

Recognition theory as a critical theory of society? Interview with Axel Honneth ¹

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The interview with Prof. Dr. Axel Honneth of the Institute for Social Research of the Frankfurt School in Meno, was conducted by Nico Bobka and Sina Knoll on August 21, 2012 in Frankfurt, Germany.

Soziologiemagazin: Professor Honneth, you intend to reformulate critical theory in terms of the theory of recognition. Before talking about the theory of recognition, could you briefly explain what you mean by the normative reconstruction method with which you intend to carry out your project?

Honneth: Here we immediately start with very difficult methodological question. The idea of calling what I am doing normative reconstruction, did not even grow in my own manure. This term is already used in Habermas's book in "Faktizität und Geltung", and basically the idea behind this methodological term made immediate sense to me, only I wanted to bring this methodological train of thought closer to Hegel. For those who know Hegel, it is always very difficult to understand how he actually proceeds, for example, in his philosophy of law. Ultimately, the procedure is one of, one would say, speculative dialectics, in the sense that he tries to translate the development in the processing of the spirit, so to speak, or to develop it with its help, into social reality. This is a procedure that is naturally not recommendable for social theory, because it presupposes knowing something like an absolute and objective concept of the spirit with its own logic process. For this, if one wants to orient oneself a little in Hegel, one needs a substitute concept in

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Part 1: Theorie der Anerkennung als kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft? – Ein Interview mit Axel Honneth (Teil 1) – soziologieblog (hypotheses.org)

Part 2: Theorie der Anerkennung als kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft? – Ein Interview mit Axel Honneth (Teil 2) – soziologieblog (hypotheses.org)

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social theory for what in his case is speculative thinking or elaboration along the self-development of the concept. And basically, the concept of normative reconstruction is useful to me in order to apply a comparable and certainly less idealistic procedure. That is, with the criterion or guide of an idea or principle institutionalized in social reality, one can trace the unfolding and development of the corresponding field or sphere of action. So, it is not simply reconstructed historically or empirically, but to reconstruct normatively means to reconstruct this sphere according to the principles or idea that is considered by the participants as decisive for a corresponding social sphere, it means historically tracing its development. That is the basic idea of what is called normative reconstruction.

Soziologiemagazin: The thesis that societies reproduce themselves through norms (which you defend in your latest book “The Law of Freedom”) and the focus on the normative dimension of the social context it contains, does it not imply an abstraction from the real, i.e., from the material-practical processes of socialization?

Honneth: No, I don’t see it that way. This is an old dispute within sociology, if you like, which probably first revealed itself most explicitly, or perhaps most impressively, in the debate between Max Weber and the Marxists of his time. Basically, it is the Marx-Weber debate in which this is discussed. The other person who has rolled the history of sociology or social theory along this opposition, that is, the question of how social order is possible, is certainly Talcott Parsons. I belong to a tradition, at least since Habermas, in which it is assumed that social orders or societies are integrated through the acceptance or approval of norms considered correct and that, moreover, we can only adequately understand the various subsystems by taking into account the norms and principles that guide and integrate them in each case. If you like, this is even an idea of society or sociality that someone like Niklas Luhmann also shares. He too understands functional differentiation in such a way that different codes can be analyzed, which in turn are responsible for the integration of a subsystem. What is decisive now is the idea that material reproduction also depends to some extent on and cannot be analyzed independently of the norms that determine what can be considered legitimate, acceptable, and approvable.

Soziologiemagazin: So you disagree with the thesis that the method of normative reconstruction has primacy over the object to be recognized?

Honneth: That’s a trick, yes. Of course, the object as such is never given to the



social scientist or the social theorist. It seemed to me a very strange notion that we can assume that relations as such can be determined in a value-neutral way, independent of normative references. We already approach the selection of material with certain prior normative decisions. For example, we are more interested in the social relations of labor than perhaps other relations, for example the treatment of small animals, because we consider social labor to be especially relevant to social production. But from there, a certain normative idea of our sociality flows. In this sense, of course, the method of normative reconstruction does not pretend to analyze or reproduce reality as such. It is rather the case that it naturally more strongly leads to idealization than other methods perhaps, because it says that it makes sense and is correct, at least under certain circumstances, to analyze a social sphere or certain systems of action with the help of normative principles that are also seen by the participants as conditions of acceptance or recognition of this sphere. In this sense, there is a normative surplus, if you will, over empirical reality. But empirical reality as such does not really seem to me to be given.

