

IS THERE SOMETHING BEYOND AUTONOMY AND THE MODERN SUBJECT? THE TROUBLE FOR THIS OVERCOMING IN ADORNO AND FOUCAULT

Marco Gomboso

Ambrosio L. Gioja Law and Social Studies Institute
Faculty of Law University of Buenos Aires

Summary: The article analyses the question of autonomy as a fundamental element for modern subjectivity. It asks about a possible overcoming of this subjectivity, and takes two emblematic positions that intend to be part of this process: that of Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault. However, it is claimed that those authors do not go beyond this identity in their criticism of it: they rather keep their structure by looking for an active detachment. It concludes that if ever happening, the overcoming of modernity involves a more fatalistic and deterministic ontology of being.

Keywords: Autonomy; modernity; subjectivity; subjugation; determinism.
EXISTE ALGO MÁS ALLÁ DE LA AUTONOMÍA Y EL SUJETO MODERNO? EL PROBLEMA PARA ESTA SUPERACIÓN EN ADORNO Y FOUCAULT

Resumen: El artículo analiza la cuestión de la autonomía como elemento fundamental de la subjetividad moderna. Se pregunta por una posible superación de esta subjetividad, y toma dos posiciones emblemáticas que pretenden ser parte de este proceso: la de Theodor Adorno y Michel Foucault. Sin embargo, se afirma que esos autores no van más allá de esta identidad en su crítica: más bien mantienen su estructura buscando un desapego activo. Concluye que, si alguna vez ocurre, la superación de la modernidad implica una ontología del ser más fatalista y determinista.

Palabras clave: Autonomía; modernidad; subjetividad; subyugación; determinismo.

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1. Introduction

Autonomy is fundamental to the nature of the modern subject. It could be said that its existence (that of the so-called modern subject) depends on the former. From the very core of the principles of Enlightenment, to think according to rational analysis appeared in association with having the chance to do so unconditioned. When Kant famously asserted that “Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another” (Kant, 1784: 1), he was exactly pointing out that premise: that to think critically involves not to depend on the directives of another, for dependence hides irrational acceptance. In other words, to accept from others what and how we have to think shows that we are immature in the art of thinking, for the act of critical thinking must rest self-sufficient in order to be purely rational. This link between critical thought and autonomy thus lies on the basis of Enlightenment.

Both Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault have been especially concerned about the modern subject and its self-declared mastery. However, they both indicate what they see as a false belief of the modern subject in relation to his own autonomy. The supposed maturity the individual seems to get after Enlightenment is then problematized, and it appears as a fraud. For instance, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), denounce the subjugation of the subject to an abstract rationality. It is then possible to ask ourselves about what is lost in this subjugation. It seems they refer to some kind of true autonomy of the subject, which is certainly not the modern one. In the case of Foucault (1982) it appears to be the need for liberation from a kind of individualization, and a proposal of a new kind of subjectivity. But what does this new kind of subjectivity involve?

Words such as “liberation” or “subjugation” point towards the loss of a certain autonomy. This loss presents itself as problematic, since the very notion of autonomy is connected to modernity. As we pointed out before, the modern subject seems to have been historically constructed upon the practical premises of this notion, since it entails the possibility of individual

freedom, one of the pillars of modern culture. Because of that, I think it bears a problematic nature in both of the aforementioned authors: although not always in an explicit way, their criticism of modern subjectivity deals with the notion of autonomy in a double sense. On one hand, autonomy is criticised as one of the aspects of subjugation. It appears as an identity which the modern subject considers fundamental and natural to its own reproduction. On the other hand, when Foucault and Adorno criticise this kind of identity construction, they seem to look for a kind of “positive” autonomy, freed from the domination of the modern identity. I would like to further discuss this problem of the double meaning of the concept and its consequences. So the main questions of this essay will be: does the notion of autonomy in Adorno and Foucault have a double meaning? Can we then arrive at a notion of a “desired” or normative concept of the self in both authors, different from the traditional one? Finally, and most important: is the critique of the modern subject so far showing an unexplored path in terms of a new kind of identity?

It is still worth mentioning that both philosophers have views on the issue which have some substantial differences. Han-Pile (2016) has argued that the Foucaultian self is not a self-oriented towards a kind of practical autonomy, but a one of self-displacement. This would be certainly different from an Adornian conception of the self and its autonomy. A problematization of possible differences may also shed light on the main questions of this work.

