

## Honneth and the Struggles for Moral Redemption

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*Abstract:* This article explores Axel Honneth's attempts to reconnect the struggles of workers with the normative content of modernity through Hegel's intersubjective account of recognition. The importance of Honneth's writings lies in his attempt to extend Habermas' account of normative self-constitution to labor via the morally motivated struggles of workers to correct the modern maldistribution of social worth. To this extent, the expansion of ethical life is predicated on the struggles of excluded participants to gain inclusion within the normative content of modernity. From this perspective Habermas' attempt to legitimate the exclusion of labor (by the system) from the normative content of modernity appears unjust and unjustified. Unfortunately, Honneth shares with Habermas a tendency to locate the economic system beyond the (culturally defined) limits of ethical life. He thereby fails to acknowledge the extent to which workers play a major role in re-moralizing the former via the de-reification of the latter.

From his earliest writings Axel Honneth has sought to widen and deepen the normative ground of critical theory in order to extend the remit of intersubjectivity to labor. Honneth thus rejects Jürgen Habermas' abandonment of labor to the non-normative system in favor of reformulating workers' struggles in normative terms. Nevertheless, Honneth's alternative to Habermas' communicative paradigm is restricted to the latter's culturally bound account of moral agency. Thus in his work on struggles for recognition Honneth largely concedes the diremption of morality from materiality to the detriment of the latter's emancipatory potential. Honneth then compensates for the lack of substance that results from this bifurcated account of modernity by grounding his own version of undamaged intersubjectivity in an underlying philosophical anthropology. To this extent, Honneth, like Karl Marx and Habermas before

him, grounds critical theory, not in the struggles of participants to redeem the normative promise of modernity, but in a social ontology that the latter is tasked to realize.

At the same time, Honneth shares with Marx and Habermas a historically informed account of critical theory grounded in the modern ethos of autonomy. Hence Honneth's declaration that: "Critical Theory in its innermost core—whatever its congruence with other forms of social critique may be—is dependent on the quasi-sociological specification of an emancipatory interest in social reality itself" (Honneth 1994: 256). Unfortunately, Honneth fails to redeem this viewpoint consistently by grounding critical theory in the struggles of participants to overcome the heteronomy of the system. Instead, Honneth adopts the standpoint of an objective observer with the capacity to rule on what is and what is not pathological about modernity. Thus just as Marx grounds the human species in self-objectifying labor, and Habermas in language oriented to mutual understanding, so Honneth emphasizes the role played by social recognition in the successful development of identity. Armed with this objective definition of what comprises an undamaged form of intersubjectivity, Honneth criticizes modernity for failing to obtain this normative ideal.

It will not, however, be possible, in what follows, to do justice to the intricacies and complexities of Honneth's account of recognition. Instead I shall limit myself to his account of workers' struggles to re-moralize labor as this demonstrates that critical theory's normative turn need not be at the expense of labor. Nevertheless, Honneth inherits from Habermas a tendency to generate a model of critical theory that is at one and the same time too strong and too weak—too strong in the sense that it transforms workers' struggles for recognition into mere means for a supra-social teleology; too weak in the sense that it fails to criticize the system's capacity to damage intersubjectivity. To this extent, Honneth's version of critical theory is dependent on an objective standpoint that arises from the system's capacity to reify intersubjectivity. Thus, it is not possible to reground critical theory within the struggles of participants to

realize the normative promise of modernity without challenging the system's diremption of ethical life.

*The moral content of labor*

In an early essay entitled "Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory", Honneth argues that Habermas' attempt to extend Marxism in the direction of intersubjective understanding "is paid for by the disappearance of the conflict potential still available in social labor from the theory of action" (Honneth 1995a: 40). In other words, by reducing labor to a purely *technical* relationship between humanity (subject) and nature (object), Habermas "dissolves the categorical connection which Marx attempts to establish between social labor and social liberation" (*ibid.*: 44). What is at issue here, argues Honneth, is not the instrumental status of labor but who is in charge of its application:

A critical concept of work must grasp categorically the difference between an instrumental act in which the working subject structures and regulates his own activity on his own initiative, according to his own knowledge, in a self-contained process, and an instrumental act in which neither the accompanying controls nor the object-related structures of the activity is left to the initiative of the working subject. (Honneth 1995a, p. 46)

Thus, it is not labor's instrumental character that robs workers of their autonomy, but workers' lack of control over the labor process. To this extent, argues Honneth, labor retains a normative dimension "based not upon the consciousness of systemically distorted relations of communication, but the experience of the destruction of true acts of work in the course of the rationalization of production techniques" (*ibid.*: 47). The moral damage that accompanies modernity is not, therefore, restricted to impaired communication, but extends to the systematic expropriation' of workers' own work activity. "The valid normative claim which thus comes to expression results from a moral vulnerability which grows not from the suppression of communicative modes of mutual understanding but from the expropriation of the workers' own work

activity”<sup>1</sup> (*ibid.*: 47). It follows that the more work is subject to external determination, the more this is attended by “an opposing action process on which working subjects cooperatively seek to reclaim control over their own activity. Thus, oddly enough, a moment of practical recollection would then seem to dwell within the unjustified domination of alienated labor” (*ibid.*: 48). Honneth then argues that it is possible to reconnect labor and normativity through a notion of what comprises “the conditions of an undistorted act of work” (*ibid.*: 45).

