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Subject / Subjectification

For a long time, only fragments and sketches were available on the formation of the subject of European modernity in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, since the human sciences presupposed a *universal subject*. The philosopher Michel Foucault was one of the first to propose clarifying how the subject is "constituted within history", a subject that "is always re-established by history." (Foucault 2002: 672) In the meantime, there is at least approximate agreement on some basic features of the history of the subject in Western modernity.

Subject Formation in Early Modernity

The formation of the modern subject or, more precisely, of patterns of 'subjection' (Haug 1987) in Western Europe and North America took place through social, political, scientific, manual, technical and other practices and orders of knowledge, as well as through physical and psychological changes in corporeality and affects and emotions. The beginnings can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries), when the investigation (*enquête*) and study of ancient writings for the purpose of self-education began. In the following centuries of the European Enlightenment (17th and 18th centuries), this knowledge expanded and changed practically and theoretically through education and work, religions, spiritual movements and human-scientific research.

Wherever possible, women and men liberated themselves from the limitations of their agency: through the development of tools, machines, techniques and scientific knowledge, some of which related to the bodily existence and the thinking, feeling and acting of human beings. (Gehlen 1962/2004) Urban citizens increasingly brought their children up and educated them more intentionally. Celibate men and women in monasteries felt obliged to develop their abilities and talents and to control the way they lived their lives.

The subject, which had only been standardized as heterosexual since the 18th century, set itself apart from the playful, permissive, courtly and aristocratic gender culture of the early modern period. A "heterosexual matrix" was formed that set new limits to the growing autonomy of action and interpretation (Butler 1990; Butler 2009). Possessive and educated citizens (men) followed the ideal of investing in a planned manner, and they did not want to endanger what they had already achieved through whims and passions, drugs or violence. They

sought to nurture and accumulate what they had inherited and acquired in order to bequeath it to children or grandchildren. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) developed a morality orienting the sexes and their relationship in marriage, parenthood and the duties of children. The secular landlords' alliance with the authorities of these confessions legitimized patriarchal regimes and supported them through their own paternalism. Domestic patriarchy and confessional and secular paternalism, soon also the paternalism of the medical profession and doctors, supported and legitimized each other.

Single women had only a few alternatives: entry into a convent, the socially recognized role of hetaera at court or prostitution, often in the troop of the early modern armies. In urban communities, the widows of craftsmen and merchants enjoyed some privileges. They took over the interim management of the house or even the business. This was granted to them in a patriarchal world in order to ultimately pass on the craft or trade business to a male heir.

The culturally hegemonic subject model was male gender, the female was considered inferior, the "other" or "second" gender. (de Beauvoir, 1949/1968) Both subject models envisaged both the self-subjugation of the male and female through self-disciplining and self-education, and the proactive subjugation of the female and children to the hegemony of the male as head of the household or aristocratic lord. The upbringing of children largely followed this gender model. The dichotomously gendered ideal form of the male and female subject was realized anew in practice and gained the appearance of normality and naturalness primarily in the performance of everyday life. Alongside religions, literature and theatre provided life models and discourses; permanent self-monitoring became more important than ever.

The early modern concept of heterosexual 'romantic' love of the couple sprang from the pens of European literati as well as from the speeches, advice and decisions of confessional preachers, pastors and missionaries around 1800. (Sieder 2010a, Sieder 2010b) They declared love to be the duty of the couple and parenthood to be the very purpose of bodily mating. Wives were very often much younger than their husbands, and this enforced their subjugation under the patriarchal rule of the husband. If they broke away from the regime of petty bourgeois and middle-class marriage and from the order of the house, they were disowned, fell ill and often died before their time. *Self-subjugation and emancipation* (fr. assujettissement, Eribon 2017, 38) in the European bourgeoisie was not only ideologically and religiously based. It also followed *purpose rationality* (Max Weber) in all economic and political matters. Reflected and legitimized purposes took the place, or at least the side, of emotions and affects, habits, religious beliefs and morality. The *process of rationalization* took hold of capitalist labor relations and reproductive relations and practices in households and families, but thus also of the subjective experience, feeling and thinking of every individual in almost every situation in life.

The fact that the bourgeois and noble subjects formed themselves in a long-lasting and multiple 'process of civilization' (Elias, 1939/1976, vol. I) primarily through their socioeconomic and political domination and cultural hegemony, as well as business and everyday life, furthered and shaped the process of subject formation within the elites of early European modernity.

