

Unemployment, recognition and meritocracy

Desempleo, reconocimiento y meritocracia

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Abstract: Unemployment is one of the greatest social problems all around the world, including in modern capitalist welfare states. A social critique of unemployment is therefore a necessary task for any critical social philosophy – such as Axel Honneth’s recognition approach, which understands social justice in terms of social conditions of recognition. This paper aims to develop an evaluation of unemployment and its moral weight from this perspective. I will lay out the recognition approach and present a moral evaluation of unemployment as socially unjust based on knowledge of its negative consequences for those affected. I will then discuss two objections to this conclusion, namely that a mere correlation of suffering and moral wrongness is not enough, and that there are legitimate differences in the experience of recognition which could justify the existence of unemployment as deserved. In the next section, I will then refute both objections and first show that unemployment can be understood as socially unjust based on the knowledge that it is involuntary and that the unemployed are not responsible for their condition. Then I will discuss the relationship between the idea of meritocracy and unemployment to examine the assumption that unemployment is deserved. I will finally conclude that unemployment is not a necessary side effect of meritocracy, and that there are good reasons to argue for a moral and justified obligation to provide actual access to paid work for all who want it. However, such changes face serious obstacles and are not likely to happen under current interpretations of meritocracy and social esteem, which are one-sided and flawed.

Keywords: unemployment, recognition, meritocracy, social critique, Axel Honneth

Resumen: El desempleo es uno de los problemas sociales más grandes en todo el mundo, incluidos los modernos Estados de bienestar capitalistas. Una crítica social del desempleo es por tanto necesaria para cualquier filosofía social crítica- así sucede con el enfoque del reconocimiento de Axel Honneth, que entiende la justicia social en términos de las condiciones sociales de reconocimiento. Este artículo trata de desarrollar una evaluación del desempleo y su peso moral desde esta perspectiva. Presentaré el enfoque del reconocimiento y defenderé un análisis moral del desempleo como algo socialmente injusto basado en el conocimiento de sus consecuencias negativas para los afectados. A continuación, discutiré dos objeciones a esta conclusión, a saber, que la mera correlación de sufrimiento e incorrección moral no es suficiente y que hay diferencias legítimas en la experiencia del reconocimiento que podrían justificar la existencia del desempleo como algo merecido. En la siguiente sección refutaré ambas objeciones y mostraré en primer lugar que el desempleo puede ser considerado socialmente injusto en la medida en que es involuntario y que los desempleados no son responsables de su condición. A continuación discutiré la relación entre la idea de meritocracia y desempleo para examinar la asunción de que el desempleo es merecido. Por último concluiré afirmando que el desempleo no es un efecto secundario necesario de la meritocracia y que hay buenas razones para abogar por la obligación moral justificada de proveer acceso al trabajo remunerado a quienes lo buscan. Sin embargo, tales cambios se topan con serios obstáculos debidos a las actuales interpretaciones de la meritocracia y la estima social, que son unidireccionales y defectuosas.

Palabras clave: desempleo, reconocimiento, meritocracia, crítica social, Axel Honneth.

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Modern societies are working societies in the sense that paid work is not just one activity among others but something that serves several important functions (Dejours and Deranty 2010). It is the main source of income, social status and recognition; it structures both one's life course and one's everyday life, and in many countries is connected to social protections such as health and unemployment insurance or pension claims. Also, the taxation of income is a major means for all modern states to finance their various expenditures. It is consequently no surprise that unemployment, and especially involuntary unemployment, is connected to various forms of harm and hardship, social and psychological burdens and overall generally decreased life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Wanberg 2012). Besides these personal impacts of unemployment, its social and economic effects have also been widely discussed and researched. For example, unemployment imposes huge costs on the unemployed, their families, and their communities, as well as social security systems. The management of unemployment – through the labour market or social policy – is one of the key areas of modern politics, and, especially due to the ongoing crisis, is a key challenge. The crisis has eradicated millions of jobs and it will certainly take some time before these return; if they do, it is highly unlikely that those who lost their jobs will get them back again. Many of these people will be too old or too long out of training and employment to have any chance on the labour market. Anti-unemployment politics is one of the spearheads of capitalistic politics, under the slogan that any form of paid work is better than none and that jobs have to be created at nearly any cost. Without doubt, the existence of unemployment is often used to argue for workfare, for activation policies, for the de-regulation and increased flexibility of the labour market, and the weakening of workers' rights (Peters 2012).