Soziologiemagazin: In your analysis of society, you try to link to a moment in the social philosophy of the young Hegel: the concept of recognition, on which you base your research practice. What is recognition and why does it occupy the central position in your theory in the first place?

Honneth: This has a long history, of course, not only in the history of modernist thought, but also in my own development. The starting point for me was actually the confrontation with the tradition of critical theory, going through Adorno, Horkheimer up to Habermas and Foucault, and the realization that the different approaches lacked something complementary. And I would say that lacking in Adorno and Horkheimer's analyses was a conception of conflictivity even of apparently integrated societies. Foucault lacked a definition of what social struggles are. And Habermas, in his focus on understanding, lacked in part an examination of conflict around understanding. And in order to address these three deficiencies in their analyses', if you will, and develop a set of tools equally capable of overcoming them all, I came across Hegel's original idea of the "struggle for recognition," which seemed to me adequate to overcome the various deficiencies. Namely, in the sense that I believed I could develop at that time with strong recourse to historical studies and sociology. Richard Sennet's first book, which he wrote together with Jonathan Cobb, on "The Hidden Wounds of Class" played an important role at that time, namely the observation that conflicts and struggles in societies largely revolve around recognition among the participants. Recognition initially means nothing more than endorsement or appreciation of the subjects in different respects. Actually, I became convinced relatively early on that what these aspects are determined in each



case by the social form of production and the mode of organization. That was the original idea. Since then, I have been deeply convinced that recognition is an adequate key to understanding both the integration of societies and their, so to speak, permanent conflict. All societies integrate through selective or symmetrical forms of recognition. But all societies also know permanent conflicts over the proper interpretation of these principles of recognition. So, the key has been found.

Soziologiemagazin: You speak of the spheres of negative freedom, i.e., juridical, as well as moral freedom, in which recognition still finds its limits. In these spheres, recognition does not yet condition the realization of concrete, social freedom and becomes social pathologies. Can you give examples of how social pathologies arise in these limited spheres of freedom?

Honneth: So I would formulate this a bit more cautiously. These social freedoms, institutionalized in the realms of legal and moral freedom, can become pathologies if they are interpreted by the subjects involved as the exclusive form of freedom in each case. Only then. Not as such. As such, of course, legal freedom is of incredible importance for understanding our modern, even recent, social history. And as such, moral freedom is also guilt-free, if you will, because it opens up enormous spaces for us to question norms, facts, obligations or impositions that are thought to be universalizable. So these two freedoms, with all their negativity, already provide an enormous dynamic to modern societies. And one need only look at the path modern societies have taken. Often, the developments and progress that have been achieved in these societies are due to the mobilization of these freedoms. As I said: as such, they do not have social pathologies. In my opinion, they lead to pathological effects when they are taken as the only form of freedom. Then it can very easily happen that something that makes sense insofar as it is woven into a social life practice, into a life world, leads to misunderstandings and a one-sided understanding of what freedom really is, i.e., to understand oneself only and only as a juridical subject, then I will seek and want to establish connections of action in all social contexts and in all social contexts of action with reference to my rights to which I am entitled, and this is only possible to some extent at the price of forms of understanding of the real life world. In this sense, this one-sidedness easily leads to pathological effects such as rigidity, abstractions, impossibilities of action, barriers to action and the like. In the following, I tried to make this evolution somewhat plausible with the help of literary or cinematographic products.

Soziologiemagazin: They understand the struggle for recognition as a principle of social dynamics, so to some extent all history to date is a history of struggles for recognition.

Through these struggles, also in the spheres of negative and moral freedom, would a progress towards concrete and social freedom finally be fulfilled in the institutions of morality?

