Chapter Six
Louis Althusser: Ideological State-Apparatuses and Subjection

6.1. The relationship to Gramsci

It is obvious that Althusser based his ideology-theory on essential aspects of Gramsci’s analyses of civil society and hegemonic apparatuses.¹ As he himself indicated, his distinction between repressive and ideological state-apparatuses is formed according to the model of Gramsci’s differentiation of ‘political society’ and ‘civil society’, coercion and hegemony.² The ideological state-apparatuses reproduce the relations of production under the ‘shield’ [bouclier] of the repressive state-apparatuses.³ Even the treatment of the ideological apparatuses as state-apparatuses would not be comprehensible without Gramsci’s enlargement of a traditional narrow concept of the state to the wider concept of the ‘integral state’. Both Gramsci’s ‘integral state’ and Althusser’s ideological state-apparatuses include those institutions and associations that are usually considered to be ‘private’, and Althusser consequently refers to Gramsci when he declares that the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ institutions is secondary because what matters is ‘how they function’.⁴

². Althusser 2001, p. 95, n. 7; Althusser 1995, p. 281, n. 133.
state-apparatuses emphasised by Althusser presupposes Gramsci’s pluralisation of the ‘superstructures’ (in opposition to the usual usage at the time, of a singular ‘superstructure’). Althusser’s insight that the resistance of the subalterns can gain a hearing in the ideological state-apparatuses by exploiting the contradictions that exist there, or by conquering ‘combat positions’, in turn implicitly takes up elements from Gramsci’s considerations on the ‘war of position’.

Nevertheless, ‘it quickly became clear that Althusser had come not to praise Gramsci, but to bury him’. This can already be seen by the gesture indicating that Gramsci’s reflections were no more than unsystematic ‘intuitions’ and fragmentary notes, which implies that it is only now, thanks to Althusser himself, that they have been elevated to the systematic level of an ideology-theory. We have already seen how Althusser criticised Gramsci for a ‘historicism’ that would eliminate the distinction between ideology and science (see above, Section 5.2.).

In addition he asserts that Gramsci deals with the question of the material base of ideologies in a ‘mechanistic’ and ‘economistic’ way. The criticism culminates in the assessment that Gramsci’s humanist and historicist materialism ‘relapses’ into the ideological concept of history and even reproduces the ‘basic theoretical principles of the Second International’s economistic and mechanistic interpretation’. Given Gramsci’s continuous struggle against the economism and mechanism of both the Second and the Third International, this reproach seems far-fetched at best. Althusser’s attitude to Gramsci is characterised by a peculiar combination of deference to his achievements and polemical attempts to pigeonhole him in a way that makes it easy to take his distance from him. This strategy corresponds to Althusser’s general tendency to assimilate the most disparate figures in Western Marxism, for example Lukács, Korsch and Gramsci, Sartre and Goldmann, Della Volpe and Coletti, within ‘a single problematic of historicism, derived from Hegel, reworked by Feuerbach and the young Marx’, a typology, which, according to Elliot, ‘borders on travesty’: ‘Althusser’s panorama of the contemporary scene bears a strong resemblance to the “expressive totality” he reprehended in the leading representatives of West-European Marxism’.

Leaving aside Althusser’s rhetoric exaggeration, which was co-determined at least in part by the mechanisms of distinction imposed by the ‘market of ideas’, I think the main theoretical differences could be identified as follows: whereas Gramsci was primarily interested in the possibilities of how subaltern classes develop the hegemonic capacities to occupy the tiers of the superstructures,

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