

## THE RETURN OF THE OTHER

*Jeanne Wolff v. Amerongen*

The ontological basis of history is the relation of men with other men, the fact that the individual "I" exists only against the background of the community . . . .

Lucien Goldmann

There are no subjects except by and for their subjection.

Louis Althusser

I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object.

Jacques Lacan

Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits, A Selection*, translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1977, pp. 335.

Jacques Lacan is scarcely a new name on the academic scene. He is widely known and discussed in the fields of psychoanalysis, literary criticism and media studies. Although many books, essays and critical reviews have been devoted to formulating a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of his work for the North American audience, relatively few critics have attempted to relate Lacan's work to the study of ideology.

The lack of critical analysis in the realm of ideology cannot be accidental since Lacan himself has never developed a concrete theory of the subject and its formation in and through ideology, and accordingly it is only on a latent level that such a description can be derived. Despite Lacan's reticence to formulate explicitly a theory of ideology, he has, however unremittingly attacked the school of American Ego Psychology for its ideological presupposition of the autonomous individual and unified ego structure. Lacan relentlessly denounces this notion as a basic misrecognition of how the subject evolves.

## RETURN OF THE OTHER

Lacan's dispute with Ego Psychology can be located in a wider historical-philosophical frame of reference where Hartmann et al. reflect on one hand a strictly Cartesian philosophy, with its postulate of an essential gulf between the *res cogitans* of the individual and the alien *res extensa* of the world. Lacan on the other hand assumes the Hegelian view in which for human beings the world and consciousness are mutually determining and interpenetrable, and that, in fact, the existence of an outside social world is already implied in the constitution of any single consciousness.

Louis Althusser was among the first Marxist theoreticians to recognize the applicability of Lacan's developmental theory of the "decentralized subject" as a powerful explanation of ideological formation and the reproduction of ideology. Althusser ends his essay on Freud and Lacan with the hopeful note:

It must be clear that this has opened up one of the ways which may perhaps lead us some day to a better understanding of this *structure of misrecognition* which is of particular concern for all investigations into ideology.<sup>1</sup>

Two recent publications, *On Ideology*<sup>2</sup> and *Language and Materialism*, have attempted to enhance this understanding and it is the latter which claims that Lacan's work "provides the foundation of a materialist theory of the subject in the social process . . . . Lacan's subject is the new subject of dialectical materialism; a subject in process."<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

What then is this new subject who becomes the bearer of ideology and at the same time is constituted by it? And since it is the structure of misrecognition that underlies the proper functioning of ideology, how does the subject misrecognize itself and consequently its outside world?

Lacan situates this moment of misrecognition in the *mirror stage*, through which the infant passes at the age of 6-18 months. The child will recognize itself in front of the mirror, a recognition that is usually accompanied by an intense feeling of *jouissance* (jubilation). Lacan interprets this elated feeling as an indication of the fundamental misrecognition that has taken place when the infant sees a unified body when, in fact it is not yet in control of complete motor coordination and constitutes nothing more than *un corps morcelé*. Thus, while the infant is completely dependent upon others, in particular the mother, it takes its reflection in the mirror, which seemingly portrays an autonomous independent human being, as itself and its own body as an alien body. Thus the first instance of misrecognition is accomplished in alienation. The child captured by its own reflection is trying out the

J. WOLFF V. AMERONGEN

movements it perceives in the mirror and reduplicates the image inside and outside itself, constantly repeating the seduction which it experiences in the mirror movements of itself. Of course Lacan's description of the mirror is to a certain extent metaphorical since the issue is not the child's reflection in a glass but rather the process whereby its first act of self constitution is achieved via the identification with a foreign body. Regardless of whether the projective identification proceeds with the child's own reflection or that of the mother or any other external other, it always remains an Other, an alien body with which the infant identifies *thus mistaking a representation for itself*. The idealized mirror representation characterizes the structure of the Ideal Ego, or *alter ego*, and at the moment that the infant identifies with its idealized ego, it also gets lost in it and captured by it.

