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# The idea of a critical social theory

Past, present and future

*Jonathan Trejo-Mathys*<sup>1</sup>

In the decade or so since the publication of *Kampf um Anerkennung*, the extent and quality of the critical reception of Axel Honneth's work has placed those that believe in the viability and necessity of critical social theorizing in a position to provisionally draw up accounts. A self-renewing tradition must always continually return to those aspects of its historical identity that remain vital, preserving that which has stood the "test of time" and seeking to creatively respond to the contemporary situation with extensions of that preserved core, drawing on whatever resources can be found that are suitable for this purpose. For such a purpose, it must always turn to those concepts, themes, theories and works that over a broad span of time orient individuals that "grow up" or "grow into" it. In the present, an assessment of the current state of the project of critical social theorizing cannot avoid the work of Jürgen Habermas. The basic figures of thought and the historical inheritances of the so-called 'first generation' of critical theory symbolized by the names of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse are for this purpose a *presupposition*. Habermas' oeuvre, on the other hand, is an ongoing *stimulus*, an established *resource*, and a tutelary *challenge*. The developing research program of Honneth and his associates is, finally, the contemporaneous *occasion* for the self-reflection of a reflexive tradition. As Honneth noted in his inaugural lecture as director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, the internally diverse tradition of critical social theory does not give any unambiguous orientation in this task (2001, p.

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56). Therefore, a synthetic approach that is both coordinating and assimilative, on the one hand, and constructive and innovative, on the other, is necessary. The first operations require tact and shrewd judgment; the second imagination and a willingness to take risks.

### **Critical social theory - in lieu of a definition**

Critical social theory has from its inception defined itself as a reflective endeavor that is self-referential in the following senses: first, unlike ‘objectifying’ theories such as physics or geometry it belongs to its own object domain; second, as a result of this it must seek to clarify its own context of emergence, a context that it is from the start (*von Haus aus*, as its German creators would say) bent on transforming into something else; the reason for this is that, third, it addresses components of its own object domain as fellow participants in a historical process of change with the aim of helping to empower all involved to collectively steer this process in a ‘direction’ that is in some way ‘better’ than heretofore. This inverts in a curious way the venerable idea that while the experimental sciences are only as good as what they allow human beings to do or make happen (as in Bacon’s famous declaration, “Knowledge is power”), it is precisely the mark of the nobility of the ‘liberal’ arts or the human sciences that they are to be pursued for their own sakes. Instead of this classical motif of early modern thought, critical social theory presents us with the paradoxical idea that in a certain way only objectifying sciences are autonomous, since they are apparently carried out only for themselves, giving no attention to anything outside of their own domain, while reflective or critical sciences are through and through heteronomous since they are motivated not by the ‘pure’ desire to investigate their given object but are instead driven, from outside as it were, by a practical interest in embodying and inciting a learning process about the way the current functioning of the social order results in the unnecessary suffering and stultification of human beings, a learning process intended to result in an understanding that is shared by both the authors of the theory and its addressees—and per essentiam in a critical social theory the authors and the addressees belong, in one significant respect or another, to the same society. (As we shall see, this last feature has become increasingly problematic in a ‘global era’.) This type of theory, then, investigates the constitutive historical constellation of interests to which the theory still belongs and examines the historical complex of action on which the theory, as action-orienting, can have an influence (McCarthy, 1978, p. 397). It is this last point about the

simultaneously participatory and transformative character of a critical social theory that explains why it is, in all its varieties, a form of “strong reconstructive internal critique” (Kaupinnen, 2002) that seeks to articulate practice-internal norms that are implicit in local social contexts but rooted in universal structures of human action and rationality. Contra the spirit of a historicist or relativist contextualism, *tout comprendre ce n’est pas tout pardonner*.

The characterization of critical social theory given thus far touches upon its relation to its object domain and its practical intent but does not indicate anything outside of the formal property of reflexiveness and the practical motives of enlightenment and emancipation. The crucial remaining components, however, are an analytical concept of a species-universal mode of action (2) and a normative idea of a social whole free of ‘domination’ (*Herrschaft*), or an ‘undamaged’ common life (3).

### Paradigm shifts in critical social theory

To paraphrase St. John and Goethe, *im Anfang war die Arbeit*—in the beginning was social labor and the production paradigm. The basic concepts of this paradigm stem from the post-Kantian Idealism of Hegel and Marx’s ‘materialist’ transformation of Hegel’s dialectical philosophy: the subject/object dyad, the idea of a *Bildungsprozess* or process of formation, the notion of negativity or contradiction as an active, productive force, and labor, whether physical, artistic or intellectual, as a mediation between subject and object. Marxism deploys these concepts in the theory of historical materialism which contains (1) a philosophical anthropology, (2) a philosophy of history, (3) a political economy and (4) a vision of an emancipated society. The theory is a ‘materialist’ one because the major emphasis in each of these components falls on the activity of production. Production, especially in its socially-organized form as social labor, is both the activity in which the creative, expressive, sensuous nature of human beings is manifested and the dimension in which the motor of social change functions. The picture of an emancipated society allows the dynamic historical process determined by the philosophy of history embedded in Marxian economics to be understood as a progressive evolution from the realm of necessity to a realm of freedom in which the natural potentialities of human beings receive their fullest development.