Unemployment is a critical focal point for understanding modern societies, because it reflects so many aspects of capitalism. If work, autonomy and welfare are the positive attributes of modernity, unemployment is the centre of its failure, and the ongoing processes of impoverishment, social exclusion and humiliation that are its consequence. The critique of unemployment is therefore one of the main tasks of any critical social philosophy and theory, and its particular form and content has always to be considered. By "critical theory" I do not refer only to the concept developed by the early Frankfurt School, but rather

refer to the more general intellectual and political enterprise of uncovering the inner dialectic of capitalism, its dynamic intertwining of liberation and oppression and the suffering it brings upon the many while the few live in clover (Honneth 2007). This paper hopes to engage with some aspects of such a critical theory of unemployment based on the writings of Axel Honneth and others who understand capitalism, its social and economic figuration, as the institutionalization of patterns of recognition and misrecognition (Honneth 1996; Honneth 2003; Petherbridge 2011). This approach is not meant to break down economic issues into individual issues but rather to interpret the social world, which includes the social organization of the economy and the labour market, as shaped by ongoing and often conflicting struggles for recognition. Unemployment is embedded within these struggles and within such institutionalization of recognition and misrecognition, and it can therefore be reconstructed, analysed and criticized with the instruments of the recognition approach. However, as I will also try to demonstrate, such a recognition-based critique reveals internal tensions within the recognition approach itself, which remain – so far –unsolved. A critique of unemployment is therefore as much a critique of unemployment as it is a critique of the criticizing theory itself. This is another important feature of any critical theory, i.e., that it understands itself as much as a part of conflicting social practices as something that reflects them – it cannot take any stance outside of social reality.

I will now lay out the recognition approach and present a moral evaluation of unemployment as socially unjust, based on the knowledge of its negative consequences for those affected. I will then discuss two objections to this conclusion, namely that a mere correlation of suffering and moral wrongness is not enough, and that there are legitimate differences in the experience of recognition which could justify the existence of unemployment as deserved. Next, I will refute both objections and show that unemployment can be understood as socially unjust based on the knowledge that it is involuntary and that the unemployed are not responsible for their condition. Then I will discuss the relationship between the idea of meritocracy and unemployment to examine the assumption that unemployment is deserved. I will finally conclude that unemployment is not a necessary side effect of meritocracy, and that there are good reasons to argue for a moral and justified obligation to provide actual access to paid work for all who want it. However, such

changes face serious obstacles and are not likely to happen under current interpretations of meritocracy and social esteem, which are one-sided and flawed.

I. Recognition and social organization of social esteem

The recognition approach of Honneth combines ethical, social, theoretical and political aims, which are all pursued by a methodology of immanent critique (Schmidt am Busch 2010; Smith 2012). While the ethical aim is to build a theory of morality and of social justice based on the securing of undistorted experiences of recognition and the absence of illegitimate misrecognition, the social theoretical claim is to understand the social world as the institutionalization of such patterns of recognition and misrecognition and to explain the inner dynamic of social change as the result of struggles for proper recognition. The political claim is then to design politics and political change upon these ethical and social theoretical insights and to support such groups and movements that struggle for a more inclusive society. So, while the social theoretical dimension of the recognition approach engenders knowledge about how the social world functions – and can also be used as the basis for empirical research – the ethical theory describes what is morally wrong in this social world and how it should change. Both are needed for political theory and practice. All three tasks of the recognition approach do not use the so-called "God's-eye view" on the social but rather situate themselves within the social relations they criticize, and show that the means to criticize the social world lie within that world itself. What counts as a successful institutionalization of recognition and the content of morality cannot be derived from any abstract principles, but rather unfolds through historical and social change driven by struggles for recognition. Legitimate social struggles claim an adequate or expanded realization of such social relations in which the experience of undistorted recognition is possible and secured.

The normative core of the recognition approach, which is also the core of its social theoretical reconstruction of the social world and its political agenda, is an understanding of the undistorted and adequate experience of three basic forms of recognition as the inter-subjective condition of identity, selfhood and the ability to lead a good life (Honneth 1996; Honneth 2003). These three forms of recognition are care and personal relationships, legal respect (expressed mainly in rights), and

social esteem. Personal relationships reflect unique individuality; legal respect is based on autonomy, and social esteem is earned by one's contribution to a shared goal or within a community. Only the basic forms of these three aspects are universal; their concrete contents can vary, change and may even interfere with each other, which can lead to struggles of recognition about proper interpretation and realization. These struggles are often based not only on the absence or misinterpretation of recognition – which could be understood as non-recognition – but on the experience of misrecognition, which is the negative reflection of recognition and is also institutionalized in social practices in various forms. Honneth distinguishes here physical and psychological harm, disrespect and the denial of equal rights, and denigration and humiliation. The task of a critical social philosophy and theory is then to uncover such patterns and developments of misrecognition or distorted recognition. Such social phenomena, which are disrespectful or experienced as harmful by those affected, are to be criticized, analysed and ultimately changed. The work of social critique takes as its starting point the negativity experienced by the poor, the alienated, the oppressed and the unemployed.

