Subjectivity in Critical Theory

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Abstract

The past decades have witnessed a relentless philosophical assault on the concept of subjectivity. While the traditional philosophy considered the subject as unitary, universal and self-sufficient, the more contemporary theories take into account the process of the construction of the subject through psychological drives, language, ideology or the material productions of culture. The critical theory occupies a distinguished position in regard to the issue of subjectivity because this tradition can be read as providing aspects of theorizing the social construction of subjectivity by having an eye on psychology, language, social interaction, and culture in specific historical contexts. The present study aims at demonstrating how the various theories and philosophical views have had different outlooks to the construction of subjectivity, and how the critical theory could be considered as a point of synthesis of different grounds of subject construction. Thinkers of this school provided many contributions to our understanding of subjectivity and agency, while challenging us to further rethink the problematics of subjectivity in relation to the socio-economic developments and political struggles of our own turbulent period.

ذهنیت در نظریه انتقادی

دهه های گذشته شاهد تهاجم بی امان فلسفی به مفهوم ذهنیت بوده است. در حالی که فلسفه سنتی موضوع را واحد، جهان شمول و خودکفا می دانست، نظریه های معاصرتر فرآیند ساخت سوژه را از طریق انگیزه های روانی، زبان، ایدئولوژی یا تولیدات مادی فرهنگ در نظر می گیرند. نظریه انتقادی در رابطه با موضوع سوبژکتیویته جایگاه ممتازی دارد، زیرا این سنت را می‌توان به عنوان ارائه جنبه‌هایی از نظریه‌پردازی ساخت اجتماعی سوبژکتیویته با توجه به روان‌شناسی، زبان، تعامل اجتماعی و فرهنگ در زمینه‌های تاریخی خاص خواند. هدف پژوهش حاضر نشان دادن این است که چگونه نظریه‌ها و دیدگاه‌های فلسفی مختلف، دیدگاه‌های متفاوتی نسبت به ساخت سوبژکتیویته داشته‌اند و چگونه می‌توان نظریه انتقادی را به عنوان نقطه ترکیبی از زمینه‌های مختلف ساخت موضوع در نظر گرفت. متفکران این مکتب کمک های زیادی به درک ما از سوبژکتیویته و عاملیت ارائه کردند، در حالی که ما را به بازنگری بیشتر در مورد مسائل ذهنی در رابطه با تحولات اجتماعی-اقتصادی و مبارزات سیاسی دوره پرتلاطم خودمان به چالش کشیدند.

کلیدواژه ها: ذهنیت، ایدئولوژی، انحلال، رادیکالیزه شدن، شیء سازی

Introduction

'The subject' is a generic term, frequently used in various fields of humanities, mainly philosophy, sociology and literary criticism, and basically stands for such terms as 'the person', 'individual' or 'human being'. However, one cannot decide on a definite definition for the term independent of the theoretical field or intellectual movement with which 'the subject' is associated.

A prevalent outlook towards subjectivity, mainly popular after the World Wars, refers to those approaches which are critical of the autonomous humanistic subjectivity, while emphasizing the way in which the social context constitutes subjects rather than the opposite. Critical Theory, which designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School, defines the subject in relation with its collective context. This theory and its authors and scholars "gauged the scope and the limits of an individual autonomy located well beyond all idealist dreams of subjective impotence, but also beyond all forms of structural subjugation and psychic fragmentation" (Zima, 2015, p. 38).

Frankfurt school is the reflection of the inter-war and post-war European social upheavals that led to the crisis of subjectivity. In their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), written during the war in American exile, Horkheimer and Adorno accused the human most-appraised rationality for its annihilation of subjectivity. The domination over nature favored and practiced from Enlightenment onwards, has led to the reification of the subject. What has happened eventually to this enlightened subject is that is has to control itself in order to impose its will on nature and in this process turns itself into an instrument of economic, social and technical progress.

