

2 THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE MODERN SUBJECT

In this section I shall outline the account offered by some contemporary theorists of the main shifts that have occurred in the way the subject and identity are conceptualized in modern thought. My aim is to trace the stages through which a particular version of 'the human subject' — with certain fixed human capacities and a stable sense of its own identity and place in the order of things — first emerged in the modern age; how it became 'centred' in the discourses and practices which shaped modern societies; how it acquired a more sociological or interactive definition; and how it is being 'de-centred' in late-modernity. The main focus of this section is conceptual. It is concerned with *changing conceptions* of the human subject as a discursive figure, whose unified form and rational identity, I shall argue, were presupposed by, and essential to, both the discourses of modern thought and the processes which shaped modernity.

To try to map the history of the notion of the modern subject is an exceedingly difficult exercise. The idea that identities were fully unified and coherent, and have now become totally dislocated, is a highly simplistic way of telling the story of the modern subject, and I adopt it here as a device entirely for the purpose of convenient exposition. Even those who hold broadly to the notion of a de-centring of identity would not subscribe to it in this simplified form, and you should bear this qualification in mind as you read this section. However, this simple formulation does have the advantage of enabling me (in the brief space of this chapter) to sketch a crude picture of how, according to the proponents of the de-centring view, the conceptualization of the modern subject has shifted at *three* strategic points during modernity. These shifts underline the basic claim that conceptualizations of the subject change, and therefore have a history. Since the modern subject emerged at a particular time (its 'birth') and has a history, it follows that it can also change and, indeed, that under certain circumstances we can even contemplate its 'death'.

It is now a commonplace that the modern age gave rise to a new and decisive form of *individualism*, at the centre of which stood a new conception of the individual subject and its identity. This does not mean that people were not individuals in pre-modern times, but that individuality was both 'lived', 'experienced' and 'conceptualized' differently. The transformations (discussed in earlier volumes in this series) which ushered in modernity, tore the individual free from its stable moorings in traditions and structures. Since these were believed to be divinely ordained, they were held not to be subject to fundamental change. One's status, rank and position in the 'great chain of being' — the secular and divine order of things — overshadowed any sense that one was a sovereign individual. The birth of the 'sovereign individual' between the Renaissance humanism of the sixteenth century and the

Enlightenment of the eighteenth century represented a significant break with the past. Some argue that it was the engine which set the whole social system of 'modernity' in motion.

Raymond Williams notes that the modern history of the individual subject brings together two distinct meanings: on the one hand, the subject is 'indivisible' — an entity which is unified within itself and cannot be further divided; on the other, it is also an entity which is 'singular, distinctive, unique' (see Williams, 1976, pp.133-5: INDIVIDUAL). Many major movements in Western thought and culture contributed to the emergence of this new conception: The Reformation and Protestantism, which set the individual conscience free from the religious institutions of the Church and exposed it directly to the eye of God; Renaissance humanism, which placed Man (*sic*) at the centre of the universe; the scientific revolutions, which endowed Man with the faculty and capacities to inquire into, investigate and unravel the mysteries of Nature; and the Enlightenment, centred on the image of rational, scientific Man, freed from dogma and intolerance, before whom the whole of human history was laid out for understanding and mastery.

Much of the history of Western philosophy consists of reflections on, or refinements of, this conception of the subject, its powers and capacities. One major figure who gave this conception its primary formulation was the French philosopher, René Descartes (1596–1650). Sometimes seen as 'the father of modern philosophy', Descartes was a mathematician and scientist, the founder of analytic geometry and optics, and deeply influenced by the 'new science' of the seventeenth century. He was afflicted by that profound doubt which followed the displacement of God from the centre of the universe; and the fact that the modern subject was 'born' amidst metaphysical doubt and scepticism reminds us that it was *never* as settled and unified as this way of describing it suggests (see Forester, 1987). Descartes settled accounts with God by making him the Prime Mover of all creation; thereafter he explained the rest of the material world entirely in mechanical and mathematical terms.

Descartes postulated two distinct substances — spatial substance (matter) and thinking substance (mind). He thus re-focused that great *dualism* between 'mind' and 'matter' which has troubled Western philosophy ever since. Things must be explained, he believed, by reducing them to their essentials — the fewest possible, ultimately, irreducible elements. At the centre of 'mind' he placed the individual subject, constituted by its capacity to reason and think. 'Cogito, ergo sum' was Descartes' watchword: 'I *think*, therefore I am' (my emphasis). Ever since, this conception of the rational, cogitative and conscious subject at the centre of knowledge has been known as 'the Cartesian subject'.

