



# NORLIT 2011

Conference on literature and politics

ROSKILDE, AUGUST 4.-6. 2011

ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

Papers published in relation to the NORLIT 2011 conference are made available under the CC license [by-nc-nd]. Find the terms of use at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/dk/legalcode>.

Papers, som er offentliggjort i forbindelse med NORLIT 2011 konferencen stilles til rådighed under CC-licens[by-nc-nd]. Læs mere på <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>, hvis du vil vide, hvordan du må gøre brug af de registrerede papers.

Accessible online: <http://ruconf.ruc.dk/index.php/norlit/norlit2011/schedConf/presentations>

## After the Subject? Dissolutions and Folds

Anders Johansson, Umeå universitet

In the introduction to *Minima Moralia* (1951), Theodor W Adorno reflects on the choice to set out from the subjective experience, the fundamental category of the bourgeois society, as he puts it. Adorno defends his enterprise, arguing that critical theory *has* to take outset in the subject, just because it is on the verge of dissolution: “If the subject today is on the verge of dissolution, these aphorisms take as a starting point the remark that ‘what is disappearing should be seen as essential’.”<sup>1</sup> The end of the passage – saying that what is disappearing is historically essential – is in fact a quote from Hegel, whom Adorno both bases his argument on and criticizes. The problem with Hegel, according to Adorno, is that he abstracts both the individual and the bourgeois society, and raises them over the historical course of events they are products of.

If we focus on the subjective experience, Adorno’s point is dialectical: a one sided faith in the subjective perspective, presupposing the autonomy of the individual, would distort subjectivity, in disregarding the social circumstances which both produce and limit the personal freedom. To try to leave the subjective perspective, on the other hand, would amount to saying that there is nothing but the objective circumstances at hand – philosophy then becomes a justification of the present condition.

Doesn’t Adorno’s account of the situation somehow appear both very up-to-date and very aged? Today we are overfed with putative subjective accounts – in blogs, chronicles, on Facebook etc – every hour, every second. In a trivial sense the subject has obviously all but dissolved, as Adorno feared it would. Accordingly, following Adorno’s Hegelian argumentation, one has to conclude that the subject is *not* essential, since it is not disappearing.

On the other hand it is hard to avoid the feeling that this hyper-individualism isn’t in fact an ironic symptom of exactly what Adorno was describing: a superficial individualism where the possibility of an experience that is my own, subjectively grounded in myself, has disappeared. The logic behind this irony would be similar to what Georg Lukács described in his *Theory of the Novel* (1920). A crucial point in this classic work is that the form of the novel supplies the totality that existence no longer provides. The objective absence of meaning, the lack of a transcendent order, is the very premise of the aesthetic creation of meaning of the novel.<sup>2</sup> Doesn’t the hyper-individualism of today spring from a similar but opposite need: to cover up for, not an objective meaninglessness, but an emptiness of the *subject*. One tries desperately to evoke the independent subject, just because the subject has become a powerless function of the discourse, circumstances, economy etc.

---

<sup>1</sup> ”Om subjektet idag håller på att försvinna, så tar de här aforismerna fasta på påpekandet att ’det som försvinner självt bör ses som väsentligt’.” Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, sv övers s. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Lukács, *Romanens teori*, norsk övers, s. 75.

This leads to a more fundamental question: what *is* a subject? What Lukács answers or assumes is one thing (in *Theorie des Romans* he is still firmly established in an idealist tradition, with Kant and Hegel in the background), but how shall we think the subject today, almost a century later? What kind of subjectivity am I talking about here? Is "subject" still the right category for a thinking that aspires to be a part of a tradition of critical theory?

The subject as we know it, the modern subject, is generally said to appear around 1700. What distinguished this modern subject from a pre-modern subject was, broadly speaking, the interest for the self. Behind this interest lie a claim to what the term "subject" denoted in pre-modern times: something fundamental, substantial. As Christoph Menke notes, what happens around 1700 is that the subject, who used to be a subaltern, is transformed into an active, thinking, creative I. "The subject is someone who attributes his conduct to himself", as Menke puts it.<sup>3</sup> The modern subject is in control, so to speak (at least until Freud enters the scene).

There are of course various ways of thinking the emergence of this modern subject. While Menke places the shift around 1700, Heidegger highlights Descartes, and Stephen Greenblatt finds the origin in the renaissance. And when Foucault discusses how moral laws result in a moral behaviour which constitutes a moral subject, the context is the classical antiquity.<sup>4</sup> The point is in any case to a certain extent the same: the subject is a historical product, the sedimented result of processes and structures that exist prior to the subject.

