

# Marx's construction of human subjectivity: elucidated through the metaphor of theater

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**Abstract:** *The thought of subjectivity runs through different schools of Western philosophy. The essence of all kinds of thoughts about human subjectivity, which is the epitome of the existence of people in their respective countries, nations and eras. Human beings are the creators of the great history and the achievers of the self-liberation movement. The study of human subjectivity has realized the positive interaction between individuals and eras, micro and macro, past and future. As the great forerunner of human liberation movement, Marx's concept of subjectivity has not been out of date until now. The interpretation of the three dimensions of human subject from the theatrical metaphor, which not only has profound theoretical charm, but also has deepgoing guiding significance to the self-realization and self-liberation movement of contemporary human beings.*

**Keywords:** *Marx; Human subjectivity; Theatrical metaphor*

## 1. Introduction

The establishment of the human subject is an unfinished activity to this day. When we ask what man is, we do not regard a living person as an individual, then the nation, the society, and the State as an organism that composed of different individuals. Or when we firmly believe that there is an ego, the identification that we make also cannot complete the building of human subjectivity. It can provide references for us to search for such a subject at most. The questioning of human beings is a consistent theme in Western philosophy, and different thinkers and scholars have been tirelessly asking what is the essence of human beings.

Although Kant made the appearance of human subjectivity through "the legislation of man-made for nature", due to the existence of the thing itself, the cognitive ability and practical scale of the subject cannot obtain thorough consistency, because we cannot be sure whether there is a hidden power affecting our thinking or action in the unknown thing itself. If it is so, "legislation" is just the mysterious power that prompt human to legislation for nature; In the same way, the subject of self-determination based on freedom in moral practice is nothing but an illusion.

## 2. From Hegel to Marx—The Inevitable Evolution of Subjectivity

Hegel is aware of this, of the limits that Kant has imposed on the emergence of a complete and self-sufficient subject by establishing the realm of the thing-in-itself. As for the thing-in-itself and subject, Hegel wrote in Phenomenology of Mind that the key of all problems lies in not only understanding and expressing the real thing or truth as entity, but also understanding and expressing it as subject. That is, therefore, a process by which the entity becomes the subject: The living entity is the subject only when it is the movement in which it establishes itself, or when it is the medium between itself and its transformation. The entity as the subject is the pure and simple negation, and so it is the process by which a single thing splits in two, or the process of the establishment of the dual of the opposite. This process is the indifferent distinction and its negation. So only this identity, which is reconstructing itself, or its reflection in something else, is the absolute truth, and the original or immediate unity, as such, is not the absolute truth. Truth is its own completion, a circle that presupposes its end and begins with where its end, and it is real only when it has realized and reached its end. This classical discourse on subject as entity is based on Hegelian dialectics, subject and entity being two effects or two manifestations of the dialectical movement of absolute spirit. Through the movement of the absolute spirit, all opposites will be dissolved. The thing itself and the subject are the two things that the original absolute spirit divides into two, and they will finally enter into the absolute unity of the transparent state in the development and return of the absolute spirit.

Although Hegel established a dialectical history about man in the absolute spirit, which does not need the power of God but is completely developed by man's subjective initiative, his dialectics is the history of absolute spirit's self-development and self-recovery. In terms of content, only thinking goes deep into the essence of things can it be regarded as true thought. So far as form is concerned, thought is not a private special state or action of the subject, but an abstract self-consciousness which is free of all particularities, of all qualities, of circumstances, and so on; and which merely makes the universal act, in which it is only the same as all individuals. The absolute spirit becomes externalization of the world and forms the object world in opposition to the subject, but this opposition first establishes all the privileges of the absolute spirit that absolute unify all of the all. So that all the opposing aspects are bound to be overcome. In the dialectical activity of Hegel's absolute spirit, there is no opportunity for the special things to appear. In the conceptual expression of the special and the general, the concrete and the abstract, the subject and the object, they never have a chance to start from their own particularity, and their status is never equal. It is not the equivalence between the identity and individuality, but the sliding of the tendency of non-equivalence. It is the overlooking of the existence of special things from the perspective of God where the identity of absolute spirit itself is the only supreme principle. The infinite time of the infinite entity, the infinite change in the infinite space, lies in the absolute spirit itself, so that the meaning and the necessity of being of the concrete are only the minor gifts which are granted by our supplication to the absolute Spirit. It is because our finitude and the finitude of changing things are in the same destiny so that the meanings and contours of our finitude in each other's eyes just become visible, thinkable, and changeable. Since the subject is replaced by the infinite absolute spirit, the individual is only the operation of the absolute spirit, rather than the creation of the actual individual, that is, the actual individual to change the world becomes essentially impossible.

