

# СОЦИОЛОГИЯ ЗДОРОВЬЯ

## IDEOLOGY AND THE STATE: RELEVANCE OF THE ALTHUSSERIAN TRADITION IN THE ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 MANAGEMENT IN SWEDEN

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**Citation:** Rodin L. (2022) Ideology and the State: relevance of the Althusserian tradition in the analysis of COVID-19 management in Sweden. *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsialnoy antropologii* [The Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology], 25(3): 108–128. <https://doi.org/10.31119/jssa.2022.25.3.5>

**Abstract.** Althusser’s theory of Ideological State Apparatuses has often been marginalised over the last decade in academic discussions as reductionist and normative. This study aims to outline major critiques and the corresponding modifications of Althusser’s initial theoretical framework. This extended version of the theory is then applied to the analysis of politics related to COVID-19 in Sweden. A case is examined of an activist group named the Media Watchdogs of Sweden (MEWAS) that challenged the management of the pandemic by the Swedish authorities and mass media. As demonstrated in this study, Althusserian insights help explain shifts between democratic and oppressive regimes within society, as well as operationalise mechanisms of conformity and resistance.

**Keywords:** democracy, face mask, Ideological State Apparatuses, interpellation, counter-behaviour

### Introduction

In February 2021, Swedish National Radio (SNR) broadcasted a news report “A hidden Facebook group tries to influence Swedish interests abroad.” It exposed a group of activists—academics, opinion leaders, and ordinary citizens—who raised criticisms of the Swedish government and national mass media. The group gathered information about the current state of affairs in Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic and contacted foreign embassies and international media to warn other countries against following the Swedish model. The group had even planned to initiate a suit against Swedish authorities in the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. Since critical tone prevailed, English language was predominantly used in communications among the activists and their agenda engaged international contacts, the group’s activity was labelled by SNR as negatively affecting Swedish citizens and “damaging the image of Sweden abroad” (Janzon and Björkstén, 2021). Soon

after the revelation the activist group, now known as the Media Watchdogs of Sweden (MEWAS), ceased operation (Carlsson, 2021), the group leader and some of its affiliates were forced to leave the country (Murphy, 2020; Carlsson, 2021). Responding to the new challenges the Swedish Government formed the Agency for Psychological Defence aimed “to strengthen the overall ability to identify and meet undue information influence and other dissemination of misleading information directed at Sweden” (Socialdemokraterna, 2021, para 3; Swedish Government, 2021). The Agency is included in civil defence as a part of the general national defence system (Swedish Government, 2021).

The situation is not a unique one. Initiatives aimed at monitoring information flow and counteracting possible influences have been established in other countries as well (e.g. European Commission, n.d.). This phenomenon exposes the recurring strong role of the State in contemporary national and international politics. Interest in relativism had previously motivated statements on the declining role of sovereignty in the government of contemporary nation-states (e.g. Foucault, 1997; Dean, 2010; Rose and Miller, 1992). The situation in Sweden demonstrates that the State should be considered as a political actor and that proper theoretical tools are needed to understand it; one such theoretical instrument is Louis Althusser's theory of State Apparatuses. Published in 1970, his famous essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (IISAs)* created a foundation for a unique theoretical perspective that attempts to revise and enrich the classical Marxist approach. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the Althusserian view on the State and ideology to demonstrate the relevance of those insights in the analysis of the government's management of COVID-19.

The Swedish COVID-19 strategy initially implemented relatively limited measures to prevent the spread of the virus (Brusselsaers et al., 2022; Giritli Nygren and Olofsson, 2021; Mishra et al., 2021). While basic hygiene recommendations were communicated to the population, schools and most enterprises remained open during the initial phase of the pandemic. Latently committed to the “herd-immunity” model, the Swedish Public Health Agency was sending controversial messages regarding the use of face masks, stating on various occasions that masks are unnecessary since they do not provide full protection from infection (Dagens Nyheter, 2020), or that mask mandates are undemocratic and can undermine equality (Expressen, 2020). As a result, face masks were rarely used among the population until the end of 2020 and were even prohibited in some parts of the country by local authorities and private companies; this impacted health service workers (Kasurinen, 2021) and primary school teachers (Hultman, 2021), among others. For medical personnel, recommendations to use face masks were issued only at the end of January 2020, with the rationale

that personal protective equipment was not previously available (TV4, 2020). As a result of the government's recommendations during the initial phase of the pandemic, the number of COVID-related deaths in Sweden was ten times higher than in neighbouring countries, accounting for population size, density, and social-economic characteristics (Brusselsaers et al., 2022). Analysis demonstrated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, hospital accessibility in Sweden was relatively low due in part to triage instructions distributed within the healthcare system that excluded individuals of advanced age and those with comorbidities from intensive care. Many people died in their homes without medical help, and patients in care facilities were given morphine instead of medical treatment (ibid.). The failure of the initial strategy motivated the Swedish authorities to embrace lockdown-like measures in June 2020 (Mishra et al., 2021), even if less restrictive messaging, such as "recommendations," was used in the public rhetoric (Brusselsaers et al., 2022). Many experts regard the Swedish COVID-19 policies as potentially harmful; according to some estimations, fully implementing the primary Swedish model in other countries, such as the UK, would have doubled their mortality (Mishra et al., 2021).

