Further Readings


Subjectivity

Subjectivity refers to one’s conscious and unconscious feelings, beliefs, and desires regarding experiences and relations to the world (i.e., to objects). Subjectivity addresses both individual experience and the shaping of those experiences’ meanings; thus, subjectivity is the ground on which identity is constructed. Subjectivity implies a degree of thought and self-awareness about identity, while allowing myriad unconscious constraints on our abilities to understand our own, or others’, identities.

Most contemporary philosophy of subjectivity is a reaction to Enlightenment thinking, where the subject was a rational and autonomous agent, the origin of all knowledge and experience. The self became the point of connection between all cognitive impulses (as in René Descartes’s famous “I think, therefore I am”). The I was an active agent, encountering the world outside it in a way that generated a unified self. Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau encoded a sense of agency in which one could remake and perfect oneself through methodical action. They valorized the “natural self,” viewing persons as possessing an essential nature and potential, which could become entrapped by society.

Several critics suggested that the Enlightenment view ignored irrationality, emotionality, and the unconscious while de-socializing the subject. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, asserted that the subject was a grammatical fiction, not a real entity existing in the world. Martin Heidegger followed, questioning the nature of consciousness and subjectivity by arguing that being-in-the-world makes us of the world, not merely placing us in it. He charged that Enlightenment thinkers failed to question the character of experience and the need for an openness to being. These themes are developed in the five streams of thought most commonly drawn on in contemporary humanities and social science scholarship.

Freud

Sigmund Freud initiated a radical rethinking of subjectivity. Freud replaced the Enlightenment’s autonomous and rational subject with a complex self directed by deep psychological drives obscured from the person’s own awareness. Subjectivity is neither innate nor determined, but constituted by gender relations and sexual identifications forged in early childhood, particularly in the nuclear family. Freud suggested that children move through stages in early life where desires corresponding with body regions (oral, anal, genital) are either met or frustrated. Prominent among his concepts is the *Oedipus Complex*, which operates through the child’s recognition of male and female genitals and fear of the father’s power; it leads children to identify with either the powerful father (and to imagine sex with the mother) or with the mother and her role as the object of the father’s sexual desire. In either case, said Freud, Oedipal desire is understood as inappropriate and is repressed: It is placed into the unconscious to avoid its effects. But repressed drives animate dreams and guide our experiencing, such that adult compulsions and identifications are shaped by unconscious gender associations, repressions of the libido, and projections of hidden and irrational sexual desires. The inner world is thus transparent to the self, yet one can grasp and control these unconscious forces with the objectifying assistance of the psychoanalyst.

Lacan

Not long after Freud, Jacques Lacan modified the former’s claims through the application of
Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism. Saussure held that language was a system of differences in which the arbitrary relation between the signifier and signified are held together in one's mind. From this, Lacan reasoned that the unconscious is structured like a language, and that if we are to understand subjectivity, we must understand linguistic human communication.

His most compelling notion along these lines is the mirror stage, the point at which an infant recognizes itself as being separate from the persons and objects around it, perhaps through seeing its reflection in a mirror. Such an image presents itself to the infant as undivided and, therefore, conveys a sense of mastery over the body. But this imaginary image is contradicted by the child's experience of fragmentation, disconnection, and powerlessness. Both image and experience are represented by signifiers repressed into the unconscious. This is accompanied by immersion in the symbolic order, where the stark distinctions of language provide an external definition of wholeness. The problem, then, is that the subject cannot define itself except in terms of the symbolic order's imaginary unitary identity. The subject is consequently decentered, and our sense of self, our identity, is generated from a misrecognition, a subject's misunderstanding of the unity of the ego alongside the accompanying alienation from oneself.

An important implication is that the subject seeks in the symbolic order—the apparently objective world we inhabit—the imaginary unity of the image in the mirror, and hence is driven by an unconscious desire to compensate for separateness and lack. And though we identify with the seductive objects of language to secure unity, the symbolic realm's basis in arbitrary linguistic distinctions and logical reason simply cannot provide that coherence. No object can replace the forever-lost unity and, in time, desire becomes its own object.

