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Suffering from Exclusion

On the critical impulse of the theory of recognition

*Michele Salonia**

Negative experiences have been at the center of critical thinking from the very beginning. Thus the idea of suffering is at play in all the keywords of Critical Theory. Whether it is the misery of the working class, reification, damaged life, the non-identical or disrespect, what is at issue is the unnecessary suffering of socialized subjects. Experiences of suffering are the pre-scientific anchoring, the point of support of Critical Theory.¹ For the Critical Theorist, suffering counts as the original form of an emancipatory interest, that is, an impulse to transform those social relations that cause this suffering. He understands his own theoretical achievement to be making social subjects aware of the social causes of their suffering in order to empower them to direct themselves with a critical eye to the social contexts that cause suffering and undertake a consciously emancipatory praxis.

The emphasis on the suffering of socialized subjects, however, has continuously made Critical Theory susceptible to a certain danger. I mean the following: negative experiences could be seen as the inevitable correlate of social life, as, for instance, Freud held the discontent of the individual to be

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¹ On the idea of a “pre-scientific” anchoring of Critical Theory, cf. Honneth (1999; 1991).

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the necessary correlate of all life within the framework of human culture. If this were so, the idea of an emancipatory praxis instigated by negative experiences would also be transformed. If suffering were a necessary correlate of all social life (*Zusammenleben*), the praxis that accompanies it would not result in the alteration of particular social arrangements, but rather in an anti-social, even anarchistic act of liberation from all social bonds. Critical Theory has continuously had to fight against such a transformation of emancipatory praxis, one that would mean at the same time a transformation of theory into a radical critique of culture. It has always attempted to avoid making the suffering of socialized subjects dependent on social arrangements in such a way that the surmounting of suffering can only be thought of as the dissolution of social relations themselves.

Now when one has the aforementioned danger in view, the result is a perspective from which one can work out a significant contribution of recognition theory to the development of critical thinking. The model of recognition developed by Axel Honneth connects individual self-realization and social inclusion in a way that allows the painful disruptions of self-realization to be overcome not through the dissolution of social inclusion, but rather just the opposite – through its expansion. According to recognition-theory suffering initiates a critical-emancipatory praxis through which renewed validity will be produced for social bonds. Suffering does not count as an occasion for the *Aufhebung* of social inclusion, but rather, on the contrary, as an occasion for a critique of the lack of social inclusion. To this extent Honneth's recognition-theory seems capable of offering the most solid approach in the history of Critical Theory for showing that the suffering of socialized subjects cannot at all be overcome by means of the dissolution of social bonds, but rather by means of their strengthening and renewal.

In what follows I will attempt to bring out this, in my opinion central, aspect of recognition-theory. First I will explain how Honneth, just like the entire tradition of Critical Theory, starts out with negative experiences (1). Then I will ask how the category of recognition makes it possible to tightly connect individual experience and social relations (2). On the basis of this two things will become visible: on the one hand the way in which, according to recognition-theory, negative experiences depend upon a lack of social inclusion (3), and on the other how such experiences are connected with normatively-laden feelings of injustice that themselves become an impulse towards the revitalization of social inclusion (4).

1.

Critical Theory, unlike a theory constituted in accordance with the ‘traditional’ view – to speak in terms of Horkheimer’s (1980) well-known distinction – does not merely aim at the description of social phenomena. Having grown out of a self-enlightenment in the theory of science, it sets out from the supposition that the theory is the affair of embodied, socialized human beings who only strive after theoretical explanations insofar as they have an interest in them. The interest of which Critical Theory understands itself to be an expression, is an emancipatory one:² it concerns the interest in the alteration of existing social contexts in favor of a state that would be free of problems of the present. Consequently, Critical Theory views social arrangements with respect to the possibility of their critical alteration.