The paper provides an overview of the Althusserian tradition, followed by its application to the issues raised by MEWAS. A case study is then presented that focuses on "bounded systems" which are collectives, events, or sequences of actions characterized by clear time and space boundaries (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Publicly available media materials and activists' testimonies are used as data for analysis.

### **Ideology and State Apparatuses: Althusser's insights**

Althusser (2001) began a productive discussion on the essence and operation of the State with classical Marxist insights: the State comprises State power and the State apparatus; State power enables the realization of class interests, therefore overtaking of state power is the main goal of any revolution; bourgeois State apparatuses can be appropriated and utilized by the revolutionary masses until the time arises to abolish it; and repression is the main function of any state. This classical theory is perceived by Althusser (ibid., p. 93) as "descriptive" and one that needs to be supplemented by an analytical distinction between *repressive* and *ideological* state apparatuses.

While a repressive State apparatus (RSA) is public and centralized (i.e. governmental, juridical, law enforcement, and military institutions), ideological State apparatuses (ISAs) are mainly private and dispersed (educational, religious, political, informational, professional, cultural organizations and the family) (ibid., pp. 96-97). The private characteristic of ISAs is addressed by Althusser as follows (ibid., p. 97):

The distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law, and valid in the (subordinate) domains in which bourgeois law exercises its 'authority.' The domain of the State escapes it because the latter is 'above the law': the State, which is the State *of* the ruling class, is neither public nor private; on the contrary, it is the precondition for any distinction between public and private.

Both State apparatuses are characterized by *double 'functioning'* (ibid., p. 98); they exercise power by repression and persuasion, though one of the functions is typically leading and the other is secondary. Repressions prevail in the operation of RSA, while ideology predominates in ISAs. The ruling class ideology ensures (not without contradictions) the *unity* of multiple ISAs (ibid., p. 97) and the "harmony" between RSA and ISAs. RSA stabilise the political milieu for the operation of ISAs and general reproduction of the conditions of production (ibid., p.101). Education is the central ISA in developed capitalist societies that championed the Church as a leader of previous epochs (ibid., p. 104). It contributes to the reproduction of labour force by socialising children into an ideology of exploitation (ibid., pp. 105-106):

The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology: an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology (because it is...lay), where teachers respectful of the 'conscience' and 'freedom' of the children who are entrusted to them (in complete confidence) by their 'parents' (who are free, too, the owners of their children) open up for them the path to the freedom, morality and responsibility of adults by their own example, by knowledge, literature and their 'liberating' virtues.

ISAs operate by *particular* ideologies, while ideology *in general* "recruits" subjects of a specific ideological order (ibid., p. 118). Ideology "interpellates" and constitutes concrete individuals into sovereign subjects who will deliberately comply with their subjection. Since ideological interpellation begins early in life, pre-ideological individuals are difficult to find: they are "always-already subjects" (ibid., p. 119). Recognizing the call of capitalism, individuals/subjects necessarily overlook what lies behind it: reproduction of the conditions of production. Thus, ideology can be defined as "the imaginary relationship of individual to their real conditions of existence" (ibid., p. 109). It is both symbolic and material, simultaneously (re)produced within ISAs and by ideological subjects (ibid., p. 115).

## Critique and further developments

Althusser's interpretation of Marxism faced challenges from both the academic left and right (Elliot, 2009), as well as from Marxists and psychoanalysts (Rehmann, 2013; Barrett, 1991). Some of the discussions prompted by the theory of ideology were fruitful. In the following section, four central directions in the Marxist critique are presented—determinism and essentialism, interpretation of the State, subject and subject formation, and the reduction of critical standpoint—to demonstrate the variety of theoretical innovations that emerged from those discussions.

### *Determinism and essentialism*

One of the major drawbacks of Althusser's conception is his unfulfilled promise to overcome determinism. Critics noted that the overall mode of argumentation appeared to reflect the classical tradition of functionalism (Hirst, 1976; Barrett, 1991; Lock, 1996; Hall, 1985; Boswell et al., 1986). Hirst (1976) suggested that this is due to the historically confirmed prominence of sociology in conceptualisations of ideology. Aimed to address cohesion and reproduction, Althusser's research question initially established a functionalist perspective on the study object. Furthermore, since ideology is shaped by class interest, class was latently assumed to empirically precede appearance, which is the assumption that evokes the classical Marxist basis-superstructure model. Abandonment of essentialism in the class definition could create new possibilities for recognising the plurality of representations and necessity of ideological struggle. Althusser seems to be aware of the determinism problem; he attempted to repair the situation by uplifting the central role of class struggle in the postscript to *IISAs*.

