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The greatness and limits of the social: Axel Honneth's philosophical journey

ABSTRACT. — *This article retraces and discusses the philosophical journey of Axel Honneth, from his groundbreaking book The Struggle for Recognition up to his recent essays Freedom's Right and The Idea of Socialism. In the first section, I examine Honneth's programmatic concept of social pathology in relation to Ernst Cassirer's idea of the secularization of theodicy (i.e., the attribution of responsibility for human suffering to society) and to the Enlightenment legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the second section, after assessing Honneth's position in the tradition of critical theory, I analyze his philosophical views, identifying two different theoretical frameworks in Honneth's work: on one hand, the theory of the struggle for recognition; on the other hand, the more recent theory of social freedom. While the first is grounded in a formal and allegedly universal anthropology, the second draws upon the Hegelian doctrine of the ethical life and develops a historicist and internalist model of reconstructive social critique. Finally, in the third section, I critically address the "divinization of the social" entailed by Honneth's project of a critique of social pathologies, and argue that Honneth seems to place excessive trust in the normative power of intersubjectivity.*

RÉSUMÉ. — *Dans cet article, je retrace et discute l'itinéraire philosophique d'Axel Honneth, depuis La Lutte pour la reconnaissance jusqu'à ses récents essais Le Droit de la liberté et L'Idée du socialisme. Dans la première partie, le concept programmatique de pathologie sociale sera mis en relation avec celui de « sécularisation de la théodicée » formulé par Ernst Cassirer – à savoir, l'attribution de la responsabilité de la souffrance humaine à la société – et avec l'héritage des Lumières légué par Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Dans la deuxième partie, une fois précisée la position occupée par Honneth dans la tradition de la théorie critique francfortoise, j'aborderai ses propositions théoriques ; je distinguerai notamment deux modèles normatifs correspondant à deux phases successives de la pensée honnethienne : la lutte pour la reconnaissance d'une part, qui s'appuie sur une anthropologie formelle à valeur universelle ; et la théorie de la liberté sociale d'autre part, qui réactualise la doctrine hégélienne de l'éthicité en s'appuyant sur un modèle historique et internaliste de critique sociale reconstructive. Dans la troisième partie, je me pencherai sur la « divinisation du social » inhérente au projet d'une critique des pathologies sociales, ainsi que sur la confiance excessive qu'Honneth semble accorder à la force normative de l'intersubjectivité.*

Prologue to Davos

The road to Frankfurt passes through Davos, the village in the Swiss Alps that is the setting for Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. So let us make a short detour into the lobby of the Berghof on one of those Sundays during the Belle Époque when the sanatorium patients are waiting for the mail to arrive. Ludovico Settembrini is beginning one of his pedagogical sermons in the hope of distracting Hans Castorp, who, desperately in love with Madame Chauchat, has lost all control over himself. To combat the unhealthy charms of the Russian beauty, the Italian humanist extols the program of a humanitarian institution, the League for the Organization of Progress, which has set itself the collective task of compiling a huge encyclopedic set of volumes entitled *The Sociology of Suffering*. This work, the ambition of which is to heal all the miseries of humanity, is based upon two fundamental convictions. First, that evil can be confronted and defeated by knowledge: "the actual enemy is the unknown";¹ second, that individual ills are largely socially determined: "almost all individual suffering is due to disease of the social organism."² Together these two intuitions delimit the field of a new discipline, which Settembrini, in an expression surprisingly close to one of the fundamental theoretical concepts of Axel Honneth, names *Soziologische Pathologie*, "sociological pathology":

Very well; this is the object of the *Sociological Pathology*. It will be issued in some twenty folio volumes, treating every species of human suffering, from the most personal and intimate to the great collective struggles arising from the conflicting interests of classes and nations; it will, in short, [. . .] in every case take as its norm the dignity and happiness of mankind, and seek to indicate the measures and remedies calculated to remove the cause of each deviation.³

Although this excerpt is based on passages from *Soziologie der Leiden* (1914) by the Munich sociologist and psychologist Franz Müller-Lyer, Mann's use of the quotation goes far beyond mere pastiche. Indeed, it is a philosophical dramatization in the style of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought, which, following the example of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, often staged spiritual conflicts by embodying them in philosophical "figures" such as Hegel's "Unhappy Consciousness," Nietzsche's "Christianity" and "resentment," and Adorno and Horkheimer's "myth" and "reason." Within the symbolism of *The Magic Mountain*, the notion of sociological pathology, which brings together in one

1. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (London: Vintage, 1999), 243.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 233–34.

causal knot the concept of society and that of suffering or *pathos*, represents the figure of the *Aufklärung*—that is to say, of Western reason and the humanist project of emancipation that is its product. It can then be invoked against the obscurantist threat represented by all those characters in the novel—doctors, psychoanalysts, patients, and, of course, the Jesuit Naphta, Settembrini’s arch-enemy—who rally to the “Eastern” front. In the above-mentioned episode we can identify two opposite interpretations of human suffering, and thus two antithetical versions of the philosophy of evil, which reappear in most of the dialogues and digressions on the theme of illness that run through the whole novel. The first, which Mann associates with the East and with Schopenhauer’s philosophy, attributes evil to irrational and imperceptible metaphysical causes of which the individual is a victim and over which they have no control. The second, the progeny of humanist civilization and the Enlightenment, links evil instead to its socio-historical origins, considering it as the effect of a contingent deviancy of human action, which can be explained by reason and reformed by praxis. From this latter point of view, suffering is understood as an anthropological and socio-historical, rather than metaphysical, phenomenon—which means that the critique of society has a therapeutic purpose, both on the level of theoretical knowledge and that of political engagement.

