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Judith Butler and the Althusserian theory of subjection

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> I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' [Note: Hailing as an everyday practice subject to a precise ritual takes a quite 'special' form in the policeman's practice of 'hailing' which concerns the hailing of 'suspects'.]
>
> Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really* him who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'.
>
> Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theatre I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession. There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that 'it really is he' who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of

> individuals as subjects are one and the same thing. (L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," trans. Ben Brewster, in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, 1976, p. 118)

In the original manuscript from which the text of the article "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'Etat (notes pour une recherche)," one of Althusser's most well-known and discussed writings, published in *La Pensée* in June 1970, was extracted, he states, at the beginning of the seventh chapter of this manuscript (titled "On Ideology"):

> The theses I am about to put forward are certainly not off the cuff, but they cannot be sustained and tested, i.e. confirmed or rejected, except by much thorough study and analysis.
>
> I therefore ask both extreme vigilance and extreme indulgence on the part of the reader in the face of the propositions I venture to put forth [**que je vais risquer**] [Editor's note: In the manuscript 'to expose/to confess' is typed over the last word is the phrase].

At the moment of the initial drafting of his text, Althusser had therefore sensed that he had much to draw upon in "exposing/confessing" **[exposant/avouant]** the analytic content that he presented as constituting the outline of a general theory of ideology, a theory which he remarked, in fact bemoaned, was absent in Marx itself, an absence that he proposed to fill. The fact that the term "confess" should have come spontaneously from his pen allowed, in his view, the characterization of his theses' exposition to be taken, perhaps, as a symptom of his consciousness or semi-consciousness of the very personal nature of the undertaking which, by remaining in the background throughout, sustained his thinking, an undertaking that had theoretical meaning and value only if it set in motion a process of discussion that allows its validity and range to be put to the test by confirming or invalidating the results. Althusser, who was accustomed to citing, in the manner of Lenin, the expression which Napoleon Bonaparte used to summarize his conduct on the battlefield, "we engage and then we will see [**on s'engage, et puis on voit**]," thus could have perfectly applied this maxim to his own approach as a theoretician of ideology, who, in order to see, advances by taking risks, by theses, by knowing perfectly well that these theses have value only as hypotheses awaiting a test whose perspective they anticipate. In other words, by his own "confession"—to take up the term which he himself used—his investigation, from which he had at the time delivered only a few extracts under the title "Notes towards an investigation,"

appeared to be of a highly problematic nature, and as a result called for a reading that he characterized as needing to be at once "vigilant" and "indulgent": indulgent with respect to the risky nature of the theses in question, which required the most extreme vigilance, in the sense of a critical attention, regarding the validity of their contents.

It is precisely this type of reading that we find in Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*, whose chapter 4 is titled "'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All': Althusser's Subjection." In reading this section of Butler's book, we realize that she took as seriously as possible Althusser's proposed analyses on the subject of ideological interpellation, devoting to them the kind of attention that they very much call for: namely a critical attention that, in adhering closely to the content of these analyses, attempts to seize from within their hidden logic, with a view to eventually detecting therein indeterminacies and defects of form. Butler even goes so far as to propose applying to Althusser himself the method of "symptomatic reading," whose schema he had elaborated in *Reading Capital*, with the aim of characterizing the particular procedure that attempts to identify, behind what a text says, what it does not say, and of which it consequently constitutes the "symptom," and not a totally developed argument. Of what are Althusser's theses on ideology and the organic link that it fosters with the constitution of the subject the symptom? What is it that they say without saying or explicitly announcing? This is what Butler's reading intends to diagnose, by reconstructing that which, in other terms, one would call their unthought **[impensé]**, that is to say that which allows them to be thought without being thought, at least completely, that is without having been entirely spelled out.

In the following manner, Butler specifies the content of this unthought, as she sees it, by proceeding to an exacting and vigilant reading of Althusser's text: "The present chapter attempts to reread that essay to understand how interpellation is essentially figured through the religious example" (113). And, a bit further along: "The concern here has a more specific textual aim, namely, to show how these figures—examples and analogies—inform and extend conceptualizations, implicating the text in an ideological sanctification of religious authority which it can expose only by reenacting that authority" (114).

In other words, according to Butler, a theory of authority is developed in Althusser's text, one which is marked through-and-through by exploitation of the religious paradigm, which consequently holds, according

