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## **Interpretations of the Concept of “Subject”: From Classical Traditions to Post-Modern Theories**

### *Abstract*

*Scientific picture of social world includes the two fundamental concepts: the concept of social reality and that related to the subject of action/cognition/power. These concepts undergo changes depending on the historical period in which certain ideas about the major features of social reality prevail among the subjects of cognition. Classical Western philosophy and sociology have introduced the concept of subjectivity in the theories of individualism and autonomy. Those theories, in turn, have interpreted an individual as a certain unchangeable construct. However, the common idea of two recent theories developed by Norbert Elias and Judith Butler is that we need a new sociology, the sociology not dealing with unchangeable constructs but studying processes and relationships between subject and power or discourse.*

**Keywords:** *individual, subject, power, discourse*

### ***Conceptual Basis for the Research***

Theoretical basis of any science is a set of some philosophical axioms, which may be often not realised by researcher. A researcher while becoming a professional usually accepts these axioms on faith, since they seem to be conventional and not requiring additional proof. However, with the growth of scientific knowledge, the objects being studied display new characteristics that may contradict conventional knowledge. This impels a cognising subject to change the dominant world view for another one, in order to meet the standards of scientific knowledge.

Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, a representative of the Lviv-Warsaw school of logical positivism, formulated the thesis that all judgements which we accept and which shape our world view are not unambiguously determined by knowledge gained from experience, they rather depend on choice of the conceptual apparatus (the totality of concepts) through which we interpret this knowledge [Ajdukiewicz, 1934: p. 259]. In other words, knowledge obtained through experience makes a cognising subject accept or reject certain statements depending on conceptual structure he/she uses. The choice of concepts used for description and analysis of the reality's processes and phenomena has a direct impact on results of his/her cognitive activity. Conceptual apparatus defines a cognitive matrix necessary, on the one hand, to arrange the objects of cognition and, on the other hand, to allow a cognising subject to substitute somewhat the reality.

The world view is a system of representations of reality accepted by culture in a particular socio-historical space. It is formed by means of both everyday and scientific languages, thus providing a basis for perception of the world by individual as a subject of cognition. The world view of a cognising subject is composed in a specific way of interpreting reality, which seems to him/her self-evident.

Fundamental ontological concepts are some kind of taboo in relation to other sources of meanings. The concepts like "God", "nature", "society", "subject" used in different world views (beginning from the religious one) make reality, variety of life and existence forms more simplified and unified. Subjects of action (actors), in their turn, can more easily orient themselves in the world and socio-cultural space where they live, creating a universal pattern of existence for the society as a whole.

Contemporary philosophy of cognition and sociolinguistics deal with a mediator in the mind of a subject of cognition called a world view or picture of the world. A general frame of meanings in different world views is created by fundamental philosophical metaphors and assumptions that have become core truths in different cultures.

### ***Subject in Classical Philosophical Tradition: Individualism and Autonomy***

Western philosophies in classical tradition developed the concept of subjectivity in the theories of individualism and autonomy. The former describe the subject whose actions are limited only by the external law of natural necessity. In the theories of autonomy the actions of subject are rigorously limited rather by internal morality and duty than by external factors.

In the first case, the subject is either antisocial or social under compulsion. In the second case, he/she willingly accepts the burden of duty and become a citizen of a society with rational behaviour. The concept of autonomy developed by Immanuel Kant is the idea of voluntary submission of the subject for reasons not defined by law. What does the law provide for is not a matter of primary importance, the main thing is voluntary assumption of certain obligations towards others and society as a whole. Only such kind of obedience creates a clear personal identity and allows an individual to feel rather comfortable within social reality.

The major characteristics of a subject in classical philosophical tradition are as follows: consciousness of the subject is clear and accessible to self-reflection, motives of his/her actions are increasingly rational and utilitarian, thinking is the main form of his/her conscious activity. Subject is formed as a separate independent person in the course of thinking.

Destruction of the classical concept of subject began in Nietzsche’s philosophy and ended in post-modern concepts of the “death of the subject”. A stable set of personal characteristics of the subject or the subject’s autonomy gives up its place to duty internalised by the subject of desire. The subject is perceived as a process of constant metamorphosis and changes coupled with changes in the exterior world and in the subject’s subconscious impulses. In Jacques Lacan’s post-structuralist theory [Lacan, 1994: p. 13] and Louis Althusser’s concept of ideology [Althusser, 1971: pp. 129–186] the subject is virtually absorbed. According to Lacan, structure of language subordinates subjective consciousness to conceptual matrices of perception while Althusser asserts that subject forms his/her own identity in response to the call (“hail”) of power. In both cases, the external independent factors hide the subject’s readiness for submission to power, or games of the subconscious mind.