Thus the mirror phase not only initiates the stage for the subject's fundamental alienation from itself, but it also marks the subject's structural dependence on an Other, because what the infant wrongly perceives as its self-identity is always at first and forever that of another. For this reason the dual relationship between the alter ego (or as Lacan also calls it the *moi*) and the other sets up the intimately linked feelings of love and aggression as the infant attempts by these alternate means to compensate for the dimly perceived alienation.<sup>4</sup>

The *Ideal Ego* is the primordial form of the I which is

objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other . . . . But the important point is that this form (the Ideal Ego) situates the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the subject can never recapture the image it projected outside and then introjected as the basic structure of its self-identity: it can only gradually approach this fundamental split between imago and body but can never meet it.<sup>6</sup>

If we now define ideology not in the traditional Marxist fashion as a *false* consciousness but as a *misrecognized* consciousness which makes the individual believe himself the agent of his own actions, we can understand the important function the mirror phase plays for the positioning of the subject in the social world.

For the subject to function properly in the realm of ideology it has to be accepted by other subjects as a separate autonomous individual. Indeed, it is this need for recognition that perpetually reifies our subjectivity, a movement Althusser describes as "the rituals of ideological recognition . . . which

## RETURN OF THE OTHER

guarantee for us that we are concrete individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects."<sup>7</sup> This fundamental need for recognition by the Other can already be observed when the child passes through the mirror stage, because not only does it seek an external proof of itself but it also desires to situate itself in the social order by comparing itself with others. It is equally important for the child to recognize the Other as it is to be recognized by the Other.

In the child's desire to reaffirm its Ideal Ego it needs the constant reassurance of the mother which it strives for in the *Imaginary* phase. At the price of her confirmation, it submerges into the eternal movement of the desire of the other (le desir de L'Autre), "namely that it is *qua* the Other that he desires."<sup>8</sup> According to Lacan, the infant not only desires recognition but constitutes its desire in a dialectical relationship in which the child is also the mother's desire. In order to satisfy her desire, the child identifies with the mother's original desire to have a *phallus*.<sup>9</sup> In other words, desire itself — what seems most private and personal — is itself a social product derived from the desire of another. The infant becomes what the mother desires it to be.

Hence, the subject misrecognizes his desire along the same line as he did his ego, "a *meconnaissance* by which he transfers the permanence of his desire to an ego that is nevertheless intermittent, and inversely, protects himself from his desire by attributing to it these intermittences."<sup>10</sup>

This imaginary realm (where everything seems to be total and absolute, either all good or bad) where no distinction or relativity can be drawn is disrupted by the entrance of the father who represents *the Law and Language*.

It is with the acknowledgement of a tertiary structure and the learning of language that the child is thrust into the *Symbolic* realm. The appearance of the Father (the Father should not be taken literally but symbolically as the all-mighty Father, a paternal authority) constitutes a great threat as well as relief. The Father, as he who *has* the phallus, destroys an object relationship which was entirely grounded upon imagination and wishful fantasy. Yet, he also liberates the individual from the here-and-now of the *Imaginary*. Through the acquisition of language the child learns to separate the paternal function from the biological father, and language also permits it to seek for substitutes in which it can *re-present* its desire.

Foremost, however, the access to the *Symbolic Order* represents the second and last step along "the fictional line of alienation." The speaking subject must renounce the omnipotence of his desire and accept the limitation that is set by the Father; he must assume his "lack." In language the child has to name its desire but since it is the nature of desire that it cannot be named the child is forced to repress it. Language can thus be seen as a substitutive process, a compromise formation for the process of having to name the unnameable.

J. WOLFF V. AMERONGEN

From this perspective language fulfills very much the same function as the symptom does.

According to Lacan "desire exists only because the unconscious exists, i.e., a language, whose structure and effects elude the subject; because on the level of language there is always something that is beyond consciousness where one can locate the function of desire."<sup>11</sup> Consequently the true desire and the multiple phantasmagoric forms it takes are repressed into the unconscious and constitute the mobilizing force of the unconscious which drives the subject to search for an increasing number of substitutes: "The nature of this repressed desire is insatiable because it is the desire not of a real person but of a symbolic position . . . it constantly recedes, being only the idea of an ultimate, transcendent guarantee of identity."<sup>12</sup>

