

# PH995-20 Topics in Continental Philosophy

**20/21**

**Department**

Philosophy

**Level**

Taught Postgraduate Level

**Module leader**

Miguel Beistegui

**Credit value**

20

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

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## Description

### Introductory description

There is now an established tradition bringing Marx and Spinoza together. This module draws on that tradition, and contributes to it by focusing on Marx's concept of ideology and Spinoza's concept of superstition. Each can be read as supplementing the other. The module will also explore the ways in which philosophy becomes critique by confronting and overcoming the obstacles of ideology and superstition. The figure that will allow us to articulate this dynamic is L. Althusser.

### Module aims

The general aim of this module is to bring together Marx and Spinoza on ideology and superstition, via a close reading of Althusser's 1970 essay on Ideological State Apparatuses. The more specific aim of the module is to reveal and analyse the irreducible role of ideology and superstition in state structures, whatever their orientation. This irreducibility is a function of the imagination – of imaginary projections and identifications – as a constitutive feature of what Spinoza calls the multitude. The third and most fundamental aim of the module is to develop a critique of superstition as an obstacle to thought, but one that can never be entirely fulfilled.

Initially, the module will focus on Marx's critique of commodity fetishism and test the hypothesis that the "rationality" of capitalism rests on a superstition regarding the value of commodities, and

money in particular. Superstition, therefore, is not simply a matter of ideology as superstructure, but is embedded in the materiality of social relations.

The module will then question Marx's assumption that, through the critique of political economy, the awakening of class-consciousness, and ultimately the proletariat's control of the state apparatus, ideology and fetishism would eventually vanish. This will be done by turning to Althusser's essay, which transforms Marx's concept of ideology through the question of the reproduction of the capitalist conditions of production, and of labour in particular. To be sure, Marx had a point when he claimed that wages are indispensable to the reconstitution of the labour-power of the wage earner, and also indispensable for raising and educating the children in whom proletarians reproduce themselves as labour-power. But is that the only and whole answer? Althusser does not believe that it is, and his idea of the "ideological state apparatus" (ISA) is his attempt to supplement Marx's answer.

This original concept, Althusser admits, owes much to Spinoza, and to his conception of superstition in particular. In order to command obedience, the state does not rely solely, or even primarily, on repression, intimidation, and coercion. It relies primarily on a form of soft power that draws on the imagination and a range of positive affects.

The module will therefore end by drawing on Spinoza's own ambiguous assessment of superstition in the Theological-Political Treatise. Superstition, he claims, has its roots in the hope or fear we feel in the absence of certainty. As such, it is irrational and a threat to thought as a condition of our freedom. At the same time, Spinoza recognises that "nothing governs the multitude more effectively than superstition."

Is superstition, then, a necessary mechanism for obedience as well as an obstacle to thought? Should the democratic state include, yet also limit, the power of superstition?

## **Outline syllabus**

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Marx on ideology

Week 3: Marx on the fetishism of commodities

Week 4: Marx on the fetishism of money and interest-bearing capital

Week 5: Althusser on Marx

Week 7: Althusser on Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)

Week 8: Spinoza on Superstition

Week 9: Spinoza on the creation of the Hebrew State

Week 10: Conclusion

## **Learning outcomes**

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Students should have a sound and incisive understanding and knowledge of Marx's concept of ideology and his critique of commodity and monetary fetishism.
- Students should have a sound and incisive understanding and knowledge of Spinoza's

concept of superstition, and the role it plays in his political philosophy.

- Students should have a sound and incisive understanding and knowledge of Althusser's concept of "ideological state apparatus", and its Marxist and Spinozist roots.

## **Indicative reading list**

L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," translated by Ben Brewster, in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127-186. Now also reproduced in L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014), 232-272.  
L. Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza," translated by Ted Stolze, in Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (eds.), *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997).

K. Marx (all references also available from marxists.org):

K. Marx, *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841)

K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology* ("The Materialist Conception and Critique of the World").

K. Marx, *Early Writings*, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992).

K. Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976). Part One, Chapter 1, iv. ("The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof").

K. Marx, *Capital: Volume III*, translated by David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review). Part Five, chapter XV, III ("The fetishism of interest-bearing capital").

K. Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, otherwise known as *Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. (London : Penguin, 1973). Part One, Chapter 1.

B. de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, translated by Michael Silverstone and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Secondary reading:

Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

B. de Spinoza, *Ethics*, translated by Edwin Curley in *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)

B. de Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, translated by R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005)

## **Subject specific skills**

Students will acquire an in-depth understanding of philosophy as critique.

Students will strengthen their ability to engage with complex material, analyse and synthesise it.

Students will strengthen their ability critically to assess complex material, and our current economic and political situation.

## **Transferable skills**

Analytical skills, critical skill, writing skills, presentation skills.

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## Study

### Study time

Type	Required
Seminars	9 sessions of 2 hours (100%)
Total	18 hours

### Private study description

No private study requirements defined for this module.

### Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

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## Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

### Assessment group A1

	Weighting	Study time
5000 word essay	100%	

### Feedback on assessment

Written feedback provided on essays.

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## Availability

### Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 1 of TPHA-V7P2 Postgraduate Taught Continental Philosophy
- Year 1 of TPHA-V7PL Postgraduate Taught Philosophy
- Year 1 of TPHA-V7PN Postgraduate Taught Philosophy and the Arts