By taking Kant as the boundary marker to discuss the general outline of the development of the human subject, the series of development and evolution of the human subject and the place where it constantly transcends the past. A clear path appears before us, that is, how the specific individual enters the stage of history, and engages in the process of a series of affairs which he participates in out of his own free will. In the previous development of the subject, the positive factors that they showed were retained, and on this basis, the huge prospect of human, the establishment of the subject, the interleaved contact between human and nature, human and society then stepped on the stage of history. Make a general survey of the great philosophers in the history, the liberation of human practical ability and the establishment of human subjectivity, which to expand the widest dimension, the most famous effect, the greatest influence is undoubtedly Karl Marx. His thought involves philosophy, politics, economics, natural science, history and other fields. The definition and extension of these different fields are the inheritance and development of his revolutionary thought by later generations.

### **3. Theater metaphor: Rationality of the subjectivity structure of the authors and the actors and spectators**

If there are fundamental problems that must be faced by Marxism, which formed by these rich theoretical and practical achievements, then it undoubtedly deals with three levels of problems: the relationship between man and nature, the relationship between man and society, and the relationship between man and God. It is in dealing with these three aspects of the problem and then Marx formed a different philosophy of the construction of human subjectivity. The demonstration of the different embodiments between these three levels, and the completion of the human subject brought about by them, which will help us to clearly recognize that some scholars' misunderstanding of Marx's theory. There is a simple metaphor in Marx's voluminous works, which condenses all aspects of man as man into a single scene. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx mentions this majestic passage:

Each principle has had its own century in which to manifest itself. The principle of authority, for example, had the 11th century, just as the principle of individualism had the 18th century. In logical sequence, it was the century that belonged to the principle, and not the principle which belonged to the century. When, consequently, in order to save principles as much as to save history, we ask ourselves why a particular principle was manifested in the 11th century or in the 18th century rather than in any other, we are necessarily forced to examine minutely what men were like in the 11th century, what they were like in the 18th, what were their respective needs, their productive forces, their mode of production, the raw materials of their production — in short, what were the relations between man and man which resulted from all these conditions of existence. To get to the bottom of all these questions — what is this but to draw up the real, profane history of men in every century and to present these men as both the authors and the actors of their own drama? But the moment you present men as the actors and authors of their own history, you arrive — by detour — at the real starting point, because you have abandoned those

eternal principles of which you spoke at the outset.<sup>[1]</sup>

Three things stand out from this masterful commentary on the relationship between man and the world: First, it is not the principle that belongs to the century, but the century that belongs to the principle; Second, treating people as the authors and the actors of their own history; Third: to abandon the original as the starting point of the eternal principle, return to the real starting point. History that is a history dominated by man, and the principles are expressed by the subject's reflective knowledge. When people come to an age where they legislate for themselves, all the power that hangs over their heads forever will be completely shattered. People do not see the past and the future from the steadiness of those principles, but from themselves as a starting point to form a world that full of vitality and creativity. In this sense, this historical theater is the living theatre formed purely by all human activities, and there is no altar for the advent of God at any place in any corner of it. In the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, God is always concerned with people and the world as a third party. Whether it is the proof of God made by Anselm or Thomas Aquinas, or Descartes' reflection that the finite self cannot produce the idea of God's perfect existence, then this concept of perfection must come from God himself. They always made a position for a Deity or God, in order to solve some theoretical and worldly matters, such as the reward of good and punishment of evil. Marx has already restored the right that look at himself and the world to man himself. In this completely transparent theater, human subjectivity naturally contains three levels: the authors, the actors and the spectators. Any concrete person is at the same time not only the authors and the actors but also the spectators. But it is not easy to make these three divisions being an ontological effect, because they are simultaneous phenomena in the human subject, and have no chronological order. The so-called human, that is to show its rich life activities in these three dimensions.

