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Interpellation, Counterinterpellation, and Education

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Abstract

In a recent essay in Rethinking Marxism, as part of a special issue on the legacy of Louis Althusser's thinking, Tyson E. Lewis takes up Althusser's thinking on schooling, trade unionism, and seminars to delimit the concepts of interpellation, counterinterpellation, and disinterpellation respectively. While Lewis's work is a crucial first step for understanding the little-known contours of Althusserian pedagogical theory, he does not elaborate key theoretical work done on the concept of counterinterpellation, namely that of the Marxist philosopher of language Jean-Jacques Lecercle. Engaging with Lecercle's work deepens Lewis's novel argument around the newly-coined term disinterpellation, which he distinguishes as fundamentally educational, as opposed to interpellation and counterinterpellation, which he calls forms of political activism. If one considers Lecercle's derivation of the concept, Lewis's characterization of disinterpellation as educational and counterinterpellation as political activism changes somewhat, and broaches fundamental questions for Marxist educational theory. In this essay - which is a comment on Lewis's important step towards Althusserian pedagogical theory - I will present Lecercle's account of counterinterpellation, setting this concept within the larger context of Althusserian philosophy. I then respond to the equivalence Lewis draws between counterinterpellation and interpellation to advocate disinterpellation as a model for Marxist educational theory and practice, a move which poses two important questions for critical educational theory in the Marxist tradition: Is there a forceless force within what both Gramsci and Althusser called balance of forces of the political terrain, and must education be that forceless force? I show these questions and their implications have important theoretical consequences for Marxist educational theory and practice in general, and the specific theory and practice Lewis advocates.



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Introduction

In a fantastic essay in *Rethinking Marxism*, as part of a recent special issue on the legacy of the French communist philosopher Louis Althusser, Tyson E. Lewis (2017) takes up Althusser's thinking on schooling to theorize a new concept: disinterpellation. Lewis distinguishes disinterpellation as fundamentally an educational concept, as opposed to interpellation and counterinterpellation, which he calls forms of political activism. Lewis's work is an essential first step for understanding the little-known contours of Althusserian pedagogical theory, yet he does not engage with previous contributions to the concept of counterinterpellation, namely that of the Althusserian philosopher of language Jean-Jacques Lecercle. Engaging with Lecercle's work deepens Lewis's novel argument around the newly-coined term disinterpellation. If one considers Lecercle's derivation of the concept, Lewis's characterization of disinterpellation as educational and counterinterpellation as political activism changes somewhat, and broaches fundamental questions about different models of critical educational practice.

In this essay, I revisit the concept of interpellation, present Lecercle's account of counterinterpellation, and set this concept within the larger context of Althusserian philosophy. I then examine Lewis's argument for disinterpellation, responding to an equivalence he draws between counterinterpellation and interpellation. I critique Lewis's formulation by posing a dilemma, out of which I craft a distinction between two models of critical educational practice: the disinterpellation model and the counterinterpellation model. The former understands critical education as the suspension of social forces, while the latter understands critical education as taking up and taking those social forces in order to shift their existing balance.

Interpellation Revisited: The Geological Problematic

In Althusserian philosophy, an interpellation is a concrete moment of ideological reproduction. When you are interpellated, you get with the program of a dominant imagined relation to real conditions. When you are interpellated, you become a subject of that ideology, recruited to the ideology, so that you "go" all by yourself and follow the ideology without any force compelling you. The recruitment happens immanently through some concrete practice. The classic case of interpellation is a police officer hailing a citizen on the street and demanding to see their papers. The police officer calls to the citizen, saying "hey, you there!" after which the citizen turns around and faces the officer, realizing (or, as Althusser writes, believing-suspecting-knowing) that *they are*, in fact, the one who is being hailed. The interpellated subject believes-suspects-knows that they are the one the officer is referring to. They are thus instructed as to how things are done, and they are made to get with the program: in demanding the citizen's papers, the police officer compels the hailed person to verify that they are who they are according to the reigning imagined relations to real conditions distinguishing foreigner from citizen.

Interpellations happen in ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), institutional spaces whose purpose is to make interventions on behalf of a ruling class by reproducing ruling ideologies, thereby achieving or maintaining their ruling status. More than just certain groups maintaining power over one another, these practices secure the continuity of relations of production over time: they hold in place a certain way of making economic life. Interpellation is therefore an everyday practice that exerts a reproductive force in the overall balance of social forces. The reproductive force exerted by an interpellative practice is distinct from the productive force that

modes of production exert, which is economic, and the repressive force exerted by the more or less unified government, courts, police, and military, which is juridical.¹

Althusser famously claimed that, with the onset of industrial capitalism, the school replaced the church as the most effective ideological state apparatus in the West. The family maintains a central place as well. Each (church, school, family) are ISAs with their own distinctive ways of instructing individuals to get with the program of the social formation. The church and the school have their own interpellations for reproducing the ideology of their historical moments: the church has songs and kneeling and vestments; the school its curricula, pedagogies, assignments, lesson plans, tests, detentions, bells, etc. Consider the following school interpellation from Malcolm X's autobiography (2015). Malcolm, in remembering high school, recounts a moment where his history teacher Mr. Ostrowski told him to be "realistic" about his desire to be a lawyer and instead pursue being a busboy or carpenter, "something appropriate" for African American men.

Mr. Ostrowski...leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer, that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands, making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person, you'd get all kinds of work" (p.38).

At that moment Malcolm writes that he felt shocked and recalls it as a pivotal episode in his development, a key experience in his socialization and politicization. Malcolm was interpellated during that concrete moment into what Michelle Alexander has called the racial caste system of the United States. Malcolm was recruited to the prevailing set of imagined relations to real conditions at that time, which, much like today, debased Black communities in the United States. In Malcolm's case, the interpellation came from a teacher immanently reproducing ruling class forces in the social formation during the one-on-one conversation. His haughty mien and toxic use of words, combined with the intimacy of the classroom context, recruited Malcolm to the strict caste system in this country where people of color, specifically working class African American men, can only hold certain kinds of jobs. While that interpellation occurred between teacher and student, interpellations into racial caste can happen between students as well. W. E. B Du Bois (2015) opens his *Souls of Black Folk* with a story about himself as a young boy talking with a white girl on the playground at school.

