



# SUBJECTIVITY

Edited by João Biehl | Byron Good | Arthur Kleinman



Ethnographic Investigations



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*Subjectivity*

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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES IN SUBJECTIVITY

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# Subjectivity

*Ethnographic Investigations*

*Edited by*

JOÃO BIEHL, BYRON GOOD, AND ARTHUR KLEINMAN



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# Introduction: Rethinking Subjectivity

JOÃO BIEHL, BYRON GOOD, AND ARTHUR KLEINMAN

This book is an extended conversation about contemporary forms of human experience and subjectivity. It examines the genealogy of what we consider to be the modern subject, and it inquires into the continuity and diversity of personhood across greatly diverse societies, including the ways in which inner processes are reshaped amid economic and political reforms, violence, and social suffering. It is an ethnographic conversation, with authors confronting specific forms of social life in particular settings, and it is a theoretical conversation, exploring the debates and disciplinary disagreements about how we think and write about human agency today.

The writings in this book suggest that contemporary social formations, with their particular ways of being and the theoretical frames available for analyzing them, have destabilized our observation, thinking, and writing about subjectivity. In editing this collection, we have sought to show the multiple ways in which scholars address the diverse phenomena we call *subject* and *subjectivity*. Striving for a single analytic strategy would have been limiting and premature at best. This volume is thus exploratory, aiming to provide new directions for studies of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in today's distinctive conditions.

In the many settings in which anthropologists now work, the vagaries of modern life are undoing and remaking people's lives in new and ominous ways. The subjects of our study struggle with the possibilities and dangers of economic globalization, the threat of endless violence and insecurity, and the new infrastructures and forms of political domination and resistance that lie in the shadows of grand claims of democratization and reform. Once the door to the study of subjectivity is open, anthropology and its practitioners must find new ways to engage particularities of affect, cognition, moral responsibility, and action.

## REGARDING OTHERS

Examples of remaking subjectivity are everywhere. "Amid China's Boom, No Helping Hand for Young Qingming," reads the front page of the *New York Times* of August 1, 2004. Fearful of being left behind in China's fast-paced but deeply uneven economic boom, Zheng Qingming threw himself under an approaching train in his rural village on June 4. That day, Qingming had learned from a school administrator that he would not be allowed to take the annual college-entrance examination. "I don't have the money," he had said. "I don't care if you sell a life," the supervisor had replied. One of Qingming's friends reportedly offered to sell blood to help him out.

Without the needed eighty dollars and with his hopes of a college education and mobility cut short, Qingming fled the school and spent the day wandering through the village. Strangers who saw him that day said that Qingming had talked about working for Interpol—a fact the authorities used to justify their claim that the young man had "lost his mind." A mental condition (possibly traceable to the "mentally retarded" relatives who adopted and helped raise him) thus became the official explanation for this young man's profoundly willful act of ending his life.

To the grandfather who is now suing the school, the boy he had raised to be a healthy and hard-working man was "upset, not insane." A scrapbook the grandfather now keeps as a memorial gives some insight into this young man's subjectivity and his response to the vanishing of familiar values. Qingming had pasted in a magazine article about a farm girl who had been raped and then abandoned by her relatives for the shame she inflicted on them. In the margins of the text, Qingming had scribbled, "We must extend our helping hand to any innocent underdog. Only by so doing can that person find a footing in society."

Chinese society is undergoing immense change. From a poor agricultural society beset with political chaos, China has, over a twenty-year period, become the world's third-largest economy with an established, if undemocratic, social order. But China's turn to capitalism has delegitimated the still-dominant Communist ideology just as radical Maoism undermined Chinese cultural traditions. The upshot is a culture of self-interest, rank materialism, and growing cynicism that has prompted widespread comment and criticism among the Chinese themselves. In the economy, health-care sector, social-welfare programs, and everyday lived experience of peasants and urbanites, the public emphasis on social solidarity and the righting of historical social inequalities to help the poor and the marginalized have given way to gated communities, deepening health inequalities, and a symbolic distance be-



tween rural and urban realities that harks back to the 1930s, if not the final decades of the Qing dynasty. A bitter joke is making the rounds in Beijing: "What is the definition of Communism?" Answer: "The longest and most painful road to capitalism."

