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On the intellectual genealogy and critique of the "nihilism of historical subject"

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Abstract. As a core form of deconstructive historical philosophy in the 20th century, the "nihilism of historical subject" dismantles historical necessity by negating the reality of the subject and objective laws. From the dual perspectives of tracing its intellectual genealogy and critiquing it through the lens of historical materialism, this theory has undergone three major transformations: the relativism of Neo-Kantianism, the linguistic turn of structuralism, and the discursive reconstruction of postmodernism. Through a strategy of "decentralization," it obscures the agency of the subject and absolutizes historical contingency. Its formation mechanism is rooted in the value vacuum during periods of social transition, and it constructs a consumer logic of "symbolized history" through pseudo-positivist data collage and the entertainment-oriented dissemination of digital media. The critique from historical materialism reveals its essence as the ideological cover of the bourgeoisie over the dialectics of history, which dissolves revolutionary potential by severing historical continuity. Based on the reconstruction of practical subjectivity, the reinterpretation of objective laws, and the methodology of class analysis, this paper proposes a pathway to restore historical subjectivity, thereby forming a practical paradigm to resist postmodern nihilism.

Keywords: historical nihilism, nihilism of historical subject, historical materialism, historical subjectivity, practice dialectics

1. Introduction

After entering the 20th century, the rise of deconstructionist thought challenged traditional understandings of history. The "nihilism of the historical subject" denies the ontological status of the historical subject and dissolves objective laws, thereby deconstructing the historical process into a pile of accidental events or the product of discursive construction. This has triggered ongoing debates concerning the objectivity of history and the agency of historical subjects. The intellectual genealogy of this theory blends the value relativism of Neo-Kantianism, the epistemological rupture of structuralism, and the symbolic transformation of postmodernism. Existing studies have largely focused on deconstructing its epistemological relativism and discursive hegemony, but have yet to offer a systematic critique of its ideological essence from the perspective of historical materialism, nor have they addressed the practical demand for reconstructing historical subjectivity in the postmodern context.

This paper unfolds along three dimensions. First, it clarifies the transformation logic of the "nihilism of the historical subject" from philosophical foundations to technological practices, exposing its ontological transgression and methodological pseudoscience. Second, by employing the critical tools of historical materialist political economy and class analysis, it tears through its disguise of "value neutrality" and identifies it as a reactionary manifestation of capitalist ideology resisting historical dialectics. Third, it draws on China's practical experiences to explore pathways for reconstructing subjectivity, using the material basis of production, the narrative of people-centered historiography, the mechanism of memory reproduction, and pluralistic anchors of objectivity to achieve a dialectical unity between the objectivity of historical laws and the agency of practice. This study seeks to provide a theoretical reference point for resisting the erosion of deconstructionism and reshaping the coordinates of historical interpretation, by engaging the dialogue between historical materialism and postmodernism. The paper proceeds according to a logical framework of "theoretical deconstruction — critical exposure — practical transcendence," aiming to promote a paradigm shift in contemporary philosophy of history.

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2. The intellectual genealogy and conceptual definition of the "nihilism of the historical subject"

As a significant manifestation of historical nihilism, the "nihilism of the subject," which emerged in 20th-century philosophy of history, weakens the necessary laws behind historical development by denying the existence of a genuine leading force in history. This theory claims that "there are no consciously autonomous agents in the historical process, and so-called historical laws are merely post hoc discursive constructions" [1]. Such a view has provoked ongoing debate in contemporary historiography over the objectivity of history and the agency of the subject. By tracing the intellectual genealogy of "nihilism of the subject," this paper clarifies its core concepts and theoretical boundaries to provide a scholarly basis for critical reflection.

