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Injustice, Violence and Social Struggle. The Critical Potential of Axel Honneth’s Theory of Recognition

ABSTRACT

Honneth’s fundamental claim that the normativity of social orders can be found nowhere but in the very experience of those who suffer injustice leads, I argue, to a radical theory and critique of society, with the potential to provide an innovative theory of social movements and a valid alternative to political liberalism.

KEYWORDS: Honneth, Marx, Recognition, Critique, Social Struggle, Critical Theory, Violence

This paper aims to explore the critical content of Axel Honneth’s ‘ethics of recognition’, that is to say, the original potential for social and political critique that it entails. These important dimensions of Honneth’s work are often ignored. The specific critical core of Honneth’s model derives from his decided action-theoretic and normative stances. Combined, they produce the axioms that underpin the model: that social reproduction is embedded in normative principles which articulate the necessary conditions for individual self-realisation, and that social agents can somehow appeal, if only negatively, to these principles.
Part I provides a brief reconstruction of Honneth’s paradigm. I follow the logic that led Honneth to first accept the shift proposed by Habermas towards a communicative paradigm, then critique its linguistic reduction, and in its stead offer an anthropologically inspired, more substantial, model of socialisation that famously delineates the three spheres of recognition. My main concern in this part is to highlight how the shift from older types of Critical Theory, to communication, and finally to recognition is driven by the concern already mentioned: to conduct social theory on the very level of the immanent normativity of social action and interaction. This concern leads to the fundamental notion of the moral dimension of social reproduction and, as a negative consequence, the moral dimension of social struggles.

Part II then explores the implications of this position for social and political critique. I show how the action-theoretic, normative approach enables Honneth to make the experience of injustice the driving epistemic guideline of theory itself. No other contemporary social theory gives as much theoretical relevance to the experience of social domination. In fact, I argue that Honneth quite self-consciously places his proposal within a sub-current of Critical Theory, which, against more illustrous systemic styles of analysis, has characterised itself as the theoretical spokesperson for the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ (Benjamin). Against all expectations, Honneth can thus be portrayed as an heir of the Marx of the historical writings, the early Lukács, but also of Walter Benjamin or Franz Fanon. The critical edge in Honneth’s model becomes all the sharper if, in line with these writers, the consequence is drawn from the normative logic of recognition struggles that violence, the irreducible practical dimension of struggle, is to some extent morally justified.

Part III identifies some of the ways in which this critical edge was subsequently blunted. Although his model seems to lead naturally to a theory of social movements, and to substantial critiques of modern institutions, foremost of late capitalism, Honneth has left this part of his theory underdeveloped. Even more puzzling has been his tendency, in later texts, to recast the theory of recognition within the framework of political liberalism. In its inception, the theory of recognition provided a powerful innovative way to do without this framework. Equally, the acritical theory of modernity that underpins Honneth’s model is mentioned.

These final remarks, however, could only arise out of the very strength of the model. Despite being critical, they confirm and extend the powerful critical potential contained in Axel Honneth’s social philosophy.

I. Honneth’s Theory of Recognition

Honneth’s position is the result of a critical reception of Habermas. The most fundamental assumption borrowed from Habermas is that the progress in rationality has seen the replacement of a model based on the subject-object axis with an intersubjective, communicative one. Honneth’s work is a defence and illustration of the intersubjective tradition applied to social and moral philosophy. He has systematically devoted studies to the most important philosophical proponents of the intersubjectivity paradigm. Conversely, much of his critical work in social philosophy consists in highlighting the mistakes that arise when the intersubjective dimension is neglected.

The adoption of the paradigm shift towards communicative action leads to a Meadian, symbolic-interactionist account of subject-formation, as in Habermas: The subject owes its constitution to its relationship with other subjects; autonomy can only be realised in intersubjective dependency. A subjective centre of action, speech and self-reflection emerges as the retroactive product of processes of internalisation of external constraints and perspectives, accessed through symbolic means, and which constrain a rebellious source of spontaneity. This means that autonomy is fundamentally ‘decentred’. Equally, the social bond is best explained neither individualistically, nor holistically or systemically, but as reciprocal interaction, as communication.

