



Examine the role of the subject and the individual within democratic society. What are the implications of these concepts in a society with a shared history. Answer with reference to Beckett's *Company* and Benjamin's *Concept of History*.

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The role of the individual within modern democracies across the world is a matter of much debate. Democracies by their own definition assert that they ensure the rights of individuals and facilitate their engagement with the formation and ongoing legislation of a government. However, as is most often the case, once a government is formed and begins to legislate on matters affecting individual citizens, tensions can arise when individuals may feel that the government, perhaps one that they themselves did not vote for, seeks to limit or affect their freedoms within society. Thus the very institution that serves to safeguard and protect individual freedoms, when its action is in opposition to the wants of individual citizens, may be seen instead as a coercive power, enforcing policy and ideology onto unwilling citizens. Such domination may also be seen in terms of history as the government form a ruling class with the power to assert their own view of history as objective fact. Equality, a concept that democracy claims to ensure for individuals in relation to the law, appears to fall into Aristotle's category of 'numerical equality'.¹ To be sure this category of equality has its merits, but what it in turn also ensures is that minority opinion, expressed perhaps by a single individual or groups of minority individuals, is made subordinate to the will of the majority. Such subordination may well be the necessary corollary of smooth democratic governance, however it poses many problems for the idea of the individual or as it may be represented in literature, the subject.

One such problem is that of a shared history. Walter Benjamin posits in his essay *On the Concept of History*, that history is always written by the 'victors' who are inevitably the people in power; 'the rulers are the heirs of those that conquered before them'.² We may infer then that the subjects of all history are these victors as they are the ones with whom the historian and society in general empathise, as 'Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time'.³ For Benjamin, the individual must therefore attempt to find his or her own interpretation of history without privileging a narrative that has always the victor as its hero or they will become a mere 'tool of the ruling classes'.⁴

Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* saw the conception of the subject within history by individuals within society as crucial to the emancipation of oppressed classes in countries throughout the modern world. Working within a Marxist framework, Freire reminds his reader that 'There is no history without mankind' and that

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1130b-1132b; cf. Plato, *Laws*, VI.757b-c) (p.153)

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken, 1969), p.256

³ *Ibid*, p.256

⁴ *Ibid*, p.255

individuals must not be ‘denied their right to participate in history’.⁵ Freire argues that individuals must leave behind the status of *objects*, to assume the status of historical *Subjects* [original italics]⁶ in order to emancipate themselves and assert their existence in opposition to the homogenous conception of history offered to them by the ruling classes. Freire, like Benjamin, identifies the coercive power of a universal or ‘homogenous course of history’ that may be used to subjugate individuals within society, enforcing a conception of history that only empathises with and thus privileges the ‘victor’.⁷ Such a conception for Benjamin and Freire may lead to individuals, despite sharing many democratic freedoms, having their consciousness manipulated so as to automatically empathise with the rulers of their government. This empathy erodes the ability of the individual to forge their own history based on their own memory and empathy with whosoever they choose in history.

For Benjamin, there is great danger in accepting a ‘continuum of history’, reifying contemporary rulers as inevitable products of a singular narrative of history that guarantees their presence, for to do so is to ignore the ‘oppressed class[es]’ with whom it is more natural for current oppressed classes to empathise.⁸ Thus the alternative to this single ‘continuum of history’ must be in the hands of individuals within society who need to create counter-narratives in history and to resist the erroneous path of ‘progress’ by making themselves the subjects of history. This process means identifying moments in history where the ‘essentially unstoppable’ idea of progress is in doubt, and where there was a possibility of change and new political orders and making these ‘moment[s] of danger’ relevant to the present.⁹ The task for individuals who do not belong to the ruling class within modern democracies is to recognise their own position as an exploited class within that system and to recognise their inherent opposition to singular narratives that serve only to justify a particular ruling class. Through this opposition, individuals may appropriate fragments of the past and make them relevant to their own situation, recognising the inherent ‘barbarism’ and ‘nameless drudgery’ that forms the necessary bi-product of the achievements of past rulers.¹⁰ Realizing that the ‘nameless’ drudgery ascribed to the past oppressed classes is their own fate, individuals within democratic society can thus attempt to name the ‘nameless’ and salvage the forgotten oppressed individuals from historical obscurity so as to ultimately understand the historiography of their own position, enabling them to ‘act, as well as reflect upon the reality to be transformed.’¹¹

