

# Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition



# Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition:

*Freedom, Normativity,  
and Identity*

By

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In memory of a mentor and a good friend, Florentino Hornedo.

Freedom is indeed a reality, a material reality.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**Axel Honneth** (cited by page number)

*CoP – Critique of Power*

*SFR – The Struggle for Recognition*

*FRS – Freedom's Right*

*R – Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*

*RR – Redistribution or Recognition (With Nancy Fraser)*

**G.W.F. Hegel** (cited by page number)

*PoS – Phenomenology of Spirit*

**Nikolas Kompridis** (cited by page number)

*CD – Critique and Disclosure*

# INTRODUCTION

## 1. The Problem of Freedom and Normativity

The main thrust of this work is to argue that normativity is an essential component of freedom in Axel Honneth's recognition theory. In this work, I will trace the progressive development of Honneth's recognition theory by looking at its place in the Frankfurt School's development of social critique from his continuation of Jürgen Habermas' project of renewing the emphasis on a social theory that renews the project of social emancipation. In this regard, Honneth's approach has been innovative in pursuing an intersubjectivist turn towards Hegel's early Jena writings; by drawing from the experiences of disrespect, Honneth can pinpoint the normative claims of individuals that are struggling towards the possibility of being recognised as a bearer of the norms that society itself intended to reproduce. Recognition in Honneth's work implies not only an individual recognition of subjectivity but also a kind of dynamic social interaction in which the individual is gradually integrated into social norms and practices that give rise to a mutual intersubjectivity. The dynamics of recognition in Honneth's theory depicts the formation of individual autonomy via the integration of the subject into social norms, which later leads to the individual's role as a legitimate social agent. This legitimisation is not merely a coerced or reified shaping of the individual; rather, it is a form of legitimisation that the individual rationally and subjectively identifies freely with norms that govern individuality within a social environment. Honneth presents the theory of recognition to re-evaluate the possibility of assessing norms that can overcome the domination and objectification of individuals as means to an end. What takes place in Honneth's theory is a cohesive theory of norms that is legitimised individually and subjectively because of its origin and continuous recognition of the individual. As the successor of Habermas' directorship of the Institute for Social Research, Honneth follows Habermas' legacy of understanding the pre-scientific conditions in which normativity finds clearer articulation as a social program of emancipation. However, unlike Habermas, Honneth does not look into the normative function of communication; rather, he pursues the experiential struggles of individuals as an impetus towards understanding their need for normative claims.

Through Honneth's recognition theory, it is possible to argue for the inevitability of reification as a point of mediation in the recognition of subjects within institutions and their supposed cohesion built upon the normative preservation of individuality. This kind of reification, however, is subject to agonistic struggle, by which the effort of the misrecognised party disrupts the current state of normativity to dialectically engage society in adopting a recognitive stance towards misrecognised parties. As a part of Honneth's comprehensive reworking of Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity, Honneth is keen on demonstrating that the desire of individuals to be recognised in society is rooted in their socialised identity formation. In other words, as a condition of individuation, solidarity takes some precedence over individuality inasmuch as individuality is only attained through social relations. Reification in the context of the *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, carries with it a value of recognition that dynamically adapts to social cohesion and yet at the same time preserves individuality.

The problem of freedom in any social and political discourse is the issue of maintaining a sense of individual autonomy while providing a cohesive sense of order in a social structure that regulates social activity. Such issue, which echoes Plato's inception of an orderly state, is still a recurring problem within contemporary institutions. The issue at hand is the possibility of looking at social institutions as enabling forces that provide autonomy to the individual. Within the Frankfurt School tradition,<sup>1</sup> institutions serve as a normative ground through which individuals are either oppressed or emancipated. In Georg Lukacs, there is a strong emphasis on how institutions play an oppressive role by dominating the consciousness of the masses through institutional norms. Through the instrumentalisation of theory, Lukacs notes that an ideology can take a "prescriptive and imperative character" (Lukacs, 1971, 38), in

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<sup>1</sup> The Frankfurt School of critical theory is an institution established by German philosophers exiled during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War that developed a philosophical bent aimed at providing critical, normative, and emancipatory theories of social and cultural forces. Initially, it was founded by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno as a form of social critique, to which Continental philosophy was utilised, particularly Marxism, Kantianism, and Hegelianism. Horkheimer, in one of his essays, argues that the status of social philosophy during his time has suffered a polemic preference for positivism, to which metaphysical concepts take prevalence over the real and social realities are dismissed (Horkheimer, 1993, 7). The goal of the Frankfurt School, as Fred Rush claims, is to erect a philosophically founded and informed school of social science that aims to displace or even oppose the scientific paradigm that dominated European social theory (Rush, 2004, 9).

such a manner that theories become elevated to the level of “natural laws” (Lukacs, 1971, 233). The normative value of institutions in Lukacs is double-edged; in the context of the Capitalists, norms are as oppressive as their alternative in Bolshevism or Vulgar Marxism insofar as norms solidify a sense of phantom objectivity in theory. This kind of objectivity is evoked in Theodor Adorno's reading of the enlightenment as a *myth*, in which nature, in our failure to dominate and harness it, becomes an ossified chimera of our thoughts. Enlightenment provides us with a utopic vision of our interaction with nature, and under the mechanism of reason, we can aptly control its fearsome force. The fear, however, becomes an irrational force to the extent that enlightenment no longer adapts to the changing dynamics of the world and thus becomes a reified force of self-imposed domination of mankind (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 33).

