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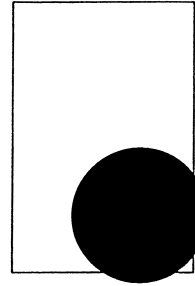
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# From understanding society to discovering the subject

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## Abstract

Succeeding to the philosophy of law, sociology organized itself no longer around the absolute State but around society itself, conceived as a system, both differentiated and able to control itself. The concepts of institution and socialization formed the core of a large number of analyses which were both theoretical and empirical. But this 'classical' view disintegrated itself both because markets eliminated a large part of institutional controls of change and because new social movements, from the 1980's on, rejected this society-centered view of social life. More recently, only the critical approach within this so-called functionalist approach survived actively, interpreting all social categories as instruments serving a domination which is more and more internalized. The most radical wing of the women's movement gave the most elaborate expression of this trend. But it necessarily exhausts itself by its entirely critical and self-destructive point of view.

The field of sociology must be entirely redefined. Some introduce the idea of a world – or global – society; some others try to give a new life to basic ideas, such as social bonds, solidarity and communication. A third group, using various vocabularies, gives a central role to the idea of Subject, which is very different from the concept of Self in its classical sense, because the Subject is defined as a self-referential effort of each individual or group to create itself as a principle of integration of more and more diversified experiences.

## Key Words

individualism • modern • social actor • society • the Subject

Society as a necessary concept to understand human behaviour became a subject matter in its own right when social thought broke with religious and traditional references. A long line of thinkers from Machiavelli, Thomas More and Jean Bodin to Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau and finally, after the French Revolution, Tocqueville and partly Stuart Mill, asserted that society was an end in itself, that the institutions organized its

integration and its capacity for change and that forms of deviance which challenged social order and harmony should not be tolerated. But throughout this long period, which extends from 15th-century Florence to 19th-century Great Britain, the idea of society was actually dominated by the idea of politics – in fact, of the State– because only political institutions were capable of constructing a social order and of supervising its functioning and interpretation. In many respects, this general mode of analysing social life is still with us today. But modern societies tend to lose their own central role because of the growing separation between their rationalized action on their environment and the formation of moral individualism or of communitarian feelings. So that State or society as a principle of integration is losing ground. First the State lost its control over economy and then society itself became more pluralist.

This commanding image of society as a system which is able to create itself through its institutions and its processes of socialization was mainly weakened by the development of capitalism, which freed the economic order from any social or political control and proclaimed that the aim to be achieved by everybody was one's own enrichment. The State thus lost a great deal of its power. Maintaining order, which was its principal traditional task, became less important than organizing economic initiatives, but these became increasingly beyond its control. As a direct consequence, the philosophy of law and political philosophy became subordinated by economics. Sociology developed a growing interest, not for demonstrating the efficiency of the new economy which was the main preoccupation of economists – but for inquiring into economic crises, into poverty, anomie or the rise of bureaucracy. It often joined forces with a moderate social-democratic, labour or 'solidarist' type of reformism.

This two-fold interest for social integration and social reform enabled sociology to obtain considerable success, in the 1920s and 1930s (with the exception of totalitarian countries) and after World War II, when the Welfare State model became widespread. But this 'classical' period in sociology ended when post-war State intervention was overturned by a new and powerful capitalist phase, known as globalization. This has led to the loss of the nation-states' central role and has attributed a growing role to economic studies and, in particular, to financial mathematics, which help to calculate risks in an era of uncertainty.

Nowadays, we are forced to accept the idea of the *end of society* as a self-controlled system, but this term has two opposite meanings, which must be distinguished to avoid any misunderstanding. In the first interpretation, society is no longer considered capable of self-regulation because it is merely the discourse of an increasingly impersonal domination, that of money, political power or mass media. From the Frankfurt School to Michel Foucault, this critical theory has played a considerable role in sociology because it is true that power is no longer above social life but inherent to each of its operations and analytical categories. This is one of the reasons for which we have all become ambivalent, as far as our ideas about progress and rationalization are concerned. But this language of denunciation rapidly gets caught in its own incapacity to understand the constant transformation of society by social actors, since it sees the latter merely as the manifestations of a hidden domination. This denial of politics, of social movements reduced to waves of refusals and negotiations, was a very effective way of leading us away from the optimistic functionalism which was widely accepted in the post-war period, but it creates a critical form of functionalism which is just as arbitrary as the classical

one. These two opposed and complementary faces of sociology, as long as it defined itself as the understanding of society, have been victims of the same transformations: nowadays, where do we observe these all-powerful societies which supervise, punish and impose their discourse in a world swept by ever-stronger economic and technological winds, which destroy or outflank all the institutions and all the levels of social organization and control?

