

# Commentary: What could a sociology of the subject look like?

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Subject, subjectivity, subjectivation  
by Paola Rebughini

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Paola Rebughini offers us a wide-ranging and perceptive discussion of the question of 'the subject' within social theory, highlighting the ways the question recurs across intellectual traditions and approaches. Significantly, most of the authors she engages with are working within or responding to philosophical traditions, where generally the question of the subject has been framed as a theoretical one. And as she notes, the overwhelming majority of these authors are working in continental European traditions. These once played a major role in structuring Sociology, with key figures shaping the discipline, from Pierre Bourdieu to Jürgen Habermas, having a philosophical formation. However over the past three decades English has established itself as the international scientific language of Sociology, and as the discipline's intellectual centre of gravity has shifted to North America, the majority of professional sociologists have little training in philosophy, and may well find the term 'the subject' unintelligible, at best an arcane question for a minor and somewhat inward-looking current within theoretical sociology.

Does this matter? That depends upon what a sociology of the subject might look like today. My contribution to the debate initiated by Rebughini will attempt to sketch out some of the contours of such a sociology, and in the process, attempt to defend the proposition that this does matter.

But first we need to note that while, as Rebughini observes, the term 'the subject' has been largely absent from English-language sociology, questions posed by this term have played an important role in English-

language sociology. For a generation of post-1945 sociologists, the question of 'the subject' occupied a central place in the discipline, framed in terms of the North American focus on 'character', a term that emerged out of 'national character studies' undertaken as part of the US war effort by the Committee for National Morale (Gleason, 1983). While 'national character' would be reframed by Erickson (who worked as part of this programme) as 'identity', understood as the culture of a collective, an important sociological tradition continued to engage with the question of 'character', understood as the ability of the actor to morally self-direct, most notably in Riesman et al.'s (1961) concern with the development of 'other-directed' personalities and mass society. This sociological preoccupation with character was shaped by the continuing concern with 'mass society' and what Barrows (1981) has called the 'distorting mirror' of the crowd within American sociology (Borch, 2012).

As American social science disengaged from its preoccupation with mass society, a cluster of transformations all but liquidated the associated concern with character (with the notable exception of Richard Sennett; see Sennett, 1999): 'collective behaviour' became reconceptualized as 'organized behaviour' governed by interests; a focus on process emerged in areas ranging from social movement studies (McCarthy and Zald, 1973) to sociological theory (Merton, 1967) that would eventually develop into social mechanisms and analytical sociology; while economics rather than history or philosophy established

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itself as Sociology's principal interlocutor (Olson, 1965). For key sociologists such as Charles Tilly, all this meant that sociology could free itself from what he called 'phenomenological individualism' (1997), the idea that 'mentalities' explained actions.

## From society to subject

As Rebughini suggests, the most ambitious attempt to construct a sociology of the subject is without doubt represented by the work of Alain Touraine. Touraine's 'sociology of action' had a major impact within the discipline. This was initially constructed through an exploration of 'worker consciousness' (1966) and developed into an ambitious exploration of 'new social movements' (1982), the form of conflict and agency Touraine saw as shaping 'post-industrial society' (1971). Despite the impact of these earlier studies, Touraine's later work has proved less accessible, framed as a shift from 'understanding society' to 'discovering the subject' (Touraine, 2002). While the earlier period involved an ambitious theoretically-led empirical engagement with conflicts explored as social movements, Touraine's more recent work has presented the subject as a new form of individualism, where the subject is a struggle to construct 'the singularity and individuality of each human being' (2002: 391) against the expansion of the market on the one hand and communities on the other – between absorption into global culture or capture in the culture of a community. Touraine refers to this struggle as 'the anti-society', arguing that it is expressed in particular in the contemporary demand for rights, as distinct from 'claims' or 'entitlements' – rights, insists Touraine, while within society are also superior to society; they appeal to a non-social principle, hence his use of the term 'anti-society'.

