CHAPTER IV

Louis Althusser on Ideology
While Antonio Gramsci gave his historicist conception of ideology, there was yet another Marxist who gave a different conception of ideology. That was the structuralist conception of Louis Althusser. Althusser’s structuralist methodology and its application to cultural phenomena had conspicuous repercussions in Marxist studies. 'Structuralist' Marxist tradition starts with entirely different assumptions from that of 'historicist' tradition.

For Althusser, everything becomes different with his theory of "epistemological break" in Marx. Althusser finds two Marxs primarily. He finds the young Marx predating the divide as 'ideological' and matured Marx in post German Ideology period utterly scientific. It is from his understanding of 'the specific difference' in Marxist philosophy that Althusser develops his theory of epistemological break. To quote him,
"The question of the specific difference of Marxist philosophy then assumed the form of the question as to whether or not there was an epistemological break in Marx's intellectual development indicating the emergence of a new conception of philosophy—and the related questions of the precise location of this break". (1)

So it was the "difference" in Marxist philosophy from other philosophies that raised the question of the possibility of some kind of break; as a result of which, a new philosophy came into existence different from the previous unscientific philosophies, a new scientific philosophy. Naming the break as epistemological, Althusser says that

"There is an unequivocal 'epistemological break' in Marx's work....... new theoretical consciousness is already beginning to show through in the erstwhile consciousness and the erstwhile language as necessarily ambiguous and unbalanced concepts". (2)
For Althusser, the theoretical work of Marx before German Ideology period is not of much value. Before the break, things were not so consciously done. It is only after the break a new consciousness came in; and in the light of the new consciousness, it can be found that the previous theories were ambiguous and concepts were unbalanced. Althusser finds the origin of dialectical materialism after this break. To quote him,

"this 'epistemological break' concerns conjointly two distinct theoretical disciplines. By founding the theory of history (Historical materialism) Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established a new philosophy (dialectical materialism)". <3>

Thus, it was a break from ideological philosophy to a scientific one, dialectical materialism. The point of this break could be seen as something like a middle point in intellectual Marx. And precisely for the same reason, Althusser finds this break as dividing Marx’s thought into two periods.

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"This 'epistemological break' divides Marx's thoughts into two long essential periods: the 'ideological' period before, and the scientific period after the break in 1845". <4>

The second period, the scientific one is further divided into two movements. One is the period of 'theoretical transition', and other the period of 'maturity'. As a result, Althusser finds three periods in Marx, which he pinpoints in the following manner.


2. 1845. The works of the break. (Thesis on Feuerbach, The German Ideology)

3. 1845 – 57 The transitional works. (First drafts of 'Capital', Manifesto, Poverty of Philosophy, Wages, price and Profit etc.)

His division of Marx into two stages of ideological and scientific resulted in doubting the young or early or Neo-Hegelian Marx. Works like German Ideology are seen as ambiguous and not
contributing much to scientific world view, and many even treated it as worthless, destined to be superseded or surpassed and replaced with more mature works, with scientific approach. Mepham suggests that Marx had not achieved a clear conception of ideology in German Ideology. Though he struggles to discover a new language of interpretation, he fails. On the other hand Poulantzas spoke at length about "the numerous ambiguities" of the young Marx's work. Althusser makes it explicit and calls theory more directly a "positivist and historical thesis".

However it seems to me that Althusser's division of Marx on the basis of "epistemological break", if amounts to dividing Marx into two water tight compartments, is very unfortunate. It is unfortunate not only for the reason that it does injustice to Marx, but also for the fact that it limits intellectual forgoing and misses the essential link in the period of intellectual evolution of Marx. In the second chapter, it was clearly shown about the stages of intellectual evolution of Marx particularly with reference to the concept of ideology.
Attempts to treat young Marx's work as not worth, or not bearing any significance to scientific Marx could essentially be one sided. The questions such as whether Marx is a humanist, or a revolutionary itself is wrong because, he is both. Marx becomes revolutionary only because he was one of the most scientific and passionate humanists history has ever seen. It was precisely such humanistic sensitivity that pushed forward him to envisage concrete conditions where men can become their real self. So Althusser's attempt to discard early Marx's works as ambiguous can not be agreed to.

