

The Interpellated Subjects: Reflections on Subjectivity in Women's Reproductive Choices

Haiyue Zhang*

School of philosophy and sociology, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730107, China

*Corresponding author's email: hai-yue.zhang@outlook.com

Abstract

The global fertility rate continues to decline, tied to diminishing fertility intentions among women. When popular feminist discourse evaluates women's choices in the name of "subjectivity", the "independent self" it invokes has been deconstructed by postmodern philosophy—from Foucault's analysis of power to Althusser's theory of interpellation, the subject is never pre-existing but constructed within the operation of power. Neoliberalism capitalizes on this: it reshapes the individual as "human capital", stripping feminism's core demands from emancipatory politics and re-encoding them into market logic. Althusser reveals that when a woman identifies with the call to "choose autonomously", she is constructed as a subject submitting to neoliberal value criteria. True emancipation may lie not in becoming the self-managing "subject", but in returning to the life-experience of the "self" uncolonized by economic efficiency. The Marxist concept of "alienation" offers an alternative measure for re-examining reproductive choices.

Keywords

Subjectivity; Reproductive choice; Interpellation; Alienation.

1. Introduction

The global fertility rate continues its significant decline. According to the Global Burden of Disease Study 2024, the global TFR fell from 4.84 in 1950 to 2.23 in 2021, projected to reach 1.59 by 2100; 110 countries already had below-replacement fertility [1]. This structural transformation spreads from high-income to middle-income countries [2]. Behind this macro-level picture lies a question: at the micro-level, what is the relationship between this widespread decline in fertility and women's reproductive intentions?

Fertility intention, understood as an individual's or family's expression of their desired childbearing after evaluating various information and practical conditions, constitutes the ideational precursor to actual reproductive behaviour [3]. Research reveals multiple social dimensions influencing women's reproductive intentions. New home economics reduces reproductive decision-making to a rational calculation of costs and benefits: childbearing costs include direct expenses plus lost work income and human capital investment—'opportunity cost' [2]. The proliferation of the internet represents another intangible force: it both weakens the binding force of traditional reproductive ethics by disseminating new ideas and squeezes the economic budget available for raising children by stimulating consumption [3]. Empirical research by Chen Weimin et al., based on CGSS2017 data, shows that internet use for entertainment and shopping significantly reduces individual fertility intentions [3]. Concurrently, the relationship between women's social status and reproductive choices presents a more complex picture: numerous cross-national studies have found that the higher a woman's social status, measured by education level, household decision-making power, and economic autonomy, the lower her fertility intention [4]. A systematic review of 68

international studies by Shi Zhilei and Yang Yuxuan concludes that reproductive choice is the result of the interplay between individual preferences and structural social influences; the higher a woman's social status, the stronger her voice in reproductive decisions, yet the lower her fertility intention tends to be [4].

Despite differing perspectives, the explanatory approaches outlined above share a fundamental methodological premise: they reduce reproductive decision-making to some form of interest calculation—whether cost-benefit analysis, consumption budget constraints, or opportunity cost considerations. This discourse undoubtedly possesses powerful explanatory force at the empirical level. However, the problem lies here: when we employ economic efficiency as the yardstick to answer the question of “whether or not to have a child”, have we not already accepted an unexamined premise—namely, that the value of childbearing should, in the final analysis, be measured by its contribution to individual self-interest?

2. The Subject Kidnapped by 'Choice': The Narrowing and Abuse of the Concept of Subjectivity

2.1. What is Subjectivity?

The concept of subjectivity, from Descartes' “Cogito, ergo sum” through Kant to Hegel's “recognition” was always interwoven with self-consciousness, reason, moral responsibility, and relation to the other [5-8].