Nevertheless, there are problems with this formulation. In the first instance it presupposes that undistorted acts of work continue to underlie the distortions of the capitalist labor process. This is reminiscent of Marx’s subject-centered account of labor as an inherently purposive activity. Thus rather than grounding critical theory in the struggles of workers collectively to ameliorate the consequences of capital, Honneth evokes a naturalistic account of labor that stands opposed to capital in its own right. In partial recognition of these problems, Honneth’s next attempt to reconcile the moral insights of Habermas with the material interests of Marx takes an intersubjective turn.

The starting point for Honneth’s later essay, “Moral Consciousness and Class Domination” (Honneth 1995a), is the proposition that “late capitalist state interventionism dries up the political and practical interests of wage workers by means of a policy of material compensations and the institutional integration of the wage policy of the labor unions” (*ibid.*: 216). This serves to undermine the importance of redistributive notions of justice for class struggle. Hence the need to switch from an account of injustice grounded in “the unequal distribution of material goods” to one grounded in “the asymmetrical distribution of cultural and psychological life chances” (*ibid.*: 217).<sup>2</sup> In which case, it is not the maldistribution of material resources but the “maldistribution of opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> In many respects the autonomy of individuals is itself a function of private property relations, in which case the conflict is a conflict over two forms of property right.

<sup>2</sup> As Marx notes, “Capital ... takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so” (Marx 1976: 381).

for cultural education, social honor, and identity-guaranteeing work ...” (*ibid.*: 218) that forms the basis for workers’ struggles.

To this end, Honneth draws on Sennett and Cobb’s work (1972) to argue that workers suffer “hidden injuries that arise from the unequal distribution of social dignity” (Honneth 1995a: 218). These are felt, primarily, by lower, primarily manually employed occupational groups who are deemed to be most at risk from a loss of recognition, esteem, honor, dignity and respect. However, because this group of workers lack “the identity supporting recognition structure of a collective social movement ... practical reactions to these daily experiences of injustice are limited to individual or group-specific constructions of a counter culture of compensatory respect ...” (*ibid.*: 218). Consequently, lower-class workers lack the coherent linguistic expression required to articulate their injuries in a politically recognizable form. It then falls to social scientists (such as Honneth) to view labor struggles, which lie below the threshold of publicly recognized normative conflict, as indicators of a consciousness of injustice which implicitly lays claim to the right to the autonomous organization of work. Thus rather than attempting to ground critical theory in the struggles of the organized working class, Honneth grounds the origins of resistance in agents that lie “below the threshold of publicly recognized normative conflict” (*ibid.*: 219).

Honneth justifies this approach on the grounds that “the social protests of the lower classes are not motivationally guided by positively formulated moral principles, but by the violations of intuitive notions of justice” (Honneth 1995a: 262). To this extent, they draw on a raw, unrefined, pre-theoretical resource that equates with the moral core of human identity. Nevertheless, Honneth’s emphasis on the struggles of the lower classes sits uneasily alongside his claim that moral concerns have supplanted material ones. For if it is the case that a higher standard of living deflects the class struggle from material towards immaterial goods, then this should primarily affect the struggles of higher-class workers whose material concerns have already been met. Why, then, privilege sections of the workforce for whom material concerns have greater priority? Thus, while Honneth’s emphasis on the moral motivations of struggles serves to

bring a normatively invigorated critical theory back into relationship with those who labor within the system, it also abstracts from the empirical concerns that motivate workers to struggle collectively against the system. To this extent, Honneth's attempt to uncover a pre-theoretical basis for resistance — grounded in the moral identity of humanity — circumvents the struggles of the labor movement to confront the morally incapacitating imperatives of the system.

Unfortunately, as Honneth's work on the moral foundations of workers' struggles has developed, so has the concern to anchor the latter in an ontological conception of intersubjectivity. Thus rather than attempting to articulate the struggles of workers to attain greater autonomy, Honneth seeks to discover the moral grammar upon which their autonomy depends. To this end, Honneth sets out to locate within intersubjectivity the conditions for the possibility of an "undistorted relation to oneself" (Honneth 1995b: 1). Having thus deduced an undamaged form of identity formation Honneth criticizes those aspects of modernity that disturb, distort or otherwise deform healthy modes of ethical development.

### *Struggles for recognition*

In *Struggles for Recognition* (1995b) Honneth sets about replacing Habermas' claim that undistorted communication comprises the normative core of critical theory in favor of undistorted recognition. Whilst remaining true to Habermas' attempt to ground *Struggles for Moral Redemption* critical theory in a universal conception of ethical life common to and independent of all particular social forms:

In contrast to those movements that distance themselves from Kant, this concept of the good should not be conceived as the expression of substantive values that constitute the ethos of a concrete tradition-based community. Rather, it has to do with the structural elements of ethical life, which, from the general point of view of the communicative enabling of self-realization, can be normatively extracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life. (*ibid.*: 172)

Thus, while seeking to broaden and deepen the normative ideals that underlie Habermas' conception of communicative action, Honneth retains the latter's

commitment to a general account of morality unencumbered by the substantive values of a particular community. To this end, Honneth, like Habermas, seeks to discover the core moral identity of humanity in Hegel's early writings on intersubjectivity, although Honneth departs from Habermas' emphasis on the distinction between labor and interaction in the belief that Hegel's writings on recognition can embrace both. Honneth then follows Ludwig Siep in arguing that Hegel's notion of struggles for recognition comprises a normative reworking of Hobbes's notion of struggles for self-preservation.