Honneth identifies and makes his the early Habermasian idea that social reproduction is not best explained through instrumental action, or in terms of social labour as in Marx, but through the logic of communication. What holds society together, what enables the fragile articulation of competing yet interconnected subjective interests and expectations, is not functional integration through praxis, or the different subsystems that have arisen in modernity, but an understanding that is reached between agents about the shared assumptions that always must inform action-coordination. This understanding is made transcendentally possible by underlying normative constraints.
The point where Honneth departs from Habermas and that signals the move towards the recognition paradigm is that, for Honneth, the underlying normativity making social understanding possible is not best explained in pragmatic-linguistic terms. On the conceptual level, universal pragmatics leave out of consideration other equally important dimensions of normativity that constrain social action just as much as linguistic-pragmatic rules: social agents agree on action-guiding norms not just if these norms respect their status as equal partners in communication, but also if their affective, physical wellbeing and their cultural and social identities are not compromised by them. The linguistic turn belies the refoundational of social theory in a materialistic philosophical anthropology that takes into consideration the, partly pre-or extradiscursive, subject-constitutive dimensions of bodily and social experience. On the critical level, the linguistic turn leads to precisely the kind of functional analysis of social domination and resistance that was supposed to have been circumvented by the focus on communication. This is because the logic of communicative rationalisation produces a reified distinction between material and social reproduction. This in turn creates the fictions of a power-free realm of communicative action and of a norm-free realm of systemic regulation which make an action-theoretic analysis of social struggle, or more specifically an analysis of the contemporary forms of alienated labour, impossible.

By accepting the shift to communication, but rejecting its linguistic interpretation, the paradigm of recognition defines an action-theoretic perspective on social interaction and subjectivity: the philosophical-anthropological dimensions of individualisation through socialisation gives substance to the intersubjective hypothesis, but also, and just as importantly, to the normative dimensions of identity, social interaction and social evolution. In this model, the subject depends on relations of recognition for its formation; the self is a form of self-relating informed by the interaction with others. Three basic structures of self-relationship can be identified as fundamental conditions of subjective identity: an intimate self-relationship which grants the self the physical and affective self-assurance necessary to face the natural and social worlds; a self-relationship in which the subject sees itself as equally worth of respect, as a morally responsible subject; finally, a more substantive self-relationship which grants the subject the self-confidence that is necessary to claim its place in the social community as a valid contributor.

These formal structures also provide the key to the normative framework of the social. Social evolution has consisted in the gradual demarcation of these different spheres of identity, both in terms of real separate identity features and in terms of a differentiation of types of rights. Social action is constrained by the normative demands implicitly expressed in these features: when one of these fundamental features is compromised by cultural or institutional arrangements, particular individual and social pathologies emerge; individual and group discontent arise as a consequence and can potentially lead to practical attempts to redress these particular injustices.

The full paradigm is precisely one of a ‘struggle for recognition’, because of the logic of recognition. Recognition enables agents (individuals and groups) to both assert their identity and discover new features of their identity; these new features, however, since unrecognised, necessitate a new struggle for recognition, and so on. The most defining aspect of Honneth’s model is its constant, decisive rejection of all ‘functionalist’ or ‘systemic’ models of explanation in social theory. By that, Honneth understands any model that explains social integration in terms of the structural imperatives and constraints of social systems (markets, administration, legal system). Against them, Honneth wants to defend an exclusively ‘action-theoretic’ perspective, one that refers social explanation back to the perspective of the agents’ actions, that explains social structures as constituted through intersubjective interactions, not as the product of supra-individual necessities. In Marx, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, Foucault, Honneth identifies always the same paradox: despite their avowed goals, these theories of society deprive themselves of the very resources that are necessary for critique by succumbing to the temptation of systemic analysis.

A critical theory of society that is coherent and faithful to the seminal definitions given by the two former directors of the Frankfurt Institute, starts from the assumption that social reality contains prescientific forms of praxis from which theory and critique arise. That is to say, the normativity to which critique explicitly or implicitly refers is in the end to be found in the social itself. As a consequence (critical) theory should presuppose that social agents can somehow refer to those criteria, notably when they engage in struggles against domination. This double assumption forms the content of the concept of ‘innerworldly’ or ‘immanent transcendence’, which is at the heart of Critical
Methodological Radicality

The exclusive focus on an action-theoretic approach gives Honneth's social philosophy its distinctive originality. But the way in which Honneth develops this action-theoretic emphasis is just as important.