But if the subject arose in history, we must also take its possible termination in consideration. Is what I called the hyper-individualism of today in fact a sign of the end of the subject as we know it, i.e. the end of the modern subject? This may sound like old news: wasn't postmodernism, and the whole theme of the death of man, death of the author, decentering of the subject, an expression of that? If the structuralists, so the story goes, questioned the autonomous and coherent, Cartesian human subject, the poststructuralists completed the project, and wiped out both man, the author and the subject altogether.<sup>5</sup> There are several reasons to be sceptical to this story. For one thing, it is problematic to pack together a number of philosophers under one term, which is then treated as an autonomous agent that can be held responsible for a complex course of events. And to

---

<sup>3</sup> Christoph Menke, "Subjektivität", i *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, bd 5, red. Karlheinz Barck et al, Stuttgart/Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2003, s. 735.

<sup>4</sup> See Alain de Libera, "Subject: (Re-/decentred)", *Radical Philosophy*, 167, 2011, p. 19; Donald E. Hall, *Subjectivity*, New York & London: Routledge, 2004, s. 3, 19 ff.; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 1-2. Michel Foucault, *Sexualitetens historia: Njutningarnas bruk* bd 2, övers. Britta Gröndahl, Stockholm: Gidlunds, 1986, s. 29.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Drolet, "Introduction", i *The Postmodernism Reader: Foundational texts*, red. Michael Drolet, London & New York: Routledge, 2004, s. 3, 34 f.; Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992, s. 154–174.

state that the "postmodernists" killed man/the subject/the author indicates, for another, that one hasn't really understood what was at stake in the different philosophical endeavours gathered under that label.

At the same time there is, of course, *some* truth in the established notion of the structuralist and poststructuralist critique of subjectivity. What was contested in the sixties, Alain Badiou writes, was "the idea of a natural or spiritual identity of Man, and with it, as a consequence, the very foundation of an 'ethical' doctrine in today's sense of the word: a consensual law-making concerning human beings in general, their needs, their lives, and their deaths".<sup>6</sup> In that perspective, it wasn't the subject as such that was under attack, but rather an ideology tied to an unmediated notion of the (liberal) human subject. In other words, the theme of the 'death of the author' or 'death of man' was an expression for a radical dissatisfaction with the established *political* order.

The problem is that the attack wasn't very effective. On the one hand the poststructuralist theorizing was followed by several reactions – like the ethical turn which Badiou points to – which seemed to *confirm* the very same autonomous, coherent, independent subject that had been questioned in the sixties.

When aspects of the poststructuralist theories on the other hand became generally accepted, the consequences were ambiguous. Today, throughout the humanities, the subject is not understood as a 'natural', self-evident, transhistorical, grounding entity, but something *constructed*, something we are free to 'do', something that is *recognized* by others or *told* as a story. In that sense we are all postmodernists. The problem is the idealism implicit in this notion, the tendency to disregard that if one is free to play with different identities, one also becomes caught up in them. The subject may indeed chose, but is also *chosen*. "We are *subject* to discourse, not simply *subjects through* discourse with the ability to turn around, contemplate and rework our subjectivity at will" as Donald E Hall puts it.<sup>7</sup> The question is if the popular and plausible notion of identity as an exchangeable attribute even strengthens an underlying idea of a stable subjectivity, an agency which masters the masquerade. This may in fact be illustrated by Halls own book.

Even though he is consciously nuanced about the power of the discourse over the subject – "subjectivity itself is textual" – it is as if he still ends up in the opposite position. "Descartes's *cogito* might be rewritten today" he states: "*We think ... and rethink ... and therefore we are.*"<sup>8</sup> So after having said that the subject is textual, he still seems to put the agency outside of this text, in a reincarnation of the Cartesian Cogito.

Hall is just one example of many. In literary criticism there have been several attempts to focus this textuality of the subject, the medialized author etc. One interesting example is the concept

---

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, s. 6

<sup>7</sup> Hall, s. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Hall, s. 130.

