

Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

The Imaginary

A: al-ḥayālī. – E: the imaginary. – F: l’imaginaire.
R: mnimoe, vobražaemoe. – S: lo imaginario.
C: xiangxiang, xugou 想象、虚构

According to the Enlightenment, the imaginary was the non-real or fictitious, which should be replaced by a rational knowledge of reality. For the romantics, it was a productive force, which, by imagining the world as completely different from the factual world, had the power to change it. **Marx** understood the imaginary as a reality *sui generis*: the way in which the capitalist mode of production ‘appears’ and by which it convincingly ‘works’. Clarification about the imaginary is necessary in order to know the world of capitalism in its reality – as an inverted [*verkehrte*] reality. Ernst **Bloch** tried to reintegrate the imaginary as a productive force into Marxism: as the ‘warm stream’ which inspires the ‘cold stream’ of Marxist analysis (**Bloch** 1986), instead of undermining it by otherworldliness.

The productive moment of the imaginary is also stressed by Jean-Paul **Sartre** who published his phenomenological treatise of the same name during the German occupation. If the imaginary supposes a free consciousness, nevertheless the imagined Unreal is always constituted ‘on the ground of the world that it denies’ (2004, 186). Every ‘concrete and real situation of the consciousness in the world is pregnant with imagination’ (ibid.). The subversive message is that, even in a situation of defeat, individual consciousness has the possibility to negate this new world.

Louis **Althusser** was the first theorist who elaborated the imaginary as a constitutive category of Marxist theory itself. The imaginary is a ‘misrecognition’ and, at the same time, a

‘recognition’ of reality, that is, of a original relation of humans to reality that can be theoretically understood but not overcome. Only on this condition will it be possible to make the imaginary productive as a specific ‘battle-field [*Kampfplatz*]’ for the transformation of social relations.

1. The term ‘Einbildungskraft’ in German was intensified by romanticism. It derives from the Greek *phantasia* and the Latin *imaginatio*, and was translated into English and the Romance-languages with ‘imagination’. It is an indispensable productive force for the concept of alternative designs of another world. ‘L’imagination au pouvoir’ was the slogan of Paris students during May 1968; it became the ‘signature of an epoch’ (**Barck** 1993, 1). In *Discours préliminaire* to the *Encyclopédie*, the imaginary, together with art, was seen as productive labour and participated in the unfettering of productive forces. ‘The defamation of fantasy or its relegation to a special domain, marked off by the division of labour, is the original phenomenon of the regression of the bourgeois spirit’ (**Adorno** 1976, 51). Charles **Baudelaire**, who defended the imaginary against the realistic battle cry of ‘Copiez la nature’ as ‘reine des facultés’ (1859/1971, 24), confronted the fierce opposition of all the theories of art that wanted to force the imagination into the chains of aesthetic rules. On the other hand, when the imaginary lacks an orientation towards the social reality for which the productive relation to the infinity of the possible has to prove itself, what remains is only a path towards the internal [*Innerlichkeit*]. The sufferings of Anton Reiser, the protagonist of Karl Philipp **Moritz**’s novel of the same name, living in material constraint and pious bigotry, appear to him as ‘the sufferings

[...] of a vivid imagination' that deprive him of the joys of his youth (**Moritz** 1926, 77). The imaginary does not remain untouched by the productivity of imagination. Be it a plebeian hero like Eulenspiegel, who holds up a mirror to the duped mass, giving the imaginary a moment of self-knowledge, or the memory that provides the mirror to establish a sense of community – the imaginary is always a mode of mis/recognition.

2. **Marx** uses the word for the first time in his critique of **Hegel's** philosophy of right and its left-Hegelian continuation. **Hegel's** method of resolving the problem of a bourgeois-civil society whose competition threatens to destroy it 'from above' by defining the state as 'the reality of the ethical idea' (*PR*, § 257), according to **Marx**, is a speculative reversal of what really occurs. The conclusions of such a procedure are, by necessity, imaginary: 'the actual relation of family and civil society to the state is conceived as its *internal imaginary* activity. Family and civil society are the premises of the state; they are the genuinely active elements, but in speculative philosophy things are inverted' (**Marx** 1975a, 8) The 'realisation' of this speculative philosophy is the bourgeois state, which can declare all its citizens free and equal by abstracting from social reality. In this way, the state itself is 'imagined' as the realm of freedom and equality. In this realm, the human being is 'the imaginary member of an illusory sovereignty, [...] deprived of his real individual life, and endowed with an unreal universality' (**Marx** 1975b, 154).