We therefore have to go further in the criticism of the idea of society. Modern life was dominated by the endeavours – which were long successful – to combine the triumph of instrumental rationality with cultural orientations through the ideas of State and then of society. Now, our *late modernity* witnesses the destruction of all theoretical and institutional principles of regulation of social life. The two universes, the economic one and the cultural one, the world of objectivity and the world of subjectivity, are separating and drifting in opposite directions. The world of rational instrumental action, which is often referred to as the industrial world, is dissolving in the instability of the market and the unpredictable nature of many processes of change. On the other hand, cultures, instead of being experienced as interpretations of nature, are becoming identities and even essences, creating everywhere an obsession for homogeneity and a refusal of difference and otherness. This major split causes the idea of society to disappear and it is very tempting to acknowledge the disappearance of any principle of unity and in particular of any definition of a social entity by its historicity. As the post-modernists say, we are living in a world composed at one and the same time of discourses imbued with power and of fundamental anthropological experiences: life, sexuality and death, both of which are present in most individual and collective experiences. But there is no unity between them and that leads to the destruction of the idea of society.

There is only one way out of these ruins; it is to consider each individual's self-construction as an actor and the only central principle of moral judgement. By way of consequence, the task of sociology is not the analysis of social systems but the understanding of social actors. The meaning of behaviour is no longer to be discovered in the logic of a system but in that of an actor. This eliminates the idea of a society as self-founded, designating as good or evil what is useful or harmful to it. This new sociology is threatened both by the influence of economic accidents or by neo-communitarian movements. Nevertheless, it is constantly expanding: it studies the construction of social actors and also of conflicts and negotiations between actors, on the ruins of what was 'society'.

I have just referred to social 'actors', because this word does retain its critical strength. To speak of actors is to refuse to consider forms of behaviour as being determined by the place of the actor in the system. But this sociocentric notion, which used to be so strong, has declined as the image of the social system fell apart. When I began to speak of social actors in industrial society, it was to react against the concept of social class which explained the behaviour of the actors by the laws of the capitalist system. But in a world in which movement has been substituted for order and in which management of change has more visible effects than labour relations, we need words which denote a more complete break with all forms of social determinism. Individualism is the most common notion which refuses to consider sociology defined as the study of social systems. During a long period of time, sociologists were defined as people who did not discuss individual choices, but norms and social roles. I therefore introduce this word because it is provocative, because it destroys the link between system and actor, which

continued to exist in the term: *social* actor. The adoption of an individualist point of view introduces the idea that an actor tends to pursue aims that reinforce or satisfy his individual demands, rather than to conform to norms.

But we must at once distinguish between various uses of the concept of individualism. They differ sufficiently from each other to define sociological 'schools' or, if the word sounds obscure, different theoretical orientations.

## 1

In the western world at least, the *rationalist* conception of individualism is dominant. The aim is to obtain the best possible results from an investment. This orientation is not limited to a simplified conception of rational choice; this is why many Marxists agree with liberals that the aim of action – even collective action – is to satisfy individual interests. This is why these sociologists reduce social movements to a process of *resource mobilization* since, for them, the problem of the ends is resolved from the outset by this rationalist conception. This rationalist individualism does not only seek to explain individual or collective behaviour. It endeavours to draw up policies for education and health, as well as policies for private companies or a type of tax system, on the basis of comparative analysis of costs and benefits. The limits of this conception are that the search for personal interest is easily converted into strategies which are controlled more by circumstances and market trends than by the calculation of personal interest. The rationalist individualist then finds himself in a position of a merchant who cannot define his own interest but only economic rationality itself. The idea of *claims* is part of this perspective. It describes attempts to improve a quality/price relationship as people say in business, or input/output in the words of the sociologists of organizations. In complementary manner, in contemporary commercial firms, we observe a strong trend to the individualization of salaries, both for the wage-earners and for the executives whose incomes are now linked to market forecasts rather than to a level of competence.