Hall (1985) praised Althusser's earlier writings for the departure from economic reductionism, pointing out his attempt to account for sophisticated relationships between various levels of the social system eventually brought together in a form of an analytical "unity." This unconventional holistic thinking—"difference *in* complex unity" (ibid., p. 93)—positively differentiates for Hall Althusser's project from post-structural and discourse-oriented writings by Foucault. The problem of difference and unity is resolved by introducing the notion of "articulation." Since there cannot be any fully predicted class determination of ideology, this linkage needs to be consciously identified in the course of ideological struggle. Consequently, "determinacy is transformed from the genetic origins of class or other social forces in a structure to the effects or results of a practice" (ibid., p. 95).

Balibar (1996) expanded on Althusser's notion of "structural causality" presented in *Reading Capital* in terms of the interplay between overdetermination

and underdetermination, pointing to the “reciprocal” interaction of fixed and flexible elements of social organisation. “Conjuncture” or “instability,” he insisted, should be seen as integral aspects of social order. As such, the question of social dynamics is posed differently: “The basic historical problem is never a dilemma of identity and change: it emerges always in reality as a problem of which change becomes effective” (ibid., 118). Since capitalism is continuously evolving in the course of reproduction, opportunities always exist for revolutionary forces “to insert themselves into the play of the contradiction” and create radical transformations (ibid.).

### *Interpretation of the State*

The primary discussant on the definition and functions of the State turned out to be Althusser’s committed follower, Nikos Poulantzas. Fascinated by social-political events of the late 1960s to the early 1970s, Poulantzas (1978b) criticised the exclusively “negative” image ascribed to the State by Althusser; the State was reasoned by Poulantzas to be “*creating, transforming and making reality*” (ibid., p. 30, original emphasis). First, it secures relations of production; second, it homogenises the interests of social clusters composing the dominant class (Poulantzas, 1978a). Contradictions and class struggle are present in the State, fragmenting and destabilising it. The State is the “central site of the exercise of power,” though power transcends it, being embodied in various apparatuses and shaped by ongoing class struggle (Poulantzas, 1978b, p. 44).

Operation of the State further includes the division of labour—a separation between manual and intellectual labour—and subsumption of the latter under the command of capitalist power. In contrast to the feudal type of sovereignty, the capitalist State lacks a narrative of “origins” and must continuously address the issue of legitimacy, producing specific discourse with the help of “state-monopolized science-knowledge” (ibid., p. 58). The knowledge produced by State science serves primarily to support and legitimise domination, therefore it is mainly made unattainable for the popular masses. Thus, the State is always “overcoded”: “it serves as the frame of reference within which the various segments of reasoning and their supporting apparatuses find homogeneous ground for their different functioning” (ibid.).

### *The controversy of subject and subject formation*

The most intensive dialogue, as well as the majority of misunderstandings, were a result of Althusser’s mechanism of subject formation (Montag, 1995). First, several commentators attempted to deduce how individuals can be always already interpellated. Second, the model of interpellation raised a disturbing issue of individual (and collective) agency and counter behaviour.

What can be the foundation of interpellation? The mechanism of recognition demands from an individual some elementary “preparedness,” for example, a certain degree of mental maturity (Hirst, 1975; Lock, 1996) or an initial sensitivity to the request of ideology (Butler, 1995). According to Butler (1995, p. 7), regarding the authority’s call on the street—as in an allegorical scene employed by Althusser to illustrate interpellation—one exhibits an obvious “desire for the law” that grants the individual identity. Desiring for the law is cemented by the initial “guilt” and one’s related pursuit of the authority that precedes knowledge and personhood. The question then arises: how can we interpret the status of interpellation storytelling itself? “If there is no subject except as a consequence of this subjection, the narrative that would explain this requires that the temporality not be true, for the grammar of that narrative presupposes that there is no subjection without a subject who undergoes it” (ibid., p. 11). Butler then poses an even more provocative question: why do individuals/subjects sometimes call on power themselves. This phenomenon of “inversion of hailing” is exemplified by Althusser in his own life; after the murder of his wife, Althusser “rushed into the street calling for the police in order to deliver himself up to the law” (ibid., p. 12).

Montag (1995) attempted to explain Althusser’s paradoxes by referencing Spinozian philosophical tradition. Spinoza problematised the externality of God and, eventually, the division of the ideal and the corporeal. Similarly, the description of ideology presupposes that “ideas...are causes that are ever only constituted *nachträglich*, retrospectively, as the effect of their material effects” (ibid., p. 63, original emphasis). Such a monist vision allows the perception of 1) ideology’s simultaneous embeddedness and realization in ISAs, and 2) subjects’ prior recruitment as well as the mechanism of their deliberate obedience. In this way, training of individuals both presupposes and (re)produces compliance.

