

Axel Honneth and the Immanent Critique of Society

By

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine the ideas and arguments of German critical theorist Axel Honneth, who has developed the theories of mutual recognition and social freedom while also defending the Hegelian tradition of immanent social critique. Immanent critique involves evaluating society by its normative principles and rational potential inherent in social institutions and practices; it is concerned with the actualization of reason and the attainment of rational freedom in collective life. Honneth claims that an individual needs to cultivate self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem through social interaction to develop a personal identity; the experience of misrecognition can motivate the struggle to expand relations of recognition and the normative order of society. Social freedom is an intersubjective freedom characterized by an ethos of mutual sympathy. When the central institutions of society embody this principle of freedom, we can speak of a democratic ethical life. I argue that the two theories stand in tension because one has the logic of conflict theory while the other has the logic of normative functionalism.

Honneth engages in an immanent critique of capitalism, and he has demonstrated the breakdown of social solidarity during the neoliberal era. However, he is inconsistent in his use of diagnostic concepts, and his critique vacillates between a phenomenological perspective and a teleological one. Since the latter results in structurally conservative prognoses with a limited political imagination, I argue that immanent critique should be carried out with recognition theory. Finally, I assess whether Honneth's ideas are useful for making sense of right-wing extremism and the crisis of American democracy. I show that he does not have an adequate concept of crisis, and that such a concept – defined as

the disintegration of normative structures and the stagnation of learning processes – is needed to discuss the possibility of ethical life. Because the social freedom framework has optimistic assumptions about the validity of existing institutions, I claim that the theory of recognition is more suitable for diagnosing the crisis of ethical life. Repairing democracy and actualizing an ethical life of freedom would involve diverse struggles for recognition to create new modes of association.

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This dissertation was made possible by the incredibly generous level of support, encouragement, and patience by many of my teachers. I came up with the idea for this project several years ago during a period when I was struggling to formulate a specific proposal for a doctoral dissertation. My then co-advisor, the late professor Erik Olin Wright, noticed that I was having difficulties, and he asked me to reflect honestly on what it is that I wanted to do. That is when I came out and declared that I was curious about a German critical theorist called Axel Honneth. I had read a good amount of Jürgen Habermas during my undergraduate and graduate years, and I wanted to learn about the state of critical theory after Habermas. The problem was that I had not yet read a single book or paper by Honneth. Erik told me to spend some time reading a few things, and then write a short memo about them; I could later expand this memo into a full proposal – which is exactly what I ended up doing, and I ultimately focused on the theme of Axel Honneth’s immanent critique of capitalist society. My dissertation turned out to be unconventional, especially within the context of the American sociology department – dissertations are almost always empirical studies that require fieldwork. In this sense, I was taking a major risk. The topic I chose was also something quite foreign to many of my professors’ usual research interests. Nevertheless, Erik was enthusiastic and animated about my work from the beginning, and I cannot thank him enough for the many years of his dedicated mentoring and for letting me take this intellectual risk. It was genuinely heartbreaking when Erik became ill and passed away. He was a brilliant man who had a penetrating mind, a beautiful kind heart, and strong moral leadership – someone who

always built a community around himself and welcomed everybody. I am extremely fortunate to have been his student for several years, and my time spent with Erik Olin Wright at the University of Wisconsin will always be one of the defining experiences of my life.

After Erik's death, my committee was co-chaired by professors Lewis Friedland and Mustafa Emirbayer; Chad Goldberg joined the committee as the third member. I am grateful to Mustafa and Chad for graciously stepping in to help me in a challenging time. In the end, professors Robert Freeland and Viren Murthy also joined my committee for the defense, and I truly appreciate their participation. Everyone on my committee pushed me to think more rigorously about theoretical problems; they helped me realize what this dissertation has not quite managed to achieve, and what my tasks are moving forward.

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I am solely responsible for the contents of this entire document, including any mistakes and shortcomings.

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Chapter 1

Axel Honneth's Critical Theory

1. Introduction

In this dissertation, I will examine the ideas and arguments of German critical theorist and social philosopher Axel Honneth (b. 1949). Honneth is one of the leading thinkers of his generation, and for nearly two decades he served as director of the Institute for Social Research at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main (also known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory). Often regarded as the intellectual successor to Jürgen Habermas, Honneth is well-known for developing the theories of mutual recognition and social freedom through a reinterpretation of G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy. He also draws on a wide range of sociological thinkers such as Émile Durkheim, George Herbert Mead, and Talcott Parsons to make his arguments. Honneth's works are an important breakthrough for critical social thought in the contemporary era because he builds on Habermas' legacy but also moves beyond the framework of communicative action: whether it is the affirmation of a pre-linguistic sociality or the construction of an alternative model of society that reflects the normativity of social life, Honneth challenges us to think about social relations and their distortion in new ways. Since I believe American sociologists will also benefit from Honneth's ideas, I will review his contributions primarily for such an audience.

This dissertation, moreover, will take the form of a study that pursues a specific problem: it will evaluate Honneth's attempt to elucidate the foundations of a viable

immanent critique of capitalist society.¹ Immanent critique is the evaluation of society by its inherent normative ideal or principle with a view to the actualization of reason. From his earlier work on recognition to his more recent work on freedom, Honneth has always crafted his critical theory with the intent of defending this tradition and making it more coherent. Interestingly, this aspect of his project has not received the amount of attention I think it deserves from commentators. I am convinced that a thorough examination of the immanent critique tradition and Honneth's place within it is indispensable for a balanced evaluation of his achievements; I will therefore assess Honneth's thought within this context of his endeavor to re-specify the tasks and methods of immanent critique.

This study is framed as an analysis of Honneth's critique of capitalism because I believe this topic is the most significant concern for him as a theorist. If we look at the trajectory of Honneth's intellectual development, it is apparent that his ideas converge on the normative ideal of "democratic ethical life" ([2011] 2014), which becomes the basis for his recent statement on the relevance and meaning of democratic socialism today ([2015] 2017). He uses the concepts of recognition and social freedom to reveal the misdevelopments or pathologies of capitalist society, but also to illustrate his vision of a more rational world beyond the current one. Implicit in his works is the claim that the critique of capitalism is more cogent if it is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of recognition and social freedom. A serious study on Honneth must evaluate this ambitious attempt to reorient the critique of capitalism upon new conceptual foundations. Another

¹ There are several books that already provide excellent summaries and analyses of the full range of Honneth's ideas (cf., Petherbridge 2013; Zurn 2015; Wilhelm 2019). Rather than providing a general commentary on Honneth like these works, my goal is to focus on a specific issue or problem within his thought. I believe this would give my dissertation the character of a dynamic, open-ended investigation.

equally important reason is that we can come to grips with Honneth's sociological perspective through a close reading of his writings on capitalism. As a social theorist, he develops his own insights on social order and change, the moral basis of economic action, the logic of functional differentiation, and other topics of interest to sociologists; in this respect, it is worth accommodating ourselves with his way of thinking about the capitalist social structure. What do the theories of recognition and social freedom contribute to our understanding of democratic capitalist societies? As sociologists, why should we think in terms of these concepts? What does it mean to critique capitalism immanently, and are Honneth's justifications convincing? These are the questions that animate this study.

Finally, this dissertation may also be of interest for those who are concerned about the fate of democratic nations in today's world. In an age of right-wing extremism, we are in desperate need of a critical social theory that can shed light on the causes of the malaise afflicting modern societies. To borrow a phrase from an earlier critical theorist, we do not live in a sane society (Fromm [1955] 2002). We live in an era of division and mistrust, where irrational populism and reactionary movements have thrived to the point of endangering the foundations of our democratic life. These developments express the profound discontent and lack of fulfillment of so many people; if an intellectual like Erich Fromm were alive today, he would say without reservation that society has not met the basic needs of the individual. The present situation is the aftermath of having lived for so long under a social structure that stifles human flourishing. If we want to understand the crisis we face today and explain the reason for the breakdown of solidarity, we must analyze the capitalist system with the tools of critical theory. Honneth has produced the

most sophisticated body of ideas since Habermas, and it is urgent that we evaluate their usefulness for understanding the present. I hope, in this regard as well, people will find this dissertation worth reading.²

1.1 Structure and Argument

This dissertation will consist of four chapters. Chapter 1 situates Honneth within the tradition of critical theory and reviews his key contributions; Chapter 2 explores the origin and evolution of immanent critique from Hegel to Honneth; Chapter 3 examines his diagnoses of capitalist society and his theory of socialism; Chapter 4 discusses the crisis of American democracy and assesses the ability of Honneth's theory to account for the disintegration of ethical life.

In the first chapter, I portray Honneth's overall thought in roughly three main blocks or stages of development. First, we look at his understanding of the task of social philosophy, which is to diagnose the social pathologies preventing humans from living the good life ([1994] 2007a). Critical theory of the Frankfurt School is unique within social philosophy in its effort to explain social pathologies as a distortion of reason. Honneth's interpretation of critical theory is distinct for his criticism of the materialist paradigm of labor: he is resolute in his rejection of Marxian functionalism and his endorsement of Habermas' intersubjective paradigm of communication ([1989] 1995a). However, he also criticizes Habermas' theory of action and society, and begins to shift

² The discussion of current affairs, the rise of right-wing politics, and the applicability of Honneth's ideas to them will take place toward the end of the study in Chapter 4. The bulk of my dissertation is dedicated to examining Honneth's immanent critique of capitalist society in general.

from language to recognition within this latter paradigm ([1980] 1995). Second, we examine Honneth's book *The Struggle for Recognition* ([1992] 1995), where he shows the necessity of mutual recognition in the form of love, rights, and solidarity for the cultivation of a complete personal identity. He argues that recognition is the normative presupposition of communicative interaction, and the struggle for recognition can lead to moral progress by expanding the opportunities for inclusion and individualization in society. Third, we focus on the notion of social freedom, which is an institutional and intersubjective concept of freedom characterized by an ethos of mutual sympathy ([2001] 2010; [2011] 2014). The realization of social freedom results in democratic ethical life, where relations of recognition and reciprocal cooperation have been established in society's central institutions. I explain the difference between negative, reflexive, and social freedom, and spell out Honneth's notion of ethical life. The chapter's argument is that while there is thematic continuity between Honneth's theories of recognition and social freedom, his perspective changes from a focus on the moral basis of conflict to the moral consensus within institutions; stated somewhat differently, he switches from a conflict-theoretic view of society to a normative functionalist one.³

In the second chapter, I explain what immanent critique is and how it differs from other approaches such as external, internal, and genealogical critique. Immanent critique evaluates society according to a normative standard or ideal found within society itself; but in contrast to internal critique, immanent critique is committed to the actualization of

³ While a similar argument has already been made by others (e.g., Petherbridge 2013; Teixeira 2017), I will explore the implications this change in orientation has for the coherence of Honneth's critique of capitalism. Also, while the juxtaposition of conflict theory and functionalism can be spurious – since he understands conflict in normative terms – I will still stress the difference between his earlier and later perspectives.

reason: the Hegelian idea that reason exists in the world and has yet to be fully realized. Its practitioners believe humans have the potential to live in rational freedom, and they envision the transcendence of the present from within ([2004] 2009; [2007] 2009a). The chapter shows how this approach is the common thread linking Hegel, Karl Marx, and the Frankfurt School theorists. I also discuss how there are different versions of immanent critique in Honneth's works: recognition refers to the normative presupposition of social interaction and the inner moral experience of actors, whereas social freedom refers to the normative ideal embodied in social institutions. The chapter argues that it is necessary to unify the competing versions around one coherent program of immanent critique.

In the third chapter, I do a survey of Honneth's writings on capitalism. He argues that capitalism is an order of recognition, which means the demand for redistribution must be understood as a struggle for recognition (2003a; 2003b; [2008] 2012); that the neoliberal era of capitalism had dismantled the moral progress accomplished during the social democratic era ([2004] 2012); and the present era is in a phase of misdevelopment ([2011] 2014). I then turn to his statement of socialism, which he defines as the realization of social freedom in the family, market economy, and public sphere through democratic experimentation ([2015] 2017). I point out Honneth's reliance on a normative teleology to diagnose social misdevelopments from the perspective of freedom; I also demonstrate the limits of his Durkheimian critique of capitalist institutions. The chapter argues that Honneth's shifting concepts of social pathology – such as misdevelopments, second-order disorders, and disease – are not coherent and lose sight of the original goal of diagnosing the pathologies of reason through a context-transcending critique.

In the fourth chapter, I assess the usefulness of Honneth's ideas for understanding the state of social division and the rise of right-wing extremism in the United States. The key aspects of the present situation in American society such as inequality, resentment, white supremacy, and political destabilization are reviewed. I show that Honneth begins to reflect on the concept of crisis, and how his insights on the regressive tendencies of group life as well as extreme behavior as reactions to the experience of misrecognition are valuable for making sense of recent developments. However, it will be demonstrated that there are limits to what his theories (especially the theory of social freedom) can reveal about the sources of extreme division. The chapter argues that Honneth needs to define crisis as the disintegration of ethical life itself, and should prioritize the theory of recognition as a normative framework to envision the repair of democracy and the fuller realization of ethical life.

The four chapters culminate in the overall argument that Honneth's immanent critique of capitalism is not only fragmented but also insufficiently context-transcending due to its strong emphasis on the normative validity of existing structures and institutions. Because he characterizes capitalist society as a normative order of recognition that has rational, freedom-guaranteeing institutions, he is not able to thematize the problems of capitalist class power, the state, and other obstacles to structural reforms adequately. As he becomes progressively more concerned with moral consensus and the functional reproduction of the social whole, his program loses the critical edge it originally had when it focused on social conflict and the potential for change. A critical theory that has democratic ethical life as its normative ideal needs to be more critical of the capitalist

social structure because capitalism regularly produces the authoritarian personality and reactionary movements which undermine the foundations of democracy and ethical life. It is suggested in my dissertation that the current crisis of democratic ethical life can only be overcome if society generates less inequality, deprivation, and resentment; this would involve carrying out large-scale structural reforms through multi-dimensional struggles for recognition. Achieving a truly democratic form of life does not mean going back to an earlier state of affairs prior to the crisis, but collectively reimagining a more rational and humane society from within. In this sense, Honneth's contributions and his defense of the immanent critique tradition are still invaluable.

1.2 Biography

Between 1969-74, Honneth studied philosophy, sociology, and German literature at the universities of Bonn and Bochum; he earned his Ph.D. in sociology at the Free University of Berlin in 1983 with a dissertation on Michel Foucault and the Frankfurt School, which was later published as *The Critique of Power* ([1985] 1991). In 1982-83, Honneth received a grant to do research under Habermas at the Max Planck Institute for the Social Sciences in Starnberg. When Habermas became chair of philosophy at Goethe University in 1983, Honneth followed him to Frankfurt to become a "scientific assistant." In 1990, Honneth completed his *Habilitation* (a second project required in Germany for academic promotion) in philosophy with a study on Hegel; this was published as *The Struggle for Recognition* ([1992] 1995). After taking up a number of academic positions, mostly in Berlin, Honneth returned to Frankfurt as professor of social philosophy in 1996.

He became director of the Institute for Social Research in 2001 and occupied this position until 2018. Since 2011, Honneth has also been teaching at Columbia University in New York; his position at Columbia became full time from the 2017/18 academic year.⁴

2. The Task of Social Philosophy

To understand the logic of Honneth's theories and what he is trying to achieve, we must familiarize ourselves with a field called social philosophy. Social philosophy is its own branch that is separate from moral or political philosophy; it is unique for its investigations into the social preconditions for human flourishing, or into the social arrangements that contribute to suffering and the obstruction of self-realization. Honneth describes it in the following way:

... social philosophy is primarily concerned with determining and discussing processes of social development that can be viewed as misdevelopments..., disorders, or "social pathologies." ...

Since its primary task is the diagnosis of processes of social development that must be understood as preventing the members of society from living a "good life," it relies upon criteria of an ethical nature. Unlike both moral and political philosophy, therefore, social philosophy can be understood as providing an instance of reflection..., within which criteria for successful forms of social life are discussed. ([1994] 2007a:4)

He traces the birth of social philosophy to Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1755] 2011) who tried to explain inequality as arising out of the competition to acquire property – which itself is caused by the struggle to attain prestige once the individual's original self-relation breaks down during the civilizing process (Honneth [1994] 2007a:5-9). By

⁴ I have gathered these details from the following websites [Date of Access: May 17, 2020]:

http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de/mitarbeiter_in/axel-honneth/
<http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de/institut/organisation/>
https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/44526981/Honneth_Axel
<https://philosophy.columbia.edu/directories/faculty/axel-honneth>

highlighting the alienation of the individual in society, Rousseau was able to pivot the analysis beyond issues of “political-moral legitimacy” and explore the “structural limitations” imposed by society onto the prospect of human self-realization (ibid.:10). According to Honneth, this form of inquiry is continued by Hegel ([1820] 1991) for whom excessive individualism in bourgeois society was a pathological development that threatened the ethical unity of the social whole; by Marx ([1844] 1978a) who thought the capitalist mode of production prevented individuals from appropriating the product of labor as a manifestation of their own creative powers; and by Friedrich Nietzsche ([1887] 1998) who considered the attitude of nihilism to be a form of cultural degeneration which interferes with the affirmation of life.

There are two conceptions of human flourishing operating in most social philosophies: a philosophical anthropology which points to an individual’s original or natural intactness, and a philosophy of history which points to a future stage of the individual’s complete development (Honneth [1994] 2007a:22). For example, Rousseau started with a vision of an intact, pre-social self, whereas Hegel had a teleological view of historical development at the end of which humans would realize their full potential. What is common to all social philosophy, however, is a formal ethics or some culturally independent notion of social normality: “The ethical background condition is formal in the sense that it only normatively emphasizes the social preconditions of human self-realization, and not the goals served by these conditions” (ibid.:36). Hence, social philosophy is not a positive theory of the good life, since it only critiques those social circumstances thought to be detrimental to the individual. The prevalence of diagnostic

concepts like alienation, reification, and bifurcation in the social philosophic literature attests to its focus on pathological developments of society (ibid.:34-5).

The early Honneth endorses a weak version of philosophical anthropology (ibid.:42) by specifying the forms of recognition needed by the individual for identity formation. He thinks the philosophy of history is untenable, naming *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács [1923] 1971) and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1997) as classic examples. In the former book, the present is critiqued from the perspective of a future proletarian class as the true subject of history, making falsification of its claims impossible and the transcendence of reified relations an asserted necessity; in the latter, the authors reduce the history of the species to the progressive attainment of rational mastery over nature, making civilization itself a social pathology rather than totalitarianism in particular (Honneth [1994] 2007a:25-6, 28-30). Honneth argues that the reliance on the philosophy of history by the founders of critical theory prohibited them from carrying out the Frankfurt School's mission successfully as a form of social philosophy. While he supports the Frankfurt School's idea of critical theory, he also believes it has been built on mistaken foundations and requires reformulation at the basic conceptual level of social action.

2.1 Frankfurt School Critical Theory

According to Honneth, critical theory of the Frankfurt School is a special branch of social philosophy that is unique for its attempt to explain all social pathology as a

pathology of reason ([2007] 2009a:vii).⁵ There are many “critical theories” in the world from feminism to post-modernism, and they are all concerned about domination in some way; but critical theory of the Frankfurt School is additionally committed to the immanent critique of society and is guided by the idea of the actualization of reason – which I will explore in the next chapter. In this section, I discuss Honneth’s interpretation of critical theory’s task by examining his thoughts on the flaws of the First Generation’s formulation. He eventually states critical theory’s task to be the following: “... a key problem of critical theory today consists in the question of how we are to obtain the conceptual framework for an analysis which is capable both of coming to grips with the structure of social domination as well as with identifying the social resources for its practical transformation” ([1990] 1995:viii). As I show below, Honneth argues that his predecessors have not succeeded in outlining a coherent program of critical theory.

The Institute for Social Research had its programmatic statement delivered by Max Horkheimer ([1937] 1972). He made a distinction between traditional theory which strives to mimic the natural sciences in its production of objective knowledge through a detached stance toward reality, and critical theory which strives to produce knowledge while understanding its own scientific activity as a social practice within the social structure of capitalism, and therefore denounces such detachment as illusory. Because traditional theory lacks awareness of its socially determined nature, it reifies ideological

⁵ In the context of this study, critical theory refers specifically to the theoretical projects of scholars who were associated with the Institute for Social Research, or the Frankfurt School. In this section I discuss only the idea of critical theory; I do not go into the history of the Frankfurt School itself. For a detailed account of the formation of the Institute for Social Research and its activities in its early years, see Martin Jay ([1973] 1996) and Douglas Kellner (1989).

categories and reproduces capitalist society (ibid.:194, 196). Critical theory, in contrast, is reflexively aware of its context of development. Instead of looking at society from the fictive stance of the free, isolated observer, it acknowledges the antagonisms inherent in society and considers the individual within the totality of structures and relationships; its goal is to “transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual’s purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built” (ibid.:210). Since it is “a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life” (ibid.:199), critical theory is oriented to the transformation of reality toward a rational society.

Honneth points out the unreconciled ideas about critique and emancipation in Horkheimer’s statement. In one instance, critical theory identifies the liberating potential of labor to illuminate the irrationality of existing relations of production given the level of productive forces.⁶ This materialist interpretation stems from Horkheimer’s philosophy of history which describes the development of civilization in terms of the rational mastery of nature: “The domination of nature, self-preservation solely through the process of social labor, is the only dimension in which socio-cultural progress takes place” (Honneth [1985] 1991:19). But for Honneth, it is not clear how labor brings about emancipatory interest if it operates with the same purposive-rational logic involved in the manipulation of nature; there is no “reflective moment” (ibid.:11) within the act of labor that can call the social order into question:

⁶ “... [T]he goals of human activity, especially the idea of a reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community, are immanent in human work...” (Horkheimer [1937] 1972:213).

The consequence of Horkheimer's argument is that theory can only yield a technical knowledge that at best anticipates the future conditions of applications of more developed productive forces, but does not permit a critique of its present mode of organization. The scientific perfection of the domination of nature does not itself lead to the "rational decision" that, in assigning emancipatory potential of the productive forces to the conscious control of the producers, breaks through human self-deception. (ibid.:12).

Horkheimer also discussed another type of action called "critical activity" ([1937] 1972:206-07) of specific groups or classes involving the reflection on subjective experiences of "prevailing injustice" (ibid.:241). It can give rise to emancipatory interest among relevant actors through a conflictual process of interaction (ibid.:215) or the exchange of competing interpretations of the "justness of an organization of social production" (Honneth [1985] 1991:16). Honneth thinks this is a promising line of thought that explores a new realm of social life beyond labor; unfortunately, not only is this notion of practical-critical activity left undertheorized, it is also incompatible with Horkheimer's materialist paradigm and philosophy of history. Since labor is the primary category by which Horkheimer interprets the constitution and development of society, he cannot consider the site of conflict, struggle, and interaction as an autonomous realm that is just as essential for social reproduction (ibid.:17).

Honneth concludes that critical theory as formulated by Horkheimer is not viable.⁷ Theodor Adorno's contributions do not resolve the flaws pointed out by Honneth either, since Adorno adopts the same philosophy of history and paradigm as Horkheimer, only to extend it in a more extreme direction (ibid.: Ch. 3). For Adorno, all social action

⁷ "Horkheimer is not in a position to solve the basic problem he himself sketched out, since his philosophy of history, which is tailored solely to the dimension of social labor, prohibited him from analyzing conceptually that social dimension of everyday cultural life and social conflict to which, in a few places, he attempted to relate his own theory" (Honneth [1988] 1991:xvi).

manifests instrumental rationality; a possible exception is mimesis, which can be a form of momentary aesthetic escape from the reified social totality. Thus, Honneth discerns an aesthetic theory of ego formation which serves as the foundation of Adorno's critique of society and modern subjectivity ([1986] 1995:130).⁸ Still, Adorno's theory fails to provide any resource within social reality that can lead to the practical transformation of society – at best, he indicates the hope or dream of reconciling with our inner psychic life and imagination which have been damaged by life under late capitalism.

Critical theory cannot fulfill its purpose if it remains rooted in the materialist paradigm of labor and a metaphysical philosophy of history – this is the conviction of both Habermas and Honneth. In the next section, I discuss critical theory's paradigm shift from materialism to intersubjectivity, or from production to communication, initiated by Habermas and continued by Honneth.

2.2 The Communicative Turn

In his essay reflecting on the history of the Frankfurt School, Honneth claims the core members of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse were essentially Marxian functionalists who thought in terms of a philosophy of consciousness – a way of thinking which “construes human rationality according to the model of the cognitive relation of a subject to an object” ([1989] 1995a:71). The philosophy of consciousness shaped the critical theorists' idea of reason as the faculty for instrumental utilization of natural

⁸ See the rest of Honneth's essay ([1986] 1995) for a discussion on the fact that Adorno establishes a normative foundation to his critique in a way that Foucault does not or cannot provide in his own studies. In Chapter 2, I will show how Adorno was still committed to an immanent critique despite his pessimism.

objects, which also led to the idea of history as the progressive development of labor and forces of production. Honneth also states that it was the fringe members of the Institute such as Fromm, Walter Benjamin, Franz Neumann, and Otto Kirchheimer who had communicative insights in their works which allowed them to avoid the reductionism of the core members. For example, whereas Adorno ([1991] 2001) interpreted the culture industry to be a system of mass psychic manipulation that supplies the capitalist economy with a behaviorally conditioned public, Benjamin saw within popular art the possibility of new perception and creativity among oppressed groups: it can “unleash unthought-of potentials of the collective imagination and thereby lead to a politicization of the aesthetic” (Honneth [1989] 1995a:82). For theorists like Benjamin, the aesthetic realm and culture more generally are not completely subordinate to the imperatives of the capitalist economy. In Fromm’s psychoanalysis, a post-metaphysical understanding of reason, freedom, and social development replaces the philosophy of consciousness: “The history of mankind is the history of growing individuation, but it is also the history of growing freedom. The quest for freedom is not a metaphysical force and cannot be explained by natural law; it is the necessary result of the process of individuation and of the growth of culture” ([1941] 1994:237-38). By taking intersubjectivity more seriously and studying interaction as an autonomous social process, these peripheral members avoided the so-called pitfalls of Marxian functionalism.

