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## Pathologies of Recognition: Axel Honneth and the Renewed Possibility of a Critical Theory of Society

**Abstract.** *This article is a critical engagement with the work of Axel Honneth and his significance for contemporary Critical Theory, social explanation, and emancipatory politics. I begin by exploring Honneth's sympathies for, and criticisms of, both first generation critical theory and Jürgen Habermas's emphasis on communicative action. I then consider Honneth's turn to Hegel's early work on recognition and his emphasis on the underlying forms of mutual recognition, along with the accompanying forms of self-relation/realisation, disrespect and the potential for moral development and resistance. I explore these alongside Honneth's 'formal conception of ethical life' which he hopes can successfully mediate between formal Kantian morality and substantive communitarian ethics whilst also providing him with both a philosophical justification for his normative position and a standard of moral development for evaluating forms of, and struggles for, recognition. I also briefly outline his recent work on reification and recognition before then considering a number of critical responses to Honneth's project as a whole. Whilst sympathetic to his focus on recognition, my criticisms of his work emphasise his tendency to idealise the notion of recognition, his lack of a sufficient conception of misrecognition, the ideological role that recognition often plays, and ultimately the abstract and procedural nature of his 'formal' conception of ethical life.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Theory, Frankfurt School, recognition, social theory, Axel Honneth, Jürgen Habermas.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *kritinė teorija, Frankfurto mokykla, pripažinimas, socialinė teorija, Axel Honneth, Jürgen Habermas.*

Axel Honneth has been increasingly recognised as an important figure in contemporary Critical Theory and in contemporary social theory as a whole. His work has been at the forefront of what has often been termed a

'third generation' of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and it has developed the 'tradition' in a number of new and interesting ways.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein to Jürgen Habermas, his work covers a broad number of areas and disciplines

<sup>1</sup> For a brief overview of the 'third generation' see Anderson (2011; 44–48).

including moral theory, social philosophy, philosophical anthropology, politics, sociology, and psychoanalysis. It has also attracted a growing number of followers and critics, and there is a rapidly growing secondary literature developing around his ideas.<sup>2</sup> This article explores the ways in which Honneth continues the ‘critical theory’ project, how he addresses a number of criticisms directed at Habermas’s communicative project, and how his work both continues – and differs from – these developments. Honneth’s own trajectory has developed in a number of ways, although there are clear continuities between his early essays on Karl Marx, his work on philosophical anthropology, his exploration of different versions of critical theory in his *Critique of Power* (1991), through to his more recent essays on psychoanalysis, reification, and individualisation and capitalism. However, the heart of his project – and still his most significant work to date – is his *Struggle for Recognition* (1996). I will begin by exploring the ways in which Honneth frames the original critical theory project, before outlining his sympathies for (and criticisms of) the development of critical theory in Habermas’s communicative turn. I will then briefly outline the key points of Honneth’s ‘recognitive turn’ in critical theory before developing a number of criticisms of his project.<sup>3</sup>

## The ‘Critical Theory’ Project

In his essay ‘The Social Dynamics of Disrespect’ (in Honneth 2007; 63–79), Axel Honneth provides an overview of his position in relation to earlier Critical Theory and Habermas. He outlines his commitment to a Left-Hegelian model of critique and explores the alternative possibilities for renewing Critical Theory along with their shortcomings. Despite Honneth’s criticisms of the original Frankfurt School project, he remains committed to a ‘critical theory of society’ which he refers to as:

that type of social thought that shares a particular form of normative critique with the Frankfurt School’s original program – indeed, perhaps, with the whole tradition of Left Hegelianism – which can also inform us about the pre-theoretical resource in which its own critical viewpoint is anchored extratheoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience. (2007; 63–64)

The ‘unrenounceable premise’ of Critical Theory demands that any (materialist) theory of society that attempts a critique of contemporary social relations must be able to identify a social source for its critique within contemporary social reality – it must be able to identify what Honneth refers to as a moment of ‘intramundane transcendence’.<sup>4</sup> Such a programme is identifiable in the work of Karl Marx and Georg Lukács but is made most explicit in

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Van Den Brink and Owen (2007), Deranty (2009), Huttunen (2009), and Petherbridge (2011).

<sup>3</sup> An extended version of my argument here appears in Hazeldine (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Honneth pursues these ideas further in his ‘A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory’ and ‘Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of ‘Critique’ in the Frankfurt School’ in Honneth (2009).

Max Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' essay of 1937 (in Horkheimer 1999), where he emphasises the need for a 'critical' theory to be able to account for its own origins in social reality (its 'pre-theoretical experience') whilst also reflecting on its role in future social change. Critical Theory is not therefore simply a philosophical pursuit, but requires a sociological account of its own emergence – one which justifies its own emancipatory claims through recourse to a theory of society that is able to identify the emancipatory impulse at work in current social forces and, in turn, encourage us to resist domination. One of the difficulties with such a project is its ability to comprehend its own history and social context without succumbing to a relativist position that would compromise its 'critical' normative and political intentions.<sup>5</sup>

At first the answer for Horkheimer seemed to lie in making explicit what had been implicit in his criticisms and theoretical allegiances so far. By adhering to the classical Marxist theory

of history, Horkheimer suggested that the developments in the forces of production had unleashed certain social relations, and a form of reason, able to critically outline the self-knowledge of society – this would therefore explain the historical and social determination of Critical Theory along with its practical role (Horkheimer 1999).<sup>6</sup> If reason and progress are apparent in history through the development of the productive forces, and become manifest through social conflict in the relations of production, the key issue becomes identifying the processes at work that hinder the development of reason and progress through social conflict, and therefore the possibility of the 'rational' organisation of society that meets the needs of all, i.e. the processes at work in advanced capitalism hindering (or rather integrating) the consciousness of the working class.

According to the criticisms made from the 'communicative' position of Habermas and Honneth, the development of earlier Critical

<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer's division between 'traditional' theory and 'critical' theory is also a response to what he saw as the increasing separation between the empirical sciences and philosophical thought (Horkheimer 1999). The empirical sciences increasingly concerned themselves with discovering 'facts' divorced from philosophical self-reflection, and philosophical thought concerned itself with speculative thinking about 'essence' divorced from any relationship to the empirical world. This division not only had consequences for forms of social criticism that sought to compare the world as it is with the world as it 'ought' to be, but also gave rise to the increasing acceptance of the empirical sciences, and their 'facts', as producing 'true' knowledge and representing the whole of reason.

<sup>6</sup> Horkheimer also turned to Marx in an attempt to expose the flaws in the conflation of the empirical sciences with 'objectivity', and sought to demonstrate the importance of social labour and its connection to the 'interestedness' of positivist science. He argued that the subsumption of facts under conceptual knowledge in scientific theory mirrors the requirements of the control of nature in societal labour, and therefore that societal labour provides the practical context (or pre-theoretical resource) for the empirical sciences. Those theories which neglect the social and practical determination and emergence of their own origins, and see themselves as 'pure' theory, are examples of what Horkheimer calls 'traditional theory'. Whereas the empirical sciences could be appealed to as authoritative knowledge in the mastery of nature, critical theory could be appealed to as authoritative knowledge in the self-reflection of a society.

Theory was ultimately unable to satisfy its own criteria (Honneth 1991, 1995; Habermas 1984, 1992). Given the historical context within which the Frankfurt School were writing – Stalinism, Fascism, and the decline of proletarian revolutionary activity – the ‘inner circle’ of the Frankfurt School (Friedrich Pollock, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse) set about trying to understand the inability of the proletariat to realise their ‘real’ interests (Honneth 1995).<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer’s original project had sought to supplement the levels of political economy and psychology with the study of culture, due to the need to explain the cultural conditions for the integration of the individual – in this case mass culture – rather than assume a direct relationship between socio-economic demands and individual conformity. In an attempt to avoid a crude functionalist connection between economic demands and psychological developments, Horkheimer originally, according to Honneth, sought to investigate ‘those “moral customs” and “life-styles” in which the everyday communicative practice of social groups finds expression’ (Honneth 1995; 69). However, Honneth argues that a functionalist conception of culture followed instead whereby, in the form of a base-superstructure

model, culture played the role of further integrating individuals into wider socio-economic demands, and it increasingly lost its critical function and assumed an administrative role in the name of economic efficiency.<sup>8</sup>

Honneth seeks to confront what he sees as a functionalist reductionism apparent in the inner circle of Critical Theory, and lays the blame at the door of their philosophical-historical presuppositions (Honneth 1995; 70). In a consistently Habermasian manner, Honneth outlines what he sees as the two key premises shared by Horkheimer and Adorno (and Marcuse) in their philosophy of history: (i) the emphasis on ‘the philosophy of consciousness which construes human rationality according to the model of the cognitive relation of a subject to an object’, whereby human rationality is ‘understood as the intellectual faculty for the instrumental disposal over natural objects’; and (ii) that ‘historical development takes place above all as a process of unfolding precisely that potential for rationality which is articulated in the instrumental disposal of man over natural objects’, and therefore ‘they remain bound to the tendency already predominant in Marx, to instrumentally foreshorten human history to a developmental unfolding of the societal processing of nature’ (1995; 71).

<sup>7</sup> Honneth initially attempts to outline a ‘social-theoretical alternative’ to what he ultimately sees as a ‘functionalist’ programme implicit in the original project of the inner circle of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, among one or two others) by referring to those more marginal members (Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Walter Benjamin) in whose work he sees an implicit reference to an alternative communicative project (see Honneth 1995; 61–91).

<sup>8</sup> Honneth sees this analysis of culture as particularly exemplified in Adorno’s work on the culture industry. Despite his earlier criticisms of Adorno, his more recent work has shown signs of renewed appreciation for Adorno’s work. See Honneth (2005), and his essay ‘The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism’, in Honneth (2007).

Once social action is only seen through the lens of a subject/object logic (what Honneth refers to as a 'logic of reification'), and then applied to 'the three dimensions of societal labour, the socialisation of individuals and, finally, social domination' (Honneth 1995; 75), a key problem emerges where a whole range of communicative practices and social achievements, such as developments in legal equality and process along with extended individual freedoms, fall out of the picture. It also appears that society reproduces itself separately from the intersubjective (and creative) social action and self-understanding of its members. It is this impoverished conception of social action, with its emphasis on the social domination of nature and its parallels with social class domination and individual self-discipline that is central to the 'communicative turn' in Habermas's work, and that becomes integral to the development of Honneth's.