Crisis and Decay of the Bourgeois Subject-Form in High Modernity

The crisis and decline of the classical bourgeois subject began in the late 19th century, at the beginning of High Modernism. This socio-cultural mode of capitalist life differed from early modernism in the increased use of the human sciences, new technologies of production and a high modern state that began to administer people and subjugate their lifestyles to social and health policy control. Around 1890, authoritative theories, primarily of psychiatry, pediatrics and pedagogy, had been formulated for this purpose.

In the 1910s and 1920s, avant-garde movements were betting on the ability to surmount the binary gender model. Political elites, such as those of the social democracy, relied on the replacement of women's subordination to patriarchy through their participation in politics, society and culture. Reform concepts also concerned the ideals of gendered corporeality.

The binary modern subject model suffered a second, even more momentous collapse in terms of its far-reaching validity. The acceleration and multiplication of the movement of people and goods took advantage of a more elastic shaping of gender roles and self-designs (Gramsci 1934/1999). The ever more rapid change of fashions and the increased disruptions in civil life (e.g. through the First World War or the world economic crisis in the years 1929-1933) demanded a reinvention and restaging of the male and female subject in many aspects.

Freudian psychoanalysis discussed the lack of fit of the old model in the diagnosis of female hysteria, among others. But it also brought to light dreams and longings that clearly transcended classical bourgeois norms and ideals. The process of self-reform was also supported by new cultural techniques such as photography or cinema. Art and the culture industry, political movements, governments and human sciences cooperating with them guided the self-designs, self-observations and autobiographical self-thematizations.

Finally, the severe economic and cultural crisis of high modernity in the late 1910s and 1920ies caused political upheavals: The monarchical empires crumbled and with them the old authorities. From their demise a new world emerged with contrasting features: Democratic republics emerged before and alongside fascist and Nazi regimes. The reactionary regimes staged a renewed parade of the classical, bourgeois-modern gender stereotypes in new garments. After the great confusion of the gender order in the years of the First

World War and after, the democratic as well as the reactionary or fascist movements and parties restored the patriarchal, authoritarian and paternalistic male model. For the young, single women, they designed (for example in Red Vienna) a network of medicalized control in which doctors, psychologists, lawyers and welfare workers were primarily concerned with their corporeality, their fertility and the quality of their motherhood. In this way, a highly modern, medicalized ideal image of the woman emerged: chaste, hard-working, willing to make sacrifices, sexually faithful, efficient in the household, strict with her children and servants.

After the catastrophic end of the authoritarian, dictatorial and fascist regimes and in view of their crimes, the authoritarian and also the fascist, bipolar gender model seemed permanently discredited. But a few decades later, in the 1990s, it reappeared in some new nationalist wars and conflicts (for example in the Balkans). In parts of Europe, it has always been popular in right-wing extremist milieus.

In the Long Transition to Late Modernity: Decentering the Subject Model

In the mid-1950s, the Fordist consumer subject entered the market in Western and Central Europe with some delay compared to the USA. It consumed what it mass-produced and traded itself, and developed a partially new morality that was determined above all by the claim to consumption and enjoyment with a still valid self-commitment to performance and discipline. As early as the 1920s, and again much more strongly from the mid-1950s, the 'fordized' (i.e. adapted to the Fordistic producer-consumer-market) female subject was trained and instructed primarily in the 'fordized' household and nuclear family. (Gramsci 1934/1999)

When males and females became able to operate the first NC machines in factories and read computer-generated spreadsheets in the offices of industrial and commercial companies, in banks and shops, and soon also operated at home on their PCs, it was clear that human subjects once again tied themselves to machines and technologies in a new way: the male and the female body became an interface to the techno-world.

This also drove the educational expansion beginning in the 1970s. Girls and women drew level with boys and men in terms of education policy and overtook them in the number of degrees of certified higher education by the end of the 1970s. This, however, did little or nothing to change the unequal opportunities in the labor market and the disadvantage of women. In each of the recurrent major economic crises, the income gap between men and women widened.

A side effect was and still is that men feel disempowered by the education and training of both sexes, or as unemployed often also feel powerless and compete with successfully employed women. Gainful employment and consumption determine the market value and the reputation of the efficient, self-disciplined man and woman much

more than in the high modern age. This is probably also a subject-side reason why the Fordist consumption of goods and services has become even more distinctive (socially differentiating): it determines the self-value and ego model of many people (women and men, even adolescents and children).

But even so, the power difference between the sexes does not disappear. When the second or new women's movement initiated a gender-political discourse from the mid-1970s onwards, demanding equal rights for men and women in education, training, work and consumption, it simultaneously demanded the self-commitment of both sexes to professional performance *and* reproductive performance in the household. This changes something about the manners, but little about the objective difference in power.

