# The Subject of Politics — The Politics of the Subject

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My point of departure is the by now well-founded assessment that the ongoing processes of globalization threaten to topple established forms and norms of politics, the sovereignty of nation-states, as well as welfare agendas or legal systems — in short, globalization unsettles the subject of politics. I will take up these issues from a related but slightly different angle. My guiding question will be: What happens under the conditions of globalization to individual and collective subjects, to issues of self and identity? In short: When the subject of politics is in jeopardy, what follows for the politics of the subject?

This question is motivated by two general premises which concern the past; the first one is well known, the second one adds a particular focus to my initial question:

First, there is a conjunction between the rise of the modern nation-state and the equally modern concept of the subject. The field of the political is desocialized in the process of modernity insofar as immediate personal and social relations are replaced by anonymous structures and institutions. The individual subject is set free and is encouraged to free him- or herself from the bonds of his or her immediate social environment. At the same time, matters of personal identity, positioning, and alignment do not vanish but, on the contrary, acquire new significance and enhanced importance.

Second, the subject and issues of subjectivity have played a prominent role in specific areas of the political, namely in the make-up and outlook of so-called social movements and new social movements (some have also been dubbed cultural movements) which focus on questions of identity and on the recognition and representation of identities. So my guiding question includes the following: What will be the fate of movement politics, of identity politics, under the sway of globalization? The evolution of democracy has not been promoted by parties and parliaments alone. Social movements of various stripes have also contributed in often controversial, less acknowledged (and sometimes even suspect) but nevertheless important ways to this project. Due to their more flexible and spontaneous character, social movements have provided crucial impulses to broadening the scope of democratic consciousness and action. The recently accelerated and intensified process of globalization affects the conditions and options of social movements as much as those of other established institutions of traditional democracy.

From its onset, the process of modernity headed into two divergent directions. It was divided between a process of rationalization and an equally important process of subjectivization: "Modernity is not based upon one single principle. ... It is the result of a dialogue between Reason and Subjectivity."[1] This cleavage between reason, rationality, or objectivity on the one hand, and the subject, the collective and individual self, selfhood or subjectivity on the other, occurs in the aftermath of the decline of a concept of transcendence that shaped the metaphysical worldview of Christianity.

It is important to emphasize that *both* sides share the initial positive experience of liberation from the constraints of an all-encompassing holistic order (catholic in the original sense of *kat-holon*):

Autonomy in the perspective of rationalization is defined along the lines of function, efficiency, expediency, economy, and material utility without regard for any "higher" point of view, for religious or moral prescriptions of any kind. It involves a continual differentiation and pluralization of subsystems,

a fragmentation of reality, an opening of ever new horizons launching an immense increase in the range of human knowledge and agency.

Autonomy on the part of the subject implies that human beings are no longer assigned a position, rank, and place in a hierarchically structured eternal order, but are set free to find for themselves the meaning and essence of existence and determine its aims. As a consequence, the quest for identity and the pursuit of happiness become the two most important obsessions of the modern subject striving for self-assertion and self-determination, self-expression and self-fulfillment: "discourse about identity seems in some important sense distinctively modern — seems, indeed, intrinsic to and partially defining of the modern era."[2]

Despite this common ground, as far as the point of departure in the process of secularization and their shared participation in the rising principle of autonomy is concerned, it is at the same time obvious that rationalization and subjectivization steer into different directions. Rationalization, following the principles of function and efficiency, is exclusively focused on instrumental aspects. Rationalization is concerned with means (the standard definition of rational action is "to choose the optimum means of reaching a given end"). Subjectivization is about meaning, the significance of existence, the aims and ends of action. Or, put a different way: rationalization refers to the spheres of economy, technology, science, law, administration, the state; it pertains to the level of institutions, or, in short, to the system. Subjectivization, instead, refers to the lifeworld of individuals and communities, to belief systems/religion, personal aesthetic expression/art, and the private sphere of intimate relationships. Rationalization results in a differentiation of spheres; but subjectivization, albeit ensuing from the same process of decentering, must perform a contrary movement of closure, centering the subject. Ideally, of course, the opposite characteristics of rationalization and subjectivization may be understood as complementary, as belonging together. Like means and end, function and meaning are supposed to mutually involve each other, as two halves of a whole and hence as achieving or at least aspiring to an ultimate harmony. And it is obvious that both processes not only go back to the same historical roots but move in close correspondence with each other. Georg Simmel, an early and one of the most brilliant analysts of modernity, observed: "Individualität des Seins und Tuns erwächst … in dem Maße, wie der das Individuum sozial umgebende Kreis sich ausdehnt"[3] — Individuality of being and doing unfolds in the same measure as the social context of the individual is expanding. I will return to this point later, referring to it as "Simmel's law."