Honneth credits Habermas above all for establishing an intersubjective foundation for critical theory and thereby getting rid of the philosophy of consciousness. By making linguistically mediated interaction a central category, he brought about a communicative

turn in critical theory. In an early set of essays, Habermas stated the need to distinguish labor from interaction: if labor is goal-directed action oriented to achieving efficient means and technical mastery of the external world, interaction is oriented to coordinating action with other subjects through communication grounded in shared norms. He also criticizes Hegel and Marx for explaining the development of the species mostly in terms of the former type of action.⁹ The argument is that the history of the species must be explained through labor and interaction together:

But to set free the technical forces of production... is not identical with the development of norms which could fulfill the dialectic of moral relationships in an interaction free of domination, on the basis of a reciprocity allowed to have its full and noncoercive scope. Liberation from hunger and misery does not necessarily converge with liberation from servitude and degradation, for there is no automatic developmental relation between labor and interaction. Still, there is a connection between the two dimensions. (Habermas [1968] 1973:169, emphasis omitted)

Habermas ([1981] 1984) later outlines a theory of communicative action – action oriented to achieving mutual understanding – by specifying the normative presuppositions and validity claims contained in speech acts. The communicative rationality of this type of action is not subject-centered like purposive rationality, but intersubjective in that it operates among multiple actors toward the ideal of the non-coercive coordination of action through the exchange of reasonable (examinable) statements. By making a further distinction between the institutional spheres of system and lifeworld ([1981] 1987), Habermas can diagnose social pathologies as the disruption of communicative action and

⁹ “Marx comprehends the history of the species under categories of material activity and the critical abolition of ideologies, of instrumental action and revolutionary practice, of labor and reflection at once. But Marx interprets what he does in the more restricted conception of the species’ self-reflection through work alone” (Habermas [1968] 1971a:42).

the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld: “Because human beings by nature are only able to form a personal identity as long as they can grow and move within the intersubjectively shared world of a social group, the interruption of the process of communicative understanding would violate a presupposition of human survival which is just as fundamental as that of the collective appropriation of nature” (Honneth [1989] 1995a:87). In this way, Habermas can reinterpret Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s diagnosis of the reification of social life as an instance of societal rationalization taking place primarily in terms of purposive rationality at the level of system, and at the expense of communicative action in the lifeworld.

There is no question in Honneth’s mind that critical theory is moving in the right direction with the communicative turn; however, he also believes there are some limits to the theory of communicative action, and is concerned that Habermas is “surrendering the actual potential of his communications-theoretic approach” (ibid.:90) by relying on systems theory to delineate a theory of society. We will now look at Honneth’s criticism of Habermas’ system-lifeworld model and its restricted notion of social action. These insights will motivate Honneth to take the communicative turn in a new direction and build an alternative critical theory.

2.3 Beyond Language and System

In his reading of *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim [1893] 2014), Habermas points to a paradox in the argument where the division of labor is the source of solidarity but also the source of anomie. For Durkheim it generates moral regulation, but

it is also responsible for morality's dissolution: "He sees industrial capitalist societies driving toward a state of anomie. And he traces this anomie back to the same processes of differentiation from which a new morality is supposed to arise 'as if by a law of nature'" (Habermas [1981] 1987:116). To address this problem, Habermas thinks it is necessary to separate two processes: social integration involving the normative regulation of action orientations through communication, and system integration involving the non-normative regulation of unintended action consequences beyond the agents' awareness (ibid.:117). His solution is to draw on two different theoretical traditions and adopt a concept from each: from phenomenology (Schutz and Luckmann [1973] 1980) he uses the concept of lifeworld; from functionalism (Parsons [1951] 1991) he uses the concept of system. By combining lifeworld and system into one theory of society, Habermas believes he can account for social and system integration simultaneously.¹⁰

Honneth considers the splitting of society into these two levels to be a questionable move. Whereas this differentiation was a necessary step for Habermas to address the complexity of the integration, reproduction, and pathological developments of modern society, the demarcation of a norm-free sphere of power (system) and a power-free sphere of communication (lifeworld) is misleading for Honneth ([1985] 1991:298). By describing the system as operating through the (delinguistified) steering media of money and power (Habermas [1981] 1987:154), this model of society reduces economic

¹⁰ The lifeworld can be defined as the taken-for-granted background context of knowledge and meanings that are intersubjectively shared during interaction. I cannot go into Habermas' reinterpretation of this phenomenological concept in this section (see [1981] 1987:119-52). I also must presume some familiarity with Parsons among readers. See *Economy and Society* (Parsons and Smelser [1956] 2001) for a general statement on the AGIL paradigm; see "On the Concept of Political Power" ([1963] 1969) for a description of a generalized symbolic medium.

and political activities to forms of purposive rational action devoid of normative content in themselves; on the other hand, by describing social pathology as the system's colonization of the lifeworld (ibid.:155, 196), pre-systemic sources of domination in society cannot be considered by this critical theory. For all his theoretical innovations, Habermas still reinvents the same dichotomy found in Adorno and Foucault between a power structure and the imperiled individual:

Habermas loses above all... the communication-theoretic approach he had initially opened up: the potential for an understanding of the social order as an institutionally mediated communicative relation between culturally integrated groups that, so long as the exercise of power is asymmetrically distributed, takes place through the medium of social struggle. Only a consistent elaboration of this alternative version of a communication theory of society would make it possible to understand the social organizations that Adorno and Foucault mistook as power complexes functioning in a totalitarian manner as fragile constructions that remain dependent for their existence on the moral consensus of all participants. (Honneth [1985] 1991:303)

It is important not to overstate the drawbacks of Habermas' theory. Honneth admits that Habermas has produced a far more sophisticated social theory and critique of modernity than those of his predecessors who relied on one-dimensional concepts of reason and action (ibid.:302). However, since Habermas draws on systems theory to divide society into communicative and non-communicative domains, in a certain sense he undercuts the intersubjective (and normative) quality of social life (see also Joas [1986] 1993).

Honneth illustrates this point by discussing how the concept of labor loses its critical emancipatory potential due to the theory's structure. In Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism ([1976] 1979a; [1976] 1979b), emancipatory consciousness is characterized as something that develops through the communicative action between actors, whereas purposive rational action such as labor accomplishes the accumulation of

technical knowledge.¹¹ In contrast, Honneth asserts that there is a moment of critical reflection and therefore the creation of moral practical knowledge within the act of labor itself. He brings up the example of industrial workers who cooperate among themselves to violate the rules of production at the workplace as a form of opposition, an attempt to reclaim the work process as their own autonomous activity ([1980] 1995:48). His point is that emancipatory consciousness can arise from within work itself, and this dynamic is not captured adequately by a framework that compartmentalizes the social world into normative/communicative and non-normative/non-communicative spheres:

The valid normative claim which thus comes to expression results from a moral vulnerability which grows not from the suppression of communicative modes of mutual understanding, but from the expropriation of the workers' own work activity. The moral knowledge which is constructed on the basis of such experiences is embodied in acts of work which claim their autonomy even in the organizational reality of externally determined forms of work. (ibid.:47)

This does not signal a return to the materialist paradigm by Honneth; rather, he is acknowledging the moral and intersubjective aspects of labor neglected by Habermas. While this argument has not been elucidated sufficiently, at an early stage Honneth was already beginning to craft a new way of thinking. As the following review of recognition theory will demonstrate, labor is constitutive of our personal identity, and so it is an inherently moral affair, which means it can serve as a basis for the critique of society. For Honneth, critique does not have to originate in the experience of distorted communication, in the failure to achieve rational consensus through speech; instead, it can originate in the

¹¹ "In the structures of symbolically mediated interaction, moral knowledge is constructed from the actors' intuitive communicative achievements, which in turn gradually bring to consciousness goals of mutual understanding which are basically contrary to those of accepted structures of social action." (Honneth [1980] 1995:46).

experience of disrespect or mistreatment, in the failure to achieve a complete identity.

Thus, Honneth starts his own theoretical shift within the paradigm of communication: he dispenses with the dualistic concept of society and adjusts the normative focus of critical theory from mutual understanding to mutual recognition.

3. The Theory of Recognition

In the following pages, I will outline the theory developed by Honneth in *The Struggle for Recognition* ([1992] 1995). This is a complicated book where Honneth discovers the idea of recognition (*Anerkennung*) contained in the philosophy of the early Hegel, finds in Mead a way to elucidate this idea in non-metaphysical terms, and proceeds to formalize a typology of forms of recognition required by the individual to achieve a complete identity. Here, I distil the basic theory concisely so that readers will not lose track of the main point in the subsequent exposition.

Recognition is the affirmation of the full personhood of an individual or social group by other members of society.¹² Honneth identifies love, rights, and solidarity (in the spheres of primary relationships, law, and community of value, respectively) as the forms of recognition that contribute to the formation of three practical relations-to-self: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Any individual must develop these three self-relations to have an identity and live an autonomous life. Corresponding to love, rights, and solidarity are three forms of social disrespect or misrecognition: physical

¹² Honneth defines recognition as “the affirmation of positive qualities of humans subjects or groups” ([2007] 2012:80). Recognition is a deliberate act of acknowledgement with actual social (institutional) substance, and it cannot merely be symbolic or a side-effect of a different action. Rather than the ascription model where one attributes positive qualities onto the subject, Honneth prefers to think in terms of the perception model where one is receptive to the subject’s already embodied qualities (ibid.:81-6).

violations such as abuse, rape, or torture resulting in the loss of trust in our own bodies and immediate environment; disregard for our status as morally responsible agents through social exclusion or denial of rights; and denigration of our ways of life such that our traits and achievements are disregarded. The experience of misrecognition can motivate individuals and groups to struggle for the recognition they believe they deserve. Such struggles can bring about moral progress in society to the extent that they expand the relations of recognition – i.e., make possible the inclusion and individualization of ever greater numbers of people in society. In this way, Honneth's theory explains social pathologies in terms of violations of (our normative expectation of) recognition, and explains social change in terms of normatively motivated struggles that strive to expand the recognition order of society.

This characterization does not do justice to the intricacy of Honneth's reasoning. The purpose of the next three sub-sections is to examine each step of the argument in depth. In my review, I will follow roughly the same order of topics as the book. The first task is to review Honneth's interpretation of Hegel and Mead. Next, we look at his systematized typology of recognition and practical relations-to-self. Finally, we consider the relationship between misrecognition and social development.

3.1 Moral Conflict and Identity

Honneth's goal is to construct an alternative to Habermas' critical theory while remaining in the paradigm of communication. His starting point is the notion of struggle, which he adopts from Foucault. Foucault's analysis of the microphysics of power is

founded upon the reduction of human behavior to strategic action among competing agents (Honneth [1985] 1991:153-58).¹³ This gives way, furthermore, to a focus on the institutions of domination and the disciplining of the body, and thus a reliance on (a variant of) systems theory “which supposes a supra-individual process of the constant perfection of techniques of power” ([1986] 1995:125). It is not surprising that Honneth does not accept Foucault’s social theory; but he does credit him for highlighting the idea of struggle as a basic feature of social life. The tendency of intellectuals to conceive struggle as an act of self-preservation is common across the history of thought, and it is exemplified in the most iconic way by Thomas Hobbes who described the human state of nature as a “war of every man against every man” ([1651] 1998:85). Unlike both Hobbes and Foucault, Honneth wants to understand struggle in moral and communicative terms; and it is in the philosophy of Hegel that he finds the clues to building such a theory.

3.1.1 Hegel

Across several works written in Jena before *The Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 2018), Hegel crafted a theory of ethical social life in refutation of atomistic theories that explained the socio-political order as an outcome of self-centered competition of actors.¹⁴

¹³ This characterization of Foucault may strike many as peculiar. It would certainly be misleading to call Foucault a rational choice theorist, although it is true that he does not attribute a normative component to action. Honneth’s interpretation is based on his reading of Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge* (1980), *Discipline and Punish* ([1975] 1995), and *The History of Sexuality* ([1976] 1990), among other writings. He divides Foucault’s career into two phases: the first was concerned with discourse and knowledge, and the second was concerned with the theory of power, systems of domination, and the effect on the body.

¹⁴ Honneth ([1992] 1995:183) mainly refers to three of Hegel’s works: “System of Ethical Life” ([1802/03] 1979), “First Philosophy of Spirit” ([1803/04] 1979), and the *Realphilosophie* or “Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit” ([1805/06] 1983). He also draws on Hegel’s *Natural Law* ([1802] 1975). While I have little familiarity with these texts, I will reproduce his formulations in *The Struggle for Recognition* as accurately as possible.

Hegel presupposes the fundamental primacy of intersubjectivity or sociality by claiming that humans always live and exist within a framework of ethical (recognitive) relations:

Instead of starting from a struggle of all against all, Hegel begins his philosophical account with elementary forms of interpersonal recognition, which he presents collectively under the heading “natural ethical life”. And it is not until these initial relations of recognition are injured by various kinds of struggle – grouped together as an intermediate stage of “crime” – that a state of social integration emerges that can be conceptualized formally as an organic relationship of pure ethical life. (Honneth [1992] 1995:18)

For Hegel, society is a normative order that has the potential to become an ethically integrated community of free citizens through a conflictual process: “... this struggle leads, as a moral medium, from an underdeveloped state of ethical life to a more mature level of ethical relations” (ibid.:17). Hegel’s three stages of self-formation progress from being recognized as (a) an individual with emotional and biological needs; (b) a legal person with formal autonomy and rights; and (c) an individuated subject with particular traits (ibid.:25). Before elaborating on each stage, let us consider the role of struggle in this schema.

When individuals experience incomplete recognition – which is bound to happen in a still imperfectly ethical society – they are motivated to engage in “crime” to assert that aspect of their selfhood which has been neglected. Legal rights universalize all individuals’ status as a “person” with legitimate claims to own and exchange property. However, because legal rights integrate individuals into society in a merely negative way, there are those who commit theft against another as a demand to have their subjectivity beyond legal personhood acknowledged; those who are robbed, in contrast, demand to have their rights to property respected. Hegel also describes the struggle for honor at the

level of the full personality, where the experience of insult brings on a metaphorical life-and-death struggle to restore the integrity of one's existence. These moments of tension turn into a learning process where we become more aware of our own identity and of our mutual dependence for the maintenance of it: "... by violating first the rights and then the honour of persons, the criminal makes the dependence of individuals on the community a matter of common knowledge. To this extent, the social conflicts that shattered natural ethical life prepare subjects to mutually recognize one another as persons who are dependent on each other and yet also completely individuated" (ibid.:24).

For Hegel, love is a relation of mutual recognition that affirms the natural individuality of the person, and it is the precondition for the individual's growth as a mature member of society. He discusses both the parent-child relationship and the intimate relationship between men and women as instances where each person is acknowledged as someone with needs and desires. Especially in romantic relations between adults, the experience of "knowing oneself in the other" enables us to regard each other with trust and mutuality. To this, Honneth adds that "only the feeling of having the particular nature of one's urges fundamentally recognized and affirmed can allow one to develop the degree of basic self-confidence that renders one capable of participating, with equal rights, in political will-formation" (ibid.:38). Love in the family sphere is not enough for the socialization of the individual, since one still has no experience of conflict situations that make one aware of the universal legal norms regulating social life outside the family. In Hegel's narrative the coexistence of multiple families necessarily gives rise to competition over property; in his later formulation,

those excluded from property will try to damage the property of others, while the victims respond with a life-and-death struggle to assert their legitimate claim to property.¹⁵ The moment of existential threat indicates to the subjects that they “have already recognized each other insofar as their fundamental rights are concerned and have thereby already implicitly created the social basis for an intersubjectively binding legal relationship” (ibid.:48). Again, struggle is not one of complete lawlessness, but one in which there exists a basic level of normative consensus and a pre-contractual framework of mutual recognition (ibid.:42-5).¹⁶

There is a step beyond the formation of legal personhood. In response to the committed crime, the community at large imposes negative sanctions on the individual and restores legal order. But, according to Hegel, legal solutions cannot heal the internal wound of the person who feels misrecognized; beyond a cognitive stance in law, recognition must also have an emotional component of empathy for the other: “respect for the ‘will’ of the individual person, as it is demanded by the criminal deed, can only be realized completely in a relationship of recognition that, unlike the one based on law, is supported by feelings of social concern” (ibid.:57). This kind of recognition can only be provided by a community of ethical life, which Hegel conceives in the form of an

¹⁵ In the earlier formulation in “System of Ethical Life” struggle at the level of legal rights occurred in the form of crime; in the later formulation in the *Realphilosophie* Hegel now includes the life-and-death struggle (Honneth [1992] 1995:20-2, 46-7). It is not clear to me why this is the case, and it seems Honneth also does not think Hegel has elucidated this process precisely enough, mentioning how it is not evident why the anticipation of death is supposed to lead to legal recognition (ibid.:48).

¹⁶ We can think of Honneth’s reconstruction of Hegel as his way of responding to the Hobbesian problem of order, just as Parsons ([1937] 1968) responded to it by interpreting the ideas of Durkheim, Weber, and others. What Parsons and Honneth have in common is the idea that social action is regulated by norms and values, making social order possible; what is unique to Honneth is the grounding of this normative quality of social life in Hegel’s concept of recognition – something not found in the thinkers Parsons relies on.

overarching State led by a charismatic monarch who has the power to unite individuals into a reconciled community (ibid.:58-61). This step in the argument, however, is not convincing for Honneth as it departs from the original intersubjective intent of the theory.

It should be stressed that Honneth does not think Hegel succeeds in building a coherent theory of recognition. Not only does he point out several times the ambiguities and lapses in Hegel's writings, Honneth is also critical of him on three main points. First, Hegel does not specify the kind of subjectivity that develops in the individual with each form of recognition (ibid.:26). Honneth will later stipulate the corresponding practical self-relations generated by recognition. Second, Hegel's designation of the state as the final shape of ethical life fails to construe it as a mutual relation among equals; instead, he has depicted a structure that stands over people: "This generates a relationship of asymmetrical dependence between the State and its members" (ibid.:59). Third, Hegel increasingly relies on a philosophy of consciousness in which everything is explained by the unfolding of Spirit; Honneth claims that as Hegel moves from the early "System of Ethical Life" to the later *Realphilosophie*, the intersubjective element starts to fade and the concept of Spirit gains priority. This way of thinking prevents Hegel from conceiving the state as the institution where individuals can recognize each other's particularity:

The reason why he is not in a position to do so is that he views the ethical sphere on the whole as a form of objectivation of Spirit's self-reflection, so that the place of intersubjective relations has to be taken throughout by relationships between a subject and its moments of externalization. Ethical life has become, in short, a form of monologically self-developing Spirit and no longer constitutes a particularly demanding form of intersubjectivity. (ibid.:61)

According to Honneth, Hegel continues to work within the philosophy of consciousness in his other works; for example, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 2018) discusses the struggle for recognition only in terms of the formation of self-consciousness or “singular intelligences” (Honneth [1992] 1995:62, 68).¹⁷ The intersubjective potential of Hegel’s early philosophy has not been fulfilled, and one must look elsewhere if the goal is to construct a viable theory of recognition out of Hegel’s original idea. Honneth turns to Mead, for whom the perception of the other is the key factor in the formation of the self. For Mead, the development of consciousness can take place only through interaction with other developing consciousnesses. Honneth believes Mead’s pragmatist way of thinking will be useful for translating Hegel’s ideas into a post-metaphysical social theory.

3.1.2 Mead

In *Mind, Self, and Society* ([1934] 1967) Mead builds a genuinely intersubjective theory of identity formation, and underscores how mutual recognition among interaction partners is indispensable for the cultivation of the self: “We cannot realize ourselves except in so far as we can recognize the other in his relationship to us. It is as he takes the attitude of the other that the individual is able to realize himself as a self” (ibid.:194). Honneth discerns three stages of self-formation in Mead’s account as well that begins with the child’s relationship to primary others, progresses to generalized social relations with members of society, and culminates in occupying a specific role in the division of

¹⁷ In a later essay, Honneth ([2010] 2012a) reconsiders the notion of recognition in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and softens his criticism by acknowledging the intersubjective insights contained in the book; however, for the most part Honneth still believes Hegel’s thinking is firmly shaped by the philosophy of consciousness.

labor. We examine how Mead uses the concepts of the I, Me, and generalized other to explain this process.

The human mind is capable of thinking symbolically (interpreting the meaning of things) and having an internal conversation of gestures in order to test alternative courses of action. The self develops through a dynamic process in which we become subject (I) and object (Me) to ourselves when we perceive the attitude of the other. The notion of Me is the sense of self we construct when we take on a second-person perspective. According to Honneth ([1992] 1995:76-8), as young children begin to formulate their sense of Me at the stage of “play” or the imitation of behavior of concrete others, they also internalize the normative expectations of behavior. This learning experience is restricted to the reactions of a small circle of people such as their parents. Then, as the children mature, they learn to take the perspective of multiple others simultaneously at the stage of “game” – they internalize the abstract rules of common activity and are able to understand the socially shared normative expectations of the larger group, or the generalized other. This step beyond play is essential for the growth of the individual: “only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs... does he develop a complete self” (Mead [1934] 1967:155). For Honneth, this second stage of self-formation is similar to Hegel’s account of legal recognition in that the individual becomes integrated into society as a person endowed with rights:

With the appropriation of the social norms regulating the cooperative nexus of the community, maturing individuals not only realize what obligations they have vis-à-vis members of society; they also become aware of the rights that are accorded to them in such a way that they can legitimately count on certain demands of theirs being respected. Rights are, as it were, the individual claims about which I can be sure that the generalized

other would meet them. ([1992] 1995:79)

Honneth brings up Mead's example of property in which he argues that one's right to property will be recognized and respected as long as one is a member of the community, i.e., one can take the attitude of others (ibid.:79-80; Mead [1934] 1967:199). While legal recognition helps engender a sense of self as a responsible member of the group, it does not affirm the unique differences and traits of each person. Honneth finds in Mead one last step in the process of individuation that involves the assertion of the I.

If the Me is the side of the self we are aware of during reflexive role-taking, then the I is the here-and-now creative side of the self that reacts to real interaction situations. The activation of the I makes the individual a unique personality within the group, and Mead thinks humans have an inherent need and desire to affirm their particularities: "We do belong to the community and our self-respect depends on our recognition of ourselves as such self-respecting individuals. But that is not enough for us, since we want to recognize ourselves in our differences from other persons" (ibid.:204-05). Everyone wants to be superior in some task or field over others, and for Mead this can be realized in a functional division of labor where each person fulfills a specific role and contributes something positive to society (ibid.:208; Honneth [1992] 1995:89). Honneth believes Mead has identified a third stage of self-formation through mutual recognition like Hegel in which "every individual can know himself or herself to be confirmed as a person who is distinct from all others in virtue of his or her particular traits and abilities" (ibid.:88) through their fulfilment of a social function. There are, however, some weaknesses to Mead's theory.

Honneth identifies two main flaws. The first has to do with a lack of distinction between the expansion of legal recognition versus the expansion of a different kind of recognition; the second has to do with Mead's failure to reflect on the ethical nature of the generalized other and to describe the final phase of self-formation as a relation of solidarity. For Mead, there is always the potential for conflict when the I is expressed over the generalized other: "His response to that organized attitude in turn changes it" ([1934] 1967:196). This can take the shape of a quest for freedom from rigid norms and conventions perceived by the self to be too narrow or obsolete (ibid.:199). Here, Honneth thinks Mead should have theorized the struggle for recognition more rigorously and distinguished clearly between conflict which expands the scope of legal recognition, and conflict which moves beyond the level of legal personhood to create or expand the opportunities for individuation, i.e., recognition of the unique self ([1992] 1995:84-7). In the former, social norms are progressively universalized beyond the context of the small group and slowly lose their unjustifiable qualities; in the latter, a wider array of traits become accepted as socially worthy of affirmation, making individualization based on ever more specific qualities possible. Honneth thinks Mead is correct to focus on work as an important basis of identity, but his notion of the functional division of labor is not sufficient for explaining the constitution of identity. Honneth argues that a formal notion of ethical life is needed:

For, in fact, it is the shared conception of the good life that determines the valuableness of individual tasks. In each case, not just the issue of how a job (defined in terms of the division of labour) is to be done "well" but even the issue of what counts as a socially useful piece of work turns, in each case, on the intersubjectively obligatory values, that is, ethical... convictions that give a society its individual character. (ibid.:89)

Therefore, it is only in a community of value or solidarity that we can regard each other in esteem and accept the particularities of every person (ibid.:91). Mead has built an intersubjective theory of identity formation based on the communicative interactions of actors without falling into the philosophy of consciousness. However, a revised version of Hegel's ethical life is useful for underscoring the normative basis of this process.