In this setting, side by side with an improvement in infant mortality and adult mortality, China has seen the emergence or escalation of social-health and mental health problems, from substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases to violence, AIDS, depression, and suicide. Suicide in Chinese society has always been associated with public and domestic injustice, so much so that many people at the margins see it as an acceptable way of coping with failure and hopelessness. Thus, to understand the suicide of Zheng Qingming, we need to see the act as rooted in a particular constellation that connects cultural representations and political economy with collective experience and the individual's subjectivity.

Suicide as social protest and resistance is a historical reality among Chinese. Only under the impress of the current phase of globalization is it beginning to be reinterpreted as the result of a mental disorder (usually depression but also any mental condition). That change comes from the infiltration of technical psychiatric categories from North America, biomedical practices, and the media into the daily affairs of the Chinese. A tragic irony exists, however, inasmuch as the mentally ill in China carry a deep stigma that marks them as not fully human and thus, among other things, not capable of rational suicide. Hence, in Zheng Qingming's suicide we see three aspects of subjectivity that illustrate differences across time and cultural spaces: historically situated differences in social sensibility and what it means to feel and regard oneself as human; cross-cultural differences in cognition, affect, and action; and the peculiarities of each individual.

For the purpose of this book, we need to see the increasing medicalization of depression and suicide not only as the state's response to a perceived new public-health crisis but potentially also as the spread of a form of diffused governance that substitutes everyday commonsense categories and practices for rational and technical ones so as to vitiate the moral and political meaning of subjective complaints and protests (chapters 2 and 6 in this volume). This form of self-governance—new to the modern Chinese state but well established in the West—is linked to the unmaking of time-honored value systems and occasions novel forms of control (Anagnost 1997; Lee 1999; Yan 2003). Subjectivity thus becomes the ground on which a long series of historical changes and moral apparatuses coalesce—in the emergence of new kinds of public-private involvements as well as a new

kind of political authority. The unintended consequences of this process of societal and personal transformation may include the creation of hyper-individualism, which itself intensifies attention to human rights and, in turn, places new pressure on the nondemocratic state. Equally unintended may be the remaking of the habitual inner sense of endurance and the creation of new forms of desire that go beyond commercial interests to structure alternative ways of feeling and living, that change the world.

. . .

In her essay “Regarding the Torture of Others” in the *New York Times Magazine* (May 23, 2004), the late Susan Sontag writes that the horror of the Abu Ghraib photographs “cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken—with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives” (26). Sontag angrily condemns the Bush administration’s attempts to displace the complex crimes of leadership and policy that the images reveal, first onto the photographs themselves—“as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict” (25)—and then onto the individuals who carried them out, as if those actions were not representative of a reigning rationality and *modus operandi*. “The issue is not whether a majority or minority of Americans perform such acts but whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts likely. Considered in this light, the photographs are us” (26).

Sontag compares the Abu Ghraib photographs to those of black victims of lynching during the 1880s and up through the 1930s—“souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done” (27). The Abu Ghraib photographs mark a shift in the use of pictures though: “less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated. . . . There is more and more recording of what people do, by themselves” (27). For Sontag, this mass-type Internet-emulated subjectivity is captured by the statement, “If life isn’t edited, why should its record be?”

These photographs, one could also argue, mark a shift in the ways people publicly organize their subjectivities vis-à-vis the suffering of others. The Abu Ghraib artifacts expose the range of moral sensibility operating in the interstices of political and legal domains. The images thus materialize a “culture of shamelessness” and the “reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality” (29). The pictures will not go away—but will be further covered-up by our “infinite digital self-reproduction and self-dissemination,” writes Sontag (42). At stake here are no longer processes of memorialization or forgetfulness but rather the normalization of the Other’s dehumanization

and the creation of a moral complicity that destabilizes public discussion, making clarification and eventual resolution ever more unattainable.