The *history* of humankind is written along two dimensions: first, as a natural-historical process of self-creation propelled by the productive activity of socially-laboring workers stored in the forces of production, and second, as a conflictual process of formation driven onward by the “critical-revolutionary”

activity of classes stored in normative structures and patterns of social consciousness (Habermas, 1973, p. 341). The *theory* of humankind, however, is elaborated by Marx in only one of these dimensions, as the construction of the naturalistically-conceived dynamics of economic processes set in motion by “das Werkzeuge fabrizierende Tier” (*ibid.*, p. 342), or the tool-making animal, an animal that is at the same time also, via the expenditure of labor power, *das Wert fabrizierende Tier* or the value-producing animal. Despite the intersubjective connotations of the Marxian notions of social labor and the relations of production (*Produktionsverhältnisse*) and the strong claims that “das menschliche Wesen ist ... das Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse” (6th Thesis on Feuerbach) and that “alles gesellschaftliche Leben ist wesentlich praktisch” (8th Thesis on Feuerbach) (Marx, 1955, p. 594-595), the social character of this practical activity can only be grasped in terms of the subject-object dyad as a collective subject externalizing itself by means of an ‘objective’ (*gegenständlich*) transformation of the objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*) of nature and an awareness of the special character of the resulting form of objectivity mediated by human labor. Ultimately this is understood in terms of the technical-instrumental rationality of intervention into the objective environment. This causes the ‘cognitive’ or ‘epistemic’ moment of recognition that the resulting objective forms, whether it be commodities or social structures, are our own human and social products, and thus the overcoming of false consciousness, or our alienated relation to them (*Entfremdung*), to have a systematically unclear position in the theory of historical materialism. (For a particularly clear presentation of this epistemic process of reflecting upon our own activity and overcoming alienation, see Marx 1953a).

As Habermas puts this point, the only progressive evolutionary developments or ‘learning processes’ incorporated into the framework of historical materialism occur in the development of productive forces. The knowledge stored in the intersubjective dimension of the relations of production and the ‘learning processes’ or social change that occur because of class-formation and class struggle cannot be accounted for using the basic concepts of the theory (Habermas, 1973, ch. 3). For this reason, the ‘expressivist’ approach of Marx’s historical studies of the sociopolitical manifestations of class conflict, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire’ and the ‘The Civil War in France’, could never be adequately connected to the ‘utilitarian’, interest-based approach of the *Communist Manifesto*, and *Das Kapital* (Honneth, 1995, p. 146-151): “the principle of economically determined, interest-based conflict stands, unmediated, alongside relativistic explanation of all conflicts in terms of

incompatible aspirations for self-realization” (*ibid.*, p. 151; cf. Habermas, 1973, p. 71, 77-78). The collective subject of humankind is divided against itself in ‘classes’, but the theory of its history is written only from the standpoint of the metabolic processes of a collective subjectivity (inner nature) appropriating a natural objectivity (outer nature) by means of instrumental action and development is accounted for only in this context of action. The conceptual framework cannot reappropriate the “dialectic of ethical life” discovered by the young Hegel and explain development in context of *interaction* between human beings (Honneth, 1995, ch. 2-3; Habermas, 1987, p. 27-31, 60-69, 78-82), in particular, between collectivities whose consciousness is partly shaped by the economic relations determined by the status of human social capacities in the context of technical, productive action. To put the point in slightly different terms, although Marx conceived of work as both a factor of production (political-economic analysis) and an expression of the needs and desires of human nature that helps to form revolutionary consciousness (theory of emancipation), the basic concepts of the production-paradigm can’t provide an adequate action-theoretical connection between social analysis and the theory of emancipation (Honneth, 1989, p. 98).

In one way or another, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse all failed to overcome the limitations built into the basic subject-object structure of the production paradigm and the philosophical tradition from which it sprang. Anyone who doubts this can verify it by examining the torturous paths Adorno takes in his desperate, ultimately unsuccessful and yet somehow magnificent attempts to break out of its limitations (1969, 1970). This failure remains despite the awareness on the part of all of them of the importance of the reflective Kantian and Hegelian elements of the inheritance of critical theory and the need to incorporate Freudian psychoanalysis and the interpretive sociology of Weber (Habermas, 1981a, part 4, p. 455-534; Honneth, 1986, ch. 1-3, p. 9-113). That these extra-philosophical importations did not help here is no doubt due in large part to the fact that both Weber and Freud themselves remained bound by the same abstract structures of *Subjekts-* or *Bewußtseinsphilosophie* that underlay the production paradigm of Marx.

This impasse motivated the turn to a *communicative paradigm* that has occupied Habermas for the entire span of his long career (Habermas, 1987, ch. 11). The basic form of the philosophy of the subject, of which the production paradigm was a specimen, involves two “equiprimordial” subject-object relations, the cognitive relationship of a knowing subject to a represented object and the dynamic relationship of the acting subject to an object brought

into existence or modified. The first relationship is constituted by *representations* and beliefs that can be true; the second by purposive *interventions* into an external environment that can be successful (Habermas, 1987, p. 63). The production paradigm only had the concept of a formative process (*Bildungsprozess*) to serve as a *tertium quid* or mediating function between these (*ibid.*). As Habermas puts it sometimes, it allowed only the notions of *inner nature* and *outer nature* and the dynamic relations between these.

The communicative paradigm explicitly introduces subject-subject relations and analyzes subject-object relations only in the context of an explication of these intersubjective processes. While subjects can act upon each other as they would upon representable and manipulable objects, it is a relationship of an entirely different kind that allows the communicative paradigm to encompass a new type of process, that of *mutual understanding*. Instead of just reflecting upon the nature of knowing and acting subjects in their relations to an independent, external environment that can be either represented or manipulated, the communicative paradigm reflects as well upon the nature of speaking subjects, subjects that by the very fact of speaking must be in principle formed by socialization into communication in the medium of a natural language. Now a notion of *social nature* or *society* appears alongside internal and external nature and corresponds to this linguistically or symbolically constituted dimension of intersubjectivity.

