

A Brief Discussion of Althusser's Theory of the State - Centered on "Sur La Reproduction"

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Abstract: As an important figure in Western Marxism, Louis Althusser's work "Sur la reproduction" theoretically reconstructs the Marxist theory of the state from the concept of reproduction, and Marx's theory of the state has always been a key issue in the study of Marxism. This paper analyzes the concept of "reproduction" as a starting point for analyzing Althusser's interpretation of Marx's theory of social formations and describes the theory of the state he constructed on this basis. Althusser's complete and rich theory of the state is an important development of the Marxist theory of the state.

Keywords: State; Reproduction; Ideology.

1. Introduction

In the modern economy and society, the importance of the state has been self-evident, and its influence has permeated all public spheres of social and economic life, and even most private spheres. Marx did not have a specialized work exploring the state, but some of his views on the state can be derived from his "Critique of the Gotha Program" and other related works, and a number of classic Marxist writers have also written about the state. In the face of the changing economic and social situation after World War II, many Western Marxists started from Marx's theory on the state, modified and supplemented it on its basis, thus putting forward their understanding and judgment of the new changes in the modern capitalist society, and interpreting the Marxist theory of the state from different perspectives. Althusser is one of the representative figures of Western Marxism. In 1970, Althusser published the article "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus", in which he discussed his theory about ideology, which attracted wide attention once it was put forward, and this famous article was taken out and organized from his book "Sur la reproduction", in which Althusser completely expounded his theory of the state.

2. The Concept of "Reproduction"

Althusser reintroduced the concept of "reproduction" in "Sur la reproduction", focusing research attention on this long-neglected connotation. In "Capital", Marx used "reproduction" to analyze the physiological mechanism of capitalist social formation. The fundamental reason for the constant change of social formations in history does not lie in the continuation of production, but in the interruption of reproduction, because as long as human beings continue to live, production must continue uninterruptedly, but reproduction can be interrupted [1].

Therefore, production must be accompanied by reproduction, specifically the reproduction of the conditions of production on which it depends, and this holds true for any form of society that wishes to continue to exist. Marx pointed out, "It is known to every little child that any nation that ceases to labor, not to mention a year, but a few weeks, will perish" [2]. And the reproduction of the conditions of production is the final condition of production, the

reproduction of the conditions of production is embodied in the reproduction of both the productive forces and the existing relations of production. The reproduction of the former includes the reproduction of the means of production and of labor, of which the means of production is the material condition necessary for material production in any society, and its reproduction is the basis of all production, thus the reproduction of the means of production is very important. However, in the reproduction of both means of production and labor, Althusser attaches more importance to the latter, and thus develops his analysis.

In Althusser's view, the reproduction of labor is secured by providing labor with material means for its own reproduction, that is, through wages [3]. Wages not only satisfy the labor force's own basic survival needs, ensure the existence of the labor force as a living organism, and provide the necessary material conditions for the labor force to be able to reproduce again, but also the wages need to be used for the proletariat's support and education of their children. However, for the reproduction of labor, it is not enough just to guarantee the material conditions. As the complexity of the production process increases and the division of labor in society continues to be refined, the requirements for the labor force itself are also getting higher and higher, thus requiring the training and education of laborers. While learning professional skills and knowledge, the laborers also need to learn, respect and obey the corresponding "norms". This "norm" is basically "the norm of the order established by class rule" [3]. Therefore, the reproduction of labor force needs to produce two effects, one of which is the qualified labor capacity of labor force; and the second is the compliance of labor force with the existing norms of order. Compliance is manifested in the labor force's obedience to the dominant ideology and the ability of the exploiters and repressors to use the dominant ideology, that is, to secure the dominance of the ruling class through language and thought. In this way, ideology and the reproduction of labor are intimately linked, and ideology is thus an important condition for the reproduction of labor.

3. Althusser's Interpretation of Marx's Theory of Social Formations

3.1. Productive Forces and Relations of Production

Regarding the unity of the productive forces and the relations of production,

Marx used the term "fit" to discuss the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production, Althusser argues that the term is still descriptive and that the theory of their unity needs to be continuously explored[3]. In his view, "in the particular unity of the productive forces and the relations of production which make up a given mode of production, it is the relations of production which play a decisive role on the basis of the existing productive forces and within the objective limits which it sets"[3]. Thus, Althusser reinterpreted the traditional statement that "the productive forces determine the relations of production" to mean that the productive forces and the relations of production determine each other.

