Databases as Discourse, or Electronic Interpellations

The Mode of Information and Databases

In this chapter I shall underscore the way computerized databases function as discourses in Foucault’s sense of the term, that is, the way they constitute subjects outside the immediacy of consciousness. This effort contrasts with other critical positions on databases which miss their discursive effects, treating databases with categories that overlook the decentering operations of language on the subject. Such, for example, is the case with Marxist writings, such as those of Herbert Schiller and Tim Luke, in which databases are seen as contributions to the power of major institutions, especially corporations. Here databases are a new instrument for capitalists to tighten their grip on the mode of production. Information in databases, Marxist critics advise, are not equally available to all, as the somewhat utopian proponents of this technology contend, but redound preponderantly to the benefit of the economic ruling class. Similarly, liberal writers on the subject, such as David Burnham, James Rule and Gary Marx, address in particular the appropriation of database technology by the state, warning of the considerable augmentation of centralized power it provides. Liberals are concerned in particular with the threats to privacy occasioned by databases in the hands of the government.

While these perspectives certainly offer much to consider, they fail to expose the cultural innovations brought about by the integration of database technology into existing political, economic and social institutions. In each case, Marxist and liberal perspectives incorporate the novel system of knowledge into their existing conceptual frameworks, revealing only that side of the phenomenon that fits within its grid of understanding. For Marxists, databases are comprehensible only to the extent they are a factor in the struggle over the means of production; for liberals, databases enter the field of politics as a component in the never-ending danger of autocratic central government. For both positions the novelty of databases is reduced to a minimum and the social individual or class as configured by the theory remains unchanged with the advent of the new. I posit that critical social theory must explore, in addition to these offerings, the relation of databases to the cultural issue of the constitution of the subject, and that to do so Foucault’s theory of discourse provides a most compelling guide.

With respect to the problem of culture, the chief limitation of Marxist and liberal theories is that they configure the social field primarily as one of action, minimizing the importance of language. With respect to databases, the action in question for Marxists is the relation of power between capitalists and workers, while for liberals it is the fate of political domination. Both positions forget that databases are composed of symbols; they are in the first instance representations of something. One does not eat them, handle them, or kick them, at least one hopes not. Databases are configurations of language; the theoretical stance that engages them must at least take this ontological fact into account. A form of language, databases will have social effects that are appropriate to language, though certainly they will also have varied relations with forms of action as well.

The poststructuralist understanding of language is of special relevance to an analysis of databases that proceeds from critical social theory because of the connection it draws between language and the constitution of the subject. Poststructuralists make a number of salient claims about the interaction of language and subjects: (1) that subjects are always mediated by language; (2) that this mediation takes the form of “interpellation”; and (3) that in this process the subject position that is a point of enunciation and of address is never sutured or closed, but remains unstable, excessive, multiple.

The first proposition is to be understood neither as tautological nor as innocent. A human being is configured as a subject, is given cultural significance, in the first instance through language. The kind of bearing that society imposes on individuals, the nature of the constraint and the empowerment it operates takes its effect in language. The significance of the proposition may become more clear if
we remember that in our culture the bearing of language on individuals tends to be systematically obscured by the privilege we give (in language) to the subject as a point of origin of motivation, consciousness and intention. Since Descartes' articulation of the configuration of the subject, since the dissemination of this configuration in Enlightenment thought, since the inscription of this configuration in the major institutions of representative democracy, capitalist economics, bureaucratic social organization and secular education, it has become the cultural foundation of the West. Once understood as a subject, the individual is fixed in the binary opposites of autonomy/heteronomy, rationality/irrationality, freedom/determinism. The linguistic level of the configuration is actively forgotten or naturalized as the cultural foundation of the West.

