


# Subjectivity and Solidarity – A Rebirth of Humanism

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## Abstract

The notion of subjectivity with which the argument will be carried out may be defined as our ability to reflect critically, to think creatively and to act resolutely in our relation to society and nature. Some essential marks of subjectivity are illustrated through an example taken from the rescue operation conducted in the fall of 2010 for the miners trapped deep underground at the San Jose mine site in Chile for sixty-nine days. With the science and technology applied in constructing the drilling rigs and making the capsule which lifted the trapped miners to freedom, ingenuity, the resilient sense of mission and perseverance of the rescue personnel, and the purposeful solidarity among the trapped miners are among the decisive factors contributing to the successful accomplishment of the rescue undertaking.

At this critical juncture of the current global economic downturn, it is consequential for us to bring ourselves to reflect upon the seriousness of the predicament which all humanity is in. It is indeed time for intellectuals to rise up and share responsibility in keeping our world sustainable by setting purposeful and resolute subjectivity before themselves and coming forward to tenaciously find ways in which to renew ourselves as well as to achieving the continuing betterment of humanity.

## Subjectivity as agent of change

My contribution to our discussion at the session ‘Toward a New Humanism’ will focus on the ability of individual and collective citizens to meet the challenges which we are today confronted with in constructing the foundation of a comprehensive, just, equitable and sustainable societal life on the planet.

My thesis is predicated on the generally accepted conceptualization in philosophy and social criticism and, indeed, the conceptualization upon which UNESCO is founded, that human beings are agents of change, possessing awareness of themselves empowered with the ability to reflect critically, to think creatively and act resolutely. These combined abilities constitute ‘subjectivity,’ that well-recognized trope stemming from the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, with its insistence that human beings are capable of self-determination.

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In the context of our time, the essence of subjectivity can be illustrated with an example taken from the harrowing rescue operation conducted in the fall of 2010 for the miners trapped deep underground for sixty-nine days at the San Jose mine site in Chile.

Initially, the rescuers had little cause for optimism after the accident. The world lost contact with the miners for seventeen days. They were finally located only through the persistent efforts of a topographer, Macarena Valdes, whose compassion for the endangered miners compelled her to venture probes into the rock to find them in their underground refuge. Only when the probing at length revealed their location, could the drilling rigs be set up in the right direction for rescue. Valdes is a woman who had earlier in her career faced the challenge of gender prejudices in a male dominated profession, and was no novice to the courage required for such persistency.

With ingenuity demonstrated in developing scientific-technological know-how applied in constructing the drilling rigs and making the capsule which lifted the trapped miners to freedom, the altruistic sense of mission, and resilience and perseverance of the rescue personnel are no doubt attributed to the successful accomplishment of a supposedly impossible mission.

And another factor which should be regarded as decisive to the rescue operation is the solidarity formed among the thirty-three miners. It was a solidarity that kept all of the trapped men alive and well for sixty-nine days before they were drawn up to the light of day. Those miners were manual workers, working for daily wages, who came from both local and other areas of the country. Surely, they were persons of various dispositions and temper, and people with different life-views. However, confronted with their own imminent demise, immediately they came to the realization that they could hope to survive only by banding together in unison, overcoming any abrasive differences whatsoever that might have existed among them.

Thus, ingenuity, perseverance, compassion, and solidarity can only be attributed to human beings. Humans are the only species to have evolved these traits to the degree of complexity witnessed during those suspenseful days at the Chilean mine site. They are inner qualities possessed by human beings. And those trapped miners and their rescuers truly exemplified them. Conscious self-reflection and empathetic interaction with other fellow beings and solidarity of purpose are marks of subjectivity and constitute part of the essential attributes that make humans capable of getting better at using affect in the service of reason and, for better or worse, using reason in the service of affect.

Here, it should be unequivocally pointed out that my argument on subjectivity has no bearing on any postmodernist discussion over the age-old polemic between subjectivism and objectivism. I have duly isolated this famous rescue operation in order to draw attention to the enormous, and in this case magnificent, extent to which the human emotional and cognitive processes comprising self-reflection, reasoning, intention, compassion, creativity, believing, valuing, planning and predicting, to name only some aspects of subjectivity, have evolved over the thousands of years of history.