First we have to take a closer look at the ways in which subjectivization works. What comes into immediate focus is the strong tension not only between the two opposed complementary processes, but the considerable strains within the concept of subjectivity itself.

The centering and unifying task to which the subject has been assigned, in the aftermath of the demise of traditional concepts of order, is extremely difficult to fulfill and becomes more precarious further in the course of the irreversible and ever increasing process of differentiation and pluralization unleashed by the process of rationalization. The subject is forced to take up the godlike position of a transcendental nodal point in order to ensure the unity and totality of being and experience. "But the principle of subjectivity is not powerful enough to regenerate the unifying power of religion in the medium of reason. … The demotion of religion leads to a split … which the Enlightenment cannot overcome by its own power."[4] Within the philosophical discourse of modernity, this problematic ontological position of the subject entails the hypothesis of a break between an intelligible and an empirical subject ("a problematic doubling of the self-relating subject"[5]); in the context of other discourses and in social reality, the subject sets out on a search for safe foundations of identity. This search leads more or less directly to the categories of nature and culture. This is the moment when identity politics is born in Western thought.

It goes without saying that in some sense nature and culture have always existed. Their conceptualization, however, begins only in the late 18th century. The concepts of nature and culture substitute notions of origin and tradition, which played comparable roles in religious, mythological, and metaphysical narratives of premodern times. The idea of origin in an act of creation refers to a transcendent anchorage mediated to the present through the chain of tradition. Nature and culture, however, are completely modern ideas, since they lack a foundation in transcendence; rather, they are designed to make up for this very loss. Yet the modernity of these two concepts is partly concealed, as it is their mission to balance the effects of modernity and cover at least some of its costs. Thus a powerful tension exists between background and intent. Therefore, culture and nature belong to a class of concepts that I would name "concepts of nostalgia" because they attempt to recapture what is about to vanish or is already lost. In this effort to keep alive something that is gone, such concepts do not exactly *recover* but rather *discover* or even "invent" what they are supposed to conserve. Zygmunt Bauman describes this paradox very lucidly: "Aspects of experience come into focus and begin to be debated in earnest when they can no longer be taken for granted; when they cease to be self-evident … The more feeble they seem, the stronger is the urge … to demonstrate the solidity of… their foundations. ‚Identity' is no exception; it had become a matter of acute reflection once the likelihood of its survival without reflection began to dwindle."[6] And further: "… at no time did identity ‚become' a problem; it was a ‚problem' from its birth — was born as a problem (that is, as something one needs to do something about — as a task), could exist only as a problem … ‚Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from uncertainty. … Though all too often hypostasized as an attribute of a material entity, identity has the ontological status of a project and a postulate."[7] In other words, the discourse on identity indicates a crisis in exactly that which is supposed to be its object. Since this is a feature that will also prove to be a long-term constituent of subjectivity and subjectivization, we may register it under the title of "Bauman's law." ‚While Simmel's law designates a linkage in the processes of rationalization and subjectivization, Bauman's law draws attention to an equally original and hereditary asymmetry between them, thus hinting at the highly precarious status on the side of subjectivization.

The concepts of nature and culture differ in many respects, but they share one characteristic which is decisive for the formation of identity: both are designed to signify what cannot or at least cannot easily be altered, what is supposed to transcend change. The individual is seen to be endowed with innate characteristics, attributes of identity which are irreversibly given by nature: "all that which is mysteriously given us by birth … includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds."[8] Of course, the qualities of culture are not in the same way innate, on the contrary, they are man-made and defined as what distinguishes humans from animals. But the making of culture is a long-term process exceeding the agency of the subject almost to the same extent as the natural conditions of its existence are beyond reach. The individual is born into a family and a larger community whom it has not chosen; it is socialized into a way of life, a system of beliefs, norms, and values, into certain ways of seeing the world, of feeling and behaving, as well as into a language (in the literal and metaphorical sense). The individual may reflect and also act upon all that and even decide to leave its heritage behind, but this is more difficult than changing other aspects of its social existence. I would propose distinguishing between cultural attributes as native (*eingeboren*) versus natural attributes as innate (*angeboren*),[9] yet both classes are equally separate from the principles of modern society.