We have seen that Althusser's conception is structuralistic as against that of the historicist conception of Gramsci. But interestingly, the origin of structuralism can be traced to Gramsci itself. The origin of structuralism can be found in Gramsci when he rejects ideology as psychologically and arbitrarily created. Structuralism is mainly concerned of freeing Marx from a conception of ideology as pure speculation or false consciousness. Historicism abates this interpretation due to its emphasis on the role of the subject class and of consciousness in the
origin of ideology. On the other hand, structuralism says that ideology has a material existence which determines the subject. If ideology has to be rejected as false consciousness, then a conception of subject participating in its origin also has to be rejected. Thus ideology is not a false or illusory representation of reality, because its source is not the subject. Its source is material reality itself.

Althusser is one of the chief and important representative of this thought. One can find Althusser making various attempts to understand and define the concept of ideology with the above spirit chiefly in his mind. But he is not very consistent always, and he even contradicts with himself at times. Speaking about ideological illusions, he says that they are well founded on ideologies. To quote him,

"......ideological illusions - illusions which are not 'naive', not mere 'aberrations' but necessary and well founded as ideologies". <8>
Further, he says that the concept of ideology as General. "it always works on something general"<9>, he gets this idea from Marx himself. Because Marx is found using general concept like Production, Labour, Exchange etc. Althusser says that such concepts are indispensable to a scientific theoretical practice. He finds that the first generality does not coincide with the product of scientific labour. It, on the other hand is the prior condition of scientific labour. He calls this precondition as the first generality, or Generality-1. Generality-1 becomes the raw material to science's theoretical practice, which transforms it to what he calls as specified concept. Specified concepts are concrete generality, or generality-2. Further, he talks about a third generality even, which is a synthesis of Generality-1, and Generality-2. He says that Generality-2 works on Generality-1 to produce Generality-3. I will return to this point later, when considering his various definitions of ideology. At another point, he defines ideology as

"......an ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with historical existence and role within a given society". <10>
After saying that ideology is a system of representations which has historical existence and a definite role to play in a society, he wants to make a distinction between ideology and science. To quote him:

"...ideology as a system of representations is distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function. (function as knowledge)." <11>

So what really differentiates ideology from science is its practico-social function. Or its primacy over theoretical function. His stress on 'social function' is particularly important. It is rather a prelude to what he is wanting to say, that ideology and society are inseparable. But first, he has to make the premises. So he goes into another aspect from ideology, he slips into a kind of definition of history.
"Subjects of history are human societies. Historical complexities can be reduced to three. Economy, Politics and Ideology". <12>

The three historical complexities form a base, or the base.

Since historic complexity is the base, and subject of human history is societies, Althusser concludes that:

"So ideology as such is an organic part of every social totality". <13>
Ideology, then is an integral part of human society. They, ideology and society, can not be separated from one another. He says that societies can not have lived without it. Even the Utopian imagination of society without ideology is the imagination of ideology. Only ideology could have imagined a society without ideology. Further, he goes into saying that ideology is a structure; it is structural in human societies. To quote him,

"So ideology is not an aberration or a contingent excrescence of history: it is a structure essential to the historical life of societies. Further, only the existence and the recognition of its necessity enable us to act on ideology and transform ideology into an instrument of deliberate action on history". \(14\)

Althusser finds ideology as a structure. This structure is essential to societies, to the historical life of societies. Accordingly, ideology
can never be done away with; and even in societies were class antagonisms and classes itself have ceased to exist, ideology would continue its existence. In Communist societies, ideologies will be different; it is transformed to become an instrument of deliberate action on history, for man to make his own history. Interestingly, Althusser doesn’t maintain the distinction between two ideologies as it was made earlier by Lenin, Gramsci etc. He treats both i.e., ideology as false consciousness and scientific with the same unqualified name, ideology. Perhaps this is what lead him into saying that ideology gets transformed.