## 2

The limits of rationalist individualism, which confines individuals to the frantic search for their interest, leads many individuals to choose an opposite, *hedonistic* orientation which corresponds well to our consumer society (even if the latter is still a society of production). In this type of behaviour, the idea is not to follow a central principle of choice but to satisfy the greatest possible number of needs with the greatest possible intensity. Hedonists are like the children described by Freud who are attracted to a large variety of forms of sexual behaviour. The outstanding aspect here is that the individual eliminates any principle of unity of the self; on the contrary, he seeks self-dispersion, and the accumulation of experiences. This reminds us of the opposition of *Erfahrung*, to which Benjamin refers, and the *Erlebnisse*, of which Simmel had already demonstrated the multiplication in modern societies.

But in this case also, individualism can easily turn on itself. For what it calls personal needs are usually socially determined, as are its choices that market research can competently forecast. On the other hand, these needs can be understood as the expression of a more general *libido*, which is very impersonal, even if it applies to very personal experiences. Desire, as many writers said long before Freud, is a passion which tends to burn, exalt and destroy the individual possessed by it.

There is a deep opposition between rationalist individualism and hedonist individualism but the two are not irreconcilable. Our lives are made of the juxtaposition of various activities of production and consumption. For example, when we watch television, we receive the most diverse messages: news, sitcoms, violence, pornography, documentaries on cultures far from ours, and many other examples. The search for alterity and the taste for difference are then easily reduced to a tourist's conception of life. It is the struggle against any stable and, above all, institutionalized definition of personal behaviour which draws together the rationalist and the hedonist forms of individualism.

### 3

The weakness of these two forms of individualism is that, in the name of the individual, they are both subject to impersonal principles, individual interest in one instance and libido in the other. This is why they are so easily self-destructive and, above all, why they so easily become forces of social decomposition. Hedonism is the opposite of civic virtue and the rational search for personal interest is an equally serious threat for society, since it gives a priority to personal interest over social utility.

(a) These remarks lead us toward a third type of individualism, which can be termed the individualism of *the Subject*, if it is agreed that this term represents the individual in his effort to be a responsible actor. In the ebb and flow of change and in the absence of any reference to a stable order, the search for ourselves is a guiding light which brings continuity in the diversity of our situations and our experiences. It is no longer possible for us to seek Man as a universal model, who is to be found within every individual and who is protected by fundamental human rights. We are no longer distinct from our creations, any more than the situations that we experience can be defined without the action that we have on them, as Anthony Giddens rightly says. Above all, we have learned to become wary of 'consciousness'. We refer to the unconscious and to the ideal ego more easily than to consciousness, which is merely the film of psychic life in contact with reality, in Freud's words. To endeavour to move from individuals to Man, in block letters, is a hopeless task since, at the end of our search, we come to an empty space, as empty as the results of ecumenical endeavours to discover the elements which are common to all religions and to all major philosophies. The Subject must therefore be sought in the opposite direction. Not above social organization, in a transcendent world, but, on the contrary, below it and in the *individuality* and *singularity* of each human being.

(b) This individuality is first of all the resistance of the singular being to invasion by mass production and mass consumption or by messages coming from the mass media. We cannot oppose this invasion with universal principles but with the resistance of our singular experiences. What remains of us when we attempt not to be completely absorbed by market stimulations or by communitarian ideologies? All we see is a naked body which we can name ours. There is nothing victorious in this elementary assertion of the self. On the contrary, the image chosen here corresponds to that of the resistant or the dissident reduced to accepting death as the price of the respect of oneself as an individual responsible for the liberty of all and not as a member of a category, of a 'series', in Sartre's words.

I say that the Subject is *empty* to indicate that the Subject is not the ego, as it is

constructed by its social relations, its education and its social experience. The Subject rejects the modes of construction of the reality which are contradictory to its own existence. On the contrary, analyses which have a total confidence in the market eliminate any reference to the Subject; those who, on the other side, appeal to the community, its integration and its ideology, reject with the same intensity a subjectivation which appears to them to be a refusal of integration and homogeneity. When mechanisms of reproduction were stronger than processes of production, it was necessary to appeal to reason and interest or the power of the State to break the resistance to change. But when the world is swept away in accelerated change, we each seek a mark by which we keep our bearings and this can only be ourselves as Subjects.

