

An Investigation into the Genesis of Subjective Thinking: A Discussion on Primitive Thinking and the Origin of Subjectivity

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Abstract: The modern theory of subjectivity has been grappling with the binary dilemma between "subject supremacy" and "object primacy," which necessitates a re-examination at the ontogenetic level of subjective cognitive formation. Subjectivity is not an a priori entity but a cognitive structure gradually developed through practical experience. Primitive thinking, as the foundation of human cognition, emerged and evolved under the dual influence of neural feedback mechanisms and survival practices. Subjects and objects are not fixed entities in practice but rather cognitive positions within thought processes, whose proportions shift with technological advancements and social structural transformations. Consequently, differences in subjectivity paradigms across civilizations primarily stem from variations in cognitive content and historical embedding patterns, rather than fundamental divergences in cognitive mechanisms themselves.

1. Introduction

Discussions on the progress and development of human society have always revolved around the issue of subjectivity. Current academic discourse on subjectivity has primarily formed two influential fundamental orientations: one is the subjectivity established by Descartes and Kant, who defined humans as independent, autonomous, and rational beings [1]. Within this framework, subjects are endowed with the capacity for self-legislation and self-grounding, continuously strengthening their control over the world through scientific rationality—subjects can break free from divine and traditional constraints, becoming initiators of logic without requiring explanations from history, society, or the Other; while objects are relegated to a subordinate position outside the subject [2]. Concurrent with the exaltation of subjectivity is critical reflection on it, which has gained significant traction with modernity's advancement. Critics proclaim the crisis of subjectivity [3], viewing subjects as objects of social discipline and construction [4] incapable of achieving freedom detached from the Other, society, and nature. Conversely, objects have regained prominence, even subverting and dominating subjects [5]. Admittedly, both celebrations and critiques of subjectivity since modern times have provoked profound reflection. Yet like pendulum swings always swinging from one end to the other, the current object-first tendency promoted by some scholars as a remedy still warrants scrutiny for its potential bias correction risks [6].

However, whether through the elevation or deconstruction of subjectivity, its theoretical foundation fundamentally revolves around how subjective consciousness perceives and evaluates human subjectivity itself. In other words, subjectivity is not some a priori ontology, but rather the subjective mind's understanding and assessment of its existential state, agency capabilities, and relationships with the world. Critiques of subjectivity likewise stem from judgments made by subjective cognition. In this context, contemporary debates over subject-object relationships primarily reflect the divergent orientations of subjective thinking across historical periods, rather than negating the biological origins of human beings' inherent drive for survival and development. We must avoid abandoning these "roots" and falling into the trap of "judging outcomes by outcomes." If humanity indeed possesses a shared matrix that nurtures subjective cognition, then discussions on subjectivity should temporarily step back from modern philosophical timelines to trace the more primordial historical stages of subjective thought formation.

Therefore, primitive thinking must be reintroduced into theoretical discourse. Since the publication of Giambattista Vico's "The New Science" in 18th-century Italy, it has garnered significant academic attention and became a prominent field in cultural anthropology during the 20th century [7]. Regrettably, existing research predominantly focuses on tribal societies that retain primitive lifestyles from modern times, relying primarily on ethnographic materials for analysis. While this approach has laid a solid foundation for primitive thinking studies, it has also limited our understanding of the historical evolution mechanisms and internal structures of primitive cognition. Particularly, certain perspectives that view primitive thinking as the antithesis of civilized thought often overlook their continuity at the level of cognitive mechanisms, inadvertently reinforcing the explanatory paradigm of cultural centrism.

In reality, regardless of the significant differences in cognitive content between primitive humans and civilized beings, the concept of subjectivity itself emerged and gradually developed during primitive times. It was precisely this early form of subjectivity that continuously adjusted its structural framework through prolonged interactions with the natural environment, thereby creating the foundational conditions for the subsequent diversification of civilized thought patterns. Consequently, the core question extends beyond whether primitive thinking was "rational" to examining the structural characteristics of primitive subjectivity and the practical conditions and cognitive tensions under which it evolved-this constitutes the central theme of this study. By tracing the origins and developmental trajectory of primitive subjectivity, we aim not only to expand the historical depth of subjectivity research but also to provide a more inclusive genetic reference framework for contemporary theoretical explorations in this field.

