



# POLITICIZING HONNETH'S ETHICS OF RECOGNITION

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ABSTRACT This article argues that Axel Honneth's **ethics of recognition** offers a robust model for a renewed critical theory of society, provided that it does not shy away from its **political dimensions**. First, the ethics of recognition needs to clarify its political moment at the **conceptual level** to remain conceptually sustainable. This requires a clarification of the notion of identity in relation to the three spheres of recognition, and a clarification of its exact place in a **politics of recognition**. We suggest that a return to Hegel's mature theory of **subjectivity** helps specify the relationship between the **normative demand** for autonomous identity and its **realization in and through politics**.

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KEYWORDS experience of injustice • Honneth • identity • politics • struggle for recognition

One striking feature of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition is that, despite its fundamental normative and critical dimensions, Honneth makes a conscious effort to avoid referring to it as a *politics* of recognition. His reluctance to discuss the political and his focus on the ethical has good reasons within his theory. The driving intuition of his model is that social progress is based on the **normative expectations** of individuals, which must be **construed as moral claims**, rather than as socio-economic interests. Consequently, the political model to be derived from the framework of a struggle for recognition is a form of 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*), in the precise Hegelian sense of a multi-layered social morality, not just an institutional framework designed by legal principles, but the **structural model of a 'decent society'** in which all aspects of individual demands for recognition are met.

Still, this avoidance of the term political is symptomatic of a weakness (Foster, 1999). Honneth's project is to **devise a normative theory of society** that will rejuvenate the original project of **critical theory** (Horkheimer, 1972):

to secure a sound normative base, on which social critique can identify contemporary pathologies and **point to the directions of emancipation**. This, however, is a mission, which is fully political. Indeed, Honneth's theory of society uses as paradigmatic cases the historical examples of politicized social movements (Thompson, 1963; Moore, 1978; Rudé, 1980), it is conceived of as conceptual support for a political critique of institutions and culture, and the normative model it offers is a critical intervention in contemporary political philosophy (Honneth, 1995a, 2001). But this avoidance of the term 'political' is to be linked to the extreme prudence employed by Honneth at the end of his major constructive work, *Struggle for Recognition*. The very last line of the book, to recall, defines the formality of its 'ethical model' in a very specific sense: it points to the incapacity for the theorist to offer any substantive interpretation of the structural criteria of recognition (Honneth, 1995a, Ch. 9). The formality of the model of ethical life is synonymous with a kind of **political agnosticism**. This prudence is surprising given that, as said previously, Honneth had defined his project as the attempt to rejuvenate critical theory, which is supposed to be a theory of social emancipation rooted in actual social struggles.

Honneth

Our conviction is that Honneth's ethics of recognition offers the most robust model today for a renewed critical theory of society, provided that one does not shy away from its political dimensions. We want to focus on two main aspects: firstly, the ethics of recognition needs to clarify its political moment at the conceptual level to remain conceptually sustainable; secondly, the ethics of recognition harbours the potential for radical political critique and it is in no way denaturing it to make this potential explicit, in fact making its political radicality explicit is the best way to give it the credit it deserves (Deranty, 2004). In the following, we summarize the main features of Honneth's ethics of recognition, before emphasizing its political dimensions, in the conceptual and practical senses of the term.

## 1. HONNETH'S ETHICS OF RECOGNITION

### a. Methodological and epistemological presuppositions

One good reason for adopting Honneth's framework in social philosophy is that it is driven to an extreme by **self-critical conscience** and, as a result, his model is theoretically sophisticated and phenomenologically credible. In his constructive proposals, Honneth displays the same vigilance as in his readings of other thinkers. He constantly reflects on the **methodological, epistemological, conceptual and normative soundness** of his claims. Self-consciously adopting the style and research methods of the Frankfurt School, he explicitly positions his critical and constructive interventions within the research of his time, both internally in respect to Critical Theory in the narrow sense, and within the wider frameworks of contemporary philosophy and sociology.

conceptual register

Honneth's social theory has two origins, one negative and one positive, one historical and reconstructive, and the other programmatic and constructive. The negative aspect originates in the Hegelian assumption that the history of science, as all other types of history, is a history of progress, a learning process.<sup>1</sup> Honneth's scientific attitude is a kind of neo-Hegelian epistemology applied to social research, based on the axiom that the history of research is a history of progress, that, consequently, the social scientist must acknowledge, and make use of, the results attained by other researchers, in empirical and conceptual domains, even if, and especially if, they entail a critique of one's own theory. Reconstructing critically the key conceptual stages in the history of social sciences therefore serves not only a historical but also, more importantly, a genuine theoretical interest. The *Critique of Power*, published in 1985, reconstructing the 'reflective stages in a Critical Theory of Society', provides the negative-reconstructive journey that takes theory to a stage reached in positive-constructive fashion seven years later in *Struggle for Recognition* (1995a [1992]). When Honneth identifies the different presuppositions guiding his research, he presents them as solutions to the fundamental problem facing a critical theory of society.<sup>2</sup> This explicit self-historicization plays a great part in providing his theses with their coherence and sophistication, as he systematically tests them against the criteria defined by Horkheimer and Habermas in their famous programmatic texts. These criteria, to recall, were precisely to ask of social theory that it be mindful of its aims and methods, by reflecting on its normative presuppositions and on its contexts of application, the emancipatory interests embodied in the social struggles, in which theory is grounded, and which it can in turn justify theoretically and serve practically. As we summarize the constructive aspects of Honneth's model, we ask the reader to keep in mind these criteria, and to judge the model by them. Aptly, we start our presentation negatively, by showing how Honneth's model is conceived as the internal solution to a series of dilemmas and aporias facing social theory at the end of the 20th century.