The question of the foundation of the 'efficacy' of the imaginary is seen as already answered by **Feuerbach**. His critique of religion 'has torn up the imaginary flowers from the chain'. The task now is to consider critically reality itself, 'so that [man] will shake off the chain and pluck the living flower' (**Marx** 1975c, 176). **Marx** emphatically demonstrates an understanding of the reason why human beings imagine a better world: 'religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress' (175).

In the critique of political economy, **Marx** encounters the phenomenon of the imaginary

once again. 'Things which in and for themselves are not commodities, things such as conscience, honour, etc., can be offered for sale by their holders, and thus acquire the form of commodities through their price. [...] The expression of price is in this case imaginary, like certain quantities in mathematics. On the other hand, the imaginary price-form may also conceal a real value-relation or one derived from it, as for instance the price of uncultivated land, which is without value because no human labour is objectified in it' (**Marx** 1976, 197). This imaginative dimension characterises the conceptuality of political economy itself, which becomes the object of his critique: 'In the expression "value of labour", the concept of value is not only completely extinguished, but inverted, so that it becomes its contrary. It is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth' (677). Thus, the imaginary concerns not only a form of thinking but the way in which reality itself appears: 'These imaginary expressions [...] are categories for the forms of appearance of essential relations' (ibid.). The imaginary in this case is not a product of subjective imagination but 'objective': not just 'semblance [*Schein*]', but 'appearance [*Erscheinung*]'. 'That in their appearance things are often presented in an inverted way is something fairly familiar in every science, apart from political economy' (ibid.) The point of **Marx's** critique is to break the persuasive power of the imaginary by the power of science. However, because what appears consists in a 'reversal' of 'things', scientific clarification reverses this only theoretically. The discovery of its imaginary character, while destroying 'the semblance of the merely accidental determination of the magnitude of the value of the products of labour', 'by no means abolishes that determination's material form' (168) because the imaginary, which appears here, 'represents' the very real power of capital.

3. Ernst **Bloch** follows **Marx's** critique of the imaginary character of the bourgeois state, the division of *bourgeois* and *citoyen*. 'The citizen [...] was conceived as a member of a non-egotistical and therefore still imaginary polis' (**Bloch** 1986, 932). However, this citizen who

precedes the ‘guiding image of the comrade’ (933), according to **Bloch**, is not only an abstraction that distracts from reality and therefore has to be exposed. ‘Guiding images’, ‘despite their class basis’, still retain an appeal ‘as if the virtue desired in them was not yet wholly done or done for’ (932). Here there is ‘a possible heritage’ that causes ‘a kind of loss, a kind of rediscovery, a kind of obligation which arouses longing’ (ibid.). The imaginary, conceived in this way, is ‘productive’: ‘wishful portraits of being truly human [...] in experimenting variety, in exemplariness which is not anywhere discharged’ (ibid.). That is, admittedly, valid only if the ‘cold stream’ of Marxist analysis is supposed to set this ‘warm stream’ of the utopian on the firm ground of the reality of class-society. But the other way around is valid as well: without utopian, imaginary ‘guiding images’ like that of the *citoyen*, the analysis is only cold and it will be difficult to spur the people: ‘Never without inheritance, least of all without that of the primal intention: of the Golden Age. But Marxism, the coldest of detectives in all its *analyses*, takes the *féerie* seriously, takes up the *dream of a Golden Age* practically’ (1458). The imaginary flower of romanticism should not simply be plucked but ‘inherited’ as well.