Through language, subjectivity is restored to the objectified individual, who is given a name and taught to refer to itself by "I," "Me" or "Myself," which are signifiers along the sliding chain of signifiers. When Lacan says that a "signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier" what he means is that language is constituted as an ever-sliding chain of signifiers where meaning is only derived by the arbitrary match between a signifier (the acoustic image) and the signified (the concept) or the idea which the word expresses. Thus the subject who is represented by the signifier either through "I," his name, or his relative position, derives his meaning only because of the system to which he belongs and the relative position that he occupies within it. Consequently, the subject cannot represent what he really is, since there is no unified correspondence between himself and the conception of himself, but *he can only be understood in his social relation to all other subjects*. The individual establishes his subjectivity through difference from others.

The "I" that is usually understood as character, identity or self is not self-consciousness but the object of consciousness: it indicates nothing more than the subject of "enunciation," yet it does not truly signify it.

Samuel Weber argues that the I, traditionally identified with the subject of self-consciousness, becomes for Lacan exactly the part of the subject which excludes the true historicity of the individual.<sup>13</sup> The subject who has always been regarded as the true agent of history, a self-conscious human being, is in fact a subject-less being dependent and dominated in its practice and desire by others and objectified from himself, remaining a mere link in the signifying chain.

From the Lacanian perspective then, language is not a tool of self-mastery but *rather a system that subordinates and constitutes the subject*. In a sense it is language that "speaks" the child-becoming-adult and not the other way around.

It is at this point that Althusser's perspective becomes most immediately relevant. According to Althusser, ideology is not merely a set of ideas or a

## RETURN OF THE OTHER

system of beliefs imposed by the ruling class; rather ideology slides into all human activity and is thus identical with the lived experience of human existence itself. Therefore, for ideology to work, it cannot be perceived as an external enforced system of beliefs but rather as an internally generated set of "natural" ideals that determine how the subject "normally" acts, feels and thinks of himself as well as of others. To assure this process of misrecognition, ideology has to appeal to the imaginary nature of the Ego, the *moi* or Ideal Ego which mistakenly perceives itself as a unitary structure, an Ego in control of itself. Ideology, like language, covers up the individual's confusion about his self and locates the fragmented and contradictory subject in a position of pseudo-coherence and responsibility for his own actions.

Since, as Ellis and Coward very clearly point out, the subject is not at the center of the social whole, ideology must not only induce a self-consciousness but it also must create a social relationship in which each individual can represent himself coherently within a social totality that is fundamentally contradictory. Ideology is the practice which articulates this relationship, and which, according to Althusser, is "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."<sup>14</sup>

Althusser argues against the Feuerbachian theory that men make for themselves an imaginary representation of their real conditions of existence because their conditions are intrinsically alienating; instead he maintains that men do not represent their real conditions of existence to themselves but rather the *relations* to their conditions, relations which are imaginary in nature and whose imaginary distortions are at the core of ideology.

We can now understand how ideology works on both the imaginary and symbolic level to assure the individual a fixed position in the social world. Ideology addresses the individual as a subject, thereby fostering the self-consciousness achieved by the acquisition of language. Yet, at the same time, it reinforces the imaginary nature of the ego, reproducing the phantasmagoric relationship no longer fixated upon the original object of desire, but rather upon the social system as a whole.

In religion, the paternal metaphor is, of course, God, "the Unique, Absolute Other Subject" in whose relationship all other religious subjects define themselves and subject themselves, becoming His "mirrors and reflections."<sup>15</sup> God could not exist by himself as the "Absolute Subject" since he needs his subjects as much as the master needs his slave in order to exist. Following Althusser's dictum that "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," we can observe in religion, as in any other ideology, that the followers do not so much misconceive their real existence as live it in the Imaginary sphere as faithful believers. Thus real poverty is lived as the humble submission to the will of God. One's relation to the real conditions become imaginary, and it is this

## J. WOLFF V. AMERONGEN

imaginary phantasmagoric part of the relationship that ensures the adherence to the Absolute Subject.

