



Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century

Psychological,
Sociological, and
Political Perspectives

Edited by
Romin W. Tafariodi

CAMBRIDGE



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SUBJECTIVITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

What is it like to be a person today? To think, feel, and act as an individual in a time of accelerated social, cultural, technological, and political change? This question is inspired by the double meaning of subjectivity as both the "first-personness" of consciousness (being a subject of experience) and the conditioning of that consciousness within society (being subject to power, authority, or influence). The contributors to this volume explore the perils and promise of the self in today's world, describing where we stand and what is at stake as we move ahead in the twenty-first century. They do so by interrogating the historical moment as a predicament of the subject. Their shared focus is on subjectivity as a dialectic of self and other, or individual and society, and how the defining tensions of subjectivity are reflected in contemporary forms of individualism, identity, autonomy, social connection, and political consciousness.

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CONTENTS

<i>Contributors</i>	page ix
Introduction <i>Romin W. Tafarodi</i>	1
Part I Relationality	
1. Subjectivity and Strong Relationality <i>Frank C. Richardson and Robert L. Woolfolk</i>	11
2. A Multivoiced and Dialogical Self and the Challenge of Social Power in a Globalizing World <i>Hubert J. M. Hermans</i>	41
3. Technology and the Tributaries of Relational Being <i>Kenneth J. Gergen</i>	66
Part II Emotional Life	
4. Melancholic Subject <i>Stephen Frosh</i>	87
5. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose: Self-Consciousness in the Twenty-First Century <i>John Hewitt</i>	111
6. New Kinds of Subjective Uncertainty? Technologies of Art, 'Self' and Confusions of Memory in the Twenty-First Century <i>Ciarán Benson</i>	140

Part III Political and Institutional Perspectives

7. Radical Subjectivity and the N-Row Wampum: A General Model for Autonomous Relations Against and Beyond the Dominant Global Order? <i>Richard J. F. Day and Adam Lewis</i>	169
8. The Theory of New Individualism <i>Anthony Elliott</i>	190
9. Feminism, Foucault, and Globalized Subjectivity <i>Margaret A. McLaren</i>	210
<i>Index</i>	245

Introduction

ROMIN W. TAFARODI

A key aspect of culture, argued Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution* (1961), is the characteristic “structure of feeling” that defines what it is like to live in a particular place and time. This emotional tone and sensibility cannot be reduced to social character and way of life, as it involves the creative response of individuals to that very social reality. “Everyone living through a period would have something which...no later individual can wholly recover,” claimed Williams (1961, p. 50), prefiguring in a curious way the later doubts of philosophers such as Thomas Nagel (1974) and Frank Jackson (1982) about the sufficiency of physicalist accounts of mind and consciousness.

This book is about the structure of feeling in our time. Its impulse is characteristic of “reflexive modernity,” a time when the task of coming to critical grips with the changing textures of private and public life has become central to engaged and informed citizenship. Whether to evaluate the present in relation to the past, or to guide ourselves into an uncertain future, the need to diagnose and evaluate a world of shared risks, challenges, opportunities, and social transformations is as pressing now as ever. The rapid advancement and spread of science, technology, bureaucratic rationality, liberal democracy, and market capitalism over the past two centuries has created a fast-moving world of human migration; transnational flows of goods, services, and information; industrial development; cultural integration (and resistance); and, more broadly, a remarkable degree of time-space compression. Our planet has never felt so small or seemed so densely animated. Alexander the Great, it is said, broke down and wept when there were no nations left to conquer. Our own disenchantment comes from there being none left to know. All lie within reach, real or virtual. From the standpoint of social theory, how do we reposition the human subject in this brave new world?

Regardless of how one chooses to thematize our age – as “late modernity,” “high modernity,” “postmodernity,” “advanced capitalism,” “the third wave,” “the information age,” “risk society,” “network society,” or even the “end of history” – there is a growing sense that the conditions of subjectivity are changing. Those born in the twenty-first century enter a world unlike that of their predecessors. Liberal democracies now include more than half of the world’s population. Consumer capitalism, firmly entrenched in the West, has achieved unprecedented consolidation and global penetration. Few areas of personal or public life escape commodification. Advanced information and communications networks circle the globe, collapsing distance and creating new forms of mediated identity, symbolic exchange, and community. A third of the world’s population has accessed the Internet; more than 70 percent use mobile phones. Urbanization has packed more than half of humanity into cities, more than two dozen of which teem with over 10 million inhabitants. Mass society, with its atomized public and deracinated, competitive individual, has naturalized into a pandemic reality. Economic inequality continues to widen even as the global poverty rate declines. North America, Europe, and a handful of high-income Asian-Pacific countries now account for 90 percent of world household wealth. Globally, the richest 1 percent of adults own more than 40 percent of the world’s assets. This, together with the increasing agglomeration and globalization of the culture industries, has brought the poor into intimate contact with the spectacle of wealth and privilege, intensifying old social tensions and creating new ones. The flow of cultural products from the developed to the developing world and hegemonic reproduction of the economic systems, social institutions, and practices that define late modernity have created a dizzying array of hybridized cultural forms, the dynamics of which overrun the boundaries of the nation-state and demand new political and topographical perspectives.