2. Origin and Development of Primitive Thinking

The exploration of primitive thinking cannot rely on direct textual records from prehistoric times, nor can it be traced through historical inquiries. However, primitive culture and primitive thinking are inherently intertwined, and interpretations of thought patterns can be sought within cultural contexts [8]. European and American cultural anthropologists have extensively discussed primitive culture and primitive thinking, with the fundamental distinction between primitive and civilized states being the key question they strive to resolve. The core of their debates revolves around whether primitive thinking adheres to logical principles (see Table 1).

Table 1: Disputes on the difference between primitive and civilization(○ represents quantity, □ represents quality)

| representative personage | Cultural differences | mindset difference | Representative views |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---|
| Represented by Taylor and Fraser | □ | ○ | Culturally, they represent two distinct types of cultures; however, in essence, they are derived from the same logical reasoning as civilized humans. |
| Represented by Vico and Levitt-Brewer | □ | □ | Discard the assumption of unchanging logic, as the two types exhibit fundamental differences. |
| Represented by Boas and Struss | ○ | ○ | The two types appear to differ significantly, yet their fundamental intellectual characteristics are essentially consistent. The distinction lies solely in whether thinking is "domesticated." |

Most scholars such as Taylor and Strauss argue that there is no qualitative difference between primitive thinking and civilized thinking, but Levi-Bruhl explicitly challenged this homogeneity view. As a scholar who emphasized differences and focused solely on them [9], he boldly broke through the mainstream opinions of his time, proposing concepts such as "primitive logic" and "interpenetration law" to reveal the uniqueness of primitive thinking [10]. However, how does thinking create the cultural differences between primitive and civilized societies? How does primitive logic evolve into civilized thinking? The ethnographic methods relied upon by cultural anthropology for studying modern remnants of primitive tribes have yet to provide sufficient explanations. Less attention has been paid to the fact that Mr.Liu Wenyong, a Chinese philosopher-historian, in his book "The Long Historical Origins: New Explorations of Primitive Thinking and Primitive Culture", reconstructs the process of primitive thinking's emergence, striving to unravel its gradual evolutionary trajectory. Compared to direct comparisons between primitive and civilized societies, Mr.Liu approaches from the operational mechanisms of the human brain, arguing that the emergence of internal feedback in the brain marks the origin of human thinking. The non-natural tools created by primitive humans through internal feedback serve as objective signs of the first appearance of human thinking in history [11]. From this perspective, it can be concluded that human thinking, in terms of function, does not differ between primitive and civilized forms; both are essentially special systems for humans to grasp objects and process information, though differing in their core components. Primitive thinking primarily relies on imagery, while civilized thinking later evolved to be dominated by abstract concepts.

Intrinsic brain feedback refers to the cognitive capacity where humans no longer rely on direct interaction with external objects. Through internal neural representations and memory-cognition processing, information processing and decision-making reasoning can be accomplished. As shown in Figure 1[12], prior to the development of the BCAAD intrinsic feedback loop, human cognitive behavior heavily depended on immediate sensory perception of external objects and responses based on genetic predispositions. When perceived objects fell outside the sensory range and information input was absent, behavioral outputs lost their basis, terminating the feedback process. In essence, the human brain initially served merely as a conduit for conditioned reflexes, incapable of storing or processing information. The evolution of the neocortex later enabled humans to develop the ability to process and reprocess sensory inputs without direct object interaction, allowing pre-programmed behavioral adjustments before actions occurred. This intrinsic brain feedback mechanism endows individuals with internal dimensions such as memory, integration, and

regulation, freeing cognition from immediate sensory constraints. Building upon this foundation, humans can perceive and evaluate their environment and behaviors, thereby generating self-awareness-what we call subjectivity. However, primitive-era object processing typically involved superficial, vivid, and concrete imagery. Most early humans lacked the ability to grasp intrinsic properties or abstract conceptual understanding. For instance, while Eskimos could easily distinguish dozens of ice types, they couldn't recognize the categorical concept of "ice" -a phenomenon Mr.Liu Wenying termed "imagery thinking." It must be recognized that even this level of imagistic thinking, which appears infantile to civilized humans, did not develop overnight but underwent prolonged and complex evolution. Academic consensus remains divided regarding the classification of primitive cognition stages. In contrast, Mr.Liu's three-stage theory (see Table 2[12]), grounded in multidisciplinary evidence from archaeology, paleoanthropology, and primitive social history with differentiated cognitive benchmarks, demonstrates greater systematic coherence and rationality. The subsequent analysis will therefore employ this tripartite framework to examine the operational characteristics of primitive humans' subjectivity from the perspectives of subject-object dynamics.

