

The Limits of Recognition: Axel Honneth's Formal Ethical Life and the Problem of Ideology

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

The term “recognition” is a commonly employed category in the political scene. Colloquially, it designates a moral demand on part of the bearers of injustice to be treated with dignity and respect. But recognition is not merely a demand, but also an action; it has addressors, but also addressees, the latter being the more powerful. How should we construe this dynamic for an ethical theory? Does recognition designate something fundamentally moral? What is at play when the powerful claim to have recognized the powerless? The following thesis explores these questions with respect to Axel Honneth’s thought, in particular in his seminal *Struggle for Recognition*. On the basis of an anthropological account as well as a historical analysis of modernity’s “learning process”, Honneth offers a reconstruction of the early Hegel’s threefold theory of recognition in order to elucidate the conditions of a just society. Yet, as I will argue, Honneth’s theory does little to address the asymmetries of power in relations of recognition. As a result, he provides an overly moral account of recognition while overlooking how recognition itself can be utilized as an ideological tool for assimilation. After explaining Honneth’s theory in the first chapter, I will develop this criticism in the second chapter, and apply it in the context of Indigenous struggles for self-determination in Canada in the third.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest thanks to my supervisor, Marie-Eve Morin, for her continued support, patience, and critical commentary. She was pivotal to my research project, and I have benefited greatly from our conversations and the depth of her knowledge. My gratitude towards Marie-Eve extends beyond the scope of this thesis. I am also greatly appreciative of the help and support of my committee members—Marie-Eve Morin, Robert Burch, and Richard Westerman—in undertaking this project. Without their insightful feedback and invaluable time, the completion of the present thesis would not be possible.

I am forever indebted to my loving family for their unconditional affection and faith. I thank my parents and older sister for their multiple reviews and feedback on the present work. Undoubtedly, this thesis is dedicated to them.

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Introduction

Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it; and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection: but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. [...] This is what makes the constitution of the state and the due distribution of its powers a matter of the most delicate and complicated skill. It requires a deep knowledge of human nature and human necessities. [...] What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician, rather than the professor of metaphysics.

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

The following thesis provides a critical evaluation of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition within the globalized and multicultural dynamic of the present. I examine whether the concept of recognition, which Honneth understands to be the "moral grammar of social conflicts" (Honneth 1996) can adequately serve as the normative basis for understanding and explicating inequitable relations in society. As the main representative of the third generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, Honneth sets out to revitalize the emancipatory role that its founders had ascribed to theory, a role which he believes to have been lost in the second generation and the works of its primary thinker, Jürgen Habermas. The main assertion of this thesis, however, is that Honneth's manner of conceiving recognition—as a formalized account of moral identity—ultimately stultifies that objective. In particular, I argue that Honneth provides an overly moralized construal of recognition while overlooking how recognition itself can be weaponized in the service of ideology, promulgating the superiority of the predominant value system and reproducing status-quo relations of domination.

This introductory chapter aims to explain the normative appeal of the concept of recognition as it relates to an emancipatory theoretical undertaking. A brief recounting of the normative foundations of the Frankfurt School Critical Theory will be necessary in this regard. This is then followed by a synopsis of the arguments laid out in this thesis.

Frankfurt School Critical Theory

First Generation: Critical Appropriation of Marxian Categories

The establishment of the Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt School) was heavily influenced by the events during and after the First World War, and the concomitant shifts that had been developing in social-philosophical thought at the turn of the twentieth century. History could no longer, *contra* Hegel, be explained as following an independent movement of thought culminating in the predetermined notion of ethical totality and Spirit. Nor did the proletariat class carry out the revolutionary role that Marx had ascribed to it. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had descended into Stalinism, and fascism was on the rise. Modern reason had developed to stand firm against metaphysical truths. And in the face of increased demands of sociological proof, many of the normative assumptions of social philosophy had been questioned. In this era of interwar instability, the need for a critical theory of society that bears the argumentative force and social appeal to bring about widescale change, whilst maintaining a strong foothold in social reality could be felt all the more vividly.

Social philosophy, in other words, had lacked foundation. Its “dilemma”, as Max Horkheimer notes in his Inaugural address to the Frankfurt School, consisted in the inability to speak of its object—namely the *cultural life of humanity*—other than in ideological, sectarian and confessional terms. [...] One might say that several concepts of reality are involved. It would be possible to investigate the genesis of these different concepts, or to which kind of innate sensibility or social group they correspond; but one cannot be preferred to another on substantive grounds. (Horkheimer 1993, 8, my emphasis).

At the heart of the problem, lies the “divorce between Spirit and reality” (Horkheimer 1993, 11): the tendency to construe truth either as belonging to a primary realm of “spiritual contents” from which the course of history is determined, and thus “a badly understood Hegel”; or the tendency to reduce it to “the economy as material being [...] and thus a badly understood Marx”

(Horkheimer 1993, 11). Such tendencies miss the constitutive role of thought in determining the being of objects. In the first instance, this means that concepts employed to describe objects are not value-neutral, but reflect a desire on part of the theoretician, inevitably transmitted to the object in the very act of description. As Fred Rush explains, using a concept already implies that a particular feature of an object is deemed significant: “picking out which among the many qualities of a thing to treat as salient is purposive and involves interests that one has in understanding the world to be a certain way” (Rush 2004, 15). For Horkheimer, this cognitive contribution is essential to understanding the relation between praxis and theory.

To aim for a mere descriptive account of society, then, is to be in discordance with the *act* of theorizing. Theory has purpose; and the role of the theoretician is not to neutralize that purposiveness, but to align it to the emancipatory interests of society. The starting point must be the concrete, morally imbued experiences of human beings. For the first-generation thinkers—most notably Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno—this was to be sought in the experience of labour and the emancipatory resistance of the proletariat, which they had maintained with Marx to be the site of social progress. The question confronting them, however, was daunting: why, then, did not the German working class rise up and overthrow the capitalist mode of production? It soon became evident that mere cognizance of one’s unity in socioeconomic hardships cannot spark the latent revolutionary spirit of the proletariat. For the first-generation thinkers of the Frankfurt School, this meant that the question of class-consciousness had to be reconceived within the context of the formative cultural elements that shape the way in which the proletariat think of their labour. An appropriation, and not an abandonment of Marxian categories, such as reification and alienation, was needed to include a revealing critique of the “cultural life of humanity”. The passivity of the proletariat was thereby traced back to patterns of behavior promoted in capitalist societies—e.g.

consumerism, competition for individual gain, and isolation from social life—giving rise to a “false” consciousness, thereby distorting their relation to the world and their place within it.

With the advent of the Second World War, however, the utopic aspirations of the early years of the Frankfurt School gave way to a prevailing pessimism. As evinced in the opening pages of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Under the leveling rule of abstraction, which makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry, for which abstraction prepared the way, the liberated finally themselves become the “herd,” which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment. The distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 9).

Within this new interpretive framework, the developmental logic of political economy takes on a despondent formulation. Witnessing the horrors of fascism, Horkheimer and Adorno no longer construe labour primarily as a realm of self-actualization, which would have to be released from the veil of the culture industry. As Honneth interprets, “in a direct inversion of the positive interpretation previously prevailing in the Marxist tradition, both thinkers perceived only that element of human labor that serves instrumental dominance” (Honneth 2007c, 29). The very same context which prompted the establishment of an institute that theorizes the conditions of emancipation is now reinterpreted within the framework of a “logic of increasing decline” (Honneth 2007c, 29) for which fascism is the endpoint.

From the standpoint of instrumental reason, early-stage capitalism and its espousing of liberal values is a necessary precursor to the total domination that marks its later stages. Whereas early stage capitalism had justified “the domination of men over men and over nature” with the ideals of freedom and the liberation of the individual, late-stage capitalism lays claim to the very domineering logic of instrumental reason itself, that is technical efficiency (Arato, Gebhardt, and Piccone 1978). Early capitalism had given birth to the individual, only however, by the paradoxical

liberating of the individual from feudal social bonds to a hollowing culture industry; late-stage capitalism fills that void by creating a society where “psychically empty individuals are as helplessly exposed to large-scale purposive-rational organizations as they once were to the unconquerable forces of nature” (Honneth 2007c, 29). The logic of instrumental domination was so entrenched in the social realities produced by fascist systems that, according to Honneth, Horkheimer and Adorno held that such systems “could only be explained if they were understood as a consequence of a pathological development in the history of civilization” (Honneth 2007c, 28); the history of civilization is the history of instrumental reason becoming more explicit.

Rationality thus reduced to instrumental reason, thinking itself becomes suspect; it unreflectively prescribes its own convictions to the objects of its analyses, succumbing to the illusion of an inherent and stable truth of the world which it encounters. For Horkheimer and Adorno, this illusion sustains the unjust framework of society; for it engenders an intuitive sense of trust—irrational faith—in reason as a reliable means of arriving at an independent truth as if it were in essence at a distance from the thinking that merely “discovers” it. Reason on this account becomes an “instrument of adaptation” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 185); it becomes appropriated within the framework of rational organization and develops to its most extreme manifestation: totalitarianism.

Thus, Hitler demands the right to practice mass murder in the name of the principle of sovereignty under international law, which tolerates any act of violence in another country. Like every paranoiac he takes advantage of the hypocritical identity of truth and sophistry; the distinction between them is as unconvincing as it nevertheless is strict. Perception is only possible in so far as the thing is already apprehended as determinate—for example, as a case of a genus or type. It is a mediated immediacy, thought infused with the seductive power of sensuality. It blindly transfers subjective elements to the apparent givenness of the object (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 160).

Now, the problem with Horkheimer and Adorno’s overarching fatalism is that it brings Critical Theory to a methodological dead-end. For as soon as we accept the conclusion that history, in its

entirety, represents reason's progress in its ideological path of domination, all occurrences are inevitably construed in a cynical light. The interpretive framework of the mentioned authors makes it so that, as Honneth claims, it is "the "process of civilization as a whole", rather than "the social reality of totalitarianism" *per se* that is problematic (Honneth 2007c, 30). There would remain nothing to hold on to; nothing to take as the basis upon which we can evaluate social occurrences as pathological; no "pre-theoretical praxis" in the moral experiences of human beings. Interestingly, Horkheimer and Adorno do seem to recant their fatalistic construal of the process of civilization in a 1969 preface to the same work, namely *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

We do not stand by everything we said in the book in its original form. That would be incompatible with a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history. The book was written at a time when the end of the National Socialist terror was in sight. In not a few places, however, the formulation is no longer adequate to the reality of today (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xi).

In terms of the normative foundations of Critical Theory, then, it is not theoretically feasible to conceive of the "pathology of cognition" as overwhelming the entire spectrum of human dealings in the world. "Our conception of history does not believe itself elevated above history", the authors continue in the preface, "but it does not merely chase after information in a positivist manner" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xii). Events point to something beyond their immediate circumstance; but their meaning must be sought within the unfolding of history itself. As Honneth observes, the problem for Horkheimer and Adorno was that the atrocities of World War II had presented an all too vivid moment which they felt compelled to take as their interpretive reference point.

Second Generation: The Communicative Turn

A defining feature of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is emphasis on the essentially social character of human beings and the rejection of isolated, egoist accounts of the self. But in confining

their search for a normative basis in the revolutionary impulses of one particular class, the proletariat, Horkheimer and Adorno had effectively reduced the sociality of human relations to the experience of labour. Sociality had been understood through the lens of individual's relation to the *objects* of their activity—that is the constitutive contribution of their activity to objects—and the collective awareness of such activity that ultimately gives rise to the transformative force of the proletariat. This, however, as Jürgen Habermas has argued, came at the expense of excluding a fundamental dimension of human sociality: the “subject-subject” relation (Bohman and Rehg 2007). As such, this triggered a turning point. Instead of limiting the issue of emancipation to the hardships of a particular class, the Habermasian approach to Critical Theory now sought its normative foundations in the basic structures of language. According to his theory of “communicative action”, it is the capacity for effective self-articulation—the basic normative structure for subject-subject relations—that comes to the fore as the basis for diagnosing and explaining social injustices.

In the course of the development of Western societies, Habermas sees concomitant developments in language that lead to the establishment of new forms of communication which progressively become freer from dominating influences. Perhaps the most manifest example of such developments is rights-discourse, which has increasingly afforded individuals a wide spectrum of linguistic means to articulate their claims to autonomy. Habermas thereby seeks to identify those forms of language that—in facilitating individuals' ability to have a say in the linguistic presuppositions of communication—can be taken as the condition of progress. The main subjects of analysis and critique are thereby the various loci of communication, such as mainstream media, public discourse, legal language, bureaucratic language that governs the division of labour etc. Accordingly, social misdevelopments amount to patterns of public and institutional behaviours

that suppress or inhibit subjects' capacity to freely endorse and codetermine the norms of communication in social interaction.

