

# The Dialectic of Subjectivity and Community in the Twenty-first Century: The Struggle for Identity

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## ABSTRACT

*The current revival of trends, such as populism, nationalism, and nativism strikes many people as surprising and counterintuitive. In this paper i try to understand what historical forces are at work that have brought back to life these ways of thinking. i wish to argue that they can be seen as a backlash to a sense of alienation that comes from subjective freedom. While individuality and subjectivity were hailed as important trends in the modern world, when they lead people to feel isolated and alienated the natural result is a desire to return to some illusory previous time when there was a sense of safety and security stemming from one's participation in a wider group.*

**Keywords:** populism, nationalism, nativism, racism, freedom, individualism, alienation

Today many academics and educated people stand perplexed as they contemplate the rise of populism and witness the return and establishment of reactionary forces in mainstream politics (Judis, 2016; Mueller, 2016; Taggart, 2000; Kazin, 1998). The legitimisation of these views is deeply perplexing for many, who ask how such a thing could have happened. How do such views arise? In this paper i wish to try to address this issue from a broader historical perspective in order to gain some insight into these recent events. Why are populism, nationalism, nativism and even racism suddenly popular and fashionable once again? Apparently running parallel to this is the gradual erosion of fundamental human rights and democratic institutions in countries such as Hungary, Poland, Turkey and the USA. Here we can think of the increasing threats to freedom of the press, respect for institutions of civil society, *habeas corpus*, the political system of checks and balances, and laws designed to respect the privacy of the individual. All of these were long taken to be valuable elements of a healthy and thriving society, which led to the flourishing and free development of individual citizens. When things such as these come to be undermined today, this is perplexing since precisely such rights, laws and institutions had to be fought for over the long course of human history, and only once these battles were won was it possible for the next generation to reap the benefits from them. However, now it seems not to have taken a very long time for people to have forgotten why exactly these laws and institutions were established in the first place. Never having personally experienced the ills caused by the absence of these laws and institutions, some people today are light-minded about rejecting them in favour of some particular political hobbyhorse of the moment.

Perhaps a part of the modern astonishment at the return of certain political opinions lies in the fact that we sometimes intuitively tend to think in terms of a kind of progressive linear development, with the idea being that certain political views grow old and disappear when the disastrous consequences of them become obvious and universally recognised. According to this conception, once this happens these views should simply die out forever. For example, the rise of fascism, aggressive nationalism and the single-minded self-identification with the state that led to disastrous consequences in the twentieth century was in many circles in Europe regarded as an outmoded paradigm that needed to be replaced by a pan-European model. Likewise, after the fall of the Soviet Empire, the ideal of a communist economy and political order was discarded. In terms of political theory or philosophy of history, this idea is often associated with the movement known as Whigism or with Hegel's philosophy, which claims that the human spirit is progressing to ever higher levels of freedom through the course of time. However, this view does not need any deeper philosophical grounding since it also seems in many ways to be in harmony with our common sense and life experience. Reflective people, when they have had bad experiences, try to learn from them in order not to repeat them. It thus seems very natural that after wars or long periods of oppression people become introspective and try to find ways to avoid the repetition of such events.

Thus, the revival of trends such as nationalism, nativism and racism strikes many people as surprising and counterintuitive. For this reason, i think it is important to try to understand what historical forces and what political intuitions are at work that have brought these ways of thinking back to life. i should emphasise that my motivation here is simply to try to understand these new developments and in no way to justify or legitimise them. As a firm believer in the explanatory power of historical contextualisation, i wish simply to take a step back from the usual daily political polemics and to see things in a broader historical perspective in order to gain some insight into these issues. i wish to argue that they can be seen as a backlash to a sense of alienation that comes from subjective freedom. While individuality and subjectivity were hailed as important trends in the modern world, when they lead people to feel isolated and alienated, the natural result is a desire to return to some illusory previous time when there was a sense of safety and security stemming from one's participation in a wider group.