What Honneth finds in Hegel is the notion that property struggles are not only injurious to an individual's material well-being, but also to his/her moral dignity. This is demonstrated by the fact that the injured party is willing to engage in a life-and-death struggle with their adversary. Having demonstrated that human dignity is more important than mere survival, Hegel argues that the reconciliation of conflict requires not a Leviathan state with a monopoly of violence as Hobbes recommends, but a set of morally sanctioned property rights capable of determining the legitimacy of ownership claims (*ibid.*: 47).<sup>3</sup> To this extent, argues Honneth, Hegel's reinterpretation of Hobbes comprises an "epoch-making new version of the conception of social struggle, according to which practical conflict between subjects can be understood as an ethical moment in a movement occurring within a collective social life" (*ibid.*: 17). Nevertheless, Honneth is critical of Hegel's attempt to ground ethical life in a metaphysical worldview. To correct this Honneth turns to the writings of the social psychologist George Herbert Mead to provide a naturalistic counterweight to the former's speculative account of social recognition.

Honneth is drawn to Mead's account because, like Hegel's, it is based on a prior conception of mutual dependence in which individual identity arises from an intersubjective process of validation (Mead 1970). To this extent Hegel and Mead are agreed, in principle, that "the reproduction of social life is governed by

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<sup>3</sup> Although it is worth noting that Hobbes does not reduce all recognition claims to material ones. On the contrary, Hobbes argues that: "The public worth of a man, which is the Value set on him by the Commonwealth is that which men commonly call DIGNITY" (Hobbes 1968: 152).

the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partner in interaction, as their social addressee." (Honneth 1995b: 92)

Nevertheless, Honneth expresses dissatisfaction with the empirical and historical aspects of Mead's approach on the grounds that it lacks a post-conventional conception of morality. Honneth then returns to Hegel in order to generate a universal account of recognition capable of transcending every particular historical context (*ibid.*: 110).

This, however, as Honneth acknowledges, is a risky maneuver that threatens to reintroduce the very metaphysical underpinnings he sought to expel from Hegel through the turn to Mead. Nevertheless, Honneth believes that this comprises the only way to arrive at a general account of the intersubjective conditions for the possibility of human autonomy (*ibid.*: 176). Honneth then seeks to renew Hegel's attempt to produce a philosophy of history grounded in the contention that just as unredeemed relations of recognition generate social struggle, so social struggle serves to expand relationships of recognition. In Hegel this takes the form of a theory of moral development which progresses through three "stages of social conflict" (*ibid.*: 23). The first is situated in the concrete-particular sphere of family life, the second in the abstract-universal sphere of law and the third in the concrete-universal sphere of moral solidarity. Each of these stages corresponds to a different form of recognition:

[I]n the affective relationship of recognition found in the family, human individuals are recognized as concrete creatures of need; in the cognizant-formal relationship of recognition found in law, they are recognized as abstract legal persons; and finally, in the emotionally enlightened relationship of recognition found in the State, they are recognized as concrete universals, that is as subjects who are socialized in their particularity. (*ibid.*: 25)

Honneth then sets about reconstructing Hegel's theory of moral development in order to generate an historically evolving conception of intersubjectivity in general. However, by eschewing the very specific — and quintessentially modern

form of — ethical life which grounds this project in social reality, Honneth risks transforming historically specific forms of identity formation into a transhistorical blueprint for identity formation in general.

*Three steps to heaven?*

### **Step one: love**

In Hegel's schema love represents the "first stage of reciprocal recognition, because in it subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures" (*ibid.*: 95). To this extent, love is restricted to the private sphere of friendships, partnerships and parent-child relationships and is not, according to Honneth, amenable to moral development. To give concrete content to this stage, Honneth turns to Donald Winnicott on the grounds that his object-relations approach is well suited to a phenomenology of recognition. In particular, Honneth emphasizes Winnicott's suggestion that adult maturity is "dependent on the capacity, acquired in early childhood, to strike a balance between symbiosis and self-assertion" (*ibid.*: 98). According to Winnicott, at a certain stage in its development the child acts aggressively towards its mother in order to test whether she exists in her own right. "If the 'mother' managed to pass the child's unconscious test by enduring the aggressive attacks without withdrawing her love in revenge, she now belongs, from the perspective of the child, to a painfully accepted external world" (*ibid.*: 104). Through this process each comes to recognize the other as not only dependent on them for love but also an independent being in their own right. Children who succeed in passing through this developmental stage go on to become normal, healthy, autonomous adults.<sup>4</sup> "This fundamental level of emotional confidence ... which the intersubjective experience of love helps to bring about, constitutes the psychological precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect" (*ibid.*: 107).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Honneth, "instrumentalism" only arises in "pathological" cases in which "egocentric independence" or "symbiotic dependence" turn into 'disorders' such as "masochism" and "sadism" (*ibid.*: 106).