Habermas' move towards systematizing and establishing a universal foundation is clear. And although Honneth ultimately embraces this move, he holds that it is not without cost. According to Honneth, the Habermasian approach strays from the original program of the Frankfurt School in one important respect: to reveal, through critique, the means for emancipation to the dominated themselves. Moral experience, in particular moral injury, is relegated to the background of Habermas' analysis. As Honneth notes, the formation of linguistic rules for communication takes place "behind the backs of subjects involved" (Honneth 2007d, 70). As mentioned, Habermas finds the condition of social progress in the subjects' ability to coordinate the validity assumptions implicit in linguistic communication. The problem, however, lies in this very implicitness: they are faint elements in the concrete experiences of morally indignant human beings. There is little room for reflective thinking in taking up "intuitively mastered" linguistic rules that have constantly changed and developed through history (Honneth 2007b, 70). As a result, positing them as the basis of a theory of emancipation would seem to diminish the active component that Critical Theory assigns to the subjects of sociopolitical analysis; it is inadequate for bringing the means for change in the hands of the subjects suffering from injustice.

Once again, then, we find Critical Theory in a precarious situation in which both its descriptive accuracy and normative appeal is put into question. Indeed, it is plausible to claim that the spirit of Edmund Burke's rather sarcastic polemic quoted in the epigraph of this chapter, namely regarding the relevance of philosophy to the material world which we inhabit, is a criticism that has perpetually occupied the minds of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Much more than being a "professor of metaphysics" wandering in the realm of "abstract perfection", the Frankfurt

Institute for Social Research has always purported to deal with the multitude of practical issues that go hand in hand with issues of justice and emancipation. But according to Honneth, to the extent that Habermas' expansion of the scope of critique to include the subject-subject relation neglects consideration of the explicitness of the moral experiences of the subjects involved, it fails to provide an emancipatory philosophy of praxis.

Third Generation: Axel Honneth and the Normative Appeal of Recognition

In his criticism of Habermas, then, Honneth proceeds by juxtaposing the reality of social struggles with Habermas' account of the norms of communicative action. Construing the latter in terms of background linguistic rules is too distant from lived experience. In this regard, Honneth's own critical theory is in large part motivated by his attempt to concretize Habermas' account of the normativity of the subject-subject relation. Here, Honneth contends that it is from the viewpoint of "the acquisition of social recognition" that we can "better understand the moral expectations embedded in the everyday process of social communication" (Honneth 2007b, 71). Taking the site of conflict as his pre-theoretical praxis, he claims that social struggles, notwithstanding their difference in content, are the expression of a discordance between the identity expectations that subjects have acquired through socialization (e.g. as a citizen, as a worker, etc.) on the one hand, and their actual, material situation on the other hand: "moral injustice is at hand whenever, contrary to their expectations, human subjects are denied the recognition they feel they deserve" (Honneth 2007b, 72). Contrary to rules of language, these identity expectations *are* present in the foreground of subjects' experience of indignation, and are articulated negatively in the course of collective struggle by the subjects themselves.

Of course, this negativist approach can only be a first step in constructing a new normative basis for Critical Theory. As Honneth states in the concluding section of "The Social Dynamics of

Disrespect”, his emphasis on subjective feelings of being treated unjustly should not give the impression that these experiences are in themselves “something morally valuable to which theory can refer without qualification in its social self-justification” (Honneth 2007b, 77). Social recognition can “just as well be sought in small militaristic groups, whose code of honour is a practice of violence, as it can be in the public arenas of democratic society” (Honneth 2007b, 77); expectations that arise through socialization can indeed be generated within an environment of hate. In this regard, Critical Theory would have to offer the conceptual means by which it can become possible to ascertain which kinds of identity-expectations are legitimate. Under the heading of the “Struggle for Recognition”, Honneth attempts in this vein to provide a systematic account of the subjective expectations that must be fulfilled as the condition of full-fledged human self-realization. As will be seen, Honneth utilizes studies in developmental psychology and provides an analysis of the moral infrastructure of modernity in order to “justify the communicative presuppositions of a successful development of identity” (Honneth 2007c, 72). It is only then that an account of recognition can begin to claim to represent something “true” about the morality of human subjects involved in social conflicts. Relatedly, the question that must also accompany this undertaking is “how a moral culture could be so constituted as to give those who are victimized, disrespected, and ostracized the individual strength to articulate their experiences in the democratic public sphere, rather than living them out in a counterculture of violence” (Honneth 2007b, 78).

In sum, as per the criticisms laid out in this chapter against the previous generations of the Frankfurt School, we can say that Honneth’s account of recognition must be construed as a non-pessimistic, universalistic theory which seeks to elucidate the path towards human emancipation in terms that pay heed to the concrete, morally imbued experiences of human beings. As one could

anticipate, Honneth chooses Hegel as his philosophical companion in explaining the moments of negativity that lead to struggle and the normative significance of recognition.

Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter is devoted to an explanation of Honneth's theory and his interpretation of Hegel which informs it. On the basis of a reconstruction of Hegel's account of recognition in his early *System of Ethical Life*, Honneth posits three kinds of recognitive relationships that are necessary for the formation of one's practical identity: 1) the relationship between the parent and the child. 2) the relationship between members of society via the fulfilment of legal obligations. In its most basic form, this means respect for the autonomy of the other, which is encapsulated by the idea of universal respect and human rights. 3) The relationship of members of society to one another via the acknowledgement of the worth of subjects' contribution to society within socially agreed-upon hierarchy of values. The underlying assumption in all three spheres of recognition is that the self is socially constituted in such a way that all self-understanding is essentially a self-relation: one comes to understand oneself by thinking about oneself in relation to others. Hence one acquires *self-confidence* in coming to know oneself as an emotionally significant being *vis a vis* the reception of love by the family; one acquires *self-respect* in coming to know oneself as an autonomous being *vis a vis* having one's rights solidified by legal institutions; and one acquires *self-esteem* in coming to know oneself a valuable to society *vis a vis* societal recognition of one's achievements.

Honneth's stated goal in the *Struggle for Recognition* is to clarify and reconstruct what he regards as Hegel's "unfinished project" (Honneth 1996, 67) of devising an account of "ethical totality" from fundamentally intersubjectivist (as opposed to individualistic) premises. What interests Honneth is a conception of humanity that situates the subject from the very outset in

“embryonic” forms of community, and thereby seeks to explain societal organization as an organic “development [...] whose ethical cohesion would lie in a form of solidarity based on the recognition of the individual freedom of all citizens” (Honneth 1996, 14). As many commentators have pointed out, this rests on both an anthropological and an historical argument. (Schmitz 2019, Zurn 2015, Deranty 2009). With regard to the former, Honneth utilizes research in developmental psychology in order to contextualize and provide an empirical basis for Hegel’s assertion that the structure of familial love points to an inextricable link between the development of the ego and our moral intuitions. More or less invoking a conception of “human nature” for explaining the first sphere of recognition, the primary function of this argument is to say that *as humans*, a moral orientation towards a thou is vital for the conception of our own self.

But Honneth also anchors this anthropological claim in an historical argument, namely that we have internalized the recognitive infrastructure of modernity, which is represented by the second and third spheres of recognition. In other words, Honneth not only abstracts from the historical process an account of enlightened moral vision, but also seeks to establish an internal connection between this moral vision and the conception of humanity as such. In the course of this thesis, I will seek to demonstrate how it is precisely this relationship between moral history and moral identity that comes to the fore as a contentious claim.

The second chapter situates Honneth’s theory of recognition in the debate between liberalism and communitarianism regarding “the extent to which the social integration of societies is normatively dependent on a shared conception of the good life” (Honneth 1996, 91). Seeking to maintain elements of both traditions in his theory, the central questions for Honneth are the following: How is it possible to maintain some plausible formulation of the sentence, the individual *is* its society, at the same time that we jettison assimilationism? Conversely, how is it possible to

assert individuality without succumbing to individualism—without that is, stripping the human subject from its intersubjectivity? The main argument of this chapter is that in accounting for the recognition of difference, Honneth provides an overly formal theory that is unable to attune itself to the normative difficulties of multiculturalism. Despite his claim as to the inadequacy of rights-discourse for conceptualizing ethical relations in multicultural societies, Honneth ultimately presumes more normative force in his own account of rights—that is the second sphere of recognition—than is justified.

The third chapter then situates Honneth's formal account of recognition within a context of ideology in order to demonstrate in more concrete terms, the shortcomings of a formalized account of recognition that purports to outline the basic pillars of the universal shape of morality. Here, the main argument is that in constructing a morality of inclusion, Honneth neglects the power dynamics that determine on whose terms, as it were, inclusion takes place. In this regard, I will allude to Indigenous struggles for self-determination in Canada, in which the point of conflict is not to be a member of a totality, that is the Canadian state; but rather to assert the sovereignty of forms of communal life that give rise to different principles of governance than that of the modern Western state. The result of Honneth's theory of recognition is a unitary framework of inclusion, as opposed to a plurality of frameworks. Insofar as this is the case, Honneth's theory of recognition remains susceptible to the problems of ideology. As I will explain in the concluding section, this stifles the practical role of emancipation that Honneth ascribes to critical theory; for insofar as the articulation of injustices goes, the threefold theory of recognition does not provide the means for its cultural others to express *their* identity expectations.

Chapter I — Axel Honneth and the Normativity of Recognition

Honneth seeks to pin the concept of recognition at the juncture of identity and morality. Broadly stated, the underlying idea is that self-consciousness presupposes a relation of mutual recognition with an “other”. Following Hegel’s break from the atomistic conceptions of the self that dominated the philosophy of his time, Honneth aims in *The Struggle for Recognition* to outline the practical implications of this paradigm shift and subsequently reconstruct it for a modern-day theory of ethical agency. The starting point is that the subject is embedded in its social context in such a way that it attains the meaning and significance of its personhood mediately through the way in which others orient themselves toward the subject. Because of this intersubjective dependency, Honneth holds moral obligation to be at the root of identity formation; as always-already structurally bound to one another, I and other are mutually impelled to act in a way that sustains the conditions for a distinct and dignified sense of self. As Honneth states in a later work: “What we mean when we speak of the ‘moral point of view’ thus refers primarily to features that are desirable or that may be legitimately expected of intersubjective relations” (Honneth 2007a, 130).

In this vein, *The Struggle for Recognition* can be characterized as a systematic account of “what may be legitimately expected of intersubjective relations”. For this, Honneth turns to Hegel’s *System of Ethical Life*. Philosophically, Honneth is primarily interested in the idea of original intersubjectivity found in this early Jena work, which—despite the “unclearities that characterize [it] as a whole” (Honneth 1996, 25) and despite Hegel’s eventual abandonment of this notion—is posited by Honneth as a robust foundation for ethical relations at the level of society. After a brief summary of Honneth’s interpretation of Hegel, I will go on to explain his own reconstruction. As will be seen, Honneth derives from an intersubjective account of identity what

he refers to as “the moral grammar of social conflicts”: a theory of recognition on the basis of which the condition of a just society can be elucidated.

Hegelian Roots: Recognition and Conflict

For Honneth, a critical theory of society must first and foremost be able to account for the motivations of morality. What normative basis can explain why we should act for the sake of the other? For this, he turns to Hegel, whose thought contains the resources for reconceiving anew the relationship between morality and freedom. In the opening pages of *Struggle*, Honneth states: “In his political philosophy, Hegel set out to remove the character of a mere ‘ought’ from the Kantian idea of individual autonomy” (Honneth 1996, 5). The underlying conviction is that the practical knowledge that comes with the conception of a rational human being does not suffice to explain the inner motivations to act for the other’s sake. An elucidation is required, of how my moral orientation towards the other is in fact a condition for the realization of my own freedom. For the early Hegel, however, such elucidation is not possible to the extent that theoretically we remain entrapped within the framework of an already thinking singular subject, who then later comes into contact with other subjects to form communities. Against this framework, Hegel sets out to contextualize, at the very beginning, the individual within its community. As Honneth elaborates, “what this means is that public life would have to be regarded not as the result of the mutual restriction of private spheres of liberty, but rather the other way around, namely, as the opportunity for the fulfilment of every single individual's freedom” (Honneth 1996, 13).

The basic idea that Honneth seeks to reconstruct from the early Hegel is a theory of society founded upon intersubjective premises. The starting point, *contra* Hobbes, can no longer be construed as battle of all against all. Emphasis rather must be put on the motif of interdependence among subjects by virtue of the fact that they are always already situated within communities; it

is this sense of belonging to a group—most primordially in the institution of the family—that constitutes the original condition. Thus, under the heading of “natural ethical life”, Hegel posits a normative basis for societal organization: an inherent “substratum of links to community” (Honneth 1996, 14). Here, the influence of Aristotle is clear, who had famously claimed we are by nature “political animals”. Social by virtue of our very essence, all humans bear within themselves the potentiality for full fruition, which is to be achieved in the ideal form of social life that the political realm is to provide. In thus following Aristotle, the early Hegel understood socialization not as a matter of suppressing a violent human nature, but as the “reorganization and expansion of embryonic forms of community into more encompassing relations of social interaction” (Honneth 1996, 15).

Within this intersubjective paradigm, Hegel offers a radical reinterpretation of the motif of conflict in human dealings. Whereas Hobbes conceived of conflict as arising from a deep-seated drive for self-preservation within the context of his state of nature; Hegel construes conflict as arising from the inevitable tension between the subject and forms of community in which she is always already situated. In this light, conflict first and foremost signifies a sense of dissatisfaction in the subject that stems from the feeling of being restrained by its communal ties. In the face of this inhibition in the expression of its individuality, the subject thereby seeks to break away from its relation to the other. The precedence of intersubjectivity, however, makes it so that at the same time that the subject seeks to differentiate herself from the other in the quest for its uniqueness, it must come to learn that such identity can only be acquired in the affirmation of the other. Thus, it is not by destroying the other, but by developing an elevated form of a relationship with the other that the subject can find fulfilment with regard to its identity claims. On this account, conflict “represents something ethical, insofar as it is directed towards the intersubjective recognition of

dimensions of human individuality” (Honneth 1992, 17); aggression is purposively directed towards a greater articulation of a horizon of meaning that grants recognition to a previously neglected identity claim.

