Collective and Individual Subjectivities. Contemporary perspectives for being and doing in common

Subjetividade individual e coletiva: perspetivas contemporâneas para *ser* e *fazer em comum*

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Abstract: The conceptual domain of subjectivity exceeds the polarized meanings of the philosophical subject (as interiorized and ontological-transcendental subjectivity related to the Cartesian and Kantian subjects) and of the political, legal, and historic subject. The quasi-opposition between those interpretations - in which philosophy could even be read as an inhibitor of the political subject - is questioned by today's struggles against multiple forms of domination. Struggles where subjectivity interconnects with, e.g., the universal, identity politics, and intersectionality. Following this, I propose a brief analysis of alternative configurations of subjectivity, combined with an attention to processes of subjectivation. I intend to highlight the relevance, for effective socio-political transformations, in moving from a primarily abstract dimension of subjectivity to one of relationality between theory, practice, and humanity.

Keywords: subjectivity, subjectivation, democratic struggles, political philosophy, the common.

Resumo: O domínio conceptual da subjetividade não se esgota nos significados polarizados do sujeito filosófico (enquanto subjetividade interiorizada ou ontológico-transcendental, afim dos sujeitos cartesiano e kantiano) e do sujeito político, jurídico e histórico. A quási oposição entre essas leituras - onde a filosofia pode mesmo ser lida como inibidora do sujeito político - é, porém, questionada no âmbito de lutas atuais contra múltiplas formas de dominação. Lutas onde a subjetividade se relaciona com o universal, com políticas de identidade e com a interseccionalidade. Assim, propõe-se uma breve análise de configurações alternativas de subjetividade e de processos de subjetivação. Pretende-se destacar a relevância, para transformações sociopolíticas efetivas, da passagem de uma dimensão primordialmente abstrata da subjetividade para outra, relacional, entre teoria, prática e humanidade.

Palavras-chave: subjetividade, subjetivação, lutas democráticas, filosofia política, o em comum.

Subjectivity is sometimes addressed as the work of the self-funded, *a priori* ontological-transcendental subject, and other times as a passive condition, resulting from being "subjected to" external influences. These are, however, polarized meanings that tend to separate the philosophical subject from the political (Marx), legally instituted (Rousseau), and historic (Hegel) subjects. In several contemporary philosophical thoughts, however, the ambiguity and duality of the term "subject" is assumed (cf. Balibar, 2020; Power, 2007), underlining false aporias that arise from those concurrent lines. They point furthermore to the opportunity of rethinking, not only what in the subject is unity, passivity, subjection, but also what in the subject is heterogeneous, action, and subjectification.[1]

According to Alain Renaut, the history of subjectivity is not exactly linear, nor does it establish "one" subjectivity; it is plural, and subjectivity acquires different interpretations (e.g., rationalist, empiricist, metaphysical and critical) (cf. 1997, p. 13). The ways in which the history of subjectivity may be read admit, as such, many objections, and these critics are reinforced nowadays by the presence, in a globalized and interconnected world, of different needs, struggles, and contexts for the realization of not only the subject, but also of contemporary politics.

From Descartes to Kant and Nietzsche, we can note, as Nina Power did, a predominant "depoliticization of the term 'subject'" (2007, p. 67). This observation relates ultimately with a major philosophical challenge of our times which is "to reconcile the 'freedom of the moderns' with the necessary existence of norms which, in constituting an unavoidable demand for intersubjectivity, presupposes a limitation upon individuality" (Renaut, 1997, pp. 22-23).

The depoliticization of the modern subject occurs alongside another break in the term: the one between essence and existence. Ludwig Feuerbach proposed a grammatical turn that could rescue the subject from the alienation of his capacities and powers:

> What the subject is – it's being – lies only in the predicate; the predicate is the truth of the subject (..). The distinction between subject and object corresponds to the distinction between existence and essence. (…) Even in the language of ordinary life one speaks of the divine not in terms of its essence, but in terms of its attributes –providence, wisdom, omnipotence. (2011 [1841], p. 45)

Feuerbach's replacement of essence by attributes characterizes, on the theoretical level, a "new subject" understood in its social, sensual, concrete, productive and economic relations (Power, 2007, p. 68). Also, we may recall Alain Badiou's claim that "[m]an is not a political animal: the chance of politics is a supernatural event" (2007, p. 345). This is a clear statement about the idea that there is no essence or substance in man's political dimension. More explicitly, the political subject is constituted by the political process itself. This leads us to theories of subjectivation, rather than to the self-made, sovereign, transparent subject of the modern, rationalist perspective.

