

Is the base an articulator of the unconscious? An encounter between Freud and the Marxism of Althusser and Marcuse

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Abstract:

In his later work, Freud states that the unconscious is an eternal place inhabited by an aggressiveness — the death drive — that can never be overcome. This drive — he says — always ends up manifesting itself and constitute a kind of “human nature.” Marx, on the contrary, affirms that everything is subject to “historical contingencies,” to circumstances that determine both the subject and their social relations. It is from this encounter that the question of how marxists who interact with Freudian theories cope with this tension arises. This paper aims to explore this issue by examining the different and potential answers that Althusser and Marcuse — two of the most important authors that integrated marxism and psychoanalysis in their work — provide. In doing so, the different nature of their interventions — mediated, as it will be seen, by Spinoza in the first case and by Hegel in the second —, as well as questions regarding the unconscious, the ideology and the complex determinations of the base and the superstructure, will be briefly analyzed in the following pages.

Keywords: marxism; psychoanalysis; death drive; unconscious; ideology.

In 1899, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud describes the unconscious as a space in which “nothing can be brought to an end, nothing

¹I would like to thank Gavin Arnall at the University of Michigan, whose 2020 course on Marxism provided the opportunity to write this paper. Also, I would like to thank my *compañero* Alejo Stark for his immense generosity. Gavin and Alejo critical feedback were essential to produce this paper.

is past or forgotten”.² Thirty-one years later, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*,³ he explains that there is an aggressive drive that needs to be repressed by civilization.⁴ Otherwise, it will make life in society impossible. This repressed aggressiveness is dragged to the unconscious. From this it follows that the aggressiveness that inhabits the unconscious, constitutes, according to Freud, part of “human nature.” On his end, Karl Marx affirms that there is nothing such as a “human nature.” He says that the historical circumstances, the prevailing institutions in a given society, determines both the subject and their social relations. This contradiction — or apparent contradiction — leads to a series of questions regarding the interaction between the omni-historical nature of the unconscious — inhabited, among other elements, by the death drive — and the changing determinations of subjectivities — which are mediated by historical circumstances. In order to examine this tension, this paper dialogues with two key texts: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,”⁵ by Louis Althusser, and *Eros and civilization*,⁶ by Herbert Marcuse.

To begin with, for Althusser, the historical contingency as a producer of different subjectivities (through different ideological interpellations) and the relationship it has with the eternity of the unconscious, supposes a theoretical and political problem of the first order; a problem which complexity — as he himself recognizes — opens up a number of questions that are extremely difficult — if not impossible — to answer. With this in mind, it is worth revisiting some of his considerations about the articulation between ideology and the unconscious, contrasting his insights and discoveries with the answers provided by Marcuse. The encounter between these two authors is undoubtedly atypical (anomalous,

²Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. (New York: Norton & Company, 1962), 576.

³Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964).

⁴The translation used here, made by James Strachey, is considered the standard one. Nevertheless, it should be noted that he translates the German *Trieb* (drive) as “instinct”, a conceptual error that was emended in more recent publications.

⁵Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. London: Verso, 2014).

⁶Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press Boston, 1974).

even), but not arbitrary. Beyond the obvious importance of both intellectuals and the different positions they adopted with respect of the student 68 revolt, their different ways of interacting with both Marx and Freud might be explained by another kind of encounter (or miss-encounter), which is the one permed by Spinoza and Hegel. The disagreements, the diverse theoretical developments mediated or inspired by both Spinoza (Althusser) and Hegel (Marcuse) are the source of a fruitful dispute that enriches any type of debate and political analysis. Thus, what can Althusser and Marcuse tell us about the historical contingencies, the unconscious, and the status of the death drive in different political context from their respective perspectives? In order to respond this, it is necessary to return to Freud.

As it was mentioned, Freud says that once installed in the unconscious, the repressed aggressiveness, in one way or another, ends up manifesting itself. This is the reason why he distrusts political projects that aspire to a kind of emancipation of this “human nature.” He even doubts projects that involve a radical change in the structures that regulate human life and mediate social relations, including socialism and communism.⁷

I too think it quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions [property] would be of more help in this direction than any ethical commands; but the recognition of this fact among socialists has been obscured

⁷Freud talks indistinctly of socialists and communist, referring in both cases to a political project that seeks the transformation of the economic relations, the eradication of social classes and private property. For him, socialists and communists also seek the end of aggressiveness, which — Freud says the socialists and communists say — is linked to the regime of property that operates in capitalism.

and made useless for practical purposes by a fresh idealistic misconception of human nature⁸⁹

To begin with, it should be noted that, for Freud, the civilization that was built to preserve the human being from this aggressiveness exercises the repression that produces discontent. In other words: the repression of drives is almost as problematic as their expression.

For Freud it is neither about dismantling the institutions of civilization in order to come back to a previous stage, which means — following *Totem and Taboo*— abandoning the fate of subjects to the violence of the primitive father.¹⁰ In this regard, he recognizes that a change in the property system is more desirable and effective to deal with aggressiveness than the “ethical commands” promoted by, for example, religious institutions. However, he immediately warns that it is naive to expect that a change in economic relations — even if it is a desirable one — will erase an aggressiveness that inhabits the unconscious and cannot be overcome. Freud thinks that either way — an ethical or an economical change — will not hold and neutralize the aggressive drives:

Aggressiveness was not created by property [...] we cannot, it is true, easily foresee what new paths the development of civilization could take; but one thing we can expect [...] is that this indestructible feature of human nature [aggressiveness] will follow it there (60, 61)¹¹¹²

⁸ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent*, 90.

⁹ In the Spanish editions, the term “property” is used instead of “possession.” The reference to property is brought systematically by Freud in other passages of the text in English; thus, it is safe here to point out that possessions could refer here to private property.

¹⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

¹¹ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent*, 60-61.