2.1. Three dimensions of its intellectual genealogy

From a philosophical perspective, the roots of the "nihilism of the subject" can be traced back to the value relativism of late 19th-century Neo-Kantianism. Wilhelm Windelband, a central figure of the Freiburg School of Neo-Kantianism, famously asserted in the philosophy of history that "historical facts are products of value-relation" [2], embedding subjectivity into the process of historical construction. He argued that historical facts are not objective entities existing independently, but are selectively reconstructed by historians based on particular value criteria. This opened the door to a partial subjectivization of history. Wilhelm Dilthey, meanwhile, emphasized the subjective nature of historical understanding, arguing that such understanding must be realized through the direct experience of individual life. He held that history is not a collection of external objective facts, but rather the unfolding of human spiritual activity over time—its meaning can only be grasped through the subject's internal lived experience. These arguments laid the groundwork for undermining historical objectivity. The most subversive claim came from Nietzsche, who declared in On the Use and Abuse of History for Life that "history is a fiction serving the needs of the present" [3]. His aim was to expose the inescapable intervention of subjectivity and value projection in historical cognition, thereby reducing history from a vessel of truth to a mere tool of life—directly challenging the reality of the historical subject.

Following this epistemological groundwork laid in the late 19th century, the 20th century saw structuralism and post-structuralism further propel a transformation of theoretical paradigms and contribute to the linguistic turn in historical understanding. Roland Barthes proposed that "historical narrative is a fabric of linguistic signs" [4], emphasizing the symbolic construction of history. He argued that the text is not a closed entity but generates new meanings through the sliding chain of signifiers. Barthes further claimed that historical facts have no referents—their existence is entirely dependent on the weaving of linguistic signs, which are configured into meaningful systems through narrative structures. Hayden White, using metahistorical analysis, revealed the literary and fictive nature of historical writing, asserting that it essentially transforms chaotic historical events into intelligible systems of meaning through literary narrative strategies. Perhaps most decisive was Michel Foucault's "archaeology of knowledge," which contended that "the subject is a provisional node constructed by discourse" [5], placing emphasis on discontinuity and rupture in historical processes and foregrounding discursive autonomy. However, it is evident that such a view overlooks the material influence of social practice on the formation of subjectivity. These theories highlight the rhetorical nature of historical writing and the power embedded in discourse, reducing the historical subject to a product of textual construction.

In the mid-twentieth century, the rise of postmodern historiography and its widespread influence once again reshaped historical narrative. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard argued that the Enlightenment and speculative narratives upon which modernity relied had lost their authority. The collapse of grand narratives deprived the subject of a universal framework to support its existence, forcing it to reposition itself within fragmented micro-narratives, thus leading to the erosion of its foundational identity. Baudrillard's notion of "simulacral history" revealed the evolution of the simulacrum from imitation and production to simulation. In the simulation phase dominated by codes, history becomes the self-replication of symbols, as media-fabricated events replace actual occurrences through pre-modeling, causing historical referents to disappear entirely. Jameson, in his analysis of the "waning of historicity" [6], pointed out that postmodern culture erodes historical depth through techniques of pastiche and nostalgia. For example, the film Blade Runner blends futuristic and retro elements to create a timeless spatiotemporal experience, leading the subject to lose any reference point grounded in linear history. Together, these theoretical tendencies form a comprehensive framework of subject nihilism within the postmodern context, manifesting in historical practice as a rupture in historical continuity and a complete negation of the subject's agency.

2.2. Dialectical analysis of core concepts

At the ontological level, "subject nihilism" involves a dual negation: it denies the existence of conscious historical agents, such as classes or nations as collective subjects, and also denies that individual actions have any substantive effect on altering the course of history. Its core arguments lie first in the "decentralization" of the subject—asserting that historical development arises from the spontaneous combination of structural elements and that subjectivity is merely a byproduct of structural shifts; and second, in the dissolution of agency—arguing that human actions are always constrained within pre-existing discursive frameworks and cannot transcend the fundamental limits imposed by historical conditions.

At the epistemological level, the construction of "subject nihilism" is essentially a dual process of deconstruction and rebalancing. It dismantles traditional notions of subjectivity to break cognitive absolutism, while simultaneously reconstructing a dynamic cognitive framework through tools such as symbolic order, dialectics of emptiness, and practical innovation. Its core aim is to carve out space for open-ended cognition through negative critique, while relying on methodological constraints to avoid the trap of relativism. However, Lacan, through his analysis of the structure of the unconscious, pointed out that the subject is not a rational and autonomous entity but an "emptiness" [7] constructed by the symbolic order of the Big Other. This exposes the illusory nature of the subject at the epistemological level and shows that rational thought, language expression, and so on are all manipulated by external symbolic systems, thereby shaking the foundational supremacy of rational subjectivity in traditional philosophy. This implies that the epistemological stability of the subject is in fact a fictional product of the symbolic network, and that its cognitive process can never escape the constraints of language and cultural preconditions.