2. Adorno. The restraint of the subject

Adorno’s criticism of modernity involves a criticism of its ideological dimension. For Adorno, the way we think about ourselves is shaped by a rationality that has objectified the mind, in terms of an abstract identity construction which involves our perception as supposed free subjects. This rationality, universally embodied by Enlightenment, permeates human beings and their actions in society in a way that it is recognized as natural. The

modern rationality derives into a technified and positivist view of the self: we have the “power” to operate in a world centred on a view only composed by a collection of objects and actions intended to make use of those objects in a technical, utilitarian way. The notion of the self is adjusted to it as well: the individual is an element that acts “freely” as another objectified entity.

This rational pattern, clearly exemplified in the economic sphere (for instance, in the form of the individual as labour force) extends itself towards other spheres, such as the cultural. That way, it reproduces the pattern of objectification in every symbolic aspect as well, and we cannot talk about spheres as such any more, since these are absorbed by universality. It allows for the existence of a kind of identity for individuals to be imitated where they can see themselves. They have a particular identity that makes them believe they are different from each other. But the difference is just part of the manifold of details already presented as possible. Adorno points it out in relation to the individual identities promoted by the culture industry:

The peculiarity of the self is a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural. It is reduced to the moustache, the French accent, the deep voice of the prostitute, the ‘Lubitsch touch’ - like a fingerprint on the otherwise uniform identity cards to which the lives and faces of all individuals, from the film star to the convict, have been reduced by the universal. Pseudoindividuality is a precondition for apprehending and detoxifying tragedy: only because individuals are none but mere intersections of universal tendencies is it possible to reabsorb them smoothly into the universal¹.

This clearly points towards the existence of an ideological sphere which shapes the desires of individualization by offering preconceived, established and accepted identities. Since the individual goes for them as something fresh and genuine, we can say the subjugation is complete. In this fashion, we can understand Adorno as considering modern subjectivity as a kind of makeshift, an artificial and social imposition.

¹ Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002: 125.

However, he subsequently indicates that “...no individuation was ever really achieved” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002: 125). If no individuation was achieved during the process, and since Adorno criticises it as a type of subjugation, can we say that individuation in itself, or to put in other words, “real” individuation, is desirable? Taking this last assertion and the fact that Adorno mentioned the previous process as the assignment of “pseudoindividualities” may lead us to think about a true or authentic individuality, a genuine identity which has been lost thanks to the rationalisation process.

We can also see this apparent true and lost individuality in Adorno if we turn to his claim of the incapacitation of the subject in his *Negative Dialectics*. “The anthropocentric sense of life has been shaken” (Adorno, 1973: 67) he writes, and identifies this shake with the fact the modern subject is “absorbed” by the universal notion of the rational control of nature, leaving human consciousness as something irrational and unsubstantial. Again, the reference to consciousness as the centre of life brings us the feeling we are dealing with a kind of loss of self-government. Adorno even acknowledges this loss as a sign of impotence, thus making our analysis in relation to the notion of autonomy even more explicit: “The truth that expels man from the center of creation and reminds him of his impotence – this same truth will, as a subjective mode of conduct, confirm the sense of impotence, cause men to identify with it...” (Adorno, 1973: 68). We have a rationality, centred on the utilitarian control of nature, justified by abstract thoughts about the unattainability of philosophical notions such as the ontological being. The individual is left “impotent”. But what does this impotence mean? Adorno is suggesting, as we can see, the existence of a loss of power on ourselves. The power of dictating our own will. But it is exactly the desire of the subject of dictating its own destiny or path under a certain content (one could say a certain identity) that the subjugation takes place. Moreover, it does it in a utilitarian or purpose-oriented manner: “There is a will insofar as a man objectified himself into a character. Toward himself -whatever that may be- he thus becomes something external, after the mo-

del of the outward world of things that is subjected to causality.” (Adorno, 1973: 217). This world dominated by causation is precisely determining the loss of power or impotence, since it shapes the content that the subject assumes as its own.

There is thus a concrete will of domination in a positivist, particularised way, in opposition to a virtuous self that escapes mere rationality and apprehends reality beyond these utilitarian limits. One could argue then that Adorno is only criticising modernity. However, and paradoxically, a critique of an identity that starts with the false “empowerment” and “maturity” of the enlightenment gives place to the asking for a lost power for self-government. One might think if Adorno thought about the problem of the critique of modernity by positing the necessity of the power of the self, i.e. if this way of thinking really gets rid of modern thought.

It seems clear then that Adorno did think about a possible and positive freedom and autonomy. A non-dependence, which looks certainly problematic in the light of the criticism of modernity; a criticism directed towards a construction of a kind of identity based on those very principles which are derived from a rationality that presents itself as ideologically oppressive. As David James pointed out in relation to the supposed space Adorno leaves for “true” freedom, a non-deterministic approach seems to be the basis of that positive autonomy:

...recognition of the ultimate contingency of whatever happens to be the case constitutes an absolute condition of a critical social consciousness that remains free in the sense of possessing the ability to think that things might be different in the future from how they happen to be at the present time...²

But contingency is certainly included in modern identity. It is actually one of its foundations: to choose a course of action which is not affected absolutely by some imposed rationality or paradigm. Despite the fact that

² James, 2016: 13.