¹² Freud also doubts the rhetoric of the communists and their position against the bourgeoisie. His criticism does not involve a political one *per se*. It rather consists in questioning the intentionality that exists behind the — justified, he says — antagonism. Freud suspects that the rhetoric against the bourgeoisie is not only about ending oppression and achieving the emancipation of the working class; the rhetoric, he affirms, works as a way to build an outside toward which the aggressiveness could be channeled, which will not be satisfied with the defeat of the capitalists: “[...] and it is intelligible that

Freud identifies and describes the tension that exists in civilization, but remains skeptical, pessimistic, fatalistic even, regarding the fact that there is no solution to the paradox that emerges between the impulse of social change and the intrinsic aggressiveness that runs through the human being. He gives an account of the discontent of civilization without elaborating any prescription or advancing any solution: “Thus I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation”¹³

After having tabled Freudian skepticism regarding communism, it is necessary to contrast more precisely the reflections that he makes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* — that is, in his postwar stage — with those postulates of Marx, who affirm that there is not such thing as “human nature.” According to the latter, everything is subject to “historical contingencies,” to certain circumstances that have not been chosen by the subject but that, circumstantially, define and limit them. In the terms that he uses in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: human beings “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”¹⁴

Now, if one of Marx’s postulates is that there is not such a thing as a human nature, how do the intellectuals from this tradition deal with the former Freudian formulations? That is, how do they answer to the fact that there is a space, the unconscious, that cannot be overcome and that will follow civilization regardless of the form it acquires? How do they

the attempt to establish a new, communist civilization in Russia should find its psychological support in the persecution of the bourgeois. One only wonders, with concern, what the Soviets will do after they have wiped out their bourgeois.” (62) It calls the attention that, for Freud, the persecution of the bourgeoisie is a mere “psychological support.” With this, he seems to imply that bourgeoisie are not the responsible of installing a regime based on private property and the exploitation of working class via surplus value, that is, that the bourgeoisies are not, as Marx says in *Capital*, the personification of capital, but have instead a kind of secondary role in this social formation.

¹³Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent*, 92.

¹⁴Karl, Marx. *A The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London: Penguin Books, 1990.), 15.

position themselves with respect to what will happen with aggressiveness, with the death drive once capitalism and the private property regime have been abolished?

This essay — again — intends to use these questions to interrogate the texts of Althusser and Marcuse, that is, two different Marxists who have explicitly interacted with psychoanalytic theory and who have been inspired by Freud to elaborate their own system of thought. The proposal is to explore their answers, their theoretical solutions, and preliminarily examine some of the points of contact between both discourses.

Although these two authors converged in time and their intellectual production was installed in the same theoretical and political context, they are not usually read together. Their interaction in these pages, which is undoubtedly an anomalous one, is carried out through Freud, who will act as a bridge. In a more general sense, following Althusser, the encounter between Freud and Marx take place outside the limits of the bourgeois disciplines. Both thinkers founded a science whose object of study, the unconscious in the case of psychoanalysis and the history of social classes in the case of historical materialism, destabilized the notions of the capitalist subject. It is true that they do not share the same object of study, but it is here, in this outside, where they merge: one going against the myth of the *homo psicologicus* and the other against the myth of the *homo economicus*. In “On Freud and Marx,” one of Althusser's last essays about psychoanalysis, the French theorist points out that understanding the subject as a divided one, that is, as a subject whose consciousness is a mere instance, a part or an effect of the psychic apparatus — which besides the ego is also constituted by the the id and the superego — poses a threat to capitalist ideology since:

The ideology of “man” as subject whose unity is assured and crowned by consciousness is not just any fragmentary ideology; it is quite simple the philosophical form of the bourgeois ideology that has dominated history for five centuries and that, even if not longer has the vigor it once had, still reigns in large sections of idealist philosophy and constitutes

the implicit philosophy of psychology, morality, and political economy¹⁵

The dialogue with Jacques Lacan, at least for the moment, is brought only tangentially to the conversation. This is not because Althusser's references to Lacan disappear in his later essays on psychoanalysis, but because it is via Freud, and not Lacan, that the French theorist converges with Marcuse, for whom Lacan is not a point of reference when it comes to intermingling with psychoanalysis.¹⁶

Since the concept of *Kultur* used in Freud's original work *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* has given rise to a numerous of misunderstandings and it has been translated indistinctly as culture (*El malestar en la cultura*, *Le Malaise dans la culture*) or civilization (*Civilization and Its Discontent*), the original word in German, *Kultur*, will be used from now on. This concept, which includes the meaning of what is usually understood both as culture and civilization, allows the Marxist categories that are incorporated here to be read with more precision along with those developed by Freud: *Kultur* coincides with what in the Marxist tradition is commonly defined as the base or infrastructure and the superstructure.

¹⁵Althusser, Louis. "On Freud and Marx" (*Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 4, Issue 1. Translated by Warren Montag. New York: Routledge, 1991), 22, 23.

¹⁶Although it is Freud who is mentioned by Althusser in the two articles cited here ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and "On Freud and Marx"), it is obvious that the theorization of the French philosopher is informed by Lacan and by his conceptualization of the unconscious (the discourse of the unconscious is structured as a language). In other words, Lacan's presence is always invoked implicitly in the work of the French thinker, and his contribution to Marxism is fundamental. In "The Emptiness of a Distance Taken: Freud, Althusser, Lacan," Warren Montag wonders about the absence of Lacan in the last of Althusser's writings. He says: "Lacan disappears altogether from the scene: his name does not appear even once in the essay ['On Freud and Marx']. But we would be wrong to think that Althusser has simply put Lacan aside to 'return to Freud.' [...] Althusser is concerned only with the essentials of the theory, the positions that place it in permanent conflict with the ideologies that surround it and seek constantly to infiltrate it as well. And the essentials are precisely those delineated as such by Lacan" (35).

In order to clarify this concept and begin to bring together the two proposed theoretical lines — to set the stage for dialogue — it is necessary to try to read Freud's *Kultur* with Marxist lens.

Firstly, it is important to point out that one of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* main critique is aimed at religion, more particularly Christianity and its main diffusion platform, the church. When speaking of this institution, he doubts the efficacy of its premises, the moral precepts that it promotes to neutralize the aggressive drives. As it was mentioned, it is possible to read the Freudian *Kultur* as coinciding with what Marxism tends to understand as superstructure, which includes, in addition to the church, institutions such as those that arise from the State and the legal system. On the other hand, when criticizing what he understands as the naivety of the socialist and communist project — and not, as can be seen in the quote from above, to the project itself — he mentions that a change in the objective relations of men and women with property will also not lead to the eradication of aggressiveness.

At this point, it is more than obvious that from Freud's perspective any proposal to transform "human nature" from the *Kultur*, either from the base or from the superstructure is to a greater or lesser extent a vain attempt.

Nevertheless, continuing along with this comparative development of psychoanalysis and Marxism is necessary to advance with this analysis. This descriptive path is relevant because it leads to a fundamental passage in Althusser's argument, that is, when he transits from what he calls the "descriptive theory" to "theory."