The neglect of agency became another disturbing aspect in Althusser’s theorising. When sovereign subjects are produced with the sole aim of contributing to the general task of reproduction, agency works as an engine that drives the continuity of the (capitalist) system (Hirst, 1976; Hall, 1985). Several proposals resolved this issue, including the emphasis on the role of language, pluralisation of socialisation, and the emphasis on material-biological aspects of individual and collective life. Hall (1985) drew special attention to the importance of recognising the symbolic dimension of ideological interpellation and explained the constitution of the subject in the context of discursive plurality. He reasoned that meanings emerge only within a specific system of representations; consequently, the same phenomenon can be framed differently within distinctive discursive formations. As an example, words such as “black” and “coloured” might manifest different connotations in England and Jamaica.

In Jamaica, Hall learned, "blacks" constituted the majority of the population and the name was normalised to designate differentiation from a structurally distinctive group of "coloured"/ "mixed." The usage of the words in England was inverted: Hall was recognized as "coloured" namely because he "was 'black,' for all practical purposes!" (ibid., 108). "It is the position within the different signifying chains which 'means,' not the literal, fixed correspondence between an isolated term and some denoted position in the color spectrum" (ibid.). For this reason, theoretical tools are needed capable of accounting for contradictions within and between simultaneously articulated discourses.

Negri (1996) elaborated on Althusser's ideas to argue that corporeality is the ultimate ground for counter-action. Since the contemporary capitalist relations are all-embracing, there is nothing outside of ideology: "the real intermingles with ideology" (ibid., p. 57). The only option perceived by Negri is the "ontological fabric of communism" that is grounded in the mobilisation of "immediately lived" bodies and community relations aimed at creating spaces that escape the control of capital (ibid.).

#### *The reduction of critical standpoint*

The notion of ideology in general was frequently charged for being at odds with the tradition of Marx's critical thinking. Having been interpreted as an element of social fabric present in any social formation, ideology in general became a "neutral" concept no longer suitable for challenging mechanisms of hegemony (Barrett, 1991; Rehmann, 2013). As specified by Smith (1984, p. 132): "Ideology loses all connection with group interests within a social order and is transformed into an amorphous 'collective consciousness' that acts as a social fluid inculcating predominant values and beliefs. These values and beliefs in their turn lend legitimacy to society rather than to the domination of one particular class within it." Apart from "neutral" and "descriptive", Smith emphasized other connotations of ideology found in Althusser's texts, including the "pejorative"/"critical" (similar to "false consciousness") and "positive" connotation (borrowed from Lenin's view on ideology as a means of class struggle) (ibid., p. 129-30).

The discussion above encompasses the central points of critique of the theory of ideology. While some challenges led to the dismissal of Althusser's approach (e.g. Barrett, 1991), others, including those presented in this chapter, contributed to its extension or fruitful transformations.

### **Contemporary relevance**

In this section, the case of MEWAS is used to demonstrate the relevance of the Althusserian tradition in the analysis of the contemporary social-political

reality. Information from mass media and activists' testimonies are utilised in this study. Public information about the group is rather scarce, however; the major source for the analysis is an interview "Enemy of the State" posted on an open-access platform YouTube in November 2021. It was conducted by a Sweden-born member of a critical scientific community "The 22"<sup>1</sup>, Marcus Carlsson. The interview involved two foreign-born MEWAS participants, Keith Begg and Andreia Rodrigues. Quotes from the interview employed in the analysis are transcribed and included in the presentation below. Real names of the interview participants are used, since they appeared in the discussion not as private individuals, but public persons who witnessed a specific social political order.

MEWAS was initiated in April 2020 to challenge the Swedish COVID-19 strategy (Carlsson, 2021). One of the group's founders, Keith Begg, revealed that the primary driver for mobilization was the perceived control over public information by the Swedish government during the pandemic. Thus, group activists focused on the fact that national media received government funds amounting to kr 700 million to "maintain" the country's image both within the country and internationally. According to Begg, it was striking that while elderly care and healthcare suffered a shortage of resources, significant levels of support were provided to a media campaign: "Why is the country so focused on protecting its own image over its people?" (9:35). Correspondently, monitoring the state-sponsored mass media became one of the central objectives for the group. In addition, group members attempted to mobilise people around the issue of protective face masks.

#### *ISAs: Double functioning, private character*

The MEWAS case did not directly involve RSA, although ISAs demonstrated their double 'functioning' (Althusser, 2001, p. 98) by exercising surveillance and pressure apart from persuasion. Thus, mass media employed traditional police method—to collect the compromising information, the Swedish Radio station used a contact person who infiltrated the activist group. Scientific media experts thereafter contributed to labelling the group as a threat to national interests (Janzon and Björkstén, 2021).