Honneth does not find in either author a satisfactory description of the inner subjectivity that develops upon experiencing recognition, nor of the negative experiences that motivate the struggle to expand the relations of recognition. The next step in his study involves the specification of these things.¹⁸

3.2 Practical Relation-to-Self

Love is the first relation of recognition for the human being. The sphere of love refers to those primary relationships based on intense emotional care such as friendship, the parent-child relationship, and the intimate relationship of romantic partners: "In the reciprocal experience of loving care, both subjects know themselves to be united in their neediness, in their dependence on each other" (ibid.:95). But beyond what Hegel has stated, is there a way to show the necessity of love for the cultivation of the self? From

¹⁸ While I cannot discuss this point at length, I do want to mention that, in an interesting way, Honneth and Habermas differ in the way they interpret the communicative insights of Mead. Habermas understands Mead to be specifying the stages of human interaction, which include gesture-mediated, symbolically mediated, normatively regulated, and finally, (propositionally differentiated) linguistically mediated interaction. For Habermas, language is the key to Mead's theory: "... language functions as a medium not only of reaching understanding and transmitting cultural knowledge, but of socialization and of social integration as well" ([1981] 1987:24). In contrast, for Honneth it is not language but recognition that is the central insight: prior to using language, humans are social-communicative creatures because we have the capacity to recognize others, i.e., we live in relations of recognition. One can argue that Honneth is making a case for the primacy of a pre-linguistic sociality that has been somewhat overlooked by Habermas, who was intent on using Mead to justify a linguistic model of social action.

psychoanalysis, Honneth draws on the object relations theory of Donald Winnicott ([1971] 2005; [1965] 2018) and Jessica Benjamin (1988). Their theories claim that it is the interactive experiences of the infant with the mother or caregiver that enables the child to begin forming a self (Honneth [1992] 1995:97-105).¹⁹ Winnicott describes the earliest phase of childhood, immediately after birth, to be a state of oneness or symbiosis between mother and child where the child's distinction between self and environment has not yet been made. Eventually, there begins the mother's de-adaptation from the child through brief absences from the child's vicinity; for the first time the child learns that there is a separate entity (parent) and an external world. This is followed by a period of aggression by the child toward the mother to ascertain if she is beyond her control; when this is confirmed, the child recognizes the mother as an independent entity, and develops a sense of self in relation to her. Honneth refers to Benjamin, for whom this process of detachment is a struggle for recognition:

For it is indeed only in the attempt to destroy his or her “mother” – that is, in the form of struggle – that the child realizes that he or she is dependent on the loving care of an independently existing person with claims of her own. But for the “mother”, in turn, this means that she too must first learn to accept the independence of the child if she wants to “survive” these destructive attacks in the context of her re-established sphere of activity. (ibid.:101-02)²⁰

It is crucial that the mother does not abandon the child during this rebellious phase. When a certain threshold of “good enough” parenting is fulfilled and the child can be sure that

¹⁹ Honneth consistently uses “mother” as a neutral term for the primary caregiver of the child; it does not have to denote the biological female mother of the child.

²⁰ While Honneth does not mention it, an important influence on Benjamin's thought – apart from Freud and Winnicott – is Nancy Chodorow ([1978] 1999).

her needs will be met despite the parent's autonomy, she gains enough confidence to be alone. Recognition in the form of love, therefore, generates basic self-confidence: the individual can trust her own body as a source of needs and "pursue them in an open, creative way, without fear of being abandoned" (ibid.:104). Love experienced in early childhood sets the stage for having friendship and intimate relationships as an adult, since the capacity gained during childhood to dissolve and re-establish personal boundaries enables one to have union with, and respect the independence of, the other. Honneth's conclusion is that the relation of loving care is necessarily prior to all other forms of recognition: "For it is only this symbiotically nourished bond, which emerges through mutually desired demarcation, that produces the degree of basic individual self-confidence indispensable for autonomous participation in public life" (ibid.:107).

In their examples of property relations, Hegel and Mead illustrated how adult members of society are supposedly equal by virtue of having a set of rights. Honneth believes Hegel correctly emphasized a moral component of legal recognition: legal subjects recognize each other's moral character as they collectively abide by the rationally justified rules of society (ibid.:107-08). While Honneth does not mention Max Weber ([1921-22] 1947) explicitly, he is likely thinking of the Weberian theory of rationalization when he talks about legal norms losing their particularistic elements as societies modernize. In traditional society, legal rights were ascribed only to some people according to their status; "with the transition to modernity, individual rights have become detached from concrete role expectations because they must, from that point on, be ascribed in principle to every human individual as a free being" (Honneth [1992]

1995:110). By doing away with special privileges, modern law affirms the moral equality of citizens: it assumes that every person is capable of rational moral reasoning and taking morally responsible action (ibid.:114). Therefore, legal rights in modern society give each person a sense of self-respect:

Since possessing rights means being able to raise socially accepted claims, they provide one with a legitimate way of making clear to oneself that one is respected by everyone else... For, with the optional activity of taking legal recourse to a right, the individual now has available a symbolic means of expression whose social effectiveness can demonstrate to him, each time anew, that he or she is universally recognized as a morally responsible person. (ibid.:120)

In contrast to self-confidence, where we have basic trust in our body and immediate environment, self-respect is a positive way of relating to our moral personality, which we have in common with everyone else.

Beyond relating positively to our moral character, we also have a need to relate to our traits and abilities that make each of us different; this is possible in what Honneth calls a value-horizon or community of value that defines the goals and ideals of society. This cultural self-understanding of society serves as the framework for intersubjectively evaluating those traits of individuals that contribute in some way toward the realization of these societal goals and values (ibid.:121-22). This form of recognition also underwent a historical transformation from a premodern, hierarchically organized value-horizon that bestowed honor to groups of people according to their status position, to a modern post-conventional value-horizon that grants social esteem to individuals based on their abilities: "... social esteem begins to be oriented not towards collective traits but towards

capacities developed by the individual in the course of his or her life.” (ibid.:125).²¹

Whereas ascription based on status can only give rise to a self-relation of collective honor or group pride, recognition of our traits and abilities generates self-esteem. In contrast to self-respect, which comes from being recognized for a universally common feature in us all, self-esteem comes from having that which is unique in each of us affirmed by others in relations of solidarity: “To the extent to which every member of a society is in a position to esteem himself or herself, one can speak of a state of societal solidarity” (ibid.:129). Solidarity is not a passive tolerance of the other but an active concern for their development; it involves each person feeling that they are regarded as a valuable member of society.

Honneth makes the strong claim that the attainment of all three practical relations-to-self is indispensable for self-realization:

Taken together, the three forms of recognition – love, rights, and esteem – constitute the social conditions under which human subjects can develop a positive attitude towards themselves. For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem – provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition – that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires. (ibid.:169)

It follows that the failure to attain these self-relations results in real suffering for the individual. To the extent that this is caused by an act of misrecognition by other members of society, it is a social injustice. We now consider how this is the case.

²¹ Stated in terms of Parsons’ ([1951] 1991:88-96) pattern variables, modernization has brought about a shift from ascription to achievement in the recognition order of society. Honneth’s essay “Post-traditional Communities” ([2000] 2007) also describes this movement toward equalization and individualization.

3.3 Misrecognition and Social Change

The denial of recognition in the form of social disrespect or misrecognition (I will use the latter term) is an injustice because it damages a person's self-understanding and identity, and restricts his or her freedom to participate in social life (ibid.:131). The notion of injustice in the theory of recognition reaches beyond issues of material distribution by focusing on the normative right to achieving full personhood in modern society. Honneth identifies three forms of misrecognition that correspond to love, rights, and solidarity. He reasons that since love generates confidence in one's body and immediate environment, the only kind of mistreatment that can damage this component of the self is physical abuse. In addition to inflicting pain and injury, such abuse can destroy the ability to coordinate one's body and thus a person's physical-psychological integrity: "... the suffering of torture or rape is always accompanied by a dramatic breakdown in one's trust in the reliability of the social world and hence by a collapse in one's own basic self-confidence" (ibid.:133). The counterpart to legal recognition is social exclusion and the denial of rights. Not only does such institutional ostracism prevent the individual from autonomous participation in social life, but it also precludes understanding oneself as a morally responsible member of society. Finally, the third type of misrecognition can be broadly labeled as insult or the denigration of ways of life. It had been stated that we are esteemed for our traits and abilities within the context of a value-horizon; when this horizon denigrates certain ways of life as inferior or deficient, "it robs the subjects in question of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own abilities" and thus the possibility of developing self-esteem (ibid.:134).

The experience of misrecognition almost always produces emotional reactions of shame, anger, or embarrassment, and Honneth attributes moral and cognitive validity to the victims' negative emotions. The reason why we feel disappointed when we are not esteemed, for example, is because our interaction partners have violated a socially embedded normative expectation. For Honneth, our feelings and experiences contain an element of truth, and they serve as the legitimate basis for demanding the recognition we believe we deserve: "It is only because human subjects are incapable of reacting in emotionally neutral ways to social injuries... that the normative patterns of mutual recognition found in the social lifeworld have any chance of being realized" (ibid.:138). Since relationships of love are restricted to primary others in the private sphere, misrecognition in this realm does not lead to collective action (ibid.:162); on the other hand, social exclusion and denigration can lead to resistance when subjects have a common interpretation of the situation and find ways to articulate their claims. The struggle of misrecognized groups can result in what Honneth calls an expansion of the relations of recognition. In the context of law, the definition of a morally responsible person gradually broadens; rights expand in their substantive content, and previously disadvantaged groups are included so that ever greater numbers of people are equally accorded the same set of rights (ibid.:118).²² According to Honneth, the community of value is always a contested social space where some groups are able to assert the value of

²² Drawing on T. H. Marshall's analysis of the expansion of civil, political, and social rights (Marshall and Bottomore 1987), Honneth interprets this development as the expansion of recognitive relations through struggle: "... historically, the establishment of each new class of basic rights is consistently compelled by arguments that referred implicitly to the demand for full-fledged membership in the political community" ([1992] 1995:116).

their ways of life over others. The task of the struggle of misrecognized groups, therefore, is to raise the social worth of their traits and abilities by highlighting the manners in which they have made positive contributions to society: "... relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life" (ibid.:127).²³ Relations of esteem approach symmetry, which does not mean everyone is esteemed to the same degree; rather, it means groups and individuals are progressively freed from systematic denigration and are able to pursue recognition in a cordial climate of cooperation and acceptance (ibid.:129-30).

The normative vision of society Honneth arrives at is that of a formal, post-traditional ethical life or recognition order. This is not a substantive vision of the good life, but one that specifies the intersubjective conditions for the self-realization of each person. A post-traditional ethical life would protect as much as possible the egalitarian relationships of love from violence and external coercion – which is made possible with the growth of rights (ibid.:176). Since legal rights gradually expand in their substance and reach, they develop in the general direction of universalization while also becoming more attuned to the particular situations of various groups of citizens (ibid.:177). And even though solidarity is necessarily shaped by historically contingent substantive values of a society, post-traditional ethical life increasingly makes room for diverse life goals and ways of life, such that mutual esteem is attainable for more and more people (ibid.:179).

²³ This view is broadly consistent with how Pierre Bourdieu understands the stratification and competitive hierarchy between different groups and forms of life ([1979] 1984; [1977] 1991). A key difference between Bourdieu and Honneth, however, is that for Honneth there is a normative basis to social life that cannot be reduced to or explained away by habitual dispositions and acquired capital within fields ([1984] 1995).

Therefore, there is a developmental logic of normative progress moving in the general direction of “a society in which the universalistic achievements of equality and individualism would be so embedded in patterns of interaction that all subjects would be recognized as both autonomous and individuated, equal and particular persons” (ibid.:175). Honneth does not rely on a philosophy of consciousness or a philosophy of history to elucidate this mechanism; social change and normative progress come about by the collective effort of communicating actors who engage in the moral struggle for recognition.

3.4 Discussion

In this section, I would like to reflect on the significance and implications of Honneth’s theory of recognition, especially in connection to other social theories and philosophies. By outlining a typology of recognition and practical self-relations, as well as a normative account of social conflict and change, Honneth has put together a unique critical theory. Other theorists have discussed recognition or similar issues, but few have theorized it in such a comprehensive way. For example, Georg Simmel understood how our identities are constituted by our specific traits, qualities, and even networks of association: “Individuality in being and action generally increases to the degree that the social circle encompassing the individual expands” ([1908] 1971:252, emphasis omitted). But he understood this simply to be a fact of modern life, and did not consider how the process of individualization entails the demand for recognition which is a normative

expectation inherent in the modern social world.²⁴ Charles Taylor claims that recognition is “a vital human need” ([1992] 1994:26), and even notes the importance of the intimate sphere; but his discussion revolves mostly around the issue of a politics of equal respect – i.e., the pursuit of “cultural” recognition by ethnic and minority groups. Habermas rebuts Taylor’s communitarian argument that individual rights and recognition of group cultures are in tension within a liberal system of law; Habermas argues that “the integrity of the individual legal person cannot be guaranteed without protecting the intersubjectively shared experiences and life contexts in which the person has been socialized and has formed his or her identity” ([1996] 1998:221). But both authors often discuss the matter by bracketing legal rights from (cultural) recognition, when in fact for Honneth the struggle for recognition can take place over forms of life as well as legal rights. There is no formal account of the different patterns of recognition and practical relations-to-self necessary for identity, or of the internal dependencies of each type of recognition (i.e., the primacy of love, followed by rights, etc.).

Honneth incorporates the insights of Marx into his theory by reinterpreting his notion of class conflict as a moral struggle for recognition. Honneth ([1992] 1995:146-51) claims there are two phases in Marx’s critique of capitalism: an early phase in which he had a normative concept of labor and understood the alienating experience of capitalist wage-labor as a distortion of workers’ identity, and a later phase which replaced this moral and intersubjective perspective with a strictly economic analysis of the capitalist

²⁴ Alternatively, one might speculate that Simmel’s reflections on the metropolis as an anomic place that generates the blasé outlook ([1903] 1971) express his concern about the lack of sufficient networks of intersubjective recognition in the modern city.

mode of production. In the “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” ([1844] 1978a), Marx argued that labor is an expression of human creativity, and since the act of labor is fragmented under capitalist organization, the working class is alienated from its own species-being. For Honneth this indicates that Marx considered labor to be essential for the formation of human identity, especially for attaining self-esteem. He observes how Marx moved away from this view and settled for a purely economic analysis in works like *Capital* ([1867] 1990) of workers’ anti-capitalist mobilization:

For Marx, class struggle now no longer represents a struggle for recognition (as Hegel interpreted it) but is conceptualized along the lines of the traditional model of a struggle for (economic) self-assertion. The theoretical position occupied by a moral conflict resulting from the destruction of conditions for mutual recognition is suddenly taken by structurally conditioned competition over interests. (Honneth [1992] 1995:149)

Instead of adopting a narrow utilitarian view on working class interests and struggle, Honneth believes it is more fruitful to subsume the earlier Marxian insights under the intersubjective framework of the theory of recognition. By taking away the workers’ autonomy in the production process, the capitalist organization of work prevents workers from experiencing their labor as something meaningful and from being fully evaluated for their abilities and performance – it thereby mutilates an aspect of their sense of self. Therefore, “capitalism can be criticized as a social relation of damaged recognition” ([1989] 1995b:14), and the struggle of the working class to take back control of the labor process is a “morally motivated conflict” to expand the relations of recognition ([1992] 1995:151).²⁵ In fact, Honneth (ibid.:150) claims that in historical writings such as the

²⁵ Honneth’s broader argument in this part of the book is that the ideas of Marx, Georges Sorel, and Jean-Paul Sartre can be reinterpreted with the theory of recognition. Sorel mostly focused on the struggle for

“Eighteenth Brumaire” ([1852] 1978), Marx describes the social conflicts taking place not in terms of the pursuit of material interest but in terms of the culture and everyday lived experiences of actors. By subsuming Marxian ideas under the theory of recognition, Honneth attempts to reinstate a critical emancipatory component to labor that was lost in Habermas, who reduced it to a form of instrumental action. A major implication of this theoretical move is that capitalism is now understood to be a specific socio-historical “recognition order” which can be critiqued immanently. Chapter 3 will focus on this part of Honneth’s project.

Finally, Honneth’s depiction of society’s moral progress moving in the general direction of greater inclusion and individualization intersects in an interesting way with Durkheim’s claim that moral individualism is “the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity” of society ([1898] 1973:50). Honneth and Durkheim are alike in their criticism of utilitarian egoism, and in their view that individualization is an inevitable and necessary aspect of modernization. Durkheim considers individualism to be moral because our humanity is the only thing left in common in the modern era, with everyone occupying a specific role in a differentiated society; and with the decline of traditional religion, there is little else that can unite people morally. From Honneth’s perspective, Durkheim is referring to the moral character common to all persons that is affirmed in legal recognition. Furthermore, the two of them agree that individuals are also

rights by the oppressed classes, whereas Sartre discussed the asymmetrical relationships between natives and colonizers. Honneth’s point is that these thinkers often conflated distinct claims to recognition and did not operate with a sufficiently differentiated model. Structures of domination and the emancipatory struggle of actors can be better analyzed, he argues, from the more comprehensive perspective of the (reconstructed) Hegelian theory of recognition.

affirmed for their traits and abilities within the social division of labor. Durkheim argued that the division of labor is moral because it generates solidarity. Although he regarded organic solidarity to be distinct from the mechanical solidarity generated by the collective consciousness ([1893] 2014), he does say that a common value-horizon is needed for the cohesion of society: “Now, the only thing necessary for a society to be coherent is that its members have their eyes fixed on the same goal, concur in the same faith” ([1898] 1973:48). The notion of moral individualism comes from Durkheim’s interpretation of Rousseau and Immanuel Kant (ibid.:45-8), and he apparently did not engage with Hegel’s ideas. One might argue that had Durkheim done so, he could have comprehended moral individualism as something that involves more than just faith in “the human person” (ibid.48). Interestingly, however, Honneth sees a high degree of compatibility between Durkheim and Hegel’s vision of ethical life, and he will draw increasingly on Durkheim’s theory of moral solidarity to critique capitalist society.

4. Theory of Social Freedom

Honneth’s second major project concerns the specification of the social conditions of individual self-realization in the form of a theory of freedom, which he obtains from a reading of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* ([1820] 1991). To some observers, this new research program may have the appearance of a sudden break from his work on mutual recognition – and there is plenty of room for debate as to whether this is the case. But one can also argue that there is continuity in Honneth’s thought: apart from the obvious fact that Hegel continues to be the main source of theoretical inspiration for Honneth, the two

projects of recognition and social freedom are alike in their defense of the notion of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). In the former, ethical life indicated a post-traditional society which embodies symmetrical relations of recognition where individuals can experience love, rights, and solidarity, and thereby attain a personal identity. In the latter, ethical life refers to a society comprising three relational institutions that embody the ideal of social freedom: it is a democratic way of life exemplified by reciprocal cooperation in the realms of personal relationships, the market economy, and the political public sphere (Honneth [2011] 2014). Furthermore, the two concepts are connected as Honneth defines freedom in terms of recognition – we can live together in social freedom only through relations of mutual recognition; (genuine) freedom without recognition is not possible. When describing the content of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, he claims that the book “can be understood as a draft of a normative theory of those spheres of reciprocal recognition that must be preserved intact because they constitute the moral identity of modern societies” (Honneth [2001] 2010:5). In this sense, Honneth’s work on social freedom is not at all a shift away from his earlier work on recognition. My task will be to show the conceptual link between his two projects; however, I will also demonstrate that there are noticeable changes in his theoretical perspective.

In what follows, I outline the theory of social freedom. I begin with Honneth’s claim that freedom is the most fundamental normative principle of modernity, and that a theory of justice must be elucidated by reconstructing this ideal from society’s historical experience of modernity. I then examine Honneth’s interpretation of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and clarify the difference between negative, reflexive, and social freedom. Next,

I review the three central or relational institutions of society which Honneth derives from Hegel. Personal relationships, the market economy, and the political public sphere are the three institutions which embody the ideal of social freedom according to Honneth. His idea of democratic ethical life is a normative vision of society in which social freedom has been fully realized in each of these central institutions; in a democratic ethical life, each individual is able to live autonomously in a network of cooperation and reciprocal roles. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the inner tensions between Honneth's theories of recognition and social freedom.

4.1 The Primacy of Freedom

In his book *Freedom's Right* ([2011] 2014), Honneth begins with the assertion that much of contemporary philosophy has become too fixated on expounding abstract normative principles of justice without engaging in social analysis. Such philosophers take an external approach to social critique and formulate their principles of justice by following the method of normative construction: they first construct, through abstract reasoning, their vision of the ideal or perfect society, which they then apply to existing reality in order to identify how it deviates from this ideal. There are merits and demerits to this approach, which I will consider later. Honneth claims that Hegel in contrast builds a theory of justice through social analysis by reconstructing the "rational institutions, i.e. the institutions that guarantee freedom, on the basis of prevailing social relations" (ibid.:1). The logic underlying this approach is the idea that universal ideals and values are embodied in the practices and institutions of existing society, and these principles can

be used to elucidate a theory of justice. Instead of taking an external perspective, Hegel adopts an immanent perspective and applies the method of normative reconstruction.²⁶ The Hegelian theory of justice, in other words, does not measure reality according to an externally imposed ideal, but according to its own rational potential.

Honneth declares that the normative foundation of any theory of justice is the idea of freedom, or individual autonomy; furthermore, he claims that no other value has had a greater impact on the institutional order of modern society than freedom (ibid.:15-8). In fact, all other values are subsumable under the concept of freedom:

... I do not address the notion of “equality”, as influential and consequential as it might be, as an independent value because it can only be understood as an elucidation of the value of individual freedom, as the notion that all members of modern societies are equally entitled to freedom. Everything that can be said about the demand for social equality only makes sense in relation to individual freedom. (ibid.:337 n. 1)

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is nearly impossible to articulate one of these other values of modernity without immediately grasping them as facets of the constitutive idea of individual autonomy. Whether it is a matter of invoking a natural order, idealizing an inner voice, upholding the value of community or authenticity, these are all but mere additional elements of what we mean by individual self-determination. (ibid.:15)

The concepts of justice and freedom are inseparable because humans in the modern era have the cognitive capacity to evaluate social orders, question their moral legitimacy, and demand rational justification. The very act of reflecting on the justness of a social order is a “practical-normative activity” that takes place as part of our quest “to (co-)determine the normative rules of social life” – i.e., to engage in rational self-determination (ibid.:17). A just society is one which enables each person to attain autonomy; this means that any

²⁶ I spell out Honneth’s premises of normative reconstruction in the next chapter.

notion of justice that cannot be elucidated in terms of freedom does not make normative or cognitive sense. According to Honneth, there are three models of freedom that have risen to prominence in modernity and exerted a real impact on the processes of social life. He considers it his task to examine each model and find the suitable concept of freedom for outlining a theory of justice.

4.2 Three Models of Freedom

Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is not, as the title might suggest, merely a study on law or the state; the term "Right" (*Rechts*) refers to the objective institutional conditions that are thought to be necessary for the realization of the free will (Honneth [2001] 2010:16-7). It is a reflection on the whole structure of society, even though the state institution occupies the most important place in the analysis. The book comprises three large sections under the headings of Abstract Right, Morality, and Ethical Life; each section addresses a different aspect of freedom in order to show how the first two individualistic conceptions are necessary but insufficient by themselves to realize autonomy (ibid.:20-1). Furthermore, Hegel's claim is that if either of these incomplete models of freedom are mistakenly understood to be the definitive ideal by members of society, this will result in a social pathology where individuals experience a state of emptiness or lack of fulfillment, or what Honneth calls "suffering from indeterminacy" (ibid.:23). While it is Hegel's intention to argue for an intersubjective model of freedom through an account of ethical life, his goal is not to discredit the other two models, but rather to demonstrate that they also have a legitimate place in the social order.

At the center of Hegel's understanding of freedom is intersubjectivity, reciprocity, or mutual dependence between people. In the section on Abstract Right, he describes how the individual has subjective rights as a legal person to pursue goals and satisfy needs so long as all persons respect the right of others to do the same within reasonable bounds. Each person is entitled to own property and to form contracts with another to exchange goods or services ([1820] 1991: §§41-81). The freedom embodied here is a legal kind where one has access to multiple courses of action with minimal restrictions. Subjects can be involved with each other through contractual exchange, but there is little reciprocity between them: "... abstract right leaves open exactly that amount of individual freedom that is necessary for the strategic interaction between independent persons; the freedom of the other here appears only as the means of satisfying one's own interest in keeping open as many options as possible" (Honneth [2001] 2010:34). In the section on Morality, Hegel shows that an essential component of freedom is the act of reflecting on our desires, goals, and intended courses of action; individual autonomy requires engaging in (internal) moral deliberations and providing rational justifications for our behavior ([1820] 1991: §§115-28). In contrast to the legal kind of freedom of the previous stage, this is a moral freedom to live according to one's self-chosen maxim or principles. Such moral freedom, however, is also an individualistic idea that lacks the element of reciprocity, as it does not properly recognize that knowing what is morally right depends on institutional contexts we share with others (Honneth [2001] 2010:39). Abstract Right and Morality present views of freedom where the subject is atomistically free with respect to the external world and internal inclinations, respectively. For Hegel, however, we are also capable of

being intersubjectively free in our relatedness to each other and through self-restraint.

This is exemplified in relations of love and friendship:

Here, we are not one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves. In this determinacy, the human being should not feel determined; on the contrary, he attains his self-awareness only by regarding the other as other. Thus, freedom lies neither in indeterminacy nor in determinacy, but is both at once. The will which limits itself exclusively to a *this* is the will of the stubborn person who considers himself unfree unless he has *this* will. But the will is not tied to something limited; on the contrary, it must proceed further, for the nature of the will is not this one-sidedness and restriction. Freedom is to will something determinate, yet to be with oneself... in this determinacy and to return once more to the universal. ([1820] 1991: §7 Addition, original emphasis)

In this relation, the individual experiences what is called *being with oneself in another*.