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### **b. Negative reconstruction of Honneth's negative reconstruction**

One way of reconstructing the negative journey that took Honneth to his current model of social theory is to interpret it as a synthesis of the positive results and a correction of the perceived aporias of the two key proponents of modern critical theory, Foucault and Habermas.

*Foucault.* Throughout his study of Foucault's work,<sup>3</sup> Honneth hammers in a crucial aporia in his methodology: Foucault never renounced the structuralist rejection of the subject-category and the concepts and methods attached to it. This steadfast suspicion towards what was perceived as remnants from the philosophy of consciousness led, in the first writings, to the radical renunciation of the theoretical resources provided by hermeneutics. This abandon becomes an intractable methodological problem for a

theory aiming to study the linguistic rules structuring cultural knowledge (archaeology). Later on, when Foucault moved from a theory of discourse to a theory of power, the radical suspicion towards the subject-category leads to a new aporia: how does a theory of power, which defines power as the outcome of struggles between social agents, account for the stabilization and institutionalization of power relations, the emergence of an order of domination, if it renounces the conceptual possibility of a normative dimension in the field of social struggle, the idea that social domination is the result of conflict between individuals and groups about norms and values? It ends up in a system-theoretic model, which contradicts the first definition of power as the result of social struggle. The agents behind social domination are now society at large, institutions, rather than individuals, classes and privileged groups. The practical effects of this system-theoretic reductionism are catastrophic for a critical theory of society. A systemic account of social domination does not by itself provide a basis to ground normative claims. It is normatively neutral as to the analysis of the social effects of power. In the end, theory regards social interactions as mere material upon which systemic forces are unleashed. The lived experiences of injustice and domination cannot be taken into consideration. Symptomatically, the real effects of economic exploitation or the role played by ideology in securing positions of power are paid little attention compared with the self-optimizing forces behind knowledge-power.

This negative assessment of Foucault's theory of society opens up a negative path. A crucial requirement of critical theory is that it be capable of providing a **valid hermeneutic of real struggles. Social theory must start from the phenomenology of domination.** This means that, against the structuralist dismissal of social and moral psychology, the moral claims of oppressed individuals and groups, and the distorting effects of social domination on their bodies and psyche, must receive theoretical primacy. And this means not simply to refer to them as examples or case studies, but to give them a truly primordial role in theory. The key concepts of critical theory must originate in those experiences. According to this methodological negativism, the definition of justice will be provided by the criteria of the experiences of injustice rather than by a reconstruction of our intuitions of justice or by a clarification of the norms of justification discourses.

Honneth, however, retains some fundamental impulses from Foucault. Foucault's definition of **power as the fragile and open-ended outcome of conflicts between social agents** (Honneth, 1991 [1985]: 156–7) is integrated into Honneth's model of recognition and becomes one of its key features. Equally, Honneth is sensitive to Foucault's **objection to the framework of a philosophy of reflection. Finding a way between the damaging dismissal of hermeneutics and phenomenology,** and naïve conceptions of power and social relations, is the most pressing task of a mature, fully reflective, critical theory of society.

Honneth

**Habermas.** In Foucault, Honneth had deplored the absence of a conceptual **account of normativity**, and the lack of **attention to the moral and psychological dimensions of social life**. He credits Habermas with having reintroduced these two dimensions within social theory. In his first epistemological writings, Habermas had argued that material reproduction, the **scientific-technical control over nature, is itself embedded in the more primordial processes of social reproduction which occur linguistically through mutual agreement over subjectively** intended meanings and values. Despite his later critique of hermeneutics, Habermas had thus firmly reintroduced the necessity of a hermeneutic component in the study of social integration. Later on, when confronted with the task of grounding the normative interest in emancipation in prescientific cognitive interests and social resources, the **intersubjective concept of communicative action** provided both the typology of normative expectations and the theoretical background to account for the emergence of social power and the phenomena of social domination.

