Newcastle University e-prints

Date deposited: 3rd December 2012

Version of file: Author final

Peer Review Status: Unknown

Citation for item:

Outhwaite W. Recognition, Reification and (Dis)respect. *Economy and Society* 2009, **38**(2), 360-367.

Further information on publisher website:

http://www.tandfonline.com

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Axel Honneth was already recognized as the leading figure in the 'third
generation' of critical theory, long before he took up, in 1996, Habermas's chair in
Philosophy at Frankfurt and the directorship of the Institut für Sozialforschung. This
volume of translated essays, together with a recent volume in German and his 2005
Tanner Lectures on reification, provide a good opportunity to triangulate Honneth's
developing work.

Honneth's first book, *Critique of Power*, published in 1986 and translated in
1991, began from the widely shared view that the first generation of critical theorists,
despite their astonishing cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary range, lacked an
adequate theory of social action. With one foot in neo-marxist economics and the
other in Freudian theories of personality and culture, they were well placed to analyse
what capitalism *does* to human beings and their social and political contexts, but less
focussed on counter-currents of resistance, which were anyway rather thin on the
ground in the interwar period. (Erich Fromm's prophetically gloomy study of the
German working class provided empirical documentation of what was anyway
evident.)

Habermas rejected the pessimism of post-war critical theory, of what had
come to be called the 'Frankfurt School', and his principal work, the *Theory of
Communicative Action*, published in 1981, aimed to provide the missing theory of
social action as well as a normative foundation for social criticism and what he came
to call a discourse ethics. For Honneth, this was the starting point, but he felt that it
needed to be complemented by Foucault's analysis of power and a more prominent
theoretical, as opposed to merely political, focus on concrete social conflicts.[1] Where
Habermas had circled around Foucault, clearly fascinated by him[2] but without
entering into direct dialogue until just before Foucault's death in 1984, Honneth, like

Albrecht Wellmer in the second generation of critical theory, was happy to engage with post-modern and post-structuralist thought.[3]

The chronologically first essay collected in *Disrespect*, 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination', originally presented at the legendary Dubrovnik Center[4] in 1981, sets the substantive focus for Honneth's subsequent work. He begins with the central principle of critical theory, which goes back to Hegel's critique of Kantian morality, that effective critique must not be grounded in abstract principles but must also have a social foundation.

> If a theory is to do more than merely appeal to the ethical standards upon which it bases its critique, then it must prove the existence of empirically effective forms of morality upon which it can legitimately build. (p.80)

Honneth is not yet using the term recognition,[5] but his focus on injustice, in which connection he cites Barrington Moore (1978) and George Rudé (1980), contains the basic theme of his next major book. Habermas, he suggests, has escaped the pessimistic trap of earlier critical theory by his notion developed in his 'reconstruction' of historical materialism, of a process of moral evolution complementary to the evolution of the productive forces. But Habermas's model, he suggests, 'is constructed in such a way that it must systematically ignore all forms of existing social critique not recognized by the political-hegemonic public sphere' (p.82).[6] Honneth, in other words, is concerned to reach the parts which Habermas cannot: 'all those potentialities for moral action which have not reached the level of elaborated value judgements, but which are nonetheless persistently embodied in culturally coded acts of collective protest, or even in mere silent "moral disapproval" (Max Weber)[7].' (p. 83) After discussing some of the obstacles to the explicit articulation of such feelings of injustice, he restates this idea a little later (p. 86): 'Since neither its value premises nor its ideas of justice are transparent, the inner morality of the consciousness of social injustice can be grasped only indirectly on the basis of standards posed by the moral disapproval of social events and processes.'