The awareness of the possibility of freedom is achieved in a social context, the antinomy of order and autonomy takes a pendulous movement as it sways from emancipation through theory and praxis to domination through the reified actualisation of a theory that is understood as a natural law. In Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (C.f. Marcuse, 2002), the repressive power of modern capitalist societies invokes a sense of control over individuals through the illusions of autonomy and freedom. For Marcuse, domination can prevail in an environment wherein one lives a life that is “comfortable, smooth, reasonable and democratic” (Marcuse, 2002, 3). Through the pacification of man's constant need to struggle against nature (Marcuse, 2002, 57), the choices that man makes become limited and thus essentially controlled by institutions and states. In this sense, there is no longer a reflective stance on how one becomes dominated by ideology; the *one-dimensionality* of man's attitude towards the social world is placed under the ambit of comfort and satiety to the extent that revolution or even dissent becomes *self-discouraging*.

Honneth's recognition theory is based on the normative values through which identity is established in social relations. Social interactions shape not only the individual but also the normative mechanisms upon which society is founded. The premise is that the individual's initial subjectivity is moulded via the inscriptions of society as they initiate recognition from the transition of a self-interested me to a reflective “I” (*SFR*, 74- 75). For Honneth, the act of recognition begins when the individual learns how to dissociate itself from self-interest insofar as self-interest does not resolve conflicts between partners of interactions. Through his reconstruction of

Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit*<sup>2</sup> via George Herbert Mead's philosophical anthropology, Honneth argues that the self-reflective interactions of the individual gradually expand to a broader sphere of social interactions governed by norms (*SFR*, 78). On this note, we find three spheres in which recognition takes place: love, respect, and esteem. In the beginning, *love* is the fundamental course of relation that defines the social interaction between the child and the parent. It is understood in the context of care where the helplessness of the child conditions a sense of inner-negativity, causing the child to realise that his identity is distinct from the parent, who is a separate partner of interaction. Hence, individuality must be recognised. In the second sphere, *respect* is recognised by the subject as it begins to form broader intersubjective relations with partners of interactions on the social level, culminating in the third sphere, wherein the intersubjective reflexivity of the individual is realised by society in the form of *esteem* or belongingness.

On this note, this work aims to look at the tension between individual identity and how it is shaped by normativity. In this sense, the problem of freedom within normativity is identified not only in the prescription of norms in society but also on how society maintains freedom by sustaining differences and revising its already existing normative reproduction. My goal of explaining the problem of normativity and freedom in Honneth's recognition theory can be summarily divided into five concerns, namely; (1) the role of normativity in the analysis of social structures, (2) the role of normativity in struggles for recognition, (3) the progressive function of freedom in maintaining the progressive assent of individuals towards norms, (4) the role of normativity in protecting the future possibilities of disclosure in individual subjects amidst society, and (5) the intermeshing of freedom and recognition in Honneth's critical theory.

Given the themes mentioned above, this work covers the development of Axel Honneth's theory specifically in recognition theory, normativity, social solidarity, and freedom. My reading of Honneth's work is guided by

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<sup>2</sup> Hegel for this matter considers ethical life or *Sittlichkeit* as a bridging of the gap between the social norms of society and the individual into a form of rational necessity that is recognised by the individual, to which the normative force of ethics is assented by the individual because of its subjective and rational acceptance of such norms or laws. Furthermore, the perspective of the individual subjectivity in its recognition of rights holds that such rights and its normative force work in tandem with the possibility of freedom, not in the sense of freedom as a principle of "doing whatever one wants," rather, as a freedom that enables the individual to function harmoniously within society (Hegel, 2001, 258).

these concepts that elaborate reconstructive re-working of Hegel's intersubjective social philosophy. In this light, the materials that I cover are as follows: Honneth's development of the recognition theory from the tradition of critical theory in *Critique of Power*;<sup>3</sup> the development of Hegel's intersubjective social philosophy in *Struggle for Recognition*;<sup>4</sup> Honneth's engagement with the objectification of norms in *Reification*;<sup>5</sup> his debate with Nancy Fraser in *Redistribution or Recognition*,<sup>6</sup> which is instrumental in Honneth's formulation of antecedent recognition; and his latest reconstruction of Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit* or the ethical life as a guiding principle in his analysis of democratic institutions and their role in enabling social freedom in *Freedom's Right*.<sup>7</sup> Alongside these materials, I will also consult some of Honneth's recent writings and interviews, as well as works written by his critics and his responses. As a counterpoint, I am also going to refer to Honneth's contemporary, Nikolas Kompridis. In Kompridis' book *Critique and Disclosure*, some of the key points of critique in Honneth's continuation of Habermas' critical theory are taken issue with. With this, I am also going to look at Kompridis' pointed critique against Honneth's earlier writings on recognition theory with the intention of articulating the recent developments that Honneth has implemented in *Freedom's Right*.