The concept of the struggle for recognition, therefore, has the double function of explaining both the development of the individual, and the forms of community in which it finds itself. In order to explain the normative logic of this conflictual process, Hegel appropriates Fichte’s account of mutual recognition, which emerges within the context of the latter’s legal philosophy. In the *Foundation of Natural Rights*, Fichte argues that the subject can only become conscious of its freedom in the face of another subject that “summons” it to act freely:

The rational being cannot posit itself as such, except in response to a summons calling upon it to act freely. But if there is such a summons, then the rational being must necessarily posit a rational being outside itself as the cause of the summons, and thus it must posit a rational being outside itself in general (Fichte 2000, 37).

If a subject is to issue a summons to another subject, the summoning subject must presuppose that the addressee is capable of understanding the meaning of the summons; “otherwise its summons to the subject would have no purpose at all” (Fichte 2000, 35). What this means, then, is that addressee must be regarded by the other as a rational being. But this in turn will take place only if the addressee *acts* rationally, which is to say that it limits its freedom for the sake of the other. The purposiveness of the issuing summons thus makes it so that the self-consciousness attained by the addressee of the summons is not that of absolute freedom, but one that remains within the confines of what the summoning subject has granted.

Fichte then explains the self-consciousness of a rational agent in terms of the concept of recognition. I can only become conscious of my freedom insofar as it is recognized by the other. But if this already implies that I have curbed my freedom for the other, then I too have attributed a characteristic to the other that makes it worthy of this curbing. For Fichte, this characteristic is

rational agency. In this vein, Fichte emphasizes reciprocity as an essential feature of one's self-consciousness as a free being: "One cannot recognize the other if both do not mutually recognize each other; and one cannot treat the other as a free being, if both do not mutually treat each other as free" (Fichte 2000, 42) The subject can only come to know itself as a free being, that is as a bearer of rights, through consciousness of the meaning of its relationship with an "other". In the case of law, this consciousness has only negative significance. The logic of mutuality dictates that one's freedom is recognized only within the context of corresponding limitations of action. But in his appropriation of the concept, Hegel also takes recognition away from this transcendentalism and situates it within a dynamic of social conflicts. Thus, as Honneth observes:

To the degree that a subject knows itself to be recognized by another subject with regard to certain of its abilities and qualities and is thereby reconciled with the other, a subject also comes to know its distinctive identity and thereby comes to be opposed once again to the other as something particular (Honneth 1992, 16).

It is by using this basic idea that Hegel seeks to explain conflict as the driving force behind the progressive movement of a moral potential. As intimated in the above quote, already established relations of mutual recognition are the sources of the self, to borrow a phrase from Charles Taylor. Within this framework, conflict represents the deficiencies of these intersubjective relations in recognizing an aspect of the subject's identity. A struggle for recognition thus puts forth a critique, demanding the expansion of these recognitive relations. In such manner, struggle increase subjects' knowledge of the ways in which they rely on the recognition of one another; for at each stage of "reconciliation", the "consciousness of the universal" to which subjects relate themselves is broadened precisely in order to include hitherto unrecognized aspects of one's identity. By acquiring a greater sense of individuality, subjects have therefore made their intersubjective dependency more "explicit". For Hegel, the outcome of this movement is the unity

of the particular and the universal (Hegel 1979, 100)—that is the unity of the subject and the intersubjective background from which it derives its identity.

But the ethical is inherently by its own essence a resumption of difference into itself, reconstruction; identity rises out of difference and is essentially negative; its being this presupposes the existence of what it cancels. Thus, this ethical nature is also an unveiling, an emergence of the universal in the face of the particular (Hegel 1979, 103).

Ultimately, this unity is to be actualized in the ideal state: “an organization of society whose ethical cohesion would lie on a form of solidarity, based on the recognition of the individual freedom of all its citizens” (Honneth 1996, 14). What is crucial for Honneth is that in conceiving what this “form of solidarity” is to look like, Hegel moves beyond the realm of legal relations. While acknowledging that legal recognition is indeed a necessary requirement for the realization of one’s freedom, his appropriation of Fichte’s theory of recognition within a context of conflict affords him the opportunity to provide a concrete interpretation on the “morality” of destructive acts. For Hegel, infringements upon the law (e.g. stealing, damaging property) cannot be merely a matter of material gain or irrational aggression; rather, the person committing the crime wants to lay claim to the fact that he or she too has moral standing—that her humanity must be recognized. As Honneth interprets, at some level this for Hegel means that the cognitive schema of the law is an insufficient medium for self-realization. In this light, Hegel introduces the category of “honor”, i.e. the recognition of one’s distinctive value to society, as a type of intersubjective relation necessary for the full-fledged realization of one’s person. The underlying idea is that the ethical cohesion that the unity of the universal and particular is meant to exemplify cannot be achieved if subjects relate to one another, beyond their relations of familial love, in the realm of negative liberty; “individual freedom” requires a substantive dimension. An outline of different aspects of one’s identity and their corresponding cognitive requirements is already evident in the

above account. As will be seen, Honneth extract from Hegel his own threefold typology of recognition.

Before I move on to Honneth's reconstruction of the theory of recognition found in *System of Ethical Life*, it is worth mentioning that the idea of an original intersubjectivity in relations of familial love was ultimately abandoned by Hegel. In his mature *Phenomenology of Spirit*, while recognition is still maintained to be the fundamental precondition to self-consciousness, it takes on a different form. Instead of starting out from always-already normative relations of concrete ethical bonds, Hegel speaks of recognition in more abstract terms and situates it within a fictional state of violent encounter among two (proto) subjects. According to Honneth, while this move offers a clearer and more robust account of the moment of negativity and opposition in the concept of struggle for recognition, it overlooks the moral formative process that underlies subjects' identities (Honneth 1996, 63). Tracing this shift to Hegel's earlier "First Philosophy of Spirit", Honneth claims that the concept of the struggle for recognition thereby takes an assimilationist turn:

The conflict between subjects [...] no longer represents a medium for consciousness-formation of individuals as well but is left instead only with the function of being a medium of social universalization, that is, of integration into community. In fact, his political theory of ethical life completely loses the character of a 'history of society', of an analysis of directional changes in social relations, and gradually takes on the form of an analysis of the education [*Bildung*] of the individual for society (Honneth 1996, 29).

In other words, Honneth holds that the unity of the universal and particular becomes monological in Hegel's later works. For in this new formulation, the conflictual movement of recognition is not "at the same time a medium of individualization, of increasing ego-competence" (Honneth 1996, 28): struggle simply signifies the "process by which Spirit is formed" (Honneth 1996, 26). Recognition thereby loses its double function of explaining both the development of communal life *and* the individual within it. This is because it is only in the early *System of Ethical Life* that

Hegel situates the individual at the very outset in its intersubjective context; this makes it so that the nullification of one's own self that is necessary for the recognition of the other (and thus the concluding of a particular stage of conflict), is in fact an expression of one's intersubjective essence; "in ethical life, the individual exists in eternal mode; his empirical being and doing is downright universal" (Hegel 1979, 143). This is while in Hegel's later works, recognition consists "in the stages of the self-mediation of *individual* consciousnesses" (Honneth 1996, 29) absolving into Spirit. Because of this purported lack of this dimension of "ego-competence", Honneth leaves the *Phenomenology*—the work with which Hegel's own account of recognition is most associated—completely out of the picture in his reconstruction. Missing in Hegel's purported integrationist account of Spirit in his later thought are the practical dimensions of intersubjectivity and how they positively relate to the individual's sense of self, i.e. how intersubjectivity enhances personal identity.

Whether or not Honneth's interpretations are correct, it is clear that his emphasis on social life by no means is meant to preclude the fundamental normative role of the individual that we associate with the Kantian formulation of morality or the liberal's emphasis on autonomy. Hence, what he sets out to do in the *Struggle for Recognition* is to rejuvenate what he regards as Hegel's incomplete project of explicating the concomitant and codetermining development of "growing communalization" and "individual emancipation" (Honneth 1996, 29). For Honneth, such account must explain the development of the individual subject, at the very outset, as emerging within the social context that it co-constitutes with others; it must conceive of "communicative relations between subject [...] as something that in principle precedes individuals" (Honneth 1996, 29)—a premise which Honneth holds to exist only in Hegel's early Jena work, *The System of Ethical Life*,

and the idea of original intersubjectivity in the institution of the family therein.¹ In this regard, Honneth seeks to first strip the Hegelian account of its speculative assumptions. For left completely unclear in *System of Ethical Life*, is “what these undeveloped [natural] potentials of ethical life must be like, if they are to be already inherent [...] in the initial structures of social ways of life” (Honneth 1996, 15). To this end, as will be shown in the next section, Honneth utilizes research in developmental psychology to derive from love relations between the parent and child, following Hegel’s cue, “the structural core of all ethical life” (Honneth 1996, 107). Once this “natural” recognitional basis of humanity, as it were, is established, Honneth proceeds to explicate its connection to relationships at the societal level, articulating them as different “spheres” of recognition, which however follow the same “logic” of cognitive relations in parental love. The ultimate goal, as mentioned, is to extract from this complex undertaking, the conditions of the formation of a full-fledged identity—i.e. a “positive relation-to-self” (Honneth 1996, 164) which will be used as the reference point for diagnosing social injustices.

Moral Identity and Honneth’s Threefold Theory of Recognition

Parental Love: Self-Confidence

As the most “genetically prior” (Honneth 1996, 107) stage of recognition, this type of relationship enjoys a fundamental role in Honneth’s normative theory.² The basic psychological premise is this: a child's cognitive abilities are negatively affected without the presence of

¹ As I will explain in the concluding section, this is an interpretation that Honneth later comes to regret.

² As seen, Honneth’s interest in love is due to its purported theoretical function in explaining the basic coordinates of intersubjective identity, an idea derived from the early Hegel, which Honneth projects onto adult life: both as the precondition to “every further development of identity” in that it leads to a basic self-confidence with regard to one’s agency (Honneth 1996, 39), and as containing the basic structure of intersubjectivity in general, including intersubjective relations in public life. It is important to mention, however, that Honneth derives more than what is perhaps permitted by even the early Hegel. As Danielle Petherbridge notes, Honneth’s reading “overburdens” the concept of recognition with “one if its determinations as a stipulated precondition of intersubjectivity” (Petherbridge 2013, 109). Proceeding in this way, Petherbridge argues, leads to Honneth’s failure to consider the power dynamics that govern relations of recognition. I will take up the issue of power and recognition in the third chapter, in the context of ideology.

emotional figures to which he or she can attach. Using this fact, Honneth seeks to provide an outline of the way in which the subject's cognitive framework develops through the process of eventual separation and individuation from the state of “absolute dependence” (Honneth 1996, 100) on its primary caretaker, or “mother”. He describes the initial state of the parent-child relationship as follows:

In the first months of life, infants are so dependent on the practical extension of their behaviour via the care they receive that it is a misleading abstraction on the part of psychoanalytic research to study the infant in isolation from all significant others, as independent objects of inquiry. The care with which the ‘mother’ keeps the newborn baby alive is not added to the child’s behaviour as something secondary but is rather *merged with the child* in such a way that one can plausibly assume that every human life begins with a phase of undifferentiated intersubjectivity, that is of symbiosis (1996, 98, my emphases).

In short, ego-formation can be characterized as the subjective demarcation from this “undifferentiated intersubjectivity”. Here, Honneth emphasizes the essential role of parental care in the formation and sustainment of an intersubjective background of meaning within which the child gradually acquires the ability to understand her surroundings. Utilizing Donald Winnicott’s conceptual apparatus, he explains this process in terms of the child's coping with the existential situation in which she finds herself as she grows older. Most palpably this refers to bodily separation, signifying to the child for the first time, the presence of a not-self, an outside world within which she is "lost". Whereas initially the child perceives all objects as extensions of its own self, it must ultimately come to grips with the reality of independently existing world of objects that stand over and against it, including the “mother”.

In such manner, a “process of disillusionment” (Honneth 1996, 100) ensues in the child which translates itself into aggressive acts towards the mother, i.e. kicking, biting (Honneth 1996, 101). But much more than a mere frustration arising from “losing omnipotent control”, these destructive acts, as seen through Honneth’s interpretation of Winnicott, are purposive; they are a

testing out of whether “the aggressively charged object” is in fact independent (Honneth 1996, 101). Ultimately, the continued existence of the “mother” serves as the confirmation of an independently existing reality: in her “surviving these destructive acts without taking revenge” (Honneth 1996, 101)—the “objectivity” of the “mother” signifies the existence of a world in which the child has “actively placed itself” (Honneth 1996, 101).