3.2. Foundation and Superstructure

With regard to the foundation and superstructure, Althusser argues that Marx built a spatial metaphor, also known as the "topographical metaphor," around social formations. This metaphor is able to graphically express the society-state structure constructed by Marx, which can be visualized as an edifice, with the foundation (the substructure) and the superstructure together forming the edifice. The so-called foundation, that is Marx called the socio-economic structure consisting of the sum of the various aspects of the relations of production, is the unity of the productive forces and the relations of production; while the superstructure can be divided into two layers, the legal-political and the ideological. In the traditional Marxist theory, the conclusion reached about this "edifice" is that the superstructure is ultimately determined by the foundation, and that changes in the foundation cause corresponding changes in the superstructure; however, the superstructure is also relatively independent and can have a counteracting effect on the foundation. Althusser recognizes this spatial metaphor of the edifice, which, in his view, allows us to understand the relative positions of the various layers of the social structure and their respective force indices, to recognize the decisive position of the foundation, which has the largest force index, and at the same time forces us to explore the difficult question of the type of force of the superstructure, specifically to show the importance of the question of the relative independence of the superstructure and its reaction to the foundation[3].

After recognizing the advantages of the spatial metaphor of the "edifice," Althusser points out that the major disadvantage of this metaphor is that it remains descriptive. Specifically, this metaphor fails to provide a detailed theoretical explanation of the dynamic relationship between the "foundation" and the "superstructure" and the existence and nature of the "superstructure" itself, and thus remains a descriptive schema. Althusser demanded to go beyond this descriptive formulation to a real theory, "Acknowledging the existence of a truth in practice is not the same as recognizing that truth (not the same as ascending to a theory)" [4], he indicates that this is not a denial of the metaphor, but rather that it itself demands transcendence, a rise from a practical form to a theoretical one. Further Althusser seeks a new kind of precision by thinking

about the existence and nature of the superstructure in terms of reproduction on the basis of Marx's theory of social formations[3]. First, Althusser inherits Marx's distinction between two layers within the superstructure, the legal-political superstructure and the ideological superstructure, and he emphasizes that there are still different indices of force between the two layers, with the former is usually more effective than the latter, and the latter has a certain relative independence that can counteract the former. But he thinks that this distinction is still in the original logic, so it is still a description, with the limitation of description.

Althusser demands to move on, and he proposes a new way of representing the two layers of the superstructure, the law-state and the various ideologies. Here, Althusser uses ideology to represent what social consciousness refers to, and connects law and the state with a hyphen to express what "legal-politics" refers to, and represents the placing of law before the state, which also leads to "a difficult question that should have been phrased in entirely different terms"[3], that is, a series of questions about law, the state, and ideology. The answers to these questions can only be found through the perspective of reproduction.

4. Theory of Law

Law is a system of rules, codified in a code, which people must observe and avoid violating in their daily lives. Althusser chose to begin his theory of the state with a discussion of law because "according to the materialist conception of history, the determining factor in the historical process is, after all, the production and reproduction of real life"[5], so it is necessary to study any form of society from the perspective of production and reproduction, and therefore from the perspective of production relations[6]. For the social form of capitalism, the concept of "legal power" is the term for its relations of production, and the purpose of the law of the capitalist countries is to safeguard the relations of production in the capitalist society as well as a series of social relations arising from it.

Law is a systemic being, characterized by its tendency to eliminate its own contradictions and to encompass all situations, while at the same time it is necessarily formal and therefore capable of being systematized. The two make the law formally universal, and it applies to and can be invoked by all those who are legally defined and recognized as legal persons. But the form of law has meaning only insofar as it acts on a specific content that is absent in itself, namely, the relations of production and their consequences, and thus it is possible to say that the law exists on the basis of a content that is completely abstracted from itself, namely, the relations of production, and that therefore the law, while concealing the relations of production, expresses and safeguards them[3]. Law is formal, a system of rules, which has no real power to safeguard the relations of production. Thus, the law is repressive and requires a corresponding system of punishment to truly guarantee the existence of the law. In concrete terms, this is manifested in the fact that the Civil Code is followed by the Penal Code, which is the realization of the Civil Code at the level of law, and the implementation of the Penal Code requires the support of material coercive forces, which in this case are the repressive state apparatus, such as the police, the courts, the fines, the prisons and so on, and thus in this sense the law and the state become one and the same[3].