At the micrological level of daily life the subject is continuously reconstituted as such through interpellation or “hailing.” In determinate linguistic acts the subject is addressed in a position and/or provoked to an enunciative stance in a manner that obscures the position or the stance. When a teacher calls upon an elementary-school student to answer a question, the position of the student as an autonomous rational agent is presupposed, a position that student must “stand into” first in order to be able to answer, in order to be a student. The operation of linguistic interpellation requires that the addressee accept its configuration as a subject without direct reflection in order to carry on the conversation or practice at hand. Interpellation may be calibrated by gender, age, ethnicity or class or may exclude any of these groups or parts of them. The issue is not that interpellation is an invasion of society upon the individual that ought to be avoided; that objection already falls within the binary freedom/determinism and presupposes the constitution of the individual as subject. Rather what is important is that the process goes on at the level of language and that in our culture it takes the particular form of the subject.

The third proposition is that the interpellation of the subject is always partial, incomplete, riddled with gaps and open to reconfiguration and resistance. The constitution of the subject in language is different from the Newtonian understanding of the world of material objects in which matter is pushed and pulled into determinate positions by laws that are inexorable and unchanging. In the most trivial case, the subject is always multiple, interpellated into different positions: the student is also child, friend, pet, master. But in each instance of interpellation, the subject is configured as fixed, determinate, closed. In adult circumstances of some social weight, interpellation appears to be or, better, is structured as final, real, complete. The fixing of identities is not a matter of being pushed or pulled by gravity but of being invited to play a role in such a way that the invitation appears to have already been answered by the subject before it was proposed, but at the same time the invitation could be refused.

II Foucault's Concept of Discourse

An understanding of the poststructuralist sense of the relation of language to the subject is necessary to gauge the stakes at play in Foucault's concept of discourse, a concept that in turn is crucial to a critical approach to databases. Foucault employs the term discourse in most of his writings, especially in his work of the 1960s, The Order of Things (1966) and The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969). In these works Foucault presented a critique of the human sciences and an alternative method of analysis. Here the term discourse is introduced above all as a counter-position to those who understand writing as the expression of a subject, those who, in their search for meaning in acts of reading or listening, move from words back to consciousness. Here is one of Foucault's more lucid statements of this position.

In the proposed analysis, instead of referring back to the synthesis or the unifying function of a subject, the various enunciative modalities manifest his dispersion. To the various statuses, the various sites, the various positions that he can occupy or be given when making a discourse. To the discontinuity of the planes from which he speaks... I shall abandon any attempt, therefore, to see discourse as a phenomenon of expression – the verbal translation of a previously established synthesis; instead, I shall look for a field of regularity for various positions of subjectivity. Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed.

The relation of writing to the subject is sharply reconfigured in this passage. The term discourse is used primarily as a way to register the...
difference of Foucault's theory of writing from that of humanism. It designates a move toward an exteriorization of the analysis which itself is strategic. Foucault's claim is not that he has discovered the one, true way to understand knowledge or even that his way is somehow epistemologically superior to other, humanist ways. Only that if one seeks a critique of knowledge in our culture, if one seeks to distance oneself from our culture's way of regarding its own knowledge, the term discourse indicates the path of that move.

Many critics of Foucault, who are usually themselves within the humanist way of knowing, complain that Foucault does not adequately specify the term discourse as a field, does not carefully indicate the boundaries of discourse, or its object. Manfred Frank, for example, even quotes Foucault as acknowledging this deficiency, except Frank takes it as an admission of failure rather than as an indication that the interest of the term discourse lies not in relation to a well-defined object but in relation to a level of analysis of any knowledge domain. Here is Frank's quote from Foucault:

Finally, instead of making the rather hazy meaning of the word "discourse" more distinct, I think that I have multiplied its meanings: sometimes using it to mean a general domain of all statements (énoncés), sometimes as an individualisable group of statements (énoncés), and sometimes as an ordered practice which takes account of a certain number of statements (énoncés)

Foucault appears to be suggesting that, if the aim is a critique of knowledge in our society, then the effort of theorization need not so much focus on delimiting the object but on specifying the level of meaning one is attempting so that the relation of knowledge to the subject – in other words, the cultural construction of the subject – can be raised as a question.

