

# Conceptualising Social Inequality: Redistribution or Recognition?

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## Abstract

*I argue that the classical crux of social philosophy, the tension between political equality and social inequality, can no longer be tackled in the terms of egalitarian liberalism. The recent exchange between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth can be interpreted as a dispute, within the tradition of Critical Theory, over the appropriate way to make political liberalism respond more adequately, both in terms of analysis and critique, to the conceptual and practical problems of the time, in other words, to the contemporary forms of social inequality in the midst of political equality. I present the positions of both thinkers in the terms of contemporary political theory, with their reciprocal objections and counter-objections. I argue that Honneth's ethics of recognition is better able to account conceptually for contemporary forms of injustice and, in its practical implications, shows the way for an exciting, new political theory based on the normativity immanent to social movements.*

At a first glance, the notion of social inequality seems redundant. This becomes obvious if we ask ourselves what its opposite, social equality, would mean. The fact that the phrase 'social inequality' is intuitively more fathomable than its opposite points to the analytical link between sociality and inequality. The social is simply, factually, the natural place of inequality, without it being possible or reasonable to bemoan this fact. The social field is the place where all the capacities of individuals can express themselves and develop. It is structured as a differential system in which capacities are measured and positions defined through constant comparison, that is, from the point of view of individuals, through competition. To speak in old-fashioned terms, the social is structured as a dialectic of similarity and distinction<sup>1</sup>. Even if the social component of social inequality could be

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<sup>1</sup> The characterisation of social life as competition is obviously as old as social philosophy. The theme figures centrally in the classics of social philosophy, in Hobbes' *Leviathan* as well as in Rousseau's *Discourses*. Axel Honneth has masterfully retraced the changes that this theme has undergone in the history of social philosophy, from Hobbes to recent Critical Theory, in his important "Pathologies of the social: the past and present of social philosophy", in D. Rasmussen (ed), *The handbook of critical theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), p.369-396.

nullified, there would still remain the intractable fact of natural differences, the whole gamut of physical and intellectual capacities, and even if these were nullified<sup>2</sup>, there remains simply the infinite array of tastes and preferences, the realm of human arbitrariness which can be equalised only at the price of individual oppression. This multitude of different capacities and preferences leads naturally, as it were, to the general, inter-individual comparative competition that is social life. This is why, even those utopian theories that base politics on the principle of equality have to acknowledge some form of inequality as the intractable law of the social. Historically, radical egalitarian movements have repeatedly failed for denying this simple necessity<sup>3</sup>. The great thinkers of political equality like Robespierre or Marx fully recognised the necessity to articulate it with its social opposite. This is precisely what the famous Marxian motto says: “From each according to his ability; to each according to their needs”.

Conversely, however, the desire to deny the structural necessity of social inequality is itself intractable. It constitutes another kind of factuality, a counter-factuality. We can never simply content ourselves with the factuality of social inequality. Even if it is structurally impossible, the dream of a community of equals has haunted politics since its origins. The very essence of politics, according to Jacques Rancière, is precisely to circumvent inequality, the iron law of the social, and to vindicate the principle of equality. The phrase social inequality is redundant only descriptively. Its true sense obtains when it is taken normatively, as a wrong done to unequals<sup>4</sup>.

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The description of the social field as structured by a dialectic of similarity and distinction, i.e. as a drive towards singularisation premised upon a fundamental similarity, can be found in Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, § 193.

<sup>2</sup> One of the main issues in liberal theories of justice is to work out under which conditions the social organisation could be fair such that, not just social, but also natural inequalities would be redressed. The *locus classicus* is of course John Rawls, *A Theory of justice* (Cambridge, Mass : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), especially p.102-108.

<sup>3</sup> In *The nights of labor*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Jacques Rancière has revisited the “archives of the proletarian dream” and attempted to make us hear and read again the philosophical, political and artistic texts of the workers that took part in the proletarian movement in France between 1830 and 1848. This historiographical work leads to the social-theoretical conclusion that the political principle of radical equality can never be smoothly integrated in the economic life of communities. The book illustrates at length the fact that egalitarian discourses were doomed to be contradicted by the demands of social and economic life, in particular, the hierarchical logic of organized labour. See also, along the same lines, “The community of equals”, in *On the shores of the political*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso Books, 1995), chap.4.

<sup>4</sup> See especially his *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (University of Minnesota, 1998). The irreducible tension between structural inequality and the no less pressing demand for equality is another fundamental dialectical feature of the social.