“performative biographism”, introduced by the Danish literary critic Jon Helt Haarder some four years ago. Haarder’s point is, in short, that the wide trend of autofictive writing during the last decades should be understood not in terms of authenticity, but rather as a play with both reality and the medium – a performative biographism.<sup>9</sup> The strength of his argument is that it reveals the dialectic between matter and mediation; the problem is that he doesn’t stick to it. His argument is quite simply not dialectical enough. Deep down, Haarder seems to tell us, we find the individual, biological life as a primary material we are free to form – mediation is secondary. This is a problem he shares with other similar attempts I believe: in the end we’re facing another version of the autonomous subject that somehow is understood to administer the game it is a product of.

So what conclusion is to be drawn from this? In the beginning of *The Ticklish Subject* Slavoj Žižek boldly states that he wishes to re-establish the Cartesian subject, as part of a leftist project. The background is that the Cartesian subject, according to Žižek, is a spectre that all philosophical schools have been combating for a long time – deconstructivists, Habermasians, Heideggerians, cognitive scientists, ecologists, post-marxists, feminists etc. To Žižek this is an ironic indication of its vitality.<sup>10</sup> Although I can see his philosophical point and, at least to a certain extent, sympathize with his political drive, I’m not totally convinced about the conclusion. That the Cartesian subject is a straw man put up in the need of an enemy is, I would say, an indication of the weakness of the theories at hand, but not necessarily a proof of the political relevance or radicalism of the Cartesian subject. Isn’t the conclusion rather the reverse: in all the cases Žižek mentions the Cartesian subject isn’t the antithesis it is presented as, but more accurately the hidden foundation, the unquestioned starting point, in a similar way as I’ve tried to demonstrate in the cases of Hall and Haarder? And isn’t that then an indication of the latent conservatism of the schools Žižek mentions? In distancing themselves from the Cartesian subject, they all confirm the fundamental bourgeois category Adorno said was disappearing.

Adorno’s notion of a dissolution of the subject is in fact more complicated than the preface of *Minima Moralia* signals. In short there is both a good and a bad dissolution of the subject in his theorizing. The ‘bad’ one is exemplified both by the culture industry and the concentration camps, where the very form of subjectivity was attacked. The ‘good’ counterpart, on the other hand, has its moment in the metaphysical or aesthetic experience, where we are liberated from the petrified form that the I is normally closed in, and enter into another relationship to the object.<sup>11</sup> In other words, we face an opening to a *new form* of subjectivity, another form of life – it is that opening that is lacking in the destructive, total dissolution of subjectivity. Something breaks down in order for something new to

---

<sup>9</sup> Jon Helt Haarder, TFL, nr 2, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Cf Alastair Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life*, p. 120.

appear, but the novelty presupposes what existed before it. Accordingly, subjectivity stands out as the site for a possibility of change.<sup>12</sup>

If we're leaving the Adorno-exegesis behind, the crucial question is if this is still true, empirically. Is there an opening towards another form of life in the experience of one's own corporeal frailty? Is the kind of metaphysical experience Adorno describes still possible? The question is not only how to interpret Adorno, but if the comportment of the subject is still its own, to relate to Menke. If the experiences of the subject is still a reality or just a reified nostalgic dream. Can we still feel it, or do we just wish that we do? And if we can, what does it lead to?

I believe these are open, difficult questions. Or is the openness rather an indication of a need for another notion of the subject, another perspective on what subjectivity is? What is at stake here is not only the *historical* situation (Adorno's position in the forties vs our situation today), and not only the *philosophical* problem of what a subject is, but also the *political* implications. These issues can hardly be kept separate. Foucault's discussion, mentioned earlier, of the emergence of the moral subject in classical antiquity, causes Gilles Deleuze's statement that the Greeks invented the subject.<sup>13</sup> More precisely they released a subject from the prevailing orders of power "(the city, the family, sports etc)"; they "folded", as Deleuze puts it, power in such a way that the free man arose. Foucault's point, Deleuze argues, is not that subjectivity came into existence once and for all during the antiquity – the Greek invention is rather just one of a series of folds. "One must assume that the subjectivation, the relation to the self is produced constantly in new and variable ways, and that the Greek way today is just a distant memory."<sup>14</sup>