Coincidentally, five years after the publication of *The Magic Mountain*, the great 1929 debate between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger took place in Davos. What was at stake in this debate, which crystallized around the interpretation of Kant’s thought, was in many ways similar to Mann’s imaginary duel between Settembrini and Naphta: an epochal assessment of the role played by reason and humanist civilization in the destiny of the West. Following the debate, in order to elaborate a philosophical alternative to the Heideggerian existential analytic, in his essays on the history of philosophy written during the early 1930s Cassirer embarked upon an attempt to salvage humanist values. During this period, in texts substantively reminiscent of Settembrini’s discourse, he put forward the idea that the vocation of the Enlightenment project was to “secularize theodicy.”⁴ This then suggests that human suffering is not to be interpreted by recourse to theological principles such as the doctrine of original sin or the idea of divine providence, but is rather to be interrogated through the mechanisms of the social order considered in its totality. The Job of modernity can no longer raise his eyes to heaven and ask God the reason for his suffering, but must turn

4. See Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951); Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. Peter Gay (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1989). Both essays date from 1932. On the Davos debate, see Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) (on *The Magic Mountain*, 87–88).

to worldly historical reality, and challenge sociologists, historians, and philosophers of culture and politics to answer this question. Experts on society can now claim competence in matters of justice and morality that were once the province of theologians. Thus the space of the social supplants the transcendent world as the etiological and therapeutic horizon of human suffering: if the cause of evil is social (“I blame society,” as the saying goes—a saying that popular culture inherited from this modern turn in philosophy), then the remedy for this evil must also be sought in the social sphere (here too we find the echo of a maxim inspired by Enlightenment thought: “the cure is the disease”).⁵ Rousseau’s great philosophical revolution, Cassirer finally adds, takes place in the theories contained in the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*: the cause of social injustice is not to be sought in transcendence, in God’s designs, or in some supposed perversion of human nature that occurred in prehistoric or extra-historic times, but rather *in history*—that is to say, within the very process of civilization itself. Evil is now imputed to a new subject, and a collective one; no longer the isolated individual, but *society as a whole*:

That is Rousseau’s solution of the problem of theodicy—and with it he had indeed placed the problem on completely new ground. He had carried it beyond the realm of metaphysics and placed it in the center of ethics and politics. With this act he gave it a stimulus which continues to work unabated even today. All contemporary social struggles are still moved and driven by this original stimulus. They are rooted in that consciousness of the responsibility of society which Rousseau was the first to possess and which he implanted in all posterity.⁶

And here we find ourselves on the threshold of the thought of Axel Honneth, who, in his 1994 essay entitled “Pathologies of the Social,” which may be considered a manifesto of the first phase of his thought, presents Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* as being the inaugural moment of modern social philosophy, which would be based on this new conception of the individual’s historical responsibility and praxis.⁷ But before undertaking a full examination of this essay, we must first retrace the last stretch of the road to Frankfurt, the essential turning point of

5. On this other principal characteristic of Enlightenment culture, see Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise, or, the Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). On the theodicy of the Enlightenment, see also Odo Marquard, *Farewell to Matters of Principle: Philosophical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) and *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Bronislaw Baczko, *Job, mon ami: Promesses du bonheur et fatalité du mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

6. Cassirer, *Question of Rousseau*, 76.

7. Axel Honneth, “Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy,” in David Rasmussen, ed., *The Handbook of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 369–98.

which was the transatlantic exile of German intellectuals fleeing the Nazi regime. Without taking into account the extreme figure of the negative that is condensed in the very event of the Holocaust, capable of destroying all confidence in the Enlightenment project, it is impossible to fully grasp the value system implicit in the concept of social pathology. For the representatives of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, subscribing to Cassirer's humanist optimism had become unthinkable, given the experience of the tragic events of the twentieth century. It is this refusal that provides the context for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a catastrophist denunciation in which Adorno and Horkheimer, through the development of a pessimistic philosophy of history—understood as a process governed by the transcendent forces of reason and myth—propose a renewed version of the metaphysical approach to the question of evil. This disavowal of *Aufklärung* and its conception of historical responsibility persisted even during the period when they were repatriated to Germany, giving rise among the Frankfurt School to a form of intellectual resistance that nevertheless relegitimized some of the values of humanist and bourgeois civilization, such as the integrity of life and the autonomy of the individual. In Horkheimer's final reflection, "Critical Theory Yesterday and Today," published in 1969, we read the following:

Two theories of religion are decisive for today's Critical Theory, albeit in modified form. The first is what a great atheist philosopher [Arthur Schopenhauer] called the greatest intuition of all time: the doctrine of original sin. We may be able to be happy, but every moment of happiness is paid for by the suffering of countless other human or animal creatures. Today's culture is the result of a terrible past. [. . .] We must all associate our joy and happiness with a sadness, an awareness that we have participated in sin.⁸

By taking up the idea of original sin, Horkheimer renounces the spirit of the secularization of theodicy and adopts a vision of sin and suffering—not just human but universal—which, from a polemical point of view, is as one with the anti-Enlightenment tendency of thought which Mann, in *The Magic Mountain*, also associates with Schopenhauer's philosophy. The attempt to reconnect the task of critical theory with the legacy of the Enlightenment would therefore fall to successive generations of Frankfurt philosophers.

8. Max Horkheimer, "Kritische Theorie gestern und heute," in *Gesellschaft im Übergang* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972). This text comes from two lectures given in September 1969 at the Cini Foundation in Venice. The second doctrine that Horkheimer borrows from theology is that of the impossibility of the representation of God, the absolute good. Translator's note: Our translation. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

The critique of social pathologies: A new figure of the dialectic of reason

For Honneth, who between 2001 and 2018 was director of the Institute for Social Research, “home” of the Frankfurt School, social philosophy is understood as the legitimate heir of “critical theory,” which is not to say that the concepts of the latter were adopted without qualification. The concept of “critical theory” was introduced by Horkheimer in order to distinguish it from “traditional theory.”⁹ Honneth’s relation to the idea of critique inherited from the first generation of Frankfurt thinkers is twofold. While he embraces the reflexive dimension and the emancipatory aims inherent in this idea of critique (critical theory must be aware of its social and material determinations, and tends to challenge the status quo), he readily rejects the polemical anti-rationalism typified by *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This new project for social philosophy, based upon a new and positive conception of *Aufklärung*, renews the question of the normative, in doing so it sets in motion once again the dialectical process of reason. Remember that, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, this process had been brought to closure by the definitive reversal of reason into myth and of the conditions of emancipation and freedom into tools of enslavement and power.