Thus, the repressive State apparatus, the aforementioned set

of repressive institutions, guarantees the concrete practice of the law, but everyone knows, based on common sense, that these institutions cannot follow everyone at all times. But even without the presence of these institutions, most people would still consciously obey the law. The reason why people do so is due to the ideology of law and its complement, the ideology of morality. This ideology "warns" everyone that they must obey the norms of the law or be punished. The ideology of law is different from law in that it incorporates law into an ideological discourse consisting of an entirely different set of notions, and thus does not belong to the rule system of law [3]. Moreover, this ideology belongs to the unconscious realm, which means that the legal ideology does not need to deliberately remind people to work, specifically, when the subject receives the "call" of this ideology will consciously comply with the law and keep "honest".

Thus, law relies not only on the repressive state apparatus, but at the same time is linked to the ideology of law-morality and functions through both. In fact, in the practice of law, the repressive state apparatus does not always act, but only intervenes when necessary, whereas the legal-moral ideology always intervenes in human consciousness and thus functions, so that law is found to function primarily through the legal-moral ideology. Thus, Althusser transforms the two layers of the superstructure in Marx's theory of social formations, the foundation and the superstructure, into a mutually supportive whole through his discussion of law. The ideology of law-morality and the ideological state apparatus of law as its realization, plays a crucial and decisive role in the social formation of capitalism, not only combining the superstructure with the substructure, but also integrating the superstructure into the substructure [3]. Specifically, the combination of the legal-moral ideology with the state becomes the legal-ideological state apparatus, and together with the repressive state apparatus, makes the law work, and the bourgeois law guarantees the production of capitalist society and the reproduction of its production relations. The fundamental relations of production need to be secured through the superstructure of law, the state, and ideology. Thus, although the foundation fundamentally determines the superstructure, the superstructure's reaction is also very influential, and the superstructure guarantees the continued existence of the foundation itself.

5. The State and the State apparatus

5.1. Althusser's Understanding of the Marxist Theory of the State

Although Marx did not have a Theory of the State as systematic as "Capital", Marx was always concerned with the question of the state, and there were discussions of the state in his writings at different times, as well as by numerous subsequent Marxist classic writers. Since the publication of works such as "The German Ideology", and especially in Marx's writings on the Paris Commune and Lenin's "The State and Revolution", the state has been viewed as the repressive apparatus that maintains the domination of one class over another, that is, the police, the courts, the prisons, and the military, which directly intervenes when the police are unable to control matters, as well as heads of state, government departments and so on above these institutions.

In Althusser's view, this theory is still descriptive, and the view of the state as a repressive apparatus is still to some extent a "metaphor" that needs to be supplemented by the

Marxist theory of the state. To this end, he distinguishes between state power and state apparatus on the one hand, and on the other hand, he proposes the ideological state apparatus (AIE), arguing that the state apparatus can be divided into two types: repressive and ideological. The most obvious difference between state power and state apparatus is that state power will change due to revolution and other forms, while state apparatus will not change with the former change, and it has a certain degree of stability and can exist for a long time. The mastery of power is the primary problem confronting a nation, around which all political class struggles revolve, and when state power is mastered, the power to dominate the various state apparatuses, which constitute the nature of the state itself, is possessed [3].

5.2. The Ideological State Apparatus

Althusser puts forward the concept of "ideological state apparatus" without defining it clearly, and he first lists the various institutions of the AIE: the AIE of education, the AIE of the family, the AIE of religion, and so on. Every ideological state apparatus is a system in which there are various defined institutions, organizations and corresponding practices. It is in the practices of the various institutions and organizations in this system that all or part of the ideology of the state is realized. Among them, Althusser considers the educational and familial AIE to be the most important of the many ideological state apparatuses, which play a dominant role and are in a position of dominance [3].

The main difference between the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus lies in the following: first, the nature of the institutions to which they belong is different. Generally speaking, repressive state apparatuses such as government agencies, police, and military belong to public institutions, while most ideological state apparatuses belong to private institutions, which include churches, families, and schools, among others. The reason why Althusser categorized some private institutions as state apparatus is that he believed that the state, as the state of the ruling class, the criterion of whether an institution belongs to the state apparatus lies in its ability to carry out the functions of the state, and as long as it can carry out the functions of the state, it belongs to the state apparatus, whereas whether the institution itself belongs to the public nature or the private nature is unimportant.

