New Modernities, Spaces and Multiple Subjectivities of the Other

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Abstract
Over the past 20 years in Western Europe, sociology has taken a “subjectivist turn” which strengthened an already sociocentric outlook European societies, especially concerning the “totemization of the self”. In Western Europe, the individuals have to deal with “double-binds” situations and to face a diversity of normative orders. As contemporary Western Europe societies are getting more complex, there is a growing diversity of “alterity regimes”: weak alterity regimes, strong alterity regimes, partially autonomous alterity regimes. Because alterity regimes are getting more and more diverse, careers have become more and more discontinuous; and along with globalization, biographies become cosmopolitan and complex, forming plural identities built not only in different situations but also in multisituated times and spaces. The concept of subjectivity may be less common in Chinese sociology, but the subjectivity of the Other is not ignored. Whereas, in Western theories, the me, the I and the others are seen as distinct moments in a discontinuous process of the self, in Chinese thinking all steps are not so clearly set apart as the process itself is much more continuous.

Keywords: Individuation- Subjectivity- Inequalities-Intermediate spaces

What is the individual in Western Europe and in China?
Over the past 20 years or more, it has been interesting to observe that in European sociology, and particularly French sociology, the contemporary individual, whether he appears uncertain (Ehrenberg 1995), reflexively or autonomously, lies at the heart of sociological thinking, whereas he is scarcely visible on the Chinese sociological scene. This phenomenon highlights the affirmation of the process of individuation as a process of civilisation – in Norbert Elias’s sense of the term – and shows that, whereas in the past it was social structures that sustained the individual and the level of reflexivity was consistent with the social structure, today the production of an identity is a condition for action and the process of individuation is mediated through access to self-governance in various affiliation and activity spaces. Individuation and subjectivity form a very complex theoretical couple; the subjectivity is a capacity of action of reflexivity and creativity of the modern individual in different situations, and also the incapacity to mobilize himself when he is depressed. Today in different modernities the Subjectivity of the Other is confronted to more and more uncertain and risky situations, to the injunction to be himself; so
he is producing different kinds of narratives to resist this injunction, to fight for collective and public recognition. We can also observe a multiplication of situations of double bind in different societies and notice a plurality of normative orders. The Other must deal with this complexity and develop creative skills to define his own identity and his own self. So we could consider that new modernities produce multiple subjectivities of the Other. We will also consider how these subjectivities are influenced by cultural globalization when the Other has to reconfigure, here and there, his narratives in transnational spaces. If, today, the Other is local and global, we will deal with the process of reconfiguration of subjectivities in different spaces located on different scales. The subjectivity of the Other is more and more complex, multisituated in legitimate and less legitimate, visible and invisible, local and global spaces.

1. From Individuation Theories to Recognition Theories

In European sociology the process of individuation as a process of civilisation is characterized more by the increasing power of the autonomy norm than by a global fall back on each one’s private space. Thus, it means that each individual faces as much inspirations and as many opportunities as he faces potential failures. Increased freedom of choice goes hand in hand with higher risks in the social construction of the individual (Elias, 1991), especially considering this construction absorbs a variety of schemes that came to light in different contexts. As Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2004) showed, social structures used to support the individual and was consistent with the reflexivity level, whereas now, identity production is a condition for action and the individuation process is mediated through self governance access. Individuals’ identities are constructed through a variety of affiliations spaces which are producing different kinds of socialisation, including horizontal ones (De Singly, 2007). Indeed, François Dubet (2009) explained how the individual was challenged as the idea of society as an organized whole declined along with the steady autonomization of social hierarchies and class, the crumbling of collective forms of action and representation and the weakening of institutions. Meanwhile, Michel Wieviorka (2005) emphasized the rise of racism, cultural fragmentation, urban segregation and institutional violence, all in a democratic context. Following Alain Touraine and Fahrad Khosrokhavar (2000), he also questions the subject as what is left out of or resists the logics of system (Wieviorka, 2007). The autonomy then becomes a widely shared yearning and simultaneously a very demanding and severe norm (Kokoreff, 2003) before which individuals are not equals. Alain Ehrenberg (1995, 2007) detailed how, in European societies, where subjectivity rose as collective questioning, an ‘uncertain individual’ had bloomed. Facing many undetermined situations that produce discomfort in its social lives, this individual drifts between social respect and social disrespect as well as between self respect and self disrespect (Roulleau-Berger 1999, 2007); this oscillation happens according to the social roles he is allowed to in the diversity of affiliation spaces he happens to cross. These indeterminate situations all contribute to hinder access to the individual himself.