To place the foundations of identity into the surrogate transcendence of culture and nature, beyond the command of choice and agency, produces two different but interdependent effects. On the one hand, it is evident that nature and culture impose necessity and constraint on the subject; on the other hand, it is precisely this dependence that allows the subject to escape the grip of society. As a result, the subject is more and other than the sum of social role, place, status, or function. In other words, the subject maintains an *alterity* toward the rules and mechanisms of society, a distance from

the "ways of the world," comparable to the religious believer whose liability for the secular realm is limited by his or her obligation to the higher commandments of his or her creed. This alterity toward one (lower-level) order ensuing from an obligation to another (higher-level) order endows the subject with "inwardness" or "depth," from which, at least potentially, resistance against the "world" may spring. As it is widely agreed that "social criticism might require social exile," a "view from outside the walls of the city,"[10] the quality of alterity is pivotal for the formulation of a radical opposition against reality.

Those features of nature and culture that serve to provide identity and stability to the individual subject merge in a concept of collective identity that shares the same linguistic root with *innate* and *native*, namely the concept of *nation*. Under the conditions of modernity and the crisis of traditional foundations of identity which ensues, the nation-state becomes not the only but certainly the most prominent source of individual and collective identity. It is by no means accidental that the idea of the modern nation-state takes its departure at a if not *the* crucial moment in the process of modernity, in the American and French Revolutions.[11] The modern idea of the nation shows the same kind of double-edged feature that I have analyzed as typical of the process of subjectivization. On the one hand, it embraces the ideal of autonomy and selfdetermination, in this case, of a collective body, named the people, whose intention to break free from bondage may be directed against either an *ancien régime* or foreign rule. On the other hand, the idea of the nation embodies the attempt to give direction to this autonomy of the people in a common identity which is beyond choice but which binds the individuals in a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate). The idea of a national community and the sense of allegiance and belonging that it inspires, known as nationalism, are closely linked to the concepts of nature and culture. The identity of the people deduced from nature, that is to say, from blood and soil, descent and territory. In addition to these natural features, identity is derived from culture, a common language, history, custom, and lore. The most important element that the purported "roots" in nature and culture convey to the nation-state is its quasi-transcendence. The nation needs such a transcendent status in order to function as the site of reconciliation and unification, in contrast to the modern civil society, which not only undergoes a constant process of fragmentation and transformation but furthermore is dominated by the dividing principle of competition.[12] The individual as well as the collective subject under the guise of the nation-state must assume a position of alterity if they are to function as sites of identity and orientation.

It is easy to discern a deep incongruity within the concept of subjectivity as well as *among* individual and collective identities. The process of modernity as promoting rationalization and subjectivization, for the first time in Western history, privileges the individual subject over the community, the particular over the whole. But as soon as this happens, it is of course consistent that the subject, who is set free to pursue his or her self-chosen aims and ends, must try to define guidelines for this action. The subject unbound from the great chain of being immediately and necessarily asks: "Who am I, where do I come from, where am I going to, and who will accompany me on my journey?" And therefore it is at the very moment of triumph of the unencumbered self that the desire to rid this self again of the burden of individuation and its manifold responsibilities is ignited (Nietzsche's idea of *Zerbrechen der Individuation*). This is also the moment when the priority shifts back from the pole of the individual subject to questions of a collective identity. But whenever and wherever safe ground on which the autonomous decision of the subject might be based comes into sight, or the burden of individual responsibility might be alleviated by a community, the autonomy of the modern subject is perceived as imperiled, and the subject is instantly up in arms against this menace. Craving for guidance, it is at the same time intolerant of any kind of authority or dependence. Accordingly, the modern nation-state wavers between democratic principles and authoritarian structures (and sometimes totalitarian temptations). Modern subjectivity is torn between the impulse to rejoice at the loss of the fetters of origin, tradition, and conventional wisdom of all kinds, on the one hand, and the urge to reestablish

certainty, orientation, and solidarity on the other. This winds up as a no-win situation: each gain of autonomy engenders fear and therefore calls forth a renewed quest for identity, while each effort to settle down on some presumably secure basis is in turn immediately suspected of endangering the hard-won freedom. The subject vacillates between the promise of liberation and the threat of disorientation, it abhors the yoke of tutelage as much as it fears the abandonment of freedom.

Should this seem to be an irresolvably tragic element in the identity-formation of the modern subject, the picture darkens when we take into account one further aspect. The existential conflict between certainty/orientation/solidarity and autonomy is projected onto social and political divisions among different collective subjects. The two inevitable poles of identity-formation, namely, the ambivalence between autonomy and belonging, oscillate at the same time as a dichotomy between self and other. The positive and desirable aspects of identity formation translate into inclusion while the negative and disadvantageous aspects are reflected in exclusion. On the positive side, we identify "us" by way of common characteristics of culture and nature that raise the nation above the rationale and rationality of society and its nexus of efficiency and profitability. On the negative side, we identify "them" as below the societal processes because of specific natural and cultural constraints. "We" are exempt, but "they" are excluded; "we" are above, but "they" are below the level of society; for "us" identity promises belonging, for "them" identity means confinement; "we" are singled out by cultural distinctions, but "they" are marked by natural traits.[13] In short, the desire motivating a critical cultural discourse to raise matters of identity *above* the social process gets entangled in the struggle for power *within* the social and political process.