In addition, the "collective political subject"[2] is paramount to question the unity and immutability of a presupposed substantial subject because "is neither the subject of law (as in Rousseau), nor of history (as in late Sartre), nor the individual before his or her superior, or God, but is *the consequence* of a kind of 'rupture' in being" (Power, 2007, p. 69). And I agree with Nina Power when she writes that

> […] it's this conception of a collectivized, political subject that haunts all attempts to reduce the philosophical notion of the subject to an individuated consciousness or a

primarily moral being. It is the haunting of philosophy itself by the political outside that persistently both shapes and eludes it. (2007, pp. 67-9)

The subjectivity I´m analyzing embodies processes of subjectivation that, in a daily basis, end up sculpting human life, modes of living and the coexistence. Jacques Rancière notes "the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other" (1992, p. 60). This goes along with the notion of subjectivation as a process and not a state, a process that produces a "disidentification, a way out of oneself", and more notably without possible anticipation of what is coming (Tassin, 2012, p. 37).[3]

When subjectivation is called political, we mean at least that the determination of this process and its development, are not entirely inherent to the subject; "'political' means that there are external conditions by which the subject, not on his own account (even if with his consent), enters a process in which he becomes other than what he is" (Tassin, 2012, p. 37). Let´s emphasize then that political subjectivation: is not the production of a definable subject; it is not an *a priori* dimension of the subject; and that its political significance and scale has to do with situations and relations by which the subject is modified (cf. Tassin, 2012).

To the political character of subjectivation we may, or may not, associate an ethical dimension. I bring this difference just to underline different approaches to what politics is. For example, Rancière takes politics only in its disruptive meaning, and because he defends a division between politics and the regulatory aspects, he confers only to the struggles for emancipation and equality the privilege of embracing the properly political dimension (cf. 1992, p. 59). For Foucault,

instead, politics must refer both to the struggles that question institutional ways and to power relations rooted in social networks, which require individuals moved by a care for themselves inseparable from a care for the truth and for the community (cf. Foucault, 1982; Tassin, 2012).

The quasi-opposition between philosophical and political subjects, by which philosophy could even be read as inhibitor of the political subject (cf. Power, 2007), does not encompass the interdependent realization of contemporary relations between subjects and between subjects and the world. There is, therefore, a meaning that goes far beyond a universal and *a priori* consciousness, and postulates a shift, like Renaut says, from autonomy as affirmation to autonomy as horizon of meaning or principle of ethical reflection (1997, p. 198). Still according to Renaut, practical subjectivity - which integrates finitude and the principle of autonomy -, performs important ethical transformations: a) the features of practical reality aren't subsumed in determining, absolute, principles, they merely lay down the conditions under which meaning can possibly be given to reality; b) the absolute foundation of value judgments breaks down, but the ethical dimension remains a necessary point of view, a horizon of meaning, which can´t be transformed into a dogmatic judgment of value; and c) in the absence of an absolute subjectivity, "the moral vision of the world cannot itself be thought of as *absolute:* it must, if you will, allow for the possibility of erring" (cf. 1997, pp. 198-9).

This configuration of practical subjectivity displays an idea of the subject that goes beyond the notion of just being *in* the world: existence is proposed to us as action, and action, as Merleau-Ponty defined it, "is the violent passage from what I have to what I aim for, from what I am to what I intend to be" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999 [1945], p. 511).[4] But, most

importantly, it is an act *with an other* because, quoting Jean-Luc Nancy, "nothing really preexists; only what exists exists" and "the co-implication of existing is the sharing of the world". So "the world is not something external to existence, the world is the coexistence that puts these existences together" (2000, p. 29).

Subjectivity does not simply fit, as we see, in mutually exclusive terms (subject/object, essence/culture, universal/particular), rather it (re)articulates and problematizes them. I agree with Renaut that

> […] it needs to be asked whether a pure and simple 'return to Kant' is possible. (…) The complexity of the problem of subjectivity (or of nonmetaphysical humanism) has greatly increased since Kant, the problem having been enriched and complicated by a whole history that cannot now be rewound in any simple, literal way (…). (1997, p. 25)

Traditional humanism and the optimistic Enlightenment view that human beings can dominate the world and nature, cannot be recaptured. "But its virtues can be preserved" (Nehamas, in foreword to Renaut, 1997, p. xv) and it is in the name of the present, and in the name of the democratic promises, that one should criticize those figures of pure rationalist subject (cf. Renaut, 1997).