The political postulate of the left and the liberals to introduce a "gender democracy" provides, among other things, for the category of 'partnership' for primary and private relations. But this private partnership, similar to the social partnership of entrepreneurs and workers, remains a partnership of unequally powerful partners. The power difference, which is culturally, practically and economically based and performed day by day, does not allow for an egalitarian partnership as the normal case. This is true for all sexual orientations, for all constellations of the household and family life: for the nuclear family, the single parent, the patchwork, living apart together, and others. (Sieder 2008, Sieder 2010b)

The economic system of so-called neoliberalism, i.e. the ideology of the post-Fordist mode of production, which became globally accepted around the mid-1980s, loosens or dilutes the subject's ties to a life profession and to ancestral societies (family, company, party, trade union, association, religious community, etc.). Patriarchal and paternalistic features in family, professional and working life and in politics do not disappear. Rather, men and women participate simultaneously in increasingly diverse and even contradictory 'constituted' life worlds. They can no longer manage with a single shape or form of their subjectivity (subject-form). They change their self-form according to place, time and opportunity, thus also their habitus. *Polyphrenia* is the psychological term for a subject-form, described as a high-functioning, multi-leveled consciousness that is well-organized and synergistic. (Gergen 1996) At the same time and inevitably, the identification with places, institutions and persons tends to weaken. In all areas of everyday life, more role distance and an increased tolerance of ambiguity are required. (Krappmann 1969/2005)

In late modernity, short-term, playful-experimental, high-risk strategies whose effects cannot always be predicted characterize the subject. They cause recurring crashes in careers, but also changes of job and location, which are not always well compatible with private relationships and ties.

The tendency towards self-aestheticization, which tends to intensify with the increased demand for marketability, leads to the *juvenalization* of adults and to new body techniques – from fitness to

wellness to cosmetic surgery. Even the aesthetics of the intimate private relationship (hetero- and homosexual) is becoming transitory. The classic modern model of romantic love is also pluralizing. (Sieder 2008, Sieder 2010a) A growing variety of hetero- and homosexual love can be experienced. This is connected with the separability of marriages, with clandestine intimate relations and polyamory. These new ways of organizing intimate relations certainly provide a higher level of autonomy in shaping one's life, but at the same time they strengthen the work-moral mandate to keep oneself physically, psychologically and sexually fit into old age.

The subject of late western modernity is constituted more frequently by changing relationships. Personal identity, which still is bond to intimate relationship, becomes precarious and de- and re-stabilized in shorter cycles. The late modern subject is no longer called upon to remain the same, but to change and adapt again and again, to learn new patterns of behavior and to reinvent oneself from time to time in various respects (aesthetically, morally, socially, economically).

Three main contributions of the social and cultural sciences to the constitution of the subject in Western modernity

Social and cultural sciences do not only describe and discuss the changes in subject formation from a distance. They were and are intellectual *productive forces* in the processes outlined earlier.

The subject philosophy of early modernity proclaimed the *autonomy of the subject*. The subject seemed to have its basis in itself. In the thoroughly critical, bourgeois confrontation with Christian and other theologies and with the outlook on life models of aristocratic clans and networks, it became the first instance of bourgeois thought and action in private life, in economy and politics.

The subject philosophy of early modernism continued to have an impact into the 20th century, thus also shaping high modernism and late modernism and their basic concept of the indivisible *individual* responsible for himself and emancipated himself from authorities and dependence no longer necessary. This was central in the grand narrative of Western modernity in the various philosophical concepts of Kant, Hegel, Engels, Marx and others.

Philosophical criticism of this began not earlier than in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1960s and 1970s the structuralist critic of the classic model proceeded (Lacan). The post-structuralists (like Bourdieu or Giddens) criticized the structuralists' claiming of "the death of the subject" and formulated more complex models of the *interacting self* that co-creates the social world. However, the subject was no longer considered the master (sic!) of its own house. It seemed *split, manipulated, decentered*. Sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists made clear, what is up to now considered a basic insight of human sciences: The human subject of all epochs can only think and speak, communicate and exist socially and culturally in the system of *langue*. The limits of language (more precisely: langue and

parole, according to Saussure's bilateral linguistic distinction) are the limits of thought and of subjectively perceived being. This argument became further evolved and differentiated by Ludwig Wittgenstein (2003), Charles Sanders Peirce (1967) and others.

G.-H. Meads (1934/1968) groundbreaking studies on Symbolic interactionism almost popularized an insight, fundamental for late modernity: Man acts according to 'his' self-imposed meanings. These meanings, however, must be interpreted by him in interaction and communication with others. (Blumer 1969/1973) These premises, however, are limited to the world of human subjects, to the social world. It was a big misunderstanding by reading postmodern theory second hand, and stating, that the postmodern condition of knowledge (Lyotard 1982/1994) was undermining, even destroying sciences and politics. This was neither the aim nor an unintended effect of Lyotard's writing, but the reactionary and clearly anti-intellectual strategy of the exponents of 'Trumpism' in the US, in Hungary and elsewhere.