The vacuum of the Subject cannot be filled by itself. This can only be accomplished by the reciprocal recognition of two or several Subjects, which can be called love relations. This rapidly leads to the recognition of everybody's right to be a Subject, an orientation which is central to democratic thinking. This individualism is not a form of egoism.

(c) Only this search for singularity of the individual can bridge the gap between the two continents which modernity, as we have said, is increasingly separating. Each of us, in his or her own specific way, seeks at the same time to participate in the world of instrumental rationality, of the technical and economic world, and to develop cultural projects which include both legacies from the past and personal innovations. As Subjects, we can combine the two sides of human experience which no institution, whether political or other, can any longer reconcile.

There is no other way for each of us to combine an increasingly global economic system with subjectivities that are increasingly free of norms and social roles. Why should we remain in this impasse: we do not define ourselves either as rational agents or as members of a community. This opposition is artificial. We are neither purely rational economic agents, nor members of a community circumscribed by its beliefs and its identity. We bear within us the desire to combine specific religious, political or moral ends, with means and instruments which use rational knowledge, as do technologies and scientific knowledge. We are Subjects, not in so far as we accumulate experiences, but in that we make efforts to safeguard and reinforce our individuality which is always in danger of being torn between the world economy and a specific culture, which continue to drift apart.

On the one hand, we want to be modern, to participate in the world of major economic exchanges and technological innovations; on the other, we speak in the name of *entitlements*, because we identify ourselves with Islam or with women, with a nation or with an age group. Today's world is full of conflicts in which one camp or even both camps appeal to their right to govern a territory, to use a given language or to the necessary respect of specific laws adopted or respected by the community. The person who identifies herself as a woman, an Algerian, a Muslim, the mother of a sick child, is not directly a Subject, because she asserts these identities. The Subject only exists if individuals seek to combine their sense of cultural identity with their participation in the modern economic and technological activities. That has nothing to do with the withdrawal into localism, which is no more conducive to the emergence of the Subject than is a religion of progress which sacrifices everything to rationalization, standardization and further still to globalization.

Today, all these contradictory demands are usually present but are rarely combined. Since 1989, and the fall of the Soviet system, many have called for a modernization which would unite the world, but many others wish to protect a local culture or society which is threatened by this globalization. Neither the first nor the second orientation can be analysed in terms of the Subject. The Subject can only be constituted by the integration of its two contradictory components in a cultural project which is capable of uniting the choice for modernity with the intention to conserve the past. This integration is only possible if we give a central importance to the personal assertion of the individual as a Subject. The assertion of the singularity of each actor can alone make possible the combination of instrumentality with value-orientations. Such a combination would not be possible if it should be reduced to the clash of two value systems. On the contrary, it becomes possible when the modern world is seen as a set of means or instruments which have their own function, while a culture is defined as a system of ends.

The formation of the Subject is all the stronger when the opposition between instrumental and cultural values is more distinct and when there is a clearer recognition of the need for them to be combined. We can therefore agree with Clifford Geertz that the western nation-states are incomplete because they have asserted their strength at the expense of their internal diversity. The Subject is constituted primarily in the endeavours to combine what seems *a priori* to be irreconcilable. But it is never entirely successful and it never achieves the complete integration of the two opposite orientations.

The construction of the Subject encounters even greater difficulties and often collapses. The idea of the Subject is necessary, both to understand its failures and its formation. Sociology has even stressed the failures of the Subject more frequently than its successes. Is it not the case that the weakening of social controls leads to the emergence of uprooted individuals rather than responsible individuals? Or again, is it not the case that this mass society tends to produce primary groups, gangs and tribes dominated by brutal forms of authority rather than personal Subjects? Another major criticism is that we are overburdened by the moral obligation to be Subjects and we reject this task which is too heavy by the flight into suicide, drugs and mental illness.

We will never sufficiently fully describe the failures of the Subject and, as Blake said, it is always easier to paint hell than heaven. The point to bear in mind is that we recognize the failures of the Subject in instances where, in the past, we used to see a crisis in social integration or socialization. In a parallel way, we learn to identify the endeavours by the Subject to assert itself in cases where we were not able to see anything between conformity and deviance.