Action-theoretic approaches to the social have to solve the problem of the access to subjective meaning, the problem of interpretation. Honneth could not hark back to a Weberian type of approach with its decidedly individualistic focus. But neither could he use a phenomenological approach as the one developed by Alfred Schulz. Instead of an 'interpretive' approach, Honneth uses a dialectical one, a methodological 'negativism' inspired by Michael Theunissen. It is based on the idea that truth cannot be accessed directly but only indirectly.17

Applied to social theory, methodological negativism states that we can gain a preliminary entry into the normative order of society only negatively. Honneth does not describe the normative conditions of individual autonomy and self-realisation in directly positive terms, nor does he attempt to devise hermeneutic tools to question the normative meaning of action in the consciousness of the actors themselves. The first step towards the normative framework is taken by reading it as the reverse image that emerges by contrast, when individual and social pathologies indicate in the negative what that order should contain. The normative order appears as the absent or damaged structures to which suffering social subjects appeal in their protest against social injuries, or even more primarily in their intimate experiences of social domination.

Honneth’s model arises from the history of social struggles and a phenomenology of social suffering. Of special importance in the construction of his model are the seminal historical studies by E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore, and the sociology of social domination, with the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Sennett as central references.18 This first ‘negative’ step does not make the further theoretical elaboration redundant, the one that proposes developmental and historical accounts of the intersubjective constitution of personal identity in its three fundamental dimensions. This theoretical construct, by stressing the essential intersubjective vulnerability of social subjects, gives a retrospective theoretical confirmation of the real
experiences of social suffering. There is therefore a dialectical relationship between the field of experience, which gives access to the theoretical realm, and the field of theory which gives substance to the primordial access granted by the initial phenomenological and sociological approach. This dialectical relationship between experience and theory works both at the general level of theory construction and at the empirical level of analysis of a particular society.

The main reason why Honneth chooses such a negativistic path is not so much methodological, a question of conceptual or epistemological sophistication, as it is ‘critical’. Honneth is so convinced that Critical Theory can achieve its goal only if it takes seriously the imperative of grounding its claims within the immanence of social action, that he makes the experience of social suffering, the ‘consciousness of injustice’ (Barrington Moore), not just the object of theory, but more fundamentally its epistemic guideline.\textsuperscript{19}

Like no other social theory, Honneth’s paradigm of recognition relies on the assumption that theory is dependent, not simply on a level of moral concern, but on the very level of theoretical construction, down to its very language, on the experience it takes as its object. This is true firstly for the choice of the term ‘recognition’ itself, which is simply extracted from the discourses of real social struggles and made into a theoretical category.\textsuperscript{20} The social theorist learns about the normative structure of society from the historical experiences of struggle, and when struggle is not even possible because domination is too powerful, from the experiences of suffering. In this model, consistent social theory does not interpret social reality from outside or from above. Critical Theory is inconsistent when it relies on the assumption, or leads to the result, that the victims of injustice do not themselves know, somehow, about the normativity that makes their situation unbearable and that renders critique necessary, the very normativity that sustains their feelings of dispossession, their eventual resistance, and possibly their revolts. Critical Theory must find in the very experiences of the dominated, even in their expressive silences, the resources and the language to articulate the normative framework of society to which they implicitly already referred themselves. The critical theorist speaks for the dominated: for them, not, as in systemic theories, in their place, but on their behalf. The self-reflective critical theorist is a mediating spokesperson.\textsuperscript{21}

The approach is methodologically original in a more specific sense. If the normative must be read off negatively from experiences of socially inflicted suffering, no such experience can be \textit{a priori} discarded. Even, and especially, that kind of social suffering is normatively, and therefore, epistemically, significant, that cannot find clear and adequate expression, either because the force of domination is strong enough to bar it from the public arena, or because it affects subjects so deeply that only psychosomatic pathologies give a negative sign of its noxious effects.

\textbf{The Theoretical Counterpart of ‘The Tradition of the Oppressed’}

This focus on the experience of the oppressed pursues a long tradition of critical thinking, one that has been constantly repressed by the more grandiose attempts to analyse modern society in systemic terms. Yet this strand has always been kept alive, precisely because it holds fast to the simple notion that a theory of social emancipation cannot consistently disregard the very individuals it purports to speak for. This sub-current brings together the most diverse authors who, despite their important divergences, share the concern that inspires Honneth’s methodological negativism. The ‘tradition of the oppressed’, the ‘wretched of the earth’ have not just moral primacy: they define a perspective that has foremost epistemic and methodological primacy. The truth of the social is not to be found in the consciousness of those who dominate, but in the experience of the dominated.