After the initial revelation, the activists became subjected to *doxxing*—unconsented disclosure of an individual's "personal and private information" (Lee, 2022, p. 326). Their names, photos, and personal data were distributed

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<sup>1</sup> "The 22" is a group of Swedish scientists who sharply criticized the national authorities for handling pandemics in spring 2020. They published several articles in national and international media (Vogel, 2020).

within the national media space. Group participants received messages and letters with threats to themselves and their families, leading some members to have panic attacks and PTSD-like symptoms. Begg summarized this condition as the following: “It’s a kind of everyday fear. Whether you can class it as paranoia or not. When a car pulls up beside me. I was constantly on my guard... I had to leave my physical address because I didn’t know in Sweden whether a rock would come through my window. You didn’t know what the next step was... It was just fear and exhaustion” (49:20). Due to the constant pressure they felt, Begg and Rodrigues decided to move out of the country. Begg—the Ireland-born experienced human rights activist—related the situation he encountered in Sweden to a totalitarian regime, pointing out that the “hyper-nationalism” of the Swedish media and the desire of politicians, by any means, to maintain a positive image of the country at the world stage motivated the repressive approach to dissidents. The activists felt that their direct offenders were not police or other officials, but ordinary Swedish citizens who were led to believe the group was a threat to their country. Civil society is frequently presented within sociology in terms of pro-democratic agency (e.g., Alexander, 2006; Habermas, 1992); in contrast, Althusser (2001) associated it with ISAs which are typically private and exhibit no obvious connection to the State apparatus. As the case of MEWAS demonstrated, however, ISAs can substitute RSA functioning by force. A form of abuse typically registered within the context of social media (Lee, 2022), doxxing was employed by the Swedish mass media as a means to punish the dissidents.

### *Subject formation*

#### a) Subject (with a capital S) and interpellation

Constitution of ideological subjects is a “double constitution” which presupposes the existence of “a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject* (i.e. God)” (Althusser, 2011, p. 121). Acting as a mirror-like reflection, ordinary subjects surround the Subject (with a capital S) to acknowledge Him, as well as themselves in Him, and get “the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right” (ibid., p. 123). Later in the discussion, the interviewer acknowledged that as a Swede he frequently advocated for the “Swedish way”: “Whenever I was in the US, and there were some problems I was very quick to explain: ‘you should do it more like in Sweden. If you raise the taxes and then you get people better blah-blah-blah, and crime will disappear. Follow us!’ This is something we were drilled into, I think” (55:20). The collection of taxes is typically associated with the operation of the State. Directly linking tax policies to “Swedishness” asserts the Swedish State as the

Subject who interpellates and organises citizens into subjects of the dominant ideology.

Keith Begg reported that he received hate mails from private individuals due to his activist work: “Some of them were my friends, who could not separate criticism of the government and the criticism of the health authorities without looking at this as the attack on Swedish culture and Swedishness... That Sweden was the best country in the world that we knew nothing about, stupid foreigners. We were traitors, etc.” (16.59). Andreia recollected that one day she was hailed by someone in the street of Stockholm. The person screamed that because the woman was wearing a mask she should go back to her own country. Shouting in the street is a classical act of interpellation. Althusser (2001, p. 118) imagined police hailing someone: “Hey, you there!” Regarding the representative of the law and confirming the legitimacy of their authority, the individual assumes a related subjection. When an ideological call is initiated by a private person to address another person, an ideological duplication is realized: “the duplication of *the Subject into subjects and of the Subject itself in a subject-Subject*” (ibid., p. 122, original emphasis). A capitalist state is a populist state; it builds on the interplay of molecularisation and homogenisation of the social body to prevent popular masses from recognising mechanisms of their exploitation (Poulantzas, 1978b). The social construction of the nation and promotion of populist discourses then attempt to cover up the primacy of the interests of the dominant classes.

#### b) Misrecognition

In ideology, relationships of individuals to the relations of production are “imagery”: “What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imagery relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (Althusser, 2001, p. 111). The YouTube discussion participants acknowledged that masks were rather unpopular in Sweden in the beginning of the pandemic. ‘Hailed’ by messages from the Public Health Agency, people might perceive mask mandates as an attack on their way of living. Ideology is material, it exists in institutions and practices. By the embodied daily ritual of refusing personal protection equipment, individuals become constituted as subjects of ideology. Althusser (2001, p. 114) famously cites Pascal’s paradoxical statement to explain the mechanism of subjection: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.” Aligning with Spinozian philosophy, symbolic and material are intimately interconnected: “[t]he more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved” (Butler, 1995, p. 14).

Recognising the call of ideology, individuals overlook the underlying structure: the reproduction of the conditions of production (Althusser, 2001).

