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**Signification, Representation, Ideology:
Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates**

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**READING AN
IDEOLOGICAL FIELD**

Let me take a brief, personal example
as an indication of how some of the
things I have said about Althusser's gen-
eral concept of ideology allow us to think

about particular ideological formations. I want to think about that particular complex of discourses that implicates the ideologies of identity, place, ethnicity and social formation generated around the term "black." Such a term "functions like a language," indeed it does. Languages, in fact, since the formations in which I place it, based on my own experience, both in the Caribbean and in Britain, do not correspond exactly to the American situation. It is only at the "chaotic" level of language in general that they are the same. In fact what we find are differences, specificities, within different, even if related, histories.

At different times in my thirty years in England, I have been "hailed" or interpellated as "coloured," "West-Indian," "Negro," "black," "immigrant." Sometimes in the street; sometimes at street corners; sometimes abusively; sometimes in a friendly manner; sometimes ambiguously. (A black friend of mine was disciplined by his political organization for "racism" because, in order to scandalize the white neighborhood in which we both lived as students, he would ride up to my window late at night and, from the middle of the street, shout "Negro!" very loudly to attract my attention!) All of them inscribe me "in place" in a signifying chain which constructs identity through the categories of color, ethnicity, race.

In Jamaica, where I spent my youth and adolescence, I was constantly hailed as "coloured." The way that term was articulated with other terms in the syntaxes of race and ethnicity was such as to produce the meaning, in effect: "not black." The "blacks" were the rest—the vast majority of the people, the ordinary folk. To be "coloured" was to belong to the "mixed" ranks of the brown middle class, a cut above the rest—in aspiration if not in reality. My family attached

great weight to these finely-graded classificatory distinctions and, because of what it signified in terms of distinctions of class, status, race, color, insisted on the inscription. Indeed, they clung to it through thick and thin, like the ultimate ideological lifeline it was. You can imagine how mortified they were to discover that, when I came to England, I was hailed as "coloured" by the natives there precisely because, as far as they could see, I *was* "black," for all practical purposes! The same term, in short, carried quite different connotations because it operated within different "systems of differences and equivalences." It is the position within the different signifying chains which "means," not the literal, fixed correspondence between an isolated term and some denotated position in the color spectrum.

The Caribbean system was organized through the finely graded classification systems of the colonial discourses of race, arranged on an ascending scale up to the ultimate "white" term—the latter always out of reach, the impossible, "absent" term, whose absent-presence structured the whole chain. In the bitter struggle for place and position which characterizes dependent societies, every notch on the scale mattered profoundly. The English system, by contrast, was organized around a simpler binary dichotomy, more appropriate to the colonizing order: "white/not-white." Meaning is not a transparent reflection of the world in language but arises through the differences between the terms and categories, the systems of reference, which classify out the world and allow it to be in this way appropriated into social thought, common sense.

As a concrete lived individual, am I indeed any one of these interpellations? Does any one of them exhaust me? In fact, I "am" not one or another of these

ways of representing me, though I have been all of them at different times and still am some of them to some degree. But, there is no essential, unitary "I"—only the fragmentary, contradictory subject I become. Long after, I encountered "coloured" again, now as it were from the other side, beyond it. I tried to teach my son he was "black" at the same time as he was learning the colors of the spectrum and he kept saying to me that he was "brown." Of course, he was *both*.

Certainly I am from the West Indies—though I've lived my adult life in England. Actually, the relationship between "West-Indian" and "immigrant" is very complex for me. In the 1950s, the two terms were equivalents. Now, the term "West Indian" is very romantic. It connotes reggae, rum-and-coke, shades, mangoes, and all that canned tropical fruit-salad falling out of the coconut trees. This is an idealized "I." (I wish I felt more like that more of the time.) "Immigrant" I also know well. There is nothing remotely romantic about that. It places one so equivocally as *really* belonging *somewhere else*. "And when are you going back home?" Part of Mrs. Thatcher's "alien wedge." Actually I only understood the way this term positioned me relatively late in life—and the "hailing" on that occasion came from an unexpected direction. It was when my mother said to me, on a brief visit home: "I hope they don't mistake you over there for one of those immigrants!" The shock of recognition. I was also on many occasions "spoken" by that other, absent, unspoken term, the one that is never there, the "American" one, undignified even by a capital "N." The "silence" around this term was probably the most eloquent of them all. Positively marked terms "signify" because of their position in relation to what is absent, unmarked,

the unspoken, the unsayable. Meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences. "Fort, da."

Althusser, in a controversial passage in the "Ideological State Apparatuses" essay says that we are "always-already" subjects. Actually Hirst and others contest this. If we are "always-already" subjects, we would have to be born with the structure of recognitions and the means to positioning ourselves with language already formed. Whereas Lacan, from whom Althusser and others draw, uses Freud and Saussure to provide an account of how that structure of recognitions is formed (through the mirror phase and the resolutions of the Oedipus complex, etc.). However, let us leave that objection aside for a moment, since a larger truth about ideology is implied in what Althusser says. We experience ideology as if it emanates freely and spontaneously from within us, as if we were its free subjects, "working by ourselves." Actually, we are spoken by and spoken for, in the ideological discourses which await us even at our birth, into which we are born and find our place. The new born child who still, according to Althusser's reading of Lacan, has to acquire the means of being placed within the law of Culture, is already expected, named, positioned in advance "by the forms of ideology (paternal/maternal/conjugal/fraternal)."