to the very plan at the heart of this theory, that to submit oneself to the legal principle of authority, whatever it may be, by subjectively upholding this submission in the terms proposed by ideology, is ultimately the same as responding positively, animated by an unwavering religious conviction, to a call issued by God himself in the absolute, and therefore literally giving oneself up to this call, in a meaning of the verb "to give" **[rendre]** akin to that which it takes in the formulation "to give up ones weapons" **[rendre les armes**], which refers to adopting the posture of the vanquished. Now it is possible that this theoretical exposition in fact does nothing else, and therein would be its own unthought: the re-staging or re-playing (**rejouer)** for its own account, in the manner in which it exploits the religious paradigm of authority, the mechanism that it claims to reveal, and this through a theory of submission to authority that would be in its very principle subjected to this same paradigm, which, in these conditions, it can only reproduce, although it apparently offers to reveal it. What the symptomatic reading aims for is therefore the fact that the theory of the interpellation of the individual as subject would be ultimately only a blind, uncontrolled reprise, by the author of the theory in question, of the mechanism that it is meant to describe objectively, without being in any fashion implicated in it, which is not the case in reality. When, in Althusser's original text, the term "confess" first spilled from his pen in order to designate the manner in which he puts forth his theory (by being conscious of taking a maximum amount of risks), he himself confirms the suspicion of the "confessional regime" that his theoretical analysis ultimately establishes, which supposes the personal implication of the author of the analysis in its contents, by a relationship from which he is incapable of distancing himself. To put it more simply and more brutally, Butler finds Althusser's theory much too "Catholic" in the sense that it is intimately marked by a certain conception of authority, in origin religious, which it has not acknowledged (insofar as in reality it submits to it in a sense very near to that of ideological submission), which disallows it the scientific character that, incidentally, it claims for itself; behind the supposedly general theory of ideology, there would be in fact nothing other than a particular ideology of ideology that identifies at first glance, without the ability to justify or even attempt to justify the general process of ideologization and the production of subjectivity in the particular model of religious inculcation and the representation of authority taken as absolute authority or a call issued by a divine voice that this model establishes.

It is therefore possible that when he writes about the ideological constitution of the subject through the mechanism of interpellation, Althusser ultimately does nothing other than speak of his own constitution as Althusser-subject, as his singular history led him to integrate the principle of submission into authority of a religious type, so that his entire thought would appear as if haunted or possessed to the point of projecting this principle upon the entire field of reality to which he devoted his investigation. However, we must note that the use of a religious paradigm as a means to form an account of the mechanisms of ideology (if this is indeed the goal of Althusser's enterprise, which remains to be confirmed) leads back to a much earlier tradition, a tradition that resurfaces in Marx himself, since his writings arise from the idea that religious consciousness constitutes the archetypal ideological form, which raises the question of knowing if he managed to effectively distance himself from this originary hypothesis thereafter. When, in 1845, Marx envisioned putting the concept of ideology back into circulation in its original form, an approach based upon an unfulfilled moment, since he had left the text of *The German Ideology* incomplete and had declined to publish it, he did so in reappropriating for himself, in his own manner, the schema of reversal that Feuerbach developed in *The Essence of Christianity*, which explains how the human being, in a thoroughly natural, original manner, is constituted as a religious subject through a dispossession of self or an alienation that transforms his essence into the property of a transcendent, divine essence, while this last is in fact only a mirror image, turned over and reversed, of its original nature. At the time Marx, along with other heterodox "Young Hegelians" such as Hess and Engels had been profoundly marked by Feuerbach's analysis, whose model they sought to transpose into the political, then into the economic, without altering its spirit, a spirit expressed in a condensed form by the concept of alienation. And Marx's reflections on the subject reached a turning point when, in his "ad Feuerbach" series of notes whose contents were only released by Engels after his death under the title "Theses on Feuerbach," he realized that it was necessary to finish with Feuerbach's concept of human essence and substitute in its place the concept of "social relations" **[rapports socials]** (gesellschaftliche Verhaltnisse); however, this had not deterred him from later reusing, in the first section of book I of *Capital*, consecrated to "commodity fetishism," the Feuerbachian schema of reversal with the aim of integrating it directly into the analysis of economic reality, which consequently relegated the term, if not the concept, of

"ideology" to the background. Althusser's very first works took it as their goal to assess the actual scope of Feuerbach's influence on the young Marx's inquiries, and it was on the basis of this that he elaborated the concept of "rupture" **[coupure]**. From this, we can conclude that the reflections on ideology within a religious paradigm had, far beyond what is represented in Althusser's work, insofar as its status has occupied Marxism form the time of its emergence, a very large scope: what we must ask ourselves, therefore, is whether the reprise of this paradigm that he himself effects constitutes an original contribution that must be characterized in and of itself and whose value remains to be measured and discussed.

As Judith Butler presents the Althusserian reference to a religious paradigm, it emerges according to her terms from "an ideological sanctification of religious authority" (114) defined by two specific traits: on the one hand, it confers an absolute dimension on ideological submission, which results in the impossibility of ignoring or avoiding the call of "divine" law to which this submission supplies the response that it authoritatively demands; on the other, this response, which thus takes the pure form of obligation, can only, even though Althusser himself addresses this point which manifestly hinders him in his text, be put forward on the basis of guilt **[culpabilite]**, insofar as the ideological subject who, by turning back, reacts under duress to the interpellation that addresses him, from behind, in the legal voice of authority, and determines to do so, or rather is determined to do so, only because he feels himself "called" in the deepest sense, an obligation from which it is absolutely impossible to shrink. What most particularly attracts Butler's attention is that this manner of accounting for the production of the subject-effect, through the response brought upon by the call of law that intervenes in a context such as that of sovereign authority, identifies it as the function of an automatism: if he who lays claim to the status of subject turns back in response to the voice from behind that hails him, and becomes subject precisely in effecting this gesture, that is to say under the condition of having effected it, it is because he cannot do otherwise, insofar as he does not have at his disposal, prior to this response to the call that constitutes his movement of turning back, a real capacity of judgment and reflection that permits him to decide to do it or not; in effect, if he had this possibility of choice, the authority to whom he submits himself would not display an absolute or "divine" and thus unconditional nature: we must resort to the subtleties of a necessary grace in order to master the alternative between liberty and obligation, and in order to explain that the

