

# NOT EVEN PAST



## Louis Althusser on Interpellation, and the Ideological State Apparatus

[Tweet](#)

 By [Michel Lee](#)


Louis Pierre Althusser. Via Wikipedia.

Louis Pierre Althusser (1918-1990) was a French Marxist philosopher who wrote in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union's brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution of 1956. These two events led many western Communist leaders and philosophers to question the tenets of the Marxism and, while many elected for a reading of Marx that sought to recover his humanist roots, Althusser opted for a provocative structuralist interpretation that downplayed the role of human agency in history.

One central concept in Althusser's writings is ideology. Early on, Althusser had argued that ideology is a "system of representations" governed by rules that serve political ends. Ideology, in Althusser's view at this time, was a matter of the unconscious, inescapable even by the dominant class. But with his publication of *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* in 1970, Althusser drastically changed his position on ideology. While he still viewed ideology as inescapable, he also came to argue that it is realized in real actions and behaviors.

Within this framework, Althusser introduces the concept of interpellation, otherwise known as "hailing." Ideologies "call out" or "hail" people and offer a particular identity, which they accept as "natural" or "obvious." In this way, the dominant class exerts a power over individuals that is quite different from abject force. According to Althusser, individuals are interpellated from the day that they are born—and perhaps even before, since parents and others conceive of the role and identity that their child will assume.

With this concept of interpellation, Althusser implies that there is no inherent meaning in the individual. There are no individuals: only subjects, who come into being when they are hailed or interpellated by ideology. Instead, the subject exists only as he or she is recognized in a

### THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN

Making History: Houston's "Spirit of the Confederacy"

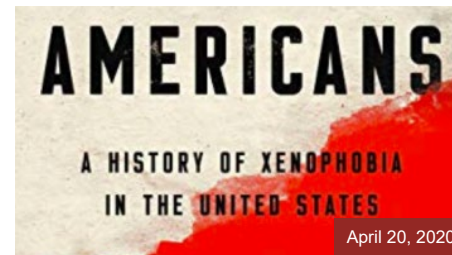


May 06, 2020

[More from The Public Historian](#)

### BOOKS

America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States by Erika Lee (2019)

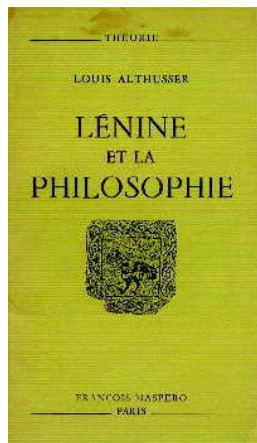


April 20, 2020

[More Books](#)

### DIGITAL HISTORY

Más de 72: Digital Archive Review



Front cover of the French edition of Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.

specific way that has a social structure as its referent. The subject is thus preceded by social forces, or “always-already interpellated.”

This act of hailing the subject is effected by what Althusser terms “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs). While Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), such as the police force and military, function primarily by repression, ISAs are churches, schools, families, religion, and other entities in the private domain and function primarily by ideology. RSAs show themselves rarely; ISAs are commonly accepted features of a society. ISAs reinforce the hegemonic rule of the dominant class by replicating its dominant ideology. According to Althusser, schools are a particularly important ISA because teachers hold captive the undivided attention of their students in what is supposedly a neutral environment, thus rendering the content taught “obvious.”



E P Thompson addresses anti-nuclear weapons rally, Oxford, England, 1980

Other scholars, namely British historian E.P. Thompson, have heavily criticized Althusser for his allegedly impersonal structuralist approach to Marx. Yet however one assesses his views, his concepts of interpellation and Ideological State Apparatuses perhaps best exemplify his structuralist reading of Marx and his work in systematizing Marx into a philosophical framework.



[More from Digital History](#)

#### FILMS & MEDIA

[Ayka \(Dir: Sergei Dvortsevoy, 2018\)](#)



[More from Films & Media](#)

#### TEXAS

[A \(Queer\) Rebel Wife In Texas](#)



Louis Pierre Althusser in the classroom.



You may also like:

Andrew Straw's discussion of [Bolshevism](#) and his review of *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary* by Bertrand M. Patenaude (2009)

Posted May 18, 2015

More [1900s](#), [Blog](#), [Discover](#), [Europe](#), [Ideas/Intellectual History](#)



March 11, 2020

[More from Texas](#)

19th century **20th Century**

[African American History](#) [american history](#) [Asia](#)  
[Asia & Middle East](#) [book review](#) [Brazil](#) [British Empire](#)  
[China](#) [Civil War](#) **Cold War** [Colonialism](#) [communism](#)  
[cultural history](#) **digital history** [Early Modern Europe](#)  
[Europe](#) [film](#) [gender](#) **history** [History of Science](#)  
[immigration](#) [India](#) [Islam](#) **Latin America**  
[Latin American History](#) [Mexico](#) **Not Even Past**  
[Public History](#) [race](#) [religion](#) [Russia](#) **slavery** [Texas](#)  
[Texas History](#) [Texas History Day](#) **Transnational**  
[Twentieth Century History](#) **United States**  
**US History** [USSR](#) [Womens History](#)  
[world history](#) [World War II](#)

NOT EVEN PAST is produced by  
 The Department of History  
 THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN  
 We are supported by the College of Liberal Arts  
 And our **READERS**

DONATE

CONTACT

All content © 2010-present NOT EVEN PAST and the authors, unless otherwise noted

Sign up to receive bi-weekly email updates

BOOKS

FILMS & MEDIA

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN

BLOG

TEXAS