Another critical contribution was made by John Locke who, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, defined the individual in terms of 'the sameness of a rational being' — that is, an identity which remained

the same and which was continuous with its subject: 'as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person' (Locke, 1967, pp.212–13). This conceptual figure or discursive device — the 'sovereign individual' — was embedded in each of the key processes and practices which made the modern world. He (*sic*) was the 'subject' of modernity in two senses: the origin or 'subject' of reason, knowledge, and practice; and the one who bore the consequences of these practices — who was 'subjected to' them (see Foucault, 1986; also *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology: SUBJECT.*)

Some have questioned whether capitalism actually required a conception of sovereign individuals of this kind (Abercrombie *et al.*, 1986). Nevertheless, the rise of a more individualist conception of the subject is widely accepted. Raymond Williams summarizes this embedding of the modern subject in the practices and discourses of modernity in the following passage:

The emergence of notions of **individuality**, in the modern sense, can be related to the break-up of the medieval social, economic and religious order. In the general movement against feudalism there was a new stress on a man's personal existence over and above his place or function in a rigid hierarchical society. There was a related stress, in Protestantism, on a man's direct and individual relation to God, as opposed to this relation mediated by the Church. But it was not until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a new mode of analysis, in logic and mathematics, postulated the individual as the substantial entity (cf. Leibniz's 'monads'), from which other categories and especially collective categories were derived. The political thought of the Enlightenment mainly followed this model. Argument began from individuals, who had an initial and primary existence, and laws and forms of society were derived from them: by submission, as in Hobbes; by contract or consent, or by the new version of natural law, in liberal thought. In classical economics, trade was described in a model which postulated separate individuals who [possessed property and] decided, at some starting point, to enter into economic or commercial relations. In utilitarian ethics, separate individuals calculated the consequences of this or that action which they might undertake.
(Williams, 1976, pp.135–6)

It was just possible in the eighteenth century to imagine the great processes of modern life as centred upon the individual subject-of-reason. But as modern societies grew more complex, they acquired a more collective and social form. Classic liberal theories of government based on individual rights and consent were obliged to come to terms with the structures of the nation-state and the great masses which make up a modern democracy. The classic laws of political economy, property, contract and exchange had to operate, after industrialization,

amidst the great class formations of modern capitalism. The individual entrepreneur of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* or even of Marx's *Capital* was transformed into the corporate conglomerates of the modern economy. The individual citizen became enmeshed in the bureaucratic administrative machineries of the modern state.

A more *social* conception of the subject then emerged. The individual came to be seen as more located and 'placed' within these great supporting structures and formations of modern society. Two major developments contributed to articulating a broader set of conceptual foundations for the modern subject. The first was Darwinian biology. The human subject was 'biologized' — reason was given a basis in Nature, and mind a 'ground' in the physical development of the human brain.

The second development emerged with the rise of new social sciences. However, the transformations which this set in motion were uneven. These were:

- 1 The 'sovereign individual', with 'his' wants, needs, desires and interests remained the pivotal figure in the discourses of both modern economics and the law.
- 2 The dualism typical of Cartesian thought was institutionalized in the split in the social sciences between psychology and the other disciplines. The study of the individual and its mental processes became psychology's special and privileged object of study.
- 3 Sociology, however, provided a critique of the 'rational individualism' of the Cartesian subject. It located the individual in group processes and the collective norms which, it argued, underpin any contract between individual subjects. It therefore developed an alternative account of how individuals are formed subjectively through their membership of, and participation in, wider social relationships; and, conversely, how processes and structures are sustained by the roles which individuals play in them. This 'internalizing' of the outside in the subject, and 'externalizing' of the inside through action in the social world (as discussed earlier), is the primary sociological account of the modern subject, and is encapsulated in the theory of socialization. As was noted above, G.H. Mead and the symbolic interactionists adopted a radically interactive view of this process. The integration of the individual into society has been a long-term concern of sociology. Theorists like Goffman were highly attentive to the way 'the self' is presented in different social situations, and how conflicts between these different social roles are negotiated. At a more macro-sociological level, Parsons studied the 'fit' or complementarity between 'the self' and the social system. Nevertheless, some critics would claim that mainstream sociology has retained something of Descartes' dualism, especially in its tendency to construct the problem as a relation between two connected, but separate, entities: here, 'the individual *and* society'.

This interactive sociological model, with its stable reciprocity between 'inside' and 'outside', is very much a product of the first half of the

twentieth century, when the social sciences assumed their current disciplinary form. However, in the very same period, a more disturbed and disturbing picture of the subject and identity was beginning to emerge in the aesthetic and intellectual movements associated with the rise of Modernism (see Book 3 (Bocock and Thompson, 1992), Chapter 9).