For Althusser, ideology has nothing to do with consciousness. It doesn’t belong to the realm of consciousness. He says that

"It is profoundly unconscious even when it presents itself in a reflected form as in pre-Marxist Philosophy". (15)
As being structural, they are systems of representations and not very related to consciousness. Making this more explicit, he says that

"they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their consciousness". <16>

However, he repeatedly asserts that ideology is inevitable for human societies, they are structural, and they ought to be transformed to suit the conditions of existence of the proletariat. He tries to sum up in the following way:

"...it is clear that ideology (as a system of mass representation) is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence". <17>
In Althusserian approach to the concept of ideology, his two articles are of crucial importance. They are,


and


In his entire theory, particularly in these two articles, it can be seen that he is laying three stages of emphasis. In the first essay, ideology is seen as an objective level of reality, independent of individual subjectivity. It is only and simply a system of representations. It has nothing to do with consciousness. Though men practice ideology, they are not conscious of it. It surpasses the way in which it is lived by particular individuals. It can only be known through its structure. Isolated images or
representations do not amount to ideology. Since it is determined by its structure; it can not be reduced to the way individuals practice ideology. In short, ideology can not be studied as objective phenomena. He says that

"it is their system, this mode of combination and disposition which give them sense; it is their structure which determines them in their sense and function". <18>

Though Althusser is very enthusiastic about this 'representation of system', he is not very consistent about the representations of this system. In "For Marx" he says that

"In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence. this presuppose both a real relation and an 'imaginary'; 'lived' then relation". <19>
But we can see him again coming back to his old formula in "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formations. Ideology and Ideological Struggle". He says

"ideology is a representation of the real, but a necessarily false one, since it is necessarily oriented and biased". <20>

Even here Althusser does not realise or see of any inconsistency or incompatibility between this vie of ideology and the previous vie of it as an objective level of society.

However, what he implies is this. Man can't live without representing this world and his relation to it. This representation is predetermined with respect to each subject. Men are born into it. to quote Althusser,

"Ideology thus appears as a certain representation of the world, which links men with their conditions of existence and with other men....". <21>
Thus the function of ideology is something that secures cohesion from man to man and man to his task. Here we can see him borrowing the Gramscian expression of "cement" - ideology functions as a cement which joins all parts of the social building. Ideology functions as adjustment between men and their roles. Ideology smoothly makes it natural for men to bear the situation, be it exploited, or the exploiter. To question such dominations, will be what is 'unnatural'. Therefore, ideology is an essential element of all societies to fulfill some essential social tasks.

"Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life. Only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies without ideology and accepted the Utopian idea of a world in which ideology (not just one of its historical forms) would disappear......... Historical materialism can not conceive that even a communist society could ever do without ideology". <22>
It amounts to saying that ideology existed before the beginning of class division, and will continue even after class division disappears. It is a structural aspect of any society, its function is that of cementing the unity of society. In class societies, ideology has an additional function which it does not have in a society which is classless. In class societies, ideology is also a means to maintain domination. Ideology enables the bourgeoisie to dominate the proletariat. To quote Althusser,

"in a classless society, just as in a class society, this function is dominated by the form which the division of labour takes in the differentiation of man in antagonistic classes". <23>

Nonetheless, ideological functions are not true cognitions of the world. True that the general function of ideology is very important to Althusser, but the origin of falsity of ideology is crucial to him. His structuralist learning is more than a technological flirtation. He says,
"the distortion of ideology is socially necessary as a function of the very nature of the social totality, more precisely, as a function of its determination by its structure, which is made, as all the social; opaque for individuals who occupy a place determined by this structure. The opacity of social structure makes necessarily mythical the representation of the world necessary for social cohesion". <24>

The opaque character of society is overdetermined by the class division in class society. As a result of these, both aspects determines the distorting and mystifying character of ideology.

