What is subjectivation? Key concepts and proposals for future research

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Abstract: The concept of 'subjectivation' is commonly used in the social sciences and humanities, but its meaning is often less than clear. The paper disambiguates different uses of subjectivation in poststructuralist sociology and interpretative sociology by showing how they draw from the terminologies of subjectivity subjection, and subjectness. A relational framework for the study of subjectivation is introduced, highlighting conceptual concerns in subjectivation research: affectivity, materiality, and agency, which together allow the authors to focus on a concept of the "subject of rights".

Keywords: subjectivity, subjectivation, agency, relational sociology, body.

1. The trouble with subjectivation

The concept of 'subjectivation' is widely discussed within the social sciences and humanities. Generally speaking, the term denotes the genesis of experiential capacities as well as behavioural dispositions under the influence of certain entities or circumstances. But such inclusive definitions have become a source of confusion. Too little attention is paid to the different meanings and uses of the concept. What is subjectivation, what are the different uses of the concept, and which assumptions about structure, agency and social transformation are implicated? We discuss different terminologies involving the 'subject' to show how diverse recent sociological interpretations of the term subjectivation can be, and which kind of conceptual baggage they come with. Depending on the line of reasoning being followed, subjectivation is either used to describe *subjection to* ideology, institutions, and government, or it implies the evolution of *subjectivity,* ways of feeling, thinking and communicating within and transcending situations. Last but not least it also describes the process of attaining *subjectness* – the capacity to act. The latter notion is underdeveloped in the social sciences, which is why we pay special attention to it, defining it as the '*subject of rights'* and empirical subjectivation research as the study of individual and collective agency.

This chapter begins by introducing the historical origins of the different 'subject' terms, and points out approaches which work with the term subjectivation. In tracing discussions and understandings of subjectivation, our objective is to offer a rich definition of subjectivation and to provide concepts for empirical subjectivation research.

We will first discuss different usages and conceptual traditions of 'thinking the subject' and to which ends they are mobilised in the concept of 'subjectivation' (section 2). These conceptual distinctions need to be taken into account before an understanding of subjectivation can be advanced which reflects the contradiction between determinacy and intentionality. It should be clear that this contradiction cannot be overcome since the ambivalence between passivity and activity is what renders subject terminology productive. Our strategy is to avoid a priori decisions about the degrees to which subjects are free or determined, active or passive. Instead, we turn to the social relations in and through which these contradictions and ambivalences are addressed and re-worked. In contemporary social thought, these problems are often obscured *or* pre-decided. This leads to either an unrealistic pessimism about possibilities of social change or an equally unrealistic optimism about social transformation through intentional action. Prompted by this false alternative, we suggest a definition of subjectivation based on an understanding of subjects as 'subjects of rights' (section 3). Consequently, we will discuss concepts for subjectivation research which include affectivity, materiality, and agency. (section 4).

2. The uses of 'subject'

In the history of social thought, the word subject (Lat. subjectum, suppositum, subjectus, subditus, Ger. Subjekt, Untertan, Fr. Sujet) carries a variety of meaning which may all inform the concept of subjectivation.[1] For disambiguating different senses of the contemporary term subjectivation, it is necessary to remind ourselves of three different notions which are based on the term subject: subjectivity, subjection, and subjectness.

2.1 Subjectivity: Knowledge (of truth) and transcendence
The notion of subjectivity (Ger. Subjektivität, Fr. subjectivité), makes subjective the antonym of objective, and 'subject' that of object. This distinction separates subjectivity from objectivity in the sense of a separation of knower and that which is known. The term subjectivity – prepared by early Enlightenment's focus on knowledge as opposed to belief – is most elaborate in German idealism and, later, in sociological debates on the subject in social constructivist thinking (Berger & Luckmann 1966). The heritage of (Kantian) idealist transcendentalism – the conviction that the known (objectivity) presupposes the subjectivity of a knower (subject) – is translated into social thought as the idea that subjects 'construct'

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[1] 'Subject' is the latin translation of the Greek term ὑποκείμενον, hypokeimenon – literally that which is 'placed under' or 'underlies' (Balibar, Cassin & de Libera 2014).