Here we find the figure of the isolated, exiled or estranged individual, framed against the background of the anonymous and impersonal crowd or metropolis. Examples include the poet Baudelaire's famous portrait of the 'Painter of Modern Life', who sets up his house 'in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of motion, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite' and who 'becomes one flesh with the crowd', enters into the crowd 'as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy'; the *flâneur* (or 'idle stroller'), who wanders amid the new shopping arcades watching the passing spectacle of the metropolis, whom Walter Benjamin celebrated in his essay on Baudelaire's Paris, and whose counterpart in late-modernity is probably the tourist (cf. Urry, 1990); 'K', the anonymous victim confronted by a faceless bureaucracy in Kafka's novel, *The Trial*; and that host of estranged figures in twentieth century literature and social criticism who are meant to represent the unique experience of modernity. Several such 'exemplary instances of modernity', as Frisby calls them, people the pages of major turn-of-the-century social theorists like George Simmel, Alfred Schutz and Siegfried Kracauer (all of whom tried to capture the essential features of modernity in famous essays on 'The Stranger' or 'Outsider') (see Frisby, 1985, p.109). These images proved prophetic of what was to befall the Cartesian and sociological subjects in late-modernity.

2.1 DE-CENTRING THE SUBJECT

Those who hold that modern identities are being fragmented argue that what has happened in late-modernity to the conception of the modern subject is not simply its estrangement, but its dislocation. They trace this dislocation through a series of ruptures in the discourses of modern knowledge. In this section, I shall offer a brief sketch of **five** great advances in social theory and the human sciences which have occurred in, or had their major impact upon, thought in the period of late-modernity (the second half of the twentieth century), and whose main effect, it is argued, has been the final de-centring of the Cartesian subject.

The first major de-centring concerns the traditions of Marxist thinking. Marx's writing belongs, of course, to the nineteenth and not the twentieth century. But one of the ways in which his work was recovered and re-read in the 1960s was in the light of his argument that 'men (*sic*) make history, but only on the basis of conditions which are not of their own making'. His re-readers interpreted this to mean that individuals

could not in any true sense be the 'authors' or agents of history since they could only act on the basis of the historical conditions made by others into which they were born, and using the resources (material and culture) provided to them from previous generations.

Marxism, properly understood, they argued, displaced any notion of individual agency. The Marxist structuralist, Louis Althusser (1918–89) (whose theories of ideology are discussed by Kenneth Thompson: see Book 3 (Bocock and Thompson, 1992), Chapter 7; see also *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*: ALTHUSSER) argued that, by putting social relations (modes of production, exploitation of labour power, the circuits of capital) rather than an abstract notion of Man at the centre of his theoretical system, Marx displaced two key propositions of modern philosophy: '(1) that there is a universal essence of man; (2) that this essence is the attribute of "each single individual" who is its real subject':

These two postulates are complementary and indissoluble. But their existence and their unity presuppose a whole empiricist–idealist world outlook. By rejecting the essence of man as his theoretical basis, Marx rejected the whole of this organic system of postulates. He drove the philosophical category of *the subject*, of *empiricism*, of the *ideal essence* from all the domains in which they had been supreme. Not only from political economy (rejection of the myth of *homo economicus*, that is, of the individual with definite faculties and needs as the subject of the classical economy); not just from history; ... not just from ethics (rejection of the Kantian ethical idea); but also from philosophy itself. (Althusser, 1966, p.228)

This 'total theoretical revolution' was, of course, fiercely contested by many humanistic theorists who give greater weight in historical explanation to human agency. We need not argue here about whether Althusser was wholly or partly right, or entirely wrong. The fact is that, though his work has been extensively criticized, his 'theoretical anti-humanism' (that is, a way of thinking opposed to theories which derive their argument from some notion of a universal essence of Man lodged in each individual subject) has had considerable impact on many branches of modern thought.