In his consideration of the symbolic domain, Lacan retained a Freudian attention to masculine domination. Freud saw the child's developing subjectivity as hinging on the possession (or lack of) a penis and a fear of the father, as controller of its possession. Lacan, however, emphasized language over anatomy. The father served as the transcendental signifier, marking the symbolic domain as a phallocentric order where meaning, reason, and truth reside. This line of thought later became central to thinkers influenced by both psychoanalysis and feminism.

Althusser

Louis Althusser moved beyond Lacan in theorizing the subject as a social construction, suggesting that subjectivity is a consequence of power-laden practices. Althusser's contribution is based on a reading of Freud's unconscious and Lacan's mirror phase to produce a conception of the power of ideology. Althusser argued that ideology, and capitalist reproduction, is based on ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)—institutions such as religion, education, the political and legal systems, mass communication, culture, and the family—that interpellate, or hail, subjects (as when police on the street yell "hey, you!" and persons, guilty or not, recognize the call and turn) by appealing to their unconscious fears and desires. These ISAs generate submission to the rules of the established order because they are supported by public-domain repressive state apparatuses, that function by force. Drawing on these notions, Althusser argued for the impossibility of existence outside of ideology, while displaying how individuals enter the subject position they inhabit. In his thinking, individuals are interpellated by ideology as free subjects in a manner that leads them to freely accept their subjection and, concomitantly, perform the requisite gestures and actions on their own volition. From this, he suggested that the notion of subject refers both to the thinking, feeling person at the center of experience—the subject of action and the location of experiences, and to the person as an object of power, as in a citizen who is "subject of" a monarch.

The ruling ideology is powerful precisely because it can provide subjects an image of identity coherence and ontological security in an uncertain world. It involves a misrecognition that differs from Lacan's: Here, subjects believe themselves to be the source of meanings when they are, actually, the effects of those meanings. With such claims, Althusser's view appears to present a deterministic model of domination, but the picture is somewhat more complicated because (a) Both the dominated and dominators are interpellated into their positions because submission is required for all; (b) the functioning of ideology and subjectivity limits the
degree to which a dominant group can smoothly reproduce itself; (c) the subject’s recognition of the ISA’s role in constructing its identity can lead to a critique of these institutions; and (d) by showing the multiplicity and overdetermination of ISAs, he helped show how “articulations” between practices and structures can become sites of struggle over meanings and associations among elements.

Foucault

Michel Foucault, a student of Althusser, developed a unique conception of subjectivity based on a denial of any ontologically given “nature” to the subject. Strongly influenced by Nietzsche, Foucault argued that discursive formations, or regimes of truth, created the concept of subjectivity to exert control over persons. Once the person is defined as a center of experience and responsibility, discursive formations classify and regulate subjects according to particular conceptions of knowledge and truth while providing materials to shape themselves. Subjectivity, then, cannot be an authentic expression of “who you really are,” but rather is a contingent effect of power (or, more appropriately, of power/knowledge regimes). Foucault suggested that key in the construction of contemporary forms of subjectivity was the human sciences, which did not exist until “man” was constructed as an epistemological category in the 18th century. Akin to Freud’s unconscious and Althusser’s ideology, the discursive formation in Foucault positions and “disciplines” subjects in the appropriate means of expression and self-construction.

Power, for Foucault, is not the top-down authority of a unitary logic or a sovereign entity. Instead, it is “capillary,” infusing all sorts of micropractices and entering into the deepest recesses of the individual. Thus, power does not remain external to the subject, but occupies the person’s interiority; power produces the procedures by which we observe, analyze, interpret, and act on ourselves, and is not merely coercive.

Feminist Poststructuralists

Several of the preceding theorists see gender as central to the formation of subjectivity, but they tend to either portray it in deterministic terms that cannot conceive of woman except in the negative (e.g., Lacan’s phallocentric order) or fail to theorize it explicitly (Althusser and Foucault). Dissatisfied, feminist thinkers produced novel views of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity, usually based in some fashion on Simone de Beauvoir’s claims about “woman” being the “Other,” perpetually defined and classified only with respect to “man.”