I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England... In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my

¹ While this is a kind of official summary of what's widely understood to be Althusser's theory of interpellation, Warren Montag (2017), one of Althusser's most careful interpreters, reminds us that "Althusser's notion of interpellation is irreducibly contradictory and complex, and its complexity is indistinguishable from the theoretical specificity and singularity that give it its power" (p. 1).

card—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others (p.8).

It was the girl's peremptory refusal of DuBois's gift "with a glance" that DuBois had a realization, when it "dawned" on him "with a certain suddenness" that he "was different." DuBois had the believing-suspecting-knowing moment at the little girl's glance that he himself, in fact, was a certain way: marginal, less than. Just as Mr. Ostrowski interpellated Malcolm X into the racial caste system by telling him to be "realistic" about his job prospects, the white girl interpellated DuBois into otherness by refusing his card and looking at him in a particular way.

These two examples are racial, but interpellations happen for every social category. Maria Dalla Costa (1971), one of the founders of the Wages for Housework campaign and of Marxist Feminism in Italy, writes with Selma James of the ways housewives must act with (and like) school teachers in providing discipline. Women, she writes, should be

producing docile workers and little tyrants, in the same way the teacher does at school. (In this the woman is joined by her husband: not by chance do parent-teacher associations exist.) Women, responsible for the reproduction of labor power, on the one hand discipline the children who will be workers tomorrow and on the other hand discipline the husband to work today, for only his wage can pay for labor power to be reproduced (p. 20).

In Malcolm's example, a teacher interpellated a student into the racial caste system, and in DuBois's, a fellow student did the interpellating. In Dalla Costa's case, mothers and teachers are both interpellated and interpellate: they themselves must be disciplined to fit within patriarchal gender roles so they can go on to discipline children and men, reproducing labor power. In this case discipline is the concrete moment of interpellation. While Dalla Costa does not specify practices of discipline in this example, we find one in another important document in the leftist tradition of the United States. The Combahee River Collective's statement remains essential for understanding how race, class, and gender combine. The authors include the following example where imagined relations to real conditions intersect and interpellate the subjectivity of Black working class women:

As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people (Taylor 2017, p. 17).

Children are told to be quiet all the time, particularly in schools, and this common practice has ideological significance depending on the social formation in which it occurs. For the Combahee River Collective, as Black socialist feminists, black working class girls getting told to be quiet has two ideological meanings, or is said with two "breaths." The first breath is an interpellation into patriarchy: to be quiet and be "ladylike." The second breath is an interpellation into racial caste: to be quiet and be "less objectionable in the eyes of white people." The interpellation of being told to be quiet, as black working class girls, therefore has at least two reproductive layers: the reproduction of patriarchy and the reproduction of racial caste. When told to be quiet, these activists recall how they believed-suspected-knew that they were being imbricated into the raced and gendered relations of production in their capitalist social formation. This example of

educational practice shows that, inevitably, interpellations reproduce intersectional imagined relations to real conditions. Each of the previous examples could be given such an intersectional analysis: Malcolm's conversation with Mr. Ostrowski had a gendered and classed aspect, as well as Du Bois's. Dalla Costa's claim about women reproducing labor power stands at the intersection of gender and class. In each case, concrete practices interpellate subjectivity with intersecting social categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and nationality.

Interpellations are therefore small moments with big meanings: they are the concrete practical moments whereby social context weaves through consciousness, connecting with and composing individual subjectivity. Schools seethe with such practices, whether it be teachers meeting with students, students playing with one another on the playground, or adults telling children to be quiet. In a sense, any school event could potentially have some interpellative significance. Thinking about school practices as interpellative is one way of thinking critically about school in general.

There is a long tradition of critical educational research accounting for such interpellations at school. One could read much of Marxist sociology of education inspired by Bowles and Gintis (2011) as measuring school interpellations both quantitatively and qualitatively. In Apple and King's (1979) ethnography of a kindergarten classroom in a working class school, the authors focus on how the teacher interpellates the imagined relation of private property to real conditions, as well as the distinction between work and play. One anecdote shows the teacher asking her students to find their cubbies without having their names labeled on them. When asked why the students could not label their own cubbies, the teacher responded: "[s]tudents must learn their assigned cubby holes" without labels because "that is their job" (p. 50). Students, from a very young age, must learn that they have a space that is their own in within larger spaces: that this cubby is *their* cubby. Further, students must learn that doing this is "their job," that the classroom is a work space and not a play space.

In Anyon's (1981) research pointing to the ways school knowledge is classed, she looked at schools serving students in five different class categories, and how practices at these schools interpellated students to their respective class position. For example, a teacher in the working class school admonished one of her students when they asked for an explanation of a math problem's solution. The teacher said there was no need for them to understand and told her to "[j]ust do what I'm doing" (p. 11). Rather than explain and ensure students learn the concepts behind what they were doing, the working class students were interpellated to follow the authority without that deeper understanding. In contrast, at the school serving students from affluent-professional families, a teacher told students "*you* decide!" when they asked for guidance on how to complete an assignment. These affluent-professional students were interpellated into their class position by being pushed to improve their own individual decision-making skills when completing their school work.

Carnoy and Levin's (1985) empirical work measures four dimensions of class correspondences, comparing and contrasting practices observed in a low-income high school and a high-income high school. They completed ethnographic research in the two schools and counted, for example, the number of teacher behaviors that encouraged students to have an external locus of control (where authority comes from someone else) or an internal locus of control (where authority comes from one's self). They found that, in the working class school, 83% of messages from teachers taught students to respect an external locus of control. One paradigm case of an interpellation for external control was a teacher saying repeatedly "I want

that done now” in the context of classroom assignments (p. 115). The locus for control in this interpellation is obviously the teacher: students should do the assignment because the teacher wants it done, not because students have decided for themselves that it is a good thing to do. In contrast, teachers at the upper middle class school gave students messages communicating an internal locus of control by a clear majority: 67% of messages teachers sent were for an internal locus of control. An example of one such message came from a teacher speaking with a student who had been distracted during one lesson. The teacher asked the student, “why do you do this to yourself?” (p. 120). The question is structured to communicate that the student has an internal locus of control, yet their behavior violates that locus. The teacher interpellates this internal locus of control by appealing to it in their disciplinary speech.