## **The making of subjectivity**

Human beings, of course, are not composed of the very best attributes with which to reason and come up with a single best mode of action. We have much else to contend with in our make-up. We are, as all our history shows, a bundle of oppositional traits which we inevitably bring to our reflections and actions, that is, love and hate, pride and humility, creation and destruction, autonomy and dependence and more. And these pairs have numberless nuanced manifestations in our daily interaction with one another. Yet, as we relate to one another, we manage to come to peaceful unity. Furthermore. In times of crises, we put aside mutual differences and come to solidarity of purpose.

Humans are not born to subjectivity that is capable of critical thinking, creative reasoning and purposive action. They have come a long way to emerge as subjectivity in relation to the objects of the outside world. They attained subjectivity vis-à-vis nature by cultivating it. Humans attain subjectivity through a series of social interactions in the modes of love, hate, peace, conflict, work, play, death, to name a few.

Work is one of the dominant modes of human existence through which we relate to nature and fellow beings. Tilling arid land, hunting fowls and beasts in the wilderness, building shelters with wood, earth and rocks, constructing dams to prevent flooding, erecting villages with high walls around to keep themselves safe from encroaching strangers, humans together have learned to sustain their way of life by appropriating the given nature. By doing so, we humanize nature by putting the stamp of our subjectivity on it. Science is a form of knowledge along with technology which humans have developed to control nature.

One can work alone but work is essentially communal as shown above. This becomes clearer in the division of labor. The product of work is always shared or traded. One hardly works alone. In the division of labor lies a powerful motive for our being with one another. Every individual must find a collective solidarity in the products of work. The division of labor implies taking part while others take their parts, all partaking of communal life in the process. In the name of survival, most human societies in the past have found ways to co-operate, to work together.

After a long day's hard work family and neighbors get together at the dinner table drowning their bodily ache in drink and lifting their spirits. Wine invites them to sing and dance life's burden into oblivion, and the make-believe world sets in. Singing and dancing are playing. Play is a collective imagination which players revel in. Fantasy is an act of creating what is not in reality. We step out of the realm of hard things into that of the infinitely variable whereby we learn the genuine sense of being free from the constraints of the factual world.

In human life love and hate are always side by side. In the warm bosom of the family, love unites the mother and the child whereas hatred prompts siblings to quarrel. Through parental love the child learns the meaning of oneness with others which imbues him with a sense of wholeness. But, out of hatred arise cleft and severance. Hatred is all in the mind. Yet, it destroys tangible things. Hatred finds its infinite ways to divide; it conjures the notions of superior and inferior among us and festers into generations of domination and subjugation.

Hatred sets all against all. Suppose that I work under the hateful gaze of the other, I shall certainly feel like losing myself, become petrified and reduced to nothing. Facing the imminent nullification of my own being I see the dark abyss of nothingness, and feel compelled to reclaim my being as subjectivity against the other and fight back until I prevail over him. This is the process of conflict in which I recover my being as subjectivity as Sartre so aptly describes in his *Being and Nothingness*. However, human life cannot remain in the constant state of conflict as Hobbes and his followers assumed.

Love binds us. And hate separates us. Both are those modes of human relationship from which we have acquired bifurcated oppositional categories of unity and division, and peace and conflict with which we relate to reality in thought and action and come to recognize that the tension of conflict has to be resolved in peace rather than in war and destruction for the sake of our own survival as Kant showed with his notion of 'unsocial sociability.' This was indeed proven by the mission accomplished in the rescue of the 33 miners trapped in the dungeon from the dark abyss of death.

Most of us entertain the thought that one day we shall pass away from here. We have seen this happen to those we loved so dearly. We know they will never return to us. This death-awareness accompanies all human beings. The inevitability of our own demise holds us captive in thought and imagination. It is a common theme of almost all religions and myths. Death illuminates the disparity between transience and eternity. Mourning over the death of the beloved clearly demonstrates

this distinction and our moral consciousness attains its strength from the gnawing anxiety about what will become of us after death. So, we yearn for perpetual life and seek a place where there is no hate, quarrels and destruction, a place where we can live with one another in eternal peace and actualize ourselves without undue hindrance.

