

Stuart Hall and the Introduction of Althusser in Cultural Studies: A Thinker of Difference

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Abstract

This article focuses on Stuart Hall's reading of Louis Althusser's main theoretical works. Since the early 1970s, Hall has undertaken a critical confrontation with Althusser's 'structural Marxism', rescuing those useful concepts to think cultural difference and identity, without failing to criticize his 'superstructuralist' interpretation of Marx. However, what Hall will retain as Althusser's most important contribution is, above all, his theory of ideology. In this context, I follow an idea formulated by Hall that could be read as summarizing the theoretical and political scope of Althusser's contribution to Cultural Studies: 'he enabled me to live in and with difference'. By complicating classical interpretations schemes in the Marxist tradition, Hall's Althusser may be read as a 'thinker of difference' who opens up a whole research program to reconsider class conflicts as traversed (or 'overdetermined') by gender, racial or colonial conflicts.

Keywords

difference, ideology, Marxism, overdetermination, structuralism

Whatever one's relation to Marxism, it is impossible to think about culture or the debates in cultural theory outside the continuing effect of the Althusserian intervention [. . .]. Althusser's work has changed the discourses, shifted the terminology, broken up the conceptualisations, and discovered secrets *hidden* away in Marxist discourse in places where people had not looked. (Stuart Hall, 1983, p. 114)¹

I want to place Hall, a young man lately arrived in England from Jamaica, in this broad world, for the philosophers of the future, rather than keeping him local. (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2014, p. 66)

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In a 1992 conference on the theoretical legacies of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall recalled that there was never such a thing as an ‘originary’ moment in which Cultural Studies and Marxist theory represented a ‘perfect theoretical fit’: ‘there was always already the question of the great inadequacies, theoretically and politically, the resounding silences, the great evasions of Marxism’, namely, those of ‘culture, ideology, language, the symbolic’ (Hall, 2019a: 74–5). Through this statement, Hall wanted to underline the fact that from the beginning, the relationship between Cultural Studies and Marxism took the form of a *problem*. It was neither a question of ‘applying’ an already stabilized, ‘ready-to-go’ theory to these new objects of study that Marx and Marxists would have neglected; nor was it a matter of simply criticizing Marxist theory in order to demonstrate its limitations and ultimately its incapacity to explain ‘super-structural’ phenomena. Following a very popular slogan from what will be known around the 1980s as ‘post-Marxism’, the work led by Hall at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University could fairly be labeled as thinking ‘Marx against Marx’, or rather, thinking ‘Marx beyond Marx’. This is what, in an exemplary way, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have explained in their preface to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, first published in 1985: ‘To reread Marxist theory in the light of contemporary problems necessarily involves deconstructing the central categories of that theory. This is what has been called our post-Marxism [. . .] [W]e do not oppose it insofar as it is properly understood: as the process of reappropriation of an intellectual tradition, as well as the process of going beyond it’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: ix).²

Following this same *strategy*, from the early 1970s Hall relied fundamentally on Althusser’s major works, *For Marx* (2005) and *Reading Capital*, first translated into English in 1969 and 1970 respectively (although it was a partial translation of *Reading Capital*, including only Althusser and Balibar’s contributions), and, of course, on the ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay, included in the 1971 translation of *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.³ Certainly, next to Althusser, the other fundamental figure among Hall’s Marxist theoretical references is Antonio Gramsci, whose influence on the New Left development is also critical (see Hall, 1990: 161–73; 2019b: 21–54). When in 1980 Hall offered an explanation of the ‘two paradigms’ in dispute in Cultural Studies, it is clear that these two ‘master paradigms’, ‘culturalism’ and ‘structuralism’, are marked by the figure of Gramsci in the first case, and Althusser in the second. Even more striking is the fact that Hall identifies the ‘culturalism’ of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson (beyond their differences) with ‘humanist’ positions, and more specifically, with perspectives that rest on an ‘expressive’ notion of totality (Hall, 2019c: 47–70) (the same terms used by Althusser to criticize the Marxism of Gramsci, Lukács and other of his contemporaries). While it may be true that the shift from ‘culturalism’ to ‘structuralism’ in Cultural Studies coincides with the shift towards (Althusserian) Marxism, as Colin Sparks (2005) has argued, it is less clear that it was ‘a prior encounter with structuralism which governed the appropriation of Marxism’, as the author maintains (p. 81), at least in Hall’s case. In any case, it would be extremely difficult to determine which of these two major figures of ‘Western Marxism’ has been more important in Hall’s intellectual production. As Mattelart and Neveu (2018) suggest, Hall would never have ceased oscillating between one reference and another (p. 57). In his commentary on Hall’s recently published *Selected Writings on Marxism* (2021), Gregor McLennan

(2021), for his part, suggests that Hall's 'neo-Marxism' sought to rely on the 'triumvirate' made up of 'the best Marx, the Althusser of *For Marx*, and highlighted segments of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*' (p. 160). Here I am rather inclined to think that more important than pure consistency, and far from any opportunistic oscillation, Hall always sought to read both authors (and not only them) following the specific constraints of a determinate political conjuncture.⁴ In this sense, it could be said that all of his reading and the different critiques Hall addresses to Althusser must also be seen as a quest for 'translation' forced by the political conjuncture.⁵ Following this view, the 'introduction' of Althusser in Cultural Studies (as mentioned in the title of this article) actually takes the form of a 'conceptual import', as Hall himself thought of his use and translation of 'foreign' theoretical concepts.