## 1. THE STORY OF THE STRUGGLE FOR SUBJECTIVE FREEDOM AND INDIVIDUALISM

The story of Western civilisation can be interpreted as representing the development of ideas such as individuality, subjectivity, and inwardness. These ideas, which constitute an important part of our modern self-conception, were discovered and refined in different ways through the course of time. In antiquity these principles remained generally unrecognised, and human beings were conceived primarily as members of the specific families, clans, tribes, or larger social groups to which they belonged. With the development of Greek science and philosophy and the advent of Christianity, the conception of human beings as having an inward side that was important and valuable slowly began to emerge. This inward dimension gradually replaced the external points of identification of the individual. This narrative can be continued right up to our present day.

The story has generally been one of liberation, as people have gradually freed themselves from the oppression of tradition, custom, the family, or the group. With the realisation of the principle of conscience or inwardness, people were able to conceive of themselves as individuals for the first time. It is easy for us living in the twenty-first century to identify with

this story of emerging freedom since we generally celebrate the value of individuality. We recognise that inwardness and subjectivity are constituent elements in the development of what it is to be fully human. Most of us are happy to have the right to make the key decisions about things that concern our own lives, and we resent being pressured to do things that run contrary to our conscience or personal preferences. We believe that we know best what will lead to our own happiness and flourishing.

However, in our modern world there has been a high price to pay for our hard-won individuality and subjectivity. As these modern principles develop, other traditional principles begin to recede. It is worth looking at these to see what has been lost with the disappearance of the ancient world. This will in turn allow us to understand our modern age from a new perspective. Specifically, it will provide insight into what is ultimately at stake in the principles of individuality and subjectivity.

## 2. ALIENATION

In our modern world our treasured individuality comes at the cost of isolation, alienation, and anomie. As we embrace individuality, we implicitly reject identification with a larger group, whether that be the family, the tribe, or some other instance. In the past, these points of identification constituted important pillars in the construction of the identity and self-image of people. The Greeks understood themselves as belonging not just to the wider community of Greek-speakers, but also to specific city-states, demes, tribes, and families. These affiliations defined who one was and provided a sense of stability and continuity. They were reinforced by differences in language, religious belief, custom and law, thus constituting the individual's foundation as a person and fundamental orientation in the world. When points like this are removed, as in the twenty-first century, it is easy for people to feel lost and disoriented. It can be a great burden to be an individual in modern mass society, where one can easily feel alone and overwhelmed. So the narrative of human liberation is only half of the story of the development of individuality and subjectivity. There is another part that is worthy of our attention, although it is too complex to be told here in all of its details.

The basic idea of alienation is that modern human beings feel a sense of separation from other people and institutions. Although our lives are largely dictated by these relations and institutions, we do not find ourselves reflected in them, and we do not feel at home with them. Unlike, for example, uncontroversial laws prohibiting murder and theft which we are able to identify with immediately since we can see our own rationality reflected in them, many of the practices and institutions of the modern world can strike us as confusing, contradictory or unjust. They are regarded not as the vehicles that enable us to flourish in the world, but instead as oppressive obstacles that stand in the way of our natural development and advancement. This was the way in which the Romantics perceived the conservative value system of bourgeois life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The idea of alienation as a diagnosis of the age was one that arose in the context of German *philosophy* in the nineteenth century. It began with the theories of Hegel and Feuerbach, and was made most famous by Marx. These thinkers explored the idea of alienation in a number of different spheres, such as social life, politics, religion and economics. They also discussed the opposite of the idea of alienation, namely that of identification or recognition. In other words, when i recognise the value and legitimacy of an institution by seeing it as a reflection of my own rationality or an expression of my own will, then i do not have a feeling of alienation but rather one of identification. i *identify with* it and *recognise* it as true and

legitimate. This idea of recognition was a guiding motif in the philosophy of the nineteenth century and remains an object of extensive discussion today in the work of modern thinkers influenced by Hegel, such as Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these philosophical theories, the idea of alienation also figures prominently in the *literature* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Romantic period, there was a nostalgic yearning for an earlier time before the feeling of separation or alienation occurred, that is, a time when people still felt at home in the world. The Romantic authors sought models for this period in different forms, such as the idea of a state of nature, non-Western cultures, and traditional folk tales and stories. Their views of earlier historical periods and foreign peoples were often highly idealised. They desired to posit an age when humans lived simpler and happier lives before becoming corrupted by modern society, which was thought to have warped their naturally good nature.