## Subjectivity in eclipse

Advanced as well as emerging market societies alike have taken total interest in technological innovations as a means to enhance the quality of life by way of generating ever increasing material abundance. As economic globalization accelerates, once idyllic rural villages are turning to buzzing and booming mega-cities, and both new and old societies are being gradually absorbed into the techno-sphere. From primary school children to aging farmers, much of the planet's population now has easy access to the Internet and they are adept at using search engines.

As technology changes, we change with it. Think of our reliance on information technology. We do research quickly on the Internet and we work with colleagues in various countries through email. Our way of responding to the world changed to our advantage when we began to use information technology, and this change appears to be in order.

However, not all is well. Driven by voracious consumerism ordinary people are drowning in the deep sea of debts. Inculcated by the global telecommunication network that carries deliberate stimulation of new needs, the desires for luxury food, clothes and housing are day by day becoming stronger having no natural limits to satisfy. Fanned by installment selling on credit card, less affluent people can jump on the wagon of mass consumption.

A luxurious life-style demands sacrifice on the part of its beneficiaries. Consumers force themselves to work all the more in order to quench their insatiable cravings for the finest goods that undermine the virtue of frugality and temperance, and political processes must give way to unilateralism in decision-making for the sake of achieving higher productivity that usually leads to the collusion of political and business elites which would manipulate the decision-making process in an expedient direction. Most findings of all scientific research hitherto have shown that the state of our environment is alarmingly impaired, and most scientists as well as the general public accept this. However, political and economic interests in job creation are in conflict with the vital issue of the protection of the sound environment on which the enjoyment of human rights to life depends. Of course, the ruling elites never failed to sound warnings about environmental endangerment but all this fanfare seems to end up being just hollow lip service to clean air and green technology.

All-devouring consumerism lets technological innovations expose its ill effects not only in natural surroundings of our lifeworld but also on the minds of those individuals living in this world. Common users of technology are unaware of or disregard imminent calamities befalling their daily life. The flashing technological wonders they behold simply leave them oblivious to the critical predicament they find themselves in.

Those governments that are reluctant to allow democratic decision-making over the goal of societal development continue to use consumerism as a justifiable excuse for power control. While society is seduced into a bland acceptance of the status quo, they have their citizens get rich and live exuberantly as long as they do not challenge governmental authority, and young generations mostly keep themselves aloof from politics doing multitasking, from iPhoning to friends, to watching TV shows, to e-shopping, to Twittering, to checking emails. They hardly find time to stop for a moment to think and reflect upon themselves and their surrounding world. They are concerned mainly with personal welfare rather than social reform. In fact, one could say that these young people appear to be the lost generation in morality and purpose.

As shown above, there is no doubt that advanced and new industrial societies alike take economic growth as the unique way by which their citizens could have the means with which to enjoy freedom for realization of their life to a fuller extent. However, where efficiency of the political and economic system is deemed as the ground of its legitimacy, all emancipatory endeavors by way of economic growth are turning to the enslavement of society to commodity fetishism.

In ideal capitalism the market should move in the balanced relationship of production and consumption. However, the logic of growth without limits seems to require a different set of rules since the economy has long reached a point at which rampant consumerism and unbridled greed have become the spirit of capitalism, ushering out the conventional work ethic to the dismay of ardent Calvinistic Protestants, and the worldview that thrives on a belief in continuing progress has come to dominate the entire markets of the world.

Consumerism is by no means new, but it can become totalitarian as suggested earlier. By the pervasiveness of ever-renewing technological innovations that invokes false needs, society is seduced to acquiesce in status quo. But, unfortunately, that status quo always consists of haves and have-nots for there is no desire to help those who cannot fit into the existing production scheme when one's own life revolves around consumption and acquisition. Now, here arises the question: Who can be the agent of change and how can breaking with the status quo come about?