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to trace and emphasize Althusser's role in Hall's theoretical elaborations, specifically regarding the former's theory of ideology, a theory that the latter intelligently reads in a necessary connection with Althusser's previous theoretical works. Just as Hall describes the relationship between Cultural Studies and Marxism, his own reading of Althusser followed a similar logic of 'productive tension'. It was never a smooth, unproblematic dialogue with Althusser's theoretical positions, but instead, a permanent *struggle* – again: with and against Althusser. As Hall himself acknowledges in a key passage:

my own experience of theory – and Marxism is certainly a case in point – is of wrestling with the angels, a metaphor you can take as literally as you like. I remember wrestling with Althusser [. . .] looking at the idea of 'theoretical practice' in *Reading Capital* and thinking, 'I've gone as far in this book as it is proper to go.' I felt, I will not give an inch to [. . .] this superstructuralist mistranslation, of classical Marxism [. . .] unless he defeats me in the spirit. [. . .] I warred with him, to the death. A long, rambling piece I wrote on Marx's '1857 Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*, in which I tried to stake out the difference between structuralism in Marx's epistemology and Althusser's, was only the tip of the iceberg of this long engagement. (Hall, 2019a: 75–6).

As I hope to show in what follows, in the course of this wrestling, there were moments of peace and alliance, as it were, in which Althusser's concepts served to wage other struggles on other fronts of the theoretical battlefield. More importantly, what I propose is that, through this very process of struggle, Althusser's theory of ideology in particular, and his reading of Marxist theory in general, allowed Hall to think the problem of *difference* or, following a remarkable statement that I take as the thread of this article, he enabled him 'to live in and with difference'. In this way, simultaneously, Hall's reading of Althusser offers an unexpected and original profile of this philosopher as a 'thinker of difference'. In the last section of this article, I will discuss the parallel that Hall's reading of Althusser shows with that developed by Judith Butler, in order to better emphasize the way in which both discover ways of reading Althusser in a different way, and in doing so, they allow us to consider him as a thinker of difference. As a consequence of the above, my argument challenges the premises of the historical balance proposed by Sparks in the 1990s, for whom it is to the extent that Cultural Studies moves away from Althusserian Marxism that it becomes capable of thinking the different forms of contradiction and that it is, rather, thanks to Laclau that it becomes possible to give equal

attention to problems of class, race, and gender (Sparks, 2005: 92–3).⁶ On the contrary, my position is much closer to the assessment made more recently by Jason Barker, who, considering the posthumous publication of many of Althusser's writings (surely unknown to Sparks), brings Althusser's approach closer to those of Deleuze and Derrida, and even proposes to rename Althusser's 'structural Marxism' as 'Althusser's differential Marxism' (Barker, 2016: 140).⁷

Exploring Althusserian Strategies: Hall's Early Reading of Marx's '1857 Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*

One of the first pieces in which one can appreciate the influential role played by Althusser in Hall's own work is precisely the lengthy comment (mentioned above) on Marx's 1857 'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse* (Hall, 2003: 113–49), first published in 1973 as a 'working paper' of the Centre for Cultural Studies. Despite the fact that some have hurried to see in this text an argument 'against Althusser' (Arthur, 2008: 253), it is hard to ignore the degree to which the essay rests on an unmistakable Althusserian vocabulary. A quick glance at the text should suffice to confirm it. From the very beginning, Hall is explicit in establishing an 'anti-humanist' point of view: just as the idea that 'the individual' cannot be considered as a 'point of departure' but only as a 'result', says Hall (2003), the notion of a 'universal human nature' is also the product of a 'whole historical and ideological development' (p. 115). This clearly echoes the strategical role that Althusser himself assigned to Marx's 'Notes on Adolph Wagner', a quotation from which he included as an epigraph to his essay 'Marxism and Humanism': 'My analytical method does not start from man but from the economically given social period' (Hall, 2005: 219). Also clearly and systematically, Hall makes use of each of the main concepts proposed by Althusser in *For Marx*: 'overdetermination', 'structure in dominance', 'conjuncture', 'theoretical practice', the distinction between 'concrete-in-thought' and 'concrete-in-history' and, more generally, the task of thinking the problem of 'articulation' along with the problem of 'determinacy' between different 'instances' of the social totality. The following passage serves as an example:

Marx gives an 'over-determinacy' to production. [. . .] In the Althusserian sense, production not only 'determines' in the last instance, but determines the form of the combination of forces and relations which make a mode of production a complex structure. Formally, production specifies the system of similarities and differences, the points of conjuncture, between all the instances of the mode, including which level is, at any moment of a conjuncture, 'in dominance'. (Hall, 2003: 128)

Of course, not everything in this essay is completely favorable to Althusser. On the one hand, Hall (2003) says 'we must prefer Vilar's brief but succinct gloss over Althusser's complex but less satisfying ones' (p. 130);⁸ and, on the other hand – a much more decisive element – Hall refuses the famous thesis of the 'epistemological break' (a criticism that is reiterated in several other places): 'The notion of a "break" – final, thorough, complete – by Marx with Political Economy, is ultimately, an idealist notion' (Hall, 2003: 145–6; see also Hall, 1986: 34). Although I cannot discuss in depth here this

entirely legitimate criticism, it is worth noting that this is exactly what Althusser's own 'self-criticism' will point to, a self-criticism that he made public only in a 1974 book (whose English translation became available two years later) (Althusser, 1976: 101–50).