From this point of view, Honneth follows in the footsteps of Habermas, who initiated the break that produced the second-generation Frankfurt School;¹⁰ and there are several reasons for conceiving this new research lineage as a continuation of the Enlightenment project. First because it aims to rehabilitate reason, refusing to reduce it to a mere instrumental subjective faculty, and reevaluates its “objective” capacity to produce norms and to propose ends; second, because it seeks to return to a certain idea of progress, albeit a more modest one, reworked as a result of the historical experiences of the twentieth century; and lastly

9. On the concept of critical theory, and in particular on the idea of “critique as a profession,” see Enrico Donaggio’s preface to *La Scuola di Francoforte. La storia e i testi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), ix–xlvi. There is an extensive bibliography on the history of the Institute. I will limit myself to mentioning Rolf Wiggershaus’s great synthesis *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), Martin Jays’s now classic *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Fred Rush, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Jean-Marc Durand-Gasselin, *L’École de Francoforte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

10. See Joel Anderson, “Situating Axel Honneth in the Frankfurt School Tradition,” in *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays. With a Reply by Axel Honneth*, edited by Danielle Petherbridge (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 31–57. An excellent introduction to Honneth’s thought can be found in Christopher F. Zurn, *Axel Honneth, A Critical Theory of the Social* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015) and for an analytical and critical interpretation, see Jean-Philippe Deranty, *Beyond Communication: A Critical Study of Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). In French, see in particular the work of Emmanuel Renault, who interprets and develops Honneth’s theory from his own original perspective. See also Louis Carré, *Axel Honneth, le droit de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Michalon, 2013).

because it wishes to restore autonomy and legitimacy to the social, challenging Adorno and Horkheimer's tendency to think of relations between human beings exclusively on the model of the control of nature—that is, as relations of reification, domination, and exploitation.¹¹ The opportunity to provide a new foundation for emancipatory ideals is based on the potential normative resources of society itself, in so far as the “distortion” of social processes that lies at the root of pathological effects—essentially due to the gradual colonization of the life-world by capitalism—can be corrected in such a way that those social processes will once more be capable of yielding validity and understanding. According to Habermas, such an approach was foreign to the first-generation Frankfurt School, who, in seeking to escape the impasse of reason, turned to precisely those very spheres that *fall short of* and *lie beyond* the social, such as God (the totally Other, the unrepresentable), Nature (toward which the aesthetic impulse of Adornian *mimesis* is directed), or the individual (as Kierkegaard understands it, i.e., as a value irreducible to society).

The first point upon which Honneth differs from Habermas is the way in which he conceives of the normative potential that resides in social experiences. Whereas for Habermas these experiences are communicative, they are more clearly practical for Honneth, who reevaluates both the role of reason and that of affects (capable of generating agreement and solidarity on the one hand, as in the case of love, respect, esteem, sympathy, and empathy; or, on the other hand, capable of humiliating personal dignity, as in the case of contempt and disrespect).¹² Honneth also differs on two other significant points, though: he claims a primacy for *negative* social experiences, and in particular takes as a starting point for his theory the moral injuries experienced by ordinary people as disturbing and unjust: it is the experience of negativity that triggers critique, understood as both denunciation and struggle.¹³ And he reconciles the great questions of justice with the question of an *ethics of happiness and a fulfilled life*. Habermas, in demanding that philosophy limit itself to the examination of problems of social justice—and thus placing the question of justice before the question of the good—remains Kantian. But Honneth goes further: he manages to reconcile Kant's moral preoccupations with the ethical concerns of Rousseau and Hegel by attributing to social philosophy

11. See Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

12. See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

13. On this point, see Emmanuel Renault, *Reconnaissance, conflit, domination* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2017), Introduction. Renault traces this primacy of negativity back to the Adornian heritage, with Honneth having abandoned it during the second phase of his thought, which is more focused on the question of social integration.

the additional task of questioning the conditions of human self-realization as well as the essential criteria of the so-called “good” life.¹⁴

To understand this gesture of Honneth’s, we must begin with the clinical imaginary, which serves as a backdrop to the concept of social pathology. Society, according to Honneth, is like a sick body that, with the right diagnosis and therapies, can be treated, while the task of the philosopher-critic is that of a doctor tackling a thorny methodological problem: the identification of a pathology in an organism requires a prior idea of what the healthy condition of the organism looks like; it is impossible to diagnose a disease without presupposing the normal functioning of the body in question. This principle of medical practice, rather debatable when applied to mental rather than physical health, becomes all the more uncertain when the pathology-physiology couplet is related to the field of society in order to judge its practices and institutions: what exactly would a “healthy” state of a social form consist in? How is it possible to determine such a state if we take into account not only the obvious relativity of cultural values, but also the mistrust that Foucault taught us to maintain toward anyone who claims to define a criterion of social normality? And even assuming that such a diagnostic criterion exists and can be applied without leading to aporias, how can the social critic get a hold of it? How can it be supplied with a solid foundation and justified?

The specificity of Honneth’s position becomes clearer when it is placed on the spectrum of contemporary debate. In an essay that returns to the question of critique a few years after “Pathologies of the Social,” Honneth begins by developing Michael Walzer’s well-known distinction between prophetic criticism, inventive criticism, and hermeneutic criticism—the first two are also referred to as “external,” the third “internal”¹⁵—and siding with the third type of criticism: the internal, immanent method has the advantage of not using normative criteria, which, in the context of social subjects, could be perceived as impositions of a

14. See in particular “Pathologies of the Social”; *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and “Die Normativität der Sittlichkeit. Hegels Lehre als Alternative zur Ethik Kants,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 62 (2014), 787–800.

15. See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), in particular chapter 1. Prophetic criticism proceeds by revelation (in a corrupt world, the social critic becomes a prophet of an ideal sphere of values to which he has immediate access), or, from a more secularized perspective, by discovery (as with the principles of natural law or utilitarianism); inventive criticism, which Honneth prefers to call “constructive,” creates its own principles in an architectonic process, as in Rawls or Habermas, and uses them to criticize actual reality (as with the first type of criticism, the criteria are valid whatever the time and place, but they do not come from some empyrean realm, and are not revealed by God or nature—they are instituted by humans); finally, hermeneutic criticism in Walzer, which Honneth calls “reconstructive” criticism, proceeds immanently, drawing its criteria from the tradition to be judged, from its “inhabited moral world”: a form of life is evaluated according to the ideals it has itself produced over the course of its history.

paternalistic or even colonializing nature. Indeed, it is the normative intuitions already familiar to social subjects, the values and ideals specific to their culture, that constitute the foundations of the immanent method. Rather than a prophet or an architect, here the critic is a *hermeneutic mediator* who assists and promotes the process of self-interpretation and self-criticism of their patient. Both Walzer and Honneth thus adopt an “analytic” model of criticism; but where Walzer conceives of criticism as an ordinary social activity and recognizes no privileged role for the intellectual in the internal interpretation of values, Honneth confers upon the philosopher a particular task that could be considered the social equivalent of the psychoanalytic stance.