• • •

This volume offers an interdisciplinary exploration of the inner lives of subjects. It also examines the interconnections among changing modes of subjectivation and transformations of social organization, modes of production, knowledge structures, and symbolic forms. The writers in this book treat subjectivity as both an empirical reality and an analytic category: the agnostic and practical activity of engaging identity and fate, patterned and felt in historically contingent settings and mediated by institutional processes and cultural forms. The book explores the ideas that subjectivity constitutes the material and the means of contemporary value systems and that capital accumulation and governance occur through the remaking of culture as well as the inner transformations of the human subject. The essays probe the nature and reach of these interior processes and new value systems.

The study of individual subjectivity as both a strategy of existence and a material and means of governance helps to recast assumptions about the workings of collectivities and institutions. Refracted through potent political, technological, psychological, and linguistic registers, inner life processes capture the violence and dynamism of everyday life. By attending to subjectivity in ethnographic terms and in comparative social analysis, we encounter the concrete constellations in which people forge and foreclose their lives around what is most at stake. Examination of the complex ways in which people's inner states reflect lived experience within everyday worlds as well as within temporary spaces and transitions—moments of crisis and states of exception—can disturb and enlarge presumed understandings of what is socially possible and desirable. What is life for? What is an adequate life? Such study also helps us understand what psychological processes are about.

#### THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SUBJECTIVITY

Even a cursory review of the etymology of the term *subjectivity* brings into view multiple historical processes and modifications of subjective form and sense. In the nineteenth century, *subjectivity* referred to an essential individuality, the consciousness of one's perceived states. This exclusive emphasis on the human mind or individual experience also implied a kind of affective domination, in which feelings, thoughts, concerns, and perceptions, all supposedly personal, overcome individuals and "cloud the eyes" (ac-

ording to the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the day). One can argue that this modern quality of defining subjective facts or things existing only in the mind (experienced affectively or symptomatically) is the counterpart to the relentless encroachment of scientific worldviews and things, “the objective” and the objectification of reality (Daston and Galison 1992).

Modern subjectivity, however, also suggests the cultivation of a mode of being that finds its highest realization in art—“the individuality of an artist as expressed in his work.” In contrast to objectivity, in this sense, subjectivity does not imply an error but connotes creativity, the possibility of a subject’s adopting a distinctive symbolic relation to the world in order to understand lived experience, as in poetry (Milosz 2004):

When will that shore appear from which at last we see  
How all this came to pass and for what reason?

The current understanding of subjectivity as a synonym for inner life processes and affective states is of relatively recent origin. Earlier etymologies of the subjective do not speak in such radically individual terms. The twelfth-century *suget* (subject) is “the one who is under the dominion of a monarch or reigning prince; one who owes allegiance to a government or ruling power, is subject to its laws, and enjoys its protection.” The fifteenth-century Latin *subjectivus* (to be subjective) is first a characteristic of the political subject. Only a few centuries later would one speak of subjective alterations in persons, of subjective and thus peculiar sentiments, and of a subjective certainty of the truth, of knowledge as distinct from “beliefs” (B. Good 1994: ch. 1).

In classic Greek, the term *hupokeimenon* referred to the subject of attributes and the subject of predicates, but, for Aristotle, the subject was also “the very material out of which things are made” (see chapter 1 of this volume). These simple observations lead us to ask about the legal, religious, medicoscientific and social mechanisms, writ large, through which political domination has migrated into and become an invisible and constitutive part of modern subjectivity. What literally goes into making a human subject? What are the limits of the subject? And how do creative subjective leaps occur (Greenblatt 2004)?

. . .

In examining subjectivity today, we are forced to rethink older formulations and problematics associated with human nature, social control, agency—and culture. Clifford Geertz, in uniting psychological with cultural themes in the Harvard Social Relations Department’s tradition in which he was

trained, famously articulated a cultural approach to subjectivity and a subjectivity-oriented theory (Ortner 2004; Shweder and Good 2004). He did so at a time, from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the British tradition of social anthropology banished the subject and when French debates focused on subjectivity's dependence on language (Lévi-Strauss and Lacan), the materiality of discourses and epistemic thresholds (Foucault), or the innate dispositions governing social action (Bourdieu).