4. Louis **Althusser** understands the category of the imaginary as the original relation of the human being to reality. Before we recognise reality scientifically, we already have an idea, an image [*imago*] of it. But there is no ‘afterwards’: the imaginary relation is constitutive for being human; it can be recognised but not overcome. As such, it is the ‘place’ of the ideological: ‘Ideology is a “Representation” of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence’ (**Althusser** 1984a, 36).

Apart from his theory of ideology, **Althusser** also has another approach to the problem of the imaginary: the art that by consciously working with images is able to play with them and to assemble them in such a way that the dominant ideology is dismantled.

4.1. **Spinoza** initially became important for **Althusser** (cf. *FM* and *RC*) because the distinction between ‘imaginatio’ and ‘ratio’

(*Ethics* II, prop. 40, schol. 2) offered him the possibility to distinguish between Marxian theory, as scientific, and ideology. **Spinoza** with his ‘theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true [...] explains to us why **Marx** could not possibly become **Marx** except by founding a theory of history and a philosophy of the historical distinction between ideology and science’ (**Althusser** & **Balibar** 1979, 16 et sq). The practical-political meaning of this difference was to create space within the Stalinist-dominated Communist movement for a free science. But, at that time already, his concern was not only to reject the ‘theoretical claims’ of ideology but also to recognise ‘its practical function’ (**Althusser** 1997, 229). Since his work on the ideological state-apparatus (ISA) in 1969–70, at the latest, the importance of **Spinoza** for **Althusser** is above all that he developed ‘the first theory of ideology ever thought out’ (**Althusser** 1976, 135), a theory of ideology in which the imaginary is not seen ‘as a psychological category’ but as ‘the category through which the world is thought’ (**Althusser** 1996b, 114). **Althusser** thinks in the first place of what **Spinoza** in the *Ethics* says about the ‘first level of knowledge’, the imaginary: the fantastic idea (‘*imaginatio*’) that ‘all natural things act on account of an end as they [men] themselves do’, ‘that all the things that happen, happen on account of them’ (*Ethics* I, appendix). However, the idea of human beings that the world turns around them and around that which is useful and agreeable for them certainly has a connection with reality in the form of a ‘*corpus externum*’, but mediated ‘through the ideas of affection of its body [*corporis*]’ (*Ethics* II, prop. 26, dem). As **Althusser** interpreted the type of knowledge of the imaginary, it is ‘not at all [...] a “piece of knowledge”, but [...] the material world of men *as they live it*, that of their concrete and historical existence’ (**Althusser** 1976, 136).

Spinoza’s theory of the imaginary was, above all, a critique of religion with its idea that ‘God has made everything on account of man’ (*Ethics* I, appendix). This theory was interesting for **Althusser** as a critique of the fantastic idea of modern, bourgeois man, as if the whole world turns around his

'I' – formulated conceptually by **Descartes** with the 'cogito, ergo sum'. Spinoza rejected what was seen as 'the origin of all western philosophy' (**Althusser** 1996b, 115). This is the concrete imagination that **Althusser** has in view in his theory of ideology, even when he deals with 'ideology in general'.

Althusser found in **Spinoza** an ideology-theoretical relevant application of his concept of the imaginary, namely, in his reflections 'the Jewish State and its ideology in the *Theological-Political Treatise*' (*TTP*) (**Althusser** 1982, 19 et sq.). Here, 'in the *history* of the Jewish people', the imaginary works 'in a practical form' (**Althusser** 1976, 136). He refers here to **Spinoza's** positive interpretation of the prophets in Israel who by their power of imagination [*potentia imaginandi*] are qualified to tell the people (which only can be approached by images) stories that give them the possibility to organise themselves as 'a society with fixed laws' without which human beings cannot live 'securely and in good health' (**Spinoza** 2007, 46 et sq.) – a 'desire' that, admittedly, is not the highest (the knowledge of truth for its own sake), but which is the only thing that counts for the people and which is the condition of the freedom of thought for the seeker of truth (the philosophers) (Ch. XX). What distinguishes the Jewish people in this relationship is that its religion, its belief in what God wants and demands is so exclusively 'political', directed to the organisation of the state (Ch. XIX). Their religion, therefore, is no less fantastic than what other peoples believe, though considerably more useful and thus more effective. Human beings imagine precisely the world that is useful for them and agreeable. In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the extent to which this imagination can be meaningful becomes clear: as a political ideology, which does not locate the goal of the imaginary at the end of or beyond history, but seeks it in politics itself.