From early on, some identities, in the first place national identities and, to a lesser degree, class identities, manage to figure on the positive side. Although they do invite polarization between "us" and "them," and although such confrontations are known to have generated disastrously bloody consequences in the course of Western history of the 19th and 20th centuries, these are conceived of as taking place on the same level, on more or less equal terms, so that the competition between identities may take the form of a conflict A vs. B. The rupture is deeper, with repercussions even more devastating, in the cases of ethnicity and gender. Here, one side claims the position of identity but repudiates the right of the other side to make the same claim. In this case, the conflict takes on the form of A vs. Non-A, confronting a position of identity with a lack of identity. Here the lines of inclusion and exclusion are drawn in a far more rigid fashion. The specifically modern maladies of racism and sexism develop on this ground, that is, on the dark side of the modern quest for identity in nature and culture.

The radically opposed positive and negative aspects of this whole complex of identity politics are perhaps nowhere so intricately connected as in the case of the category of gender. The division of public and private realms in modern society not only reflects the persisting division of labor along the lines of gender difference but, in addition, the modern private sphere of family and intimate personal relationships plays a pivotal role in creating a highly valued sphere beyond the reach of all the effects and side-effects of modernization that are experienced as negative. The private sphere comes to be revered as a "haven in a heartless world," as a refuge of human values expunged from the public sphere, and as the most important resource (birthplace and cradle in the literal sense) of the identity-formation of the subject (*Bildung*). The positive characteristics of the bourgeois private sphere are attributed to women, who are chiefly assigned the duty to inculcate and enact the values and functions of the family. But at the same time, the need to maintain this complex societal construct reinforces the exclusion of women from legal, economic, social, and political rights and participation. The very same reference to nature and culture invoked to solemnize the private sphere as exempt

from modern society's war of all against all is used or abused to justify the exclusion of women from everything other than family life. The margin between the boons and banes of identity politics is extremely narrow.

In the long run, however, the denied right of the other generates opposition and leads to the formation of new social movements that struggle against the unequal distribution and unjust divisions that this kind of identity politics implies. Even the most derogatory xeno-identification may be turned into a favorable self-identification to become the nucleus of new forms of identity politics. Notwithstanding substantial differences between movements that revolve around national or class identities and movements taking their departure from the categories of ethnicity/race and gender, the structure of identity politics remains, in principle, the same. The obvious ambiguity of the categories of nature and culture does not diminish their attractiveness as a mainstay of resistance against the conditions of society. And finally, the double dilemma of freedom vs. certainty and inclusion vs. exclusion also persists.

At this point, I will not pursue the historical development of identity politics and their dialectics any further. Instead I shall turn to some still more urgent questions concerning present and future politics of the subject.

"There has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of ‚identity."[14] This dramatically heightened interest in issues of identity has sparked off a widespread debate, giving occasion to recall Simmel's law: "Individuality of being and doing unfolds in the same measure as the social context of the individual is expanding." If this still holds true, we have to understand the "discursive explosion" of recent years as the flip side of an equally dramatic further step in the process of rationalization. The renewed attention paid to identity and identity politics must be perceived against the background of the tremendous progress of *globalization* that we are witnessing today. In a similar vein as rationalization was accompanied by subjectivization, globalization calls forth individualization. In addition, we have perhaps even more reason to assume that Bauman's law is also still valid, according to which we should recognize the increased preoccupation with identity as a symptom of its crisis.

To invoke Simmel's and Bauman's laws means to stress aspects of continuation in the long-term process of modernity. Although such aspects are clearly discernible, as the current process of globalization flows from and carries on the longstanding process of rationalization, there are nevertheless significant differences between past and present that have to be taken into account as well. It is important to distinguish between elements of continuity and those of discontinuity, for it is as crucial not to mistake old structures for new phenomena as it is necessary not to react in old ways to new exigencies. This involves the much discussed question of a possible transition to a postmodern era or, rather, to a later stage in the ongoing process and project of modernity. While modernity is defined in sharp contrast to a premodern phase of history, by a clear-cut break in the flow of time, as expressed in the metaphor of "revolution," no such rupture appears to occur in the present. On the contrary, the process of modernization is continued and intensified. But it is this very acceleration, the increased speed and extent of modernization, that might induce the transformation into a new stage. The transition from modernity to postmodernity, or from an earlier to a later stage of modernity, does not occur in the form of a break from the previous phase but as its excess.