Returning to Freud: the function of the church proposed by him is in tune with the most mechanist version of Marxism since from both places it is understood that a change at the level of the "ethical precepts," of the superstructure, would not generate any profound change in human relationships. Now, when we move on to the analysis of the base, of the relations of production, a short circuit is generated, since mechanist Marxism — against which both of the Marxist authors treated here react — considers that the transformation of the productive relations — which suppose, to put it synthetically, the exploitation of human kind by human kind via the extraction of surplus value — produce a transformation in the su-

perstructure. Freud, on the other hand, rejects this possibility and understands that thinking in these terms is a product of an “idealist misconception”.¹⁷ Mechanistic Marxism agree with Freud insofar as a change in the superstructure would not lead to an essential change in *Kultur* and its discontent. The disagreement erupts, then, at the level of the base.

That said, it is worth paying attention to what happens with this relationship between Freudian *Kultur* and Marxist architecture — base, superstructure — when the Althusserian concept of determination in the last instance, State Apparatus (SAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is included in the analysis, and when this same operation is realized with Marcuse and his concept of surplus repression; that is, when a theoretical insight that escapes the mechanistic interpretation of Marx is included into the equation.

According to Althusser, the concepts of base and superstructure suppose a metaphor that, although useful, must be overcome. For him, one must move from this metaphor, which he places on the plane of what he calls “descriptive theory,” to “theory,” which is guided by the scientific knowledge present in Marx’s theory. Thus, he introduces a new distinction: “the state apparatus contains two bodies: the body of institutions which represent the Repressive State Apparatus on the one hand, and the body of institutions which represent the body of Ideological State Apparatuses on the other.”¹⁸ The SA is defined by its public nature and by a certain homogeneity in the means of action of its institutions, which are mostly based on explicit violence and determined by the negativity of repression. The police, the army, prisons, and the courts are among the most representative institutions of this group. The ISAs, for their part, rely on a more heterogeneous platform that gives rise to the reproduction of a plurality of voices. They have their origins in the private sphere, and they

¹⁷Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontent*, 90.

¹⁸Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 246

do not operate mainly with violence, but from — and through — ideology, which imply an affirmative operation and charged with positivity: instead of repressing, it is directed towards individuals, disturbing different and specific roles, reaffirming the subjects in those social functions. In bourgeois society, the school is the most important tool of ideology interpellation. This supposes replacing the role that the church has historically had. The school, Althusser says,

takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable’, squeezed between the family state apparatus and the educational state apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy)¹⁹

Although the ISAs can give room, in their institutional and discursive diversity, to a certain questioning of the dominant ideology, to a certain critical thinking, in the last instance, they always end up reproducing the ideology that allows the reproduction of the dominant mode of production and the social relations associated with it. In other words: ISAs have autonomy, but a “relative autonomy,” which is ultimately guided by the type of social formations dominant in a given society. The base, in turn, needs the subjects configured by the ISAs — and the SAs, through repression — to be able to reproduce itself and continue sedimenting and supporting the rest of the structure.

What ideology does, in the first place, is to interpellate individuals to make them subjects. Second, ideology configures an imaginary deformation of the relationship that subjects have with their real conditions of existence (the productive relationships in which they participate). Imaginary deformation is what, to give a somewhat vulgar but — perhaps, hopefully — effective example, guarantees that the worker, who is exploited through the extraction of surplus value, goes to work every day

¹⁹Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 251.

voluntarily and reproduces the base. In *Althusser: The Infinite Farewell*, Emilio De Ípola explains this in the following terms:

The ideology of the subject would enjoy the privilege of being the most complete form of expression of the illusion that the actor himself has instituted this relation by his own will. In sum, the actor forges the fantasy that he is himself the lord and master of his destiny, and he believes in this fantasy²⁰

Or, to use Althusser's own words: ideology involves "material practices regulated by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material acts of a subject acting in all good conscience in accordance with his belief."²¹²²

Althusser adds that the category of subject — of the individual interpellated by ideology — is "[...] the constitutive category of all ideology, whatever its determination (regional or class) and whatever its historical date - since ideology has no history."²³ It is in this last sentence, in "has no history," where the French philosopher takes the decisive step that concerns us here. After making the statement, he inquires into its theoretical consequences of this affirmation:

For on the one hand, I think it is possible to hold that ideologies have a history of their own (although it is determined in the last instance by the class struggle); and on the other, I think it is possible to hold that ideology in general has no history, not in a negative sense (its history is external to it), but in an absolutely positive sense.

²⁰De Ípola, *Althusser, The Infinite Farewell*, 65.

²¹Althusser, *On Reproduction*, 187.

²²In "Figures of interpellation in Althusser and Fanon," Pierre Macherey says that with this materialist definition Althusser distances himself from both the idealist and repressive theorization of ideology prevalent in some political associations, such as, for example — says Althusser in *On Reproduction* —, anarchists.

²³Althusser, *On Reproduction*, 262.

This sense is a positive one if it is true that the peculiarity of ideology is that it is endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, i.e. an omni-historical reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history, in the sense in which the *Communist Manifesto* defines history as the history of class struggles, i.e. the history of class societies²⁴

This implies that the human being is always interpellated by ideology, and this is a process that runs through its whole existence. However, the specific kind of interpellation that takes place within a structure that does not expire, that is “omnihistorical” and, as such, cannot come to an end, is determined in the last instance by the history of class struggle. This means that ideology’s content is defined by the type of social formations, by the dominant mode of production and by the struggle that is waged to transform both of them. Ideology supposes an eternal structure where the different plots of humanity develop. Different kinds of social formations and different kind of modes of productions can give birth to different kind of subjects. In an interview with the philosopher Fernanda Navarro, Althusser explains: “I think that ideology has a trans-historical character, that it has always existed and always will exist. Its ‘content’ may change, but its function never will.”²⁵

At this stage, Althusser’s argument can generate misunderstandings, since it seems that ideological intervention is always carried out, in the last instance, for the benefit of the ruling class, leaving no room for resistance. Warren Montag points out:

As it stands in Althusser’s essay, the notion of interpellation leaves itself open to misunderstanding that it indicates a scheme according to which struggle and revolt are all but

²⁴Althusser, *On Reproduction*, 255.

²⁵De Ípola, *Althusser, the infinite farewell*, 77.

impossible, the ideological apparatuses functioning as machines which reproduce the condition of domination by inter individuals as subjects in order better to control and direct their activities²⁶

This misreading is what motivated Althusser, one year later, to write the postface, where he sheds light on the matter. First, he distinguishes ideology in general — as a structure — from concrete ideology — the specific content, which was so far called historical contingency — and then emphasis about the class struggle. Talking about class struggle at the level of ideology supposes that the ideology at stake is not reduced to that of the ruling class, whose horizon is the reproduction of social formations and capitalist relations of production. Rather, there is a dispute where another type of ideology, the one of the dominated, also circulates and interpellates individuals. “And [w]hoever says class struggle of the ruling class says resistance, revolt, and class struggle of the ruled class,” says Althusser (70; In De Ípola). Later, in the aforementioned interview with Navarro, he adds: “Otherwise there would be no change, and people would never take positions that challenge and oppose that which is established, that which is dominant. There would be no ‘revolutionary subjects’” (77; in De Ípola).