However, although Habermas seemed to provide the solutions to the problems identified in Foucault, in the end, Habermas' theory of society after the *Theory of Communicative Action* took a direction quite similar to the one taken by Foucault. The turn to transcendental pragmatics instead of philosophical anthropology, to ground the normative potential of interaction, meant that the hermeneutic and phenomenological components of the theory of social integration were repressed. Subjective experience and symbolic mediations lost their place in the account of social domination (Honneth, 2001). In parallel with this, the evolutionistic idea of a rationalization of society, triggered by the uncoupling of system and lifeworld, led to a system-theoretic turn, in contradiction with the earlier, action-theoretic model of interaction. A final diagnosis similar in its structure to the one pronounced over Foucault must therefore be established: an early alternative for grounding critical theory in the real experiences of social struggle had been repressed by system-theoretic assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

Honneth's original intervention in social theory consists of a combination of what is most fruitful in Foucault and Habermas. He retains the Foucauldian emphasis on the **conflictual nature of social life, to be read at the institutional level, but also at the cultural, symbolic and micro-physical levels (bodies and attitudes)**, but he reinterprets conflict along normative lines, so that the **interests of the individuals and groups involved in conflict are construed as moral identity-claims**.

### **c. Positive reconstruction**

The positive result of this negative journey is an ethics of recognition, based on the key **concept of a struggle for recognition**. According to Honneth, the post-structuralist ~~critique of the subject category~~ cannot be ignored (Honneth, 1995b). The **critique of the subject**, however, does not

necessarily end up in the dissolution of all subjective categories, or in the renunciation of the notion of individual autonomy.<sup>5</sup> It only implies that individual subjectivity depends on intersubjective relations and that the individual **autonomy that functions as the telos of individual demands of recognition is decentred autonomy** (Honneth, 1995b: Ch. 16), an autonomy that can only be reached through socialization, through social recognition. Honneth emphasizes that recognition is not only a psychosocial condition of individuation and autonomy, but also a moral claim, as far as each individual needs to be recognized in his dignity if he is to maintain a positive relation to himself. This is the reason why his theory of recognition is basically an ethics of recognition.

If a hermeneutic of experiences of injustice has to take the form of an ethics of recognition, it is because the various feelings of injustice point to **three main spheres** of recognition. To recall these three spheres in summary: the first sphere is the one of **intimacy**, where the subject finds her affective needs fulfilled. The fulfillment of early **physical and affective demands provides the subject with the self-confidence** that forms the basis for successful social autonomization. In normative terms, a first set of prescriptions is attached to this sphere: the respect of the person's body and affectivity. The second sphere of recognition is the **juridical recognition of the equal dignity of persons**. When it is provided, it grants the individual **self-respect** as she views herself as a fully competent moral subject. When this recognition is denied, the demand is the classical demand for the widening of the sphere of rights to populations and individuals that were so far excluded. Finally, the third sphere of recognition is the recognition of the **individual contribution to the social division of labour**. When successful, it provides the person with **self-esteem**.

The purpose of the concept of recognition is not only to describe injustice but also to emphasize that **justice is a matter of conflict**. As Hegel explained in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, if individuals or groups face denial of recognition, they have no other solution than fighting for recognition. This fact has sociological as well as political significance. Individual social integration occurs neither idealistically through transparent processes of linguistification, nor in a subject-less process of systemic optimization, but through conflict. Finally, the evolution of society is the result of **clashes of recognition between conflicting groups about the value of social institutions** at a given time. When social recognition is denied, it triggers struggles for the recognition of individuals' and communities' social and cultural worth.

## II. POLITICIZING RECOGNITION

Given that the ethics of recognition intends to describe the clash between social groups about the **value of institutions**, it constitutes a political as much as an ethical theory. Axel Honneth has mainly developed its

ethical side. We will focus on its political potential. It depends on the one hand on the relation between politics and injustice, on the other hand on the relation between social contempt and institutions.

**a. Politics in unjust societies**

In political philosophy, methodological negativism is consistent with the fact that politics has to deal with injustice. The concept of social justice, as well as the political concept of equality, is an abolitionistic concept, and this constitutes the first difference between morals and politics. The scope of moral and political questions differs because political action begins with the refusal of peculiar social situations, develops into a fight against the social groups interested in the permanence of these social situations, and aims at a more egalitarian society. The theory of recognition is able to take these three levels of politics into account (Renault, 2004, Introduction and Ch. 1).

First, one has to admit that the motivational basis for political action is not the positive representation of moral principles, but rather experiences of injustice: being the victim of an injustice is a feeling rather than a rational conviction. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this feeling is irrational and that it depends only on individual, psychological factors, separate from social injustice. On the contrary it potentially results from a social denial of recognition. Thus, the ethics of recognition can be used to elaborate a normative framework at the very level of the motivation of political action, in order to describe its normative dynamic and its specific claims to validity. The normativity of political action is to be understood in terms of social justice, and in political action, social justice is not intended in clear representations but in experiences of what is no longer bearable, i.e. in feelings and practical reactions to peculiar social situations.