Chantal Mouffe (2018), amongst others, clearly defends that the essentialist perspective is not able to capture the multiplicity of struggles against different forms of domination. The classical system of representation of the subject, and the sociocultural conventions that emerged from this notion, are being profoundly challenged, for example, by the so-called social "minorities" (cf. Braidotti, 1994). One important precept of the anti-essentialist approach is that "the social agent is constituted by an ensemble of discursive positions

and practices[5] which can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 166). [6] The diversity of social agents relates to "a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement", and therefore "[i]t is impossible to speak of the social agent as if we were dealing with a unified, homogeneous entity" (ibid). Mouffe suggests that we have instead to approach it as a plurality, in its constant effort to establish links through historical, contingent, and undetermined articulations.

I remind here Mouffe and Laclau's project of "radical democracy". Such a project gives a political expression to the articulation of contemporary struggles, establishing a "chain of equivalences" that enhances the articulations of the demands of the working class with those of other movements (e.g., ecological, feminist, racial, disability rights) in order to construct a "common will" (cf. Mouffe, 1993).

We have far moved from the subject as a pure act of thought (and the only one responsible for giving meaning), and reached multiple, intersectional human experiences, in its simultaneously singular and plural character. Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of being singular plural resumes it all, "the essence of Being is only as co-essence (…) or being-with (being-with-many)" (2000, p. 30). In this regard, if some ontological unity is still required, it must be looked up for, as he proposed, in "[b]eing with (…), so that Being shows itself, gives itself, dis-poses itself as its own singular plural with" (ibid).[7]

Perhaps the rational paradigm of the subject has been weakened (cf. Habermas, 1990; Braidotti, 1994). This does not force us, however, to abandon the modern project of freedom and equality. What we need is to reformulate the terms of the unitary subject (cf. Mouffe, 2018). And I add, with Etienne Tassin, that we also need to abandon the subject

of universal history, because these notions interfere with our comprehension of those political struggles and forms of subjectivation led by beings who in no way intend to be subjects of universal history, but "wish, by far and simply, to be the subjects of their own history", their own singular emancipation (cf. 2012, p. 48).[8]

The broad and complex terrain of democratic struggles is characterized precisely by the "multiplicity of subject positions which constitute a single agent and by the possibility that this multiplicity can become the site of antagonism, and thereby politicized" (Mouffe, 1993, p. 12). Let´s not forget that sometimes a process of subjectivation is a process of disidentification or declassification. An "'outcast' is the name of those who are denied an identity in a given order of policy" (Rancière, 1992, p. 61). So, political subjectivation may be "the enactment of equality by people who are together to the extent that they are between" (ibid) – between identities, between cultures, between territories - and "relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, that link a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being" (ibid). That's why "the place of a political subject is a gap: being together to the extent that we are in between" (Rancière, 1992, p. 62). I relate this "in between" condition to some post-structuralist critique (cf. Butler, 1999 [1990]; Crenshaw, 1991; Mouffe, 2018) that attributes to contemporary identity politics the crucial role of exposing, as the basis of social injustice, the equivocal view of the subject as metaphysical substance - a cohesive entity, equal to itself and ontologically, if not actually, prior to any form of social injustice. Furthermore, contemporary identity politics should allow us to note the paradox of acting from one's own situated, contingent, normative position while simultaneously being "subject to", a paradox

which must be rebutted for the emancipation of the subject(s).

Rancière is clear when he elaborates that political subjectivation can then be understood as "a collective process" when the political subject is a "group" engaged in a process of emancipation, and from which it is expected mostly three things: the ability to articulate a dimension of dissent with the general logics of dominance; the breakdown of the global count of society due to the production (and exposure) of a part that exceeds normativity; and finally, the affirmation of "equal capacity of anyone, any group to manifest and formulate the terms of a political question" (Tassin, 2012, p. 47).[9] It is defended explicitly that "the construction of such cases of equality is not the act of an identity, nor is it the demonstration of the values specific to a group", it is, "an heterology, a logic of the other" (Rancière, 1992, p. 60).[10]

So, "universalism is never univocal", as Étienne Balibar once said (2020, p. vii), and that may be what also constitutes its strength: as a persistent site of conflict within society and subjects themselves, the universal is constituted by performative contradictions that nevertheless provide the emancipatory force necessary to stimulate and (re)imagine contemporary politics and philosophy. Many of the contemporary struggles show us "how in every assertion of universality there lies a disavowal of the particular and a refusal of specificity" (Mouffe, 1993, p. 13). The idea of a "radical democracy" demands this acknowledgement, that "the particular, the multiple, the heterogeneous - in effect, of everything that had been excluded by the concept of Man in the abstract",[11] require the unfolding of democratic practices, require operations for "institutionalizing them into ever more diverse social relations" (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 12-13). An action that requires the assumption of new and intersectional subject positions that

would allow the articulation between struggles many times interpreted as independent as, e.g., antiracism, antisexism and anticapitalism (cf. Mouffe, 1993).