For Honneth (1991), Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the further 'repression of the social' in Adorno's later work, marks a theoretical shift in the 1940s. A more pessimistic philosophy of history is assumed – in the light of Fascism and Stalinism, and the integration of the working class in the commodified and administered society of

the US – and an increasing scepticism around the possibilities of progress and civilisation inaugurates a re-thinking of their philosophy of history in the direction of a 'logic of disintegration' from the origin of the species to the barbarism evident in Fascism (Honneth 1995; 73). This grand philosophy of history adheres to the previous emphasis on work and the social mastery of nature, but no longer in the direction of Marx's broadly positive account of the emancipatory potential latent in scientific and technological developments. Instead, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise the cognitive component of the mastery of nature that they associate with 'objectivised thinking' or 'instrumental rationality' – the reification of thought apparent in human interaction with nature – and emphasise a broadly Weberian conception of formal rationality at work in the scientific and technological domination of nature.<sup>9</sup>

What also arises here for Honneth is the related issue of providing a theoretical justification for (rational) critique, given the entwinement of rationality and domination. If social practice and consciousness, as the possible (social) sources for independent and critical consciousness, have become completely reified, then any attempt at social critique that grounds itself in social reality must be considered

<sup>9</sup> It is the Marxist reception of Max Weber's theory of rationalisation and the 'disenchantment of the world' in Lukács, Adorno and Horkheimer that Habermas also blames for the impasse reached by early Critical Theory (Habermas 1984; Chapter IV). Whereas from Lukács to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, the forms of consciousness of bourgeois society are traceable to the abstract nature of commodity exchange (Lukács 1971, and Sohn-Rethel 1978), in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* commodity exchange is seen as the modern form of a broader instrumental rationality; as a form of mediation that generalises the type of rationality that developed out of the aims of self-preservation in the human confrontation with nature.

impossible. Or, to put it another way, if mundane social experience is considered from the viewpoint of the 'administered society', then any attempt to identify a critical element of 'intramundane transcendence' will be found wanting (Honneth 1991; 129). Honneth therefore suggests that early Critical Theory fails to ground its critical position in 'actual social experience'. He argues that Adorno and Horkheimer's reduction of social action to the realm of social labour, and their account of the administered society, impoverishes a Critical Theory that seeks to ground its reflective position in practical social activity. Furthermore, as their philosophy 'already makes the pure act of conceptual operation into an elementary form of instrumental reason', Honneth argues that 'it cannot justify any form of discursive thought, even its own' (1991; 61–62). Without a form of rationality free from domination, they are unable to ground a (rational) critical position able to provide an account of the (rational)

possibility of emancipation (Honneth 1995; 61–91).<sup>10</sup> Their theoretical position is reduced to a utopian negativity that exposes any (false) claims to social reconciliation. And without a pre-theoretical resource for social emancipation apparent in *social* history, their critical position – particularly Adorno's – ends up seeking grounding in the non-instrumental, yet rarefied, sensuous particularities of modern art (Adorno 1997).<sup>11</sup>

However, as I will argue later, despite some validity in these criticisms of earlier Critical Theory, Honneth's tendency to embrace Habermas's communicative turn, albeit in a recognitive direction, throws up a number of significant theoretical issues which Adorno's commitment to particularity and non-identity, and to an aesthetic praxis, might help us to resolve. In particular, his work poses a number of challenges to Honneth's emphasis on recognition and explores a number of the ways in which we are often structurally compelled to

<sup>10</sup> As philosophy itself is intimately tied to instrumental thought, Honneth argues that Adorno and Horkheimer limit its activity to the *negative* task of criticising conceptual thinking, and renounce the possibility of any claims to *positive* knowledge. This negative task of philosophy is the logical conclusion to their attempts to avoid self-contradiction, and is an idea that is explicitly worked through in Adorno's 1966 work, *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1990). However, Adorno would suggest that reason might be predominantly instrumental but is also able to criticise itself and recognise its own complicity in domination (which in turn has important educational and transformative value etc.). Arguably, the emphasis on contradiction and particularity in dialectical thinking, alongside Adorno's appeal to aesthetics and ethics, suggest that reason need not be (perpetually) instrumental (Adorno 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Adorno appeals to the realm of aesthetics due to his belief that art, although still cognitive, allows for non-conceptual (and non-instrumental and non-coercive) knowledge of reality and freedom. Adorno's position does not seek merely to emphasise the realm of art and aesthetics as a counterweight to the dominance of science and morality, but instead, and more radically, conceives of art and aesthetics as a realm cast out from truth, and therefore as a realm which contains the deeper (reflective) truth concerning the partial nature of, and the damage done to truth by, presumptive reason and universal morality. For an outline of Adorno's aesthetic theory, see Adorno (1997), and for an excellent extension of these arguments see Bernstein (1993).

misrecognise others whilst denying our own desire for recognition.

### The Communicative Turn

The unsatisfactory negativism that Honneth associates with early Critical Theory leaves him in no doubt as to the pressing problem of contemporary Critical Theory:

If the Left-Hegelian model of critique is to be retained at all, we must first re-establish theoretical access to the social sphere in which an interest in emancipation can be anchored pre-theoretically. Without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or movement within social reality, Critical Theory cannot be further pursued in any way today, for it would be no longer capable of distinguishing itself from other models of social critique in its claim to a superior sociological explanatory substance or in its philosophical procedures of justification. (Honneth 2007; 66)

Given the nature of the impasse of early Critical Theory according to Honneth, what is therefore needed is (i) a non-instrumental form of rationality, such that all conceptual knowledge is not simply a reflection of the instrumental demands of social domination and the domination of nature, thereby avoiding the contradiction of attempting to present a 'rational' critique of society while arguing

for the entwinement of rationality and domination;<sup>12</sup> and (ii) evidence of a pre-theoretical ('critical') resource in social reality, i.e. a form of practical social critique or concrete social 'interest' in emancipation that can provide Honneth with a pre-theoretical resource for his renewed 'critical' theory. Following Habermas, Honneth hopes that these tasks are satisfied by the communicative turn. By outlining a logic of 'intersubjectivity' at work in an alternative 'communicative rationality' which is relatively autonomous in relation to social labour and the instrumental domination of nature, Habermas and Honneth hope to sidestep the philosophy of consciousness, and identify a pre-theoretical resource for critique in the emancipatory possibilities at work in the 'conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals' (Habermas 1984; 398) – be they 'built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species' (ibid.) for Habermas, or ultimately apparent in 'identity claims acquired in socialisation' for Honneth (2007; 70).

Habermas's work represents the important alternative to earlier Critical Theory for Honneth, and opens up the possibility of meeting Horkheimer's original criteria. His 'paradigm of communicative action' replaces the Marxist

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, however, would refuse the temptation to clearly separate out freedom (or rationality) and domination, as is the tendency in Habermas and Honneth. For interesting accounts of the 'aporia and determinate negation of morality' in Adorno, which emphasise both the repressive and emancipatory moments in morality, see Schweppenhauser (2004) and Menke (2004). Simon Jarvis usefully highlights the related point that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* avoids the separation of social action and (a pre-social) nature we find in cultural idealism, and instead seeks a 'reconciliation of culture and nature' (Jarvis 1998; 35), whereby happiness would involve more than 'free and rational intersubjectivity' and would include 'bodily delight' along with freedom from self-preservation and 'material suffering' (ibid.; 221).

emphasis on production and social labour, and pins its hopes for emancipatory action and social progress on the rational potential inherent in 'social interaction'.<sup>13</sup> The 'rational potential of communicative action' is found in the normative presuppositions contained in the pragmatics of language, and it is here (in this 'pre-theoretical sphere of emancipation') that Habermas is able to ground his normative position. Put rather simply, in the process of communicative action, we carry with us certain normative expectations connected to the linguistic rules that are implicit in communication geared towards understanding. Should our normative expectations not be fulfilled, certain moral demands arise that expose the forms of domination at work in current forms of communicative action. In comparison to Horkheimer who initially 'saw capitalist rela-

tions of production as setting unjustified limits on the development of the human capacity for labour', Honneth suggests that Habermas 'sees the social relations of communication as putting unjust restrictions on the emancipatory potential of intersubjective understanding' (Honneth 2007; 69).<sup>14</sup> By arguing that there is a normative impulse at the very heart of human communication, and that this normative impulse is expressed in the (implicit) linguistic rules of communication, Habermas is in a position to propose a 'critical' theory that aims to highlight, and hopefully contribute to changing, the social obstacles that impede the full expression of these rules.<sup>15</sup>

Habermas emphasises that subjects are always already in relation to each other due to processes of linguistic understanding, and it is this language-mediated intersubjectivity which

<sup>13</sup> As Habermas had already argued in *Theory and Practice*, 'Marx does not actually explicate the interrelationship of interaction and labour, but instead, under the unspecific title of social praxis, reduces the one to the other, namely: communicative action to instrumental action' (Habermas 1974; 129).

<sup>14</sup> Again, to put it rather crudely, we could say that for Habermas at the very heart of all human action is the use of language, and when we use language we commit ourselves to a number of (universal) 'validity claims' that we may be asked to justify on the basis of defensible 'reasons'. These unavoidable validity claims introduce a moral commitment into our interactions with others and provide the possibility for consensus and social order. Should our communication breakdown in some way, we will (or should) move to a level of 'discourse', with the aim of reaching a new level of understanding and consensus. The discourse we engage in over particular validity claims can be characterised as theoretical (truthful), moral-practical (right) or aesthetic (sincere) discourse (see Habermas 1990). Habermas extends these validity claims with additional logical-semantic and procedural rules (1990; 87–88), as well as a third set of 'social' rules specific to post-conventional contexts (*ibid.*; 89).

<sup>15</sup> Habermas's own version of 'critical' theory famously attempts to make the distinction between 'false' freedom and 'true' freedom, 'pseudo-communication' and 'true' communication, through recourse to an 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas 1974; 19). He is keen to emphasise that 'true' freedom is not achievable without the possibility of real, free and open communication leading to consensus. However, he has to be able to distinguish between true and false communication by setting out a critical standpoint from which actual (and particular) forms of public discourse and consensus can be critically exposed as illusory (see Habermas 1973 in McCarthy 1978; 301).

distinguishes human beings as a species.<sup>16</sup> Social reproduction cannot simply be seen in terms of, or as determined by, material reproduction, but rather language and communication must be seen as playing an equally important role in history. Equipped with his distinction between 'labour' and 'interaction', Habermas attempts to further develop a theory of societal rationalisation that outlines the different forms of knowledge production and rationality associated with each (Habermas 1987a). He wants to demonstrate not only the development of strategic action in society through the lens of social labour and political administration, but also to identify a separate communicative sphere whereby certain institutions play the role of reducing barriers to the free communication of those social norms and values which are central to social integration and reproduction. From here, according to Honneth, the task is set for Habermas to not only develop his outline of the linguistic presuppositions of language and communication, but also (i) a notion of social evolution able to explain the process of societal

rationalisation (in both instrumental and communicative spheres), and (ii) an outline of the ways in which 'realms of social action become independent purposive-rationally organised systems' (Honneth 1995; 88).<sup>17</sup>

Habermas's development of these themes throughout his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 and 1987b) provides Honneth with an alternative 'communicative-theoretic' version of Critical Theory, and Habermas is applauded for developing a historical account of societal development from the standpoint of communicative rationality. Habermas sees the development of 'systemic' forms of strategic action as increasingly separate from other communicative forms of social life, which he collectively refers to as the 'lifeworld'.<sup>18</sup> He is then able to conceive of a dualistic development of society, albeit one where the two logics of development are unevenly weighted. Communicative rationality and linguistic understanding are seen as fundamental to social reproduction, whereas the norm-free sphere of action encapsulated in his notion of 'system' is conceived of as a historical consequence of

<sup>16</sup> Honneth explores many of these ideas in his early work on philosophical anthropology, particularly his work with Hans Joas – see Honneth and Joas (1988). Here Ludwig Feuerbach is identified as playing a key role in outlining the '*a priori* intersubjectivity of the human being' (ibid.; 15) and Marx's work (along with the work of George Herbert Mead, Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias and Habermas) is also dissected for its intersubjective insights.

<sup>17</sup> Again, there is limited space to explore the details of Habermas's key ideas in any depth here; these core ideas remain the key theme throughout his work, but they are predominantly explored in Habermas (1979, 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1990). Here I am also neglecting Habermas's work on religion and Europe which has been at the heart of his more recent publications. See Habermas (2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Habermas suggests that the lifeworld is made up of those spheres outside of formal economic and political life that serve the function of symbolic reproduction, e.g. family, cultural tradition, media, community groups, social movements etc. It provides shared meanings, consensus and social integration, and transmits knowledge and traditional beliefs. He argues that it serves a number of functions that have increasingly become separated over the course of social evolution: specifically cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation (1987; 152).

a process of abstraction.<sup>19</sup> Although the economic and political subsystems of the 'system' developed out of the lifeworld, and continue to rely on it for normative reproduction, they cease to be as amenable to the questioning of validity claims and tend to invade and dislocate lifeworld relations and produce a series of 'social pathologies' in a process that ultimately leads to a crisis in cultural reproduction – anomie, alienation, disintegration, instability, and lack of personal responsibility (Habermas 1987b; 142–145). The systemic forms of instrumental action are not to be seen simply as the logical outcome of humanity's mastery of nature, but rather as the outcome of a process of societal rationalisation emerging from the lifeworld. Consequently, it is not merely the existence of such instrumentally driven forms of administration, organisation and steering that pose the problem for contemporary society, but rather the way in which they unjustifiably encroach on those areas of social life premised on communicative understanding – what he calls the 'colonisation of the lifeworld' (Habermas 1984).