***Individual and Subject as a Constant Process of Becoming:  
A Comparative Analysis of Theories Developed by  
Norbert Elias and Judith Butler***

Norbert Elias’ ideas are considered to have significant influence on critical theory and post-modern thought. In his book “The Society of Individuals” (1939) the scholar discusses a new dynamic perspective on the concept of the “individual”. His idea of close relationship between individual and society undergoing permanent changes and transformations, has not lost any of its relevance. In the author’s opinion, the Elias’ “individual” reveals similarities to the Butler’s concept of subject, since both authors criticise classical mechanistic theories separating the individual from society and treating them as static concepts.

The major characteristics of individual interpreted by Norbert Elias are as follows.

First, the individual is part of a larger whole being formed together with others. Individual consciousness is not something solidified and formed once and for all. The subject of knowledge or the subject of life can make an independent choice whether to be open to new patterns of behaviour or not.

Second, “the invisible social order of this form of living together offers the individual a more or less restricted range of possible functions and modes of behaviour” [Elias, 1991: p. 19].

Third, “functions of the most disparate kinds have made the individual dependent on others and others on him... He lives in a tissue of mobile relationships, which have by now been precipitated in him as his personal character” [Elias, 1991: p. 21]. The basic framework of interdependent functions, their structure and pattern give a society its specific character.

Norbert Elias argues that it is necessary to give up thinking in terms of single, isolated substances and to start thinking in terms of relationships and functions.

He considers such situation as a result of some ideological stereotypes that have been universally accepted. For example, there are two ideological stereotypes in classical sociology: “Society is the final purpose and the individual only a means” and “the individual is the final purpose and the union of individuals into a society only a means to his/her well-being” [Elias, 1991: p. 24].

Moreover, the scholar mentions “the gulf and the intense conflict which the highly individualised people of our stage of civilisation feel within themselves” and which are “projected by their consciousness into the world. In their theoretical reflection they appear as an existential gulf and an eternal conflict between individual and society”. “The advance of the division of functions and of civilisation at certain stages is therefore increasingly accompanied by the feeling in individuals that in order to maintain their positions in the human network they must allow their true nature to wither” [Elias, 1991: p. 26].

The stereotypes existing in classical sociological theories have been somewhat overcome by Judith Butler in the theory of subjection. She continues to develop the theory of the subject of power/knowledge suggested by Michel Foucault [Foucault, 1983]. This theory treats the subject as an entity which is self-aware and capable of choosing how to act. Foucault was a consistent opponent of theories arisen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and phenomenological notions of the universal and timeless subject which was at the source of how one made sense of the world and which was the foundation of all thought and action. The problem with this conception of the subject, according to Foucault and other thinkers in the 1960<sup>s</sup>, was that it fixed the status quo and attached people to specific identities that could never be changed. Althusser's doctrine of interpellation [Althusser, 1971] clearly sets the stage for Foucault's later views on the “discursive production of the subject”. Social categories imply both subordination and existence of the subject. Thus, the risk of death for subject is coextensive with the insurmountability of the social. Only restricting himself/herself with social classification categories and terms, the subject can maintain his/her own existence. This interpellation is a form of misrecognition, as in Lacan's mirror phase [Evans, 1996], where an externalised image is perceived both as the self and the “other”. It is “the position we take is relative to a more significant, superior and central ‘Other Subject’, whether it is the state, God or some other ultimate authority. The person-as-subject is thus defined by the “other” and the person recognises themselves as an image or reflection of the Other. This allows the person to claim the quality of the Other but also requires subjugation to the Other. To deny the Other is to deny one's own existence” [O'Farrell, s.a.].

However, Butler thinks that the subject is not the final result of socialisation, but an ambivalent process. At first, the subject becomes subordinated by power, then the subject realises his/her self-dependence and finally he/she feels the need to violate the ban, to go beyond the boundaries determined by power. The scholar tries to reveal the factors explaining an individual's subconscious inclination to obey authority at the first stage of subjection and the forces motivating him/her later to seek the ways of releasing from obedience to power and acting independently.

The subject being formed in the field of discourse and power finds his/her own social identity, even partially typed, and gets the opportunity to act in the

field of discursive practices. This is the first breakpoint in the discourse of power, and there arises a possibility of freedom for the subject. Any action of the subject entails a series of unpredictable consequences, even if his/her purpose and means of action were chosen from a set of legitimate aims and means. The acting subject may overstep the limits but cannot evade the influence of power. In other words, the subject cannot overcome ambivalence that he/she has built.