In each of these cases, research points to how schools interpellate for the dominant forces in society: recruiting subjects from individual students by propagating debasing and constraining ideologies immanently in school practices. But there have been important critiques of this Althusserian framework for understanding school practices. Althusser’s philosophy fell out of fashion in the 1980s and 1990s for a variety of reasons, one of the most oft-repeated being that the philosophy (and social reproduction theory in general) does not leave room for human agency. In each formulation above, it can appear as though the social formation is determining an individual’s subjectivity, as though the individual is a robot being programmed by a force greater than their self. This critique was most passionately made by Edward P. Thompson (1978) in *The Poverty of Theory*, was emphatically applied to education by Paul Willis (1981) and then repeated by Henry Giroux (1983). While there is not sufficient space in this essay to fully represent and respond to Thompson’s and Willis’s critiques, it is important to note key developments in Althusser’s philosophy which make matters more complicated.

Interpellations do not successfully reproduce ideology just by virtue of occurring. An interpellation is not a done deal. As Stuart Hall (1973/2001) famously argues in “Encoding/Decoding,” subjects do not always decode encoded messages properly. There is a gap between the encoded message, the interpellation, and the individual who decodes that message. Ideology, Hall writes elsewhere (1986), is without guarantees. There are no guarantees that an intervention made in an ideological state apparatus will succeed: interpellations misfire, get lost in the mix, or get taken up in unintended ways (see Martel, 2017 for a well-developed theory of misinterpellation). An interpellation is not the final shot in the battle to maintain hegemony, but rather an opening salvo that ruling classes launch to maintain that control in the specific balance of forces under consideration.

School is no exception. As Willis (1977) carefully described in *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, interpellations that teachers and other school officials attempt can be blocked, minced, or rerouted by individual students. The interpellations do not mechanically land and automatically make individuals subject to ideology. Willis was a student and colleague of Stuart Hall’s, and his original ethnographic work recognized what Hall explores in his own development of Althusser’s thinking: the contingency of social structure. A balance of forces could always be other than it is. The fact that dominant forces in that balance attempt to recruit for their ideology, but not always successfully, is an important point to note in understanding interpellation, particularly how it was taken up (or not) by future generations of educational researchers.

Althusserian philosophy, specifically Althusser’s concept of social structure, is an extension and development of the notion that society is a formation, a contingent balance of

forces. This notion that a society is a social formation was one of Marx's contributions to social thinking in general when he noted that capitalist economies entail a struggle between classes. There is an inherent struggle for power in such economies, a class struggle, within which each group continually vies for superior position. Vladimir Lenin developed this thinking further by posing the idea of hegemony, or class control, which Antonio Gramsci then reconceptualized, drawing from Niccolo Machiavelli, into the idea of a political terrain or landscape composed of social forces, or the myriad complex ways social forces array and direct themselves. Althusser added to this tradition by pointing out that this balance of forces has a structure. But that structure, he adamantly maintained with his forebears from Marx to Gramsci, is fundamentally contingent: no matter how much control one class has over another, no matter how subordinated one group is to another, that balance can always change. Althusser's concept of social structure is that society is a balance of forces structured in dominance: that arrays of social forces have orderings of superior and subordinate classes, but that ordering could be always otherwise, depending on how successfully subordinate classes engage in the class struggle. Interpellations, we must remember, happen within that contingently structured balance of forces.

Despite what Willis (1981) and Giroux (1983) claim, social structure in Althusserian philosophy is not some transcendent machine determining the course of individual lives, leaving no room for freedom or agency. His philosophy is neither mechanistic nor functionalist, though he does sometimes write those words. Rather Althusser's philosophy, following the most important contributions to Marxist thinking throughout the twentieth century, is premised on the freedom inherent in class struggle. Even in his (in)famous essay "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation," Althusser (1970) included a section on resistance that is not often cited:

The Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle. The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISAs as easily as it can in the (repressive) State apparatus, not only because the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle...The class struggle is thus expressed and exercised in ideological forms, thus also in the ideological forms of the ISAs. But the class struggle *extends far beyond* these forms, and it is because it extends beyond them that the struggle of the exploited classes may also be exercised in the forms of the ISAs, and thus turn the weapon of ideology against the classes in power. (p. 147)

Althusser's philosophy was always a philosophy of struggle, a development of the geological problematic that understands society as a formation, a balance of forces where each force engages in contestation. Rather than a finely-tuned mechanism or series of functions yielding a social equilibrium, the geological problematic casts society as a teetering arrangement of elements (groups, individuals) arranged in variations (political positions and practices) which, over time, layer into regions (the largest features of the social formation) which are relatively autonomous from one another. Groups fight in various ways to keep or win or block hegemony. Such struggles happen at weak sites in the social formation where, inevitably, ruling classes cannot control the formation fully. These sites are sometimes called contradictions in the Marxist

tradition, the full set of which Gramsci calls the conjuncture. Althusser contributed to this tradition of the geological problematic by distinguishing the ISAs from the repressive state apparatus and describing how they work. As Pêcheux (2015) would write later, “class struggle traverses the mode of production in its entirety and that, in the sphere of ideology, class struggle *occurs through* the ISAs” (p. 3). Victories by subordinated groups at the conjuncture force concessions, and sometimes lead to significant changes in the formation. The activists cited at the beginning of this essay are paradigm cases: while they were interpellated into their respective social formations, they successfully struggled in and through those social formations to transform them.

Their activism is not somehow alien to Althusser’s philosophy, but rather robust examples to look at with this philosophy. Society is not a machine in the geological problematic, nor is it a set of functions, but rather a terrain, and Althusser was one of the most important theorists to expand on the philosophical implications of this geological problematic. Interpellation was a flagship contribution in this regard, providing a way of naming how fine-grained, everyday practices have great significance within the social formation. Althusser did this philosophical work explicitly against the mechanistic problematic espoused by leaders in some communist parties in the twentieth century. Althusser’s theories of structural causality, relative autonomy, and overdetermination paved the way for ground-breaking arguments in cultural studies, such as those of Stuart Hall mentioned earlier. Thus much of the writing about Althusser in educational theory that we inherit today has misunderstood Althusserian philosophy, and therefore misunderstood its potency for pedagogy.