Adorno sees modernity with a deterministic character, modernity defines itself as mainly non-deterministic. Notwithstanding the discussion if the modern thought is consistent within itself, the praise of contingency does not escape the same paradigm of freedom and autonomy. Contingency, in order to escape determinism, presupposes that the sphere of possibilities regarding actions is open, thus allowing for rational choice. Moreover, rational choice is based on autonomy. Again, the circle of modern thought is complete³.

3. Foucault. The will to escape subjugation

The relation of Foucault with the notion of autonomy appears to be more subtle, or at least is only adjacent to the main endeavour of the French philosopher, namely the tracing of the development of subjectivity, the history of the creation of subjects out of human beings.

Still, the criticism of modern rationality is, just like in Adorno, a main topic in Foucault's work. However, whilst in Adorno the subjugating force of the modern rationality seems to come in the form of an ideological imposition that takes over the individual, in Foucault's view the development of that very subjugation seems to originate and reside in the individuals themselves, as actors who deploy the actions which institute a certain type of domination. For example, in the case of the practices adopted in academic institutions: where individuals look for the enhancement of their abilities and capacities as proper students according to academic standards, performing themselves the reproduction of a form of domination at the same time they succeed in their particular purposes. Thus Foucault (1977) stresses the fact of domination directly in bodies, disciplined not "en masse" but individually, in their economy and efficiency. It's a kind of "political anatomy", which assures the very disengagement of the subject with any

³ It is true that one could think of contingency under a "chaos" context, thus not necessarily allowing for rational choice. However, it is not clear that chaos escapes determinism. Actually chaos might be closer to determinism rather than to contingency.

disobedience. Now, this particularization of the effect of a kind of rationality of subjugation (such as the one in the aforementioned example) in individuals themselves seems to make the analysis of any possible gap between the auto-disciplinary practice and a possible “positive” freedom more difficult. For instance, when referring to the way binary rationalities operate defining the subject, Foucault writes: “They are struggles which question the status of the individual: (...), they assert the right to be different, and they underline everything which makes individuals truly individual” (Foucault, 1982: 781). In the very constitution of the individual as such resides its own recognition. It seems hard to think then about a possible positive view on autonomy in Foucault considering this almost match between discipline and concrete being. Foucault’s definition of the subject is unequivocal on that:

There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to⁴.

We see explicitly here the fact that, for Foucault, the subject is such when it is subjugated. To be a subject (the word itself denotes it) is to be either dependent on others (explicit no-autonomy) or to be labelled by our own self-consciousness. The latter seems to indicate a kind of autonomy, but in Foucault’s view is actually not true at all, since the subjugation to our own imposed identity that constitutes us is no other thing than a very effective technique of domination, a precise form of discipline. The need to be a good student, or an efficient and healthy person in a determined social context.

After analysing these definitions it might appear that Foucault does not think in terms of a positive autonomy or true nature of freedom. However,

⁴ Foucault, 1982: 781.

is this really the case? In certain paragraphs, the French philosopher does not show an absolute denial of a space for such a positive situation. As he claims after giving some hints on “what to do” in the last parts of *The question of the Subject*:

...the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is (...) to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us...⁵

The refusal of a kind of individuality and the promotion of a subjectivity that replaces it leaves no doubt that, at least, Foucault still allows for a “space” beyond mere subjugation. The problem is, what does this kind of liberation involve? Foucault does not appear to be concerned with the explanation or the details of this new subjectivity, but with the criticism of the historical one. This space for a new form of subjectivity is also implicit in his conception of the way governments act in modern times “...what government has to do with is not territory but rather a sort of complex composed of men and things” (Foucault, 2008: 93). If to govern is actually the dealing or the administration of the relations between people as well as their relation to things in terms of power, the very act of governing involves different degrees of at least a kind of control of people. Control is only possible when something has the potential to be controlled. The word potential here is of utmost importance: implies that the subject to be controlled is or can be in a certain state of non-control or freedom from the agent that eventually will exercise its power. Thus a subject that has the potential to be controlled bears the condition of escaping this subjugating scenario too. Again, a distance between a full and absolute subjugation and a condition where this is not the case shows up. What implies this distance for Foucault is certainly a question for debate.

⁵ Foucault, 1982: 785.