This application of the imaginary is to be found again in **Althusser's** considerations on a *proletarian ideology*. This is 'an ideology of a political character'; the dominant idea is that 'of the class struggle which envisages the abolition of classes and the establishment of com-

munism' (**Althusser** 1983, 463). However, unlike **Spinoza**, the imagining subject is not 'the' human being or the 'people', but the members of the working class imagining a world that is useful and agreeable especially for them. This ideology constitutes them as a 'fighter-subject' (462) which, informed by the experience of class-struggle and the Marxist science of history, rejects the imagination of a sovereign and autonomous ruling subject (of the great God of religion or the little bourgeois god of bourgeois ideology) and opposes to it the fantastic sentence from the *Internationale*: 'No saviours from on high deliver / No trust we have in prince or peer / Our own right hand the chains must shiver / Chains of hatred, greed and fear' (**Althusser** 1995, 234). The image that human beings make of their world is thus not simply one to which they have to subjugate themselves. They search for images in which they can recognise themselves. These images are not just invented but always already connected with existing images.

4.2. As clear as it is that **Althusser** owes his concept of the imaginary to psychoanalysis, it is nevertheless difficult to determine exactly how he uses it. The text in which he published his theory of ideology (**Althusser** 1984a, 1–60) claims a relation between 'Freud's proposition that the the *unconscious is eternal*' and his own 'proposition: ideology has no history'. **Althusser** even calls this relation 'theoretically necessary' but leaves open how the connection can be thought (35). He does not refer back to the brief attempt at clarification he made in 'Freud and Lacan' (1964). **Althusser** deleted the relevant sections in the original version of 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses' (published posthumously in 1995). Obviously, he was not sure of the matter. Nevertheless, from this text and others published after his death, it is possible to make a reconstruction regarding how he was feeling his way towards this relation.

What interested **Althusser** in psychoanalysis in the first place was its analysis of the anthropogenesis that precedes the conscious existence of human beings [*bewusstes Menschsein*]: 'the *unconsciousness* and its laws' (**Althusser** 1984a, 156). Humanisation runs through

the symbolic order, by which the biological human child is inserted into an already ruling order (166). This symbolic order can only succeed because the child first receives an image of itself: the *imaginary* order (161 et sq.). It will find its place in the world necessarily through images; its relation to reality – its own and of others – is essentially imaginary. **Althusser** follows here **Lacan** (**Lacan** 1977, 6 et sqq) in his presentation of the moment in which the child receives an image of itself and recognises: that is me – a ‘recognising’ that, at the same time, is a ‘misrecognising’: it is ‘only’ an image of the ‘I’. This original ‘recognising/misrecognising’-structure situates ‘the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which always be irreducible for the individual alone’ (2). To this extent, this explanation applies to ideology in general: what is meant is an ‘eternal’ constellation, not a specific ideology.

However, the supposedly generalised validity of the psychoanalysis of anthropogenesis is, in fact, very specific. **Althusser** also cannot negate this specificity: in the imaginary order, there already appears the mother who holds up the mirror for the child, therefore determining this order as an Oedipal one (**Althusser** 1984b, 162). The human child ‘falls’ into the ‘immediate familial milieu’, not into ‘society in general or “culture” in general’ (**Althusser** 1996a, 71). Whatever **Althusser** may claim, the structure of the symbolic can only be localised ‘in the specific forms of the reality of the familial environment’ (73). The ‘fantasies’ of the child are caught from the beginning in a ‘family ideology’ (**Althusser** 1984a, 50). The familial constellation seems therefore to be an original moment in the reproduction of social relations. **Althusser** went in this direction by ‘coupling’ the school, which he thought to be dominant, with the family, without working out this connection further (31).