What exactly should one understand, however, under the heading, “emancipatory interest of socialized subjects”? “Interest” is something that moves bodily subjects from within and internally motivates them to be engaged. Therefore “interest” means something practical that is capable of setting a praxis in motion. The bearers of an emancipatory interest are ready to take on practical attitudes whose goal is the alteration of the social contexts in which they live.

Understood in this way, interest announces itself most clearly in the suffering of social actors. Subjects that experience a lack, a need, or a discontent are ready to undertake something in order to overcome the state of discontent.³ Such negative experiences bear within themselves a motivating force for overcoming them. Where individuals suffer their entire existence is bent on freeing themselves from that suffering. The discontent mobilizes all the cognitive and practical energies of the individual to concern themselves with the alteration of the state of affairs that accompanies that discontent. Suffering, one can say, compels the subject to make practical decisions and to break up habituated attitudes.

Theodor W. Adorno dedicated some acute remarks to the practical import of suffering. In *Negative Dialectics* (1973, p. 203) we read: “The physical

² On the idea of the interest in emancipation, cf. Habermas (1987, chap. 3).

³ According to Axel Honneth, critical theorists found the connection between suffering and an interest in emancipation in Freud’s Psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytical treatment starts out from the presupposition that “the individual who subjectively suffers from a neurotic illness also wants to be free from that suffering” (Honneth, 2004, p. 355).

moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different. “Woe speaks: ‘Go.’” Hence the converge of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice.”

Adorno alludes here to the physiological dimension of suffering.⁴ Suffering fulfils a protective function for the organism. In suffering the organism learns to avoid those situation that cause suffering and at the same time endanger its self-preservation. In the moral realm there is a source of motivation that corresponds to the protective function in the biological realm: namely, the motivation to protect oneself against social contexts that cause suffering. Only injuries or negative experiences actually push subjects to the point of switching over to praxis, of making decisions to resist that which exists. As opposed to this, one does not find a similar practical force in positive moral convictions. As our everyday experience proves, knowledge of the morally good has no such immediate effect upon our will as the experience of the bad and the painful. The latter compels us to action in order to quickly remove ourselves from what is painful. Put otherwise: moral ideas become binding only insofar as they are violated.

Honneth as well views experiences of injury as an essential source of motivation.⁵ Having in mind “historical sociological studies devoted to the forms of active resistance engaged in by the lower social classes”, he asserts in a pregnant way “that the social protests of the lower classes are not motivationally guided by positively formulated moral principles, but by violation of intuitive notions of justice” (Honneth, 1999).

Furthermore, in Honneth’s discourse it is clear that not all forms of suffering stand in the center of attention for critical thinking, but rather only those that are caused by social contexts and thus tend towards their alteration. Critical Theory sees itself placed before the task of making clear which forms of suffering can be traced back to social relationships. However the point is not merely to indicate the social causes of suffering, but rather to make plain the fact that determinate forms of suffering are violations of expectations that can only be redeemed in social relationships. Therefore it is always social expectations that are in question. In accordance with this we have the idea of “social suffering”, that is, suffering that is accompanied by the violation of

⁴ On the role of suffering in Adorno’s theory, cf. Früchtel (1986, p. 100-134) and Bernstein (2005).

⁵ Honneth emphasizes the motivational element of suffering in various places throughout his work: cf. Honneth (2004; 1992; 2000); Fraser; Honneth (2003, p. 114-134).

expectations that members direct to society and which can only be fulfilled in society.⁶

2.