Beginning with the essay "The Discourse on Language," first presented as his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, Foucault introduced a connection between the terms discourse and power. From that point on, most effectively in Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality, Foucault developed usages of the category "discourse" that were distinct from those in his earlier works. In the 1970s and 1980s discourse was frequently used as a couplet, "discourse/practice," an indication that Foucault refused the separation of discourse from the "non-discursive." He also intro-

duced terms such as "technology of power" and "micro-physics of power" in which discourse was subsumed into arrays and articulations of various kinds of practices, institutional, disciplinary, resistive and so forth. The question of the relation of language to the subject was here considerably broadened: as language, discourse was configured as a form of power and power was understood as operating in part through language.

III The Panopticon as Discourse

The question of discourse, with its imbrication to power, then, is about the cultural issue of the constitution of the subject. And in particular it is about the constitution of the subject as a rational, autonomous individual. Max Weber had also developed the thesis of the rational subject as a problem, as an index of domination rather than, as in liberalisim and to a certain extent in Marx, as a sign of freedom. But Weber's understanding of rationality was burdened by its character as a universal principle. He was able to historicize the problem of reason and the subject only to a minimal extent. Foucault noted this difference in his position from that of Weber, attributing to the latter an understanding of rationality as "an anthropological invariant," whereas Foucault's own effort was to analyze reason as historically constructed.

Foucault's problem then is to construct a theory of discourse that historicizes reason, reveals the way discourse functions as power and spotlights the constitution of the subject. Strictly speaking Foucault never provided such a theory because, he argued, theory reinscribes the rational subject at another epistemological level. Instead he demonstrated such a theory of discourse in his histories of punishment and sexuality. The closest he approached such a theory is found in brief statements, mostly in his occasional writings, such as the following given in a late interview:

I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very skeptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty, . . . on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment.
Discourse is understood as having a power effect on the subject even in movements of "liberation."

The power effect of discourse is to position the subject in relation to structures of domination in such a way that those structures may then act upon him or her. The chief characteristic of the power effect of discourse is to disguise its constitutive function in relation to the subject, appearing only after the subject has been formed as an addressee of power. A classic example of this operation of discourse is, for Foucault, psychoanalysis. The discourse/practices of Freud produce in the subject an Oedipalized child, an understanding of the subject, appearing only after the subject has been formed as an addressee of power. A classic example of this operation of discourse is, for Foucault, psychoanalysis. The discourse/practices of Freud produce in the subject an Oedipalized child, an understanding of one's childhood as, in the case of boys, a desire for one's mother. Once the child-subject is so constituted by psychoanalytic discourse, the child is then seen as being forbidden this desire, with the consequences of the Oedipal traumas and its deep effects on the personality. But the crucial point is that the effect of the discourse/practice is to name the child's desire, to configure the child as a libidinal subject with the particular aim of its mother.9 Discourse has the same function in Discipline and Punish.

The modern system of punishment, incarceration, is first of all itself not the result of a rational subject. Against liberals and Marxists, Foucault argues for a Nietzschean genealogy of prisons in which its origins are found neither in the ideas of the Enlightenment nor in the workings of early industrial capitalism. Foucault traces the origins of the prison to a multiplicity of non-related pieces of earlier history: Enlightenment critiques of Ancien Régime forms of punishment, military training practices and schedules, procedures of examination in schools, Bentham's architectural ideas for prisons - none of which is understandable as a cause of the prison. Foucault attributes the origin of the prison to a kind of non-agency as follows: "Small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious, mechanisms that obeyed economies too shameful to be acknowledged, or pursued petty forms of coercion - it was nevertheless they that brought about the mutation of the punitive system, at the threshold of the contemporary period."10 Having dethroned the rational subject from the agency of the establishment of prisons, Foucault goes on to analyze its operations as discourse.