In the analysed case, this can apply to the usage of personal protection equipment. According to Marxist understanding, capital is highly dependent on circulation: produced commodities should be brought to market and exchanged for money which is then invested back into production (Marx, 2013). Any restrictions in capital circulation, including constraints in interactive capacities and mobility of both people and goods, can threaten the capitalist system. For this reason, masks might be latently perceived as hindering the economy. Guised in nationalistic and (neo)liberal rhetoric, this primary reason for refusing face masks was misinterpreted by the popular masses.

### c) Bad subjects

Althusser (2001, p. 123) briefly touched upon the issue of “bad subjects” in *IISAs*, acknowledging that they exist, while the majority of “good subjects” function perfectly “by themselves”: “caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects ‘work,’ they ‘work by themselves’ in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the ‘bad subjects’ who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus.” Therborn (1982) elaborated on the possibility of bad subjects. Slightly shifting focus away from class, the scholar insisted that individuals are simultaneously hailed by a variety of ideologies, and they might respond to some calls while ignoring others. Many of MEWAS’s affiliates were of foreign descent which initially exposed them to distinctive national ideologies, as socialisation in other cultures might foster adherence to dissimilar values and behaviour patterns. Andreia Rodrigues suggested that national experience with dictatorship in Portugal cultivated a tendency to challenge authorities and openly resist undesirable politics in her home country. Keith Begg praised solidarity typically observed in Ireland and other European countries that had faced crises in the past. Both interviewees were uncomfortable with the Swedish conformity, individualism, and hyper-nationalism as undermining social morals; for them, interpellation by the Swedish COVID-19 strategy was not successful. Similar to the findings in Ashwin Desai’s study on social resistance in post-apartheid Africa (Rehmann, 2013, p. 176), MEWAS members did not answer the call “We are Swedes,” promoting instead other identities: “We are individuals”, “We are citizens”. Subjects constructed in the complex ideological system are “fragmented” and “contradictory” (Hall, 1985, p. 109). Attention to the contradictory and multifaceted functioning of ideology/ies and ideological interpellations offers opportunities for thoughtful resistance and change.

It can be also argued that double recognition had failed for interviewees. Therborn (1982, p. 17) explained that longing for recognition (and inclusion)

should be considered as a tandem “subjection-qualification,” where qualification signifies one’s legitimacy within the structure of social positions and the related roles. In ideology, individuals/subjects become acquainted with a particular representation of reality, the normative definition of this reality, and their possibilities within this social construct. In the case of MEWAS, central representations and the related promises of the Swedish State—promises of security and protection (physical, social, political), transparency and accountability, and social justice and political inclusion for all—remained unfulfilled and left the activists highly disappointed with the Subject. They criticised mass media for its inability to focus on the problematic situation, public health officials for providing what they perceived as misinformation, and the government for misconduct that resulted in a high number of deaths. They also asserted that the popular masses had no influence on the situation due to the large gap between them and the political establishment.

Finally, foreign-born activists voiced discontent with their low status within Swedish society. Their foreign background made them “unreliable” in the eyes of Swedes and their opinions were frequently marginalized. Keith Begg employed the notion of “dehumanisation” to describe the situation: “It is the most dehumanising: be happy that you are here in such a great society but shut up” (23:59). Individual’s response to the call of ideology secures the very existence of an individual/subject. In this way, subjection becomes a precondition of one’s very “being” in the world (Butler, 1995). Those who refuse a deliberate acceptance of submission might risk segregation and neglect. Andreia Rodrigues additionally pointed out a disadvantaged class positioning for foreigners: “I just started to have this feeling that yes, I can stay here, work my ass off, work way more than the Swedes, get less salary than the Swedes because I am not Swedish, pay my taxes, shut up and then it will be fine for them. But the moment I will have an opinion all hell breaks loose” (22:56). In this way, the movement of individuals towards subjection (e.g. engagement in productive activity benefiting public objectives) did not ensure qualification for full social-political inclusion. Reflecting on the failure of ideological interpellation, Rehmann (2013, p. 178) summarised: “Ideological interpellations are effective only when they succeed in appealing to lived experiences, and they can only be challenged or rejected when there are better and more convincing ways of making ‘good sense of our lives.’”