To this extent, Honneth takes Winnicott's writings on child development to represent an ideal of interaction that comprises the transhistorical basis for normal family development in general. Thus despite criticizing Hegel for universalizing the patriarchal model of bourgeois family relations, Honneth sanctions Winnicott's universalization of white, middle-class, patriarchal family life in 1950s America. Thus, in support of Winnicott, Honneth argues that confident adult roles are dependent on the child's relationship with the mother. According to Honneth's translator, the term mother designates "a role that can be fulfilled by persons other than the biological mother" (*ibid.*: xiii). So the term appears in scare quotes in the English translation, but not the German original. This gives the impression that the role of mother is one of the invariant basic structures of family life. Families that fail to conform to this norm can be charged with exhibiting pathology, disorder and deviation from the normal form of family life.

The problem here is not so much Honneth's attempt to associate critical theory with an outdated view of family structures—although that is bad enough—but his attempt to confer on the latter a transhistorical status grounded in the moral grammar of intersubjectivity. Thus it is one thing to claim that one family form is morally superior to another; it is another to argue that this judgment rests on an objective evaluation of family forms, not least because this flies in the face of critical theory's concern to expand the capacity of participants to determine their own moral principles — as in Habermas' account of discourse ethics — rather than looking to an objective expert to prescribe what constitutes a normal form of family life irrespective of participant's culture, concerns and values.

Taken in conjunction with his claim that the private sphere does not admit of the potential for normative development, Honneth appears to endorse the view that family relationships in 1950s America comprise the norm for growing healthy and happy humans. Anything that departs from this norm comprises a pathological deviation from the ideal form of identity formation. Indeed, if the family form is not amenable to moral development, it follows that feminist calls

to restructure family life are — as Winnicott himself argues — an abnormality (see Winnicott 1986: 188), thereby placing Honneth’s version of critical theory at odds with the struggles of the women’s movement to enhance social autonomy in line with the normative content of modernity. This also raises concerns about Honneth’s claim that the family comprises a private sphere in which recognition claims are restricted to love. While this may have been the prevailing norm in the 1950s, since the advent of feminism and its politicization of the personal gender identities have acquired a more public guise. The norm of participative parity once foreign to the private sphere has subsequently become one of the key issues that men and women struggle with on a day-to-day basis. All of which casts doubt on Honneth’s claim that family relationships do not avail themselves of normative development.<sup>5</sup>

### **Step two: rights**

According to Honneth, it is only with the stage of law or rights (*Recht*) that normative development occurs. This begins with the bourgeoisie’s struggle to free itself from the status-bound evaluations of feudalism. To this extent, argues Honneth, the bourgeoisie play a key role in generating a universalistic conception of legality that underlies the modern notion of autonomous individuality. Nevertheless, Honneth is reluctant to support Mead’s assertion that legal rights arise from a specific form of concrete-community. On the contrary, argues Honneth, such rights possess a post-conventional character in keeping with Hegel’s philosophy of history. “With the transition to modernity, the post-conventional principles of justification that had already been developed in philosophy and political theory made their way into established law ...” (Honneth 1995b: 109). In this way modernity brings into being a legal system that expresses the universal interests of all members of society whereby each agrees to recognize all others as persons capable of autonomously making reasonable decisions about moral norms. However, while the recognition of

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<sup>5</sup> Although Honneth does concede that freedom is enhanced the “more rights come to be shared by partners” (*ibid.*: 107).

individuals as ends in themselves knows no further development, the conditions under which individuals are free to exercise their autonomy are capable of expansion. Consequently, the more individuals are enabled by social circumstances to act in an autonomous manner, the more relations of recognition are expanded throughout society.

Thus having generated a post-conventional form of civil rights, the bourgeoisie find themselves under pressure from below by disadvantaged groups seeking to expand citizenship rights beyond the legal sphere. To theorize this process Honneth turns to the writings of T. H. Marshall in support of his claim that workers can avail themselves of bourgeois liberties only when “the appropriate preconditions [are] present for equal participation in a rational agreement” (Honneth 1995b: 115). The importance of Marshall’s work, for Honneth, lies in its developmental conception of citizenship rights. This takes a three-stage form. In the first stage civil rights guarantee an individual’s liberty; in the second political rights guarantee participation in the formation of laws; and in the third social rights guarantee basic welfare needs. Thus it is only insofar as disadvantaged groups avail themselves of the most political rights that they can take advantage of civil right and it is only insofar as they acquire welfare rights that they can take advantage of political rights.

To this extent, argues Honneth, to be involved as morally responsible persons, individuals need not only legal protection from interference in their sphere of liberty, but also the legally assured opportunity for participation in the public process of will-formation, an opportunity they can only actually take advantage of, however, if they also have a certain social standard of living. Nevertheless, rather than analyzing the third and final stage of social solidarity as an attempt by workers to extend the normative content of modernity into the economic system, Honneth views it as a means to acquire the material conditions necessary for the achievement of individual autonomy. As a consequence, his account of social solidarity is insufficiently informed by workers’ struggles to re-moralize the economy.