Hegel stresses that real freedom is achieved in communicative relations with others, rather than in the self-obsessed pursuit of specific courses of action by the legal or moral subject. To be sure, the precondition of freedom is that the individual is already a bearer of rights and has a moral conscience; but it is through participation in the institutional fabric of society that the subject realizes herself: “We are really free only where we are able to shape our inclinations and needs in such a way that they are directed toward the universal in social interactions, which in turn can be experienced as an expression of unlimited subjectivity” (Honneth [2001] 2010:25-6). Since the freedom of individuals depends on communicative interaction with others, the justness of modern societies from a Hegelian perspective is determined by the extent to which they provide citizens equal access to the relational institutions where interaction is epitomized by mutual recognition (ibid.:15, 26). In *Freedom’s Right* ([2011] 2014), Honneth reconstructs the three models discussed by Hegel: negative (legal), reflexive (moral), and social (communicative or

objective) freedom. We will now look at his characterization of each model, and more importantly, examine his account of the inadequacy of negative and reflexive freedom; he will ultimately defend the concept of social freedom which avoids the pathologies linked to these other models.

Honneth traces one of the earliest elucidations of the modern idea of negative freedom to Hobbes, who defined freedom as the realization of one's aims in unimpeded fashion – i.e., with as few obstacles or restrictions as possible ([2011] 2014:21-2). As Honneth notes, this idea of freedom has had a lasting impact on modern thought, evidenced by all the restatements it has received from philosophers like John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Robert Nozick (ibid.:23). For Hobbes, what is important is the realization of the individual's goals or aims, whatever they may happen to be; as long as it is something the human subject desires, the person is justified in pursuing it strategically. Threats to freedom, therefore, are external ones that limit the individual's set of options, and a just social order would protect the personal space for making decisions and pursuing them (ibid.:27). A major flaw of negative freedom is the lack of consideration as to whether the actors' aims and desires themselves are free (Honneth [2001] 2010:37; [2011] 2014:28). For example, an alcoholic may be negatively free in choosing to drink, but from a rational standpoint it is obvious that he is a slave to his own impulse and is thus unfree. The actor's volitions may be heteronomous, and so this means freedom requires the component of rational self-determination. Furthermore, theorists of negative freedom usually invoke the idea of the social contract to depict the placing of limits on harmful selfish behavior in the interest of establishing social order

under a sovereign power (Hobbes [1651] 1998:91, 114-15). As Honneth points out, however, this reveals how negative freedom is in fact dependent on the collective self-imposition of moral restrictions on action, which contradicts its own position regarding such constraints ([2011] 2014:26). In other words, negative freedom cannot explain its very possibility in its own (legal) terms.

Although the idea of reflexive or moral freedom has existed since the ancient era, its modern statement is found in Rousseau ([1762] 2011), who argued that humans are free not by following their desires compulsively but by carrying out a decision that has been reached by their will (Honneth [2011] 2014:30-1). While he did not clarify the exact nature of the human will, two subsequent philosophers extended his idea in different directions: Kant pursued the notion of autonomy, whereas Johann Gottfried Herder reflected on authenticity (ibid.:31-4). For Kant, “humans are free precisely because they can obey the moral laws they have imposed upon themselves” (ibid.:32-3). These laws, or the categorical imperative (Kant [1785] 2012), must be rational (based on correct insights) and generalizable to all moral beings (universally valid). The acts of resisting impulses and foreign influences, formulating intentions and justifications, and never treating oneself or others as means to an end, are what make us autonomous according to Kant. In contrast, Herder and the Romanticists were concerned with freedom as the authentic expression of personality: one is authentically free when one has reached (through language) a genuine understanding of one’s inner self and is thereby able to carry out the truest intentions. Since Kant’s vision is much more important for Honneth, the rest of the discussion will revolve around the former’s account of autonomy and self-

determination. The shortcoming of reflexive freedom is its “context-blindness” (Honneth [2001] 2010:39) to the institutional and social environment which provide human agents the normative guidelines for rationally deriving what is morally right:

... the Kantian procedure of examining one’s maxims can take place only when certain rules of social life have already been accepted. Whenever we apply the categorical imperative, at some point we will run up against the constitutive norms of our form of society, which we cannot grasp as being authorized by ourselves, because we must in the first place accept them as institutional facts... When it comes to our moral judgments and actions, we are instead constantly compelled to antecedently recognize institutional facts that appear to us in the shape of socially foundational norms for our respective form of coexistence and are thus absolutely valid for each individual. (Honneth [2011] 2014:111)²⁷

Because reflexive freedom is so focused on the procedure of moral deliberation, it does not consider whether it is at all possible to carry out the moral act in the external world. In this sense, Kantian moral philosophy fails to conceive reality itself as something that is free. Hegel had problematized this abstraction in Kant’s thought: “However essential it may be to emphasize the pure and unconditional self-determination of the will as the root of duty... to cling on to a merely moral point of view without making the transition to the concept of ethics reduces this gain to an *empty formalism*, and moral science to an empty rhetoric of *duty for duty’s sake*” ([1820] 1991: §135 Note, original emphasis). Since the

²⁷ Interestingly, Honneth considers the discourse ethics of Habermas ([1983] 1990) and Karl-Otto Apel to be an intersubjectivist improvement to Kant’s procedure. In discourse ethics, the normative presuppositions of speech are integral to the process of self-determination; the normative guidelines are no longer external to the reflexive act. Freedom is now “social” to the extent that the moral subject attains autonomy by participating in a communication community rooted in the lifeworld. Even here, however, the theorists do not conceive the notion of (real) social institutions in a sufficiently substantive way: “In discourse theory, ‘discourse’ is understood either as a transcendental event or as a meta-institution, but never as a particular institution in the multiplicity of its social appearances. There is a lack of commitment to provide the historical concretion needed to gain an insight into the institutional foundations of freedom. Hence, the approach undertaken by Apel and Habermas could not cross the threshold to a social concept of freedom” (Honneth [2011] 2014:43).

individual cannot be free in an unfree world, Hegel's call for a philosophy of right is his way of arguing that reality itself must be shown to be the outgrowth or expression of freedom (Spirit).²⁸

The only model that characterizes the institutional basis of rational freedom adequately for Hegel is objective freedom, which Honneth renames as social freedom, following Frederick Neuhouser (2000; 2008). Social freedom expresses the idea that "individuals can only experience and realize freedom if they participate in social institutions characterized by practices of mutual recognition" (Honneth [2011] 2014:49). What does this statement mean? As Hobbes' depiction of the state of nature shows, a world in which everyone behaved in a negatively free manner by constructing arbitrary goals at every instance would be chaotic. Thus, Hegel saw the need for the coordination of people's aims toward the universal. This is accomplished through institutions which socialize actors with the relevant normative expectations, symbols, and practices, such that they learn their role-obligations and learn to formulate aims that are complementary to those of others (ibid.:48-9, 53).²⁹ It has also been made abundantly clear that Kant's method of solitary reflection cannot guarantee the feasibility of the moral course of action in the external world; this is why Hegel was convinced individual freedom must come about by taking the presence of the other into account. In any social setting, I encounter

²⁸ Honneth's predecessors at the Frankfurt School also share this view about the limits of Kant's moral thought: "... his transcendental philosophy aroused the belief that the realization of reason through factual transformation was unnecessary, since individuals could become rational and free within the established order... Reason and freedom become tasks that the individual is to fulfill within himself, and he can do so regardless of external conditions" (Marcuse [1937] 2009:101). I will discuss the implications of this view for the method of critique in the next chapter.

²⁹ For Hegel ([1820] 1991: §§145-55), the ethical order has an educative or cultivating effect on individuals so that (personal) intentions and (social) duties broadly coincide.

an other who has intentions of her own, whose aims complement mine, and upon whose cooperation I am dependent to realize my own goals. In other words, individual freedom is made possible by relations of mutual recognition:

Subjects must have learned both to articulate their own aims to the other and to understand the other's articulations in order to recognize each other in their dependency on each other... "To be oneself in the other" thus necessarily entails a relation to social institutions, for only established and routine practices can guarantee that subjects will recognize each other as the other of their self. And only this form of recognition can enable individuals to implement and realize their reflexively determined aims at all. (ibid.:45)

Honneth uses a key passage from Marx ([1844] 1994) to illustrate the reciprocal nature of our existence. Marx is completely aware that as humans, we all have needs which we cannot satisfy on our own; we are reliant on the contributions (products, fruits of labor) of others to survive. In this basic way, you and I complete each other, and ultimately, every individual's full self-realization depends on the cooperative practice of production. Marx identified four outcomes of such a human manner of production: unlike in alienated labor, (1) I would have the pleasure of expressing my unique personality in my activity and finished product; (2) I would have a sense of fulfillment in my object meeting your needs; (3) "I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species and thus been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own essence and a necessary part of yourself and have thus realized that I am confirmed both in your thought and in your love"; and (4) in expressing my own life and in enriching yours I would have "realized my own essence, my human, my communal essence" (Marx, in Honneth [1992] 1995:196 n. 4; cf. Marx [1844] 1994:52-3). Honneth sees in Hegel's and Marx's ideal of freedom a strong intersubjective component of mutual sympathy: my self-realization

depends upon your self-realization; I cannot be free without you, at your expense.³⁰

If social freedom is the superior model conceptually and normatively, is there a place for negative and reflexive freedom in society? Honneth believes there is. Both types of freedom allow people to withdraw temporarily from their social obligations and relationships; they grant people the personal space to reflect on their preferences or commitments without always being consumed in their social environment. (A) In the case of negative or legal freedom, Honneth explains that the modern state endows all individuals with subjective rights, giving them the chance to exercise private autonomy: protected from outside interference, subjects can “examine their life aims in total privacy” ([2011] 2014:81). Yet legal freedom presupposes a framework of recognition in which we recognize each other’s valid claims to private pursuits. And even this private moment is tacitly dependent on an ethical (non-legal) deliberation which legal freedom cannot make possible on its own: we must take others into account as soon as we begin to reflect on what it is that we want in life. Hence, Honneth states that legal or negative freedom can never lead to self-realization (ibid.:85). (B) Reflexive or moral freedom ensures the possibility of exercising moral autonomy, where individuals can step back and reconsider whether they agree with the existing social practices before participating in them. Modern culture secures for people the “informally permitted space for obeying only those moral

³⁰ The requirement of social freedom is much more demanding than the scenario of interdependence described by Adam Smith, who thought social integration comes about when individuals pursue their self-interest or what he calls self-love ([1776] 1998:22). Contrary to popular belief, Smith was not an advocate of totally unregulated market activities; he theorized the necessity of some amount of mutual sympathy ([1759] 2009:13-21) for harmonious co-existence. However, it is undeniable that Smith believed social order was basically possible when everyone acted in a utilitarian way: his iconic “butcher, brewer, baker” line states that if everyone pursued what they thought was best for themselves, each of them would succeed and survive – that it is futile to expect the benevolence of others. In Chapter 4, we will see that Honneth reconsiders the value of Smith’s reflections on mutual recognition.

norms to which they can rationally consent” (ibid.:104). This option also relies on the fact of recognition, as such moral reflection is not conceivable without each person having cultivated the self-relation of moral responsibility (ibid.:105-7). Reflexive freedom is insufficient because it is fictitious to pretend that we can self-legislate the normative rules in our lives at all times; we will inevitably run up against rules we have not authorized, which we still must accept as given institutional facts in order to keep living (ibid.:111-12). However, Honneth thinks moral freedom is more valuable than legal freedom since the act of questioning the justifiability of practices can “exercise influence on the public interpretation of moral norms” (ibid.:113). It contains, in other words, a transformative potential. But on its own, moral reflexivity is a form of postponement, and so it cannot bring about self-realization or individual freedom substantively.

Given these limitations, it would be problematic if members of society confuse negative or reflexive freedom to be the definitive ideal: acting based on these principles beyond their valid contexts would bring about social pathologies because such mistaken understandings of the self in the world violate “the rational structure underlying our social practices.” Individuals would fail to realize themselves and would be afflicted by a state of “unfulfillment and indeterminacy” (Honneth [2001] 2010:30, 45). Negative freedom becomes pathological when people misinterpret the purpose of the freedom secured by the law, such that (a) they adopt a juridical point of view to all of their affairs and regard others only as bearers of rights – and thereby lose sight of the option of communicative arbitration, or (b) they put off their role-obligations constantly to the point of refraining from committing to specific life aims and living in a permanent state

of indecision: “Instead of viewing this space as a chance to temporarily free ourselves from all communicative demands of justification and to focus solely on succeeding in our aims, this interruption of communication is misunderstood as the adequate method for coordinating all further interaction with others” (Honneth ([2011] 2014:88). As a result, the human subject is reduced to a legal personality with little capacity to participate in social practices meaningfully. Reflexive freedom becomes pathological when people mistakenly believe they can or must shape the external world according to their moral vision and forget that their moral outlook is already shaped by society itself. This leads to a rigid moralism, where subjects do not hesitate to abandon any obligations they perceive to be at odds with their own values. The most extreme case would be a kind of moral terrorism in which such confidence in one’s moral superiority leads to radical doubt of the existing order’s legitimacy – along with the conviction that one is justified in using any means to right the (perceived) wrong. Either way, the consequence is very clear: institutions and relationships cease to have any weight or meaning (ibid.:113-20).

4.3 Relational Institutions

Modern society contains the institutional spheres of action within and through which we can experience social freedom. These institutions are imperfectly realized, but they embody the ideal and practices of mutual recognition and reciprocal cooperation. This means social freedom is an actually existing potential, which is what Hegel and Honneth mean when they say freedom is a reality. Drawing on Parsons to complement Hegel, Honneth calls these ethical spheres of action the *relational institutions* of society:

These systems of action must be termed “relational” because the activities of individual members within them complement each other; they can be regarded as “ethical” because they involve a form of obligation that does not have the contrariness of a mere “ought”, without, however, lacking moral considerateness. The behavioural expectations that subjects have of each other within such “relational” institutions are institutionalized in the shape of social roles that normally ensure the smooth interlocking of their respective activities. (ibid.:125)³¹

It must be shown that relational institutions have in fact come into existence over the course of society’s modernization; Honneth’s approach to doing this is called normative reconstruction. In the next chapter, I will explain what normative reconstruction entails for social critique. Here, it refers to the historical survey of institutional change and development “in order to uncover the spheres of action that guarantee freedom” (ibid.:127). The task is to decipher and identify those institutions that have come to possess the norms and practices of mutual recognition, such that they play an essential part in enabling individual self-realization.

This is why much of *Freedom’s Right* is an historical analysis of institutions in Western civilization. And Honneth confirms the existence of three relational institutions – personal relationships, market economy, and public sphere – broadly in line with what Hegel had elucidated. The reciprocal roles in these spheres of action have not been imposed onto people, but rather are “acceptable reflexively” and “viewed as consciously desirable” (ibid.:126); they are, in this sense, morally legitimate. Personal relationships allow each human to become an individuated person through the satisfaction of bodily

³¹ Parsons made a distinction between relational, regulative, and cultural institutions. Unlike the latter two which define the legitimate limits of interest pursuits and the obligatory culture patterns for acceptance, relational institutions define the reciprocal role-expectations, which is why he thought they were especially important: “The social system is... essentially a network of interactive relationships. The most central institutions therefore are those directly constitutive of the patterning of these relationships themselves through the definition of the statuses and roles of the parties to the interactive process” ([1951] 1991:51).

and emotional needs; the market economy allows participants to pursue material interests and partake in meaningful work and thus be esteemed for their accomplishments; the public sphere allows each citizen to communicate with each other as equals and become co-authors of the law. Together, cumulatively, these relational institutions comprise democratic ethical life: a society that actualizes egalitarian relationships, a just division of labor, and vibrant civic engagement – a society within which all individuals can flourish and live cooperatively together in freedom. Of course, this is an ideal that has yet to be realized due to pathologies and/or misdevelopments; but it is a real potential, and so Honneth concurs with Habermas ([1985] 1987) that modernity is an unfinished project.

In what follows, I explain how each relational institution contributes to social freedom. I limit the historical descriptions to a minimum, and I reserve the discussion of misdevelopments for the third chapter.

4.3.1 Personal Relationships

Honneth says that social roles in relational institutions can be broadly classified as either contractual or non-contractual (*ibid.*:131). The market economy's role obligations are generally contractual, whereas roles in personal relationships and the public sphere are non-contractual. Honneth illustrates the non-contractual nature of friendship, intimate relationships, and families. He begins with friendship – which was overlooked by Hegel, who had reduced the first sphere of ethical life to the bourgeois nuclear family (Honneth [2001] 2010:67-70). In the Middle Ages of Europe, voluntary friendship did not yet exist. Relations between upper class men were mostly ceremonial and had the character of

strategic alliances; those of lower class men took place in towns and the workplace, but they never had a voluntary quality. In the 18th century, we see evidence of a new kind of social bond beyond the realm of family where individuals engaged with each other based on mutual affection. But friendships were restricted to educated men who still could not express their private sentiments completely freely. It would take another century and a half for this new relation to spread among the general population. By the 20th century, friendship had taken root in all Western societies; it was now culturally acceptable for men and women of all classes to enjoy such private relations, with few barriers to communication (Honneth [2011] 2014:134-38). Friendship embodies social freedom because we can articulate our thoughts and feelings honestly in relations of mutual trust. The moral stance we adopt with each other allows us to explore our inner subjectivity, and thus to be with oneself in the other. Interacting with a friend places limits on what I do individually, but it is precisely in this relation that I can develop my sense of self, which is why friendship is an enabling experience for each person; it realizes an intersubjective kind of freedom which is otherwise not possible (ibid.:139-40).

Intimate relationships based on romantic feelings and sexual desire between two partners did not emerge until the late 18th century. At first, these relations were still regulated by parental calculations of marriage and restricted to heterosexual partners, while women did not have the same degree of autonomy as men. Over time, this institution had differentiated from marriage to such an extent that, by the 20th century – especially after the sexual revolution – it became its own independent sphere. Today, intimate relationships can be entered into by any consenting adults irrespective of their

sexual orientation or their intent to get married. The expansion of women's autonomy and inclusion of sexual minorities are evidence for Honneth of a general democratizing and equalizing trend in this sphere (ibid.:141-45; cf. Luhmann [1982] 1998). Unlike in friendship, partners in this relation pursue physical intimacy: they not only reciprocate trust but also desire and love. In entrusting their bodies and desires to each other, intimate partners can meet their needs for physical satisfaction and emotional connectedness: "In the intimacy of love, being with ourselves in the other therefore means recovering the natural neediness of our own self in physical interaction, without fear of being humiliated or hurt" (Honneth [2011] 2014:151). If at any point this radical trust between partners is violated, one can always exit the failed relationship.

According to Hegel, the nuclear family is an ethical institution that supersedes traditional family and marriage practices. In modern marriage two separate adults form a consensual union, produce and raise offspring, and exist as a household unit independent of blood relatives. The modern family is the legitimate context for the spouses to pursue long-term intimacy while fulfilling their social obligation to raise and educate the next generation of society's members.³² Honneth traces the evolution of marriage practices and the family, and notes that in the Middle Ages and the early modern period marriage was conducted primarily for economic or political purposes. Children were raised to take

³² Hegel wants to argue that this union is neither reducible to the legal contract nor the result of natural sexual drives or romantic emotions ([1820] 1991: §161 Addition). The legal contract view does not grasp the most central fact that marriage and the family are not possible without love: "The family... has as its determination the spirit's feeling... of its own unity, which is love" (ibid.: §158, emphasis omitted). But marriage cannot be the outcome of an irrational passion or a fleeting emotion either: "It is an ethical act done in freedom" ([1820] 2005: §168). Marriage is a long-term, stable institution that persists even after the dissipation of erotic interest between spouses. Its central ideal is the cultivation of the autonomy of every member in the family (Jaeggi [2014] 2018:147). These reflections by Hegel constitute his "justification of the bourgeois family as an institution of ethical life that actualizes freedom" (ibid.).

up household labor or, in the case of the upper class, ceremonial positions – hence, “childhood” (as we know it) did not exist, and a strong emotional connection between parents and children was not part of the family dynamic (ibid.:155). By the end of the 18th century, the nuclear family of the kind Hegel talks about comes into existence; however, it was a patriarchal institution structured by gendered role-expectations: the mother commits to domestic and emotional labor, the father earns income and social prestige in the outside world, while the child receives affection and matures within this secure unit. Such a functional division of labor may have allowed each family member to realize some degree of freedom, and this organization of the household did persist for another century and a half (ibid.:156). During the 20th and 21st centuries, the gendered role-obligations within the family were progressively dismantled. As more and more women pursue careers of their own, mothers are no longer expected to carry the burden of child-rearing single-handedly; raising children is now seen as a common task of both parents (ibid.:159-61). The practice of child-rearing has also changed from a model centered on parents giving orders and demanding obedience to a model centered on having inclusive negotiations with the child. There is more emphasis today on cultivating the child’s independence by giving her the chance to articulate her thoughts and desires (ibid.:158).

The general trends of the equalization of parental roles and the elevation of children’s status as autonomous persons are evidence for Honneth that the family is indeed a sphere of social freedom: “... a successful family now understands itself more than ever as a community of solidarity, in which each supports the other in different

phases of life in order to meet the existential challenges of a life marked by constant threats” (ibid.:165). He observes that the vast increase in longevity has resulted in family members spending much greater portions of their lives together than in previous eras. The experience of watching one’s children grow or one’s parents age teaches us about the biologically determined phases of life; an emotionally intense form of reciprocal freedom materializes by “playfully learning to cope with... natural barriers” (ibid.:171). In the sharing of familial duties like providing assistance and care for those in need, each person internalizes the ethos of cooperative individualism and the democratic dispositions required for participation in the broader society. For Honneth, the family is still one of the central institutions for cultivating the next generation, and it operates as a small school of democracy within society (ibid.:174-75). The practices of mutual recognition and reciprocal cooperation are still at work in the contemporary institution of the family.

4.3.2 Market Economy

If individuals had their needs met in the small context of the family, in civil or market society – which Honneth names the market economy – the individual steps out into the community at large to pursue material interests through work and transactions with others. As such, civil society represents a higher stage of individuation for Hegel. Writing in the early 19th century, Hegel was already aware of the destabilizing tendencies of the capitalist market, but he still considered the economy to be a normatively regulated sphere of action. Economic actors are capable of aligning their own interests with those of others and the community; and all participants in the market are aware of their reliance

on the contributions and cooperation of everyone else. Hegel stresses that civil society is not a norm-free space full of ego-centric agents, but is an ethical institution with its set of role-obligations that contribute to the realization of individual (social) freedom: “The selfish end in its actualization, conditioned in this way by universality, establishes a system of all-round interdependence, so that the subsistence... and welfare of the individual... and his rightful existence... are interwoven with, and grounded on, the subsistence, welfare, and rights of all, and have actuality and security only in this context” ([1820] 1991: §183). Honneth defends the market economy as a relational institution by putting forth a normative functionalist argument that synthesizes the insights of Hegel, Durkheim, Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001), and Parsons. He sees in Hegel and Durkheim the common idea that the smooth operation of the economy depends on all actors respecting the non-contractual elements of contract in their transactions: “According to Hegel and Durkheim, the market can only fulfill its function of harmoniously integrating individual economic activities in an unforced manner and by means of contractual relations if it is embedded in feelings of solidarity that precede all contracts and obligate economic actors to treat each other fairly and justly” ([2011] 2014:181). Polanyi also characterizes the economy as an institution embedded in a social and cultural framework. He argues that the notion of the self-regulating market is a liberal ideology that is contradicted by the liberals’ dependence on government intervention to prevent monopolistic practices ([1944] 2001:154-56). Most importantly, he shows the existence of a “double movement” in the 19th century involving the expansion of the market economy and a protective counter-movement that reacted against its negative consequences (ibid.:151). Given the

spontaneous nature of this reaction in several nations whenever the market encroached upon social life, he believed this proves the harmfulness of unregulated markets and the presence of built-in social mechanisms to curb any such impingements (ibid.:156-57). Honneth interprets Polanyi to be demonstrating the validity of Durkheim's theory: "If the capitalist market is robbed of its pre-contractual supports in the shape of commonly shared norms of solidarity, and thus becomes afflicted by 'anomy' ... the resulting unwillingness of the population will necessarily be expressed in social movements demanding the moral intervention of the state" ([2011] 2014:187). For Parsons, the economy as a social sub-system is conditioned by moral imperatives (Parsons and Smelser [1956] 2001), and the integration of workers into the market is accomplished by means of the labor contract and occupational roles. The normative demands of fairness and responsibility inherent in these institutional complexes ensure the cooperative fulfillment of duties as well as the provision of job security and livelihood (Honneth [2011] 2014:188-89).