How can the same phrase be internally twisted such that its normative use contradicts its descriptive one? The answer is not difficult; it is a question of quantity, so to speak. Social inequality is intractable until it reaches a degree where it becomes unbearable and unjustifiable, in other words, unjust. The paradoxical twist linking the intractability and the problematic justifiability of social inequality constitutes the crux of the justice question, and the crux of politics. Historically, the precise point at which social inequality becomes unjust is the point of abjection to which the individuals on the wrong side of inequality are subjected. Social inequality becomes a normative wrong when it contravenes the basic law of politics, which is the simple equality of all. When equality before the law and equality in political participation are contradicted by the factuality of social inequality to such an extent that the latter makes the former factually impossible, or simply irrelevant, social inequality becomes simply equivalent with injustice.

But even in affluent societies, or even for the individuals who have not reached this point of abjection, social inequality retains its normative sense, this time at another level. This thought is precisely the one inspired the reflections of John Rawls in his *Theory of justice*. Rawls' theory of justice is essentially linked to the historical specificity of welfare States in which the economic survival, and even the well-being of a great number of individuals seemed to be secured. As it turned out, the possibility of welfare in modern societies did not abolish the question of justice. Since Rawl's grand opus, questions of justice have concentrated once more on the link between the intractable factuality of social and natural inequalities and the normative demand for equality. These questions have been put in terms of individual desert, or merit: it is unfair to have one's fate decided by undeserved circumstances, by the factuality of inequality, whether social or even natural inequality. As a consequence, justice must lead to a redistribution of the common wealth such that social and natural inequalities can be compensated and a true equality of opportunity can be achieved.

Despite the considerable literature that the paradigm of liberal egalitarianism and redistributive justice has generated, it has soon shown its conceptual and practical limits. First, the goods to redistribute are "social primary goods", freedom, opportunities, wealth, and the social basis of self-respect. This non-problematised indistinction between the orders of having, being, and acting, however, is highly suspect. It portrays the social subject as related externally to its own freedom and the social factors of its identity. It describes the social as a market in which the definition of social positions and the normative features attached to them can be conceptualised as the exchange of commodities. It limits political intervention to institutional reform.

The practical, political, outcomes of the theory are equally improbable. The redistribution that is to achieve justice is performed through State institutions assessing individual performances in order to decide what in them is due to individual social or natural endowments, and what is due to individual choices and merits. This is quite a dubious solution. The highly sophisticated schemes worked out by the liberal egalitarians to achieve just redistribution of unjustly distributed social goods leave the relation to social and political reality unclarified, and end up advocating improbable directives for policy change. As soon as the historical context became hostile, liberal egalitarianism was forced in a defensive attitude in which the weakness of its political import clearly appeared.

Finally, as it conceptualises the problem of justice as the just distribution of social goods, the liberal paradigm is unable to account critically for the whole range of contemporary forms of injustice.

The conceptual and practical problems posed by contemporary forms of social inequality are not well addressed by the paradigm of egalitarian liberalism. Amongst the recent attempts to transform social and political theory in order to make them more appropriate to the problems of the time, some of the more important ones have been attempts to widen the scope of the liberal paradigm, or shift its conceptual strategies, by engaging it in a dialogue with external traditions. One such attempt that seems to me to be one of the most fruitful has been the installation of a dialogue between political liberalism and Critical Theory. The current debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth can be seen as a controversy over the form that a critique of political liberalism informed by the tradition of Critical Theory should take<sup>5</sup>.

Of the two, Nancy Fraser is the one that is closest to the liberal tradition. She characterises her model as a “thick deontological liberalism”<sup>6</sup>. She is happy to characterise her model as a form of liberalism, because it is grounded in the liberal notion of equal autonomy and equal moral worth. She calls it ‘deontological’ because she also accepts the liberal distinction between the just and the good and refuses to tie the theory of justice to particular conceptions of the good. One of her criticisms of Honneth’s model is that it sets itself an impossible task by retaining the teleological notion of the good life whilst acknowledging the necessity of some form of historical relativism and moral

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition. A political-philosophical exchange*, trans. J. Golb, J. Ingram and C. Wilke (London: Verso Books, 2003). A first critique of Honneth’s social and political theory appeared in *Justice interruptus. Critical reflections on the ‘postsocialist’ condition* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Redistribution or recognition*, p.230.

pluralism<sup>7</sup>. In this, she appears to be more of an Habermasian than Habermas' disciple. This paradoxical vicinity to Habermas is substantially confirmed by her characterisation of the link between the theoretical delineation of ethical norms and their practical application. According to Fraser, the norms of equality must be applied in democratically conducted public debates. She insists also that demands for equality and the denunciation of situations of injustice can be received in democratic debates and carry political weight only if they abide by the criteria as articulated by the theory of justice<sup>8</sup>. As in Habermas, therefore, there are pragmatic constraints to the acceptability of justice claims.

