

Book Review

Axel Honneth: *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. Translated by Joseph Ganahl. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. Pp. 412.)

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

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

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

Honneth works with a threefold distinction of freedom as negative, reflective, and social, resembling Fred Neuhouser's reading of Hegel. It is hard to overestimate the fruitfulness of that conceptualization. The familiar *negative* freedom to do as one pleases amounts to freedom from external obstacles, whether or not one is a slave to one's passions and whether or not these are in line with the aim of freedom. The *reflexive* freedom of self-determination, self-realization, and authenticity overcomes these faults, but is limited in other ways, which *social* freedom then overcomes: the interpersonal and institutional surroundings must be freedom friendly, so that living in the available roles and taking part in the available practices do not amount to heteronomy

46 or alienation. These surroundings are not mere contexts for action, or poten-
47 tial obstacles, but actualizations or embodiments of freedom, constitutive
48 aspects of what it is to be free. Freedom is not mere individual self-
49 determination, but partly constituted by standing in the right kinds of
50 relations to others and to institutions. When these relations have the structure
51 allowing the subject to be oneself in the other, they are constitutive of
52 freedom. Honneth's version of social freedom further emphasizes (arguably
53 too strongly) the interdependence of agents' aims: freedom-constitutive rela-
54 tions are ones where the satisfaction of your aims depends on the satisfaction
55 of mine and vice versa, so that we both cooperatively contribute to each
56 others' aims. In any case, social freedom broadly along Honneth's lines
57 seems undeniably a fruitful notion.

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

80 Whereas the point of negative and reflexive freedom is to provide a protect-
81 ed option to "get away," the point of social freedom is to enable participants
82 to be free within the social world. It comes in three variants: personal, eco-
83 nomic, and political. The first is embodied in personal relationships, such
84 as friendship, intimate love, and family life. They are Hegel's prime examples
85 of the structure of finding oneself in the other, being oneself through the other
86 —negative and reflexive freedom cannot capture the freedom-constitutive
87 significance of such relations.

88 By far the most controversial and thought-provoking suggestion in
89 Honneth's book is that the same goes for the market economy. When legiti-
90 mate, the market is a form of cooperation, where the roles of workers,

91 owners, speculators, moneylenders, and consumers are arranged so that the
92 contribution of each complements the legitimate aims of the others. Mere
93 market mechanisms do not guarantee that, so they must, first, be embedded
94 in ethical understandings via discursive mechanisms providing the needed
95 socialization and deliberation, and second, they must be legally regulated.
96 These ethical orientations and legal regulations are *intrinsic* aspects of the
97 market economy, claims Honneth (drawing on a reading of Hegel, Durkheim,
98 Parsons, and Polanyi). It is a misunderstanding to think of the market as a nor-
99 matively disembodied sphere (just think of the ethics of what should not be for
100 sale at all). But it is precisely as a project of a social freedom that the modern
101 market economy is to be understood, and apparently has been understood by
102 the most clear-sighted observers. Of course, Honneth sees the latest twists and
103 turns of the neo-liberal economy as a massive misdevelopment threatening to
104 ruin the achievements of previous generations and grinding the very project
105 of social freedom to a halt.

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

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

134 Against the promise of social freedom, in all three spheres massive misde-
135 velopments have taken place. If Honneth is right, we will have a huge

136 practical task in guiding the unfinished project of modernity back onto its
137 tracks. Whether right or not, Honneth has provided us with a central refer-
138 ence point for future debates on the nature of modernity, freedom, justice,
139 and the social world.

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