### *State and its functions*

As discussed above, the Althusserian tradition identifies the major function of the State as maintaining homeostasis of the system. In the case of MEWAS, the Swedish State appeared to the activists in the orthodox form of a repressive

machine (Althusser, 2001) rather than a mutable apparatus “*creating, transforming and making reality*” (Poulantzas, 1978b, p. 30). Thus, promotion of Althusser’s “negative” image of the State received additional support in the context of the Swedish COVID-19 management. The analysed interview is titled “Enemy of the State”, voicing out activists’ experience of the situation: “It was like a war between our tiny group of regular people and the Swedish establishment, the authorities, the media, the politicians, everything” (48:46). The interviewees indicated that there were no visible struggles or contradictions within the ruling power. All the parliament parties quietly supported the politics implemented. In this way class struggle did not occur within the State; fractions of the dominant class were homogenized by a shared agenda and the main struggle unfolded within ideological apparatuses (see also Brusselsaers et al., 2022; Giritli Nygren and Olofsson, 2021). Activists further indicated that ruling forces were in control of the discussion both nationally and internationally: “We had a Big brother in the authorities literary trying to silence and scare ordinary people... I think what is very important... that people, media, international media found this impossible to believe: this doesn’t happen in Scandinavia and especially in Sweden” (50:57). Even when criticisms about COVID-19 management were published, the situation was unchanged. Commenting on the authorities’ violations, the interviewer summarized: “[t]he interesting thing is all of this (critical information) is out and its pf-pf-pf no one is held accountable, it’s not really followed up, same mistakes are being repeated... Let’s turn the pace and move on” (1:07:00).

Ideology of the rule is formed through the production of knowledge (Poulantzas, 1978b). The State shapes the division between intellectual and manual labour with the support of science and the operation of private and public ISAs. The MEWAS activists attempted to challenge this division; they expressed concerns over the credibility of the information sources, the reliability of the data presented to the public by state-sponsored scientists, and the adequacy of interpretations of international studies by national experts. The activists also problematised the political neutrality of knowledge production and the lack of critical debates. In an article titled “Anders Tegnell: The Rise and Fall of an Emperor with-no-clothes in Sweden” published by *Foreign Policy News* in January 2021, Keith Begg questioned the professional qualifications of the chief Swedish State epidemiologist, Andres Tegnell, arguing that he lacked necessary professional training and failed to take accountability for his actions. Begg conducted his own research and concluded that the public rhetoric professed by Tegnell should be defined as “pseudo-science” and challenged (*ibid.*, para 21). In an attempt to pluralise a view on ideology, Poulantzas (1978b, p. 33) stated that ideology is not necessarily “cheating” the subordinating classes:

“The truth of power often escapes the popular masses. But the State does not intentionally conceal it from everyone: rather, for infinitely more complex reasons, the masses do not manage to hear the state discourse directed to the dominant class.” In contrast, the MEWAS’s members experienced ideological functioning in a traditional form of false consciousness. Begg used the expression “Potemkin village” to describe the overall state of affairs in Sweden during the pandemic (54:06).

Challenging publicly broadcasted information turned out to be a difficult task due to the high standing of science and state-sponsored scientists in Sweden. As Begg observed during the interview: “it is almost like in Sweden that they held an ivory tower, that you cannot criticise an expert in Sweden... the architects of the strategy... Their word is the gospel, etc, and that is very difficult to understand for just an ordinary layperson like myself... You don’t need to be a scientist to figure that they are blatantly lying at some stages” (45:17). Of particular interest in this quote is the reference to the field of religion (“gospel”) in the description of scientists’ social-political status. Althusser (2001) employed several theological allegories to explain subject-Subject relationships. As an example, in the scene of interpellation of Moses, God calls Moses by his name and Moses answers ““ It is (really) I!... And the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him *’I am that I am’*” (ibid., p. 121). God appears in this allegorical description as a primary Subject. His status is obvious, unquestionable, and needs no legitimisation; he is a self-evident authority whose call is “almost impossible to refuse” (Butler, 1995, p. 10). However, the Subject exists only when he is recognized by subjects, who in turn constantly long for an Absolute Other as a guarantee for law and salvation. In the COVID-19 management, state-sponsored science obtained an exceptional status and near immunity to critique by the direct association with the Subject—the Swedish State. As such, recognition of the state-sponsored science by individuals/subjects signified recognition of the State itself and successful interpellation by the dominant ideology.

The privilege of the scientific community regarding knowledge production and circulation was problematised in the interview repeatedly: “We are not scientists, but there are certain assumptions you can make” (38:50). Activists indicated that there was an epidemiologist in the group, but simply applying common sense in many cases might allow an educated audience to distinguish reliable information from manipulations. It was further argued that democracy should provide a safe space for debates, even if scientific data are misinterpreted. Problematisation of the professionals’ monopoly has grown in contemporary society with the widespread availability of information and communication technologies (Coiera, 1996), exposing the constructed nature of the division of labour that serves the interests of the ruling classes.