Modern literary works are full of protagonists who feel alienated from traditional values, their families, their communities, and society in general. Turgenev's Barzov, Dostoevsky's underground man, Kafka's Joseph K., Camus' Meursault, Sartre's Antoine Rocquentin, and Salinger's Holden Caulfield are all well-known examples of characters intended to capture, among other things, this element about the modern condition. These characters continually bump up against absurdities in modern human practices and institutions. Separated from others, they feel that they are strangers or outsiders in their own societies.

Also in the *social-political sphere*, the notion of alienation with the emergence of subjectivity has exercised a profound influence in shaping the modern world. In the eighteenth century, traditional practices, privileges and social structures were called into question. This resulted in radical social changes that began with the American and French Revolutions and continued into the nineteenth century with, among other things, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. During these periods people felt alienated from social and governmental systems that privileged an elite group and disenfranchised everyone else. The emerging principle of subjectivity led to an undermining of the sense of identification with any larger institution. This gave rise to grave suspicion of, for example, the government, the financial sector, the police, or authority figures in general. These were no longer regarded as representing and defending the individual's interests and rationality but instead came to be seen as corrupt and nefarious in different ways. Today, one often feels an alienation from these larger instances, and there is a sense of powerlessness in the face of them. They are even seen to represent a threat to one's freedom and well-being. In the absence of any wider points of identification, the individual is left to flee to the inwardness of oneself. This diminishes the traditional sense of solidarity, community, and civic obligation.

An acute sense of alienation leads to the idea that the reigning societal rules, regulations and laws no longer apply, given that they are issued and enforced by illegitimate institutional powers. It makes no sense to try to comply with the laws of society when that society itself suffers from a deeply rooted corruption and oppresses its members. On the contrary, by going along with the status quo, one simply lends credibility and legitimacy to a corrupt system. Thus, on this view, individuals have the right to resist. In the modern world, this has

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. by Joel Anderson, Cambridge: MIT Press 1995. Axel Honneth, *The i in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*, trans. by Joseph Ganahl, Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press 2012. Charles Taylor and Amy Gutman, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994.

taken many forms, including Locke's advocacy of the right to revolution or the notion of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience developed by figures such as Thoreau, Gándhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

From this it is clear that the notion of alienation is a widespread principle in many spheres in the modern world. Moreover, it is dialectical in nature, that is, it can be seen in both a positive and a negative light. Traditionally, it is usually taken to be something entirely negative, as with the Romantics. The idea is that we have lost something substantial from the ancient world that we struggle in vain to recover. The modern sense of dissatisfaction and the feeling of being strangers in the world are sad facts of modern existence. However, modern alienation also has a positive side; it can be seen as the impetus for positive social change and human development. It can motivate people to criticise and combat oppressive institutions in the hope of replacing them with ones that better respect the rights of the individual and cultivate human flourishing.

In any case, it is possible here to see the tension between the ancient view and the modern one. While the ancients enjoyed a sense of immediate belonging in their world with traditional values and customs, we moderns, wallowing in alienation, can never hope to re-establish this. But this is not something that is entirely negative. For all of our deep-seated dissatisfaction, the modern world has made great strides in the establishment of legal and social institutions that ensure a space for the free development of the individual. But in both cases there is a trade-off: something is lost, but something is also gained.

### 3. THE PERCEIVED THREAT AND THE CREATION OF THE OPPOSITE PRINCIPLE

When the breakdown of traditional values and institutions occurs, and alienation sets in, individuals lose their basic points of orientation and identification in the world. When one feels alienated from traditional institutions and affiliations, this leaves an empty space that needs to be filled. Modern people are thus forced to find new ways to address the pressing question: Who am I? There then arises within each individual a struggle to establish one's own identity, without reference to any larger group. This is a vexing issue in the modern world, since without a clear conception of who they are as individuals, people feel insecure and disoriented. This can lead to extreme forms resulting in well-known ways of thinking such as relativism and narcissism. With the entire focus being on the establishment of the identity of the individual, the external world becomes only a malleable means for this.