The present article tends to argue the concept of subjectivity from the viewpoint of the critical theory. As Far as subjectivity is a controversial concept, every philosophy, movement or approach has considered it as a substantial discipline over which the basis of the entire theory is established. As a result, the second section of the study elaborates on the different theories of subjectivity and the basic presuppositions about the nature of the subject through the lens of a number of well-known critics or philosophers. The aim is to emphasize the significance of the idea of subjectivity through the history of thought development. In the Argument section, the concentration will be in particular on four distinct figures of the Frankfurt school, namely Adorno, Horkeimer, Benjamin and Marcuse, in regard to each philosopher's peculiar view to the issue of subjectivity. Although

generally, they all share a common outlook, the critics might be distinguished by minute modifications of the term. Eventually, the concluding section and the references would follow.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of subjectivity, which is the chief theoretical concern of this study, is a complex notion, including a broad range of meanings, changed and modified through the centuries. This concept has been employed in various fields of study including history, sociology, philosophy and literature and has been attributed different and even opposing meanings and connotations. Each theory has attempted to answer such questions as the following:

What constitutes subjective experience? What role do other people play in the development of our subjectivity?

Can subjectivity be adequately explained without accounting for that which is outside the subject?

Can subjectivity be understood as a product of our linguistic interaction with others?

Is the subject autonomous or linguistically bound?

Following, there is an attempt to briefly address some of these questions.

Psychological subject

Psychoanalysis and the discovery and the construction of the unconscious influenced the formation of the psychological subject to a great extent. Two of the basic principles of psychoanalysis are first, that there is an important element of pattern and continuity in the mental and emotional life of the individual, and second, that the explanation of this pattern is to be sought in the satisfaction of unconscious needs and goals. Here is the passage Freud (1993) italicized to make his point:

The unconscious is the true physical reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of unconscious as is the external world by the communication of our sense organs. (p. 603)

As a result, Freud argues that unconscious is that part of our existence "of which we are not directly aware" but is "fundamental to experience" and "governs" our whole being (Rieff, 1961, p. 35). This is the beginning of the construction of a form of subjectivity which is based on an unconscious of repressed desires, abnormal urges, dreams and delusions.

Linguistic Subject

As a psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan has been influential in his assertion that subject is structured through language. Although the basis of Lacan's principles about psychological growth is almost correspondent to Freudian concepts, what is new with him is his insistence on the significance of the linguistic nature of the formation of the unconscious and self. Lacan assumed for unconscious a signifying nature. Therefore, unconscious is governed by the same rules that govern language. This means that if language is a system of signs in which each "basic unit has meaning only in relation to another unit" (Con Davis & Schleifer, 1998, p. 265), unconscious would be governed by the same rules and relations between signifiers and signifieds. This is contrary to Freud who thought of unconscious as a container of blind instincts which "has no organization, no unified will" and no logical rules can be applied to it (Freud, 1993, p. 98).

The unconscious for Lacan is not a chaotic rush of unfulfilled desires and forbidden instincts, but "an orderly network, as complex as the structure of language" (Barry, 1990, p. 111). The formation of subjectivity arrives its crucial point at the Symbolic Stage, when the subject first encounters language. As a result, in Lacanian theory, subjectivity is defined through language.

Existential Subject

Jean-Paul Sartre is the philosopher who used the term 'existentialism' for the philosophy that deals with human existence and his place and relationships in the world. Individualism, as the central claim of Sartre's theory emphasizes the fact the human doesn't have a "given nature" and instead can "freely choose his own goals" (Olson, 1962, p. 53). This is why for Sartre, between being (man's existence) and his being free, there is no difference: to exist, therefore, is to be free. He proposes that "existence precedes essence", which means that man would possess essence (would become what he is) only after coming to existence, and this is the point that man's freedom is definable, for man is free as he incessantly creates and invents himself. However, the awareness of this freedom and the experience of being responsible for one's own fate beget anguish. In return, the individual experiences anguish and therefore embarks on action. The anguish of nothingness and the fear for lack of existence forces him to take the heavy responsibility of his actions on shoulders and actively step on the path of self-recognition. I would experience anguish when I come to know that "decisive behavior which determines my future projects must emanate from a

self which I have not yet become" (Hayin, 1996, p. 17). This moral anguish of one's passivity and lack of awareness forces him to change his situation and choose to give meaning to his existence, but he then comes to experience despair, a Sartrian conclusion of existential perception.