It is at this point that Honneth explains the role of love in the child’s development. For the non-destruction of the “mother” is not merely a cognitive matter, but more fundamentally an affective precondition to the child’s self-consciousness. “Continued existence”, in other words, points to the “mother’s” role in maintaining an emotional environment for the child to relate what she perceives reflexively back to herself. In this vein, the mother’s response to the child’s aggressive act—that is the “survival” of the parent in the face of the child’s “struggle”—leads to the child’s realization of her own dependence on the “loving care of an independently existing person” (Honneth 1996 101). This “loving care” is precisely the recognition that the “mother” confers to the child, which confirms the latter’s status as an “emotionally needy” (Honneth 1996, 18) person that is to be treated as an end in itself:

What the aggressively charged situation demands of her [“the mother”], in fact, is that she understand the destructive wish-fantasies of her child as something that goes against her own interests and thus as something that can be ascribed to the child alone, as an already independent person. If, in the way just sketched, a first step of mutual demarcation is successfully taken, then mother and child can acknowledge their dependence on each other's love without having to merge symbiotically (Honneth 1996, 102).

In such manner, therefore, we can speak of a “release into independence” (Honneth 1996, 107). But as can be seen, independence here does not refer to total separation, but requires an “other” in relation to which this releasement can be confirmed. To gain consciousness of oneself as an independent person is to recognize that independence through the other—in this case though acknowledging the independence of the loving “mother”. In the case of parental love,

consciousness of this independence takes the form of one's self-awareness as an emotionally needy person. This "first step of mutual demarcation" (Honneth 1996, 102) marks the initial stage by which what already lies implicit, that is primary interdependence, becomes explicit for the child—that her independence requires confirmation. In such manner, a dynamic of expectation is instilled in the subject's sense of identity; independent, but with concrete emotional needs, nevertheless.

Ultimately, for Honneth, this dynamic of expectation is manifested in constant boundary negotiations between "mother" and child, wherein their dependence on one another is presupposed, but constantly challenged to expand its recognitive potential. Awareness of oneself as an emotionally needy person goes hand in hand with an engrained sense of obligation, which the child must be cognizant of is she is able to navigate her independence in the movement of struggle. From the perspective of the child, this recognition proceeds from the "lasting and reliable" love of the mother, thus opening up a "psychological path" for the child to acquire a "basic capacity to be alone" (Honneth 1992, 104) The ultimate confirmation of this recognition consists in the continuation of parental love even after the child's "full" separation and transition into adulthood. The practical significance of such relationship is the subject's development of a fundamental trust in her own agency: the *self-confidence* necessary for the pursuit of goals and intentions.

Legality: Self-Respect

Now, as mentioned, the significance of love is not limited to a distinct aspect of one's identity, namely self-confidence. Love is fundamental to identity formation in general. Thus, acknowledging that the second sphere of recognition, i.e. law, "differs in about every essential respect" from relations of love, Honneth nevertheless maintains that "the logic of each cannot be adequately explained without appeal to the same mechanism of reciprocal recognition" (Honneth

1992, 108). Once again, a normative background of social relations is presupposed, both as the condition of further socialization, and the concomitant development of the subject's individual identity, which Honneth explicates within a historical framework.

Transitioning from tradition to modernity, history points to a gradual separation of the legal framework from the peculiarities of one's circumstance. Whereas previously the hierarchical structure of legal recognition tied "rights and duties [...] to different valued tasks within a system of social cooperation" (Honneth 1996, 111), law eventually came to embody a universalistic morality that extends protection to all members of society. As Honneth argues, whereby the granting of a basic respect for one's humanity is no longer dependent on the perceived societal value of different roles, two hitherto undifferentiated institutionalized form of respect emerge: respect for one's universality, and respect for one's individuality. The former pertains to the framework of the law and occupies itself with the issue of determining the "constitutive quality of persons" as persons (Honneth 1992, 113); the latter pertains to determining the normative reference point by which individual "traits and abilities" are esteemed.

In obeying the law, subjects recognize one another in light of the characteristics they share as human beings. In its basic form, this entails negative obligations. As mentioned, however, this sense of obligation is not an external matter. Recall that with Fichte, law is not simply a limitation imposed upon an aggressive totality-seeking nature but is the precondition for rational freedom. On Honneth's de-transcendentalized formulation, the law is structurally tied to a distinct aspect of the subject's practical identity. But quite clearly, an emotional dynamic as in the case of parent-child will not here be able to explain why subjects are internally motivated to place limitations on their actions. Thus, instead, Honneth points to the "new" form of legitimation to which modern law is structurally bound:

If a legal order is considered to be valid, and, moreover, can count on the willingness of individuals to follow laws only to the extent to which it can appeal, in principle, to the free approval of all the individuals it includes, then one must be able to suppose that these legal subjects have at least the capacity to make reasonable, autonomous decisions regarding moral questions. In the absence of such an ascription, it would be utterly inconceivable how subjects could ever have come to agree on a legal order. In this sense, because its legitimacy is dependent on a rational agreement between individuals with equal rights, every community based on modern law is founded on the assumption of the moral accountability of all its members (Honneth 1996, 114).

The underlying premise is that we are all equal co-authors of the law to which we are subject. And what is crucial to keep in mind is that for Honneth, this is an *internalized* expectation expressed in the idea of human rights; to be recognized in one's universal features is the guiding normative principle of what it means to be a legal subject. This is the always-already normative horizon of the second sphere of recognition. But what the practical significance of this precondition to the legitimacy of the law is can only be determined by the situation-specific application of this very norm. It is at this point that Honneth once again introduces the idea of the struggle for recognition. Occasions for "fleshing out the moral idea" of according universal recognition for the autonomy of all individuals are triggered precisely by the disappointment of subjects' identity expectations—in this case the discrepancy between the idea of being equal to others on the one hand, and the way in which they are actually treated on the other. Through attentiveness to struggles for recognition, (e.g. Women's Rights Movement, Civil Rights Movement), modern conceptions of rights have thereby incorporated the existential situations which have previously hindered members of society from actively participating in the legal order to which they are subject.

In such manner, Honneth argues that legal recognition has progressed through the double movement of "inclusivity and precision". For on the one hand, the development of contemporary understandings of the legal system can be said to be motivated by the intent to alleviate the

unjustified exclusion of the underprivileged from the general definition of humanity that the law is meant to materialize. On the other hand, in this movement of inclusion, we continually acquire knowledge of which universal features of human beings ought to be protected. The modern legal system thereby not only came to guarantee negative rights of non-intrusion, or the political right to vote, but also economic and social welfare rights (e.g. healthcare and education). In short, the question of legal recognition is: what are the subjective prerequisites for the exercise of our universal capacities? What must be guaranteed to all members equally as “right” in order to make possible their participation in collective will formation? The “essential indeterminacy” of the answer to this question ultimately renders law structurally open to further inclusivity and precision.

In Hegelian vein, Honneth thus speaks of a continuous making explicit of a shared intersubjectivity. As mentioned, this is also a medium of ego-competence. Due to its “public character”, the recognition of one’s rights fosters a positive relation-to-self in the subject. Through awareness of the fact that one’s actions have the same legal bearing as others, the subject acquires the *self-respect*, that “empowers [the subject] to engage in action that can be perceived by interaction partners” (Honneth 1996, 120).

Solidarity: Self-Esteem

In many respects, this sphere of ethical relations poses the most demanding form of recognition; for it neither contains the kind of affective immediacy that is present in the parent-child relationship, nor the universalistic principles of equality that, through popular discourse on human rights, have found their way into common sense. Honneth’s third sphere of cognitive relations rather pertains to the affirmation of difference. In contrast to respect-recognition, which essentially requires the bracketing off of difference as irrelevant, here Honneth seeks to explain the normative underpinnings of recognizing the other specifically in light of those characteristics

and abilities that she possesses or has acquired throughout the course of her unique life (Honneth 1996, 122). In conformity with the previous two spheres, Honneth posits that a normative background within which subjects are situated must already be at play so as to justify the kinds of identity expectations subjects may have of one another. In this case the constitutive condition of recognitive relations is some form of existing identification with a horizon of value; “for self and other can mutually esteem each other as individualized persons only on the condition that they share an orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contributions of their qualities for the life of the other” (Honneth 1996, 121).

Building on his historical analysis of the modern distinction between legality and social standing, Honneth states:

In the transition to modernity, it is not simply the case that relations of legal recognition became detached [...] from the hierarchical order of social esteem. In addition, this order itself was submitted to a tough, conflict-ridden process of structural transformation, because in the wake of cultural innovations, the conditions for the validity of a society’s ethical goals changed as well (Honneth 1996, 124).

Prior to this transition was the “corporate” organization of premodern societies whereby the status of “honour” was mediated by one’s membership in a group or “estate” within society. Characteristic of such traditional societies is the pre-given substantive hierarchy of values by which the “worth” of each estate is determined. According to this form of organization, an asymmetrical relationship exists between “culturally typified” estates where membership in one group is deemed more valuable than membership in another (Honneth 1996, 123). Whereas individuals within an estate could esteem one another symmetrically in light of shared traits and abilities that define that group, such traits and characteristics were themselves placed on an evaluatively fixed point in relation to their perceived contribution to overall societal goals and values. Accordingly, Honneth claims that the kind of practical relation- to-self that individuals acquire in this manner pertains to

the realm of “group pride” or “collective honour” (Honneth 1996, 128). Individuals are recognized in their difference, but only insofar as they “conduct [themselves] in a manner suitable to [their] estate” (Honneth 1996, 125).

With the rise of modernity, however, the self-evidence of any predetermined hierarchy of values was put into question. In lieu of a metaphysical or religious justification, the conviction that the determination of value is the “result of inner-worldly decisions” (Honneth 1996, 124) came to the fore. At the same time, a cultural transformation surrounding conceptions of the self was promoted by Romanticism’s emphasis on the ideal of authenticity and self-realization, increasingly inducing attitudes of non-conformism amongst individuals. Increasing pressure mounted thereby for neutralizing, as it were, societal frameworks of valuation towards abstract references such as individual achievement and affirming diversity (Honneth 1996, 126).

Of course, such abstract formulations and the inclusivity they entail by no means eliminates the major practical difficulties in regard to cultural conflicts over values. In this vein, and in similar fashion to the second sphere of recognition, Honneth claims indeterminacy to be a constitutive condition of societal value horizons. Society’s “abstractly defined goals provide very little in the way of a universally valid system of reference” (Honneth 1996, 126). What is also required is a making-concrete of these goals through “secondary interpretive practices” (Honneth 1996, 126). The issue, in other words, is not merely to define what the good life is, but also to determine what counts as good according to that definition. Having evidently in mind the dynamic of multiculturalism, Honneth writes of these secondary interpretive practices:

Since the content of such interpretations depend in turn on which social groups succeed in publicly interpreting their own accomplishments and forms of life in a way that shows them to be especially valuable, the secondary interpretive practice cannot be understood to be anything other than an ongoing cultural conflict. In modern societies, relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by

means of symbolic force with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life (Honneth 1996, 127).

It is up to the communities of society to engage in cultural struggle so as to assert their interpretation as the predominant mode of valuation, as the basis on which individuals are esteemed. On the one hand, this made possible for previously under-esteemed estates or groups within society to call for the reinterpretation of their social worth. On the other hand, this flattening out of predetermined hierarchies of estates led to a newly developed form of societal organization in which each individual is empowered to be regarded as valuable in society by virtue of her unique traits and characteristics. However, as mentioned, the value of these traits and characteristics must be justified by reference to a notion of “shared praxis” towards which members of society are collectively oriented: “for only to the degree to which I actively care about the development of the other’s characteristics (which seem foreign to me) can our shared goals be realized” (Honneth 1996, 129). This relationship of active care, or “felt-concern” with regard to the life of the other engenders the practical relation of *self-esteem* in which the subject’s worth is affirmed by the other.

Summary

In lieu of a pre-social self, Honneth grounds his theory on a social-ontological claim: the priority of recognition in our manner of relating to each other as beings in the world. The implications of this ontological claim for social life were then presented as the threefold typology of recognition. As Danielle Petherbridge puts it, the notion of struggle that Honneth derives from Hegel is intended both to reveal “underlying mutual recognition relations and provide the means to expand existing recognition relations” (Petherbridge 2013, 106): demands for recognition are normatively sound because—as Honneth had sought to establish within each recognitive sphere—we are always recognizing and recognized beings. In other words, the recognition of our status as emotionally needy subjects, rights bearers, and unique individuals inheres in our identities as

fundamental expectations. The kinds of practical self-relations to which each sphere of recognition is to give rise are respectively self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Absent the conditions under which these threefold aspects of the subject's moral identity can be fulfilled, and injustice ensues.

Chapter II — Formal Ethical Life

As seen in the previous chapter, Honneth attempts to provide an inherently moral account of recognition on the one hand, and to explain the normative core of societal organization on the basis of this paradigm on the other. There is always in place an intersubjective normative horizon of meaning in which the subject co-participates, having already taken it up in order to understand itself and interact with others. As the precondition to one's humanity in its particularity, universality, and individuality—to which the spheres of love, legality, and solidarity correspond—recognitive relations cannot be deemed as external impositions; forming communities, as mentioned, is not a matter of taming a narrowly construed aggressive and selfish human nature, but rather as something arising from the depths of our intersubjective identities, developing through the movement of struggle. On Honneth's Hegel inspired theory, then, an account of society must move beyond a calculative explanation of self-interested individuals who limit their personal freedom for the sake of self-preservation, and instead focus on the organic development of the roots of human sociality: a notion of society that can be explained as the internal condition for self-realization. This is indeed the conception of ethical totality that Honneth had sought to revive from Hegel's early works.