By means of a pragmatic analysis of the various functions of speech-acts and a reconstruction of the presuppositions of these functions as they are embedded in the pre-theoretical intuitions of socialized subjects, the communicative paradigm delivers a highly-differentiated understanding of the dimensions in which learning processes can occur and normative statuses justified. In the domain of instrumental or functional rationality, human groups can accumulate technically-utilizable knowledge about the objective world by means of collective scientific and experimental inquiry. These increases in the productive capacities of human action and technology can then be implemented in the social sphere by means of the evolution of functional subsystems of action. In these subsystems, the actions of disparate individuals is coordinated and integrated independently of the intentions of any particular individual or group within the social system. Insofar as these functional subsystems increase the ‘steering capacity’ of the society in question, that is, contribute to its continued successful manipulation of and adaptation to a potentially hostile environment, and make possible more complex forms of social organization, these developments can be seen as a gain in rationality in

the dimension of effectiveness, to which correspond *true* beliefs about the objective world (Habermas, 1981b, p. 229-295, 420-437, 449-489). The reconstruction of learning processes in the dimension of normative structures, or the systems of norms and values integrating a society, is more contentious and complex but it depends ultimately on the establishment of the rational superiority or greater legitimacy, in terms of moral *rightness*, of the system in question (Habermas, 1976, p. 9-49, 144-200; 1981a, p. 34-44, 114-152). The picture of social evolution that emerges in the synthesis of this new communications-theoretical approach with both the *phenomenological* tradition from Hegel through Husserl to Schutz and the *systems-theoretical* tradition from Smith through Marx to Parson and Luhmann is correspondingly complex. Societal rationalization occurs in the heightening of social complexity via the differentiation of cultural validity-spheres (scientific truth, positive law, post-metaphysical morality, autonomous art), functional subsystems (marketized economy, administrative state) and the anchoring of both of these in appropriate institutions ensuring the non-pathological or non-anomic integration of the society as a whole (formal and informal public spheres) (Habermas, 1981b; 1992). This integration, in turn, depends in the final analysis upon the communicative achievements of socialized human beings seeking mutual understanding with each other – put sociologically, the reproduction of any society requires a sufficient normative consensus concerning the legitimacy of the social order, that is, the distribution of property, power, rights, status, and so on. This consensus must ultimately rest upon what are seen, even if only tacitly or hypothetically, as *good reasons* from the standpoint – implicit in pragmatic intuitions of all responsible speaking subjects – of a participant in a possible discourse concerning the normative principles of this order of interaction.

From this framework of basic conceptual choices and assumptions, a diagnosis of social pathologies in modern society flows quite elegantly: “in the modern period an economy organized in the form of markets is functionally intermeshed with a state that has a monopoly on power, [and] gains autonomy as a piece of norm-free sociality over against the lifeworld, and ... opposes its own imperatives based on system maintenance to the rational imperatives of the lifeworld” (Habermas, 1987, p. 349). This is the communication-theoretical transformation of Marx’s dialectic of living/concrete labor and dead/abstract labor into a thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld by functional subsystems.

This result at the end of the long process of exploration, reformulation and development of the idea of a linguistic turn in critical theory has not been

without its critics. In fact it is hard to think of anyone that has entered the discussion that has not perceived some fundamental inadequacy or other in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. On the other hand, it seems that the work genuinely touched a vital nerve in its diagnosis of the times, since the colonization thesis has become public property in the lexicon of social criticism across multiple disciplines like sociology, philosophy, rhetoric, communications studies and political science, to name just a few. What are the sources of dissatisfaction?

First, there is a *methodological* criticism that takes the form of a charge of reification concerning two pivotal points in the theory. The first pivotal move is that Habermas claims to be starting from merely analytical characterizations of dimensions of human action but often seems to present and treat them as a typology, thus reifying a *conceptual distinction* between instrumental, strategic and communicative elements of human praxis into an *ontological difference* (Alexander, 1986; Joas, 1986; Giddens, 1982). The second is that Habermas then projects the ontologically reified analytical distinction onto separate “spheres of action” (*Handlungsbereiche*) or subsystems of society that meet functionally-distinct requirements for social reproduction (Honneth, 1986, p. 279; Fraser, 1989). This conjunction of moves at the methodological level leads to what is perhaps a more serious substantive matter if the critics are correct.

This more substantive *empirical* criticism is pointed at Habermas’ resulting characterization, visible in the passage cited above, of the modern economy and the modern state apparatus as “norm-free” domains of action or even as a kind of “norm-free sociality” (cf. Habermas, 1981b, p. 256ff., 455). For instance, Habermas writes that “mit den über Steuerungsmedien ausdifferenzierten Subsystemen schaffen sich die systemischen Mechanismen ihre eigenen, normfreien, über die Lebenswelt hinausragenden Sozialstrukturen” (Habermas, 1981b, p. 275). This consequence of the above-mentioned theoretical decisions is seen by critics as embodying two “complementary fictions”, namely, norm-free organizations of action on the one hand and power-free spheres of communication on the other (Honneth, 1986, p. 328). Closely related to this is the strange disconnect that occurs between rationalization-processes in the sphere of action organized as purposive rationality (*System*) and the sphere of action constituted by communicative rationality (*Lebenswelt*).

The reconstruction of a pathogenic history (*Gattungsgeschichte*) or formation-process of the species (*Bildungsprozess der Gattung*) that results

from this no longer refers in the first place to the conflicts between social groups fought out within the framework of social institutions (or systems) and cultural worldviews, as with the sociopolitical struggles of classes defined by reference to distributions of property and their economic logic that Marx's political writings describe, but instead the anonymous effects of processes of rationalization in abstractly defined domains of action (Honneth, 1986, p. 295-296). What is lost is, in short, the capacity to conceptualize social interaction not just as a phenomenon ultimately constituted by ascribed or achieved consensus in propositionally-articulated validity-claims, but "auch als einen *Kampf* der gesellschaftlichen Gruppen um die *Organisationsform* des zweckrationalen Handelns" (*ibid.*). This loss is related to the unduly narrow interpretation of Marx's notion of praxis, such that the bodily, affective elements of the suffering of laborers disappears from the theory. One sees here a lack of mediation between two abstractly conceived domains similar to that observed in the production paradigm. There it was the polar opposition of subject (inner nature) and object (outer nature); here it is the sociological and action-theoretical opposition of lifeworld (communicative rationality) and system (instrumental rationality). What Honneth is proposing is that yet again we need an extension and reformulation of the basic conceptual framework of critical social theory in order to grasp the mediation between two abstractly opposed moments.

