

*Review of*

## *The Gold and the Dross: Althusser for Educators*

by David I. Backer. Boston: Brill Sense, 2019

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David I. Backer introduces the newcomer to the thinking of Louis Althusser with his second original volume—a concise, approachable text that will appeal even to those of us who form the “dross” of academia. In his introduction, Backer humbly mentions that his “longer, more technical manuscript on Althusser’s influence on educational thinking [is] due to be published in 2020” (p. XII), and it might be helpful to think of this book as primer for that one. Backer also suggests that this book be approached as “an activist reading” for “organizers that teach; teachers that organize; campaigners that study; students that campaign” (p. XII).

Throughout the five chapters that follow, it becomes apparent that Backer is indeed speaking directly to those of us who work in and in-between the academy and the wider world of politics, and that the preparatory approach he takes here is a form of pedagogy unto itself. One point of caution regarding this otherwise salutary approach is that Backer does not seem particularly concerned about whether his introduction to Althusser is an intellectual history or a more conceptual introduction. Given his heavy use of personal experience and anecdote, it can sometimes slide into an analogy of the former to explain the latter. What makes this more than bearable and in fact quite enjoyable is Backer’s direct and spotless prose and, as we will see, the fact that following Althusser’s approach makes it difficult to separate history from thought.

One might justly wonder what the importance of Althusser is for educationalists more broadly. In many respects, Backer’s book can be read as a response to this very question, but the legacy of Althusserian thought in educational theory is already fairly well established. Backer does give a slightly different rhetorical impression in this book, but his fresh take on Althusser seems reasonable considering that it is, as we have noted, a precursor to a longer work to come. Scholars orbiting the general interests of “critical pedagogy,” including those trying to move beyond it, have made frequent use of Althusser’s theory of ideology, particularly drawing on his conception of the state apparatus and interpellation. Much like their frequently secular readings of Paulo Freire, these scholars often overlook Althusser’s early work on Marxism and Christianity, and Backer is no exception here, although his reasons are perhaps more justified.

In recognizing the impossibility of extracting Althusser’s thinking from the historical context in which it was thought, as well as from the Marxist scholar’s own personal history, Backer demonstrates

his understanding of one of the central tenets of that thinking. Similarly, Backer's book is best understood against the backdrop of his own situation, which he initially addresses with just three short paragraphs in a brief "Author's Context" section that reads somewhat like a hurried "positionality statement." But ample opportunities to better get to know Backer are interwoven throughout the book, infused with quirky creativity and warm charm. In fact, he does not hesitate to share with us some of his most intimate memories should he sense that he might be able to configure them into some analogy that might help communicate his understanding of Althusser.

The first of Backer's five chapters, titled "A Beginner's Guide to Interpellation," is based on a pamphlet he wrote to introduce key concepts in Althusser's work to teachers. With this audience in mind, he starts by illustrating how interpellation is the process through which ideology recruits subjects, and he does this using familiar references to schooling as well as anecdotes from his own early childhood. For example, he describes "getting in trouble" as a form of interpellation, which essentially constitutes a particular kind of "teachable moment"—later specifying that he is referring to the "completed" teachable moment (p. 4). On the one hand, Backer suggests that interpellation's impact can be "like a slow drip that eventually forms a stalagmite" (p. 4). On the other hand, he elsewhere insists that it is "a moment of forced integration into [a] program" (p. 3), "a gut-wrenching, difficult, unpleasant moment" (p. 8) that makes the soul turn, as commonly happens when one gets in trouble. He then claims that "falling into ideology" is like falling in love, not in that it can be pleasant or enjoyable, but in that it is deeply personal; falling in love, unlike getting in trouble, is not itself an example of interpellation (even if one might suggest that falling in love is actually just another kind of getting in trouble). But when Backer's father gets mad at him over his test results, we wonder if it is really the *test* interpellating him, or if it is his father, and might invite a psychoanalytical interpretation here.

Chapter 1 also introduces a series of short, clever, loosely connected sections addressing interpellation and various other Althusserian concepts—some of which Backer expands on in Chapter 4. One of the sections, only a sentence long, is simply Backer's cheeky parody of a famous line from the 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*; another section illustrates the functioning of interpellation through the intricate, page-long description of a bizarre, imaginary "Interpellation Machine." While they are likely to contribute to the reader's understanding of the different concepts addressed, these bits of Backer's pamphlet for teachers might have benefitted from a little more attention in editing, which would have given the book a more finished feel. Furthermore, beyond the passages Backer includes, citations directing us to source material in the work of Althusser and others (for example, Crenshaw on the topic of intersectionality) are regrettably few and far between. Nevertheless, Backer is generous in providing bold analogies, pairing those passages from Althusser with invocations of grains of sand, a hut, and a play to assist the reader in understanding Marxist ideas about social forces and structures.

In Chapter 2, "The Law of Dislocation," Backer describes Althusser's notion that our knowledge of a thing is a separate thing in and of itself, a concrete-in-thought (object of knowledge) that exists parallel to the concrete-real (real object) about which it is formulated. The thing-in-the-head may pose as the thing-in-the-world that it is about, explains Backer, but the two never actually meet. He illustrates this relationship with continued help from an eclectic collection of welcome similes involving sunsets, snakes, ropes, and a Werner Herzog film, and he emphasizes how Althusser's take marks a critical break from both empiricism and expressivism. Here, Backer also introduces his titular analogy, taken directly from Althusser, of the gold and the dross: the precious element and the messy, worthless layers

of sediment in which it is contained. However, his first go at it risks confusing the reader, as he suggests that Althusser's law of dislocation involves "tak[ing] knowledge out of reality," or "extract[ing] gold from dross" (p. 26). This account inadequately differentiates Althusser's thought from expressivism and empiricism, and appears to contradict the opening epigraph of Backer's book:

To know is not to extract from the impurities and diversity of the real and pure essence contained in the real, as gold is extracted from the dross of sand and dirt in which it is contained. To know is to *produce*... (Althusser, 1990, p. 15; cited in Backer, p. XI)

It is further on that Backer's use of gold and dross as analogy becomes more helpful, as he digs deeper into the philosophies of empiricism and expressivism, and arrives at Althusser's rejection of the concept of human nature as "saying the gold is in the dross" or "locat[ing] an object of knowledge in a real object" (p. 33). Instead, Althusser concludes that "the real object is neither the object of knowledge (expressivism) nor is the object of knowledge there in the real object (empiricism)" (p. 33). The law of dislocation and the gold–dross analogy introduced in this chapter are also interwoven throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 is titled after another of Althusser's laws, "The Law of Uneven Development," which follows from the law of dislocation. Central to this discussion is, first, an understanding of social relations as "a structured mess, ... a balance of forces where some forces are dominant over others, creating tensions and torsions and contradictions" (p. 38), and second, Lenin's realization that changing a political reality requires locating the weakest link in the chain and breaking it—two more concepts that reappear throughout the rest of the book. Backer aptly goes on to explain additional Althusserian theories all based on the notion that any real object is composed of entities that are related in variations that both determine and are determined by the overall balance of forces. To the reader's great benefit, Backer then turns again to a series of clever analogies to help illustrate his understanding—race relations under the Obama presidency, acorns, the New York City subway, cartoon superheroes—before offering some reflections on the law of dislocation and the law of uneven development taken together.

Backer further explores the possibility of finding the weakest link in the chain and shifting the balance of forces in Chapter 4, titled "Theory of Social Formations." He does so by also returning to address in greater depth the ideas of base and superstructure, the concept of economic, ideological, and political regions, and the corresponding forces of production, reproduction, and repression (to which he adds a fourth: ecological force). In addition to his aforementioned hut and theatre, Backer's illustrative examples here include Thanksgiving, a news aggregator website, and his experience buying a home. Backer then skillfully turns to the question of whether freedom is possible in the midst of these forces and relations, concluding that "freedom is a quality of the social structure and not individuals" (p. 64), but that every part of that social structure, including our individual selves, is a contingent formation of complex elements that are always shifting and uneven. He provides a strange, contrived, perhaps unnecessary allegory about two people in a house, before finally arriving at a vital discussion of how to use our understanding of the balance of forces in a social formation in order to change it. Backer tells us that, "in the last instance," the productive force proves decisive, but that this last instance never comes; any change in a social formation requires a combination of at least two forces, and this combination will vary according to the terrain on which these forces are exerted.

Chapter 5 is titled “Conclusion: Ideology, Truth, Science,” and Backer begins with Althusser’s ambivalence between the notion that ideology is inescapable (ideology theory) and the desire to escape ideology and find the truth (ideology critique). Backer effectively resolves this situation by proposing an activist theory of truth, conceiving of truth as correctness, or the capacity to “correctly [name] the conjuncture so that the balance of forces shift” and cause a change in the world of things (p. 73). Whereas imagined relations to real conditions constitute ideology, non-imaginary relations constitute science, and the “sweet science of maneuver” (p. 74) requires, like a boxer (or Lenin, the great social scientist), finding the weakest spot in the balance of forces and striking in a way that will cause the desired change. Althusser’s thinking may have produced a shift in the balance of forces in Marxist philosophy, Backer concludes, but it remains up to us whether it has the same effect in the larger social formation.

The book ends with an afterword by Tyson E. Lewis, “Studying the Dross,” in which he credits Backer for taking Althusser up on his challenge to make Marxism accessible to a wide audience, and praises the pedagogical quality of Backer’s experimental writing style. As Backer explains in Chapter 2, Marx and Althusser both implored us to start with theory, to focus first on the abstract, but Backer has disobeyed. Instead, Lewis defines Backer’s style in terms of the interweaving of “carefully constructed analogies, the formalization of laws, and selected passages” (p. 80); it is “*pure dross*,” it reveals Althusser himself to be Marxist dross, and it claims dross “as a *pedagogical asset*” (p. 79–80). While Lewis alludes to Althusser’s law of dislocation, we might also describe the book in terms of uneven development: longer discussions are contrasted against brief mentions, conceptually dense sections are followed by more easily digestible fare, and some notions receive thorough explanations while others, intentionally or not, leave us wanting more.

Although the book is written in a tone that inspires a high degree of trust and confidence, Backer offers little in terms of his rationale in writing it, beyond his stated hope that “[i]t will ... be useful for thinking deeply about how to unlearn capitalism and learn socialism” (p. XII). We wonder, what exactly brought him to Althusser’s thought in particular, and why does he deem his engagement with this thought relevant enough to our shared ideological–historical moment that it should produce not just this book but also its forthcoming follow-up? If we were to venture a guess, it might be that Backer senses Althusser’s perspective holds some potentially revolutionary insight for the politically conscious, critically minded educator, who is perhaps uniquely positioned to advance truth in such a way as to effectively shift the balance of forces in our society toward socialism.

Overall, *The Gold and the Dross* is a pleasant appetizer that has us looking forward to Backer’s main course on Althusser’s pedagogy later this year—a pedagogy that Lewis identifies as Althusser’s “weakest link.” This is a reader-friendly text that can be used in a variety of ways and formats, from the classroom to the activist reading group. It also has us wondering what Backer’s own pedagogical theory will someday disclose, inspired by Marx and Althusser while continuing his compelling personal story.

## **About the Authors**

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