reality through the use of symbolic objectivations. Subjectivity only comes into being as part of a network of beings and matter, even if and because it is grounded in the body (among other animate and inert bodies) (Mead 1934). This relational understanding of subjectivity has been most clearly articulated in phenomenological thought from Bergson to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Schütz. It can be exemplified in the distinction between 'Erleben' and 'Erfahrung'. Both signify experience, but whereas 'Erleben' (Engl. experiencing) takes place in a singular body and mind, 'Erfahrung' (Engl. experience) only exists intersubjectively. Through interpreting *Erleben* in an intersubjective process, it may become *Erfahrung*, expressed through gestures, ritual, music, words, images, narratives, and its more complex cultural forms, such as dramas, compositions, theories. The transition from experiencing to experience implies both, synthesising and deconstructive activities. When experiencing has been habitualised and subsumed by experience-as-knowledge, new modes of experiencing may also 'explode' experiential knowledge, expressed through defiant gestures, critical interpretations or a collective crisis of experience (Schütz & Luckmann 1989). Transcendence of conventional knowledge is enabled by realisation, by experiencing 'explosive' reality as truth. However, conditions for such transcendences of experience are difficult to describe in the framework of interpretive sociology only, since they lack concepts of power and sovereignty. The issue with these mostly phenomenological conceptions of subjectivity is, that they exaggerate the force of experience and overlook structural and material constrains on agency.

2.2 Subjection: power and sovereignty

The notion of subjection (Lat. subjectus, Ger. Unterwerfung, Fr. assujettissement) is associated with dependency or subjugation. Those who are subjected are under the power of a sovereign or a sovereign order. In the early modern political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, which sets part of the stage for the social sciences, subjection is an important term describing the relation of freedom and violence. To subject to the Leviathan guarantees cooperation through voluntary submission to a sovereign. The association of subjectivation with politico-legal subjection is pronounced in French theory, where 'assujettissement' implies being 'subaltern'. Foucault's rejection of Kant's philosophy of enlightenment through the development of self-liberating subjectivity (Foucault 1984) exemplifies that privileging subjection over subjectivity (the basis of knowledge) is an explicit strategy of French subject theory, which builds on the (Hobbesian) notion of subjection (Lat. subjectus). For Foucault, knowledge is not a method for emancipation but a technology of power, manifesting itself in

endless chains of power/knowledge. However, subjection does not preclude all intended social transformation by the subjected. One example of the attempt to consider transformation within subjection is Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. She suggests that subjection operates through the categorizing force of language. The iteration of subjecting categories creates a dynamic between sovereignty and interpretation: A symbolic order that is essentially oppressive can be upset by continually reinterpreting its meaning. Butler thus challenges the old wisdom that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' without going so far as to allow for intentional social change. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that much of contemporary poststructuralist subjectivation theory lacks an adequate conceptualisation of agency. Subjectivation is considered a power effect which eclipses the power to resist of those being subjected. Recent appraisals of the relevance of Spinoza's philosophy for Foucault, Gramsci, Althusser and other authors of the era (Saar 2013; Diefenbach 2018) demonstrate the influence of Spinoza's discovery of 'potentia agendi', an *immanent* power to act, which acts blindly and with determinatory force within and between subjects. To distinguish it from the older hierarchical model of power, it is called in French 'puissance' (Lat. potentia agendi, Ger. Macht) in contrast to 'pouvoir' (Lat. Potestas, Ger. Herrschaft). Subjectivated entities gain puissance only insofar as this agency allows them to function within a specific field of normative and affective forces. Puissance simply never trumps pouvoir. This assumption leads to a position which is critical of instances of subjectivation, but is also complicit with social reality, suggesting its unchangeability through intentional social action. Our proposition is that this contradiction between criticality and complicity can only be avoided if the historical development of the 'subject of rights' is taken into account: actors attaining the capacity to change the social world together and coming to an understanding with what purpose they are doing this.

2.3 Subjectness: The subject of rights

The notion of *subjectness* (Lat. subjectum, Ger. Subjektheit, Fr. subjectité) is the oldest and most difficult to understand from a modern point of view. It is directly derived from Aristoteles' concept of hypokeimenon (later translated into latin as substratum and subjectum) which merges the logical and the physical. This logical-physical subject is something of which there can be predicates. That is its logical aspect: It can be defined by predicates which constitute its identity. But it is not only identical (with itself) – it also has an 'accidental' aspect. The physical subject is affected by (co-) incidences and can also be described by the range of accidents which can happen to it. In antique philosophy accident is a technical term,

describing different forms a subject can assume without losing its identity. The latin term *subject* inherits this Greek duplicity of identity and accidentality: it designates the logical identity of a subject of action *and* the substrate for accidents, i.e. physical effects and conditions. It therefore has logical consistency on the one hand; on the other hand, it is a material thing, matter among matter. This 'mattered' subject is affected by other matter, and thus carrier of changing appearances. The everyday word closest to subjectness is probably 'personality' (Ger. Persönlichkeit), coined originally by Kant to denote the at once accidental *and* universal character of practical reason.