These lines of thought relate importantly with a notion of "commons" that may be translated, following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as a collective construction of concepts, where the intelligence and the action of the multitude[12] are combined, "making them work together". Constructing concepts is as relational common good (contrasting with substantial, material, common goods), and means "bringing to reality a project that is a community", a project fully "invested by a phenomenology of production, an epistemology of the concept" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 302-3). It is invested also by co-responsible practices conducted by individuals committed with the principles of liberty, equality, and pluralism. As such, subjectivity as practice and as relation of interdependencies may favor awareness and comprehension of the potentialities of collective action (cf. Laclau, 2005). Ultimately these perspectives, epitomized in a collective configuration of subjectivity, lead us into the consideration of conditions of possibility for the *common*, hopefully to imbue *the common* with a greater responsiveness to individual and collective contemporary inequalities.

We stand in face of one of today's crucial roles for philosophy in general, and for social and political philosophy in particular: by rebutting *a priori* relations and fixed categories (cf. Mouffe, 1993, pp. 20-21), philosophy may enable ways to construct and share a world of meanings and possibilities. For example, instead of trying to establish a definition of "liberty" and "equality", political philosophy may present the different, plural, intersectional[13] interpretations of those concepts and its possible (re)articulations. For the sake of such philosophical strategy, we are required to problematize universalism, the essentialist and naturalizing conception of social reality, and the fiction of a unitary subject.

Moving from a primarily reflexive dimension of subjectivity to that of a relational exercise between theory, practice, and humanity (cf. Power 2007; Balibar, 2020), reveals processes and dynamics of subjectivation that are underway in social and power relations. Processes and connections which can be mobilized against forms of domination (Butler, 1999[1990]; Tassin, 2012; Mouffe, 1993) that individuals or social groups confront daily in their workplace, at home, dealing with institutions, and in the public, political spaces of contemporary world.

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[1] The term "subjectivation" is referred here to emphasize the processes of recognizing [something/someone] as a subject or, indeed, of someone becoming a subject.

[2] The collective political subject, for the purposes of this reflection, must not be envisaged exclusively in terms of "class", "race", "men" or "women". It should be interpreted more broadly as an active force or collective action in which possibly different subjects articulate themselves to defend or demand the same principles and/or objectives.

[3] Every citation of Etienne Tassin in the present work was translated to English by the author.

[4] Translated to English by the author.

[5] By "discursive practice", Chantal Mouffe refers to "the signifying practices in which signification and action, linguistic and affective components cannot be separated. It is through their insertion in discursive/affective signifying practices, involving words, affects and actions that social agents acquire forms of subjectivity". Mouffe suggests "deploying the dynamic of affectio/affectus derived from Spinoza to examine the process of formation of political identities", where discourses and affects are articulated, enabling identifications, and "those identifications are crucial for politics because they provide the motor of political action" (2018, p. 99, translated by the author).

[6] Translated to English by the author.

[7] To the point that It may be defended that, "[t]oday, the situation of ontology signifies to think existence at the height of this challenge to thinking that is globalness as such (which is designated as 'capital,' '(de)Westernization,' 'technology,' 'rupture of history,' and so forth)" (Nancy, 2000, pp. 46-47).

[8] We should notice that "the singularity (…) is not opposed to the universal, it indicates that any element can, by proximity and connection, extend to a plane that exceeds all particularity. Basically, the singularity's function replaces the universality's function" (Tassin, 2012, p. 48, translated by the author).

[9] Translated to English by the author.

[10] Rancière is very clear justifying this heterology: it is always "the denial of an identity given by another or by the ruling order of policy"; "it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes another"; and finally, "the logic of subjectivation always entails an impossible identification" with already established names and/or categories (1992, pp. 60, 62).

[11] Mouffe pertinently reminds us that possibly the "increasing dissatisfaction with the abstract universalism of the Enlightenment explains the rehabilitation of the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (…). It is agreed today that we need to broaden the concept of rationality to make room for the 'reasonable' and the 'plausible' and to recognize

the existence of multiple forms of rationality" (1993, p. 14).

[12] Negri and Hardt define "multitude" as "an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (…) but on what it has in common" (Negri &Hardt, 2004, p. 100). In fact, "the innumerable, specific types of labor, forms of life, and geographical location, which will always necessarily remain, do not prohibit communication and collaboration in a common political project" (Negri &Hardt, 2004, pp. 105-6).

[13] Intersectionality recognizes, in the processes of subjectivation, the overlapping and mutual reinforcement of inequalities, and defends the chance of theoretical-practical opportunities for the collective and revolutionary subject to promote socio-political structural transformations.