Second, one also has to admit that the logic of political action cannot only be conceived of as an effort toward consensus, but also as a logic of dissensus. One of the problems for political theory is to be able to articulate these two dimensions, and the theory of recognition offers a model that emphasizes their irreducible link. When individuals or social groups are victims of a denial of recognition, the only means for them to obtain recognition is struggle for recognition. It appears clearly that such struggle intends to obtain by violent means what hasn't been obtained by non-violent means: individuals and groups who deny recognition to others must take notice of the victims of their denial for the simple fact that they are engaged in a struggle with them. But this agonistic dimension of political action is intimately associated with a consensual dimension in so far as the experience of injustice, triggering the dynamic of refusal, is associated to a positive counterpart as a kind of telos of a more egalitarian distribution of recognition in society. When individuals and groups fight against social contempt, they don't just fight against individuals and groups denying them recognition, they are also more or less explicitly driven by a normative dynamic aiming

at a social order which would provide self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem to all individuals. It is clear that this aim belongs to the normative dynamic of political action and not necessarily to its explicit goals. In its development, a social movement elaborates some kind of self-reflection on its norms and aims, as well as a characterization of its enemies and friends. A political discourse results from this self-reflection which has to be judged from a normative standpoint.

The first interest of the theory of recognition is to show that the question of the normative dynamic of political action has to be distinguished from the question of the value of the means and ends of political action. Some political action may rest upon legitimate claims without working towards a legitimate aim (for example, in the case of urban collective violence), or without using legitimate means. The second interest is to take the standpoint of political normativity itself to propose a truly political judgement on the value of these aims, and not an external standpoint like the moral standpoint.

It is a fact that not every struggle against denials of recognition is political. That is why the key to a politicization of recognition is the concept of social contempt. It is only when individuals and groups are fighting against the denial of recognition produced by the institutions of social life that their struggle is political and that it really involves political normativity. Conversely, it is only if the theory of recognition is able to explain when institutions produce recognition or denial of recognition that it provides a definition of social justice, and thus, a description of political normativity.

### **b. Politics and institutions**

If the **majority in a social group feels despised**, this feeling appears clearly as a social phenomenon. But what exactly is social in recognition and contempt? In Honneth's theory, recognition tends to be conceived of as a single interaction between me and you. Recognition is basically the confirmation by others of the idea I have of my own value. So the concept of recognition can be applied to various institutions, and to society as a whole, only as an expressive concept. Institutions express recognition when they enable individuals to maintain relations of recognition, and they express a denial of recognition when they hinder such relations. **Institutions are not the place of recognition, only their results and their external conditions**, and it is thus only insofar as they are socially conditioned that recognition and contempt are social. The real place of recognition is the interaction between individual demands and responses: **recognition is pre-institutional in essence**. The theory of recognition has to be understood as a normative social philosophy, and in Honneth it is based in ~~a moral psychology~~ (Honneth, 1995a: Ch. 5). In our opinion, this expressive concept of recognition and the grounding of social philosophy in moral psychology are responsible for the underdevelopment of the political in Axel Honneth's theory of recognition.<sup>6</sup> They are insufficient both on a theoretical and on a political level.

On the theoretical level, the question at issue concerns the relation between subjectivity and institutions. According to the expressive concept of recognition, individual demands for recognition are basically independent of institutions: individuals want to be recognized because they need it as individuals, and it is only on that basis that they also want the institutional conditions of recognition to be fulfilled. But it is inaccurate to analyse subjectivation as occurring outside an institutional framework. It is always within institutional frameworks that individuals address their demands for recognition towards other individuals and institutions. This issue raises the problem of the role played by interactionist principles in a theory of recognition.

We agree with Honneth that the study of recognitive interactions offers the best means to describe the normative content of socialization and social struggles. But in opposition to Honneth, we believe that existing recognitive interactions are always structured by material conditions such as natural and artificial things, bodies and institutions, and we also believe that the normative content of these interactions cannot be fully described independently of their material conditions (see Deranty, 2005a, 2005b). Among these material conditions, the specific status of institutions depends on the fact that they define the social dimension of individual recognitive interactions. But in order to give a full account of the social context of these interactions, one should not forget that institutions are also in relations to each other and that their influence on social interactions also depends on the social structures and historical systems they are part of. Struggles for recognition are not only oriented toward institutions, but sometimes also towards macro-social settings such as feudalism or capitalism. Nevertheless, it is always from given relationships to given institutions that they arise.

One has to distinguish between three kinds of institutional effects on individual behaviour. First, an institution means a way of coordinating behaviour by the means of rules. Second, an institution can involve a mobilization of individual subjectivity, in order to coordinate individual actions not only by rules, but also by 'interpellation' (Althusser, 1976: 79–138). Third, institutions are also the place of the socialization and constitution of identities. To these three kinds of effects correspond three kinds of recognition. As far as the rules condition the way others behave towards me, they have a direct influence on the recognition of my value by them. To this first type of recognition is associated a peculiar form of denial of recognition: depreciative recognition.<sup>7</sup> Social relations are so structured that they produce hierarchical relations between groups, and the rules of interaction are so constituted that they reproduce this hierarchy in everyday life practices.