However, a key problem emerges here for Honneth in that Habermas produces an account of social evolution in terms of a conflict between communicative and purposive-rational action *spheres*, rather than conflict within a wider process of understanding between social classes or *groups*. This conflict is not seen as being mediated through social struggle, but rather as a process of rationalisation over and above classes, whereby the purposive-rational actions, whose origin is in intersubjectively produced norms, assume a life of their own and adversely turn upon the sphere of social interaction.<sup>20</sup> Habermas is seen as reifying the distinction between the two action spheres by perceiving the sphere of communicative action as limited in its influence on the sphere of purposive-rational action, which itself in turn only acts destructively upon the communicative sphere of action. For Honneth, as for a number of other critics,<sup>21</sup> Habermas's conception of contemporary capitalist societies here, in terms of the autonomous and opposing spheres of system and lifeworld, leads to what

<sup>19</sup> He uses the term 'system' for those aspects of modern societies that co-ordinate strategic action geared towards the material, rather than symbolic, reproduction of society. He argues that the system has, necessarily, become 'uncoupled' from the communicative context of the lifeworld, and institutionalised in the form of the modern state and modern economy, with money and power as 'steering media'.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting here that Honneth is also particularly critical of Habermas's tendency to reduce work to instrumental action and therefore to give up on a 'critical concept of work'. For Honneth's attempts to work through these issues, see his 'Domination and Moral Struggle', 'Work and Instrumental Action', and 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination' in Honneth (1995). For an excellent study that explores these earlier elements of Honneth's thought, see Deranty (2009).

<sup>21</sup> See McCarthy (1991) and Fraser (1989). Fraser also argues that this split has consequences for the theoretical understanding of gender as well, as Habermas's assumption that the family is simply characterised in lifeworld terms separately from the system, risks missing the elements of power in gender relations, and also risks glossing over important issues such as unpaid (domestic) labour (Fraser 1989; 118–120).

Honneth calls 'complementary fictions' or reifications resulting in the supposition of '(1) the existence of norm-free organisations of action and (2) the existence of power-free spheres of communication' (Honneth 1991; 298). Honneth opposes the notion of 'norm-free' strategic action by arguing that 'the organisational structures of management and administration can be generally clarified only as institutional embodiments of both purposive-rational and political-practical principles' (ibid.). He criticises the notion of 'power-free communication' by questioning Habermas's presupposition of the cognitive separation of actions oriented to success and actions oriented to understanding, as well as the fiction of a social lifeworld that is reproduced independently of strategic influences. Furthermore, if power is only considered at the level of systems integration, Honneth argues that Habermas ignores 'the importance of pre-state, situationally bound forms of the exercise of everyday domination in the reproduction of a society'; and conversely, if social integration is only perceived in life-world practices concerned with the symbolic reproduction of society, then he ignores 'the importance of processes of social interaction internal to an organisation for the functioning of social organisations' (ibid.; 301).

For Honneth, Habermas's social theory ends up with an analysis of the social consequences of autonomous power complexes, and his dualism of system/lifeworld parallels that of an organisation/individual dualism in Adorno's work, and a power apparatus/human body dualism in the work of Michel Foucault (ibid.);<sup>22</sup> all of these ultimately adhere to what Honneth calls a 'systems-theoretic', rather than a 'communication-theoretic', approach. The central pathology of contemporary society for Habermas becomes the 'penetration of systemic forms of steering into the previously intact region of a communicative everyday practice' (ibid.; 302). However, despite this conception of social spheres as systems, Honneth sees Habermas's approach as having the advantage over earlier critical social theorists due to the serious consideration of *moral* processes of understanding through his notion of the centrality of communicative action for social reproduction. Yet, the dualistic conclusions of Habermas's thought lead to a two-fold sacrifice. On the one hand Habermas abandons a conception of 'the communicative organisation of material production which, under the title "self-administration", belongs to the productive part of the tradition of critical Marxism', thereby sacrificing 'the possibility of a justified critique

<sup>22</sup> Honneth's initial attempts to transcend the Habermasian divisions with a notion of 'morally motivated struggle' (1996; 1) also employed a conception of struggle taken from Foucault's notion of discipline. Honneth brings Foucault into the problematic of Frankfurt School Critical Theory as an alternative 'rediscovery of the social' alongside Habermas's communicative approach (Honneth 1991). However, Foucault's work is increasingly seen as emphasising the all-encompassing disciplining power of modern institutions at a distance from his starting point of the unceasing process of social struggle, and ends up as a 'functionalist' account of 'the augmentation of social power' and social control whereby social groups end up as the mere effects of such systemic processes (ibid.; 199).

of concrete forms of organisation of economic production and political administration' (ibid.; 303). On the other hand, he ends up sacrificing,

the communication-theoretic approach he had initially opened up: the potential for an understanding of the social order as an institutionally mediated communicative relation between culturally integrated groups that, so long as the exercise of power is asymmetrically distributed, takes place through the medium of social struggle. (ibid.)

Honneth (2007; 70) is also critical of the 'emancipatory process in which Habermas socially anchors the normative perspective of his critical theory'. For Honneth, the key characteristic of Critical Theory is its attempt to ground its 'critical' (i.e. potentially emancipatory) intent in what he calls the 'pre-theoretical resource' apparent in social needs or social movements; without this critical theory becomes just another form of social (scientific) critique. The problem, according to Honneth, is that the 'critical' and emancipatory element of Habermas's theory appeals to the normative presuppositions 'implicit' in *linguistic* understanding and is therefore too far removed from the actual (moral) experiences of social actors. If a pre-theoretical resource for a 'critical' perspective is to be found in social

reality, then Honneth suggests that it has to articulate 'an existing experience of social injustice' (ibid.).<sup>23</sup> Habermas's theory still meets Horkheimer's methodological criteria, by replacing social labour with communicative understanding, but he has no replacement for the moral experiences of injustice faced by the proletariat. It was these practical *experiences* that provided the everyday social reality and pre-theoretical resource for Horkheimer's normative standpoint, experiences that could be articulated in a more systematic manner in the form of a 'critical' theory. Honneth follows Habermas in rejecting the idea that the possibility of emancipation is attributable to 'a group of people who have nothing but socio-economic circumstances in common', but he follows Horkheimer in seeking to identify the moral experiences of social actors that would indicate the justifiability of a 'critical' normative standpoint. The 'communicative rationalisation of the lifeworld', whereby the linguistic rules of understanding are developed, and become apparent, occurs 'behind the backs of the subjects involved; its course is neither directed by human intentions nor can it be grasped within the consciousness of a single individual' (ibid.).

<sup>23</sup> Honneth's criticisms here are in line with a number of Hegelian-inclined criticisms of Habermas's work. Habermas might be able to tell us what the presuppositions of communication are, and also what social conditions need to be in place for us to fully exercise our communicative competences, but it is still too rarefied to guide everyday social actors in their specific duties. He arguably purifies the ideals of communicative reason and turns practical norms into formal-theoretical norms on the assumption that their formality is what provides them with universality and 'rational' authority, thereby depriving these norms of their link to action, motivation and solidarity (see Bernstein 2005; 307–308; Pensky 2011; 136). See also Benhabib (1986; 321), Pippin (1997; 157–184), and Putnam (2004; 111–134). For an important critique of Habermas's notion of universalisability as 'culturally-specific' as well as gendered, classed and racialised, see Young (1996; 123 in Ashenden and Owen 1999; 139).

I agree with Honneth here in his Hegelian criticisms of Habermas's overly dualistic and purified distinction between communicative and purposive-rational action spheres, as well as the subsequent loss of the 'productive part of the tradition of critical Marxism' in the conception of 'the communicative organisation of material production'. I also agree with his critique of the emancipatory potential in Habermas's emphasis on the normative presuppositions 'implicit' in linguistic understanding, due to the distance between this 'critical' normative position and the concrete experiences of social actors. As we will see, Honneth's alternative 'critical' theory seeks to close this gap between the (moral) experiences of social actors and the reflective critical-theoretical position they provide a pre-theoretical resource for, and to make stronger motivational links between experiences of injustice and emancipatory politics. However, I also argue that his success here is limited and that we witness a repetition of Habermas's tendency to purify and idealise, although now transposed to a notion of recognition, and a 'formal conception of ethical life' founded on recognition relations which is also ultimately too formal to produce solidarity or motivate action and which abstracts from difference and particularity.

### Honneth's Recognitive Turn

Honneth points to his specific resolution of the problems he identifies in Habermas's work

by seeking to broaden what is at stake in our processes of social interaction. He is still working with a Habermasian notion of the normative presuppositions of communicative action, but seeks to make them more substantial than Habermas's linguistic account; he does this by making these presuppositions into explicitly social prerequisites for successful self-relations. Rather than isolating the linguistic rules implicit in communicative action, Honneth wants to emphasise how human subjects can only be said to have moral experiences, and to respond to a sense of injustice, when a broader sense of self is under threat. He argues that subjects 'experience an impairment of what we can call their moral experiences, i.e., their "moral point of view", not as a restriction of intuitively mastered rules of language, but as a violation of identity claims acquired in socialisation' (Honneth 2007; 70).<sup>24</sup> The normative potential of social interaction is found within the moral experiences of disrespect at work in everyday communication and emerges from the lack of recognition given to one's (implicit) identity claims. Evidence for such experiences is sought in historical and sociological studies, such as those by Barrington Moore, Jr., (1978) or E.P. Thompson (1963), which are concerned with the everyday social resistance of the lower social classes. What Honneth sees here are examples of resistance that, rather than resulting from explicitly articulated moral principles, emerge out of *implicit* and *intuitive* notions of justice,

<sup>24</sup> Honneth seeks to prevent Habermas's 'idealising presuppositions' concerning rules of language from forming a moral law without connection to the moral self-understanding of social agents, thereby reproducing the problem of motivation for which Hegel criticises Kant. See Hegel (1967; §133–135).

unarticulated raw material that can be worked up into positive moral principles. He argues that 'the normative presupposition of all communicative action is to be seen in the acquisition of social recognition', and that 'subjects encounter each other within the parameters of the reciprocal expectation that they be given recognition as moral persons and for their social achievements' (Honneth 2007; 71).