While Touraine's recent work has focused on a critique of neoliberalism (2010), his collaborators have set about exploring social practice through the lens of 'the subject'. François Dubet's 'sociology of experience' (1994) proposes that social actors find themselves in a social world lacking in integration, one where they are confronted with the challenge of constructing coherence between different spheres or fields of action. Dubet identifies three: a field of community (organized in terms of norms, where collective identities are constructed); a field of competition (organized in terms of markets or the competition for scarce resources); and a field of subjectivity (organized in terms of the struggle for meaning, freedom and dignity). Dubet, like Touraine, argues that these fields do not converge,

insisting that there is no unity to social life. Instead social actors find themselves confronted with the imperative of integrating these fields, and through this of constructing their experience. This theoretical framework places the *action of a subject*, and its construction of a coherent experience, at the centre of sociological analysis, replacing a previous focus on 'society' or 'system'.

## Relationship to world passes through relationship to self

Thus framed, a sociology of the subject is not primarily a question of sociological theory, but central to sociology's capacity to engage with contemporary social life. An example can illustrate this – Dubet's exploration of contemporary high school education. A subject-centred sociology is not focused on systems and reproduction, nor the functioning of an institution. Instead it places the action of students at the centre of analysis: in this case, the action of learning. Dubet insists that for the school student, the challenge is not principally to construct an identity – that is offered (to an extent) by the role of student and location in a world of friends. The challenge is to discover her or himself as the *subject* of this identity, as the author of her or his experience. This has very practical implications. Where the student is unable to do this, they find themselves learning information, but unable to make this part of themselves – school life is experienced as intellectually empty, a place where learning becomes 'going through the motions'. For many students, the difficulty experienced at school is not principally a difficulty with learning, but a difficulty to construct themselves as the authors of their experience (Dubet et al., 2012). On the one hand there are students who enjoy school, who find it meaningful, while others find that they are unable to become interested in it, unable to construct an account of why they are there. Understanding and responding to this demands a sociology of what Touraine calls 'subjectification', the construction of oneself as the author of one's experience. A *sociology of the subject* puts the student's *action of learning* at the centre of the sociology of education – something eclipsed by analyses that understand education as an instrument of the reproduction of society or class structure.

A sociology of the subject extends in other directions as well. Dubet and his team of researchers in Bordeaux have explored the ways workers experience justice or injustice (Dubet et al., 2006). Their research suggests that actors arrive at qualitatively different kinds of judgements depending upon the social field they are engaging with: within a social

field of community, justice is constructed in terms of *equality*, while its violation is recognized in relationships of *inequality*; within a field structured in terms of competition, justice is understood in terms of *merit*, while injustice is experienced in terms of *exploitation*; while from the point of view of work as an experience of creativity or subjectivation, justice is understood in terms of *autonomy*, while its denial is considered evident in experiences of *alienation* and denial of dignity. This analysis highlights the plurality of principles of justice that actors mobilize, and the tensions between these different principles. These competing principles of justice shape different types of action in the workplace.

Similar analysis of urban neighbourhoods highlights the tensions between neighbourhood experienced in terms of community and its fragmentation, as a field of opportunity but also exclusion, and as central to dignity but also to loss of meaning and self-destruction (McDonald, 1999). In such cases, urban poverty may be less evident in an absence of goods, than in the forms of suffering experienced by actors as they find themselves unable to hold together different dimensions not only of their worlds, but also their selves. These analyses highlight the extent to which justice is fundamentally lived at an intimate level, connected with experiences of resignation, shame and fear, but also forms of resistance ranging from detachment to generosity and forms of virtue. Such a sociology of the subject underlines that our relationship to the world passes through an uncertain and continuously reconstructed relationship to our self (Dubet et al., 2006; McDonald, 1999).

Such a sociology has extended beyond education, work or the city, to engage with the agency constituting contemporary social movements (McDonald, 2006; Pleyers, 2010). A sociology of the subject also informs recent analyses of violence, from the destruction of self involved in terrorism (Khosrokhavar, 2009; McDonald, 2013) to the increasing importance of extreme forms of violence shaped by an excess or an absence of meaning, violence that links forms of subjectivity to extreme cruelty, where the destruction of the other is a source of pleasure (Wieviorka, 2009).

These examples suggest that a sociology of the subject is neither a current within sociological theory nor an account of 'mentalities'. Instead, it is an attempt to engage with the construction of selfhood through social practices located within and constituting social fields, including in contexts where such fields have collapsed or been destroyed. The sociology of the subject opens out a more complex account of human agency, with actors engaged with different and ultimately conflicting accounts of the good and the just, while it also ventures into contexts shaped

by the impossibility of constructing such accounts, or by their total destruction.