The story is by now well known. Prisoners reside in cells surrounding a central tower in which a guard is placed who can look into the cells but whom prisoners cannot see. A peculiar authority is thereby instituted, one who is all-seeing (hence the term "panopticon") but invisible. This instance is part of a complex articulation of discourse/practices which includes the juridical practices that sentenced the individual to prison, criminologists who study prisoners as individual cases, administrative schedules and routines for prisoner activities, evaluation procedures for possible parole, and so forth. Foucault characterizes the operation of the panopticon in these words: "By means of surveillance, disciplinary power became an integrated system... it also organized as a multiple, automatic and anonymous power; for although surveillance rests on the individual, its functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom... and laterally... this network holds the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisor perpetually supervised..."11 Properly understood the panopticon is not simply the guard in the tower but the entire discourse/practice that bears down on the prisoner, one that constitutes him or her as a criminal. The panopticon is the way the discourse/practice of the prison works to constitute the subject as a criminal and to normalize him or her to a process of transformation/rehabilitation. My argument is that, with the advent of computerized databases, a new discourse/practice operates in the social field, a super-panopticon if you will, which reconfigures the constitution of the subject.12

IV Databases as a Super-panopticon

Databases are discourse, in the first instance, because they effect a constitution of the subject. They are a form of writing, of inscribing symbolic traces, that extends the basic principle of writing as différence, as making different and as distancing, differing, putting off to what must be its ultimate realization. In its electronic and digital form, the database is perfectly transferable in space, indefinitely preservable in time; it may last forever everywhere. Unlike spoken language, the database is not only remote from any authorial presence but is "authored" by so many hands that it makes a mockery of the principle of author as authority. As a meaningful text, the database is no one's and everyone's yet it "belongs" to someone, to the social institution that "owns" it as property, to the corporation, the state, the military, the hospital, the library, the university. The database is a discourse of pure writing that directly amplifies the power of its owner/user.
Everyone knows this. Because they know it, they resist it. A poll by *Time* magazine in late 1991 revealed that between 70 and 80 percent of respondents were “very/somewhat concerned” about the amount of information being collected about them in databases, with the higher figure referring to the federal government, credit organizations and insurance companies and the lower figure referring to employers, banks and marketing companies.13 The population is now cognizant of being surveilled constantly by databases and it apparently feels ill at ease as a result. Database anxiety has not of yet developed into an issue of national political prominence but it is clearly a growing concern of many and bespeaks a new level of what Foucault calls the normalization of the population.

Examples of the politicization of databases multiply every day. The federal government has developed FinCen (Financial Crimes Enforcement Network) with an awesome power that combines artificial intelligence programs with massive parallel processing to monitor bank transactions for the purpose of detecting criminal activity.14 In the economic sphere, retailers that sell by modem regard the information they accumulate about customers as their property, as a valuable asset, gained as a by-product of the sale, which they may then sell to other retailers. But customers do not want such information about themselves travelling, beyond their ken, from one vendor to another. Although an effort in the early 1990s to sell customer information by the Lotus corporation was thwarted by consumer protests,35 resistance to the use of these types of database is likely to fail because it is based on the modern, political distinction between the public and the private. Consumers regard their purchases as private, as part of the capitalist system which designates all economic transactions as “private.” But databases are a postmodern discourse that traverse and cancel the public/private distinction.

Increasingly economic transactions automatically enter databases and do so with the customer's assistance. Credit card sales are of course good examples. According to the conventional wisdom of political economy, the consumer buys something in a “private” act of rational choice. Yet when the credit card is extracted from the wallet or purse and submitted to the clerk for payment, that “private” act has become part of a “public” record. The unwanted surveillance of one’s personal choice becomes a discursive reality through the willing participation of the surveilled individual. In this instance the play of power and discourse is uniquely configured. The one being surveilled provides the information necessary for the surveillance. No
the database in question, as a social agent. Without referring the database back to its owner and his or her interests or forward to the individual in question as a model of its adequacy or accuracy, we comprehend the database as a discursive production which inscribes positionalities of subjects according to its rules of formation. In this way we see the database outside the dichotomy public/private and outside the dynamics of the mode of production. Instead the discourse of the database is a cultural force which operates in a mechanism of subject constitution that refutes the hegemonic principle of the subject as centered, rational and autonomous. For now, through the database alone, the subject has been multiplied and decentered, capable of being acted upon by computers at many social locations without the least awareness by the individual concerned yet just as surely as if the individual were present somehow inside the computer.