This is the intellectual scene in which Lewis (2017) makes his own fascinating intervention, opening up Althusserian pedagogical theory in a novel way. He recognizes that Althusser was in fact improving an already antimechanistic philosophy, writing that interpellation “is never complete, always missing its mark” (p. 306) and opens by giving a short presentation of the Althusserian linguist Michel Pêcheux’s concept of counterinvestment. Lewis thereby introduces the terms counterinterpellation and disinterpellation:

My use of the terms interpellation, counterinterpellation, and disinterpellation are inspired by Michel Pêcheux’s analysis of identification. For Pêcheux (2015), identification indicates a coincidence of subject and Subject (or individual and state). Counteridentification, on the other hand, suggests a breakdown of this coincidence in the form of refusals and revolts. No longer is the empirically given identical to the dominant ideology. This breakdown results in an inverse form of interpellation-identification-subjection through which bourgeois ideology is appropriated and used against itself (p. 304).

This inversion of the interpellation, resulting from a breakdown in the coincidence between subject and Subject, taking the form of refusals and revolts, is precisely the geological problematic at work. Lewis’s focus, as is evident here, is not necessarily on counterinterpellation but rather his new notion of disinterpellation, a “suspension of the trajectory” of both interpellations and counterinterpellations. Disinterpellation, he claims, does not get caught up in the problems of counterinterpellation, which represent the potential reassertion of bourgeois ideologies from the inside.

What follows is an analysis of Lewis's worthy arguments, though my analysis amounts to a critique that his interpretation of counterinterpellation may be too quick. Considering the work of the Althusserian philosopher of language Jean-Jacques Lecercle, who built on Pêcheux's linguistics and coined the term, a counterinterpellation takes up and takes on interpellations so as to alter the balance of forces from which it issues. Counterinterpellation, for Lecercle, is an insult to the insult of ideological reproduction by ruling classes. As I hope to show, deeper engagement with Lecercle's work shows that Lewis's essay, while integral to any examination of Althusserian pedagogy, conceals larger theoretical and political questions about critical educational practice.

Counterinterpellation: Insulting the Insult

There was never a linguistic turn in Marxism. There have been significant studies of language and discourse in leftist thinking on politics, economy, and society, and it is obvious in these studies that language is an integral part of social life. But there was never an analogous movement in Marxism comparable to the one made by early analytic philosophers to prioritize the function of language above all other philosophical concerns. Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2006) begins from this premise in his *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, published in French in 1991 and translated to English in 2006. Lecercle compiles a canon of historical-materialist texts and perspectives on meaning, utterance, and truth; articulates central premises of the Marxist philosophy of language; then contrasts this philosophy with others, such as Noam Chomsky's methodological individualism and Habermasian communicative action. Lecercle proposes the term counterinterpellation in this context. Althusser's allegorical interpellation "hey, you there!" obviously relies on a speech act to subject the individual to the dominant ideology, and Lecercle writes that such speech imposes a set of ideological constraints on listeners. In Lecercle's theory, linguistic meaning is composed of such sedimented ideological constraints, established over time in the balance of forces via layers of interpellations occurring throughout multiple apparatuses. Speaking, in this theory, is a perpetual fixing of subject positions.

Yet the ideological constraints which compose linguistic meaning, and thus the constant flow of interpellations, are always "subject to creative exploitation" (p.208). The fixed subject position can be unfixed; in fact, it is always in a constant state of struggle over its composition in the balance of forces. Lecercle's argument for why the fixed subject position is always subject to unfixing comes from an insight about idiosyncratic speech. We must learn to speak a language which pre-exists us and within which we must form our sense of self, but we also speak the language in undeniably unique ways. Poetry, innuendo, paradox, neologism, philosophy, and puns all happen within and against the prefabricated linguistic structures speakers must speak. Lecercle's extends this insight about language to ideology and generates the notion of counterinterpellation.

As I speak, I counterinterpellate the language that interpellates me to my place as a speaker, which makes me what I am. I exploit the potentialities of meaning that it provides me with, I play tricks with and on it, I accept or reject the names with which it assigns me a place in the community of speakers or excludes me from it...the speaker acts on and in language by using it (p. 208).

What "makes me what I am" is not the one-way interpellation of the subject by state power, but rather the two-way negotiation between the interpellation and the interpellated's tricks,

rejections, and exploitations of that interpellation. Working in that same geological problematic inaugurated by Gramsci and built upon by Althusser, Lecercle claims that by speaking, the subject can “act on and in” the ideological constraints imposed by the interpellation. This action “has the form of a counterinterpellation” (p. 208). He writes: “the insult that wounds me and seeks to fix me in an interlocutory, subjective position which I do not want to occupy can not only be returned, but taken up, taken on, and revalued” (p. 115).

Counterinterpellation is therefore an insult to the insult of interpellation, a linguistic-ideological negation of the negation by negotiation. This negotiation happens in speech acts, the things we say to one another every day, but has ideological and political ramifications. Rather than large-scale dialectical movements these are minute dialect moments: the conversations, chats, and back-and-forths of everyday life which can constitute, deconstitute, and reconstitute our relations of production. These interactions can fix individuals in subjective positions through successful insults, insofar as the interpellation reproduces, through the speech act, an exploitative, debasing, marginalizing, alienating relation of production. A successful interpellation requires the message be encoded by the apparatuses of ruling classes properly and decoded properly by subject. But the background of struggle within which that interpellation has fixed the subject, the social formation and its balance of forces, implies the equal and opposite possibility for that subject’s unfixing. The interpellation can be “returned, taken up, taken on, and revalued” through “creative exploitation.”

