The action as the concept of existence. Subjectivity between praxis and public space

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Abstract

Categories such as public space, citizenship and identity are based, in their complexity, on the question of the constitution of the subject, in fact the problem of defining the content and structure of subjectivity is the horizon within which they move into the above categories and which must be included. My contribution wants to analyze briefly this issue, identifying a common background to the various conceptions of the subject acting as an epistemological horizon, where the idea of the subject corresponds to a foundation of the contents of the existence of a practice that states it procedurally. In addition, we want to discuss how this way of working doesn't exhaust the question of the foundation of subjectivity by the practical activity, but it raises delicate questions about the original nature of the subjective condition and its value. I would like to take this path by analyzing especially the first phase of Foucault's thought, where the construction of the subject is conceived in relation to an original root now placed beyond the horizon of understanding of the subject and the social structures and Honneth's theory of recognition, where intersubjectivity pushes the subject to overtake the practical and functional relationship with the object and distinguish the inner value of subjectivity itself.

Keywords: Subject, Identity, Structuralism, Recognition, Public Space;

1. Introduction

With this paper I'd like to examine a difficult issue we find at the bottom of present prospects of social research, that is to say the theme of the subject's foundation; currently the debate revolves around some of the fundamental themes, as citizenship, public spaces, identity, which by now are considered beyond precise spatial or territorial connections to circumscribe the limits of the possible experience. This change of prospect has been possible in so far as the subject, the one living the experience, is no more a clearly delimited monad, but becomes the variable product of a praxis constituting the subject itself, of a social structure, of relationships where the space anyone belongs to and related identities define themselves, always ready as they are to change and adapt to the complex contests they move in.

It's clear that these themes originate from the different way we consider subjectivity, nonetheless we cannot think that this constructivist or structuralist prospect could automatically solve the issue of subject's foundation, of its origin, simply by referring to an heterogeneous factor out of its genesis within the view of a merely functional relationship; actually the subject's relationship with this outer root of its is an issue to be dealed with the more seriously and deeply the more distant this subject's early moment becomes.

Therefore I'd like to indentify an epistemological horizon to deal with this issue; this horizon will be acting as a concept of subjective existence, of its structure and of its contents: we can indeed affirm that praxis procedurally decrees subjectivity, but while establishing it, it also raises the problem of its foundation, of the original nature of its genesis. In other words, praxis, although composing subjectivity, does not exhaustively solve the question about its genesis, cross-referring to the question about ethical and social value of subjectivity itself within social relationships' fabric and about why single subjects are worth being preserved, and finally how they're defined by this value of them. This peculiar point of view becomes central with the emergence of modernity, as a peculiar feature of this
time is the recognition of the historical, temporal, processual nature of things' foundation, coinciding with a shift of attention from essence meant as time building in one's identity; and in this activity relationships and social context carry out a central role in defining these contents.

Certainly it's possible to adopt a structural and procedural explanation of subjectivity and experience of reality as specific epistemology of social sciences, as a condition of knowledge, but we also have to consider how this *episteme*, in defining what we can know, cannot exclude the problem of what goes beyond this knowledge: a structuralist, functionalist, behaviorist approach inherently refers to an undefined but original moment, an “unthought” which, excluded from the field of knowledge, becomes its thorniest problem and its condition of society's possibility and of its understanding.

And so, I’d like to engage this theme by a brief reconnaissance of the early Foucault’s work, and of Honneth’s theory of recognition, in order to stress how in these important authors of our time, the issue of originality in the subject’s foundation appears between the lines in each one’s researches’ folds as a background question guiding and stressing their thought and as a problematic frame for any speculation about subjectivity. In this way we could highlight some research outlines that maybe have not been conveniently dealt with yet, and offer further suggestions to the ever-living debate about subjectivity.

### 2. Action as a concept

One of the problems consist in the inner aptitude of any debate about action that leads us to consider its genesis starting from an individual performing it, or from a structure developing it as an inner process of its own; nonetheless in order to think acting as a concept, it has to be isolated and defined in its own peculiarity, though considering how it constitutes a relationship between two terms, and therefore includes in its own contents the reference to the terms it results from and it address to. Acting, praxis, is indeed the relationship founding reality and, developing, it opens it in the two polarities of subject and object; we could say it's the distance that allows to qualify and distinguish subject from object and, in this meaning, it defines and sets them: object is the result of an action originated by subject, but at the same time, subject itself is founded, as it acts, and by this activity aimed at setting the object, it gains its own subjectivity’s meaning and contents; this means that praxis has both a positive dimension, by creating or transforming the material object of reality, and a reflexive feature, because in its acting the subject experiences and recognizes a content, an aptitude or a quality of its own subjective condition.