Honneth is therefore able to make a stronger link than Habermas between the normative presuppositions of social interaction and the moral feelings of those involved. By identifying the need for *recognition* as a core (anthropological) aspect of the development of our identities, Honneth argues that any threat to such recognition in the form of 'social disrespect' will lead to a threat to our very identity and will inevitably evoke feelings of 'shame, anger or indignation' (ibid.; 72). It is these feelings in the face of 'structural forms of disrespect' that provide Honneth with the 'pre-theoretical resource' for a coherent Critical Theory, and he develops these ideas in more detail in his *Struggle for Recognition* (1996). Here he turns to the notion of recognition in the Jena writings of the young

Hegel and seeks to identify the communicative presuppositions involved in successful identity-formation, with recourse to the importance of autonomy and self-realisation.<sup>25</sup> He argues that:

Hegel was convinced that a struggle among subjects for the mutual recognition of their identity generated inner societal pressure toward the practical, political establishment of institutions that would guarantee freedom. It is individuals' claim to the intersubjective recognition of their identity that is built into social life from the very beginning as a moral tension, transcends the level of social progress institutionalised thus far, and so gradually leads – via the negative path of recurring stages of conflict – to a state of communicatively lived freedom. (Honneth 1996; 5)

He takes from Hegel's *System of Ethical Life* a distinction between three forms of recognition: (i) the 'affective relationship of recognition found in the family' where we are 'recognised as concrete creatures of need', (ii) the 'cognitive-formal relationship of recognition found in law' involving recognition 'as abstract legal persons', and (iii) the 'emotionally enlightened relationship of recognition found in the state', where we are 'recognised as concrete universals [...] as subjects who are socialised in their particularity' (ibid.; 25).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> As they did for Habermas, Hegel's Jena writings serve Honneth's project well due to their emphasis on the moral-developmental potential of conflict between social subjects for the collective ethical life of the community. Criticising the atomism at work in the Hobbesian notion of struggle and the natural law tradition, Hegel proposes that intersubjective forms are always already part of human nature and at the heart of every process of human socialisation. Social struggle is understood to be driven by moral impulses rather than by motives of self-interest and preservation, and the life of the community is not to be conceived of in terms of a necessary limitation of individual liberty, but rather as opening up the possibility for the freedom of every individual.

<sup>26</sup> In his account of Hegel's 'absolute ethical life', Honneth emphasises the point that intersubjective relations extend beyond cognitive recognition and 'provide the communicative basis upon which individuals, who have been isolated from each other by legal relations, can be reunited within the context of an ethical community' (1996; 24). This Hegelian conception of the State would result in the 'respect of each and every person for the biographical particularity of every other' becoming 'the habitual underpinnings of a society's common mores' (ibid.; 58).

Honneth now sets himself three tasks in relation to Hegel's theory. Firstly he attempts to rid Hegel's thesis of what he sees as its speculative foundation by using empirical social psychology, in the form of George Herbert Mead, to ground the importance of intersubjective relationships<sup>27</sup> – i.e. to demonstrate that the intersubjective process of identity development, whereby individuals only recognise themselves as 'individuated selves' through the confirmation of others, is an empirical event in the social world.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, he seeks to develop an 'empirically supported phenomenology' able to concretise the different forms of mutual recognition that Hegel had 'constructed purely conceptually to cover empirical reality' (ibid.; 69). The forms of mutual recognition discernible in Hegel's *System of Ethical Life* and *Realphilosophie* – what Honneth calls 'love', 'law' and 'ethical life' – are to be read as relations whereby individuals recognise each other in increasingly individuated and autonomous ways. Finally, Honneth seeks to develop Hegel's idea of a parallel development between the sequence of forms of recognition presupposed in successful ego-development (i.e. love, rights and solidarity) and the formation of societal structures that develop as a result of moral struggle. In sum, he

argues that incomplete identity formation, due to the incomplete nature of societal structures of recognition, produces an experience of disrespect that informs individuals of the 'absence of recognition', and impels them to engage in intersubjective conflicts resulting in the (institutionally-mediated) social affirmation of new claims to mutual recognition and autonomy.

### *Love, Rights & Solidarity*

Not only does Honneth seek to justify the three-fold division of forms of recognition he finds in Hegel and Mead, with recourse to empirical research from individual sciences, but also to identify those forms of disrespect that mark the *negative* elements of recognition relations. These forms of disrespect would not only allow subjects to perceive their lack of recognition, but would also provide the motivation for them to engage in struggles for recognition. What Honneth wants to do in distinguishing between the three forms of recognition – love, rights and solidarity – and in testing them in relation to empirical studies, is demonstrate that they form 'independent types with regard to (i) the medium of recognition, (ii) the form of the relation-to-self made possible, and (iii) the

<sup>27</sup> According to Honneth (1996; 29), Hegel's 'original plan' is sacrificed in the development of his thought in favour of the 'philosophy of consciousness' apparent in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Honneth agrees with Habermas and Michael Theunissen in arguing that the later Hegel sacrifices his earlier work on intersubjectivity in favour of absolute spirit or the rational state (see Habermas 1992 and Theunissen 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Honneth uses Mead's notions of the 'I' and the 'me' as 'empirical' justification for the necessity of the perception of the other in the development of self-consciousness. However, he has since largely abandoned Mead due to him not providing a sufficient normative dimension for recognitive relations – e.g. he 'reduces recognition to the act of reciprocal perspective-taking, without the character of the other's action being of any crucial significance' (2002; 502).

potential for moral development' (Honneth 1996; 95). Alongside the forms of recognition are discernible forms of social disrespect which match up to the practical relations-to-self, and Honneth wants to determine how 'the experience of disrespect is anchored in the affective life of human subjects in such a way that it can provide the motivational impetus for social resistance and conflict, indeed, for a struggle for recognition' (ibid.; 132).

'Love' as the first stage of mutual recognition involves subjects responding to each other's needs and recognising each other as needy beings. Subjects come to recognise their dependence upon each other and also that their recognition must take the form of affective approval and esteem. In an attempt to empirically support Hegel's assertion that love be understood as 'being oneself in another', Honneth turns to psychoanalytic object-relations theory – particularly the work of Donald Winnicott (1971) and Jessica Benjamin (1988) – which he sees as dealing particularly well with the mutual balance between independence and attachment necessary in those primary relationships of reciprocal recognition. The emphasis here is on the psychological importance of early interactive experiences, in addition to libidinal drives, and how the success of such early affectional bonds depends upon the capacity of

the child and 'mother' to successfully balance self-assertion and symbiosis.<sup>29</sup> The negotiation between forms of boundary-dissolution and boundary-establishment in later relationships develops out of this originary experience of symbiosis and can take the form of unforced moments in friendship or sexual union in erotic relationships. These intimate forms of recognition provide 'a type of relation-to-self in which subjects mutually acquire basic confidence in themselves', and they are 'both conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition' (Honneth 1996; 107). He outlines how physical injury, especially in the form of torture or rape, deprives a subject of the ability to dispose over his or her own body. These most fundamental forms of 'disrespect' not only cause physical pain to its victim, but also affect their practical-relation-to-self by damaging the basic self-confidence, acquired through love, in autonomously controlling one's own body.

The recognition relation at work in the sphere of 'law' is based on the notion that we can only understand ourselves as legal persons, with rights in relation to others and assurances that our claims will be satisfied, once we have assumed the position of the 'generalised other' and recognised others as bearers of 'rights'.<sup>30</sup> On the premise that subjects will accept legal

<sup>29</sup> For important feminist critiques of Honneth's notion of love, and his characterisation of the mother-infant relationship, see Allen (2010), Young (2007), Meehan (2011), and Butler in Honneth (2008; 107). At the heart of their criticisms is Honneth's neglect of the unequal power relationships already at work in such 'primary' relationships. Meehan also questions Honneth's tendency to describe the initial mother-child relationship as one of symbiosis rather than acknowledging research that emphasises distinctive selves within the first few days.

<sup>30</sup> Here Honneth outlines the historical transition from 'traditional legal relations', whereby the recognition of an individual as a legal person is tied to the social esteem accorded to their social

norms if they have been able to freely agree to them on an equal basis, a recognition relation is established whereby legal subjects 'recognise each other as persons capable of autonomously making reasonable decisions about moral norms' (ibid.; 110). Here Honneth outlines a historical development of personhood, seen in terms of an increase in individual rights-claims, whereby the definition of a morally responsible person is expanded due to certain struggles for recognition, which highlight the increasing number of prerequisites, and which have to be taken into consideration for participation in rational will-formation.<sup>31</sup> Utilising the work of T. H. Marshall (1963), and his historical distinction between civil, political and social rights, Honneth identifies two developmental paths that mark the continuation of the struggle for recognition in the legal sphere. The principle of 'equality' in modern law leads not only to a broadening of the *content* of the status of a legal person, in terms of differences in individual opportunities for taking advantage of socially guaranteed freedoms, but also to the expansion of such status to an increasing number of previously excluded people. The conflicts that arise in the legal sphere therefore are responses to a lack of recognition or being treated with disrespect, and aim to expand both the 'sub-

stantive content and social scope of the status of a legal person' (Honneth 1996; 118). Being denied rights not only limits an individual's autonomy, but also takes away their ability to experience themselves, according to intersubjective expectations, as a morally responsible partner-to-interaction.

Having outlined the spheres of love and law, Honneth now turns to the importance of the recognition relation he terms 'solidarity' – the relation, discernible in Hegel's concept of 'ethical life', that recognises an individual's *particular* traits and abilities. Honneth stresses how this recognition relation presupposes an 'intersubjectively shared value-horizon' in that subjects can 'mutually esteem each other only on the condition that they share an orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other' (ibid.; 121). The social medium that is required to fulfil the task of expressing individual differences in a universal and intersubjective manner, rather than the universal characteristics of human subjects found in modern law, Honneth terms the 'cultural self-understanding of a society'. This cultural self-understanding is therefore the measure used for the social esteem of individuals, due to the fact that their particular traits

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status, to 'modern legal relations', whereby rights are detached from social roles and (theoretically at least) given to all human beings as free individuals, making modern legal relations less hierarchical and more equal and universal. For Honneth, this process marks the historical juncture at which two aspects of respect are clearly discernible due to the uncoupling of legal recognition from social esteem (Honneth 1996; 107–121).

<sup>31</sup> For Honneth, this process is due to the way in which the 'institutionalisation of bourgeois liberties' set in motion a moral guiding principle that throughout history has been redeemed by disadvantaged groups who have demonstrated that their conditions are not adequate for full and equal participation in the rational will-formation of the current political community.

and abilities are judged according to how they contribute to the culturally defined goals of a society. Thus:

The more conceptions of ethical goals are open to different values and the more their hierarchical arrangement gives way to horizontal competition, the more clearly social esteem will be able to take on an individualising character and generate symmetrical relationships. (ibid.; 122)

For Honneth, social esteem in contemporary societies is accorded to individuals as individuated beings rather than as a member of a particular social group.<sup>32</sup> The differences in relation to others, that allow one to feel 'valuable', are no longer defined collectivistically but rather individualistically, and according to the traits that individuals develop along with the evaluation of these traits in terms of the realisation of societal goals. The social worth accorded 'societal value-ideas' comes to depend upon the ruling interpretations of societal goals,

which in turn depends upon the dominance of particular social groups in having their forms of life publicly recognised as valuable. It is in this sense that Honneth considers relations of social esteem to be subject to cultural *struggle*.

Whereas the practical-relation-to-self experienced through status groups in corporatively organised societies can be considered in terms of collective honour, the practical-relation-to-self experienced after the individualisation of this form of recognition is seen by Honneth as 'self-esteem'. 'Self-esteem' now becomes a parallel concept with 'self-confidence' and 'self-respect' for Honneth, and he looks forward to the 'social relations of symmetrical esteem between individualised (and autonomous subjects)' which would lead to a 'state of societal solidarity', whereby all members of society are able to esteem themselves (ibid.; 129).<sup>33</sup> This 'symmetricality' of esteem cannot be identi-

<sup>32</sup> This recognition relation has also undergone a historical transformation, according to Honneth (1996; 121–130), marked by the transition from pre-modern notions of 'honour' to modern categories of 'social standing' or 'prestige'. In pre-modern, 'corporatively organised societies', ethical goals are organised hierarchically according to their contribution to the achievement of certain societal values, and individuals attain 'honour' by participating in behaviour which is collectively expected of their social status. Honneth sees the decline of traditional ethical life as being due to a transformation in the cultural self-understanding of a society, from one largely still dependent on religious and metaphysical presuppositions to one that recognised 'ethical obligations' as inner-worldly decisions' (ibid.; 124). This also led to the bourgeoisie's confrontation with the nobility over notions of honour and conduct in accordance with one's 'estate'; a confrontation that not only established new value-principles but also questioned the very status of such value-principles.