However, the postmodern philosophy that emerged in the second half of the 20th century posed a fundamental challenge to this tradition of subjectivity. Postmodernism, with its anti-essentialist, anti-rationalist, and decentralized stance, proclaimed the “death of the subject” and questioned the modernist project of subject emancipation [9]. Foucault revealed that the subject is not pre-existing but produced by power/knowledge mechanisms. In *Discipline and Punish*, the subject is constituted through discourse on the body: as the body submits to law, normative discourse forms it; the 'soul' becomes 'the prison of the body' [10]. This implies that the subject is generated in the process of being disciplined and controlled; its “freedom” and “autonomy” are merely effects of the operation of power. Althusser advanced this critique from the perspective of ideology. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser proposed that the subject is constituted through “interpellation”—ideology constitutes individuals as subjects through a “hail”, and in responding to this call, the individual simultaneously and voluntarily submits to the framework of ideology. Althusser's profound insight lies in revealing that subjectivation and submission are two sides of the same process—to become a subject means to accept a set of ideological determinations external to oneself [11]. The postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity provoked profound shockwaves and debates within feminist theory. In these debates, the position of Judith Butler is particularly radical and representative. Building on the theories of subject-construction from Foucault and Althusser, Butler argues that the subject is constituted by power, not a pre-existing free being. She positions feminism as a discourse of subjectivation, advocates for the deconstruction of gender and de-essentialization, and proposes the concept of the “performative” subject: one's subjectivity is never natural, but is shaped in the process of “performance” according to the “script” of the power discourse of dominant norms. Butler refuses to presuppose “women” as political subjects, insisting on the necessity of analysing “women” as the result of certain discursive practices. In her view, the subject is not a presupposition or a product, but a process of continuous redefinition with infinite possibilities [9]. There is no unified, essential female subject, “woman” itself is the result of discursive practices; the subject is always in a process of being repeatedly constituted, and the fissures and excesses of this process may contain the possibility of resistance [12].

2.2. The Abuse of “Subjectivity” in Popular Discourse

It must be clarified that the target is not feminist academic tradition but the emptying of 'subjectivity' into a synonym for 'independent self' in popular discourse, where an abuse occurs [13].

Popular discourse uses 'subjectivity' to denote the ideal 'independent self', while philosophy reveals that this 'self' is itself constructed. This pre-Foucault, pre-Althusser, pre-Butler image remains stuck in a freely choosing individual unaware of how it's constructed.

This conceptual lag leads to a paradox: when we use “subjectivity” to encourage women to “be the master of their own destiny” concerning childbearing, we are effectively using a theoretical tool that reveals the “constructed self” to support an ideal of the “self as independently existing”. More dangerously, because the concept of subjectivity itself contains the dimensions of being “interpellated” and “constructed”, when we guide reproductive decisions with the goal of “becoming a subject”, women may very well be responding to the call of a certain ideology—for instance, the neoliberal demand that women become “self-managing human capital”—mistaking this for “free choice”. Althusser's theory demonstrates its penetrative power here: when a woman identifies with the call “you are an independent subject, you must choose autonomously”, she is in that act of identification constituted as a “subject”, but it is also in this process that she accepts a set of value criteria external to herself, experiencing them as her own free will.

The specific nature of childbearing intensifies the risk inherent in this dislocation. Childbearing is not an ordinary consumer choice or career plan; it is an experience most intimately connected to a woman's body, emotions, and life-experience, belonging properly to the realm of the “self” that is not yet politicized, not yet fully colonized by ideology. Using 'subjectivity'—a politicized concept revealing power's operation—to judge reproductive choices is a category error. Popular discourse encourages women to weigh childbearing against the standard of “whether it embodies my subjectivity”, yet fails to inform them that this very discourse of “subjectivity” may itself be the vehicle of ideological operation.

3. Interpellation: How Neoliberalism Shapes the 'Free' Female Subject

3.1. The Neoliberal Imaginary of the Female Subject

Foucault revealed neoliberalism as not merely economic policy but a 'governmental rationality' extending market principles to all life. The individual becomes 'human capital'—no longer 'subject of exchange' but 'entrepreneur of himself' [14]. Wendy Brown notes that homo economicus as human capital is concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all spheres of life, an activity undertaken through practices of self-investment and attracting investors [15].

This transformation reconfigures 'freedom' and 'choice': 'freedom' becomes self-investment and market participation; the individual has only the freedom of 'how to participate' [16]. 'Autonomy' becomes an obligation internalized as self-imposed requirement.