The distinction between general ideology and concrete ideology — the specific type of interpellation — makes it possible to clarify that the omni-historical character of the ideology refers to ideology in general. This precision allows to move to the other decisive step that Althusser makes in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” that is, equating ideology to the unconscious:

If eternal means, not transcendent to all (temporal) history, but omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history, I shall adopt Freud’s expression word for word, and write ideology is eternal, exactly like the unconscious. And I add that I find this comparison theoretically justified by the fact that the eternity of

²⁶Montag, Warren. “Marxism and psychoanalysis: an impossible encounter” (Minnesota Review, Number 23. Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), 72.

the unconscious is not unrelated to the eternity of ideology in general²⁷

By emptying the concept of eternity of a transcendental content, and by converting it into the place where historical contingencies unravel, which in this given period translates into class struggle between proletarians and bourgeoisie, Althusser somehow resolves one of the tensions existing between the Marxist “historical contingency” and the “eternity” of the Freudian unconscious. In the configuration of the subject both dimensions interact. There is something immutable (ideology, unconscious), and there is something that can be transform (its content): if ideology supposes an eternal structure where the different plots of humanity develop, the same definition could also apply, following Althusser, to the unconscious. If this is the case, because the class struggles between proletarians and bourgeoisie is based on a dispute for the kind of subject that is produced by ideological interpellation, a change in the ideology that configures the subject mean a change in the type of repression that takes place in *Kultur*. At the same time, a change in *Kultur* determines what is drawn into the unconscious, that is, the content of the unconscious that explains and directs some of the subject’s actions. If this hypothesis is correct, or at least if this reading is possible, since there is no single ideology, it can be assumed that an ideological struggle — between dominated and dominated — also implies a struggle for the content of the unconscious. As noted, different processes of subjectivation require different forms of repression and different channels to satisfy unconscious desires or to express, for example, the aggressiveness that is housed there and that pushes to get out. This dispute for the content of the unconscious, thus, could be something that unfolds in ideological struggles.

In any case, Althusser leaves several blank spaces unresolved. The uncertainties left by the French philosopher in the text can be translated into these questions: is the ideological interpellation always responding to the rhythm of the class struggle or can it be configured in different ways, through other types of antagonisms? In case the latter is valid, what kind of ideological interpellation can take place after the withering of the State,

²⁷Althusser, *On Reproduction*, 255

of its Repressive State Apparatus and its Ideological Apparatuses, and the abolition of social classes? Will the end of the class struggle, the negation of the negation and the consequent ideological change give rise to another type of unconscious? If not, saying that the class struggle is eternal is equivalent to the fact that, once communism is achieved, the contradictions within ideology through the class struggle would continue to take place and a kind of permanent revolution would be necessary? And perhaps, the most important question for the purposes of this work: what happens with the intrinsic aggressiveness, with the death drive that is housed in the eternity of the unconscious, after the end of capitalism?²⁸

Althusser does not end up clarifying these questions nor does he specify the characteristics that the ideological interpellation would assume in a communist society. He does not address the questions that concern the relationship between ideology and the unconscious. Regarding the latter, although it can be interpreted that for the French philosopher the unconscious operates according to the rhythm set by ideology, by social formations, by the base, and by the class struggle, and even if he speaks of a “relationship” between the two structures, he does not explicitly specify the nature of this relationship. To clarify this issue, it is necessary to turn to “Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses,” which was published posthumously but written a few years before the “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” more precisely, in 1966.²⁹

²⁸One of the main arguments that Althusser’s critics have pointed out is that the French theorist anchors social struggles and the processes of subjectivation to the State. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler says “[...] Althusser’s view, useful as it is, remains implicitly constrained by a notion of a centralized state apparatus, one whose word is its deed, modeled on divine authority. The notion of discourses emerges in Foucault in part to counter the sovereign model of interpellative speech in theories such as Althusser’s, but also to take account to the efficacy of discourse apart from its instantiation as the spoken word” (6).

Indeed, part of the early criticisms to Althusser can be found in the works of Michelle Foucault, such as *History of sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, and the courses reunited in *Society Must Be Defended*, which, as Étienne Balibar points out in the preface of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, were an anti-Marxist response, even though nowadays they might allow a different kind of reading.

²⁹About this text, even though he points to a different direction than these pages, Warren Montag says in “Discourse and Decree: Spinoza, Althusser and Pêcheux” that this Althusser’s text “offers ‘solutions’ to some of its most difficult and persistent problems,” (2) that appear in his following works about ideology, which includes, of course, the essay about the SA and the ISAs.

Also, in this essay, Althusser will introduce the notion of discourse, a notion that he will abandon in his following works.

In this text, Althusser explains that the discourses of ideology structure differ from the discourses of the unconscious structure (and also from other structures with which both are related, such as the aesthetic and the scientific one), although they are intimately linked: “[...] that the subject/function which is the characteristic effect of ideological discourse in turn requires, produces or induces a characteristic effect, the unconscious-effect or the effect subject-of-the-unconscious [...]”.³⁰ He then adds: “the interpellation of human individuals as ideological subjects produces a specific effect in them, the unconscious-effect, which enables these human individuals to assume the function of ideological subjects”.³¹ Both of them are specific structures that have autonomy, but they are closely linked and, more importantly, their interaction allows a differential articulation from which the configuration of the subjects take place: ideological interpellation works because there is an unconscious.³² Montag explains it in the following terms:

Ideology and the unconscious are both fully real and material. They are irreducible either one to the other or to anything outside of themselves. The subject, any subject, comes into existence only within the configuration described by the conjunction of these two fields³³

Althusser’s “Three notes” does not answer, however, most of the questions raised so far. Taking this into account, it is pertinent to ask what happens if the theoretical movement made at the beginning of the work is reversed and the Marxist affirmations of Althusser are read with Freudian lens, a movement that, perhaps, can help to clarify some of the points brought into these pages.

³⁰Althusser, Louis. *Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 2003), 53.

³¹Althusser, Louis. *Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 2003), 56.

³²Later on, in this same text, Althusser takes a distance from these series of affirmations and argues that the only subject is the subject of ideology, who still intrinsically linked with the unconscious; in the scientific discourse — the discourse of historical materialism, for example — the subject is absent.

³³Montag, “Marxism and Psychoanalysis,” 53.