I do not think it is forcing Honneth’s position to suggest that his idea of immanent criticism consists in a completely original translation, into the social field, of the therapeutic model of Freudian analysis (or more precisely, of a certain unorthodox interpretation of this model). During the critical process, the philosopher is confronted with the pathologies of society in the same way as the psychoanalyst is confronted with the neuroses and psychoses of their patients. In both cases, the sick subject remains the protagonist of the therapeutic process, while the therapist limits themselves to *guiding the patient through the self-reflexive process* and asking the right questions, but without suggesting any answers, so as not to impose an external reading of the phenomena. Internal criticism helps the subject to understand themselves, to enlighten themselves as to their own goals, to undo the knots that hinder their will, and thereby to “reappropriate their freedom.”¹⁶ Honneth also places great importance upon “reconstruction” (*Rekonstruktion*)—that is, the essentially narrative moment of recalling and examining the past, which he likes to Hegelianize as a “turning back on oneself.”

16. See in particular Axel Honneth, “Decentered Autonomy: The Subject after the Fall,” in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 181–94; and “Aneignung von Freiheit. Freuds Konzeption der Individuellen Selbstbeziehung,” in Axel Honneth, *Pathologien der Vernunft: Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 157–79. For Honneth’s largely Hegelian Freud, the subject has an innate vocation to freedom, and makes the work of reflexivity and memory the basis of the relationship to self. The Freudian model, however, corrects the Hegelian model to the extent that it makes the transparency of consciousness more opaque and “decentralizes” subjective autonomy. On the role of Freud in the tradition of critical theory and in Honneth’s thought, see the work of Joel Whitebook, including “The Marriage of Marx and Freud. Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, 74–102; “Omnipotence or Fusion? A Conversation between Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook,” *Constellations* 23, no. 2 (2016), 170–79. Whitebook criticizes Honneth for neutralizing one of Freud’s central ideas, the conception of the individual as an egoistic and asocial being, and for watering down the most pessimistic aspects of psychoanalysis by resorting to the tradition of object relations. Indeed, the philosophy of recognition is to a large extent based on Donald Winnicott’s theories, which in particular inspired Honneth’s reflections on love and the positive role of groups. See in particular Axel Honneth, “Postmodern Identity and Object-Relations Theory: On the Seeming Obsolescence of Psychoanalysis,” *Philosophical Explorations* 2, no. 3 (1999), 225–42.

Although this seems to reinforce our analogy, a crucial difference nevertheless remains between social philosophy and psychoanalysis: while the patient voluntarily turns to the analyst for help in healing, it is the social critic who, on his or her own initiative, assumes the role of the diagnostician and undertakes to examine society. An initiative that, not being the subject of any explicit or clearly identifiable request, may risk being perceived as precisely the typical attitude of the condescending father or nagging Jiminy Cricket that “internal criticism” was supposed to leave behind. The concept of social pathology thus leaves open a whole series of questions that are at the center of the current debate on social criticism.¹⁷ It remains to be explained, for example, how the relationship between philosopher-therapist and social “patient” is articulated in practice. Since society cannot go to the analyst’s office, since it lacks the individual’s intentionality and agency, all the data relating to its suffering and normative claims must be interpreted and transmitted by other instances of representation and mediation.

In Honneth’s theory, this task of representation is left to the social sciences—sociology, psychology, and history (if ethnology and cultural anthropology are excluded, it is probably because a parallel with other cultures would risk going beyond the limits of the internalist model). Their investigations serve to forestall the speculative temptation always latent in the Hegelian paradigm adopted by Honneth: charged with providing an account of past and present social transformations, they also require the critic to base their diagnoses upon empirical reconstructions rather than personal intuitions. *The social sciences are thus the indispensable medium for society’s critical self-reflection.* The lesson that the Frankfurt Institute has imparted to contemporary social philosophy is of inestimable value: it is reflected in the ability to coordinate the various disciplines in a fruitful dialogue between theoretical and empirical knowledge. To further extend the clinical metaphor it could be said that, in Honneth’s conception of things, social scientists play the role of medical specialists, while the function of the philosopher, who occupies the position of the generalist, is to challenge them and

17. Pragmatist philosophy proposes the most democratic approach: it removes the critic from their paternalistic function of showing social subjects that they do not know what they are doing, as unwitting victims of a system of domination that reproduces itself through their actions. It is no coincidence that the most recent theoretical proposals return to this tradition of thought, which, at the antipodes of Adorno’s elitism, recast criticism from below, conceiving it as an ordinary practice carried out by social actors. See in particular Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), and Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). See also the conversation between Boltanski and Honneth, “Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory? Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth in Conversation with Robin Celikates,” in Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the “Pragmatic Sociology of Critique”* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 561–89.

then work with them to build a complete general diagnosis.¹⁸ Social movements also have an important role to play, and the new critique sees them as having a twofold task: to represent the protests and demands of the indignant, the suffering, and the excluded, and to embody the impetus for historical progress. History, according to Honneth, does not evolve by virtue of a teleological impulse of its own, but advances thanks to the concrete struggles of social groups. This motif, more Marxian than Hegelian, which is already placed center-stage in the title of Honneth's first major work, *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992), seems, however, to have lost its force over time. For in *Freedom's Right* and the essays of the same period, it is the objective spirit incorporated in institutions and mores that is presented as the true actor of the historical process; and at the same time, hidden beneath the concept of rationalization, there reappears a strain of philosophy of history free of social conflict.¹⁹ We shall come back to this point.

In parallel with this development, Honneth's idea of criticism has also undergone a significant shift over time. In a first phase, his normative model was clearly of universalist orientation, proposing a return to a formal ethics based on an equally formal, "weak" concept of philosophical anthropology. As well as denouncing the forms of alienation—those negative social phenomena that stand in the way of free human self-realization—the critic must also try to define the conditions of possibility favorable to a fulfilled existence. While these preconditions do not say anything about the concrete ends that a form of life might pursue, nor claim to offer a univocal and substantial definition of human nature, they are nevertheless indispensable in fostering the development of the autonomy required in order to determine such ends. This formal ethical criterion is expressed in the concept of recognition, an ideal intersubjective condition that enables each person to acquire those basic capacities—self-confidence, respect, and self-esteem—that are indispensable for free self-determination.²⁰ In "Pathologies of the Social," comparing the merits of this ethico-anthropological approach with those of the contextual alternative, Honneth drew attention to the fact that a strategy with a historically relative foundation would risk jeopardizing

18. Honneth has shown all the richness of this method in the reconstructive parts of his great systematic work *Freedom's Right*. For a conception of the relationship between philosophy and social sciences comparable on many points to that of Honneth, see Bruno Karsenti, *D'une philosophie à l'autre: Les sciences sociales et la politique des modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), chapter 1.