### Future terrains: transformations of equality, the sociology of democracy

The sociology of social movements developed by Touraine had no hesitation in linking a type of actor with a type of society – working-class conflicts were seen as central to industrial society, while new social movements were shaping an emerging postindustrial society. However today's constructions of the 'sociology of the subject' have yet to find the mediation between analyses of social experiences and propositions around type of society.

In part this reflects a disciplinary culture that is much more sceptical of 'grand theory' than was the case four decades ago. Yet despite this reluctance, it is evident that 'neoliberalism' has emerged over recent years as a descriptor of a societal type that has had a significant impact within sociology. This concept often attaches agency to neoliberalism or to markets, and is frequently framed within a history of forms of economic activity and their crisis (Centeno and Cohen, 2012). As such, critical transformations in contemporary social life tend to be passed over, and possibly a sociology of the subject may have a key role to play in the construction of a sociological analysis of such transformations.

Potential dimensions of such an analysis are pointed to in the recent work of the French political historian and philosopher, Pierre Rosanvallon. He argues the issue we confront is not primarily the collapse of an economic model, but social and cultural processes leading to a break with a 'century of redistribution' that had been shaped by deindividualization involved in the socialization of responsibility and productivity characterizing organized capitalism. From this perspective, we are witnessing not simply a triumph of neoliberalism, but an increasing importance attached to individual creativity, a shift from planning to the ability to adapt to uncertainty, and the emergence of new types of individuality. For Rosanvallon these shifts amount to the emergence of a new 'individualism of singularity', one where the person seeks recognition in terms of their *particularity* rather than their membership in a group (2011: 311).

Such individualism is not a simple culture of neoliberalism – it is evident in new types of large-scale cooperation, in particular within digital cultures, from fan authorships and blogging to visual cultures, all of which demonstrate new forms of the 'pleasures of doing', in particular shifting the balance between what was once intimate and what is

increasingly shared and made public (Flichy, 2010; Lasén and Gómez-Cruz, 2009). These transformations are obscured if social life is reduced to a series of economic models and their crisis. They become central, however, if our lens to explore the contemporary world is a sociology of the subject. Such a sociology alerts us to the extent that injustice within this emerging social model increasingly takes the form of the denial of singularity. Hence the contemporary importance of the awareness of *discrimination* as a social experience, explored by a sociology of the subject that places the actors' question, 'why me?', at its centre (Dubet et al., 2013).

In the current social model, the tensions between the different dimensions of equality are becoming increasingly acute, undermining models of democracy based on the coherence of the forms of equality expressed by human rights, universal suffrage and the market (Rosanvallon, 2008). These transformations are central to understanding the contemporary 'age of distrust', evident in particular in movements ranging from vindictive populism, where politics becomes transformed into a 'theatre of cruelty or a circus' (Rosanvallon, 2008: 272), to the emergence of 'the ideology of transparency as democratic ideal', where in an age of increasingly problematic democracy, citizens look to limit power rather than exercise it, with transparency becoming 'the fundamental virtue in an uncertain world' (2008: 258). In this context, Rosanvallon insists that creating new forms of democracy depends upon social actors inventing new forms of *equality* in a society of singularity, as actors enter into relationships of *singularity*, *reciprocity* and *communality* (mirroring the three fields of relationships proposed by Touraine and Dubet).

### Rethinking agency: the vulnerable subject

As Paola Rebughini observes, much of the debate about 'the subject' within English-language sociology has been constructed around the themes of agency or freedom, often juxtaposed to 'structure' or 'determinism'. The model of actor present in these discussions has had a considerable impact in the sociology of social movements, where the actor is a person 'reborn as new', as 'self-confident and free of worry, capable of vigorous, wilful activity' (Walzer, 1965: 313). This understanding of the subject is one where the actor possesses 'uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastery' (Arendt, 1958: 234), a type of sovereignty over the self that we encounter in contractarian political theory as well as in voluntarist conceptions of the subject in the notion of *choice* (Markell, 2003: 12).