Beyond ontological and epistemological theoretical alienation, "subject nihilism" also has a distinctive operational system at the methodological level, which can be broadly described as fragmentation and decontextualization. Regarding the methodology of fragmentation, historical nihilism employs narrative strategies of "detailization" and "fragmentation," replacing holistic analyses of historical processes with isolated events or incidental details. This reduces complex social movements to accumulations of contingencies, thereby eroding the inherent logic and necessity of historical development. For instance, by magnifying the personal actions or local mistakes of historical figures, it obscures the deeper structural contradictions and laws of history. In the realm of literature and art, historical nihilism often uses "neutralization" and "pan-entertainment" techniques to deconstruct the solemnity of history. In short, "subject nihilism in history" transforms historical events into freely combinable consumer symbols by pasting together historical signs and stripping away concrete historical contexts, ultimately hollowing out historical cognition and displacing its value focus.

In terms of the logic of decontextualization, historical events are reconstructed in an ahistorical fashion, with methodological features such as "hypothetical history" and "reconstructed causality." For example, hypothetical propositions are used to deny the real foundations of historical development, severing the connection between events and their temporal background, reducing history to an abstract concept divorced from specific contexts. Meanwhile, under the dominance of capitalist logic, nihilism reduces social relations to instrumental rational calculations and dissolves historical continuity through decontextualization. One example is the opposition drawn between the socialist construction of the first thirty years of reform and the development of the subsequent forty years, denying their intrinsic continuity and dialectical unity, thus triggering a rupture and inversion in the cognitive framework.

3. The generative logic and operational mechanism of "subject nihilism"

Historical nihilism dismantles historical subjectivity and value systems through multidimensional mechanisms. Its generative logic is rooted in the collective memory vacuum caused by the rupture between tradition and modernity during periods of social transformation. It reduces positivist methodology to a tool for selectively assembling historical materials and constructing counterfactual narratives, while algorithm-driven echo chambers in new media accelerate the symbolic reconstruction of historical interpretations. On the operational level, by deconstructing the forms of subjectivity and reshaping the logic of historical cognition, it reduces individuals to consumable symbols and severs the continuity of collective history. Through emotional manipulation, it seeks to impose false identifications, thereby revealing the deep crisis in both dialectical historical interpretation and the reconstruction of subjectivity.

3.1. Analysis of the generative logic

The generative logic of "subject nihilism" can be broadly analyzed from three interrelated dimensions: the value vacuum during social transformation, the alienation of positivist methods, and the ideological restructuring driven by media technologies.

First, contemporary Chinese society is undergoing structural transformation across economic, technological, political, and cultural domains. The widespread disintegration of values during this period provides fertile ground for the rise of "subject nihilism." Under the impact of globalization, the rupture between traditional value systems and modern aspirations has disrupted the continuity of historical memory. This rupture in collective memory creates a space for manipulating historical subjectivity, as historical nihilists construct a binary opposition between tradition and modernity, situating historical subjects within a framework of nihilistic interpretation.

Second, historical nihilism distorts positivist methodology into a tool of deconstruction, selectively using historical materials to form fragmented evidence chains. Tactics such as removing historical events from their specific contexts, abusing counterfactual reasoning to construct imagined historical scenarios, and using partial truths to deny the integrity of historical logic exemplify this approach. Such pseudo-positivist methodologies form a key methodological pillar of "subject nihilism."

Third, in the era of advanced digital networks, the characteristics of information dissemination in new media significantly accelerate the production of subject nihilism. Algorithmically generated information echo chambers lead to increasingly fragmented historical cognition. This technological mechanism undermines traditional interpretive authority, generating a pluralistic and relativistic cognitive landscape characterized by decentralization. At the same time, social media platforms deploy

emotionally charged dissemination strategies—fragmenting information to break logical continuity, fostering group polarization to weaken fact-checking, and replacing rational argument with emotional resonance—to reshape historical cognition. As a result, historical interpretation tends toward superficiality and dramatization.