freely consenting choices of the religious subject can only be effected because they are predetermined. The atmosphere of guilt that accompanies the process of the constitution of the subject therefore expresses nothing other than religious conviction in its principle, a conviction well anchored in the one who responds to the call by turning back, which he is destined to do, and one is tempted to say that he is programmed to adopt this type of behavior, thus coming to occupy a place that is assigned to him at the start, which explains that this behavior can be reduced to the functioning of an automatism acting under duress, without the possibility of a deviation [**écart**], without a gap between the moment when the call is received and that in which a response comes about, a response for which there is no alternative position imaginable, which excludes, on the behalf of the one who turns back, all hesitation, the operation that makes him into a subject, since, in the line of thought traced by Althusser, one is not born a subject, but becomes one, not freely however, but automatically, under the irresistible pressure exercised by the sovereign call of law: from this it follows that to be constrained [**contraint**], to be conscious, and to be subject are one and the same thing expressed in three different ways.

To this way of seeing things, Butler opposes an argument which is, as she puts it, "grammatical" (117). If the subject is such under the condition of having responded on command to an exterior, and consequently transcendental, call, and if, being absolutely unable to do otherwise, he provided this response because he had lived, haunted, by an unshakeable feeling of guilt that pushes him to act precisely in this manner, then at the same time another question is raised, a question that, formulated in grammatical terms, is that of "who": who responded to the call? Who originally felt himself to be guilty? From the perspective adopted by Althusser, it is certainly not the subject himself: he is not conscious of the feeling of guilt of which he is the unfortunate vehicle or the point of application, and he does not exist prior to the response he submits to the call, a response which he does not, properly speaking, authorize, which crucifies him in the deepest sense of his very being. But then, who is this "very being," shot through with a feeling of guilt, who bears a weight for which he himself is not responsible? Or should we say, rather, which is he? what is he? in an effort to focus on that "thing" that is not yet a subject but instead is only "called" to become one, and who effectively becomes one in automatically turning back towards the call issued from the sovereign voice of authority that orders him to come and occupy the position of a subject, a

position to which it had been called, and in some ways requisitioned? Upon examination, the ritualistic formula of interpellation as it is mentioned by Althusser—"Hey! You! Over there!"—reveals itself to be entirely as ambiguous as the sacramental speech which allegedly effects the miraculous operation of transubstantiation over the course of a mass: "This is my body!" In this last affirmation, what exactly does "this" mean? Does it refer to the piece of bread that materially predates the operation to which it lends itself, or is this the result of that, that is to say the mystic body of Christ that the piece of bread ultimately became after the magical pronouncement had been made? And similarly, when the fatal interpellation is thrown forth from behind he who will inevitably turn back because he cannot fail to do so, who or what is this "you" to whom it is addressed? Is it someone or something that existed already before the call, and plays in this case a role analogous to that of the piece of bread, or is it what it became after having responded to the call, an "it" that thus absolutely merits the name of a "him," that is of a subject capable of speaking in his own name, or believing himself to be capable of doing so, as a result of the new dignity that his submission to the law's call has conferred upon him that in some way enthrones the subject? One thing is certain: in the two incriminated phases, "Hey! You! Over there!" and "This is my body!" neither "you" nor "this" have a purely constative weight; in other words neither serves to designate a reality independent of their enunciation, yet they play out performatively in the sense that they represent the action by which "you" and "this" become what the phrases that employ them call them to become, or order them to become, in the absolute. This tends to confirm that with the Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation, we would be plunged into a liturgical type of speculation which tends to align the process of inculcation with that of transubstantiation by exploiting a paradigm that, taken at its source, takes up religion and its astonishing practices.

Bearing in mind this analysis and the type of objections that it produces, one could try, in the first place, to respond by asking if it is reasonable to place absolute trust in the rules of grammar: ultimately, those that do nothing more than reflect or sanction previously taken positions, statements of fact that they cannot possibly account for and upon which, consequently, they are not in a position to cast really new light? Butler herself takes up this type of inquiry, which relativizes the scope of the grammatical argument:

Is it a failing of Althusser not to provide the subject prior to the

> formation of the subject, or does his "failure" indicate only that the grammatical requirements of the narrative work against the account of subject formation that the narrative attempts to provide? To literalize or to ascribe an ontological status to the grammatical requirement of "the subject" is to presume a mimetic relation between grammar and ontology which misses the point, both Althusserian and Lacanian, that the anticipations of grammar are always and only retroactively installed. The grammar that governs the narration of subject formation presumes that the grammatical place for the subject has already been established. In an important sense, then, the grammar that the narrative requires results from the narrative itself. The account of subject formation is thus a double fiction at cross-purposes with itself, repeatedly symptomatizing what resists narration. (124)