Honneth: Yes, I would also describe it a little more cautiously at the beginning. In fact, I would say that this would require, of course, much more proof and evidence than I could provide on my own. In fact, I would suggest that one of the main dynamics of social change is the struggle for recognition. Indeed, the moment we see societies integrated on mutually accepted principles of recognition, it lends itself to understanding their dynamics from the fact that there is a dispute over the interpretation, better interpretation, for the improvement of these principles of recognition. This dispute is, in fact, an eternal dispute, in a sense it cannot be stopped. That the special achievements of modernity can develop solely out of these struggles for recognition is not something I claim. Of course, other historical developments, classically one would say “the development of the productive forces,” that is certainly an advance in the possibilities of social production, in industrial development, play an important role. I would not deny all this at all, but first of all I would assert that with the transition to modern societies, something new emerges in the sense that the principles of recognition of essential spheres of action are now reinterpreted, actually to some extent with the value of freedom. One could say that the essential spheres of our society owe their existence to the mutual acceptance of normative principles, each of which refers to freedom. In my opinion, this applies at least to the legal sphere, but also to the moral sphere. But it also applies to the spheres of private relations, which are distinguished behind the concept of morality, even to the market, which in a certain sense is only justified by the concept of freedom or the idea of freedom, and of course also to the modern form of political democracy. I would not go that far to say that all modern principles of the spheres of social action refer to freedom. In the case of science, which was also a favorite subject of Luhmann’s, one might ask whether the value of truth, which is institutionalized as a code, does not indirectly contain the idea of freedom of inquiry, i.e., in some way it goes together with the idea of freedom. In any case, the institutionalization of these different principles of freedom in their fields sets in motion a dynamic that is characteristic of modernity, namely that in different fields, with reference to the specific freedoms in each case, there is a struggle for better fulfillment in different manners by those concerned, of course. In the private sector, essentially throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, it was women. In the area of the social or economic market, essentially by the labor movement. And in the sphere of political democracy, essentially through the various parties that soon began to emerge, either on the part of the working class or the bourgeoisie. What is decisive now is that



all these struggles take place in reference to the institutionalized principles of freedom and their dynamics demand a reinterpretation of these principles.

Second part

Soziologiemagazin: We have already discussed that norms and the progress of social freedom are supposed to be reconstructed from the reproduction of society, and yet these norms are not infrequently in contradiction with social reality, which you then call aberrations. How do you explain these aberrations?

Honneth: I think that is rather difficult in detail. First of all, the category of undesirable development must of course be an instrument that allows me not to be forced into something like a hypostasis of progress. Of course, it is absurd to suppose that struggles in these areas will always have progressive results. We immediately realize that in different historical contexts, at different times, in different places, there have always been setbacks. And setbacks, at first, only mean that reinterpretations of freedom that had already been implemented, and in some cases even legally guaranteed, were reversed. It is thus an undesirable development. Anything that leads to an adjustment of the struggles underway or to a reversal of the institutionalized mediation that has already been achieved is a mistake. The cause of this undesirable evolution can probably only be discovered by using ideas such as power relations, which, however, are also difficult to apply empirically. In certain historical situations, due to the circumstances to be discussed, power relations may change in the sense that there are, so to speak, opportunities for the dominant strata to reverse the improvements that have already occurred in various spheres. One could understand financial market deregulation as an expression of a change of forces in the sphere of the social organization of the market. But there is no magic solution as to when and under what circumstances these undesirable developments occur.

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Soziologiemagazin: Adorno or Benjamin placed not the norms but the undesirable developments at the center of their thinking and defended the thesis that the concept of progress, in contrast to what Hegel and in some places, Marx still assumed, should not be founded on the idea of freedom but on the idea of catastrophe, and that freedom could therefore only be determined negatively? Do you look for the positive in what Adorno called the false everything?

Honneth: I would say that the reorientation of critical theory actually began with Habermas. It is true that the older critical theory - not entirely true either, because the



early Horkheimer also undertook very different theoretical constructions - but let's say that since the advent of National Socialism, critical theory is essentially more negatively oriented, in the sense that the category of social progress is dispensed with and the further development of society is rather understood as a threatening growth of barbarism and inhumanity. In any case, this is the image of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment". Certainly, part of Walter Benjamin's work can be understood in this way. With Habermas there is a shift insofar as it is said that we can only really give critical theory a kind of prospective function again if we succeed in identifying norms of social development that can also be seen as reference points for social progress. And I tend to move in this tradition with my approaches, in the shadow of the Habermasian turn in critical theory, if you will. What I have presented in the "Right to Freedom" is an attempt, of course, at least and only for modern societies, that is, for societies that can be said to be functionally differentiated according to the point of view of the differentiated principles of freedom. That one can certainly name an internal criterion of progress for these, which cannot be generalized historically, but can only be applied for this period of time, and that, on the basis of these criteria, one can certainly attempt to measure progress, to outline it, and thus also mark setbacks.

Soziologiemagazin: So you contradict Horkheimer's determination that critical theory, even in relation to traditional theory, can only be had as a single unfolded existential judgment?

Honneth: That would first require an interpretation of this sentence by Horkheimer.

Soziologiemagazin: In a certain sense, that progress under certain conditions necessarily become regression.

