

Agency and subjectivity: From Holzkamp via Bourdieu to Laclau and Mouffe (and back?)¹

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Abstract

How can we better understand the subject and its agency? There is a wide range of theoretical concepts dealing with this question - from (post)marxist to (post)structuralist theories. However, often these theories are not discussed together in order to compare and combine them. In this chapter, I aim to analyze three key approaches in left theory which have the focus on political and social struggles and the regarding role of the subject and its agency: the concepts of Klaus Holzkamp, Pierre Bourdieu and Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe. I will examine the differing aspects and the elements that can be combined with each other in order to gain a more precise understanding of the subject and its agency. In short, I go from Holzkamp via Bourdieu to Laclau and Mouffe and in some aspects back again to Holzkamp.

Keywords

subject, subjectivity, agency, Klaus Holzkamp, Pierre Bourdieu, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe

Introduction

The theoretical concepts of Klaus Holzkamp, Pierre Bourdieu and Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe are important approaches for many leftist scholars in analyzing political and social developments and struggles regarding the role of the subject and possible ways of emancipation. With some exceptions, in which two of the three theories have been jointly examined, these theories have never been discussed together. However, each of them stands for a key approach in

¹ This paper is based on my diploma thesis (Vey 2007).

theory building within the left (and beyond) and are used for many important analyses. Holzkamp as the main representative of a strong Marxist perspective on the subject, Bourdieu as a Marxist-inspired sociologist of the wide landscape of practice theories, and Laclau and Mouffe as representatives of poststructuralist perspectives on social reality and the subject stand for key streams in left and mainstream political and social theory.

All theories have a particular, implicit or explicit epistemological understanding of subjectivity and agency. This understanding has far-reaching effects on the construction of their main categories, ideas and analyses. However, these understandings are often not visible at first sight. Klaus Holzkamp, as a main representative of German Critical Psychology, puts a very strong emphasis on the idea of a (potentially) rationally acting subject, whereas Pierre Bourdieu understands the subject as very much produced by external social structures, which are incorporated into the subject. While Bourdieu conceptualizes the subject as a largely coherent unity – united by the habitus as an action-producing entity – Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe reject the existence of closed and coherent subjects without inner contradictions. With their theory, a fundamental fragmentation and de-centralization of the subject is being introduced.

The three approaches differ widely regarding their disciplinary background (psychology, sociology and political science). They are developed in very different academic contexts and argue different sides of the subject and society. So why discuss these three theories together? In my view, the value added by such a comparison and combination lies at different levels: All three approaches stand – of course to varying extents – in a Marxist tradition. They all show similarities concerning different, but very essential aspects of critical theory and practice. They all discuss and reflect on the possibility of autonomy of the subject and ways of emancipation. Whereas Holzkamp and Bourdieu also shed much light on the *individual* level of the acting subject and its social conditions, the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe is characterized by a predominantly *meta-subjective* view – with the main focus on the production of social reality. With these three theories, it is possible to illuminate different and important levels and aspects of agency and subjectivity.

In this chapter, I aim to analyze the different understandings of subject and agency in the three theories. I will examine the differing aspects and the elements that can be combined with each other in order to gain a more precise understanding of the subject and its agency.

The Autonomous Subject: Klaus Holzkamp and Critical Psychology

„[The individual] always also [has] the *‘alternative’ not to act or to act differently*, and is in this sense *‘free’* with respect to the meanings as mere *possibilities* for action.”² (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 236, emphasis in original, see also Holzkamp, 1992, p. 198)

This quotation gets to the heart of a subject-based Critical Psychology³. According to Holzkamp, the subject always has the possibility to decide, to decide in a different way, or not to decide at all. As a consequence, until its death, even right before being executed, the subject always possesses agency. In Holzkamp’s view, agency is the basic quality of every human being. Thus, agency (Handlungsfähigkeit)⁴ is the key category in his approach. However, in capitalist societies, agency is fundamentally limited by the way capitalist society is organized. Thus, Holzkamp’s analysis is a fruitful supplement to other works in critical theory, because it illuminates the subject-theoretical blind spots in Marxist thinking and lays the foundation for a Marxist-inspired psychology (see also Gundlach, 2015). The basic premise of Critical Psychology is the “material a priori”, which means “that no one can consciously act against his or her life interests, as he or she experiences them”⁵ (Holzkamp, 1991, p. 7). The actions performed always have a subjective functionality for the subject, even if the subject does not know it yet. For this reason, all actions can be understood and explained through a rationally reasoned discourse. Or, as Morus Markard puts it: There is a fundamental connection between the premises of an action and the action’s subjective functionality for the individual; what follows from this is that an intersubjective comprehensibility is always given (cf. Markard, 2001, p.