This elementary subjectness is redefined through the Hegelian, Husserlian and Schutzian terminologies of subjectivity as mentioned above. Through the association with the capacity for truth and transcendence, the concept is brought close to the "becoming subject of the revolutionary and postrevolutionary citizen, and especially to the establishment of the category of a 'subject of law' (Ger. Rechtssubjekt) of which we do not, as yet, have a sufficiently clear idea", and which, as "the subject as one [sic] 'he who frees himself' remains repressed" (Balibar, Cassin & de Libera 2014: 1083, emphasis in the original). We agree that the notion of the 'subject of law' – perhaps a better term would be the 'subject of rights' – is still underdeveloped. The ubiquitous notion of the *actor* in the social sciences corresponds in some ways with this 'repressed' notion of subject of law/rights but lacks some of its features. While the term actor certainly has a number of diverging uses, the attribution of agency to individuals by others and the attribution of agency to oneself is common: The seductively simple idea that social action originates from an actor. However, when 'actor' is used, it is less common in the social sciences to identify it as a subject of law or of right, as one fighting for her or his rights (Hark 1996; Meißner 20210), even though some authors emphasize this aspect through theories of recognition (Honneth 1996), neo-Kantian discourse theory (Benhabib 2013), and modernization theory (Eisenstadt 1982). Important contributions to the problematique of a 'Rechtssubjekt' (Engl. subject of rights) come – perhaps little surprisingly – from studies of minority positions, such as Gender Studies, Disability Studies and Postcolonial Studies. These studies confirm the critique of utilitarian and individualist accounts of the subject of rights offered by Benhabib:

> "It is the weakness of all agent-centric accounts of human rights that they abstract from the social embeddedness of agency in such shared contexts of speech and action, and instead focus on the isolated agent as the privileged subject for reasoning about rights" (Benhabib 2013: 40).

3. Researching subjectivation: contemporary concerns and a working definition

The rise of concepts and terminologies of culture and power in the social sciences has led to the opening of a debate about subjectivation. In the German speaking social sciences, educational sciences, and cultural sciences, this debate is very lively. Through the reception of poststructuralism and by turning to cultural studies, many scholars are hoping to find answers about pressing questions in (post-) neoliberal societies: How are subjects addressed and governed? How can subjects gain agency individually and collectively?

The concept of subjectivation owes its attractiveness to a current epistemic and societal problematic: the drifting apart of communities of knowledge and the resulting crisis of truth and justice. The dominant reaction to this crisis is a withdrawal to scientism and technocracy, reinforcing divisions between subject and object, researcher and 'subject', pushing back the dangerous voice of the 'masses'. Our alternative approach is to study contexts and institutions of subjection, to observe how subjects of rights emerge, and to identify emancipatory moments in processes of subject formation. Subjectivation research aims to promote a vocabulary and a set of methods, which allows members of society – including researchers – to negotiate structural constraints and to distribute agency broadly within societies. Subjectivation research can contribute to the study of 'social embeddedness of agency' through an understanding of relationality: the mutual stabilisation of subject-producing societies and society-producing subjects through shaping their relation in processes of longue durée. The subject is a relational entity (Donati & Archer 2015): its individuation relies on offers of relationship, and is never complete. This individuation is prone to accidents, which consist of changes in relations, new relations, and the finitude of relations. The struggles of subjects-in-relations vis-à-vis the law, social and symbolic order, institutional realizations, and the collective or networked attainment of rights should become focal points for further studies. By analyzing the longue durée of social and symbolic orders and by confronting these with social action, we observe how subjects change in structure and how structure changes in regard to subjects' actions. It is important to note that the issue of subjection (Ger. Unterwerfung, Fr. assujettisement) is of limited importance – it describes the limits of subjectivation in terms of the attainments of rights. Also, asking about subjectivation in terms of post-Kantian, phenomenological subjectivity may help to show how actors represent social reality and think beyond it, but it alone does not necessarily lead to the issue of the subject of rights. Both subjection and subjectivity are terms we need to describe the limits of and presuppositions for the attainment of rights-generating agency, since neo-Kantian *or* Foucauldian discourse theory are in themselves little helpful in describing the participatory vicissitudes of the struggles of *talking back* (hooks 1989) to authorities. These are struggles

for the right to 'subjectivate ourselves', shifting the boundaries between us, them, and I. The following definition of subjectivation is proposed to facilitate this line of inquiry:

I) Subjectivation is the genesis of dispositions to feel, think, and act toward others and oneself. It is a process relating two (or more) subjects in mutual or hierarchical figurations, mediated by objectivations such as languages, images, laws, rights and media. Individual entities are subjected by instances of subjectivation: actors (organisations, institutions) and objectivations (discourses, norms, structures, the totality of social and symbolic orders). The acquisition of dispositions to feel, think and act requires and mobilizes subjectivity.[2] Emerging within social relations, subjectivity is an embodied, practical, and reflexive agency of adapting to and changing the social and material world through communicative processes. It is grounded in reciprocity and shaped by relations of dominance, submission, as well as equality and solidarity.

II) Social and symbolic orders are force fields subjecting individuals to expectations, exploitations, and exclusions. *[subjectness!]* Subjectivity, operating on its own plane of consistency, allows for a range of affective and interpretive reactions to expectations and exclusions, including the capacity to 'speak back'. Collective actors may thus re-work the instances of subjectivation. Through the *work of subjectivation*, subjectivities and social orders stabilize (and disrupt) each other. Thus, subjectivation processes have a trajectory in biographical as well as in historical time. While *subjectivation regimes* produce modal subjectivities securing periods of stability, transformation may take place through mutual self-subjectivation, appropriation of instances of subjectivation, and self-government.

III) 'Subjects of rights' emerge when experiences of being subjected are reflected and articulated symbolically. This reflection and articulation is based on the civilizational development of subjectivities. Full *[Normativ]* modern subjectivity includes an orientation toward truth including an openness to alterity, and the visionary transcendence of imperfect, dysfunctional social and cultural orders. Subjectivation processes are problem-solving activities and vital for producing the agency which stabilizes *and* transforms modern societies. Desubjectivation, the loosening of the hold of norms opens the way for novel, more adequate and complex subjectivations. However, brutality, domination, exploitation and

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[2] Subjectivities are of relative permanency and extend across the social worlds an individual is interacting with. While *socialization* adapts individuals to specific contexts, *subjectivation* is an achievement which creates 'persons' who act after the image they project of themselves and which are projected onto them.

extractivism may cause anomic desubjectivation: The loss of agency which supports civilisational standards such as truth, justice, solidarity, and the transmission of historical experience, resulting in authoritarianism and fascism.

This definition serves to reinject the (philosophies of) history, conflict theory, and the analysis of social structure into subjectivation research on the basis of relational social thought. In the following section, we will spell out conceptual implications of this understanding under the labels of affectivity, materiality, and agency.

4. Concepts of empirical subjectivation research

The proposed definition of subjectivation reacts to shortcomings of both poststructuralist and interpretive sociology: Interpretive sociology conceptualizes the acting subject (*subjectum*) and its subjectivity. The interest in social action is informed by pragmatist and interpretive (or social constructivist) social thought and their formulations of alternatives to utilitarian theories of social action. One major drawback of the interpretive concept of subjectivity is its known lack of consideration of power and domination. This makes it difficult to develop an understanding of the structural constraints of social action. Approaches informed by 'poststructuralist' notions of power, on the other hand, address the subject as generated through various structures, apparatuses or dispositifs of subjection – and thus subjectivity is rejected as an independent term. It is a mere 'effect' of subjective reactions to subjectivating instances. Knowledge as a Nietzschean will to power is identified as the main mechanism of subjection. Resistance (Ger. Widerständigkeit) or obstinacy (Ger. Eigensinn) of the subject is but a remainder of a subjectivity totally shaped by subjection through the 'will to knowledge' (Foucault 1979) – that which does not fit into the rules of socially desired subjectness and may destabilize its functioning (see Caygill 2013; Schünzel & Traue 2016).

Empirical subjectivation research proposes an alternative to these two main lines of inquiry, a broad synthetical perspective with a specific outlook.[3] This line of argumentation, which combines a theoretical outlook with a methodological strategy, is certainly not entirely innovative; it takes its cues from earlier attempts to escape the wrong alternative between theories of action and theories of domination.

4.1 Affectivity and double subjectivation

3   See Pfahl & Traue in this volume; Bosančić 2017; Spies & Tuider 2017; Schürmann, Pfahl & Traue 2018; Bosančić, Pfahl & Traue 2019; Spies 2019.