In an attempt to give an interpretation to this issue, Han-Pile has recently argued that we should not look in Foucault's thought for a positive and desired identity:

The point is not to identify wholeheartedly with oneself, let alone to find a repressed 'true self.' This is largely the reason why Foucault rejects psychological conceptions of authenticity, and the ground of his opposition to Sartre on this issue. It is not a question either of forming a new 'practical identity' which would regulate our comportment in a consistent way. By contrast, critique as a practice of the self is an exercise in self-displacement, self-estrangement...⁶

The argument is mainly based on the fact that Foucault made the criticism of the identity of the self not just a theory through which we could see things more clearly, but a practice of liberation itself. Still, we can ask ourselves about the implications of this "self-displacement". If it constitutes a separation, or maybe a transformation from the starting point of a subjugated identity towards something that it is not (for even though the self-displacement is not about defining something new explicitly, the point is to arrive to a "release" from the subjugation) it would show a new state of things. Is such a state possible if not positively defined? If the answer is no, it's difficult not to think about a new subject. In this sense, it would probably entail a verbalization, a self-definition. And that would be certainly problematic if not contradictory according to Foucault's thought. If, on the other hand, no definition of subjectivity is required and we interpret Foucault's thought strictly as self-displacement, we face two problems. First, why a self-displacement is required. Why is liberation required, in the name of what? Second, the fact that negativity is also a positive position, namely an affirmative reaction against certain identity. The content of this affirmation can be built tacitly from what stands against. The question then is, if we can consider as satisfactory Han-Pile's assertion of the non-existence of a desired self in Foucault; if the mere self-estrangement

⁶ Han-Pile, 2016: 99.

does not imply a positive definite standpoint for another kind of selfness established again on the grounds of rational and claimed independence.

4. The “desired” self

We have seen that both Adorno and Foucault do insinuate a double concept of autonomy. The criticism of the modern subject as such comes together with a kind of normative proposal, either in explicit terms, or indirectly by using concepts that point towards a positive opposite: “to free the subject”, “liberation”, the “incapacitation of the subject”, even “the governing of the subject”. All of them imply a struggle between parts, a reaction against something that “holds”. I think the “desired self” is enclosed in these struggles. It shows itself in a clearer manner in Adorno, where the distance between the oppressive and its object of oppression is still visible. But I don’t see it is absolutely missing in Foucault, as Han-Pile suggests by saying Foucault only allows for the transformation of the self as becoming a stranger of oneself. The action of “getting free of ourselves” entails to look critically in rational terms towards the constituted self (Han-Pile does not deny this), but the result of that criticism can hardly lead to something that is not positively constituted as a self as long as we keep (as Foucault does) the relation of it with what desires to be not. In other words, the “liberated” cannot claim to be so if it does not *stand* (by itself) free. For how can one be conceived to be free if there is no autonomous self at all?

The question of freedom thus turns out to be fundamental as well. Of course freedom is a concept that precedes modernity, and it is subject to many interpretations that make grasping it quite a difficult enterprise. Freedom can be taken to be, in its modern understanding, as a lack of dependence towards other things or people, as we would mention at the beginning of this essay with Kant’s famous quote. This kind of understanding of freedom is the one that I assume Adorno and Foucault criticise. But what about other kinds of freedom? For instance, freedom can be understood not as a kind of independence, but as mere positive action, a kind of “taking

place”, being this in a collective or individual fashion. The independent or autonomous character could be somehow avoided, and therefore one could think of this as a non-modern kind of freedom, where just positioning is the key concept. But this freedom does not entail any liberation, displacement or avoidance of control. It is rather an unconscious assertion of existence, a positioning that acts beyond rationality, a kind of vitalist stance. If we would like to relate it to the discourses of Foucault and Adorno it would certainly not fit. This is because in both cases the centre of their analysis is how subjugation acts against freedom. Thus the aforementioned first kind is present here, not the second. Why? Because in the second one there’s no place for escaping or destabilising an order, it is not in the nature of it to think about it in those terms. The bringing up of the problem of subjugation is therefore an undesired link to modern thought.

Still, one can think of the modern subject and its proclaimed autonomy as identities that are certainly bound to historical change, without losing their degree of reality. This does not collide with Adorno and Foucault’s interpretations of the subject and it is even presupposed. The problem is not that, but the criticism of that identity on the basis of its own modern assumptions, thus falling into the problem of being a type or part of it. The usage of a word such as liberation it’s enough to understand this latter point. Maybe, what actually lies beyond the modern identity of the subject is much closer to words such as determinism or fatalism. If this is the case, then rather than an analysis of its displacement we might think of it as a limited historical understanding of it, being the subject and its freedom a broader and existential reality that transcends these contingent battles.

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Marco Gomboso
mgomboso@derecho.uba.ar