² German: “[Das Individuum hat] immer auch die ‚Alternative‘, nicht oder anders zu handeln, und ist in diesem Sinne den Bedeutungen als bloße Handlungsmöglichkeiten gegenüber ‚frei‘.“ Unfortunately, most of Holzkamp’s writings have not been translated into English (Painter et al., 2009) and he himself only wrote one paper in English (Holzkamp, 1992). An exception is the book edited by Ernst Schraube and Ute Osterkamp with selected writings by Holzkamp in English (2013). For this reason, the quotations are translated by myself with the help of Felix Pahl, who corrected this paper and to whom I owe many thanks.

³ As Horst Gundlach points out, there are also other critical psychologies which are not mainly based on the writings of Klaus Holzkamp and colleagues (Gundlach, 2015).

⁴ The German term „Handlungsfähigkeit“ is translated into English in different ways: Whereas Holzkamp used the term „action potence“ (Holzkamp, 1992), other authors speak of „capability for action“ (Papadopoulos, 2009) or simply „agency“ (Tolman, 2009). The latter seems to me the most readily understandable term (Tolman, 2009) and will therefore be used in this paper.

⁵ German: dass “niemand seinen Lebensinteressen, wie er sie erfährt, bewusst zuwiderhandeln kann”.

1179). Therefore, irrational actions cannot exist, because actions are always functional for the subject. Thus, I would argue that in this respect, functionality and rationality are synonymous in Holzkamp's understanding. Even if the reasons do not seem to be rational and clear at first sight, they are definitely comprehensible and subjectively functional on second sight. They are "subjectively grounded" (Papadopoulos, 2009, p. 163). Based on a "grounding discourse",

"it can be shown that the groundedness of actions is 'comprehensible' or comprehensibly reconstructable to the extent that the particular concrete living conditions can be understood as the *premises* upon which the subject can base actions that achieve an increase in satisfaction of needs and quality of life through disposal over the conditions of his/her life." (Holzkamp, 1992, p. 200, emphasis in original)

Agency as the main category of a subject-based psychology is defined as the "social disposal over the conditions of his/her life"⁶ (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 239). In modern societies with division of labour, "necessities for action become possibilities for action: the subject is free to select from different opportunities"⁷. Consequently, it is able to behave consciously towards them. In order to characterize different grades of agency, Holzkamp differentiates between a *restrictive* and a *generalized* form of agency⁸ (Holzkamp, 1985, 1990, 1992). *Restrictive* agency describes situations in which the subject acts along the existing structures and does not challenge them. The restrictive alternative is the more obvious one in capitalist society ("naheliegender"), since it is able to expand the scope of action to a certain extent and in the short run. For example, it can be easier not to protest against bad working conditions and instead to struggle to withstand competition. In the short run, agency might be extended: Possibly, I will get a promotion or at least not lose my job. However, in the long run, my agency is limited or at least not extended: I have to compete with colleagues and permanently struggle in order to survive in the labor market. In particular in the neoliberal regime, no one's job is safe. My health, my well-being and my future perspectives are fundamentally influenced by this. In Holzkamp's view, I am forced to act against my interests and values (and against those of others). By contrast, the term *generalized agency* describes situations in

⁶ German: "gesamtgesellschaftlich vermittelte Verfügung über die eigenen Lebensbedingungen".

⁷ "The individual's action is not directly determined by the societal meanings but responds to them as mere *possibilities* for action" (Holzkamp, 1992, p. 199, emphasis in original).

⁸ German: „restriktive und verallgemeinerte Handlungsfähigkeit“.

which the subject tries to change the social structures in order to expand agency. This can mean standing up against the hierarchical relation of dependence and protesting against these harmful conditions, although this can limit the current agency.

It is important to underline the fact that Holzkamp introduced the idea that classification of actions cannot be made from an “objective” external point of view. Holzkamp points out that only the subject itself can decide on the (limiting) character of an action (Holzkamp, 1985). The task of a Critical Psychologist is thus to help the individual better understand and analyze its motivations and reasons for its actions. Furthermore, these categories of actions only classify situations and not persons.