What can be found implicitly in discussion here is the thesis, supported by Ricoeur, according to which to be subject is to be in a position to confess in the proper manner, that returns anew to the first model, increasing in importance, of the religious paradigm: in effect, to confess is to account for oneself, which supposes that one should do so before an authority of supreme judgment, whether by confessing one's faults so that they may be pardoned, or by pleading not guilty. But, as Butler justly points out, such an approach is retroactive and non-constitutive: to confess oneself, with a mind to exist as a subject, is in fact to confirm, by responding to an accusation under the form of a plea, and therefore upon the basis of supposed guilt, a preexisting nature that constitutes the veritable subject of the narrative through which it exposes itself, from the perspective of perfect circularity, whose value is justificatory and not at all explicative. Althusser's approach is of an entirely other type, one which, from his point of view, resolutely distances itself from theological reference that, conversely, underlies the entire theory of the subject as defended by Ricoeur. This approach short-circuits the supposed necessity of having to confess, or to make confession in order to exist: in effect, in the scene of interpellation, the only formula that must be pronounced is that of the anonymous call, "Hey! You! Over there!" to which the response, incidentally, is not verbal, since it consists solely of the gesture of turning back extorted by the abusive voice of authority. The only "rhetoric" admitted by Althusser is that of the gesture, which underlines the particularly insistent reference that he makes to Pascal's idea according

to which one need not believe in order to kneel **(s'agenouiller)** because, inversely, it is by completing the gesture of kneeling that one really gives oneself over to belief. The question-answer procedure through which the production of the subject is accomplished therefore does not occur through representations susceptible to being translated with the aid of grammatically correct phrases (otherwise they would risk being inadmissible), but rather relies upon that which Bourdieu calls "practical meaning," that is to say upon modes of behavior inscribed in the materiality of the body that do not posit the intervention of any ideality of spiritual type in order to be efficient. In this context, objections taken from grammar lose all value. If, in such a situation, the question-answer relation assumes the allure of an automatism, it is because it brings into play, as Bourdieu explains as well, not voluntarily reasoned, and as such confessable, choices, but habitus inculcated by a disciplinary path, from which it is consequently impossible to stray, despite what the rule of grammar may say.

To which we ought to add the following remark: does the theory of interpellation as such transgress the rules of grammar? Is it not necessary rather to admit that this theory is based upon other rules that themselves conform to the rules of grammar inasmuch as they make use of such an extensive menu of usages that it cannot be restored to a standard model? Let us return once more to our point of departure: What Butler, for her part, raised as an objection, or at the very least as a surprise, is the conceit, syntactically contestable from her point of view, of formulating phrases without an immediately assignable subject. Yet language normally offers the possibility of composing this type of phrase. In "it rains" **(Il pleut)**, which is certainly not a performative utterance, but rather simply describes an event which is unfortunately much too frequent for the taste of some, "it" designates neither something nor someone; whereas, in another context, for example in the phrase "he cries" (**Il pleure),** which does not display a performative nature either, "he" **(Il)** inarguably represents the person to whom we can attribute the action of shedding tears. "It" (**Il**), in "it rains," acts not under the guise of a personal pronoun, but as a neutral designative: "it rains" aims to say, with a nearly imperceptible nuance, "that rains" (**ça pleut)**, while "that cries" (**ça pleure)**, an implicitly depreciative formulation, would express something entirely other than "he cries," precisely in that it denies to the he or she who cries the authentic status of personhood. We could maintain that the approach followed by Althusser tends to build upon the use of phrases composed in the model of "it rains" or "that rains": the

becoming-subject or subject-to-be **(devenir-sujet)**, such as he is reconstituted by the scene of interpellation, is in some ways the process through which there is that which we call "of the subject" **[du sujet]**, and "of the subject" constituted through-and-through by ideology; in this manner, the production of the subject, or rather we should say the production of the subject in the field of ideology, could be properly conveyed by a phrase like "that becomes of the I"**[ça devient du je**], which gets across the fact that the result of the transformation, namely "of the I" **[du je]** or "an I" **[un je]**, therefore a thing worthy of being counted under the genre "I" [**je**], remains marked throughout by the originally impersonal character of "that" (**ça)** out of which it was formed, and a subject constituted under such conditions will never be the free subject, entirely master of himself, spoken of by idealistic metaphysics, but is instead condemned to remain a "subject-thing" or a "subject-effect," which is to say that thing or that effect produced in the guise of a subject in the framework of the process of interpellation.

This is what Althusser tried to theorize by additionally putting forth the concept of the process without a subject: because the process through which the subject comes to be is, considered in itself, without subject, it would be possible to describe it by using phrases such as "it rains" **[il pleut]** or "that rains" **[ça pleut]**, and this underlines the non-subjective, and consequently objective, character of the phenomenon in question. From this perspective, to become a subject is to be objectified or ideologized, in other words, to be welcomed into the realm of ideology, which is the fate of each child called to transform himself into an adult, according to the lesson that Althusser, along with others, developed in his text on "Freud and Lacan" by proposing a rectified and probably tendentious version of Lacanianism. And to be ideologized is to be socialized, under the authority of a common law that constitutes or "calls" the subject, in the sense that, for example, on the first day of the school year the call is made, as a summons thrown forth that, de facto, addresses itself not to those subjects that are already constituted insofar as it is itself the means by which they are identified as such, as recognized respondents to the call who, once this verification is effected, conform to the proper demands of the label "subject" or the label "student." Understood thus, Althusser's entire effort would have consisted of neutralizing to the maximum the presentation of the process of subjection or the production of the subject, by trying to reestablish with the aid of phrases in which the reference to a grammatical subject finds itself systematically eluded; nonetheless, the fact remains that such phrases must be

grammatically correct. Of the subject, it is necessary to say in proper terms that "it produces itself," in the sense that one says of an event that it produces "itself " **[se]**, by referring "itself " **[se]** not to an alleged author of the event in question, upon which this author exercises complete mastery, but as the result of the process through an intermediary out of which the event produced itself, a process that is, as we have come to call it, a process without an anteriorly assignable subject. From here, the dynamic of subjection finds itself objectified, that is to say properly de-subjectified: it does not depend on the subject in person to become subject, which he achieves only at the close of an operation of which he is not the master, and in regard to it is possible to say that this is effected under constraint, insofar as it leaves no place for initiative coming from the subject himself. According to Althusser, such an approach is that which is most in keeping with a materialist position in philosophy: to neutralize the operation of subjection with a view to objectifying it is to bring to light the fact that it ultimately relies upon material conditions, conditions that produce "of the subject" **[du sujet]** without being themselves dependent upon the pre-existing position of a subject.