19. In addition to the works cited, see the essays "Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 22, no. 2 (2001), 3–12; *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and "Die Normativität der Sittlichkeit."

20. See "Pathologies of the Social," 393–94. This first model has affinities with Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian theory (the so-called "capability approach" developed in collaboration with Amartya Sen), and especially with Charles Taylor's philosophical anthropology.

the classical ambition of social philosophy, which seeks to make evaluations according to criteria that transcend their immediate context.²¹ In later writings, however, this ambition gives way to an ever more pronounced localism, while the historical and especially the “objective” dimension of moral ideals becomes more prominent. Indeed, social criticism proposes to reclaim these ideals by “making explicit” the norms that are materially embodied in the fabric of concrete practices and institutions. It is from this perspective that the concept of ethics ends up absorbing the concept of recognition, which no longer aspires to provide a grammar applicable to many cultures, but is part of a historical project of the “reconstruction” of Western democratic ethics inspired by Hegel’s philosophy of right. Thus, in the essays that develop the questions addressed in *Freedom’s Right*, the concept of *Anerkennung* no longer designates a universalist formal ethic, but the specific condition of the Western *Sittlichkeit* that allows social subjects—*modern subjects only*, and only within *modern institutions*—to conceive of themselves as both authors and recipients of moral norms. It is up to the philosopher to reconstruct and restore legitimacy to the system of normative practices by reconnecting them with their ideal origins and promoting their full realization, still hampered by obstacles and contradictions.

“Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation”: this is the phrase with which Honneth sums up the legacy of the Frankfurt School,²² at the same time identifying the task of critical theory with the idea of “reconstruction”: the norms that are foundational for the evaluations of our forms of life are already provided by the mores according to which we live. The risk of teleologism, still considerable in the idealistic model, is clearly reduced by what Honneth calls the Nietzschean-Foucauldian “genealogical reservation.” Social criticism must always bear in mind two things: first, that between an ideal and its realization there is always a hiatus, the possibility of a drift or distortion, and second, that even the values that seem most noble can also serve as instruments of domination and exploitation. This reservation, a kind of precautionary principle introduced into the Enlightenment project, unlike Nietzsche’s use of genealogy, does not delegitimize the normative competency of reason: critique is neither reduced to a deconstructive operation nor to the demystification of power relations disguised as norms, because its capacity to make progress toward ideal objectives is formally safeguarded. At the same time, however, Honneth seems to be moderating the emancipatory impulse, since he admits that it is impossible to produce the

21. “Pathologies of the Social,” 394.

22. Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Reservation. On the Idea of ‘Criticism’ in the Frankfurt School.” On Honneth’s assessment of the Frankfurt tradition, see also the essays collected in Axel Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

radically new either in thought or in praxis. Only existing reality can provide criticism, conceived as a reconstruction of the past and a “self-reflection,” with the criteria by which to evaluate that same reality. These ideals can no doubt be rectified, revitalized from the source, reactualized. But there remains the risk, for the principle of critique, of being trapped in a stifling circular operation. Indeed, this approach leaves two persistent impressions. First, that of a domination, still very much present, of the inexorable law of reality (even conceived in its left-wing Hegelian version—as a rational, positive, and above all dialectically open process). And second, that of seeing the demise, following that of the transcendent claims of prophetic critique and constructive critique, of those utopian impulses that, in reaction to an unacceptable reality, inspired the “dialectical imagination” of the first wave of critical theory.

Heaven is other people: From recognition to social freedom

The conception of modern theodicy, namely the “sociodicy” drawn from the philosophy of the Enlightenment upon which the concept of social pathology is based, presupposes a theory of secularization; and on this point the innovation of the moderns is twofold. It consists first in approaching the question of suffering and happiness by attributing to “society” a set of competences that previously, for Christian theology, were divine prerogatives. It is then expressed more specifically in the project of taking over the mortgaging of salvation, a legacy of the Christian religion.²³ If we take into account this process of the sacralization or divinization of the social—which reverses the trajectory of Feuerbach’s religious alienation and thus comes into proximity with the thinking of many modern authors including Hegel and Durkheim—it is not difficult to understand why the question of recognition has become the keystone not only of Honneth’s philosophy but also of many modern social theories. One of the main prerogatives of the Christian God is that of *judgment*, that extraordinary power to assess the value of the existence of human beings and to sentence them to salvation or damnation. This theological motif—which modern philosophy largely inherited from the Augustinian doctrine of justification and self-love—has a secular equivalent in

23. For this notion of the “mortgage” in relation to modern secularization and modern self-affirmation (*Selbstbehauptung*), of which the humanist values and ideals of the Enlightenment can be seen as a development, I draw upon the work of Hans Blumenberg, in particular his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). According to Blumenberg, secularization does not consist in the transmission of the same doctrines from the Middle Ages to Modernity, but in the mortgaging of the unanswered questions that the declining era passed on to its successor.

those theories that, reasoning on the level of historical immanence, demonstrate that the individual is dependent on social judgment, and attribute the “power of recognition”—that is, the power to decide the importance of a human being and to confer meaning upon the existence of each person—to the figure of the Other. Indeed, the capitalization of “Other” by many twentieth-century authors only serves to highlight the essentially theological matrix of the problem.

Pierre Bourdieu has quite rightly insisted upon this point in a chapter of the *Pascalian Meditations* where he unhesitatingly presents the question of recognition as the social equivalent of the theological problem of *justification*:

It is the question of the *legitimacy* of an existence, an individual’s right to *feel justified in existing as he or she exists*; and this question is inseparably eschatological and sociological. No one can really proclaim, either to others or, above all, to himself, that “he dispenses with all justification.” And if God is dead, who can be asked to provide this justification? It has to be sought in the judgement of others, this major principle of uncertainty and insecurity, but also, and without contradiction, of certainty, assurance, consecration.²⁴

René Girard has argued in similar terms that the investment in intersubjective relations characteristic of modernity is directly proportional to the degree of secularization of historical experience: “[A]s the gods are pulled down from heaven the sacred flows over the earth”; “God is dead, man must take his place”; “Denial of God does not eliminate transcendence but diverts it from the *au-delà* to the *en-deçà*.”²⁵

