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X-BUDDHIST DISIDENTIFICATION

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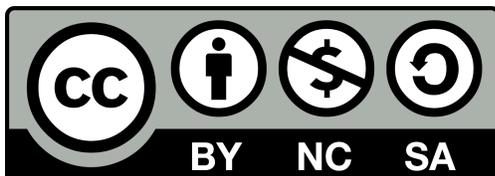
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X-Buddhist Disidentification

§ 16.2 of “Speculative Non-Buddhism: X-buddhist Hallucination and Decimation,” in *Cruel Theory / Sublime Practice*.

Michel Pêcheux and disidentification. Pêcheux, a student of Althusser's, was not alone in finding that his teacher did not offer a clear enough account of how the conditions for a critical practice as a "science" of ideology arose for the (always, thus already, subjugated) individual. For many, it seemed that Althusser's emphasis on the institutional nature of subject formation via ideological state apparatuses allowed too little room for vigorous rejection of the subject-forming hail.

As many commentators have pointed out, one of the most perplexing aspects of Althusser's formulations on ideology is the absence of an elaborated stance regarding the possibilities for the realization of a resistant or counter-hegemonic politic at the level of the text-subject encounter. How to succeed in making "common sense" uncommon? (Montgomery and Allen n.pag.)

Given the determining force of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, how can the subject gain insight into the manner in which his ideology goes about “naturalizing” or making self-evident (*cf.* the x-buddhist claim on *things as they are*) its portrayal of the world? Another way of asking the same question is: how is a change of subjective view possible? Pêcheux offers three means for answering this question. His first step is to de-reify the process of subject formation by recognizing the possibility of contradiction and resistance inherent *within* that process. Our ideological apparatuses, in other words, are the site of both formation and de-formation. Second, drawing on Lacan, he emphasizes the role that language and other symbolic systems play in the formation (and de-formation) of

subjectivity. Third, he articulates the three decisive ways of *positioning* oneself within those structures. We can look at these points a little closer by concentrating on the final one. I will discuss it in terms of x-buddhist subject formation.

As I mentioned earlier, non-buddhism is concerned with cultural criticism in the present. So, when I speak of “the x-buddhist subject,” I mean a specific re-fashioning of a contemporary westerner. Such a person comes to x-buddhism as an already-formed subject of some other kind. Encountering the x-buddhist symbolic system (words, expressions, theses, beliefs, propositions, prescriptions, axioms, mythos, narratives, etc.), the person is convinced, to some degree, of the naturalness and inevitability of the x-buddhist doctrines. For Pêcheux, this moment of consent characterizes “the effectivity of hegemonic ideology” or “the ‘*winning out*’ of the reproduction of social divisions over their transformation” (Montgomery and Allen n.pag.). The person now *identifies* with x-buddhism. He sees the world through its categories and narratives; and, in participating in the community, he is implicated in reproducing its forms. He learns the rituals and protocols, and ascribes to them the values claimed by the community leaders. He accepts the social hierarchies of the community, and knows and takes his place therein. *Identification* is thus the first manner in which an individual can position himself in relation to x-buddhist ideology. The individual who identifies with x-buddhism is, moreover, the “good” subject.

It would appear that this relation [i.e., identification] provides “already available” subject positions for the *good* subject who, realizing his or her subjection in the form of the “freely consented to,” “*spontaneously*” assumes the position offered by the universal Subject “in all liberty” (Pêcheux 114, 156). This subject accepts the image of self [that is] projected by the dominant discourse. (Montgomery and Allen n.pag.)