The second kind of subjectivation effect tries to identify the individual with a social role. It produces a form of recognition that is linked to a new form of denial of recognition. Here, the institution offers recognition only if individuals try to identify themselves with a given institutional role: the result is misrecognition and invisibility rather than depreciation; misrecognition

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inside institutions, invisibility outside institutions (invisibility or social death for those who are excluded from institutions).<sup>8</sup>

The third effect of subjectivation concerns the constitution of identity. Various institutions (the family, the school, the labour place etc.) also produce the different features of personal identity. These elements are based on the internalization of rules and social roles through the identification to significant others, in a process where individuals construct their value through the recognition by these significant others. As far as these rules and roles are determined by institutional functioning, again, institutions produce recognition. To this kind of recognition is associated a third form of denial of recognition: unsatisfactory recognition. The social world can be so constituted that the various institutions produce effects of subjectivation that are incompatible, so that individuals can't identify fully with the different social roles in which they try to be recognized by society. This kind of fragmentation of personal identity can be understood as an internalization of fragmented society.<sup>9</sup>

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Taking institutions into account leads us to replace the expressive concept of recognition with a constitutive one. Institutions not only express recognition or denial of recognition, they also produce different kinds of recognition and different denials of recognition. This conclusion is crucial for the renewal of critical theory. If institutions are the place of recognition and denial of recognition, then demands for recognition always have something to do with the recognition of identity (Renault, 2004, chs 4 and 5). Identity means the representation of one's own personal value, and it is precisely the conviction of his own value that an individual wants to confirm through the recognition of others; depreciation, misrecognition, invisibility and dissatisfaction are the four ways of failing to meet this demand. Thus, the problem of identity is closely linked to the feeling of injustice and the logic of political action. Conversely, the question of the politics of identity cannot be reduced to cultural and sexual identities; it also concerns social and professional identities. Understood in this way, the theory of recognition is able to take into account the large range of motivations behind political action as well as the full extent of social justice.

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A possible objection to this interpretation could be that the ethics of recognition loses all normative content and is reduced to a descriptive concept. In order to respond to this objection, we have to recall that the main interest in a theory of recognition is to describe the internal normative dynamics of political action rather than provide abstract criteria to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate actions. Our ethical life rests upon a positive relation to ourselves, because one can try to choose the good or the just only if one has a positive image of one's existence. Thus the demand for recognition belongs to a normativity of a higher range, even if the idea of recognition doesn't provide by itself criteria for the good and the just. We will see in the next section that this normativity is grounded in freedom

understood as negative as well as positive, and it is quite clear that such freedom cannot be defined by a single list of formal rights. Finally, the alleged normative deficit of our politics of recognition is nothing else than the difference between morality, law, and politics: moral and legal normativity depend on static criteria, political normativity depends on practical dynamics.

### **c. Politics of identity, politics in identity**

In the debate around the politics of identity, the link between identity and politics seems quite different from what it is in our model. According to Nancy Fraser, the idea of social justice has two opposite meanings: on the one hand, recognition of cultural identities, on the other hand, an egalitarian distribution of goods. Honneth replies that justice as redistribution can be conceptualized adequately in terms of certain aspects of the recognition of the individual economic, social and cultural contribution to the community (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Fraser objects to this by charging this solution with producing a grave 'displacement' of political questions. Her critique clearly targets Honneth amongst others. She claims that his ethics of recognition propounds a 'culturalist' view of society, which must view the economic sphere as having no independence, and which therefore limits the correction of economic inequality to the struggle against cultural and social misrecognition. This is not a fair assessment of Honneth. When he argues that the theory of recognition leads to a description of social pathologies, he clearly insists on the fact that the object of social critique should be pathological institutions themselves.

Nevertheless, one should admit that the political position of Honneth is ambiguous because of his expressive concept of recognition. If institutions are pathological only in the sense that they hinder recognition, a possible solution could be to offer recognition to individuals by means other than the changes brought into these institutions, for example by giving a compensatory recognition through other institutional means. In any case, our political interpretation of his ethics is free from this ambiguity. We argue that existing institutions produce the experience of social injustice. Our conviction is precisely that politics originates in these experiences and is defined by a struggle against such pathological institutions. For us, political normativity entails the two interrelated dimensions of a rejection of the order of things and the project of a fairer society. Nothing in our framework prevents us from interpreting this rejection as an intervention over the economic organisation of society. On the contrary, it is clear that economic institutions are the major place for the third sphere of recognition. It is above all in the institutional framework of labour, and the market as place of social validation, that the social value of individual activities is recognized or not.

The use of the notion of personal identity to ground the normativity of recognition does not lead to a culturalist interpretation of society, since

institutions contribution ==> recognition <== social contribution

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we want to emphasize the institutional and dissensual (antagonistic and universalistic) aspect that is constitutive of personal identity. To express economic inequality in terms of a feeling of injustice that can be further formalized and made explicit in an alternative critical discourse on political economy does not debase the critique of political economy. On the contrary, it shows the experiential basis of a critique of political economy, and thus its practical conditions of possibility.

Axel Honneth is right when he argues that the requirement of egalitarian distribution is a consequence of the requirement of recognition of the individual's value. However, he also considers that the recognition of cultural identities cannot be considered in itself a form of justice, but should always be subordinated to the criteria of justice defined by the three spheres of recognition. In our opinion, it is not so easy to establish such a sharp distinction between the recognition of the three kinds of positive relationships to oneself and the recognition of identity. On the level of phenomenological analysis, self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are always linked with the various features of personal identity.