The advantages of such an understanding of the subject, its actions and motivations are obvious: Since actions and reasons for actions can only be understood through the eyes of the acting individual, a paternalistic view and relationship among people can be prevented. An equal relation between patients and therapist is being fostered. The subject is not analyzed independently from the social structures. Options for a fundamental expansion of agency and for an enhancement of life conditions are improved. The subject and its actions are taken seriously.

Despite the idea of an autonomous subject, Holzkamp's concept is not based on the assumption of an almighty subject. On the contrary, it is very much influenced by the “imperatives of a reflexive subject, of a general rationality and ultimately of a universal understanding of history”⁹ (Papadopoulos, 2006, p. 8), and in this respect it stands very much in the tradition of the enlightenment. Hence, it is dominated by a strong idea of a rationally acting subject that is potentially free to act: “Whether or not a person can utilize the possibilities offered by an object or situation will depend on his or her power to do so” (Tolman, 2009, p. 154). It is the (capitalist) society that potentially limits its agency. In this understanding, the subject is never fully determined by social structures and power relations. Humans always theoretically possess the cognitive ability to act consciously, to challenge and to shape social structures. They are able to act autonomously, and they are responsible for their decisions (Maiers, 1996). Therefore, “defensive self-restrictions of the subject”¹⁰ (Maiers, 1998, p. 93), which may appear irrational, are a highly functional reaction of the subject. As a consequence, there are no irrational actions.

⁹ German: “Imperativen eines reflexiven Subjekts, einer allgemeinen Vernunft und schließlich eines universellen Geschichtsdenkens”.

¹⁰ German: “defensive Selbstbeschränkungen”.

The Socially Determined Subject: Bourdieu and the Concept of Habitus

„Not the subject acting according to a free conception it chose for itself, as it is found in all its radicality in Sartre and in attenuated form in the rationalist theories of action (...), but the actor shaped by society stands at the center of what might be called Bourdieu’s sociological ‘conception of the human nature’.¹¹ (Schwingel, 2003, p. 61, own translation)

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory is developed on the basis of extensive empirical research. On that basis, he builds his theory of social reality, the *theory of practice* (Bourdieu, 1976). In his ethnographical fieldwork, he found that many human actions are not logical or only follow rational arguments up to a certain point. He concluded that there must be a different explanation for these actions. Cornelia Bohn and Alois Hahn explain it this way: “For the logic of practice is (...) logical up to the point at which being logical would no longer be practical”¹² (Bohn & Hahn, 2003, p. 255, own translation). In order to explain this observation, he developed the concept of the “habitus”, which he defines as “lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action” which – most of the time – are unconscious and control our action unintentionally. They are the permanent internalization of the social order in the human body;

“(...) systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules.” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72, emphasis in original)

Being “history become body” (Bourdieu, 1985a, p. 69, own translation; see also Costa, 2006, p. 882), they are persistent and lasting structures in the subject. For this reason, our actions are in most cases not the result of a strategic intention and purposeful behavior; by contrast, they are the result of incorporated social structures, based on our social position in society – in particular in relation to the social fields and classes. The way we think and feel and even the ability to reflect on our actions are strongly influenced by these dispositions.

¹¹ German: ”Nicht das gemäß einem freien, selbst gewählten Entwurf handelnde Subjekt, wie man es in aller Radikalität bei Sartre und in abgeschwächter Form bei den rationalistischen Handlungstheorien findet (...), sondern der gesellschaftlich geprägte Akteur steht im Mittelpunkt dessen, was man auch als Bourdieus soziologisches ‚Menschenbild‘ bezeichnen könnte.“

¹² German: “Denn die Logik der Praxis ist (...) logisch bis zu jenem Punkt, an dem Logischsein nicht mehr praktisch wäre.“

As a consequence, according to Bourdieu, “we are automatons in three-quarters of what we do” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 474). Nevertheless, Bourdieu does not assume a simple causal relation: “Take all the impressions that a person has received – you will not be able to deduce a single future action from them (...)” (Bourdieu, 1985b, p. 386, own translation). Instead, these dispositions define the scope of possible actions, and here in particular the way an action is being performed. For example, Bourdieu argues that workers may also listen to classical music or go to a museum. But the way in which they listen to the music or look at a picture is determined by their class-related habitus. Thus, you can often identify very clearly from which class someone comes. Bourdieu explains this observation by the fact that similar conditions of life produce similar forms of habitus. Decisions are thus made in a “quasi-conscious manner”¹³ (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 166, own translation). They are in most cases not the result of a strategic and rational intention. Although it is possible to reflect on these conditions and their influence on one’s actions, it is not possible to reflect on them fully and to get rid of these dispositions. Even if you try to climb up (or down) to another class and to adopt another habitus, it will still be visible that your behavior is not fully incorporated in your body and that, instead, you always have to actively imitate this habitus. Thus, the habitus as the “unchosen principle of all choices” (Bohn & Hahn, 2003, p. 259, own translation). Even “free” decisions are made on the basis of the habitus. It works as an action-producing principle.

