

Becoming Vigilant Subjects



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Part 1

Self-making through Vigilance

How does vigilance affect the formation of the self and how does this process vary across different time periods? And conversely, how do watchful individuals engage with, and potentially change, social situations at specific moments and within particular constellations? How might these processes of subject formation affect an individual's understanding of themselves?

These were the main questions examined by one of the working groups of the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 1369 'Cultures of Vigilance' at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. The group has analysed the historical and cultural variations of vigilance, as well as its current forms.¹ The discussions within our working group focussed on the various ways in which a subject² emerges and is transformed through 'vigilance', paying particular attention to socio-material and political constellations in different epochs. Our work draws on case studies from medieval literature studies, social and cultural anthropology, and early modern and modern Eastern European history. This book evolved

as a result of our discussions, and in it, we propose a set of heuristic tools that can serve to address questions relating to subjectivation in varied contexts of vigilance. To this end, we have pursued an agenda based on our specific sources and data material, which enables us to scrutinise the nexus of vigilance and subjectivation in detail. We thus do not intend to compile a complete or universal catalogue of criteria, nor do we seek to present a revised theory of subject formation, although we do depart from previous studies on subjectivation. Rather, we aim to develop tools, adequate for our case studies, that allow us to explore the emergence of a vigilant subject in a nuanced way. In this regard, our study thus lays the groundwork for further research and refinement.

In his later work, Michel Foucault understands subjectivation not merely as an insertion into an existing social position but emphasises the potential for shaping the self through practices centred on the individual. By means of this care of the self (*souci de soi*), existing orders can be modified, and alternative subject positions created. This conscious confrontation with the self is the focus of attention, whereby these self-reflections not only have an inward effect on the formation of the subject, but also on relationships to the outside. It is this reflexive moment that Catherine Trundle calls ‘self-ex-

ternalisation',³ which moulds social relations and entails a potential for change. Yet these processes do not just happen in a kind of neutral sphere, but are rather shaped by specific, identifiable, and often uneven, power-loaded constellations. Subjection has a double meaning, for it refers to the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as becoming a subject.⁴ Judith Butler⁵ views the subject as non-coherent and always relational, constantly in the making and shaped by symbolic orders, norms, and discourses – which she sees as manifestations of power.⁶ They constitute the frame for subjectivation processes, which entail an act of subjection to power. Butler has described this aspect by considering psychic life in detail. In her view, power is not 'internalised', but rather has ambivalent effects. It is through submission to power – e.g., norms and discourses – that the subject emerges. However, this process entails an act of subjugation and domination at the same time, pointing to the ambivalence of subjectivation. As such, subjectivation is contradictory and even paradoxical: it is a process that oscillates between dependency and autonomy, and involves resistance.⁷

We contend that subjectivation occurring through unequal power relations is particularly marked in colonial and quasi-colonial, but often framed as post-colonial, relationships. Frantz

Fanon⁸ and W.E.B. DuBois⁹ each described a process through which people become alienated from their own subjecthood through their attempts to meet the expectations of the coloniser or the dominant actors in society. Fanon, who writes from a psychoanalytical vantage point, finds that Black people in the colonial and postcolonial Algerian context physically embodied the ‘white gaze’ of the coloniser in the ways that they move in the world.¹⁰ In physically incorporating the coloniser’s gaze there is a sense in which surveillance of the – in this case – colonial state is no longer needed, though this alienation is fostered by colonial institutions. DuBois,¹¹ drawing on his own experience, writes of a process occurring among Black people in the early twentieth century USA, in which perceiving themselves through the eyes of white¹² people results in a ‘double consciousness’: ‘[...] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others [...]’¹³ may cause internal conflict and a fragmentation of the self.

Butler has elaborated the critical, subversive moment in her studies on sex, gender and desire and thus focuses on the fragility and incompleteness of the practices that accompany subject formation.¹⁴ Equally significant are language, the speech act, discourse, and the body as materialisation of subjectivation. This is developed by means

of performance, which is characterised by the repetition of norms and discourses permeated with power which makes it effective.¹⁵ It is precisely in this that the possibility of change, displacement and subversion exists since a reproduction is never identical. This process also reveals the parallel existence of permanence and change, which at first seems contradictory. But, through human action, which can contain both reproduced and new aspects, social structures change, in the sense of a performative becoming as an unfinished process.¹⁶ These processes cannot be considered in isolation, but against the background of specific constellations, i.e., in the context of the social interactions in which they occur. The embeddedness of social practices means that it is particularly fruitful to understand processes of subjectivation against the background of vigilance.

The concept of vigilance that we work with is related to, but differs fundamentally from surveillance, which is associated with the description of the Panopticon by Michel Foucault based on Jeremy Bentham's prison architecture and highlights the idea of being observed by a centralised eye from above.¹⁷ However, as Arndt Brendecke and Paola Molino suggest, many fundamental social services like security rely 'on observations made and communicated by regular citizens who neither observe

“from above” nor are representatives of any particular institution’.¹⁸ In this regard, their interest focuses on studying ‘services rendered by people who willingly report what they have seen, heard or sometimes smelt’,¹⁹ linking individual attention with institutional tasks, such as security in the light of terror attacks.²⁰ The authors argue that interaction between private attention and broader institutions is mediated by complex cultural, linguistic, and social relations, which can be framed within discussions about the *civic self*. In line with the approach of the CRC, we understand vigilance as a form of individual watchfulness, in our cases exercised by non-state actors, specifically ordinary individual citizens, whose observation is linked to a specific goal, beyond an individual task. Of particular interest is the link between attention and broader institutions and goals beyond the individual. This nexus is important in the relationship between, for instance, a believer and the presumed omnipresent watchfulness of God, as well as between a good citizen and the state. The link between individuals and mediating institutions (e.g., the church or institutions of the state, such as the legal system) points also to the relationship between subject positions and particular group identities.

As the CRC’s research projects have shown, there are overlapping forms of vigilance involving