<sup>33</sup> Honneth predominantly argues that solidarity is made up of the societal recognition accorded us through our contribution to society in the form of organised labour, and 'the chances of forming an individual identity through the experience of recognition are directly related to the societal institutionalisation and distribution of labour' (Honneth 2007; 76). A key example that Honneth feels exemplifies this issue is the feminist discussion around unpaid societal labour, in the form of childcare and housework, in the context of patriarchal cultural values. However, although he wants to emphasise the link, severed by Habermas, between work and moral experience, he also wants to avoid reintroducing the role of 'emancipatory consciousness formation' assigned to labour in Marxist philosophies of history.

fied in quantitative terms but rather refers to a state where 'every subject is free from being collectively denigrated, so that one is given the chance to experience oneself to be recognised, in light of one's own accomplishments and abilities, as valuable for society' (ibid.; 130).<sup>34</sup> The final form of disrespect that Honneth outlines here is therefore concerned with 'the denigration of individual and collective ways of life'. If an individual's status is dependent upon the collective esteem accorded to their approach to self-realisation within society's cultural value system, then a cultural system that denigrates certain individual forms of life prevents the subject from socially valuing their own particular traits and abilities. This in turn creates a loss of personal self-esteem for the individual.<sup>35</sup>

Having sketched out the broad outlines of the three forms of recognition – with their dif-

fering media of recognition, forms of relation-to-self, accompanying forms of disrespect as well as potential for moral development – Honneth now suggests that two conclusions can be drawn here. Firstly, we should be able to identify 'symptoms' of social disrespect that make subjects aware of the state they are in, such as the 'negative emotional reactions expressed in feelings of social shame' (ibid.; 135), and how these emotional reactions can translate into struggles for recognition and forms of political resistance.<sup>36</sup> Here he also explores the (flawed) 'traces of a tradition' in the social philosophy of Marx, Georges Sorel and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as some historical research on political movements which exposes the normative, rather than utilitarian, motives for resistance.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, by obtaining an overview of the different forms of disrespect, a positive sense of

<sup>34</sup> However, of course, this begs the question of how to conceive of a post-traditional ethical life, i.e. one that accepts the loss of a substantive cultural consensus under conditions of social modernity and individualisation. Once recognition relations are increasingly individualised, then how are we to understand the recognition of individuals in their difference and specificity? And how are we to conceive of the cultural consensus which might recognise the individual contributions towards shared societal goals? Honneth (2011; 406–407) has since criticised his conception of esteem here for giving the false impression of the possibility of a normative consensus in times of ethical pluralism; he opts instead for the possibility of agreement on 'constitutional principles' rather than 'ethical values'.

<sup>35</sup> Honneth elaborates on this point in his 'Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today' in Honneth (2007).

<sup>36</sup> Utilising John Dewey's idea that emotions are a response to frustrated actions, Honneth argues that the failure to meet one's expectations in normative action leads to moral conflicts, and also that negative emotional reactions are therefore seen as a response to the violation of normative expectations. Honneth argues that the likelihood of the moral knowledge, implicit in experiences of disrespect, becoming political resistance is dependent on the subject's cultural-political context: 'only if the means of articulation of a social movement are available can the experience of disrespect become a source of motivation for acts of political resistance' (1996; 139). However, he also acknowledges that there are no guarantees that 'the normative direction of its critique is shared by the victims of disrespect' (2007; 78).

<sup>37</sup> He particularly relies on the work of E. P. Thompson (1963) and Barrington Moore, Jr., (1978).

what constitutes 'psychological health' can be identified, along with the 'social guarantees associated with those relations of recognition that are able to protect subjects most extensively from suffering disrespect' (ibid.).

### *A Formal Conception of Ethical Life*

Honneth takes the 'intersubjective conditions for personal integrity' to be the 'presuppositions for individual self-realisation', and wants to extend his conception of social conflict from being a framework for explaining social struggles to being part of a wider process of moral formation. The important role played by social struggles in the logic of recognition relations means that they can be evaluated in terms of the moral progress in the historical development of society. However, to be able to make such judgements, Honneth seeks to identify a normative standard point from which to outline the developmental direction of moral progress. Starting with the tripartite distinction between love, rights and solidarity, and acknowledging the distinction itself as a historical product, Honneth imagines a past where 'the existence of an archaic group morality, in

which aspects of care are not fully separated from either the rights of tribal members or their social esteem' (1996; 169). The function of this speculative projection is to determine the moral learning process as one that both differentiates between the different forms of recognition, and also unleashes the normative potential inherent in each. He argues that these developmental normative potentials are identifiable in experiences of disrespect, and can be appealed to in the struggles arising out of such experiences. With this general logic of the expansion of recognition relations in place, Honneth seeks to outline the idealised developmental path that would allow for the evaluation of particular struggles in terms of their positive or negative contribution towards the goal of undistorted recognition.<sup>38</sup> Accepting the necessarily hypothetical nature of such a task, Honneth thereby sets out to contemporise Hegel's 'formal conception of ethical life'.

Honneth is dissatisfied with what he sees as the dominant, Kantian, philosophical position on morality which, by insisting merely that all subjects be justly given equal respect, is unable to incorporate all elements necessary for undistorted recognition relations. He is

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He emphasises 'the internal connection that often holds between the emergence of social movements and the moral experience of disrespect' and seeks to delineate 'a concept of social struggle that takes as its starting-point moral feelings of indignation, rather than pre-given interests' (1996; 161). Thompson is particularly useful inasmuch as he looks at the moral context of the resistance of the lower classes to capitalist industrialisation and points out that social resistance cannot be simply an expression of economic deprivation as 'what counts as an unbearable level of economic provision is to be measured in terms of the moral expectations that people consensually bring to the organisation of the community' (ibid.; 166).

<sup>38</sup> In his debate with Nancy Fraser (in Fraser and Honneth 2003), Honneth has extended this point with recourse to a notion of 'validity surplus' at work in the three forms of recognition. See also Honneth's 'Recognition as Ideology' in Honneth (2012).

more ambitious in his attempt to outline the necessary conditions for a 'good' rather than a merely 'just' life, and these conditions would include universal respect as one, but not the only, important factor. Honneth's conception is instead concerned with the *self-realisation* of human beings in addition to their moral autonomy.<sup>39</sup> However, he insists that:

in contrast to those movements that distance themselves from Kant, this concept of the good should not be conceived as the expression of substantive values that constitute the *ethos* of a concrete tradition-based community. Rather, it has to do with the structural elements of ethical life, which, from the general point of view of the communicative enabling of self-realisation, can be normatively extracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life. (ibid.; 172)

Similarly to Habermas and his notion of 'discourse ethics' then, what Honneth wants to do here is place himself in the middle of Kantian moral theory and communitarian ethics,<sup>40</sup> by championing the former's emphasis on general norms, while insisting on the importance of the latter's emphasis on human self-realisation. Honneth justifies the three forms of recognition as necessary conditions for a successful life by suggesting that it is impossible to imagine successful self-realisation – understood as having

the freedom to achieve one's chosen goals – without self-confidence, legally guaranteed autonomy, and affirmation of the value of one's abilities. On the one hand, Honneth now considers the three forms of recognition, which are also necessary conditions for self-realisation, as 'formal or abstract enough not to raise the suspicion of representing merely the deposits of concrete interpretations of the good life' (ibid.; 173), i.e. they are generalised enough to be applicable to all particular forms of life. On the other hand, he argues that there is sufficient detail here 'to be of more help than Kantian references to individual autonomy in discovering the conditions for self-realisation' (ibid.).

In fleshing out what this might mean, Honneth seeks to provide an outline of what a 'post-traditional ethical life' might look like. He argues that the basic structure of 'love' – which 'represents the innermost core of all forms of life that qualify as "ethical"' and is the necessary precursor for other types of self-realisation in that it allows individuals to express their needs and will remain the same in post-traditional ethical life – is restricted in its openness to normative development (ibid.; 176).<sup>41</sup> However, the sphere of rights in post-traditional ethical life allows for the extension of rights equally to

<sup>39</sup> In many ways, Honneth's emphasis on a recognitive account of autonomy and self-realisation follows the attempt to move beyond the liberal notion of justice made by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*. Honneth explores this in more depth in his Spinoza lectures, published as *Suffering from Indeterminacy: An Attempt at a Reactualisation of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (2001) and republished in Honneth (2010).

<sup>40</sup> See Habermas (1990, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Honneth has since revisited the claim that love is exempt from the possibility of normative development in Fraser and Honneth (2003). Here he acknowledges that love can only be conceived as a recognition relation necessary for self-confidence once the family as a private sphere, and 'childhood' as a distinct phase, has emerged historically.

more people (universalisation), whilst also developing beyond liberal civil rights and becoming more sensitive to individual circumstances (deformalisation). The legal sphere is increasingly able to accommodate the fact that there are certain prerequisites allowing individuals to enjoy the liberties that come with civil rights, whilst not sacrificing their universal quality. With regard to the recognition relation of 'solidarity', he also sees a process of individualisation alongside 'equalisation in communities of value', and suggests that:

social-structural upheavals in developed societies have so greatly expanded the possibilities for self-realisation that the experience of individual or collective difference has become the impetus for a whole series of political movements. In the long run, their demands can only be satisfied once culture has been transformed so as to radically expand relations of solidarity. (ibid.; 179)

Honneth makes a compelling case here for the centrality of recognition and disrespect in our struggles for equality and justice, and for the ways in which our ego development and personal identities are formed through recognition relations and are therefore, implicitly and intuitively, damaged by a discernible lack of recognition in the realms of love, law, and solidarity. There is also a lot I find convincing in his claim that incomplete identity formation, in response to incomplete forms of societal recognition, produces negative feelings of shame and indignation which educate us about the lack of recognition, and produce the possibility of individual and collective struggles for more complete and inclusive forms of societal recognition and moral development. One advantage here is that this broad theoretical framework

avoids a reductionist class-based analysis of social injustice, whilst being able to conceive of class struggle in 'recognitive' terms alongside other, and often intersecting, forms of injustice and struggle along the lines of gender, race and sexuality. Another advantage, as we have seen, is that it also makes stronger links than Habermas does between the normative presuppositions of social interaction and the moral feelings of social actors, providing a stronger link between aspects of everyday experiences and a 'critical-theoretical' standpoint with concrete emancipatory possibilities. However, I take issue below with signs of abstraction and proceduralism in Honneth's 'formal' conception of ethical life, which can he believes strengthen his critical-theoretical standpoint insofar as the three forms of recognition are to be seen as *universal and necessary* conditions for self-realisation – both sufficiently substantive yet 'formal' enough to be applicable to *all* particular forms of life. I also challenge the way in which Honneth conceives of the process and possibility of recognition – what it is that we recognise about the other and about ourselves in this process, and the extent to which established recognition-relations and institutions are able to satisfy what it is we seek recognition for.