In order to explain how negative experiences can be reconstructed in a recognition-theoretical perspective, a preliminary discussion of the model of analysis bound up with the concept of recognition is in order. One can begin with a minimal definition of recognition. Honneth describes recognition as “a category that conditions subjects’ autonomy on intersubjective regard” (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 1). This short formulation already shows that recognition-theory is embedded in the so-called communication-paradigm. According to this paradigm, phenomena such as morality and knowledge must not be viewed starting out from isolated subjects, but rather from intersubjective relations. Just as the communication-paradigm claims that the subject only achieves cognition of an objective world insofar as it takes on the perspective of its communication-partner, so Honneth asserts that the individual can only achieve a relationship to itself by means of the expectations that its interaction-partner (*Gegenüber*) directs towards it. The interaction-partner recognizes (*anerkennen*) the identity of the subject by means of such expectations. It is through this that the subject learns to conceive itself as a self. The intersubjective agreement enables the subject to recognize the different aspects of its identity as its own. Intersubjective agreement is thus a necessary condition for the development of self-consciousness. Of course the individual constantly has a direct experience of itself, of its inner states and drives. However it can only positively relate itself to this insofar as it at the same time also experiences an intersubjective agreement regarding such aspects of its personality. Intersubjective agreement lies, therefore, just as much at the root of both the production of self-consciousness and the development of a positive relation-to-self. This latter itself represents a necessary condition for the unfolding of the person, that is, for its successful self-realization. From this follows the thesis that “the experience of social recognition represents a condition on which the development of the identity of human beings depends” (Honneth, 1999, p. 329-330).

In order to further explicate the recognition-theoretical model of individualization, it may be helpful here to connect the discussion to Honneth’s

⁶ The idea of “social suffering” corresponds to that of “social pathology” (cf. Honneth, 1996).

(1996, p. 71-91) reconstruction of George Herbert Mead's social psychology.⁷ According to Mead's social-psychological approach, the individual can relate itself to itself by means of the expectations that an other directs towards it. From the perspective of the other the subject knows itself as a "me": it develops, in other words, a consciousness of its self. However, in order for the subject to become conscious of itself as an active, autonomous subject, it is supposed to experience something in itself that diverges from the intersubjectively recognized "me". Such a diverging, or if one wants, creative power is what Mead named "I". The "I" makes it possible for the individual to take on determinate attitudes towards the expectations of the other. It learns thereby to experience itself as a source of action, namely as an autonomous individual that is responsible to others for its own actions. The "I" is the source of the peculiarities of individual identity. At the same time it is the source of those determinate expectations that the subject itself directs at other subjects. Where these expectations are acknowledged by others, the subject can positively relate itself to the various aspects of its personality, which is a presupposition for the successful unfolding and realization of its own identity.

I would like to emphasize two aspects of this recognition-theoretical model of individuation that are particularly relevant in light of my argument. In the first place, the key point is the constitutive connection between self-realization, self-relation, and social inclusion. Insofar as self-relation is dependent upon intersubjective *Anerkennung*, the individual can, as shown above, only have a positive relationship to itself to the extent that it can count on social agreement, that is, to the extent that it is socially included. However, for its part such a positive self-relation is, further, a necessary condition for the ability of the subject to develop the various aspects of its personality. From this one can conclude that social inclusion, insofar as it represents a condition of positive self-relation, constitutes at the same time a necessary condition of individual self-realization. In other words: the individual can have a successful life if it receives the opportunity to take part in social life without having to be ashamed. Honneth characterizes intact identity-formation as that which gives the subject the capability "to appear in public without shame" (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 196).

⁷ In the meantime Honneth has partially distanced himself from his own earlier connection to Mead's social psychology (cf. Honneth, 2002, p. 502-504). He corrects his own position, however, on account of problems that don't play a role in my reconstruction of negative experiences from a recognition-theoretical perspective. In the following I will therefore not touch upon Honneth's self-revisions.

The second aspect of the model I have presented to be emphasized is its dynamic character. This can be explained using Mead's terminology. There where the "I" diverges from the socially-recognized image of the "Me", the subject can only win back a positive relation to itself insofar as it can produce, thanks to its creativity, a new image of itself, a new "Me", that includes the surplus (*überschießenden*) part of the "I". For that reason, however, the subject must at the same time imagine an expanded generalized other that could recognize this new "Me". As Honneth (1996, p. 83) says:

One is capable of 'asserting' oneself, as Mead says – that is, of defending the demands of the 'I' vis-à-vis one's societal environment – only if, instead of taking the perspective of the existing collective will, one can take the perspective of an expanded community of rights.