Even if we may recognize the whole Althusserian terminology at work in this piece on Marx, two more elements are worth underlining here. First, the fact that Hall has decided to title this essay with the word 'reading' (in quotes) is an indicator of the type of exercise and the theoretical strategy that he follows throughout the text. When Hall says, for example, that in the 'Introduction' Marx offers an 'answer to an unwritten question', he is clearly following Althusser's 'symptomatic reading', that which allows us to 'see' the absence of a question in the presence of the answer to a question that was never actually asked. As Althusser explains in his first contribution to *Reading Capital*:

What political economy does not see is what it *does*: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained in relief in this new answer. Through the lacunary terms of its new answer political economy produced a new question, but '*unconsciously*'. (Althusser, 2015a: 22)

This was made explicit by Hall in the original 1973 version of his essay, which not only had a slightly different title, but which also included a marginal but revealing reference to Althusser on the first page, which has been inexplicably cut from the 2003 version:

My aim, then, is to inaugurate a 'reading' of the 1857 text [. . .]. It is, of course, *not* a reading *tabula rasa*, not a reading 'without presuppositions': thus, a 'reading' which, in Althusser's sense, is a 'guilty' one. It reflects my own problematic, inevitably. (Hall, 1974: 1)

The second element has to do more directly with what the title of this article announces, that is to say, how Althusser's theoretical work is a valuable aid to think the problem of difference in Marxism (which is not unrelated to the task of thinking Marxism *differently*). While explaining the type of totality Marx is thinking of, regarding the simultaneous but different processes of production, distribution, consumption, and exchange, Hall seems to mix Marx's own terminology with that of Althusser:

we must 'think' the relations between the different processes of material production as 'members of a totality, distinctions within a unity'. That is, as a complexly structured differentiated totality, in which distinctions are not obliterated but preserved – the unity of its 'necessary complexity' precisely *requiring* this differentiation. (Hall, 2003: 127)

Even if Althusser is not explicitly mentioned here, the *complexly structured differentiated totality* clearly alludes to the Althusserian concept of a 'complex totality in dominance' (and the constant contrast with the Hegelian concept of totality only confirms this impression). 'For Marx', Hall continues:

two different terms or relations or movements remain specific and different: yet they form a 'complex unity'. However this is always a 'unity' formed by and requiring them to preserve

their difference: a difference [. . .] which cannot be abolished by a simple movement of mind or a formal twist of the dialectic, which is not subsumed into some ‘higher’ but more ‘essential’, synthesis [. . .]. This latter type of ‘non-immediacy’ is what Marx calls a *differentiated unity*. (Hall, 2003: 127)

In a way, this will be a constant trend in Hall’s thought, specifically regarding his theoretical engagement with Marxism.

Although a closer discussion of this 1973 essay is still possible and can be an interesting exercise, I will limit myself here to analyzing two subsequent articles from the mid-1980s in which Hall addresses explicitly the problem of ideology in a direct dialogue with Althusser’s theory.

Struggling with Althusser – Without Guarantees

The first article to consider is ‘The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees’, published in 1983 (Hall, 1986), where Hall develops an exemplary exercise of reading Althusser against Althusser (in order to read Marx beyond Marx, so to speak). In general terms, Hall systematically uses the conceptual arsenal offered in Althusser’s major works, to point out the way in which Marxism’s classical theory of ideology should be criticized in order to be ‘corrected’ and developed thanks to new theoretical resources that do not necessarily come from Marxist tradition (above all, psychoanalysis). By doing so, Hall surprisingly seems to resume in quite a similar fashion the argument deployed by Althusser (2006) in his posthumous book-length text, *Marx in His Limits* (written in 1978, and evidently unknown to Hall). As in many of his articles, Hall (1986) speaks of ideology as a *theoretical* problem, which means for him a *political* and therefore *strategic* problem (p. 28), that must be addressed considering the complex combination of different trends that informs the current historical conjuncture (at that time, notably but not exclusively, Thatcherism and neoliberalism; see Hall, 1988). Thereby, Hall endorses the materialistic and conflictual conception of theoretical practice as defined by Althusser, if not exactly as ‘class struggle in theory’, at least as a necessary positioning of one’s own perspective in the field of theory, as ‘taking sides’ in the philosophical battlefield or ‘*Kampfplatz*’, as Althusser liked to say (Althusser, 1971b: 11–22). Quite explicitly, the ‘Introduction’ to *Policing the Crisis* – a book that on several occasions relies on references to Althusser – ends with the following statement to his readers: ‘We hope they will read it as we have tried to write it: as an *intervention* – albeit an intervention in the battleground of ideas’ (Hall, 1978: x).