To undertake an effective critique of society one must start by taking into account instances of injustice or violations of standards of justice. In contrast to its positive counterpart, the experience of injustice possesses greater normative bite. As such, for Honneth, no experience of injustice must be ignored even if its public expression is fraught with danger and difficulty. This approach to social justice and normativity is typical of the Frankfurt School, which grounds the motivation for social resistance and liberation movements not on grand theories of intellectuals but on people's everyday experience. (Pilapil 2011, 81)

From this starting point, the ethical goal of recognition-based political practice is then to establish such social relations, such a society in which every member has the opportunity and the ability to experience undistorted forms of recognition – personal relationships, legal respect and social esteem – so that his or her claims and struggles for recognition are satisfied. On the one hand, this means that social justice is a means to secure the conditions to experience recognition; although it cannot secure actual experience itself because some experiences cannot be socially controlled – for example that of being loved by others, or feeling adequately recognized for one's activities by family and friends. On the other hand such a socially just society – in which everyone experiences

recognition, is protected from misrecognition and is able to lead a good life – is only a regulative ideal, which in reality will always be broken because of the inner conflicts between different claims for recognition.

Despite the incalculable variations, historically and also between different cultures, social contexts and habits, which express recognition, and in the forms of which recognition and misrecognition are experienced, there are universal patterns that are important in all modern societies. Universal does not mean that these are of equal importance for all members and that there are no exceptions or breaches, but rather that these patterns are particularly powerful in the social life of modern societies and that they structure and determine what can be called a “normal” or “standard” life in these societies. This also implies that those spheres of social life that are filled with recognition are always equally filled with misrecognition, and are the arenas for these struggles for recognition. The most important of these social practices is work and labour, solely because it fulfils all these different functions for the individual, the society and the state. In addition, closely connected to the sphere of work and labour, is social esteem, and what Honneth calls the “achievement principle” (*Leistungsprinzip*) (Honneth 2003, 140ff). This is the key to the normative ideal of meritocracy, in which everyone gets what he or she deserves according to his or her achievements or contributions. According to Honneth this was the main point of reference for the overcoming of feudalism and the formation of civil, bourgeois society.

The members of such societies then esteem one another on the basis of the social usefulness of their achievements; the more useful they are to society, the higher the social esteem they will enjoy. [...] According to [Honneth], the world of work is the place where social esteem is distributed. With regard to the greater or lesser amounts of social esteem to which an individual has a claim, however, it is now the social usefulness of his or her occupational work that is decisive. On the basis of this ‘gradual’ conception of social esteem, Honneth then asserts that income that is commensurate to the social usefulness of the activity it remunerates is the institution in which the society’s esteem of the individual ‘legitimately’ manifests itself. He adds that by establishing this form of social esteem, bourgeois-capitalist societies have ‘meritocratized’ the pre-modern, feudal conception of honour. (Schmidt am Busch 2010, 265)

However, social esteem and the “achievement principle” are also highly organized and institutionalized. Both inside and outside the sphere of work and labour they are embedded in certain patterns of practices and reactions, not randomly experienced or determined. This is a form of

security, so that one can know and expect to be socially esteemed in a certain way for one's contribution, but this also excludes many contributions which are not esteemed at all or only insufficiently. The worker who does his or her work adequately to the standards set by the employer can expect to receive pay, to be appreciated by his or her colleagues, friends and family, and to gain a certain social status. It is here where certain forms of social esteem are transformed into rights, which are secured by the state and are no longer in the hands of the employer, or which become matters of collective bargaining. However, this inclusion and protection, which are the results of struggles for workers' rights, are in no way universal. Not only are many forms of work unregulated and dominated by the unequal relationship of power between employers and workers, but there are also many forms of work which are not recognized adequately at all. These include, for example, jobs done by illegal immigrants, in female-dominated professions and care work (Anderson 2010). For these forms of work and labour, social esteem is precarious; jobs are paid badly, insecure, come with bad working conditions, and do not earn any social status; they are not recognized but rather misrecognized and denigrated. This dialectic of recognition and misrecognition is inherent in the "achievement principle".

Once we become cognizant of the many superimpositions and distortions inherent in the capitalist achievement principle, it is hard to see any normative principle of mutual recognition in it at all. Nevertheless, putting the new idea into social practice indeed did away with the estate-based form of social esteem, and at least normatively sustains the demand that the contributions of all members of society be esteemed according to their achievements. (Honneth 2003, 147)

As a consequence, most of the social theoretical and empirical research that has been carried out based on the recognition approach has focused on work, seeking to explore how recognition is structured within and by work and labour, how it develops and what conflicts of recognition take place here (Honneth 2010; Petersen 2004; Smith and Deranty 2012). The sphere of work structures – not entirely, but to a large extent – and influences all other areas of social life, an individual life's course, family, private life, consumption and social security (Kohli 2007). Marie Jahoda has developed and established the manifest and latent functions of work, which are irreplaceable by other activities even if material maintenance is secured (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel 1972). Newer research confirms

the accuracy of this theory of the working society (Paul and Batinic 2009). Work and labour therefore affect all three forms of recognition; they influence and are influenced by care and personal relationships, respect and rights, and social esteem. However, paid work is the most important factor for social esteem, to such an extent that the labour market is the universal integration machine within modern societies based on social esteem and the “achievement principle”. Social esteem can be experienced outside of paid work, but it can never replace the absence of the social esteem earned through and by it.

