

Subjectivity

Concept: Subjectivity

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Description Subjectivity is a concept that refers to the cultural, social, political, and psychological processes that shape and determine who we think we are and how we situate ourselves in the world. Generally, the notion of subjectivity has a number of meanings. On the one hand, it tends to be associated with the faculty of being subjective, rather than objective, and thus stresses personal feelings and experience. On the other, it evokes a legal language of citizenship, namely of being the subject of a nation-state, endowed with rights and obligations. More often, subjectivity occurs in conjunction with such concepts as identity, the self, the individual, and the human being. Although loosely related, these terms should not be used interchangeably.

The latter group of terms refers to an understanding of identity that has historically given precedence to the autonomy and self-consciousness of the human being and experience over the social and cultural situation in which human beings live and act. In contrast, contemporary concepts of subjectivity emphasize the link between power, language, and identity and the fundamental interdependence of human beings with their environment. It is by being part of a highly interconnected and violent world that human beings articulate who they think they are in terms of complex networks of sexual, racial, ethnic, familial, colonial, political, institutional, and cultural identifications. In recent years, humanist and psychoanalytical concepts of subjectivity have given way to post-colonial and feminist understandings of the concept that examine the limits of self-consciousness and self-knowledge as the dominant traits of modern subjectivities. Moreover, globalization has contributed to the formulation and proliferation of subjectivity concepts based on experiences of dislocation, war, migration, and resistance. Globalization not only questions the status and nature of the human itself, but it also generates "disposable" human beings to whom subjectivity is denied, if not brutally repressed.

Historically, the notion of subjectivity has developed in close proximity, yet contradictory relation, to the emergence of the idea of the autonomous individual. René Descartes' famous dictum "I think therefore I am" typifies two central ideas of the Enlightenment that shaped European political thought and helped legitimize European colonial expansion: first, the predominance of the self-knowing, autonomous individual who operates on the basis of reason to order the world, and, second, the individual self as the source of all knowledge and experience. Emphasizing self-criticism, self-sufficiency, and the uniqueness of the human being in its natural state of existence, namely, outside social norms, Enlightenment thinkers such as

Kant and Rousseau articulated subjectivity as a number of properties and a self-analytical process that culminated in the celebration of individuality as freedom, duty, autonomy, and as a universal value of humanity. Such an understanding of individuality overlooks the different meanings individuality gains in different societies and cultures. Instead of being a universal phenomenon, then, individuality in this sense is a Western concept.

Despite their controversial status, Enlightenment concepts of the modern subject still affect how we imagine and organize global communities today. For example, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which serves as a legal framework for global governance, is based on the autonomy of the individual human subject, thus imposing a Western rather than locally differentiated model of subjectivity. Moreover, individuality and individualism become a social value that has become global capitalism's most precious commodity. This development is reflected in the logic and practice of brand names. By wearing Nike shoes with the swoosh or drinking Coca Cola, one defines who one is by how one dresses and eats and drinks.

In contrast, contemporary concepts of subjectivity examine how psychological and political processes shape subjectivity. For example, in Freudian psychoanalysis, subjectivity designates a process governed by what lies outside the control of the individual, namely by the violent impulses of the unconscious that need to be integrated into a psychological whole. Thus, despite questioning the subject's autonomy, psychoanalysis maintains that the subject is fully knowable and, therefore, controllable. In contrast, post-Freudian psychoanalysts maintain that subjectivity depends on language and is radically "decentered" or alien to itself. It is the product of both a distorted reflection of itself in someone else's eyes and of a system (i.e., language) that pre-exists the subject and is shared by all and controlled by none. In this sense, subjectivity is not the discourse of the autonomous self but that of another. What psychoanalysis teaches is that the perceived need for a unified self is the most profound illusion through which we articulate identity.