At least once, however, he did indicate the individual-historical primary meaning of the family. He illustrates the thesis that ‘ideology in general always already interpellates individuals who are always-already subjects’ (**Althusser** 1995, 229) with the help of the ‘development’ of the little Louis (!) who, inter-

pellated as a subject by one or another ideology, is ‘always-already’ a subject, i.e., ‘already a familial subject’ (*ibid.*). Of course, he also cancelled this passage in the published version. He does not want to say it, but says it nevertheless. At the same time, with this, he also suggests that ideology in general, despite its general claim, in fact does hint at this specific socialisation. The imaginary relationship of human beings to their real conditions of existence is always their relation to *this* condition of existence, the condition of the ‘family’. The relationship between psychoanalysis and ideology-theory could then be thought in the following way: psychoanalysis explicates the ‘eternity’ of ideology from the fact of the ‘always-already’ of this social relation. A definition that **Althusser** himself gave also goes in this direction, although it apparently says the contrary: ‘one cannot produce a theory of psychoanalysis without founding it in historical materialism (on which the theory of the formations of the familial ideology are dependent in the last instance)’ (**Althusser** 1993, 54). Only historical materialism can explicate familial ideology as a moment within the reproduction of society as a whole, which in its turn is the real condition of existence of the family. However, because **Althusser** *finds* psychoanalysis in historical materialism and does not dissolve it, he also implicitly states that it explicates something that only it and no another analysis is able to explicate: the paradoxical phenomenon that ‘culture precedes itself’ (1996b, 91). It is ‘the law of culture’, that is, the Oedipal, familial constellation, that *a priori* ‘conditions all the inculturation of this small human being’ (81). Psychoanalysis, in this way, helps historical materialism to understand a fundamental dimension of socialisation. To this extent, psychoanalysis is, in the words of **Althusser**’s student Michel **Tort**, ‘a component discipline on the continent of historical materialism’ (**Tort** 1970; cf. **Ghisu** 1995, 127 et sqq.).

If psychoanalysis is right in this respect, however, the question is whether the notion that social being [*gesellschaftliches Sein*] determines consciousness [*Bewusstsein*] does not lose its emancipatory sense. How will human beings

ever liberate themselves from this original constellation – this structure of submission that exists already before the individual subject exists (Althusser 1994, 73)? ‘Does this not presuppose a determinism that treats the individual as an effect of the structures that precede it and found its existence’ (74)? Althusser’s answer remains vague: ‘Thus one of the most noble concerns of our theory is to reduce a little the theoretical distance between the determining and the determined’ (74). In the theory of ideology he did publish, he only thematised the class-struggle as the ‘outside’ of ideology that provides for a movement against the dominant ideology from within it (Althusser 1984a, 59).

Via psychoanalysis, however, Althusser indicates an ‘outside’ of ideology that brings familial ideology in particular into permanent disorder: the unconscious. At stake here is the ‘abyss [*abîme*]’ that goes ‘alongside the *Ich*’ (Althusser 2003a, 78), a ‘something’ that fights against this order, a war that is lost by most people – they are ‘in order’ – but for some people (‘fighters!’) (Althusser 1984b, 21) never finishes. However, Althusser did not make this war productive for the ideological struggle, as he did with class-war – perhaps because these fighters, in their resistance, were too destined to remain patients. He did give an indication: the unconscious may be fixed to images offered by ideology, but it can ‘play’ with them (Althusser 1993, 109). Althusser sees how a oppressing ideology (e.g., Nazism) permits and manipulates this play (fantasies of violence). From his perspective, however, a playing with oppressing ideology itself is also conceivable: the unconscious “selects” within the ideological imaginary the forms, elements or relations that “fit” it’ (ibid.). However authoritarian ideology ‘always-already’ may be, the ‘selection’ of its counter-ideology can turn out to be very anti-authoritarian. The imaginary is thus a ‘battlefield’.