According to the class division and class structure, ideology itself is bifurcated into various tendencies in class societies. In such class societies, Althusser finds dominant and dominating ideologies. At this point, one can find an analogy between Althusser and Lenin. He closely follows Lenin's tendencies in "What is to be done?" There may be occasions when dominated ideology represents the protest of the oppressed.
As a pre-scientific mode of cognition, ideology appears opposed to scientific mode of cognition. Ideological theoretical practice is opposed to scientific theoretical practice. Even if the case is such, scientific theoretical practice works on the result of ideological theoretical practice to produce scientific concepts. According to Althusser, science "does not 'work' on a purely objective 'given', that of pure and absolute 'facts'. On the contrary, its particular labour consists of elaborating its own scientific facts through a critique of the ideological 'facts' elaborated by an earlier ideological theoretical practice". <25>  

Speaking about 'ideological theoretical practice', he says that such practice produces problems which are not genuine, spurious or false problems. And the solution of this problems were already produced and kept ready outside the process of knowledge.
Thereby, because of this advance production of solution before the problems would appear, the solution that science produces will be arbitrarily not different; it is form the "epistemological break" between ideology and science. Science poses the problems totally different and therefore their solution is not prejudged and imposed in advance by ideological theoretical practice. At this point another analogy could be found between Althusser's 'epistemological break' and Lenin's 'political consideration on the importation of science from without into spontaneous consciousness' of the proletariat.

Althusser speaks about two functional requirement of ideology. On the first place, it is analysed in the context of 'reproduction of relations of production' and of the material existence of ideology in the Ideological State Apparatus which assumes the short form of ISA. Secondly, ideology is seen as a mechanism which constitutes subjects by interpolating them.

Althusser's article on ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) starts with the question of the need of producing the means of production again. He says
that it is absolutely necessary for the capitalist to reproduce the means of production in order to make further production possible. He says that

"The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production. This may be simple (reproducing exactly the previous conditions of production) or on an 'extended scale'. "<26>

In order to exist, it is absolutely necessary for any condition to reproduce the same 'system' of production. Althusser finds two types of reproduction, one, reproducing everything exactly as it were before, and two, reproducing it as an improved version on an extended scale. However, he says that

"It follows that, in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce."
It must therefore reproduce:

1. reproductive forces,

2. the existing relations of production". <27>

The reproduction of circumstances has to be simultaneously done along with production itself, for production to repeat. For that, on the one hand the productive forces must be reproduced, and on the other, the relations of productions are to be reproduced. In reproduction of productive forces, reproduction of labour power is very important, and at the same time risky and tricky. For the labour power to be of any use, they not only must multiply, but also must continue behaving the same way. The reproduction of labour power is done in the following manner.

"It is ensured by giving labour power the material means with which to reproduce itself: by wages". <28>

Explaining wages he says that

"......., wages represent only that part of the value produced by the expenditure of labour power which is indispensable for its reproduction". <29>
Thus only minimum requirement is given away as wages. Althusser says that this minimum does not mean biological minimum, he says that this minimum is historical minimum. Wage implies not only food etc., but also certain other things with out which it is sort of impossible for the workers to live and function. He gives the example of the English labourers habit of taking beer and their French counter part taking wine. This he calls as historically variable minimum. After securing the reproduction of labour by giving wages, what is next needed is the reproduction of the environment of production, or reproduction of productive circumstances.

In the article on ISA, he concretises a distinction which was implicit in his first writings. Earlier he had made a distinction between general function of ideology as cementing the social building and particular functions of ideologies in class societies, which enables the dominant class to continue dominating and repressing. In class societies, the general function of ideology is dominated by the particular function. Thus, he makes a distinction between
theory of ideology in general, and theory of particular ideologies.

The theory of particular ideologies refer to ideologies in concrete historical social formations, depending on certain combination of mode of production and on specific class struggle. Hence, here, ideologies have a history. But for the former, it is different. The theory of ideology in general treats ideology in the following manner:

"Endowed with a structure and functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, in the sense in which that structure and function are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history". <30>

Thus, though particular ideologies have history, ideology in general have no history. In Althusser's early treatment of the concept of ideology he implied a question, how men accepted the tasks and roles given to them by society without questioning. In his later treatment of
ideology another question was implied, that is how
the skills of labour power and labour power itself
are reproduced in capitalist society. He finds that
this reproduction takes place

"in the forms and under the
forms of ideological
subjection". <31>

To make this more explicit, he makes a
distinction between Repressive State Apparatus and
Ideological State Apparatus. Repressive State
Apparatus functions by violence. The employ force
and function. He gives the example of Army,
Government, Administration, Police etc. Ideological
State Apparatus on the other hand functions by
ideology.