The second of the great 'de-centrings' in twentieth-century Western thought comes from Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious. Freud's theory that our identities, our sexuality, and the structure of our desires are formed on the basis of the psychic and symbolic processes of the unconscious, which function according to a 'logic' very different from that of Reason, plays havoc with the concept of the knowing and rational subject with a fixed and unified identity — the subject of Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am'. This aspect of Freud's work has also had a profound impact on modern thought in the last three decades. Psychoanalytic thinkers like Jacques Lacan, for example, (whose work

on the unconscious foundations of femininity is discussed by Helen Crowley: see Book 3 (Bocock and Thompson, 1992), Chapter 2) read Freud as saying that the image of the self as 'whole' and unified is something which the infant only gradually, partially, and with great difficulty, *learns*. It does not grow naturally from inside the core of the infant's being, but is formed in relation to others; especially in the complex unconscious psychic negotiations in early childhood between the child and the powerful fantasies which it has of its parental figures. In what Lacan calls the 'mirror phase' of development, the infant who is not yet coordinated, and possesses no self image as a 'whole' person, sees or 'imagines' itself reflected — either literally in the mirror, or figuratively, in the 'mirror' of the other's look — as a 'whole person' (Lacan, 1977). (Incidentally, Althusser borrowed this metaphor from Lacan, when trying to describe the operation of ideology; see Book 3 (Bocock and Thompson, 1992), Chapter 7.) This is close in some ways to Mead's and Cooley's 'looking glass' conception of the interactive self; except that for them socialization was a matter of conscious learning, whereas for Freud subjectivity was the product of unconscious psychic processes.

This formation of the self in the 'look' of the Other, according to Lacan, opens the child's relation with symbolic systems outside itself, and is thus the moment of the child's entry into the various systems of symbolic representation — including language, culture and sexual difference. The contradictory and unresolved feelings which accompany this difficult entry — the splitting of love and hate for the father, the conflict between the wish to please and the impulse to reject the mother, the division of the self into its 'good' and 'bad' parts, the disavowal of the masculine/feminine parts of oneself, and so on — which are key aspects of this 'unconscious formation of the subject', and which leave the subject 'divided', remain with one for life. However, though the subject is always split or divided it experiences its own identity as being held together and 'resolved', or unified, as a result of the fantasy of itself as a unified 'person' which it formed in the mirror phase. This, according to this kind of psychoanalytic thinking, is the contradictory origin of 'identity'.

Thus, identity is actually something formed through unconscious processes over time, rather than being innate in consciousness at birth. There is always something 'imaginary' or fantasized about its unity. It always remains incomplete, is always 'in process', always 'being formed'. The 'feminine' parts of the male self, for example, which are disavowed, remain with him and find unconscious expressions in many unacknowledged ways in adult life. Thus, rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an on-going process. Identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is 'filled' from *outside us*, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *others*. Psychoanalytically, the reason why we continually search for 'identity', constructing biographies which knit

together the different parts of our divided selves into a unity, is to recapture this fantasized pleasure of fullness (plenitude).

Again, Freud's work, and that of the psychoanalytic thinkers like Lacan who read him in this way, has been widely contested. By definition, unconscious processes cannot be easily seen or examined. They have to be inferred by the elaborate psychoanalytic techniques of reconstruction and interpretation and are not easily amenable to 'proof'. Nevertheless, their general impact on modern ways of thought has been very considerable. Much modern thinking about subjective and psychic life is 'post-Freudian', in the sense that it takes Freud's work on the unconscious for granted, even when it rejects some of his specific hypotheses. Again, you can appreciate the damage which this way of thinking does to notions of the rational subject and identity as fixed and stable.

The third de-centring I shall examine is associated with the work of the structural linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (see Book 1 (Hall and Gieben, 1992), Chapter 5, for a discussion of his theories of language). Saussure argued that we are not in any absolute sense the 'authors' of the statements we make or of the meanings we express in language. We can only use language to produce meanings by positioning ourselves within the rules of language and the systems of meaning of our culture. Language is a social, not an individual system. It pre-exists us. We cannot in any simple sense be its authors. To speak a language is not only to express our innermost, original thoughts, it is also to activate the vast range of meanings which are already embedded in our language and cultural systems.

Further, the meanings of words are not fixed in a one-to-one relation to objects or events in the world outside language. Meaning arises in the relations of similarity and difference which words have to other words within the language code. We know what 'night' is because it is *not* 'day'. Notice the analogy here between language and identity. I know who 'I' am in relation to 'the other' (e.g. my mother) whom I cannot be. As Lacan would say, identity, like the unconscious, 'is structured like language'. What modern philosophers of language, like Jacques Derrida, who have been influenced by Saussure and the 'linguistic turn', argue is that, despite his/her best efforts the individual speaker can never finally fix meaning — including the meaning of his or her identity. Words are 'multi-accentual'. They always carry echoes of other meanings which they trigger off, despite one's best efforts to close meaning down. Our statements are underpinned by propositions and premises of which we are not aware, but which are, so to speak, carried along in the bloodstream of our language. Everything we say has a 'before' and an 'after' — a 'margin' in which others may write. Meaning is inherently unstable: it aims for closure (identity), but is constantly disrupted (by difference). It is constantly sliding away from us. There are always supplementary meanings over which we have no control, which will arise and subvert our attempts to create fixed and stable worlds (see Derrida, 1981).