First we saw Habermas bring the communicative and pragmatic moment of linguistically-mediated intersubjective understanding fully into view to serve as a *tertium quid* needed to dissolve the aporias of the production paradigm. Now we see Honneth, appropriately enough for a tradition always aware of the irony of history and "der List der Vernunft", reappropriating Hegelian-Marxian concepts of 'struggle' and 'recognition' that played major roles in Habermas early work (1973) in order to mediate the too abstract opposition between a phenomenological understanding of social integration (communication-theoretical transformation of the 'lifeworld' concept) and a reified functionalist understanding of systemic integration (communication-theoretical assimilation of the 'system' concept). And this brings us finally to the *recognition paradigm*.

Honneth begins *The Struggle for Recognition* by briefly recounting how an interest-based model of politics expressed by Machiavelli and Hobbes in terms of a basic principle of self-preservation replaced the good- or virtue-based classical model of politics. Beginning with Rousseau, however, we see a reassertion of the classical republican concerns with a social or intersubjective

twist—whereas ‘honor’ was key term in the older order, ‘respect’ and ‘recognition’ will be the key terms of the new. Honneth’s aim is reintroduce the notion of social struggle into the very conceptual framework of critical social theory and articulate a moral and social psychology to help achieve this. He does not, of course, deny the importance of interest-based social action—whether a particular social conflict follows the logic of interest or the logic of recognition is an empirical question (Honneth, 1995, p. 167). He is responding to a lack of extended engagement in all the mature critical social theories of Horkheimer, Adorno, Foucault and Habermas with the normative-rational motivation of *collective action* on the part of social groups that can lead to change, both systemic and institutional, in the social structure (Honneth, 1986; compare Lockwood’s similar, highly influential criticisms of Parsons, on whom Habermas draws extensively, in Lockwood, 1956, 1964). And indeed in the theory of communicative action there is a certain tendency to dissolve the logic of social change into something like a logic of ‘interest’ for systems and a strangely disembodied normative motive of lifeworld self-preservation. The self-interest of individual agents evaporates into the anonymous ‘interests’ of self-maintenance or functional imperatives of media-steered subsystems, and the normative counterweight thins out into the circulation of reasons in the public sphere of the lifeworld. While Habermas mentions the ‘new social movements’ of the last quarter of the twentieth century in the last section of his great work, it is difficult to see them expressed in its basic architectonic. These movements were certainly not mobilizing themselves to protect the lifeworld from colonization – rather they were typically either protecting something deeply valued, that is, something subject to ‘strong evaluation’ (Taylor), as in the case of the environmental movement, or they were aiming to change patterns of disrespect or injustice regarding a particular social group, that is, demanding proper ‘recognition’ either of equal status or concrete contributions to the good of society or both (Honneth), as in the case of the American civil rights movement and the international feminist movement.

According to Honneth’s basic model – and here he is a faithful student of Habermas – personal identity has an intersubjective structure. Drawing on the young Hegel and Mead – again a continuity with Habermas – he shows that in the course of normal psychological development one learns to refer to oneself from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other as a being with certain positive traits or abilities. The ability to see oneself from the perspective of another is the formal condition of self-identity, while the perception of positive traits or abilities fills in this formal structure of self-consciousness with content. The scope of such traits – hence one’s positive

relation to self – increases with each new form of recognition individuals are able to apply to themselves as subjects (Honneth, 1995, p. 173). Honneth distinguishes, following Hegel, between three modes of recognition: love, respect, and esteem, corresponding respectively to the intimate sphere, the legal-political order, and shared communities of value. Each type of recognition is independent with respect to (1) its medium, (2) the form of self-relation made possible by it, and (3) its potential range of moral development (*ibid.*, p. 95).

The social-theoretical import of this becomes visible only when we establish phenomenologically that *experiences* in which these positive dimensions of self-understanding are violated, denied or placed in question are directly tied to *motives for action* like anger or resentment that can lead, in the form of successful collective-identity formation, to collective action for social change – perhaps the closest we will get in our times to an analogue of Marx’s idea of ‘critical-revolutionary’ praxis (Marx, 1955, p. 593-594). The type of motivational impetus and the potential for further normative development of this pattern of motivation depends, as stated, on the particular mode of recognition. In addition, these modes of recognition develop historically as society develops. They are not transhistorical invariants (Honneth, 1995, p. 174-175). Still, they permit us to elaborate two formal, basically quantitative criteria of progress: first, the number of *modes* of recognition available within a given lifeworld, and second, the number of *members* of society included in the practices that make available and sustain these modes of recognition (Fraser; Honneth, 2003. p. 260).

This framework is designed to overcome another perceived inadequacy of the procedural reading of communicative rationality found in discourse ethics, namely a failure to adequately explicate the *motivational and evaluative basis* of argumentative discourse as a specialized form of communicative action (Taylor, 1986, p. 44-46) as well as, relatedly, the *social-psychological prerequisites* of participation in such discourse (Honneth, 2000). In his very interesting “empirically-supported conceptual analysis” (1995, p. 110) of the historical development of legal recognition as a form of social integration in modern societies, Honneth points out that the kind of responsible autonomy or legal personhood attributed to subjects in modern legal-political orders depends upon both cognitive and affective-motivational elements. Such subjects are assumed to have rational insight into the validity of norms that must in the final analysis embody a claim to legitimacy, since otherwise it is a mystery as to how they agreed upon a legal order (this remains true even if those with power are a small minority, for they will have to agree amongst themselves

concerning the norms – an old point that goes back to Plato: see *Republic*, p. 352b). So rational insight refers back to intersubjective agreement, and this, ultimately, as Habermas rightly notes, to participation in discursive processes of opinion- and will-formation. But such participation itself has prerequisites, some of which clearly vary with history and often one's position in society. The basic point is that there is a minimal threshold of self-confidence and self-respect one must have in order to assert one's interests as demands. One must have a sufficient amount of respect for oneself before one can be moved to demand respect from others (Honneth, 1995, p. 118). And this capacity does not follow automatically upon the acquisition of the capacity to speak a natural language or communicative competence.