When power is unbound and fluid, diffused across shifting global networks rather than localized in sovereign and official bodies, to what interpellation does the individual answer? To whose judgement are we required to give an account of ourselves? To what do we conform and what creative resistance is possible within and beyond this conformity? And can culture, when in flux and “at large” (Appadurai, 1996), inscribe individual and collective identities solid enough to serve as moral horizons for thought and action? In a world in which experience itself is routinely bought and sold, and representations eclipse occurrences, how do we distinguish reality from the technicolor projections of our own fears and fantasies? How do we divide self from non-self? Public from private? What consequences does

this existential blurring have for social and political agency? The possibility of sustained personal and collective commitments? The meaning and structure of community?

More generally, we must face up with Williams' cultural question. What is it like to be a person today? To think, feel, and act as an individual in a time of accelerated social, cultural, technological, and political change? This question is inspired by the double meaning of subjectivity as both the "first-personness" of consciousness (being a subject *of* experience) and the conditioning of that consciousness by our society, culture, and time (being subject *to* power, authority, or influence). This duality recognizes the historicity of subjectivity and the need to articulate its changing character and contingencies across time and place.

The contributors to this volume explore the perils and promise of the self in today's world. Their shared aim is to describe where we stand and what is at stake as we move ahead in the twenty-first century. They do so by interrogating the historical moment as a predicament of the subject. Their shared focus is on subjectivity as a dialectic of self and other, or individual and society, and how its tensions are reflected in contemporary forms of individualism, identity, autonomy, social connection, and political consciousness.

The authors of the chapters that follow work within a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Their distinctive voices and varied sensibilities were not pressed into a forced harmony. They were left free to identify and interpret the predicament of the subject in their own manner and on their own terms. The resulting spectrum of viewpoints revealed affinities and connections that were spontaneous rather than bought through the imposition of a totalizing vision.

Part I offers an examination of contemporary relationality. In Chapter 1, Frank Richardson and Robert Woolfolk diagnose our era as suffering under the modernist conceit of disengaged individualism. We are exposed as never before, they argue, to liberal democratic pluralism and its vertiginous flux of values, commitments, and beliefs. This shifting multiplicity injects considerable uncertainty, insecurity, and alienation into private and public life. Challenging the modern notion of an autonomous, self-contained subject – a self "conceived in opposition" to its own cultural and social context (Trilling, 1955) – the authors see only limited freedom in a collective self-understanding that fails to acknowledge the "deep relationality" of human existence. In a time of "real or threatened disintegration," they look to restore to subjectivity a coherent "relational ontology" that recognizes and embraces our dialogical and hermeneutic dependence on others. Only by respecting the mutual constitution of self, other, and the world, they argue,

can we reverse the reifying excesses of hyperindividualism and give back to subjectivity a genuine sense of community and transcendent meaning.

In Chapter 2, Hubert Hermans amplifies and expands on Richardson and Woolfolk's theme of dialogue to argue that the accelerated flows of globalization have brought individuals into welcome or unwelcome proximity with a greater range of competing standpoints or "voices" than ever before. Recalling the sociogenetical accounts of consciousness offered by Vygotsky and Mead, and the dialogism of Bakhtin, Hermans argues that the contradictions, tensions, and oppositions that define the global polyphony become interiorized to form a consciousness that is best thought of as a "society of mind." Thought, on this account, becomes a multilateral dialogue among "*I*-positions," each representing particular investments in the world and differential power relations with other positions. In an age of widespread cultural hybridity and reinvention, diasporic and migrant communities, and multicultural interaction, this complexity increases the risk of fragmentation and confusion in the psychic life of the individual. Today, argues Hermans, our "dialogical capacities are challenged to the utmost," increasing the attraction to the "securitizing" certainties offered by "monological" fundamentalisms of all sorts. Both across and within selves, the contemporary challenge becomes how best to promote and support egalitarian forms of dialogue that allow for competing voices to understand and enrich, rather than suppress or override, each other.