Social inclusion is constitutive for the subject in such a way that, where its entire personality is not socially integrated, it must imagine a widened form of social integration. For it is primarily through a more encompassing form of social integration that the subject is in a position to relate positively to itself. The divergence of the "I" from the intersubjectively recognized "Me" thus kicks off a process of idealization that provides the foundation for a widened form of intersubjective recognition. Thereby a new, at first only ideally given, widened collective will emerges that provides the basis for the recognition of a correspondingly widened "Me", which for its part also includes the surplus (*überschießenden*), heretofore socially-unintegrated aspects of the individual.

The recognition-model also has, next to the aforementioned consequences in the realm of moral psychology, an effect on both the realms of social-ontology and the theory of justice. Starting out from this model, recognition can be seen as the foundation of social institutions. The relations of recognition that underlie both process of socialization and individualization are sedimentated in the institutions of society. If the institutions of society did not secure the conditions of intersubjective recognition, they would give up that participation that is the basis of their existence. With this point in hand, the significance for the theory of justice that is inscribed in the recognition-model can be understood. For the subjects learn during their socialization that the institution in which they take part are only to be seen as just insofar as they include those concerned and thereby set up opportunities for successful self-realization. The members of society measure its justice – according to Honneth – "proportionated to its ability to secure conditions of mutual recognition

under which personal identity-formation, hence individual self-realization, can proceed adequately” (Fraser; Honneth, 2004, p. 174).

3.

On the basis of this brief presentation of the recognition-model one can now see how negative experiences are reconstructed in a recognition-theoretical perspective. The suffering of the subject allows itself to be seen, in general, as a disturbance of self-realization. For its part such a disturbance depends, according to the recognition-model, on the impossibility of a positive relation-to-self. And the impossibility of a positive relation-to-self, moreover, depends upon an inadequacy on the part of society: because subjects can only develop a positive relation-to-self to the extent that others recognize it, a negative relation-to-self can be understood as a lack of social recognition. The positive relation to oneself depends on the redemption of those expectations of recognition that the subject directs towards society. If they are not fulfilled, the subject can neither positively appreciate itself, nor develop its identity in a successful way. A state of discontent results from this. The individual begins to be ashamed of those personality-components that diverge from the socially-recognized image of its self. A quasi-schizophrenic condition thus results, an internal crisis, in which the individual must in a certain way bid farewell to a part of its personality.

That not all of the personality components of the individual are socially recognized can also be described as an inadequacy of the social conceptual framework that underlies all relationships of recognition or inclusion. That is, the individual confronts a social conceptual framework that is not sufficiently differentiated to do justice to all the various aspects of its personality. It experiences something in itself that cannot be conceptualized by those intersubjectively shared concepts that are available. In such a situation it cannot but negatively esteem the aspects of its personality that do not permit of conceptualization: it experiences in itself something that is divergent, deviant, monstrous, or obscene, about which it is ashamed. This kind of crisis in the relation-to-self is the source of discontent.

It should from this point on be clear that the lack of social inclusion, or the inadequacy in the intersubjectively shared conceptual framework that underlies social inclusion, immediately strikes back at the individual: the individual must in a certain way exclude and, viewed psychologically, repress the surplus part of its personality that is not socially included. In short:

according to the recognition-model, suffering as disturbance of self-realization depends upon a negative relation-to-self that results from a lack of social inclusion. Social exclusion leads to the exclusion by the individual of a part of itself and thus to suffering.

4.