It seems to have been an earlier period in the Hegel Archive,[8] and the work of the Hegelian philosopher Ludwig Siep (1979; 2006) which led Honneth to pick on the Fichtean and Hegelian notion of recognition (Anerkennung). As he writes in the Introduction to *The Struggle for Recognition* (p.1), he had reached the conclusion in *Critique of Power* that

> any attempt to integrate the social-theoretical insights of Foucault's historical work within the theory of communicative action has to rely on a concept of morally motivated struggle. And there is no better source of inspiration for developing such a concept than Hegel's early, 'Jena' writings, with their notion of a comprehensive 'struggle for recognition'.

The rest is history. The concept of recognition has become massively influential in critical social theory and the focus of numerous books. To put it very briefly, Honneth ranges over developmental psychology and object relations theory, Mead, Marx, Sorel and Sartre (among others), distinguishing three variants or domains in which recognition is in play: love, rights and self-esteem grounded in solidarity.

As he summarises the theory in his inaugural lecture at Berlin, delivered shortly after the book was published and reprinted here as Chapter 3[9],

> I distinguished three forms of social recognition which can be regarded as the communicative presuppositions of a successful formation of identity: emotional concern in an intimate social relationship such as love or friendship, rights-based recognition as a morally accountable member of society and, finally, the social esteem of individual accomplishments and abilities. (p.74)

What recognition is contrasted with is not misrecognition[10] but disrespect, seen as the motor and idiom of social conflicts. As the *Internationale* goes, 'nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout', or at least let us be acknowledged for what we are.

It cannot I think be denied that this concept captures a good deal of the notions of natural justice which motivate many social movements of exploited or suppressed people. Strikes, notoriously, often begin with an apparently trivial violation of some perceived right rather than the broader context of ongoing exploitation.[11] Critics of the concept have however argued, with more or less emphasis, that there is something flimsy about it. If Habermas is thought, in a typical caricature of his theory of communication, to reduce moral and political conflict to a seminar discussion, perhaps Honneth is reducing it to the senior common room or *salle des professeurs*, with its petty slights and interminable resentments. Nancy Fraser, in particular, has argued for the importance of issues of redistribution, in a friendly critique of Honneth's emphasis on recognition.[12] The complexity of these issues exceeds the scope of a review essay, but it may be worth mentioning a body of work which Honneth and Fraser have not, I think, discussed but which is highly germane to this issue. Richard Wilkinson has for many years been analysing the relation between the degree of inequality in societies and their mortality and morbidity rates. Crudely, inequality is bad for your health. The immediate question is of course what mechanisms are responsible for these effects, and Wilkinson has increasingly come to stress more qualitative notions of social distance and, in Honneth's terms, socially engineered disrespect. 'It may simply be that larger class differences lead to a steeper social gradient in health, but it could also be that a more unequal society becomes more dominated by status competition and class differentiation and suffers a more widespread health disadvantage as a result.'[13]

The range of current social conflicts with which Honneth engages in his own work and in that which he encourages at Frankfurt is enough to refute charges that the concept of recognition is in some way narcissistic and insubstantial, but it may be partly with these criticisms in mind that he tackled, in his Tanner Lectures at Berkeley in 2005, the grand Marxist theme of reification. Reification in the sense in which Lukács (*not* Marx, as Gillian Rose showed in the first of her brilliant books)[14] used it is the treatment of social relations between people as relations between things.[15] In his account of reification, Honneth stresses the sense of 'forgetting' pointed to by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 'All reification is a forgetting'.[16] To say, for example, that I need to shed 'jobs' from my business in the credit crunch is to forget, in this sense, that these are the jobs of the people whose jobs they are. The same goes for, say, 'collateral damage' as measured in numbers of dead and wounded victims of military force. Honneth's aim, in a nutshell, is to detach the

notion of reification from its original productivist philosophical anthropology and to show its relevance to a wide range of social pathologies as well as the capitalist exploitation and its mystification which was the focus of Lukács' critique.

