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Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose? Not for Axel Honneth, whose Hegelian reconstruction sees freedom as the central, even sole, driving force of Western modernity. Other apparently central values are mere modifications of freedom. Nothin’ don’t mean nothin’ if it ain’t free.

In his deliberately grand narrative, Honneth follows Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* in developing an account of social justice by means of an analysis of society. The end result is an outline of society in terms of roles and ethical relations through which individuals can achieve freedom and self-realization. The construal is at the same time a description of the constitutive spheres of contemporary society, in terms of its less than fully realized potentials and promises. In Hegelian parlance, the “rational” is in the process of becoming “actual” in modern history, but owing to misdevelopments and social pathologies, there is still ample room for social criticism, in light of the very concept that these institutions (are meant to) embody, namely, social freedom.

Honneth, however, puts Hegelian teleological philosophy of history and metaphysics of reason aside, and sees the mundane notions of shared acceptance concerning the central value, and social reproduction guided by that value, as the mechanisms that keep freedom going. One unintended consequence of that shift is that Honneth’s citizens must be “clear-sighted” about this process, while Hegel’s construal may appeal to a “cunning of reason” even when the participants have only a partial appreciation, or are “dim-sighted” about what is worth accepting in the society as it is.

Honneth works with a threefold distinction of freedom as negative, reflexive, and social, resembling Fred Neuhouser’s reading of Hegel. It is hard to overestimate the fruitfulness of that conceptualization. The familiar *negative* freedom to do as one pleases amounts to freedom from external obstacles, whether or not one is a slave to one’s passions and whether or not these are in line with the aim of freedom. The *reflexive* freedom of self-determination, self-realization, and authenticity overcomes these faults, but is limited in other ways, which *social* freedom then overcomes: the interpersonal and institutional surroundings must be freedom friendly, so that living in the available roles and taking part in the available practices do not amount to heteronomy.
or alienation. These surroundings are not mere contexts for action, or potential obstacles, but actualizations or embodiments of freedom, constitutive aspects of what it is to be free. Freedom is not mere individual self-determination, but partly constituted by standing in the right kinds of relations to others and to institutions. When these relations have the structure allowing the subject to be oneself in the other, they are constitutive of freedom. Honneth’s version of social freedom further emphasizes (arguably too strongly) the interdependence of agents’ aims: freedom-constitutive relations are ones where the satisfaction of your aims depends on the satisfaction of mine and vice versa, so that we both cooperatively contribute to each others’ aims. In any case, social freedom broadly along Honneth’s lines seems undeniably a fruitful notion.

Even though the core of freedom is to be realized in social life, it is important that individuals have their private spaces for taking temporary leave from the social world, or for experimenting with new roles and orientations. These are provided by their legal freedoms and rights institutionalizing the negative aspect of freedom. It is equally important that individuals have their moral freedom to take autonomous critical distance toward their social roles: the social world is to be justifiable to all. Honneth stresses that these institutions of legal and moral freedom are central and well grounded, but their function is to provide protected and approved distance, of a temporary nature, from participation in the social world (lifelong only in cases where the available social worlds are wholly unacceptable). Yet there is a constant danger and tendency to mistake these forms of freedom for the whole thing, to forget that the “normal” or desirable state is that of participation in the social world (which should enable freedom for participants). The autonomization of distance can lead to familiar social pathologies of two kinds: first, legal considerations (in the case of legal freedom) can be applied beyond their proper scope, threatening the social bonds with excessive juridification, and moral agent-neutrality (in the case of moral freedom) may make one blind to the moral relevance of particular attachments. Second, they may lead to hollow self-understandings, when one starts to see oneself as nothing but a legal person or moral subject. The most extreme form of moral pathology is that of morally motivated terrorism.

Whereas the point of negative and reflexive freedom is to provide a protected option to “get away,” the point of social freedom is to enable participants to be free within the social world. It comes in three variants: personal, economic, and political. The first is embodied in personal relationships, such as friendship, intimate love, and family life. They are Hegel’s prime examples of the structure of finding oneself in the other, being oneself through the other —negative and reflexive freedom cannot capture the freedom-constitutive significance of such relations.

By far the most controversial and thought-provoking suggestion in Honneth’s book is that the same goes for the market economy. When legitimate, the market is a form of cooperation, where the roles of workers,
owners, speculators, moneylenders, and consumers are arranged so that the
contribution of each complements the legitimate aims of the others. Mere
market mechanisms do not guarantee that, so they must, first, be embedded
in ethical understandings via discursive mechanisms providing the needed
socialization and deliberation, and second, they must be legally regulated.
These ethical orientations and legal regulations are intrinsic aspects of the
market economy, claims Honneth (drawing on a reading of Hegel, Durkheim,
Parsons, and Polanyi). It is a misunderstanding to think of the market as a nor-
matively disembedded sphere (just think of the ethics of what should not be for
sale at all). But it is precisely as a project of a social freedom that the modern
market economy is to be understood, and apparently has been understood by
the most clear-sighted observers. Of course, Honneth sees the latest twists and
turns of the neo-liberal economy as a massive misdevelopment threatening to
ruin the achievements of previous generations and grinding the very project
of social freedom to a halt.

Honneth’s chapter on the market will raise objections from many view-
points. Not much is said about why economic cooperation should take the
form of a market at all. Not much is left of a Hegelian analysis of the
market as a jungle of external relations, with a tendency to produce a
“rabble,” not to mention Marxist worries about the nature of capitalism,
which are brought up but not really addressed. Further, it is not clear that
the prevailing shared deep ethical understandings concerning the market
are in terms of social freedom, as opposed to a more liberal individual
freedom, or even a more minimal code of honoring contracts. That many of
us are more or less mistaken seems to pose a problem for Honneth’s “clear-
sighted” view. Perhaps his forthcoming short volume on early socialism’s re-
liance on social freedom will shed different light on the ideal, stressing again
ethically motivated social struggles, as in his earlier work.

The third aspect of Honneth’s construal discusses public will-formation and
its execution via constitutional states. Against instrumentalist views, Honneth
sees democratic public life as the central aspect of social freedom. As a kind of
reflective cooperation it both constitutes an aspect of social freedom and reg-
ulates the other aspects of freedom (legal, moral, personal, economic).
Democratic should be responsive to predemocratic forms of freedom and
respect at least moral and legal freedoms (as is stressed by the liberal main-
stream), but also the personal and economic aspects of social freedom that
are realized in personal relationships and the economy. Honneth’s Deweyan
theory of democracy is familiar from his previous writings: both economic
and democratic cooperation are aspects of social life more broadly construed.
No doubt, other traditions stressing the agonistic aspects of politics will beg to
differ concerning any predemocratic constraints on the democratic process,
but many will also find the idea of democratic will-formation as a form of
social freedom readily acceptable.

Against the promise of social freedom, in all three spheres massive misde-
velopments have taken place. If Honneth is right, we will have a huge
practical task in guiding the unfinished project of modernity back onto its tracks. Whether right or not, Honneth has provided us with a central reference point for future debates on the nature of modernity, freedom, justice, and the social world.

–Arto Laitinen

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University of Tampere