Processes of subjectivation require more engagement, more activity, more work than is recognized in theories of ideology and Spinozist theories of the subject (Schürmann, Pfahl & Traue 2018). The 'internalization' of an expectation, especially an expectation concerning how to behave as a kind of person is by no means an automatic response, but requires a kind of emotional labour that we may discuss as 'affectivity'. The individual addressed by a subjectivating expectation must not only recognize what is expected, but also communicate to others that it embodies the normative expectation – she or he must 'feel' the role in order to play it convincingly and to minimize cognitive and emotional dissonance. This dissonance may be experienced as "role strain, the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations" (Goode 1960: 483), or the subject may fail to pass as the kind of person one is expected to embody (Goffman 1959, 1963). Other role theorists point out that in times of social stress and transformation, novel roles emerge which are designed to evade role stress, such as that of drug addict or slacker (Dreitzel 1968), indicating that embodiment is a necessity, but can also involve the joys of role-making (Turner 1962). Role theory highlights the activity of the actor in sustaining social structure, but does not theorize the affective experience of subjectivation. While current affect theory refers to the non-intentional effects of bodies on other bodies as theorized by Spinoza, we would like to invoke affectivity rather as phenomena of lived experiences of the body (Ger. Leib), which are perceived through intentionality and can be communicated: "one's own emotions must be felt subjectively" (Knoblauch 2017: 136; own translation).

Subjectivation is therefore always a twofold or 'double subjectivation': An expectation to conform may be directed forcefully toward an individual, but is not effective without a reactive activity of a subject, which is affected by the interpellation and learns to feel it and perform it. As double subjectivation, subjection is not simply the societal power to which subjects are submitted, but it also works through affectivity, allowing and pushing individuals to feel and show what they experience. Subjectivation, we might say, requires an activity from the individual, which is not simply a 'mirroring' of expectations but the acquirement of an affective action through which being-affected, relationality, and valuation 'become felt'. This activity mediated by communicative affectivity manifests itself in "self-positionings" (Bosančić 2017): Individuals position themselves explicitly or implicitly vis-à-vis (potentially) subjectivating expectations. Every subject position requires self-positioning by subjects. However, while such self-positionings require activity, they may be experienced as violent afflictions invoking emotions of humiliation.

Lena Schürmann (2013; in this volume) points out that especially those aware of their rights are prone to experiencing shame, hobbling their capacity to resist. The subject of rights is not a proud, self-certain subject, precisely because it perceives itself in social relations. Violations of rights often invoke forms of "feeling bad" (Cvetkovich 2012), which can only be undone collectively by working through them as *public* emotions.

While subjectivity itself remains opaque to the scientific observer, self-positionings and expressions of emotions may be observed empirically. In subjectivation research, such observations should not be limited to verbal activities or writing, they are performed and can therefore also be observed through other media: visually, acoustically or through other senses (see Traue, Blanc & Cambre 2019; Brodersen, Czedik, Pokitsch & Traue in this volume).

In double subjectivation, subjection can be said to work in different ways: firstly, it preformats 'as who' the individual may 'logically' or rather: conventionally appear, speak, and act, its potential roles, positioning it as an individual or as part of a group. Secondly, through the power of organizing the inequality structure, built space, and the structure of social rituals, relationality becomes a limiting and enabling moment. Within its relational network of relations, the individual may experience itself as somebody affected by and reacting to expectations or social norms. In this sense we speak of 'collective subjectivation', since individuals are not only constructed as individual subjects, but through the pre-formation of the affective relationality on which they must rely to experience and feel what is expected of them and what they in turn might expect from others, from other groups, or 'from society'.

While some scholars still prefer a 'decentered' subject (see Bosančić for a critical discussion in the volume) without reflecting on its agency, this assumption is clearly out of touch with the empirical observation of subjectivation processes. The 'relational subject' (Donati 2010; Donati & Archer 2015) is clearly endowed with agency: The capacity to feel what it is (not) supposed to feel, to remember and disregard what it has been taught, and to (mis-)step into action (Depelteau 2018). In subjectivation research, the affective and communicative responses to norms of being 'the right kind of person' are actively observed.

4.2. Subjectivation through objectivations

In current debates, subjectivation may appear to be a complex process taking place between individual and society or between two unequal human beings who become aware of themselves because others are governing, observing and addressing them (cf. Ricken, Casale & Thompson 2019; Alkemeyer, Budde & Freist 2013; Gelhard, Alkemeyer & Ricken 2013).

