

LOL OR ISA: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA FUNDS STATE-SPONSORED CAPITALISM

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

An estimated 233 million people use social media in the United States (“The Infinite Dial 2021”). This figure accounts for approximately seventy percent of the U.S. population. For context, in 2005, only five percent of the adult population in the United States used social media. That figure ballooned to approximately fifty percent of the population by 2011, trending upwards until reaching the current staggering statistic (*Demographics* 1). There can be no dispute about the pervasiveness of social media in modern America, it has become a foundational mainstay of American culture as a result of its ubiquitous usage across all ages, races, and classes. Social media beguiles users with promises of connection and community, an assurance made all the more attractive by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. But users who create a Facebook account with the intention of reconnecting with distant relatives or old friends make a tacit agreement with the technology conglomerate, unknowingly signing themselves up to become a cog in the grinding machine of capitalism that is social media advertising. In this essay, I will analyze the way in which social media operates as a specialized system meant to placate the exploited class into subjugation by the ruling class with coercive social media advertising. Louis Althusser, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” defines the titular Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as systems of oppression that operate primarily by ideology and secondarily by repression. ISAs function in service of the State, furthering the dominance of the ruling class over the working class in various economic, political, and social contexts. This essay explicates social media as a modern communications ISA. Social media operates as a modern ISA because it perpetuates capitalism in today’s society through its pervasive advertising. In doing so, social media platforms serve the theoretical State by lining its pockets. Social media has, like everything else, been corrupted by capitalism in that its original goal (enabling users to build connections and create communities) has been subverted in the name of profit – it has become yet another means of commercialization. This essay seeks to expose the danger of social media as a weapon of capitalism using Althusser’s ISAs as the theoretical foundation.

ISAs

Louis Althusser, in defining ISAs, foregrounds the separation of ISAs from the Repressive State Apparatus (also known as the SA) (Leitch 1290). The Repressive State Apparatus, which includes institutions such as “the Government, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.,” functions by violence (1291). That is to say, these are agencies that function by “at some point imposing punishment or privation in order to enforce power” (Felluga 1). Althusser considers these institutions to be united as one common enemy, “it is clear that while there is *one* (Repressive) State Apparatus, there is a *plurality* of Ideological State Apparatuses” (Leitch 1291). As a result of their multiplicity, ISAs are able to penetrate the private sphere of the exploited class in various forms: “the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA, [and] the cultural ISA” are all empirical examples of institutions that permeate the private domain. The most important distinction that Althusser makes between ISAs and the SA is that of their function: “the Repressive State Apparatus functions ‘by violence’, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses *function ‘by ideology’*” (Leitch 1292). Althusser uses two theses to explain his definition of ideology; the first, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” and

the second, "Ideology has a material existence" (Leitch 1301-1302). However, despite this distinction, Althusser acknowledges the "double functioning" of these apparatuses in that ISAs, while operating primarily by ideology, operate secondarily by repression. Conversely, while the SA operates primarily by repression, it functions secondarily by ideology. ISAs encapsulate the ideology of the ruling class and, as Althusser explains, "given the fact that the 'ruling class' in principle holds State power (openly or more often by means of alliances between classes or class fractions), and therefore has at its disposal the (Repressive) State Apparatus, we can accept the fact that this same ruling class is active in the Ideological State Apparatuses insofar as it is ultimately the ruling ideology which is realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses" (1292).

ISAs TODAY

It is necessary at this juncture to address the issue of contemporaneity in Althusser's essay and to define the modern roles of ISAs more clearly in today's society. Louis Althusser, living in 1968 socialist France, was a part of a society actively revolting against capitalism. France was in the throes of a labor revolution that gained overwhelming momentum following a student revolt. Students were campaigning for "changes in student life and more say in the governance of their academic institutions, but in a broader sense, they were protesting capitalism, American imperialism, and Gaullism - the conservative policies and centralized executive power with which President Charles de Gaulle ruled" (Keller 1). It didn't take long for what started as a student revolution to gain widespread support in France, however. The French public was receptive to the students' grievances, particularly young workers, and the student movement transformed into a labor movement that inspired a collective. "France in May 1968 was a society in ferment, and its example inspired a generation of activists and revolutionaries around the world. This was the closest that a core capitalist country had gotten to a revolution in modern times" (Reed 1). Compare Althusser's society's attitudes towards capitalism to modern America's attitudes towards capitalism, and the difference is striking. Americans are unable to resist capitalism in the way that the French did in 1968. One of the reasons is the project of this essay, capitalism is too deeply ingrained (via social media, as one example) in modern society to be resisted by the people - unless we arm ourselves with every revolution's weapon of choice, common knowledge. To that end, it is necessary to reorient Althusser's ISAs in a modern context.