### **Step three: solidarity**

According to Honneth, the sphere of solidarity arises from the need to evaluate individuals on the basis of their specific contribution to the life of the community. However, he rejects Mead's assertion that it is possible to relate the determination of social worth to the division of labor. "The solution that Mead envisions here involves linking self-realization to engaging in socially useful work. The degree of recognition accorded to persons who, within the context of the societal division of labor, fulfill their functions "well" is enough to help them develop a consciousness of their individual particularity" (*ibid.*: 88). On the contrary, argues Honneth, "the evaluation of the various functional jobs depends, for its part, on the overarching goals of the community" (*ibid.*: 90). In Habermasian terms this is equivalent to arguing that the social validity accorded different occupations arises not from the economic system but from the symbolic lifeworld. Hence, Honneth's attempt to link social recognition to the abstract goals of society through a value-community in which prestige or standing signifies only the degree of social recognition the individual earns for his or her form of self-realization by thus contributing, to a certain extent, to the practical realization of society's abstractly defined goals.

Nevertheless, Honneth's rejection of Mead's approach leaves the nature of the relationship between the cultural sphere and the economic sphere under-theorized. Thus it is unclear whether the value-community complements the economic system as in Parsonian functionalism or conflicts with it as in Marshall's writings on the welfare state. This points to an important lacuna in Honneth's account of social recognition. Although Honneth is concerned to identify a greater social role for recognition in motivating social struggle, this is largely confined to the non-economic sphere. For this reason, Honneth defines value predominantly in cultural terms, whether in the form of "cultural self-understandings" which function to "realize culturally defined goals" (*ibid.*: 122), or in the form of "cultural conflict" between groups that deploy "symbolic force" to control "the climate of public attention" (*ibid.*: 127). The economic system that forms the backdrop to Habermas' writings on the lifeworld is in

danger of disappearing into the background in Honneth's analysis. When it does appear it takes the form of strategic subjects who pursue their material interests in a utilitarian fashion devoid of moral meaning beyond questions of redistribution. This, however, lapses behind Hegel's attempt to ground material struggle in a more substantive conception of ethical life.

### *Money, markets and morality*

The impetus for Honneth's recognition-theoretic account of sociality arises from the desire to uncover the role played by moral claims in motivating class struggle. These moral insights are opposed to the Marxist category of material interests. "The motives for rebellion, protest, and resistance have generally been transformed into categories of "interest" and these interests are supposed to emerge from the objective inequalities in the distribution of material opportunities without ever being linked, in any way, to the everyday web of moral feelings" (Honneth 1995b: 161). Against this Honneth seeks to reconnect the motives for social struggle to the moral grammar of human life. "Unlike all utilitarian models of explanation, it suggests the view that motives or social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition" (*ibid.*: 163). This, as Foster notes, leads Honneth to adopt Habermas' distinction between "the sphere of normative interaction and the sphere of production" (Foster 1999: 7). Thus, according to Honneth: "In the first case, we are dealing with the analysis of competition for scarce goods, whereas in the second case we are dealing with the analysis of struggle over the intersubjective conditions for personal integrity" (*ibid.*: 165). However, by focusing on the cultural sources of social conflict, Honneth perpetuates the divide between materiality and morality that detaches labor from the normative content of modernity.

Although Honneth acknowledges that a recognition-theoretic model has a duty not only to extend but possibly to correct an interest-based model of social conflict insofar as "relations of social esteem are indirectly coupled with patterns of income distribution" (Honneth 1995b: 166), he falls short of Nancy Fraser's

claim that “recognition is the fundamental concept of justice and can encompass distribution” (Fraser 1997: 74).<sup>6</sup> By restricting struggles for recognition to the intersubjective conditions for personal integrity, Honneth bypasses the role played by the economy in reifying questions of social recognition. Thus, according to Foster, “what is lacking from [Honneth’s] work thus far is an account of the relation between the denial of recognition and structurally reproduced forms of material exclusion” (Foster 1999: 13). Above all, Honneth fails to acknowledge the way the economy transforms status-based forms of social worth into pecuniary forms of market value. However, this calls for a more substantive conception of ethical life capable of placing a normative floor under the economy.

The notion that money comprises a means to allocate social worth is not alien to Honneth’s writings. Unfortunately, it remains little more than an aside in an otherwise culturally determined account of social recognition. To this extent, Honneth’s account of recognition requires augmenting in terms of the relationship between property and prestige. Thus, according to Veblen, under modern conditions: “The possession of wealth ... becomes in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act. Wealth is now itself intrinsically honorable and confers honor upon its possessor” (Veblen 1992: 37).<sup>7</sup> In this way, inequalities in the distribution of material wealth are linked to the web of moral feelings prevailing in society through the role money plays in allocating social esteem under capitalism. Money does not displace morality so much as appropriate its role in disseminating social validation. Thus, the question of property ownership is not separate from the question of social esteem, as the former now comprises the basis for the latter. As Veblen notes, once “the

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Honneth specifically argues that “not all forms of resistance have their roots in injuries to moral claims” as there are many instances in which “the securing of economic survival ... motivated massive protest and revolt” (Honneth 1995b: 166).