We could therefore say that acting is creating or producing completely indifferently and separately from determined things, and that this is the reason why it goes through them as a condition of their own existence; but as far as it is an indifferent process or a flow, from which determinations proceed, it can exist only by materializing in each of the elements determining its extension and structure, that is subject as an agent and object as an act. This mean that, although action is indifferent, and therefore structureless, it takes on a specific contents architecture in the very moment it ties itself to these two ends that, while they define its limits, they even model its shape; we could think about this praxis’ feature as about pointing out: that is as about a gesture that, by addressing a thing, recognizes it in its own reality, so much as being worth to be pronounced and thought; in other words it's a way to set a relationship between subject and object, and even more: maybe it's the relationship's birth allowing us to talk about subject and object and becoming significant when it's possible to think it apart from the acting subject.

This structural and procedural definition of acting clearly expresses, within the rigour of a system, how it's possible to understand praxis and at the same tome how praxis itself constitutes subjectivity as one of the ends of this process. Nonetheless such an approach cannot fully account for this genesis, as it hides within it an unsolved question about the origin of action itself: does praxis exist in itself or does it emerge from a horizon, form an original place or object from which, consequently, even subject itself – as a result of the process – would result from? This is a basic factor to modernity epistemology, where subject can't anymore find in itself the reason for its own being, but it situates it in an alien dimension, so that its own genesis can be only thought as a “coming from”, that nonetheless, as we are subject ourselves, we can only understand in the limited horizon of our subjectivity as a process giving life to our being (acting, indeed), but which beginning is not for us to see. Like a shadow following us closely, that vanishes in the very moment we turn to look at it, nowadays *episteme* settles in a relationship where
man is separated from this “different” never falling into its field of view, but, from blind corners of our knowledge, it silently leads us and holds back our being; this means that both when we think about origin as a material fact or a cultural specific one, and when we imagine it as a combination of our own subjective existence's conditions of possibilities, it cannot be identified with acting, but acting is rather the element connecting and communicating the subject with this original moment founding us ethically above all as subjects of rights worthy of protection, and socially as members of a community and actors of a specific public space, but it never appears in a specific form within our representations.

3. Foucault and the finitude of the subject

3.1. The issue of the subject in “The Order of Things”

We are used to think about Foucault as the author dissolving subject in the discourse, announcing man's death by opening the possibility of a structuralist philosophy and sociology where reflection about the subject leaves space for a field of research about preexisting dimensions as work, life, and above all language and consequent knowledge. Nonetheless, by considering in particular Foucault's early thought (Foucault, 1994; Foucault, 2003; Foucault, 2005) we can see how his prospect is not just blind structuralism, but on the contrary it founds itself starting from the issue of the origin's “engulfment” and growing distance in the meaning explained above. This clearly appears in the way Foucault uses finitude's category (Foucault, 1994: 312 – 322): by using it he wants to peruse this subject's distance from its foundation, its becoming unaware of it in respect to what it implements by which conscience is no more introspection but alienation; finitude doesn't states limits, but rather an ambivalent relationship where acting is the process articulating existence's contents, which can only exist by defining themselves in the positive roles of a subject's praxis. At the same time, a subject exists and is founded only starting from these contents flowing through it and therefore qualifying it by setting its subjectivity's structures.

Foucault clearly explains this passage talking about work, life and language: these structures subsist following their own laws and their own story and they are the subjectivity's contents in so far as man can define his work starting from his being a producer, a living being, and moreover because he's able to speak; these existence's dimensions are colouring and founding man, identifying some of his main discretions and aptitudes, that yet have origin and development out of the subject itself, that precede it, run through it, and overcome it. Nonetheless we have to say that these contents can only be real when they assume a positive shape by a subject's praxis catalyzing them, enunciating them: work is work only when a producer realizes it by transforming an object, life is life only when it inhabit a body, and language only exists when articulated in a speaker's voice. Therefore finitude is the relationship of mutual dependence by which subject can only exist in a space defined by these practices, that in turn can only exist by going through that empty “space” that’s man (Foucault, 1994: 310); both ends limit is having in the other one the essential condition to their own being.