The Ideology represented in social media, for the purposes of this essay, is capitalism. Capitalism realizes the two truths of Althusser's definition of ideology in the following ways: Capitalism is a representation of the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" because it deceives individuals into believing that they are the masters of their own fate when, in reality, individual actions and behaviors are significantly influenced by the ruling class (Leitch 1300). Furthermore, capitalism has a "material existence" because it incentivizes certain performance. Capitalism as an ideology values the free market above all else - trade and industry are controlled by private entities rather than by the State. The hypothetical benefits of capitalism are plenty; it gives power to the people, not to the State, it encourages innovation, and it is better than the alternatives (Pettinger 1). In practice, however, capitalism is a weapon wielded by the ruling class (the ultra-wealthy technology conglomerates, in the case of social media) against the working class (the average social media user) in order to promote production, consumption, and waste. It is this core value that social media instills in its unaware users through pervasive advertising. Furthermore, whereas Althusser identified specific monolithic institutions as representations of the State (the Government, the Police), the modern version of the State is much more aligned with the private sector. The modern State is, in this context, the handful of ultra-wealthy technology conglomerates that monopolize the digital market. That means, in particular, five of the biggest tech companies: Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Alphabet (Google), and Facebook. These companies have amassed an estimated worth of \$8.4 trillion as of 2021 (Wilhelm 1). These companies form the State that the Ideology serves. Finally, the Apparatus. Althusser lists a number of examples of ISAs in his essay, and I would like to draw particular attention to "the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.)" (Leitch 1291). Obviously, Althusser could not have accounted for the rise of social media at the time of his essay's publication, but it is clear in a modern context that social media falls neatly within the bounds of the communications ISA. Thus, we have reoriented Althusser's 20th century

definition of the ISA into the 21st century. With these axioms established, this paper will now critically examine the specific and unique methods of social media advertising utilized by two of the most popular social media platforms, Instagram and TikTok. Identification and analysis of these practices will allow users to better understand the toxic relationship that exists between social media and capitalism. If users can spot the predatory practices of capitalism in their day-to-day routine, which almost certainly includes social media usage, the hope is that they will be able to combat against it through knowledge and resistance. In furtherance of this goal, I will examine Instagram's usage of influencer marketing and TikTok's usage of algorithm advertising in order to clearly demonstrate how social media operates as a modern ISA by promoting capitalism and funding the State.

In order critically to examine the specific methods of advertising used by Instagram and TikTok, it is necessary to establish a basic understanding of the origins of online advertising. In the early 2000s, Google's AdSense was first launched (Platz 1). AdSense used contextual advertising, a form of targeted display advertising that uses the internet activity of users to pre-select personalized advertisements (Shepard 1). AdSense provided users with "more relevant" advertisement and provided companies with invaluable knowledge about consumer purchasing practices (Platz 1). At its outset, this was hailed as a win for both parties – users would no longer be bothered with irrelevant advertising (a young woman using Facebook would no longer see advertisements for Viagra, for example) and companies would be better suited to serve their customers based on the knowledge AdSense provided. However, I challenge the notion that the development of AdSense was ever a boon for users. Companies harvest "four or five thousand data points on every individual" according to former CEO of Cambridge Analytica, Alexander Nix (Cheshire 1). In return, internet users receive more advertising and the eerie feeling of being watched by Big Brother. The idea that targeted advertising was ever going to be beneficial for users is another lie perpetuated by the ruling class (tech conglomerates) in order to deceive the working class. "We're stealing your data and invading your privacy *for you*, dear user" seems to be the unspoken assertion here.

SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND PERSONAL DATA

The next step in the State's profit-driven advertisement journey was surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism is defined as a "market-driven process where the commodity for sale is your personal data, and the capture and production of this data relies on mass surveillance of the internet" (Holloway 1). Surveillance capitalism is what happens when the State's avarice remains unchecked. Surveillance capitalism was society's first warning signs that social media was beginning to morph into something manipulative and greedy. It would take some time for data privacy policies to be addressed in the legislature, and the first steps towards curtailing these invasive practices were made in 2018 with Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (Platz 1). This new wave of data protection required companies, who were likely fearing litigation, to protect their uses by limiting (or banning) cross-site tracking and third-party cookies (Platz 1). With these new shields in place, platforms relying on surveillance capitalism had to find new avenues of data collection and, thereby, profit. These new avenues materialized in the form of influencers and algorithms. Instagram has become famous for its influencers, privileged social media users who have amassed enough "influence" within their audience to wield some kind of purchasing power amongst their community. Influencers are paid to recommend products, and their audience oftentimes responds by purchasing that product *en masse*. TikTok uses algorithmic advertising, which would also seem at first glance to be the more private relative of contextual advertising since algorithm advertising uses anonymous statistics and figures, and not personalized data, in order to match users with specific advertisements (Kant 1). Both of these strategies, while not appearing as overtly predatory as surveillance capitalism, are merely sanitized reiterations of the same idea – social media users are pawns to be manipulated in the market, and tech conglomerates are always finding new ways to victimize their users.

Social media influencers (SMIs) are "everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles" (Abidin 1). SMIs have been recognized by brands as an invaluable source of advertising because of the "cultural capital" they accumulate amongst their mass audience (Audrezet 1).

Thus, influencer marketing is defined as “promoting brands through use of specific key individuals who exert influence over potential buyers” (Audrezet 1). Influencer marketing is utilized by nearly all social media platforms but is the most prevalent on Instagram. In 2019, Instagram was ranked as the number one most strategically important social media channel for influencer marketing (*How to choose* 1). Since then, Instagram’s dominance in influencer marketing has been challenged by the rise of TikTok, but it has remained one of the most “strategically important” influencer marketing apps alongside TikTok and YouTube (Geysler 1). Influencers act as agents of the social media ISA by promoting capitalism with an added layer of intimacy. An influencer’s audience trusts them, so any recommendations made by the influencer hold a certain kind of weight or, as it was previously described, “cultural capital” (Audrie 1). Thus, when influencers coerce their fanbase into purchasing the latest product they’ve been paid to promote, they are inadvertently advancing the plot of capitalism as agents of the modern social media ISA.

TikTok’s algorithm is a “recommendation system that determines which videos will appear on [user’s] For You page” (Geysler, *How the TikTok* 1). TikTok’s For You page is a curated collection of content specifically tailored to the user’s preferences based on the user’s past behavior on the app (Geysler, *How to feature* 1). The algorithm’s goal is to keep users ensnared in an endless loop of content, prolonging their exposure to advertisements. Advertisers use the algorithm to their advantage by seamlessly integrating their advertising content with the other content of a user’s curated For You page. Posts by companies are nearly indistinguishable from posts by the average user, except for the small “sponsored” tag located at the bottom of the screen (Epstein 1). The algorithm enables TikTok advertisers to subvert users with a near constant stream of advertisement, but its “scrollable, skippable, interactive ad format” has prevented TikTok’s advertising policies from being critically scrutinized because the app remains a “positive experience for users independent of any algorithm. Thus far, ads have not been an impediment to growth—they’re the reason it’s been able to grow in the first place” (Epstein 1). TikTok is an example of the way social media operates as an ISA because its endless loop of advertisement supports capitalism by coercing users into purchasing whatever newest product the algorithm has decided to promote.

CONCLUSION

This essay has examined the ways in which social media can act as an Ideological State Apparatus. Louis Althusser, the father of such terminology, defines ISAs as systems of oppression that operate primarily by ideology and secondarily by repression (Leitch 1291). Social media is a modern ISA because it promotes the ideology of capitalism, keeping the exploited class ensnared in a never-ending cycle of production, consumption, and waste. Capitalism also serves the State, which in this context is to mean the handful of ultra-wealthy technology conglomerates that monopolize the market of social media. Companies like Facebook and Google make an exorbitant profit from social media advertising, and the coercive and manipulative practices of social media advertising make these capitalistic practices all the more heinous. Since the fall of surveillance capitalism, which was criticized for its invasive privacy violations, the State has had to find new avenues of social media advertising in order to continue the indoctrination of users. These new avenues arrive in the form of influencers (seen most commonly on the popular platform Instagram) and algorithm advertising (seen most commonly on TikTok). No matter how the ISA changes its outward appearance, its function remains the same – it coerces social media users into believing they are acting of their own free will, participating in the free market as capitalism is meant to enable us all to do, when in actuality users are only making the State wealthier. Acknowledgement and understanding of these predatory advertising practices is key to resisting such efforts. Social media users, in order to free themselves from the repression of the social media ISA, must recognize their role in the machine of capitalism and, in doing so, reclaim their power.

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