However, Fraser is also critical of the formalism of mainstream liberal theories of justice, and concurrently of the formalism of Habermas' proceduralist theory of democratic discussion. She wants to replace the liberal understanding of equality with the paradigm of "participatory parity", defined as the equal possibility for each individual to participate in social life. According to Fraser, while this respects the imperative of value-pluralism, it also avoids the formalism of liberal equality since it takes into account the social factors that are necessary for the realisation of individual autonomy. With participatory parity, Fraser thinks she can strike a balance between communitarianism and liberalism: her model avoids the problems of communitarianism by holding firm on the idea of a deontological definition of the just, and the empty formalism of liberal justice by considering the social factors of autonomy.

This displacement of liberal justice via what Fraser calls her "radical-democratic interpretation of autonomy"<sup>9</sup> leads directly to a kind of social critique that is phenomenologically more substantial and more attuned to the reality and complexity of contemporary forms of injustice. In line with the introduction of the social factors of moral autonomy into the theory of justice, Fraser advocates a "perspectival dualism" in her approach to social inequality. The "quantitative" definition of justice in egalitarian liberalism<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Redistribution or recognition*, p.222-233.

<sup>8</sup> *Redistribution or recognition*, p.42-45, 229-233. In "Rethinking the public sphere" (*Justice interruptus*, chapter 3), despite her critical stance towards Habermas' reconstruction of the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser continues to use his work as "an indispensable resource", a founding paradigm, which, if insufficient, gives critical theory with its conceptual direction (p.69).

<sup>9</sup> *Redistribution or recognition*, p.229.

<sup>10</sup> The description of classical liberal theories of justice as "quantitative" is due to Emmanuel Renault, who opposes it to a alternative, "qualitative" theory of justice that would attempt to define justice through the qualitative experience of justice or, more precisely, through the experiences of injustice. See his *Expérience de l'injustice. La théorie de la reconnaissance comme clinique de l'injustice* (forthcoming).

must be abandoned as it cannot adequately account for those forms of injustice that have to do with denials of recognition or discriminatory practices in social recognition. What Rawls termed the “social basis of self-respect” is too broad a term that encompasses both forms of economic injustice, for example exploitation and pauperisation, and forms of cultural discrimination. On the other hand, the culturalist turn in the social sciences also leaves much to be desired as it tends to reduce economic injustice to the questions of social identity<sup>11</sup>. This alternative can be rejected if one postulates that every form of social injustice can be analysed from either point of view. It then turns out that no experience of injustice can be accurately described following just one explanatory scheme. Even those cases that seem to be the clearest case of either economic exploitation or social discrimination entail recognitive and economic aspects. In the end, however, the accurate description of any given empirical case of social inequality bears political relevance only to the extent that it can be formulated in the terms of participatory parity, that is to the extent that it can demonstrate how an institutionalised form of injustice prevents its victims from participating fully in social life, from appearing fully as equals amongst equals. To sum up: Fraser proposes that we conceptualise social inequality as unfair social restriction of the right to moral autonomy that is expressed in the multiple aspects of participation to social life.

Her position leads her to a critique of Honneth, because his focus is not on self-determination, but rather on self-realisation, which she interprets as incompatible with the imperative of a deontological definition of the good. In order to understand properly the frame of the debate between Fraser and Honneth, it is important to note that the phrase “redistribution or recognition” does not reflect the two positions of an alternative that each would represent. The alternative is precisely what Fraser advocates as a grid for analysis. Honneth on the other hand favours recognition over redistribution as a fundamental concept.

