborn (1980, 4-11; Laclau 1977, 101).

Althusser’s self-defenses (in his Essays in Self Criticism and “Note sure les AIE”) against accusations of functionalism, theoreticisms, and a crude commitment to the ideology (false)-vs- science (truth) dichotomy diluted these criticisms’ force and applicability. Stuart Hall (1996, 25-46) and John Thompson (1984, 90-98) have stressed Althusser’s very nuanced and subtle formulations of the ideology/science couple. Similar appreciations of Althusser’s non-reductionist approach generally and in relation to ISAs in particular appear in Resnick and Wolff (1987, 81-108) and Grahame Lock (1996, 69-90).

Althusser's discussion of the ISAs invited a more sustainable criticism (as did his other works) for ignoring the different modern forms of capitalist class exploitation. These would presumably shape ISAs in different ways. Capitalist exploitation can, for example, exist in both private and state forms. That is, the capitalist exploiters – the appropriators of a surplus produced by others – can be either private individuals or state officials. In modern capitalist corporations, the capitalists are either private individuals comprising a board of directors elected by share-holders or they are state officials assigned to that position. Althusser's otherwise trenchant criticisms of the USSR might have, but never did, lead him to ask how a state capitalism would interact differently with ISAs than a private capitalism. This is unfortunate especially as it might have provoked him to analyze how interactions between ISAs and state capitalist class structures contributed to the collapse of the USSR in 1989 (cf. Resnick and Wolff 2002, Ch. 10).

In conclusion, Althusser's theory of the ISAs enabled a distinctively Marxist examination of culture and its relation specifically to class analysis and class politics. It added several layers of depth and richness to Gramsci's efforts to study ideology and culture from a class-revolutionary standpoint. Althusser would have ridiculed the notion that the term "post-Marxist" need or should apply to cultural studies, since he clearly believed that Marxist work was precisely what had not yet been undertaken beyond mere beginnings. We can suggest the rich possibilities of Althusser's contributions by extending his ISA analysis to the world's so far most successful capitalism, the United States.

II. ISAs in the United States

The basic statistics on capitalist exploitation in the United States since its civil war are stark in Marxist terms. Because real wages rose but far less than labor productivity, US capitalism enjoyed a rising rate of exploitation for the last 150 years (Resnick and Wolff 2004). In simplest terms, ever more surplus value was generated relative to the value paid in wages to productive workers. That steadily rising surplus enabled the US to achieve its ostentatious wealth and massive state wielding global military preponderance. A rising surplus relative to wages *defines* US workers, in Marx's precise terms, as increasingly exploited. US capitalists devoted parts of the rising surplus appropriated from their workers to find and control cheap sources of raw materials around the world. They distributed other parts to a growing army of managers whose task was to supervise and discipline workers into ever greater work efforts. Still other parts of appropriated surpluses funded technical changes aimed at getting more output per labor hour. All such distributions of their rising surpluses enabled US capitalists not only to accelerate that rise but *simultaneously to reduce the production costs of the consumer goods they sold to workers*. Capitalists could raise their workers' wages far more slowly than the workers raised their delivery of surplus to the capitalists *because every dollar of workers wages could buy ever more of the consumer goods whose costs kept falling.*

The key success formula of US capitalism thus coupled rising surpluses for capitalists with rising standards of consumption for workers. Marx had foreseen exactly this possibility in **Capital, vol. 1**'s famous discussion of "relative surplus value". The unique circumstances of the US from 1860 to 2000 enabled that possibility to be realized as nowhere else on the planet. By enabling increasingly exploited workers to enjoy rising standards of consumption, the US economy has achieved not only the most exploited

working class in the world, but also to do so while encountering relatively less resistance than many capitalisms elsewhere. Rising worker consumption helped to disable trade union militancy, undercut socialist and communist opposition, and mute anti-capitalist criticism from the US intelligentsia. It became the securest capitalism on the planet, a magnet for the wealth of the rich across the globe. Yet the extreme rate of capitalist exploitation in the US entails equally impressive social costs. Levels of physical overwork, psychological stress, drug dependence and abuse, interpersonal violence, broken families, psychological depression, loneliness and isolation are also extremely high.

Of course, the reasons for US capitalism's success – its security, its growth, and its wealth – lie only partly in its particular economic performance. For US capitalists so successfully to compensate their workers for extreme exploitation by delivering a rising level of consumption, the workers had to *accept such consumption as an adequate compensation.* They had to value rising consumption levels as more positive than rising exploitation was negative. In accepting such a system of values, US workers fulfilled a hope articulated much earlier by Adam Smith. He had argued that as capitalism widened inequalities between the profits garnered by the few and the wages of the many, the resulting envy and resentment threatened a Hobbesian war of all against all. Smith hoped that threat might be thwarted if such a capitalism could compensate the wage-earning mass for deep income inequality with rising consumption. This is what US capitalism accomplished.