One of the most emblematic testimonies of this deviated transcendence that haunts the social experience of modernity is found in the work of Rousseau, the first modern philosopher to have constructed an entire social theory on the basis of the question of recognition, which within his thought is representative of the theoretical apparatus of sociodicy: self-love, at once the historical cause of evil (human beings become corrupt at the moment of their first experiences of socialization, when they begin to seek the gaze of the other) and a remedy for that evil (In *Émile* and *The Social Contract*, the quest for respect and for the esteem of others functions to forge the new man), is simultaneously a vehicle for social

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 237. On the relation between mimetic theory and the theory of recognition, and between Girard and Bourdieu, see Christian Lazzeri, “Désir mimétique et reconnaissance,” in René Girard, *La théorie mimétique, de l’apprentissage à l’apocalypse*, ed. Charles Ramond, (Paris: PUF, 2012), 15-58, and Emanuele Antonelli, ed., *Mimesis e Anerkennung*, special issue of *Tropos* 6, no. 1 (2013). On the relation of justification to recognition, see also Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *De la justification: Les économies de la grandeur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

25. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 62, 56, 59.

alienation and social redemption.²⁶ It circumscribes the human existence in its entirety. Last but not least, recognition is that experience through which—as in the eschatological scene that opens the *Confessions*—the modern subject experiences the drama of justification, invoking the other as an oracle who is invested with the power, by their sole decree, to judge and to decide that subject's value:

Let the trumpet of the last judgment sound when it will; I shall come with this book in my hands to present myself before the Sovereign Judge. I shall say loudly, "Behold what I have done, what I have thought, what I have been." [. . .] Eternal Being, assemble around me the countless host of my fellows: let them listen to my confessions, let them shudder at my unworthiness, let them blush at my woes. Let each of them in his turn uncover his heart at the foot of Thy throne with the same sincerity; and then let a single one say to Thee, if he dares: "*I was better than that man.*"²⁷

At first glance, Honneth seems a stranger to the discourse of secularization, which is too far removed from his sociological concerns and the post-metaphysical style of his thinking. And yet, reread in the light of the notions of deviated transcendence and the mortgage of salvation, his theory acquires a very particular significance. Precisely because it is guided by the objective of total immanence, Honneth's thought tends to absolutize and divinize the social to such an extent that it could well be condensed in the dazzling formula with which Girard crystallizes the humanist project of modernity: "*men will be gods for each other.*"²⁸ Honneth's conviction, which guides his entire philosophical trajectory and even seems to have grown stronger over time, is that the heaven of the moderns is to be found here on earth, in the world of fraternity and "beautiful ethicality."

26. On recognition in Rousseau, see Barbara Carnevali, *Romanticismo e riconoscimento. Figure della coscienza in Rousseau* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), and Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008). My interpretation of Rousseau emphasizes above all the tragic dimension of self-love, its link with Augustinian theology, and its conflict with the demand for authenticity, which gives rise to an insoluble tension between individual freedom and community life. Neuhouser's reading is linked to Kant and German idealism, emphasizing that the need for recognition plays a positive, normative role that is propaedeutic for social union. This latter reading can coherently integrate Honneth's system, and indeed Honneth has used it in his recent works that aim to correct the genealogy of *The Struggle for Recognition*, where Rousseau's contribution was absent: "Untiefen der Anerkennung. Das sozialphilosophische Erbe Jean-Jacques Rousseaus," in *WestEnd. Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 9, no. 1–2 (2012), 47–64.

27. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995). On first impression, it would seem that God is the judge of this imaginary court; however, the only duty of the omniscient figure is to guarantee the sincerity of the individual's confession and of intersubjective communication: the true addressees of the demand for recognition, the real judges, are others.

28. Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 61. Girard continues: "they think they are heralding paradise but they are talking about hell." This introduces the theme of ambivalence, which is worthy of consideration, but we shall return to it later.

The good life, a healthy physiological condition that the critical philosopher would like to restore, flourishes freely in the cradle of social relations, in union and solidarity with others, when each individual benefits from the love, respect, and esteem of their fellows.²⁹

In order to appreciate the full scope of this thesis, it should be pointed out from the outset that Honneth, unlike those authors who have dealt with the problem of recognition through the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject, does not begin with the analysis of individual motives, but with the idea of the relationship, the foundation of the intersubjective model of Habermas and Mead: the point of departure is not the so-called need for recognition, Kojève's desire for desire through which the human being opens themselves up to the other, seeking their approval and esteem; rather, it lies in an interactive mechanism based on the reciprocity of roles and the link between duties and expectations.³⁰ It is to Fichte—with his doctrine of natural law—and to Hegel's Jena writings that Honneth attributes the discovery of this philosophical apparatus. And two intersubjective experiences, in his view, illustrate in exemplary manner how it works: law (in legal recognition, subjects are both encouraged to make use of their autonomy and to self-limit, accepting each other's status as free individuals) and romantic love (conceived as a delicate balance between autonomy and dependence, based upon collaboration in solidarity for common ends).³¹ The example of romantic love shows quite clearly how Honneth's theory breaks with common sense: where subjectivist thought sees two individuals required to sacrifice a part of their freedom in order to live together, recognition theory sees a reciprocal relationship, a "we" that represents a collective person, and within which committed individuals become more autonomous and free precisely because of this mutual bond and not in spite of it. In other words, the autonomous and free

29. On Honneth's "socializing-sociologizing" reduction of Hegelian ethics to the detriment of the primacy of "politics," see the critical remarks of Bernard Bourgeois, "De la richesse actuelle de la théorie hégélienne," in Yves Charles Zarka, ed., *Critique de la reconnaissance: Autour de l'œuvre d'Axel Honneth* (Milan and Paris: Mimésis, 2015), 81–88.

30. This subjectivist approach was ubiquitous in modern philosophy from Hobbes through to Rousseau, only to be sidelined after the intersubjective turn of German Idealism. In its first phase, Honneth's thought chiefly referred to Hegel's Jena writings, but later lent more importance to the *Philosophy of Right*. On his interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—whose pages on the relationship between self-awareness and recognition are very often interpreted in a subjectivist sense, as in Kojève—see Axel Honneth, "From Desire to Recognition: Hegel's Account of Human Sociality," in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 76–90.