Among the numerous factors to bring about a real sea change, we have, above all, to consider that the thrust of the current wave of innovation and rationalization is taking place in the fields of genetic engineering and communications technology with effects of commodification in the wings that have massively fueled a new economy. The consequences are so far-reaching that it is no exaggeration to

speak of a new level of industrial revolution and a new stage in the evolution of capitalism. The full impact on the future is as yet hardly foreseeable but the relevance for issues of identity and identity politics is obvious enough even now. As major processes of industrialization and commercialization occur in the domains of genetics/reproduction and communication, human nature and culture become the immediate objects of rapid change. Once more the scope of human agency is considerably enlarged, requiring political and social as well as individual decision making and action. Hence the idea of an immutable realm beyond the vagaries of the societal process and immune to historical change, as was once deemed necessary in order to serve as base of identity-building, is no longer tenable. The specifically modern construction of nature and culture as extraterritorial foundations of collective and individual identities has certainly been fictitious right from the outset, but in the light of recent developments, the last glimmer of plausibility is lost. To take these developments seriously means to discern that the paths which served as exits from the identity crisis in earlier phases of the process of modernity are barred today. Furthermore, common definitions of life and death as well as the order of time and space are overturned in ways unheard-of ever before in human history. Previous waves of technological innovation certainly had deep and lasting effects on the realms of culture and nature (this is what the rise of the concepts of the subject and its identity politics was about), but only the recent industrial revolution breaks out in their very heartlands, threatening to overthrow the entire symbolic order of Western thought.

Given the quantity and quality of innovations that separate the current stage of the process of rationalization from preceding waves, it is surprising how much the reactions to this new situation on the part of subjectivity still resemble past patterns. The familiar antagonism, the conflict between the gain in freedom and the loss of certainty, is reinstated or continued. On the one hand, there is again the impulse to see the widening of the circle owing to globalization as liberating. On the other hand, there are again fearful reactions regretting the loss of safe foundations, prompting efforts to reestablish them. The only difference between the present stage and its precedents seems to be that both types of reaction appear radicalized and therefore even more polarized than before.

Under the rubric of a celebratory postmodernism those voices may be summarized who rejoice in the liberating prospects of globalization, including the option to free the self from the constraints which the modern concept of the subject imposed. Transgressing the imprints of national, class, or gender identity in a multicultural global society seems to open up new dimensions of freedom of choice, offering the possibility to willfully, if not arbitrarily, construct, constantly shape, and reshape one's identity according to shifting individual preferences, finally destroying the notorious illusions of imagined foundations in nature and culture. Flexibility and fluidity of identity are acclaimed as new ideals, not least because cultural and historical studies of various stripes have thrown — and rightly so — a very negative light on the history of identity politics, in particular on its involvement with racism and sexism.

This postmodern attitude stands in stark contrast, but actually must rather be considered in close connection to, the opposite stance, which may be summarized under the heading of fundamentalism, if we agree to understand this term in a broad sense. The fundamentalist attitude performs the reverse movement in the desperate but stubborn attempt to reassert or reestablish foundations that are believed to be safe, stable, and untainted by either technological/ social progress or postmodern subversion. The scope of such endeavors extends from the promotion of family values in advanced industrial societies to the mobilization of ancient religious visions or indigenous cultures. It is evident that the attitudes of postmodern relativism and fundamentalist essentialism are distributed along certain positional differences and also imply power differentials. Individuals or groups who expect to profit from the progress of globalization are more ready to embrace the postmodern attitude, while those who fear to be on the losing side tend to cling to essentialist alternatives.

Behind the new labels of postmodernism vs. fundamentalism, the contradictory yet circular movement from the triumph of individual freedom to the depression of disorientation and back again is repeated, if only on a larger scale, at higher speed, and with increased volatility among the contrary positions. Basically, there is nothing premodern about essentialism/fundamentalism and there is nothing postmodern about that which comes under this buzzword, nor is there a real contradiction between the two poles. Both alternatives are two sides of a single pattern of reactions to the process of modernity, a pattern that has accompanied this process all along. The fact that both positions now appear as more extreme and their contrast more acute must be read as symptoms of how inadequate *both* have become today. It is high time to break the vicious circle between the notion of a gain of freedom and the search for roots to which the reactions of fundamentalism and postmodernism are still relating. Under the conditions of rationalization/subjectivization, there was both a gain in freedom to rejoice in, as well as a loss of certainty to make up for. Under the continual yet altered conditions of globalization/individualization, however, we have reached a situation of "neither-nor": neither can we hope to compensate the loss of orientation, certainty, or solidarity in a quest for new foundations, nor can we celebrate the freedom we will win.