Ideological Subject

In his classic and influential essay, "On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation," French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1971) theorizes the process of identification through which individuals become "knowing subjects" (p. 16). A knowing subject is an individual conceived of as a sovereign, rational and unified consciousness, in control of language and meaning. It is the 'I' that thinks and speaks and is the apparent author of meaning. This is the theory of the subject that is usually assumed in commonsense discourses. Althusser (1971) describes an everyday situation in which an individual is walking down the street and hears a police officer or other voice call out "Hey, you there!" (p. 100). Almost always, Althusser suggests, the hailed individual will turn around. In the process she/he becomes a subject. Althusser comments on the reasons for this, suggesting that it occurs, because he [or she] has recognized the hail was really addressed to him [or her], and that "it was really him [or her] who was hailed" (p. 163). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailing is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him [or her] who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by "guilt feelings", despite the large numbers who "have something on their consciences" (p. 163).

   Faced by this strange phenomenon, Althusser theorizes the process of hailing, that is, the process of the constitution of the individual as subject within language and ideology, as fundamental to human societies. In Althusser's theorization, the process of recognition by the individual of herself or himself as the one addressed by the call to recognition interpellates the individual as a subject within ideology. The individual is hailed, and responds with an identification through which she/he is a subject in a double sense. She/he becomes both the agent of the ideology in question and subjected to it. This process of identification, Althusser argues, inserts individuals into ideologies and ideological practices that, when they work well, are lived as if they were obvious and natural. In Althusser's theorization, a range of what he terms 'Ideological

State Apparatuses' such as religion, education, the family, the law, politics, culture and the media produce the ideologies within which we assume identities and become subjects. Identities may be socially, culturally and institutionally assigned, as in the case, for instance, of gender or citizenship, where state institutions, civil society and social and cultural practices produce the discourses within which gendered subjectivity and citizens are constituted.

Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and subjectivity is concerned both with the mechanism of interpellation and with the role of identity and subjectivity in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. According to Althusser, ideological state apparatuses play a central role in the reproduction of individuals as class subjects. Each apparatus contributes to the reproduction of capitalist relations in its own specific way, creating subjects through the process of interpellation: "The political apparatus by subjecting individuals to the political state ideology, the communications apparatus by cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism etc." (Althusser, 197, p. 146). Individual subjects internalize particular meanings and values and take up the identity offered to them by the institution in question, for example, that of worker, mother or citizen of a particular state. As it is briefly referred above, different theoretical approaches to subjectivity and identity will produce different types of analysis and forms of knowledge. It is shown through this brief survey that how different forms of cultural practices – historical, psychological, political, and lingual – work to constitute subjectivity and identity for the individuals who engage with them.

Argument

The Frankfurt School, also known as the institute of Social Research, is a social and political philosophical movement of thought located in Frankfurt, Germany. It is the original source of what is known as Critical Theory. The Institute was founded with the aim of developing Marxist studies in Germany. The Institute eventually generated a specific school of thought after 1933 when the Nazi forced it to close and move to the United States, where it found hospitality at Columbia University, New York.

The academic influence of the critical method is far reaching in terms of educational institutions in which such traditions is taught and in terms of the problems it addresses. Some of its core issues involve the critique of modernity and of capitalist society, the definition of social emancipation

and the perceived pathologies of society. Critical theory provides a specific interpretation of Marxist philosophy and reinterprets some of its central economic and political notions such as commodification, reification, fetishization and critique of mass culture.

The forerunners of Frankfurt School argued that critical theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), just as it should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences. Critical theory combines practical and normative thinking to "explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify actors to change it, and provide clear norms for criticism and practical goals for the future" (Bohman, 1996, p. 190). Whereas traditional theory can only mirror and explain reality as it presently is, critical theory's purpose is to change it; In Horkheimer's (1976) words the goal of critical theory is "the emancipation of human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (p. 219). The entire tradition of critical theory – which draws on Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Weber – posits the historical and social construction of the individual, and members of this tradition can be read as providing aspects of theorizing the social construction of subjectivity in language, social interaction, and culture in specific historical contexts.