Similarly, twentieth century cultural historians and theorists argue that autonomy is an ideology and subjectivity an effect of power and knowledge. This view is predicated on the Marxian understanding that subjectivity is always produced through particular historical relationships, the needs of capital, discourses of power, and institutions (church, family, school, mass media, academia). Given that schools produce docile subjects and consumers to maintain the logic and structure of capitalism, while making them believe in their freedom as autonomous individuals, subjectivity does not develop on the subject's own terms. Instead, subjectivity denotes what capitalism fosters as its own indispensable value and necessity.

In the movie *The Matrix*, to use an example from popular culture, human beings serve as energy sources for an omnipresent and centerless power

system, all the while imagining themselves as self-determining individuals participating in the world. Their sense of subjectivity is vital to the survival of the system itself. Subsequently, the formation of subjectivity has become the ultimate object of knowledge production and control. The French historian Michel Foucault used the transparent architectural construction of the nineteenth-century prison — the panopticon — to exemplify how the normalizing power of the state and its institutions discipline and control human behaviour and bodies by giving inmates/citizens the impression of being under constant but invisible surveillance and scientific observation. Similarly, global subjectivity is partly constructed and managed through the rise of global surveillance systems (e.g., credit cards, public surveillance cameras, the US Department of Homeland Security) in response to an elaborate national discourse of fear and in the name of global security.

Subjectivity, then, is not one thing but composed of the subject's multiple positions and identifications. Understanding identity in a global age, however, requires us to contemplate how race and gender inequities have complicated and generated new subjectivities. While women's subjectivity has historically been linked to the critique of women's subjection to systemic patriarchal oppression, twentieth century feminists have underscored language, the body, eroticism, and lesbian sexuality as sites of women's subjectivity. In particular, feminist reassessments of classical and poststructuralist psychoanalysis and linguistics have contributed to a fundamental redefinition of female subjectivity.

For example, the Belgian psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray suggests that the imaginary body that informs all psychoanalytical practice is neither gender neutral nor conceptualized outside the cultural and historical constructions. Rather, its universalistic representation merely masquerades its male inscriptions. Classical psychoanalysis therefore does not reflect to what extent the subject is socialized by a language that is already sexualized and gendered and excludes the female from proper symbolic representation. If subjectivity is mainly constituted through language, the question of representation and the need for a sexually differentiated symbolic language become paramount. For theorists such as Irigaray and Hélène Cixous the female body and its internal as well as external erogenous zones provide a quarry through which to imagine female subjectivity and modes of representation.

The Bulgarian cultural and literary theorist Julia Kristeva provides a linguistic and intersubjective model of subjectivity that emphasizes pre-verbal and pre-Oedipal forms of subject formation. In this context the subject emerges through an intersubjective space, which, shared by mother and child, denotes a maternally defined pre-symbolic space that destabilizes and intrudes into the symbolic space of patriarchal representation and subject formation. For postmodern feminist theorists, then, subjects are formed primarily through acts of transgression of patriarchal norms and exclusion from dominant systems of representation.

The postmodern emphasis on language as the predominant site of subject formation has focused critical attention on the notion of the unstable subject or the subject in crisis. Recent feminist scholars reject both social and biological constructions (gender and sex) of female subjectivity and, instead, argue that it is performative. For example, the American feminist philosopher Judith Butler argues that subjectivity does not depend on an essential core of identity but the correct enactment of social discourses and conventions, which constitute socially and legally acceptable forms of gender identity. However, the dissolution of traditional identity categories also questions an individual's ability to act intentionally, be accountable, and self-reflexive. Without a strictly defined notion of identity and its appeals to authenticity, it becomes difficult to make political claims for social justice and equity. In this sense, the subject in crisis renders collective identity politics ineffective if not impossible.