A contemporary criticism of Marxist thought is that its insistence on economic categories of class, that is, those who own the means of production and those who do not and are thus exploited, negates the fact that the working class as a political group are plural. Thus, culturally speaking, it may seem to be naive to imagine them unified in all their diversity and differing ideologies. Further, the Marxist position to assert a ‘true’ understanding of social and economic processes itself may be seen to impose an ideology and paradigm of thought on people that it claims to seek the emancipation of. If Benjamin’s ‘oppressed class’ are to emancipate themselves it seems reasonable to expect that the ideas and thought behind their revolution will be based upon their own home-grown ideologies, not ones imposed upon them by political thinkers.¹² Ultimately the Marxist assumption of political truth may be seen as itself an assault on individual citizens who, regardless of their economic situation, should not have ideology imposed upon them. This imposition of ideology and political analysis

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2006), p.130

⁶ Ibid, p.160

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969), p.263

⁸ Ibid, p.261; p.260.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Benjamin, Ibid, p.256

¹¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2006) p.130

¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969), p.260

would make them not 'subjects' of their situation and history, but objects of political ideology and would thus not make them a truly emancipated revolutionary class within Freire's framework of analysis.

However, Freire's preoccupation with the idea of the subject manages to bypass this criticism through his theory of pedagogy. Freire opposes all knowledge that is transmitted in a manner so as to make the learners objects of information and thus produces an innovative theory on the transmission of thought and political analysis that allows all individuals to remain subjects in their understanding of history and knowledge in general. Freire identifies the paradigm of teaching whereby 'knowledge', a concept endowed with the principles of objective truth, is transmitted to individuals without question or discourse as a 'banking education' in which ruling classes and their associated ideology and interpretations of history are passed down to citizens as objective fact and as a singular narrative.¹³ He criticizes this system for making objects of the individuals who are taught. Therefore, in order to maintain agency and subjectivity in benefactors of education, Freire suggests a 'dialogical character of education' in which ideas and concepts are analysed and discussed and not merely transmitted, allowing individuals to interpret events and ideas on their own terms.¹⁴ In the context of history this allows individuals to understand and learn about social processes around them and to associate them with their own lives, creating their own interpretation of events and ideas that is valued and facilitated by the dialogical process. This process allows a freedom of thought that although conceptually supported and valued by modern democracies is not always present in their pedagogical institutions, as instead of individuals learning a universalised conception of history they are allowed the freedom to interpret history on their own terms. Further, dialogical approaches to pedagogy allow the conception of knowledge not as a universal abstract notion of truth but as an object that itself may be subjected to investigation and criticism.

In Beckett's enigmatic text *Company* we are presented with 'a voice [that] comes to one in the dark' (p.3). The status of the voice is unclear; it may be that the protagonist who is 'on his back in the dark' (p.3) has devised this voice 'for company' (p.16) or that the voice has devised the 'hearer' for the same purpose. In all the ambiguity and elusiveness of the text, however, the reader detects the issue at stake is the idea of the subject, in this case seemingly a subject stripped of his own memories and physical faculties, who is intent on finding company. The text plays with the literary convention of the subject with limited use of the pronoun 'I'; the protagonist is referred to as 'one' and 'he' as well as in the second person, 'you' that 'marks the voice' (p.3). However the voice that speaks to the 'hearer' appears to have an intimate knowledge of the protagonist's memories and himself has a similar physical situation 'in the dark' (p.36) and the reader may infer, though not conclude that the protagonist has devised the voice himself 'for company' (p.3). Such a separation of memory from the individual leads to a conception of a schizophrenic subject, and one that seems to be dependent on another repeating its memories. Thus the reader is represented with two distinct subjects but may infer that they in fact are part of the same subject.