But how plausible is this assumption of an entirely social process without the intervention of materiality and technology? Reminding ourselves of the Aristotelian hypokeimenon, the subject is an entity with logical identity to which 'accidents happen'. When speaking of subjectivation, two differently positioned subjects seem to be involved: one subjectivating, the other subjected. In subjectivation research, an echo of the Aristotelian subject appears: Logicality and accidentality are split up between the logically consistent symbolic order as an agent of subjectivation, and the 'candidates' to whom it happens (from their perspective). Is this split in any way natural or unavoidable? What effectuates this split between activity and passivity, distributing them between the two entities? The problem is that the symbolic order only 'knows' recognizable subjects, attempting to harness their accidentality and test their identity. Individuals or groups which deviate from theologically or rationally or comprehensible identities have been branded as heathen, apostatic, mad, hysterical, generally as 'others' (Bauman 1991). While rational identity and accidental deviation from it have been naturalized in modernity (Hegel 1938), late modern social thought has struggled to find materialist, technological, and cultural mechanisms giving rise to such divisions – from Marx' commodity to McLuhan's media, Habermas' colonization of the life world to Strathern's dividual. Thus, theorizing subjectivation requires us to conceptualize the mediating third which is constitutive of relations between subjects.

The consistency of logical identity as well as the reality of the accident can only be assured by a "third" (Lindemann 2014): another person, an authority, a language, an artefact, a medium etc.; in short: an objectivation. While this conceptual figure is prominent in social theory, its implications for subjectivation need to be spelled out: Every subjectivation relies on *objectivations*. Identities as well as accidentalities need to be communicated, which is not possible without a medium, e.g. gesture, voice, sign, symbol etc. This simple insight has consequences for the theory of subjectivation. If the objectivation remains invisible, the split appears to be *within* the subject; the subject 'is' rational *but* emotional, obedient *but* deviant, active *but* passive. Karl Marx was one of the first to locate the origin of this split subject in production as the material organization of social relations:

> "The person objectifies himself in production, the thing subjectifies itself in the person; in distribution society mediates between production and consumption in the form of general, dominant determinants; in exchange the two are mediated by the chance [or: accidental] characteristics of the individual" (Marx 1973: 89).

The objectivation of the person in production is famously a condition of alienation through the fetishization of the commoditiy. But for Marx, following Hegel, this objectivation is also a precondition for emancipation, the condition for which Marx will see in a reappropriation of

the means of production. Note that the 'accidentality' of the subject may tilt the balance of power between production and consumption. This accidentality is a result of the manifold of relations forming the individual, resulting in an imaginative process which is never completely controlled by the territorializing categories of social orders.

In view of the recent technological process it has been argued, however, that imagination as well as memory are not internal, cognitive processes, but rely on objectivations. For instance, Walter Benjamin has argued that visual apparatuses such as cameras support an "optical unconscious [Optisch-Unbewußtes]" (Benjamin 1980: 371) which is created by an integration of human perception and imaging technologies. It has been noted that such technologies are no longer restricted to the alteration of perception, but extend toward the shaping of human memory (Stiegler 2001). Like Stiegler extending the philosophy of technology proposed by Gilbert Simondon (2016), philosopher Yuk Hui suggests that digital objects shape thoughts and imagination:

> "The question of technological convergence, first through networks, second through the intervention of imagination, announced the end of humans as holding the central position among objects and being at the center of knowledge—because humans now have to adapt to the rhythm of the technical system, not only physiologically and materially, as Marx described, but also cognitively (making-present)" (Hui 2016: 244).

The digital object is – through its recursive operations based on data referring to human perception and action – capable of suggesting perceptions or plans of action that would not be known or relevant without technology (such as a restaurant recommendation on google, a friendship recommendation on social media, or a stream of data based on previously used data). This diagnosis is consequential for notions of human agency:

> "The organization of digital objects through the standardization of data structures and the invention of algorithms is not simply what has fashionably been called the "organization of knowledge" but is also the organization of time [...] The imagination based on the programming of intersubjectivity through interobjective relations is an attempt to enact this, and it is no surprise to find that social norms are increasingly easily formed because of this programmability. That is to say, technological normativity is the source of social normativity" (Hui 2016: 247).