This, however, creates a difficulty. Until what point is the neutralizing and objectifying approach of which we have been speaking successful? Does it succeed in completely eliminating the subjective as such from the process of subjection, which it attempts to do by reducing its status to that of a result of this process that only appears at its close, once the process has unfolded in its entirety? Has it not in fact simply displaced the position of the subject, a displacement that leaves intact the constitution of the subject? Is not the process without subject still, in a different form, the process with subject? Exiting through one door, does the subject not return through another?

To respond to these interrogations, let us begin by taking a path other than the one chosen by Butler. We must admit that a phrase composed according to the rules of neutrality leaves vacant the place normally occupied by the subject in phrases where actions relate back to personal pronouns, "I," "you," "he," "us," etc. . . . : in a formula of the same type as "it is produced" or "it produces itself " **[ça se produit]** or "that took place" **[ça a lieu]**, "it" **[ça]** designates a void that the evoked action must fill. But is this void not apparent in reality? Is it not already occupied, filled with something that thus becomes, implicitly, the veritable subject of the operation? Thus this implicit subject, "whatever" **[quel]** it is, failing to be a "who" **[qui]**? Hence that which one offers up, for the process of subjection, to be neutralized, and

as a result objectified, returns to be socialized. But what does it mean to be socialized?

The debate Butler started around the scene of interpellation pushed to the foreground the question of knowing who, in the context of this scene, is called. And it is precisely in the domain opened by this inquiry that we witness the return of something that resembles a subject, firmly planted on both feet, under the auspices of the grand subject "Society," that, through the intermediary of its representative or placeholder "Ideology," ultimately exercises mastery over the process of subjection by exercising total control over the multitude of small, personalized subjects that in the end are nothing other than its products/offspring, its "children" or its "students" that it inventoried in issuing the call. If this is so, the process of subjection rediscovers a subject, that is to say an overseer, who imparts to it its orientation, directs it in a certain sense, contingent on interests that, supposedly, belong to it: this subject would be "the Society," or rather, we would be tempted to say as a pastiche of Lacanian language, the "thesociety" (**lasociete)**. The problem is that this "thesociety" such as it is means the great society-subject, that predates the process of subjection and constitutes the source of the call launched in the framework of the symbolic scene of interpellation, does not exist, except in the name of a fiction that comes to justify the operation a posteriori, once it is effected, but in no way accounts for the effective cause. What exists in reality is a dynamic of socialization that, following the neutralizing logic adopted by the theory of interpellation, must be itself a process without subject, which means that something like the "thesociety" constitutes its end and in no sense its point of departure. But then, what is to be found at the point of departure, or rather at the base of this process? According to Marx's decisive observation, it is that which can be found recorded for the first time in the sixth of his "theses" on Feuerbach, "the ensemble of the social relations" ["das ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhaltnissen", "l 'ensemble (en francais dans le texte original) des rapports sociaux"], that is to say, not that already constituted and indissoluble organic totality that would be the "thesociety", in the singular, but the unstable complex of antagonistic forces, in the plural, whose conflicts, at each instant, make, unmake, and remake that which is nothing but a precarious resultant. From this point of view, he must move away from the great subject "Society" as he moves away from the small personal subject created in its image, that, the both of them, are manufactured in a context of relations of force in which equilibrium is not at

all guaranteed. Consequently, in order to dispose of the religious paradigm and detheologize or desacralize **(desacraliser)** the analysis of social fact in keeping with the spirit that should in principle define a substantive materialist attitude we must renounce once and for all reference to abstract entities which assume a character of absolute right (**droit**), like "society," "law," "authority," "power," and that are at most recurrent fictions, that is to say ideological constructions stripped of material referents in reality, or rather that have material referents in reality other than those that they signal in the first degree.

In light of these reflections, it is possible to return anew to the objection Butler raised according to which the "ideological sanctification of religious authority" impresses its stamp upon the presentation of the scene of interpellation insofar as it confers an absolute dimension upon the call that constitutes the driving force of the scene, which once again brings up the fact that the response to the call appears as the function of an automatism, without the possibility of lag between the question asked and the response it brings. This objection must be taken extremely seriously. Putting forth a theory of subjection that forges an act of submission carried out under constraint in the becoming-subject inevitably raises the question of knowing where this constraint comes from, where it gathers the strength to make itself obeyed without discussion, hence automatically. And yet, if one admits that this constraint comes from nowhere, since no central seat exists that would occupy the stable position from which it would be emitted, one must at the same time recognize that it does not display an absolute character, even if, a posteriori, once its result is obtained, it can ideally represent itself in this manner. In reality, there is no obligation to turn oneself around following the shouted summons "Hey! You! Over there!" and—if we agree to call "one" (**on**) the target of such an interpellation— "one" could just as well turn away from the call. It is at this point that the entirely disciplinary perspective adopted by Bourdieu reaches its limit, insofar as it implies that the response to the call issued by the voice of interpellation should already be entirely presupposed in the question addressed by this voice, which is a prejudice of the sociologist who, in order to safeguard the permanence of his discipline, needs to believe that something like the "thesociety" exists, endowed with authority and power that, in practice, would not be open to being challenged.