By drawing on these theorists, Honneth advances a normative functionalist argument in defense of the market economy. He claims that the market economy is a relational institution that fulfills a vital role in the reproduction of society, and thus it is accepted by the people as legitimate. His implicit reasoning is that if the market economy was such an inherently unjust institution, the people would have refused to participate in it. In his view, the fact that this collective refusal has not occurred shows that the market has a valid place in the social order:

Even though these authors' basic theoretical assumptions differ significantly and they belong to different political-cultural milieus, they all agree that the economic market must not be isolated from the ethical value horizon provided by the surrounding liberal-democratic society. Instead, in the economic processes of exchange, strategic actors who encounter each other in competition over supply and demand remain embedded in this framework of pre-market norms and values even when they violate or deviate from it, because then subjects would no longer be willing to actively participate in the economy. There is an intrinsic connection between the conditions of competition on the market and the norms of the lifeworld, because market competition can only be viewed as legitimate and justified on the condition that it takes these norms into account. (ibid.:190-91)

The statement gives clear expression to Honneth's moral economism. According to this view, the market economy satisfies two key moral imperatives: meeting material needs and interests in the consumer market, and recognizing individual achievements through work in the labor market. In the consumer market, a reciprocal relation exists between buyers and sellers. Consumers satisfy their needs and interests by purchasing things offered on the market, while producers make a profit by providing things that are in demand at reasonable price (ibid.:208). The history of social struggles – from the 19th century bread riots and the rise of consumer cooperatives, to the 20th century legislation protecting public health and consumer rights – shows that the production-consumption dynamic is more than just an economic relation of supply and demand; it is also a morally regulated communicative relation between buyers and sellers to ensure the safety and availability of goods while keeping predatory practices in check (ibid.:202-10). The labor market exhibits reciprocity between employers who provide work and employees who attain esteem-based recognition through their contributions. Despite the well documented tendency of capitalist industry to generate poverty and precarity, the labor market is still a normative institution due to the existence of a shared moral understanding of the nature of work. In their fight for better working conditions, unionized laborers of past centuries

have framed their collective bargaining claims in terms of dignity and right to work (ibid.:227-31). Honneth claims that such demands “only make sense if the whole idea of a ‘free’ labour contract has been normatively accepted or at least tolerated” by employers and employees (ibid.:227). There is a shared understanding that work should be safe, fulfilling, and compensated – that it is a valuable contribution to society. The historical struggles to humanize and co-determine the work process are a collective effort to realize this potential for cooperative relations in the labor market.³³

These views contrast with those of Marx, who thought the capitalist market was a coercive and exploitative institution. Following Hegel and Durkheim, Honneth considers the flaws of the capitalist market to be deviations from the embodied ideal of the market economy, and that they do not invalidate its normative legitimacy (ibid.:194-97). Chapter 3 will examine the tensions between Honneth’s moral economism and Marxism. However, let us be very clear: he states unequivocally that he does not think the market economy as it currently exists lives up to the ideal of democratic ethical life (ibid.:176). The lack of discursive mechanisms linking the reciprocal roles in the consumer and labor markets means these institutions are failing to be fully relational.

4.3.3 Political Public Sphere

Democratic will-formation is the third sphere of social freedom that Honneth reconstructs. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel identified the state as the institution that

³³ This is by no means a smooth or linear process, and Honneth acknowledges it. He provides a detailed account of the obstacles and ambivalent developments that stood in the way of realizing social freedom. The welfare state, for example, created social policies that protected the working class, but it also destroyed the associational ties that had hitherto existed between workers ([2011] 2014:231-32).

consummates ethical life: “The state in and for itself is the ethical whole, the actualization of freedom, and it is the absolute end of reason that freedom should be actual” ([1820] 1991: §258 Addition). For him, it was the most central entity that has the capacity to regulate economic activities, enforce the rule of law, and maintain the rational organization of society. Honneth departs from Hegel by not making the state a relational institution; instead, he assigns this part to the public sphere and will define the state in terms of the public sphere. The reason for this is because Honneth believes Hegel over-emphasizes the state – it is given too much priority in the overall structure of ethical life, and consequently the element of recognition loses its centrality.³⁴ For Honneth, it is more fitting to designate civic political life as the realm of social freedom because citizens in the public sphere potentially interact with each other as equal partners in communication (speaker/listener) and as co-authors of the law.

The public sphere is the social space where citizens discuss and debate freely on a variety of issues; it is a discursive mechanism that generates public opinions which “form the principles to be obeyed by the legislature in accordance with the rule of law”

³⁴ Hegel’s tendency to subsume the individual under the state is evident: “The state is the actuality of the substantial *will*... as such, it is the *rational* in and for itself. This substantial unity is an absolute and unmoved end in itself, and in it, freedom enters into its highest right, just as this ultimate end possesses the highest right in relation to individuals... whose *highest duty* is to be members of the state” ([1820] 1991: §258, original emphasis); the individual “has his truth, real existence, and ethical status only in being a member of it” ([1820] 2005: §258 Note). These remarks suggest to Honneth that recognition is no longer accomplished horizontally between citizens but is vertically necessitated by the state: “Here subjects do not relate to each other in a spirit of recognition in order to achieve the universal through common activities, but the universal seems to be given as something substantial, so that the recognition acquires the sense of a confirmation from below of what is above” ([2001] 2010:78-9). However, we should not misconstrue Hegel as some progenitor of the totalitarian state. He was a critic of both liberalism and republicanism, and he was trying to achieve a complex balance between the two (Beiser 2005:224-43). His priority as a liberal thinker was to defend the rights and freedom of the individual, and to qualify the state as dependent on the rational consent of citizens for its legitimacy. This aspect of his political thought is correctly acknowledged by all responsible Hegel scholars.

(Honneth [2011] 2014:254). Like Habermas ([1962] 1989), Honneth traces the origins of these communicative spaces to the bourgeois literary salons of 18th century Europe. Initially, participation in such meetings were restricted to economically independent men; and yet, the meetings were an important occasion for people to gather freely, discuss, and scrutinize the nobility's affairs. For the first time it was possible to publicly evaluate the traditional order in a space outside the family or state apparatus. A proletarian discursive community of male laborers had also developed in public houses and clubs around the same period, which enabled members to articulate concerns about working conditions. These forums would gradually integrate into a public sphere over the next century with the expansion of liberal and political rights (resulting in greater inclusivity), cultural growth of urban centers, and spread of print media ([2011] 2014:255-64). Nationalism also played a part in consolidating a common political consciousness; but given how easily it can encourage racism and aggression, it has an ambiguous place in the history of democracy (ibid.:264-67). These factors nonetheless contributed to creating the demos and realized, however imperfectly, the basic ideal of democracy – that anyone affected by a specific policy or decision should be included in the discussion concerning it.

Honneth draws on Durkheim, John Dewey ([1927] 1954), and Habermas to show that the public sphere is a moral and epistemic community. Durkheim claimed the state is an intellectual organ of society that solves problems, and that communication channels must exist between the state and the public. The exchange of knowledge and information ensures intelligent problem-solving and allows citizens to place the state under its watch. Communication also cultivates civic morals and gives birth to a universalistic patriotism

that can unite a differentiated society with an affective solidarity (Honneth [2011] 2014:266-70).³⁵ Dewey also discussed the importance of communication for socially intelligent solutions by likening the deliberative process to scientific research: just as scientific experiments are more intelligent when a greater number of scientists interact with each other on problems, democratic experiments are also socially intelligent when more citizens are involved in discussing the relevant issues. Dewey was alarmed by the commercialization of the press, since the mass media had the essential task of spreading “information about social affairs, which allows an anonymous audience to understand the consequences of their actions and thus to take up a generally agreed-upon stance” (ibid.:274). When the “art” of communication is achieved, citizens would form a research community of free cooperation that tries to come up with creative solutions to shared problems (ibid.:271-74). Habermas agrees with Dewey’s diagnosis of the mass media, and additionally stresses the trend of consumerist privatism as a worrying sign (ibid.:281). He describes the deliberative process as a rational debate that leads to non-coercive consensus through the force of the better argument. Habermas’ historical study of the bourgeois public sphere demonstrated the birth of a specific normative self-understanding of society: the rationality of politics depends on the communicative input of opinion from the public. Unlike Dewey, for Habermas “cooperative interaction in the public sphere was not merely a well-intentioned construction, but an already institutionalized claim that was valid as long as political action intended to be rational” (ibid.:284).

³⁵ Honneth draws heavily on the German edition of Durkheim’s lecture course “Physique Générale des Mœurs et du Droit” which he offered at Bordeaux. This lecture is also discussed by Steven Lukes ([1973] 1985: Ch. 13).

After carrying out these sweeping historical and theoretical reviews, Honneth lays down the six conditions of a functioning liberal democracy. There must be in place (1) legal guarantees of freedom of expression and association for all citizens, as well as the right to vote; (2) inclusive communicative spaces where members of various groups and classes can exchange opinions on public matters; (3) a differentiated mass media system that provides accurate information and insightful news coverage; (4) voluntary services by citizens to organize and host events where opinions could be exchanged face-to-face; (5) a political culture that supplies the commitment or ethos among citizens to actually participate in public life and contribute toward the common good; and (6) a democratic constitutional state that is responsive in its decision-making to the opinions formed in the public sphere, such that citizens feel their discursive activities are socially effective and meaningful (ibid.:289-304). It is worth noting that the first five of these conditions concern the public sphere itself. For Honneth, the public sphere has normative and institutional primacy over the state, as the latter is founded by and subordinate to the former: “In this conception of the state, all our normative attention is turned away from state organs and directed toward the conditions of non-coercive self-legislation among citizens” (ibid.:305).³⁶ The revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries have brought down absolutist regimes and founded the modern state which at first only empowered a fraction of men. Over time, different branches of power had differentiated in the state structure,

³⁶ Honneth continues: “This reversal of the logical relation of justification and dependency – according to which the state does not found and create the public, but the other way around – results in the claim that all constitutive elements of the modern constitutional state, especially with regard to its legal composition and the division of powers, must be understood in terms of the tasks accruing to the state by virtue of the fact that it must presuppose, protect and implement the will-formation of the citizens – all at the same time” ([2011] 2014:305).

and the consolidation of nation-states made it possible for populations to perceive themselves as part of the same community of destiny. Social movements have extended the scope of rights and citizenship, so that women, minorities, and those previously excluded were eventually included in popular sovereignty. In reconstructing the state as an element in the historical realization of social freedom, Honneth makes its legitimacy hinge on protecting the public sphere and implementing – as society’s reflexive organ – the collective will of the reasoning public into laws and policies (ibid.:304-06, 308-14).

This view on the relation between public sphere and the state reveals an important difference between Honneth and Habermas. Habermas never quite conceived the state as subordinate to the public sphere: as a “system” that has decoupled from the lifeworld and that operates on the steering medium of power, the state stands somewhat independently of society. The role of the public sphere is to *influence* the parliamentary deliberations by exerting “communicative power” from the periphery ([1992] 1996:371). One gets the impression that the state is something in need of democratic taming due to its propensity to encroach upon communicative relations.³⁷ Since Honneth does not adopt the system-lifeworld view, he is able to characterize the state as a normative institution stemming from the public sphere that has a duty to reproduce the conditions of social freedom in the realm of political life. In Chapter 3, I will revisit Honneth’s theory as an alternative to the procedural model.

³⁷ Because the public sphere has this primacy over the state, some believe Honneth’s theory of democracy is more radical than Habermas’ (e.g., Zürn 2015:183). One should keep in mind, however, that Habermas does not believe the state (by definition) should stand over civil society and the public sphere. Within his theory, the state is described in this way only because that is how the economy and state on the one hand, and the lifeworld on the other, have separated during the process of modernization ([1981] 1987: Ch. 6).

Honneth is aware that social freedom has not been fully realized in the public sphere or state. The commercialization of the mass media and sensationalization of news have degraded journalistic practice (ibid.:291); liberal corporatism between the state and private enterprise led to the removal of major decisions from the space of deliberation and public democratic input (ibid.:324); political disenchantment has become widespread because the state is perceived to be unresponsive to the public's will (ibid.:325). Civic apathy is exacerbated by powerful global and transnational forces such as the market integration of the European Union, capital flight, and ethnic migration (all of which have destabilized national identity and solidarity). What is needed, in Honneth's mind, is the revitalization of civic energy and solidarity that relies neither on nationalism nor constitutional patriotism: the former is dangerously tied to fascism and racism, and the latter is too narrowly legalistic and therefore unrealistic as a source of solidaristic identity (ibid.:321, 327-28). He pins his hopes on the emergence of a European identity founded upon a culture of recognition and common history of emancipatory struggles across the modern era (ibid.:333-35).³⁸

4.4 Discussion

We can speak of a democratic ethical life when society actualizes social freedom in all three relational institutions – i.e., in personal relationships, the market economy,

³⁸ Honneth believes Europeans have a “collective memory in which everything that has contributed to realizing institutionally promised freedoms is remembered as a symbol of social progress”, making it a promising source of identity and solidarity. In contrast to the civic nationalism centered around the legal constitution, “the patriotism inherent in the European archive of collective struggles for freedom aims to realize all the promises of freedom institutionalized in the various social spheres” ([2011] 2014:335). If a European public sphere can take shape out of this common democratic culture, it may be possible to re-embed the market economy in a normative framework and establish a transnational deliberative democracy.

and political public sphere. It is a society in which individuated persons live in rational freedom through reciprocal cooperation among complementary roles. Democratic ethical life also necessitates the mutual reinforcement of each sphere of action, for it is simply not possible to speak of social freedom in any meaningful sense if any of the three institutions is deeply unfree or unequal in its habits and practices. It therefore involves the integration of emancipatory families and relationships, a humane and just division of labor, and active political participation by engaged citizens:

The political sphere of democratic will-formation can only do justice to its own normative claim of freely involving all participants if the latter learn that the social struggles to realize the demands of freedom institutionalized in the other spheres of action deserve support, because they represent the conditions of one's own freedom. The social system of democratic ethical life thus represents a complicated web of reciprocal dependencies, where the realization of freedom in one sphere of action depends on the realization of the principles of freedom underlying the other spheres. (ibid.:330)

In this overall scheme, the political sphere of democratic will-formation has a higher priority for Honneth over the other two institutions because it has the capacity to create new laws in response to social struggles: it has the legitimate authority to “interrupt the flow of discourse going on elsewhere and secure the results by means of legislation” (ibid.:331) and bring about concrete change that embodies social freedom. Additionally, the political realm is where the primary mode of interaction is reflexive rational discourse. Whereas in the economy or in relationships interaction mainly consists of completing practical tasks, in democratic will-formation it takes the form of thematizing issues and exchanging arguments. For Honneth, this sphere epitomizes communicative freedom, and it is in this sphere that the social misdevelopments obstructing freedom in any region of society can be dealt with: “everything that has been withdrawn from discussion due to

misdevelopments or political oppression can and should be made an issue” (ibid.:332).

We will later see how the public sphere is given an especially important role in the democratic transition to socialism.

I began this section on *Freedom's Right* by saying that Honneth is arguing for a theory of justice as social analysis. The normative reconstruction of the three relational institutions – the demonstration that social freedom and recognition are institutionalized in roles and practices of specific spheres of action – is the social analysis component. Rather than evaluating society with an external principle imposed by the observer, the approach taken by Honneth is to evaluate society with its own normative principle that has materialized in Western civilization over the course of modernity. Therefore, society is just to the degree to which it realizes its own ideal of social freedom: “If freedom of the individual means first and foremost ‘being with oneself in the other,’ then the justice of modern societies is measured by their ability to guarantee for all their members equally the conditions of such a communicative experience and thus enable every individual to participate in conditions of undistorted interaction” ([2001] 2010:26). His diagnosis, which we will continue to examine, is that social freedom is imperfectly realized in modern society, as evidenced by the distortion of discursive mechanisms in economic and political life and the strains placed on the pursuit of personal relationships. The fact that social freedom is a rational ideal with context-transcending potential supposedly makes Honneth’s critique immanent rather than external. The difference between external, internal, and immanent critique will be the focus of the next chapter, where I will ask if Honneth’s immanent critique is sufficiently coherent and superior to the other approaches.

I will finish this section by shedding light on two broad issues facing Honneth's mature critical theory. The first concerns the shift from a philosophical anthropology to a philosophy of history as he moved from the theory of recognition to the theory of social freedom, and the concomitant change in the critical perspective from conflict theory to normative functionalism.³⁹ The theory of recognition was concerned with the process of identity formation; it spelled out the forms of recognition needed for intact personhood, as well as forms of misrecognition. It elucidated the moral logic of social struggle, where the experience of misrecognition motivates certain groups to struggle for the recognition they believe they deserve. This normative version of conflict theory established a direct link between social pathology and emancipatory change: the struggles engaged by such groups can result in change of the structure of recognitive relations. In contrast, the theory of social freedom depicts a history of progress in modernity. While Honneth is not a teleological determinist who believes there will be a future of perfectly realized freedom, he does view existing social institutions as already rational and legitimate – that there is a foundation of normative consensus. The focus in his later program is to see if society can embody more fully an ideal that is already there. One must ask if such a perspective is critical or radical enough, given the original intentions of the Frankfurt School. Does it not fall into a kind of moral conventionalism about the current order with a liberal-reformist outlook on politics? Moreover, even though the public sphere has a privileged role in promoting democratic change, it is unclear how misdevelopments or

³⁹ By saying that Honneth has moved toward a philosophy of history, I do not mean he is adopting a metaphysical philosophy of consciousness.

pathologies give rise to change since Honneth makes diagnoses as an observer without giving much agency to those who suffer in his account – an agency that had existed in his earlier theory. As the next chapter shows, Honneth does see himself doing an immanent critique instead of a conventionalist internal critique; and the third chapter will focus on his vision of social change toward socialism via democratic experimentation in the public sphere. His writings will indicate a preference for the social freedom framework.

The second issue has to do with Honneth's somewhat perplexing definitions of social injustice, pathology, and misdevelopment in *Freedom's Right*. In Section 2, we encountered a statement in which Honneth claims social philosophy's task is to diagnose the conditions which stifle human flourishing. There, he grouped misdevelopments, disorders, and pathologies together as if they are equivalent. Now he distinguishes them, and it is worth quoting his definitions. Honneth defines social pathology as "any social development that significantly impairs the ability to take part rationally in important forms of social cooperation" ([2011] 2014:86). They "arise whenever some or all members of society systematically misunderstand the rational meaning of a form of institutionalized praxis" (ibid.:113). It is essentially a situation in which people lose awareness of the fact that their action is always regulated by the norms and values of society, and believe they are only free by exiting from social ties or obligations. This is different from injustice "which consists in an unnecessary exclusion from or restriction on opportunities to participate in social processes of cooperation" (ibid.:86). He seems to be saying that injustice is some kind of structural obstacle, whereas pathology afflicts the perspective and behavior of actors: "Someone who is unable to comprehend the purpose

of a certain socially institutionalized practice is not psychologically ill, but has only lost the ability, due to social causes, to practice adequately the normative grammar of an intuitively familiar system of action” (ibid.). When he speaks of the pathologies of individual freedom, Honneth is talking about the confusion of legal-negative or moral-reflexive freedom as the quintessential modes of being free. Pathology prevents people from seeing the reality and necessity of social freedom. On top of this, he introduces the notion of misdevelopments: they are practices that “fail to meet the demand of social freedom underlying the respective sphere of action” (ibid.:128). It is different from a pathology, then, because it is not something that leads to misinterpretation, but is something that undermines ethical relations irrespective of people’s understandings. It turns out most of the problems treated by Honneth are not pathologies or injustices, but of this latter type: “the misdevelopment that we will encounter in our discussion of relational institutions does not consist in systemically induced deviations; they are not ‘pathologies’ in the true sense, but rather anomalies whose sources must be sought elsewhere, not in the constitutive rules of the respective system of action” (ibid.:129). So, when Honneth talks about love and marriage under attack by economic pressures, or neoliberalism as undermining the normative potential of the market (ibid.:177), he is diagnosing misdevelopments. Later, I will assess whether it makes sense to separate these items out. While these distinctions may be helpful, it is somehow strange that he began with an intent to build a “theory of justice” and stated that the task of social philosophy is to diagnose pathologies – only to render these concepts irrelevant and turn his attention to misdevelopments. I will explore if it is worth unifying these diagnostic concepts.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a comprehensive overview of Axel Honneth's intellectual origins and theoretical contributions. There were several distinctive aspects to his thought: he is a social philosopher who considers his task to be the diagnosis of pathologies that prevent individuals from living the good life; he rejects the materialist paradigm of labor and endorses the intersubjective paradigm of communication which was established by Habermas; however, he does not accept the system-lifeworld model of society or the linguistic model of communicative action; instead, by interpreting Hegel's early works, he initiates a shift away from language and makes the concept of recognition the center of his own theory. The theory of recognition specified the three practical relations-to-self a person needs to develop for a complete identity. Honneth argued there is a moral basis to social conflict in the struggle against misrecognition. He has also moved on to reinterpret Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* to stipulate an ambitious theory of social freedom. Social freedom is normatively and conceptually superior to other models; and he demonstrated through normative reconstruction the reality of this type of freedom – that it has become embodied in the roles, practices, and dispositions of relational institutions: personal relationships, market economy, and political public sphere. In each institution, relations of mutual recognition and reciprocal cooperation exist; when social freedom is fully actualized, society lives up to its own ideal of democratic ethical life. This has not yet come about due to certain misdevelopments.

Honneth understands himself to be carrying out an immanent critique of society, rather than an external, internal, or genealogical critique. Immanent critique evaluates

society according to its own context-transcending concept of reason. In the next chapter, I will conduct a review of the origin and development of immanent critique. This should help us understand what Honneth is trying to accomplish, and it will be an opportunity to examine whether his methods are coherent.

Chapter 2

Foundations of Immanent Critique

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we have considered Axel Honneth's theories of recognition and social freedom, as well as his notion of democratic ethical life; these ideas were studied within the broader context of Honneth's attempt to distance himself from the materialist paradigm and work within the communicative paradigm of critical theory. We are now in a position to address the question "What is immanent critique?" Since the goal of this dissertation is to examine Honneth's critique of capitalism, and Honneth understands his own project to be an immanent critique of social reality, it is crucial that we clarify the objectives and method of immanent critique. This will be a difficult task, as several generations of thinkers have contributed to this tradition without necessarily defining immanent critique explicitly. Nevertheless, I take the following to be a suitable working definition for this chapter: *immanent critique is the evaluation of society according to normative principles embodied in existing institutions and practices; it assesses whether social reality lives up to its own rational potential, rather than to an externally imposed or internally available ideal.*⁴⁰ This formulation reflects the central themes of "reason and freedom" and "reason in history" in German thought.

⁴⁰ I have drawn on and slightly modified the following definition "immanent critique evaluates reality not with alien principles of rationality but with those intrinsic to reality itself. An immanent approach to social criticism exposes the way reality conflicts not with some 'transcendent' concept of rationality but with its own avowed norms" (Buchwalter 1991:254). Minor differences between this definition and mine will become apparent later in the chapter.

German Idealist philosophers such as Kant ([1784] 2001) and Hegel ([1820] 1991) have characterized freedom as autonomy, or self-determination guided by reason: it is through reason that we act in accordance with the moral law and live cooperatively through institutions. Additionally, Hegel ([1837] 1988) envisaged the progressive development of reason across history, which decidedly shaped critical theory's interest in the "actualization of reason," or the embodiment of rational freedom in social life. While critical theorists have distanced themselves to varying degrees from Hegel's faith in the progress of reason (e.g., Adorno [1966] 1973; Habermas [1981] 1984), a concern for the rationality of social life has been an enduring theme among the Frankfurt School theorists. This is evident in their analyses of capitalism as a social system that distorts reason and thereby obstructs the self-realization of human beings:

Through all their disparateness of method and object, the various authors of the Frankfurt School are united in the idea that the living conditions of modern capitalist societies produce social practices, attitudes, or personality structures that result in a pathological deformation of our capacities for reason. It is this theme that establishes the unity of Critical Theory in the plurality of its voices. As heterogeneous as the works bound to it may be, they always aim at exploring the social causes of a pathology of human rationality. (Honneth [2007] 2009a:vii)

What is both interesting and puzzling is that Honneth has displayed conflicting views about this connection between reason and critique. Earlier in his career, he problematized the "rational-theoretic narrowing" of critique by his predecessors at the Frankfurt School, who had diagnosed the pathologies of capitalist society in terms of the "developmental level of human rationality" ([1994] 2007b:73). The advantage of recognition theory, he claimed, was that it identifies social pathologies out of moral experiences that are usually overlooked by concepts of reason. However, he later shifts to outlining an agenda of

immanent critique that is concerned with the rationality of social life; *Freedom's Right* ([2011] 2014), for example, shows the failure of capitalist society to fully realize social freedom – a rational ideal which he has retrieved through normative reconstruction.

Honneth's most sustained methodological statements defend a reconstructive program of immanent critique ([2000] 2009; [2004] 2009). Therefore, I will characterize him in this chapter as being committed to the idea of the actualization of reason, while also being attentive to inner tensions and difficulties that arise.

This chapter will explain what distinguishes normative reconstruction and immanent critique from other approaches. We can generally make a distinction between external, internal, immanent, and genealogical critique; methodologically, they involve the tasks of normative construction, reconstruction, or deconstruction.⁴¹ In external critique, the critic stipulates a normative principle independently of historical context and evaluates social reality according to this standard imposed from the outside (normative construction). In internal critique, the critic interprets the normative principle found within a particular community and evaluates it according to its own espoused values (hermeneutic, normative reconstruction). In immanent critique, the critic identifies the normative principle that has crystallized over time within existing institutions or practices and evaluates the extent to which society realizes its own rational ideal (practice-based,

⁴¹ Honneth ([2000] 2009) only uses the term “genealogy” and does not distinguish between genealogical critique and what I have taken the liberty to call normative deconstruction. I find the usage of these terms helpful and consider them to be consistent with his characterization. By deconstruction, I am referring to the approach of Nietzsche and Foucault ([1971] 1998) to history, rather than Jacques Derrida's analysis of language, text, and meaning.

normative reconstruction).⁴² In genealogical critique, the critic debunks accepted values and ideals by demonstrating that they have been distorted into ideologies of repression and control (normative deconstruction). The philosophical origins of external, immanent, and genealogical critique can be traced back to the Kantian, Hegelian, and Nietzschean traditions, respectively. Representative practitioners of each approach include John Rawls for external critique, Michael Walzer for internal critique, the Frankfurt School theorists for immanent critique, and Michel Foucault for genealogical critique.