3.2. Exploring the operational mechanism

The operational mechanism of "subject nihilism" can largely be examined from two key aspects: the deconstruction of the forms of subject existence and the reconstruction of the logic of historical cognition.

Marxism adheres to the principle of interpreting history from the standpoint of the people—this is not only a foundational premise and starting point, but also the ultimate destination and fundamental goal [8]. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels emphasize that "our starting point is real, active human beings," [9] i.e., "actual individuals." These "actual individuals" are engaged in "practical activity" within specific social relations, primarily in the practice of producing material life itself. Marx's concept of "real individuals" encompasses the individual subject, the collective subject, and the species subject. The nihilism of these "real individuals" as subjects is a core manifestation of historical nihilism, and represents what has been termed the "first stop" in the historical nihilist denial of history [10]. This "subject nihilism" manifests primarily in three ways: first, the nullification of the individual subject; second, the nullification of the collective subject; and third, the nullification of the species subject. Hence, the operational mechanism of "subject nihilism" first targets the subject itself, aiming to deconstruct the forms of subject existence and, at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, systematically dissolve the cognition and narrative of individual, collective, and species subjectivity, respectively. At the micro level, the symbolic erosion of the individual subject involves reducing historical figures to entertainment icons, thereby dismantling their subjective agency in historical processes. For instance, the stories of revolutionary martyrs are repackaged into dramatized short videos, turning them into disposable cultural products in a consumerist context. This practice follows the postmodern logic of decentralization, plunging individual value judgments into a relativistic quagmire. At the meso level, the rupture of collective subject narratives involves reshaping collective memory through hypothetical historical reconstructions—such as promoting the so-called "colonial modernization theory," which denies the people's central role in anti-imperialist struggles. By severing the continuity of history, this approach creates generational cognitive disjunctions that alienate younger audiences, fostering the belief that "history has nothing to do with me." At the macro level, the disenchantment of species subject values is facilitated by the echo chamber effects of algorithmic recommendation systems, which continually disseminate content denying the progressive nature of human civilization. For example, exaggerating the negative impacts of the Industrial Revolution serves to undermine the shared understanding of humanity as a community of common destiny, ultimately collapsing the system of existential meaning.

The core of "subject nihilism" in historical nihilism lies in the deliberate rewriting and restructuring of historical events. In order to strengthen identification with these "rewritten" versions of history, it becomes necessary to reconstruct the logic of historical cognition. Three common mechanisms used to achieve this include: First, strategic manipulation in the selection of historical materials. A typical example is the selective presentation of historical fragments under the guise of "data mining" techniques—such as only showcasing battlefield statistics of the Nationalist forces during the War of Resistance, while deliberately omitting the contributions of guerrilla warfare behind enemy lines. This creates a cognitive illusion of a "holographic history projection," a method that aligns with Foucault's notion of the collusion between knowledge and power [5]. Second, paradigm shifts in cognitive frameworks. This involves constructing a de-ideologized discourse system that replaces historical materialism with technological determinism—for instance, using GDP growth rates to justify the so-called "Golden Decade" of the Republican era, while deliberately avoiding analysis of the essential contradictions in production relations. Yet it is precisely this analytical perspective that is central to understanding society through Marxist historical materialism. Third, emotional misappropriation through so-called affective resonance. A common approach is the emotional manipulation seen in film and television works—such as glamorizing feudal dynasties through exquisite costumes and sets, evoking a kind of "time-travel identification" among viewers. The goal is to emotionally alienate the audience's historical cognition, detaching them from rational engagement with the past.

4. The critical deconstruction of "subject nihilism" from the perspective of historical materialism

In historical nihilism, "subject nihilism" seeks to negate the reality of historical subjects and dissolve the objectivity of historical laws, attempting to reduce history to a pile of accidental events or a construct of power discourse. Historical materialism, however, offers a profound critique of this theory by grounding itself in the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness.