In this expansion, feminism encounters profound 'co-optation'. Neoliberalism captures certain core demands of feminism—that women should participate in public life as independent individuals, have employment opportunities equal to men, and autonomously determine their own lives—and strips them from the framework of emancipatory politics, re-encoding them as components of market logic.

Fraser notes a 'dangerous liaison' between second-wave feminist ideals and the neoliberal order [17]. As feminists criticized the welfare state, neoliberalism cut welfare; as they called for women's economic independence, neoliberalism absorbed women into the labour market. Feminism unwittingly supplied a key ingredient of the neoliberal spirit; liberation dreams became engines of capitalist accumulation [17].

This critique reveals the rise of “Neoliberal Feminism”. Dai Xuehong points out that this new feminist variant is rapidly replacing mainstream liberal feminism. Neoliberal feminism grants women the right to “choose” while remaining blind to the structural conditions within which these choices occur, presupposing that diligence and self-management suffice for workplace equality [16]. As Li Lianbo et al. demonstrate through the South Korean demographic crisis, this logic fails women who remain trapped between career and family under traditional roles [18]. Neoliberal rationality negates reproductive and care work, outsourcing these labours to other women and creating, in the name of “empowerment”, new forms of class stratification and racialized exploitation [16]. Fraser encapsulates that feminists witness with astonishment how the very gains they championed have been transformed into a strange double that we can neither simply accept nor wholly repudiate [17].

It is within this critical reflection that we can re-examine the abused concept of “subjectivity” in popular feminist discourse. When figures like Sandberg encourage women to “lean in” and become masters of their own destiny, the “subjectivity” they invoke is the “human capital” subject shaped by neoliberalism—an individual capable of self-management, self-optimization, and self-responsibility. It is required to become its own legislator and operator; it does not contain the possibility of resistance, but is required to constantly invest in itself to cope with market competition. Yet it is this ostensible “freedom” and “autonomy” that conceals its constructed nature—the woman who believes herself to be “freely choosing” is, in fact, responding to the neoliberal call, fashioning herself into the human capital demanded by the market.

3.2. The Interpellated Subject: Introducing Althusser's Theory of Interpellation

In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser poses a profound question: how does the individual become a “subject”? His answer points to a key mechanism: “interpellation” [11]. As elaborated in 2.1, Althusser's theory of interpellation reveals interpellation as a dual operation: the individual is hailed as a subject and endowed with social identity, yet simultaneously ‘voluntarily’ submits to ideology, experiencing external norms as free choice [11]. Ideology operates through Ideological State Apparatuses, shaping behaviour through prescribed practices.”

The call positions women as ‘choosing subjects’, presupposing an ‘I’ outside social structures, capable of rational calculation and free decision. Yet this ‘independent subject’ is ideological construction—ideology constitutes individuals by leading them to identify with an imagined self-image [11].

Second, the call transforms “choice” itself into an obligation that individuals must fulfil. When women are repeatedly told “you must choose autonomously”, “choice” ceases to be a right and becomes a responsibility. Not choosing, hesitating, or delegating the decision are all seen as manifestations of a “lack of subjectivity”. Angela McRobbie's analysis is penetrative here: terms like “empowerment” and “choice” have been “converted into a more individualistic discourse”, becoming a “substitute for feminism” and instrumentalized to serve anti-feminist purposes [19]. In other words, the more women act in the name of “autonomous choice”, the more deeply they are embedded a pre-set value framework.

The call also operates through daily practices—from social media to workplace trainings—interpellating women into self-management logic. When women include childbearing in this ‘portfolio’, they accept the premise that body, time, emotions, life-experience are ‘capital’ to be optimized.

3.3. Being Oneself vs. Being a Subject: A Crucial Distinction

This analysis also leads to a deeper question: if “becoming a subject” means being constituted by ideology, is there a possibility—that beyond being a “subject”, women can also exist as “themselves”?

Althusser's theory leaves space for this inquiry: interpellation may fail—the hailed might mishear, not hear, or turn when not hailed. Butler notes this structural failure opens a 'gap' for agency [20]. Zhang Yao identifies interpellation's failure and power's psychic remainder as sites of agency [12]. This “psychic remainder” constitutes the dimension of the subject that cannot be reduced to a product of ideology.