It is difficult to directly divide the main structure of the three levels between them from the perspective that a comprehensive survey of phenomena. Why, for example, is the authors called a dramatist? Roughly speaking, it is regarded as a director of a theatrical performance, as if he had obtained the whole process of the play before it was performed. And the dramatist, by virtue of this convenience of viewing the whole process of the play, could at the same time be a direct spectator. In this way, there seems to be no necessity for a subject structure that supported by three dimensions. But if the writer of the play has outlined the picture of historical development and given it absolute authority from the beginning, it is contrary to the argument of abandoning the eternal principle as the initial point of departure and returning to the real point of departure. Therefore, the authors here are not the director of theatrical drama in the usual sense. Better say, the subject as the dramatist is a self-prescribed conscious actor, who does not determine the sequence of historical development in advance, but first it allows itself to master its own integrity. In this sense, "the authors" are such activity, which the presentation of all human activities constitutes a continuous drama. And in this history, the subject occupies or appears in each historical episode, which is entirely the playwright's own history. In this sense, "writing" among the playwright is a way for the subject itself to present in history, that is, to highlight how the subject completes the original way of the play. Therefore, it is not, in the first place, a theory-oriented human activity, and theory does not yet manifest its power. This is a starting point, or a starting point in this sense that the play is far less colorful than it is in our own age. Strictly speaking, it is only a simple living activity of man for his own survival, that is, labor, the simplest objective activity in order to obtain the material on which he lives. Therefore, it can be said that the author became a playwright based on the unique position of engaging in the basic labor of material production, "Labour" is the living basis of private property, it is private property as the creative source of itself. Private property is nothing but objectified labour.<sup>[2]</sup> Conscious life activities directly draw a distinction between human and animal, and such conscious life activities are the labor of human transforming nature and creating the human world.

As for the difference between an actor in a play and an author or a spectator, an actor in a play is a role-play, that is, he plays various roles. Each of these roles is a manifestation of its own existence, and the role in the play is a kind of being in the sense of Heidegger. That is to say, in the human activity of the whole society, anyone has no special sphere of activity, but can develop in any sector, and society regulates the whole production so that it is possible for our to do this thing today and that thing tomorrow as we please. The actors are free to choose the roles they want to play among all the possible options. If someone asks whether there is a real authentic non-role me behind the role in role playing, Marx has given an answer to this question: The essence of human is not an abstract object that inherent to a single person, but the sum of all social relations in its reality. The role played by the actor is not so much the role as the type of existence that the subject can possess in the play. The assertion on the ontology of human subject is similar to Heidegger's interpretation of the theory of "ability-to-be" of "being in the world". The bystander marks the reflective function of the subject, or has the quality of epistemological contemplation, which means the legitimacy of the bystander's cognition of the phenomenon that confronted by him. This legitimacy, that is, the secret of truth, was fundamentally in the hands of God in

the previous philosophy. But now Marx wants to return the right to cognition truth to man himself, that is, affirming that man has the ability to know truth, and does not doubt the truth of all intellectual activities like agnostics. It can be said that the establishment of the bystander identity is primarily the criticism of God and the organization of God belief, namely religion. "The criticism of religion is the premise of all other criticism".

If Kant's "man-made natural legislation" and "moral self-discipline" are the signs that human subject emerges from the passive material world, Hegel unifies "being" and "nothing" with absolute spirit and proves the proposition that "subject is entity". Then Marx constructs human subjectivity through theater metaphor: author, actor and spectator. It must be noted that this division is an irreducible construct, and that if the three, through their phenomenally complex manifestations, which are to be regarded as simply immediate unity and exist only as one and the same subject, they may have to return to Hegel's absolute mental mortar. The subject structure established by Marx does not overlook phenomena from a supreme uniter, but from the special object of existence, from the limited activities of man. Just as Marx's critical reflection on Hegel's theory of civil law. Hegel describes civil law as the right of abstract personality or as abstract right.<sup>[3]</sup> The establishment of the existence of the particular and, more importantly, the understanding of unity as unity is that Hegel's analysis of being and nothing is derived from the understanding of the particular individual objects. Or as Heidegger says man is first thrown into the world and confronted with a series of encounters. We do not hold the belief of the unity of the world directly a priori, but it should be based on abstract reflection from its living reality.