Nonetheless, the main topic that Hall retains from Althusser’s own reworking of the theory of ideology is his critique of the Hegelian notion of totality which still haunts the ‘young Marx’ philosophical definitions of ideology, a notion to which Althusser opposes the concept of a complex totality, which – as seen in Hall’s 1973 essay – is to be understood as a differentiated whole, a complexly ‘structured whole in dominance’ (Althusser, 2005: 200–18). This means that as a complex totality, every social formation has an internal hierarchy, and is made up of different instances with unequal temporalities and, therefore, unequal rhythms of development. As Hall carefully argues, this concept of complex totality allows us to correct the main weaknesses and limitations of classical Marxist definitions of ideology:

Marx's model of ideology has been criticized because it did not conceptualize the social formation as a determinate complex formation, composed of different practices, but as a *simple* (or, as Althusser called it in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, an 'expressive') structure. By this Althusser meant that one practice – 'the economic' – determines in a direct manner all others, and each effect is simply and simultaneously reproduced correspondingly (i.e., 'expressed') on all other levels. (Hall, 1986: 31)

Of course, what is at stake here is the problem of the relative autonomy of the ideological (or the 'superstructure'), and the problem of the determinacy in the last instance by the economic (the 'base' or the 'infrastructure', in Marx and Engels' classical terminology). Both were at the heart of Marxism's most critical limitations, 'economism' and 'historicism' being the most symptomatic forms of reductionism and orthodoxy, both of which Althusser criticized as different versions of a 'humanist' conception of Marxism – hence his 'theoretical anti-humanism' (see Althusser, 2005: 219–47).⁹

Following Hall's analysis, nonetheless, it is thanks to Althusser's theoretical innovations that we are able to think ideology in a more suitable way, not reducing ideology to mere 'expression' of economic determinants, or to being simply 'distorted ideas' or a 'false consciousness' with no positive effects on its own. 'There is no fixed and unalterable relation' between the economic structure and ideological formations (Hall, 1986: 36); or in other words, 'the economic relations themselves cannot prescribe a single, fixed and unalterable way of conceptualizing it. It can be "expressed" within different ideological discourses' (Hall, 1986: 38). At this point we might begin to see in what sense Hall's reading of Althusser's theoretical concepts allows him to think difference without abandoning a materialistic, i.e. Marxist, position. Let me quote again a particularly illuminating passage:

The ideological categories in use [. . .] *position us* in relation to the account of the process as depicted in the discourse. The worker who relates to his or her condition of existence in the capitalist process as 'consumer' – who enters the system, so to speak, through that gateway – participates in the process by way of a different practice from those who are inscribed in the system as 'skilled labourer' – or not inscribed in it at all, as 'housewife'. All these inscriptions have effects which are real. They make a material difference, since how we act in certain situations depends on what our definitions of the situation are. (Hall, 1986: 39)

Thus, it is thanks to the reworking of the categories of 'totality' and a radical transformation of the conception of ideology into a materialistic one (against the idea of 'false consciousness' or a simple cognitive 'distortion') that Hall is able to apprehend these different forms of subjectivities, despite the criticisms he formulates against Althusser (Hall, 1986: 32). The 'Marxism without guarantees' that Hall stands up for – and which has become one of the hallmarks of his 'post-Marxism' – means a Marxism without the assurances of the simple principle of determinacy in the last instance by the economic; without the assurances of a subject which has to deal with a given object in a perfectly transparent relation of knowledge; without the assurances, finally, of the comforting idea of 'class consciousness' and the reassuring supposition of a unique and perfectly identifiable 'subject of history'. In a rather provocative reformulation of the problem of determinacy, Hall (1986) states: 'It would be preferable [. . .] to think of the "materialism" of

Marxist theory in terms of “determination by the economic in the *first* instance” (p. 43) (rather than in the *last*), meaning thereby that we cannot ignore the material determinacy of class and productive social relations, but we cannot assume either that this determinacy works as the single, fixed and univocal effect over ideological or cultural formations.

In a way, this is Hall’s (2005) own method to ‘resolve’ (with a theoretical formulation which is not a definitive ‘solution’) the same impasse that Althusser sought to resolve with a highly paradoxical formulation from ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’: ‘From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the “last instance” never comes’ (p. 113). Much has been discussed about the decisive role Althusser assigns to the ‘last instance’ in his major works published in the 1960s, but there have been few who have read with real care (and justice) what this paradoxical formula means in Althusser’s theoretical project as a whole: not only is this a way to undermine the ‘sovereignty’ of the last instance, that is to say, a way to put a radical limit to any possible orthodox (i.e. mechanistic) reading of the determination in the last instance by the economic, but also, as Balibar (2014a, 2016: 42–52) has drawn attention to correctly, what is important to underline in Althusser’s formulation is not so much the idea that the lonely hour of the last instance *never comes*, but rather that it never comes *alone*. This means that it never presents itself in a pure form, all alone, it never comes into presence as a purely economic cause or determination, but rather it always ‘presents’ itself in combination or articulated with multiple other determinants, combinations that are always aleatory or contingent. At the end, the last instance never truly appears as such, because it works as an ‘absent cause’, following another paradoxical formula with which Althusser defines structural causality. As he explains in *Reading Capital*: ‘The fact that [social structure] only exists in its effects does not mean that it can be grasped completely in any one of its determinate effects: for that it would have to be *completely present* in that effect, whereas it is only present there, as a structure, in its *determinate absence*’ (Althusser, 2015b: 335). From this point of view, the ‘determination in last instance’ works in a much more complex way than what is normally thought – and to this extent, it works in a much more ‘real’ or ‘material’ way, which amounts to saying that every determination (in the first or last instance) is always an *overdetermination*. Balibar (2016) explains this by saying that the ‘last instance’ must not be understood ‘as the one who always outweighs the others in power, but like the one which, in secret, distributes the *efficacy* or the *index of efficacy* among the others, so as to institute a historically changing “dominance”’ (p. 43). Hall does not seem to be very far from this conception of determinacy, when he affirms that