While this outcome may be more obvious (at least to liberal Western eyes) in the case of the fundamentalist reaction, which becomes bottomless absent the possibility of finding firm ground in nature or culture, as these realms are the main targets of rampant innovation, it is no less pertinent to the opposite case of the postmodern reaction. Only at a very superficial first glance might the current situation seem to favor a further liberation of subjectivity under the guise of individualization. A closer look reveals that the subject who would be able to enjoy his or her liberation from all bonds of identity vanishes in the aftermath of their complete dismissal.

The changes in the structure and character of subjectivity that underlie the transition from the subject to the individual and distinguish the ongoing post-- modern process of individualization from the modern process of subjectivization are linked to, but are at the same time obliterated by, a change in the main factor of identity-building. Parallel to the relative retreat of more conventional makers and markers of identity, another powerful player in the game of identity and identity politics comes to the fore: the issue of consumption. The more the subject is set free from traditional bonds and obliged to create and construct its individual identity, the more immediately and invariably it will turn to the marketplace for guidance. The subject begins to "shop for the real self." In the quest for identity, one kind of dependence is replaced by another, but this is to a certain degree concealed by the particular rhetoric of consumption that constantly appeals to the freedom of choice and celebrates the individual as subject of his or her sovereign purchase decision.

Consumption is not exactly a new player in this field, for it has performed the function of "a privileged medium for negotiating identity and status within post-traditional society"[15] ever since Western society began to understand itself a "post-traditional"; this is to say, since the onset of modernity. What is new about the current situation is not that the self dresses and expresses identity by way of acquisition and display of consumer goods, but the immense expansion in what belongs to the sphere of consumption. Not only material articles of all sorts create our lifestyles but, in addition, more and more services, relations, values, concepts, ideas, ultimately the generation of (human) life itself, and social existence as a whole, are colonized by the market. In particular, the entire gamut of inventions and discoveries in the field of the new technologies immediately assume commodity form. This advanced stage of consumer culture is correctly labeled as "hypercommodification," a term being defined as follows: "hypercommodification ... erodes the distinction between commodified and non-commodified regions and gives a twist to the commodification of meaning."[16]

The consequences can hardly be overrated. When the production of meaning is commercialized, the division of functions between the sphere of subjectivized meaning and the rationalized sphere of instrumental reason as the sphere of means is overruled. The distinction between system integration and social integration becomes blurred; social integration tends to be replaced by system integration, meaning and ends tend to be overrun by means. The repercussions are reflected in a coinage such as that of *consumer culture*, forcing together the two worlds of economy and culture that were to be carefully kept apart (or at least distinguished as high and low culture) under the conditions of modernity. In other words, not under the impact of production but under the impact of consumption, capitalism is identified with and as culture. For the first time in its history, capitalism does not spare culture but *becomes* culture.

Under the hegemony of consumer culture, the position of subjectivity is at once "hardened" and "weakened." This double-edged move is not to be confused with the familiar dialectics of win and loss, although it is striking to see a similar form of polarization being recapitulated under altered conditions.

On the one hand, the position of subjectivity is hardened, or, as Alain Touraine puts it, the subject gets locked in an "obsession with identity," as the cleavage between the pole of rationality/the system and the pole of subjectivity/ individuality deepens — to the detriment of both: "Without Reason, the Subject is trapped in to an obsession with identity; without the Subject, Reason becomes an instrument of might."[17] Touraine regrets the "complete dissociation between system and actors, between the technical or economic world and the world of subjectivity. As our society comes increasingly to resemble a firm fighting for its survival in an international market, there is a widespread obsession with an identity which can no longer be defined in social terms. In poor countries it takes the form of a new communitarianism; in rich countries, that of narcissistic individualism" — the fundamentalist and postmodern positions being two sides of the same coin. Touraine's fear: "A complete divorce between public and private life would lead to the triumph of powers defined purely in terms of management and strategy. The majority would react by retreating in to [*sic*] a private space, and that would leave a bottomless void where there was once the public, social and political space that gave birth to modern democracies."[18] The position of subjectivity is hardened, since identity politics applies more and more exclusively to either individual identities or to that of small communities, whereas the notion of a universal public sphere and the idea of a common good recedes into the background.