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that while Hobbes argues that the value of a person is commensurate with the price their capacities command in the market, he also recognizes an intersubjective element to evaluation. “The Value or WORTH of a man, is as of all other things, his Price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his Power: and therefore is not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another” (Hobbes 1968: 151–2).

possession of property becomes the basis of popular esteem ... it becomes a requisite to that complacency which we call self-respect” (*ibid.*: 38).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, just as social esteem is a source of material power in pre-modern times, so money is a source of material power in modern times. The difference is that now the modern medium of social recognition is capable of purchasing goods and services directly as a social power in its own right. Indeed, it is this that comprises the material power of money. However, this should not distract from its moral content. On the contrary, the fact that the medium of social validation is also the means to acquire goods and services demonstrates the degree to which questions of distribution are predicated on questions of social worth. To this extent, money — in the absence of an alternative value-community — is the key means for determining human worth in a modern capitalist system. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the value-community, which oversees this state of affairs, should reflect its utilitarian calculus.

Thus against Talcott Parson’s suggestion that modern sociality generates an anti-Hobbesian value-system which integrates strategic actors within a common set of moral beliefs (Parsons 1968), Robert Merton argues that the key value promoted by modern capitalism is pecuniary success. In other words, rather than arguing that the value-system of modern societies is an antidote to the selfishness engendered by market capitalism, Merton argues that the former is a vehicle for the promotion of the latter. To this extent, the ruthless pursuit of pecuniary goals, coupled with the connotation between high income and high social status, comprises the hegemonic value-community of modern capitalism. Thus, it is not simply a question of opposing morality to the amorality of interest-based actions, but of opposing a collective morality based on cooperation, community and social justice to an individualistic ethos based on self-interest, success and technical efficiency.

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<sup>8</sup> Trade unionists often point out that in so far as money is a measure of social esteem under capitalism, it not only contributes to the material well-being of workers but also their sense of social worth.

If Merton is correct, then a recognition-theoretic-based form of critical theory cannot afford to ignore the role played by the economy in allocating social esteem. Thus rather than viewing social recognition in primarily cultural terms, we need to enquire what it is about the economic system that allows it to usurp the role of allocating social recognition. Unfortunately, Honneth fails to ask this — partly because he views the system as an expression of material interests and partly because he has adopted an increasingly individualistic conception of autonomy (Kalyvas 1999: 100). As a consequence, Honneth neglects the role workers' struggles play in generating alternative value-communities that resist market-based forms of value-allocation in favor of welfare criteria. Thus rather than simply adopting the contrast between the language of interests and the language of morality, critical theory needs to examine the extent to which their diremption comprises two sides of an ethical totality which workers' struggle plays a key role in reconciling. It is thus possible to argue that the pursuit of utilitarian interests only appears to lack a moral content because such interests operate in a social environment in which ethical life has been monetarized.

As we have seen, Hegel was the first theorist to analyze this phenomenon in any detail. Unfortunately, Marx's identification of labor with self-objectifying subjectivity deprived critical theory of these normative resources. Hence the importance of Simmel's account of the way the economic system serves to transform moral duties into monetary obligations. According to Simmel, with the advent of modern markets "the honorary prize, which reflects the cooperation of the whole group, has to be replaced by the money prize, which reflects the ultimate recognition of the performance. The enlargement of the social group requires the transition to expressing merit in money terms because it means the inescapable atomization of such a group" (Simmel 1978: 348). To this extent, there exists a dialectical relationship between the monetarization of social recognition and the atomization of individual decision-making. Thus the more questions of social recognition acquire an economic form, the more individuals are freed from anterior moral obligations. However, while this creates a

tremendous boost for individual autonomy it also serves to disguise the extent to which social agents are dependent on one another.

Whereas in the period prior to the emergence of a money economy, the individual was directly dependent upon his group and the exchange of services united everyone closely with the whole of society, today everyone carries around with him, in a condensed latent form, his claim to the achievements of others. Everyone has the choice of deciding when and where he wants to assert this claim, and therefore loosen the direct relations of the earlier form of exchange. The extreme significant power of money to lead to the individual a new independence from group interests is manifested not only in the basic differences between a money and a barter economy but also within the money economy itself. (*ibid.*: 342)

In this way the monetarization of social recognition fosters autonomy by freeing individuals from the status-based value-communities to which they formerly owed their moral allegiance. Thus while Honneth is quite correct to emphasize the relationship between universalistic forms of social recognition and the development of individual autonomy, he fails to account for this in terms of the emergence of a monetarized system of social recognition in which the pursuit of economic interests becomes detached from anterior moral obligations.