Beyond the explicit reference to Freud by the French philosopher around ideology and the unconscious, it is evident at other levels of reading, on other conceptual planes, that Althusserian hypotheses and reflections vibrate at frequencies very similar to those that emanate from the *Civilization and Its Discontent*, where the father of psychoanalysis speaks of the superego, that is, following Freud, the moral representative of *Kultur* in the psychic apparatus.

From various platforms — such as the Church — *Kultur* disseminates moral codes that are adopted by the subject. These moral codes lead to the reproduction of certain practices. The problem is that these practices — Freud continues — go directly against the subject's desires and drives. In the most advanced societies, he adds, *Kultur* demands and expectations are internalized and transformed into a superego: the premises that tell the subject how to act are introjected; the superego is installed within the subject's psyche. The superego establishes an intense surveillance and tirelessly watches that the subject does not go beyond the ethical prescriptions, or even think beyond those limits: "Civilization [*Kultur*], therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city," says Freud.³⁴

The vigilance, and the guilt that emerge as a result of the crossing — be it the crossing of the boundary through action or through mere thought — works unconsciously; *Kultur* traffics its demands within the subject in such a way that the subject ends up believing that the mandates and impositions coincide with their own desires, when they tend to go against them. The subject, unconsciously, becomes the guarantor that his own interests are violated, who ensures the conditions of their own submission.

The interests of *Kultur* which defines normality from an outside, becomes an inside. This resonates with the unconscious character of the ideological interpellation. As De Ípola explains, the ideological interpellation described by Althusser implies that the subject "lives its relation with itself

³⁴ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 70-71.

and with the world in the form of an unconscious, soothing, and constant self-deception.”³⁵

The point of contact between the Althusserian ideology and the Freudian superego is clear. It is clear, too, that although Freud is extremely skeptical about the communist project, he identifies the excesses of *Kultur* — and although he does not say it directly, it can be inferred, of bourgeois *Kultur* — as a problem. He even seems, and this is extremely relevant, to be receptive to the idea of introducing institutional changes (to fight an ideological battle, perhaps) to make *Kultur* and therefore the superego’s demands more flexible:

We may expect gradually to carry through such alterations in our civilization as will better satisfy our needs and will escape our criticisms. But perhaps we may also familiarize ourselves with the idea that there are difficulties attaching to the nature of civilization [*Kultur*] [and, to complete the Freudian scheme, it would be necessary to add the human essence itself] which will not yield to any attempt at reform³⁶

In the encounter between Freud and Althusser, it could be said that both ideology and *Kultur* are unavoidable structures, elements always present in any project of human organization, which forms of regulating and organizing human relations vary. At the level of disagreements, it should be noticed that the initial dilemma raised by Freud’s criticism is not solved. Althusser identifies the need for a change at the level of social formations, the base and the productive relations that determine, in the last instance, the SA, the ISAs, and, therefore, according to the reading performed here, the unconscious. For Althusser, the ideological change should be oriented to stop reproducing the productive relations of capitalism, which could generate a change at the level of the unconscious. For Freud, the change implies relaxing the demands of *Kultur* so that they do not completely prohibit the drives, what he calls the human nature. The change in the base

³⁵De Ípola, *Althusser, the infinite farewell*, 66

³⁶Freud, *Civilization aín Its Discontents*, 62.

and in the superstructure, although it may have an effect on what is repressed and what is not, in no way determines what happens at the unconscious level. According to Freud, drives are not determined by *Kultur*, which is to say that neither the SA through repression, nor the ISAs through ideological interpellation, nor the radical change and subsequent withering of these institutions after the revolution, will have an impact on the aggressiveness that constitutes the human being, that is, on the death drive.

The contrast of both texts make it possible to preliminarily affirm that, following to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the eternity of the unconscious is in relation to the eternity of ideology in general, but it is not totally determined by it: aggressiveness has a non-relative autonomy with respect to *Kultur*. Freud says: “[...] the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual [drives] disposition in man [...].”³⁷ Following this avenue, Althusser can solve the problem of “eternity” and “historical contingencies” from his structuralism (or rather, Spinozism), but not the problem of aggressiveness. It would be fair to point out that in this regard the “claim” should fall on Freud and not on Althusser: one wonders if both the communist and socialist thinkers contemporary to Freud effectively announced the total eradication of aggressiveness with the revolution, or if this is a Freudian critique that has no real basis.

Althusser, without a doubt, does not announce the conclusion of aggressiveness, the eradication of the death drive (nor does he address directly this problem). And the fact that he gives an autonomy to *Kultur* — at the base, the SA, and the ISAs — that is not present in the original Freudian formulation, does not suggest a problem either. What might be problematized instead is Freudian postwar pessimism and its conceptualization of the unconscious. It is worth posing some questions in this regard: is the unconscious a place where nothing can be concluded or transform and that, therefore, cannot lead to a change in the configuration of the subject, or does the unconscious suppose a place where new types of subjectivities can be produced? Of course, these questions go far beyond the limits in this work, but perhaps one of the possible answers could be found in Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*.

³⁷Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 69.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to make a conceptual precision. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud says that the impulse to build *Kultur* is governed by the reality principle. Marcuse synthesizes the characteristics of this principle establishing that its objective is to provide “delayed satisfaction, restraint of pleasure, toil (work), [and] productiveness, security.”³⁸³⁹ This translates, in Freud’s words, as the urge to “preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units.”⁴⁰ The reality principle then antagonizes the pleasure principle, which consists of aggressive drives that have as their goal to obtain the greatest amount of pleasure possible in the least amount of time, regardless of the consequences.

By expanding social relations, the reality principle avoids the instances of intense pain that inevitably comes with the instances of intense pleasure. Because the reality principle gets in the way of getting gratification, the pleasure principle antagonizes with the basis of *Kultur*.⁴¹

The proposed scheme evokes, as is evident, a tension that Freud and Marcuse each address. Both recognize that repression is necessary for life in society. The problem in *Kultur* occurs when the reality principle, in its eagerness to avoid displeasure, does not provide any source of satisfaction as compensation, when the pleasure principle is overshadowed, totally repressed by the relentless weight of *Kultur*: “Just as a satisfaction of instinct

³⁸Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 12

³⁹In Marcuse’s original text *Eros and Civilization*, published in 1955, the German concept *Trieb* was still being translated as instinct. However, the most recent translations and those accepted by the psychoanalytic community refer to *Trieb* as a drive, not as instinct. Here, when speaking of instinct, Marcuse refers to drives. In fact, the German title of *Eros and Civilization* is *Triebstruktur und gesellschaft*, linking Eros not as it appears in the English or Spanish version (“instincts” or “instintos”) but effectively with — again — drives.