Some readers may object that databases cannot be characterized as discourses in Foucault’s sense, since for Foucault discourses were large collections of texts. The examples he gives are psychology, economics, grammar and medicine, all of which include sentences and paragraphs strung together by arguments. The same can hardly be said of databases, which for the most part are not textual in this way but rather agglomerations of isolated words or numbers whose location in the “discourse” are paramount. The only places where sentences of any kind are found in databases is in the program or code language that constitutes them and in some types of fields that are textual. And yet the crucial features of discourse are indeed contained in databases even though they omit the standard features of prose. Databases are fully what Foucault calls “grids of specification,” one of the three “rules of formation” of discourse. These grids are “the systems according to which the different kinds of [the object in question] are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of . . . discourse . . .” (Archaeology, 42). Nothing qualifies as a grid in this sense as well as databases; they are pure grids whose vertical fields and horizontal records divide and classify objects with a precision that more traditional forms of discourse such as psychology must surely envy.

But what is most important about discourses for Foucault is that they constitute their objects. His greatest concern is to avoid treating discourse as “groups of signs,” as texts or as writing perhaps in Derrida’s sense, “but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Archaeology, 49). His emphasis is on the performative aspect of language, of what language does rather than what it denotes or connotes. Computerized databases are nothing but performative machines, engines for producing retrievable identities. A feature of many databases that indicates their status as “practice” is their “relational” abilities. Two databases may function as one if one field in each is identical. Thus if a census database and an employee database both have fields for social security numbers (which is increasingly the identifier field of choice), the employer may use the census to discover whatever he might about the employee that is not in his own records but in the census. These kinds of linkages between databases have been used in the Parent Locator System, the effort to find divorced and separated men who do not support their children. Relational databases thus have built into their structure the ability to combine with other databases, forming vast stores of information that constitute as an object virtually every individual in society and in principle may contain virtually everything recorded about that individual - credit rating data, military records, census information, educational experience, telephone calls, and so forth.

The most sophisticated examples of the use of relational databases are in market research firms such as Claritas Corporation. This company boasts the use of “over 500 million individual consumer records from several leading databases.” The company combines and analyzes data from the following categories of databases: media and market research studies, newspaper research (including readership of newspapers, viewing of television and listening to radio), customer research studies, car and truck registration data, mailing lists and credit rating data. The company combines over 1,200 databases of both the private and public sectors. Claritas generates its own database, “compass,” which it makes available to its customers for their own research. Its masterpiece, though, is a database called “prizm” that is an identity construction system. Prizm divides up the entire population into “clusters” which can be as fine grained as six households. Each cluster is then fit into forty types such as “rank and file,” “black enterprise,” “single city blues,” “furs and station wagons,” and so forth. Each type is defined by income, percentage of the US population, age, class, size of household, and “characteristics.” In the case of the identity known as “bohemian mix,” some 1.1 percent of the population, characteristics are, for example, “Buy, wine by the case, common stock; Drive, Opel, Peugeots; Read, GQ, Harper’s; Eat, whole-wheat bread, frozen waffles; TV, Nightline.” The company then provides a few sample zip codes where this species may be found.
Databases such as prizm constitute subjects in a manner that inscribes a new pattern of interpellation. The “hailing” of the individual is here quite distinct from that of the teacher or the student, the policeman and the perpetrator, the boss and the worker, the parent and the child. In these cases there is often a direct message sent and received in a face-to-face situation. With databases, most often, the individual is constituted in absentia, only indirect evidence such as junk mail testifying to the event. Interpellation by database in this respect is closer to the instance of writing, with the reader-subject being hailed by an absent author. But here again there are important differences: from the standpoint of the person being interpellated, the writer is known, even if only as a writer, and is an individual or a group of individuals. The reader very often intentionally selects to be interpellated by the particular author, whereas in the example of computer databases that is rarely if ever the case. Interpellation by database is a complicated configuration of unconsciousness, indirection, automation, and absent-mindedness both on the part of the producer of the database and on the part of the individual subject being constituted by it. More research needs to be done in order to specify the configuration of interpellation in various types of databases, to answer the question of just how centered or dispersed subjects are in these cases and the characteristics of this dispersion or multiplicity. However, the above discussion suffices to indicate the importance of databases in complicating the concept of interpellation. The computer database inaugurates a new era of interpellation far different from that of modernity with its discourses of print and its multiplicity. The database is part of a larger, massive cultural transformation which positions the subject outside the framework of visibility available to liberal and Marxist theoretical orientations. No wonder Lyotard struck a chord when he announced in _The Postmodern Condition_ his “incredulity toward metanarratives.” As daily life is pervaded more and more by the regions of the mode of information, the culture of modernity enjoys less and less verisimilitude. Though the effects of the mode of information are differential with respect to class, gender and ethnicity, they constitute a very general phenomenon that betokens a new play of power, a new dialectics of resistance and a new configuration of politics and its theorization.