In Chapter 3, Kenneth Gergen surveys the landscape of cultural life to argue for several trajectories of contemporary relationality. He sees these trajectories as calling into question modernism's "individualist tradition" and its central notion of a territorialized, centered, autonomous, separate, and self-contained subject of experience. First, he argues, advanced information and communication technologies have ushered in an "unbounded self" that is constituted within shifting global networks of social connection. This allows for "continuous expansion in the dimensions of relational engagement," which thereby become decentered and diffused. Second, these same technologies allow for greater "encapsulation" within affinity groups, fragmenting the public sphere into self-selected sphericules that insulate members from dissenting viewpoints and dissimilar sensibilities. The social tethering that defines this encapsulation, enabled largely by mobile technologies, tends to breed new insecurities and dependencies. Chief among these is a need for constant social affirmation on the part of our digital youth. Third, the marriage of digital technologies and entertainment culture has brought about a "cultural shift toward play" with its attendant pleasures, projection of "second-order selves," and highly contextualized social

logics. Although the psychological and moral futures of all three trajectories remain unclear, Gergen sees hope in a common movement toward “a greater appreciation and investment in relationship.” Echoing Ulrich Beck (1992), he sees the possibility of new solidarities and collaboration toward effectively addressing the global risks and shared challenges we face today.

The changing textures of emotional life are taken up in Part II. In Chapter 4, Stephen Frosh reads modern social life, the mixed effects of global capitalism, and the political and cultural challenges faced by postcolonial, post-authoritarian, and diasporic societies as spawning forms of subjectivity characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, ambivalence, rootlessness, and most important, a deep sense of loss and longing for a fantasized past. The latter is often expressed as a false “nostalgia for more certain times.” This in turn motivates the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), antagonistic and even violent demands for recognition (Taylor, 1994), racism, and a variety of fundamentalisms. The prevailing social pathology here is “melancholic” in the psychoanalytic sense, claims Frosh, in that it involves the failure to satisfactorily recognize, mourn, and integrate any “lost object” or essence from the past. The failure is due to the perceived loss in fact masking an emptiness or insufficiency – a “lack.” Rather than languish in the “stuckness” of melancholic attachments, denials, and accusations, Frosh recommends that we strive to understand and integrate the past, whether at the level of individual or collective history. Integration of the past requires constructive mediation with our present circumstances. It is only through such open-ended and ongoing hermeneutic construction that genuine “resistance and renewal” becomes possible.

John Hewitt, in Chapter 5, explores one expression of contemporary melancholia in American society – the tradition of academic and popular hand-wringing over the cultural rise of “*homo authenticus*” and his social, emotional, political, and moral failings. Much of this cultural criticism is couched in terms of historical change. As such, it becomes as much a lament for a lost past as a denunciation of the present. Synoptically, we can say that today’s narcissistic, impulsive, emotionally overexpressive, other-directed, and entitled citizen is contrasted with an allegedly self-sacrificing, inner-directed, rationally instrumental, and self-reliant (yet community-minded) predecessor. Hewitt rejects this narrative of decline as fictive, arguing instead that the contrasted historical types represent opposing poles of a dialectical ethos – one that pits the individual against the community – that has been at the heart of American society from its beginnings. Seen in this light, the valorization or condemnation of one or the other pole is less a description of a *changing* culture than one of its constitutive and *preserving* discourses.

Namely, it allows for reflexive “boundary maintenance,” a way of “establishing the outer limits of acceptable conduct” by “portraying the normative contours” – however caricatured and essentialized – of a self-consciously contradictory society. Looking forward into the twenty-first century, Hewitt doubts that there will be any “significant transformation of the American self.” He foresees only further rhetorical efforts to delimit and reconcile the abiding American values of individualism and communitarianism.

Revisiting the theme of technology in the shaping of subjectivity, Ciarán Benson in Chapter 6 examines recent advances in simulative technology and virtual reality. He argues that art may be “the richest arena for imagining changes in subjectivity in the twenty-first century.” The ever-increasing interactive, immersive, and projective power of contemporary arts and entertainment media allows for intensely “realistic” levels of physical and emotional participation in representational spaces. We are quickly moving toward an “age of fantasy,” argues Benson, where the individual’s memory for simulated events and experiences may become subjectively indistinguishable from authentic ones. Because first-person memory provides the narrative thread in the construction of personal identity, this conflation can only complicate our understanding of personal freedom and autonomy, raising new uncertainties and anxieties as a result. After all, social power is exercised as much through the shaping of memory and identity as through the use or threat of force (Foucault, 1980). The success of simulation “leaves us without a test for a reality that is independent of ourselves,” argues Benson. To be constituted through engineered experiences that often blur the line between artificial and genuine, designed and adventitious, and individual and collective, presents fresh challenges for political and emotional security.