My goal of answering the problem of normativity in freedom and recognition is to construct a model of a social theory that provides an immanent understanding of social relations as well as provide a grounded and progressive critique of social relations and the institutions that hold these together in solidarity. While this work does not provide an actual application of Honneth's social theory, my way of assessment is based on the continuity of Honneth's arguments with his engagement from critiques and elaborations from his recent works. Furthermore, as an alternative to applying Honneth's recognition theory to actual social realities, my proposal in this work is to use a triangulation method of identifying social

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<sup>3</sup> Initially published in German as: Honneth, Axel 1985: *Kritik der Macht. Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

<sup>4</sup> Initially published in German as: Honneth, Axel 1992: *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

<sup>5</sup> Honneth, Axel 2007: Rejoinder, in: Axel Honneth: *Reification. A New Look at an Old Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press, 147–159.

<sup>6</sup> The original German title of this book is: Honneth, Axel und Nancy Fraser 2003: *Umverteilung oder Anerkennung? Eine politisch-philosophische Kontroverse*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp

<sup>7</sup> Initially published in German as: Honneth, Axel 2011: *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

pathologies through a reconstructive normative simulation, which I will discuss in the fifth part.

## 2. Contextualising Honneth's Recognition Theory

The main contention of Honneth's recognition theory is that its reconstruction depends entirely on the sense of order found in Hegel's notion of ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*. In this sense, the problem of normativity is open to the possibility that the normative claims of the individual or society itself may fall prey to the possibility of reification. For Habermas, normativity is problematic when it comes detached from the social norms that it tries to regulate, and thus becomes prone to the function of objectification; what he proposes is an alternative approach that can overcome the metaphysical indifference of theory towards praxis that attempts to bridge the immanent and everyday conditions of the lifeworld towards an objective implementation of norms through communication (Habermas 1996, 7 - 8).

The problem of reification in Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, in this case, requires a nuanced reading of Honneth's theory of recognition. Freedom, as a culmination of recognition, assumes which struggles that arise from recognition or misrecognition are intrinsically directed towards a progressive appropriation of subjectivity and normativity. The fundamental assumption in my reading of Honneth's work is that normativity in social interaction is not entirely subject to the complete and totalising effect of reification where individuation becomes impossible in the spheres of recognition. Honneth argues that if such is the case with reification, then "human sociality must have vanished completely" (R 55). In this sense, reification becomes a state in which one becomes forgetful of recognition itself (R 58).

The strong emphasis on recognition allows the subject to sustain a certain kind of openness or an emphatic sense of caring upon which all forms of social interaction begin with *love*. This openness towards individuality is precisely the starting point of authentic social interactions, which are often misconstrued by the critics of Honneth as a reduction of the political aspect of recognition to moral psychologism. Deranty and Renault opine that the weakness in Honneth's theory lies in the grounding of social theory in moral psychology to the extent that it neglects the issue of politics and institutions (Renault 2007, 99-100). A similar point is raised by Hedrick, claiming that Honneth's moral psychology has the tendency to de-historicise reification (Hedrick 2014, 179). In response to



these criticisms, I argue that Honneth's turn to moral psychology and, inevitably, the supposed de-historicisation of reification point to a fundamental assumption that institutions have to acknowledge the individuating character of their subjects in order to maintain at least a minimal sense of social cohesion. The first sphere of recognition does not necessarily limit itself to the immediate sphere of the family; *love* or *care*, for that matter, is the prevailing character that is seminal in any institution since it accepts the individuality of persons through the recognition that they are potential partners for interaction. In an interview with Gonçalo Marcelo, Honneth further asserts that institutions are dependent on the principle that binds people together through recognition (Marcelo 2013, 211), for it is only in this initiating and binding principle that partners of interaction can engage with one another with a sense of receptivity. Furthermore, in his latest work, *Freedom's Right*, Honneth further expands the idea of *love* and *care* in the seminal institutions responsible for the foundation of institutions through friendship.<sup>8</sup> This argument proposes a potent and yet positive reconstruction of history as a progressive and dynamic process of socialisation. On one hand, Honneth is able to diagnose social pathologies anchored on existing normative practices in social interactions. On the other hand, he provides an analysis of possible emancipatory alternatives within an existing framework of normative practices and social interactions.

Recognition is a key element towards the possibility of attaining freedom achieved in the solidarity of individuals within an institution. Freedom in the case of recognition derives an enabling force through the solidarity of individuals in a society in which individuals no longer pose as impediments to one another, but rather, solidarity becomes an enabling force of development within existing social structures. This utopian conception of freedom, however, is not conceived from without; rather, it is something implicit within social interactions. As Bolaños asserts, Honneth's approach in critical theory moves our theoretical consciousness from an essentialist perspective to a "theoretico-materialist-practical" stance that is "sensitive to social realities from within and not from without" (Bolaños 2012, 24). Furthermore, the implications of freedom through recognition entail a struggle where the individual subjects himself