As a consequence, the idea of a free and autonomous agent becomes subject to a huge limitation. Bourdieu shows that only conditioned freedom and autonomy are possible. Due to this invisible action-producing principle, the actions people perform always imply more meaning than they are aware of (c.f. Bourdieu, 1976, p. 179). Thus, despite all efforts of critical reflection, it is never possible to uncover all of the limiting dispositions and foundations of decision-making processes and to act without these inner limitations. As an amplifying effect, as a result of their socialization, subjects have different dispositions concerning the ability to reflect on their habitus. Therefore, the ability to reflect on the reasons for actions and to make a decision on that (rationalized) basis does not primarily depend on a person’s reason, but on the dispositions of a subject to reflect on and consciously deal in a constructive way with the reasons. Additionally, the expected prospects of success might also have an impact on the question whether a subject starts a reflection process, reacts on an emotional level or just suppresses the moments that might irritate the habitus. Choices, actions and reactions thus mainly depend on the dispositions and not on a free choice for either a rational or an emotional action or reaction. Because of these

¹³ In German: „quasi-bewusste Art und Weise“.

predispositions, for some persons a rational decision is more likely than for others.

What does this tell us about the context of a justification for an action and the resulting agency? First of all, it is theoretically possible to reflect on one's actions and to identify and analyze the reasons why a person is acting in this or that way. The actions are surely often functional for the subject in the sense that it acts according to its habitus and challenges neither the internal nor the external structures. However, a full transparency of reasons is never possible.

Secondly, the reasons for social and individual change are often not a result of a rational reflection and one's own independent motivations and a free will, but of a contradiction between the personal dispositions and social structures. The starting point of such a reflection can be an experience through which the habitus as an *internal* structure encounters irritating *external* structures (c.f. Bourdieu, 1976, p. 182f.). At this point, Bourdieu follows a strongly dialectical argumentation. If the schemes of perception, thought and action are suddenly irritated and not running smoothly, they have to be modified or displaced with new ones. On a larger scale, revolutions can be initiated when – due to fundamental changes in the political, social, economic or cultural structure – conditions of the masses are aggravated.

With Bourdieu, Holzkamp's relatively autonomous subject experiences fundamental limitations. In Holzkamp's view, actions that proceed unconsciously are also rational in the sense that they are functional for the subject (or rather, he seems to make no difference between a subjective functionality and rationality). With Bourdieu's insights, therefore, it seems to be more precise to understand this functionality as an autonomous reaction based on socially determined habitus; consequently, "free will" is never free from these internalized social structures. With Bourdieu, it turns out that the simple division of external limiting structures and a potentially independent inside is too undifferentiated and thus has to be abandoned. In Bourdieu's terms, the subjective functionality is instead a "practical sense" (of one's place). For this reason, actions often seem to be rational, since they can be reconstructed as such. However, they are neither functional nor dysfunctional for the subject. They are more a kind of habit und thus not really justifiable or intentional. Due to the fact that the habitus is class- and field-related and thus can be very different from person to person, the perception and ways of reasoning can vary widely interpersonally. Therefore, an intersubjective "comprehensibility" of actions and their reasons can be very complex, challenging and sometimes even impossible. In order to understand the reasons for an action, you need to understand the (biographical and social) background of the action in its whole complexity, or, in other words: the genesis of the habitus. And still, since you yourself also always speak from a specific,

subjective point of view, it can happen that you are not able to understand the other person's reasoning.