[t]he economic *cannot* effect a final closure on the domain of ideology, in the strict sense of always guaranteeing a result. It cannot always secure a particular set of correspondences [. . .]. This is precisely because (a) ideological categories are developed, generated and transformed according to their own laws of development and evolution; [. . .] [and] because (b) of the necessary ‘openness’ of historical development to practice and struggle. (Hall, 1986: 43)

It is from this conception of determinacy, which necessarily implies a certain degree of indeterminacy, however paradoxical it may be, from which Hall (1986) concludes: ‘we have to acknowledge the real indeterminacy of the political’ (p. 43). Again, this is nothing more than thinking the political ‘without guarantees’.¹⁰

Let me now turn to the second piece mentioned: Hall's 1985 article 'Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates', which further develops his previous argument. Hall repeats the gesture of recognizing the contribution of Althusser's theoretical innovations – he speaks of his 'immense theoretical revolution' in the Marxist theory of ideology – and at the same time acknowledging his limitations, the problems or even the paradoxes to which his theory may conduct: what Hall identifies as Althusser's 'superstructuralist' and even 'idealist' positions. But it is here, actually, where Hall (1985) makes an astonishing statement regarding Althusser (which inspired the title of this article): 'he enabled me to live in and with *difference*' (p. 92). At first glance, this might seem quite unsettling when it comes to a white male French Marxist, Communist Party member, professor at the École Normale Supérieure, the cradle of French intellectual life, located at one of the main capital cities of Western Europe, who never (or almost never) spoke of racism, colonialism, or feminism. And to top it all, it is a statement coming from a Black Jamaican immigrant, whose career is largely devoted to thinking questions of race, ethnicity, colonialism and cultural identity. Maybe we would not be that unsettled if the statement would have been made regarding someone like Derrida, for instance, whom Hall also acknowledges as one of his most important theoretical references.¹¹ We must pay attention though to Hall's own words:

Althusser's break with a monistic conception of Marxism demanded the theorization of difference – the recognition that there are different social contradictions with different origins; that the contradictions which drive the historical process forward do not always appear in the same place, and will not always have the same historical effects. We have to think about the articulation between different contradictions; about the different specificities and temporal durations through which they operate, about the different modalities through which they function. (Hall, 1985: 93).

As in his 1983 article, Hall (2005) is referring here to 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', one of the most influential essays of *For Marx* (pp. 87–128). As previously suggested, the concept of 'complex totality' or the 'structured whole in dominance' is in fact inseparable from the concept of 'overdetermination', which Althusser fruitfully recovers from Freud. To put it briefly (and in a quite literal way), overdetermination designates the impossibility of a simple or single determination by a unique instance (say the economic) over another instance (the ideological), in one direction and synchronical way. This is because the complexity of the concept of totality not only refers to a multiplicity of different structural determinants, and their unequal rhythm of development, but also because every contradiction in itself has 'internal' differences. In other words, to say that there is never a simple contradiction is the same as saying that a contradiction is always overdetermined. 'After "Contradiction and Overdetermination"', Hall maintains, 'the debate about the social formation and determinacy in Marxism will never again be the same. That in itself constitutes "an immense theoretical revolution"' (Hall, 1985: 97).

The difference and inequality (*décalage*) of every contradiction – and *between* different contradictions – allows us to understand more precisely the claim of 'no guarantee', what Hall also designates as the 'necessary contingency of the political'. More precisely, this not only means that there is no direct necessary correspondence between the economic instance and ideological formations, but that there is *no necessary non-correspondence either* (Hall,

1985: 94).¹² The degree of correspondence or non-correspondence depends in fact on the contingent encounter of different trends in a given political conjuncture. That is the whole point of Marxism being an open-ended theory: its scientificity or its objectivity relies on it being not a ‘theory of everything’ (Hall, 2019d: 143), a ‘general theory’ able to explain every kind of phenomenon, but in being a ‘finite theory’, as Althusser himself argued in a 1978 article (most likely unknown to Hall):

Only a ‘finite’ theory can be really *open* to the contradictory tendencies it detects in capitalist society, and open to their aleatory becoming, open to the unpredictable ‘surprises’ that have never ceased to mark the history of the workers’ movement, open, therefore attentive, and able to take seriously and account *in time* for the incorrigible imagination of history. (Althusser, 1998: 286)