In this gap, we distinguish 'being a subject' (interpellated by ideology, endowed with identity) from 'being oneself'—the life-experience before interpellation, the 'living being' maintaining estrangement while responding. As Wang Yanqiu notes, humans must relate to the world through the body; consciousness and cultural values are both transcendent and embodied [13]. On childbearing, 'being oneself' means suspending the evaluative framework and returning to the life-experience intertwined with choice—bodily changes, gestational imagining, desire or fear of parenthood, meaning of transmitting life. These overflow economic rationality yet constitute reproductive choice's most intimate dimension.

Thus, we can reinterpret the meaning of “emancipation” concerning childbearing. True emancipation may not lie in “becoming the choosing subject”—that self-managing subject repeatedly summoned by neoliberal discourse is the product of ideological operation. True emancipation lies in this: while responding to the call “you must choose autonomously”, maintaining a constant sense of alienation, realizing the call itself could be an interpellation; while employing the standard of “economic efficiency”, continuously questioning where this standard comes from and why it has become the sole criterion; while operating “as a subject”, never losing connection with “oneself”—that living life-experience not yet fully colonized by the yardstick of economic efficiency.

4. Alienation: An Alternative Measure for Reproductive Choice

4.1. Activating the Concept of Alienation: From Labour to Female Experience

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx revealed the alienated situation of the worker under capitalism [21]. The essence of alienation lies in the separation of human beings from their own life-activity, which then becomes an external force dominating them. Engels applied this to women in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*: subordination stems from imbalance between “production of subsistence” and “production of human beings” [22]. With private property, domestic labour lost public character, becoming private service; the wife became domestic servant, excluded from social production. A distorted, alienated relationship formed between women and their own labour.

Alison Jaggar systematically constructed a theory of “female alienation” building on this foundation. In her view, alienation is a more encompassing concept than either class oppression or gender oppression, capable of accommodating critiques of both capitalism and patriarchy simultaneously [23]. The oppression of women in capitalist society is centrally manifested as a comprehensive state of alienation: in sexuality, women are alienated from their own sexual experience; in maternity, women are alienated from the procreative capacities, the process and the childrearing; in intellect, women are alienated from their own rational capacities, excluded from core domains such as politics, science, and culture [23]. Jaggar argues that the root of female alienation lies in the dual oppression of “capitalist patriarchy” [23].

4.2. The Dual Possibility of Reproductive Choice and Alienation

Within the theoretical context outlined above, the relationship between reproductive choice and female alienation can be re-examined. Childbearing, as an event intertwined with a woman's body, emotions, and life-experience, itself contains the dual possibility of alienation—it may either deepen alienation or become an opportunity for its sublation.

When reproductive choice is fully subsumed into the calculative framework of neoliberal economic rationality, it inevitably deepens the degree of women's alienation. Women become alienated from their bodies as childbearing is calculated in terms of 'cost' and 'efficiency'; from the reproductive process itself as it becomes an 'investment' to be optimized; from their own life-experience as 'subjectivity' is redefined by neoliberal criteria; and from others as relationships are reduced to transactions.

However, Jaggar's theory also reminds us that the elimination of alienation is not achieved by renouncing childbearing or simply rejecting economic rationality, but rather by transforming the entire social-structural context within which childbearing occurs. Engels' analysis provides a historical materialist argumentation for this path: the fundamental road to women's emancipation lies in “abolishing the monogamous family as the economic unit of society”, transforming “domestic work into a social industry”, and “making the care and education of children a public affair” [22].

5. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing analysis, we might propose “alienation” as a measure for reproductive choice: not “does this choice conform to my economic efficiency?” but “does it bring me closer to my life-experience or embed me deeper in ideology?”; not “does it embody my subjectivity?” but “does it establish authentic relationship or deepen separation?”. This opens a reflective space beyond calculation and choice. When women touch the self, they may discover what cannot be calculated or quantified—the dimension unique to childbearing. True emancipation lies not in becoming the self-managing subject—product of neoliberal operation—but in maintaining distance from the call to choose autonomously, questioning the standard of economic efficiency, and never losing connection with the “self” uncolonized by that yardstick.

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