Social, sexual and ethnical inequalities kept growing, while at the same time some specific groups of population appeared more clearly as stigmatized and invisibilized and therefore a feeling of injustice soared. The topic of the Other’s subjectivity was then redefined, not so much according to individuation theories as it was in the light of recognition theories. When inequalities become unbearable, subjects are eager to mention the lack of recognition. This notion, recognition, thus slowly became the center of a sociology of subjectivity, a sociology of social movements and
a moral and critical sociology (Caillé, 2007). Subjectivity, after being neglected for so long by sociology, as many gaps between individuals and the social world grew wide (Martucelli 2002) interactionist, constructivist and comprehensive thinking opened the way for a renewal of the topic of subjectivity, formerly buried by structuralism, functionalism, structuro-functionalism and marxism. Nowadays, « being yourself » has become a social injunction, which, along with the increasing testing situations tied to the stigmatization processes, rejection and social unaffiliation, forces sociologists to put subjectivity back under the spotlight, as it is now a true collective local and global topic. Subjectivity now appears as it is constructed by each society but redefined in each local situation with the Other, with the individual also reconfiguring his own subjectivity in the process. The more worlds an individual belongs to, the more subjectivities fluctuate, either negatively, when facing overwhelming hardships, or positively, when individuals gain access to a rewarding self-consciousness.

Since the end of the 90s, the issue of recognition and the struggle for it (Honneth 2000, 2006) became fundamental on the French sociological scene (Caillé, 2007; Payet & Battegay 2008). It has been widely used to expose new forms of relationship to the other in contemporary societies where normative orders increase in number, while new social fragmentations appear. Following the debate in America about multiculturalism, we had to rethink the ties between the recognition of individuals and the recognition of groups (Taylor 1998; Walzer, 1997; Kymlicka 2001). Axel Honneth’s recognition theory was based on the reconfiguration of social struggles in contemporary societies. In his steps, German sociology opened a fundamental debate about the relationship between recognition and injustice. In the beginning, the topics of interest, exploitation and redistribution were overshadowed by identity, difference, cultural domination and recognition, but the debate became even more international when Nancy Frazer contributed to it by refocusing the arguments around the idea that justice requires redistribution and recognition. Through the notion of “parity of participation”, she delivered a new theoretical frame, built on the linkage of the objective condition of the parity of participation, which is the distribution of material resources granting every citizen economic independence and the intersubjective condition of the parity of participation, the existence of institutionalized models of interpretation and evaluation granting an equal respect to all citizens (Frazer 2005). In Western Europe, the subjectivity of the Other is, in itself, an important part of this fundamental debate about justice, redistribution and recognition. Nancy Frazer brought a synthetic frame which envisions recognition struggles through socioeconomic inequalities between classes, genders, ethnic groups, but also through cultural injustices as they appear in cultural domination, denial of recognition and disrespect. Her position is now the main one in sociology when it comes to thinking the subjectivity of the Other.

2. Inequalities, Double Bind and Recognition Demands

With the end of industrial capitalism, we entered a new capitalist regime, in which the wage-earning societies went through a dramatic change as the inequalities between social positions increased. Access to resources and goods is becoming less and less common, while there are more and more people who lack resources and face the risk of true material poverty, while being less and less protected and cared by the welfare system. Mass unemployment, growing uncertainties in work relations and labor, the decline of institution and the recomposition of new institutional forms, all concur to point out that “modernity is not about the strong grip of the
system on the subjectivities, modernity is mostly about the wavering of an actor relentlessly forced to define again and again his place and his identity” (Dubet, 2009). On the one hand, social, economic and ethnical inequalities keep growing, along with new forms of exploitation, reject, stigmatization and even destitution of the “weakest”. On the other hand, cultural domination, recognition denial and disrespect create situations of injustice. Exploited workers, young people facing high uncertainties, migrants, and ethnic minorities subject to racial discrimination, are all prime examples of these processes.