Such spontaneous identification, however, may be threatened by the individual’s recognition of contradiction. He begins to question the supposed naturalness or self-evidence of the community’s interpretive

categories. We now have, then, the potential of a subject who rejects the self that is prescribed—and indeed *naturalized*—in x-buddhist discourse. Pêcheux names this position within the ideology *counter-identification*. From the perspective of the community, the subject who thus opposes its claims is the “bad” subject. He is the “trouble-making” subject, who calls into question the very foundation of the community’s ideology *as natural and self-evident*. Insight into contradiction may be more specific, too. In terms of x-buddhism, this may mean to challenge the historical grounds on which the Buddha’s authority is assumed; the reliability of the canonical literature; the efficacy of the rituals; the relevance of the teacher’s “wisdom” for contemporary life; the coherency of the central x-buddhist narrative, and so on. Because he takes a purely oppositional stance within the x-buddhist community, the “bad” subject, in an important if paradoxical sense, nonetheless perpetuates the power of the dominating x-buddhist ideology. That is to say, he *lets stand* the dominant ideology that informs the community. He does not attempt to construct an alternative to it, and certainly not *from* it.

The discourse of what then becomes a *bad* subject “turns against” the dominant identification, primarily by *taking up a position* that consists in initiating a separation, challenge or revolt against “what the ‘universal Subject’ gives him to think: a struggle against ideological evidentness on the terrain of that evidentness, an evidentness with a negative sign, reversed in its own terrain” (Pêcheux 157). That is, Pêcheux argues, the “trouble-making” subject does not recognize those meanings lived by the good subjects as being “obvious” or “natural,” but rather as achieved contradictorily; and therefore the identity on offer is refused.

The philosophical and political forms of a counter-discourse will then produce in the “bad” subject a *counter-identification* with the discursive formation imposed on him or her by interdiscourse, yet one where the evidentness of meaning remains complicit with it, in this case to be rejected. (Montgomery and Allen 1992 n.pag.)

The prefix “non” in non-buddhism does not signify brute opposition for precisely the reasons articulated above. An oppositional account of x-buddhism preserves the terms of x-buddhism’s symbolic system. It remains complicit in the “evidentness” of the x-buddhist symbolic system, though “with a negative sign, reversed in its own terrain.” So, counter-identification is incapable of creating a subject who is free from the shaping power of the x-buddhist apparatus. How, then, is such a “free” subject possible? Pêcheux’s answer is: through *disidentification*. The disidentified subject alone is able to enact the crucial distinction between subjugation by an ideology and what Althusser calls the critique or “science” of one’s ideology.

In his "Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspré," in *Lenin and Philosophy*, Althusser draws a distinction between art and science that will be useful here. Art offers us perceptions that *allude* to the world. Science offers perceptions that *know* the world.

Art...does not give us a *knowledge* in the *strict sense*, it therefore does not replace knowledge (in the modern sense: scientific knowledge), but what it gives us does nevertheless maintain a certain *specific relationship* with knowledge. This relationship is not one of identity but one of difference. Let me explain. I believe that the peculiarity of art is to “make us see,” “make us perceive,” “make us feel” something which *alludes* to reality. If we take the case of the novel, Balzac or Solzhenitsyn, as you refer to them, they make us *see, perceive* (but not *know*) something which *alludes* to reality. They make us “perceive” (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held. (222-223)

Specifically, what art offers us in the form of “seeing,” etc., is “the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes” (222). Science has a different task; namely, to provide a “theoretical practice” for distinguishing between *seeing as* and *knowledge of*. Pêcheux casts this distinction in terms of the *representations* of ideological hailing and

the *concepts* of scientific process. The former furnish *meaning*, while the latter perform a *function*. Significantly, both thinkers hold, when we employ a “theoretical practice” such as science (or non-buddhism), when we, that is, operate within a “discourse which claims to be scientific” or critical-theoretical, we are, in an important sense, subject-less. For, in Althusser’s terms, “there is no ‘Subject of science’ except in an ideology of science” (171).