The individual is caught in a pathological condition insofar as it introjects the lack of social inclusion and thereby represses a part of its personality. However, where such an introjection does not take place, in contrast, a public conflict between the individual and society can arise. This can be viewed from two perspectives. From the observer perspective, one can say the following: if the social institutions do not fulfill the expectations of their members, the basis of social life is endangered. From the perspective of the socialized subjects, what corresponds to this is an experience of injustice. The subject experiences the fact that those expectations of recognition that it legitimately directs towards society are not redeemed. This negative experience of the individual indicates, consequently, a normative dimension: the individual perceives its own suffering as a social injustice; it feels the injustice of a society that cannot fulfill its normative expectations of recognition. With respect to this Honneth remarks:

If the adjective ‘social’ is to mean anything more than ‘typically found in society’, social suffering and discontent possess a *normative* core. It is a matter of the disappointment or violation of normative expectations of society considered justified by those concerned. Thus, such feelings of discontent and suffering, insofar as they are designated as ‘social’, coincide with the experience that society is doing something unjust, something unjustifiable (Fraser; Honneth, 2003, p. 129).

At this point the feeling of injustice that accompanies that suffering must be considered further. Feelings of injustice connect themselves with a protest against the existing social arrangements; they link up with an emancipatory praxis that aims at the overcoming of those social arrangements that cause suffering. It is not a matter here of an act of liberation from all social bonds. To the extent that the suffering goes along with a lack of social inclusion, it can only be overcome through an expansion of social relations of inclusion. The emancipatory praxis that is kicked off by suffering and feelings of injustice aims at this kind of expansion of inclusion. Thus, out of feelings of injustice grows the normative expectation of more just social relationships of interaction that would be capable of redeeming the claims to recognition of their members.

Only such a society, one with widened orders of recognition, would place its members in a position from which they could again produce a positive relation-to-self and thereby overcome present discontent. Consequently, the praxis that accompanies the feelings of injustice aims not at a weakening of social inclusion but rather, entirely to the contrary, at a widened and strengthened inclusion. Feelings of injustice are the impulse for a critical actualization of the normative foundation of social ties: experiences of injustice compel social actors to interject themselves into social life so that their social expectations might be socially recognized. The effects of this are struggles for recognition within social space, conflicts kicked off by feelings of injustice that legitimately demand formerly withheld recognition.

This picture can be filled out with reference to the Meadian terminology introduced above. When the socially recognized “Me” does not cover the claims of the “I”, a creative or idealizing process is set off in which a widened “Me” and a correspondingly widened community are conceptually determined. That is, the feelings of injustice incite a dynamic process of self-reflection in the subject. Through this the part of the individual disrespected by the existing society is more closely defined, and thus at the same time that which should be recognized in widened and more differentiated social arrangements. The conceptual framework regarding that which it is just to recognize socially is thereby expanded. On the one hand, therefore, the feeling of injustice denounces the limits of the existing social conceptual system that does not do justice to the different aspects of individual personality. On the other hand it contributes to the determination of a widened and more differentiated conceptual system that can encompass the formerly disrespected parts of the individual personality. So the central issue is the expansion and finer definition of the view of what ought to be included in society.

In conclusion I would like to discuss, on the basis of the argument developed so far, the main idea of my paper. The theory of recognition reconstructs those negative experiences out of which results an emancipatory impulse towards the alteration of the social arrangements. It does this in such a way as to make clear how such an impulse does not aim at the dissolution of social connections, but rather entirely to the contrary at their expansion. This is part and parcel of the basic model of recognition. To the extent that, in accordance with this model, self-realization is dependent on social inclusion, injuries to self-realization causes demands for new and wider forms of social inclusion. Such injuries to the formation of intact personalities lead to an emancipatory praxis that aims all at once both to differentiate and widen the

view of which social expectations should be recognized. This emancipatory praxis revivifies the social bonds of inclusion. In that Honneth bases himself on a fundamental connection between self-realization and social inclusion, his theory clearly escapes the danger to which Critical Theory was subject from the very beginning. I mean the danger that, beneath the radar of the critical theorist, the emancipatory praxis that accompanies social discontent would metamorphose into an anti-social act of “liberation”. Contrary to this, the theory of recognition wants to conceive of discontent as a practical impulse towards the creation of a more developed and integrated form of social life. Social suffering is the cry for more inclusion.

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