So much for the outline of the theoretical intent and advantages of the recognition paradigm. Now to three serious deficits that have been observed. It seems to me that all three deficits reflect what one might call undialectical juxtapositions in Honneth's theory. First, an *identity-theoretical* deficit appears in the rather additive or aggregative summation of self-relations in the theory of recognition and the projected telos of a formal conception of ethical life as the ensemble of conditions for the successful formation of an intact identity, or, in other words, autonomous self-realization. The model roots 'quasi-transcendental' recognition-needs in historically-developing forms of intersubjectivity but does not pay sufficient attention to the *conditions of integration* of these different self-relations or "identity-aspects" in the leading of a life (Renault, 2004, p. 78-83; Trejo-Mathys, 2007; Laden, 2005; Wollheim, 1984). The success of such a narrative "fitting together" of the various roles and endeavors one takes on in life evidently depends upon intrapsychic, interpersonal and social conditions, conditions that, in turn, mutually determine each other to some degree. It seems to me there are both phenomenological and sociological reasons why some attention to this strangely neglected form of integration is necessary. After all entire traditions of social theory have based themselves upon systemic and social ideas of integration, so why has there been so little focus on psychic integration as a *problem* for social theory, instead of, as with Freud and Parsons, one of its theoretical preconditions? To begin with, *phenomenologically* the incompatibility of demands that stem from different aspects of our identity or different social roles is experienced as painful, stressful, exhausting or even agonizing, as Honneth himself has noted (2000b, p. 172-174). In addition to this, *sociologically* the increasing difficulty of achieving this kind of a coherent self-understanding or life-narrative stems from structural changes in the "new culture of capitalism" that Richard Sennett has brilliantly portrayed:

Consuming passion [i.e. passionate consumerism] ... meritocratic concept of talent ... idealized self publicly eschewing dependency on others ... These are cultural forms which celebrate personal change but not collective progress. The culture of the new capitalism is attuned to singular events, one-off transactions, interventions; to progress, a polity needs to draw on sustained relationships and accumulate experience. In short, the unprogressive drift of the new culture lies in its shaping of time. (Sennett, 2006, p. 178)

In particular, high turnover rates in employment (“flexibilization” of labor), low institutional loyalty, and a premium on the ability to constantly adapt to new tasks, acquire new skills and “let go” of old abilities and pursuits require individuals to manage short-term relationships, do without institutions that give them a long-term frame and “improvise” life-narratives without a sense of self sustained by lasting relationships to work, colleagues and social environments (*ibid.*, p. 4-5). While it is necessary to develop a sufficiently differentiated view of the normative structures of communicative rationality in modern societies, it is equally necessary, both theoretically and practically, to pay attention to the conditions of successful, non-regressive integration of these in non-pathological forms of individual and social life.

Second, and related to the first, a *moral-theoretical* deficit appears in the acceptance of an unavoidable, conflict-ridden negotiation between the demands arising from different modes of recognition, each of which give rise to a specific pattern of moral reasoning (e.g., love – emotional ethic of care; respect – deontological ethic of respect; social esteem – communitarian ethic of civic virtue and common good) on the one hand, and then a claim that after all the universalist and egalitarian structures of legal recognition must trump these in cases of conflict on the other (Honneth, 2000b). I will return to this issue in section 3 below. For the moment I will only suggest that insofar as the demands arising from each of these modes of intersubjectivity becomes subject to questioning and require legitimation or critique they are reunified in discursive contexts of justification that *are themselves realizations of respect* and hence embodiments of the universalistic moral consciousness characteristic of a deontological ethic. This is a further reason to suppose that (legitimate) law is indeed, as Habermas has suggested, the institutionalized form of ‘transmission belts’ of solidarity (Habermas, 1992). This claim should be appropriately qualified, however, by the recognition-theoretical insight that if law is to serve this function there must *exist* a solidarity that can be transmitted. In this context, that translates into the observation that laws are enacted and applied within the horizon of an understanding of the common

good of a given society, *whatever the scope of that society may be*. The modes of intersubjectivity and the self-relations embodied in relationships of care and communities of value expressing social esteem, however, are *sources* of both new members and self-renewing patterns of motivation for human societies, at any rate to the extent that they are not pathologically deformed in one way or another. They become in this way positive motivators of change, innovation, creativity, striving, etc., that can complement the negative engines of change that are represented by experiences of humiliation, disrespect and misrecognition. (In addition, of course, to the social change that is driven by constellations of interest and power.)

This leads us naturally to, third, a discussion of a *social-theoretical* deficit. Honneth has clearly stated, and later reiterated (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 255) in view of Fraser's uncharitable reading (*ibid.*, p. 219), that the principles of recognition "do not represent established institutional structures but only general patterns of behavior" (Honneth, 1995, p. 174). This is a point well taken, but the relationship between these rather abstract principles and the concrete institutional life of society – Honneth is after all a Hegelian – remains underdeveloped both in terms of theoretical premises and support or testing by empirical research. A sensitive hermeneutic reconstruction of the moral grammar of major social conflicts and movements and their institutional effects in the last couple of centuries of development in Western society is certainly an illuminating achievement. However, it is difficult to see how a social theory with practical intent can give guidance to actors if it gives no concrete indication about how recognition is translated into lasting social structures, or what kind of connections exist between "institutional structures" and "general patterns of behavior" that express recognition. What, after all, are institutions if not general patterns of behavior? In addition to this institution-theoretical point, there is a further unclarity in the recognition paradigm concerning the conceptual resources it has for dealing with non-intentional forms of sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*). Can such non-intentional forms of coordination of action be understood as expressions of recognitive relations which seem to be *per definitionem*, in a broad Husserlian sense, intentional? This matter must be tackled if the recognition paradigm is to succeed in being a critical *theory of society* as a whole and not just social criticism of this or that aspect of it, for such non-intentional mechanisms of integration are part and parcel of modern societies (Peters, 1993, ch. 5-7).