We can gain a good point of entry into Honneth’s model of social theory, and thereby into his conceptualisation of social inequality, by looking at his own

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<sup>11</sup> A famous target of Fraser’s attacks on the culturalist paradigm is Iris Marion Young and her influential *Justice and the politics of difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Fraser is careful not to reduce Young’s position to a unilateral or extreme version of culturalism. Rather, she shows that, despite Young’s claims to account for both recognition and redistribution problems, she implicitly favours a recognition, to wit, culturalist model. For Fraser, it is clear that Honneth’s ethics of recognition is a form of culturalist theory. See “Culture, political economy and difference”, in *Justice interruptus*, chapter 8, and also her attack on the politics of recognition in “Rethinking recognition”, *New Left Review*, 107, May-June 2000.

criticism of Fraser, and his reply to her attacks. Honneth basically argues that a deontological conception of justice used as a basis for critical theory faces an inescapable dilemma: either it consistently holds on to the priority of the just over the good and must content itself with a thin, proceduralistic theory of social participation, as in Habermas. Or alternatively it can say more about the normative ground of equality itself, but then it is forced to consider at least a formal model of the good life<sup>12</sup>. The latter is precisely what Honneth wants to offer. His fundamental insight is the same as Fraser's: liberalism remains formal and conceptually inadequate if it does not consider the social dimensions of autonomy. Against Fraser, however, he argues that to consider these dimensions seriously amounts precisely to offering an ethical theory. He accuses Fraser of bad faith when she pretends that her proceduralistic deontology saves her from falling into the conundrum of either presenting a sectarian view of the good life, or presenting such a formal concept of ethics that it dissipates into nothing. Her own concept of "participation" he argues is one such implicit ethical concept that liberal theories typically make use of without acknowledging it. To ensure the social conditions for an equal participation of all in social life is nothing but a formal concept of the good life.

The difference between Fraser's and Honneth's formal ethics is that Fraser sees the normativity of autonomy as grounded in social participation, whereas Honneth sees it as grounded in self-realisation. To say it more clearly: the reason commanding the equal treatment of all is not that all can participate equally in social life, but that each can develop fully in their own capacities. Against a deontological liberalism, Honneth therefore proposes a "teleological" version of liberalism, one that grounds equality in the *telos* of full individual identity. Autonomy becomes the name of unharmed identity. Relying on the strong inclination towards Hegel that already informed his critique of the Kantian types of deontology, as well as on the results of contemporary psychology<sup>13</sup>, Honneth argues that modern individual identity is formed in different types of interactions with significant others. Through these interactions, the individual is able to develop positive relationships to herself, which form the basis for individual autonomy. When these positive self-relations are lacking or damaged, structural features of the self hamper the possibility of autonomous action and express themselves in psycho-sociological pathologies. The primary interaction is affective and enables the subject to appropriate her own psycho-somatic autonomy in the natural and social environments, and thus to enter the physical and social worlds with

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<sup>12</sup> *Redistribution or recognition*, p.260-262.

<sup>13</sup> Honneth's Hegelian model of ethics is famously developed in his *Struggle for recognition. The moral grammar of social conflicts*, trans. by J. Anderson (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1995).

sufficient self-confidence. The second fundamental type of intersubjective interaction leads to the recognition of the person as abstract bearer of right. Looking at herself from a universal perspective, the individual knows herself as subject of right and is able to claim the self-respect she deserves in any social context. Finally, singularising her contribution to social life, the individual wants to see this contribution positively recognised. By feeling self-esteem, she can fully engage in social participation. These three spheres of recognition, affectivity, right and social performance outline a formal structure of ethical life, which accommodates historical and cultural plurality, yet also substantially constrains and complements the concept of social justice. A society is just when it enables all its members to develop fully in their particular projects, when it grants each of its members full recognition. Social inequality, which is a substantial notion in Fraser, despite its transformation through the prism of “participatory parity” and perspectival dualism, must now be conceptualised in differentiated form, depending on the sphere of recognition where injustice occurs. As just one notion, social equality is only the formal notion of a right to self-realisation, and social inequality is the general notion encompassing all the different forms of obstacles to self-realisation.

The full extent and the value of Honneth’s proposal become evident as soon as the emphasis is placed not just on theoretical validity, but on the accuracy of the phenomenology and critique of inequality that the theory enables. The fundamental impetus that seems to have driven Honneth towards his critique of the Habermassian paradigm is the fact that the discourse theory of ethics does not provide the conceptual tools that could account properly for the full range and depth of experiences of injustice, and more importantly for their epistemological, paradigmatic pre-eminence<sup>14</sup>. To analyse claims of injustice and demands of justice as demands for a more transparent form of social communication seems to fall well short of the actual suffering of those expressing those demands. Even more importantly, it seems to fail by the standards of Critical Theory which specify that theoretical apparatus and normative frameworks are to be found in the very facticity of existing social movements. It seems absurd to force the language of social movements into the highly sophisticated and ethereal language of pragmatic linguistics. A similar reproach is directed at Fraser. Her way of articulating conceptual and normative considerations with concrete examples of social struggles only