In Holzkamp's view, the subject is the starting point of social change. It is able to reflect and position itself consciously towards society. With Bourdieu, a more complex and differentiated but also pessimistic picture is being drawn. In this respect, Bourdieu seems to be closer to a materialist-Marxist understanding of society than Holzkamp, since he gives more weight to the power of the social structure than to a free and autonomous subject. With Bourdieu, the externally, materially produced internal limitations of a free and independent agency and subject come into view. In that conception, it is not the insistence on an autonomous and self-reflective subject that produces agency, but the insights into the possibly irrational, highly socially determined reasons for action. Nevertheless, this can produce a kind of agency, too:

“If it is true that the idea of personal opinion itself is socially determined, that it is a product of history reproduced by education, that our opinions are determined, then it is better to know this; and if we have some chance of having personal opinions, it's perhaps on condition that we know our opinions are not spontaneously so.” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 27)

The Post-Foundational Subject: Laclau and Mouffe and the Loss of the Subject

“So, what we did, and this is central for your point concerning identity, is to put into question the notion of an identifiable agency. That is to say, what we conceived is that the subject is constructed through a plurality of subject position [sic!], that there is an essential unevenness between this position and, that there are constant practices of re-articulation.” (Laclau, in Laclau & Mouffe, 1999)

Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse-theoretical hegemony theory is mainly situated in the field of political philosophy, and specifically in poststructuralist theories. Their work is strongly influenced by a critical examination of Marxist theories; besides Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is the main Marxist anchor point (Laclau & Mouffe, 2006). Although their work is not a result of empirical studies, it has its origin in the wish to understand the new social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s which were not formed around a class core but instead around different issues and identities. Laclau's and Mouffe's theory integrates and rethinks very different philosophical theories, such as Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, Jaques Lacan's works on language, Derrida's deconstruction and the ideas of other

poststructuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. In the poststructuralist tradition, their understanding of the subject is fundamentally anti-essentialist; they view it as fragmented, de-centralized and fragile. As Urs Stäheli puts it: “What Bordieu still assumed with the concept of the habitus is renounced here: a *unifying principle* that coordinates the practices of a subject so as to avoid incongruities¹⁴ (Stäheli, 2000, p. 48, emphasis J.V., own translation). What exactly does this mean regarding their understanding of agency and the subject?

In their eyes, the subject is not constituted by external structures or in reaction to them. There are no basic needs the subject can act against. Since there are no ultimate foundations, fixed facts or conditions such as economic structures or material bodies, subjects can only get their identity through difference and in relation to others. Thus, this approach is also classified as difference-theoretical and post-foundational. As a consequence, no identity and subjectivity is independent from relationships (c.f. Buden, 2000). What follows from this is that the idea of identity has significantly changed: identity is no longer understood as a coherent unity, but as a subject which identifies itself with and in relation to something and which gains its identity only through this process of identification. This field of differences constitutes different subject positions, a term introduced by Michel Foucault. A subject position can be being a teacher, a white citizen of the EU, a woman, a mother, a girlfriend, a political activist etc. Every identity consists of many different subject positions. Since different expectations and logics of actions concerning these positions exist, and since the subject is always interpellated (in the Althusserian sense, see Althusser, 2014) as a concrete subject, these different positions can and often do conflict with and contradict each other. Accordingly, the subject is fundamentally ambivalent, de-centralized and fragmented. As a consequence, meaning is never fixed and elements always have more than a single meaning; they are “overdetermined” (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 2006). In contrast to role theory, the subject not only *takes* these different roles, it is fundamentally *constituted* through these positions (c.f. Stäheli, 2000, p. 49). The reality of the subjects is thus always contradictory, fragmented and incoherent. The assumed unity (“Einheit”) of the subject and the idea of a subject as an autonomous executor of actions are both only produced discursively and thus not “real”. Due to this fundamental overdetermination, a closure of the subject and a compatibility of all the different positions are never possible:

¹⁴ German: „Was etwa Bourdieu mit dem Begriff des Habitus noch voraussetzt, wird hier aufgegeben: ein *vereinheitlichendes Prinzip*, das die Praktiken eines Subjekts so aufeinander abstimmt, dass es nicht zum Stilbruch kommt.““

“Such an approach can only be adequately formulated within a problematic that conceives of the social agent not as a unitary subject but as the articulation of an ensemble of subject positions, constructed within specific discourse and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those positions.” (Mouffe, 1992, p. 237)

Moreover, these different positions are also not based on rational or pre-discursive foundations. For example, being a woman does not imply predetermined and common interests or needs. A deduction of specific demands is not possible. For that reason, for example, it is potentially possible to connect feminist demands with racist *and* anti-racist demands at the same time, since the connection of elements is not determined. Instead, the connection is always made in a contingent space of possibility (“Möglichkeitsraum”). As a result of this temporary connection, the elements receive a concrete meaning and identity. This space of possibility is not completely open for all kinds of possibilities. It is limited and pre-structured by former discourses and praxes. Some of them may have sedimented and appear as a social structure. Nevertheless, they always need to be reproduced. They are always at risk of being replaced. For this reason, neither is everything possible nor is everything totally determined; instead, everything is contingent. At this point, Holzkamp, Bourdieu and Laclau/Mouffe share the same understanding of society.