This idea finds a most famous illustration in Marx himself, with the opposition between ideology and proletarian consciousness. The proletariat and the capitalist suffer the same type of alienation, but because their experiences of alienation and of social reality are radically opposed, their epistemic positions themselves are also incommensurable. The bourgeois who profits from the alienating tendencies of his world is for that very reason unable to see its structural contradictions. The bourgeois is the first to be fooled by his own ideology. By contrast, those who actually experience social domination are potentially granted a point of view which enables them to see through the ideological veils.

Of course, a common thread between Marx and Honneth can be claimed only if it is characterised in the most formal terms. Honneth has repeatedly criticised the Marxist paradigm.\textsuperscript{22} He often points to Marx’s productivist model
of action, his instrumentalist conception of rationality, the metaphysical conception of history, and the two deleterious consequences resulting from these premises: the restriction of emancipatory potential to the proletariat, and a functionalist reductionism in the analysis of modern society. Honneth’s own model can be described precisely as the attempt to keep alive the driving intuition of Marx’s thought: the normative and epistemic paradigmaticity of experiences of injustice, without the theoretical and critical liabilities that come with the problematic premises just mentioned.25

Next to the functionalism of the mature economic analyses, Honneth finds another strand in Marx, which he embraces. In the early writings, the expressivist conception of labour retained action-theoretic and intersubjectivistic flavours that led to the acknowledgment of the moral dimension of alienation. This early focus on the moral dimension of social suffering disappears in the economic writings of the maturity, but reappears in a different shape in the historical studies. For instance, in his historical report on the class struggles in France, Marx’s interest is widened and includes, beyond the mere utilitarian interests of the classes in conflict, their class-specific values and expectations, in other words the whole area of class-specific culture and experience.

This focus on class-specific forms of experience and their respective moral and epistemic worth is a fundamental aspect in Honneth.24 Following the Marx of historical class struggles, but also Bourdieu, Honneth explicitly opposes the discourses and cultural modes of expression of dominating and dominated individuals and groups. The capacity of dominating groups to articulate moral and legal norms in universal, logically consistent language produces the illusion of a representation of the existing social order from a neutral, interest-free, epistemically and morally relevant, perspective. But there is a great suspicion that the capacity to articulate specific moral norms from an apparently neutral perspective is at least as much the result of necessity as it is the product of specific abilities: it is precisely because ruling classes have to justify their social domination that they are made to produce universalistic forms of morality. As Honneth says, they are under “a social constraint of justification.”25 However consistent moral justification is, it remains a form of justification, a justification of social domination. Moreover, the ruling classes also rule over the symbolic universe and thus exercise a monopoly over the very means that enable any group or individual to present their experiences in legitimate terms. These two socially determined structures, the lack of justificatory pressure and the inaccessibility of symbolic means enabling a socially acceptable representation of specific experiences combine, with other social and political mechanisms, to bar dominated classes from participating in the public sphere, from having their voices heard and acknowledged as relevant. The normative characterisation of moral discourse de facto creates forms of cultural hegemony. Conversely, however, these two structures and the cultural exclusion that results from it are precisely the sources of the moral and epistemic superiority of the individuals and groups suffering from social exclusion: beneath the justificatory discourse of the existing order, their invisible, unheard attempt at expressing suffering and discontent point to the reality of the existing order, and, negatively, to the normative ideal that could drive change. Therefore, as Honneth concludes, it is in the repressed experiences of social suffering that ‘historical progress’ finds its real resource.

Honneth’s constant interest in class-specific forms of experience and their relevance for critical theory are a retrieval and transformation of the Marxist intuition that precisely those who suffer from injustice have a privileged position, in epistemic terms, but of course also in an emancipatory perspective. The fundamental difference is that, with the abandonment of the exclusive focus on the revolutionary character of the proletariat, all forms of social suffering and experiences of injustice become a priori relevant.