In Western Europe, individuals are crossing more and more social spaces, each of those being subject to conflicting demands and requirements. Facing a diversity of normative orders, they have to deal with double-binds situations (Bourdieu, 1993; Castel, 2009) in which the distinctions between recognition orders get blurred. Thus, the reflexive capacity of individuals to spot and frame social orders weakens (Roulleau-Berger, 2004). Those who face the most uncertainties, the most socially fragile and the most discriminated against ethnically are caught in situations where their socializations conflict, in a double-bind where they are deprived of control over the economic, social, material and symbolic dimensions of their lives. They are trapped into low legitimacy spaces, which mean a form of confinement where the only recognition that happens is very circumstantial and invisible. Other groups of population are forced to be mobile through unstable status, leading to economic injustices, sometimes coupled with cultural ones. The double bind situations produce symbolic and material reversibilities in the biographies of the individuals who are experiencing them. Material reversibility implies that social, economic and cultural situations can be turned upside down; for example, a young unemployed person is able to secure a job with a fixed-term contract at the end of which he is unemployed again, before being hired as a temporary employee. These reversibilities are felt subjectively through a fluctuation between positive and negative forms of recognition, between social or self disrespect and social or self support. It’s becoming more and more difficult for individuals to tune their different “selves”, to keep face, which is a never-ending activity, considering recognition is infinite in nature and the Other is less and less willing to recognize. These difficulties to recognize the Other bring to light conflicts between normative orders. These conflicts have a great influence on the capacity of individuals to keep control of the situation, to exert their motivations and resources to deal with the situations resulting from the blurring of recognition grammars.

Double bind situations are responsible for these conflicting recognition situations and the blurring of recognition grammar that ensues. Individuals are no longer able to tell when, where and by whom they are recognized. Recognition demands thus increase with the rising number of conflicting socialization and recognitions situations, as the actors have to keep redefining their place and identities. As violence and sufferings become more common in public space, recognition demands are upheld disclosing structural emergencies, anomic areas, all symptoms of social, cultural and economic breaching. Many recognition policies were enabled to respond to these demands, paradoxically producing micro-segregations (Payet & Battegay, 2008) as the different forms which socially confirm or support the individuals are thoroughly tested. Recognition demands are indeed expressed in many different ways. Less qualified young people living in segregated neighborhoods, the long-term unemployed, unauthorized migrants, all of which uphold different recognition demands, are more or less visible or quiet in the public space. These recognition demands arise from social, economic and ethnical inequalities and the experience of disrespect, social domination and recognition denial. They are the symptoms of many social conflicts involving the breaching of the implicit rules of mutual recognition, situations when
individuals are deprived of their rights and denied the intersubjective recognition of their capacities and doings. These conflicts between normative orders arise from institutional violence, inequalities and ethnical discrimination, all of which are built up through distinct access to social, economic and symbolic resources. Recognition demands can break into public space at any time, as social movements, riots, rebellions (for example in workers’ neighborhoods). In such instances, they force a redistribution of social and public recognition and they redefine the hierarchy of identities. Conflicting normative orders produce a strong increase of recognition demands by questioning what is “common decency” in a given society (Margalit, 1999).

3. Alterity Regimes and Intermediate Spaces in Contemporary Societies

As contemporary Western Europe societies are getting more complex, there is a growing diversity of “alterity regimes” (Abeles, 2008). These regimes allow for different levels of legitimacy in the way recognition is handled, as some regimes are more visible than others. Recognition is then closely tied to visibility and invisibility. This notion of alterity regimes moves beyond the oppositions between the self and the Other, between Subject and object. Thanks to the plurality of the alterity regimes, different forms of alterity are visible beyond the “ordinary” subjectivity narrative. Recognition implies an alterity which is situationally built between individuals involved in roles used in complex relationships where a diversity of resources and involvement are made available.

Three alterity regimes will be defined depending on:
- Social, economic and ethnical inequalities
- Positively or negatively experienced forms of recognition
- Strengthened or disjointed subjectivities when relating to the Other

Weak alterity regimes happen when groups of populations without many resources or protection from collective welfare systems are experiencing social, economic or ethnical inequalities in low legitimacy social worlds and are unable to distribute much social or public recognition or social respect. In this case, individuals are involved in forced or conflicting socializations, causing disjunctions in their subjectivities and a negatively based relationship to the Other. Repeated situations of double bind in parallel with disjunction of subjectivities can lead to a loss of self and Other, producing anti-Subjects (Wieviorka, 2008).

Strong alterity regimes happen when groups of populations well endowed in resources and protected by collective welfare systems are engaged in social, economic and cultural affiliation processes in legitimate institutions distributing social and public recognition as well as social respect. Individuals are involved in different socializations (familial, professional, etc.) where their subjectivities are mutually strengthening themselves in the relationship to the Other, thus producing respect towards the Other.