The principle of subjectivity has developed to such an extreme that it now has reached a point where it produces a backlash, giving rise to its opposite: the principle of objectivity. With this, the pendulum now begins to swing back in the opposite direction. In this we can find the explanation for the rise and increasing popularity of movements such as tribalism, nativism, nationalism, and religious fundamentalism. The adherents of these trends feel threatened by what they perceive to be a loss of the objective, that is, what they regard as secure, traditional values and beliefs. They yearn for a simpler time, when traditions were less diluted and confused. They reject the global trends of international cooperation and cosmopolitanism, which are perceived not as new opportunities but as threats (Josephides & Hall, 2014).

The growth of industrialisation, urbanism, and changes in the structure of the family have all led to individuals losing what were formerly key elements of their traditional identity. Globalisation has only accelerated this trend. As the world begins more and more to creep into the daily lives of people in their local communities, it becomes increasingly menacing.

With globalisation, things which happen on the other side of the world can no longer be ignored as remote and irrelevant. Now everything is interconnected and a local problem can easily become a global one.

There are many examples of this. With increased travel, the danger of the rapid spread of disease increases: thus, the rise in concern about epidemics and pandemics. With the interconnectedness of the global economy, an economic crisis in one place can have a profound effect on the rest of the world. This was illustrated by the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, which started in the USA but quickly became a major international phenomenon, leading to global recession and costing millions of jobs around the world. Thus, a threat to one's own financial well-being could arise in a country far away, with the individual worker bearing no responsibility for it and having no ability to prevent it. From this arises a feeling of helplessness and vulnerability.

Globalisation has also brought into focus the problem of mass migration. The war in Syria produced several large waves of refugees, many of whom fled to Europe, creating a crisis in several countries. The response was fear and consternation. There were practical concerns that large numbers of refugees would constitute a drain on the national budget, which would be insufficient to pay for the housing and re-education of so many newcomers. However, more vexing for many people was that large numbers of refugees from a Muslim country would undermine traditional Western values. This was particularly worrisome for countries with smaller populations, which feared being overrun and losing their sense of national language or identity. These concerns were sometimes further complicated by a complex historical background in some countries where peoples had long struggled to assert their independence and national identity. All of this is of course a complex topic in itself, but it illustrates clearly the threat that globalisation poses in the eyes of many people.

One of the greatest sources of modern anxiety is the rise of global terrorism. This is another threat that comes from far away and in the face of which the individual feels vulnerable. This makes people nervous in public spaces and separates individuals from one another, as foreigners or those with specific profiles become regarded with an eye of suspicion and fear. The constant thematisation of terrorism in the news media and in the modern political debate leaves one with the impression that it is necessary to be looking over one's shoulder constantly, since the next threat could be right around the corner. The irony of this is not lost on the critical observer, since this sense of fear is precisely the goal of the terrorist in the first place. Terrorism is no longer something far away that can be left to others to deal with. Now globalisation has seemingly brought the terrorist into our immediate lives.

All of this creates a culture of fear, where people are constantly on the lookout for the next threat from the outside world. An enduring sense of uncertainty and anxiety gives rise to a need to hang on to traditional values and beliefs even more adamantly. People believe that with the rise of globalisation they are losing the safe environment that they knew from the past. They feel a need to have a community with others whom they perceive to be like themselves, that is, others from whom no threat will come. One can say that this is just the opposite of the modern celebration of individualism, even though it arises from the same cause — the loss of the objective sphere. People who feel this anxiety would be more than happy to give up a part of their own individuality in order to feel the security and comfort that the group or traditional values and beliefs offer. This intuition testifies to the basic human need for shared values and traditions in communities that we have identified as a positive element in the ancient world.