The establishment of a social order and social identities always implies a temporary suppression of alternatives. Since there are no foundations that decisions can be based on, they are accomplished by acts of power in a “space of undecidability”. According to Laclau and Mouffe and other poststructuralist thinkers, power is not conceptualized as an external relation, but as a constructive and positive force, the basic precondition for the constitution of identities: Power suppresses other possibilities and thus makes identities and sense possible in the first place. Without power no identity. Agency thus arises in the opposite way as it is thought in Holzkamp’s approach, who does not differentiate between power and domination. In relations of domination, identities, hierarchies and subject positions are fixed and cannot be changed. In contrast to power relations, domination is negative and destructive. It is not the absence of power that guarantees agency, but the presence of power that makes the subjects autonomous. The idea that Holzkamp and Bourdieu share, that external power relations limit the subject, is in this sense obsolete. Difference, conflict, antagonism and power are integral parts of subjects and society. For this reason, they are not understood as disruptive factors that need to be eliminated. Only if a power relation transforms into a relation of dominance, Laclau and Mouffe regard this as limiting for the subject. Thus, the idea of an autonomous (Holzkamp) and self-identical subject (Bourdieu) is abandoned by Laclau and

Mouffe. Instead, we can learn from them that different kinds of self-relationships exist.

As a consequence, the assumption that any decision and action can potentially be understood and explained to everyone has to be abandoned. No rational or intersubjective foundation exists on which a decision-making process is equally comprehensible to everyone. Instead, all points of view are fundamentally subjective. Mouffe underlines this argument in reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who concluded that agreements in opinions depend on agreements in forms of life (c.f. Mouffe, 2000). Lila Abu-Lughod puts it this way:

“Standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere.” (Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 468)

To sum it up, the assumption of the *social production* of meaning and identity, which Holzkamp and Bourdieu also share, but do not realize in total, is fully applied here. While Bourdieu’s approach still implies the existence of external structures, such as socio-economic conditions, which are internalized (in a modified form) into a habitus, here, the distinction between external and internal structures is being fully – also analytically – abandoned. Everything is relation, and without relations, there is no subject, agency or meaning. Actions are neither primarily the result of a rational or at least potentially rationalizable decision and motivation, nor the result of an internalized schema of perception, thought and action as it is thought by Holzkamp and Bourdieu. They are the result of contingent, hegemonic constellations that make some actions more likely than others. All decisions are made within this constellation of power.

Laclau and Mouffe, and also Bourdieu, show with an almost hard brutality how unfree and dependent on social relations the subject is. So how can we conceive of agency and subjectivity in this concept? At first sight, their concept can leave a frustrating feeling regarding the understanding and the perspectives of autonomy and agency. However, at a second glance, you could say that while one door is being closed, another is being opened: If there are no ultimate foundations on which a decision is based, not only the decision itself but also the conditions of the decision come into sight. To give an example, this can mean to not only and primarily ask: Are there two different genders and how can we prove this assumption? But also, first and foremost, to ask: Why do we differentiate between sexes and genders? What is the purpose and objective of this differentiation? Who is representing which point of view and which “facts” are being presented? And, above all, from which position is someone speaking? As a consequence, relations of power and dominance that constitute these

discourses come into sight. For example, with regard to political actions, the main point of struggle can be not to defend assumed pre-existing identities or class positions, but to produce these identities in the first place, to create a legitimate subject position and make it politically visible and livable. In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe put the emphasis on the closure of a social order and identity for the sake of becoming a subject. Butler follows the same argumentation, but she highlights the potential re-opening of a temporary fixed identity as an opportunity for resistance, social change and political action. She argues that since no identity is based on pre-existing foundations such as a material body or a sex, the borders that constitute an identity can always be moved.