Like television, music reproduction, computer writing and video art, databases generate discursive effects by simulating a reality, or, better, to use Baudrillard’s term, a hyper-reality. The fields that compose the database construct representations of individuals. The fields, often consisting of a fixed amount of characters, are highly limited by the imperative of the technology, its rule of formation in Foucault’s sense, which is retrieval speed. The database is effective only to the extent that its information is instantaneously accessible, but at the same time it must be large and comprehensive in relation to its referent population. Near total coverage and instantaneous accessibility characterize a good database. Yet this accessibility refers to the constructions within the database, which function as simulacra of the population covered. To the database, Joe Jones is the sum of the information in the fields of the record that applies to that name. So the person Joe Jones now has a new form of presence, a new subject position that defines him for all those agencies and individuals who have access to the database. The representation in the discourse of the database constitutes the subject, Joe Jones, in highly caricatured yet immediately available form.

Another way of understanding the discursive nature of databases is to relate them to what Foucault calls governmentality. This is a form of power characteristic of welfare states. It is neither the micro-physics of power that characterizes local situations in everyday life, nor the grand state power of monarchs and presidents. Governmentality is a kind of bureaucratic power, one that relies upon knowledge of the populace to police society and maintain order. Foucault in places calls it “biopower” and takes as its precursor the management of the family as in ancient Greece, the original meaning of economy. He defines governmentality as follows: “To govern a
state will therefore mean to apply economy, to set up an economy at
the level of the entire state, which means exercising towards its
inhabitants, and the wealth and behaviour of each and all, a form of
surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family
over his household and goods.”

Governmentality, or the form of power of the welfare states of the advanced industrial societies of the
later twentieth century, is inconceivable without databases. The vast
populations of these societies might well be ungovernable without
databases. Databases provide contemporary governments with vast
stores of accessible information about the population which facili-
tates the fashioning of policies that maintain stability. An important
political effect of databases, as they have been disseminated in our
societies, is to promote the “governmental” form of power, to make
knowledge of the population available to coercive institutions at
every level.

To counter this stabilizing effect of databases, Lyotard, in The
Postmodern Condition, suggests that a new emancipatory politics
would consist in giving everyone access to databases. Certainly
this policy, however utopian under present circumstances, would
serve to democratize information. Each individual or group would
have easy computer access to the same information as the gov-
ernment. Although such a prospect seems unlikely, given the increas-
ing poverty in this country, it is conceivable that at least in principle
computer access to such databases could be widely extended to
the vast majority of the population. A policy that worked in this
direction would indeed constitute a “freedom of information” act.
The thought of government critics being able to race through the
cyberspace of data even as it is recorded is a counterfactual that gives
one pause.