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<sup>8</sup> Honneth expands his initial treatment of the first sphere of recognition, proposing that *love* or *care* begins not only within the context of families. Honneth argues that this is experienced in the founding of clubs, social groups, and even sexual groups that constitute the majority of institutions that we encounter today (*FRS* 134-138).

openly to social interactions to shape, not only the norms of society but also that of the individual. In the third sphere of recognition, the realisation of freedom becomes implicit in the sense of *esteem* as the individual is recognised in his capacity to contribute to society through the development of his self-worth (*SFR* 128-129). Freedom, as Hornedo notes, ought to develop the individual and at the same time provide social-significance for his development (Hornedo 2000, 102). In the same context, Honneth's emancipatory project of recognition is not taken from without; rather, it begins with socially established norms from which recognition and misrecognition take their value. Recent works, such as Pilapil's *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles*, follow Honneth's emancipatory and critical framework to analyse contemporary struggles for recognition in the Philippines (Pilapil, 2015).<sup>9</sup>

Nikolas Kompridis, in his assessment of Honneth's discourse on recognition, misses the point about social cohesion when he disputes the formal theory of good in recognition as a flawed ideal of self-realisation (Kompridis 2007, 286). Self-governance or the autonomy for self-legislation of moral norms is implicitly taken from the dynamics of social interaction. *Love*, as an initial sphere of recognition, situates the individual in always-already existing grounds of normativity, not as a passive recipient of norms or rights but, rather, as a partner in intersubjective legislation of norms. The worry that accompanies Kompridis' criticism that the norms of recognition itself may have a coercive force (Kompridis 2007, 287) in shaping the individual's identity is already addressed by the fact that the normativity of recognition itself has a degree of social cohesion that allows normativity to take place. In other words, the force of coercion in recognition places the normativity of a practice in question, which provides instances of disruptions in normative expectations (*SFR* 137). This issue is further expatiated in the succeeding parts of this work where I address Kompridis' criticisms of Honneth's recent work, *Freedom's Right*, by arguing that Kompridis' notion of identity realisation through the

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<sup>9</sup> Pilapil's *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles* provides a good assessment of the state of recognition theory, not only in the context of Honneth's critical theory but also in the recent developments of the works of Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Seyla Benhabib, and James Tully. This work serves as an excellent introductory reading in the context of recognition theory as it is adopted by critical theorists in resolving identity disputes. A thorough review of the book could be seen in Bolaños' "Pilapil on the Theory and Praxis of Recognition" (Bolaños 2016).

formation of alternative “voices” (*CD* 57) is indeed realised in Honneth's problematisation of moral autonomy through self-legislation (*FRS* 97).

Despite the apparent conflict between individuality and normativity, Honneth's dialectical treatment of recognition in Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* values autonomy and freedom as the bases for social cohesion. Honneth argues that the critiques of modern societies, namely, Marxism and capitalism, are somewhat similar since they insist on strengthening individual autonomy (*FRS* 180 - 181). On the one hand, capitalism preserves individual autonomy by providing individual freedom from interference by the state; on the other hand, Marxism provides freedom from oppression and domination through the control of the modes of production. By preserving this individuating character of these modern critiques, he demonstrates that the possibility of a socially cohesive individuality is a necessary development in the progression of democratic institutions. Reification in this sense does not figure itself out as a simple fetishistic reduction of social relations found in Lukacs' Marxist critique of reification in which normative practices impose as coercive laws (Lukacs 1971, 133). Honneth picks up reification as a case of misrecognition that leads to disrespect, where antecedent forms of recognition are forgotten.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, we must not forget that normative practices imply an always-already existing teleological trajectory that entails freedom as an agent and as a goal. This is primarily observed in contemporary democratic societies that are founded on the cohesion of rational self-legislating agents; in other words, the self-propagation of freedom within the context of social norms serves as a normative basis for recognition which I argue to be neither immanent nor transcendent in its appropriation since it can ease the tension between the objectivity of normativity and the sphere of subjectivity.

Freedom is a redemptive form of the tension between the immanent and the transcendent. What we see in the immanence of the facticity of existence and its conflict with transcendence is its redemption through freedom. Freedom provides an alternative thought through the preservation of individuality, and yet, at the same time, retains the extrinsic reflexivity in already existing structures of norms and practices that progressively evolve into a non-reified form of social order. Kompridis' notion of disclosure, in contrast, claims to preserve tradition and at the same time

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<sup>10</sup> Georg Lukacs also makes a similar observation in *History and Class Consciousness*, (Lukacs 1971, 2); See also in (*R* 58).

provides a receptive form of hearing<sup>11</sup> the *new*. The *new* is a concept not simply from without but from within an already existing form of tradition that is heard at moments of crisis. It is a direct reaction to Habermas' linguistic intersubjectivity (CD 5), which Kompridis claims has suffered a formulaic paradigm that objectivises normativity to the point that its disputation no longer becomes an issue (CD 17). By taking a Heideggerian stance of "rootedness," Kompridis insists on preserving traditions over norms in favour of an assumed authenticity of self-projection. Kompridis' position is indeed slanted towards Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, for the moments of crisis are understood in the context of fear as *angst*, or crises coming from *without*. The anticipatory nature of Kompridis' notion of disclosure, thus, prefers to look for receptivity towards other *voices* that have yet to come. At this point, I think that Kompridis directs us to possibilities that project us from this crisis-inducing moments not entirely from without, but rather from traditions instead of norms. In other words, Kompridis asserts that we anticipate transcendence of our factual conditions through the very conditions that we are left to begin with. On the contrary, Honneth does not specifically deal with the issue of crisis-inducing moments coming from without because his understanding of the individual or subject is not rooted in some metaphysical or abstract *cogito*; rather, it focuses on a socially-shaped autonomous individual of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*.