Honneth ultimately defends the tradition of immanent critique. Unlike external critique, it does not rely on arbitrary moral criteria; immanent critique is reflexively aware of its context of development and application. Unlike internal critique, it is not concerned with society's moral consistency; immanent critique strives to be context-transcending by placing society's own self-understanding under the critical eye. Finally, unlike genealogical critique, it does not avoid establishing clear normative foundations; immanent critique's commitment to the notion of socially embodied reason enables it to explain social pathologies as a violation of a normative ideal. Immanent critique is therefore unique for taking on the simultaneous tasks of establishing a socially grounded vantage point for evaluating society, as well as making a case for rational progress from within that society. The goal of this chapter is to explain how this is possible.

I will begin with a brief section on external critique to highlight the limitation of normative construction. After explaining the difference between hermeneutic internal

⁴² It is important to stress that normative reconstruction is not the only way of doing immanent critique. It certainly is the method advocated by Honneth, and this chapter will focus almost entirely on this method. Later, I will consider other approaches such as Rahel Jaeggi's ([2014] 2018) negativistic immanent critique.

critique and practice-based immanent critique, I trace the origin of the latter to Hegel and its further development in Marx and the Frankfurt School. It will become apparent that each theorist conceives the project of immanent critique differently, and my definition does not fit any single theorist perfectly. I will still claim, however, that there is a common core to this tradition: it is concerned with finding a valid basis in the present society to point toward a possible future that actualizes rational freedom. This chapter will show that Honneth frames the project of immanent critique in at least two different ways: one is a phenomenological approach that starts from actors' real-life experiences of misrecognition, and the other is a more teleological approach focusing on society's failure to realize an institutionalized ideal of freedom. I will suggest that it is necessary to unify these two operations under one coherent program that consistently diagnoses social pathology as a pathology of reason. Finally, I will set the stage for inquiring whether Honneth's reconstructive immanent critique is sufficiently context-transcending. A static understanding of social freedom may result in morally conventionalist arguments that only focus on realizing what already exists, which could blur of the distinction between internal and immanent critique.

2. The Limits of Normative Construction

There is no such thing as what philosopher Thomas Nagel (1986) calls "a view from nowhere," or a perspective of total neutrality. One who engages in external critique may claim to have deduced a universally valid standard to evaluate the world; but such a standard reflects the socially conditioned preferences of the individual critic, and it is

morally arbitrary to a large extent. That is the main fault of external critique's method of normative construction, as the discussion below will try to show.

Honneth defines external critique as “a form of social criticism that tries to bracket or transcend the accustomed local value horizon by appealing to external, universalistic moral principles” ([2000] 2009:44). Methodologically, it involves “using a procedure of justification capable of general agreement to attain normative principles in whose light the institutional order of a society can be criticized in a justified way” (ibid.:48). This procedure can be called normative construction. It is fair to say that external critique's philosophical origin can be traced to Kant ([1785] 2012), whose moral philosophy is known for its individualistic and generally ahistorical approach for determining the moral principles by which to carry out our lives. Kant describes how one derives the categorical imperative – an unconditional requirement to uphold universal moral maxims – through rational reflection on what constitutes the right thing to do. It is through the power of the reasoning mind that the individual constructs a categorical imperative that can be willed into universal law because it is rationally valid for everyone. The consequence of this mode of moral reasoning for critique is that normative principles are constructed by the individual thinker, usually without much consideration of the structure of the social world. A Kantian theory of justice “stipulates that the normative principles according to which we judge the moral legitimacy of social orders may not stem from within existing institutional structures, but must stand alone outside of this institutional framework” (Honneth [2011] 2014:1-2). Let us consider the leading work from the contemporary era that carries out normative construction.

John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* ([1971] 2005) is a famous example of external critique, as he establishes the fundamental principles of a just social structure with a thought experiment called the "veil of ignorance." The idea is that individuals, imagining themselves stripped of their specific traits (such as their goals, values, skills, and class position), reflect and decide on fair distributive principles for society. Rawls argues that when people do not know who they will be born as, they will generally agree on a vision of a meritocratic society that guarantees basic liberties and allows for inequality only to the extent that it is beneficial for the least advantaged. Having established the image of a just society, Rawls is able to assess how real societies fall short of this standard and point out some reforms that could be implemented to approach this ideal of social justice. The crucial point is that Rawls claims to have devised a neutral method to derive a principle of justice that is universally valid and agreeable for all.

Rawls' work exhibits the main drawback of normative construction, which has to do with its lack of reflexivity in deriving so-called universally valid principles. What is portrayed as a neutral procedure may in fact contain unacknowledged preferences and normative influences: "... any such criteria will be normative, for they will depend on what the theorist considers essential or inessential aspects of human nature... The initial counterfactual abstraction from which the theorist proceeds does not justify, but merely illustrates, the concept of human nature and reason that he subscribes to" (Benhabib 1986:25).⁴³ This means the moral claims of external critique will reflect the socially

⁴³ The abstract use of reason (in the form of an "original position") is necessarily shaped by historical context, making the claim of validity for all individuals across time and place problematic: "What counts as neutral can be disputed, and will always be influenced by the position that the writing person finds him- or herself in" (Schmalz 2019:303).

contingent views and preferences of the individual critic. The indictment of society for falling short of a normatively constructed ideal turns out to be a form of moralism that even risks becoming a form of moral dictatorship; someone like Rawls may be successful in presenting an “ought” in broad terms that is morally defensible from his point of view, but it is an entirely different question whether such an imperative resonates compellingly with social actors living in real human communities.

Practitioners of immanent critique believe it is futile to judge society while pretending to stand outside it, for critical theorists “still share one core commitment: that their critique of modern, capitalist society is supposed to be more than a form of moral condemnation” (Stahl 2013a:1, emphasis omitted). Since normative principles do not exist outside of history and society, the act of deriving a moral ideal must be part of the analysis of critique.⁴⁴ Immanent critique is designed to have this self-awareness, as the following sections will show. In the next section, I discuss how immanent critique’s foundation in social practice and institutionalized rationality helps it avoid the difficulties of what can be called internal critique.

3. Beyond Hermeneutic Interpretation

If external critique tries to derive its normative standard from outside the society in question, immanent critique derives its standard from within it. This does not mean, however, that immanent critique simply relies on the values people are consciously aware of or claim to espouse; rather, it relies on values that have become institutionalized in the

⁴⁴ The members of the Frankfurt School consciously abided by this requirement: “Critical theory is... critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis” (Marcuse [1937] 2009:115).

objective structures and practices that make up society: "... only those principles or ideals that have already in some way gelled in a given society count as legitimate resources for social criticism" (Honneth [2007] 2009b:47). It is therefore important that we differentiate between internal and immanent critique, or between hermeneutic interpretation and normative reconstruction. By defending the tradition of immanent critique, Honneth is also arguing that it has a superior procedure of justification than internal critique.

Internal critique makes use of normative standards that already exist in society and are generally understood by its members. Through a reinterpretation of accepted ideals and beliefs, the critic reveals how society has not lived up to the full meanings and implications of those commonly held values. What is often implied is the importance of commitment to the authentic meaning of those values for some notion of social well-being. Internal critique is essentially what Michael Walzer argues for in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (1987). Distinguishing between moral discovery, invention, and interpretation (in social and religious discourse), he argues that social critique always involves exploring new normative potentials of accepted values through the task of interpretation: "... the prophetic message depends upon previous messages. It is not something radically new; the prophet is not the first to find, nor does he make, the morality he expounds... But the prophets do not only recall and repeat the tradition, they also interpret and revise it" (ibid.:71, 82). According to Walzer, moral discovery or invention would be a form of "disconnected criticism." In his attempt to separate his preferred approach from the disconnected type, in one passage he problematically uses

the term “immanent critique” to denote interpretive social criticism (ibid.:64). Beside saying that this latter form is a “criticism from within” (ibid.), Walzer does not specify what it means for critique to be specifically immanent; given how a few pages later he identifies the main dichotomy as that between “external and internal criticism” (ibid.:69), I think we can safely claim that he regards internal and immanent critique to be the same. This, of course, is a problematic conflation in the context of our discussion.

According to Honneth, an effective critique of society would in some way presuppose the validity of the existing value horizon – otherwise, the critic would not be able to point out a deficient state of affairs in a way that members of society could also perceive ([2000] 2009:44). The decisive difference between internal and immanent critique seems to be how the normative principle employed to evaluate society is retrieved: whereas the former draws on existing social mores (such as those expressed in religious texts and teachings), the latter draws on the moral potential contained in institutionalized social practices: “Practice-based immanent criticism thus presupposes that the structures and modes of interaction in a social community contain – beyond the explicit understanding of their participants – immanent normative potentialities upon which a critic can draw” (Stahl 2013b:535). What practitioners of immanent critique from Marx to Honneth have in common is the idea that social practices are a more valid foundation for critique than people’s espoused values or society’s self-understanding. Therefore, those who advocate immanent critique are also claiming that the normative reconstruction of moral ideals out of social practice is superior to the mere hermeneutic

interpretation of existing ideals.⁴⁵

Internal critique has no sure way to demonstrate that the available normative principles in society are somehow rationally valid; through the interpretive efforts of the critic, it can perhaps highlight the desirability of living authentically to these accepted values. Immanent critique, on the other hand, has the component of rationalization that can help identify the rational values embodied in objective structures. It makes use of those institutionalized values that represent the rational achievements of modernity instead of existing values which may not have this rational quality:

... the starting point [of normative reconstruction] is the left-Hegelian premise according to which social reproduction occurs through forms of social practice in which the rational achievements of human beings are incorporated. It is further assumed that these rational achievements unfold according to progress that is realized through the learning process in connection to social action. At each new level of social reproduction, human rationality thus takes on a more highly developed form, so that the whole of human history can be spoken of as a process of the realization of reason. (Honneth [2000] 2009:50)

⁴⁵ This makes it sound like there is a sharp split between hermeneutic interpretation and normative reconstruction, and that there is nothing reconstructive about internal critique – when in fact there is a fair amount of ambiguity and difference in terminological usage among scholars. For example, Titus Stahl uses the term “hermeneutic immanent critique” for internal critique and considers both the practice-based and hermeneutic variants to be on two ends of the same spectrum (2013b:534-35). Rahel Jaeggi thinks internal critique is reconstructive because it involves retrieving a norm that is already there, whereas immanent critique is transformative because the negation of a contradiction results in a change in the norm itself ([2014] 2018:203). She therefore distances herself from Honneth’s reconstructive immanent critique which “takes a positive stance on the rational norms embedded in reality”; however, she admits that negativistic immanent critique is reconstructive to the extent that it identifies “reasonable developments” in crisis situations (ibid.:360 n. 25). Jaeggi also says internal critique focuses on shared values and beliefs while immanent critique focuses on norms embedded in practice (ibid.:213), which is consistent with my description. These intricate details will require closer inspection later on. For now, I will conclude that it is misleading to characterize internal critique as a non-reconstructive approach; both internal and immanent critique require a reconstructive effort by the critic. But the decisive difference is that immanent critique employs a *rational* normative principle (as I will explain below). Hence, I think it is fair to emphasize the difference between the hermeneutic approach of Walzer and the practice-based reconstructive approach of Honneth. For Honneth, “the reconstructive procedure of critique contains a completely different meaning than Walzer’s interpretation” ([2000] 2009:50) because immanent critique employs a context-transcending notion of reason.

Determining the rational quality of normative principles and social practices is not part of internal critique's method, while it is central to immanent critique. As a result, internal critique is not rigorously critical or transformative because it "cannot thematize the framework of the form of life itself" (Jaeggi [2014] 2018:31). At best, it can question whether society is consistent with its own ideals and urge society to be in conformity with them. In contrast, immanent critique makes use of a context-transcending concept of reason that enables it to assess social reality according to a metric of rational progress.⁴⁶

The purpose of normative reconstruction is to establish this rational foundation:

... normative reconstruction must now mean uncovering in the social reality of a given society those normative ideals that offer a reference point for a justified critique because they represent the embodiment of social reason. Thus... the Frankfurt School solves the justification problem posed by every immanent form of social criticism by inserting a concept of social rationalization. As soon as it can be shown that an available ideal incorporates progress in the realization of reason, it can yield a justified standard to criticize the given social order. (Honneth [2000] 2009:50-1)

In *Freedom's Right* ([2011] 2014), Honneth reconstructed social freedom as a rational ideal, which he believes he has successfully demonstrated by examining the history of social struggles in Western modernity and showing the progressive expansion of relations of recognition. Accordingly, social freedom for Honneth is a justified standard by which to measure society; the failure to realize social freedom would be an instance of society failing to live up to its rational (immanent) potential, rather than a particular (internal) value. Whether Honneth's reconstruction is indeed coherent is something I will consider

⁴⁶ Immanent transcendence should not be confused with "transcendent critique" which is sometimes used synonymously with external critique. External critique is transcendent because it invokes "criteria lacking intrinsic connection to the real" (Buchwalter 1987:297). Immanent critique is transcendent since it points to "something *within* actual society that simultaneously points *beyond* it" (Zurn 2016:16, original emphasis), while the applied normative criteria are inherent (immanent) in social reality.

in the second half of this study. For now, I want to emphasize that the fundamental difference between internal and immanent critique has to do with the latter's context-transcending character. Internal critique ends up being morally conventionalist because it relies on values that just happen to exist and highlights an inconsistency or contradiction between society and its own avowed ideals; since it usually calls for an authentic return to or restoration of society's normative order, there is something structurally conservative about internal critique (Jaeggi [2014] 2018:186-88).⁴⁷ Unlike immanent critique, it is not oriented to transformative change. It will be worth asking down the line whether Honneth himself is free from such conventionalism and conservatism.

4. Immanent Critique: Genesis and Evolution

Immanent critique does not engage in moralistic condemnation of society like external critique because it retrieves the normative standard of evaluation from within society, and it thereby avoids using arbitrary principles constructed from the critic's abstract use of reason. Furthermore, reconstructive immanent critique does not rely on just any normative principle that happens to exist in society – it uncovers those rational principles that are embodied in the institutions and practices of society. Thus, immanent critique does not make particularistic arguments like internal critique, which can only evaluate whether a society is consistent with local values; immanent critique assesses whether a society lives up to its own institutionalized *rational* values, and this concept of

⁴⁷ Other problems with internal critique mentioned by Jaeggi include the difficulty of agreeing on the defining value or self-understanding of a society (especially in a pluralistic one), as well as the difficulty of determining whether a normative standard is actually external or internal – for, depending on framing and perspective, the same ideal can appear to be derived from the status quo or independently constructed to different critics ([2014] 2018:184-88).

rationality is context-transcending. In other words, it can take a critical attitude toward its own society because it is concerned with the actualization of reason: the focus is always on moving beyond the present toward a possible future of rational freedom. I now turn to Hegel, who laid the foundations of dialectical thought and illustrated the pursuit of the actual as occurring through a process of determinate negation.

4.1 Hegel and Actuality

The philosophical origin of immanent critique can be traced back to Hegel, who attempted to expose the dogmatism contained in natural right theories.⁴⁸ According to Hegel, natural right theorists are guilty of dogmatically asserting the validity of their own concepts and normative standards. For example, by conjuring the famous idea of the “state of nature,” Thomas Hobbes ([1651] 1998) conveniently justified the Leviathan state by abstracting out of the complexity of human communities and imposing what he took to be the essence of human nature: “The assumption in accordance with which this abstraction is carried out is never spelled out. In fact, these thinkers are guided more by their prejudices as to what is and is not part of human nature than by philosophical principle... The normative vision of humans which they try to justify is the one they start out by presupposing” (Benhabib 1986:24). For Hegel, such dogmatism reduces social relations and collective life to an inevitable outcome of a static psychological trait, and makes no room for conceiving them as rational, collective accomplishments.

⁴⁸ While some scholars dispute that Hegel invented immanent critique (Finlayson 2014), many still choose Hegel as the starting point to introduce this tradition (Antonio 1981; Benhabib 1986; Buchwalter 1991; Honneth [2004] 2009). I am in agreement with these scholars, and I will also choose to start with Hegel.

Hegel rejects dogmatic critique and begins to develop an entirely new way of thinking called speculative philosophy in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 2018). This book is the beginning of an ambitious project to show that the world is the product of reason, and that reason is embodied in history and progressively develops within it in stages. Spirit, or Mind (*Geist*), is a concept he used to describe this activity and unfolding trajectory of reason:

The *final goal of the world*... is Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom. (Hegel [1837] 1988:22, original emphasis)

Thus history is to be understood teleologically as directed in order to realize *Geist*... History thus reaches its culmination in a community which is in conformity with reason; or we could also say, one which embodies freedom. (Taylor 1975:389, original emphasis)

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel reveals the true nature of human experience as self-consciousness, and he interprets knowledge and the world as the embodiment of self-conscious Spirit. Hegel demonstrates the necessity of the transformation of human consciousness from the most basic stage of sense-certainty of objects to higher modes of knowing. He describes the transition from sense-certainty to perception, perception to understanding, and understanding to self-certainty; the transformations come about as the necessary consequence of immanent contradictions within each stage of consciousness. For example, having sense-certainty of an object presumes that the subject and object exist independently of one another. It then becomes evident that objects are constituted by the knowing subject, and perception is necessary if the subject is to have any certainty about the object. In this way, the contradiction within one stage of consciousness leads to its negation, bringing on the next stage. Eventually, the existence of a self-conscious

subject becomes undeniable, since the objective world gets its essence from a self-consciousness that comprehends the “laws” and “forces” that define objects ([1807] 2018:60-108).

Dialectical thought, which brings about the negation and transcendence of one thing based on its inherent contradictions, is also called speculative philosophy. Hegel’s wanted to establish speculative philosophy as the true science of knowledge in opposition to the crude objectivism and positivism of traditional philosophy. Positivism’s knowledge claims are like mathematical statements in that they can be stated concisely as static truths. But for Hegel, truth cannot be stated in a single proposition, for truth is a dynamic process; one understands the truth of something only by considering the full experience of its development and transformations (ibid.:26-9). The predominance of the positivist way of thinking leads to humanity’s estrangement from its own world because truth and reality are portrayed as existing independently of us, and humans submit to the authority of their supposed objectivity. Dialectical speculative philosophy redirects our attention back to the fact that the self-conscious subject constitutes truth and gives meaning or essence to objects, and that the world is the creation of self-conscious Spirit’s labor:

For there is, in the last analysis, no truth that does not *essentially concern* the living subject and that is not the subject’s truth. The world is an estranged and untrue world so long as man does not destroy its dead objectivity and recognize himself and his own life “behind” the fixed form of things and laws. When he finally wins this *self-consciousness*, he is on his way not only to the truth of himself but also of his world. And with the recognition goes the doing. He will try to put this truth into action and *make* the world what it *essentially* is, namely, the fulfillment of man’s self-consciousness. (Marcuse [1941] 1999:113, original emphasis)

Reclaiming a reified world through labor is a social process because the world of objects is permeated by the essence of other subjects. This relationship, however, is not equal or harmonious, as Hegel portrays in the famous passage on Lordship and Bondage ([1807] 2018:108-16). In a reified world, the servant labors to create objects for a master, who in turn appropriates them; the servant's existence and identity appear to be dependent on the master. But since the act of labor imbues the subject's essence within the created objects, the servant can attain independence by materializing or externalizing its own subjectivity into the world through labor. The master appears to be an independent being at first, but the master's existence is dependent on the objects made by the servant and is in large part defined by the servant's self-consciousness. By depicting this dynamic relationship of labor and struggle, Hegel dissolves the false dichotomy between subject and object, and reinvents reality as the creation and expression of self-conscious Spirit.

Hegel laid the foundations for immanent critique in the *Phenomenology* by establishing a new mode of analysis whereby one evaluates something by its own standard and follows through the implications that arise in the process of scrutiny. We saw how Hegel moved from one stage of consciousness to the next by focusing on a contradiction found within one stage, and letting that contradiction unravel into the next: "Consciousness in its own self provides its own standard, and the investigation will thereby be a comparison of it with itself... [T]he examining consists in our seeing whether the object corresponds to its concept" (ibid.:55, 56). Hegel calls this process a determinate negation because "non-truthful consciousness" is not just sublated but leads to something else, a truer content, such that "the progression through the complete series

of shapes comes about on its own accord” (ibid.:53).⁴⁹ In this sense, we can argue that Hegel’s speculative philosophy paved the way for a new kind of critique. Also, by highlighting the importance of labor as a self-formative act that can dispel the force of reification, he demonstrated that critique is historical rather than atemporal. Neither the relationship between master and servant nor the condition of reification are timeless, permanent features of human existence; they are specific manifestations of a certain stage in the historical development of Spirit. Hegel’s focus on the liberating potential of labor in its historical context makes him an important predecessor of practice-based immanent critique.

If Hegel’s *Phenomenology* dealt with subjective Spirit’s quest for freedom in an estranged world, the *Philosophy of Right* ([1820] 1991) reflects on the objective institutional requirements of this freedom. As discussed in the previous chapter, these institutions take the form of an ethical life comprising the family, civil society, and the state – which, altogether, represent the product of reason or the outward expression of objective Spirit’s development:

... [Hegel] establishes a connection between historical progress and ethics. Reason unfolds in the historical process by re-creating universal “ethical” institutions at each new stage; by taking these institutions into account, individuals are able to design their lives according to socially acknowledged aims and thus to experience life as meaningful... The members of society must agree that leading a successful, undistorted life together is only possible if they all orient themselves according to principles or institutions that they can understand as rational ends for self-actualization. (Honneth [2004] 2009:23, 24)

⁴⁹ Therefore, Marcuse considers Hegel’s *Phenomenology* to be an “immanent history of human experience” and an “immanent refutation of positivism” ([1941] 1999:94, 113). Positivism is rejected on its own ground based on the implications of its own principles. For Stephen Houlgate, the *Phenomenology* “is a strictly immanent study which renders explicit what is implicit in what consciousness takes itself to be and in so doing shows how one shape of consciousness turns dialectically and necessarily into another” (1998:48).

From a Hegelian perspective, a pathological situation exists when society is not able to “express the rational potential already inherent in its institutions, practices, and everyday routines” (ibid.:23). Hegel himself illustrates this when he shows that bourgeois civil society produces poverty, unemployment, and the rabble on a regular basis ([1820] 1991: §241-4). This is a contradiction of civil society because, as an institution of ethical life, it is supposed to secure people’s livelihood through work and integrate everyone’s pursuit of their interests. The fact that it systematically generates its own destabilization and does not fulfill its normative claim means that civil society in its present form does not live up to its concept. It will be seen that, according to Honneth, the Frankfurt School members all adopt in one way or another this Hegelian idea that rational, cooperative practice and institutions are necessary for individual flourishing and social integration. Hence, their diagnoses of adverse conditions of society can be traced back to a “pathology of reason,” or the failure to “actualize” reason.

The preface to the *Philosophy of Right* contains the famous statement “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (Hegel [1820] 1991:20). I have already discussed how in Hegel’s philosophy reason necessarily realizes or actualizes itself through Spirit. While the terms actual/actualize and real/realize are used interchangeably even in scholarly texts, it is important to stress the difference between them: to actualize something means to realize the rational potential found within an entity.⁵⁰ To realize something is a general expression which may simply indicate that something has come

⁵⁰ Terry Pinkard (in Hegel [1807] 2018:xli-xlii) discusses the difficulty of translating the German word *Wirklichkeit* and justifies using the terms “actual” and “actuality”: “What is actual, one might say, is what is *at work* in reality” (ibid.:xli, original emphasis).

into existence without really containing the special emphasis on an inherent rationality which was in some way meant to come about. The real (what currently exists) and the actual are not the same:

... Hegel distinguished between phenomena that embody a rational structure and those that do not. The mere fact that a state exists, on Hegel's view, does not entail that it is either rational or, in Hegel's technical sense, "actual." Hegel's distinction between existence and actuality is tied to his metaphysics, according to which the universe's rational structure progressively actualizes itself. In the political sphere, this means that social institutions aspire and tend to achieve a fundamentally rational form. (Westphal 1993:234)

Actuality is what of necessity realizes the essence of a thing, and so it is not mere reality or existence, which is contingent. Hence Hegel does not mean to endorse every aspect of the existing social and political world as rational. Crime, poverty and tyranny might be real or exist but they are not actual because they do not realize any ideal of reason. (Beiser 2005:222)

It is probably fair to say that achieving the actual (or what Honneth also calls the rational universal) is the highest goal in Hegel's philosophy. The actualization of reason in the social world would take the form of a cohesively functioning ethical life. Hegel does not construct an ideal principle of justice to then explore the institutions that would best satisfy it; rather, "the modern conditions of life are reconstructed in such a way as to reveal those patterns of interaction that can be regarded as indispensable prerequisites for the realization of the individual freedom of all members of society" (Honneth [2001] 2010:57). This approach reflects Hegel's rejection of Kantian morality and freedom, and it is based on a conviction that "the social conditions of modernity" contain "enough justifiable moral norms" out of which a just social structure can be specified (ibid.:56).

This concern for the actualization of reason is the centerpiece of Hegel's thought and his legacy to the project of social critique. Virtually all subsequent practitioners of

immanent critique, from Marx to Honneth, continue to work with this notion of actuality in some form. All of these thinkers develop their theories with the intent of demonstrating the irrationality of the existing social world according to its inherent rationality.⁵¹

4.2 Marx

The purpose of this section is to show that Marx was a proponent of immanent critique who made original contributions to this tradition. I will identify two components to Marx's critique of bourgeois political economy: categorical and normative immanent critique. In both cases, Marx evaluates things according to their own standards to show their falsity or failure to live up to what is claimed by them. Finally, I will defend Marx against the accusation that he fails to engage in an authentic immanent critique of social reality; I will argue that the notion of actuality is operative in his critique of capitalism.