To sum up: the production paradigm proved conceptually incapable of reconstructing the history of contemporary human societies in light of a general view of social evolution because it could not accommodate in a sufficiently

differentiated way change-inducing processes in dimensions outside of the transformation of outer nature by means of the expenditure of inner nature in social labor: social-scientific analysis and moral-practical emancipation lacked an adequately conceived connection in human action. In the communication paradigm we see a missing anthropological-motivational base (e. g., ‘why should *my* – wealthy, privileged, powerful, etc. – people care about the “colonization” of *your* – poor, working class, middle class, etc. – lifeworld?), an absent critical sociology of collective action, and a false reification of communicative praxis through both the retrojection of the Weberian content-based sociological differentiation of ‘validity-spheres’ into a formal-pragmatics of ‘validity-claims’ and the projection of a typological view of action onto entire social domains. In the recognition paradigm we see a missing sociology of institutions and systems, an inadequately developed political sociology of struggles for recognition, no properly located normatively-charged theory of the public sphere (what role do public spheres play in the recognition paradigm?), and a somewhat unclear mode of normative justification. My suggestion is that, for the time being at least, we need to change our mode of advance from paradigm-shifts to *paradigm-constellations*, that is, to interweave the paradigms as best one can, without the hopeless prospect of a direct synthesis by brute force, by means of delicate constellation and juxtaposition in *particular contexts of inquiry* (e. g., organizational psychology, structural change in the economy, analyses of political rhetoric or new social movements, normative political theory, etc.) with *particular aims in mind* (assess prospects of success for certain types of social reform, compare patterns of development in different countries or regions, help coordinate political action at international, interregional or even global levels, etc.). Then we will see if light can be generated by placing the theories next to each other like mirrors while we examine social and political situations, and then angling them back and forth until reflections of meaning that flow into the process of judgment-formation from both experience and inference light up the context of action with critical insights. I will attempt (somewhat imprudently no doubt) to make some concrete suggestions in this vein in the final section of the paper.

### **Sources of normativity: pluralism versus monism**

Carl-Gören Heidegren has provided a very interesting account of the way Habermas’ single-minded insistence on the unity of post-Kantian moral consciousness in modern societies needs to be seen as a response to the anthropologically-rooted pluralist relativism of Arnold Gehlen (Heidegren,

2002). Gehlen anthropologically roots a basic ethic of reciprocity, a family or kinship ethic, certain patterns of physiologically-rooted conduct (e. g., caring for small things), and finally an institutional ethic in various sources in the evolution of humanity as a social species. According to him, there is no possible ‘rational’ mediation or harmonization of these ethics. They give rise to competing demands, but all are necessary for our form of life and none can replace the others or claim ultimate priority (*ibid.*, p. 440). (Universalism or a cosmopolitan ethics is conspicuous by its absence. Gehlen believes such an ethic is possible only as a highly improbable extension of the ‘kinship’ ethic, one that would in addition destabilize the institutional ethic of necessarily particular societies.) Against Gehlen, Habermas pointed to the way any justification of the claims arising from these anthropologically distinct but normative fields draws them into the problematizing current of discourse, for instance, in Gehlen’s own philosophical argument for them. The rational acceptability of such arguments is then related to the normative properties of rational discourse itself and its non-trivial presuppositions ... and you know the rest of the story. What is interesting in light of this, as Heidegren points out, is that fact that Honneth has in a way returned to a moral-theoretical stance not unlike Gehlen’s, though the political differences between them remain naturally unmistakable. For instance, in 1994 Honneth wrote that the task he had set himself was “justify in all its consequences the claim that the expectation of social recognition belongs to the structure of communicative action”, and that this would “require solving the difficult problem of replacing Habermas’ universal pragmatics with an anthropological conception which can explain the normative presuppositions of social interaction” (Honneth, 1994, p. 263; cited in Heidegren, 2002, p. 435-436). The actual anthropological conception proposed by Honneth leads to a view of three moral points of view or dimensions of moral life arising from the modes of recognition that together ensure the preconditions of an intact identity or our “personal integrity as human beings” (Honneth, 2000b, p. 190). Faced with conflicts between these there is no decision procedure. The “constant tension” between them is only to be resolved in individual deliberation (*ibid.*).

Against this, a critical social theory integrating the communication and recognition paradigms must, I believe, once again make the move that Habermas made against Gehlen and insist upon a unification of our moral consciousness in the face of diverse sources. This unification must not be forced, or else it will become delusive and perhaps even ideological. Examples of such forced unification might be various types of theocracy, of which Iran offers a possible example, the rigid orthodoxy of “Diamat” in the former Soviet

bloc, and, in a more diffuse and less visibly enforced version, in the widespread “common-sense” belief in the United States, apparently mandatory for any politician appearing in the public sphere as a candidate for president, that *all* rights, duties, and virtues must ultimately come from “Nature’s God” and that a corollary of this is (somehow, somehow, according to some never articulated metric) that America is the “greatest” country in the world.

The unification of moral consciousness is simultaneously a unification, or perhaps better, harmonization, of moral practice, that is, social arrangements must be modified such that the adequate fulfillment of the different demands made upon individuals in their various roles is less difficult, less painful, and less a disintegrative factor in the ethical task of leading a reasonably coherent, successful life (cf. the point above about social conditions of psychic integration). The recognition paradigm gives us an account of the anthropological and sociological sources of moral obligations arising from, taking an observer perspective, the *formal* conditions of identity-formation and, taking the participant perspective, the prospect of an *actual* (‘material’ if you want) realization of the needs, desires and aims arising from the complex aspects of that identity. Honneth has not yet made this point clear enough, and the result has been that people see in his writings a social-psychological functionalist theory of identity-formation and a philosophical ethic of self-realization; the first lays out the factual preconditions of a certain state of affairs, and the second argues (or perhaps simply says) that we should bring it about. I suggest that an attempt to synthesize these discourses can dissolve the impression that they have different (and unconnected) statuses by showing how they arise from a differentiation between the objectivating perspective of a social-theorist and the agent-perspective of a socialized human being. These perspectives are *both* apparently rooted in the basic structures of human action and understanding—the difference between them does *not* constitute a difference in their object-domain.