II. On the moral wrongness and injustice of unemployment

I have argued that the recognition approach views paid work and labour as being of high importance and as the main social relation in which social esteem is earned. Some recent sociological studies have already confirmed the fruitfulness of this approach (Voswinkel 2012). However, there is also an outside to the sphere of paid work and labour – the sphere of unemployment and non-recognized work. It is within this triangle of paid work, social esteem and unemployment that a social critique of unemployment is situated. Honneth himself has noted that unemployment should be understood as a form of misrecognition rather than a form of positive freedom:

A mere glance at studies of the psychological effects of unemployment makes it clear that the experience of labour must be assigned a central position in the model emerging here. The acquisition of that form or recognition that I have called social esteem continues to be bound up with the opportunity to pursue an economically rewarding and thus socially regulated occupation. (Honneth 2007, 75)

Given the manifold functions of work, it comes as no surprise that unemployment is a harmful experience. It is true that the consequences of unemployment for the unemployed and also for their families and communities are widely studied and, to at least some extent, are the direct negative results of the positive functions of paid work and labour. The unemployed are often poor in many aspects, such as limited social inclusion, reduced income and other material goods, and reduced living standards; the unemployed also suffer more often from physical and mental ill-health and problems (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Paul and Moser 2009; Wanberg 2012). Furthermore, unemployment, especially if it is of longer duration, is experienced as denigrating, stressful and humiliating.

These negative effects are not experienced by all and there are several different coping mechanisms that can be employed to limit them, but resilience factors – such as education and information, functioning networks and connections or sources of support – are also unequally distributed. In conclusion, to be unemployed in a working society is a harmful and excluding experience.

So, if work and labour are the ultimate resources for social esteem, it is convincing to argue that their absence is harmful. A lot of social research has confirmed this assumption. An initial examination of unemployment from the perspective of the recognition approach can conclude that it is socially unjust because it is connected to such various forms of misrecognition as poverty, denigration, distress or humiliation. This conclusion is well founded on empirical knowledge about unemployment that is also articulated by those who are unemployed. Their suffering can serve as a starting point for the social critique of unemployment. They are limited in their experiences of recognition and affected in their opportunities to live a good life. But it is important to stress that this can only be the starting point; it is not enough for a normative social philosophical critique of unemployment, which has to explore the moral wrongness and injustice of unemployment. But why is the suffering connected to unemployment not enough to confirm its moral wrongness? Does not the connection between work and social esteem provide the necessary basis to criticize unemployment? I do not think that there is a simple connection between empirical knowledge and moral judgement and I do think that this reveals an inner dialectic of the recognition approach itself. Two arguments can be brought forward that weaken or even refute the easy conclusion that the suffering of unemployment shows its moral wrongness. The first argues that unemployment can be deserved as a form of punishment; the second argues that unemployment can be deserved because paid work is a competitive good, and that not everyone should have work because this would diminish its positive and also moral value.

Firstly, then – the most prominent negative consequences of unemployment are poverty, or at least financial losses and negative effects on mental health, such as distress, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, and decreased subjective well-being and self esteem. Furthermore, unemployment not only affects the unemployed person but also his or her family, children and, if widespread, the whole community

and society. These are all harmful consequences and without doubt they are important for any critique of unemployment; however, they are all experienced equally by those who are incarcerated. There is significant evidence that being in prison has negative consequences – also on the prisoner's family and children – and it is highly doubtful that these consequences can be prevented entirely by increasing the quality of imprisonment (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Schnittker and John 2007). There are even good arguments that the whole purpose of imprisonment is that it negatively affects the lives of those who are found guilty and convicted. It is part of the punishment that life in prison is hard and that it should not be socially esteemed to be in prison – which it is, in some social groups. I do not want to overwork this comparison of unemployment and imprisonment – but what are the reasons that make comparable suffering morally wrong in one case and rightful in another? Why is the provocative thesis wrong whereby unemployment and all its negativity is the rightful punishment for those who are lazy or do not want to work? Can unemployment be deserved? A social philosophical critique of unemployment cannot be satisfied with just noting that unemployment is a harmful experience – it has to bring forward reasons why these experiences of misrecognition are unjustified and wrong.