Either way, what is even more important is that from this standpoint Hall is able to refute a very common critique against Althusser’s theory of ideology: its alleged ‘functionalism’. As is well known, this objection is in a way at the core of Edward P. Thompson’s furious critique of Althusser’s structuralism (first published in 1978). For Thompson, the account that Althusserian Marxism offers of historical process is unable to explain individual or collective historical action, social change, or class struggle. Furthermore, Althusser’s thesis, according to which individuals would be nothing more than ‘bearers’ of a set of different ‘roles’ or ‘functions’ assigned by the multiple structures or instances of the social totality (an idea that Althusser recovers from Marx’s concept of *Träger*), is considered by Thompson (1995) to be a result of the ‘reigning fashion of bourgeois ideology’ (p. 206). Hall (1981) answered back to this attack, with an article that was significantly titled ‘In Defence of Theory’. Demonstrating basic intellectual honesty, Hall does not assume an unrestricted or religious defense of Althusser’s theory (‘my work is neither a refusal nor an apologia of Althusser’s position’, states Hall [2019e: 243] elsewhere). On the contrary, his response to Thompson does not prevent him from recognizing several highly problematic points in Althusser’s structuralism. Still, Hall convincingly argues that Thompson’s criticisms are directed rather at a ‘vulgar Althusserianism’ which, although it existed, does not adequately reflect the theoretical contribution that effectively represents ‘the Althusserian moment’. Beyond the violent polemics and his reductive caricatures, willingly or not, according to Hall (1981), Thompson’s argument ends up promoting a ‘mindless “anti-theory”’ discourse that could mean a great setback for Marxism (p. 379). Ultimately, Hall (1981) maintains that, ‘by failing to do justice to his adversary, Thompson ends up by not doing justice to himself’ (p. 381).

As I maintain, then, the perspective assumed by Hall actually allows him to open a very different reading of Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation in much more complex terms than a simple and mechanical ‘functionalism’. Even though there are indeed typically functionalist elements – which Althusser, in fact, undertook to explain and clarify in a ‘Note on the ISAs’ from 1976¹³ – we must not forget that the ‘ISA essay’ (virtually the only piece that Althusser publishes during his lifetime on his theory of ideology), far from constituting a finished essay, does not even qualify as an article, properly speaking. It should not be forgotten that the text was published in 1970 with the subtitle ‘Notes towards an investigation’, and that the text is indeed a montage of

fragments and notes that in the original version were even separated by dotted lines.¹⁴ Only after his death, with the publication of *Sur la reproduction* in 1995 (Althusser, 2014), has it been made possible to understand and ponder the scope of a much vaster project of which the 1970 text was originally part. Along with other important texts published posthumously (such as the ‘Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses’, written in 1966), the functionalist character of some of Althusser’s arguments becomes thus complexified, nuanced and ultimately calls for a new reading that must take into account all the theoretical elements that Althusser had in view in his unfinished theory of ideology. This is what Stefano Pippa has convincingly argued in a recent article: it is by reading the ‘ISA essay’ as part of *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* that it is possible to elaborate a more ‘complex account of the ideological constitution of subjectivity’, allowing Althusser to ‘avoid the pitfalls of functionalism’ through a ‘less monolithic’ reading of the process of subjectification (Pippa, 2019: 55). My hypothesis here is that even not having had access to these works published posthumously, Hall’s strategy also allows thinking this possibility, precisely because he was interested in trying to give an account of subjectification – or the always conflictive process of identity formation – using some of Marxism and specifically Althusser’s concepts, and this in the context of problems that Althusser’s theory never explicitly addressed.

Reading Difference, Reading Different: Althusser, Thinker of Difference

Let me review now how Hall’s reading of Althusser, despite his – sometimes necessary and completely legitimate – criticism, not only provides a whole different understanding of his theory of ideology but does so by considering Althusser as a thinker of difference (as someone who enabled him *to live in and with difference*).

From what has been discussed, it is possible to state that because every social formation is complex and internally differentiated, the very process of *reproduction* of social relations of production – the process in which ideological interpellation is conceived as its elemental mechanism – must always admit ‘counter-tendencies’ as a *possible* result of that same process (and it is necessary to underline here *possible*, that is, not ‘necessary’). This implies that as ‘structuralist’ as it might seem, Althusser’s theory actually accounts for the historical action of the masses and for the possibility of resistance,¹⁵ of deviance, of the ideological process of interpellation as producing unexpected results in its subjects (or in the ‘forms of subjectivity’ that it produces). The revision and reformulation of the theory of ideology carried out by Hall actually allows us to give an answer to the question: ‘how does one account for subversive ideas or for ideological struggle?’ (Hall, 1986: 32).

To further illustrate this argument, allow me now to make a detour through one of the most attentive and original readers of Althusser’s ‘ISA essay’: Judith Butler. Butler reads ‘Althusser’s Doctrine of Interpellation’ following a strategy similar to that of Hall, inasmuch as, without ceasing to identify the limitations of his theory, it also recognizes the value of certain elements to think the problem of difference. The heart of her critique is that in its own construction, Althusser’s theory seems to have to presuppose a sort of

circularity, in the sense that that which was supposed to be explained as a *result* of the process of interpellation (the subject) is at the same time that which must be presupposed as a *condition* for that same process to work. In other terms, Butler identifies a kind of 'automatism' in the process of ideological interpellation, which seems to guarantee in advance the success of the constitution of individuals into subjects (which is another way of looking at the problem of 'functionalism'). But just as Hall wonders how to account for subversive ideas, or for some kind of resistance in the subjectivation process, Butler also wonders about the possibility that the interpellation mechanism *fails*, or that it fails to produce the expected result (a particular form of subject). Summarizing her argument, at least two elements are worth highlighting. First, since the ideological interpellation takes place at the level of the unconscious (at the instance of the 'imaginary'), the process of interpellation must necessarily follow the same recognition/misrecognition mechanism that Althusser describes for the functioning of ideology. This means that interpellation demands, by principle, that the 'hail' (of the policeman, of God, or of the other in general) must be partly recognized and partly misrecognized at the same time. In the context of real material practices, it is always possible not to recognize (or to confuse) the interpellation that is being addressed to one, or to recognize it in *different* ways, to react *differently* to that interpellation, depending on our particular social position:

As Althusser himself insists, this performative effort of naming can only *attempt* to bring its addressee into being: there is always the risk of a certain *misrecognition*. If one misrecognizes that effort to produce the subject, the production itself falters. The one who is hailed may fail to hear, misread the call, turn the other way, answer to another name, insist on not being addressed in that way. Indeed, the domain of the imaginary is demarcated by Althusser as precisely the domain that makes *misrecognition* possible. (Butler, 1997: 95)

This risk, this possibility of failure or divergence, belongs to the process of ideological interpellation as one of its constitutive features. The very theory of psychoanalysis that inspires Althusser's theory (namely Lacanian psychoanalysis) demands that *misrecognition* should be a permanent possibility in the process of subjectivation or identity formation. As Butler argues: 'Identity can never be fully totalized by the symbolic, for what it fails to order will emerge within the imaginary as a disorder, a site where identity is contested' (Butler, 1997: 97). This perspective alone would suffice to show that, although not fully developed in the texts published by Althusser, ideological interpellation does not work in a purely mechanical way, it cannot be understood simply in terms of 'functionalism', precisely because it contemplates the possibility of the failure of the mechanism, or even that the mechanism produces unexpected, contingent, aleatory results (including those that can lead to forms of resistance to the dominant ideology and political practices of subversion of power).

However, there is a second element to highlight in Butler's analysis, which brings her somewhat closer to Hall's concern about the 'material difference' of each specific *position* that individuals occupy in the field of social relations. Butler argues that precisely because social reality does not work *mechanically* (it does not *function* simply as a machine), or precisely because ideological interpellation always works in a complex and differentiated social formation – with different temporalities and unequal rhythm of

development, to recall the Althusserian vocabulary – the result of the ideological process of reproduction of the social relations of production does not follow a necessarily linear correspondence between one level and the other. Again, Butler's example is quite illuminating:

Consider the force of this dynamic of interpellation and misrecognition when the name is not a proper name but a social category, and hence a signifier capable of being interpreted in a number of divergent and conflictual ways. To be hailed as a 'woman' or 'Jew' or 'queer' or 'Black' or 'Chicana' may be heard or interpreted as an affirmation or an insult, depending on the context in which the hailing occurs (where context is the effective historicity and spatiality of the sign). (Butler, 1997: 96)

This seems to be exactly what Hall (1986) points to when he asserts: 'in language, the same social relation can be differently represented and construed' (p. 36). Or also, when Hall argues that subjects 'are situated differently in relation to a different range of social sites', that a *differentiated field* of social positions is exactly that 'which allows the individual to enunciate him- or herself as a particular gendered, raced, socially sexed, etc., individual in a variety of specific representational systems in definite societies' (Hall, 1985: 106; see also 1986: 39). If, as Hall suggests, it is necessary to consider the dynamic of ideological interpellation from a materialistic perspective, then it is inevitable to conceive its operation under the conditions and circumstances of what Butler designates as the 'context'. It is the specific historicity and spatiality of each different context that necessarily 'overdetermines' ideological interpellation.¹⁶ Put differently, the interpellation of individuals into subjects can never happen in a simple and unambiguous way, but on the contrary, always in a specific context, or under a determinate *conjuncture*: just as with the process of class struggle, the process of subjectivation is always an overdetermined process, a process without guarantees (a 'process without a subject'). Ultimately, this means that the individual never becomes purely and simply 'a subject' (in the singular), the same kind of subject, as it were; individuals are always interpellated into different 'forms of subject' – they are always molded by different 'subject-effects' which correspond to different structures or different discourses at play. This is what Althusser explicitly maintains in his 'Three Notes on the Theory of Discourses': '*every discourse produces a subjectivity-effect*'. A theory of discourses not only 'must account for the subject-effect of every discourse' but 'must also account for these different *forms of the subject* as so many *possibilities* of variation of the subject-form' (Althusser, 2003: 48–9). Although Hall did not have access to these notes (decisive for the Althusserian theory of ideology), it is precisely these *different possibilities* that he strives to think.

It is not my purpose to comment in detail on Butler's reading; her contention allows us to illustrate Hall's argument from another angle: it is due to Althusser's own theoretical developments that we are able to think social, historical, and political processes *from* difference and *within* difference. Averting any reductionism (like many of Althusser's critics), but also without giving in to an unconditional defense of Althusser, what distinguishes Hall's reading is that through a critical analysis of his classic works from the 1960s, he is able to offer an interpretation of his theory of ideology that eschews functionalism, while at the same time allowing an account of the problem of

difference and articulation. When Hall argues that the different contradictions in every historical process ‘do not always appear in the same place, and will not always have the same historical effects’, it is precisely in the sense of what allows thinking different forms of subjectivation and different effects of the complex process of ideological interpellation. ‘Social positions’, says Hall (1985), ‘are by definition over-determined’, this is, they are always determined by the contingent encounter and complex intertwining of different contradictions, such as class, race or gender, ‘each of which has a different history, a different mode of operation; each divides and classifies the world in different ways’ (p. 111).