The communication paradigm, on the other hand, gives us an account – one that I believe has not been bettered by any of the current theoretical approaches available in practical philosophy – of the conditions of possibility for the justification of moral or practical claims and the legitimate adjudication of conflicts. On the other hand, the recognition paradigm gives us a further specification of the point of such discursive determination of the content of moral obligations and the courses of social action taken to make them a social reality: namely, to ensure that social relationships have a certain quality constituted by a formal but differentiated structure of mutual recognition, a

normative quality that is also an experienced quality both with respect to one's self-understanding and one's relation to others. This potentially shared end of social action is supposedly 'formal' enough not to prejudice things in favor of particular (e.g., European) forms of life. I do not think enough has been done yet, however, to rule this ethnocentrism or particularism out (cf. the related criticisms of Habermas in McCarthy, 1982). The contemporary task of globalizing critical theory (Pensky, 2005) requires that this process involve individuals from all regions of the globe, in particular at the very least representatives of cultures shaped by each of the 'world' or 'Axial' religions – what some scholars refer to as 'Axial civilizations' (Eisenstadt, 1986). If critical theorists from cultures shaped by these five or six major sociocultural and historical forces can show that the recognitional structures elaborated in the three historically developed forms of recognition are also found in their societies or cultural traditions, whether *in posse* or *in esse*, this would go a long way towards allaying the fear that particular interests and perspectives were being falsely (and perhaps even ideologically) portrayed as universal.

### Methodological and disciplinary questions

Regarding the role of experience in a critical social theory, or put otherwise, the theoretical requirement of an "empirical reference point", Nancy Fraser has warned against a tendency towards a reduction of political sociology to moral psychology in Honneth's writings (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 201ff.). Honneth has responded that he never meant feelings of misrecognition to be taken as something given to us in an unmediated way as a historical invariant and that this impression stems largely to the logic of his presentation of the theory of recognition (*ibid.*, p. 245). They are both correct. Honneth has not sufficiently developed the sociological dimension of his theory, for instance regarding the questions of the dynamics and consequences of struggles for recognition or the institutionalization of the different principles of recognition (see, however, the interesting ideas developed on this point in Basaure, 2007). However, he has attempted to develop a position on the historical development of forms of recognition that steers between the Scylla of an ahistorical value realism and the Charybdis of a cultural relativism of value (Honneth, 2002, p. 508-9). According to this conception, "the 'space of reasons' is also a historically changing domain; the evaluative human qualities to which we can respond rationally in recognizing others form ethical certitudes whose character changes unnoticeably with the *cultural* transformations of our

lifeworld” (*ibid.*, p. 512). This neutralizes the worry of an implausible ahistorical view of value. A conception of progress in which two criteria – the *expansion* of the range of human qualities socially realizable in an intact identity (Honneth refers to this as a process of “individualization”) and the *inclusion* of ever more members in the enjoyment of the conditions of possibility for realizing those qualities in their own lives – draws the venom from the bite of relativism (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 260; Honneth, 2002, p. 509-611). The formulations of this position given by Honneth to this point remain rather provisional. I doubt that anyone, Honneth included, feels a sufficient justification of it has been given. Nevertheless, the “perspectival dualism” that Fraser proposes (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 60-64), while being quite methodologically sensible as an analytical tool for social critique, is not a sufficiently developed alternative normative framework, as we have seen.

It seems clear from this that critical social theory will continue to require a full engagement with every major discipline of the social and human sciences, but most especially with what we may call the core disciplines of critical social theory: sociology, political science, economics, psychology (both individual and social), and last, but of course not least, philosophy. In addition, each of these disciplinary seeds must be planted in the soil of a historically-(in)formed consciousness—hence at any and perhaps every point the humanities may become relevant as well. Needless to say, this means that it is now even more important than it was in the earlier stages of the tradition’s development to conceive of critical social theory as itself a form of social labor, indeed, as a transnationally-organized collective activity. In such a process of coordination, some form of shared theoretical framework becomes a necessity, even if more than one is being used. For instance, some critical social theorists may utilize the theory of communicative action as an analytical and normative framework for certain purposes (e. g., investigation of the interplay between systemic and social integration in transnational processes or of social movements that directly thematize the relationships between economic systems and media networks or public spheres; cf. Niesen; Herborth, 2007) while others find it necessary to employ the theory of recognition for other purposes (e. g., research into the shared moral semantics of an oppressed group or the motivational roots and rhetorical patterns of a social group struggling for social change *within* the political and economic systems and *in* the public sphere but thematizing instead patterns of misrepresentation and disrespect or concrete issues of social justice). A more comprehensive social theory that could incorporate both paradigms is of course, *ceteris paribus*, greatly to be desired, and attempts at this encouraged in a critical and rigorous

spirit. Until then practical coordination of various approaches will be the order of the day. For it is clear that no currently existing paradigm lacks conceptual blindspots and explanatory weaknesses.

A separate matter is a growing tendency in recent critical theory for *anthropology* to displace (or supplement) sociology as the (or a) key discipline that retains a relation to ‘the whole’ (*das Ganze*). Near the beginning of *The theory of communicative action*, Habermas makes the argument that sociology is necessarily the discipline of choice for attacking the rationality problematic that, as we have seen above, is part of the necessary analytical and normative architecture of any critical social inquiry. The main reason he gives is that only sociology retains the aforementioned relation to the entire complex of social processes and therefore to crises undergone by that ‘whole’ (1981a, p. 20-21). Other candidate disciplines are tailored to specific subsystems or, using the Parsonian A-G-I-L schema, particular functional aspects of action systems. So *economics* focuses on the economy or adaptation (A), *political science* on the state or goal attainment (G), and *anthropology* on culture or pattern maintenance (L). Only sociology is tailored to the integration (I) of all these subsystems or functions into one coherent and effectively coordinated ‘society as a whole’ (*Gesamtgesellschaft*) or ‘societal community’ (Parsons, 1966, p. 17-18).