For Geertz (1973, 1983; Good and Good 2004), subjects embody culture, not in the simplistic fashion posited by the culture and personality school, but in the sense that people live in a distinct phenomenal world—spirits here, mystical powers there, particular categories of kin in each—and have access to that world through a set of embodied practices (Javanese meditation, Balinese dance, or simply activities associated with growing up in a Balinese household). They encounter realities that “clothe those conceptions with . . . an aura of factuality.” Culture shapes “the behavioral environment,” as well as the selves who inhabit that environment; the moods and motivations that are part of these selves are not limited to the religious perspective but carry over into the everyday, commonsense world. Anthropology, from this perspective, understands subjective life by analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—through which people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another.

But critical appraisals of the Geertzian legacy of cultural analysis—even by Geertz himself (2000, 2005)—have produced a growing consensus within anthropology that conceiving culture as a *sui generis* symbolic domain is hazardous. Whereas some anthropologists have called for the outright elimination of culture from the analytic lexicon (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990), others have insisted on its continued relevance.<sup>1</sup> Maintaining the importance of subjectivity in social life, these anthropologists have rethought culture, seeing it as emerging from institutional and intersubjective interactions and as an evolving phenomenon, constantly remade through social encounters, ethical deliberations, political processes—and writing (Boon 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fischer 2003; B. Good 1994; Marcus and Fischer 1985; Ortner 1999; Rabinow 1978; Rosaldo 1989; Stoler 1995; Taussig 1986; Tsing 1993).

There is no culture, and all we do is cultural, writes Michael M. J. Fischer: “Culture is not a variable; culture is relational, it is elsewhere, it is in passage, it is where meaning is woven and renewed often through gaps and silences, and forces beyond the conscious control of individuals, and yet the space where individual and institutional social responsibility and ethical struggle take place” (2003: 7). This formulation suggests the need for cul-

tural analyses that make visible differences of interests, access, power, needs, desires, and philosophical perspectives. The writers in this book suggest that ethnographic practices and theories that link investigations of symbolic forms with studies of the lives of individuals can provide such analyses.

Who empirically is the agent of this making and remaking of culture? How is this process mediated by individual lives? What do psychological structures and modes of experience contribute to the work of culture? And how do modes of subjectivity intertwine with particular configurations of political, economic, and medical institutions? In other words, how, under quite new conditions, do people value life and relationships and “enact the possibilities they envision” (Rosen 2003: x) for themselves and for others?

#### EVERYDAY REFLEXIVITY

In a “world in pieces” (Geertz 2000), older notions of the subject who is cultural “all the way down” seem inadequate. Moreover, “the body” has reemerged in anthropological analysis much as Mauss and, later, Bourdieu conceived it, as a privileged heuristic to historical and social processes, thus extending cultural phenomenology to political subjectivity. The presumed subject of humanist theorizing has been deconstructed by poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist writers and shown to be a product of Enlightenment, colonial, and racialized and gendered discourses rather than a foundational reality for investigation. Ethnographic studies (such as Bourgois 2002; Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Csordas 1994; M-J Good 1998; Kleinman 1999; Lock 1993, 2002; Martin 1994; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Young 1995) have, using varying methodologies, shown how medico-scientific formations, political economy, and social networks are mediated by the body and the sense of psychological interiority. These studies go beyond mentalist reductionism and convey a key understanding of the self as corporeal, with the body as part and parcel of technical, political, and social processes. The “mindful body” (Hahn and Kleinman 1983; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) has become an important part of our understanding of the person in diverse, but always specific, times and places.

By drawing attention to the importance of somatic processes for social life, anthropological studies of the body have cast light on some of the blind spots of a strictly symbolic approach. They have greatly helped to reveal human and institutional interconnectedness and to generalize ethnographic findings. Yet by treating the body as a privileged heuristic to reality, such studies have, at times, also produced a one-dimensional picture of individ-

uals, as if they were a socially entrained physiology (that is, as if they were fundamentally determined, “all the way down,” by traceable forms of control and discipline). Not surprisingly, debates on subjectivity that begin with this assumption often center on questions of domination, resistance, normalization, and social identity.