31. On the basis of Winnicott's work, Honneth sees the relationship between mother and son as another example of this form of interaction: love is the relationship that is established when, once the symbiosis of the uterine and postnatal condition is broken, the two subjects begin to recognize one another's autonomy; and the child, who knows that he can count on affection and attention even when the mother is physically absent, becomes free by virtue of this bond.

subject of the modern liberal tradition turns out to be not so much the starting point of social relations as their product. It is probably this reversal of the logical and historical order of the analysis of intersubjectivity that constitutes the most authentically Hegelian aspect of Honneth's method. The same inversion is apparent in all the fundamental concepts of his thought—apart from recognition, we could also cite ethics and social freedom, which in turn are based on the concept of *Selbstbeziehung*, the practical relationship to oneself. An almost occult yet inescapable principle of Honneth's system, *Selbstbeziehung* designates the basic structure of the self that enables the subject to construct an identity sufficiently robust to engage in relations with the outside world and to decide autonomously upon the ends to be achieved. For Honneth, this disposition is not spontaneous but is acquired through positive experiences of socialization.

The principle that the modern person, characterized by a positive relationship to themselves, represents not the starting point but the *result* of social relationships, has remained stable in Honneth's theory. This principle, however, like his conception of criticism, has followed a trajectory from formal anthropology to historical ethicality. During the period of *The Struggle for Recognition*, the triad of love, law, and social consideration is presented as a universal moral grammar rooted in primary social experiences. For the necessary conditions for the full realization of *Selbstbeziehung* are, first, self-confidence, conceived as the ability to express physical and bodily needs, which the individual acquires in the context of satisfying intimate relationships through the experience of love and care; second, self-respect, experienced as an autonomous and responsible agent, the product of legal recognition; and finally self-esteem, which society returns to the individual when it values his or her specific contribution to common life. These three forms of recognition, connected to one another as levels on a scale of increasing complexity, where each capacity, once conquered, provides a basis for the next, must be conceived as "transcendentals of freedom." It is first of all these three forms that provide the basis for formal ethics, which describes the framework of fulfilled existence: it is up to the subject to complete the picture, i.e., to freely construct his or her vision of the good. It is subsequently around these three forms that the struggle for recognition of individuals and groups is organized, as they fight for institutions and the collective ethos to guarantee them the symbolic, legal, and material conditions of their freedom.

In *Freedom's Right*, recognition gives way to social freedom, which, linked to the concept of ethicality, emphasizes the institutional and concrete dimension of freedom: autonomy loses all meaning if it is not *objective*—in other words, if its conditions of possibility are not located in actual reality. The ends that I give myself as an autonomous subject are truly free only if they are seconded by reality itself, in other words only if they find an incubator conducive to their

fulfillment in the ethical spheres of modern democratic society: personal relationships (friendship, romantic love, family), the market (of which Honneth proposes an original reappraisal), and the public sphere. To prevent the misunderstandings to which this apology for modern freedom might lead among followers of a more traditional conception of critical theory, Honneth recalls that this same definition of freedom is found among the authors of French “protosocialism” such as Fourier and Proudhon, and that it animated the writings of the young Marx. This is precisely the theme of Honneth’s book *The Idea of Socialism* (2016): the members of a society only become truly free when their individual behaviors recognize each other in such a way that the freedom of one is a presupposition for the freedom of others.³² Worker cooperation, love, and friendship are examples of this “we,” this community of subjects in solidarity in which the ends of individuals are not just intertwined but indistinguishable. The idea that everyone should be able to “be at home in an other” is an image that recurs repeatedly in the essays of the last period, and which alone can be said to contain the spirit of Honneth’s entire path of thought from recognition to social freedom.

How is this theoretical proposal to be evaluated, then? I believe that, of all the criticisms that have been made so far, the most interesting are those that go to the heart of Honneth’s theory and confront its problems at their source. I will nevertheless review the most important external criticisms, starting with the debate with Nancy Fraser.³³ Honneth responds to the Marxist objection by trying to demonstrate that questions of economic redistribution can be seen as a corollary of questions of recognition, provided that the latter are not conceived as mere identity claims, but as conflicts over the moral status of subjects within the common ethical order; the choice between a moral or materialistic conception of justice always remains open and can be tested in concrete politics. Which means that the objection remains external, since it relates to a conflict between paradigms and places in doubt not so much the solidity and coherence of Honneth’s philosophical proposal as its effectiveness as an instrument for interpreting the social world and as a tool for struggle. The same applies to those who, taking a

32. Axel Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016). On the concept of social freedom and its relationship with other forms of freedom, see *Freedom’s Right*; “On the Poverty of Our Liberty: The Greatness and Limits of Hegel’s Doctrine of Ethical Life,” in Jacques Rancière and Axel Honneth, *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, ed. Katia Genel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 156–76; and “Drei, nicht zwei Begriffe der Freiheit. Ein Vorschlag zur Erweiterung unseres moralischen Selbstverständnisses,” *Internationales Jahrbuch für philosophische Anthropologie* 5, no. 1 (2015), 113–30.

33. A full version of the debate can be found in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London: Verso, 2003).

radical view, reproach Honneth for betraying the legacy of the Frankfurt School, for defending a conservative vision of politics, or even for helping to justify neo-liberalism, or for returning to a dated conception of the self and of identity.³⁴ Here too the conflict places worldviews in opposition, and does not seem to touch the substance of Honneth's philosophical argumentation. It seems to me that no real substantial challenge takes place until the critics target the very heart of recognition theory. I will conclude by mentioning two problems.

The first concerns the link between power and recognition, a subject that Honneth confronts in his essay on recognition as ideology.³⁵ Several critics with perspectives along the lines of Foucault's or Judith Butler's point out that the principle of subjectivation through recognition can easily come to take on a meaning opposite to that described by Honneth.³⁶ Basically, it is the very concept of *Selbstbeziehung*, as a practical disposition towards oneself acquired through social relations, that testifies to the narrow gap between subjectivation and subjection: for what guarantees that the attestation of the other, rather than liberating the individual, will not imprison them in a given status—by leading to a labeling or identity classification—and end up forcing them to take on tasks that are in contradiction with their interests, but functional for the interests of the social order? In seeking approval, the subject makes themselves de facto available for voluntary servitude, and becomes increasingly docile and faithful to the degree that their symbolic demands are satisfied. Honneth acknowledges the validity of this objection and attempts to respond to it by way of his progressive conception of history, by addressing in turn the examples of three typical figures of “willing slaves” (the devoted mother, Uncle Tom, and the good soldier). The ideological nature of these figures, in his view, appears only a posteriori, and from the point of view of *our* current *ethicality*, which has now gone beyond the value systems represented by each of the examples. Although they now seem archaic to us, these old forms of recognition may have had positive effects in promoting the self-awareness and autonomy of the subjects concerned. And it is indeed possible that these forms may have positively conditioned their subsequent emancipation. But this answer is too weak in its relativism and in its treatment of the philosophy of history, and does not clearly answer the question of why at a certain point in history some of these slaves rebelled against subjugation, in particular by claiming a new, more independent conception of self and condemning as accomplices

34. See Honneth, Rancière, and Genel, *Recognition or Disagreement*.

35. Axel Honneth, “Recognition as Ideology,” in Bert Van den Brink and David Owen, eds., *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 323–47.