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<sup>14</sup> This critique of the Habermassian framework is most clearly pursued in “Moral consciousness and class domination: some problems in the analysis of hidden morality”, in *The fragmented world of the social. Essays in social and political philosophy*, ed by C. Wright (State University of New York Press, 1995), chapter 12, and in “Die soziale Dynamik von Mißachtung. Zur Ortsbestimmung einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie”, in *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: 2000), p.88-109.



superficially respects the programme of Critical Theory<sup>15</sup>. What this programme strictly understood stipulates<sup>16</sup>, is not only that there should be a possible illustration of theory in practical cases and historical examples, but that the interest in emancipation should reveal itself, in its conceptuality and normativity, in the social movements themselves. It should not be decided upon by the theorists, from above so to speak, but immanently followed and normatively and conceptually reconstructed at this immanent level<sup>17</sup>. In concrete terms, as soon as social and political theory set out to outline transcendent criteria of justice, they place themselves within what Horkheimer called “traditional theory”, and so outside Critical Theory. In contrast with this, Honneth argues that a hermeneutically sensitive study of the “grammar of social conflicts” reveals that demands of justice invariably express themselves negatively as unfulfilled demands for recognition. This hermeneutic of feelings of injustice provides his theory with its guiding thread. Therefore, if his theory of recognition and the spheres of recognition leads to a kind of quasi-transcendentalism in its own right, just like Habermas’ philosophy of communicative freedom or Fraser’s theory of participation, it is a form of “quasi-transcendentalism” that remains grounded in the social field it inquires about.

Much more important, however, than the adequacy of Honneth’s model to the prescriptions of Critical Theory, is its critical and political import. His model opens an exciting new alternative in social theory, and a new form of political theory that would go beyond political liberalism. In this sense, it is disappointing to see Honneth’s attempts, in his latest texts, to highlight the continuity between his model and liberalism<sup>18</sup>. What his model clearly shows is the possibility of discovering the normativity and conceptuality of social and political struggles in the very immanence of these struggles. Instead of developing transcendent concepts, normative principles deduced and articulated in abstracto, and instead of judging social movements from above, the political theorist can, indeed, must become their mouthpiece. Honneth has

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<sup>15</sup> *Redistribution or recognition*, p.243-247.

<sup>16</sup> In the classical retrospective definition provided by Horkheimer in “Traditional and critical theory, in *Critical theory: selected essays*, trans. by M. J. O’Connell et alii (New York: Continuum Pub. Corp, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> This fundamental epistemological concern is shared by Rancière. Rancière’s decisive theoretical gesture was to break up with Althusserianism precisely on the grounds that its structuralist interpretation of Marx led to an unbridgeable gap between the theorist and the masses he would supposed to represent. The research that Rancière conducted in the *The nights of labor* is the direct practical result of this fundamental epistemological shift. See Rancière, *La leçon d’Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), and my “Jacques Rancière’s contribution to the ethics of recognition”, in *Political Theory* 31(1), Feb. 2003, p.136-156.

<sup>18</sup> For example, *Redistribution or recognition*, p.178.

shown convincingly that ethical, social and political theory should be paradigmatically grounded in the experiences of social suffering. This theoretical gesture meets with great resistance because it openly contradicts the implicit axiom that continues to reign in contemporary discourse, the axiom of an irreducible, ontological gap between experience and thought, theory and practice. In his later texts, it is as though Honneth had shied away from the radical implications of his first model, in respect of those deep-anchored habits of thought. Against this gesture of self-restraint, an urgent task for political theory, one of its most promising new directions, is to face all the conceptual difficulties and develop all the implications of his originary insight<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the program of research that Emmanuel Renault has engaged into, with already some extremely promising results. See especially his book *Mépris social. Ethique et politique de la reconnaissance* (Bègles: Le Passant ordinaire, 2000), and the collection of essays he has edited with Yves Sintomer, *Où en est la théorie critique?* (Paris: La découverte, 2003). About the characterisation of the political theorist as “*porte-parole*” (mouthpiece) of social movements, see his “La philosophie critique: porte-parole de la souffrance sociale?” in *Mouvements*, no24, 2002.