From a sociological point of view, this is a basic concept, in fact social structure procedures connect and divide at the same time subject from what makes it a subject, they carry towards it existence’s contents, but they hide where they rise from; finitude’s category allows us to explain acting even by a social point of view, and to think society itself as the place where man represents this ambivalent relationship. We can think about how this prospect could be applied to the public space concept: subjects can be considered as social subjects only in so far as they act within the public space, they actualize their lives in relationships and in communication where they can found, for instance, their political identity; in the same moment, the combination of procedures and structures by which we define such a space can be thought only with relation to a subject receiving them and giving shape to an active and public life of its own.
3.2. **The origin as the “Same”**

Starting from what I said above, we can affirm that finitude’s concept recalls the problem of origin as a substantial element of it: if these two terms are a cause to each other, is therefore problematic to identify an original moment of reality and of knowledge about reality itself (Foucault, 1994: 328); moreover if we connect this reflection to sociology scientific sphere there’s a further ethical outline arising – a practical one, as the possibility to qualify a subject as worthy of protection only exists when we ascribe to the subject an original condition bearer of a primary value in the system of values characterizing a culture. Foucault peruses this problem in *The Order of Things* through the copious passages devoted to the same, that is to the moment when identity between thing and word, between real and knowledge, between subject and its content, is achieved; for instance when he analyzes Renaissance (Foucault, 1994: 71), Foucault talks about a reality order based on similarity, that is on a close correspondence of these opposites spheres, making them adhere to each other, and even more making them fall into each other, so that reality’s original character (its being founded in itself) is an evident factor. *Ethos*, consequently organizing both social structure and the relevant system of values, will perfectly overlie reality order.

On the contrary, modernity takes its origin exactly in the end of this correspondence, therefore origin still remains as an issue, but to be thought as a theoretical problem incidental to existence (Foucault, 1994: 217); if subjectivity’s originality is no more a certain factor, it has to be rebuilt by analyzing the shapes this mutual dependence relationship assumes from time to time. From a sociological prospect, subjects’ tendency to claim the right to defense their own specific condition in regards to the social and political context they move in can be only justified if subjects themselves have the opportunity to know these relationships that define them and to act on them; we can read how these reflections reach the following stages of Foucault’s thought: if power is but a power assuring control on the dynamics where subject is founded, man is free when he becomes the ruler of that “technology of the self” where subjectivity finds itself and therefore becoming the subjects’ self-determination, consequently founding the possibility of modern ethics.

3.3. **Thinking the “outside”**

Foucault wrote an essay, *The Thought of the outside*, explaining the above mentioned issue, that – in French intellectual thought – finds its deepest expression in language; between the two possible statement of a subject, “I think” and “I speak”, there’s a path composing, where the speaker and the spoken are overcome in that amorphous and dumb space where the only existing element is conversation, speaking, that is the possibility things have to become object and subject beyond the question: “who’s speaking?”, a question remaining uninteresting because word itself is the only speaker. The “I speak” statement enlights itself in its peculiarity of stating nothing but itself, nothing but the statement that someone is speaking or better the existence of speaking itself; notwithstanding the specific act of saying, exhausting in the very moment it appears, “I speak” represents in the essay the nakedness of language (Foucault, 1998: 148), the conversation becoming contentless to appear as an “absolute opening” (Foucault, 1998: 148), a place of possibilities where word enunciates itself in the undefined silence of its being definable, of its preexisting that discourse or that word; a place without extension, where any discourse is possible, somehow founding the discourse’s possibility itself. In other words, this statement define language in its bare essence, considered only as its aptitude for planning, before anything else, those places and positions where specific discourses can meet each other, where subject and object can combine and words can assume a clear meaning; a silent language, weaving through these elements and pushing them apart until they exist bordering with their opening and dilating, starting a common space where things can coexist, knowing the same that pull them close.

While “I think” is the reflexive moment, when subject defines itself thinking about its origin within itself, “I speak” puts man in the position of the one who expresses a discourse that does not belongs to him and is brought back in a world where identity doesn’t exist; the one who speaks does not corrupt language with his inner being, with his contents, but he gets ready to play the mere role of the town crier, of the person who speaking announces the naked language. And the thing spoken by the word sinks in a well where word itself plunges becoming silence again. So, which is the value for existence of “I speak” statement and of language? They stand for what is beyond
inner being, beyond subjectivity, beyond the possibility of bringing any thought back to “I think” categories. It’s not by chance that Foucault finds out tracks of this thing, for instance, in negative theology, in a thought “that has prowled the confines of Christianity” (Foucault, 1998: 150); therefore of a thought outer our foundation and pushing to keep us inside. And that’s the “thought of the outside”, i.e. an *episteme* drawing and describing this void that makes possible become real, and where real belongs; a thought composing in a “discourse appearing with no conclusion and no image, with no truth and no theater, with no proof, no mask, no affirmation, free of any center, unfettered to any native soil; a discourse that constitutes its own space as the outside toward which, and outside of which, it speaks” (Foucault, 1998: 153).