My expatiation of the relationship between recognition and freedom is divided into five main parts. The first part is dedicated to the discussion of Honneth's turn from critical theory's focus on domination, power, and institutions, to intersubjectivity and social philosophy. In *Critique of Power*, this transition is traced from Horkheimer's program of aligning critical theory as a depiction of social realities in which emancipation becomes possible. By following the methodologies of Horkheimer, Adorno, Foucault, and Habermas, Honneth can argue that social critique ought to be based on an empirical understanding of the development of norms and how it informs and reproduces such norms in social interactions. As an alternative to Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, Honneth proposes a reconstruction of Hegel and Mead's intersubjective philosophical anthropology as the basis for developing the epistemological foundations for critical theory.

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<sup>11</sup> Kompridis favours metaphors that refer to sound. His idea of receptivity revolves around identity in the form of *voices*.

In the second part, I outline the development of Honneth's reconstruction of Hegel's theory based on the observable function of social struggles as a basis for the development and progression of societal norms. In this part, I will point out that the immanent foundation of recognition theory is based on the implicit understanding of respect and disrespect, and that through these experiences one can derive both critical and descriptive understanding of already existing norms that produce either solidarity or social pathologies. In the case of social pathologies, we can understand that they are pathological in two aspects—firstly, when the norm in practice no longer allows individuals to gain self-confidence based on the esteem that they acquire from their social relations, and secondly, when subjects are unable to integrate themselves into society due to the lack of recognition or their insistence on social atomism. In either case, both areas of social pathologies prove that the foundation of norms lies precisely in their capacity to create social bonds and maintain social solidarity.

In the third part, I explore Honneth's idea of social freedom in *Freedom's Right* as a much-needed supplement for his recognition theory. Honneth's reconstruction of the historical progress of democratic societies (specifically in Germany and in some parts of Europe) presents a convincing argument against the instrumentality of normativity in the theory of recognition. In this part, I outline Honneth's discussion of the products of social freedom, namely, negative, reflexive, legal, and moral freedoms that constitute three important spheres of modern democracy. With social freedom, Honneth can assert that the sphere of private relations, economics, and democratic public sphere are all reinforced by their collective cooperation in creating a social structure of freedom that handles heteronomous identities and norms. Thus, the pursuit of individual freedom is only made possible through collective social action.

In Part Four, I present a counterpoint against Honneth's recognition theory by looking at Nikolas' Kompridis critique of the tradition of critical theory as well as his pointed critique of Honneth's recognition theory. In this part, I present some of Kompridis' cogent arguments against the limitations of disclosure that have been carried over from Habermas' critical theory to Honneth's recognition theory. For Kompridis, the issue of critical theory's pursuit of a pragmatic programme of critique leads to the exhaustion of normative resources necessary for generating self-confidence in subjects in modernity. By imposing the necessity of recognition, Honneth is seen to be limiting the discourse of modernity to socially accepted forms of normativity. I present three arguments that sum up Kompridis' critique of Honneth's recognition theory: (1) The question

of the stability of normativity, (2) the unitary nature of recognition, and (3) the question of the possibility of freedom in recognition. Since Honneth does not directly answer any of Kompridis' criticisms, I will try to reconstruct a possible response from Honneth to address Kompridis' critique and assess whether Kompridis is correct in levelling these three points against Honneth's recognition theory.

In the fifth part, I will attempt to merge Honneth's recognition theory with his reconstruction of social freedom in *Freedom's Right*. In this part, I will locate how the four forms of recognition (love, rights, esteem, and antecedent) can intermesh with the concept of social freedom in private relations, economics, and democratic sphere. My intention in this part is to present a working model of how recognition theory supports individual freedom to accommodate and transform new and old norms into a cohesive social structure of solidarity. By doing this, I will be able to demonstrate the potential of Honneth's work as a socio-normative critique of society.