#### 4. THE NEED FOR A BALANCE

The concept of subjectivity can be seen as dialectical or, if one prefers, contradictory. This can be understood as a conflict between the ancient and the modern world. The ancient world focused on tradition and the group, while neglecting the individual. The modern world, by contrast, focuses on the individual at the expense of the larger collective units. In both cases something is won and something is lost. In antiquity, people enjoyed a feeling of belonging to a larger social whole but had no sense of individual freedom. In the modern world we enjoy this freedom, but struggle to maintain a broader sense of community. What this tells us is that the concepts of subjectivity and individuality are ideas that stand in a necessary relation to their opposites: society, community, family and tradition.

The ultimate goal is to strike the correct balance that brings these different elements into harmony with one another in such a way as to lead to human flourishing. This harmony did not exist in the ancient world due to an exaggerated focus on tradition and larger social institutions, at the expense of the individual. Likewise, this harmony does not exist in the modern world due to a one-sided focus on the opposite principle. In short, universalising the one principle to the exclusion of its opposite leads to a lack of balance. Instead, what is required is a recognition of the importance and value of both principles.

This is a balance that we struggle to attain in our modern world of the twenty-first century. As mentioned above, our celebration of subjectivity and individuality has often ended in self-absorption and narcissism. It has separated us from our families, neighbours and communities. In this regard, we have something to learn from the ancients and their sense of identification with their traditions and the generally accepted values of the community. The movements today of nativism, nationalism, and populism give expression to the sense that something has been lost in our modern globalised world, where we all interact with one another as atomic units. There is a felt need for some commonality of values and beliefs. This part of the story of the development of subjectivity and individuality is well worth exploring.

It is neither desirable nor possible to return to the ancient world and live immediately in harmony with custom and tradition. The price of such a harmony is the well-known repression of the individual and subjective freedom. We clearly need critical reflection about our customs and traditions. However, there is something praiseworthy in the old view in the fact that there is a substantive truth in the public sphere which is recognised by everyone. This provides a sense of belonging and solidarity, which we should attempt to preserve. This is an element of the ancient world and parts of the non-Western world that is valuable and important.

Thus, the goal is to unify the two views, that is, the objective and the subjective. We need to strive to create a public order that is generally recognised as true and rational but at the same time allows individuals the opportunity to grant their assent by means of their own critical evaluation of the concrete customs and traditions. In short, the truth is both in the outside world and in the inwardness of the individual simultaneously; while it exists in the customs and traditions in the public sphere, these must be recognised as rational by each individual. This is the formula for overcoming the repression of the ancient world and the alienation of the modern. Hegel articulates this by saying that the "right of the subjective will" to recognise the good must coexist harmoniously with "the right of objectivity," i.e., the right of the validity and truth of the external world (Hegel, 1991).

The desired harmony is characterised by a higher unity by which one can identify with the social whole in a reflective manner without feeling threatened as an individual. While antiquity represents the principle of immediacy with its focus on custom and tradition, and the modern world that of mediation or reflection with its emphasis on the individual, the final step would involve a combination of these elements. One should feel a sense of community and solidarity without being so absorbed in it in such a way that it undermines one's individuality.

With the idea of the tension between dialectical opposites such as individuality and tradition, we have a useful tool for evaluating our own time. This gives us a specific criterion which we can use in critical discussions about the location of our present age on the sliding scale of history with respect to the idea of subjective freedom, on the one side, and shared community, on the other. With this criterion or conceptual framework, we can examine concrete evidence and try to determine whether it suggests that the contemporary situation contains more elements that favour the side of the individual or the side of the social whole. The goal of such studies would be to discern some kind of trend or movement in the one direction or the other. If such a trend could be demonstrated, then this could be used in the service of a broader social-political criticism of our current political situation. This would allow us to compare our present age with previous ages on concrete points. While it would admittedly be difficult to determine any perfect position of harmony between the individual and the social whole, this is not to say that it would be impossible to identify specific trends in the one direction or the other, which could in turn be critically evaluated. This could serve as a point of departure for a valuable assessment of what some regard as the enigmatic social movements of our own day.

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