"by the exercise of the state
power in the State Apparatuses,
on the one hand the
(Repressive) State Apparatus,
on the other hand the
Ideological State
Apparatus". <32>
Speaking about Ideological State Apparatus, Althusser speaks about various ISAs. In fact, he gives a list of several ISAs. They are,

1. Religious ISA. (The system of different churches).

2. The Educational ISA. (The system of different private schools)

3. The family ISA. (Though family has other functions) 

4. The legal ISA. (Law belongs both to RSA and ISA)

5. The political ISA. (Political system and parties)

6. The trade union ISA.

7. The communication ISA. (Press, Radio, TV etc.)

8. The cultural ISA. (Literature, Arts, Sports etc.)

The reproduction of the relations of production is done with the help of repressive state apparatus and ISA. He says that
"...for the most part, it is secured by the exercise of state power in the (Repressive) State Apparatus, on the one hand the (Repressive) State Apparatus, on the other the Ideological State Apparatus". <33>

Regarding the combined operation of RSA and ISA, Althusser says that

"...the State Apparatus secures by repression the political condition for the action of the Ideological State Apparatus". <34>

So RSA secures the political conditions for ISA to operate upon. Ruling ideology is specially concerned with ISA, and not RSA, to secure the reproduction of relations of production. Althusser says that

"...the Ideological State Apparatus which has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist social formation as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant Ideological State Apparatus, is the educational ideological apparatus". <35>

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Althusser finds that the Educational ISA having prime importance in capitalism. When wages reproduces labour power, other circumstances are by and large reproduced by nothing other than educational ISA. Speaking about ISA of education, Althusser says that

"it takes children from every class at important age, and then for years........it drums into them..........a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology.......or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state.......each mass ejected enroute is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society: the role of the exploited.........the role of the agent of exploitation......of the agent of repression.......or of the professional ideologist". <36>

He says that previously it was the church family couple that guaranteed the proper functioning of ISAs. But now the school-family couple has replaced the church-family couple. In school they successfully train both the exploiters
and the to be exploited ones, teaching them various 'proper' ways etc. of behaving, conducting in societies and types of 'know-hows' which are designed in such a way to produce the desired type of people in the society. The school becomes crucial.

As for the question of general ideology, he now solves the problem of definition. Of the previous two alternative formulations, such as one, ideology as representation of world and two, ideology as a representation of man's 'lived' relation to the world, he reaffirms what he said in "For Marx".

"ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". <37>

Ideology is not produced by a small group of men. It projects not the real world, but the relationship between men and their reality. It doesn't have an ideal existence, but it has a material existence. Ideology
"exists in an apparatus, and its practice or practices". <38>

Men live in ideology. Because men participates when practices within specific ideological state apparatus. Thus, they live in ideology. Therefore, there cannot be any practice except by taking part in or within a definite ISA or ideology.

What precisely Althusser wants to establish is simply this,

"there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects". <39>

But here, it appears that this thesis suffers from duplication. It appears duplicated into imaginary subject and subjects. It is the subjects who holds speculatory relationships with individual subjects. They find themselves as free subjects in
the subject, and are therefore subjected to it. Individual subjects does constitute by submitting to the subject; they act as they are acted by ideology.

Althusser's theory of General ideology and ideology in particulars; i.e., ideology in class societies, create problems to Marxist approach. His theory implies pretension of constituting ideology as an immutable subject across various modes of production. Even if one wants to help Althusser by trying to use abstract concepts making them applicable to various modes of productions, they still can not become object of any general theory. Contrary to Althusser, Marx went the other way.