Yet as a strategy of resistance it does not take into account the
performative effect of the discourse of databases, their ability to
constitute subjects. The implication of Lyotard’s position is that
“real” subjects would recuperate the “power” inherent in the data-
bases, enabling them to manipulate its knowledge for their own ends,
a politics different from the current conservative restrictions on the
use of databases to those who can foot the bill, usually large social
organizations. The thesis of the liberation of the databases presup-
poses the social figure of the centered, autonomous subject that the
databases preclude. Postmodern culture configures multiple, dis-
persed subject positions whose domination is no longer effected by
alienated power but by entirely new articulations of technologies of
power. The cultural function of databases is not so much the institu-
tion of dominant power structures against the individual but in
restructuring the nature of the individual. Lyotard’s suggestion pre-
sumes that knowledge and power are separable, that increased avail-
ability of databases equals increased knowledge equals increased
power. But the viewpoint that I am proposing posits a different
relation of knowledge and power, one in which knowledge itself is a
form of linguistic power, the culturally formative power of subject
constitution.

The process of subject formation in the discourse of databases
operates very differently from the panopticon. Foucault argued that
the subjects constituted by the panopticon were the modern,
“interiorized” individual, the one who was conscious of his or her
own self-determination. The process of subject constitution was one
of “subjectification,” of producing individuals with a (false) sense of
their own interiority. With the super-panopticon, on the contrary,
subject constitution takes an opposing course of “objectification,”
of producing individuals with dispersed identities, identities of which
the individuals might not even be aware. The scandal, perhaps, of the
super-panopticon is its flagrant violation of the great principle of the
modern individual, of its centered, “subjectified” interiority.

A politics of databases, then, would respond to the cultural form of
subjectification in modernity. Instead of developing a resistant
politics of privacy to counter the alleged incursions of databases on
the autonomous individual, we need to understand the forms of
agency appropriate to a dispersed, multiple subject and to generate
strategies of resistance appropriate to that identity formation. The
issue is not that the new forms of subjectification are in themselves
emanipatory but that they are the new arena of contestation. A
politics that circumscribes freedom around the skin of the individual,
labelling everything inside private and untouchable, badly miscon-
ceives the present-day situation of digitized, electronic communi-
cations. Since our bodies are hooked into the networks, the databases,
the information highways, they no longer provide a refuge from
observation or a bastion around which one can draw a line of
resistance. The road to greater emancipation must wind its way
through the subject formations of the mode of information, not
through those of an earlier era of modernity and its rapidly disap-
pearing culture. The appeal for community, as Ernesto Laclau and
Chantal Mouffe argue, must take into account the forms of identity
and communication in the mode of information, and resist nostalgia
for the face-to-face intimacy of the ancient Greek agora. In the era of cyborgs, cyberspace and virtual realities, the face of community is not discerned easily through the mists of history, however materialist and dialectical it may be.

Since World War II Marxist theory has confronted a conjuncture that has proven increasingly recalcitrant to its categories and analysis. Although the mode of production has remained capitalist, and therefore amenable to the critique of political economy, the locus of revolution and social protest has, within the most advanced capitalist nations, shifted further and further away from the labor process. In the period 1840 to 1880, when Marx searched the world panorama for signs of emancipatory stirrings, his eyes fixed on the English, French and German factory workers, the proletariat that resisted the harsh discipline of the new labor process. His hopes for the transformation of civil society lay with a class that was becoming or was sure to become the most numerous, the most downtrodden, the most exploited but at the same time the most necessary to modern capitalism.

Marx tended to overlook or at least to downplay the more ambiguous features of the situation. The most militant rebels came from two groups that were in transition: the artisans who were losing their independence as they moved into the factories; and the peasants, who came to the factories from the countryside, a world apart from the industrializing cities. The fact that these groups may have resisted capitalism because of the change in habits it demanded of them rather than because of its intrinsic structure was not highlighted in Marx's