### *Resistance*

According to the classical view, ISAs are “the *site* of class struggle” (Althusser, 2001, p. 99), “because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle.” Although *IISAs* do not provide significant information about resistance, it did occur. Andreia Rodrigues stated that “I didn’t want people to be able to write in a history book 20 years from now: ‘This happened in Sweden, and no one protested’. That can no longer happen because we did protest” (11:50)

As previously discussed, struggle unfolded around perceived misinformation; another point of resistance became the usage of face masks. Masks were reframed by the activists as personal protective equipment and not a tool of oppression. Hall (1985, p. 109) suggested that counteraction to the existing ideological system does not necessarily imply the invention of new names or identities, but it can appropriate and subvert existing labels. Thus, the word “black” can be used as both a depreciating term within the discourse of the dominant groups and as a self-liberating identity within the discourse of anti-colonial struggle. In this way, Hall moved ideological struggle beyond the materiality of practices and ideological apparatuses to account for symbolic counter-actions as a powerful resource to transform the ideological arena. Combining a symbolic reframing with embodied performance, MEWAS members took to the streets of Stockholm with signs advocating for mandatory face coverage as a protective measure.

Class character of the unfolding struggle became shadowed in the activists’ rhetoric by human rights discourse, though on several occasions they emphasised the class privileges of the Sweden-born middle class. As discussed earlier, Andreia Rodrigues described the embodied experience of oppression at the intersection of class and ethnicity (“I can stay here, work my ass off, work way more than the Swedes, get less salary than the Swedes because I am not Swedish...” 22:56). In the development of class solidarity and counter-behaviour, a corporeal aspect might be crucial. When it is no longer possible to separate reality from ideology, corporeality can be mobilized to challenge the existing order and create alternative domains of life (Negri, 1996).

### **Conclusion**

Althusser’s initial interpretation of the State and ideology was enriched by multiple contributions allowing identification of a unique Althusserian tradition that combined Marxism with a psychodynamic perspective (see also Eliot, 2005). This study assessed the applicability of the theoretical constructs to an analysis

of contemporary reality. As demonstrated in the case of MEWAS, the notion of ISAs might provide valuable insights into the issue of dissidents in Western societies: why and how counter-behaviour arises and how it is threatened by power. It was argued that the State played the central role in 1) production of obedience and conformity within the Swedish population, and 2) management of deviations. Ideological apparatuses (i.e., mass media, civil society, scientific community) are intimately connected with the State, promoting its objectives both by ideology and by force.

Interpretation of the State as a repressive machine was a common theme in the activists' experiences. Moreover, the State appeared to them in its extended version, comprising what Althusser identified as ISAs and civil society more generally. In this context, the initiation of the Agency for Psychological Defence discussed above provides evidence of further subsumption of ISAs under RSA. This initiative enables the securitisation of critique of state-driven politics and provides additional tools for regulating people's bodies and minds. The current analysis demonstrated how the Althusserian approach can be employed to explain shifts between democratic and oppressive regimes in society and to describe unorthodox methods of domination.

Althusserian insights on subject formation allow a thorough operationalisation and detailed description of both conformity and resistance. Here, both "neutral" (ideology in general) and critical (ideology as false consciousness) connotations of ideology (Smith, 1984) were utilised. In addition, subjectivity allows addressing cognitive-emotional aspects of the work of ideology. This issue, however, was not among the primary objectives of Althusser's theory focused rather on the structural domain of social life (Barret, 1991). A more challenging issue would be to ensure self-reflexivity of the interpellation account itself: how is a description of the interpellation scene possible if there is no subject before interpellation? (Butler, 1995). To uncover this paradox, Butler (1995) employed a retrospective functioning of language and consciousness. When "the grammar that the narrative requires is a result of the narrative itself," Althusser's description of the subject formation signifies "what resists narration" (ibid., 21). The Althusserian tradition appeared as deep, affluent and relevant to the analysis of the present social-political context. Further research is needed to test the theoretical constructs in different social-cultural contexts.

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## ИДЕОЛОГИЯ И ГОСУДАРСТВО: АКТУАЛЬНОСТЬ АЛЬТЮССЕРИАНСКОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ В АНАЛИЗЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЯ COVID-19 В ШВЕЦИИ

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**Цитирование:** Rodin L. (2022) Ideology and the State: relevance of the Althusserian tradition in the analysis of COVID-19 management in Sweden. *Журнал социологии и социальной антропологии*, 25(3): 108–128. <https://doi.org/10.31119/jssa.2022.25.3.5>

**Аннотация.** Теория идеологических государственных аппаратов Альтюссера в последнее десятилетие часто маргинализировалась в академических дискуссиях как редукционистская и нормативная. Исследование направлено на изложение основных критических замечаний и соответствующей модификации первоначальной теории Альтюссера. Расширенная версия теории затем применяется к анализу политики, связанной с COVID-19 в Швеции. Рассматривается случай группы

активистов «Медианаблюдатели Швеции» (MEWAS), которая оспаривала управление пандемией со стороны шведских властей и СМИ. Как показано в исследовании, идеи Альтюссера помогают объяснить сдвиги между демократическими и репрессивными режимами в обществе, а также операционализировать механизмы подчинения и сопротивления.

**Ключевые слова:** демократия, маска для лица, идеологические государственные аппараты, интерпелляция, контрповедение.