The translated volume includes, as well as Honneth's characteristically brilliant lectures, a substantial introduction by Martin Jay and comments by Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss and Jonathan Lear. Their critiques converge, to a large extent, on the theme I alluded to earlier, and I think Honneth's stress on 'forgetting' encouraged a certain degree of misunderstanding of his project.[17] The book remains however an exceptionally useful contribution and one which brings out the ways in which Honneth's work as a whole reworks the tradition of critical theory and its antecedents in the classical German philosophy of Kant and Hegel so as to bring it to bear on current concerns as well as those which, like the poor, are still with us.

Critical theory, for Honneth, is alive and well as resuscitated by Habermas;[18] it needs to be tweaked back into a direction which one could call post-marxist, if the term had not been attached to rather different intellectual and political projects, and which also recalls Marx's early concern with a wide variety of social conflicts.[19] In the last part of this review I shall concentrate on these more general and programmatic aspects of Honneth's work.

Most important of these, I think, is his bold rehabilitation of a strong notion of social pathology which had tended to be confined to seminar discussions of Durkheim and journalistic phrases about our 'sick' societies. In the first essay in *Disrespect*, Honneth ties this to the tradition of 'social philosophy' which, as he notes, has withered away in the Anglo-Saxon countries into a sub-discipline of political philosophy. Against this current, Honneth aims to restore it in relation to 'processes of social development that can be viewed as misdevelopments…' (p. 4). The 'diagnosis of the times', a term introduced into Britain by Karl Mannheim, becomes specifically a diagnosis of social pathology, Thus 'In order to be able to speak of a social pathology that is accessible to the medical model of diagnosis, we require a conception of normality related to social life as a whole.' (p.34) In what he calls 'a weak, formal, anthropology' (p. 42)[20], Honneth gestures towards 'an ethical conception of social normality tailored to conditions that enable human self-realization'. (p. 36)

This important initiative makes explicit something which had been latent in much of critical theory. The theme of suffering of misdevelopment and 'damaged life' (Adorno 1951) pervades the work of the first generation of critical theorists, and Habermas' reworking in *Theory of Communicative Action* of Marxist, Weberian and indeed Parsonian theory (Holmwood, 2009) contains a substantial discussion of social pathologies. Honneth has however pushed this theme further, against the limits of the organic analogies and functionalist assumptions which he, like most of us these days, would find unacceptable. There is an excellent discussion of these issues by Christopher Zurn (2009), who notes at the beginning of his article that it has received much less attention than the theme of recognition.[21]

This is brought out in what is more or less the title essay of the perhaps ambiguously titled *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*. In this essay, 'A Social Pathology of Reason. On the intellectual

heritage of critical theory', Honneth suggests that, although we are now a similar distance from the beginnings of critical theory as its protagonists were from the last representatives of classical idealism (p. 28), critical theory is still linked by its model of '…socially effective reason: The historical past is to be understood as a developmental process whose pathological malformation by capitalism can be overcome only by a process of enlightenment carried out by those affected.' (p. 30) Critical theory therefore stands out in the present century against a context dominated by a liberal conception of justice which fails to ground its critique in social and historical explanation and by Foucauldian or hermeneutic lines of social criticism.[22] Together, these three books document one of the most striking features of Honneth's work: the way in which he combines a return to the intellectual sources of critical theory with a thoroughly modern concern with contemporary social pathologies and with movements to overcome them. I believe there is still mileage in this tradition, and he is undoubtedly its leading contemporary practitioner.

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[1] Habermas has of course always been a close observer of, and incisive commentator on, the contemporary political scene, but has tended to keep his political writings separate from his theoretical work. *The Postnational Constellation* did not appear in the series of his political writings, but it bore the subtitle *Political Essays.*

[2] See the two chapters devoted to him in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity.*

[3] See, for example, Chapter 5 in this volume: 'The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism'.

[4] The Inter-University Center was, as much as or more than Frankfurt, the crucible of third-generation critical theory, bringing together thinkers from West Germany and the English-speaking world. More importantly, of course, it was a meeting-point between East and West in a still divided Europe. The session I attended a couple of years later was probably fairly typical, including, for example, Wellmer from Germany, Ferenc Feher (then in Australia) and Mihaily Vajda from Hungary, and Andrew Arato, Jean Cohen, Joel Whitebook and Drusilla Cornell from the US.