One good way to understand these ideas is to apply them to the case of Mexico. Since the revolution, Mexico has wanted to integrate the Indians into a national society. Indigenism, supported by the State, endeavoured at one and the same time to *recognize* the originality of each culture and to promote the idea of Mexicans as a people of mixed race. The result, in Mexico as elsewhere, of this emphasis on integration has been to confine the Indians to the lower strata of society. Pablo Gonzalez Casanova's classical study *Democracia en Mexico* is a good analysis of the isolation of the Indians and the split within a nation which thought of itself as united. The counterpart of this situation was the total absence of ethnic demands. These were introduced into the Indian community by leftist political groups which came from the towns and organized guerrillas.



The importance of the recent Indian movements, especially in Ecuador and Mexico, resides in its opposition to ideologies which subordinate social and cultural ends to revolutionary ends. The importance of the Zapatista movement and its national and international success lies in the fact that, from the outset, it emphasized the necessary alliance between the defence of the Indian populations of Chiapas and the campaign for a real democratization of Mexican society. In other terms, it proclaimed the complementarity of the defence of a cultural specificity and the will to construct a modern form of citizenship, based on equality for all. The same approach was used by Indians in Ecuador who are even better organized than those in Mexico, but who, because of their links with some military groups, were crushed by a counter coup d'état. In Mexico, the Chiapas movement constructed a real union between local and national aims. If the name of Marcos is so well known, it is not because the balaclava he always wears makes him look like a social bandit, but because his discourse and his actions constantly link what had been separated for centuries: the national democratic idea and the defence of communities.

I can now come to the most important example, that of women's action, which, in reality, is more than an example because it is the main motive force behind the construction of the Subject. Women have been divided between those who wanted to get rid of all forms of discrimination and consequently eliminate any reference to *gender* in the greatest possible number of situations and those who, on the contrary, wanted to assert the specificity of the feminine personality and culture. But the important point is that neither of these types of mobilization lasted very long because the women's movement was satisfied with legal victories, on one hand, and, on the other, with the opening up of the public sphere to women. However, it was during this period of apparent disorganization that a women's movement was formed which corresponded to the general definition of social movements, that is to say that was capable of defining itself as well as its adversary and, at the same time, able to identify the issues at stake in their conflict, which actually are the major cultural orientations of our society today. Whether we ask women or men, a large majority of respondents believe that women and men are both equal and different. A declaration of this type is often seen as self-evident. The difference between men and women is that the former recognize the ongoing development and even the superiority of women, who are better at combining public and private activities, while they are aware of being themselves confined to occupational roles. Women constitute themselves as Subjects whereas men are still dominated by the loss of their domination, which they often accept.

One may be astonished by the almost silent construction of such a combination between equality and difference. Because anthropologists, like Louis Dumont or Clifford Geertz, have forcefully maintained that all difference implies or reveals unequal relations, so that the idea of equality between different groups is a contradiction in terms. In a seminar held in Italy, Clifford Geertz advised me to stop my quest to – as he put it – square the circle. Nevertheless, today, a few years later, difference and equality seem to be inherently related to each other.

This major transformation of our representations is inseparable from the idea of the Subject. Instead of the gridlock opposing the abstract universalism of liberalism to a form of communitarianism which so easily can withdraw into the defence of an artificial identity, or even into a policy of *ethnic cleansing*, we find in the idea of the Subject the

elements which enable us to bring the two orientations together – not by decreasing the tensions between them, but by defining the Subject as an instrument of integration or at least of compatibility between the rationalist thinking of the Enlightenment and a communitarianism which is always in danger of becoming *Völkisch*. The Subject is not a question of going beyond specificities and rising to the Universal, as Apel and Habermas think. It is in everyday life, and first of all in the experience of the body, that the Subject succeeds in combining the world of ends and that of means, that of the economy and that of cultures, unity and diversity.

We must go even further. The Subject is not social; it is neither the spirit of a time nor a collective ethic. The idea of a society defining good and evil in terms of the social utility or harmfulness of forms of behaviour has been weakened and partly destroyed, as I said at the outset. The sphere of 'society' has to a large extent been invaded by all sorts of forms of domination. A counter-coalition can be formed against the latter, and against the alliance of processes of domination with what remains of the functional organization of society, of the division of labour for example. The Subject, because it exists beyond social organization, can be reinforced by the other major non-social component of individual and collective experience which is the sphere of the body and of life, marked by important experiences such as birth, transmission of life, death and especially by sexuality which receives social and cultural form while remaining a non-social space. It is even difficult to conceive of the Subject and sexuality as distinct entities, because they are complementary and opposed to one another. The Subject goes beyond the limits of social life by the personal creation of a personal, singular actor; sexuality does so by resorting to the body, to libido, to suffering as expressions of an anthropological consciousness much more than as a collective social consciousness.