The question is thus to know if, in the space opened by the choice between turning back and not doing so, obeying or disobeying, something

can assert itself that would merit the name and the dignity of the free and conscious subject, master of his actions in that he would ultimately decide upon them. Why orient oneself to one side rather than the other? What is it to choose or to decide, and does such an undertaking necessitate a prior position for the subject, determining who decides or chooses? But, would it not be the case that to say that the subject is that which determines the action is precisely to assign to it a cause from which it is impossible to escape, and consequently to restore it to the character of an obligation? In essence, knowing what or who is the cause of the action matters little, the law that claims to make itself obeyed or the person who understands himself as determined in an autonomous manner: what is essential is that the carrying out of the action is ascribed to a causal determinism whose principle can be furnished equally well by the authority of law or by the liberty of a person. The benefit that one might expect from a neutralizing analysis guided by the notion of the process without subject, and we can presently specify that it is without subject or cause, is precisely that it permits one to evade this type of choice, that of the internal and the external as well as that of the subjective and the objective, or moreover that this introduces, on the one hand, the idea that dominates the client's mind in the form of a conscious representation and which is supposed to order his behavior and, on the other hand, his material conduct such as it is carried out in practice and not solely in theory. In reality, in the context delineated by "the ensemble of social relations," the two sides of these different choices communicate and interpenetrate permanently, creating each time circumstantial equilibria liable to be challenged at any moment.

But is it truly a process without subject or cause? Is it such an aleatory dynamic that it would become definitively impossible to return it to reason, that is, to a perspective from which it can be explained? If this is the case, then the thesis of interpellation misses its mark, which is to free up the conditions in which the production of the subject is effected, conditions that can act as if they were stripped of the dimension of necessity that precisely makes them effective, efficient, and effectual conditions. Examining the matter more closely, this is not at all the case: a process without subject or cause is in reality a process that is its own subject for itself and its own cause, insofar as it generates, by reinventing at every moment, at its own risk and expense, the figures of necessity through which it is deployed, unless these figures bear a relation to a prior entity, of the "thesociety [**lasociete**] or "theperson" [**lapersonne**] type that would constitute the *causa proxima* or

remota. From this vantage point, it becomes necessary to address, along with the subject-effect, the society-effect, meaning a dynamic of socialization cannot be restored to an already mapped out structure. Consequently, there is no place for the traditional debate between the two alternative types of society, the closed society and the open society: every effect of socialization takes up at once a logic of closure [**clos**] and a logic of openness [**ouvert**], from which it renegotiates equilibrium at each instant, that is to say, in each conjuncture, without any model of reference other than that of a retroactive guarantee that tends at least partially to mask its true nature. This is the reason why, according to the perspective offered by the conception of a process without subject or cause, the choice between constraint and liberty have with reason, and no more than those who had been evoked before them, been presented in a fixed manner, in the name of a relation of exclusion of the type "either/or" ["**ou bien… ou bien…**"]. The practical behavior of turning back through which the subject is subjected is, following the viewpoint through which one considers it, free as well as constrained, insofar as it obeys at once the two logics that Spinoza calls *agere* and *operari*, two sides of human existence that are not at all exclusive, but that, in some manner, are translations into two different languages: *agere* is to be freely determined to adopt a behavior taking place in the frame of a process without subject or cause; and *operari* is to act under the pressure of rules which cannot be disobeyed. Now all human behavior without exception at once depends upon these two explicative types, whose relation must be restructured at each instance.

But this is not the perspective that Butler adopts in her effort to answer the question of knowing until what point and under what conditions the neutralizing and objectifying approach revealed by the scene of interpellation, attains its declared aims, effectively producing the subject as comprehending everything that could be attributed to the concept of the subject, without the residue that, escaping analysis, would thus constitute its "remainder." What principally attracts her attention is the thematic of culpability that, associated with that of the automatism of the act of turning back, reveals the subordination of the Althusserian theory of subjection to the religious paradigm. As she recalls at the very end of chapter 4 of *The Psychic Life of Power*, "the theological impulse also structures Althusser's work in the figure of the punitive law" (127). The voice that issues the call [**appel**] that the gesture of turning back responds to is not only expected to enforce obedience, and without appeal [**sans appel**], but it also proceeds by a

punitive logic that would not function if it were not based, in part, upon, "that one" ["**celui**"] to whom it is applied, in the form of a feeling or a potential recognition of guilt that gives the scene of interpellation its horizon of expectation [**horizon d'attente**]. This is why the production of the subject, as the declaration of obedience reveals once it is obtained, supposes as prerequisite something like an intention or a desire to obey, unconscious of course, whose origin can only be a "that one" ["**celui**"] or a subject predating the production of the subject: this results in the fact that, in order to really effect this production, there needs to be a subject there already, a subject carrying the motor of guilt that inclines it towards submitting itself to the voice that calls, by adopting an obedient posture that corresponds not solely to the functioning of an automatism because it also consists of the fulfillment of a desire.