In Marx, ideology in general have no validity. They are like "productions" or "labour" in general. Such concepts have no substance; and since they do not have any substance, they do not have any validity. Such general concepts, by themselves, they can not explain the way in which they make their appearances in specific situations. It is inconsistent to expect abstract concept to manifest in concrete situations, they do not.
Therefore, there can not be any connection between an abstract concept of ideology in general and concrete ideologies. From such generals we can not start from and make a deduction possible to deduce conditions of the concrete. Though Marx recognizes that labour process in general is common to every social phase of its existence, he also says that

"as the taste of the porridge does not tell you who grew the oats, no more does this simple process tell you of itself what are the social conditions under which it is taking place". <40>

Althusser's theory that particular ideology as depending on ideology in general appears that he is trying to establish something like the relation of part and whole. However, he is clearly mistaken to say that particular ideology is depending on a general theory of ideology.

One can find a shift in Althusser from his early position to 'Lenin and Philosophy'. He undergoes a change from his early position when he reached 'Lenin and Philosophy'.

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Earlier he was of the opinion that the general function of ideology was even applicable to classless societies. But later he thinks that the function is immutable. Throughout the history of class societies, it existed, and existed and present in the same form. Still this change does not consider class struggle. He has not taken care of a very important and crucial aspect of Marxism; Class Contradiction. He has not taken class contradiction into account in defining ideology as well as process of reproduction. He implies that ideology in general as well as ideology of the dominant class are realised in some state apparatus without any problem, and it is very easily imposed upon even against the will, just by the effort of conscious majority. It is this misunderstanding that eventually made him think that teachers are scapegoats and helpless when he was analysing the ISA of the school. He says

"So little do they suspect it that their own devotion contributors to the maintenance and nourishment of this ideological representations of the school.......". <41>
However, at a very later stage he recognizes the abstract character of his previous analysis in a post-scriptum of the article on ISA. Now he is found saying that class struggle must be introduced for the analysis of the ideologies and their realisation in ISAs. Even in the post scriptum on ISA, he fails to solve the problem. Though here he brings together the general mechanism of ideology and the concrete conditions, they are not shown to have any theoretical relation. Class struggle is only introduced as an external addition and therefore it appears as an "over determining factor". As ideology here does not take class struggle into account, its objective role will be concealing class struggle. The early writings of Althusser appears as making attempts to compromise between the necessity of social cohesion 'in general' and class domination 'in particular'.

As ideology looses its historic character, science too becomes alienated form its relations to social contradictions. For him, science makes its entry from without to liberate the working class from their spontaneous ideological consciousnes. As a result, science appears as above class struggle.
Another inconsistency that arises from his abstraction of science and ideology is at the arena of the confrontation between science and ideology. It appears as an abstract confrontation of truth and error, which reminds one of something akin to a war in heaven.

In the essay of self criticism, he is found of trying to correct science and ideology relation. Here he recognizes that Marx could break from bourgeois ideology. To quote him,

"because he took inspiration from the basic ideas of proletarian ideology, and from the first class struggle of the proletariats". <42>

However, even with all their changes, his theory continues to be ahistorical.

To conclude, two main criticisms can be spotted chiefly against Althusser's theory of ideology. First, is none other than the non-historical character of his theory of ideology. The
non-historical character of his theory eventually makes it the theory of social necessity of ideology. Secondly, his science and ideology relation overrate the role of science and forget the importance of revolutionary practice. His structuralism makes ideology an objective functional requirement of all societies.
NOTES


2. Ibid. p.33.

3. Ibid. p.33.

4. Ibid. p.34.


10. Ibid. p.231.

11. Ibid. p.231.


15. Ibid. p.233.


17. Ibid. p.235.


19. Louis Althusser. *For Marx* p.233


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21. Ibid p.49
22. Louis Althusser. For Marx p.232
24. Ibid. p.55.
25. Louis Althusser. For Marx p.184
27. Ibid. p.128.
28. Ibid. p.130.
29. Ibid. pp.130-1.
31. Ibid. p.128.
32. Ibid. p.141.
33. Ibid. p.148.
34. Ibid. p.150.
35. Ibid. p.152.
36. Ibid. p.147.
37. Ibid. p.153.
38. Ibid. p.156.
39. Ibid. p.159.
42. Louis Althusser, Essays in Self Criticism p.121.