36. In particular, see Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

to power those who continued to fall victim to the old symbolic categorizations. It is hard to imagine that the self-assertion of feminists could be the product of the recognition given to devoted mothers. There must have been an abrupt break at some point; a shift in focus must have exploded old values and created irreducible tensions between different ethical systems. Conceiving of recognition as a gradual integration within already given, and above all homogeneous, ethical relationships—which amounts, in short, to thinking of recognition as an integration into what psychology would call a functional family, or even as an adaptation to reality—leads Honneth to deny ethical pluralism and to stifle the subversive potential of the struggle for recognition. As we have already mentioned in relation to the circular disposition of internal criticism, then, Honneth’s theory shows certain weaknesses on two points: not only does it fail to account convincingly for the creation of new values, it also tends to mitigate the irreducible violence of moral conflicts through the irenic ideal of beautiful Hegelian ethicality.

Similar doubts may arise when reading the important essay on invisibility.³⁷ It offers an analysis of the epistemological and moral conditions of recognition, and examines the role played, under the conditions of recognition, by human expressiveness. Here too, Honneth’s thought intentionally evades the problem of power, avoiding all the questions that might be suggested here not only by the Foucauldian theory of surveillance but also by a more dialectical conception of the anthropology of visibility. The latter, as demonstrated before him by Hans Blumenberg and Helmuth Plessner—the author upon whom Honneth based his concept of the “expressive gesture”—is also and above all a condition of exposure and vulnerability.³⁸ Indeed, the morality of recognition requires the claiming and the conquest of a public visibility that depends upon the gaze of the other, to whom we attribute the performative faculty of “validating” the subject’s social existence. But in giving the other the power to validate the subject’s social existence, we also grant them access to the possibility of controlling this social existence. The morality of recognition does not protect the subject from subjection to the power of the other’s gaze, which can take on several forms: first, as a power to physically assault and terrorize (thereby annihilating that physical security that, according to Honneth, derives from successful intimacy); second, as a power to identify, monitor, classify, and exclude (the opposite of legal recognition and social consideration); and finally as a power to reify the subject, through a judgment that “freezes” their freedom. In this respect, it is remarkable

37. Axel Honneth, “Recognition: Invisibility: On the Epistemology Of ‘Recognition,’” *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 75, no. 1, 111–26.

38. See Hans Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014); Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*, trans. James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

that, in his essay on *Reification* (2005), Honneth gives a definition of the eponymous concept—namely, that the reification of the human being occurs when they are denied the empathy conveyed by the gaze of the other—that is diametrically opposed to that given by Sartre, who precisely places the cause of the reification of the subject in the gaze of others.³⁹ What results is two opposing conceptions of recognition and freedom, with the possibility of a social freedom, or a freedom *in others*, opposed to the possibility of a freedom *from others*: the freedom *not to be according to others*, or authenticity.⁴⁰

We now touch upon what seems to me an essential problem of Honneth's theory, namely the lack of an ambivalent conception of intersubjectivity. By choosing to focus solely on the normative nature of social relations—an approach that, in his view, is characteristic of the vocation of the German school—Honneth almost completely evades the “dark side” of recognition.⁴¹ A favorite subject of the French tradition from Pascal to Sartre, from Girard to Bourdieu, from Althusser to Lacan, the darker dimension of the relationship to others is the most characteristic and tragic theme of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. When he denounces the miseries of the social, Honneth only half follows Rousseau's example. Indeed, it is not so much in intersubjective relations as such that he situates the pathological factor, but rather in the historical preconditions that prevent the positive relations of recognition from unfolding (in Rousseau, on the other hand, the two factors of anthropological explanation and historical explanation cohabit and are always in tension).⁴² In Honneth's view, it is the incursions of capitalism into the realm of life, and not the tensions inherent in the relationship between

39. See Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). “The Struggle for Recognition: On Sartre's Theory of Intersubjectivity,” in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 158–67.

40. In the words of Paul Audi, who quite rightly thinks of Rousseau's lesson here: “That individual who says no to the common rule, to general prescriptions, and makes a test of their constitutive freedom in the mere subversion of the norms in force, or in a refusal to contribute to the framework of the social order that does not support him or oppresses them [. . .], must they, by critical theory itself, be assimilated from the outset to an ‘asocial,’ an ‘anomic,’ or an ‘anarchist,’ if not, in the extreme, to a criminal? But in order to escape from this, one must not only want, but must be able to do two things: first, one must no longer claim an intersubjective psychology whose primary aim is to endow the Self with the means to develop its personal aptitude for greater adaptation to reality—that is to say, greater conformity to the *current discourse* that speaks unceasingly within us, even though we are already subject to it; and, second, one must get rid of the twofold function that morality was formerly seen to fulfill, as if this function had always been self-evident: to produce or even reproduce social order, and to establish a common world” (“L'envers de la reconnaissance,” in Zarka, ed., *Critique de la reconnaissance*, 13–26: 26).

41. This article was completed before the publication of Honneth's book *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). In this book, Honneth addresses some of the problems discussed here, identifying a certain French tendency to treat recognition as a negative experience.

42. See Carnevali, *Romanticismo e riconoscimento*.

self and others, that generate phenomena such as rivalry, inequality, violence, and performance anxiety.⁴³ Honneth's idea of recognition admits only the moral and socializing dimension of the interaction which, following a Kantian leitmotiv that is recurrent in Honneth's writings, leads to respect for the other through the "destitution" of individual egoism. In contrast, Rousseau demonstrated, with Hobbesian realism, that the socializing force of self-love also harbors an uncontrollable mimetic and destructive tendency, and that the passions that lead human beings to need one another are also those that have the power to transform life into a hell of competition, conformity, and inauthenticity. Even though, for Honneth, Rousseau's intellectual legacy is summed up in the ambivalence of recognition,⁴⁴ he is unwilling to accept this legacy in its entirety. And his idea of the social remains marked by too weak a conception of negativity.

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43. Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth, "Paradoxes of Capitalism," *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006), 42–58.

44. This is the thesis of "Untiefen der Anerkennung. Das sozialphilosophische Erbe Jean-Jacques Rousseau."