The second argument is concerned with the concept of social esteem itself, and I think that this is more compelling for the recognition approach. It is illuminating that Honneth cites the negative effects of unemployment to foster his argument that work and social esteem are so closely tied, because this links the positivity of work with the negativity of its absence. This is the peculiarity of social esteem which differentiates it from the other two forms of recognition. It hurts not to be loved or to have no close friends to support one just for being one's self – but this hurt is not the result of others being loved and having such personal relationships. A world is possible – although admittedly highly unlikely – in which everyone experiences love and friendship. Legal respect is universal in its nature, if not in its content, in that every human, whoever they are, whatever they are like, or whatever they have done in their life, is entitled to it. That one is respected and has certain rights does not imply that others are not – the idea of equality is in contrast to the idea of universal respect. However, social esteem is a competitive good, which not everyone can have at the same time for the same reason, because if all are esteemed equally, ultimately no one is, and the concept is rendered

useless (Voswinkel 2012). Social esteem, at least as the recognition approach understands it, is a competitive good, which is of value exactly because one gets it while others do not. This is especially the case in the sphere of work. If one is esteemed for having done a good job then this esteem becomes worthless, maybe even harmful, if everyone is esteemed the same way, even those who have not done a good job. Praise or appreciation for one's contribution is worthy because not everyone is praised. Social esteem points out the differences between people, between their contributions, efforts and achievements. One is esteemed for being something, having something or doing something above and beyond others. Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch has convincingly argued that one has good reasons to improve one's social esteem at the expense of others, and that necessarily produces winners and losers:

[I]n a society where people are esteemed according to the usefulness of their work and where this usefulness is evaluated by the market economy, a human individual is better positioned from the perspective of recognition theory when his or her income rises and/or when the incomes of other people sink. As a result, such an individual has a recognition-based reason to strive for an improvement of his or her income and to contribute to the reduction of other persons' incomes. Moreover, since in the present context no maximum in the difference in income can be established, such an individual has a recognition-based reason to *always* strive *anew* for both an improvement in his or her own income and for a reduction in other people's incomes by virtue of participating in the social practice of social esteem. (Schmidt am Busch 2010, 270–71)

This argument can ultimately be expanded to cover unemployment too. If one has reason to aim to earn more social esteem for one's work, then one also has reason to be glad that not all people are working in the first place, as this would necessarily result in one's social esteem being lower. Therefore, my second argument against the moral wrongness of unemployment is based on the whole idea of social esteem and its differentiation between those in work and those who are unemployed. If the recognition approach assumes that the value of social esteem is based on difference and particularly on the difference one earns for one's achievements in work, then the access to paid work is a form of social esteem itself. Would it not undermine the value of work if everyone were employed? If the social esteem gained through work and labour is thought of as a form of merit and desert, the question arises again as to whether it can be deserved to be unemployed. Considering these objections, I will

now examine on what grounds unemployment can be morally criticized.

III. Unemployment in a meritocracy

First, I will refute the assertion that unemployment should be understood as a form of legitimate punishment and show how it can be understood as a form of injustice and moral harm. The main argument here is that legitimate punishment demands that people are responsible in a strong sense for the actions for which they are punished. This is also a core demand for the notion of desert. It is exactly this prerequisite that is missing in most if not all cases of unemployment in modern working societies. Thus, unemployed people have not done anything wrong for which one can say they deserve their unemployment.

The overwhelming empirical evidence shows that unemployment is not the result of individual choices or failures, but most often the result of the social and economic conditions in which people have grown up and lived. Despite differences, these findings apply in general to all modern welfare societies, to the Anglo-American model as well as to the European. The most important possible reasons for unemployment are economic downturn, limited access to proper education and training, growing up in families that are not able to properly support their children, or limited information and access to networks that can help with a job search (Blanchard 2006; Lindvall 2010). In 2010, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training estimated the jobs lost in Europe due to the crisis to be as high as ten million, and predicted that the labour markets will not recover until 2020 (Cedefop 2010). This is a whole generation lost without any responsibility, with social effects and costs that go way beyond individual harm.

The labour market does not have enough jobs for all and the starting chances are highly unequally distributed. The most important bases on which later success on the labour market depends on are laid during childhood and adolescence, and it appears reasonable to assume that children and young people are not or are only to a very limited extent responsible for their upbringing and the education. This life-course and ecological perspective on unemployment views it as a combination of actual and forerun choices and actions embedded in social circumstances that are beyond the individuals' control, giving good reasons to view unemployment as a structural rather than an individual failure.

Another portion of the unemployed are simply not able to compete

on the modern and performance-oriented labour market because they are chronically ill or otherwise challenged, because they have duties of care or because they are deemed too young or too old (Cornwell et al. 2009; Wu and Eamon 2011). The negative consequences of unemployment and the shared conviction that paid work and labour are one of the most important things in life are highly motivating even for people that have little chance on the labour market; only a very small group of people can be called voluntarily unemployed (Chadi 2010). It would also be short-sighted to assume that most of those who have stopped searching for a job are voluntarily unemployed. This is in most cases rather a coping mechanism to deal with the ongoing experience of physical, mental and social harm during unemployment and some people have simply given up on themselves.