Essays in this volume build on the anthropology of the body literature and probe the extent to which market logics, institutional norms, and rational-technical interventions actually define the relationship between body and subjectivity. In chapter 3, for example, Das and Das chart the emergence of “local ecologies of care” by tracing the itineraries that the ill follow in their search for therapeutic attention in poor, urban contexts in India. Rather than looking for subjectivity in the embodied experience of illness or healing, Das and Das reveal the dynamic density of the interpersonal ties that become the contours of the sick person’s local world and experience (see also chapter 7 in this volume). In this way, people come close to James Boon’s “everyday reflexivity (regardless of culture),” disrupting the “comfortably consolidated transdisciplinary theme (‘You-Name-It-Of-The-Body’)” (1999: 263–65).

A “descent into the ordinary” (Das 1998) of often broken and fractured places has made necessary a rethinking of the terms of anthropological inquiry (see chapter 4 of this volume as well as Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren 2002).<sup>2</sup> As Geertz has written, “In a splintered world, we must address the splinters” (2000: 221). Drawing from Michel Foucault’s work on biopower, contemporary studies have turned attention to the centrality of error in (modern) life, charting the emergence of “mutant ecologies” (Masco 2004) and “biological forms of citizenship” (Petryna 2002), in the wake of technological disasters, for example. Studies of media and medical technologies have shown the truly prosthetic quality of such technologies as people deploy them to refigure capacities and value (Biehl 2001a; Cohen 1998; Rabinow and Dan-Cohen 2005; Rapp 1999; see also chapters 6, 12, and 13 in this volume). The body—real or imagined, living or dead, present or hypothetical—can mobilize scientific communities and patient populations in equal measure around quests for profits, knowledge, justice, or simply the will to live (see chapters 11 and 14).

In short, several anthropologists in this volume address the unfinished quality of the body, the surpluses and inadequacies that emerge through the demands made on it. Whether these demands come from institutions, discourses and disciplinary practices, or the subject’s own desires and needs, the body, from the perspective of subjectivity, is always more and less than what it seems it should be. Thus, one continually learns and relearns to live *with*

as much as *through* one's body, in its various states of health and illness, youth and old age, boredom and trauma, routine and instability.

#### EMERGENT VALUE SYSTEMS

By and large, contemporary anthropological writing considers the subject and subjectivity not as original forms but as dynamically formed and transformed entities (Borneman 1992, 2001; Cohen 1998, 1999; Collier 1997; Crapanzano 1980; Das 1997, 2000; Desjarlais 1997, 2003; Fischer 2003; Hammoudi 1997, 2006; Herzfeld 1996; Luhrman 2000; Pandolfo 1998, 2000; Turkle 1997). These insights reflect both altered theoretical sensibilities and changes in the world in which anthropologists do their research and in the personal lives of their informants. Awareness is growing that the kinds of social forms traditionally analyzed by anthropologists and thoroughly critiqued by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu—the family, village, school, sex and gender, labor and scientific practices, health-care systems—can no longer be the foundation for tracing and specifying delimited “identities” and “subject positions.” Arjun Appadurai, for example, argued a decade ago that the twin engines of media and migration have so accelerated transnational processes of globalization that, under the aegis of the imagination, the “quickened beat of improvisation” stands to outrun the habitus’s “glacial force” (1996: 6).

New information and life technologies enable new types of networks and allow people to imagine and articulate different destinies. Stable or imagined environments (such as nations and communities) are being transformed or displaced by ecological disasters, ethnic conflicts, free-trade economics, developments in the global pharmaceutical industry, terrorism, and war (Fassin 2005; Fassin and Vasquez 2005; Fortun 2001; Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren 2002; Le Marcis 2004; Petryna 2002; Petryna, Lakoff, and Kleinman 2006; Redfield 2005; Tsing 2005). Anthropologists thus investigate subjectivity in contemporary settings of economic crisis, state violence, exploited migrant communities, massive displacements, hegemonic gender politics, and postcolonial states—settings increasingly familiar to them, though hardly new to the people under study. Research is showing that only through explicating the logic of key emotional and intersubjective constructs do major social dramas become intelligible; likewise, only amid such contemporary social enactments can we understand particular domains of affect and agency.

In the domain of health and medicine, not only are the raw effects of economic and social inequalities ever more devastating, but subtler and more



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