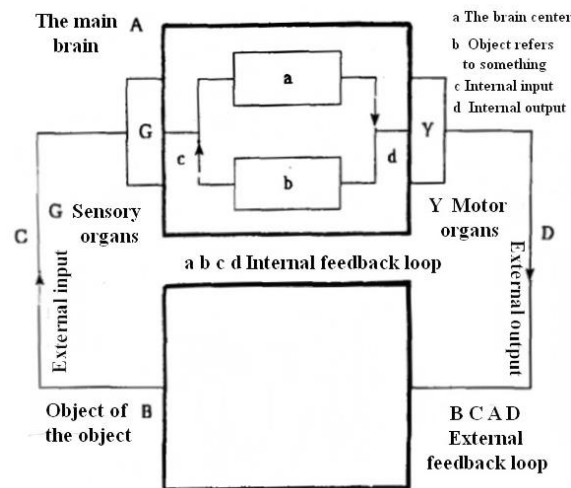


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of internal and external feedback in the brain

Table 2: Three Stages of Primitive Thinking

| Match by installment | length of time | Characteristics of stage-based thinking |
|---|--|---|
| low paleolithic Early to late hominins, Homo erectus Bloodline Family Commune | From over 3 million years ago to 300,000 or 200,000 years ago | Imagery and action operate simultaneously, with the two interwoven. Image operation directly depends on action operation. Internal feedback directly depends on external feedback. |
| Middle to late Paleolithic period to Middle Stone Age Early to late Homo sapiens matrilineal clan commune | 300,000 to 200,000 years ago to 8,000 to 3,000 years ago (with significant variations in timeframes across different regions) | Image operation does not have to directly depend on action operation. It can process information and program from image to image. Internal feedback through imagery processing can precede external feedback. |
| Neolithic Barbarian (late Homo sapiens) Transition from matrilineal to patrilineal clan system | From 8000 BC to modern times (There are significant variations in start and end times across regions) | The level of image generalization and abstraction improves, showing a trend toward symbolization of images and generating initial simple concepts. The thinking form consists of a large number of images and a small number of simple concepts. |

3. Subject and Object of Primitive Thinking

From the experiential perspective of primitive humans, all human practices must engage closely with their objects. The existence of primitive subjectivity enables individuals to acquire object information through sensory perception, process it by integrating memory, experience, and emotions in the brain, and conduct evaluations and adjustments prior to action. In natural interactions, subjects subconsciously perceive the relative existence between themselves and objects. Beyond material production controllable through cognition, subjects also imbue objects with anthropomorphic imagery, actively seeking egalitarian and mutually beneficial relationships. On this foundation, the agency of subjects and the materiality of objects coexist symbiotically, without any inherent value orientation favoring one over the other.

During the "image-action" phase, hominids possessed only single-purpose intentions in their cognitive processes with minimal memory capacity. Their consciousness could only perceive how actions affected immediate objects, lacking clear distinctions between self and non-self. They remained unaware of initiating actions and struggled to retain explicit mental representations of objects. When objects disappeared from view, they would merely search briefly at their last known location, abandoning the search entirely if no trace remained-as if the object had never existed. At this stage, the subject-object relationship had not yet been differentiated within their cognitive framework.

As experimental trials accumulated and brain structures evolved, later hominins gradually recognized that certain actions originated from their own consciousness, enabling autonomous behavioral regulation and outcome anticipation. Actions like picking up objects or throwing them to displace objects allowed subjects to affirm their identity as action initiators. However, it was only when throwing positions deviated from expectations that they developed vague perceptions of "objects." Within this tension between "controllable" and "uncontrollable" states, cognitive structures distinguishing subject from object gradually emerged. Consider this: without mental differentiation between subject and object, how could human cognition transcend immediate actions? Without pre-processing information, editing behavioral patterns, and achieving desired outcomes in advance, the creation of diverse stone tools marking the "image-image stage" would remain impossible. Conversely, without the initial emergence of single-intentional thinking and extensive practical experimentation in the first stage, subjects and objects would remain indistinguishable, let alone the development of conscious thought processes.