The fourth major de-centring of identity and the subject occurs in the work of the French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault. In a series of studies (some of which have been referred to in other volumes in this series: for example, Book 1 (Hall and Gieben, 1992), Chapter 6; Book 3 (Bocock and Thompson, 1992), Chapters 4 and 5), Foucault has produced a sort of 'genealogy of the modern subject'. Foucault isolates a new type of power, evolving through the nineteenth century, and coming to full flower at the beginning of this century, which he calls 'disciplinary power'. Disciplinary power is concerned with the regulation, surveillance and government of, first, the human species or whole populations, and secondly, the individual and the body. Its sites are those new institutions which developed throughout the nineteenth century and which 'police' and discipline modern populations — in workshops, barracks, schools, prisons, hospitals, clinics, and so on (see, for example, *Madness and Civilization* (1967), *Birth of the Clinic* (1973) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975)).

The aim of 'disciplinary power' is to bring 'the lives, deaths, activities, work, miseries and joys of the individual', as well as his/her moral and physical health, sexual practices and family life under stricter discipline and control; bringing to bear on them the power of administrative regimes, the expertise of the professional, and the knowledge provided by the 'disciplines' of the social sciences. Its basic object is to produce 'a human being who can be treated as a "docile body"' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p.135).

What is particularly interesting from the point of view of the history of the modern subject is that, though Foucault's disciplinary power is the product of the new large-scale regulating *collective* institutions of late-modernity, its techniques involve an application of power and knowledge which further 'individualizes' the subject and bears down more intensely on his/her body:

In a disciplinary regime, individualization is descending. Through surveillance, constant observation, all those subject to control are individualized. ... Not only has power now brought individuality into the field of observation, but power fixes that objective individuality in the field of writing. A vast, meticulous documentary apparatus becomes an essential component of the growth of power [in modern societies]. This accumulation of individual documentation in a systematic ordering makes 'possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given population'. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p.159, quoting Foucault)

It is not necessary to accept every detail of Foucault's picture of the all-encompassing character of the 'disciplinary regimes' of modern administrative power to understand the paradox that, the more collective and organized is the nature of the institutions of late-

modernity, the greater the isolation, surveillance and individuation of the individual subject.

The fifth de-centring which proponents of this position cite is the impact of feminism, both as theoretical critique and as a social movement. Feminism belongs with that company of 'new social movements', all of which surfaced during the 1960s — the great watershed of late-modernity — alongside the student upheavals, the anti-war and counter-cultural youth movements, the civil-rights struggles, the 'Third-World' revolutionary movements, the peace movements, and the rest associated with '1968'. What is important about this historical moment is that:

- These movements were opposed to the corporate liberal politics of the West as well as the 'Stalinist' politics of the East.
- They affirmed the 'subjective' as well as the 'objective' dimensions of politics.
- They were suspicious of all bureaucratic forms of organization and favoured spontaneity and acts of political will.
- As argued earlier, all these movements had a powerful *cultural* emphasis and form. They espoused the 'theatre' of revolution.
- They reflected the weakening or break-up of class politics, and the mass political organizations associated with it, and their fragmentation into various and separate social movements.
- Each movement appealed to the social *identity* of its supporters. Thus feminism appealed to women, sexual politics to gays and lesbians, racial struggles to blacks, anti-war to peaceniks, and so on. This is the historical birth of what came to be known as *identity politics* — one identity per movement.

But feminism also had a more direct relation to the conceptual de-centring of the Cartesian and the sociological subject:

- It questioned the classic distinction between 'inside' and 'outside', 'private' and 'public'. Feminism's slogan was 'the personal is political'.
- It therefore opened up to political contestation whole new arenas of social life — the family, sexuality, housework, the domestic division of labour, child-rearing, etc. (This is discussed further in Book 3 (Bocock and Thompson, 1992), Chapter 2.)
- It also exposed, as a political and social question, the issue of how we are formed and produced as gendered subjects. That is to say, it politicized subjectivity, identity and the process of identification (as men/women, mothers/fathers, sons/daughters).
- What began as a movement directed at challenging the social *position* of women, expanded to include the *formation* of sexual and gendered identities.
- Feminism challenged the notion that men and women were part of the same identity — 'Mankind' — replacing it with *the question of sexual difference*.