Today the power is not only becoming an impersonal power of discourse but also losing its legitimacy because of not being able to ensure stability and certainty of subjects in the everyday world and to maintain their identities.

It would be advisable to describe briefly dialectic relationship between subject and power. At first, the subject is necessarily subordinated to the parental authority, society, or cultural traditions. The subject cannot exist without power. Both the power has an influence on the subject and the subject in a figurative sense comes into force thanks to the power. The power also exists in the form of authority voluntarily accepted by the subject and recognised as a legitimate governing body. The subject is ready to obey authority both emotionally and rationally. We should acknowledge that the power not only restricts the subject's freedom of choice but also creates an opportunity for subjective existence in discursive and counter-discursive spaces.

The so-called conscious stage can be formed only if the subject himself/herself becomes a hindrance to his/her own desires: (1) to live in subjection and (2) to destroy himself/herself as realising that other people have a real influence on his/her thoughts and behaviour. If the subject is able to overcome practically both of these desires (subordination and self-destruction), there comes a breakpoint in his/her life and a new form of power takes place. This is the control that the subject exerts himself/herself over his/her own desires, thoughts and actions as an ability to overcome the limits imposed by any form of discourse including parental.

According to Butler, there are four main steps in the subject's becoming.

Firstly, the subject is formed in the field of discourse and power. “No subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those or whom he or she is fundamentally dependent” [Butler, 1997: p. 7]. This passionate attachment becomes, in turn, the ground of subjectivity.

Secondly, the subject recognises his/her dependence on social norms and rules. “Conscience is the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive. Reflexivity becomes the means by which desire is regularly transmuted into the circuit of self-reflection” [Butler, 1997: p. 16].

Thirdly, the subject changes his/her attitude towards the earliest objects of love – parents, guardians, siblings, and so on. “That accounts in part for the adult sense of humiliation when confronted with the earliest objects of love – parents, guardians, siblings, and so on – the sense of belated indignation in which one claims, “I couldn't possibly love such a person” [Butler, 1997: p. 17].

Fourthly, the subject becomes a hindrance to his own desires. As previously mentioned, these are desire to live in subjection or to destroy himself/herself when he/she realises that other people influence his thoughts and behaviour. A theory of the subject should take into account the full ambivalence of the condi-

tions of its operation. A power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming.

In the author's opinion, there are two basic features common to Elias's individual and Butler's subject. First, just as the individual exists in close connection with other people, groups, or society as a whole, so the subject is formed in the field of discourse and power. Second, there are no "individuals without society" and the subject does not exist without power/authority either.

At the same time, there are some differences between these two concepts. For instance, Elias thought of the individual as a result both of social control and self-control processes. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to study how these processes interact with each other. However, Butler considers the subject as something which may be opposed to the power. Therefore, we have to find out how the subject formed in the field of power can develop the desire to be independent and ability to think on his/her own.

### ***Conclusions***

Metaphysics is an epistemological basis for classical picture of both physical and social world. Rejection of metaphysics in positivism has meant only seeming rejection of hypotheses or temporary suspension of this level of analysis. However, it has not solved the main problem because an independent sociological basis for scientific analysis could not be formed. Although positivism verbally rejects metaphysical tradition, in fact, it is nothing but a direct continuation of this approach. Metaphysics actually undergoes methodological criticism only in phenomenology and postmodernism. The current stage in the development of sociological thought may be considered as a stage of overcoming basic hypotheses of classical Western metaphysics.

Post-modern sociologists pay close attention to new interpretations of the concept of "individual"; for example, to the "subject" concept developed by Judith Butler. This concept can be an alternative to the classical concept of person since the person is a result of socialisation while the "subject" is a process of becoming that never completes. Modern theories interpret the consciousness of the subject as a well-ordered internal world opposed to the objective reality of the external world, while post-modern theories argue that the subject's consciousness is a thin shell which hides his/her chaotic desires and impulses. This chaos can become a temporary image of the individual due to his/her inner will or outer influences (e.g., socio-cultural norms).

Post-modern conceptions stress the role of inner practices of the "subject" who has made himself/herself as a personality. "Subject" is not an existing reality of thinking but a specific technique for understanding one's identity, a way to oneself. Everybody can pass this way, but very few actually do this. Although the subject is generated by discourse of the global power, he/she is opposed to the influence of power. Despite being subordinated to the authority the subject has needs for self-expression and freedom of action. Power becomes vulnerable just as the subject begins to realise mechanisms of its influence.

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