4.1. The reality of historical subjects: from "abstract man" to "real man"

"Subject nihilism" regards historical subjects as products of discourse construction, claiming that concepts like "the people" or "class" are mere ideological fabrications. In contrast, historical materialism emphasizes that the agents of historical change are "not individuals in some illusory, isolated, and immutable state, but individuals involved in a real, observable, and condition-

dependent process of development" [9], in other words, "real people." Just as we cannot deny the existence of peasant fighters with homemade rifles on the Anti-Japanese battlefield or the textile workers striking in Shanghai alleyways, the reality of historical subjects has never been a philosophical proposition but rather the living proof of practice.

Furthermore, assertions that "class is a fictitious concept" appear especially absurd in the context of modern Chinese history. In the 1938 Battle of Taierzhuang, peasants used wheelbarrows to maintain supply lines; during the 1947 land reform, poor peasants marked land division agreements with red fingerprints. In these historical moments, the people were not "ideological symbols," but active agents capable of altering the course of war and reshaping land relations. As Marx emphasized in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, people cannot make history exactly as they please [11], yet the wheelbarrows of the Huaihai Campaign and the drilling machines of the Daqing Oil Field concretely demonstrate that it is the collective practice of countless individuals that shifts the lever of history.

4.2. The objectivity of historical laws: necessity behind contingency

"Subject nihilism" exaggerates the role of contingency in history, viewing historical development as nothing more than "power struggles" or "a play of cultural symbols." Yet from the theoretical framework of historical materialism, the apparent contingencies of historical development are governed by the underlying logic of necessity—namely, the dialectical contradiction between productive forces and relations of production, which serves as the fundamental driving mechanism of historical evolution. As Engels noted: "Historical events seem to be governed by chance overall, but where chance appears to be operating on the surface, it is always controlled by hidden internal laws" [12].

Take the Industrial Revolution, for example. Although it may seem to have been sparked by the accidental invention of the steam engine, it was in fact rooted in the contradiction between the growing productive forces of the workshop system and the constraints of feudal production relations. By the time British textile output soared and traditional water power could no longer meet demand, advances in metallurgy made iron machinery feasible, creating a market demand for improved steam engines. According to the analytical framework of historical dialectics, every historical contingency is grounded in material conditions of necessity. When the accumulation of technology, capital, and labor transformation during the workshop period reached a critical threshold, the power revolution represented by the steam engine became the inevitable choice to break through the constraints of the feudal guild system. This model of historical explanation, based on objective economic laws, fundamentally deconstructs the epistemological fallacy of reducing history to a "collection of random events."

4.3. Class analysis: revealing the ideological nature behind "desubjectification"

The critique of "subject nihilism" from the perspective of historical materialism essentially targets a manifestation of bourgeois ideology. When history is deconstructed into a symbol game devoid of subjects, the reality of class struggle and the legitimacy of revolutionary narratives are nullified. Lenin noted: "Marxism provides a guiding thread that allows us to discover regularity in what seems to be a state of confusion and chaos. That thread is the theory of class struggle" [13]. It's like observing a swarm of bees—if one focuses only on the flight paths of individual bees, one gets lost; but once the class relationship between the queen and worker bees is understood, the logic of the entire hive becomes clear.

Although postmodernist thinker Michel Foucault was not a historical nihilist, his theory of "discursive power" is often misappropriated as a tool for denying historical subjectivity. On this, Terry Eagleton sharply pointed out: "Reducing everything to discourse precisely obscures the real structure of material exploitation [14]." When American labor historians use Foucauldian methods to analyze strike movements, they often overlook the violent suppression of unions by capitalists and instead reinterpret workers' struggles for the eight-hour workday as mere "contests over discursive symbols."

It is worth noting that such "desubjectified" narratives never truly eliminate the subject; instead, they implement a concealed subject substitution. When the proletariat is displaced from its position as the historical subject, financial capital and technocratic elites naturally fill the power vacuum. Just as the blinking numbers on a stock exchange screen erase the presence of actual workers, algorithmic recommendation systems dissolve class consciousness through data profiling. This form of symbolic violence is more deceptive than naked exploitation—it allows oppression to be reborn under the guise of free choice.