This fixing-unfixing view of language is non-fetishistic, letting language and thus ideology itself “change, develop, and vary through [speakers’] linguistic practice” (p. 145). After the interpellation has occurred there are myriad and obvious opportunities to accept or reject the ideological constraints imposed by the moment of interpellation (p.145). Counterinterpellation thus admits that there is a set of constraints external to and prior to social existence which fix the individual speaker into a subject position. Yet by virtue of its very existence as a moment of fixation in the balance of forces, this subject position is subject to negotiation, open to shifting and reappropriation by a newly fixed subject.

The speaker is therefore interpellated to her place by language, but, in so far as she makes the language her language, she counterinterpellates it: she plays with it, pushes it to its limits, accepts its constraints in order to subvert them...Hence the interpellated one counter-interpellates the ideology that interpellates her (p. 164).

Thus there is a kind of free and creative expression possible within the play, push, and subversion of interpellations. This free creativity is sponsored by the conditions of the interpellation itself. Lecercle’s argument accords with the geological problematic laid out earlier: there could be no interpellation unless there was an arena of struggle and negotiation in which the interpellation took place. Interpellations only make sense in the context of struggle. The terrain of struggle does not disappear after the interpellation hits its mark. Rather, society itself is a social formation where forces constantly struggle. Thinking about language as part of the terrain, the balance of forces, is what makes Lecercle’s Marxist philosophy of language

unique among philosophies of language, contributing to Althusser's immanent structuralist paradigm.²

For Lecercle, speakers are interpellated by the ideological constraints composing language, yet the speaker can simultaneously counterinterpellate by speaking that language creatively. The constraints which enable the speaker to speak against the dominant ideology are set by the same conditions in which an ideological state apparatus attempts to interpellate them: struggle. The counterinterpellation where speakers speak in their own right is part of struggle, an answer to the interpellations issued by ruling classes. The counterinterpellation is a taking up and taking on those interpellations to shift the balance of forces away from the ruling class's control. Counterinterpellations are therefore not what Walker (1985), commenting on Willis (1977), calls recusance, or the mere refusal of interpellation. The counterinterpellation must answer the interpellation, not just resist it, distinguishing Lecercle's theory from Willis's and Giroux's concept of resistance wherein human agency appears *ex nihilo*, without a structural understanding of struggle. Rather it is more in accordance with Althusser's concept of resistance laid out earlier: the ways working classes wage successful battles in the ISAs, using ideology as a weapon against the ruling classes. Not just any refusal, rejection, or reaction would count as a counterinterpellation. Only those responses and speech acts which take on, take up, and return the interpellation: that is the counterinterpellation.

Lecercle unfortunately does not offer detailed examples of counterinterpellation. Arguably, the life and work of the activists cited at the beginning of this essay are rich with counterinterpellations. Look at Malcolm X's speeches and organizing activity; W.E.B Du Bois's writings throughout his career; Mariarosa Dalla Costa's work with the Wages for Housework campaign; as well as the Combahee River Collective's activism. The histories of these important activists are treasure troves of counterinterpellations. More examples from classrooms follow at the end of this essay, but Lecercle does mention two of note. The first comes from the queer community. In a brief remark, he writes that by using the term queer that community was able to creatively reappropriate derogatory terms, the very language used to enact their marginalization (p. 218). He also mentions telemarketing as another example, specifically when a receiver of a telemarketing call talks back to the telemarketer:

the telephone operator who replies to a demand for information cannot allow herself to devote more than a certain number of seconds to each conversation, if she is to meet the objectives that have been set for her, which obey profit constraints. Far from being the site of freedom of expression and ethical responsibility, such conversations obey a fixed standard schema, whose ideal is a completely automated exchange (an artificial, but nevertheless cheerful voice encourages me, if I want to check my accounts, to press the star button). Even when the operator is still a human subject, her language is strictly controlled: tone of voice, formulae for addressing the customer and ending the conversation, vocabulary and levels of language, no expressive or stylistic choice, no personalisation of the utterance permitted. Pretend customers and real inspectors, or recording machines, will take care of verifying that instructions are properly

² Althusser's is a rejection of transcendent structure in favor of immanent structure, a distinction which, along with Willis and Giroux's misreading, deserves more attention as part of a larger project (see Backer, unpublished).

applied, with ‘evaluation’ interviews on offer. Here, the practice of communication is the exact opposite of the ideology of communication: it aims to prohibit (in the case of the employee) and limit to the maximum (in the case of the customer) freedom of expression, the ethical responsibility of speech, and the irenic co-operation of dialogue as sharing and consensual search for agreement. In these conditions of rigid interpellation, the only possible counterinterpellation is the raising of the voice by the furious customer who insults an operator whom she knows is not responsible and the collective struggle of operators to improve their working conditions. For this communication, like any other, is the site of power relations. (p. 218)

By raising their voice against the telemarketer, the person on the other end of the line taps into a balance of forces set by the ideological constraints demanded by an exploitative mode of production. When the customer raises their voice at the telemarketer, it is one of only a few options to take up and take on these constraints from within and alter the balance. Lecerle mentions at the end of this example that the “collective struggle of operators to improve their working conditions” is a possible counterinterpellation as well. Union organizing is a good example and fits exactly with Althusser’s example of the trade union as a school for working against interpellations, which Lewis (2017) cites as counterinterpellative because it is counterideological to capitalist relations of production (p. 310).³

Lewis’s Disinterpellation

By way of contrast, Lewis argues that counterinterpellation is not disinterpellation. A disinterpellation is neither a reproduction of existing relations of production nor a creative expropriation of that interpellation. Rather, recalling terms from Althusser’s later work on aleatory materialism, disinterpellation is the productive non-production of a nonstate. Disinterpellative study, for Lewis, preserves the weak power of impotentiality by suspending the interpellation or counterinterpellation of anything. Interpellation is an insult. Counterinterpellation insults the insult. Disinterpellation is neither an insult nor an insult to the insult, but rather the suspension of any insult. But Lewis, on the way to his fascinating argument for disinterpellation, draws an equivalence between interpellation and counterinterpellation. For his central thesis, he reads Pêcheux as saying that a counteridentification is an inversion of identification, leading to the same result as an identification:

For Pêcheux, the problem with a political strategy predicated solely on counteridentification is that inversion merely reasserts bourgeois ideology in a new form thus insuring its dominance over the workers’ movement from the inside. Disidentification then is the moment of ideological rupture, which is an attack on the trajectory of interpellation and counterinterpellation. Because it holds open a possibility to move beyond this cycle, disidentification offers a fundamental move...I will follow a similar line of analysis but with a focus on educational problematics. My goal is to offer a new, Marxist notion of education that does not get caught up in the problems of counteridentification, as theorized

³ Though of course unions themselves are not always such schools of struggle. Most unions in the United States, McAlevey (2016) points out, rarely think about their work as having anything to do with class struggle.

by Pêcheux, and instead offers the possibility of a suspension of the trajectory that leads from interpellation to counterinterpellation and back again. (p. 304)

While Lewis opens with this reading of Pêcheux, thereby establishing an equivalence between interpellation and counterinterpellation, he moves on to educational examples without lingering on this important premise in his argument. Pêcheux's analysis of identification, counter-identification, and dis-identification deserves more attention than I can give it here. We should note however that Pêcheux claims a counter-identification is superficial and too credulous when it comes to ideology, "taking [dominant ideology] at its word and reversing it" (p. 11). Counterinterpellation, in Lecercle's conception, is not "taking ideology at its word" to merely reverse it superficially. Rather, counterinterpellation takes up and takes on ideology to shift forces in the conjuncture. At least in terms of the philosophical arguments, Lecercle's counterinterpellation may be more like Pêcheux's dis-identification.

Lewis continues with the equivalence, however. To demonstrate this equivalence using educational examples, Lewis first characterizes unions as an ideological revolutionary apparatus, or IRA, which involve their own kind of subjectivation. An IRA, like an ISA, hails subjects and recruits them. Thus he writes that "hailing, whether interpellative or counterinterpellative, is about giving the subject an orientation according to a predefined set of ideological themes" (p. 311). Lewis then argues that counterinterpellation is not educational:

what I want to suggest is that...[in] a counterinterpellation through which subjects come to recognize themselves as revolutionary, there is something educationally missing here. Indeed, it would appear that...there is a total collapse of education into political activism. As such, education evaporates as a theoretical problem needing philosophical development (p. 311).

Lewis goes on to identify disinterpellation as educational, properly speaking. The disinterpellation clears a space "outside any ideologically bound territories" in an encounter between "nameless atoms, [in] a field of force relations rather than knowing relations" (p. 313). It is this force emerging from the encounter that provides the educational experience, since it is not a "subjective disposition or even a desire but rather a *force* that emerges from a clash and pileup of atoms" (p. 315). The subject dissolves in this clash-force, an "unpredictable eruption wherein...no one controls it, no one has particular rights over interpreting it, and no one can predict its outcomes" (p. 314). The subjectless moment of force in this clash is therefore "an education through desubjectification" and "is part of a larger Marxist agenda because it is only in the abrupt collapse of the...subject that one can touch a communist horizon" (p. 315).

The conclusion here is a significant one, as it yields a model for critical educational practice: "Marxist education is a practice in which...the product is a subject without a subject (a subject estranged from itself, a desubjectivized subject)" (p. 314).⁴ Disinterpellation is the definition of Marxist education because it "destabilizes and suspends any and every interpellative process in order to open the subject to that which is beyond subjectivity" (p. 316). The seminar, for Lewis, is a pedagogy for disinterpellation since

⁴ Note that Pêcheux (2015) explicitly says dis-identification is not "a question of an impossible desubjectification of the subject" (p.12). It is therefore not clear that Lewis's disinterpellation correlates to Pêcheux's dis-identification in the way Lewis implies.

students, materials... and the teacher enter into a constellation of forces that destabilize and thus open up a space and a time wherein a new kind of educational life beyond the subject temporarily forms...that does not have a proper name or destination (p. 316).

During seminars “the very conditions for a different world open up” and thereby set the “preconditions for a different kind of world” (p. 316).

In Lewis’ account, a counterinterpellation is included in the concept “any and every interpellation” because a counterinterpellation sets a counter-constraint. This counter-constraint recruits individuals to positions in the balance of forces. Education, for Lewis, hangs in the balance: since a counterideology is still an ideology, and a counterinterpellation still fixes a subject position, neither can be properly educational. Rather, they are political activism. Only the disinterpellation, which is neither interpellation nor counterinterpellation, can be called educational. Yet I would contend, drawing from Lecercle’s account of counterinterpellation as an insult to the insult of ideological reproduction, that this conclusion simplifies a much more complex theoretical picture. A counterinterpellation, according to Lecercle, must take up and take on the insult of an interpellation, creatively exploiting the ideological constraints set within the existing balance of forces, potentially altering that balance. To take an interpellation up and take it on in the balance of forces is to exert a force in that balance, not merely turning the interpellation around but rather engaging in effective struggle. A counterinterpellation is not just a reversed interpellation, just as a counterideology is not just a reversed ideology. I draw two main conclusions from this insight, from which I then extract two models of critical educational practice: the disinterpellation model and the counterinterpellation model.

Distinterpellation or Counterinterpellation?

Consider first that counterinterpellation must be educational. To take up and take on dominant ideologies and potentially alter the balance of forces of a social formation, speakers must study, learn, and teach in robust ways. It would require a non-negligible educational experience to successfully counterinterpellate. A person fixed in a position by the dominant forces of the social formation must learn what the contours of that balance of forces are, experiment with interventions, and decide to creatively exploit them in such a way as to potentially shift the balance. This taking up and taking on would require knowing the balance of forces as they are, conceiving of the weaknesses or tensions within that balance, and then successfully formulating a proposition or action which would push on that weakness such that it has a meaningful consequence. This process is entirely educational.

Take, for example, the case of Joe Szwaja and his students in Celia Oyler’s (2012) *Actions Speak Louder than Words: Community Activism as Curriculum*. In 1996, at the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Mr. Szwaja incorporated the protests into his social studies class focusing on globalization. Oyler reports that

they planned a street theater piece with large Bread and Puppet style puppets...According to a student named Amber, they had about 500 people watching the street theater at one point in time. Then, after the protests were over, the class created a quiz for the media to take related to facts about globalization because they were dismayed that the coverage was about the small incidents of

violence [at the protests] rather than about the major issues. They sent out the quiz as a press release and invited journalists to come to their class (p. 26).