Although many lines of theorizing follow from this, two are of particular interest. The first consists of work by French feminist psychoanalysts, including Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. Irigaray, in particular, sought to deconstruct Lacanian phallocentrism. She argued that women’s subjectivity cannot be captured in traditional terms because it is both multiple and decentered; thus, female subjectivity cannot be reduced to the converse of the male. Attempting to fit this version of subjectivity has forced women to replicate a male language that erases the feminine. In its place, she advocated developing a “female imaginary,” fostering language and experience that is fragmented, nonlinear, and polysemic. The result would not be a subjectivity built on a female “essence,” but instead would be open-ended, ambiguous, and destabilizing—and, in turn, would generate new possibilities for selfhood. Kristeva (as well as Cixous) took a similar stand, seeing the feminine as occupying a distinct mode of language. From this perspective, subjectivity is fundamentally and always in process, and desire is seen as an outcome of ongoing changes and contradictions in that subjectivity. Moreover, in Kristeva, the subject never considers herself stable and knowable, even to herself, and therefore cannot be fully captured by patriarchy’s efforts to secure a controllable unity.

Also important here is Judith Butler and her conception of performativity as the basis of subjectivity. Butler argued that gender, sex, and sexuality are not the outcomes or implications of a (distinct) linguistic code, but are objects in a system of normatively governed and iterative performances, not all of which are under our control. These performances, always scrutinized for gender appropriateness, present themselves to subjects as both natural and authentic presentations of self. Their repetitiveness emphasizes the ritualized character of subjectivity but, at the same time, displays indeterminacy in that each iteration awaits its enactment and can never provide precise duplication. Performativity, therefore, assumes a potential for resistance to
regulative discourses, sometimes unintended or unperceived by the actor herself. Recently, Butler argued that self-narratives are necessarily incomplete and that subjects are insufficiently aware of Others' claims on their subjectivities; accordingly, assertions about ethical obligations are always based on limited knowledge of self, implying an interrogation of regulative discourses as essential to ethical interaction. Butler, thus, retains a conception of agency, constrained though it may be, in her view of subjectivity, accompanied by a desire to shape ethical accountability. She does not subscribe to Irigaray's vision of a distinct female imaginary, preferring to seek destabilization and examination of all models of subjectivity to keep selfhood open.

**Subjectivity and Identity**

These five lines of thought present rather different conceptions of subjectivity, forming dramatic contrasts with Enlightenment thinking and, for several, creating the basis for social-political action. They address the unconscious, language, and the social world to varying degrees, and, with respect to identity, theories of subjectivity help us investigate how, when, why, and from where identity is constructed. Subjectivity thus concerns the nature of the self as well as the relationship between individual and collective—persistent and central concerns across the human sciences.

_Timothy Kuhn_

*See also* Critical Theory; Cultural Studies; Gender; Language; Modernity and Postmodernity; Philosophy of Identity; Self-Consciousness

**Further Readings**


**SURVEILLANCE AND THE PANOPTICON**

In its simplest sense, *surveillance* is the act of observing or the condition of being observed, and it has always existed in some form. The term *surveillance* is generally used, however, to mean the act of watching or being watched in a systematic and focused manner. The Panopticon is a prison structure designed by Englishman Jeremy Bentham in 1785, which allows one guard to observe all the prison cells from a central tower that provides a view into each prison cell. The Panopticon is often used to illustrate the ways in which surveillance can discipline the individual. Surveillance strategies can have a specific impact on racialized and gendered identities that are often targeted in specific ways by surveillance. This entry looks at the impact surveillance technologies have had on the entertainment industry, the importance of surveillance in a post-9/11 world, the ways in which data collection constitutes a form of surveillance, the details of Bentham's Panopticon prison, Michel Foucault's influential ideas about surveillance, the impact of surveillance on racialized and gendered identities, and the development of a new field of scholarship, surveillance studies.

In the past few decades in Western countries, sophisticated surveillance technologies have been developed that make it possible to monitor the activities of just about anyone or to put oneself under observation for the purview of others. Although surveillance has traditionally been understood to be the act of watching someone without that person's explicit knowledge, with the proliferation of surveillance technologies in public spaces (cameras in elevators and closed-circuit televisions to monitor public spaces, for instance), people are now often aware that they are being watched or that there is a possibility that they may be watched. Additionally, surveillance now includes collection of information about the activities of an individual and is thus no longer understood as an exclusively visual activity.

Surveillance activities are particularly relevant to the modern age because they can be used to monitor workers in industrial and bureaucratic institutions. Such institutions can improve productivity and maximize effectiveness by tracking and