

## **Althusser, 'What Is Practice?' (Chapter 7) and 'Dominant Ideology and Philosophy' (Chapter 17 and 18): introductory note**

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This selection of chapters from Louis Althusser's *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers* are a short but challenging read. They do however represent a crucial exposition of the philosophical justifications of materialism, and the political stakes that come with defending it.

Chapter 7 provides some of the philosophical grounding for the materialist conception of history: exploring what it means to see, against idealism that the social relations under which people produce their means of subsistence structure all other social relations - in Althusser word's: that the practice of production is 'determinant in the last instance'.

Chapters 17 and 18 demonstrate the stakes of class struggle 'in' the domain of philosophy, showing why being a materialist *matters* politically. Althusser's claim is that idealism has dominated the history of philosophy because of the way it serves the dominant class. The dominant class needs a unified ideology, a coherent set of ideas capable of making the existing order seem natural or inevitable, and philosophy's historical function has been to provide exactly that. Idealism, which locates the driving force of history in ideas as an autonomous force, rather than in class struggle, is perfectly suited to this task.

Materialism, by contrast, produces the kind of scientific knowledge of society that makes it possible to understand, and therefore to change, the structures that reproduce class rule. In short, Althusser is arguing that materialism – because of the kind of knowledge it produces – serves the class struggle of the exploited.

These chapters thus show the stakes of adopting a materialist worldview: that it isn't simply a philosophical preference, but a class-political commitment.