Here is how Butler develops this point:

> For the conscience which compels the wayward pedestrian to turn around upon hearing the policeman's address or urges the murderer into the streets in search of the police appears to be driven by a love of the law which can be satisfied only by ritual punishment. To the extent that Althusser gestures toward this analysis, he begins to explain how a subject is formed through the passionate pursuit of the reprimanding recognition of the state. That the subject turns round or rushes toward the law suggests that the subject lives in passionate expectation of the law. Such love is not beyond interpellation; rather, it forms the passionate circle in which the subject becomes ensnared by its own state. (128-9)

First of all, as it is presented here, the turning-back behavior appears to be susceptible to taking two reciprocal forms: if, in the first degree—and it is from here that we have started—it consists of reacting to a voice representing an authority who calls from behind, from the back, it can also, as Butler suggests, come from the subject himself who, without being incited by who or what else, literally turns himself back towards the law, as one turns back spontaneously, driven by a personal impulse, towards an expedient authority from whom one seeks intervention, in the manner of a child who runs and throws himself into the arms of his parents when he feels himself to be in danger. At the beginning of chapter 4 of *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler had already noted, with the aim of bringing to light the personal implication of the singular subject Althusser in his analysis (in

principle objective and impersonal) of the production of the subject, that in the account that he himself had given of Hélène's murder in *The Future Lasts Forever* he instinctively returned to the interpellative scheme by inverting the scenario term by term, which he did by relating "how he rushed into the street calling for the police in order to deliver himself up to the law" (113). But is this connection pertinent? Is this the same Althusser, the same "subject," to whom we can attribute the writing of "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and who is the author of the laborious and on the whole indecent confession that comprises *The Future Lasts Forever*? In writing his "memoirs," which fed a most unhealthy curiosity, Althusser placed himself, in an effort to obtain a particular, certainly morbid type of satisfaction, in the posture of the subject as Ricoeur describes it. Such a subject is he who agrees to be held accountable because he feels at the deepest level of his "self " that he cannot shrink back from the necessity of doing so, and is thus animated by the conviction that he is guilty, not only of having carried out certain reprehensible acts, but quite simply of being who he is or that one whom he is, who must be submitted to judgment because he deserves it in absolute terms, without the possibility of reprieve apart from that which he can eventually attain by confessing, that is, by freeing himself of the burden of his sins by some words, a behavior which, it is undeniable, could not be more religious in principle: because this subject, overburdened in every sense of the word, has been effectively theologized. But was this really the same Althusser, the same Althusser "subject" who had developed the theory of interpellation, and did guilt intervene under the same form in the presentation of this theory, presented, according to its own terms, in the guise of the "confession"? If, that is, we can reasonably ask what leads us to avoid the temptation to read the analysis developed in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" and to measure therein its theoretical range in light of the position of supplication or martyrdom subsequently adopted by someone whose tragic personal circumstances have "brought [him] to his knees" in an entirely other sense than that which Pascalian kneeling [**agenouillement]** evokes, and in doing so led him to carry out an irreparable, unpardonable gesture, that no explanation could ever manage to justify: this is essentially a crucifixion. This is why we should not expect too much from the connection between the two approaches, that of the theoretician who attempts to develop a consistent and coherent analysis, consequently calling for a vigilant reading, and that of the "subject" who confesses in an effort to acquire pardon for a fault, in reality inexpiable, that,

if it condemns him personally, does not however alone suffice as a refutation of the contents of theses formulated in another place by someone who formally bears the same name, but who is perhaps not entirely "the same," as any reader of Pirandello can easily understand.

Let us therefore inquire as to what the thematic of guilt is, not from the point of view of personal fantasies of a "subject" for whom terrible events taking place in an extremely complex context that we will never truly know provide compelling reasons for judging him guilty, but from that which is the work's principle objective, at least as we suppose it to be: the material and impersonal conditions for the production of the subject. The argument Butler advances is that this production would not reach its end if there was not, parallel to the mechanism of interpellation, a desire for law, taking the form of a spontaneous attachment to the principle of authority, which is expressed most directly as the feeling of guilt: to use her own terms, it is this "desire for the law" that "ensnares the subject" in the manner in which one ensnares birds through the use of decoys, which attract them in order to better catch them. And yet, for the subject to be thus "ensnared" it is necessary, it would seem, that he exist in one way or another before falling into the snare that is set for him. This is why, Butler explains,

> According to the logic of conscience, which fully constrains Althusser, the subject's existence cannot be linguistically guaranteed without passionate attachment to the law. This complicity at once conditions and limits the viability of a critical interrogation of the law. One cannot criticize too far the terms by which one's existence is secured.
>
> But if the discursive possibilities for existence exceed the reprimand voiced by the law, would that not lessen the need to confirm one's guilt and embark on a path of conscientiousness as a way to gain a purchase on identity? What are the conditions under which our very sense of linguistic survival depends upon our willingness to turn back upon ourselves, that is, in which attaining recognizable being requires self negation, requires existing as a self-negating being in order to attain and preserve a status as "being" at all? (129-30)