#### **4. The theoretical and practical significance of Marx's construction of human subjectivity**

Labor as a process, in which authors realize their functions, provides materials for self-survival, which is a way of self-preservation. If people want to achieve their true history, from the simplest point of view, it is the process of maintaining their own existence. No matter how the era changes, people in all specific historical situations should engage in certain basic material production activities. Even if, as it is envisaged, even the same quantity of labour employing the same instrument could work up double the amount of raw material,<sup>[4]</sup> most of the work of the future will be done by machines instead of people, the activities used to make these machines are not in essence different from agricultural Labour in primitive societies, and it has an eternal property in the sense of man's own self-preservation. Although different individuals have different living backgrounds, they all enter into the same basic material production activities in a certain sense. Activity itself does not distinguish each individual; it merely serves to maintain the physical existence of the group that collectively known as man. People always use a variety of jobs in exchange for the most basic needs of life, so in the theatrical metaphor, the authors no longer refer to a single person, but the existence of the whole human group. They are confined to the same group by all the most basic constraints, such as cattle and sheep subsisting on grass, fish and shrimp subsisting on plankton, and man, virtually all human beings are fixed in a certain food lineage. This is the rule of human existence itself, and we cannot go beyond this limit. Our bodies, including our minds, define the range of things we can use to sustain life. Based on this provision, individual people are united in their common food pedigree, thus forming the history of existence of the historical beings, that is, the historical materialism initiated by Marx. However, when people's labor is forced into a huge social division of labor, alienation will inevitably appear. For Marx, alienation is historically located in the dialectical and contradictory relation between capital and labour and the resultant loss of control over one's labour power.<sup>[5]</sup> The meaning and value of labor has become more complex. It has separated from the limited situation of man himself and become a materialized commodity.

To deal with Marx's thought, we need to see its two sides, that is historical origin and reality. On the basis of following the German classical philosophy, his theory pays attention to the problem of people's survival in the real historical situation. The place where this line is constantly emphasized and has internal consistency is undoubtedly the process that human subject gain independence, the process that human should be responsible for his own behavior, and only responsible for it. The evolution of the notion of the subject is not only a process of "Man and Ape say goodbye", but also a process that Man and God bid farewell to each other. After clearing away all the mysteries, demons and ghosts of the human world, what remains is a world of man and his object activities, a world in which history is transformed into the history of man, a world in which the world is transformed into the free transformation of man, countries and societies are an "imaginary community" in which people cooperate with each other. If we do not clarify Marx's construction of the subject, or if we do not clear up the essence of this construction of the subject, we cannot refute a series of misunderstandings, which object to his thought. Marx's construction of human subject is the core of his discussion of material production and superstructure, and to clarify it theoretically is itself an important theoretical work.

Although Marx died in his time, his precious spiritual wealth has been carried forward by his successors, but in a large number of scholars who study Marx, there are still some misunderstanding of Marx's basic views. Of course, any theory or thought in its subsequent development must be a process of continuous expansion and depth, to what extent the original thought and its development are consistent, to what extent the latter deviates from the original intention, this is a very important question for the study of Marx's thought. Deviation itself may not be right or wrong, but the theoretical exploration has always been pioneering and forward-looking, it will in its spreading popularity describe an idea that originally rich in long-term vitality as its opposite, that is, the fate of decay in the near future. If it is not demonstrated and corrected, such power will be a serious blow to the country under socialist construction. After all, just as Max Weber said: Man is an animal hanging on the web of meaning woven by himself. Naturally, it can be determined and affected by meaning while creating meaning. In this way, the theoretical analysis of thought is the process of providing inner space and inner vitality for social practice.

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