If technological normativity – which only becomes visible as such in the social – intervenes in social relations and the relation to oneself, subjectivation cannot be studied with studying the techniques of subjectivation. This realization has methodological consequences: alongside with the technologies, which do not contain, but effectuate normativity, the sensibilities afforded by technologies must be taken into account: Are subjectivation processes constituted by what is heard, seen, or read; by evaluation, recognition, or experiment; by discipline,

creativity, or care? There is thus no golden method for the study of subjectivation, and each method must consider the materiality of the social it is designed to bring into a clearer view. From these considerations we draw the conclusion that technological objectivations structuring relations and the inequalities embedded in them must be addressed in the study of subjectivation. Objectivations establish cognitive and affective relations between members of society – and thereby foster and hinder agency.

4.3. Can subjects talk back? Triple subjectivation and collective agency

Thinking subjectivation not from the perspective of subjection, but by appreciating the notion of subjectivity as the capacity to grasp reality and "talk back" (hooks 1989), the issue of agency becomes a more relevant part of the conversation on subjectivation. Without assuming agency as a relational process, notions such as resistance and solidarity remain philosophical abstractions. Only realizing the right to participate in the social process and to overcome exclusion links subjectivation to the question of who can be a 'subject of history'. Without this link, subjectivation research remains an empty exercise. bell hooks points out how the public and the personal, intimacy and politics are intertwined in the practice of "talking back":

> "Safety and sanity were to be sacrificed if I was to experience defiant speech. Though I risked them both, deep-seated fears and anxieties characterized my childhood days. I would speak but I would not ride a bike, play hardball, or hold the gray kitten" (hooks 1989: 7).

How does the social formation of relations, which subjectivates actors, chill, foster and shape their capacity to know reality and react upon that knowledge? In a pragmatist understanding, agency is the "engagement by actors of different structural environments […] which […] both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 970). If we follow Emirbayer and Mische in that „agency is always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998: 974), the question remains: what enables and hinders this engagement?

A 'response' to historical situations cannot be limited methodologically to individual responses, since a) an individual response my not have any effect on that situation, and b) the individual may not be able to "speak back" from a position of marginality (Spivak 1988) or have the chance become visible as a political subject (Rancière 2000). However, the chances for speaking back may be underestimated, given the expansion of communication technology. Speaking back should not be reduced to the form of official political or scientific speech, but

includes different registers, such as the use of visual symbols, which allows people to act 'in the image of' that which empowers them (Cambre 2015). But there are also structural constraints: The liberty to engage in non-utilitarian communicative practice, that is outside hierarchical relations, relies on a de-commodified organisation of the life-world (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990). The democratisation of educational and media apparatuses is another central condition for agentic engagement. Social organisation neither forcing nor hindering non-utilitarian social relations may reconcile the double-subjectivated split subject, not as an all-conscious individual, but as accident-driven subjects externalising their particularity in objectivation allowing for that particularity to be communicated. Ergo and contra Foucault, subjectivation is not necessarily subjection, but also a mutual process of co-subjectivation – 'triple subjectivation'. Finally, the critique of subjection and the exteriorisation of subjectivity reveals the repressed 'subject of rights': The subject of 'double subjectivation' feels and articulates the affects that interpellations awaken 'in' the subject, mediated by objectivations. The subjects of communication habitualize such feelings, whereas collective action does not provide the self with private feelings 'belonging' to the individual psyche, failing to satisfy the criterion of "singularity" (Reckwitz 2020). Individuals seduced and forced to 'feel' singularly suffer structural constraints in realizing their interests, wishes and visions insofar as these are relational phenomena and can only be communicated "within collectively organized contexts of action". Following Donati and Archer (2015), we assume that the predominant locus of agency shifts back and forth between society and subjects in the course of history (and life histories). Analytically, the *workings of subjectivation regimes* can be distinguished from the collective work of re-subjectivation. Taken as a whole, the intersection of both subjectivation regimes and the work of subjectivation is a societal *subjectivation process* (Ger. Subjektivierungsgeschehen).

5. Conclusions: The contemporary relevance of subjectivation research

What is understood by subjectivation is shaped by the genealogies of the term subject. The history of the term goes back to antiquity and suggests a dual character of the subject: It is a 'foundation' and as such an origin of action, but it is also prone to circumstances, to things simply happening to it. Furthermore, it has been noted that the process of subjectivation involves two subjects, one of which may be an institution, may be an organisation, may be a collective subject. These two subjects are defined by their relation, wherever relations always implying thirds – persons and objectivations. The relational character of subjectivation also indicates that subjectivation can be mutual and egalitarian or hierarchical and unequal.