# PART ONE

## RECOGNITION AND CRITICAL THEORY

*“You taught me language; and my profit on ’t  
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
For learning me your language!”  
—Caliban, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*<sup>1</sup>*

In this part, I retrace the trajectories of the notion of freedom and recognition in Honneth’s work. My aim is to detail and align Honneth’s discourse with the already existing works in critical theory that consider the problem of freedom and recognition. By tracing the developmental progress of Honneth’s thought, it is possible to articulate and dissect his notion of recognition with regard to how he aims at reconstructing Hegel’s sense of social freedom. It can be traced back to Honneth’s earlier essays wherein his interest clearly lies in the articulation of Hegel’s notion of ethical life as a systematic explanation of how normative developments in society are made and changed (Honneth 1988, 362). Freedom in Hegel’s ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) is only realised in the perspective of social interaction (*PoS* 212), this potent axiom holds an explanation for both negative and positive forms of freedom. On one hand, we can find that ethical norms are shaped through an individual’s integration within society, within which the subject can form and create its consciousness, thus giving rise to a positive form of freedom. On the other hand, negative freedom arises when the subject of social interactions finds that its will and its actions are free from restrictions from external factors because its will acknowledges the same normative principles that gave rise to its consciousness. Despite the strong Kantian undertones of the ethical imperative of reason, Hegel’s conception of the ethical life does not end in a simple form of ethical conformism. As Honneth notes, there must be a commitment towards understanding how normative principles become manifested as *reason* (Honneth 2014, 817).

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<sup>1</sup> (Shakespeare 1958, 1140)

## 1. Recognition, Identity, and Solidarity

Any discussion regarding the pervasive nature of morality is bound to be problematic and exclusionary when it fails to recognise the existing state of things that have always-already been there. Since morality is aimed at projecting an end or a goal, its normative presupposition is teleological insofar as it aims to direct the actions of those who subscribe to its normativity. Institutions assume a greater role in collecting and collating normative ascent towards a common goal of individuals living in a social ecology and economy. By social ecology, I am referring to the capacity of individuals to live amongst each other in a cohesive fashion that compliments singular differences as well as similarities. As a social economy, we also see the dynamics of how differences and similarities play a role in the transactions and roles that individuals demonstrate in order to achieve their individualised goals and ends.

Institutions, despite their intrinsic connection with morality, also bear the burden of creating and propagating social pathologies that malign and oppress individuals intentionally or unintentionally. Social pathologies occur whenever a norm comes into conflict with the individualities of persons acting as moral agents for their own intents and purposes. As moral agents, individuals ought to be able to exercise their freedom and self-determination as they concretise a social norm. However, in a social context, it is also common and prevalent to have moral agents enacting norms that are contrary to their own sense of freedom and self-determination because of the historical and circumstantial factors that are already in place.<sup>2</sup> Institutions, as enforcers and propagators of norms, must live up to the challenging task of coping with immanent and transcendent factors that inform and transform the practices of individuals under such institutions. Since institutions exercise a certain degree of rational ascent from their historicity and establishment, they should enforce their teleological purpose of achieving a sense of social cohesion on individuals who are considered rational agents. The problem with individuals, however, is that they have rationally made self-intentions and interests that may run contrary to the intentions of the institutions. Thus, the burden of institutions is to perform a delicate act of balancing the intentions of the

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<sup>2</sup> At this point, we are reminded of events such as the Nuremberg trials wherein the conflict between self-determination and duty becomes conflated when given orders by a superior. This issue of obedience and its ethical conflation has been explored in the Milgram experiment (Milgram 1963) as well as the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo 2007).



state for the purposes of social cohesion while, at the same time, maintaining a recognitive stance towards individuals who are under them to give way to the latter's own rational self-made intentions and interests.

The teleological trajectories of normativity hinges on their ability to accept and generate their own critique as well as maintain a sense of receptivity to individuals within institutions. The danger of institutionalised normativity is the inability of the institution to maintain continuity from the institution's normative assent towards the individual assent of subjectivities insofar as the intended telos of norms are forgotten, obscured, or lost. Honneth's theory of recognition enjoys a veritable position of articulating this nuanced character of social relations within institutions and individuals because it offers a balanced perspective of social analysis. Honneth begins with his critique of existing cultural and social critique to understand the basic normative underpinnings of critical theory.

Throughout its tradition, critical theory has been in pursuit of providing a working description of the normative conditions of social practices in society, not only to provide a theoretical understanding of social pathologies but also to guide social research in establishing a viable immanent critique that leads to emancipation. Bolaños notes that there are three normative claims in critical theory (Bolaños 2016): (1) the first one asserts that *reality is social*; (2) the second claim is that critical theory works towards an emancipatory framework that pursues the abolition of slavery and social domination; (3) the third and last claim asserts that within this scope, critical theory's impulse for emancipation is not limited towards proletarian sensibilities (Bolaños 2016, 85). I argue that Honneth, despite his somewhat conservative take on this tradition of critical theory, is also guided by these three normative claims. In the *Critique of Power*, Honneth pursues the normative issue of critical theory by investigating the normative intentions of theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Foucault, and Habermas in their intention to understand the relationship between societies and social domination. Honneth is convinced that the approaches of Foucault and Habermas offer an alien appropriation of critical theory that ventures away from Adorno's model of the critique of the domination of nature. Adorno, argues Honneth, failed to provide a model wherein social interaction and social integration becomes possible as an action-theoretic paradigm of "struggle" and "mutual understanding" or intersubjectivity (*CoP* xii). Through this analysis, Honneth provides a strong theoretical foundation for *Kampf um Anerkennung* or "struggle for recognition" as a model of social relations in his succeeding work.