Yet rising wages would hardly have sufficed if workers in the US had defined themselves and the quality of life they sought differently. Suppose workers valued most

egalitarian and mutually nurturing interpersonal relationships among *all* gathered at a worksite, workers' collective decision-making powers over the surpluses they produced, and individual free time for aesthetic, athletic, and cultural activities. Had such values – rather or more than personal consumption levels - been their measures of the good life, workers in the US would have rejected rising consumption *as an adequate offset to rising exploitation*.

Here Althusser's ISAs assume their importance. Workers in the US had somehow to be interpellated systematically – in their families, schools, churches, civic and labor organizations, the mass media, and so on – as consumption oriented and driven. They had to be called to think of (identify) themselves and everyone else as free market participants striving to maximize the consumption they could achieve from work. They had to define themselves as above all "consumers" who willingly suffered the "disutility" of labor to acquire the "utilities" embodied in consumption. The neoclassical economics that so totally dominates academia, the media, and politics in the US theoretically formalizes this interpellation. The advertising that pervades every aspect of life relentlessly popularizes this interpellation. Workers in the US have been systematically subjected to/by an ideology that defined and celebrated them as consumers first and positively (and workers as secondary and negatively). Individual worth – for themselves and for others – became measurable above all by one's achieved level of consumption. And that level of consumption came to be understood as the appropriate reward for their individual contribution to production, i.e. for their exploitation. The "manipulation" of the masses entailed in such consumerism was possible because it "latched onto" something real

enough in workers' lives – the need for a compensation, rationale, and justification for the alienation and exhaustion of extreme exploitation (cf. Haug 1986).

Only in so far as the ISAs in the US effectively defined most individuals' subjectivity in such terms could rising real wages compensate workers for ever higher rates of exploitation. Only if the workers desired chiefly consumption from their alienated and exhausting labor (rather than a reorganization of worksites to enable them collectively to appropriate and distribute their own surpluses) would rising wages satisfy. The ISAs performed well in the US, perhaps better for capitalism there than anywhere else.

Althusser's caution to be mindful of the contradictions always plaguing ISAs is applicable to the US as well. Rampant "consumerism" in the US has always provoked criticisms, such as Thorstein Veblen's attacks on "conspicuous consumption" from the left and clerics' laments about lost "spirituality" from the right. More than a few workers, partly inspired by such criticisms, recognized that accumulating consumer goods failed to overcome the intolerable strains of exploitation at work and its unwanted effects on society and on their personal lives. Such persons revolted, more or less and in diverse ways: some fled to rural villages, some "dropped out" for lives on the social margins (artistic pursuits, alcohol, lives in religious sects, crime, and so on), some turned inward to fetishize their family units, and some undertook the perilous insecurities of self-employment. These and still other kinds of revolts presented ideology and the ISAs in the US with the problem of limiting them to forms and diverting them in directions that would not undermine capitalist class structures. They tried to solve that problem by shaping ("interpellating") subjects such that if they revolted against consumerist society,

that revolt should be individual, not collective, and should not aim at displacing capitalist in favor of communist class structures.

Here finally, the issue arises as to how Marxists such as Althusser might use the notion of ISAs to inform a Marxist politics. That politics aims to intervene socially with an agenda that includes transforming capitalist (exploitative) into communist (non-exploitative) class structures of production. In the US that would mean entering into the contradictions of its ISAs precisely to undermine the interpellation of individuals as chiefly consuming subjects and thereby to expose the profound inadequacy of consumption as compensation for capitalist exploitation. Anti-capitalist forces would stress the costs of that exploitation while exposing the consumerist subjection of workers as a key ideological support of that exploitation. Such forces would counterpose the benefits of a communist class structure that, by eliminating exploitation, would also reduce its social and personal costs.

A tragedy of anti-capitalist politics in the US for a long time is that they were rarely informed by Althusser's ISA argument. The left in the US did not mount any sustained attack on the interpellation of individuals as consuming subjects. Indeed, the left mostly endorsed and repeated such interpellations. It presented itself and socialism generally as the better vehicle for all individuals to achieve higher levels of consumption. It addressed itself especially to those suffering from various discriminations that kept them from achieving even average levels of consumption. It endlessly repeated and reinvented slogans and programs with goals of "higher wages", "family wages", "living wages", "minimum wages", "comparable worth", "guaranteed incomes" and so on. The US left thus emphasized programs that contested capitalism in just the one area, rising

consumption, where capitalism could deliver enough to render the left unpersuasive and unnecessary.