⁴⁰Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 65.

⁴¹Despite this tension, both principles are governed by the same force, that is, by the Nirvana principle, which can be defined as the desire to return to an inorganic form which the human life comes from. The return to the inorganic supposes the end of tensions, the absolute rest, and the end of pain. This will be addressed by Marcuse in his conclusions and, of course, later in this text.

[drives] spells happiness for us, so severe suffering is caused us if the external world lets us starve, if it refuses to sate our needs,” says Freud.⁴² Then he adds:

Here the aim of satisfaction is not by any means relinquished; but a certain amount of protection against suffering is secured, in that non-satisfaction is not so painfully felt in the case of instincts [drives] kept in dependence as in the case of uninhibited ones. As against this, there is an undeniable diminution of the potentialities of enjoyment. The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse [drive] untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct [drive] that has been tamed⁴³

Marcuse starts from this dilemma to design his own concepts. First, he acknowledges that there is an unconscious aggressiveness, a death drive, that cannot be overcome. He expands on this by stating that the type of repression imposed on the subjects is determined by historical contingencies. In this sense, the relations of production of the capitalist system need a repression that goes beyond the minimum repression required to make *Kultur* work. This is what he calls “surplus repression”: an overflow of impositions that are deployed not by an unintended consequence of *Kultur*, but by a deliberate operation of capitalism that needs this extra repression in order to reproduce and assert itself.⁴⁴

He continues by saying that under this regime there is a special intention to avoid the gratification of the drives, since realizing the drives could imply a threat to *Kultur*. Drives, observes Marcuse, can become a vehicle for liberation from the excessive impositions of capitalism. Because of this, in order to shield itself, capitalism redoubles its efforts and creates a

⁴²Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 25-26.

⁴³Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 26.

⁴⁴A potential question to rise here is, what happened in the pre-capitalist modes of production, that is, in systems with no surplus value but with surplus labor; in other words: is not surplus repression a characteristic that goes beyond capitalism?

cultural industry destined to neutralize its disruptive power. It redirects them in a way that not only do not pose a threat, but become functional to the capitalist horizon, that is, the drives are organized in such a way that they make the capitalist accumulation reproduction of the conditions of exploitation possible.⁴⁵

To maintain a high level of production, capitalism needs working hours that exceed those necessary to cover human needs, hours designed so that the bourgeois can expropriate — in this case, through absolute surplus value (Marcuse does not talk about relative surplus value) — workers' labor and accumulate capital. According to Marcuse, these productive relations require diverting drive energies towards work without guaranteeing the satisfaction that these drives would have had if they had not been completely domesticated. This implies that the death drive, which always ends up expressing itself, makes its way through the superego: the death drive is redirected towards the self, towards the subject, in the form of demands that are functional to *Kultur*. The answer given by the German philosopher to remedy this situation, or, rather, to change it substantially, is to modify the pleasure principle, intervene in *Kultur* to eliminate the “surplus repression” and give rise to another “performance principle”— which is defined as the prevailing historical form of the reality principle.

Thus, to summarize: Marcuse recognizes the existence of an unconscious eternity and an aggressiveness that inhabits that eternity, the death drive, which cannot be modified. From this Freudian diagnosis, he provides an answer to discontent by proposing that the ways these drives have to be satisfied in *Kultur* are subject to historical contingencies:

The various modes of domination (of man and nature) result in various historical forms of the reality principle. For example, a society in which all members normally work for a living requires other modes of repression than a society in which labor is the exclusive province of one specific group. Similarly, repression will be different in scope and degree according to whether social production is oriented on individual

⁴⁵Marcuse will delve into this topic in *The One-Dimensional Man*, which was published in 1964 and constitutes one of his most important works.

consumption or on profit; whether a market economy prevails or a planned economy; whether private or collective property. These differences affect the very content of the reality principle, for every form of the reality principle must be embodied in a system of societal institutions and relations, laws and values which transmit and enforce the required “modification” of the instincts. This “body” of the reality principle is different at the different stages of civilization⁴⁶

Unlike Althusser, who seems to resolve the tension between eternity and historical contingency by stating that the content of the unconscious is determined by the content of concrete ideology, Marcuse focuses on the place that is given to the pleasure principle in a given system, in the kind of transition or in the passage that exist from the unconscious towards the external world. He speaks of, for example, the “modifications and deflections of instinctual [drive] energy.”⁴⁷

The German intellectual says that the death drive that inhabits the unconscious is immutable, although he insists on the fact that the base is still relevant: the type of economic relationship determines the type of place that is given to the satisfaction of the drives. What Marcuse does, it could be argued, is to historicize Freud’s theory: “the Freudian terms, which do not adequately differentiate between the biological and the socio-historical vicissitudes of the instincts [drives], must be paired with the correspondent terms denoting the specific socio-historical component.”⁴⁸

Marcuse thinks that the demands of *Kultur* should be reduced so the drives could be satisfied. He suggests that, to make the transformation possible, the bourgeois institutions that give rise to an economy based on private property and capitalist accumulation should be eradicated. This is the point where he introduces the sexual dimension to his analysis — a key point of his argument. For Marcuse, surplus value is possible thanks to surplus repression, which consists in sexual repression and the reduc-

⁴⁶Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 37.

⁴⁷Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 38.

⁴⁸Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 35.

tion of sexual pleasure to heterosexual, genital, and monogamous relationships. This is the premise of bourgeois morality, which is introjected by the subject, and repeated by the voice of the superego. What is needed, therefore, is a greater liberation of the drives and the destruction of this restrictive libidinal economy.

The reflection of the German thinker is the following: capitalist modes of production and their subsequent division of tasks result in an alienated type of work; subjects end up performing tasks that are necessary to keep the system functioning, but that do not coincide in any way with their desires or with the satisfaction of their drives. With the prevailing principle of action and surplus repression, work is absolutely desexualized.

The interesting thing about this last point is that, for Marcuse, it is rather impossible to avoid the desexualization of work in any type of advanced *Kultur* — not only in capitalism. Division of labor would be still required, and these activities will not give a great amount of gratification to subjects in any case. The struggle for existence and the scarcity of resources would continue to demand a type of alienated work, where social functions and needs are prioritized over individual ones.⁴⁹ While working without surplus repression would probably increase gratification, it will not solve the problem: there will always be desexualization. The change in the relations of production, then, would not aim so much at modifying the content of labor; instead, the abolition of surplus repression necessary for capitalist production based on surplus value would aim to reduce long and unnecessary working hours, that is, absolute surplus value:

Relieved from the requirements of domination, the quantitative reduction in labor time and energy leads to a qualitative change in the human existence: the free rather than the labor times determines its content. The expanding realm of freedom becomes truly a realm of play — of the free play of individual faculties. Thus liberated, they will generate new forms of realization and of discovering the world [...]⁵⁰

⁴⁹This type of argument is harshly criticized by Althusser on *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. Here, he attributes the claim that division of labour is independent from the social formation to economicism and humanism, two faces — he says — of the same coin.