5. Beyond nihilism: practical pathways to reconstructing historical subjectivity

In an era when historical nihilism deconstructs historical continuity and shared values, the historical materialist view must urgently employ the dialectics of practice to break through metaphysical dilemmas. "History is nothing but the activity of people pursuing their own aims" [9]; thus, the reconstruction of historical subjectivity is essentially a return to the dialectical nature of human practice. This process requires not only paradigm innovation at the theoretical level but also the affirmation of subjectivity within real-world contexts. At its core, it involves reconstructing the practical coordinates, narrative logic, and value dimensions of historical interpretation.

5.1. Material production: the practical field for generating subjectivity

Marx emphasized in the Theses on Feuerbach that "all social life is essentially practical" [15]. Therefore, the reconstruction of historical subjectivity must be grounded in material production. China's reform and opening-up process demonstrates that farmers reshaped their role as productive subjects through the household contract responsibility system, while workers advanced industrial upgrading through technological innovation. This process of reshaping subjectivity through material production validates Arendt's analysis of the tripartite dimensions of "labor–work–action." When laborers transform from mere tools of production into agents of technological innovation, their subjectivity transcends the domain of simple reproduction, breaking the metaphysical predicament of "subjective nihilism" and entering the realm of creative practice.

China's reform experience provides strong evidence for this proposition. Through the household contract responsibility system, farmers not only achieved the economic goal of increased grain output but also, by engaging in autonomous operations, reestablished themselves as decision-makers in production. Likewise, workers, through technological innovation and industrial upgrading, shifted from being mere executors on assembly lines to drivers of technological reform, thus asserting their subjectivity in the reconfiguration of production relations. The rise of township and village enterprises vividly illustrates this transformation—farmers, while "leaving the land without leaving the village," founded businesses, managed resources, and explored markets, thereby breaking the shackles of traditional smallholder economies and ascending to leading roles in rural industrialization. Through this process, laborers gradually evolved from "the dominated" to "proactive creators," awakening a conscious sense of subjectivity.

5.2. The people's perspective of history: from "elite narrative" to "mass narrative"

In the contemporary philosophical discourse on history, historical nihilism often reduces the complex historical process to a narrative of elite power struggles. Such an explanatory model constitutes a vulgarized interpretation of Hegel's proposition of the "cunning of reason," dissolving the subjectivity of the masses within the metaphysical framework of a hero-centric historiography. In stark contrast, historical materialism has always upheld the central tenet of "the people's subjectivity." As Mao Zedong classically stated in On Coalition Government: "The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history" [16]. The ecological relocation project in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of northwestern Yunnan offers a vivid practical illustration of this principle. Local residents cultivated tsaoko (fragrant black cardamom) and transformed their "cliffside villages" into modern communities. The deeper significance of this transformation lies not merely in escaping poverty but in the cognitive leap from being "the object of narration" to becoming "the subject of history."

This shift in narrative paradigm compels us to reconsider the epistemological foundations of historical writing. China's contemporary "targeted poverty alleviation" campaign exemplifies this logic: impoverished populations are not merely passive recipients of aid but become active agents in transforming their own destinies through participation in industrial initiatives and ecological relocation programs. Such "subjective participation" redirects historical narration from "description by others" to "self-construction," effectively deconstructing the epistemological binary between subject and object found in traditional development theory, while reaffirming the classical historical materialist proposition that "people make their own history."

5.3. The reproduction of historical memory: constructing a narrative that unifies scientific rigor and value orientation

In response to historical nihilism's fragmentation of collective memory, Habermas's concept of "communicative rationality" in The Theory of Communicative Action offers guidance for rebuilding historical narrative frameworks [17]. At the National Memorial Ceremony for the Nanjing Massacre, a triadic interplay of survivors' personal memories, documentary evidence, and symbolic rituals constructs a multidimensional space of remembrance.

The Chinese Communist Party's approach to constructing historical memory embodies a dialectical unity of scientific rigor and value orientation. From the digital archive project "Letters from the War of Resistance" at the Central Archives to the immersive experiential design of the "Long March National Cultural Park," the reconstruction of memory follows a dual logic. On the one hand, historical objectivity is ensured through methods such as archival research and archaeological discoveries; on the other, emotional engagement and value-based guidance foster collective identity. This integration of "hardcore historical evidence" and "soft narrative strategies" effectively resists the erosion of historical continuity by nihilist interpretations.