Honneth: I would first understand what Horkheimer said in another way. And I might not agree with the sentence as it stands. I would understand that Horkheimer means that all judgments about the previous society converge into a negative existential judgment and that means that those societies must not be. And that is what is meant by existential judgment. And I really couldn't agree with that, because I see that modern societies are characterized, first of all, by some achievements that I think are quite unambiguous. In this sense, not everything in the past is worthy of condemnation, but we have to realize much more strongly that we find many things worthy of condemnation in the present because the past has already given us norms, institutionalized norms, that allow us to criticize the present. So, in this sense, the existential judgment I make would be differentiated much more. With the idea of freedom, for example, freedom in love, and

also with the idea of democratic decision-making, powerful normative ideas have been launched, of course, which are currently institutionalized in the constitution, so I would not want to lose them and they represent the horizon of a critique of present conditions.

Soziologiemagazin: With Hegel, undesirable developments are definitely understood as a necessity. For example, poverty in the philosophy of law is based on the immanent dynamics of bourgeois society, which in turn entails the necessary possibility of the emergence of mafias. Frank Ruda has argued in his dissertation “Hegel’s Pöbel” that one can think of this problem only inadequately because it is attributed only as an aberration of social pathologies, but not as pathologies of the social itself, which find their possibility in socialization, specifically the mediation of subjective position and objective conditions in the form of values. You say that your theory of recognition cannot think of poverty, especially as something necessary. Is this accusation wrong?

Honneth: It is very difficult to properly determine the object of dispute of this accusation, so to speak. That is difficult for me in any case. I would say: I am going to leave aside Hegel’s interpretation for the time being. I think there is a lot that can be said about it. In any case, I don’t think it’s so clear whether Hegel regards poverty as an essential phenomenon or as an accidental phenomenon. But I’ll leave it for now. That perhaps also takes us away from the current topic. I think my own description of the thesis that poverty is a necessary and irreversible product of a capitalistically organized market economy would be correct. I could not share the proposition that poverty is a necessary product of a market economy. In other words: I would try to develop a differentiation as to the place and role of the market as such. I would like to distinguish between a capitalist market and a socially integrated market. Now, going back to Hegel, this means that it is not at all clear in Hegel what kind of market he really thinks of. Whether he wants to think of a socially integrated market, for which there are some indicators, or whether he already thinks of the market in capitalist realities. I don’t think that’s entirely clear. So in this sense I would accommodate Ruda on the one hand and I would not accommodate him at all on the other hand. Poverty seems to me inevitable under a market economy that regulates the ownership of productive forces and the associated dispositional and market opportunities the way our market does. But I do not want to make speculation impossible at all, a speculation which, on the contrary, can be very fruitful in terms of what we can do at the moment, speculation about the embedded market and a social market. In other words: I would make a much stronger distinction between forms of market organization within societies than Ruda and many Marxists would probably do as well. The old opposition of market and plan seems to me no longer useful and I think that all economies of the future will be market societies in one way or another, with restricted markets, with regulated markets, with



perhaps more differentiated markets, with social spheres completely excluded from the market and the like. But I may have a different image or understanding of the market.

Soziologiemagazin: I would like to once again speak about your relationship with critical theory, to which you yourself say you are linked and which, as director of the Institute for Social Research, is in a way also your legacy and obligation.

Honneth: I don't know if it is an obligation.

Soziologiemagazin: One might suppose so.

Honneth: Yes.

Soziologiemagazin: In the 1930s, Horkheimer, Pollock, and Neumann, in particular, tried to understand National Socialism in terms of liberalism, democracy, and the failure of world revolution. And after the Allied suppression of National Socialist Germany, Adorno also felt compelled to place Auschwitz at the center of his thinking, in a sense as the negative truth of capitalist socialization, and especially to understand the post-truth of National Socialism in democracy and social development arrested through its dynamics. On the other hand, you write in "Recht der Freiheit" that National Socialism is the non-integrable other of the liberal democratic institutions of freedom. Is this a capitulation to coercion in thinking after Auschwitz?