Thus a general representation of social life is put in place. The latter no longer has any unity, so that the idea of society becomes obsolete. Social life is therefore open to opposite forces. The winds of domination and the winds of production blow in opposite directions to those of the Subject and sexuality. But there is always a certain degree of regulation of the relationships between these four orientations. What we call *political life* seeks to render compatible orientations which would otherwise be involved in an endless struggle. Nevertheless, the sphere of politics is restricted and must remain so; it can *no more* be confused with the logic of domination or of production than with that of the Subject or with sexuality. Social life no longer has the unity which the expression 'social system' conveys. It cannot be reduced to the alliances and conflicts provoked by opposite orientations in the same social field.

We have to come back once again to the theme which is so central and so difficult to admit: social life is based on non-social principles, whether it be what I call the Subject or the experience of life and death. And when social life frees itself from everything which is not social, it is converted into closed systems, into utopias, into homogenous communities, authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Liberty would have no foundation if it were not opposed by the Subject against the logic of power and against that of production. This analysis leads us to the diametrical opposite of the sociologisms referred to at the beginning of this text; but in a situation which is constantly changing, how could there be a reference to a social order, to norms and to socialization agencies? There can only be a fundamental opposition between social behaviour and the principles which order it.

This anti-society which is also the foundation on which all social life is based is

constantly gaining ground. It is the sphere of rights. The immediate objection is that there is nothing more socially constructed than a right. But this is not an objection that really matters since it is society itself which recognizes the principles which are above it and to which it must conform. The history of the assertion of rights may shed light on it. In the modern world, we began by recognizing political rights, most formally in the United States and in France, which has not prevented the franchise from becoming slowly generalized. This right was declared in the name of mankind, of Man and of the Citizen, in the words of the French Declaration in 1789. This conception is based on the idea of a natural right, which refers to a post-religious image. On the other hand, the idea of social rights which gains momentum as from the mid-19th century deserves its name since it applies primarily in situations of employment and does not call on any transcending principle. This is why its content is variable and constantly subject to negotiation, as are wages, conditions of employment and housing. A Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up after World War II, but it is a demonstration of the weakness of this type of statement. It defines an acceptable and just situation which aims at improving the situation of the greatest number. But in general, there is no way of enforcing these rights. With one important exception: the welfare state period, when we could attribute to the State the entire capacity to create and transform society.

Today, we are very far from assertions of this sort. On one hand, we have become ambivalent with respect to modernity, progress and rationalization and each day takes us further from the almost religious faith that we had in them. On the other hand, we have extended our conception of rights, by insisting on cultural rights, on the right of each individual to practise a culture, therefore a language, choose a type of family or of food, or again the religion of his or her choice. The addition of these three types of rights enables us to consider as a Subject, in its own right, each individual defined by the combination of a political affiliation, a social situation and cultural legacies or projects. It is no longer a question here of a social being, but of an individual of whom we recognize the right to be what he wants to be, to manifest his or her liberty in every sphere. Human rights thus defined no longer rise above the confines of social life with quasi-religious references to natural rights, but undermine these confines from below, by the intention of each individual to impose the acceptance of all sets of practices which he considers to be a basic element of his liberty.

The idea of rights is therefore located at the head of the analysis of social facts. It controls social reality at both ends. The notion of *entitlement* is not as strong, because it refers to that which resists the law, while being a pre-requisite condition for the existence of rights. The concept of rights opposes the notion of *claims*, or demands, which is situated wholly within social organization. This, in my opinion, is the relationship which exists between the three terms which have been proposed for our consideration. Their ranking is defined in terms of their level of independence in relation to social organization. *Claims* are wholly social; on the contrary, *entitlement* is defined by a reality which is not directly social but is cultural, so that society does not have the right to destroy legacies, languages and territories. Finally, the idea of *rights* indicates the formation of a specific space within society which is superior to it. We discover this space if we study the school or the family. We no longer think that their functions are to socialize children; we are increasingly convinced that they must be at the service of the child's capacity to act as a Subject.