Basically, this is how we can conceive of agency and subjectivity in this concept: by expanding the space of possibility, namely in at least two major ways (c.f. Vey, 2015, p. 83ff.). First, the space of possibilities is expanded by including subject positions which were hitherto excluded or impossible in the space of legitimate identities (Butler, 2001). For example, in Western societies (and also in other societies worldwide) in the past decades, other sexual identities made inroads into the social order, gained certain rights or at least a legitimate speaking position or recognition. However, at the same time, every identity inside the social order is – certainly to a different degree – at risk of ending up outside the legitimate space.

The second way agency and subjectivity can be conceived of in this approach is in form of a re-signification of existing identities and meanings. With regard to an observed governmentalization in the Western societies in Europe in the 16th century, Foucault points out that the key questions are “how not be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that and by them” (Foucault, 2007, p. 44). On this basis, he defines critique as “The art of not being governed quite so much.” This means that by resisting (hegemonic) interpellations, existing social horizons of truth can take on another meaning or be used in a different way. An example for this is the attempt to resist an interpellation as a woman or the neoliberal interpellation as a pro-active, entrepreneurial self.

Conclusion: Subject – what’s left of you?

The following table compares the approaches of Holzkamp, Bourdieu and Laclau/Mouffe concerning their understanding of the subject, agency, structures, rationality, freedom (of decision), individual and social changes and sums up

their key problems and shortcomings on the one hand and their benefits on the other.

Table 1: Comparison of the concepts of Holzkamp, Bourdieu and Laclau/Mouffe (source: own research)

Understanding of ...	Holzkamp	Bourdieu	Laclau/Mouffe
... the subject	<p>Based on premises of the enlightenment. - subject is able to reflect on the reasons for an action and to act on that basis -> rationaly acting subject</p>	<p>Determined by society. - subject is produced by the internalization of external structures, written into body and mind = dispositions of the habitus</p>	<p>Subject as fundamentally relational, fluid, fragile, decentralized and fragmented. - no consistent subject and identity - instead: focus on subject positions which can be taken - is produced discursively, always in relation and differentiation from others.</p>
... agency	<p>Subject always has agency and is able to act consciously. Two kinds of agency: 1. restrictive 2. generalized</p>	<p>Most actions are unconscious and not intentional. - reaction of inner structures to external requirements - subjects are up to three quarters automated in what they are doing</p>	<p>The subject is not the primary origin of actions. - <i>however, no differentiated theory of subject and action developed</i></p>
... structures	<p>Strict division between internal and external structures. - external structures potentially limit freedom of action, subject behaves towards them.</p>	<p>No strict division between internal and external structure. - external structures are transformed into inner structures - however, objective and measurable social structures do exist</p>	<p>No division between internal and external structures at all. - no external conditions such as economic structures - materiality as only discursively accessible - the social as sedimented practices, they need to be reproduced all the time</p>
... rationality	<p>Possibility of rationality. - subject can theoretically fully understand the reasons for actions by analyzing them rationally</p>	<p>Rationality as a historical construct.</p>	<p>No universal rationality, power as central force. - no universal rationality or truths which decisions can be based on or receive their legitimacy from - Instead: undecidable situations, always multiple solutions possible</p>
... freedom (of decision)	<p>Subject theoretically has full freedom, if external structures do not restrict it</p>	<p>Most actions are not based on (free) decisions - instead they are performed automatically on the basis of the habitus - understanding of premises of actions and free decisions is only partly possible</p>	<p>No freedom - resistance as: not to be governed in that way (Foucault) - power always exists and is something constructive; domination can be battled</p>
... individual and social changes	<p>Reflection of external (capitalist) conditions which</p>	<p>Habitus and field no longer match → new forms of action need to be</p>	<p>Space of possible actions is transformed: broadened or reshaped, or new spaces are</p>

	restrict my freedom, make use of the generalized form of agency and change the conditions of my actions.	found.	opened. <i>Why this happens is undertheorized.</i>
Problems/ shortcomings	Too rational understanding of the subject. Insufficiently complex understanding of the interrelation of subject and society.	“BourDIEU”: Subjects seem to be predominantly automated with no real agency and freedom of decision. Unity of subject and objectively existing structures and identities is assumed.	Subject theoretical blind spots concerning the understanding of subjectivity and agency, and thus concerning the reasons why the world is changing and how you can characterize different degrees of agency.
Advantages of the approach	Fruitful TOOL TO ANALYZE how (capitalist) society restricts agency. - Basic premise: actions are always functional for the subject - radical subject-oriented perspective: reasons for actions can only be understood by the subject itself - characterization of different degrees of agency and personal freedom	Useful UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBJECT and the reasons for its actions. - the foundation and character of the subject are not chosen autonomously, but socially determined - makes visible how complex premises for actions are and how hard it is to change them - against the idea of a free will - subject-focused theory of social inequality - besides economic inequality also cultural, social and symbolic social inequality is uncovered - materialization of social inequality within the subject is theorized	POST-FOUNDATIONALIST PERSPECTIVE ON IDENTITY and the role of power, fragmentation and contingency is underlined. - subject not as a self-identical unit - no objective social structures, instead they have to be given meaning - no universal truths, instead particular, non-rational reasons