In short, it is in this sense that Hall’s Althusser may be read as a ‘thinker of difference’ who opens up a whole research programme to rethink class conflicts as traversed (or *over-determined*) by gender, racial or colonial conflicts. Thus, Hall’s reading not only allows us to attain another assessment of Althusser’s role in Cultural Studies, but as a thinker of difference, Hall’s Althusser can become a valuable source to think the theoretical and political challenges of intersectionality,¹⁷ as well as to develop the so-called ‘social reproduction theory’ in a new light.¹⁸

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Notes

1. In all quotations throughout text, emphasis appears in the original text quoted.
2. On the ‘post-Marxism’ label, see also Hall (2019c: 243–4).
3. Hereafter ‘ISA essay’.
4. See on this topic Mellino (2016: 1–26).
5. See on this point Grossberg (2005: 153). This strategy has nothing to do with a childish ‘desire’ to be fashionable in intellectual trends, as suggested by the always-loquacious Eagleton (2005).

6. Larrain's (1991) evaluation of Hall's concept of ideology also suffers from the same problem that Sparks' analysis faces, namely, an overly stereotyped reading of Althusser's theory (no doubt marked by the ignorance of his later published texts) of 'structuralism' and 'post-structuralism'.
7. A discussion of the specific meaning of this 'difference' in Althusser (and also its *difference* with authors such as Deleuze and Derrida) is beyond the scope of this study. This requires much more extensive work which, at least in the case of Derrida, I have tried to carry out in my doctoral thesis. I am preparing a book on this topic, but in the interim two of my articles may be consulted: Montenegro (2022a, 2022b).
8. Even if it's in reference to an article where Vilar (1994 [1973]) engages a sincere debate with Althusser. See also Althusser's (2018) draft response (pp. 99–102).
9. By 'historicism', Althusser refers to a wide variety of thinkers, notably but not exclusively Gramsci, Lukács and Sartre. 'Economism', on the other hand, refers to all sorts of thinking that, presupposing an idea of expressive totality, conceives economic determination in terms of simple causality. Often complicit with historicism, this form of reductionism includes some of the leading intellectuals of the Second International, such as Kautsky or Plekhanov, as well as PCF militants such as Garaudy or Sève. See Althusser (2015b) and the translator's 'Glossary' (Althusser et al., 2015: 531–49).
10. Discussing Althusser's texts on theatre, Balibar (2015) considers that even a 'politics of ideology' can be thought of in these same terms, that is, as a 'politics without guarantee' (p. 19). See also Sprinker (1987).
11. Although Hall (1985) makes an explicit statement in this regard: 'we have to characterize Althusser's advance, not in terms of his insistence on "difference" alone – the rallying cry of Derridean deconstruction – but instead in terms of the necessity of thinking unity *and* difference; difference *in* complex unity, without this becoming a hostage to the privileging of difference as such' (p. 93).
12. See also on this matter the now canonical study 'Encoding/Decoding' (Hall, 2005: 125).
13. Written in 1976, it was only published in German in 1977 and in Spanish in 1978, remaining unpublished in French until its inclusion in the posthumous *Sur la reproduction*. The note begins with the following statement: 'The charge most often levelled at my 1969–70 essay on the ISAs is "*functionalism*", to which Althusser answers bluntly: 'the specificity of the theory of ideology deducible from Marx consists in affirming *the primacy of the class struggle* over the functions and functioning of the state apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses. This primacy is obviously incompatible with functionalism of any kind' (Althusser, 2014: 218). Clearly unknown to Thompson, this note also does not appear to have been known to Hall, which is surely explained by having remained unpublished in French (the German and Spanish editions probably had a rather local circulation).
14. Its first footnote reads: 'This text is made up of two extracts from an ongoing study [. . .]. The ideas expounded should not be regarded as more than the introduction to a discussion' (Althusser, 1971a: 127, n1). Regarding this writing resource of 'dotted lines', see Balibar (2014b: xii–xiii).
15. In the 'Note on the ISAs', Althusser is explicit on this point: if 'the dominant ideology *can never completely resolve its own contradictions*', this is because ISAs are 'both the site and the stake' of class struggle. In other words: 'If the function of the ISAs is to inculcate the dominant ideology, the reason is that there is *resistance*; if there is resistance, the reason is that there is *struggle*' (Althusser, 2014: 220).
16. This is what Pippa (2019) designates as 'overinterpellation' (a superposition between interpellation and overdetermination): interpellation is never single and it never occurs in a simple or homogeneous ('undifferentiated') standard situation. Rather, individuals are always

interpellated by multiple different ideologies and discourses, and their effects vary according to the different positions they occupy in the social structure.

17. See in this regard the recent work by Romé (2021). Other important clues for this line of research may be found in Barrett (1986), Rodríguez and Starcenbaum (2017), and Backer (2022).
18. Within a vast and growing literature, see especially Arruzza (2021), Bhattacharya (2017) and Gimenez (2019).

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