However, insofar as the economy performs moral tasks in an amoral fashion any attempt to enlarge the field of normative decision-making must revoke the system's reification of intersubjectivity. Hence the importance of Marshall's account of the role played by workers' struggles in extending the normative content of modernity into the material sphere. Thus rather than confining moral struggles to the cultural sphere, Marshall shows how workers help to democratize the economy's capacity to shape the social identities of citizens, not only between the distribution of wealth and individual autonomy but also between the distribution of wealth and collective autonomy. Unfortunately, Honneth fails to acknowledge the extent to which modern forms of social solidarity result from the struggles of participants to establish control over the autopoietic impulses of the system. Consequently, his notion of social solidarity assumes a functional rather than a critical orientation to the system's capacity to commodify labor. However, before developing these insights further in the next

chapter I want to re-examine Honneth's appropriation of Hegel's notion of undamaged intersubjectivity in relation to labor.

### *Beyond Hegel?*

According to Honneth, in Hegel's latter writings, "the programme of the philosophy of consciousness gained the upper hand ... over all intersubjectivist insights ..." (Honneth 1995b: 62). This is a controversial claim that writers such as Robert Williams (1992) dispute. Nevertheless, even if we were to concede the point, it still needs explaining. The only clue that Honneth offers concerns Hegel's move from a theory of communicative action to one grounded in "the theoretical and practical confrontation of individuals with their environment" (Honneth 1995b: 29). This suggests that the transition from an intersubjective to a subject-centered account of modernity arises from Hegel's attempt to incorporate an instrumental relationship to nature into his model of ethical solidarity. To this extent, Honneth appears sympathetic to Benhabib's claim that the subject-centered character of both Hegel and Marx's writings arises from their attempt to model human activity on labor. "[B]ecause the primary model of human activity to which both resort is, in the final analysis, work and not interaction, the discourse of trans-subjectivity comes to dominate" (Benhabib 1986: 68). In other words, given labor's inherent tendency to self-objectification, a labor-based model of humanity inevitably results in a trans-subjective account of sociality.<sup>9</sup>

However, if we start from the view that labor is a social process — even under capitalism where it appears to be pared down to its instrumental essence — then rather than regarding labor under capitalism as the paradigmatic form of humanity's metabolism with nature, labor's instrumental character is to be regarded as arising from its capitalist organization. In which case, Hegel's tendency to subordinate an intersubjective to a subject-centered account of modernity can be explained, not in terms of his adoption of a labor model of

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<sup>9</sup> One is reminded again of Hannah Arendt's (1958) contention that there is something inherently reifying about labour that renders it intersubjectively unassimilable.

sociality, but in terms of his attempt to do justice to the autopoietic imperatives of the economy. As Honneth notes, for Hegel, “individuals’ market-mediated activities and interests — which later come to be gathered under the title “civil society” — comprise a “negative” though still constitutive “zone” of the “ethical” [*Sittlich*] whole” (Honneth 1995b: 13). To this extent, civil society comprises an alienated (externalized) form of ethical life in which moral prescriptions take the objective form of economic laws.<sup>10</sup>

*Money* is that materially existing concept, unitary form, or the possibility of all objects of need. By elevating need and work to this level of universality [*Allgemeinheit*] a monstrous [*ungeheures*] system of common interest and mutual dependence is formed among a great people, a self-propelling life of the dead [*ein sich in sich bewegendes Leben des Toten*], which moves hither and thither, blind and elemental and like a wild animal, it stands in constant need of being tamed and kept under control. (Hegel 1979: 249)<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Hegel has no wish to return to feudal forms of economic arrangements. On the contrary, he sees the way to salvation through a form of ethical life capable of re-internalizing the market’s “invisible hand” mechanism. However, because Hegel, like Marx, Habermas and Honneth after him, regards the system’s externalization of morality as a natural consequence of modernity, only an objective form of morality can tame the self-propelling imperatives of the system. Thus Benhabib’s trans-subjective form of sociality is less a function of labor than the economic system that sets it to work.

Consequently, rather than arriving at a form of ethical life commensurate with modernity’s subjectification of substance, Hegel sacrifices individual autonomy to the autonomy of a self-objectifying subject writ large. Substance is then reconciled with subject in the form of an absolute subject modeled on the autopoietic system it is designed to tame. In which case, as Benhabib argues, Hegel’s “model of crises integration and management does not alleviate the

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<sup>10</sup> According to Lukács, the German terms *Entäußerung* and *Entfremdung* are simply translations of the English word “alienation” which was used “in works of economic theory to betoken the sale of a commodity, and in works on natural law to refer to the loss of an aboriginal freedom, the handing over or alienation of freedom to the society which came into being as a result of a social contract” (1971: 538).

<sup>11</sup> The reference is to Hegel’s *First Philosophy of Spirit* (1979), but the translation is a slightly modified version of the one that appears in Lukács’ *Young Hegel* (1971: 333).

consequences for citizens of their loss of freedom, but encourages the emergence of a second sphere of social relations, which are as omnipresent *vis-à-vis* the citizens as the laws of the market are *vis-à-vis* the bourgeoisie. This second sphere is the bureaucratic system of justice and administration” (Benhabib 1986: 100). If we are concerned to arrive at an intersubjective notion of morality, which avoids the system’s reification of morality, it is necessary to link the former to the struggles of agents to re-moralize the system.