In light of this argument the return to anthropology may very well be a reasonable, though perhaps in some respects desperate, response to changing historical conditions. Economic, political, demographic, migrational and cultural processes have begun to cross national boundaries at levels of such high intensity and extent that social and political theory can no longer unreflectively assume a territorially-delimited state, economy or society as a background magnitude defining the scope of their gaze. While in many cases, these phenomena do not seem novel enough to justify the newfangled lexicon of ‘global’-terms, since older word-families like those around ‘international’, ‘universal’, ‘liberalization’, ‘Westernization’, ‘imperialism’ and the like seem perfectly capable of doing justice to them (Scholte, 2000; cf. Held; McGrew, 2003, p. 84-88), it remains the case that the *processes* of increasing intensification and expansion of intercontinental or interregional connections in the realms of economic, politics, electronic media, military and culture, or ‘globalization’ (Keohane; Nye, 2000, p. 104) have reached a point at which quantitative increase dialectically passes over into qualitative shift in the nature of human interrelatedness – a new ‘global age’ (Held et al., 1999) or a ‘post-national constellation’ (Habermas, 2001). Because at the transnational level

there is no clear *focal referent* for a ‘social’ theory, no centralized state or state-like apparatus, no formal public sphere centered around an authoritative norm-generating or legislative body, no coherent single regulatory framework for a global market or economic system, no tolerably uniform shared culture, or ‘overlapping consensus’ of value-orientations, languages, and so on: in short, because of the absence of a sufficiently integrated ‘totality’ at the transnational level that could count as a ‘global society’ (despite the recent discussions about a ‘global civil society’ or ‘global public sphere’), theorists have turned to a consideration of universal anthropological traits of human beings as an anchor for the construction of empirical hypotheses and normative models. The presupposition, it seems, is that human nature is in one respect or another invariant across the bewildering variation observed in the social structures, cultural narratives, identity- and community-forming practices, and patterns of economic interaction in the world. While this universal core must be articulated with an eye to the historical and mutable character of all human modes of personality and social organization, one may hope to uncover it and utilize it with practical intent by means of methods and conceptual frameworks whose effectiveness is not impeded by current conditions as much as those of the main stream of sociology are.

This trend goes beyond the circle of critical social theory, however. It seems to be bolstered as well by the increasing importance in our “biologischer Zeitalter” (Illies, 2006) of neo-Darwinian approaches to human individual and social psychology that are themselves supported and supplemented by advances in neurology. These approaches have potentially important ramifications for our understanding of human agency and are therefore properly the subject of intense debate and controversy (Habermas, 2005a; Illies, 2006). Against the background of these developments in theoretical philosophy, the recent return to prominence of neo-Aristotelian approaches to practical philosophy, even at precisely the transnational level, is not so surprising. Lack of a clear shared cultural framework or integrated social system to depend upon makes something like a “capabilities approach” based upon an inductively-generated list of basic and universal human needs (Nussbaum, 2006, *passim*, but especially p. 69-81, 392-401) look more attractive. Honneth’s writings, going all the way back to his engagement with the German philosophical anthropology of Plessner and Gehlen in *Social action and human nature* and especially clear in the reintroduction of teleological and perfectionist elements into the ‘formal conception of the good life’ that is the normative crown of his social theory (1995, ch. 9, p. 171-79), have been both a powerful impetus for this development and a sophisticated expression of this as well.

### Concluding remarks, risky suggestions, troubling questions

Critical social theory, then, has no overarching theoretical synthesis to draw upon at present. This is no cause for nostalgia. There never was such a unified framework at the Institut für Sozialforschung during the heyday of Horkheimer and Adorno. To my knowledge, even a unified *research program* for developing such a theory existed at best during the 1930s until the outbreak of WWII. We have seen the evolution of critical social theory from the production paradigm, through the communication and recognition paradigms. None of these have *aufgehoben* earlier varieties of theory. They have supplemented, improved and innovated, and sometimes of course neglected insights of earlier theorists. Hence the task of the day is to creatively draw upon the existing paradigms we have for specific theoretical and practical tasks, an endeavor for which I have used the term ‘paradigm-constellations’. Synthesis is desirable whenever possible, i. e., if and only if objective conditions (facts, phenomena) support it. In the spirit of such remarks, I will close with two concrete suggestions for broadening out the recognition-paradigm by placing it into constellations with other disciplinary frameworks, and in particular continuing to draw on the immense resources present in Habermas’ still-expanding oeuvre.

First, it seems to me that recognition-theory needs an *Anerkennungspragmatik*, or a pragmatics of recognition, to be elaborated on the basis of investigation of linguistically-mediated recognition-constituting *interactions* and their institutional settings. Relevant literatures to draw upon here are obviously the vast literature on the pragmatics of language and communication, as well as sociological studies of what Habermas calls ‘dramaturgical action’, especially the sociological work of Goffman, and the ‘ethnomethodological’ work of Garfinkel, both discussed in vol. 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, and also used in criticisms of Habermas by McCarthy. The objects of investigation would be speech acts, gestures, and actions, whether formal (like prize or award ceremonies) or informal, that convey the kinds of recognition distinguished in Honneth’s theory. Perhaps the most important benefit of such research would be a better understanding of the mechanisms of recognition and of its denial, and how objectionably unequal distributions of recognitions are created and reinforced in society.

Second, recognition theory needs a more well-elaborated *Anerkennungssoziologie* (sociology of recognition), or account of the way *institutions* are constituted by, produce, maintain and disseminate relations of recognition, a necessary complement to the pragmatics of recognition mentioned above. This is a needed filling out of the meso-social (institutional, organizational)

dimension that has been to this point neglected by Honneth in the major works elaborating the sociology of recognition. Honneth consistently addresses microsocial phenomena such as psychological development and macrosocial phenomena such as orders of recognition and normative criteria of progress for these, at most merely indicating relevant institutional bearers of these orders, or dynamic transitional phenomena that mediate the micro and meso levels such as the formation of social groups into movements or ‘struggles’ (*Kämpfe*) for social change. But for theoretical and practical purposes, this too is an essential element in a fuller critical social theory. Honneth’s repeated indication of the importance of law is a sign of his appreciation of this point. But we are still waiting for a recognition-theoretical version (or revision) of the discourse theory of law and democracy presented in Habermas’ *Between Facts and Norms*.

Having placed these two proposals on the table, it only remains to say all critical social theorists and those interested in the continuing life of this tradition – Get to work.

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