We identified subjectness with the subject of rights as the conceptual articulation of the contradictory and conflictual opposition between hierarchical subjectivation and mutual self-subjectivation. The subject of rights enters into a negotiation with the powers-that-be by relying on solidary relations of self-subjectivation between equals. A first conclusion we may draw is, that there is no collective subject, but collective subjectivation, which extends agency from a reproductive to a transformatory force.

In recent years, the triadic relationality of the social has been highlighted (see Lindemann 2014, Donati & Archer 2015, Knoblauch 2017), emphasizing the interactive character of subjectivation. The relational understanding of subjectivation outlined in this chapter required us to reconsider three current concepts in subjectivation research: affectivity, objectivation, and agency. Beyond the cognitive-linguistic aspect of identity, affectivity targeting and activating the body is salient in subjectivation. The communication of affectivity as public emotions is determined by the availability of objectivations, such as symbols, language, visuals, resources, brands and commodities, the "contact media" of subjectivation (Traue 2017). Studying objectivation as part of subjectivation allows us to consider dialectic social thought and analyse processes of subject alienation, phenomena of split subjects such as projection, identification, and othering as well as (revolutionary) perspectives of re-appropriation of instances of subjectivation. It is famously difficult to study agency, because it is a condition of social action manifesting itself in a whole variety of practices, which might indicate simple conformity or transformatory power. In the study of responses to interpellations, classifications, and propaganda, the agency of the subject of right is rendered visible as the capacity to resist, to modify, to modulate, to repurpose, to ignore etc.

We should remind ourselves that the reconsideration of subjectivation comes at a time of disenchantment with the notion that a shared language can counter exploitation and violence: The idea, beginning perhaps with the invention of Volapük and Esperanto, blossoming with the linguistic turn and culminating in discourse ethics that language is the primary vehicle for civilising modern societies by bridging differences in interests and urging speakers to accept the 'unforced force of the better argument' (Habermas 1984). Discourse analysis was, as a critique of language usage in modernity (Foucault 1969), intimately tied to this project.

In the face of rising authoritarian tendencies, a global climate crisis, and a capitalism wholly unimpressed with the force of linguistic reason, it seems advisable to turn to the question of why a certain view of reality is convincing in the first place, and why people turn to beliefs that might seem to contradict their own interests or even reason itself. Analyses of the linguistic self of 'identity' and even the critique of a self created by knowledge as power are

of limited value in answering these questions. The concept of a 'subjects of rights' promises to provide a better grasp of the dynamics within 'communication societies' (Castells 2009), in which 'vertical' power relations are complemented by horizontal relationships allowing for a sharing of power.

Are subjectivities generated in lived relations powerless? Such ultimately pessimistic account of agency underestimates the real authority of self-government when it has taken its chances, from the French and American revolutions to the Paris Commune, the independence movements in India to the peaceful European revolutions of 1989. Also, consider the partial revolutions of antiracist struggles, the feminist and disability movement, which have all 'spoken back' to instances of subjectivation. They spoke back by reversing the subjectivating powers of categorizations, repression, and social inequalities. Considering such broad emancipatory movements, which have increased in scope in the past decades it seems inappropriate to conceptualize subjectivation as a one-way street. It is indeed an inter-action of subjects in relation. This is why we prefer to speak of subjectivation as a 'work' (Ger. Wirkung), that is a practical achievement of embodied and political practice (see Pfahl & Traue in this volume). Attempts of certain social groups to subject others to their image may be accepted, countered or resisted. Resisting does not rely on the choice of alternative possibilities, as Caygill (2013: 97) points out: "This resistant subject facing chance and violence, suffering the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', is bereft of the luxury of choice between possible outcomes [...] The capacity to resist occupies a subject that must resist". The theorist of modernization Shmuel Eisenstadt (1982) has pointed out that this communication, emancipation and democratization from the margin to the center is a mark of modernity.

In the observation of long durations, subjectivation research is confronted with the question of historical progress: Does history evolve through a number of steps leading to more complexity and greater 'humanity' or is it without direction? Critiques of modernity have led many scholars to abandon any idea of historical directedness or progress. The historicism that poststructuralism has flirted with has lost its plausibility: The institutional frameworks and mentalities of modern societies are threatened with breakdowns and descents into brutality and exploitation. This changes the conditions of description and critique. The immanent critique of the power inherent in the human sciences, of paternalism of the welfare state, of the classification errors of bureaucracy, and of exploitation within social democratic capitalism increasingly should be complemented by defences of democracy, justice and equality, however flawed their reality is, however unrealized their potential.

6. Literature

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