4.3. The critique that Althusser’s theory of ideology ‘eternalised’ socialisation from above is also connected to the way in which he handled psychoanalysis. He comes ‘to the conception, one of resignation for historical materialism, of leaving responsibility for the

ideological in general to psychoanalysis, cancelling the deconstruction of the ideological out of the Marxist research agenda’ (PIT 1979, 203). It seems, however, to be more likely that Althusser managed to avoid the threat of a resigned conception by eventually not making psychoanalysis the foundation of his theory of ideology in general, but by leaving it as an analogy between the two. Otherwise, he would have needed to make familial ideology, as the first representation of the imaginary relation of human beings to their conditions of existence, the centre of his theory of ideology. He did not do this, perhaps because he could not see how, in that case, an ideological struggle with a perspective of liberation would still be possible. That does not make this critique obsolete. In particular, if one, differently from Althusser, understands ideology in general as the generality of this particular ideology, the question remains of whether ‘ideal socialisation from above’ (PIT 1979, 181) is not absolutised by the fact that resistance can only modify it, but never bring about its breakdown. Here, we need the ‘analytical separation of general-historical functions and their historically changing implementation, specific for a determinate social formation’ (PIT 1979, 179). Should not the generality of the Oedipal-familial constellation be put into question – as an impermissible generalisation of a temporally and culturally situated phenomenon (cf. Haug 1993, 17 *passim*)? Could one not think of a generality more general than this one: a relation between parents/elders and children in which the elders pass down to the youngsters their equality? If we think this way, then, of course, it is under the concrete historical condition of an unequally organised society, even only as the imagination of a world in which things would run totally differently, a world of which we have an image but that still awaits its realisation. This image is necessary because it mobilises the longing for this world. And it is possible: because of this ‘something’ that from the beginning on fights against the ‘law of culture’.

4.4. To (de)mobilise imagination consciously is the peculiarity of art. Art ‘plays’ – ‘with words, with images’ (Althusser 1994/5,

594). It plays ideology, it makes the (world-) picture of the dominant order attractive, but it can also play *with* ideology, take advantage of the ‘playing ground’ that ideology offers to imagination. That is ‘authentic art’ that ‘maintains a certain *specific relationship*’ with ideology (Althusser 1984c, 174). Art produces an ‘internal distance’, ‘which gives us a critical “view” of [ideology]’ (177). It shows the ideological of ideology so the ‘spectators’ (observers, reader) can dissociate themselves from ideology (Althusser 1979, 219). The theatre of Brecht offers an example of this. The audience goes into a theatre to let a mirror of reality be held up to them, a mirror that meets the ideological expectation of the spectators: ‘That’s exactly right! How true!’ (Althusser 2003b, 146). Brecht, however, shows what games are played with us (142). The mirror has to be shattered: ‘the theater’s object is to destroy this intangible image, to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness’s mythical world’. That is the task of theatre for the sake of ‘the production of a new consciousness in the spectator’ (Althusser 1997, 151). Art, however, is only able to fulfill this task insofar as human beings longing for change and their imaginary relation to reality is open to something new that never was before. Then, the imaginary becomes a ‘battlefield’, the imagination, a productive force.

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Althusserianism, Enlightenment, expression, image, dialectical theatre, knowledge, appearance/form of appearance, eternity, family, fiction, Freudo-Marxism, humanist controversy, ego, ideology-theory, ideological state-apparatuses/repressive state-apparatuses, illusion, inner, critique, art, Lacanianism, fairytales, anthropogenesis, fantasy, psychoanalysis, critique of religion, being/consciousness, play, Spinozism, subject-effect, symbolic order, theatre, unconscious, alienation, inversion, truth, reflection, reality, science.

Althusser-Schule, Aufklärung, Ausdruck, Bild, dialektisches Theater, Erkenntnis, Erscheinung/Erscheinungsform, Ewigkeit, Familie, Fiktion, Freudomarxismus, Humanismus-Streit, Ich, Ideologietheorie, ideologische Staatsapparate / repressiver Staatsapararat, Illusion, Innerlichkeit, Kritik, Kunst, Lacanismus, Märchen, Menschwerdung, Phantasie, Psychoanalyse, Religionskritik, Sein/Bewusstsein, Spiel, Spinozismus, Subjekt-Effekt, symbolische Ordnung, Theater, Unbewusstes, Verfremdung, Verkehrung, Wahrheit, Widerspiegelung, Wirklichkeit, Wissenschaft.