Honneth's theoretical focus moves towards the direction of articulating Hegel's Jena writings, his reconstruction of Hegel's abandoned project of recognition in the form of struggle found its articulation in Herbert Mead's philosophical anthropology (*SFR* 11-130). Honneth's aim was to salvage the intersubjectivist aspect of Hegel's mode of socialisation with the intent of depicting social struggles as motivated by the possibility of recognition. Through his reading of Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Mead, Honneth underlines the teleological intent of social solidarity in the struggle that occurs between individuals and institutions. The intention of solidarity in institutions and social struggles characterises the need to depict an intersubjectivist articulation of Hegel's notion of recognition to reconcile the trajectory of social criticism towards a dynamic and constantly shifting social reality. By going beyond the Habermasian project of depicting social relations through the grammar of communicative action, Honneth envisions a theoretical analysis and criticism by taking the perspective of experiences of social struggles that are not limited to a proceduralised form of rationality (Honneth 2007B, 25-26). With this agenda in mind, Honneth develops the theory of recognition by pointing out that struggles for recognition are always-already shaped by normative principles that are developed early on during the process of an individual's introduction to society. Through this, the question of the origin of normative values as transcendent, rational, or even innate is no longer bound to the assumption of rationality that can be seen in Kantian ethics.

The assumption of reason has been an important point of departure for many of Honneth's works. The frequency of Honneth's reference to Kantian morality as a conformist assumption of reason can be seen immediately in the first few paragraphs of most of the writings of Honneth.<sup>3</sup> While Kant's universalist sense of normativity may be the desired outcome of any given social relation, the demands of a categorical imperative, insisting on rational outcomes from individuals, require more than just an appeal to reason when reason can be defined, practiced, and observed in different ways. The rational assent to a sense of ethical sensibility implies that there is an already existing system that regulates social practices among individuals. Honneth's interest in the function of normativity in Hegel's idea of an ethical life or *Sittlichkeit* is an alternative

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<sup>3</sup> To note, Honneth usually begins his discussions with the issue of Kantian ethics as a dominant ethical theory when it comes to the understanding of rationality as a main principle of justice, autonomy, and recognition. C.f. the following works: (Honneth 2007B, 5), (*SFR*, 5), (Honneth 2007A, 129), (Honneth 1995, 271), (*FRS*, 2), and (Honneth 2014, 817).

explanation that can fill the gap left by Kantian ethics.<sup>4</sup> Not only does Honneth provide a means to explain how norms inform social practices, it also provides a perspective on how disruptions of social relations (i.e., crime) may result from the reification of norms. The identification of these disruptions of norms or “social pathologies” is an aspect of Honneth’s theoretical work that allows him to engage with the shortcomings of the Frankfurt School tradition. For example, Adorno’s critique of social pathologies and the culture industry engages with capitalism, while Marcuse criticises the one-dimensional society, and while Habermas provides a model of critique of the colonization of the lifeworld.<sup>5</sup> Honneth notes that these pathologies exemplify a defective sense of reason, which is why the necessity of establishing a reconstructive effort to put forward a theory of recognition is in order—so as to demonstrate how reason is formed in the subjective and experiential level of the individual.

Individuality plays a pivotal role in the development of Honneth’s work. In the *Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth was initially discouraged by Hegel’s progressive tone in *Phenomenology of Spirit* since the emphasis of Hegel’s Jena lectures, specifically, the idea of a struggle for recognition has been substituted with a greater emphasis on the philosophy of consciousness (*SFR* 30, also in, 63 and 145). Hegel’s progressive tone, however, should be acknowledged as a consequence of Hegel’s focus on a possible realisation of the *Sittlichkeit* as a product of social interaction within a state. Honneth’s focus on the grammar and experience of struggles for recognition takes a different cue through his reading of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. In *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth pursues the path that he initially decided to abandon in his reading of Hegel. In this recent work, the progressive outcome of social institutions and their struggle with individuals become realised as a necessity for fortifying an uncoerced sense of cooperation between individuals and institutions.

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<sup>4</sup> While Kant’s universalist ethics can point moral agents towards the proper norms by appealing to their capacity for reason, the universalist appropriation of ethics has to posit a homogenous function of reason to guide everyone as if they were following a maxim for each and every person’s own end. In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant points out that the limitation of this form of ethics is that it does not guarantee that everyone else would follow the maxim of universality (Kant, 2002, 56).

<sup>5</sup> (Honneth 2007B, 22) Furthermore, Honneth notes that Adorno’s focus on the domination of nature as evinced in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* missed out the details of the “social” in society. *C.f.* (*CoP*, xii)