The evidence – which is only a small portion of the social empirical and theoretical research on the prevalence and causes of unemployment – refutes the conclusion that unemployment is the result of a voluntary decision or an individual's failure to find a job. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that in a morally coherent sense it is deserved to be unemployed or to encounter its negative consequences such as poverty, social exclusion and ill-health (Schweiger 2013a). These effects are the consequence of the current social, political and economic order. It is unjust to be unemployed for reasons over which one has no real influence and to suffer. The individualization of unemployment and poverty are mere cover-ups.

However, do these considerations that under today's social, economic and political conditions most people are simply not responsible for their unemployment also refute the second argument I brought forward that unemployment could be the necessary consequence of meritocracy? This assertion of unemployment as the negative but still justified result of a fair competition for social esteem is more difficult to examine. I will discuss here the relationship of social esteem and universal respect to sketch the answer that paid work is an important prerequisite of social esteem in a working society and that this social basis has to be provided to all members of society. It is necessary under the idea of meritocracy that everyone has actual access to paid work if he or she wants to. This would certainly demand radical changes in how paid work is organized, whether it be that the state secures this paid work and labour, or whether this task is delegated to the private sector. I will argue

that such a strong right to work also does not undermine the idea of a meritocracy in which everyone should get the job one deserves and in which social esteem should be distributed based on one's efforts and achievements.

The whole idea of a meritocracy is that people get what they deserve based on merit and that only a few exceptions should be made to this principle. According to the tripartite of recognition these exceptions concern legal equality and respect, and also personal relationships. I will not discuss the latter here because I do not see any relevant tensions between the social esteem gained through work and being loved for whom one is, but such tension does exist between social esteem and having certain rights. Every human being is entitled to respect as a form of recognition, but what is in dispute is the content of this respect, and which different areas of life should be regulated by laws and which not. There is no easy answer to these questions, but there are good arguments to include certain social rights that guarantee provision with basic goods and services. With these goods and services a decent living is possible even if one is not able or willing to increase one's living standards by any means. Honneth understands this balancing between social rights and the "achievement principle" as the historic development of the welfare state.

But it was also precisely this principle of equal legal treatment that could be mobilized in countless social struggles and debates, especially by the working class, to establish social rights. Thus, the recognition sphere of the achievement principle was in a certain way contained by the social-welfare state by making a minimum of social esteem and economic welfare independent of actual achievement and transforming them into individual rights claims. (Honneth 2003, 149)

Such a welfare provision, which is often criticized by defenders of certain versions of liberalism, is also not in contrast to meritocracy but rather one of its necessary conditions. This has a lot to do with the idea of desert (Olsaretti 2004), which only makes sense based on two assumptions. Desert demands that everyone has an equal chance to participate or compete for the goods in question. This means that equality of opportunity is necessary for meritocracy. Furthermore, it is necessary that the measures are the same for all. This is the fairness condition of meritocracy. It would be unfair, and undermine the idea of desert, if A were to receive X for Y but B Z for the same Y. There is a principle of

equality built into the principle of desert. The “achievement principle” is rather based on social rights and does not suspend them, although there is a necessary tension between those forms of recognition. If someone is in a good position to experience social esteem for his or her achievements, which allows him or her to be independent of protection from social rights, for example because of a high income and high social status, then this person has a recognition-based interest to opt against such a welfare provision altogether, because this would increase his or her position and therefore his or her social esteem in relation to those who are dependent on those welfare rights. So, even if, from a recognition-theoretical perspective that takes into account the society as a whole, meritocracy has to be off-set by the protection provided by social rights, equality of opportunity and the fair distribution of social esteem, the individuals or groups that compete do not have such motivation. This theoretical assumption also allows for in-depth empirical social research into distributional conflicts as struggles for recognition, in which certain groups have good reasons to opt against welfare while others have good reasons to opt for it. This is also reflected in the actual formation of capitalistic welfare states, where some tend more towards the “achievement principle” from which those who benefit are already better off – this can be called the Matthew effect (Wade 2004) – whilst others tend to provide more inclusive support and also to interfere with market results (Heath 2011).

The question now is whether or not paid work and labour fall under the concept of universal respect or under the “achievement principle”. I will argue that there are good reasons to say that access to paid work should be interpreted as a form of universal respect. My main argument is that it is a prerequisite for a meritocracy to make it possible for everyone to work and to earn their achievements. Another argument refers to the idea of community and contribution, saying that everyone has a right to contribute according to his or her talents. One central aspect is that all members of a society have equal access to paid work and labour, and that they can actually compete for jobs and positions and within jobs for social esteem. This implies a strong understanding of equality in the social conditions that govern access to paid work, especially in education, upbringing, social background, birthplace, networks or advantages in information. In a meritocratic society everyone gets what he or she deserves based on merit, but the starting chances have to be levelled.

Hence, such a society has to ensure that everyone has access to the relevant social contexts and practices and that the competition for jobs, position and other benefits is fair.