How can we conceive of all these three important left approaches together? No coherent conception of the subject and agency connecting the three approaches is possible. Fortunately, this is not the objective of this paper. However, each approach is able to solve some problems of the other two. In Table 2, the key benefits of the three approaches are summed up (in boldface). The remaining entries in the table show how one theorist (named in the column) resolves the shortcomings of another theorist (named in the row).

Table 2: Advantages of each approach (own research)

	... Holzkamp by ...	... Bourdieu by ...	... Laclau/Mouffe by ...
Holzkamp resolves the shortcoming of ...	... presenting a tool for the analysis of agency from a subject-theoretical point of view, to	... putting emphasis on the subjective perspective of an action.	... filling the subject-theoretical blank space in hegemony theory.

	understand why subjects act in a specific way.		
Bourdieu resolves the shortcoming of ...	... showing the limitations of the subject's free chosen identity and agency.	... understanding the genesis of the subject and its premises of action as a result of a personal and social history, and by putting emphasis on why it is so hard to change oneself and society.	... theorizing the oversimplified understanding of the subject and agency in hegemony theory.
Laclau/Mouffe resolve the shortcoming of ...	... relaxing Holzkamp's strict differentiation of subjectivity and society and his oversimplified understanding of power.	... tempering Bourdieu's inflexible/rigid understanding of the subject and its coherent identity; resolving his essentialist understanding of identity and society.	... understanding the subject as fundamentally fragmented, instable and incoherent, and by considering the role of relationality of identity and social structures. In that context, by giving the subject its agency back.

Regarding Holzkamp's idea of an intersubjective comprehensibility of motivations, it is still relevant and desirable to try to understand, from a subjective point of view, why a person acted in a specific way. Although we are standing on shifting ground, and without the clarity and safety of universal truths or logics, we should at least try to understand the highly subjective reasons for an action that may make sense to the acting person. Holzkamp shows us that it often seems to be easier to act against one's own needs and to restrict one's own agency in the long term, since society makes this the easier way of acting. This insight and emphasis on the subjective functionality of actions can help us to refrain from judging others from the outside, and instead to try to discover the motivations and reasons for actions from *their* point of view. However, we must also take into account that, due to the different grounds we are standing on, there is no universal reason that is the same for everyone. Even if we try to understand the motivations and conditions, it is important to recognize that this might not always be possible.

With Bourdieu, by contrast, we can better understand that many actions do not primarily imply functionality for the subject. Instead, they are mainly a result of incorporated social structures that control our actions automatically. Often, when a person stays in the same class and field, the habitus is functional for the subject since most of the time it is synchronized with the rules of this field and class. However, in particular when someone changes his or her social environment, it becomes obvious that it is not that easy to change one's habitus. Although most actions are not functional for the subject anymore, it is hard to

change these dispositions. This phenomenon can be better explained on the basis of the habitus concept. As a consequence, the idea of an autonomous agent who is able to reflect upon, and on that basis to position itself towards the social structures and limitations, is highly diminished.

Finally, Laclau and Mouffe deconstruct the assumption of pre-discursive existing foundations, such as material bodies, classes or economic conditions that give the elements meaning and help to differentiate between right and wrong needs, motivations and actions. They assume a fundamental fragmentation, incoherence and fragility of the subject. According to them, the unity and autonomy of the subject are only discursively produced and not of any substance. The coherence that Bourdieu's understanding of identity is dominated by is only an imagined one. But instead of leaving us frustrated on abandoning the idea of a rationally thinking and acting subject and the idea of an independent social actor in general, this viewpoint opens new perspectives on agency and the constitution of the subject: Social realities and borders are highly contingent and can be moved, so that alternative identities and social orders become possible; or, as Foucault puts it: "We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (Foucault, 1983, p. 216). Thus, the question of the possibility of subjectivity and agency is and always will be a question and struggle about the understanding of subjectivity and agency themselves.

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