Subsequently, after primitive thought differentiated between subject and object, how did the concepts of subject and object evolve? Overall, the concepts of subject and object exhibited divergent trajectories during the evolution of primitive thought. The path of object transformation progressed from the specific to the general, from the individual to the whole, while the progression of subject development followed a route from the collective to the individual.

3.1 Evolution of Object-Oriented Concepts

First, the transition from concrete to general object recognition signifies a cognitive shift in perceptual objects from identifying specific attributes to recognizing universal characteristics. During the Ape Man era, tool-making exhibited high randomness with no established production standards, indicating that stable object imagery had not yet formed in their cognitive systems, allowing only recognition of tangible sensory stimuli. The Homo sapiens phase marked a breakthrough in object image discernment. Cultural anthropologists have repeatedly marveled at the linguistic precision of specialized terms-such as a tribe using a single word to refer exclusively to "two-year-old injured cows." As technological advancements increased tool diversity and standardized forms, the intense pressure of image storage compelled categorization based on visual

similarity and functional consistency. This classification process persisted throughout *Homo sapiens* history, reaching its peak during the "image-concept" stage where conceptualization emerged, enabling multiple specific instances to be represented by shared mental images. This paradigm shift marked the transition from concrete to generalized object cognition.

Secondly, the transition from specific to general objects manifests in cognitive shifts from individual to holistic perspectives, specifically through the combination of similar and dissimilar object imagery. Taking dissimilar imagery combinations as an example: bows and arrows bear no inherent connection with animals. Yet when the subject's cognitive capacity accommodates multiple imagery types and incorporates instrumental imagery into subject-object interactions, seemingly unrelated tools and animals can form new associations based on shared "functions" like hunting with bows. Similarly, whether through anthropomorphizing animals or dehumanizing humans, or through various magical rituals and surreal representations, these phenomena demonstrate how subjects integrate disparate object imagery into unified semantic systems. With the advent of productive economies like agriculture and animal husbandry, subjects increasingly require advanced imagery integration capabilities to achieve sophisticated levels of division of labor, collaboration, and management.

In essence, the progression from particularity to universality reflects the subject's cognitive capacity for object categorization and abstraction. The transition from individual to collective highlights the subject's experiential ability to form associative connections and construct structural frameworks. While these dual developmental trajectories coexist, they simultaneously pose inherent risks: The emphasis on universality and integration inevitably leads to the neglect of object-specific individual differences, which may become latent blind spots in future conceptual-dominated civilizational thought structures.

3.2 Evolution of Subject Concepts

When primitive thought first enabled the manipulation of physical forms through bodily movements, the concept of subjectivity began to emerge. However, it was only through the capacity of thought to differentiate between subject and object that primitive humans truly assumed the identity of a "subject." Unlike the conceptual evolution from concrete to abstract objects, the notion of subject underwent a progression from collective subjectivity to individual subjectivity.

During the "Image-Action" stage, the concept of subjectivity remains rudimentary. *Homo habilis* possesses only minimal internal feedback mechanisms, struggling to integrate imagery with personal experiences. Their behaviors are predominantly governed by animal instincts and constrained by singular intentions. Under these conditions, communal living arrangements become the primary adaptation to harsh environments [13]. By the "Image-Image" stage, collective consciousness continues to dominate cognition while individual awareness begins to emerge. For instance, within tribes, *Homo sapiens* generally regard tribal members and tools as collectively owned assets. Yet between tribes, individuals often serve as representatives of the collective—any individual violation signifies damage to the entire community. The strong tribal unity makes it difficult to perceive individual differences. Notably, subjects at this stage can mentally discern "who does what." The emergence of symbolic figures like hunting leaders, tribal chiefs, and shamanic priests internalizes these "special individuals" as independent mental representations, laying the groundwork for individual consciousness. The "Image-Concept" stage sees accumulated labor achievements—pottery production, crop cultivation, and livestock breeding—significantly reinforce recognition of human agency. Individual physiological traits gain affirmation, as evidenced by mythical creatures like the hand-bearing swan [14] in the "Classic of Mountains and Seas". More crucially, productive economic division of labor grants certain individuals authority to oversee

specific tasks, establishing them as symbolic representatives. This process deepens the subject's understanding of individuality.