To summarize this process of ideology (of which religion has been just one example for which any type of system<sup>16</sup> or belief system could be substituted) four general characteristics can be described:

- 1) the individual is exchangeable;
- 2) the subject subjects itself to an Absolute Subject since it needs an Other as a reflection of itself;
- 3) the subject ensures its subjectivity by recognizing the other subjects as subjects and simultaneously being recognized by them;
- 4) the Absolute Subject has to recognize himself in the subjects for the subjects to recognize themselves in Him.

Returning now to Lacan, we can say that the constitution of the subject in language is based on the same principle as the formation of the subject in ideology. Yet, if we maintain that ideology works on the same basic structure as language, where can we find in language the place of the Absolute Subject without whom, according to Althusser, ideology could not effectively work?

In language, the position of the Absolute Subject would be fulfilled by the *phallus* which Lacan calls the "privileged or central signifier" to which all other signifiers submit themselves. The phallus gains its central and indivisible position because it marks the splitting and simultaneous passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The individual can only become a subject if he acknowledges the existence of the phallus and, moreover, accepts that it belongs to the Father, thereby assuming his own lack. At the cost of repressing the phantasies of either possessing the phallus or being the phallus (for the mother) the individual gains entry into the social world, obtaining his subjectivity. Although the imaginary nature is repressed, it is not lost but becomes instead the repository of desire. However, if the individual does not accept the Law of the Father and forecludes (*verwirft*) the existence of the phallus or misrecognizes its proper locus, he will not pass into the Symbolic realm or social world but will be led into psychosis and thus be outcasted like the religious subject from his social order.<sup>17</sup> In repressing the phallus the child moves from sexual desire to linguistic substitutions. The paternal phallus — the Absolute Subject — represents Law, and the individual's submission to it.

Thus we could conclude that Lacan's model of the subject passing from the Imaginary to the Symbolic and being constituted in language parallels the development of ideological formations. Lacan seems to have offered a detailed *developmental schema* of how this subject becomes the bearer and supporter of ideology.

However, it seems still problematic to adopt Lacan's model for an explanation of ideology, to think that his psychoanalytic version can answer fully the question of why the individual misrecognizes itself as an autonomous

## RETURN OF THE OTHER

subject and thus enters and reproduces ideology. If we accept Lacan's theory of the individual as fundamentally alienated from itself as a result of the passage through the mirror stage, we enter the realm of ontology and explain a largely historical phenomenon by a socio-individual fact. For ideology which is so deeply rooted in the history of class struggles and power relationships, Lacan's explanation of the objectification of the subject appears to be too mechanistic and essentialist in its underlying presuppositions, offering no possible conception of change, struggle or opposition.

Looking at Lacan's work from a more critical perspective then, one can detect certain flaws (or inconsistencies) within his theory, flaws that are particularly relevant for a understanding of ideology.

At the center of his theory, Lacan posits a misrecognition committed by the infant when it mistakes its reflection for itself and itself for another, yet he never elaborates on the moment of recognition. If the infant is only capable of misrecognizing the world, at what point in life does it begin to recognize itself adequately, or is life solely a series of misrecognitions? Strictly speaking, even if full recognition can never be attained, a theory of misrecognition makes no sense without at least a theoretical model of a possible mode of genuine recognition; without such a parallel possibility, this crucial moment is reduced to an arbitrary and largely metaphysical presupposition on Lacan's part.

Another area that is left unquestioned and seems to be based on an assumption rather than a scientific elaboration is Lacan's insistence on the *phallus* as the indivisible central signifier.

Jacques Derrida treats this problem at length in his essay "The Purveyor of Truth." He argues that it seems peculiar that "the subject is very divided but the phallus never shared."<sup>18</sup> In other words, if the subject is truly a signifier for another signifier who attains his meaning only because of the position taken along an ever-sliding chain, thus constantly splitting himself and uniting again, it seems illogical suddenly to propose one single signifier that remains indivisible, strictly maintaining the same meaning. Why, Derrida asks, can the phallus not be split off and divided, thus rendering its meaning also arbitrary? Both Althusser and Lacan never examine the indivisibility or destructuralization of the Absolute Subject, and their reluctance to consider the possible breakdown of this central figure makes their concept of ideology at best fragmentary.