Furthermore, as I have argued, social esteem is just one form of recognition and it cannot, therefore, rule all possible social contexts and guide the distribution of all relevant goods and benefits. The “achievement principle” has to be offset by a strong understanding of social equality, and, as Honneth puts it, the market has to be tamed by the welfare state. On the one hand this is necessary to secure a decent living for those who cannot or are not willing to take care of themselves. This basic provision is protected by social rights. On the other hand, it is necessary to secure a fair competition on the market itself. Only if the pre-market social contexts are shaped by social equality it is possible to think of the market as an adequate distributor of social esteem. A third form of regulation is also necessary, and that concerns certain biases within the market to undervalue certain forms of work and therefore to undermine the social esteem that the people doing these jobs would deserve. These distortions of the market are not simple market failures but rather built into its orientation towards private profit, which necessarily undervalues social goods. The state has to produce and provide these public goods and therefore must intervene in the job market as an agent that employs different standards of desert than private agents. A fourth form of intervention is the regulation of how social esteem is distributed within the market and also the outcomes of this distribution by the state. Labour laws, social protection, regulations and taxation all are prerequisites of the distribution of social esteem according to the “achievement principle”.

However, even if all people in a society have more or less the same chances to compete for jobs and positions in the first place, which means that they all have the same chance to earn social esteem and to be esteemed for their achievements, still not everyone will get a job on the “free” labour market and for certain not everyone will get the job that he or she is aiming for or is qualified for. Jobs, especially good ones, i.e., those that come with high income, social status and power, or those which are meaningful and engaging, are scarce in current capitalism, and someone must do the “dirty” jobs too, i.e., underpaid jobs and those that are physically or mentally hard and dangerous. Currently, most of these precarious and undervalued jobs are done by women, migrants or people with little formal education (Honneth 2003). However, these jobs do not

vanish simply because the education system gets more equal or because discrimination based on gender, race or nationality stops. Even under such “ideal” circumstances – which will probably never be fully achieved under the current system – unemployment as well as precarious jobs will exist if the state does not intervene and provide a job for people who have no chance on the capitalistic job market, which will always produce lucky winners and many losers.

If modern societies are working societies, and if this is not only arbitrary but rather has an intrinsic worth and moral value, then it is a moral obligation to make paid work and labour accessible to everyone in order to distribute social esteem according to the “achievement principle”. In fact, a more inclusive welfare provision is needed and also a society in which equality of opportunity is more than a mere slogan behind which the sheer luck of having the right birthplace, and the power of cliques and money is hiding. If it is viewed to be of high moral value that certain goods are distributed based on desert for one’s efforts, talents and achievements, and that the sphere of paid work is the main medium of this distribution, then everyone should have access to it and the real opportunity to earn social esteem. This also does not undermine the idea of hiring by merit and that a job itself should be deserved. David Miller – whose tripartite theory of social justice resembles the three forms of recognition, although they derive from a different perspective (Honneth 2012) – follows the same route when he argues for the best candidates to deserve jobs and the connected rewards.

“To sum up, hiring by merit is the policy that in general brings about the closest correspondence between individuals’ contributions and their rewards. [...] Nepotism or discrimination is unfair because it predictably creates a state of affairs in which there is a discrepancy between deserts and income rewards. Moreover, the best-qualified candidate who is passed over can legitimately complain that she is the victim of an injustice through being prevented from earning rewards commensurate with her potential contribution.” (Miller 1999, 166)

Hiring by merit implies that the best candidate should get a certain job, but it does not imply that there should not be enough jobs for everyone. A commitment to eliminate involuntary unemployment would not undermine the idea that jobs should be deserved by merit and that only qualified persons should become doctors, teachers or plumbers, and that it would be unfair not to take the best candidate. The argument for

the existence of unemployment based on the function of social esteem can therefore be countered by the argument that it is not a necessary implication of social esteem. This conclusion allows us to take up Honneth's remarks about the consequences of unemployment again, but to reinforce them. It is not only because unemployment has such harsh and damaging consequences that it is morally wrong and unjust, but it is because there is no ground to justify these consequences and they are also not necessary to provide room for social esteem and to value meritocracy.

IV. Conclusions

There are important objections to the idea that the state can provide all its citizens with a decent job without negative economic and social consequences, and these have to be taken seriously. Such a situation would demand that either the state itself employ the unemployed, which would come with hefty costs, or that the state force private employers to do so. Both options would demand extensive administrative efforts and it is unclear what kind of jobs the unemployed would be offered in such a scenario. It is very likely that a job one only has because the state has provided it does not generate the same social esteem as a job one has earned in competition with others. These jobs might even be experienced as humiliating in themselves, and deteriorate into welfare programmes in which the unemployed are forced to do the jobs that no one else wants; it is also possible that the private sector would lower the wages of all employed or demand that they are subsidized by the state – scenarios that are already seen in practice. Without major shifts in the current order of recognition based on the capitalistic “achievement principle” this situation would most likely lead to a division between the “good” jobs for which one still has to compete and which are highly esteemed, and the “bad” jobs provided by the state – for those “losers” who need them. The problem of unemployment would be solved only superficially and most likely at least some of the social and psychological problems caused by it would remain. The divide would no longer be between paid work and labour and unemployment but rather between good work and bad work, or, as it would probably be referred to, “real” work and “state” work. Such a division – which would restrict the experience of social esteem and admiration for those “real” jobs – is also coherent with today’s interpretation of the “achievement principle” that favours market success

as the only relevant measure.