In the following chapters, I examine the critical potential of Honneth's theory of recognition within a multicultural dynamic. Recall that in line with the Frankfurt School tradition, Honneth intends his theory to be both revelatory and emancipatory. That is, not only must it be able to diagnose social pathologies—understood as “social developments that can be viewed as misdevelopments” (Honneth 2007b, 4); but it must also offer the resources for change. As seen, Honneth locates this in moments of negativity with regard to our identity expectations: the denial of *due* recognition, which leads to struggle, came to the fore as the basis for articulating the

suffering from injustice. In other words, a normative conception of “the subject”, one that is heavily linked to communal life, is the guiding idea behind a critique of society. And Honneth’s theoretical configuration of this relationship—i.e. the threefold spheres of recognition—is clearly intended to remain valid across space and time whilst still remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of culture; as evinced in the following passage:

On the one hand, the three patterns of recognition—which now can count as just as many preconditions for successful self-realization—are defined in a sufficiently abstract, formal manner to avoid raising the suspicion that they embody particular visions of the good life. On the other hand, from the perspective of their content, the explication of these three conditions is detailed enough to say more about the general structures of a successful life than is entailed by general references to individual self-determination (Honneth 1996, 174).

The goal of this second chapter is to elucidate the shortcomings of this approach. In particular, I wish to shed light on a tension between the second and third spheres of recognition—that is between a universalistic morality on the one hand, and a substantive ethics on the other—a tension that Honneth glosses but does not completely flesh out.

In order to carry out this task, it is first necessary to explicate the normative problems that Honneth’s theory of recognition seeks to address in social-philosophical thought. Here, the main culprit is liberalism and its emphasis on individual rights. As will be seen, Honneth not only lays emphasis on the social structure of rights, but also advocates a move beyond rights-discourse itself; for despite claims to their essential intersubjectivity, rights nevertheless retain an individualistic tone: “progress in social universalization is paid for with an emptying and formalizing of the aspects of the individual subject” (Honneth 1992, 19). Mere reference to universalism, for Honneth is perhaps *too* formal in that it is not “detailed enough to say more about the general structures of a successful life than is entailed by general reference to individual self-determination”. The essence of community, so to speak, is ethical and substantive; it pertains to the realm of the

concrete, the values we believe in and act upon in our everyday lives. This is what justifies the need for a third sphere of recognition. One cannot account for the normative role of community without considering this substantive dimension.

Despite this affinity with communitarianism and its emphasis on a shared value-horizon, recognition theory, as Christopher Zurn notes, “has never paid justificatory deference to that which is socially and historically given simply because it is so given” (Zurn 2009, 7). In this regard, Honneth’s second sphere of recognition, that is respect for autonomy via rights, is intended to normatively safeguard the problems of a thick and exclusionary value-horizon of the third recognitive sphere. But as will be seen, Honneth ascribes more normative force to rights than is justified. In particular, Honneth provides a rather one-sided account of the relationship between the second and third spheres of recognition whereby the former is construed as the checks and balances of the latter; overlooked, however, is how the exclusionary logic of a framework of value can detrimentally affect the granting of rights, a notion conceptualized by Hannah Arendt as “the right to have rights” (Arendt 2000). After briefly situating this criticism in the context of a later work by Honneth “Three, not Two Concepts of Liberty”—I will proceed to explain in the third chapter how Honneth’s theory of recognition can be susceptible to ideological weaponization.

Social Solidarity and Individualism

As seen, Honneth’s theory of recognition attempts to navigate a middle ground between the Kantian notion of universal autonomy on the one hand, and a politics of active involvement on the other. In his description of the latter, Honneth stops short at defining exactly what this horizon of solidarity is to look like, if it is to generate “felt-concern” among members of society for the well-being of one another. This, of course, is done intentionally in order to remain sensitive to cultural differences. Honneth, in other words, is content with the formal claim that society is not primarily

based on relations of right but a communion of *ethical* subjects. As Max Pensky notes, Honneth takes as foundational that: “modern societies require a form of social solidarity that binds members to one another in a network of mutual relationships, strong enough to sustain the various strains and challenges of accommodation and mutual self-limitation” (Pensky 2011, 126). The substantive cultural dimension, which is represented by the third sphere of recognition thus not only pertains to a distinct aspect of the subject’s identity, i.e. individuality, but more importantly is the fundamental cohesive force for societal organization.

Indeed, Honneth’s critique of liberalism is directed precisely at its neglect of this substantive frame of reference. As he states in a joint article with Joel Anderson, the main objection to liberalism is not that it values personal liberty but that it “sneaks in [...] the idea that individuals realize their autonomy by gaining independence from their consociates” (Honneth and Anderson 2005, 128). Not taking into account the intersubjectivity of human beings, liberal accounts of right neglect the fact that “gains in freedom and power come from having others see one’s needs and aspirations as legitimate”(Honneth and Anderson 2005, 139). As a result, liberal rights discourse remains “problematically individualistic” for it construes rights in the distributive sense of granting specific powers to subjects “as if they were individual possessions” (Honneth and Anderson 2005, 139). The vernacular of rights is insufficient for the articulation of calls to justice; by overemphasizing its role, we downplay the multifaceted character of recognition: “what one needs is to be loved and esteemed—and precisely not because one has a legal claim to it” (Honneth and Anderson 2005, 138).

Nevertheless, a familiar dilemma arises in Honneth’s own thought. For, in regard to the third sphere of recognition, we cannot escape the sheer fact that as soon as the “abstractly defined” value horizon is determined at the second-order level of interpretation, exclusion will ensue. This

possibility of exclusion occurs, even though Honneth had also asserted that a notion of “shared praxis—that is to say, a shared praxis that must remain open enough so as to be the object of the collective orientation of all members of society—is fundamental to the third sphere of recognition.. As seen in the first chapter, in combatting this problem, Honneth embraces a normative notion of conflict in order to resolve the distance between the “level of lived experience in which people work, interact, compete and either accord with or deny esteem to one another [...] and the abstract set of supervening norms regarding goals” (Pensky 2011, 143) . This is designated by the notion of “symmetry”, which means that

Every subject is free from being collectively denigrated, so that one is given the chance to experience oneself to be recognized, in light of one’s own accomplishments and abilities, as valuable for society. For this reason, too, the social relations that we conceived of here in terms of the concept of ‘solidarity’ open up, for the first time. The horizon within which individual competition for social esteem can then acquire a form *free from pain*, that is, a form *not marred by experiences of disrespect* (Honneth 1996, 130, my emphases).

Solidarity and Symmetry

At this point, we begin to see how Honneth attempts to reconcile two *prima facie* conflicting claims—namely the embeddedness of cultural tension in relations of solidarity on the one hand, and an ethical life “free from pain” on the other. The latter does not signify the absence of struggle but the fair conditions under which they can take place: the sustainment of the possibility to engage in struggle. This is to say that all members of society must be afforded the opportunity to advocate for their vision of the good life—i.e. the possibility to have a say in the determination of what ought to be valuable for society and to what degree, and how— in the political scene.

Construed thus, one can claim that Honneth’s account of solidarity fundamentally denotes the mutual acknowledgement of subjects’ *potentiality* to be valuable. Recall that Honneth’s argument in *Struggle* did not involve *per se* the rejection of the state of being undervalued (and presumably even non-valued); this tension rather, namely between individuals who feel unrecognized and the

evaluative frame of reference, is a *constitutive* condition of the third cognitive sphere: it is an indication of the structural openness of this framework to change via struggle. Honneth thereby makes clear that symmetry has less to do with the *actual* ascription of value and more to do with the possibility of being valuable—which must be universally, symmetrically, and equally applied to all. But in this formulation, it would remain unclear how the introduction of the third sphere of recognition would alleviate the problems associated with a mere rights-based approach, namely regarding the “emptying and formalizing of the aspects of the individual subject”.

Can we not conceptualize symmetry simply as the *right* to engage in cultural struggle? How else can such a formal promise—which is to persist even under conditions in which certain members of society feel underrepresented or non-represented under the *status quo* value framework—be guaranteed? What does it mean to be “free from pain” under a system that does not recognize one’s value? After all, Honneth does describe this formal condition of solidarity—symmetry—in negative terms: “not marred by experiences of disrespect”. Interestingly, Honneth seems to allude to a similar point in an earlier work, albeit in a different context. In “Between Aristotle and Kant”, Honneth observes that the normative demands of the three patterns of recognition—love, respect and solidarity— are not necessarily in harmony with one another. A quick glance of our everyday experiences suffices to show how our obligations to others often come to conflict with one another. This, of course, gives rise to an internal process of decision-making whereby we are inevitably confronted with the task of prioritizing these obligations—both on the basis of our own overall self-understanding, and the force by which these demands present themselves to us. But a genuine space of rational deliberation on these decisions cannot be normatively justified, as Honneth continues to argue, without ascribing “absolute priority” to the autonomy of others:

A normative restriction is placed on such decisions, one which follows from the universal character possessed by respect in the form of recognition. Because we have to recognize all human beings as persons who enjoy equal rights to autonomy, we may not choose social relationships whose realization would require a violation of those rights (Honneth 2007a, 141).

Is the symmetry of conflict in the third sphere of recognition, then, simply a manifestation of the absolute priority of respect-recognition? If this is the case, then, the normative boundaries of conflict in the substantive realm of the everyday is once again justified by an empty formalism that Honneth sought to move beyond. The crucial question is not merely how this condition of symmetry can protect the individual from the imposition of say, the majority value-system, but also whether it can tell us much about the kind of solidarity, i.e. the citizen identification with a societal *ethos*, that is needed to bind members of society *despite* their particular differences on particular questions of value. To my understanding, given the fundamentality of a substantive ethical life for Honneth, he would require to account for a residual solidarity, so to speak, that can explain why members of society would be motivated to support their cultural others to influence and change the value-system in which they, the majority, are deeply ingrained. Whether this task is even possible, or perhaps too idealistic for multicultural societies, Honneth's conception of symmetry does not adequately consider this problem. As noted in a series of rhetorical questions by Max Pensky:

Has the arena of supplemental interpretations become so capacious and inclusive that the overall social goals they interpret become completely insubstantial, purely abstract and procedural assurances of the value of public reason, diversity and tolerance? And would such *success* not then precisely undermine the possibility of solidarity by making *any* form of life valuable, simply by definition (Pensky 2011, 148, original emphases)?

This is of course something that Honneth would like to deny. Clearly, he eschews a completely free-floating account of the individual pursuit of the good life; an overarching evaluative frame of reference must be able to accompany any conception of the good life subjects may have. But

Honneth's own account of formal ethical life falls into the same trap; for the reference point of solidarity ends up being *not* the substantively thick values that exemplify a vision of the good life but a further abstraction, namely symmetry: this abstract promise of the chance to be valuable constitutes the normative backbone which is purported to sustain the overall framework of esteem in the face of its inevitable tension. But how this notion of symmetry is to differ from a liberal account of "true equality"—one that allows for differing degrees of allocating rights so as to remedy unjust circumstances, i.e. to level things out—remains unclear. A reference to Will Kymlicka's conception of "minority rights" will serve to demonstrate the harmony:

In a democratic society, the majority nation will always have its language and societal culture supported and will have the legislative power to protect its interest in culture-affecting decisions. The question is whether fairness requires that the same benefits and opportunities should be given to national minorities. The answer, I think, is clearly yes. Hence group-differentiated self-government rights compensate for unequal circumstances which put members of minority cultures at a systematic disadvantage in the cultural marketplace, regardless of their personal choices in life. This is one of many areas in which true equality requires differential treatment in order to accommodate differential needs (Kymlicka 1995, 113).

Kymlicka's account of being on a fair playing field in "the cultural market place" seems isomorphic with having the "chance to be recognized [...] as valuable to society" (Honneth 1996, 130); Honneth's theory of recognition does not provide an adequate account as to why we should think otherwise. Indeed, he has no qualms with the notion differential rights to which Kymlicka is referring, insofar as they can be justified by appeal to the enhancement of autonomy, the universal human trait for individual self-determination. Invited to clarify his stance on the issue in a debate with Nancy Fraser, he makes clear that this justification pertains to the second sphere of recognition, which he now expressly calls the "equality principle". Accordingly, a valid "type of demand" exist on part of minority communities that pertains to the satisfaction of what is necessary to "promote and develop the cohesion of the community":

The spectrum of demands extends from economic support to instructions in the native language to adequate representation in mass media; but in each case the group in question must first publicly establish that it will not be possible for them to maintain their culture and way of life without such resources or preventative measures (Honneth 2003, 165).

What is especially liberalistic about this line of thought is Honneth's further point regarding the temporariness of these differential privileges, "since they lose their normative force with the elimination of the disadvantage" (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 165).