By the same token, Samuel Weber points out that the predominance of the phallus is in itself an indication of Lacan's own ideological bias and at the same time an accurate reflection of present cultural dynamics.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the attractiveness and distinct validity that Lacan's concepts have for the studies of ideology and social formation, an all too eager application of his theory fails to recognize the historical and social forces that impinge upon the subject in its social formation. This is not to say that Lacan is not a social

## J. WOLFF V. AMERONGEN

theorist, since, as we have seen, he firmly grounds the infant's development in a dialectical social relationship; rather he treats the familial environment as a global force that encourages the infant's path along alienation without granting the possibility that this same force might arrest, oppose, confront or change the direction that Lacan envisions for each subject. There is social process in Lacan's theory, but no concept of society, no model to show the complex interpenetrations of the specific and the general.

The Wright Institute  
Berkeley, California

### Notes

1. Louis Althusser, "Freud and Lacan," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 219.
2. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *On Ideology*, London, Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland: The Anchor Press Ltd, 1977.
3. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, "On the Subject of Lacan," in *Language and Materialism, Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1977, p. 93.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the intra-subjective love/aggression between Ego and alter Ego, see Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," in *The Language of the Self*, New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968, pp. 160-173. Also Leo Bersani, "Subject of the Power," in *Diacritics, a Review of Contemporary Criticism*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins Univ. Press., Fall, 1977, pp. 2-21. Bersani argues that the subject is structured as a rival of himself when he identifies himself in the mirror with his *imago*.
5. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1977, p. 2.
6. Samuel Weber clarifies the unattainability of any true consciousness in the following way: "But we cannot conceptualize this misrecognition (*Verkennung*) as merely an avoidable, false consciousness, since the structure of this consciousness, of this I, is not just misrecognized by this I, in order to be truly *recognized* as in a traditional model of absolute knowledge. This movement would only be possible if the I would be truly that, as what it presents itself: *namely to be identical with itself*. Only then could it hope to recognize itself. But as long as the I is and has always been and always will be *something else* all attempts to come to *itself* must imply misrecognition (*Verkennung*) and disavowal (*Verleugnung*)" (translation mine). "Das Subjekt als Fader," in *Rückkehr Zu Freud, Jacques Lacans Ent-stellung der Psychoanalyse*, Frankfurt, Berlin, Wien: Ullstein Verlag GmbH, 1978, p. 87.
7. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and the State," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, pp. 172-173.
8. Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire," in *Ecrits*, p. 312.
9. The child identifies with the phallus because it wants to be for the mother what only the father can offer her, since by virtue of having the phallus the father possesses the mother. From the mother's perspective, Juliet Mitchell explains: "the mother who herself in her infancy has envied the penis that she lacked will find her substitute for it in the child to which she gives birth; in a sense then, she will want her child to represent her phallus, and, in turn, the child

## RETURN OF THE OTHER

- will desire to be what she desires of it . . . ." When the Father intervenes it is not only the child who must renounce its desire, but also the mother who must give up her phantasy of having a penis. Juliet Mitchell, "The Different Self, the Phallus and Father," in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1974, pp. 382-398.
10. Lacan, "Subversion . . . ," pp. 312-314.
  11. Jacques Lacan, *Psychanalyse et médecine*, Lettres de L'Ecole freudienne, p. 45, quoted in *De la Structure en Psychanalyse*, "Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?" Paris, 1968, pp. 252-253.
  12. Steve Burniston, Chris Weedon, "Ideology, Subjectivity, and the Artistic Text," in *On Ideology*, p. 216.
  13. Weber, p. 17.
  14. Althusser, p. 162.
  15. Althusser, p. 179.
  16. For a description of the functioning of ideology in the bureaucratic apparatus, see Joel Kovel, "Rationalization and the Family," in *Telos*, No. 37, Fall 1978, pp. 5-21.
  17. Lacan considers psychosis as the result of the subject's failure to pass from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, which occurs when the infant does not accept the Law. Or, if the mother does not recognize this position in the Father, the infant will remain identified with the phallus and subjected to the mother's desire. Consequently, the subject is fixated in the Imaginary which he takes for real thus never developing the ability of symbolization.
  18. Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," in *Yale French Studies*, No. 52, 1975, p. 86.
  19. See Weber, pp. 123-124.