## **Renascent humanism and citizenry solidarity**

It is generally said that when awareness of oneself as an independent individual subjectivity among the majority of people in a society is being raised, a strong catalyst of change for democratic development can be expected. The Renaissance and the Reformation were the two moments whereby Europe was able to build the cultural foundation from which social and economic conditions were readied for democratic development, and we identify this stage of history with modernity. Modernity implies freeing from blind dependence to nature through the advancement of science and technology and freeing from subjugation to unjust political power through reform or revolution.

Daniel Bell asserted back in the 1970s that the fundamental assumption of modernity which had run through Western civilization was that the unit of society was the self-determining individuality which can be epitomized in the Protestant tenet that the individual is the source of judgment (Bell 1981: 16). Today, one can easily say that the notion of individuality should be applied to newly industrialized societies. Yet, as noted earlier, the citizen's awareness of self as autonomous is being eroded through perverted consumerism and unquenched possessiveness. However, in less industrialized traditional societies in which the Arab Spring is being spoken of, the cries for individual freedom, justice and human rights are stronger than ever, and ever growing. Demands for such democratic ideals from students, teachers, clerics and office workers of those countries should attest to the fact that democracy is no longer the privilege of those highly advanced societies that take pride in being heir to the humanist heritage of the Renaissance.

Many events in recent history have precipitated the process of dissemination of democratic ideals throughout the world. Most importantly, the rampant use of information technology has built up the close network of communication and interconnectedness which enabled their ever-widening diffusion and history has led us to the juncture where we see about us an understanding of human rights and dignity in our lifeworlds.

In reality, the notion of human rights has travelled through time but its universality was seriously articulated in mid-twentieth century in the Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and right.' When the Declaration was first drafted in 1948, many nations in both Asian and African regions were not represented, and

the suspicion of Eurocentrism surrounding the concept of human rights was aroused on the part of non-Westerners. After over six decades since its inception, however, the civil, political, economic, and social rights stipulated in the Declaration are believed to be acknowledged by the greater part of the entire international community. This is the consequence of humanity's long and tenacious struggle of self-liberation from the conditions that had threatened to degrade individual dignity and significance. Over the centuries of dissemination processes, the idea with human rights that no human being has the right to exercise his or her rights at the expense of another's has come to encompass almost all existing cultures of the world.

What is it, then, that allows us to accommodate those democratic ideals? The answer should not be farfetched. As discussed earlier, we have acquired through social interactions with fellow human beings a complex of meanings by virtue of which we relate to society and nature, and among these meanings are the aforementioned bifurcated oppositions of unity and division, peace and conflict, creation and destruction. These contrasting pairs function as categories of reasoning and action in every society and in every culture. We are aware that unity and peace would lead us to overcome differences among us so that we could live a creative life in harmony with others rather than in war and destruction.

At this critical juncture of the global economic downturn, the role of change catalyst seems to be falling on the shoulders of concerned intellectuals. First and foremost, their task would be to bring the citizens of the world to self-awareness of their subjectivity, in terms of critical reflection, creative reasoning and determined action, and intervening in their worldviews that are blind to sober reasoning when the entire world economy is being tumbled by sheer avarice of the plutocrats. And we also need to strengthen the voice of those humanists and social and natural scientists so that policy- and decision-makers can hear. Above all, we need to find ways to reinvigorate the role of civil society.

John Dewey, a reform liberal, famously wrote that 'Democracy has to be born anew in every generation, and education is its midwife' (Dewey 1980: 19). This perennially insightful thought reminds us that democracy requires its citizens, not just their representatives, to engage in constant deliberations. And we need to reclaim from the market worldview from kindergarten to university. Students need to understand the limits of natural resources.

They need to know that they are the ones entrusted with keeping the earth safe. We need to deeply reflect on our unnatural and unnecessary lust for an extravagant lifestyle and recover the old virtues of thrift and sobriety. We need to promote citizens' participation in the political process while they involve themselves in close dialogue with decision-makers in government and business. Dialogue brings parties with different backgrounds together to reason and identify common interests to shape fruitful cooperation.

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