In summary, the shift in subjectivity from collective to individual represents a cognitive evolution in primitive thinking—from a natural, unified "we" to an active, distinct "I." Individual consciousness does not emerge in isolation but is continuously reinforced through self-awareness acquired through productive practice. This individual-oriented subjectivity ultimately permeates civilized societies, forming the foundational basis for certain civilizational subjectivity frameworks.

3.3 Subject and Object in Thinking

The evolution of object-oriented and subject-oriented concepts demonstrates the variability and dynamic constructiveness of subject-object relationships in cognitive processes. In other words, the terms "subject" and "object" do not refer to actors and targets in practical contexts, but rather to cognitive positions within mental frameworks. While conceptual shifts originate from internal feedback mechanisms, they ultimately influence real-world subject-object interactions through practical behaviors. From this perspective, although the characteristics of subject-oriented thinking in the three primitive cognitive stages exhibit phased development, two consistent patterns emerge [15].

Firstly, the perceptual objects input into cognitive processes are not the objective entities themselves, but rather composite representations formed through selective information processing by sensory organs intertwined with the subject's memory and emotions. Thus, perceptual objects inherently contain both subjective and objective components, with differences across stages primarily reflected in their proportional distribution: early-stage perception dominated by objective elements gradually gives way to subjective agency through cognitive categorization and abstraction. Secondly, the subject's self-perception remains inherently partial and dynamic. Individuals continuously adjust self-evaluations based on practical outcomes and deviations from prior expectations. Consequently, in human-object interactions, advancements in material means of nature engagement often correlate positively with subjective self-assessment. In interpersonal contexts, the division of labor within productive economies and the acquisition of managerial positions drive the emergence of individual consciousness.

Therefore, both the subject and object in thought are related to subjective judgments, which are shaped by innate endowments and postnatal construction. Modern medicine generally holds that differences in genetics and prenatal transmission can lead to acquired psychological states and behavioral orientations [16]. Extending this view of innate endowment differences to primitive times may also apply; for example, in comparisons of stone tool styles from the global Paleolithic era, researchers found that compared to the West, stone tool remains unearthed in China exhibited characteristics of "practicality over refinement, inheritance over innovation" [17]. Considering the limited global mobility at the time and the brain structure of early humans being nearly identical to that of modern humans, the divergence in stone tool-making styles between China and the West can be inferred as cognitive and behavioral preferences shaped by innate endowments. Additionally, postnatal construction stems not only from individual experience and understanding of that experience but also from continuous input of external information. The highly collective survival structure of the entire primitive period was not only a necessity for adapting to the environment but also demonstrated the power of others in shaping cognition—individuals formed their understanding of "self" and "us" through others.

Overall, the "cognitive subject" and "perceptual object" within subjective cognition do not equate to actual subjects and objects in practical contexts, yet exhibit mutually constitutive characteristics (see Figure 2). Changes in practical objects influence the subject's self-cognition and

object perception evaluation. Conversely, adjustments in subjective thinking feed back into practical processes, altering practical objects. Driven by cognitive tension, continuous productive practices keep subjective thinking in a dynamic adjustment state, prompting cognitive subjects and perceptual objects to seek structural equilibrium through constant adaptation. Taking the relationship between Homo sapiens and celestial phenomena as an example: during the "image-image" stage, Homo sapiens lacked predictive capabilities and coping mechanisms for natural disasters, placing their cognitive subjects in a disadvantaged position relative to perceptual objects. At this stage, they alleviated intense cognitive tension by personifying perceptual objects. By the "image-concept" stage, Homo sapiens gradually recognized certain natural patterns. Increased predictability of perceptual objects led to more positive self-evaluations and disaster response experiences, unconsciously guiding subjects to delve into object intrinsic principles. Coupled with the creation of artifacts like pottery and the adoption of agricultural production systems, the strong dependence on external worlds began to shift [18]. The subject-object relationship in subjective cognition appeared to tilt toward "object weakness and subject strength," though this subconscious tendency persisted in primitive thinking patterns.