In the following sections, I reconstruct Honneth's articulation of freedom by tracing his original idea of social participation and cooperation in the implicit necessity of recognising freedom in the social subject. This discussion depends entirely on how Honneth articulates Hegel's notion of recognition as a decisive point in articulating the necessity of freedom when it comes conflicted with social norms, be it legal, cultural, or individual. As a scholar, Honneth draws intensively from the discussions of his predecessors from the Frankfurt School tradition. His work identifies with Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas, while at the same time drawing from a wide array of interdisciplinary theories ranging from sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Despite this, aligning Honneth's work with the tradition of critical theory seems difficult for the following reasons: (1) Against the backdrop of the emancipatory program of critical theory, Honneth's recognition theory espouses emancipation as a phase in which social domination becomes recognised and evaluated through already existing norms. Honneth's aim is to provide a critique from within the system of domination since the system already contains within it a system of recognition. (2) Recognition as the heart of Honneth's critical theory rejects the idea of a universalisable form of reason that gives norms an absolute moral foothold in institutionalising norms; it acknowledges both transcendent and immanent factors that affect the production, distribution, maintenance of norms. Honneth's approach in providing an immanent and transcendent depiction of social norms lies in his Foucaultian approach of observing social interactions with the acknowledgement of the heteronomy of individual intentions. The similarities with Foucault, however, ends where Honneth aims for the possibility of seeing such heteronomous intentions in individuals channelled through a cooperative relationship. In other words, for Honneth, there is a teleological implication that can be read within society that supports both the maintenance and adjustment of norms to accommodate individuality. A peculiar characteristic that can be noted in his work is his careful and sensitive approach in discussing the notion of *Sittlichkeit*. While Honneth mentions the concept of *Sittlichkeit* often, it is only strictly discussed as an end or goal of recognition as a sense of a good-life. As an end or goal, the Hegelian notion of the ethical life is not to be seen here as a definitive end of every society. Honneth does not clearly point this out and only until he emphasised Hegel's ethical life as realisable under the concrete teleological framework of institutions (*FRS* 59). Of further interest, here are Honneth's earlier sketches of the ethical life in the context of recognition and crime. Crime, as a point of contention, leaves us with the intimate understanding of whether the law

acts out a form of misrecognition of individuals or the individuals committing crime are in need of further integration with society. (Honneth 1988, 364). In the same essay, Honneth concludes in the last paragraph that Hegel designates this breach of social relations as a necessary means for emancipating the individual towards a formal manifestation of freedom. Through this, revolution becomes possible when the normative principles of the law require further reconciliation as the ethical guarantor of the state (Honneth 1988, 367).

## 2. Critique of History, Power, and Critique Itself

In the *Critique of Power*, Honneth outlines the early attempt of critical theory to grasp the idea of social criticism under Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment as a domination of nature. Starting from the main thesis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer argue against the overwhelming confidence of reason that leads to the domination of nature (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, 17). As opposed to myth, enlightenment presupposes certainty at the level of science without considering the unpredictable and probabilistic limitation of reason. The consequence of enlightenment thinking puts human reason at risk because it assumes the predictability and controllability of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that:

Myth becomes enlightenment and nature mere objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator of human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their "in-itself" becomes "for him." In their transformation, the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature. Neither it nor the unity of the subject was presupposed by magical incantation. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, 6)

The quasi-historical development of enlightenment, for Adorno and Horkheimer, traces itself from the time of myths to the age of industrial revolution. Humanity originally treated nature as if it were some divine entity with which it engages in mimetic dialogue. Myth encouraged a different relation between man and nature; it involved man treating nature as if it were a force that one can dialogue with, rather than simply a tool or an object that caters to man's will. Man communed with nature through *mimesis*, an act that is attuned to the very principle of *aporetic* acceptance of the limited knowability or non-identical character of nature. With the

age of enlightenment, humanity started to forget the limitations of knowledge to the extent that nature itself became simply an instrument of man's will.

The social issue at stake here with the domination of nature is how its domain became extended to human social reality. Much as we can harness the power of steam, water, and electricity to obey our whim, human enlightenment is an analogy of the domination of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer's social concern was with the predominant attitude of the enlightenment towards how society can be directed towards human reason. Through faith in the certainty of enlightenment, history can attest to the atrocity of social domination from the horrors of the condition of labour during the industrial age of Capitalism to (but not limited to) the genocide of race in the concentration camps of Auschwitz. Honneth is interested in Adorno-Horkheimer's analysis because the critique of the domination of nature is related to how normative expectations in society can lead not only to the possibility of critique but also to that of emancipative action. Horkheimer's aim during the 1930's was to take a traditional account of the sciences as a basis for social research; the goal was to deduce theoretical statements and apply them to empirically observable realities (*CoP* 5). The failings of social theory during the time of Horkheimer was, according to Honneth, based on the same principle that haunted the theories of the early Marx, which is the inability to account for the social process in which domination was able to take place due to the focus on labour and production (*CoP* 7). Horkheimer was criticised for the failure of his materialistic critique to include the experience of the struggle for recognition as an essential conduit of autonomous change and social reproduction (*CoP* 17). Honneth's intention here is to provide a convincing case through which he could argue for the foundation of critical theory through the emancipative discourse of social struggles. The undeveloped potential of working out a social theory that acknowledges social struggles as a commitment to avoid prolonged strains of domination is seen through Honneth's further dealings with the complex history of critical theory.

Honneth makes further comparisons with the works of Foucault and Habermas as a missed potential in the disclosure of social struggles. One can observe that Honneth's argumentative approach towards the critique of critical theory is aimed at the development of intersubjectivity as an emancipative source of social cohesion within the already existing and established systems of socialisation. The potential that was missed in Foucault and Habermas was the development of a concrete analysis of