What exactly does Butler mean to say when she asserts that "the logic of conscience [. . .] fully constrains Althusser ? What do we understand as "the logic of conscience"? In order to understand it, we must return to the earlier passage in chapter 4 of *The Psychic Life of Power* which refers to the

conditions in which conscience emerges and succeeds in imposing its own logic:

> For Althusser, the efficacy of ideology consists in part in the formation of conscience, where the notion "conscience" is understood to place restrictions on what is speakable or, more generally, representable. Conscience cannot be conceptualized as a self-restriction, if that relation is construed as a pregiven reflexivity, a turning back upon itself performed by a ready-made subject. Instead, it designates a kind of turning back—a reflexivity—which constitutes the condition of possibility for the subject to form. Reflexivity is constituted through this moment of conscience, this turning back upon oneself, which is simultaneous with a turning toward the law. This self-restriction does not internalize an external law: the model of internalization takes for granted that an "internal" and "external" have already been formed. Instead, this self-restriction is prior to the subject. It constitutes the inaugurating reflexive turn of the subject, enacted in anticipation of the law and hence determined by, having prejudicative foreknowledge of, the law. (114-5)

Let us take up two essential points from this extremely dense analysis. Firstly, in order for the law to successfully impose itself, and therefore obtain the expected response to its call through which the subject is constituted, it is necessary that its call make itself heard as an interior, and not exterior, call; in other words, that it situate itself as the protraction of a need to obey coming from the deepest part of the subject himself: at the very end of the chapter of *The Psychic Life of Power* dedicated to Althusser, Butler invokes along these lines the ethics of the slave as Nietzsche describes it, in the capacity that it corresponds to the fulfillment of a certain will to being. What does the subject who submits himself to the law's call "want"? Simply put, he wants "to be," driven by the obscure premonition that, if he does not give the expected response, he will be cast off into the limbo of non-being, by completely ceasing to be recognized/known ["**reconnu**"]. Secondly, and this point is of course tied to the first, the logic of conscience into which the subject locks himself in order to thus succeed in making himself recognized/known, that is to say in order to attain "being," has in principle a self-restriction, a self-negation: it is as if, in order to evade non-being, the conscious subject reaches the point of resigning himself to be less, by

voluntarily sacrificing a part of himself. This is in some manner the thematic of voluntary servitude that Butler reworks here, and we might wonder if, truly, the slave submits himself voluntarily, and does so because he has a conscience or prescience that he will need one to satisfy an intimate desire that pertains to him personally: in any case, it is not at all certain that this is the same point in question in Althusser's analysis.

That said, there is something in the interpretation of the theory of interpellation proposed by Butler that we must examine: the manner in which it exploits the thematic of conscience. Butler rightly says that this conscience does not intervene in the production of the subject under the form of a preexisting reflexivity, that shapes it into a clear conscience, in other words a conscience entirely on its own: in effect, this last conscience forms itself, in principle, only at the end of the process of which it constitutes one of the results. But then what type of conscience is it? It seems that it would be this sort of "bad" conscience, or conscience of guilt, that is indispensable for the constitution of "good" subjects. This line of thinking highlights a very important, and certainly criticizable and revisable, aspect of Althusser's thesis, which is as follows: if the thesis succeeds in explaining the conditions under which good subjects are formed, such subjects who submit themselves to the call of law because they believe it to be "doing the right thing" **(bien faire)**, it leaves completely aside the question of knowing whether there are only "good" subjects, in the same sense that during times of conscription one was declared "fit for service" **(bon pour le ser vice**), and whether there is not also the possibility, in the same context of the interpellative scene, of the advent of bad subjects, who do not give the right/good/proper (**bonne**) response, like those that Foucault indexed by arranging them under the heading of "infamous men" who had been rejected because they did not fit the conditions required by the call, this point being treated as a given despite the fact that it depends on their will, good or bad. Put otherwise, if the mechanism of interpellation plays out effectively in an automatic manner, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the functioning of this automatism leaves room for error; in other words, from time to time it does not work, or there is a problem, as if the machine breaks down for mysterious reasons that are not necessarily attributable to divine providence. Let us go further: would there not be, in every "good subject," a part of the "bad" subject, who silently resists the pressure exercised upon him by the call of authority? And so, to be subject would be not only to satisfy a desire for legality inscribed in the deepest register of all being, but would

also be to be shared, or even rent, between two temptations straining in opposite directions, one striving to become a good subject, and the other striving to remain a bad one. By raising this hypothesis, it would perhaps be possible to break away from the theological phantasm that, we must admit, is not totally absent from the perspective adopted by Althusser, although we can conceive of its elimination without completely abandoning this perspective.

It is in this sense that we can understand this remark, presented by Butler at the very end of chapter 4 of *The Psychic Life of Power*:

> Under what conditions does a law monopolize the terms of existence in so thorough a way? Or is this a theological fantasy of the law? Is there a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise, without denying our complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would re- quire a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness not to be—a critical desubjectivation — in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems. (130)

In effect, law always has only the power that we concede to it, which tends to relativize, if not to totally negate, the authority that it wields. Thus there would be, in the same space opened by the functioning of authority, a place left vacant in which something like freedom or volition could "play" **[jouer]** in the sense that, as Foucault writes, "one finds the strength to break the rules through the very act of playing along with them."