Partially autonomous alterity regimes happen when groups of populations, which are rather poorly endowed in resources and pointed out as possessing only weakly socially recognized abilities, do manage to collectively and individually rally themselves, showing social creativity and even resistance by empowering themselves with the control of interstitial spaces. Intermediate spaces (Roulleau-Berger, 1999, 2007) are then born, existing in more or less side-stepping from the institutions where double bind situations and conflicting recognition are dealt with. In these spaces, mutual recognition is slowly built based on shared norms, albeit different from the
mainstream ones. Individual capacities are then collectively claimed and submitted to public approval and evaluation. By using different scales and contexts, individual capacities become societal capacities (Ricoeur, 2004). Intermediate spaces then bring to light how active minorities or unvisibilized groups of population can empower themselves and claim the “right to capacities” (Sen, 2000), be it social or societal capacities. Individuals experience peaceful mutual recognition based on symbolic mediations independent from legal as well as market orders (Ricoeur 2004). Based on peculiar and plural minor proceedings, these spaces do not cancel the domination but allow migrants to be redefined as inventing and creative in ways of “coping with” or tactics used by the “weakest” against the “strongest” (De Certeau, 1980).

Alterity regimes are not completely independent of each other. It is possible to move from one to another and some of them are antagonists because of the tensions tied to the processes of unequal differentiation. While growing along different paths, European modernities generate situated conflicts, instil competition between subjectivities concerning access to a “culture of self” (Foucault, 1975), but also foster the development of affinities and solidarities between some subjectivities. Double bind situations do break up the subjectivities, but they can also contribute to foster the rise of intermediate spaces. These intermediate spaces are founded on some specific alterity regimes, where individuals get involved in producing positive reinforcement for each other’s subjectivities through shared norms concerning the distribution of symbolic goods. In some part of the social world, the egological subject is then carefully kept at bay.

4. Biographical Polygamy, Pluri-societal Capacities and Multisituated Subjectivities

As contemporary societies are getting much more complex and alterity regimes are getting more and more diverse, careers have become more and more discontinuous as they are less ruled by collective regulations (Castel, 2009). Along with globalization, biographies become cosmopolitan and complex, forming plural identities built not only in different situations but also in multisituated times and spaces. This phenomenon is especially obvious concerning transnational migrations. Ulrich Beck writes about the “cosmopolitization of biographies” and “geographical polygamy” to express how globalization changes the way biographies are built (Beck, 2006). According to Ulrich Beck, “geographically polygamic biographies are growing through social classes, legal or illegal paths, mobility and migrations”.

Individual paths are drawn through a series of branchings at the conjunction of migratory steps, which means a change in spatial regime that occurs by geographical mobility and a change of economic regime that occurs through professional mobility and alterity regime evolution. Each branching sees a new arrangement of spaces, events (wars, unemployment,…) and repertoires of individual resources to reset status, places and social identities. Societal capacities influence repertoires of resources in their shapes and setups. Stronger branchings require stronger action ability to deal with identity shocks and blurrings. “Archeological inequalities” (Scardigli & Mercier, 1978) are brought to light and disclose the differences between resources, since some of them become available only in some branching situations while the migratory experience provides new limits and obstacles. Each step of the migration sees individuals renegotiating their cultural, professional and social identities through interactions with other individuals, all of which happens in spaces with specific norms. It is then possible to witness strong changes in the meaning individuals grant to what they are and what they do. These polygamic biographies are built along social and economic inequalities, cultural differences and societal capacities which become
pluri-societal as they have to adapt to the mainstream norms of the society in which the migrant finds himself. Subjectivities are becoming multisituated because of the plurality of these identity anchors, they can either get stronger or break up in the relationship to the Other, as this relationship itself is multisituated on different scales, spaces and temporalities (Roulleau-Berger, 2010).

Individuals may lose material, social, economic and symbolic goods in the diversity of low legitimacy transnational spaces they have to cross. In this case, their social and spatial capital dwindles as they access low valued places. These individuals stay on the edges of the institutions of the society they arrived in. Societal capacities become pluri-societal by reducing their scope of action and their social creativity. Subjectivities weaken the individuals in their relationship to the Other, making it harder for them to find their place in this relationship.

When individuals accumulate material, social, economic and symbolic goods in a diversity of high legitimacy transnational relocated spaces, their social and spatial capital grows while they access high valued places. They fit in the institutions of the society in which they arrived and their societal capacities become pluri-societal. Multisituated subjectivities are then strengthening identities.