The broader point I wish to make is that Honneth merely appropriates the problem of a thick and therefore exclusionary third sphere of recognition for his theory. He formalizes the tension as the normative condition of solidarity while sidestepping the fact that this is really the normative problem. Rights cannot merely be construed as the normative checks and balances for individuals competing for the assertion of their values in the cultural marketplace—as the implications of Honneth's notion of symmetry suggests; but rather as Hannah Arendt had reminded us in her analysis of stateless peoples, it is the recognition of one's value that first make possible the granting of rights:

From the beginning the paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an "abstract" human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some kind of social order. If a tribal or other "backward" community did not enjoy human rights, it was obviously because as a whole it had not yet reached that stage of civilization, the stage of popular and national sovereignty, but was oppressed by foreign or native despots. The whole question of human rights, therefore, was quickly and inextricably blended with the question of national emancipation; only the emancipated sovereignty of the people, *of one's own people*, seemed to be able to insure them. As mankind, since the French Revolution, was conceived in the image of a family of nations, it gradually became self-evident that the people, and not the individual, was the image of man (Arendt 2000, 32, my emphasis).

As can be seen, Arendt gives priority to a notion of shared praxis, a community of values *vis a vis* national solidarity as an empirical fact of social reality. Unlike Honneth, for Arendt, "one's own people" does not seem to carry with itself a moral connotation. Quite the contrary, it represents the exclusionary logic of human rights. This is while Honneth is concerned with elucidating a basic

form of social solidarity that can then be used as a reference point for a kind of societal organization that is based on “felt concern” rather than “passive tolerance”. It is my contention, however, that in doing so, he touches upon, but ultimately misses the problem. Honneth’s analysis of history’s moral learning process whereby “relations of legal order became detached from the hierarchical order of social esteem” simply goes too far. After all, the learning processes of the second and third spheres of recognition, as Honneth makes clear in *Struggle*, were concomitant; it would be utterly inconceivable how one can be granted recognition for her distinct value to society without being recognized for the autonomy that is necessary for the strive towards the recognition of her individuality. It is this union that is captured by the notion of symmetry, which states that the normativity of the value-recognition of one’s individuality rests on a basic affirmation of one’s universal capacities. But this is only one side of the equation as it pertains to the level of the individual; in terms of the communal recognitive infrastructure that makes possible the affirmation of those traits in the individual in the first place, it is the third sphere of recognition that in reality provides the basis for establishing a second sphere for recognizing rights. On the Arendtian formulation, this is characterized as “the right to have rights”: “a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” (Arendt 2000, 32).

Arendt’s concern about the plight of stateless peoples is the quintessence of the tension between what Honneth has conceptualized as the second and third spheres of recognition; that is between the purported universality of rights on the one hand, and the fact that their actualization is mediated through the concept of “citizen” and therefore requires state solidarity, which is substantively thick and thus not universal on the other hand. But more so than conceiving it as a tension, Honneth, to my understanding, has reiterated this point in its positive formulation in the notion of symmetry. He does acknowledge the fact that that while the second and third sphere of

recognition are analytically distinct, empirically they are not; the problem, however, is that he does not adequately articulate this intermeshing at the level of intersubjectivity. Without considering that recognition of one's universal capacities via rights is mediated by questions of value, Honneth's account of recognition highlights morality at the expense of ideology. This will be the topic of the third chapter in which I will evaluate Honneth's response to such criticisms.

Before I move on to the next chapter, however, it will be useful to consider how Honneth takes up this intermeshing in his later thought. Here, the analytic distinction between the second and third sphere of recognition are relegated to the background as Honneth's main concern is to elucidate the value of rights, for which he uses the concept of "social freedom". But as I will seek to elucidate, Honneth's account of social freedom proceeds in the same direction: what he is concerned with is the further elucidation of the essentiality of solidarity whilst still maintaining the core conviction in *Struggle*, namely construing the relation between rights and esteem as a harmonious conflict, a symmetrical struggle free from pain.

Social Freedom

In "Three, not Two Concepts of Liberty", Honneth contends that intention-formation is seldom a solitary task. While it is indeed the case that the sphere of private freedom belies this assertion, Honneth's medium of analysis is common experiences of everyday life in which the subjective ego is anchored in the social life-world to the point that the distinction between its intentions and that of the others becomes blurry. In experiences such as love and friendship, and democratic will formation, the "we" is always invoked in the conception of the "I" (Honneth 2017, 181). This is simply because the very formation of such social bodies presupposes common goals and shared values that the subjects must have taken up in order to be perceived as an individual

member within them. All individual demands must be understood against the background of this intersubjectively formed “we”.

If broadly speaking, freedom is defined as the success of carrying out one’s “own” will, then it is clear that freedom in this context depends on the reaction of the “we”. To be free means that I have convinced the “we”, as it were, to carry out my intentions—which are themselves influenced by the practical relations I have with other members of the “we”. Communal membership on this account is the “Other of objective reality”. Within it, the individual can find “willed fulfilment” (Hegel) of its intentions in the collective action of others. A “doubled intersubjectivity” is thus operative; for sociality is both the condition and the end of freedom: it is both the medium of intention formation and where the will is actualized. The crucial point is that the shared value horizon of the social body and the individuality of the subject within it continuously effectuate one another: the subject contributes to the common goals, and the contribution of other members to these goals gives further access to the horizon of meaning with which the subject can form new intentions.

The essential underpinning of social freedom is therefore the conviction that “I can envisage the other not as a limitation but rather as a requirement for the realization of my striving” (Honneth 2017, 184). This is because subjects “do not proceed from an ethical null point, as suggested by the models of positive and negative liberty but rather from the acceptance of responsibilities they already have with regard to others in the pursuit of common aims” (Honneth 2017, 191). One cannot claim that the “we” inhibits freedom because the limitations that is entailed in becoming a member of the “we” is freely endorsed by the subject. One simply chooses to confine the scope of one’s demands and actions in light of the common goals that one shares with other members. In becoming a member of a social body, one assesses one’s own values, juxtaposes them

against the values and goals of a social group, and decides whether one wishes to be a member of the “we”. It is precisely this sense of willing that Honneth seems to be referring to when speaking of the “underlying shape of freedom itself” (Honneth 2017, 189). This not only means that social freedom does not stand in opposition to the principle of non-coercion that is characteristic of negative liberty; but rather social freedom helps strengthen that principle: the other does not impede my will, but carries it out for me— not like Hegel’s slave, but in a manner that is in line with the other’s own autonomously formed convictions.

As can be seen, Honneth shifts his analysis in this later work from the distinct aspects of subject’s identity to an account of the subjects’ practical relation to society as such. Instead of universal rights and individualized esteem, Honneth presents the notion of the “right to have a say” to designate the conditions of a just society (Honneth 2017, 190). This reflects the “corrective power” of each subject to challenge the norms of values and action in the social body.

At this point, however, we once again touch upon a similar theme in Honneth’s thought, namely the fact that some form of social solidarity is taken for granted as the starting point, which is precisely what accounts for the normative force of the right to have a say: this fundamental right exists because subjects are already recognized—by virtue of the traits and characteristics that signify membership within a given community—in their ability to contribute to the overall goals and values of that social body. In this vein, it is plausible to claim that Honneth’s account here draws out the implications of what was designated as symmetrical esteem in the kind of freedom it enables. Social freedom signifies precisely the third sphere of recognition that Honneth had formulated in *Struggle* as solidarity, which engenders “not just passive tolerance, but felt concern”. In similar fashion Honneth claims in “Three not Two Concepts of Liberty” that social freedom explains the “special quality such solidarity has for us” (Honneth 2017, 191). In solidarity, the

other is invested in my freedom; and it is in this strong intersubjective confirmation that I can experience the significance and meaning of my own will:

We are totally unable to comprehend the value of certain social forms of being together unless, alongside the concepts of “negative” and “positive” freedom, we have at our disposal a third concept of freedom that makes it clear to us that we strive for such forms of being together for the sake of experiencing the complete absence of coercion. The distinctiveness of this third form of freedom is the complete withering away of all hindrances that the intentions of other subjects generally pose for me. Only here do I find in the social world a sort of “home,” which Hegel already knew could exist only where I am at home with myself in others (Honneth 2017, 192).

As in the case of the solidarity that provides the conditions for “symmetrical esteem”, here the “right to have a say” is our reference point for justice. Missing, however, is an account of resolving the issue of the residual solidarity that would be required if this ideal right is to be actualized in society. In James Tully’s words, this would amount to an explication of a form of “attachment to the system of governance and political projects under dispute, even among those members who do not always achieve the recognition they seek” (Tully 2007, 21). In the absence of an account of mutual trust among members of society that would make this attachment possible, Honneth’s theory of recognition, as I will seek to demonstrate in the next chapter, is susceptible to ideological weaponization.

Conclusion

Given the implications thus drawn out, it seems to me that more so than constructing a middle ground between liberalism and communitarianism, Honneth simply advocates for both positions. For on the one hand, he claims rights are overly formal and empty; and no matter their intersubjective infrastructure, they retain an individualistic core and for this reason we must move beyond rights discourse to explain the fundamentality of value and culture in our normative assumptions. Yet, on the other hand, the question of value is claimed to be exclusionary and for this reason must be safeguarded by symmetry, which as I have tried to demonstrate, amounts to

the assertion of rights. As can be seen, both formulations beg the question. Indeed, as Antti Kauppinen notes, Honneth's emphasis on the communal background in which individual freedom becomes possible is not so much a criticism against liberalism as it is a contextualization regarding the social dimensions of autonomy:

It seems liberalism is an easy target to shoot at, but a hard one to hit. Its commitment to providing everyone with the basic goods needed for autonomy gives it a great deal of flexibility in response to conceptions that add more conditions to the list – if something really is necessary for the autonomous pursuit of any kind of good life, the liberal will (or at least should) happily adopt it. The real issue is whether some of these commitments conflict with other core commitments of liberalism, such as those of limiting the means to individual legal rights and state neutrality (Kauppinen 2011, 291).

Between a substantive ethics and universal rights, we must assert the fundamentality of one over the other in the final analysis. Insofar as the “absolute priority” of autonomy is concerned, Honneth clearly chooses universal rights. Yet he also makes the claim that rights can only have their purported function of guaranteeing freedom within the context of concrete values from which they derive their significance in the first place. Unlike Arendt, however, Honneth does not make the further claim that the very granting of rights ironically originates in being regarded as worthy of bearing that status in accordance to a particular value system. More so than an account of how rights can become actualized by the institutions charged with granting and protecting them, Honneth's analysis was focused on the universal *content* of rights, which develops through the learning process of abstraction from the peculiarities of culture and value. Neglected in Honneth's account, however, is the extent of the tension between the second and third spheres of recognition and the paradoxical phenomenon of the right to have rights; the political aspect of rights was relegated to the background in favor of a systematic account of their social preconditions.

Chapter III — Recognition and Ideology

Honneth's account of social solidarity suffers from his downplaying the tension between the second and third spheres of recognition. The notion of symmetry presented a happy balance between the two, whereby the universal principle of equality guaranteed the conditions under which each subject has the interpretive power in determining what the "abstractly defined goals" of society *actually* mean. To experience this interpretive power is to receive positive societal feedback (from individuals and institutions) with regard to a way of life that in some way or another contributes to the overarching and binding framework of valuation. But in asserting the malleability of this framework—that it must remain open to struggle—Honneth has said little more than that all individuals within society must have the chance to pursue their own version of the good life, which rests on the notion of the potential to be valuable. But how can one know this potential in the absence of actual recognition? Why should, say, members of a minority culture group whose value orientations fail to make it to the institutional level of the "symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld" nevertheless affirm society as the space in which their identities can become actualized?

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Honneth's formal account of ethical life does not provide an adequate answer to these questions. In particular, what he leaves relatively unaddressed is the mediation of institutions. At the societal level, the "terms" of recognition are inevitably determined by the centers of power. This is not only the case with regard to the realm of social esteem, but also human rights. As seen with Arendt's "right to have rights", it is the state that is the ultimate arbiter of recognition: it determines who is recognized, as what, to what extent, and under which conditions. This is while Honneth's formal ethical life takes this right for granted in the form of a "right to have a say" and presents it as a theoretical ideal against which existing

circumstances can be evaluated. Never in *Struggle*, however, did Honneth consider the ideological grip that institutions hold on the terms of recognition. Instead, the role ascribed to institutions pertains merely to providing the conditions under which different manifestations of his anthropological assertion—i.e. the moral necessity of recognition for identity formation—in the lifeworld can be sustained. (Petherbridge 2013, 176) This thought is carried out later to his debate with Fraser, and is summarized in the following passage:

The distinctively human dependence on intersubjective recognition is always shaped by the particular manner in which the mutual granting of recognition is institutionalized within a society. From a methodological point of view, this consideration has the consequence that subjective expectations of recognition cannot simply be derived from an anthropological theory of the person. To the contrary, it is the most highly differentiated recognition spheres that provide the key for retrospective speculation on the particularity of the intersubjective ‘nature’ of human beings. Accordingly, the practical self-relation of human beings—the capacity made possible by recognition, to reflexively assure themselves of their own competences and rights—is not something given once and for all; like all subjective recognition expectations, this ability expands with the number of spheres that are differentiated in the course of social development for socially recognising specific components of the personality (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 138)

The crucial point is that Honneth does not problematize the role of institutions in his theory of recognition. This is because, as Emmanuel Renault rightly points out, Honneth espouses an “expressivist” view of institutions; they do not “produce recognition or denial of recognition by themselves”, but reflect “recognitive relations that belong to a pre-institutional level” (Renault 2011, 108). Insofar as the threefold recognitive patterns are concerned, institutions are to be evaluated in terms of their ability to embody the “social developments” that have been acquired so arduously throughout the course of struggle. While it is undeniable that such criteria can to a certain extent serve as the basis for diagnosing social pathologies, this cannot justify arguments as to the essentially moral structure of recognition. In this vein, the present chapter aims at elucidating the danger of recognition, so to speak, and thereby juxtapose it against Honneth’s fundamentally moral construal of recognition.