### **(Mis)Recognition in Honneth's Recognitive Turn**

In his later work, *Reification* (2008), Honneth still maintains his earlier categorisation of recognition relations in terms of love, law and solidarity – and the formal conception of ethical life they imply – but he deepens the centrality of recognition even further

by arguing that underlying these normative forms of recognition there is an 'existential' (and transcendental) level of recognition. This 'affective' level of recognition, where we 'feel existential sympathy for the other' (2008; 152), is described as a primary mode of relating to the world which colours all of our future human relations, and provides a foundation on which other recognition relations are built. In order to be able to engage in other forms of recognition relations, we must already have affirmed our interaction partners in some way, and this affirmation is a form of recognition which involves empathetic engagement. In this light, 'reification' can be seen as an extension of the forms of disrespect outlined above, and for Honneth it becomes a 'forgetting' of our primordial recognitive praxis such that our cognitive, detached, and spectator-like approaches to the world – and our tendency to instrumentalise others, ourselves and our environment – forget that they are underwritten by a pre-cognitive, affective engagement with others, ourselves and the world. In his attempt to explore the idea that 'recognition precedes cognition', Honneth makes reference to a number of similar ideas including John Dewey's 'practical involvement', Stanley Cavell's 'ac-

knowledgement', Martin Heidegger's 'care', Adorno's 'mimesis', and Lukács's 'engaged praxis'. He describes reification as 'an atrophied or distorted form of a more primordial and genuine form of praxis, in which humans take up an active and involved relationship toward themselves and their surroundings' (ibid.; 27), and he emphasises 'the notion that the stance of empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world's significance and value [*Werthhaftigkeit*], is prior to our acts of detached cognition' (ibid.; 38).

A number of critics have questioned Honneth's tendency here and in his earlier work to single out 'recognition' as the underlying source of all forms of injustice and suffering here. Alessandro Ferrara (2011) and Christopher Zurn (2011), for example, mainly criticise Honneth for relying on a monocausal account of social pathologies that operates with a grand narrative and reduces all injustices and pathologies to the realm of recognition.<sup>42</sup> Instead they suggest that a more multi-dimensional approach would be more effective at addressing the specificities of particular pathologies, something Zurn believes Honneth is attempting to do in his more recent work on organised self-realisation and the paradoxes of capitalism.<sup>43</sup> A key critic of

<sup>42</sup> Zurn (2011; 346) also argues that Honneth's 'socio-theoretic explanations' for reification and forgetting are inconclusive, and we are left wondering whether the social causes of reification are 'ineliminable features of human life' or 'socio-culturally specific forms of pathology that are amenable to amelioration or eradication through the transformations of current social structures, institutions and practices' (ibid.; 357–358). Ferrara's analysis of Honneth's *Reification* criticises the implication in Honneth's work that the different forms of reification (in terms of what Ferrara calls 'technical fetishism', 'misrecognition' and 'inauthenticity') share the same social causes, rather than developing out of differential processes. For Honneth's response see Honneth (2011; 419).

<sup>43</sup> See Honneth (2004) and Hartmann & Honneth (2006), both of which are republished in Honneth (2012).

Honneth here is Nancy Fraser whose exchange with Honneth in their *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003) centres around the difference between her dualistic approach to injustice (recognition *and* redistribution) and his monistic approach (recognition). Fraser claims that an approach based solely on recognition tends to miss important aspects of economic equality and she therefore sets up an analytical distinction between injustice premised on the lack of economic and political resources and injustice resulting from the lack of social and cultural recognition of one's identity.<sup>44</sup> Beyond both 'culturalism' and 'economism', she sets herself the task of outlining what a society might look like where all its members are accorded *participatory parity* and the equal opportunity to lead an autonomous life; for her this includes the importance of both distributive *and* recognitive goods. Honneth on the other hand, according to Fraser, reduces all struggles and injustice to a core of recognition (supplemented with moral psychology) and seeks to provide an excessively strong notion of the good life in the form of 'self-realisation', rather than the more formal account of 'parity' which Fraser believes to be more appropriate in modern, pluralist societies.

In response to this, Honneth suggests that his notion of recognition is sufficiently robust to cover economic and political injustices in addition to cultural recognition, for example he sees struggles over redistribution as being centrally concerned with how we 'recognise' different types of labour and economic contribution; he finds the more justice-based approaches, such as Fraser's, as overly formal and lacking in substance. Honneth refers to the 'achievement principle' and the notion of 'equal respect' as examples that demonstrate the way in which the capitalist economy is rooted in a broader normative context, and displays symptoms of 'asymmetrical forms of recognition'. He suggests that although these principles have served ideological purposes (i.e. justifying wealth inequalities in capitalism), they have also been used to support welfare distribution, and used as tools by worker's movements, women and other groups to challenge inequalities and gain recognition for societal contribution.

However, it is not Honneth's exclusive focus on recognition as *the* source of all forms of injustice and suffering that I believe to be of particular concern in Honneth's reconfigured critical theory,<sup>45</sup> but instead the tendency to *idealise* the notion of recognition, his lack of

<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that Fraser has now developed an updated three-dimensional rather than dualistic approach (see Fraser 2005). For her original conception of injustice in terms of recognition/redistribution, see her *New Left Review* article (Fraser 1995).

<sup>45</sup> I tend to broadly agree with Honneth and the other critics of Fraser in this debate, who have not only contested Fraser's tendency to separate out a sphere of the economy (driven solely by the maximisation of profit) from the 'social limits on markets' set by laws and forms of cultural evaluation (see Honneth in Fraser and Honneth 2003; 256), but also questioned the redistribution/recognition division, and demonstrated that her own theory of participatory parity, in outlining the necessary conditions for social participation, is 'already a theory of recognition and misrecognition' (Bernstein 2005; 310). There is also a clear tension here with Fraser's earlier criticism of

an adequate conception of *mis*recognition, his neglect of the *ideological* role that recognition often plays, and the *abstraction* at work in his 'formal' conception of ethical life. I will now outline these criticisms in turn.

### *Idealising Recognition*

Some of the critics of Honneth's work, particularly his recent work on reification, tend to bring a number of these key criticisms together. Despite their differences, all seek to question the idealised notion of mutual recognition at work in his notion of (precognitive) empathetic engagement.<sup>46</sup> Judith Butler questions Honneth's tendency to idealise a notion of empathetic engagement and to neglect the 'negative' aspects of what this engagement often involves (e.g. hate, sadism, aggression etc.). She suggests that:

if a normative value is to be derived from involvement, it is not because involvement presupposes a normative structure of genuine praxis, but because we are beings who have to struggle with both love and aggression in our flawed and commendable efforts to care for other human beings. [...] It is not a matter of returning to what we 'really' know or undoing our deviations from the norm, but of struggling with a set of ethical demands on the basis of myriad affective responses that, prior to their expression in action, have no particular moral valence. (Butler 2008; 104)

Butler also suggests that 'there is no innate moral trajectory in involvement, participation and emotionality, since we are beings who, from

the start, both love and resist our dependency, and whose psychic reality is, by definition, ambivalent' (ibid.; 106). Jonathan Lear makes a similar point and also argues that Honneth's account assumes the narrative structure of 'the fall' with the concomitant tendency to 'build too much goodness into the prior condition' (Lear 2008; 132, 139).

Roger Foster (2011) develops these ideas further and argues that rather than being a primal layer of social interaction as such, recognition is a 'dynamic process' driven by an 'existential ambiguity' – the fact that 'we both want and need recognition, and we fear and refuse it, and neither of these tendencies is more primordial than the other' (ibid.; 257). Foster goes some way towards explaining this ambiguity by suggesting that recognition both humanises us but at the same time leaves us feeling 'exposed, dependent, injurable, and mortal' (ibid.); he argues that 'we are (have become) selves that are invested in this refusal of recognition; it is the continually re-enacted work of denial by the self for whom the exposure to the other is experienced as a source of fear' (ibid.; 263). So rather than following Honneth in his account of reification, whereby the 'forgetting' of recognition is akin to amnesia or 'reduced attentiveness', we might be more convinced by Foster's more Freudian, psycho-social conception whereby our involvement with others 'is instead actively, and continually, repressed'

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Habermas's distinction between system and social integration. For notable criticisms of Fraser's recognition/redistribution distinction see Butler (1998), and Fraser's response to Butler (in Fraser 1998), Young (1997) and Fraser's response to Young (in Fraser 1997), Philips (1997), Bernstein (2005), and Smith (2011; 335–336).

<sup>46</sup> For Honneth's response to the critics of his *Reification* book, see his 'Rejoinder' in Honneth (2008).

(ibid.; 260). By exploring the relationship between reification, subject-formation and cognitive activity, Foster suggests an Adornian conception of 'movement, or better, *struggle*, towards self-awareness within cognition itself' (ibid.), whereby our empathy is enlivened by acknowledging 'our own self-disfigurement in so far as we have become the type of subjects who are able to function in a way that enforces the dominance of the neutralised point of view' (ibid.; 260–261). This way the recovery of such recognition underlying reification would involve the subject becoming aware of the way its own self has been damaged by reified forms of thinking. Here Foster refers to the importance of 'transformative experiences' and, following Cavell and Adorno, places a special emphasis on the de-reifying role of aesthetics.<sup>47</sup>

### *Mis-Recognising*

In addition to these criticisms of Honneth for idealising recognition, I also wish to question the curious absence of a notion of *misrecognition* in Honneth's work as a whole. As Foster suggests, recognition 'is possible only by working through our inevitable tendency to *misrecognise* the object' or other (2011; 258), and to 'deny, repudiate, and refuse the voice of

the other' (ibid.; 256) in the process. Instead Honneth gives the impression that recognition is a fixed and constant factor underlying social life and is characterised by positive relations to the self and other. What this misses out is the fact that 'recognition is a process that is conflictual and involves struggle, both within the self and between self and others, [and] its realization must encompass a movement of self-transformation' (ibid.; 258).<sup>48</sup> Without an account of how we attempt to recognise others, fail to do so, and transform our self-conception in the process, Honneth is unable to do justice to the importance of recognition in our collective lives. Along similar lines, Peter Osborne (1996) criticises Honneth's use of 'recognition' for the tendency to separate out the social aspect, whereby individuals or groups are assigned a certain status, from epistemological issues, i.e. how we come to *know* the other, and what we come to *know* about them. It is for this reason that the opposite of recognition for Honneth is 'disrespect' rather than 'misrecognition'. In other words, it tends to be the *phenomenological* aspects of Hegel's notion of recognition that are missing in Honneth's work, including the notion of *desire* which is at the heart of the struggle for recognition for Hegel.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> I agree with Foster on these points and pursue these ideas further in Hazeldine (2015).

<sup>48</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink (2011) makes a similar point here in relation to the loss of a notion of 'struggle' in Honneth's work. He argues that despite Honneth's earlier engagement with Foucault, due to the advantages of a notion of power and struggle he sees missing in Habermas's work, Honneth in fact ends up losing sight of the importance of struggle in his own account of recognition. Sinnerbrink argues that the emphasis on morality rather than the politics of recognition in Honneth's later work also leads to the abandonment, or at least the neglect, of the importance of an action-theoretic model of the social.

<sup>49</sup> Again, an idea I pursue further in Hazeldine (2015) but have insufficient space to elaborate on here.