These objections are not easily to be dismissed, and they can lead us to revise the strong conclusion about the right to work that I have drawn above, in order to target a more realistic solution for the problem of unemployment. As it is unlikely that political forces are strong enough to radically change today's capitalism and its division and organization of paid work and unemployment it seems favourable to aim for gradual improvements to help the unemployed right now. Unemployment is still a moral wrongness and injustice with severe and harmful consequences that have to be alleviated, and which will exist as long as access to paid work is restricted by market mechanisms, but the priority of social and political change should be to make unemployment more decent and to change the superstructure that frames it as an individual failure. The flawed discourse that uses social esteem and the "achievement principle" to justify unemployment and other inequalities such as poverty and precarization has to be criticized and countered (Schweiger 2013b). Only then can the recognition approach make sure that it does not, involuntarily, support oppressive social stratification and policies. Two more points should be considered in this regard: the development of the "achievement principle" and the role of the unemployed as the possible agents of change.

First, it is unclear how the "achievement principle" will develop itself. As many critics have pointed out, today's understanding and interpretation is to legitimize and esteem only certain forms of achievements. This capitalistic and market-oriented interpretation is more or less hegemonic in modern societies, although it is broken and in flux. Certain developments over the past years have at least opened up spaces for other interpretations of the "achievement principle", like the rise of the importance of self-realization outside the job, the demands of functioning work-life balances or the ideal of individualism without egoism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Hartmann and Honneth 2006; Honneth 2004). All these developments are certainly not free of their own distortions and paradoxes, and are also accompanied by new forms of alienation and oppression, but they show the possibility of changes in the second-order structure of capitalism from which the ideas of the "achievement principle" and the working society unfold.

It is therefore possible that the progressive core of the "achievement principle" and the moral core of social esteem can be mobilized to break-

up their one-sided interpretation that focuses on paid work and labour, leading to a more inclusive understanding of work. This could furthermore shift the main focus from monetary success to the social value of work, and thus trigger an expansion in the number of those who work in these occupations. There is a great demand for such employment in care, health, education and culture. So, there is a possibility that future developments may lead to a different allocation of social esteem that is still based on desert and the “achievement principle” but that provides a different setting for what today is understood as unemployment, namely the inability to find a decent job on the free market. This is inherent in the dialectic of the three forms of recognition, that each social context and sphere can be shaped more by respect or more by social esteem, and also the inner dialectic within each of these forms. As I pointed out earlier, the recognition approach cannot once and for all determine the content of each form of recognition, but rather leaves this open to social interpretation, which is only measured if it points in the direction of a more socially just society in which everyone has proper conditions to experience each form of recognition, or if it points in a direction in which the experience of recognition is only protected for a few while others have to live with misrecognition. Today it seems as if one particular distorted interpretation of social esteem is widespread, and serves as a justification to dismantle social rights and to intensify social inequality across all different contexts and goods – but this is not the necessary content of the “achievement principle”.

“For each of the three recognition spheres is distinguished by normative principles which provide their own internal standards of what counts as ‘just’ or ‘unjust.’ In my view, the only way forward here is the idea, outlined above, that each principle of recognition has a specific surplus of validity whose normative significance is expressed by the constant struggle over its appropriate application and interpretation. Within each sphere, it is always possible to set a moral dialectic of the general and the particular in motion: claims are made for a particular perspective (need, life-situation, contribution) that has not yet found appropriate consideration by appeal to a general recognition principle (love, law, achievement). In order to be up to the task of critique, the theory of justice outlined here can wield the recognition principles’ surplus validity against the facticity of their social interpretation.” (Honneth 2003, 186)

The second point concerns the agents of the “achievement principle” – those who are the winners and those who are the losers of today’s distinction between “good” paid work and “bad” unemployment. The

recognition approach wants to stand on the side of social movements towards a more inclusive society and support those legitimate struggles for recognition. However, it cannot prescribe social justice and it also cannot plan it in the academic ivory tower. Today's unemployed are a very heterogenic group and it seems therefore unlikely that they will organize and struggle united for changes in their situation. They have no union, they have no public support, they have no voice and no say in their administration. In contrast, the fission between the employed and the unemployed is getting deeper and deeper and this prevents much needed solidarity and united action. But without such struggles the hegemony of the capitalistic interpretation of the "achievement principle" will prevail and the moral core of social esteem will be undermined.

V. Bibliography

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