Adorno and Horkheimer: Liquidation of the subject

In *The Culture Industry* (1991) Adorno argues that what a critical social theory really needs to address is why hunger, poverty, and other forms of human suffering persist despite the technological and scientific potential to mitigate them or to eliminate them together. The root cause, Adorno says, lies in how capitalist relations of production have come to dominate society as a whole, leading to extreme, albeit often invisible, concentrations of wealth and power. Society has come to be organized around the production of exchange values for the sake of producing exchange values. This, he refers to as 'the principle of exchange' and the society in which this principle prevails 'exchange society'.

Besides the politico-economic (the economic character of capitalist exploitation), and the social-psychological (the effectiveness and pervasiveness of late capitalist exploitation) level of exchange society, Adorno diagnosed a third level as well: the cultural level. Adorno's cultural studies show that a similar logic prevails in television, film, and the recording industries. He argues that culture industry executives speculate on the conscious and unconscious state of the masses in

order to develop an advertising scheme which is disseminated via the modern media apparatus. This media machine deifies the power of production, and the individual feels impotent. However, this sense of impotence is overcome by identifying with the production deity, or with its 'inescapable product'. Identification is achieved through consumption. This new consumerist communion generates an ecstasy similar to that produced by more traditional religion: "Mimesis explains the enigmatically empty ecstasy of the fans in mass culture. Ecstasy is the motor of imitation. Under the force of immense pressure, the identity of the personality gives way, and since this identity itself already originates in pressure, this is felt as liberation" (Adorno, 1991, p.88). The ecstasy of consumption eradicates critical consciousness, and this eradication reifies consciousness, so that the individual mimes or approximates the condition of the dumb, reified commodity. In turn, reification of consciousness liquidates subjectivity, and this liquidation feels like liberation because subjectivity no longer has to be protected from the production deity: "If you can't beat them, join them" (p.94).

For Adorno no single domain of culture industry is sufficient to ensure the effects he identified as generally exerting upon individual's consciousness and lives. However, when taken altogether, the media of the culture industry constitute a veritable web within which the conditions of leading an autonomous life, for developing the capacity of critical reflection upon oneself and one's social conditions, are systematically obstructed. The culture industry prohibits the development of autonomy by means of the mediatory role its various sectors play in the formation of individual's consciousness of social reality. The commodities produced by the culture industry may be "rubbish", but their effects upon individuals is deadly serious.

Marcuse: Radical Subject

The key to Marcuse's reconstruction of the concept of subjectivity is the "Philosophical Interlude" in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) which he develops a critical analysis of the presuppositions of Western rationality and its concept of the philosophical subject. Marcuse claims that the prevalent reality principle of Western civilization presupposes an antagonism between subject and object, mind and body, reason and the passions, and the individual and society. "Nature is experienced on this basis as raw material to be mastered, as an object of domination, as provocation or resistance to be overpowered" (Marcuse, 1955, p.110). The ego in Western thought is thus conceptualized as

an aggressive, offensive subject, fighting and striving to conquer the resistant world. Through labor, the subject seeks continually to extend its power and control over nature. The Logos of this reality principle is, Marcuse argues, a logic of domination that finds its culmination in the reality principle of advanced industrial society, the performance principle. The performance principle is hostile to the senses and receptive faculties that strive for gratification and fulfillment. It contains a concept of repressive reason which seeks to tame instinctual drives for pleasure and enjoyment. Its values, which are the governing norms of modern societies, include:

profitable productivity, assertiveness, efficiency, competitiveness; in other words, the Performance Principle, the rule of functional rationality discriminating against emotions, a dual morality, the 'work ethic,' which means for the vast majority of the population condemnation to alienated and inhuman labor, and the will to power, the display of strength, virility (Marcuse, 1974, p. 282). This hegemonic version of the reality principle has been challenged, Marcuse argues, from the beginning of Western philosophy. Against the antagonistic struggle between subject and object, an opposing ideal of reconciliation and harmony has been formulated, in which the individual strives for fulfillment and gratification. This "Logos of gratification," Marcuse suggests, is found in Aristotle's notion of the nous theos and Hegel's ideal of spirit coming to rest and fruition in absolute knowledge (1955, p. 112). In these philosophical conceptions, the human being is to attain a condition of reconciliation after a process of struggle, suffering and labor, in which alienation and oppression are finally overcome. In addition, Marcuse finds a logic of gratification and different conception of subjectivity in Nietzsche's emphasis on the body, the passions, joy and liberation from time and guilt (p. 119). The values affirmed in this reality principle would be the antithesis of the repressive performance principle and its dominating subject and would affirm receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, tenderness, and so on. These characteristics appear indeed as opposites of domination and exploitation. On the primary psychological level, they would pertain to the domain of Eros, they would express the energy of the life instincts against the death instinct and destructive energy (Marcuse, 1974, p. 284).