If it has failed in this it is because critical theory entertains a naturalistic account of labor that views the objectivity of the system as an inevitable consequence of the purposive transformation of nature. Once it is assumed that the objective character of sociality is inescapable it must then be analyzed in an objective fashion. In Marx’s case, this takes the form of scientific socialism, in Habermas’ case a post-conventional notion of morality, and in Honneth’s case a trans-subjective account of ethical life that grounds the moral grammar of social conflicts in a teleological account of historical development. Thus, rather than inquiring into the normative principles employed by modern agents to justify their struggles, Honneth seeks to deduce the transcendental conditions for the possibility of a successful life from the internal structure of intersubjectivity. As a result, Honneth follows Marx and Habermas in assuming an objective standpoint over and above the intersubjective standpoint of participants in the lifeworld. This enables each to ground his critique of modernity in a moral ideal commensurate with the essence of humanity. Armed with an objective account of ethical life Honneth then translates the normative concerns of critical theory into a scientific account of modernity’s pathologies.

### *Pathology and social critique*

Honneth is explicit about his desire to abstract from the moral ends of participants in order to arrive at the moral ends inherent within intersubjectivity *per se*. “This framework lets an objective-intentional context emerge, in which historical processes no longer appear as mere events but rather as stages in a conflictual process of formation, leading to a gradual expansion of relationships

of recognition” (Honneth 1995b: 170). Nevertheless, this not only transforms social agents into unwitting means for a set of transhistorical objectives, it also transforms critical theory into a positivistic account of modernity in which the ethical formulations of participants are buried beneath the objective assessments of experts. This is confirmed in an interview with Simon Critchley in which Honneth argues that “the only chance we have to keep the tradition of Critical Theory alive is to continue ... the social-philosophical enterprise of a kind of diagnosis of our present culture, the pathologies of that culture, of a certain capitalist culture” (Honneth 1998: 37). Questioned about the suitability of the language of ‘pathology’ for critical theory, Honneth replies: “I guess I think you can’t do it [critical theory] without the language of pathologies ... the Critical Theory of society presupposes some vision of a society that would exclude the sorts of damage they describe. So this kind of normative underpinning of an enterprise like the critique of social pathologies is always there” (*ibid.*). In conclusion, Honneth argues, “we [critical theorists] are the specialists for the deficiencies of society ... we are, in a sense, the doctors of society” (*ibid.*: 39).

However, in departing from his attempt to ground ethical life in the moral autonomy of human beings in favor of the conditions for their realization in general, Honneth risks sacrificing a human in favor of a supra-human conception of self-constitution. The struggles of participants to articulate modernity’s moral ends are in danger of being reduced to mere means for an unfolding supra-historical *telos*. To this extent, Honneth fails to complete the intersubjective reformulation of critical social theory begun by Habermas. As a consequence, critical theory finds itself in conflict with, rather than articulating, the moral ends of participants. In his doctoral role Honneth seeks objectively to determine what comprises a healthy form of sociality. Thus rather than arguing that a healthy form of sociality is one in which agents are in a position to intersubjectively determine their own sense of well-being, Honneth endorses an expert culture in which welfare regimes are imposed on participants from without.

By assuming the standpoint of a doctor Honneth removes himself from the need to engage in a dialogue of equals with the agents he is concerned to liberate.

Armed with a notion of what comprises their rational interests there is no need to enquire what comprises the rational interests of agents. This perhaps explains why Honneth is reluctant to ground his account of workers' struggles in the organized labor movement, preferring instead to voice the inarticulate concerns of the lower social classes, who are incapable of diagnosing their own ills and suggesting their own remedies. Having discovered a set of moral principles that makes autonomous agency possible, there is no need to subject them to the validation of autonomous agents. On the contrary, because the struggles of social agents are not the starting point for his version of critical theory, Honneth can ignore what James Bohman calls the "knowledgeable social agents to whom its claims are publicly addressed" (Bohman 1996).

Ultimately, Honneth's failure to identify with the struggles of participants to render the system accountable is symptomatic of critical theory's failure to challenge the system's colonization of the lifeworld. Thus Honneth believes that it is possible to keep social philosophy (his term for critical theory) alive only in terms of a formalistic anthropology grounded in the fundamental conditions of human life in general (Honneth 1996: 394). However, by adopting a medical model of social diagnosis Honneth only compounds the weakness of critical theory by aligning it with the capacity of the system to reify intersubjectivity. Thus rather than endorsing an intersubjective version of critical theory in which "members of a concrete society decide what counts as "pathological" in their own social life-form ..." (*ibid.*: 393), Honneth borrows from the system's capacity to reify the lifeworld in order to generate an objective account of social normality.

However, if we wish to reconcile critical theory with the normative content of modernity it is necessary to do justice to the ethos of autonomy that informs it. This means repudiating attempts to provide critical theory with an anthropological underpinning in favor of the struggles of participants to resist the reifying tendencies of the system. The substantive content of critical theory is supplied not by the invariant structures of humanity, but by the capacity of social movements to humanize the system, on the understanding that the ethos of

humanism develops in opposition to the systems transformation of participants into mere means for its autopoietic ends.

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