⁵⁰Marcuse, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 223.

In the context of an industrialized and advanced *Kultur*, the liberation of the drives would not imply — following Marcuse — a regression in terms of violence, it would not invoke the return to the rule of the primitive father. On the contrary: it would suppose a coming back only in terms of satisfaction. Drives that have been repressed and that were once satisfied would be satisfied again without involving the primitive violence that led to the origin of *Kultur* in the first place; it would be a sort of a progressive coming back, a coming back of gratification towards the future, towards an “unconquered future of mankind.”⁵¹ It would lead to a sexuality at the service of life drives, of Eros, which would use the released sexual energy to expand the units of lives and create more lasting social relationships:

Under non-repressive conditions, sexuality tends to ‘grow into’ Eros — that is to say, toward self-sublimation in lasting and expanding relations (including work relations) which serve to intensify and enlarge instinctual [drive] gratification⁵²

The latter, nevertheless, does not entirely solve the problem of aggressiveness, of the death drive. A change in the basis and in the terms of private property would give way to a greater gratification of the sexual drives, but in any case, following Freud, there would still be aggressiveness. As a matter of fact, Freud warns about the aggressiveness present in sexuality, and question the fact that communism deals with the violence that arises from the base without coping with the violence that emanates from sexual relations:

If we do away with personal rights over material wealth, there still remains prerogative in the field of sexual relationships, which is bound to become the source of the strongest dislike and the most violent hostility among men who in

⁵¹Marcuse, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 147.

⁵²Marcuse, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 222.

other respects are on an equal footing. If we were to remove this factor, too, by allowing complete freedom of sexual life and thus abolishing the family, the germ-cell of civilization, we cannot, it is true, easily foresee what new paths the development of civilization could take; but one thing we can expect, and that is that this indestructible feature of human nature will follow it there⁵³

The German philosopher solves this issue by invoking the Nirvana principle. As Freud says in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the Nirvana principle is “the dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension [...]”⁵⁴ One possible reading is that both the pleasure principle and the reality principle are directed by the Nirvana principle; these two principles converge in an ultimate objective, which is the end of pain. Having this in mind, Marcuse address the problem of the death drive as a human nature and the potential strategy to deal with it in the following terms:

The death instinct [drive] operates under the Nirvana principle: it tends toward that state of ‘constant gratification’ where no tension is felt — a state without a want. This trend of the instinct [drive] implies that *its destructive manifestations would be minimized as it approached such a state*. If the instinct basic objective is not the termination of life but of pain — the absence of tension — then paradoxically, in terms of the instinct, *the conflict between life and death is the more reduced, the closer life approximates the state of gratification* (my italics)⁵⁵

By releasing the sexual drives and putting them at the service of Eros, the death drive would be partially dominated. And while Marcuse’s reasoning

⁵³ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 61.

⁵⁴ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 49.

⁵⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 234-235

focuses on the transition of drives from the unconscious to the external world, a change in the base would result in a liberation of sexuality (the liberation of sexuality and the drives would suppose a threat to the base as well) and, in the long run, in a change in the content of the unconscious. According to the German philosopher, all these social transformations would imply a moral change, and while the superego is the mental representative of the ruling morality, a change in the relations of production and in sexuality would imply a change in the superego:

It has been pointed out that the superego, as the mental representative of morality, is not unambiguously the representative of the reality principle, especially of the forbidding and punishing father. In many cases, *the superego seems to be in secret alliance with the id, defending the claims of the id against the ego and the external world* (my italics)⁵⁶

In conclusion, Althusser solves the problem of the eternity of the unconscious by affirming that its structure is eternal, that it is not tied to any type of contingency, although its content is. That is to say, the concrete ideology determines the content of the unconscious: a change in the form of ideological interpellation implies a transformation of the reality principle, of the repressed behaviors and of the prevailing moral guidelines, that is, a change in the premises of *Kultur* that are introjected and forms part — along the ego and the id — of the configuration of the subject, which leads him to act in a certain way and assign him a certain function in the world.

The drawback emerges when Althusser seems to attribute a “relative autonomy” to the content of the “eternity” of the unconscious, something that is not in tune with the Freudian proposition that no social change implies a profound transformation in human aggressiveness: a change in ideology might imply certain changes in the unconscious content, but it won’t disrupt the destructive drive that is housed there and that will be

⁵⁶ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 228.

expressed in one way or another, through different channels — property relations, sexuality — in the outside world. To put it in other words: ideological change won't eradicate the death drive.

The fact that Althusser does not deal with this last issue explicitly, however, is not entirely problematic, since he never states that a social revolution will lead to its eradication. Even more importantly, this is not a problem in the sense that adopting *Civilization and Its Discontent's* fatalism would lead to stop theorizing about the possibilities of changing the processes of subjectivation and the social formations associated with violence, exploitation and capitalist destruction. This supposes a kind of paradox in Freud: on the one hand, as Althusser points out in “On Freud and Marx,” the definition of the object of study of psychoanalysis poses a threat to the bourgeois theoretical order, which needs to work and operate from the definition of the subject based on the centrality of consciousness, on the ego; and on the other hand, in its postwar instances, such as in *Civilization and Its Discontents* — where Freud focus on the death drive and defines the inclination towards destruction as a “human nature” — he distrusts of any attempt to transform society. The changes or the different emphasis that he put on the theorization about the unconscious, that is, the passage of the disruptive discipline that shakes the foundation of the capitalist subject as an ego, to a source of fatalism that prevents theoretical speculation about social change, might suggests that his own point of views may be guided by the historical circumstances in which he elaborates them. And just as the unconscious content (Althusser) and the different ways of channeling the death drive that inhabits the unconscious (Marcuse) are oriented by *Kultur*, so might the very analysis of these concepts. In this context, the question would be: which Freud is worth inheriting?

It should be noted that the German philosopher, unlike Althusser, attends to both dimensions of the problem posed by Freud. He starts his analysis stating that the death drive is an immovable unconscious element, and then he adds that the passage from the unconscious to the outside world is subordinate to historical contingencies. By focusing on the passage of this “eternity” and the place that this “eternity” have in a “historical contingency” he resolves the tension that emerges from the questions posted at the beginning of the paper. Second, by recognizing that there is

an aggressiveness that lives in the unconscious, and that that aggressiveness is constitutive, he dismantles the Freudian argument that aims to question communist and socialist thinkers for seeking to overcome aggressiveness — an argument that, as it was mentioned, does not point in any specific direction: Freud does not mention which Marxist made that projection in the first place.