5. Towards a Cosmopolitan Thinking: The Chinese Sociology Added Value

Over the past 20 years in Western Europe, sociology has taken a “subjectivist turn” (Ehrenberg, 2007) which strengthened an already sociocentric outlook European societies, especially concerning the “totemization of the self”. Subjectivity is now a major issue in much sociological research. It fluctuates depending on the paradigm used; yet many researchers are nowadays focusing on individuation. That’s why it is now really necessary in Western societies to free ourselves from “methodological nationalism” (Beck, 2006) by inviting “thoughts from the outside” (Jullien, 2000) to question and challenge thoughts from the inside.

We mentioned how, in Western Europe, the subjectivity of the Other is a main part of the debate about justice, redistribution and recognition. Some Chinese anthropologists (Luo Hongguuang, 2000 and sociologists (Li Peilin, 2002; Tong Xin, 2002; Li Chunling, 2005; Li Peilin, Li Qiang & Ma Rong, 2008; Shen Yuan, 2011; Sun Liping, 2003) envision struggles for recognition as being firstly based on socioeconomic inequalities between social classes and only secondarily on cultural injustice, denial of recognition and disrespect. For instance, the question of property rights (Liu Shiding, 2006) is essential today in China, at the crossroad between state property, collective property and individual property. Since 1979 these rights have been re-arranged and now foster self property. Thus, in today’s Chinese society, a different kind of individual arises, owning material and symbolic collective goods, social goods, but also recently privatized goods. This individual is gaining access to his own property, even if it is in a very different way from what happened in Western Europe. Individuals who have managed to claim a place, a status and access to goods will benefit from social and public recognition. Those who have failed to fit in collective systems, or have been unable to gain protection from the collectivity, and without much resources or support won’t be able to reach “self property” (Castel, 2001) and won’t gain access to public recognition spaces.

The concept of subjectivity may be less common in Chinese sociology, but the subjectivity of the Other is not ignored. Through the question of guanxis, which is fundamental in the whole Chinese sociological field, subjectivity of the Other is handled according to interactionist and
pragmatist traditions. Chinese sociologists handle relationship to the Other as closely tied to social networks. Yang Yiyin (1998, 2008), for instance, posits the hypothesis that a “double we” is made through the construction of interaction orders. In this book Inghai Pan, in the same perspective, has developed the concept of “double consciousness”, meaning how we know ourselves and how the others know themselves. Yang Yiyin explains how, to define interpersonal guanxi, we have to take into account the legacy of the parenting regime as well as trust and mutual duty relationships. “We” is produced on one hand by some guanxis which draw the specific borders of the “self” (or, precisely speaking, of what Fei Xiaotong called chaxu geju) and on the other hand by social categorizations, identifications and affiliations. It could be said that self-identity and identity towards others (Goffman, 1975) would be based on this “double we”, whereas, in Western societies, identities would be based firstly from myself and me as stepping stones in the process of the self. Along this process the individual does meet some others, enabling him to proceed to “we”. Depending on the kind of guanxis, the relationship to the Other will be set in a different way and the “me” will not be at the same place. The importance of guanxis in the construction of collective and individual identities looks essential to the past and present Chinese civilization and also because the relationship between the group and the individual is, above all, the construction of a social relationship which cannot be reduced to a simple act of categorization or a single social role. The Chinese individual is therefore plural, situated and tied to a process of civilization in a society which is experiencing a transition. According to his social resources, this individual gains access to a fluctuating number of socialization spaces. Whereas, in Western theories, the me, the I and the others are seen as distinct moments in a discontinuous process of the self, in Chinese thinking all steps are not so clearly set apart as the process itself is much more continuous.

6. Conclusion

In the context of cultural globalization, we have to resist the temptation to follow European some theoretical perspectives, more especially the subjectivist stream and work on analysing the “alterity regimes” in Western societies. Such work would have to focus on reciprocal relationships between structural processes, collective and individual capabilities and the question of subjectivities in local and global contexts. Inviting thoughts from the outside allows us to find some new room for theoretical invention, to reconfigure our thought by questioning former categories without being forced to abandon them all. Through heterotopias, we have the possibility to identify the blind spots of our thoughts from inside and thus to escape from our usual theoretical legacies. Some French anthropologists, as F. Laplantine (2007), are urging us to question the Subject as it was historically, philosophically, sociologically and anthropologically developed in Europe. We have to ask ourselves if this European subject is similar to other subjects from other cultural or even civilizational contexts (Roulleau-Berger, 2011). Like Norihiro Nakamura has suggested in this book, we could develop theoretical and transnational spaces with new perspectives produced in China, in Japan and in Taiwan.

References


—— Received on September 2, 2013, Accepted on November 29, 2013 ——