On the other hand, the position of subjectivity is weakened. With the foundations in nature and culture eroding and the influence of social ties diminishing, the individual is exposed to the (economic) system without mediation or restraint. Without any points of reference in a sphere beyond the reach of the societal process, the subject loses its "alterity" to distinguish it from this process. It must be kept in mind that this does not only affect issues of identity-formation but also concerns the capacity for dissociation from and resistance against a given reality, a capacity that amounts to an important component in the modern understanding of freedom. Together with the constructs of nature and culture, those fields "which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity"[19] disappear. As a consequence, the individual is devoid of the "depth" or inwardness with which the subject was invested. From this perspective, the position of subjectivity now looks alarmingly feeble. "The managed possession of consumer goods and objects is individualizing, atomizing and dehistoricizing. As a producer ... the worker presupposes others ... As a consumer, man becomes solitary again, or cellular — at best, he[20] becomes gregarious ... The structures of consumption are both very fluid and closed ... The consumer object isolates. The private sphere has no concrete negativity because it is enfolded on its objects, which have none."[21] "A modern world based on pure individual self-interest leaves the individual in a chronically weak condition. Without a binding collective culture, without solidarity, the individual — isolated, adrift on tides of desires — is open to manipu-

lation and the most subtle forms of unfreedom."[22] Basically all features attributed to the ideal postmodern identity, such as flexibility, reflexivity, fluidity, versatility, creativity, openness, (self)-irony, are much less achievements of a more enlightened and liberal era that has finally freed the self from the confinement of essentialist subjecthood; they are, instead, to be explained by the exigencies of late capitalism and its concomitant, the hegemony of consumption. However, the weakening or, rather, the adaptation of the subject to the conditions of market society will not bring about the definite end, the "death" of the subject — for one simple reason: the subject is "practically irreplaceable"[23] as consumer. Late modern economy needs the subject position, and it needs the subject in exactly this weak position of the *soggetto debole* that postmodern theory acclaims. Hence, there is little normative input or critical surplus in the plea to keep up a weak subject position for "strategic" reasons, for example, in order to not completely forfeit the subject of movement politics.[24] Market society accomplishes this feat anyway.

For the first time over a long period in Western history, the subject loses its agency and, in particular, its status as agent of resistance against the "ways of the world," against the machinery of a deficient society.

In the end, a negative answer seems to impose itself to my initial question concerning the future of social movements and the development of democracy. And yet, I would caution against an overly pessimistic conclusion.

Keeping in mind the highly problematic character of identity-building on the foundations of nature and culture, I see, in principle, little reason to regret the shift to other ways of resolving these questions. There is no need to be any more critical of identity-formation via consumer culture than with regard to more conventional methods — though there is no reason to be less critical either. The configuration of the subject position has always depended on the formative principles of the respective society and this continues to be the case to the present day. The issue of subjectivity and subject identity must be placed in the context of the shift from the hegemony of politics to the hegemony of economy which began with the fall of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.[25] This shift brings about a further step in the process of secularization in the sense that the quest for a transcendental point of reference in which the social order would have to be grounded is abandoned. Under the hegemony of the political, the principle impulse was to substitute a lost transcendent anchorage. In accordance with this intention, the subject was endowed with a quasi-transcendent status and with roots in the extra-societal realms of nature and culture. Capitalist economy instead operates without such a premise, since it does not imply the model of a holistic metaphysical order on which the concept of the political was still molded, but is organized as a self-referential and self-perpetuating mechanism. Such a system has neither need nor use for a transcendental subject position.

However, this loss of the classical locus of resistance "outside the walls of the city" must not necessarily result in the end of social criticism. Above all else, there is an urgent need and a demand for such criticism in view of the anomic features of contemporary society. The world-system of late capitalism is riddled with problems. On the one hand, there are countless forms of psychological and cultural discontent within the privileged centers of consumer culture. On the other hand, there are the infinitely more severe and blatant problems of utter poverty and, still worse, pauperization and exploitation of a growing majority of people all over the world. If the different types of misery, cultural discontent, and social resentment should ever reach a point of intersection, cutting across the lines of social and political divisions as well as divergent "identities," the economic system might prove to be much less stable than it looks today.

Given the need for social criticism, there will be ways to meet this demand. Last but not least, the ideas of freedom and dignity of the human subject as developed in the history of Western thought remain — or, rather, they might yet become — an important weapon in an arsenal of resistance and critique. In order to use this potential, we must not close our eyes to the contingent conditions and limitations of its history. The freedom and dignity of the human subject were never or nowhere reality. We have no paradise to lose but we do have a few past visions to redeem; visions born in the interstices of the errors and horrors of the past.