The fact that Beckett's protagonist cannot recognise his own memories calls into question their objective reality. The voice, when intimating the memories in the second person, asserts them as a true fact, occasionally telling the 'hearer' directly 'You have never forgotten' certain aspects of the story.¹⁵ The implications of this separation of memory from the individual are as various as they are ultimately ambiguous. However, it remains clear that Beckett is attempting to explore the status of memory, challenging the automatic assertion that memories are personal, subjective and unaffected by society.

¹³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2006) p.130) p.73

¹⁴ Ibid p.93

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Company etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.6

Memory, as it is related in Beckett's *Company* serves as a personal history of the protagonist, picking out choice and personal occurrences in his past. The memories are fairly unextraordinary in their aspect, relating domestic scenes of a boy walking home with his mother and the language suggests a specific voice and subject experiencing the scene in a subjective manner with almost lyrical descriptions of 'sun...above the crest of the rise' (p.5) such that under normal conditions a reader might identify the story as similar to their own memories. However, despite the apparent normality of the memories, Beckett frames the memory in confusion, creating doubt as to who the memory belongs to and from whence it has come. This confusion is never resolved as both the 'voice' of the story and the 'hearer' cannot work out how they relate to each other or whether they even exist. The 'hearer' doubts the status of the memories and ponders that he may have devised the memories and indeed the voice that speaks them 'for company' (p.13). Despite this ambiguity however, the reader is compelled to examine the status of memory and its relation to the subject. Benjamin would have it that a capitalist democracy, due to the powers of the ruling class, imposes history and thus collective cultural memory on the subject, making them objects of ideology. Here, although Beckett offers us no conception of the social or mechanisms of the situation, we have a similar instance of where we memory and history can no longer be conceived as purely subjective, but the product of an entirely more complex and social process, where ideology and specific historical narratives impose themselves on the individual.

Beckett's text may be seen as the ongoing battle of the individual to understand itself as a subject with agency over its own ideas and memory. As the text goes on, and Beckett explores the relationship between the 'voice' and the 'hearer' it has been suggested by many critics that the two subjects represent two aspects of the protagonist that has become a 'schizophrenic subject' whose multiple subjectivities attempt to reconcile themselves with one another but ultimately fail, as the philosophical object of the singular subject, is in fact a social construct and an idealization of the individual.¹⁶ The impossibility of the singular subject, a largely post-modernist concept, is explained by Deleuze who asserts that 'we must always contemplate something else in order to be filled with an image of ourselves'.¹⁷ The implication of this appears to be that as the subject is always conceived of in relation to others, this relation ties the conception of self and the subject down to the 'something else', meaning it cannot be viewed as singular. Therefore the 'subject' is a bi-product of the social as it may only exist in relation to others, meaning that an individual agency that claims to exist outside of the social is made impossible.

Deleuze's necessity of an individual for a 'something' else with which to understand itself, serves to elucidate the essential paradox at the heart of Beckett's *Company*. If we accept Gendron's analysis of the schizophrenic subject in *Company* that attempts to 'solidify an image of himself', then we may question why on the one hand this subject attempts to create himself as a singular subject, whose subjective existence is distinct from others, whilst on the other hand feeling an inevitable desire and 'need for company... [as] a matter of desperation'.¹⁸ This need for company within the Beckett's text forms the essential theme of the piece with the repetition of the motif 'What an addition to company that would be' (p.12) pervading the text. The core of this paradox however seems to be explained in Deleuze's assertion of the need for 'something else' to understand ourselves. For Deleuze, the subject necessitates another for contemplation and thus a stable autonomous subject is impossible. An individual may strive, as Beckett's protagonist appears to attempt, to solidify itself as a singular subject, but their attempt is in vain.