⁵¹ This concern for the actual leads to an ethos of "reconciliation" in Hegel's social philosophy, where the goal is to reconcile ourselves with the existing world – i.e., to find our own place within it and work to bring its rational potential to fruition (Hardimon 1994). The emphasis on accepting and living in the present reality is evident in the following: "To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to delight in the present – this rational insight is the *reconciliation* with actuality which philosophy grants to those who have received the inner call *to comprehend*, to preserve their subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial, and at the same time to stand with their subjective freedom not in a particular and contingent situation, but in what has being in and for itself" (Hegel [1820] 1991:22, original emphasis). This statement may be hard to understand because it is taken out of context, and immediately before this quote Hegel is referring to a Latin pun inspired by a passage in an Aesop fable. Despite this, the passage articulates the idea that "to meet the challenge of comprehending the rationality of the actual is also to find a way of rejoicing in the present" (Houlgate 1998:339 n. 3). The goal of critique is not to reject reality or to propose a complete transformation of it; the goal is to accept the world we currently inhabit and dedicate ourselves to becoming (as individuals and as a society) what we could be. Hegel's articulation of freedom as the culmination of universality, particularity, and individuality expresses this view ([1820] 1991: §§5-7; Beiser 2005:198-200). Someone is truly free when (a) he or she steps back from the concrete situation to reflect on the various possible courses of action and their consequences (the stage of universality); (b) picks a specific course of action and follows through with the act (the stage of particularity); and (c) identifies with and commits to that course of action, thereby coming to an acceptance of one's choices and position in life (the stage of individuality). Because freedom involves determining ourselves to a specific life in this reality, Hegel believes we must also reconcile ourselves to the world. This suggests a reformist program of social change: since there is something already rational about reality, the task is to implement reforms that will fully actualize them. While he was aware of the problems created by the capitalist market economy, Hegel did not see the need for a radical transformation of the social structure.

It is not necessary to summarize the entirety of Marx's thought; instead, we will benefit from a comparison of Hegel's idealism and Marx's materialism. Like Hegel, Marx also had a teleological view of history in which humanity is heading toward the end-goal of a free and rational order. Whereas Hegel described this trajectory as the progressive development of Spirit until it attains self-consciousness and absolute knowledge, Marx described it as the progressive development of the mode of production through real material labor until it reaches the final stage of communism – an association “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1978:491). Just as inherent contradictions in each stage of consciousness brought about its negation and the transition to the next in Hegel, inherent contradictions in each mode of production (manifested as class antagonism and fetters to production) bring about the demise of one stage and the transition to the next in Marx ([1859] 1978).

It is well-known that Marx appropriates Hegel's dialectical method but rejects his idealism. In the German Afterword to *Capital*, Marx says Hegel's dialectics is “standing on its head” and that it “must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” ([1873] 1990:103). By this, Marx meant that the real premises of human history are material ones. *The German Ideology* asserts how real individuals living in and acting upon the physical world are the real makers of history (Marx and Engels [1845-46] 1978:154-57). With the understanding that each mode of production contains class antagonism between the oppressor and the oppressed, Marx revises the Hegelian idea of estrangement. Crucially, he argues that alienation is not the mere

externalization of the world, but results from the specific organization of economy and society:

Marx rejects Hegel's equation of objectification with estrangement – that “reappropriation of the estranged objective essence” is simply “a process of incorporation into self-consciousness”. Marx argues that estrangement does not derive from objectification, but originates in the economically mediated process of social domination. He asserts that alienation can be overcome only by labour and struggle, not by a simple alteration of consciousness. (Antonio 1981:333)

For Marx, overcoming estrangement and exploitation can only happen through structural change of the social world, and the irrationality of inequality and domination cannot be explained by Spirit's hindered development: critical theorists are “no longer able to draw on the Idealist concept of reason when explaining deviations from... universality” (Honneth [2004] 2009:30). Honneth praises Marx for bringing about a post-Idealist turn in social philosophy, such that the diagnosis of pathology and the search for actuality become sociologically grounded in real structures and agents: “It would no longer be the internal compulsion of spirit but, rather, the external challenges of nature that would lead to a learning process consisting in a science of experience that justifies talk of the actualization of reason” (ibid.:31).

Despite his rejection of Hegel's idealism, Marx applies the very same Hegelian logic of examining something on its own terms and revealing an inherent contradiction, or its failure to live up to its own standards. In *Capital* ([1867] 1990), Marx examines what capitalism takes itself to be (an economic system founded on the freedom of all participants) and proceeds to reveal how it does not live up to its own ideals and premises, having turned instead into a system of inequality and unfreedom. This involves two kinds

of analyses on Marx's part: categorical and normative immanent critique.⁵² Marx's categorical immanent critique scrutinizes the concepts used in political economy to explain the workings of capitalism, to then uncover how these concepts in fact fail to explain them. This is evident in Marx's analysis of the concepts of capital and exchange: as a bourgeois science, classical political economy understands capital as self-expanding value, or wealth that grows through the process of exchange. But this definition of expanding value does not make sense if commodities of equivalent worth are simply traded – value must be increasing somehow, but political economy does not identify the exact mechanism that makes this possible. In turn, Marx highlights the exploitation of human labor during the production process as the key mechanism that makes capital grow; his writings on the General Formula of Capital and increasing relative surplus value exposes the reality of exploitation as the central feature of capitalist production (ibid.:247-57, 429-38).

Marx's inspection of political economy's central concepts is a case of immanent critique because he is evaluating their internal coherence and consistency, and whether political economy truly explains what it claims to explain: "Since Marx does not measure the achievements of political economy against external criteria but confronts the claims of this science with the thought-out consequences of its own categories and assumptions, this aspect of his procedure presents an immanent critique of political economy. The categories of political economy are measured against their own objective content"

⁵² These two aspects are identified by Seyla Benhabib (1986). Also, Marx's categorical immanent critique is directed at classical political economy, whereas his normative immanent critique is directed at the bourgeois ideals of capitalist society. I may refer to Marx's overall project as a "critique of capitalism," but I will show that he carries out an integrated analysis of both bourgeois science and bourgeois values.

(Benhabib 1986:106, emphasis omitted). The same logic applies to Marx's normative immanent critique. He questions the normative ideals of freedom and equality that are often evoked by defenders of capitalism. They would argue that all individuals are equal in their right to own, exchange, and consume commodities; likewise, all individuals are free to move, make transactions, and form contracts: "By freedom is meant, under the present bourgeois conditions of production, free trade, free selling and buying" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1978:486). By studying the production process, Marx exposes how such ideals are the ideology of the bourgeoisie who put forth a self-serving form of individualism to legitimize the current system.⁵³ Because one class owns the means of production and another class owns nothing but its own labor power, freedom under capitalism is in fact coercion, where workers have no choice but to sell their labor power and put up with exploitative work relations. Equality has devolved into inequality and impoverishment, where workers cannot claim for themselves the product of their own labor and are reliant on the capitalist class for survival. By exposing the gap between reality and professed ideals, Marx demonstrates the falsity of these bourgeois values:

In criticizing political economy, Marx is also criticizing its normative force of legitimation. Marx's critique of the normative self-understanding of capitalist civil society does not replace the immanent by the transcendent point of view. Rather, this critique aims to show that this society contains within itself an unrealized potential for expressing "the most developed social relations." Under conditions of capitalist production, this unrealized potential appears through the oppositions of poverty and wealth, exploitation and accumulation, individual impoverishment and social enrichment. (Benhabib 1986:111-12)

⁵³ The famous statement "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx and Engels [1845-46] 1978:172) expresses the untruth of mainstream ideals in a class-divided society.

Making use of categorical and normative immanent critique together enabled Marx to explain the mystification of reality and reification of human relations, as well as the general workings of the capitalist mode of production. He was also able to highlight the irrationality of suffering in a society that is productive enough to enable autonomous co-existence between people.⁵⁴ I now address this last point about the notion of actualization which underlies Marx's project.

Marx's critique results in a set of well-known theses about the inevitable demise of capitalism and the onset of a socialist society. Because he envisions the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system, some argue that Marx does not see any rational potential in the present that could be actualized, and he is therefore not doing an authentic immanent critique:

For Marx, essential contradiction does not denote the contradiction between an entity and a germinally present, albeit unrealized, conception of rationality; it designates the wholesale falsity of the real... As a result, Marx, despite his claims to the contrary, cannot expect existing reality to furnish a critical standard of rationality. Having demonstrated the intrinsic irrationality of the real, he must invoke normative criteria that surpass the domain of immanence... (Buchwalter 1991:268)

I believe this statement misinterprets what Marx is doing. He is not necessarily invoking external criteria by arguing for the transcendence of capitalism, and Buchwalter's error lies in claiming that Marx determined the "wholesale falsity of the rea." The falsity was found to be in bourgeois values, classical political economy, and the capitalist relations of

⁵⁴ In the *Grundrisse*, Marx comments on how capitalist society is latently rational and contains the potential to become a society founded upon relations of cooperative practice among free individuals: "... when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange?" A post-capitalist society that actualizes reason would resemble are world in which the "development of all human powers as such [would be] the end in itself" ([1857-58] 1993:488).

production. Within reality itself, he acknowledged the latent presence of the actual: “Reason has always existed, only not always in reasonable form. The critic can therefore... develop from the unique forms of existing reality the true reality as its norm and final goal” ([1844] 1978b:14, emphasis omitted). In other words, the critic’s task is to derive the true (more rational) actuality from the present and measure the world against this rational potential (Cook 2004:4). In the same letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx states unequivocally his intent to do a ruthless criticism of the existing order not in external or moralistic terms, but with an immanent standard: “Then we shall confront the world not as doctrinaires with a new principle: ‘Here is the truth, bow down before it!’ We develop new principles to the world out of its own principles” ([1844] 1978b:14). This is why Marx is neither a utopian critic who evaluates capitalism with a general principle of humaneness, nor a dogmatic one like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who takes bourgeois ideals and categories at face value and does not consider the inner historical movement of society’s contradictions (Marx [1846] 1978).

Marx’s categorical and normative immanent critique examined capitalism with its own standards so that its irrationality (and thus its unrealized rational potentiality) became exposed. It is certainly true that where Hegel saw the need for reconciliation with the present, Marx saw the need for revolution and transcendence.⁵⁵ That being said, it would be misleading to call Marx an external critic – the actualization of reason was the central concern of his project.

⁵⁵ Benhabib states that there are two models of historical change and emancipation in Marx: a progressive model of fulfilling an inherent potential, and a utopian model of transfiguring the present to create a new world. Both models inform Marx’s immanent critique, but she thinks their connection has not been clarified sufficiently (1986:114).

4.3 Frankfurt School

So far, I have discussed the origin of immanent critique in Hegel and its evolution in Marx. I will now discuss Honneth's predecessors at the Frankfurt School, all of whom were deeply influenced by Hegel and Marx. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse might be remembered as pessimists who ultimately gave up on the project of emancipatory critique, but this is not entirely the case. It is true that they made devastating diagnoses on modern society, but they also continued to develop their programs of critique in various ways. I will portray the struggle and ambivalence of the first generation: they were all aware of modernity's disastrous outcomes, but they also continued to explore other possibilities for rational freedom. I then focus on Habermas' attempt to revive immanent critique from the first generation's equivocation through his theory of communicative action.

Early in their careers the Frankfurt School theorists, in broadly Marxian terms, saw the need to liberate humanity from capitalist relations of production. Horkheimer talks about the oncoming of a future "community of free men" where "rational intention and its realization" are possible – a future that will grow out of a society that is already economically productive enough to meet human needs. His commitment to immanent critique is evident when he said "the state of affairs upon which judgment is passed... and the tendencies inciting men to build a rational society are not brought into existence outside thought by forces extrinsic to it" ([1937] 1972:217).⁵⁶ Marcuse also considered the importance of making labor a truly cooperative practice. In a rational society, humans

⁵⁶ The insights generated by the critique of society do not necessarily inform the praxis of the proletariat. Horkheimer and others did not designate any single class or group as the agent of emancipatory change; they were more concerned with specifying the aims of transformation (Alway 1995:27-30).

will no longer have to submit to the imperatives of the labor process – labor would be organized in the service of human needs ([1937] 2009:106). Well-versed in Hegelian philosophy, Marcuse was committed to dialectics and the actualization of reason; criticizing (Kantian) philosophical concepts of freedom as “arbitrary inwardness,” he claimed freedom “means a real potentiality, a social relationship on whose realization human destiny depends” (ibid.:105). A glimpse of such a free world is visible through an immanent critique of reality: “In replying to the question, ‘What may I hope?’, it would point less to eternal bliss and inner freedom than to the already possible unfolding and fulfillment of needs and wants” (ibid.:114). It is well known, however, that their confidence in the possibility of carrying out immanent critique was severely shaken by major events of the 20th century.

The publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1997) and *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse [1964] 2002) showcased the critical theorists’ reservations about the fate of reason and freedom. While it may appear as if the Frankfurt School gave up on immanent critique, I will suggest that the critical theorists were forced to reshape their projects and probe new paths for emancipation.⁵⁷ As the co-author of *Dialectic*, Horkheimer believed reason is inherently conducive to domination. But in his essay “On the Concept of Philosophy,” he also maintains hope for salvaging reason from its deformation: “Reason can realize its reasonableness only through reflecting on the disease of the world as produced and reproduced by man; in such self-critique, reason

⁵⁷ Habermas accuses Adorno and Horkheimer of abandoning “hope in the liberating force of enlightenment” ([1985] 1987a:106). I will provide a slightly more sympathetic account of what they were doing, in contrast to Habermas’ portrayal of the exhaustion of rational emancipatory potential in their critique of society.

will at the same time remain faithful to itself, by preserving and applying for no ulterior motive the principle of truth that we owe to reason alone” ([1947] 2013:177). Rejecting ahistorical principles of justice and freedom as philosophical propaganda, Horkheimer continued to insist on an immanent approach to critique (ibid.:182-84). He seems to advocate dissent (to the dominant form of reason) as an emancipatory reaction when he says the “denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service reason can render” (ibid.:187). However, as several authors have pointed out, Horkheimer became much more inward-looking by reflecting on the themes of faith, love, and justice while avoiding the question of praxis and political agency (Alway 1995:51-60; Kellner 1989:101-04). It is therefore difficult to claim that his later insights resulted in a mature, coherent theoretical project.

Despite his diagnosis of the triumph of technological rationality, Marcuse persistently explored new pathways for freedom throughout his career. For example, in *Eros and Civilization* he discusses how the elimination of surplus repression and the embracing of our life-affirming instincts will lead to true liberation: “No longer employed as instruments for retaining men in alienated performances, the barriers against absolute gratification would become elements of human freedom” ([1955] 1998:227). Marcuse also contemplated on the emancipatory potential of art ([1977] 1978). Liberating art emerges in the present but also transcends reality by creating new subjectivity and experience; it has the power to show what could be, what has not been achieved, and make people step out of the logic of exchange relations that permeate society. Unlike his colleagues, Marcuse also continued to entertain the idea of dismantling capitalism and

establishing socialism. *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) designates humanity's instinctive reaction to the "obscurity" of capitalist life as the starting point for articulating new needs and desires – these new sensibilities will shape the subsequent struggle to create a non-exploitative, non-repressive society. However, Marcuse was inconsistent about the relevant agents of change, switching his emphasis between the working class and non-class factions. This reveals his uncertainty about the praxis for an emancipatory future despite his continuous effort to develop new ideas.

Having been impacted profoundly by the atrocity of the Holocaust, Adorno built his critical theory for the sole purpose of examining the suffering wrought by the social totality. The theme of Adorno's project can be expressed as follows: "The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy... the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating" ([1967] 2003:23). Adorno develops his own notion of autonomy as resistance through a critique of Kant and Hegel, accusing the latter's philosophy of generating "identity thinking" which subsumes everything under universal categories ([1966] 1973:119-20, 314-29). Identity thinking does not do justice to particularity, and for Adorno it is undoubtedly connected to the totalitarian culture of coerced conformity. Kant's moral reasoning involves the repression of impulse by the rational ego in order to derive the categorical imperative; Adorno gives priority to moral impulse and proposes a new categorical imperative based not on any rationalized view of what is right, but on the individual's instinctive reaction against suffering and evil (ibid.:221-39, 260-79, 365-68). The task of education in any society after the Holocaust should be to foster a "critical consciousness in which individuals learn to resist various

forms of manipulation” (O’Connor 2013:134). Autonomy is redefined as resistance to evil, dubious norms, and the totality’s pressure to conform.

Negative dialectics, as a form of non-identity thinking, is Adorno’s approach to doing immanent critique. Critique of the totality and its system of thought may shed light on an alternative way of life:

... freedom need not remain what it was, and what it arose from. Ripening, rather, in the internalization of social coercion into conscience, with the resistance to social authority which critically measures that authority by its own principles, is a potential that would rid men of coercion. In the critique of conscience, the rescue of this potential is envisioned – not in the psychological realm, however, but in the objectivity of a reconciled life of the free. (Adorno [1966] 1973:275)

Using a constellation of interrelated concepts against identical thought exposes the contradiction between the universal (the idea of freedom) and the particular (unfreedom of real individuals). For society to actualize freedom (i.e., to be rationally identical with the concept), there would have to be real structural change in society (Held 1980:216-17; Stahl 2017:512). Skeptical of Hegel’s optimism about the dialectic’s forward movement toward a coherent totalizing system of thought, Adorno believed negative dialectics can at most hint at the opportunity for change.⁵⁸

Adorno did not engage in a straightforward reconstruction of a normative ideal, for he understood all such ideals to have been mediated by the totality. He did, however,

⁵⁸ “If thinking can continually be dissolved into a critical process, at least receptivity to a moment of transcendence can be preserved. Negative dialectics alone cannot lead to change. But it can help to break the grip of all conceptual systems which would freeze the object and ignore its genesis” (Held 1980:213). In Hegel’s dialectics, negation always involves moving beyond a contradiction; for Adorno, the critique of contradiction does not guarantee its transcendence: “The only function critique can perform is to reveal that irrationality (contradictoriness): it cannot go with Hegel in thinking that critique is already a step beyond the state of affairs criticized” (O’Connor 2013:49).

see within the practice of mimesis the prospect of repairing reified relations and healing the damaged life. Honneth ([2005] 2009) discusses how Adorno held on to the notion of socially inherent reason when he interpreted reification under capitalism as a deformation of reason. According to Adorno, human reason is cultivated through imitative behavior of loved ones during childhood, allowing the individual to decentralize her perspective to gain a rational understanding of the external world, as well as the capacity to empathize with others. Despite the spread of exchange relations to all aspects of social life, Adorno leaves open the possibility of breaking from reification as he draws on Freudian insights on suffering and liberation:

... in psychic suffering and impulsive reactions there constantly lies a dormant interest in an unrestricted capacity for reason, the realization of which would be a humane form of life... [S]uffering as an impulse with which subjects react to capitalist living condition becomes the prereflective desire to be freed from conditions that fetter our potential for imitative reason. (ibid.:56, 69)

It would be inaccurate to say that Adorno continued to pursue the Hegelian notion of the actual, for he believes Hegel's philosophy had unjustly ignored the wisdom of individual experiences ([1951] 2005). Therefore, we are justified in only claiming that Adorno continued the agenda of immanent critique in significantly modified form. The rise of fascism and the failure of a social revolution to come about have proved to Adorno that Hegel's project of understanding the world as rational is fundamentally misguided and has to be revamped (Honneth [2007] 2009b). Adorno's effort to conceive a new dialectic reflects his conviction that the only viable form philosophy could take is the self-criticism of its own premises. Even though it might seem as if he no longer had any confidence in the actualization of reason, we may point out that his critique of reification, antisemitism,

and authoritarianism do not make sense without the idea of rational freedom somewhere at work. Adorno's insight into the rationality of mimetic practice and his attempt to heal the injuries inflicted on the subject by identical thought indicate his commitment to a "restitutional justice" (ibid.:87) while holding on to a glimmer of hope for redemptive transcendence.⁵⁹ A major limitation, however, is that the plausibility of Adorno's entire vision depends on an incredibly rigid determination of the fate of philosophy based on his interpretation of Hegel, Marx, and the political events of his lifetime.

4.4 Habermas

We have seen how Habermas brought about a paradigm shift in critical theory by developing the theory of communicative rationality and action. He undertakes this ambitious task in response to what he perceives to be the failures and pessimism of the first generation. Specifically, he rejects Adorno's and Horkheimer's argument in the *Dialectic* that domination and suffering are the necessary outcome of Enlightenment reason. This argument, he points out, "does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity" which include knowledge creation in the sciences, universalistic laws and values informing democratic politics, and authentic self-expression in the arts ([1985] 1987a:113). Despite its flaws, modernity has a set of rational achievements that should

⁵⁹ Some argue that Adorno's immanent critique is incoherent because it relies on a medicinal notion of healing, which implies an original state of good health for society – which contradicts his own view that the totality is pervasively evil (Finlayson 2014:1162). A more sympathetic reading would acknowledge that he held on to a (heavily revised) notion of actuality *despite* the totality's all-encompassing corruption, which underscores the immense challenge faced by the critic: "Since we derive our ideas about what ought to be from our negative normative assessment of what is, whatever we postulate as reality's better potential, its more fully rational identity, has also been contaminated and distorted by damaged actuality. Thus, critical thinkers must strive to think what it is virtually impossible to think – possibility – because possibility alone affords a critical perspective on damaged life" (Cook 2004:146).

not be ignored and cannot be accounted for by the concept of instrumental reason. This insight is what informs Habermas' differentiation between purposive (instrumental) and communicative rationality in *The Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 1984).

Out of the separation of the two concepts of rationality, Habermas derives the action types of instrumental, strategic, and communicative action. Communicative action is a non-purposive mode of action oriented to reaching mutual understanding with other actors. Unlike the subject-centeredness of purposive rationality, communicative rationality orients action toward the ideal of achieving rational consensus and the non-coercive coordination of action. Communicative action makes reference to three validity claims by indicating that (a) our statement is true, that something is the case (truth, reference to the external world); (b) our statement or action is appropriate or correct within that particular normative context (normative correctness, reference to the social world); and (c) our statement or action is sincere, authentic, and consistent with our inner experiences (truthfulness, reference to the subjective world). In social interaction, our speech acts can be criticized and defended in reference to these validity claims: we can dispute whether something is true, appropriate, or authentic by asking "why did you say/do that?" Communicative action differs from dramaturgical and normatively regulated action because it places validity claims under rational scrutiny, whereas the latter take norms and conventions for granted. For Habermas, rational consensus is attainable through communicative action if we abide by certain rules of discourse protecting it from internal and external constraints.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ In the first chapter, I discussed the distinction Habermas made between labor and interaction. Because

Habermas' immanent critique is focused on the actualization of communicative reason, which is inherent in linguistically mediated interaction: "... the rational potential [is] built into the validity basis of speech" ([1985] 1987b:315). The realization of this rational potential in the form of successful communicative action would result in mutual understanding among members of society and the reproduction of the social lifeworld:

... Habermas secures the Hegelian idea of the rational universal by means of the concept of communicative agreement, whose idealizing presuppositions are supposed to meet the concern that the potential of discursive rationality regains universal acceptance at every new stage of social development. We can speak therefore of a social pathology as soon as the symbolic reproduction of society is no longer subjected to those standards of rationality which are inherent in the most highly developed form of linguistic understanding. (Honneth [2004] 2009:24-5)

Social pathology in Habermas' theory is explained by the system's colonization of the lifeworld, in which the goal-directed activities of the economy and state extend beyond their institutional boundaries into the lifeworld and obstruct communicative action ([1981] 1987:318-31). The consequence of colonization is the failure to reproduce properly the lifeworld institutions of culture, society, and personality. Although system and lifeworld are both necessary components of modern social structure, when the system impinges on the lifeworld it can cause the loss of meaning, anomie, and psychological disorders for individuals (ibid.:142-43).

Critics have questioned whether Habermas is successful at renewing immanent

labor is a form of purposive action, Habermas does not wish to make it the conceptual foundation of his critique. For his predecessors, the potential for solidarity and cooperation contained in the practice of labor made it an appropriate basis for critique. He is, however, not engaging in hermeneutic (internal) critique either, since he thinks the available bourgeois values have exhausted their persuasiveness and are no longer capable of securing broad consensus in society: "In the meantime, bourgeois consciousness has become cynical; as the social sciences... show, it has been thoroughly emptied of binding normative contents. However, if... the bourgeois ideals have gone into retirement, there are no norms and values to which an immanent critique might appeal with the expectation of agreement" (Habermas [1976] 1979a:96-7).

critique with his theory of communicative action. Here, I will focus on one issue: the extent to which the rational ideal employed in critique is historically grounded. The following expresses skepticism about the immanence of Habermas' concept of reason: "Habermas' effort to save immanent critique via a quasi-transcendental move, stressing universal norms nestled in the taken-for-granted substructure of interaction, upheld the constructive aims of early critical theory, but lacked its historically determinate thrust aimed to illuminate and help steer tensions and struggles *within* society" (Antonio 2017:663-64, original emphasis). We will see below how Honneth makes a similar point himself. Habermas does acknowledge the rootedness of communicative rationality in "historical time, social space, and body-centered experiences." Even though speech is a universal practice of the human species, "the rational potential of speech is interwoven with the resources of any particular given lifeworld" ([1985] 1987b:325-26, emphasis omitted). I believe this means the reference to the potential of communicative reason is specific to the historical context in question, and Habermas is not simply basing his critique on a foundation that transcends time and place. Furthermore, he has described communicative rationality as a distinctly modern principle of reason embodied in the rationalized lifeworld.⁶¹ In his account of the uncoupling of system and lifeworld, he explains how communicative rationality was unleashed by the differentiation of societies. While it is true that modern society as we know it cannot be maintained without the system and lifeworld functioning together, Habermas' critique is not just about balancing

⁶¹ "The communicative potential of reason has been simultaneously developed and distorted in the course of capitalist modernization" (Habermas [1985] 1987b:315). This means it has grown out of the historical process of modernization; in Habermas' perspective, it is an historically immanent form of rationality that is imperfectly embodied in the present.

two types of rationality (as argued by Buchwalter 1991:277); its normative priority is the protection of the lifeworld from systemic imperatives and the actualization of the modern principle of communicative reason.