Honneth: No, I would say the other way around. This means, first of all, that it remains a very difficult challenge for any post-Auschwitz thinking to understand National Socialism together with the Holocaust in a causal way. And precisely because it was a rupture, a break with civilization, I think the decisive question is: do we understand the Holocaust, as many do today, as a rupture with the already developed civilization, including the rule of law, or do we understand it rather as the intensification of what was achieved in the liberalism of the time? I am much more inclined to the idea that it is a very difficult rupture to understand, even in its prehistory and above all in its enormous dynamics. And that's what it means in the first place. In this sense, of course, it departs from the traditional elements of critical theory, in which fascism has been understood as the intensification of the logics, so to speak, normative logics of modern societies. Indeed, this is how Adorno and Horkheimer understood it, or this is how Zygmunt Bauman occasionally understands National Socialism or the Holocaust. I do not share it. Indeed, for me, the formation of German National Socialism is in many



ways a puzzle for social theory and the most difficult challenge for the whole enterprise of normative reconstruction. A challenge whose weight is already clear from the fact that someone like Hegel could not have imagined it even in his wildest dreams. That is to say, no nineteenth-century theorist would have considered this kind of barbarism conceivable given the conditions that had already been reached, despite the fact that the nineteenth century saw an enormous amount of exclusion, genocide, colonialism and also anti-Semitism. But this degree of barbarization, so to speak, continuing right up to industrial mass murder, would probably not have been conceivable for all the 19th century theorists and probably won't be conceivable for the theorists of the 1920s. And that means that I would join the underlining of categories such as the breakdown of civilization, and therefore really the breakdown, so to speak, of the formation of National Socialism

Soziologiemagazin: We are left with one last question: with the “Dialectic of Enlightenment” Adorno and Horkheimer sent a message in a bottle into the future, which they did not know would ever arrive and be uncorked and, above all, by whom it might be uncorked. It was then mainly students who, in the late 1960s, tried to translate the interventionist critique directly into practice, partly against the intentions of the two philosophers. Earlier this year, you sat in the Römerberg as part of the Cluster of Excellence “Normative Orders” and tried to answer questions from the citizens of Frankfurt. How do you understand the role of the intellectual today, the possibilities for interventionist critique in the university and beyond and, above all, who is the addressee?

Honneth: Thus, the numerous activities that every second university professor working in the humanities or social sciences is engaged in today, day in and day out in public, have, of course, nothing to do with the idea of the intellectual, which was once decisive in the sense of the critical intellectual. In my opinion, the role of the intellectual has become, we could say, more habitual or normalized, that is, due to a greater use of science, also for public concerns, most of those who work in universities are also small intellectuals on a day-to-day basis. And the intellectual is by no means an exceptional phenomenon anymore. Every editor of a newspaper who writes in the reporting section assumes the role of intellectual intervenor. In this sense, I think we should radically change this whole debate about intellectuals and, to some extent, start over. Starting over simply means being aware, first of all, of the universalization of the role of the intellectual, for better or for worse. All the debates that have been held again and again in the past about the difference in the role of intellectuals in France and in Germany seem



to me to be completely obsolete. Our media intellectual has been around for a long time, there are intellectual articles to be read every day in every report section of a decent newspaper, twice a day a university professor speaks on the radio. We talk incessantly. And one would have to distinguish, I think, from this daily role of the intellectual, that perhaps used to be more literally associated with the intellectual, namely the task and the effort of interruption, as the interruption of this often idle intellectual conversation that takes place in accepted and widely accepted conditions. So one would have to create, if you will, a new category to replace the category of the intellectual. That is, these approaches existed before: Kracauer, for example, distinguished the critic from the intellectual much more. In the Weimar Republic there was also discussion, for example, of the universalization of intellectual opinions and corresponding attempts to distinguish the critic from them, so to speak. So what I did in the Römerberg has, I think, initially very little to do with social criticism. It is the inclusion of the scientist in the public sphere. Politicians and all kinds of political parties are increasingly striving to include science, including the public presentation of science. In a way, one depends on making a public spectacle of oneself. All this seems to me to have nothing to do with criticism. And what I say on the radio or in newspapers is not necessarily criticism. Criticism would be in a way a new beginning. Perhaps the best embodiment of the figure one could have in mind today is Foucault. In other words, someone who began in his lectures - long before he made public statements and became an intellectual - to question presuppositions about thought, that is, generally accepted presuppositions. In this sense, of course, today's Marxist is no longer simply a critic, because he/she very often appeals to something that is generally shared. The market is unfair, it leads to bad outcomes, it produces poverty: these are all guiding values that have probably been accepted for a long time, even by Deutsche Bank, and that no one questions. In this sense: the critic's task is different from the intellectual articulation of opinions that are publicly acceptable. The task of the critic would be to re-question the thinking conditions of that same public with respect to hitherto unimaginable preconditions. It seems to me that this is what Foucault did. That has also been his achievement, perhaps unique. I don't think that everything he did was correct, it seems to me that some things are very problematic, but at least he started from zero, that is, he started from a different place and that seems to me to be the role of the critic, as opposed to the intellectual. So we should give less importance to the intellectual and pay more attention to real criticism.