Marcuse directly addresses Freudian skepticism without accepting his fatalism, which, taken to the extreme, and to say it one more time, would consist in not making any theoretical and political effort to improve the conditions of existence. In Marcuse's words: "Freud did not believe in prospective social changes that would alter human nature sufficiently to free man from external and internal oppression."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Marcuse departs from Freudian objections — a "fatalism" that the German philosopher considers to be justified — toward, through the same theories that Freud himself developed, efforts to imagine building a "better future."⁵⁸

Of course, this work is not about investigating the full efficacy and theoretical potentiality of Althusser and Marcuse. Rather, it is about simply questioning them about the death drive, to contrast their observations with the criticisms made by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontent*. At this point, it is evident, for example, that Marcuse's Freudo-Marxism articulation would seem to completely ignore the fact that *Kultur* not only operates through repression, but also through the positive production of subjectivities, something that is obviously thought in the Althusserian concept of ISAs. Nor does Marcuse's address the fact that the exploitation of the worker is not only based on the length of the working time (absolute surplus value): exploitation can take place and be increased by other methods (without altering the working hours at all or even reducing the time), such as technological improvement or a more efficient division of labour (which is for him an intrinsic quality of an advance society — not only capitalism), that is, through relative surplus value. He neither foresees the plasticity of capitalism when it comes to appropriating and neutralizing changes that could be considered disruptive in the first place, such as that

⁵⁷Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 273.

⁵⁸Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 272.

of a liberated sexuality (which could eventually be transformed into commodities), and thus the criticism could continue with an extensive enumeration.

The objective is to address the specific theoretical problems tabled in the first pages — the human nature constituted by the death drive vs the human being determined by the historical contingencies — from their perspectives and explore the terrain of encounter between them, a place opened by Freud but described, nevertheless, from the very beginning, as anomalous. Having examined both answers, it is the time to ask: why anomalous?

In dealing with the relationship that exists between ideology and the unconscious, Althusser, invoking Spinoza, speaks of different forms of articulation between both structures, which at the same time are in interaction with other structures — such as aesthetics and science — and affirms that both the ideology and the unconscious — which like a motor feeds with the energy provided by the ideology — are sensitive to undergoing modifications in terms of their content, although not at the level of their function. That is, there will always be ideological interpellation, there will always be an unconscious. Its content, though, may vary. In “The Three Notes,” in fact, Althusser goes a little further and says that the interaction of the two autonomous structures gives rise to a new structure:

The categories that overlap with the others, and the way they overlap, as well as the significance they take on as a result of the position conferred upon them in the new structure, must be thought with reference to this new structure, not the structure to which they belonged prior to or outside of this articulation⁵⁹

The class struggle, thus, aims transforming the different structures that configures the social formations and the subject; in order to understand Althusser’s position, it is worth to explain this through Spinozist categories: class struggle could mean a dispute of the manner in which the infinite attributes and modes of an infinite substance are articulated, a dispute

⁵⁹Althusser, *Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, 61.

which would lead to an endless multiplicity of ideas, organizations of the bodies, relations among the bodies, etcetera. These articulations do not respond to simple contradictions and they do not advance progressively and unequivocally into a definite synthesis. Here, it worth citing Hasana Sharp, who, while dealing with Spinoza and Althusser, elegantly explains the interaction of these these two extremely complex concepts (attributes and modes) in the following terms:

There are few concepts in Spinoza's ontology as difficult as the "attributes." Briefly, Spinoza's ontology consists in the infinitely complex, unbounded totality that goes by the names "nature," "substance," or "God," which is simply all there is and all that could ever be. Nature is expressed in infinitely many attributes, or "ways of being," of which we know two, thought and extension. Each way of being is further articulated into infinitely many modes. Thus, there are infinitely many bodies within the attribute of extension and infinitely many ideas within the attribute of thought. Spinoza defines an attribute as "what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence" (Idef4)⁶⁰

In Marcuse, on the other hand, the unconscious content is related to a dynamic that is explained through a simple contradiction: the history of *Kultur*, which, as Freud puts it in *Totem and Taboo* begins with the murder of the primitive father by the brothers, culminate in a revolution that can eliminate surplus repression: there is an origin and a conclusive end. This implies a progressive conceptualization of humanity, which through its contradictions can lead to a new stage, a new order of things: a synthesis.

Montag qualifies the efforts of the Frankfurt School as that of a radical humanism striving for "the adaptation of society to a reality of a question of human nature [drives in the case of Marcuse], that is, the construction of a new order that would be finally adequate to the substratum of human

⁶⁰Sharp, Hasana "The Force of Ideas in Spinoza." (Political Theory, Volume 35, Number 6. Sage Publications: 2007), 734

essence as revealed by Psychoanalysis.”⁶¹ This search, which is based on human needs (the need to satisfy the drives) and which, according to Montag, has as a collateral the presupposition of a “human nature,” sets up a dilemma that is explained through two opposite and complementary forces: principle of pleasure against the principle of reality, Eros against death drive, liberation against repression, necessary repression against the plus of repression, which is in open conflict with the multiple structures and the infinite forms of articulation of the modes and attributes of which Althusser talks.⁶² The anomaly, then, is to be explained by the tensions posed in an encounter between a Marxism with Hegelian leanings, and a Marxism read along with Spinoza, a fruitful dispute that continues to be at the center of contemporary debates.

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⁶¹Montag, “Marxism and psychoanalysis,” 74.

⁶²This affirmation, however, needs to be problematized. For Marcuse, the new order would not imply the end of conflicts: “The ascendancy of the pleasure principle would thus engender antagonisms, pains, and frustrations — individual conflicts in the striving for gratification. But these conflicts would themselves have libidinal value: they would be permeated with the rationality of gratification. This sensuous rationality contains its own moral laws.” (228). Nevertheless, Montag’s argument is still very accurate and fits Marcuse’s interpretation of Marx since Marcuse does project the adequation of society with a human essence.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler identifies a Hegelian presence in the work of Freud himself, from where Marcuse departs. She says: “We can see in both Hegel and Freud a certain reliance on a dialectical reversal by which a bodily experience, broadly construed, comes under the censor of the law only to reemerge as the sustaining affect of that law. The Freudian notion of sublimation suggests that denial or displacement of pleasure and desire can become formative of culture; his *Civilization and Its Discontents* thus laid the ground for Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*” (58).

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