Planning for this project and executing it were clearly educational, but also counterinterpellative. Students quizzing the news media is a particularly creative exploitation of the balance of forces at that moment: students are typically the ones who are quizzed about their knowledge of history and social studies, but in this case the students decided to quiz society about its knowledge of free trade. They even invited the media to their class to learn something about globalization. To complete this project, Szwaja assigned essays on the history of the WTO, as well as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Act (GATT). In addition, “students wrote a play about sweatshop labor around the world, including alternatives to such practices” (p. 21). Amber, the student mentioned above, reported that “[w]e made huge puppets. We used cardboard and newspaper and rags. We made masks too” (p. 31). Further, students being present at the protests had first-hand experiential knowledge of social studies and history in action. Oyler reflects that Szwaja “gave his students the opportunity to engage in a curriculum of public protest” (38).

According to Lewis’s argument, Oyler’s notion of a “curriculum of public protest” would not make sense, as public protest could not furnish an educational curriculum. Yet I think it limiting to deny the educational complexity of this process, the inquiry (or we might even say study) it requires. Reducing this process of engaging with the balance of forces to political activism is to deny its educativity. Of course, such a curriculum is also activism. But political activism can be an educational process, just as educational processes can be outright or incipient forms of political activism.

This point about the relationship between political activism and education gestures towards a fundamental question in Marxist educational theory. Again, a key concept that forms the political-ontological background of Althusser’s philosophy is the Gramscian notion of political terrain, or balance of forces. The terrain created by the balance of forces is what makes the geological problematic so novel and important in the history of social theory. If society, according to this problematic, is always a social formation of forces; and if classes, groups, factions, and fractions exert these forces; and these forces are always in a balance with one another, then it is not only an equivalence but a false equivalence to say, as Lewis does, that subordinate forces in that balance are meaningfully similar to the dominant forces *because they are forces*. In terms of the geological problematic, Lewis presumes that because a force counters another force, each are meaningfully similar by virtue of their being forces. At this point in the argumentation, a dilemma emerges.

Lewis claims that there is a concrete educational practice called disinterpellation that erupts in a moment where force relations come into being without knowledge relations, dissolving subjectivity to create the preconditions for a different world. No one controls this moment, no one determines the outcomes. The moment is beyond ideology. This disinterpellation suspends subjectivation, rendering recruitment inoperative. Going back to the geological problematic, and taking this insight with us, we would have to assume Lewis is arguing that there is a kind of force, an educational force, that is forceless. To be more precise, this educative position in the balance of forces exerts a force, but because no one controls it and there is no ideology, this force does not recruit for any imagined relation to real conditions.

Lewis interprets Althusser's notion of the encounter, at least within education, as a moment where imagined relations to real conditions are suspended.

This forceless force itself is a matter for further thinking, as it is not clear how a Marxist theory of the political terrain, following the geological problematic, would permit there to be such a force. Questions abound. First, is there a place beyond ideology? Lewis claims that a disinterpellation suspends any imagined relation to real conditions in a nameless place of the balance of forces that no one controls. Is there such a thing? Wouldn't a social force *qua* social force exert pressure on behalf of *some* imagined relation to real conditions, even if that imagined relation to real conditions stipulates that, according to it, it does not stipulate any imagined relation to real conditions? In Althusser's ideology theory, such a position would still be an imagined relation to real conditions. And, if this is true, does this supposed imagined relation to real conditions that imagines it is not an imagined relation to real conditions end up in a kind of neutrality, or a place outside of politics?

Lewis has a robust response to this set of questions. He claims that the disinterpellation opens up the possibility of a communal being, and that, in a capitalist social formation, this desubjectivized moment of forcelessness is a kind of communist horizon (p. 316). He cites Derek R. Ford (2016) and Curry Malott with Derek Ford (2015) here, whose books take up these questions. Yet such a communal imagined relation to real conditions is not a suspension of all ideology, but rather an ideology with certain features, namely that of a communist horizon. While claiming that the suspension of imagined relations to real conditions in a capitalist social formation leads to an imagined relation of communist horizon to real conditions is a fascinating move to make, it leads to an educational dilemma in the geological problematic.

An example from critical educational practice would be helpful to illustrate the dilemma. Lewis uses the seminar as his example of educational practice, and I presume that discussion (speaking and listening about a question held in common) would be a central feature of such seminars. I have argued elsewhere (Backer & Lewis 2016, Backer 2017b) that classroom discussion, if facilitated such that different participants address one another in an equal and various sequence of turn-taking, can lead to the suspension of active prohibitions in the psyche, or what Jacques Lacan calls dehiscence. To mix Lewis's language with this claim about discussion, when there are a mix of moves in classroom discussion, and no one follows up one another more than anyone else, there is a disinterpellation. Such a discussion, according to the disinterpellation model, is an eruption in the balance of forces, taking participants beyond ideological territory to desubjectify the discussion participants. In a capitalist social formation, capitalist social forces may suspend, but what occurs in that suspended moment need not be a communist horizon. In principle, it should not be any horizon. But if it is a communist horizon, then the seminar was a counterinterpellation, according to Lecerle's account of the idea, since the discussion took up the constraints of a capitalist formation and took them on to shift the balance of forces enough to render a communist horizon there in the classroom.

The result is a dilemma: either the disinterpellation recruits for no ideology whatsoever, or, if it recruits for a communist ideology in a capitalist social formation, then it is a counterinterpellation. In this case, I would argue that the discussion in the seminar was a counterinterpellation and not a disinterpellation. The discussion is not a forceless force, but rather a practice taking place in a balance of forces where all forces have impact in some direction, whether that direction be with the seam of dominant forces, with some alternative subordinate seam, or, inevitably, an uneven mixture thereof. The seminar has to have some

impact in the balance of forces, or otherwise be an impactless impactor, which may be possible, as mentioned before, but would be difficult to theorize in the geological problematic.