In one way or another, the politics of the rebellious subject contesting the conditions of the dominant economic system will take on the form of movement politics. This implies the relinking of isolated subjects of consumption into a kind of community. But this community cannot revert to any preestablished common identity. It must at the same time presuppose as well as transgress the individual.

*Cornelia Klinger. The Subjects of Politics. In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Democracy Unrealized. Documenta11_ Platform1. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 254–266.*

## References

**1** Alain Touraine, Critique of Modernity, trans. David Macey (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), p.6.

**2** Craig Calhoun, Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), P. 193.

**3** Georg Simmel, Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung, vol. 2 of Gesammelte Werke (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1983), ch. 10: "Die Erweiterung der Gruppe und die Ausbildung der Individualität," p. 527.

**4** Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), P. 20.

**5** Ibid., p. 265.

**6** Zygmunt Bauman, Culture as Praxis (London: Sage, 1999), p. xxix. The modern mind is rich in nostalgic notions; nature, culture, and identity are preeminent; "aura" or "memory" are further cases in point.

**7** Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist — or a Short History of Identity," in Questions of Cultural Identity, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 18, 19.

**8** Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), new ed. with added prefaces (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), pp. 300ff. Arendt ardently endeavored to keep these matters off the political agenda as a reaction against fascist politics in which the modern effort to substitute the lost roots in blood and soil found its notorious apogee.

**9** The gist of both is the same but they differ in degree and value. It is obvious that the binding power of nature over the subject is taken to be stronger than that of culture. On the other hand, the lesser degree of necessity attributed to the cultural "birthmarks" of the subject and the fact that these are products of human agency explains their higher evaluation.

**10** Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," Praxis International 11, no.2 (1991), p. 146.

**11** "The American Revolution added a further ingredient to the political form of modern society. It asserted the principle of self-determination. Only those states were legitimate in which a people of common culture ruled for themselves a common territory. Foreign rule, or rule by an alien elite, as in the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, was unnatural. Only nation-states were natural political entities; only they were legitimate" (Entry "Modernization" in Encyclopaedia Britannica 1999-2000, www.britannica.com., p. 5).

**12** David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, Culture and the State (New York: Routledge, 1998). Lloyd and Thomas name three important aspects of convergence between the concept of the modern nation-state and that of modern culture. "Both are given the role of furnishing sites of reconciliation for a civil and political society that is seen to be riven by conflict and contradiction. Both are seen as the sites in which the highest expressions of human being and human freedom are realized. Both are seen as hedges against the potential anarchy of rapidly transforming societies" (p. 1).

**13** At this point a certain hierarchical element divides the twin concepts of nature and culture. The positive identification is more often based on culture; the negative attribution, legitimating exclusion, refers inevitably to nature.

**14** Stuart Hall, "Who Needs ‚Identity'?," in Questions of Cultural Identity, ed. Hall and du Gay, p. 1.

**15** Don Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity (Oxford: Polity Press, 1997), pp. 29ff.

**16** Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski, and Malcolm Waters, Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society (London: Sage, 1992), p. 74. "Until the early years of the 20th century ... family, class and community ties and religious affiliation were basic to identity-formation and were relatively non-cornmodified. In such circumstances a wide variety of goods ... can be sold in association with their ‚images.' The limiting condition is that the images must engage with conceptions of self rooted in non-commodified relations" (p. 60). In the course of the 20th century, this undergoes a more or less rapid change: "the images and daydreams which link commodity with identity no longer need to orient themselves to a non-commodified region of meaning. In hypercommodification, commodified meanings become self-referential" (p. 61). "Style follows the erosion of institutionalized cultural authority" (p. 60).

**17** Touraine, Critique of Modernity, p. 6.

**18** Ibid.

**19** Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 49.

**20** The use of the generic masculine form is particularly misleading in this case as the sphere and the activity of consumption is usually identified with women and femininity (see, e.g., Rita Felski, The Gender of Modernity [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995]). In overlooking this fact, Baudrillard misses the opportunity to consider the process of the weakening of the subject under the aspect of "feminization."

**21** Jean Baudrillard, The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures (London: Sage, 1998), p. 85. Such a nostalgic praise of the "concrete negativity" that the bourgeois private sphere offered may appear justified in the present circumstances. But it should not make us forget the extremely high price of social injustice and exclusion that the construct of a secluded private sphere demanded in the past.

**22** Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity, p. 73.

**23** Baudrillard, The Consumer Society, p. 83.

**24** Cf. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.49.

**25** To speak of such a shift does not imply that capitalist economy has not played an immensely important role before, or, on the other hand, that politics in the guise of the nation-state or in any other form ceases to exist.