[5] The term had cropped up in Habermas's speech of 1974 on receiving the Stuttgart Hegel Prize, 'Can Complex Societies Construct a Rational Identity'. Here he writes of 'a flexible identity in which all members of the society can recognize themselves [wiedererkennen] and acknowledge [anerkennen], i.e. *respect* [achten] one another'. This essay was reprinted in 1976 in Habermas's book *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus* which forms the starting point of Honneth's paper. See Müller-Doohm (2008: 41), where I was reminded of this passage.

[6] Here of course Honneth is implicitly referring to Habermas's classic analysis of the public sphere and its deterioration under conditions of modern democracy.

[7] Honneth is referring here, he says, to Weber's Economy *and Society*, vol. 2 p. 929.

[8] See Honneth's discussion in London in March 2007 with Peter Dews, as reported by Robert Farrow (http://blackthumb.wordpress.com/2007/03/30/honneth-in-london/).

[9] 'The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today', pp. 63-79. This and Chapter 4, which I mentioned earlier, are probably a good route into the book as a whole. Other chapters cover the history of critical theory, themes of *The Struggle for Recognition* such as the family and emotional ties, the human subject and human rights, and aspects of the work of Dewey and Isaiah Berlin.

[10] Recognition in German here would be wiedererkennen, rather than the sense of acknowledgement conveyed also by Anerkennung (cf. Jay, 2008). Habermas, as quoted above (n,.4), interestingly uses both terms, and Achtung or respect, which in its negative form gives 'disrespect'.

[11] An early book by Scott Lash (1984) on worker militancy in France and the US comes to mind as an example.

[12] See, for example, Fraser and Honneth, 2003, and the more hostile critiques by Lois McNay (2007, 2008).

[13] Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006: 1775; see also Wilkinson, 2005.

[14] This has a lesson for all of us who pretend to some form of scholarship. Everyone she spoke to said that of course Marx used the term throughout his work; they couldn't of course say just where, off the cuff, and so on. One day I triumphantly pointed out a use of the term buried in volume 3 of *Capital* (which of course was published posthumously and therefore might not count), but this is very much the exception which proves the rule.

[15] I deliberately use the ambiguous term treatment, since what is at issue is not a purely cognitive process.

[16] This quotation appears as one of two epigraphs at the beginning of the lecture series; the other is from Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*: 'All knowledge is based on acknowledgement' (Anerkennung).

[17] Having given a hostage to fortune with an example of someone forgetting themself in the heat of a sporting contest, Honneth clarifies in his 'Rejoinder' that his real starting point was reflection on industrialised mass murder.

[18] See for example Honneth 1985 and Chapters 3 and 5 in *Disrespect.*

[19] See Lubasz, 1977. I do not of course mean to suggest that Marx lost, or Habermas lacks, these concerns; just that the focus on the proletariat in Marx's later work, and a more diffuse notion of humanity as a whole in Habermas', might be complemented by an approach which engages with a wide range of substantive conflicts. As Joel Anderson (2009) notes, 'few outside Germany follow the Frankfurt School tradition of combining interpretations of classic texts…with both critical social theory and social scientific research'.

[20] In the sense, of course, of philosophical anthropology (see Honneth and Joas, 1980)

[21] I am grateful to Gordon Finlayson for drawing this to my attention. See also Zurn 2005.

[22] On the last of these, see his discussion of Michael Waltzer in the final essay in the book: 'Idiosynkrasie as Erkenntnismittel' (pp. 219-34). The other essays in the volume, with the exception of a superb one on morality and philosophy of history in Kant, mostly discuss aspects of critical theory from Adorno and Benjamin, who is particularly important for Honneth, to Albrecht Wellmer.