In opposition to the empiricist model of knowledge production, Althusser proposes that true or scientific knowledge is distinguished from ideology or opinion not by dint of an historical subject having abstracted the essence of an object from its appearances. Instead, this knowledge is understood to be produced by a process internal to scientific knowledge itself. Though this transformation takes place entirely in thought, Althusser does not maintain that scientific knowledge makes no use of facts. However, these facts or materials are never brute. Rather, specific sciences start with pre-existing concepts or genera such as “humors,” “unemployment,” “quasars,” or “irrational numbers.” These genera may be ideological in part or in whole. Science’s job is to render these concepts scientific. This labor is what Althusser terms “theoretical practice.” The result of this practice is scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is produced by means of applying to these genera the body of concepts or “theory” that the science possesses for understanding them...The result of this application of theory to genera is the transformation of the “ideological generality into a scientific generality.” (Lewis n.pag.)

It should be clear that the Althusserian axiom “man is an ideological animal by nature” dispels the notion that scientific discourse is performed by pure, non-ideological, subjects (171). Indeed, it is worth recalling that the “two conjoint theses” that form the foundation of Althusser’s theory of interpellation are: (i) there is no practice except by and in an ideology; and (ii) there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects (170). The crucial point for our purposes is that a conceptually-oriented, or “scientific,” critical theory such as non-buddhism keeps in its sights the *very topic* of subject formation.

In the conceptual process of knowledge, the determination of the real and its necessity...is materialized in the form of an articulated body of concepts which at once *exhibits* and *suspends* the “blind” action of this same determination as subject effect (centering-origin-meaning)." (Pêcheux 137)

It is in this moment of suspension of the ideological representations that *disidentification* becomes possible. It constitutes a "transformation-displacement" of the identifying and counter-identifying subject.

The ideological mechanism of interpellation does not disappear, of course—there is no "end of ideology" as a result of science—but it does begin to operate in reverse, on and against itself, through the "overthrow-rearrangement" of the complex of ideological formations and the discursive formations that are imbricated with them. In short, Pêcheux maintains that the appropriation of scientific concepts by the subject-form tends to undermine ideological identification in a way that other ideological discourses, for example, literature, cannot since they are trapped within a field of representation-meaning constituted by and for the subject-form. (Resch 147)

Although the distinction is somewhat crude—and indeed Althusser's failure to elaborate has elicited criticism—we can usefully apply it to our subject matter, x-buddhism. Althusser's basic distinction captures a feature of x-buddhism that is obscured—indeed, one that x-buddhism itself both conceals and eludes—when we let stand its self-presentation as knowledge system akin to science or even to art history as opposed to an ideological system that has more in common with literature and art. A final passage from "Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspré" should make this clear:

Ideology is also an object of science, the “lived experience” is also an object of science, the “individual” is also an object of science. The real difference between art and science lies in

the *specific form* in which they give us the same object in quite different ways: art in the form of “seeing” and “perceiving” or “feeling,” science in the form of *knowledge* (in the strict sense, by concepts). (223)

How can this distinction between forms be made transparent from within the x-buddhist ideological system? How, in other words, can x-buddhism’s *allusion* to reality be *perceived* as such and hence become a form of *knowledge*? Pêcheux, recall, wants to insist on the role of both the “material character of meaning” in subject formation and the subject’s position in relation to that meaning: “All my work,” he says, “links the constitution of meaning to that of the constitution of the subject which is located in the figure of interpellation” (Pêcheux 101). Similar to Heidegger’s claim that tradition becomes our “master”—that it successfully hails us to the extent that we identify with it—by delivering itself “over to self-evidence” (Heidegger 43), Pêcheux holds that ideology functions in large part by delivering over to the subject the self-evidence (or, in translations of Pêcheux, “self-evidentness”) of its supplied meanings. Again echoing Heidegger, Pêcheux believes that subject-forming institutions accomplish this by causing us to “forget” the relationship between ideological interpellation and its very supply of meaning. For both thinkers, two key elements in both the masking and unmasking of interpellation is the transparency of language and one’s position relative to that language.

[W]ords, expressions, propositions, etc., change their meaning according to the positions held by those who use them, which signifies that they find their meaning by reference to those positions, i.e., by reference to the ideological formations...in which those positions are inscribed. (Pêcheux 111-113)

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SPECULATIVE NON-BUDDHISM

RUINS OF THE BUDDHIST REAL