The observation puts me in mind of a related early experience. It is a story frequently retold in my family—with great humor all round, though I never saw the joke; part of our family lore—that when my mother first brought me home from the hospital at my birth, my sister looked into my crib and said, "Where did you get this Coolie baby from?" "Coolies" in Jamaica are East Indians, deriving from the indentured laborers brought into the country after

Abolition to replace the slaves in plantation labor. "Coolie" is, if possible, one rung lower in the discourse of race than "black." This was my sister's way of remarking that, as often happens in the best of mixed families, I had come out a good deal darker-skinned than was average in my family. I hardly know any more whether this really happened or was a manufactured story by my family or even perhaps whether I made it up and have now forgotten when and why. But I felt, then and now, summoned to my "place" by it. From that moment onwards, my place within this system of reference has been problematic. It may help to explain why and how I eventually become what I was first nominated: the "Coolie" of my family, the one who did not fit, the outsider, the one who hung around the street with all the wrong people, and grew up with all those funny ideas. The Other one.

What is *the contradiction* that generates an ideological field of this kind? Is it "the principal contradiction between capital and labor?" This signifying chain was clearly inaugurated at a specific historical moment—the moment of slavery. It is not eternal, or universal. It was the way in which sense was made of the insertion of the enslaved peoples of the coastal kingdoms of West Africa into the social relations of forced labor production in the New World. Leave aside for a moment the vexed question of whether the mode of production in slave societies was "capitalist" or "pre-capitalist" or an articulation of both within the global market. In the early stages of development, for all practical purposes, the racial and the class systems overlapped. They were "systems of equivalence." Racial and ethnic categories continue today to be the forms in which the structures of domination and exploitation are "lived." In that sense, these

discourses do have the function of "reproducing the social relations of production." And yet, in contemporary Caribbean societies, the two systems do *not* perfectly correspond. There are "blacks" at the top of the ladder too, some of them exploiters of other black labor, and some firm friends of Washington's. The world neither divides neatly into its social/natural categories, nor do ideological categories necessarily produce their own "appropriate" modes of consciousness. We are therefore obliged to say that there is a complicated set of articulations between the two systems of discourse. The relationship of equivalences between them is not fixed but has changed historically. Nor is it "determined" by a single cause but rather the result of an "over-determination."

These discourses therefore clearly construct Jamaican society as a field of social difference organized around the categories of race, color and ethnicity. Ideology here has the function of assigning a population into particular classifications organized around these categories. In the articulation between the discourses of class and race-color-ethnicity, (and the displacement effected between them which this makes possible), the latter is constituted as the "dominant" discourse, the categories through which the prevailing forms of consciousness are generated, the terrain within which men and women "move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." (Gramsci, 1971, p. 377), the systems of representation through which the people "live the imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1965/1969, p. 233). This analysis is not an academic one, valuable only for its theoretical and analytic distinctions. The overdetermination of class and race has the most profound consequences—some of them highly contra-

dictory—for the *politics* of Jamaica, and of Jamaican blacks everywhere.

It is possible, then, to examine the field of social relations, in Jamaica and in Britain, in terms of an interdiscursive field generated by at least three different contradictions (class, race, gender), each of which has a different history, a different mode of operation; each divides and classifies the world in different ways. Then it would be necessary, in any specific social formation, to analyze the way in which class, race and gender are articulated with one another to establish particular condensed social positions. Social positions, we may say, are here subject to a "double articulation." They are by definition over-determined. To look at the overlap or "unity" (fusion) between them, that is to say, the ways in which they connote or summon up one another in articulating differences in the ideological field, does not obviate *the particular effects* which each structure has. We can think of political situations in which alliances could be drawn in very different ways, depending on which of the different articulations in play became at that time dominant ones.

Now let us think about this term, "black" within a particular semantic field or ideological formation rather than as a single term: within its chain of connotations. I give just two examples. The first is the chain—black-lazy, spiteful, artful, etc., which flows from the identification of /black/ at a very specific historical moment: the era of slavery. This reminds us that, though the distinction "black/white" that is articulated by this particular chain, is not given simply by the capital-labor contradiction, the social relations characteristic of that specific historical moment are its referent in this particular discursive formation. In the West Indian case, "black," with this connotative resonance,

is a way of representing how the peoples of a distinctive ethnic character were first inserted into the social relations of production. But of course, that chain of connotations is not the only one. An entirely different one is generated within the powerful religious discourses which have so raked the Caribbean: the association of Light with God and the spirit, and of Dark or "blackness" with Hell, the Devil, sin and damnation. When I was a child and I was taken to church by one of my grandmothers, I thought the black minister's appeal to the Almighty, "Lord, lighten our darkness," was a quite specific request for a bit of personal divine assistance.