The dilemma implied by this forceless force has further implications. That the seminar discussion would have some impact in the balance of forces is a first point. A second point is implied: just as the seminar impacts the social forces within which it takes place, this seminar and its participants would be impacted by other social forces relatively independently of the social force they exert. Even if subjectivating forces are rendered inoperative by the discussion, there would still be forces emanating from the modes of production, repressive apparatus, and other reproductive apparatuses. What if a student looks at their cellphone during the seminar, for example? The media state apparatus makes an intervention as the disinterpellation takes hold. Does the disinterpellation suspend that social force too? To what extent? Other productive and repressive forces could be exerted on the classroom, even while the classroom exerts a school-based reproductive force that suspends certain forces.

Consider student debt as an example. If a professor enters a university classroom where students are indebteding themselves by taking the course, then does the disinterpellation occurring in this professor's seminar suspend the social force of the debt students accrue by taking the course? As they take the seminar, as they engage in the encounter, they are paying per credit hour: paying with money that they must borrow from someone else and pay back at some future point with interest. Jason T. Wozniak (2017) has argued that it is possible to block the subjectivating and mis-educative force of debt using what he calls counterpedagogies. Perhaps the better model for Marxist education would be such a counterpedagogy understood as a counterinterpellation that takes up and takes on the balance of forces afflicting indebted students, rather than a disinterpellation that suspends some social forces. The counterinterpellation model of critical educational practice would not subjectivate students in a superficially reversed ideology as Lewis argues, but rather bid students and teachers attend to the balance of forces around them with the goal of intervening in that balance, to take up and take on the ruling classes by struggling against the forces oppressing them.

Allison G. Dover (2015) provides a case of this counterinterpellative model of critical educational practice. Dover studied teachers who incorporate social justice into their public school classrooms, specifically under constraints of state-mandated curricula and tests. Dover describes a literature teacher named Karen who, along with her students, counterinterpellated against their dilapidated school infrastructure.

[Karen] described her unit as one that uses "literature to facilitate" wider conversations regarding race, class, and inequality; in her case, *Macbeth* leads to a wider examination of pressing social issues. After teaching the play, the students evaluated how the poor physical condition of their school affected their ability to perform theater. Students completed a thorough analysis of resource shortages and physical deficiencies at their school, developed a wish list of materials that would facilitate informal theater production, created formal proposals for renovations, and wrote letters to local businesses requesting donations to support their efforts (p. 524).

The school and its infrastructure prevented these students from learning and performing *Macbeth*, the productive and repressive social forces acting on the school made it under-

resourced in this way. The purpose of this unit, according to Karen, was to give students the opportunity to “write to change their environment” (p. 524). Like Szwaja’s curriculum of public protest, this opportunity for students to write to change their environment is a counterinterpellative pedagogy. Students took up and took on the interpellation of their school building, juxtaposed with their curricular requirements for reading *Macbeth* and writing, to change the balance of forces in their part of the social formation. Karen attempted to teach her students to intervene in that prohibitive political terrain, to struggle within and against the ideological constraints of their curriculum and facilities. Dover does not report the consequences of the letter-writing campaign, but we imagine the class exerted a force of some impact: perhaps a newspaper article, a response from City Hall, or even funds from the local businesses.

I have extracted a dilemma from Lewis’s argument about disinterpellation and crafted two models of critical educational practice: the disinterpellation model and the counterinterpellation model. The question becomes: which should critical educators use, a model that seeks to suspend social forces or a model that takes up and takes on the existing balance of forces to alter them? Of course, this question is not an either/or matter and educators should use both models extensively. It may be the case that some disinterpellation must happen for a counterinterpellation to take place, or vice versa. It may even be an empirical question; that is, one that warrants observation of lived educational practice (just as Anyon and Carnoy and Levin did, along with Dover and Oyler) to take stock of what disinterpellations and counterinterpellations actually entail from moment to moment, and whether critical educators should adopt one or the other as their paradigm in the context of their positions in the balance of forces. This empirical research would be an exciting avenue for further inquiry. In any case, this contrast between the disinterpellation model and the counterinterpellation model is helpful in thinking about one’s commitments as a critical educator, and is a central finding of this essay.

Conclusion

Tyson E. Lewis’s fantastic work on Althusserian pedagogy is an important first step into an unexplored region of critical educational theory. Althusser’s philosophy has been misread for at least a generation of educational researchers. He takes the geological problematic seriously and continues this tradition of Marxist philosophy of education rather than eschewing it. Lewis’s delimiting of interpellation, counterinterpellation, and disinterpellation is an intervention to celebrate. However, I have shown that as Lewis is on his way towards theorizing disinterpellation, he moves past the concept of counterinterpellation too quickly. Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s understands counterinterpellation as an insult to the insult of interpellation; a taking up and taking on of dominant ideological constraints via creative exploitation to potentially alter the balance of forces within which the counterinterpellation is issued.

Lewis also draws an equivalency between counterinterpellation and interpellation, claiming that they are both recruitments of some kind and thus should be associated with political activism rather than education. Disinterpellation according to this argument, which is neither interpellation nor counterinterpellation, renders both ideologies and counterideologies inoperative. Lewis therefore argues that disinterpellation is the better educational model. I have argued that this move, while important and fascinating, not only passes over a robust account of the concept of counterinterpellation, but that this concept broaches fundamental questions for critical educational practice. Lewis’s arguments about disinterpellation and counterinterpellation lead to a dilemma. Either one accepts that there is such a thing as an educational forceless force

which recruits to no ideology, or that every educational encounter happens in a balance of forces, which it both impacts and is impacted by.

I have found that two models of critical education emerge from the dilemma. The disinterpellation model Lewis outlines says that education exerts a forceless force that suspends ideology, and that this suspension should be the aim of critical educators: to teach so that students engage in encounters where social forces suspend. According to this model, counterinterpellation is political activism and not educational. The counterinterpellation model I have outlined is different. Counterinterpellation is educational in this model, though it may also be political activism. The counterinterpellation model says that while disinterpellation may be an important notion to consider, educational practices exert force in the social formation and are exerted upon by other forces. Being a critical educator, according to this model, means knowing what kinds of social forces act on and through one's classroom, and means teaching such that students learn how to make interventions that shift the social formation's balance of forces.

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