¹⁶ Sarah Gendron, 'A Cogito for the Dissolved Self', *Journal of Modern Literature*, (Volume 28: 2004), p.51

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp.74-75

¹⁸ Gendron, 'A Cogito for the Dissolved Self', p.52

Beckett uses the abortive attempt for individuals to understand themselves as singular subjects to dramatise the absurdity of the humanity's desire to create meaning out of nothingness. In *Endgame*, Hamm, whose name ironically evokes Shakespeare's Hamlet, is presented as an anti-hero so unheroic that he starves his own parents to death during the course of the play. Through this depiction of Hamm, Beckett questions the literary convention of the virtuous hero. However, in *Company*, Beckett's concept of the hero has developed such that he questions the ability of an individual not only to be a hero but their ability 'to be' as a single subject at all, thus challenging the nature of a 'subject' within literature. In addition, the challenging of the "subject" puts language itself into question as language's conception of syntax demands the existence of a 'subject' in its sentences structures. Thus Beckett not only challenges the ability of the individual to exist without depending on another through which to conceive itself, but also dissects the language that he is writing in, exposing the fallacy of the singular subject and thus deeming language unfit to express thought adequately. This challenging of language is furthered by Beckett's word games that appear to reduce language to absurd riddles: 'Can the crawling creator crawling in the same create dark as his creature create while crawling?' (p.34). This deconstruction of language creates a further paradox to Beckett's conception of the subject as if the subject is always in search of another in order to solidify an image of itself then its task is impossible, as language, reduced by Beckett to cliché and nonsense, cannot possibly communicate the thoughts of the individual to another.

Despite the apparent nihilism of Beckett's literature, it is also possible to see Beckett's insistence on meaninglessness not as a purely pessimistic message but as an attempt to enrich human understanding. Benjamin and Freire point out the need for individuals within society to resist singular narratives of history that exclude themselves as subjects and Beckett may also be seen to encourage this in his reader. Beckett's destruction of conventional chronological narrative and plot within his story may be seen to align with Benjamin's insistence that history and memory should not be seen as single linear narrative but as fragments pulled together by individuals to bring meaning to the present. Beckett disallows a linear narrative with temporal indicators, instead presenting humanity in its bare essence, deconstructing all of the institutions and cultural ideologies around him. Beckett points out that all philosophy and ideology is ephemeral; temporal indicators therefore become meaningless within the infinite abyss of time and space and all that remains is humanity 'alone' 'in the dark', yearning for understanding. Such a conception of man in its bare essence immediately achieves what many Marxist critics have attempted in the past; to strip away all of the socially constructed meanings of a specific time, exposing them as ephemeral institutions that soon will be reduced to dust. Such a conception of meaning in society liberates the individual to the understanding that nothing is historically inevitable, demonstrating to the reader that society as it exists should not be reified and that the ruling class should not be believed when they call themselves the inevitable product of 'progress'. These conceptions of reality are shown to be fallacies such that a reader may thus come to the conclusion that there is a possibility of an alternative to things as they are, an ability to conceive history differently and to appropriate history not as a linear narrative but as fragments that be re-constituted in many different ways.

Therefore, we may conclude that freedom within democracies is dependent on individuals having a conception of history that is not merely a linear narrative that automatically empathises with the 'victor'. Instead, individuals must regard history as something which may be appropriated and interpreted to produce multiple meanings in the present. Benjamin demands that history should not serve to merely reify current ruling classes as inevitable but that individuals who feel marginalized should reinterpret history to identify moments of 'danger' where an alternative reality was possible. In *Company* we see Beckett

explore the notion of the “subject” and the individual as concepts that demands criticism and comprehension. His text ultimately encourages the reader to conceive of him or herself not as a singular subject, who has agency over their own memories and history, but as a complex combination of various subjects whose dependence on ‘company’ means that their consciousness is fundamentally affected by society and that memory can thus be imposed onto the individual as can ideas of universal collective history.

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