Increasingly, however, social and political studies are placing experiences of human *vulnerability* at the centre of experiences of action, and in the process going beyond traditional oppositions of structure/agency, freedom/determination. One example highlighting this is the increasing presence of embodied vulnerability within action. This was particularly important during occupations such as that which occurred in Tahrir Square, Egypt in 2011. The philosopher Judith Butler (2011) underlines the importance of such actions making embodied need visible, highlighting the importance of the need for rest, food, security and safety, together with the centrality of cooking, cleaning and caring for self and others. She insists that in these actions embodied need and human vulnerability assume a social and political form. Such action makes visible what she calls our 'fundamental dependency upon the other', involving a form biopolitics that extends beyond the paradigms of action as discourse that emerged in the 1980s. In such action, the body appears,

... not only in order to speak and act, but also to suffer and to move, to engage other bodies ... how could we understand action, gesture, stillness, touch and moving together, if they were all reducible to the vocalization of thought through speech. (Butler, 2011)

This account of the vulnerable subject is not simply at issue in occupations such as occurred in Egypt in 2011. Increasingly we live in economies of engineered emotion, shaped by the importance of affect and by experiences of immersion that both limit and expand what can be sensed (Thrift, 2011). Engaging with this is part of a more general shift to a 'practice turn' within the study of action, one that involves a shift away from a 'logocentric' understanding of action premised upon a sequence of 'I think therefore I act' (Whatmore, 2006: 603). The break with such logocentrism highlights the importance of making, doing, building and caring in contemporary action, where action involves the pleasures of cooperation, but also forms of anticipation and memory, together with physical experiences of loss and emptiness. This highlights the extent that action is not simply goal directed, but involves experiences of displacement and strangeness, that break down binaries and, just as a work of art, may turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. Equally, contemporary forms of action manifest a high degree of *improvisation*. This is not a result of the absence of planning, but highlights the importance of *attention to the particular* for contemporary actors, from the use of recycled materials found ready at hand to collaborations that use the skills and capabilities of participants. All these dimensions of embodied action are very different

from the grammar of the march and the parade that shaped so much of the public presence of social actors in the 20th century, a form of incorporating rhythm where the individual subject is subsumed into a greater whole. Contemporary forms of action foreground instead a *grammar of attention* directed to what is immediately at hand, to the particular as opposed to the general, and to *the here and now* as opposed to the distant future. And just as a work of art is experienced through the senses, so too increasingly is the embodied nature of action, which takes place in ‘spaces to which you take your whole body, bringing ... an understanding ... as grasped by the complex perception of the body as a whole’ (Hawkins, 2010: 324).

These transformations in contemporary action are beyond the scope of this article. However, to explore what they mean and their potential resonances, we need to break with an understanding of the subject framed within a dichotomy of agent and structure, freedom and determination. The embodied subject is a *vulnerable subject*, the giver and receiver of care, and it is his or her condition of vulnerability that makes possible the shift away from what Wittgenstein (1965) called the ‘craving for generality’, highlighting instead the ethical importance of the particular and the singular, the basis for action shaped by a paradigm of *care*. These are not minor transformations in collective action: the foregrounding of the vulnerable subject in occupations such as Tahrir Square played a central role in the shift from a culture of action based on honour to a culture of action based on dignity, more focused on the self as opposed to mirroring the violence of the other (on this shift, see Khosrokhavar, 2012; on the relationship between vulnerability and dignity, see Rendtorff, 2002).

### New agendas: new data, new research methods

The transformations we have pointed to only briefly, from the importance of the body in action to the increasing significance of making, doing and making need visible, all involve new forms of ethics and sociability. These are occurring in a context of wider transformations that involve the end of older forms of solidarity and democracy, while also putting into question traditional frameworks that sociologists have used to make sense of social worlds. The sociology of the subject involves a major recentring of sociological analysis from system to actor, from the critique of structures of domination to an exploration of imaginaries and practices. This confronts us not only with theoretical questions, but also

questions of research method, to the extent that the traditional sociological priority attached to numerical and discursive data (captured by surveys and interviews) may find itself out of phase with a world shaped by flows of affect and the senses, and new types of sociability and ethics being constructed through these. As such, a sociology of the subject demands new types of research practice and method capable of engaging with experiences that may not find themselves articulated discursively, and which may not give rise to the types of social pattern traditionally captured by surveys. This question, however, will have to remain for another issue of *Sociopedia*.

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