In order to carry out this task, it is necessary to take into account Honneth's own response to the criticism mounted against the "innocence" of recognition. In two later essays, "Recognition as Ideology" and "Organized Self-Realization", Honneth now considers the implications of understanding the term "recognition" in a normatively negative way—that is not anymore as a moral demand but an ideological framework for assimilation and reproducing *status quo* relations of power. But, as will be seen, Honneth does not so much revise his assertion regarding the morality of recognition, as attempt to reconcile it with the existence of "distorted" forms of recognition. His analysis is thereby directed at distinguishing between genuine moral recognition on the one hand, and faux-recognition in service of a particular ideology on the other hand.

Yet, as I shall seek to elucidate in the proceeding section, the distinction between moral and ideological recognition is much blurrier than Honneth would like to admit. In the final analysis, according to Honneth, ideological recognition simply amounts to recognition not really being granted: there is a difference between, say, an employer's verbal praise of an employee's hard work, and the "material fulfilment" of that praise. If the verbal praise is not translated into meaningful action (e.g. increased benefits, salary raise, etc.), then one can speak of ideological recognition, which arguably instills a false sense of self-esteem in the person being recognized (employee), thereby encouraging them to willingly take on roles that serve to contribute to their own domination. By contrast, the argument I seek to put forth is that far from being the yardstick by which we distinguish moral from ideological recognition, "material fulfilment" represents the real danger of ideological recognition. I will demonstrate this by reference to Indigenous struggles for self-determination in Canada, were mere inclusion within an existing framework of recognition—the modern state—amounts to the ideological assimilation of the identity of the

other. The struggle thereby primarily pertains to establishing a fundamentally different framework, one that is not centered on the basic structures of the state.

Ideological Recognition

Briefly put, ideological recognition denotes affirmative attitudes towards subjects that are in reality intended to encourage behavior that contributes to the stability of the status quo. Honneth's own example—the public esteem enjoyed by soldiers deployed to war for their patriotism and heroism—is a revealing one. More so than anything else, the danger of ideological recognition lies for Honneth in its deceptiveness; it weaponizes seemingly moral acts of value-ascription for the sake of “[reproducing] existing relations of domination” (Honneth 2012d, 77). An element of voluntariness is therefore at play; the positive feedback “recognized” subjects receive from society is meant to “create a self-image that conforms to social expectations”, leading to the willful submission of the “recognized” within the framework of a dominant ideology (Honneth 2012d, 77). In the example just used, the “ritual affirmation” of individuals' war-worthy characteristics serves to instill the motivation for the quest of “glory and adventure” in the face of a perceived enemy that poses a threat to one's country. To put it differently, ideological recognition is intended to do what would otherwise be required by outright repression.

It is important to mention that in conceding the point that recognition and domination are not necessarily antithetical to one another, Honneth can no longer merely hold an expressivist view of institutions. If in some cases cognitive practices are part of the problem, we cannot content ourselves with the claim that institutions embody norms of recognition that have been handed down through the learning process of history. While this was presumed in *Struggle*, almost entirely absent was a description of how intersubjective practices of and struggles for recognition are transmitted as norms to the institutional level, and the new meaning and significance they take as

a consequence. It is one thing to demand recognition from below; and another to grant it from above. Without this distinction, the evolution of norms could only be construed as morally progressing, thus conceptually precluding the analysis of ideology.

In the two more recent works, however, Honneth now takes into consideration, the other “direction” of recognition, as it were: not only from lifeworld to institutions, but also vice versa. It is undoubtedly true that institutional practices of recognition take their cue from social struggles on the ground. But on the other hand, as Honneth now observes, if say, “a certain organization takes on a leading role in the creation or discovery of new evaluative qualities, [...] modified patterns of recognition are established in the rules of an institution before they find expression in the narrative praxis of a given lifeworld” (Honneth 2012d, 84). Similarly, in “Organized Self-Realization”, Honneth now claims that institutions can “creatively adapt” to the normative presuppositions of social life in order to foster new patterns of expectations that motivate members of society to behave in a manner consistent with existing power structures (Honneth 2012c, 161). The crucial point is that when demands for recognition reach the institutional level, they are not simply mirrored back onto the lifeworld, but are susceptible to ideological framing.

As a more illustrative example of ideological recognition in the present, Honneth points to the conception of the working subject in modern capitalist societies, a dynamic that has increasingly become attached to the ideal of authenticity. Here, Honneth observes how individuals in the workforce are no longer addressed merely in terms of the tasks assigned to them by their employer, but as “creative entrepreneurs” in pursuit of their “vocation” (Honneth 2012d, 91). Here, the norm to which the labour sphere is “creatively adapting” is the individualization of esteem, represented by the third sphere of recognition. We can speak of ideological recognition because the increasing demand for self-fulfillment is channeled onto “the organization of labour in the sphere of

production and the provision of services” (Honneth 2012d, 91). Encapsulated by the term “entremplees”, the nomenclature of esteem-recognition is instrumentalized in such a way as to engender the “motivational resources” for subjects to take on roles that effectively stabilize and reproduce the status-quo:

It certainly seems reasonable for us to discern the outlines of ‘ideological’ recognition with regulative power. The suspicion is that the shift in accentuation of recognition primarily has the function of evoking a new relation-to-self, which encourages willing acceptance of a considerably modified workload. The increased demands for flexibility and the deregulation of labour that have accompanied capitalism’s neoliberal structural transformation require the ability to productively market oneself, an ability engendered by referring to workers as ‘entremplees’ (Honneth 2012d, 92).

Insofar as the interpretive framework within which the ideal of self-realization can be sought is usurped by the evaluative language and institutions of a particular ideology and system of governance, recognition becomes problematic. Under such schema, individuals are to view the activities they undertake in the workplace as the product of their own autonomous decisions, made in light of their strive towards self-realization; within this trajectory, individuals are esteemed for certain traits such as the readiness to pull oneself by the bootstrap, the willfulness to take risks, resilience in the face of failure, etc.—which in turn function to block individuals’ cognizance of the systematic inequities that situates them in a lower position on the capitalist ladder in the first place. In lieu of viewing the rules of the game as fundamentally rigged, so to speak, ideological recognition here serves to replace this perception with an image of legitimate difficulty that one must face in order to attain success.

Honneth’s analysis of ideological recognition proceeds on two levels, one is the “evaluative promise”, the other is “material fulfilment”. To stick to our current example, recognition for one’s hard-working and resilient traits is coupled with the evaluative promise of professional and financial success. But the crucial question in distinguishing ideological recognition from genuine

recognition is whether its promise has been materially fulfilled: can we point to something in the objective world, to put things crudely for a moment, that can show us the success that is promised in esteeming one for her consistency and “acceptance of a considerably modified workload”? If not, then we can most probably speak of ideological recognition, which as can be seen, is a recognition that has not really taken place. Here, the neoliberal underpinning of a globalized economy is structurally unable to accommodate the success it promises for the abundance of individuals it seeks to attract for the functioning of its workforce; for the “institutional prerequisites” that would be required for the genuine affirmation of one’s individuality “would no longer reconcilable with the dominant social order” (Honneth 2012d, 93).

In such manner, Honneth can offer a clearer account as to how recognition can deceive. It is on the first-order level of “evaluative promise” that ideological recognition masks itself as genuine recognition; the latter being essentially moral and rational. For after all, ideological recognition must appear credible in the eyes of the “recognized” themselves. But it is only when we consider the aspect of material fulfilment, that we come to realize that ideological recognition suffers from a “second-level rationality deficit”; for even if such forms of recognition “remain rational in the sense that they derive from the historically changing realm of evaluative reasons”—evaluative reasons such as the universal recognition of autonomy and the individualization of esteem (second and third spheres of recognition) which represent moral progress—“they remain irrational in the sense that they do not go beyond the merely symbolic plane to the level of material fulfilment” (Honneth 2012d, 93).

Material Fulfilment and Invisiblization

It is important to note at the outset of this section that, in Honneth’s formulation, there is clear acknowledgement of the blurriness of moral and ideological recognition. This is not only an

implication of the deceptive way in which ideological recognition functions, but also in the temporality of the “chasm” between the evaluative promise and material fulfilment: “a mere delay in the realization of the institutional pre-requisites” (Honneth 2012d, 94). As is the case for any genuine recognitive relationship, “we should expect lengthy learning processes before the evaluative substance of a new form of recognition can find expression in changed modes of conduct or institutional arrangements” (Honneth 2012d, 94); for all we know, we may simply be in that temporal gap learning how to fulfill our recognitive promises. Hence, we ought not fall astray “into overly self-confident hermeneutics of suspicion” (Honneth 2012d, 94). But despite this caveat, it is clear that Honneth holds material fulfilment to be key in resolving the blurriness of moral and ideological recognition that makes the latter so deceiving. What I wish to suggest here, however, is that it is precisely this aspect of material fulfilment, to remain with Honneth’s terminology, that in fact must be a primary subject of our suspicion.

This can be made clear if we shift our focus from esteem-recognition to rights-recognition. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these two spheres are inextricably linked. In the case of the “entremployees”, the evaluative promise of success that motivates individuals to view their job as vocation would require the institutional recognition of their basic rights. Otherwise, it would simply be inconceivable how modern subjects can view their activities in the workplace as expressions of their free and independent will. From this perspective, it becomes clear that ideological recognition, in order to perform its purported function, must occur against the background of the actual fulfilment of other promises. In the case of “entremployees”, it would be inadequate to lay emphasis on the third sphere of recognition at the expense of the second sphere. In terms of the evaluative promises that universal rights are meant to embody—freedom and equality—there *is* something to be said about the aspect of material fulfilment: individuals do

exercise their rights, say, by freely entering into contract relations. As Rahel Jaeggi notes, this is not just a matter of “talking” freedom and equality “without them being realized, but the way in which they are (and have to be) realized under the conditions of capitalist production produces as an effect a new, if hidden, way of being unfree and exploited” (Jaeggi 2009, 68). Here, the systematic political and economic inequalities provide the context in which the actual exercise of freedom via rights contributes to a state of unfreedom.

The broader point I wish to make is that in the case of ideological recognition, the question of whether recognition has taken place cannot be separated onto two distinct planes, that is the evaluative promise on the one hand and material fulfilment on the other. Of course, we would still be required us speak of the deficient, or paradoxical realization of the promise of recognition—freedom and equality in the case of rights. But this gives a markedly different formulation to the task of critique; for the diagnosis of a social development as a pathology would not merely consist in claiming that recognition has not been fulfilled; but more precisely that what has indeed been fulfilled—the actual exercise of freedom that really does take place—is false. If this is correct, then we are justified in asking: can Honneth’s threefold pattern of recognition be realized—that is materially fulfilled—and still be problematic? I think the answer to this question is yes. This becomes especially significant when we consider the cultural aspects of ideological recognition.

In order to make this argument, it first necessary to assert that Honneth’s theory ultimately amounts to a politics of inclusion. His formal account of ethical life, by way of a thin universalization, attempts to provide the theoretical contours of a space in which all individuals can actualize their identities. Yet, despite his continuous rejection of starting off from an “ethical null point”, Honneth seems to presume a neutralized space of inclusion in his formal account of ethical life. As David Owens brings into view, this is essentially at odds with Honneth’s construal

of “coincidence of state and society” as the “default background framing ” in which recognition takes place (Owen 2012, 174). What of the struggles that have an explicitly “transnational character”, i.e. Indigenous struggles for collective self-determination, asylum seekers, etc.?

Here, what is at stake is precisely the aspect of material fulfilment of recognition, which for Honneth is essentially limited by its close connection to the concept of statecraft. Whereas the motif of conflict was intended to provide Honneth’s formal ethical life with the flexibility it needs so that in principle it could remain open to all forms of self-realization; conflict itself is anchored to the absolute legitimacy of the basic structure of the state as “bounded societies” (Owen 2012, 176), which in turn entails some form of centralized basis to which the issues of right and value refer. What resources for engaging in conflict, then, would be available for those whose identities cannot find expression in this basic structure? As Owen’s analysis suggest, the normativity of Honneth’s theory rests on an already agreed upon framework of socialization: “parties understand themselves as participants in a common context of recognition” (Owen 2012, 75). Misrecognition or non-recognition would amount to the denial of the expectations that are generated in accordance with the normative assumptions of that common context. What we are speaking of here, however, is a situation in which it is only one party that “understands the context to be a common context of recognition and the other side does not” (Owen 2012, 75). Here, the struggle is not to be included within an established framework of socialization in which all individuals are purported to have the chance to be recognized. The struggle rather pertains to establishing a wholly new recognitive framework due to the structural inadequacy of the existing context for granting certain members their due recognition, which can be due to cultural or epistemic differences. This is a struggle *over* rather than *for* recognition, to use Tully’s terms.