The post-structuralist sociology of culture (*Kultursoziologie*) of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s reacted increasingly critical to early or classical structuralism and focused the position and situation of the subject in society, determined by its accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital or resources in every field in which the subject is interacting, interpreting and speaking. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996) Discourse theory (Foucault 1972/1974/1991) was and is clearly less anti-humanistic than early structuralism, although it becomes reductionist, when it denies material, mechanical or biologic forces operating outside discourses. Its great achievement, however, is certainly the insight that people in their everyday discourses as well as in scientific and professional discourses say what can and cannot be said at a given time in a given social setting.

After all, the subject is assumed that is not free to speak, but able and even forced to interact and perform by speaking (Foucault 1972/1974). Thus every human being co-creates social reality. After the post-structuralist turn starting in the 1970s, it seems important again *how* the subject thinks, feels, acts and speaks in its respective socio-cultural and socio-economic condition. But also that it can *contradict* the prevailing power relations under favourable conditions. (Foucault 1991; Irigaray 1974/1980)

In the current crisis of late modern democracies, it seems almost challenging to recognize the subject as a *political* subject and as an political actor, participating in political processes and decision-making and that it is not only subjugated to them. (Laclau 1996/2002; Laclau & Mouffe 1985/2001)

In summary, after this cursory sketch, three main ways of constructing the subject respectively the process of subjection in Western modernity by human sciences can be distinguished:

- a) *Decentering the subject by the 'classical' social sciences*: In the thinking of the sociological classics of the 19th and 20th centuries (Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Parsons and others), the subject stood *opposite* society and was forced to recognize

hegemonic values, norms and meanings. The premise was that the subject was not "free" (in the sense of classical subject philosophy, see above) but *socially determined*. Therefore, until Lyotard's thesis of the end of grand narratives (fr. *grands récits*) and the turn to a *postmodern condition of knowledge* (Lyotard 1982/1994), the social sciences played a decisive role in the grand narrative of the emancipation of the human subject. This took place by discussing the basic competence of human beings to communicate and of discourse ethics (Habermas 1983) as well as processes of autonomization and individualization, affecting the human subject's stance and social power (Honneth 1994).

- b) *Decentering the subject by 'understanding' social sciences:* Phenomenological philosophers, sociologists and social or cultural anthropologists (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1966, Schütz 1932/1974; Luckmann 1980, Geertz 1973/2003) were the first to contradict the opposition of subject and society in the social and cultural sciences. In the variety of post-structuralist ways of thinking, the subject does not act apart from society, but is considered a social and reflexive, albeit imperfect co-constructor of society. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1996; Giddens 1984/1988)
 Through the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism, this subject is seen as being disembedded from powerful traditions of modernity and has since been condemned to make its own interpretations and orientations of action, however with growing dependence on the high and late modern state, on mass media and communal systems (Giddens 1984/1988). This is described as the dialectical two-facedness of the individualization of the subject or actor with higher agency but also with "risky freedoms". (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1994)
- c) *Decentering the subject in the 'new' cultural sciences:* As far as I can see, the human sciences designated in this way have not yet produced their own subject theories, but they do receive those of the classical and the 'qualitative' or 'understanding' social sciences (see above) in order to base a multidisciplinary cultural studies program on them: Their specific questions are: "In what social practices and technologies of the self does the individual draw a 'reflexive habitus' into him or herself (e.g. routines of professional or private self-inquiry)? What is the cultural 'other' of the reflexive subject (...)? To what extent do different, contradictory cultural codes overlap in this *culturally binding subject model*? (...) Instead of presupposing the reflexive subject, it then becomes visible as a product of highly specific *cultural modes of subjectivation*." (Reckwitz 2008: 16)

The new cultural studies thus explicitly claim to add to the older theories of the subject the empirical reconstruction of the cultural production of subjectivity and the time- and place-concrete performance of the subject as an socio-cultural actor. After the idealistic and free subject of classical social-scientific theory and the

determined or even declared 'dead of the subject' by the early structuralism, a post-structuralist and late-modern subject returns onto the stage of society as an actor resp. actress, bond closely to meaningful acting. Here this reinvented subject finds itself questioned above all as a political subject, as a citizen of late-modern democracies and communities, struggling for being recognized as free and mindful. (Laclau & Mouffe 1985/1991).

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