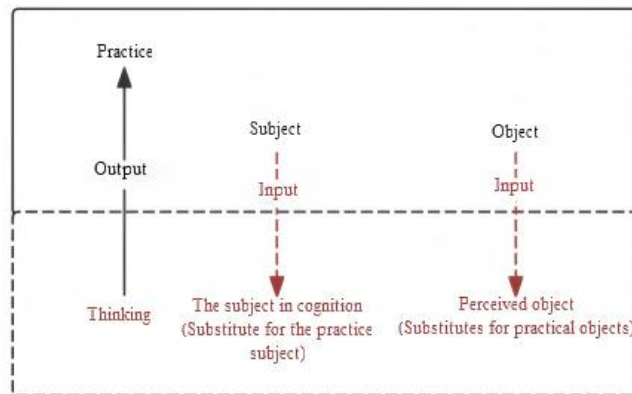


Figure 2: Schematic Diagram of Mutual Construction between Thinking and Practice

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of both form and content, primitive thinking can indeed be regarded as the starting point of human cognition. With the emergence and development of neural feedback mechanisms, early humans gradually developed the ability to anticipate and regulate their behaviors through practical activities, marking their first emergence as "subjective agents" in historical processes. Through the mutual stimulation of thought and practice, primitive humans created diverse and enduring prehistoric cultural achievements that laid the foundation for subsequent civilizational thinking. This perspective reveals that primitive thinking is neither a "mysterious" or "irrational" form disconnected from civilized thought, nor does it exhibit discontinuity. Instead, it demonstrates clear continuity and unity at the structural level of subjective cognition.

The emergence of primitive subjectivity requires two fundamental prerequisites: the developmental maturity of brain tissue and the advancement of practical activities. The mismatch between practice and cognition becomes a critical driver of cognitive evolution when objective information emerging from practical contexts exceeds an individual's existing cognitive processing capacity, creating cognitive tension. Through continuous gap bridging, individuals progressively enhance their abilities in information integration, prediction, and control. Unlike modern subjectivity theories that indulge in abstract distinctions between subject-object concepts, primitive thinking manifests as a practice-centered framework shaped by survival needs-where cognition evolves through practice, while practice simultaneously refines cognitive structures.

In the cognitive relationship between subject and object, the subject and object in practice cannot be factually distinguished; they coexist symbiotically throughout practice. However, at the level of thought, to enhance information processing and predictive behavior capabilities, the internal feedback mechanism prompts the brain to differentiate between subject and object, thereby constructing the subject in cognition and the perceived object. For primitive humans, the close connection and harmonious relationship between subject and object, or even their unity (such as a person being an animal), could significantly alleviate cognitive tension when facing unknown objects, hence their subject-object relationship lacked hierarchical differences. With technological progress and cognitive evolution, the agency of the subject in cognition gradually strengthened, while the perceived object began to require abstraction and integration. The weight of subject-object relationships in cognitive thinking started to tilt toward a "subject-oriented, object-assisted" trend. This evolution of cognitive structures gave rise to differentiated paradigms of subject thinking in the age of civilization, yielding diverse material achievements and spiritual wealth—such as the Western tradition emphasizing subjective agency and China's mindset advocating object value—both reflecting varying proportions of subject-object structures within their respective civilizations.

In summary, primitive subjectivity thinking, having not yet evolved advanced conceptualization capabilities, more directly reveals the primal state of human cognitive mechanisms—the spontaneous synergy between thought and practice. The pluralistic patterns of subjectivity thinking in civilized eras should be attributed more to differences in cognitive content and historical embedding patterns than fundamental divergences in cognitive mechanisms themselves. Therefore, the varying proportions of subjectivity and objectivity in cognitive structures across civilizations do not inherently possess superiority or inferiority in a priori terms; their rationality depends on alignment with specific historical conditions and practical realities. In this sense, revisiting primitive subjectivity thinking holds not only theoretical-historical value but also methodological implications for contemporary subjectivity studies: Discussions on subjectivity issues must begin with the "generality" of human cognitive mechanisms, then interpret the formation paths of "specificity" within different civilizations and social contexts, rather than absolutizing particular historical periods or cultural experiences as universal models. Only through this approach can subjectivity research avoid theoretical pitfalls of "reversing causality," maintaining necessary historical depth and theoretical flexibility while addressing contemporary subjectivity dilemmas.

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