Secondly, the way in which they function is different. Violence is the main means by which the repressive state apparatus performs its function, while the ideological state apparatus functions mainly through ideological means such as admonition and persuasion. It should be noted that this distinction is not absolute, because in Althusser's view the state apparatus has a dual function, and both may function through both violence and ideology [3]. For example, the military and the police, as representatives of the repressive state apparatus, will function not only through repression, but also through ideological means, ensuring unity internally and propagating their values externally [7]; and such specialized institutions as schools and churches will not only use ideological means, but also punishments, expulsions, and other "violent" ways to make people obey the rules. But for the ideological state apparatus, the violent means of repression are rather subdued, almost symbolic, just as for the repressive state apparatus, the ideological approach is secondary. This is where the most significant difference between the two, and it is this that makes it impossible to confuse the two.

Third, the number of the two is different. The number of state apparatuses of both repressive and ideological types is one and many, respectively. Despite the great differences between these ideological state apparatuses, they still have unity and exist in a unity, and it is the dominant ideology that unites the diversity of the different institutions.

Summarizing the above differences between the two types of state apparatus, repressive and ideological, but it should be noted that they both belong to the state apparatus, and both have the same purpose, their common purpose is to ensure that the ruling class can continue to exploit the exploited class, and above all, to guarantee the reproduction of the relations of production in which exploitation is able to exist and to take place, because in the class form of society, the relations of production are relations of exploitation[3].

5.3. Class Struggle Theory

Althusser considers the two AIEs of education and the family to be the most important of the many ideological state apparatuses, but he focuses on the political and trade union AIEs, which leads to the question of class struggle. In Althusser, the state is a dynamic structure in which there are multiple elements (forces) interacting with each other while constantly maintaining themselves. Class repression is a force, as is the ideologization of the class[3]. Thus Althusser puts the proletariat's political class struggle organization (the party) and economic class struggle organization (the trade unions) into the list of bourgeois state AIE's as well, because they gain recognition due to force.

In the political sphere, it is through the class struggle that the proletarian ideology is retained within the AIE of the bourgeois state and continues to struggle against the bourgeois ideology. At the same time, however, the struggle of the proletarian organization within the bourgeois AIE also faces great risks, the most representative of which is the risk of class cooperation, because the proletarian organization is born out of the external class struggle. When through class cooperation, there is a great risk of transforming the external class struggle into the internal class struggle of the bourgeois AIE, and specifically of falling into the political "game" of the bourgeois AIE, and thus of being melted and dissolved into the "rules" of that "game". The proletarian organization must therefore be alert to this risk and constantly expand the scope of the class struggle, whose ultimate mission is to overthrow and destroy the bourgeois state power[3].

In the economic sphere, great importance is attached to the status of the trade union struggle, which has the nature of a direct economic class struggle. The actions of the party members in the enterprises must be deeply rooted in the actions of the trade unionists in their struggle for concrete material conditions, and the golden rule for the revolutionary struggle is that "the political class struggle is rooted as deeply as possible in the economic class struggle, in the trade union struggles of the masses for the sake of their material demands" [3]. This is because the economic class struggle ultimately determines the political class struggle. But only the political class struggle can lead the masses in this decisive battle, so it

has priority, and it is important to point out that this priority is based on the fact that the economic class struggle, which is the foundation, is on the right track and is constantly deepening [3]. This theory of class struggle of Althusser comes precisely from his interpretation of Marx's theory of social formations.

6. Summary

Althusser transforms Marx's metaphor of the "edifice" of the society-state into a topological plane of the society-state that constantly maintains its structure through reproduction. The superstructure and the substructure (foundation) are no longer topographically dichotomized, but fully intertwined, influencing and interacting with each other, instead of the original abstract vertical "determining" and "counteracting", and the relationship between law, state, and ideology in the superstructure is closely intertwined. In general, Althusser developed the Marxist theory of the state and analyzed it more precisely. In his view, the state contains both the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus, which are interwoven together to safeguard the existing relations of production and make them continuously reproduced, which in class society is the exploitation and domination of the ruling class over the ruled class. Althusser's theory of the state complements and enriches the Marxist theory of the state, and the numerous theses he puts forward are still of great significance today; in addition to this, the methodology adopted by Althusser in conducting his research is noteworthy, as he studies philosophical issues from the perspective of economics, and this kind of interdisciplinary research method is worthy of our reference and study, and for the study of Marxism, it can help us to better connect the theories of different parts of Marxism. To study and research Marxism more deeply on the whole.

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