Insofar, therefore, Honneth's threefold spheres of recognition is construed as an all-pervasive common context, he is presented with the familiar charge of universalizing what is in fact particular. To be sure, this criticism of universality is different from what Zurn calls the critique of the "genealogical skeptic" who generally rejects universal ascription of traits and attributes to humans. To this latter, one could defend Honneth's threefold theory, as Zurn notes, by putting the onus of justification on the skeptic:

Is love not a vital human need, and is it not required for the development of basic self-confidence? Does the development of self-confidence not depend in fact upon a specific form of unconditional love and support that negotiates the boundaries between intersubjective dependence and independence? Is it false that the historical differentiation of social relations of honor into two distinct forms of regard—respect for autonomy and esteem for traits and achievements—represents the realization of an implicit and important conceptual division in the very idea and practice of honor? And is it false to say that this differentiation represents an improvement in the overall social conditions necessary for individuals' realization of distinct dimensions of their practical identity? (Zurn 2015, 124).

The common context of recognition, however, does not *per se* designate universal characteristics of individuals, but the intersubjective background in which these universal features can be recognized. It is true that all humans need to be loved, respected, and esteemed; and to this extent, we can assert some degree of universality. Honneth's theory of recognition, furthermore, is not intended to provide a "full catalogue of all universal features of human life" (Zurn 2015, 123). What remains problematic, however, is Honneth's analysis at the level of community; for insofar as the public sphere goes (that is notwithstanding familial love), all forms of self-actualization can be realized only within the basic structure of the modern state. And this is not universal.

It is at this point that we can see how the fundamentality of culture and value-systems ultimately resists the formalization with which Honneth seeks to frame the issue of recognition. This is especially made clear in settler-colonial context such as the Indigenous struggles for self-determination in Canada. Here, the issue of recognition or lack thereof does not in the first instance

refer to the misrecognition or non-recognition of individuals who then unite based on those denials of recognition to initiate a struggle. At stake, rather, are the basic communal structures that provide subjects the essential space for self-realization: the recognition of what would allow recognition in the first place. Indeed, in regard to the Canadian legal system, one can speak of ideological recognition through the normative dominance of its common context. For as it currently stands, it is the Indigenous legal orders that must be subjected to translation. The Indigenous peoples are the ones who are charged with making their laws compatible with a legal system that does not afford them the means for their expression. Is there not a presupposition of the superiority of the Canadian legal system evidently at play, for instance, when the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) posits “culture tests” in *R v. Van der Peet* for defining “Aboriginal rights”, essentially determining (“facilitating”, in the Canadian framing) the conditions under which Indigenous rights can be articulated into the confines of common law (*R. v. Van der Peet* [1996] 2 S.C.R. 507)? As Glen Sean Coulthard explains in his *Red Skins, White Masks*:

One need not expend much effort to elicit the countless ways in which the liberal discourse of recognition has been limited and constrained by the state, the courts, corporate interests, and policy makers in ways that have helped preserve the colonial status quo. With respect to the law, for example, over the last thirty years the Supreme Court of Canada has consistently refused to recognize Aboriginal peoples’ equal and self-determining status based on its adherence to legal precedent founded on the white supremacist myth that Indigenous societies were too primitive to bear political rights when they first encountered European powers. Thus, even though the courts have secured an unprecedented degree of protection for certain “cultural” practices within the state, they have nonetheless repeatedly refused to challenge the racist origin of Canada’s assumed sovereign authority over Indigenous peoples and their territories (Coulthard 2014, 40).

On Honneth’s formulation, it would be correct here to claim that in terms of “material fulfilment”, the Canadian system of governance is structurally unable to recognize Indigenous peoples’ identity. But the crucial point is that this can also be said at the level of “evaluative promise”. The Canadian legal system is unable to articulate the normative language that generates the promise of

the recognition of subjects' identities. In other words, even upon the fulfilment of the promise of the Canadian-sanctioned human-rights regime, recognition would remain ideological insofar as it does not allow a genuine sovereign space for communal life based on Indigenous histories, spiritualities, and legalities.

What remains problematic, therefore, is the “‘domestication’ of the terms of recognition” (Coulthard 2014, 40) whereby the state, Canada, has monopolized a framework for affirming the rights of its cultural other—ignoring the fact that what this really offers is a choice between assimilation and exclusion, both of which amount to alienation. Neglected is the fundamental political right that stems, not from being a citizen of the state, but inherently from Indigenous nationhood; for “delegated exchanges of political recognition from the colonizer to the colonized usually ends being structurally determined by and in the interests of the colonizer” (Coulthard 2014, 152). As opposed to a right which despite its individual content must be considered within its essential intersubjective context; this right is collective in that its very content addresses the collective; it is concerned not with what must be guaranteed to each individual for the effective exercise its universal capacities, but is intended to empower Indigenous communities.

As can be seen, this political right resembles Arendt's notion of the “right to have rights”; that is insofar as we are speaking of an essential space for collective self-determination— “a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective” (Arendt 2000, 34). For Arendt, to be stateless is to be denied this essential space. But the irony of the struggles of Indigenous peoples is that they are not stateless; quite the contrary, they have been subsumed— that is “incorporated” —within the Canadian state. And it is precisely at this point that we touch upon the devastating impact of modern-day colonialism: Indigenous peoples are not stateless but are still denied the essential communal space that can be built according to their own values,

traditions, and convictions. A dynamic of invisibilization, therefore, is clearly at play. Procedural rules of the democratic order take absolute precedence in justifying actions and cultural critiques of specific applications of those laws are pushed to the borders of illegitimacy. Indigenous peoples are thereby made invisible in the process: they become Canadian.

Conclusion

In sum, For Honneth, ideological recognition functions by propagating an evaluative promise, whose vividness for individuals is sufficient to give rise to forms of self-perception that ultimately blocks them from realizing the institutional dead-ends that impede the fulfilment of that promise. Willingness to taken on certain roles, as well as the increased self-esteem that comes along with the mere “ritual affirmation” of that willingness function in a feedback-looping manner, with the goal of entrapping individuals within this cycle of ideology.

As seen, however, this distinction between evaluative promise and material fulfilment is inadequate for the conceptualization of Indigenous struggles for self-determination. While there may be an element of willful self-ascription of the colonial terms of recognition—which Coulthard diagnoses by building on Franz Fanon’s conception of the “‘psycho affective’ attachments to [...] master-sanctioned forms of recognition” (Coulthard 2014, 26)—ideological recognition threatens, more broadly, to make invisible through a common context of recognition which, at large, may include the material fulfilment of *its* promises. In other words, the problem of ideological recognition is not merely that its deceptive structure stifles moments of negativity—i.e. dissatisfaction with regard to identity expectations—that would otherwise give rise to the struggle; but that the moments of negativity themselves remain unseen to the epistemic framework of the addressees of the struggle: in this case the Canadian state and more generally, the majority culture.

Concluding Remarks

In the course of this thesis, I have attempted to outline the shortcomings of Honneth's threefold theory of recognition and the formalization by which it gains its purported universal application. In the first chapter, I explained his construal of recognition as a moral context in which the well-being of the individual and community are inherently connected. In the two subsequent chapters, I sought to demonstrate that this association ultimately downplays the problem of difference. As seen, difference was articulated in terms of a conflict that explains the continuous discrepancy between the theoretical ideal of ethical life on the one hand, and the concrete experiences of the everyday on the other hand: an endless struggle that pushes recognition towards further moral progress. In the second chapter, I argued that insofar as the fundamentality of social solidarity for the formation of a society "based on the recognition of the individual freedom of all its citizens" (Honneth 1996, 14) is concerned, the notion of "symmetry" is inadequate for conceptualizing a solution to the exclusionary logic of a substantive value-system. This is because the conflict arising from exclusion was formulated not so much as a struggle *against* unjust conditions but a struggle *within* the normative contours of a theory of justice: an infinite struggle *free from pain*. The third chapter was devoted to demonstrating this criticism in the context of the social applications of Honneth's theory in regard to ideology in general, and the colonial dynamic of Indigenous struggles for self-determination in Canada in particular. At stake here is not to justify one's culture by reference to a central value horizon, but to assert the sovereignty of forms of communal life which engenders legalities and systems of governance that is different from the Western liberal state.

In the final analysis, the epistemic and cultural differences belie the always-already normative dynamic from which Honneth's theory derives its argumentative force. In short, he

unjustifiably injects morality into the very structure of recognition as such. Indeed, recall that it was the perceived lack of this socio-ontological dynamic—the essential moral orientation between self and other that is present at the very outset—that prompted Honneth to exclude the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from his appropriation of Hegel:

The Phenomenology of Spirit allots to the struggle for recognition—once the moral force that drove the process of Spirit's socialization through each of its stages—the sole function of the formation of self-consciousness. Thus reduced to the single meaning represented in the dialectic of lordship and bondage, the struggle between subjects fighting for recognition then comes to be linked so closely to the experience of the practical acknowledgement of one's labour that its own particular logic disappears almost entirely from view (Honneth 1996, 62).

Now, as mentioned, Honneth later walks back from this interpretation. In the preface to the *I in the We*, which contains his later works on ideological recognition, he states:

After more intensive study of his mature writings I came to realize how wrong I had been. I no longer believe that Hegel sacrificed his initial intersubjectivism in the course of developing a monological concept of spirit; rather, Hegel sought throughout his life to interpret objective spirit, i.e. social reality as a set of layered relations of recognition (Honneth 2012b, vii)

Yet, as can already be anticipated from this quote, Honneth's concession does not amount to a recanting of his original claim about the inherently moral essence of recognition, as it were; if anything, it seems to have strengthened his conviction in this regard. For now, Honneth is afforded the possibility of offering purely transcendental account of recognition that does start with the individuals' situatedness in their intersubjective background. In other words, this paradigm allows for explaining the development of intersubjectivity as also signifying the development of the medium of "ego-competence", as opposed to the monological absolution of the individual into Spirit, which Honneth had previously associated with Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In similar fashion to his interpretation of the early Hegel, Honneth posits recognition as signifying an *a priori* normative background for understanding oneself and the other: an "act of moral self-restriction

which we must be able to perform on ourselves in the face of others if we are to arrive at a consciousness of our self” (Honneth 2012b, vii).

Thus, instead of justifying the moral basis of recognition only in terms of the psychological development of the child’s brain in the experience of parental love—the moral particularism of which remains problematic for many critics of Honneth’s theory (Petherbridge 2013, Deranty 2015) Honneth, in his renewed engagement with the Hegelian roots of recognition, can attempt to make this claim to *a priority* in more abstract terms. Against the “historicizing or sociological interpretations” of the account of recognition contained in The Lordship-Bondage chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Honneth thereby asserts: “By sharpening Hegel’s considerations into concrete and tangible concepts, we risk losing sight of this chapter’s argumentative core in the face of all this conflictual interaction”; the “phenomenological method” is meant to elucidate in the abstract the “transcendental fact” that “[entering] into a relationship of recognition with another subject [...] should prove to be a prerequisite of all human sociality” (Honneth 2012a, 3-4).

Whether on the basis of love or a transcendental foundation, a moral substructure is to persist and be transmitted onto more concrete social relations. An ontological continuity, in other words, is maintained from recognition construed as the fundament of sociality and the recognition we call for in society. The question that remains to be answered, however, is whether one need to construe recognition as *essentially* moral in order to assert that it is the basis for socialization. The criticism of Honneth’s account is not that it understands recognition as a relation that precedes consciousness; nor is the claim that this basic relation of recognition is the relation which makes possible one’s moral awareness of oneself and others problematic per se. The criticism is rather that the cognitive basis of socialization is *restricted* to moral relations; whereas recognition is in fact the basis of *all* forms of sociality and the self-consciousness they give rise to—even, that is,

relations of domination (Sinnerbrink 2004). It is precisely this further step of inscribing a unitary moral space of inclusion on the basis of this foundation that makes his theory problematic.

What Honneth leaves underexplored in his theory of recognition is the state-centered aspects of this unitary framework and its domineering consequences for other forms of communal life. As Bert Van Den Brink explains: “The problem here is not that classifications and evaluations based on Honneth’s post-traditional conception of ethical life might not always remain uncontested. Rather, the problem is that the post-traditional conception mistakenly claims that it can be ‘abstracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life’” (Van Den Brink 2011, 162).

Ultimately this “expectation of harmony” that arises from a universalistic foundation stifles the emancipatory potential of Honneth’s theory. The threefold theory of recognition meant to bring the means for change to the hands of the subjects themselves by speaking of struggle as a matter of moral identity—that is as something to which subjects have imminent access and can reflexively refer when articulating their demands for justice. But insofar as the social conditions for actualizing aspects of one’s identity are inextricably tied to the state-structure, this objective side of recognition can only have limited application. In this regard, Honneth is confronted with precisely the criticism that he had explicitly sought to avoid, namely that his threefold theory of recognition pushes a Western ethics. The moral structure of recognition, furthermore, is unable to assert itself in the face of power dynamics. For the issue is not merely to be included, but also on whose terms. If Honneth’s theory of recognition can only be articulated in terms of a singular centralized state, his theory of recognition is unable to diagnose or emancipate the injustices that arise from disputes pertaining to the issues of sovereignty and culture.

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