In the language of poststructuralism, Marcuse thus envisages an embodied subjectivity in which the opposition between reason and the senses, central to the modern philosophical concept of the subject, is deconstructed. For Marcuse, the play impulse is connected with the aesthetic function which would mediate between the passive, receptive 'sensuous impulse' and the active creative

'form impulse', thus reconciling reason and the senses. The play impulse aspires to a condition of freedom from restraint and anxiety, involving "freedom from the established reality: man is free when the reality loses its seriousness and when its necessity becomes light" (Marcuse, 1955, p. 187). This "freedom to play" and to create an "aesthetic reality" requires liberation of the senses and, as Marcuse called for, "a total revolution in the mode of perception and feeling" (p. 189).

The resultant conception of an aestheticized and eroticized subjectivity preserves the sensuality, receptiveness, art and eros, thus redeeming the body and the senses against the tyranny of repressive reason and affirming the importance of aesthetics, play, and erotic activity in human life. Hence, against the rational and domineering subject of mastery, Marcuse advances a notion of subjectivity as mediating reason and the senses, as seeking harmony and gratification. Thus, he affirms an intersubjective ideal of a libidinal subjectivity in harmonious and gratifying relations with others and, one might add, with nature itself. Instead of controlling and dominating objects, Marcusean subjectivity seeks gratifying and peaceful relations with others and with the external world.

Benjamin: Reified Subject

The problem of the individual that Benjamin confronts is that modern subjectivity is shocked, reified, fragmented, and depersonalized, making it vulnerable to seductive compensations in the form of domination, grandiosity, control, on the one hand, and isolation, rest, and illusion of immortality on the other.

Throughout Benjamin's work, from his early statements regarding modernity's siege on meaningful experience, in his descriptions of the modern world of meaning and relationship as empty, to his preoccupations with perception in ordinary and extraordinary conditions, in particular in relation to modern technology, the topography of the subject is central to all. (Stewart, 2010, p. 88). For Benjamin, capitalist society is headed towards total reification. By this, he meant that as a result of socialization, the reified system of behavior develops, which is a quantifying apprehension of the object, the instrumental treatment of the other and the transformation of the human qualities into opportunities to pursue the quest for profit. While Marx, by his conception of fetishism as 'the personification of things', expresses the domination of reified conditions of production over the laboring subject, Benjamin, in an almost similar way, expresses the

domination of the reified tradition over the perceiving subject. In such a reified culture with its reified subjects, every experience of human relationship is reduced to the commodity form. This "decay of the experience" occasioned by the commodification of social relations causes money to stand "ruinously at the center of every vital interest" (Caygill, 1998, p. 129).

Conclusion

Subjectivity refers to the condition of being a person and the process by which we become a person; that is, how we are constituted as subjects (psychologically, philosophically and socially), and how we experience ourselves. Different theoretical approaches to subjectivity produce different types of analysis and forms of knowledge. While psychoanalysis attempts to explain subjectivity in terms of universal drives that illicit repressed sexual desires, with poststructuralists as Lacan language pre-exists the individual and produces subjectivity, identity and meaning. Besides, when it comes to the social theories, Althuser's theory of ideology and subjectivity emphasizes the role of the ideological state apparatuses in the reproduction of individuals as class subjects. However, while the present study dealt with various resources for the construction of subjectivity, it has specified its primary focus on the issue of subjectivity in regard to the critical theory and the Frankfurt School. Thinkers of this school provided many contributions to our understanding of subjectivity and agency, while challenging us to further rethink the problematics of subjectivity in relation to the socio-economic developments and political struggles of our own turbulent period.

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Biodata

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