By neglecting the importance of misrecognition, we might also want to ask some difficult questions about which identities are recognised, along with which aspects of our identities, and whether the simple recognition of these identities necessarily constitutes a step forward in terms of emancipatory politics. Despite his earlier appropriation of Foucault's work for example, Honneth tends to miss or at least downplay the point that, as subjects, we tend to be formed partly through our subjection to particular power relations, and therefore the affirmation (or 'recognition') of one's identity or cultural specificity may well serve to affirm certain (socio-economic) power relations. Emmanuel Renault (2011), for example, criticises Honneth's account of recognition for being predominantly 'expressivist' rather than 'constitutive'. What he means by this is that Honneth tends to understand social institutions as 'expressions' of underlying recognition relations, and tends to focus exclusively on the way in which recognition relations transform these institutions. What gets lost in this account, according to Renault, is the way in which social institutions both form and restrict – or 'constitute' – subjects, and also pervert certain moral claims; there is an absence of a notion of 'subjectivisation' in the Foucauldian sense of becoming 'subject' to particular institutional discourses.<sup>50</sup> By neglecting, or not fully appreciating, the importance of this institutional level, Renault suggests that Honneth misses the complexity of struggles for recognition, e.g.

the ways in which institutions are evaluated according to people's 'already constituted (social and professional) identities', rather than simply through the lens of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, or the ways in which,

groups can use institutional recognition models either as a central claim (for instance when minorities struggle for alleged universal rights), or as merely strategic means (for example, when a group calls for more cultural recognition as the only way to benefit from more economical integration). (Renault 2011; 228–229)

Related to this is the argument that we might consider genuine cultural critique to be neutralised within the public sphere of late capitalism and that 'by converting cultural opposition into claims to the affirmation of cultural particularity, the link is effectively broken between oppression and the reproduction of socio-economic structures – that is to say, between "cultural" exclusion and material exclusion' (Foster 1999; 12). This criticism directly relates to the tendency in Honneth to perceive claims to recognition as 'identity' claims. Foster argues that this runs the risk of affirming the notion of a fixed (and private) identity, as a 'victim' that merely needs to be protected by law, rather than allowing for the possibility of a *transformative* identity, e.g. the difference between affirmative gay rights and more transformative queer politics. Osborne (1996) makes a similar point and criticises Honneth for both lacking a sense of how cultural forms already mediate the process of recognition and for focussing on the legal recognition of identity-claims rather

<sup>50</sup> In his response to this criticism Honneth suggests that we might see the relationship between institutions and recognition as one marked by 'co-evolution' (Honneth 2011; 403–404).

than more complex 'social forms of subjectivity'. He argues that Honneth idealises the formal universality of legal recognition and thereby 'abstracts from the existence of the state with its "class- [and, we might add, gender- and race-] specific implementation" of the law; not to mention the specificity of state forms in different social formations' (ibid.; 36). Osborne also suggests that we pay significant attention to what we might call 'injuries of recognition', and the ways in which the law actually *forms* certain identities through exclusion, rather than simply focusing on how we might go about recognising already existing identity claims.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Recognition as Ideology***

In further support of the above arguments, I also want to draw further attention to the ways in which what appears as successful recognition can be the result of the attempt by dominant interests to undermine emancipatory possibilities. Foster gives the example of the recognition of trade unions, as the 'legal subjectivity of the working class', and the way the recognition of certain freedoms (e.g. to strike) paralleled certain administrative procedures (e.g. collective bargaining) that sought to undermine class conflict by establishing unions as mediators between workers and the state (Foster 1999).

Jay Bernstein makes a similar point in terms of 'idealising identification' when he suggests that 'it is recognising wage labourers as free and equal that secures their domination; just as it is recognising the table as worth a hundred dollars that secures its fetish character' (Bernstein 2005; 318). Here Bernstein defends Marx's (dialectical) critique of rights: 'that rights as they now are preserve the very lack their possession promises – the right to vote as a continuation of disenfranchisement, the right to welfare as a way of keeping people impoverished' (ibid.; 324). Instead, our notions of injustice 'must exceed ideal, established justice because justice's mechanisms of recognition till now simultaneously systematically misrecognise' (ibid.; 318). So not only does Honneth have to be more sensitive to the ways in which recognition is a fragile and ambiguous process, as well as a threat to self-identity and therefore often actively avoided, but he also has to make sense of the struggles that take place over what it is that is being 'recognised', and the often exclusionary practices of established forms of recognition.

Another point of contention is the tendency for Honneth to operate with an idealised notion of cultural autonomy that assumes that individual experiences of disrespect are (directly) translatable into group experiences, which

<sup>51</sup> A similar point is forwarded by Jacques Rancière in his exchange with Honneth (Rancière 2016). Honneth goes some way towards tackling some of these criticisms in his 'Recognition as Ideology' essay (2012), where he seeks to distinguish between ideological forms of recognition (e.g. the recognition of a housewife for her cleaning skills, the recognition of a slave for his subservience etc.) and 'socially productive' forms. He suggests that the former are characterised by a gap between what they promise and the material and institutional context within which that promise can be fulfilled. He also suggests here that we might want to distinguish between 'recognition orders' that primarily end up affirming forms of domination, and those that create new identities and extend the scope of our normative claims.

are then channelled into collective resistance without the intervening impact of a liberal ideology (and liberal culture) encouraging us to understand our fate in individualistic terms. Honneth in other words lacks a sufficient account of how power and ideology thwart the emancipatory possibilities of struggles for recognition. Foster (1999) suggests that although Honneth is correct to question the tendency of earlier Critical Theory to see culture as serving an ideological and socialising function, he does not sufficiently explore to what extent contemporary culture can 'serve as the focal point for resistance against dominant norms' (ibid.; 11), or the ways in which individual and collective action 'occur under conditions of severe structural constraint and the ubiquitous (but in no sense all-powerful and all-determining) operation of liberal ideology' (ibid.; 13). Foster argues that often we see how 'the potential of cultural resistance gets stuck between the "rock" of a neutralising assimilation to dominant interpretations of liberal individualism and the "hard place" of an outright rejection of the dominant value system' (1999; 11).

In other words, forms of social and economic exclusion may well result in the inversion of dominant values and the redefinition of 'respect' in counter-cultural terms. Although

Honneth takes this point on board and responds with the hope that a 'moral culture' will give those suffering from 'disrespect' the 'individual strength to articulate their experiences in the democratic public sphere', Foster suggests that this demonstrates an overly optimistic and idealised faith in the democratic public sphere, and thereby 'overlooks the extent to which oppositional subcultures can be understood as a *reaction* to patterns of social exclusion whose very existence is *denied* within the democratic public sphere itself' (ibid.; 12). He argues that Honneth neglects the way in which participation in the public sphere tends to require groups to adhere to the demands of a liberal-individual ideology which in turn neutralises resistance and reproduces structures of domination. Following Foster then, and in the light of our criticisms so far, we might ask whether it might be the case 'that normative claims emerge through forms of struggle which a liberal-communitarian structuring of the conditions of self-realisation proves unable to satisfy' (ibid.; 10).<sup>52</sup>

### ***Questioning a 'Formal' Conception of Ethical Life?***

The final set of criticisms which are of importance for the thrust of my argument, concern the problems with Honneth's 'formal

<sup>52</sup> We might also criticise Honneth's account for seeing social and political institutions as 'conditions for the formation of self-consciousness', whereby such institutions, in the light of struggles for recognition, are slowly transformed into conditions adequate for a positive relation to self. This poses the danger that we see politics, and moral progress, through the lens of (individual) self-relations, such that ethical life is reduced to providing the intersubjective context for (individual) self-realisation; we end up instrumentalising politics and turning cooperation and ethical life into the means for our private ends (see Bernstein 2005; 304). We thereby lose the relational aspect of recognition which is concerned with, amongst other things, the destabilising of identity through communal relations, and also the destabilising of current communal relations.

conception of ethical life'. At the heart of these criticisms is both the question of the appropriateness of Honneth's conception in the context of pluralist societies, and the tendency for Honneth to follow Habermas in formalising and purifying practical norms. Max Pensky (2011) and Bert van den Brink (2011) focus their criticisms of Honneth on the notions of 'ethical life' and 'solidarity', and at the heart of their critique is the tension, or rather irreconcilability, between a formal conception of ethical life and the pluralism of modern societies. They argue that our modern, ethically pluralist, societies are unlikely to agree upon the kind of common idea of the good life that Honneth believes is necessary to provide the recognition (and esteem) of individuals in their particularity. They remain unconvinced by Honneth's attempt to mediate between abstract, formal accounts of solidarity on the one hand, and substantive, but often exclusive, accounts of solidarity on the other (see Pensky 2011; 148). In the light of their comments, it is hard to see how Honneth takes us beyond either the Rawlsian account of an overlapping consensus in terms of broad agreements about how we disagree, or Habermas's account of the solidary effects of communicative rationality. We are left

with the dilemma of broad, yet inclusive, social goals that are too formal to produce solidarity (i.e. notions of procedural justice and public reason), or a substantive version of ethical life which risks forms of denigration and exclusion. Pensky suggests that Honneth's 'formal' conception of ethical life tends to side with the former and therefore lacks a true sense of the 'ethical, in the sense of describing a sphere of interpretations of the kind of life desirable *for us*' (ibid.; 152).

Bert van den Brink also suggests that a *formal* conception of ethical life is incoherent and that Honneth's conception of ethical life should be conceived as '*one* substantive account of ethical life among several, rather than *the* formal account of ethical life for post-traditional societies' (van den Brink 2011; 160).<sup>53</sup> In other words, he suggests that self-realisation, autonomy and pluralism can be seen as substantive values, rather than formal ones abstracted from plural versions of the good life, and that a solution to the problem might take the form of a 'public dialogue among several substantive positions' (ibid.; 164).<sup>54</sup> Honneth however seems to accept the terms of this dilemma and of these criticisms in his later work (e.g. see Fraser and Honneth 2003), and

<sup>53</sup> For a similar critique see Owen (2007).

<sup>54</sup> In fact, van den Brink goes further in suggesting not only that 'in a pluralistic world, the best we can hope for is that we will mutually *respect* each other's life-choices even if we cannot really set ourselves to granting them our full *esteem*', but also that 'as long as the mutual respect that is implicit in our recognising valid legal relations is warranted, the lack of full esteem and, at times, even the mutual devaluation of each other's convictions need not be a constant threat to our wellbeing'. For him, *contra* Honneth, 'we make ourselves needlessly vulnerable to the impossibility of social harmony if we conceive of ethical life as presupposing undistorted and unrestricted relationships of recognition' (2011; 172).

suggests that there might be an ‘overlapping consensus’ regarding constitutional principles but not regarding ethical values. In an attempt to avoid this problem Honneth takes what he sees as a Durkheimian route and links social esteem to ‘the exchange of services’ (as a ‘transcendentally institutionalised medium’), and argues that ‘independent of the ethical aims that individual members of society might pursue, they must share an interest in securing the material conditions of their social existence’ (2011; 407). Honneth recognises that the way different tasks are esteemed relies upon ‘ethical or cultural background assumptions’, but believes that this does not involve ‘competing ideas of the good’, and that we can transcend such concerns in a more rational and objective manner by concentrating on the ‘more “concrete” question of which activities are necessary and indispensable for society’s material reproduction’ (ibid.; 407–408). However, he fails to elaborate on this in any sustained and convincing way. The fate of Honneth’s original link between self-esteem and individual particularity – i.e. those elements of esteem attached to individual self-realisation that are outside of economic exchange and dependent on ethical convictions – is also in many ways subsumed back within the sphere of legal recognition, where the emphasis is on individuals being given the autonomy to pursue their own particular aims (ibid.; 409).