Of course, struggles to raise wages, when successful, thereby diminish the surplus left for capitalists to appropriate. In the limit, rising wages could eventually choke off sufficient surplus to make it impossible for capitalist enterprises to survive. Yet, that limit was rarely reached and even more rarely sought in actual workers' struggles (notwithstanding employers' ritualized complaints to that effect). Workers in the US neither understood nor drove wage struggles as means to undermine capitalist class structure and achieve transitions to communist or other class structures in their place. The demand that the workers themselves – rather than managers or owners - appropriate and decide what to do with enterprise profits rarely arose. Instead, workers struggled for higher wages to achieve more consumption. This followed from their interpellation in ISAs as chiefly consuming subjects. Likewise, they were especially susceptible to employers' threats that wage increases might diminish or even close enterprises since that would cut off the means to workers' consumption. By contrast, notions of reorganizing the business along non-exploitative class lines remained vague, utopian, and "unrealistic" in most workers' minds in the few instances when such notions surfaced at all.

Family ISAs in the US have long been major inculcators of consumerism in children and adults. This has been widely documented in academic studies of US families and households. Popular phrases like "keeping up with the Joneses," "shop till you drop," and "the malling of America" provide endless material for journalists, comedians, and academics seeking sound-bites to describe US citizens. Advertisers and those who study advertising have shown how sales have come to depend ever more heavily on training

masses of consumers to see commodity purchases as the indispensable means to everything positive in life. Parents who have come to accept rising consumption as the compensation for their labor transmit such values to their children. Religious ISAs play their role less by promoting consumerism than by seeking to direct the frustration of the many workers whose wages do not allow sufficiently rising consumption (who feel left out of the consumerism that seems to define individual worth) and the fewer who remain dissatisfied despite rising consumption. To both groups, the religious ISAs preach a spirituality whose goals and modalities they keep far removed from any direct contestation over the class organization of work, over exploitation and its consequences, over possible transitions from exploitative to non-exploitative class structures.

The mass media, overwhelmingly private capitalist enterprises themselves and having other private capitalist enterprises as their chief customers (selling advertisement opportunities to them), promote consumerism continuously. Advertising has increasingly succeeded in “colonizing” workers’ “free time” by defining the purchase and consumption of specific commodities as the necessary way for “leisure” to be “enjoyed.” Schools in the US routinely organize their procedures and curricula around the explicit notion of making students “knowledgeable consumers” as well as skilled and disciplined workers. Scarce school funds flow far more readily to the purchase and consumption of new computers as sure means to educational improvement than, for example, to changing teacher-student ratios, reorganizing classroom learning, and establishing more supportive learning environments outside of schools.

This brief survey of ISAs in the US and their agendas’ relationship to consumerism may conclude with a glance at the labor union movement. There the

consumerist approach – limiting worker's struggles to the goal of achieving higher standards of consumption – has often contested with the notion that workers could and should also struggle for "dignity" and "respect" on the job.[8] Yet this important glimmer of awareness that consumption is not a sufficient compensation for exploitation rarely matured into a non-consumerist union strategy. Time after time, wage increases have prevailed over (when they have not simply displaced) most other possible objects of union struggles with employers. To advocate that unions ought properly to contest capitalist exploitation itself has been made a dangerous and widely demonized position for union activists and leaders to hold. Indeed, where "dignity" and "respect" have survived as important union goals, they have mostly been defined not in terms of basic changes in the class organization of production but rather in terms of enabling the fuller inclusion of marginalized groups of workers (racial and ethnic minorities, women, immigrants, etc.) into the ranks of workers enjoying rising levels of consumption.

Of course, all the ISAs discussed above have their own complex contradictions reflecting the myriad influences that shaped their structure and operations. Notwithstanding the support each has provided to a consumerism undergirding capitalist class structure, each ISA has also undermined capitalist class structures in other ways. For example, the consumerism promoted by ISAs in the US has contributed to the peculiarity of what might be called a "worker politics of tax cuts." Federal, state, and local governments become alien, resented agencies: their tax demands viewed simply as threats to workers' consumption levels. A lop-sided politics emerges in which workers support politicians who promise tax cuts even when the consequent cuts in government programs can and repeatedly do damage workers' standards of living. When tax-cutting

US municipalities have cut waste disposal and public school programs, for example, workers had to spend much more on private commodity purchases (private schools, after-school programs, private waste disposal goods and services, etc.) than they saved from tax cuts. Their nonetheless ferocious focus on tax-cuts reveals a politics of an intense consumerism. Yet, revenue-starved government agencies can and often must also cut all sorts of programs that provide supports for capitalist enterprises – a contradictory consequence of a consumerism.