At the same time, collective identity politics tends to privilege collective over individual needs and emphasizes difference over commonality. Subsequently, it intrinsically operates through a set of exclusions. In order to avoid the traps of exclusionary identity politics, feminist theories of subjectivity have criticized the idea of identity for implying that the individual can at some remote point conceive of herself as being free from social, historical, and gendered construction (e.g., being just a "woman"). In this context, identity denotes a self-knowing, unified, and stable self, while subjectivity emphasizes plurality and historical situatedness and confers political agency. The latter term is designed to counter the assumption that the subject is devoid of political action. In particular, agency emphasizes the subject's capacity to challenge dominant concepts of identity and to act politically and socially responsible without claiming complete control over the effects of one's actions. Agency, namely, the ability to propel individual and collective change, resides precisely in the subject's instability and its tendency towards permanent transformation and critique.

Similarly, post-colonial discourses of subjectivity situate agency and identity in particular cultural and historical contexts. Since race and ethnicity form collective identities, identity itself has become a troublesome category and means different things to different people. The term becomes specifically problematic whenever it is questioned by, and overlaps with, other concepts of national and cultural belonging. Moreover, in a post-colonial context, agency results from the ways in which post-colonial subjects have both been shaped by imperialism and colonialism and resisted imperial power. In particular, ethnicity and race do not constitute social identity but, through a variety of political and racist uses, are restraining categories employed to stereotype people and impose on them particular social identities and positions. In fact, racial and ethnic identities emerge through the repetition of presumed and legally enshrined norms of identity and the transformative role racist violence plays in the formation of modern subjectivities. In this view, subjectivity is a process rooted in experiences of abjection and resistance that generate

counter-subjectivities. Furthermore, maintaining a sense of Western superiority necessitates the dehumanization and assimilation of the colonial "Other" as an abstract philosophical category rather than his or her recognition as a living being. Thus native subjectivity becomes alienated and subordinated to the colonizer's needs and claims to technological and cultural superiority. But post-colonial subject formation can also be a process that emphasizes multiple differences independent from colonial notions of cultural and racial Otherness. In other words, it depends on the construction of a more tangible moral, ethical, political, and cultural other, so that subjectivity is not reducible to simple opposites. Under prolonged conditions of social and economic inequity on a global and local level, the former colonized people remain materially and psychologically bound to the colonizers' myths of modernity, reason, progress, and development. Enjoying their economic and political privileges, the former colonizers suffer from historical amnesia. They conveniently forget the ways in which colonial exploitation and racism constitute the historical present of the Western subject and render decolonization an unfinished and "forgotten" project. This kind of erasure imagines globalization as a new — historyless — and transcultural phenomenon.

Globalization has relocated existing notions of subjectivity in open concepts of cultural and social space. In particular, subjectivity is negotiated through the contradictions arising from the decreasing institutional powers of the nation-state and the increasing global flows of people, labour, images, and capital across national boundaries. Some argue that in a world marked by large-scale voluntary and involuntary diasporic movements of people, mobility and cultural hybridity designate dominant traits of global subjectivity. While diasporic communities tend to foster cosmopolitan subjectivities, namely inclusive identities organized around multicultural pluralism, these communities are also touched by gender and class differences and amenable to cultivating exclusionary, normative patterns of absolute cultural difference.

In this context, women living in diasporas are frequently assigned the role of guarding received traditional identities and racial purity. Although cosmopolitanism frequently counts as the "tamer" of globalization and antidote to wars, it conceals that globalization creates a fundamental divide between those who are mobile and those who must stay put and, thereby, constitute a global population of "disposable" people. As with imperial capitalism, the enormous violence of globalization (e.g., extreme impoverishment, ecological destruction, illegal trafficking in people) has created forms of dissent that articulate new subjectivities. For example, globalization creates a new class of collectivities connected across the globe (from the Zapatista to counter-globalization movements in Seattle, Hyderabad, and Geneva), which work toward global forms of social justice and autonomy. The latter requires us to radically re-imagine the normalizing effects of global institutions and power networks in order to narrate and perform grassroots democracy and alternative subjectivities. Yet, it remains to be seen if and how this form of autonomy can

productively escape from its Enlightenment legacies.

Suggested
Reading:

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