In many ways, I believe that Honneth’s work has been important in broadening the communicative perspective, and in developing a deeper sense of what binds us together, what

provides us with a sense of solidarity, and what also motivates us to resist forms of injustice and suffering. However, despite Honneth’s attempts to close the gap between abstract rational principles and the (substantive) norms of lifeworld practices, I agree with critics such as Bernstein (2005) who argue that Honneth repeats the tendency in Habermas to ‘purify’ the ideals of communicative reason for the purpose of distinguishing between progressive and regressive societal developments. Ideals (as quasi-transcendental principles) – i.e. a ‘formal conception of ethical life’ and ‘the general presuppositions of communicative action’ – become separated from their (empirical) use in everyday social practices for the purpose of providing a critical yardstick by which to assess such practices. In addition to this, there is the assumption in Honneth, as in Habermas, that the ‘formal’ nature of such ideals is what gives them their ‘rational’ authority. Bernstein (2005; 308) argues that the ‘formal’ ideals outlined in Habermas and Honneth are in many ways part of the problem: despite their attempts to ground such ideals in the ‘pre-theoretical resource’ of social action and resistance, they end up turning practical norms into ‘theoretical norms’, i.e. the ‘purification’ of practical norms robs them of their immanent link to motivation and action and they become merely contemplative. Despite pointing to this in his criticisms of others, Honneth’s ultimate emphasis on ‘rights’, as we have seen, tends to neglect the fact that they might be implicated in forms of ‘misrecognition’, e.g. the tendency for legal recognition to be premised on mutual

indifference, and to abstract from particularity.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, as Bernstein suggests, ‘Honneth’s purification of recognition reiterates without shifting the wild hopefulness implied by Habermas’s wish to obtain a clean separation of instrumental and communicative rationality’ (ibid.; 317). Foster also suggests that Honneth is guilty of too neatly ‘analytically separating the instrumental from the intersubjective’, and therefore risks ‘becoming blind to the persistence of instrumental attitudes within the intersubjective, and to the persistence of the intersubjective dimension of our interaction with the non-human world’ (Foster 2011; 259). Despite Honneth’s desire to bridge the gap between abstract rational principles and the (substantive) norms of lifeworld practices, and to avoid the abstraction and proceduralism

of Habermas’s ‘idealising presuppositions of communication’, Honneth’s ‘formal conception of ethical life’ again abstracts from difference, particularity, subjectivity, and social – as well as material and temporal – context.<sup>56</sup> The proceduralism apparent in Habermas’s work, despite his attempts to escape the confines of instrumental rationality, reappears in a new form in Honneth’s idealising presuppositions of recognition, and again we encounter a ‘universal’ reason at odds with the claims made by desire, the body, nature, and particularity.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Future of Critical Theory: Some Concluding Remarks**

As we have seen, in many ways Honneth’s emphasis on the significance and explanatory value of recognitive relations is a critical-theoret-

<sup>55</sup> Alexander García Düttman (2000) makes a similar point. In criticising Honneth’s formal conception of ethical life he suggests that the struggle for recognition is determined in advance by Honneth’s idealisations, and he argues that there is ‘an essential link between the reification or objectification of recognition and an idealisation which has the effect of an ideologisation. It is difficult not to conclude that a politics of recognition which is determined by such a link cannot but produce and reproduce *social conformism*’ (ibid.; 156). See also García Düttman (1997).

<sup>56</sup> Signs of an alternative route were apparent in Honneth’s sympathetic engagement with post-structuralism in his 1994 essay, ‘The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism’ (in Honneth 2007). Here, it is Jacques Derrida’s Levinasian-inspired ‘ethics of care’ that is seen to surpass Habermas’s discourse ethics in terms of responsibility to the singular other. Honneth claims that deconstructive ethics does a better job of incorporating a notion of care than what he sees as Habermas’s appeal to an affective ‘solidarity’ between communicative partners, because the latter requires us to abstract ourselves from the particularity of our social and cultural (and value) communities – where we often experience concrete forms of solidarity – in order to find a form of solidarity based on broader shared goals of communication.

<sup>57</sup> Although instrumentally-rational proceduralism, and its concomitant nihilism, is at the heart of Adornian (and Habermasian) Critical Theory’s understanding, and critique, of contemporary societies, we can argue here that the strong idealising presuppositions at the heart of Habermas’s discourse ethics (which seeks to separate out universal norms from ethical values) tend to display the purifying and procedural properties of such instrumental rationality. As Bernstein argues, ‘formalism and proceduralism are themselves the primary criteria that make a form of reasoning instrumental [...] communicative reason is a component of the very disintegrative process it means to remedy’ (Bernstein 1995; 33).

ical improvement on the limitations of Habermas's theory of communicative action. Honneth is right in his Hegelian critique of Habermas's reifying distinction between communicative and purposive-rational action *spheres*, and right to question the 'critical' and emancipatory possibilities of Habermas's appeal to the normative presuppositions 'implicit' in *linguistic* understanding, and the ways in which this conception remains too far removed from the actual (moral) experiences of social actors. His alternative, recognitive version of critical theory is to be credited for its appeal to the violation of identity claims as 'an existing experience of social injustice,' and as a pre-theoretical resource for a 'critical' perspective in social reality. Honneth is thus able to make a stronger link than Habermas does between the normative presuppositions of social interaction and the *moral* feelings of those involved, thereby identifying important aspects of everyday experiences which are able to ground his critical standpoint whilst pointing towards concrete emancipatory possibilities. An emphasis on the violations of – often implicit – relations of intersubjective recognition at work in 'structural forms of disrespect', and on how these pose a serious threat to the identity and personal integrity of those most vulnerable, also allows for an account of the ways in which experiences of personal suffering (potentially) translate into struggles for expanded forms of social and political recognition.

Although Habermas's theory still meets Horkheimer's methodological criteria for a 'critical' theory, his replacement of social labour with communicative understanding, rather than an exploration of their complex entwine-

ment, also leaves him with no replacement for the moral experiences of injustice faced by the proletariat. Honneth, on the other hand, importantly focuses on a conception of 'the communicative organisation of material production', which he sees as the 'productive part of the tradition of critical Marxism' abandoned by Habermas. To his credit, however, Honneth does this without reinstating any simple priority of social class, and he avoids a reductionist economics or class-based analysis of social injustice – not that the Critical Theory tradition was in any way a straightforward example of this. Instead, Honneth's focus on relations of recognition 'in the broadest sense' is to be commended for developing a critical-theoretical framework which explores the injuries of gender inequality, racial injustice, and homophobia, amongst others, in addition to class exploitation, as well as the complicated ways in which these inequalities intersect, and the diverse nature of the struggles seeking to address them.

However, as we have also seen, there are a number of problems with the ways in which the notion of 'recognition' operates in Honneth's work. His tendency to *idealise* and purify the notion of recognition neglects the difficulties and ambiguities of recognition, as well as our frequent investment in the disavowal of the other. Honneth lacks an adequate conception of *misrecognition*, and often misses the ideological misadventures of recognition: our failures in recognition and the phenomenological question of how we come to know the other and what we know about the other, the risk of affirming fixed identities rather than exploring transformative ones by perceiving of claims to recognition as

'identity' claims, and the ways in which 'injuries of recognition' might require new forms of recognition which exceed established forms of justice. Despite his criticisms of Habermas, as well as his desire to bridge the gap between abstract rational principles and the (substantive) norms of lifeworld practices, Honneth also reproduces similar strains of abstraction and proceduralism in his 'formal' conception of ethical life, and we are left with broad, social goals that are too formal to produce solidarity or motivate action, and which abstract from difference and particularity and lack a true sense of the ethical.

What these shortcomings leave us with, if we wish to pursue the original project of Critical Theory under changed circumstances, and with a greater sensitivity to the importance of recognition, is the need to not only provide a more substantive conception of recognition and ethical responsibility, whilst remaining sensitive to the paradoxes and reversals of recognition, but also one which avoids the temptations of idealisation, normative universalism and procedural accounts of freedom which we have discovered in the work of Habermas and Honneth. A return to Adorno's account of non-reified culture and ethics – as a response to the suffering produced by commodification, identity thinking and technological rationality – is one promising alternative to the shortcomings in the work of Habermas and Honneth. Adorno's

commitment to non-identity and particularity, and his outline of an aesthetic praxis, might help us to identify a number of the ways in which we are often structurally encouraged to objectify – and misrecognise – others whilst disavowing our own need for recognition. Despite Honneth's criticisms of early Critical Theory outlined above, arguably Adorno provides us with a more sensitive – albeit more rarefied – account of recognition, ethical responsibility and solidarity, and his work is therefore a more promising critical-theoretical response to the instrumentality and atomism of our late capitalist acquisitive culture.<sup>58</sup>

I also find Jacques Rancière's emphasis on the dis-identification with pre-determined identities instructive and promising here (Rancière 2016; 92). Rancière foregrounds the importance of 'disagreement' (*mésentente* – which plays on the relation and disjunction between 'hearing' and 'understanding') and its prevention of dialogue, preferring to see the political constitution of community in terms of division – and the constitution of the subject as indeterminate – rather than as presupposed in the (Habermasian) possibility of ideal agreement or the (Honnethian) possibility of reciprocal recognition (Rancière 1999). Instead of a procedural account of how we might reach consensus or achieve recognition and self-realisation, Rancière insists on the importance of questioning the political

<sup>58</sup> I pursue this line of thought in Hazeldine (2015) where I argue that the failings of the communicative turn (and Foucault's alternative critical theory) immanently point us back towards the philosophy and negative aesthetics of Adorno. There I particularly focus on Adorno's commitment to non-identity and particularity, his notion of dialectical experience, his critique of the culture industry and related politics of representation, as well as his outline of an aesthetic praxis.

constitution of community, its forms of communication, and its constitution of political subjects. Ultimately, he sees Honneth's focus on recognition as affirming the social order (of 'policing'), and he is concerned that his theory of recognition presupposes and affirms already-existing identities and institutions, and forgets the importance of disagreement and dissensus, and the need for the indeterminate (and non-identical) to have a voice. Rancière's political conclusions also make important links to aesthetics, a sphere largely missing from Habermasian and Honnethian versions of critical theory, and his conception of the police in terms of 'the distribution of the sensible' – as

'an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise' (Rancière 1999; 29) – return us to some of Adorno's insights regarding aesthetics and the ethics of non-identity. However, due to limitations of space here, what a reconfigured version of a recognitive Critical Theory might look like, one informed by the work of Rancière and a return to Adorno whilst also being able to meet the demanding criteria set out by the original Critical Theory project, and to incorporate the important interventions made by Honneth, will have to await future work.

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## SANTRAUKA

### SOCIALINIO PRIPAŽINIMO PATOLOGIJS: AXELIS HONNETHAS IR KRITINĖS TEORIJS ATSAUJINIMO GALIMYBĖ

Straipsnyje kritiškai įvertinami Axelio Honnetho teoriniai darbai ir jo indėlis į šiuolaikinę kritinę teoriją, sociologinę analizę ir išsivadavimo politiką. Teksto pradžioje aptariamas Honnetho darbų santykis su pirmąją kritinės teorijos karta ir Jürgeno Habermaso komunikatyvaus veiksmo teorija. Vėliau pereinama prie Honnetho susidomėjimo ankstyvaisiais Hegelio darbais apie pripažinimą ir abipusio pripažinimo formas, kurios struktūruoja savivertės, savęs realizavimo, nepagarbos, moralinio vystymosi ir pasipriešinimo galimybes. Analizuodamas moralinio vystymosi standartus, leidžiančius įvertinti visuomeninį pripažinimą ir sykiu kovoti dėl jo, Honnethas kuria „formaliąją etinio gyvenimo koncepciją“. Joje jis bando suderinti komunitarinę etiką ir formalią Kanto moralės filosofiją ir sykiu pagrindžia savo paties normatyvinę laikyseną. Pabaigoje, trumpai pristatius Honnetho vėlyvuosius darbus apie sudaiktinimą ir pripažinimą, imamas išsamios jo teorijos kritikos. Nors Honnetho pasiūlyta pripažinimo samprata išplečia kritinės teorijos perspektyvas, labiausiai kritikuotinas yra jo polinkis *idealizuoti* pripažinimo sąvoką, argumentuotos *nepripažinimo* koncepcijos stoka, *ideologinio* pripažinimo vaidmens ignoravimas ir abstrakti bei procedūrinė „formalios etinio gyvenimo koncepcijos“ prigimtis.

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