Part III offers a number of political and institutional perspectives on identity and subjectivity. In Chapter 7, Richard Day and Adam Lewis take a prescriptive look at relations between “settlers” (broadly construed) and “indigenous peoples” within decolonizing societies. They attempt to articulate a “radical subjectivity” that is committed to achieving social justice and realizing the full autonomy of indigenous groups. In an effort to transcend the limits of “dualistic modes of thinking” that too often unintentionally “reinscribe colonial dynamics,” the authors present an alternative metaphor – the “N-Row Wampum.” Their vision provides a model *for* (in Geertz’s sense) political consciousness and action that is capable of accommodating the shifting “intersectionality” of collective self-identifications, political positions, and situated solidarities across and within separate communities. It opens up possibilities for “bridgework” between communities toward reversing historical injustice and opposing oppressive aspects of the dominant order.

In Chapter 8, Anthony Elliott describes the pressures of the new global economy as reshaping not only our institutional forms, values, and practices, but also the “reflexive project” (Giddens, 1991) of self and identity. As people strive to adjust themselves to the social and institutional transformations wrought by globalization, they are driven to internalize its key imperatives – adaptability, constant reinvention, instant change, acceleration, and “short-termism.” Taken together, these imperatives define the “imaginative contours” of contemporary reflexivity, which is pursued largely through a consumerist life politics offering only “frustrated desire, dashed hopes, broken promises, and deceit.” We are, claims Elliott, bound to “a fantasy of the self’s infinite plasticity.” We are also seduced into believing that “ceaseless reinvention is the only adequate personal response to life in a globalizing world.” The harsh market realities of devaluation, obsolescence, and transience are absorbed into people’s everyday understanding of themselves and their futures, spawning a free-floating anxiety and “ambient fear” that can no longer name its source. These changes, according to Elliott, define the emergence of a “new individualism” in the age of “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000).

Finally, in Chapter 9, Margaret McLaren offers a feminist perspective on identity and subjectivity in the context of globalization. She draws on Foucault’s “analytics of power” to argue for a conception of the subject as constructed through discourses and disciplines, and negotiated within micro- and macro-regimes of power. She balances the claim that “social institutions and practices significantly shape subjectivity” with a view of agency that sees it as constituted “through power relations rather than outside of them.” McLaren addresses the contradictions and complexities of shifting situated identities in a time of accelerating global migration. She points out that “changes in location, situation, and circumstances may help to contribute to new possibilities for constructing identity.” To illustrate her argument, she offers the example of Moroccan women working as strawberry pickers in Spain. These women are selected as temporary workers within a “circular migration program” that rests on legitimating discourses about femininity (docility, menial diligence, nimble fingers, etc.). They are positioned within multiple structural inequalities (gender, ethnicity, class, religion) that limit their options and leave them relatively disenfranchised as employees. Nonetheless, argues McLaren, where there are changes in the determining context of subjectivity, there is the possibility of fresh resistance to power – or at least creative negotiation. She points out how the migratory experience of these workers inspires them to mobilize collectively and self-assertively around new identities as valued wage earners. Their transformed consciousness leads them to oppose some of the practices of their Spanish

employers as well as demand more equitable pay for the work they do back in Morocco.

Taken together, the varied perspectives brought together in this volume provide a mosaical portrait of the freedoms, tensions, and challenges that define contemporary subjectivity. They provide a reflexive frame for making sense of who we are now and mark out what we can expect of and for ourselves in the twenty-first century. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel (1821/1942) offered the sober observation that philosophy can only give conceptual form to an actuality – a world that already exists. It cannot “rejuvenate” that world. Philosophy, in other words, changes nothing. The same might be said of social science, which also often “comes on the scene too late.” Even so, conceptual articulation of the reality we are living through is more than an idle matter. It is, in fact, a vital prerequisite to envisioning how things could be otherwise. A society that cannot see itself in the mirrors of its own construction possesses little impetus to pursue change by other means. As Northrop Frye (1964, p. 140) memorably put it, “The fundamental job of the imagination...is to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in.” It is hoped that the tentative self-portrait offered in these pages inspires readers to exercise that progressive imagination.

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PART I

RELATIONALITY