With *The Thought of the Outside* Foucault leads his thought to a new stage, the one about biopolitics and microphysics of power: therefore the theme of origin vanishes as an explicit problem (it becomes the “void” quoted before) and is absorbed in the idea of a technology of the self, without losing its strength, but protecting itself inside its thought as a speculative horizon, that is the background of our studies even now.

4. Axel Honneth and the subjectivity from the recognition

4.1. The struggle for recognition as an ethical – practical answer to the quest for subjectivity

Although coming from such a different tradition, Axel Honneth’s thinking faces the same issue of the subject’s foundation, developing an original approach that recovers some themes of Hegel’s philosophy inside an ethical-practical frame which directly raises the question about subjectivity’s value and about how this value shapes itself; and thanks to the epistemological difference between our two authors we can enrich our path and increase, in the conflict, all the possible shades.

The concept used by Honneth to explain the constitution of subject as a problem is reification (Honneth, 1995; Honneth, 2008): subject establishes a practical relationship of production-transformation with its object, a relationship therefore assuming specious features, as object is completely instrumental to the needs and the existence of subject itself that, with this activity, leads it back to its individual sphere; consequence is the reduction of all of the social relationships, including the ones among men, to relationships where the other is the means to gain a purpose that, in a general meaning, coincides with the statement of the self transforming the other in a “thing”. And moreover, the subject identifies itself with the act of producing the object with such a strength that it eventually identify its own being, its existence’s content with this same act and with the things he produces as a display of this statement. In this way reification expresses two faces: the first one where subjects reify themselves, becoming things in a mutual way; the second one, more subtle, where the subject empties itself of any content and identifies constitutive elements of its own existence in the things it produces. This conception offers a parallelism and a criticism for the definition we gave above for action, because thinking about praxis as a constitutive part of subject means emptying the subject itself of any meaning and value; social relationships take on a merely instrumental nature where any ethical consideration about a single man’s value is scarified for the sake of the social structure itself. It’s clear that in this way Honneth uses typical concepts from Marxism to criticize functionalist, structuralist, behaviorist social theories, along with the ones connected to the systems theory, in an attempt to bring back inside social theory itself an ethical discourse about social relationships’ nature.

In order to remove social relationships from any instrumental use, Honneth has to find a dimension where the reification of the other is impossible, and he therefore puts at the core of his reflection intersubjective relationships of recognition: when a subject sees another subject and recognizes in it its own subjective condition, it won’t be entitled to consider it as an object, but it will be “forced” to respect its status and to guarantee its integrity’s preservation; and even more important, by being recognized by another subject, in the intersubjective relationship it will experience a reflexive moment through which it will become conscious of its own subjectivity and of its own right to be preserved (Honneth, 1995: 171). This means that in the intersubjective recognition the individuals’ subjectivity constitutes itself in a mutual way, in the moment they are interrelated, and they assume a value preserving them from any exploitation and founding a social relationships’ ethics. It must be pointed out that stating
the subjectivity’s origin from recognition relationships (which, to Honneth, are practical-moral relationships), doesn’t entail a genesis of the subject starting from the relationships network; subjectivity preexists instead these relationships, but it enters the field of conscience only when two subjects face each other and reflect the other’s subjectivity. This is clear in the Honneth’s interpretation of Mead’s thought (Honneth, 1995: 71): if “me” is not in connection with an “I” conveying individual instincts, it’s nothing but the projection of its own individual identity in a collective plan it has to adapt to in order to be accepted.

This implies also a substantial change in the way it interprets the public space, which becomes the place where recognition applies and therefore where subjects can affirm themselves as such.

4.2. The dynamic of recognition: an instrumental relationship?

Nevertheless, one cannot but wonder whether intersubjective recognition can really avoid an instrumental logic; this can be understood only by clarifying what we mean with “instrumental”. Normally an instrumental relationship is a relationship between a purpose and the means aimed at obtaining it, but on closer inspection this doesn’t exactly explain all the implications of this tie; in order to let an instrumental relationship exist, the means must be deprived of its own autonomy, that is to say it must be considered as devoid of a distinct identity of its own. The means, or the object in connection with subject according to Hegel’s categories, doesn’t come out the space defining the purpose, but it represents a determination of it, or an expression; in this way the only thing freely existing is the purpose, the subject “using” the object to gain consciousness of its own content. In the light of this, we can sense that maybe in the intersubjective recognition there’s a substantial contradiction: the other’s subjectivity and autonomy are recognized to let them reflect the subject’s own subjectivity, and that leads one to think the other subject as a determination of one’s own subjectivity, as a mirror that must give back one’s image; in other words, we could say that the other is not fully other, but in some measure is a “mine”, an “own” falling back in one’s own conscience. By this I do not mean to say that Honneth was wrong in his analysis; I’d rather underline an unsolved contradiction in recognition, making an intersubjective relationship eventually fall again in the field of single subjectivity.