Equally the recognition of the psycho-biologic, moral and social value of my existence depends on the recognition of the different features of social identity. For example, if an employee considers that his wage involves a denial of recognition of the social value of his existence, we can interpret this depreciative recognition as a denial of recognition of his value as a human being, or as a denial of his demand to be recognized in the social part of his dignity. But it is quite clear that from his own point of view, this wage is a denial of the specific social value of his work, that it is a denial of recognition of his professional identity.

Finally, the normative content of recognition has to be understood in a broad meaning so that it **subsumes the recognition of dignity** as well as the recognition of identity. Understood thus, the requirement of recognition cannot be considered as a criterion of justice. It is nevertheless able to produce a definition of social justice appropriate to the specific level of political normativity and to the fact that the domain of social justice concerns the various aspects of social life and of our relations to institutions. Here again, it is important to emphasize the distinction between the **norms of** moral judgement and those of **political action**.

Considered from the standpoint of theory of recognition, the concept of a politics of identity is subject to another major change. As far as the elements of personal identity are produced in institutions, identity itself becomes political (Calhoun, 1995). The problem for individuals is to **unify** the various elements of their identity and such unification is to be achieved in **recognitive relations**. These elements are not only effects of institutions, because each individual has to try to unify them by himself and to make them recognized by institutions. For example, the employee of a company cannot be acknowledged by the company simply as an employee because

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he interprets his professional identity in relation to the other elements of his personal identity. If he wants to refuse misrecognition (recognition only as the abstract model of the employee of his company) or unsatisfactory recognition (recognition as someone he accepts to be in the company, but as someone he doesn't really want to be), he has to demand to be recognized in the personal interpretation he gives of his professional identity. Finally, socialization is to be understood as a process whereby individuals appropriate new identities in institutions and try to conform institutions to their demands which are rooted in identities. Socialization is not only the internalization of social roles, because this internalization goes together with an effort to transform institutions and the recognition effects they produce. The theory of recognition is not only a way of making political normativity explicit, it is also a way of describing what is political in identities and how socialization leads behaviours not only to social reproduction but also to social transformation.

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### III. FREEDOM AND NEGATIVITY

#### a. Subjectivity as negativity

We argue that the normativity immanent in demands of recognition is not just ethical but political in nature, in that it questions the institutional contexts and contains the implicit potential for a universalistic project of community. This thesis is reinforced by a second thesis regarding socialization. The construction of identity is indeed shaped by the institutional forces and the imposition of their discipline, but conversely, there is also a political dimension in the process of identity-building. Subjects have the ability to engage in processes of bargaining with institutions, adapting their imposed discipline to their project of self.<sup>10</sup> The subjective force that drives these transactions is the need for subjects to unify the different aspects of their personality into a coherent story in which they can make sense of their own value. As we said earlier, there is no hard distinction to be made between the spheres of recognition and identity. Personal identity is the synthesis of the different strands of identity. As a consequence, socialization is not just about the reproduction but also about the transformation of society. Recognition is therefore political in two interrelated senses: first, as delivering the grammar of political struggle, and second, as supporting the potentially political, integrating dimension of subjective identity.

This idea that there is a fundamental political dimension in processes of identity-formation is not new. It can be read as an intersubjectivistic correction of Sartre's theory of subjectivity. It can also be found in Mead's theory of socialization, whereby the social self is supported by a subconscious I that constantly questions the roles and norms integrated by the self, and is thus able to appeal to an ideal community in which the different norms can be unified (Habermas, 1987, vol. 2: 36–59; Tugendhat, 1986, Ch. 12).

Mead's theory of socialization shows a way of resolving the crux of the ontological status of political subjectivity (Fraser, 1981). Political agency demands a concept of the subject.<sup>11</sup> Mead's theory of socialization, which constructs subjectivity as an effect of intersubjective processes and ends up establishing the model of a 'decentred autonomy', shows how it is possible to make sense of the concepts of relationship to oneself, identity, integrity and autonomy without returning to an outdated philosophy of consciousness. However, Mead's solution to the problem of the contradictions between internalized norms, namely the (political) appeal to an ideal communication as a normative support of the subjective development, is not used to its full potential by Honneth. His way out of the 'me/I dialectic' leaves out of consideration the decisive moment of universalization.

The need to fine-tune the theory of socialization that supports the thesis of the political normativity of recognition, combined with the perception of the political weakness of Honneth's proposal, leads to a different interpretation of the concept of decentred autonomy. We believe it is necessary to return to a more literal Hegelian reading of recognition and the ontology of personal identity (Renault, 2001). If we read the structure of the *Philosophy of Right* formally, as Honneth invites us to do, it is apparent that already in Hegel the partial identities of the subject are unified in the universal, meta-social project (Hegel, 1991). Symptomatically, Honneth's 'reappropriation' of Hegel's mature political philosophy stops before the political level of state institutions (Honneth, 2002). Honneth does not provide an analysis of the link between the three spheres of recognition and autonomy. We suggest, following Hegel, that this link is political. By that we mean that the construction of personal identity is an anthropological, social and cultural condition of politics and that 'politics is the final stage in the construction of identity.'