5.4. Responding to the postmodern challenge: anchoring historical objectivity amid plural narratives

First, reconstructing historical objectivity requires establishing a framework for intersubjective dialogue. Postmodernism's deconstruction of grand narratives does not deny objectivity itself, but rather exposes the cognitive limitations of monolithic discourse hegemonies. Axel Honneth's theory of the "politics of recognition" [18] offers methodological inspiration in this regard. Mutual recognition among different civilizational subjects in an egalitarian dialogue helps dissolve the epistemological narrowness of Western-centrism while facilitating the reconstruction of a cross-civilizational historical consensus through the dimension of

Lefebvre's "production of space." This practice transcends binary oppositions and makes objectivity a dynamic product of negotiation among diverse subjects.

Second, an inclusive epistemology must achieve a dialectical integration of empirical methods and hermeneutic perspectives. The collaborative Sino-Kenyan archaeological research at the Mambrui site demonstrates that writing "polyphonic history" establishes a scale of objectivity through dual empirical pathways. On the one hand, material remains corroborate historical records of Zheng He's maritime expeditions; on the other, the uniqueness of Swahili civilization is used to interpret the complex mechanisms of cultural exchange. This approach avoids the mechanical pursuit of "absolute truth" inherent in positivism, while resisting the value dissolution of relativism through a cross-cultural interpretive framework, thereby forming objective standards with explanatory power through intersubjective dialogue.

Third, the reconstruction of historical subjectivity must return to the generative logic of practical philosophy. Marx's concept of the "real individual" acquires new meaning in contemporary technological practice. From BIM modeling in Xiong'an New Area to the calibration of the FAST (Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope), cognitive activities of technical subjects are always embedded within systems of material practice. Such subjectivity is neither a priori nor a product of disciplinary power, but—as Li Zehou's theory of "sedimentation of practice" [19] reveals—is generated as the subject reconstructs their cognitive structure in the process of transforming the objective world, thereby achieving the unity of grasping historical laws and exerting subjective agency.

This three-dimensional theoretical construction fundamentally responds to Frantzke's contemporary interpretation of historical materialism: when objectivity is understood as an intersubjective consensus generated through practice, and subjectivity is positioned as the cognitive sublimation of material activity, historical narrative is able to resist nihilism while providing practical orientation and meaningful coordinates for human civilization. This theoretical orientation—rooted in reality yet forward-looking—serves as a powerful intellectual tool for confronting postmodern challenges.

The "nihilism of historical subjectivity," shaped by the value relativism of Neo-Kantianism, the linguistic turn of structuralism, and the discursive reconstruction of postmodern historiography, gradually dissolves the agency of historical subjects and the objective laws of history, reducing historical processes to a heap of contingent signs. Its generative logic is rooted in a value vacuum during social transformation, pseudo-positivist fragmentation, and the entertainment-oriented dissemination of digital media. At its core, it represents the ideological obfuscation of historical dialectics under capitalism, aiming to sever historical continuity and erode the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. The critical deconstruction offered by historical materialism reveals that historical subjects are always "real individuals" actively engaged in material production, and the collective practice of countless individuals attests to the objective necessity of the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. Class analysis further exposes how the "nihilism of subjectivity" conceals the real structure of class struggle through discursive displacement, ultimately serving the capitalist logic of suppressing labor subjects.

Reconstructing historical subjectivity requires grounding in the practical realm of material production, employing a people-centered historical view to rebuild "popular narratives." In practices such as targeted poverty alleviation and ecological migration, the masses have risen from being "objects of narration" to historical subjects, achieving a cognitive transformation of "self-construction." At the same time, the reproduction of historical memory that unifies scientific and value-oriented dimensions, along with intersubjective dialogue among multiple actors, helps resist the erosion of historical continuity by nihilism. As historical subjects, "real individuals" are continually awakening their subjectivity by grasping historical laws and winning agency in social transformation [20]. As Frantzke aptly states, the vitality of historical materialism always lies in the practical impulse to "change the world" [21]—an impulse that is both the ultimate response to historical nihilism and a spiritual compass that guides human civilization beyond the fog of meaning. Future research should deepen the dialectical relationship between historical laws and subjective agency in the new context of technological change and globalization, and explore paradigm innovations that are more oriented toward practice.

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