Another example of the contradictions of consumerism and the ISAs that purvey it appears in the stunning willingness of US workers to assume historically unprecedented levels of personal debt and debt-service burdens. US households that wrestle with the simultaneous maintenance of traditional family relationships and the ideology (and hence costs) of rising consumption have foundered. Family dysfunction, divorce, stress and so on proliferate with all sorts of negative impacts for capitalist enterprises (reduced worker productivity, absenteeism, alcoholism, etc.). The consumerist ideology promoted by families and households has often reacted back to undermine them and thereby also the many supports they provide to US capitalism (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 1994).

Althusser's theory of ISAs might have informed a left or Marxist strategy of intervention connecting household contradictions – and those of other ISAs - through consumerism to capitalist class structures. Consumerism might then have been exposed as an inadequate compensation for exploitation as well as a destructive ideology for workers in many other ways. Instead of consumerism, an alternative response to capitalist exploitation, namely changing exploitative into non-exploitative class structures, might then have become foregrounded as a politics workers could understand and support. One

model for such a shift of workers' political strategy comes from the movements critical of slavery in the US in the nineteenth century. They eventually changed from demands for higher consumption levels for slaves to the alternative demand for the abolition of slavery as the organization of production. Today, movements critical of capitalism need similarly to graduate from demands for higher wages to demands for an end to capitalist exploitation.

Inadvertantly, perhaps, the US left generally gave little more than rhetorical lip service to the demand for an end to the exploitative class structure of capitalism. It succumbed to a consumerist ideology in strategies – often justified as "realistic" - that consistently overemphasized raising consumption levels partly because it had not absorbed Althusser's ISA arguments. It seriously undervalued the power of ideology generally and the importance of the consumerist ideology for US capitalism in particular. It failed to register and thus to take oppositional advantage of the contradictions of the ISAs charged with purveying consumerism in the US. In its own accommodations to consumerism, the left reinforced the capitalist-sustaining aspects of ISAs and thereby frustrated many of its own goals. It did not grasp the need for and necessary scope of a counter-capitalist (and pointedly anti-consumerist) system of values to be fought for inside each ISA *as a basic component of its political action.* This criticism applies to many lefts outside the United States as well. In any case, we might transform failure into success if we can explain that failure. That was the point of Althusser's ISA intervention in France in 1969 and it is likewise the point of extending his arguments here and now.

Endnotes:

[1] The article appeared first in the French journal *La Pensee* in 1970; it was then reprinted in the collection of Althusser's articles translated into English by Ben Brewster and published as Lenin and Philosophy by New Left Books in London in 1971, 127-186; there followed several subsequent reprintings. The page numbers here refer to the Monthly Review edition of 1978. Althusser later responded to critics of his initial argument about ideological state apparatuses: "Note sur les AIE" (1971, 253-267).

[2] Althusser explicitly (p. 142) credited Gramsci's work as one basis for his own.

[3] Althusser uses these terms repeatedly, on pages 137, 150, 154 and 156, to pinpoint what was, for him, the definitional core of the capitalist mode of production: the economic relation whereby some take and use (socially distribute) the surplus produced by others. In a personal communication to this writer in 1979, Althusser stated that "Marxists need to rescue the precise notion of exploitation from the ever-vaguer usages of 'mode of production' by both Marxists and non-Marxists." By contrast, in a non-exploitative class structure such as the communist, the workers who generated a surplus would also be the collective appropriators of that surplus (Resnick and Wolff 2002, Part 1).

[4] Althusser's argument here is quite subtle. He insisted that the distinction between RSA and ISA was a matter of emphasis and degree. The RSA, he said, worked mostly by force and secondarily by ideology, whereas the reverse applied to the ISA (p. 145). Althusser thus recognized the social diffusion of mechanisms of power and repression stressed by Foucault, but, unlike the latter, systematically maintained the distinction between power and ideology as central to his argument about capitalism's reproduction.

[5] See his important essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (1970, 87-128. The importance of overdetermination and its relation to constitutivity as a new and different Marxian concept of cause and effect are discussed at length in Resnick and Wolff, (1987, pp. 81-106).

[6] Part autobiography, part confession, and part Marxist psychosocial analysis: Althusser, 1993.

[7] See the analysis of such feudal class structured households in Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff, (1994).

[8] Socialist and communist labor unionists in the US have tried repeatedly to criticize "pork-chop unionism" and advocate a broadening of union goals to social issues including some reorganization of production itself. Sometimes this broadening went so far as to challenge, usually in quite limited ways, the organization of production so as to give workers greater power and authority on the job. However, a program of demanding a change from exploitative to non-exploitative class structures happened extremely rarely. In any case, the inability of socialist and communist unionists even to achieve some broadening in most cases attests to the rank and file's immersion in the consumerism promoted by ISAs – including most labor unions - in the US.

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