What is the status of identity in Hegel's construct of subjectivity through recognition? Every time he mentions subjectivity, Hegel defines it as 'pure' or 'absolute' negativity. By that he means a 'double movement' (Hegel, 1991: 37–42). Subjectivity is, first, the absolute power of negation as the power to abstract from any particular identity, be it given by nature or society. 'Absolute' or 'pure' negativity means absolute power of self-negation. This power, however, must 'consistently negate itself; otherwise it would not be absolute.' The negation of the first negation, which is just self-negation, leads therefore to self-determination, the 'positing' of positive features of the self. Therefore, any positive feature of the self, any partial identity, is positive only in the sense that it is the reflection onto itself of the absolute power to negate. The subject's identity, as it were, has nothing positively positive about itself. It is the reflection of negativity into and onto itself, the permanent negating of one's power to permanently negate, the contradictory immanence of negativity to itself.<sup>12</sup>

This Hegelian model can surely not be interpreted as a general descriptive definition of personal identity, but can be considered a normative

definition of the kind of identity which fits with autonomy. For an individual, autonomy is incompatible both with the exclusive attachment to one of his peculiar identities – for example, a religious (fundamentalism) or a sexual (machismo) identity – and with a general indifference towards all his identities (Balibar, 2001). Thus, freedom has to be understood both as the possibility to be something other than our particular identities, as negative freedom, and as the possibility to be engaged in each of them, as positive freedom. It may seem paradoxical but the Hegelian defense of freedom as self-realization is grounded in this definition of identity as absolute negativity. Hegel offers a definition of freedom consistent with a definition of identity far removed from any spiritualistic definition of identity in terms of positive unity and self-harmony,<sup>13</sup> and this definition of identity as the self-reference of negativity is crucial for our purpose for two other sets of reasons, one theoretical, and the other practical.

#### **b. Negativity and identity**

To define subjectivity as the circle of negativity enables us to take an alternative position in the American debate between redistributive justice and the politics of difference.

Our recourse to Hegel's definition of identity as negative self-reference absolves us of the charge of reifying identity and groups. This is an interesting charge that Fraser levels at Young, since Young develops her model precisely as a postmodern objection to the unproblematic identity of the liberal subject (Young, 1990: Ch.1). Fraser's charge seems quite valid in view of the unproblematic reference in Young to the self-consciousness of underprivileged groups. By holding firm to our 'Hegelian premises', by defining identity as the product of a negative unification of moments defined purely in terms of reciprocal negation, we propound a dialectical view of identity. Each partial identity owes its positivity only to its being the negation of other possible identities. It thus remains structurally open to these other possibilities. This openness to otherness can be realized in the construction of personal identity through the unification of one's partial identities since we believe that this is conceivable only as a political project, which by definition must oppose other projects, but also offer the possibility of defining a sphere of commonality.

This responds to the charge that identity-politics' separatist tendencies destroy the very possibility of politics by pitting group against group. To say it differently, we don't believe that identity (or difference) is the origin of politics, in the sense that politics would be about recognizing identity (or, for that matter, difference). We believe the opposite is the case: personal identity is the result of a process of unification of particular identities and this process is in essence political since it redefines all our particular identities within the framework of our vision of a society in which personal value and integrity would become possible.

Finally, while we accept Fraser's critique of Young's politics of difference, we believe conversely that Young's critique of redistributive views of justice also holds. We share Young's distrust towards a narrowing down of political theory to a theory of justice grounded in moral normativity. If political normativity is grounded in the experiences of injustice, then the definition of justice must become wider than just the formal requirements for a just distribution of goods. The **institutional focus** in particular must be paramount. Indeed this is precisely the theoretical advantage of a political theory conceived from the paradigm of recognition: **justice** can be **defined** in terms that do include the **real experiences of social injustice**, whereas the different Kant-inspired theories of justice all end up devising theoretical models that seem unable to account for the modern phenomena of exclusion, oppression and domination (Renault, 2004).

### c. Negativity and freedom

The second important advantage of our focus on the negative core of identity is **practical**. What do the self-consciousnesses strive to have recognized in their struggle for recognition? In Hegel's original idea: not their identity, but their **freedom** (Hegel, 1977: 111–12). The 'pure concept of recognition' is a response to the following problem: how can consciousnesses, which have the certainty of their autonomy, make a truth out of this certainty? The answer is that **autonomy can become truth only through reciprocal recognition**. Freedom in Hegel, however, is only the other name of the circle of negativity. In the dialectic we followed earlier, the third moment as the unity of the power to negate and the power to self-determine is the **moment of true autonomy, the 'freedom of the will'**. In the famous page of the *Phenomenology* where the 'pure concept of recognition' is described, the characterization of autonomy as recognition is only the transfiguration (the instant reversal) into positive terms of a process of reciprocal negation/self-negation. What individuals want to have recognized in the struggle for recognition is therefore, strictly speaking, not so much their positive identity, rather it is their identity as negative, their **freedom to posit their own identity**. Recognition is claimed as a right to self-empowerment, as the **right to self-creativity and self-realization**, not with the aim of entrenching fixed identities.