What's interesting with Deleuze's interpretation of Foucault, his understanding of the subject as a series of folds, is that it breaks with a historicizing notion, à la Menke, Greenblatt etc, of the subject as a product of certain exterior circumstances, and history as an irrevocable process where a modern subject may be clearly distinguished from a pre-modern subject. In Deleuze's perspective there is no memory that renders such a process possible; the subject is not constituted by a sedimented experience: "Nothing ever 'remains' for the subject, since it has to be made anew, as a centre for resistance" Deleuze writes.<sup>15</sup> If we relate this to Lukács, Adorno and postmodernity in general, the dissolution of the subject, death of the author, of man or whatever, is not to be understood chronologically, as something that occurred once and for all, but rather as something that happens all the time. The subject may always dissolve – that's how capitalism works – or appear – that's what

---

<sup>12</sup> Morgan, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, sv övers, s. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze, s. 150. "Vad man måste anta är att subjektivationen, självrelationen, hela tiden skapas på nya och föränderliga sätt, och att det grekiska sättet idag bara är ett avlägset minne."

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze, p. 150. "Ingenting 'återstår' någonsin för subjektet, eftersom det varje gång ska göras på nytt, som en härd för motstånd".

politics is.<sup>16</sup> The word “resistance”, in my last quotation, is important in that sense: the subjectivity Deleuze talks about in his book on Foucault should be understood as a resistance to the various forms of individuality that are laid down on us in capitalist society. Individuality and subjectivity are thus virtually opposed in Deleuze’s perspective: ”The struggle for a modern subjectivity runs through the resistance against the two contemporary forms of subjection, one consisting of an individuation according to the demands of power, another consisting in the fastening of every individual to a conscious and familiar identity, determined once and for all. The struggle for subjectivity thus stands out as a struggle for the right to difference, variation and metamorphoses.”<sup>17</sup> The “freedom” of the individual is in other words a form of subjection to a fixed, familiar identity; if there is real freedom it lies in the very emergence of other forms of subjectivity.

Deleuze’s perspective seems to give both more and less power to the subject. On the one hand, the subject is *not* determined by some historical development; on the other hand, the subject is not a constitutive, meaning giving instance, but rather an effect. It isn’t man who thinks and makes an object out of being; it is being as difference that thinks itself and reflects over itself in man.<sup>18</sup> This also means that there is no conflict between taking outset in the subjective experience and thinking society. New forms of subjectivity means political change, for better or for worse.<sup>19</sup> That’s the whole point.

So what about the future? A guess is that it will become harder and harder to distinguish the individual from the subjective, to speak with Deleuze. Harder and harder to find forms of resistance. Harder and harder for the subject to claim autonomy, as Adorno would put it. Perhaps we have to realize that we – Europeans, North-Americans – have reached a situation where our space for subjectivation, the possibilities of new folds, are prepared in advance to such an extent that it is hard to see a possible subjectivity that’s not part of a biopolitical strategy or capitalist calculation of profit.

In the light of that I find Hardt & Negri’s concepts of the *multitude* and the *common* very interesting. “A key scene of political action today”, they write in the beginning of *Commonwealth*, “involves the struggle over the control or autonomy of the production of subjectivity. The multitude makes itself by composing in the common the singular subjectivities that result from this process.”<sup>20</sup> I understand their project as an attempt to release subjectivity from the individualism promoted by capitalism, and instead see a subjectivity of the multitude.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf Rancière...

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze, p. 150 f. ”Kampen för en modern subjektivitet löper genom motståndet mot de två samtida formerna för underkastelse, den första som består i att individualisera oss enligt maktens krav, den andra som består i att fästa varje individ vid en medveten och känd identitet, bestämd en gång för alla. Kampen för subjektiviteten visar sig alltså som en kamp för rätten till skillnad, variation och metamorfos.”

<sup>18</sup> Cf Jonnie Eriksson, *Monstret och människan*, Lund: Sekel, 2010, s. 484.

<sup>19</sup> Cf Rancière.....

<sup>20</sup> Hardt & Negri, *Commonwealth*, s. x

This could also be related to Jacques Rancière's idea of a "political subjectivation" that produces a *we*, a multiplicity which didn't have any space in the existing political order. The prototype for this subjectivation is still the Cartesian "ego sum, ego existo" Rancière writes, but it isn't an individual that arises, but a new field of experiences, a "nos sumus, nos existimus".<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, Rancière stresses the difference between this subjectivation and identification: the subjectivation he talks about is rather a de-identification, an opening of a space where those who didn't count are now counted. What is meant by this political subject is not a group that becomes aware of itself – it is rather a catalyst, a function, something that breaks the existing notion of what is common, what can be sensed and said.

---

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Texter om politik och estetik* s. 57.