This proximity between the central inspiration of Marxism and Honneth’s theory of recognition is confirmed by Honneth’s strong engagement with the Marxist scholar who best thematised the epistemic superiority of the dominated, Georg Lukács. Famously, the third part of History and Class Consciousness is devoted precisely to the analysis of the truth content of the proletarian standpoint. Of course, there is, as with Marx, no straight continuity between Lukács and Honneth. In Lukács, Honneth sees precisely the fateful influence of a theory of emancipation driven by a philosophy of history which led the first generation of Critical Theory into an impasse. However, Honneth’s study of the early Lukács shows how much he wants to retain the spirit of Lukács’
early romantic anti-capitalism. In it, Honneth finds a precursor to his idea that justice and freedom imply individual self-realisation through successful socialisation. Interestingly for Honneth, Lukács provides such a focus from within the Marxist tradition, where the utilitarianism of the orthodox interpretation usually precludes it. Lukács' 'socialromantic' reading of Marx is precisely the reason why he is able to develop a social-theoretical view that is sensitive to 'social suffering and individual pain', a theory in which 'social suffering can appear as suffering'.

In his important reconstruction of the theoretical projects that founded the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Honneth applies his recurrent critique of 'functionalist reductionism' to the authors that formed the 'inner core' of the Institute, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. In opposition to them, Honneth sees another precursor in Walter and Benjamin. Against Adorno's blindness to class-specific experiences and cultural achievements and his blanket rejection of modern forms of cultural expression, Honneth approvingly finds in Benjamin a writer for whom "the conflict between classes was a continually lived experience, as well as a theoretical premise of every cultural and social analysis." Benjamin was able to see that "it is the cultural struggle of social classes itself that determines the integrative ability of society." As a consequence, Benjamin was able to view cultural phenomena not just as the effects of a totalitarian process of reification, but as empowering and expressive elements, as the cultural dimension of social struggle.

As with always with Honneth, one should read in the words dedicated to another author an indirect description of his own theses. This is confirmed by another study, where Honneth interprets Benjamin's messianic conception of history as a theory of recognition. Benjamin sees justice in the duty, repeated for each generation, of giving the 'tradition of the oppressed' its right, by wrenching it from the interpretation imposed by the winners. This, Honneth claims, amounts to elevating the invisible subjects of domination to the status of integral partners in communication, that is to say to recognising them at last, beyond a past invisibility that history, as the historical self-assertion of the winners, had fatefully entrenched.

Other authors in the tradition of social critique could be mentioned, which have been commented upon in positive terms by Honneth, and share with him the methodological decision to paradigmatically focus on social suffering as the relevant epistemic perspective in social theory: Georges Sorel, Jean-Paul Sartre, or Franz Fanon. The Moral Justification of Violence

The moral dimension of social struggles does not lead to a weakening of the critical potential of Critical Theory. On the contrary, it implies that primacy be given to the experience of social suffering at the methodological and even epistemic level. Few social theories have dared make this move, even within the critical tradition. This goes even further if we now focus on the agonistic dimension of recognition. If social struggles are more than just the battles between divergent strategic interests, or the symptoms of systemic failures, if in fact they are waged on the basis of unmet demands for recognition which, because they try to defend, vindicate or redress the very identity and autonomy of endangered subjects, are fundamentally moral, then struggles themselves have a moral dimension, that is to say they are themselves normatively significant. This new aspect is also easily overlooked and its radicality ignored. Honneth's social philosophy provides not just an explanation, a descriptive framework, but more importantly a normative justification of social struggles. The normativity of social struggles has two dimensions. First, struggle is normatively justified as the engine of evolution, both at the level of the species and for individuals. Social movements have been responsible for the emergence and entrenchment of differentiated types of rights, from political, to social, to cultural rights. The previous comparison with Marx receives a new confirmation: with the abandonment of the proletariat as the class of emancipation, Honneth rewrites Marx's famous thesis that history is the history of class struggles. Modern history is the history of social struggles.

The critical potential of this justification of social struggle becomes all the more obvious, and in fact all the more radical, if the focus shifts from the teleological normative justification of social struggles as factors of evolution, to their dynamic aspects, the conditions of their emergence, the logic of their development and their own internal structure.

According to the theory of recognition, subjects engage in struggles for recognition when features of their identity that are essential for their full autonomy have not been recognised: since an identity feature can only be established