We must however recognize that this position is somewhat surprising because we have been accustomed to analysing human behaviour as social behaviour. This was primarily to protect ourselves from an image of subjectivity which considers it as being above social determinants, while it is in fact shaped by them. This is why I insist on the opposition between the social or cultural subject and, on one side, a *Volk* and on the other with the philosophical subject of the classical tradition, an opposition which I wished to underline by speaking of the Subject as an individual, as a concrete being who opposes his liberty and in the first instance his body to all forms of domination and who succeeds in combining, in a way which is always specific, participation in the economic sphere and the defence of old or new cultural projects. I insist on repeating that this conception of the individual does not isolate him or her, but, on the contrary, gives central importance to the recognition of others as Subjects, to the supreme point at which there would be no other social reality than conversations of lovers and gestures of mutual recognition.

The analysis that I have just presented is neither a utopia nor a complete description of social life today. It is easy to name sectors which are only marginally concerned by the transformations I indicate or perhaps even name a few others which actively resist these changes. In particular, nationalism in industrialized countries is far from having disappeared. But in all cases our approach is necessarily critical; it is even more so the nearer one comes to the image of a nation-state in which feelings and attitudes are strongly linked to a social, administrative or religious organization. For, at this level, the main phenomenon to be observed is *desocialization*. Most people tend to emphasize its negative aspect: anomie, the failure of the training of children, indifference to public life, but these, indeed negative, realities cannot let us forget the positive aspects of desocialization: the most important one being the central place occupied by the relationship of self to self and to what many, in Germany and in Britain especially, call *self-esteem*. Not very different is the search not for social insertion or integration, but for a career or a life history which would receive its meaning from the individual who lives it and who is himself or herself a Subject. Finally, it gives a major importance to the recognition of the other and to the consciousness of alterity. Our world, in constant movement in which goods, capital, and information circulate freely over vast territories and in which the number of migrants is increasing and will increase rapidly, can neither break down into closed communities nor be left to a 'free for all' organization which would bring catastrophic clashes.

The Subject is no longer associated with roles and duties. When production is organized in *flows*, in *networks* and in the creation of virtual universes, the Subject is expelled from economic life. It can be drowned in the river of change; we are surrounded by individuals who have been nearly drowned in this way and who only survive abandoned to the risks of circumstances. But in many cases, the Subject reconstructs him or herself outside the economic and social sphere, and also relies on the institutions of which he or she is the driving force on the basis of fundamental human rights.

The ideas that I am presenting to you are far from the central role given to the concepts which were the driving force behind so many important writings in sociology and social anthropology. The concept of Subject is a weapon of rupture with functionalist sociology, swept away in the cultural and social crises of the 1960s and 1970s. But I want to point out that the functional dimension of social life has not entirely

disappeared. Our criticism should therefore be directed not so much against a principle of analysis as against the tendency to integrate all the directions of analysis into a general theory which assumes that a social system has a unity. When we speak of late modernity, what we want to discuss is this necessary deconstruction of the idea of society which leads from the idea of society to the duality of structuralist studies and the concept of Subject, which seems to me to define the state of the social sciences today. Now, in sociology at least, we have emerged from the aggressive years of post-structuralism, be it Marxist or not, when the idea of Subject was dismissed and despised. Now it is resuming a central importance while the idea of society is losing it. Let's take advantage of the springtime of the Subject.

A final remark: are these analyses limited to the problems of the most developed, richest and highly industrialized regions of the planet? In no way, because the expression *one world* has become a reality and we are *all* keenly aware of our interdependence. In the same way, we perceive signs of resistance and misunderstanding in all types of societies; finally, the mutual recognition of Subjects can take place much more easily than before over frontiers. This is one of the reasons why social anthropology and sociology, which began by being united, then separated, are now coming closer together again. We can see forms of desocialization of the Subject everywhere, but we can also see, in all parts of the world, the formation of personal and collective Subjects. The triumphant success of individualism does not mean only the victory of the market economy: it goes well beyond the rationalization of production and the multiplication of choices which mass consumption offers us; it leads to the emergence of a self-constructed Subject free from any transcendental principle. A world is being created, which is positively oriented towards the creation of Subjects but which is equally subordinated to the logic of economic, social and political forces. The conflict between these two orientations is as central today as the class conflict was in industrial society.

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