Our choice to use the old word of freedom to make sense of the normativity of recognition arises out of two main considerations. First, the idea of freedom strengthens our case that the norms that are made explicit in the logic of recognition are different from the criteria or principles of classical theories of justice. We believe that a politically relevant definition of justice must go beyond the distinction between the good and the just because politics must be rooted, in theory as much as in practice, in the real experiences of social subjects. This was already Honneth's original conviction (Honneth, 1995a: Ch. 9). Honneth, however, grounds normativity in moral

psychology rather than in a theory of freedom as self-realization. The three-fold practical relationship to the self which defines the **structure of integrity**, or personal identity, and provides the norms of social critique is not conceived by us as a moral relationship, but as a relationship of freedom. Subjects engage in **struggles** for recognition to defend and assert their autonomy, **defined as their power to posit their own identity** through transactions with the roles imposed from the outside. Personal identity defined as integrity and autonomy is structurally political because it involves a universal project of the self. This project underpins a critique of existing society and a project of a community. The normativity of struggles for recognition lies therefore in their ability to articulate the demand and defence of real autonomy.<sup>14</sup>

Second, the reference to the idea of freedom is important to further characterize the social-critical dimensions of our proposal and to make more explicit its relation to the project of social emancipation. The category of freedom or autonomy is extracted from the liberal framework in which normative principles of justice appear disconnected from their institutional and social realization, and is restituted to social experience. A theory of justice that is based on a concept of freedom defined through social recognition is thus justified in calling itself a critical theory of society. It can interpret experiences of injustice not just as relative to particular social or subjective expectations, in terms of particular conceptions of the good, but more fundamentally as **viable normative expectations**. Furthermore, it can interpret contemporary pathologies of the social as forms of alienation, that is, as forms of life in which the intersubjective conditions for self-realization, which are the individual representation of one's dignity, value and integrity, are imperiled or destroyed. A morally or legalistically grounded theory of justice can detect inequalities in the distribution of material and symbolic goods but does not possess the conceptual tools to analyse contemporary phenomena of social exclusion, stigmatization and disaffiliation. We understand them as **experiences of alienation**, not only because they hinder self-realization but also because, in them, the intersubjective dependence of individuals destroys their identity and puts them in situations where there is no other alternative than adaptation to injustice or struggle against it. As experiences of alienation, experiences of injustice are not just moral injuries but also **call for political solutions**.

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### Notes

1. Honneth, like many post-war German philosophers has been influenced by Michael Theunissen's, 'dialectical negativism', the notion that truth is accessed through the negation of what cannot be accepted (Anghern, 1992). But before that, it is obviously also a consequence of Adorno's own method.
2. Apart from the famous text by Horkheimer (1972). See also Habermas (1971: 301–17) and Honneth (1991: chs 1 and 7).
3. *The Critique of Power* does not consider the latest stage in Foucault's writing.
4. For instance, the reification of the two spheres of action leads to the abstraction of a norm-free sphere of instrumental action opposed to a power-free sphere of communicative action; see the last chapters of *The Critique of Power*.
5. Honneth seems to share to some extent Manfred Frank's critique of post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity. See Frank (1989).
6. The function devoted to psychology as normative ground is also leading to some psychological theoretical problems (see Deranty, 2003b). For the various theories about the relation between individuals and institutions in Honneth, see Renault (2005).
7. Recognition as a subordinate or an inferior; disqualification and stigmatization are its different forms.
8. The concept of invisibility has recently been elaborated by Honneth (2003). For an interpretation of exclusion as de-institutionalization of existence and as social contempt leading to social death, see Renault (2004: Ch. 7).
9. For an illustration of these three kinds of denial of recognition in labour situations, see Renault (2004: Ch. 3).
10. This is an important similarity with Foucault's concept of ethics in his latest writings.
11. Conversely, critical theory also entails the task of a critique of subjective alienation. To operate like Badiou, by disconnecting political practice from social experience, is counter-intuitive. It prevents political theory from any differentiated form of social critique. Rancière's political thought, on the contrary, provides a more viable model of a politics of radical equality grounded in the experiences of injustice. About identities and differences between Rancière and Honneth, see Deranty (2003a, 2003c).
12. To characterize subjectivity as negativity is obviously the cornerstone also of existentialist ethics. The difference between existentialist ethics and the ethics of recognition is that the power to (self)-negate is given to consciousness in the first instance, while it is constructed through intersubjective processes in the second. Hegel and Mead's theories of socialization show better than Sartre how socialization enables the subject to learn to 'say no' (see Honneth, 2003).

13. From this point of view, it is possible to draw a critique of Honneth's definition of identity as positive relationship to oneself (see Deranty, 2003b).
14. Real as opposed to a Kantian, moral autonomy, or a liberal, legal autonomy.

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