This clearly appears in Honneth’s interpretation of marxist anthropology of labor, where man is considered as a worker-producer-actor above all: Honneth poses the problem of how capitalism prevents man from expressing himself through his work, but never gets how praxis as production defines humanity’s contents starting from the needs one needs to fulfill, not expressing an essence, but building it; it’s not by chance that late Marx’s economicism is to Honneth a limit to a possible struggle for recognition, not considering the possibility that the assertion of the Thesis on Feuerbach implies economicism as a totally practical conception of existence, and that the moral element of this struggle is but the praxis itself’s emancipation from capitalistic production system’s bonds.

We could say that instrumentality is not the result of an utilitarian approach, but an inner problematic tie in the same subject-object relationship; considering the intersubjective recognition, being recognized by the other coincides with recognizing oneself through the other, therefore ceding an ethical value in view of this recognition.

4.3. Origin and Recognition

And it’s exactly in this thought’s tangle that Honneth displays the issue of origin that undergoes the different social theories. Recognition cannot be founded on the simple subjective conditions’ mirroring, but it needs to grow out of a question about originality of such a condition before any practical approach, founding a possible ethical reflection aimed at orienting recognition’s praxis itself; a deep reflection on the conditions of subject’s establishment cannot restricts to procedural perspectives, but has also to inspect which relationship exists between the subject’s establishment praxis and its fully developed structure. This also changes the way public space is considered: actually if a mainly practical concept considers it as the place functioning as necessary condition for the subject’s birth (as a practical reality this cannot exist but within the public space), in this sense relationship becomes
more complex, and the subject’s possibility conditions also function as building conditions of the public space itself; the latter would therefore result as the practical extension for a reality that it could never include.

5. Conclusions

It’s interesting that Honneth, in one of his early works, The Critique of Power (Honneth, 1993), carries out an analysis of Foucault’s work (along with Adorno and Habermas) to offer an incisive interpretation of social theories and to open new possible developments which will lead him to his theory of recognition. The more considerable aspect is that Honneth clearly explains how Foucault, by focusing on the theme of the disappearance of the subject, pays less and less attention to the question about the subject’s foundation, meaning that he connects reality to outer elements, reducing it – developing his thinking – to an element that’s defined out of society itself; he actually identifies in the French author’s thinking a behaviorist trend where actors move inside society according to structurally and objectively preordained schemes from which they infer praxis’ rules and contents. This accurate observation made by Honneth allows us to understand the problematic side of Foucault’s thinking, that is the complexity one finds in explaining subjectivity as a free and autonomous condition starting from a structural and functional consideration; this critique will indeed mark one of the passages the Frankfurter philosopher uses to reach intersubjective recognition in an ethical-practical frame, more than in a functional, structural and systematic one.

At the same time, we have to underline how Honneth, connecting Foucault’s work with this theme, doesn’t get the subject’s ambivalent relationship with its origin, a significant issue in the French philosopher’s early studies that silently undergoes all of his works; reading it as a deaf structuralism closed to any opening towards non-structural dimensions, Honneth never directly peruses the issue of subjectivity as original condition, and believes he can explain subjective establishment with a model where subjects are placed in front of each other notwithstanding any structural relationship. This normative approach to social relationships ethics offers an efficient and deep solution to the issue of moral and practical dimensions of social existence, reduced, in structuralism, to a function of the structure itself, but at the same time it focuses on moral categories, therefore excluding from its discourse an epistemological reflection about the subject-object relationship’s inner dynamics, which are never overcome, but always reemerge in different forms.

In some way we could say that both theories represent ways of rethinking the dualism of subject and object and, more specifically, of the subjective foundation of existence. And this is the fundamental theme that has to come to light as a possible research profile, already implicit in different society theories, because thinking about acting as a concept of existence offers us an epistemological instrument that can open different theoretical prospects about the implied issue of subjective condition and of categories its social and relational nature performs on.

References