5. Honneth's Dilemma

In the Introduction to this chapter, I mentioned that earlier in his career Honneth had expressed some skepticism about conducting the critique of society solely from the perspective of rationality. But we have also seen how he has come to identify with the method of the Frankfurt School – which he claims is concerned with the actualization of reason. While it appears that he has consolidated his views around the latter position, it is still difficult to make sense of this discrepancy. One way of understanding the earlier position is to see it as a reaction to Habermas' idea of communicative rationalization. Honneth questions the success of Habermas' immanent critique by suggesting that this notion cannot give sufficient expression to emancipatory interest. It is not that Honneth was arguing for a non-rational approach to social critique; rather, he was stressing the need to highlight the emancipatory interest that exists in the face of a pathology. While this is indeed an accurate description of his views, it does lead to a new problem: Honneth's own program of critique becomes less capable of enunciating emancipatory interest as he adopts the social freedom framework. In this final section, I will show that Honneth ultimately has two different ways of doing immanent critique, which raises concerns about his project's overall coherence. In later chapters I will also discuss how social freedom is conceived as a static ideal, and Honneth becomes increasingly reliant

on an organicist-functionalist perspective on the social order to diagnose pathologies. Such aspects of Honneth's mature critical theory will be shown to be detrimental to carrying out an immanent, context-transcending critique of society.

5.1 The Moral Experience of Injustice

According to Honneth, critical theorists from Horkheimer to Habermas all deal with some notion of a "historically effective reason" in order to address the issue of emancipatory interest ([2004] 2009:36-42). Inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, they believed emancipatory interest arises as an impulse or reaction against the irrationality of suffering and expresses the desire to restore or actualize reason: "... the stress from suffering presses toward a cure by means of exactly the same rational powers whose function the pathology impedes" (ibid.:39-40). Since the well-being of humans depends on "the presupposition of cooperative rational activity" (ibid.:39), there is a real desire to change the present state of affairs. Therefore, the expression of emancipatory interest was thought to be a natural reaction of individuals in the face of social pathology.

One aspect of Honneth's criticism of Habermas has to do with the supposed inability of the theory of communicative action to provide a convincing account of emancipatory interest.⁶² In one of his essays, Honneth claims that critical theory must give a sociological account of the pathological state of society and the existence of a desire for emancipation among real social actors ([1994] 2007b:63-5); that it must be

⁶² Honneth concedes that in the past Habermas ([1965] 1971) did identify emancipatory interest as one of the three knowledge-constitutive interests of human intellectual pursuits; but this has given way to a theory of communication that places normative emphasis on agents responding to the force of the better argument (Honneth [2004] 2009:41).

“capable of identifying empirically experiences and attitudes that give a pre-theoretical indication that its normative standpoints have some basis in social reality” (ibid.:69).

Honneth acknowledges that Habermas’ theory accomplishes this to the extent that it identifies the normative quality of the linguistic rules regulating social interaction. The normative expectations inherent in communicative action have an emancipatory potential because their violation “becomes a constant source of moral demands that go beyond specifically established forms of domination” (ibid.). But Honneth believes Habermas still has difficulty specifying how the violation of a normative expectation and the concomitant desire for emancipation are manifested in the everyday world of real agents:

For Habermas, the pre-theoretical resource grounding his normative perspective in reality has to be that social process by which the linguistic rules of communicative understanding are developed... [i.e.,] the communicative rationalization of the life-world. However, such a process is typically something which could be said... to occur behind the backs of the subjects involved; its course is neither directed by human intentions nor can it be grasped within the consciousness of a single individual. The emancipatory process in which Habermas socially anchors his Critical Theory in no way appears as an emancipatory process in the moral experiences of the subjects involved... For this reason, a correlate cannot be found within social reality for the pre-theoretical resource referred to in Habermas’s normative perspective... (ibid.:70)

Honneth argues that the emancipatory interest of real people gets stimulated not by the restriction of speech and the conditions for reaching understanding, but by the experience of having their claims to identity denied. What also seems to be implied here is that Habermas’ critique is insufficiently immanent because it takes an external observer’s perspective on pathology and on the proper direction of emancipatory change.⁶³ By

⁶³ If I understand his argument correctly, this is what Titus Stahl (2013b:540-44) also means by saying Habermas’ separation of first-person and third-person perspectives of the lifeworld runs into difficulties and results in an unconvincing account of the “social ontology of normativity” of the lifeworld.

shifting to the theory of recognition, Honneth attempts to establish a closer connection between the violation of the normative expectations of social interaction and the moral experience of injustice in people's everyday lives. He discusses how this is consequential for revealing the suffering of the working and lower classes, who are usually neglected in the public sphere ([1981] 2007). Members of these classes often do not possess clearly formulated principles of justice which they can expound in public discursive settings; what they possess is the raw awareness of injustice of a society that does not fully recognize their labor and contributions. Whereas Habermas "must implicitly ignore all those potentialities for moral action which have not reached the level of elaborated value judgments" (ibid.:83), Honneth draws on the consciousness of injustice of suppressed groups to disclose "as yet unrealized potentialities of historical progress" (ibid.:95).

Honneth understands capitalism to be a normative order of recognition – an idea which I will consider in the next chapter. This means capitalist society embodies the rational achievements of modernity in the form of expanded and differentiated forms of recognition, even though it simultaneously obstructs or impinges on these relations as well. Since the integration, reproduction, and legitimacy of capitalist society depend on the validity of the principle of recognition (2003a:157), an immanent critique would have to appeal to this inherently rational basis of society in order to make a case for progress: "... 'transcendence' must be attached to a form of practice or experience which is on the one hand indispensable for social reproduction, and on the other hand – owing to its normative surplus – points beyond all given forms of social organization" (2003b:244). The moral outrage of misrecognized subjects Honneth prioritizes so much is not just an

emotional reaction but a valid indication that the current social structure does not yet fulfill the ideal of recognition (normative surplus component); for Honneth, this outrage almost necessarily becomes an “engine of social change” (ibid.:245). If my descriptions are accurate, then we can say that the recognition program is generally consistent with the overall agenda of immanent critique: it tries to show through society’s own ideal of recognition what is still irrational and heteronomous about its practices. A complication arises, however, when the immanent logic changes as Honneth switches to the social freedom program and stipulates the premises of normative reconstruction.

5.2 Values in Social Spheres

Earlier, Honneth had designated the moral experience of injustice as the starting point for immanent critique; now, he is convinced that the historically institutionalized values in society are a more appropriate basis for immanent critique. Once again, he has Habermas in mind when he justifies the focus on socially embedded values: “In contrast to the Habermasian approach... there may be a superior conception that ties the aspects of social rationalization (in an internal realist sense) more closely to the ability of socially established values to disclose problems.” Instead of “invariant values of linguistic communication,” Honneth thinks “the historically produced values present in social spheres of meaning” can be deployed to reveal the pathologies of society in an immanent fashion ([2004] 2009:32-3). By describing his own task as conceiving a “theory of justice as social analysis,” Honneth unequivocally endorses the Hegelian method and proceeds to spell out the four premises of normative reconstruction in *Freedom’s Right*.

The fundamental insight guiding Honneth's normative reconstruction is captured in the following statement: "... the constitutive spheres of our society are understood as institutional embodiments of particular values whose immanent claim to realization indicates the principles of justice at work in each specific social sphere" ([2011] 2014:vii). The four premises can be traced back to this core idea. The first premise is that there are shared values and ideals upon which social order and the reproduction of society depend (ibid.:3). Seeing a convergence in Hegel and Parsons, Honneth is convinced that "institutions, social practices and routines reflect shared normative beliefs about the aims of cooperative interaction" (ibid.:4). The second premise is that these values and ideals should be the normative point of reference for social critique (ibid.). This expresses the deliberately anti-Kantian view that there are no free-standing ideals of justice since what counts as just is shaped by the historical process. Moreover, Honneth believes Habermas does not meet this premise satisfactorily. Like Rawls, Habermas relies on "the historical congruence between independently derived principles of justice and the normative ideals of modern societies" (ibid.:5) in his discourse ethics (Habermas [1983] 1990); he "retains the [Kantian] test of universalizability" by using a discursive procedure to derive moral principles (Schmalz 2019:305). By grounding his critique of society in intrinsic *values*, Honneth apparently strives to make his critique more Hegelian and immanent than Habermas, who must rely on the norms of discursive *procedure*.

The third premise states that out of the vast array of existing practices and institutions, one must identify those which are "truly capable of securing and realizing general values" ([2011] 2014:10). Referring to Hegel's concept of ethical life, Honneth

says the point is not to describe society as it is, but to illuminate within it those practices that embody a rational ideal (ibid.:7-8). The fourth and final premise therefore involves demonstrating the imperfect realization of the normative ideal. If modern society contains rational ideals, we can draw on them to critique the present and envision a possible future in which such ideals are better realized (ibid.:9-10). For Honneth, this means the social freedom program of immanent critique is context-transcending as well: "... the criterion of 'rationality' ... not only asserts itself in the uncovering of already existing practices, but also in the critique of existing practices or in the attempt to anticipate other paths of development that have not yet been exhausted" (ibid.:8). It differs from internal critique because it does not merely affirm or reinforce what exists; and it differs from external critique because it is using socially inherent principles to "criticize insufficient, still imperfect embodiments of universally accepted values" (ibid.:9). Finally, Honneth turns his attention to genealogical critique to see if there is anything it can offer to strengthen the procedure of normative reconstruction.

Honneth obviously believes in the normative-reconstructive approach, but he also expresses his reservation about its reliability as a stand-alone method. He points out the need to supplement it with a genealogical procedure to derive and apply valid principles for critique. This is because the content and meaning of a normative ideal may change over time, losing its original normative thrust and becoming susceptible to misuse ([2000] 2009:51-2). The purpose of a genealogical procedure would be to ascertain if the normative ideal still possesses its original meaning and is still appropriate for use in the normative evaluation of society:

For without the addition of such a historical test, critique cannot be sure that the ideals it adduces still possess in social practice the normative meaning that originally distinguished them. To this extent, social criticism that has learned from the dialectic of enlightenment simultaneously delineates the norms at its disposal from two sides. On the one hand, the norms must satisfy the criterion of being socially incorporated ideals at the same time as they are the expression of social rationalization; on the other hand, it must be tested whether they still possess their original meaning. (ibid.:52-3)

The genealogical enterprise is something quite antithetical to Honneth's neo-Hegelian agenda. Nietzsche's ([1887] 1998) genealogy of morals demonstrated how a culture's values and ideals no longer retain their original meaning because they have been inverted by the resentment of the powerless masses. Genealogy does not concern itself with the actualization of reason, for it considers any narrative of progress to be dubious. The genealogical ethos is expressed succinctly: "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled" (Foucault [1971] 1998:380). According to Foucault, genealogy deconstructs moral teleologies by delving into history to expose the accidental, farcical quality of moral values and accepted truths (ibid.:370-73). It unmasks the "various systems of subjection" and "the repeated play of dominations" occurring throughout history (ibid.:376, 377). Whereas for theorists like Habermas and Honneth the Enlightenment gave birth to a liberating rationality, for Foucault it also unleashed new techniques of control: "The 'Enlightenment', which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines" ([1975] 1995:222). How does Honneth reconcile genealogy with normative reconstruction without undermining immanent critique?

This issue does not seem to be especially troubling for Honneth because he thinks genealogy on its own is not a viable, coherent approach. Simply put, genealogical critique

does not justify its own normative standpoint even though it problematizes issues in a normatively charged way. For example, Foucault exposes the reality of normalization and surveillance that afflicts all subjects in the modern age, but he abstains from specifying the perspective from which he highlights such phenomena. One receives the impression that he does not believe there are valid rational norms and ideals worth striving for, even though Foucault is clearly troubled by these developments and considers them to be serious threats to human freedom. Hence, there is something arbitrary and hypocritical about genealogy: "... this kind of procedure... always requires an additional step to normatively justify why social discipline or political repression should represent a moral evil in the first place. In this sense, genealogy is... a parasitical critical procedure, since it lives by presupposing a normative justification that it does not itself try to give" (Honneth [2000] 2009:48). I think it is safe to say that Honneth is interested in drawing on the genealogical procedure only for the purpose of strengthening immanent critique: by making it more reflexively aware of the continued relevance and validity of the principles it employs. Combining genealogy with normative reconstruction will not, in his view, turn immanent critique into a merely subversive endeavor that is unconcerned with the actualization of reason.

5.3 Unresolved Issues

I would like to highlight two problems with Honneth's accounts of immanent critique. The first has to do with the fact that he has two competing agendas, each one having a different logic and critical perspective. It is worth asking if this is really a

coherent set-up – and moreover, which program of critique Honneth wants to prioritize.⁶⁴

While Honneth might believe he has transitioned seamlessly from recognition to social freedom, I have tried to show that the two frameworks view the social world differently. The recognition program draws on the subjects' experience of injustice as an indication that there is something pathological about the social order; it establishes a connection between the experience of misrecognition and the rise of emancipatory interest – which Honneth earlier on had declared was necessary for a successful immanent critique. Imperfectly realized relations of recognition will stimulate social change from within, as “the facticity of social relations always contains a dimension of transcending claims” (2003b:244). On the other hand, in the social freedom program this focus on the moral experience of actors seems to disappear, the theory does not specify if and how the experience of restricted social freedom gives rise to emancipatory interest. Since the concept of social freedom is derived from the idea of recognition, we may presume that imperfectly realized social freedom would also spawn a struggle for recognition at the everyday level – but this does not necessarily have to follow given the structure of the theory. Must immanent critique identify pathology and emancipatory interest together to count as immanent? While commentators have noted how the centrality of struggle has waned with Honneth's turn to an institutionalist view of society (Petherbridge 2013; Zurn 2015), few have inquired whether this impacts the coherence of his program of critique. I

⁶⁴ His description of normative reconstruction fits the social freedom program better than the recognition program, even though both are forms of practice-based immanent critique. Honneth reconstructs the ideal of social freedom out of the institutions and practices of society; on the other hand, recognition is the normative expectation inherent in social interaction, but he does not “reconstruct” the ideal of recognition in the same way. The normative force of recognition asserts itself in conflict situations. This disjunction is not resolved.

will show that those who have focused on this issue have fruitfully scrutinized the changing meaning of pathology in his writings. Their insights will inform my views on what needs to be improved.

The second problem is that the social freedom program may not be a thoroughly context-transcending program of critique. Honneth's critique is transformative to the extent that it envisions the superseding of an unfree state of affairs; however, it may be the case that he has conceived the ideal of social freedom in a static way. One receives the impression that the normative ideal of freedom is already determined, and the task is to align society with this inherent principle. This problem will be dealt with in the second half of this study. One should keep in mind for now that Honneth's critique implies a politics of moderate reformism. I do not intend to juxtapose reform versus revolution; rather, the question concerns the degree of transformative-ness. If the existing society already realizes social freedom partially, and the task is to make society fully actualize freedom, then exactly how transformative is Honneth's mature program? Does this not come close to being a kind of internal critique? The following remark will inform my assessment of Honneth's thinking:

Immanent criticism is not reconstructive, like internal criticism, but transformative. It aims not so much to restore an existing order or to reinstate valid norms and ideals as to transform them. Thus, it does not restore a prior harmony between norm and reality that was lost, but instead seeks to transform a contradictory and crisis-riven situation into something new. (Jaeggi [2014] 2018:203, emphasis omitted)

It will be worth asking whether Honneth has a precise notion of crisis or contradiction in his critical theory. I will show that he relies heavily on the diagnostic concept of social misdevelopment – making it difficult to grasp the exact meaning or currency of the idea

of social pathology. If diagnosing a misdevelopment merely implies the need for society to go back on the right track, this would beg the question of emancipatory transformation.

In addition, Rahel Jaeggi argues that in immanent critique the normative standard used to evaluate social reality undergoes a change in the process of critique. The ideal or principle does not remain fixed:

Immanent criticism is as much criticism of a practice in terms of norms to which this practice does not conform as it is criticism of the norms themselves. The standard of criticism changes accordingly in the process of criticism. But then the contradiction on which immanent criticism turns cannot be eliminated, as in the case of internal criticism, by merely adjusting reality to the norm, but only through a change that affects both sides. (ibid.)

This idea of the evolving standard goes back to Hegel's dialectics.⁶⁵ It is consequential because it makes us wonder if Honneth's principle of social freedom has this dynamic quality to it. If social freedom is a static, unchanging ideal, Honneth may be failing to do an immanent critique; he may be doing an internal critique that is focused on bringing society in alignment with its own ideal. If this is true, Honneth's critique might actually be morally conventionalist and structurally conservative rather than context-transcending. It is necessary to move on and investigate the validity of these claims.

6. Conclusion

This brings our exploration of the tradition of immanent critique to a close. We can now proceed to examine Honneth's immanent critique put into practice. Chapter 3

⁶⁵ The *Phenomenology*'s Introduction states that "the standard for the examination is altered when that for which it was supposed to be the standard itself fails the examination, and the examination is not only an examination of knowing but also an examination of the standard of knowing" (Hegel [1807] 2018:57).

will look at the substantive diagnoses and arguments on capitalist society that result from his analyses.

In this chapter, I have attempted to explain what immanent critique is and how it differs from other approaches of social critique. At the beginning, I defined immanent critique as the evaluation of social reality according to its inherent normative principles; that it assesses whether society lives up to its own rational potential. I conclude that this definition is mostly accurate. Basically all (reconstructive) immanent critics have the common idea that reason is embodied in modern society; that social practices and institutions have an intrinsically or latently rational quality; and that the actualization of reason would culminate in a society in which individuals flourish and live together freely. Hence the task of immanent critique is to diagnose any development in society that inhibits the full expression of this modern rational potential as a pathology. A shared intuition among the Frankfurt School theorists is that the structure and dynamics of capitalism contribute to the distortion of socially inherent reason, resulting in human suffering and loss of freedom in some form.

However, as my review of the evolution of immanent critique has shown, there are many discrepancies and disagreements within this school of thought. Not only do theorists conceive the project of critique differently across generations, but the same thinker such as Honneth can present two conflicting plans for the same overall agenda. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to impose an artificial unity onto this tradition. How to do an immanent critique of society is a question that theorists will continue to address, and this tradition will keep on growing in new, interesting ways.

Our task now is to assess the cogency and coherence of Honneth's social critique. What do the theories of recognition and social freedom reveal about contemporary capitalist society? Does he really succeed in critiquing society *immanently*, according to his own specifications? Is Honneth's critique context-transcending, or does it simply justify the status quo? These questions will guide my investigations in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Pathologies of Capitalist Society

1. Introduction

In the first chapter I provided an overview of Axel Honneth's theories, and in the second chapter I explained what immanent critique is and what it strives to accomplish. In this third chapter, I will examine how Honneth carries out an immanent critique of capitalism. My focus is on his substantive diagnoses of contemporary society and the specific pathological developments that are revealed by the theories of recognition and social freedom. I will show that his analyses are primarily post-Marxist, and his critique of economy and society in the form of moral economism is a synthesis of the ideas of Hegel, Durkheim, and Dewey. Given the flawed or imperfect state of existing relations of recognition and social freedom, Honneth argues for the establishment of corporative organizations and communication mechanisms to make economic activities transparent and strengthen solidarity among workers; he also suggests implementing various reforms through a democratic-experimental process. His critique of capitalism will culminate in an argument for a revised understanding of socialism as the realization of social freedom in the central spheres of society. Honneth's normative vision for society is an ethical life that also embodies organic solidarity and creative democracy.⁶⁶ I will assess the cogency of his post-materialist critique and the consistency of his immanent approach.

⁶⁶ Honneth does not exactly frame his vision in this specific way, but since Hegel, Durkheim, and Dewey figure so centrally in his critique of capitalist society, I think it is fair to characterize his social ideal to be a combination of Hegelian ethical life, Durkheimian organic solidarity, and Deweyan creative democracy.

The first topic I address is the theoretical connection between capitalism and recognition. For Honneth, capitalism is a normative order of recognition, which means it embodies the rational achievements of modernity in the form of moral universalism and expanded relations of recognition. A key implication of this view is that the demand for redistribution is an instance of the struggle for recognition. His debate with Nancy Fraser explores whether this is theoretically tenable (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Honneth admits that capitalism nonetheless perpetuates class domination through a variety of institutional mechanisms ([1981] 2007). He claims that recognition has become ideological, as employees are manipulated into being obedient to the status quo; they are now pressured to be relentlessly flexible for careers that do not provide sufficient material security ([2002] 2012; [2007] 2012). Honneth also discusses the Marxian concept of reification, which he redefines as the forgetting of the recognitional stance of empathetic engagement with others (2008a). He will claim that neoliberal capitalism is paradoxical because it has dismantled the normative progress of the social democratic era ([2004] 2012). Finally, he argues that the capitalist organization of work must be critiqued not by drawing on an external ideal of craftsmanship, but on the ideal of transparency and meaningfulness of labor ([2008] 2012) – which he believes is immanent to the market economy based on his reading of Durkheim.

I then address Honneth's remarks about capitalism from the perspective of social freedom. We have seen that in *Freedom's Right* ([2011] 2014) he regards the market economy to be a relational institution that has the potential to actualize social freedom. Drawing on Hegel and Durkheim, he evaluates the capitalist market from a normative

functionalist perspective which he calls moral economism. According to this view, the economy is a normatively regulated sphere of action that contributes to the reproduction of society. Therefore, the issue for Honneth is not the transcendence of capitalism, but the realization of the market's inherent ideal of reciprocity and cooperation. He is clear in his assessment that Western societies fall short of democratic ethical life due to the lack of communication channels in the consumer and labor markets, and that neoliberalism is a phase of misdevelopment which departs from the historical trajectory of progressively expanding social freedom. I will interrogate Honneth's interpretation of the market (Jütten 2015) and his reliance on a form of normative teleology (Zurn 2015; Fazio 2019).

In *The Idea of Socialism* ([2015] 2017) Honneth extends the argument of his previous work by reconstructing socialism as the realization of social freedom in all three institutional spheres of society. Socialism is no longer conceived as a working class agenda to socialize the economy, but is reframed as an experimental process involving every citizen to democratize all aspects of social life. I will show how Honneth draws extensively on Dewey to emphasize the experimental and communicative nature of social change and to defend a cooperative model of democracy as an alternative to the procedural one ([1998] 2007). He will argue that procedural rules of discourse get their meaning and currency from a democratic ethos, which can only come about through a just division of labor. I will suggest that Honneth's ideas are consistent with Dewey's creative democracy; however, his description of socialism neither specifies the long-term goals of experimental reforms nor takes account of the structural obstacles to carrying them out. I will argue that, due to his moral economism, Honneth fails to elucidate the

anti-capitalist qualities of democratic socialism. Sociologically, he would have to reckon with antagonistic forces and the structures of power.

I finish this chapter with a reflection on the coherence of Honneth's immanent approach to social critique. The two main concerns are the shifting meaning of social pathology and the adoption of a strong organicist-functionalist logic. In Chapter 1 (Section 4.4) I drew attention to the fact that Honneth makes a distinction between pathology, injustice, and misdevelopment, and that he believes the problems afflicting society are not pathologies but misdevelopments ([2011] 2014:129). Scholars have expressed doubts about the coherence of his views (Freyenhagen 2015; Schaub 2015; Wilhelm 2019), and I will also argue the need for a revision. Provisionally, I think it is fruitful to step back from the conceptual distinctions and return to the definition of social pathology as any development that undermines the rationality of social practices and prevents the self-realization of individuals.⁶⁷ The second concern is Honneth's turn to a biological functionalist view in recent writings when thinking about the social order. He will go beyond Durkheim and Parsons by saying that society really is like an organism containing functionally interrelated parts, and that pathology must be interpreted as the disease of the organic whole when it suffers from a state of functional disorder (Honneth 2014). This perspective has been described as a kind of organicism or naturalism (Särkelä and Laitinen 2019), and the meaning of pathology shifts yet again with the notion of

⁶⁷ If, according to Honneth, a misdevelopment is the failure to realize the demand of social freedom in a sphere of action, and a pathology is the socially caused misinterpretation among subjects of the rationality of existing practices, then neoliberalism is clearly a case of both: social freedom is undermined by market fundamentalism, while subjects also believe falsely in an extreme form of individualistic freedom. Both are "pathological" to the extent that they obstruct the actualization of self and reason (i.e., identity formation, reciprocal cooperation).

disease. I hope to show that the inconsistency of Honneth's social-theoretic view and diagnostic concepts is detrimental to his project of immanent critique.

The overall argument of this chapter is that Honneth's critique of capitalist society does not live up to its context-transcending intentions. Because his functionalism assigns strong normative validity to the existing set of institutions, it effectively legitimizes the current social structure; since capitalism is a normative order, it is difficult to imagine large-scale change beyond it.⁶⁸ Through concepts like misdevelopment and disease, Honneth gets fixated on system maintenance over individual self-realization, and on normative consensus over social conflict. Perhaps most fundamentally, the ideal of social freedom operates in a static way in his critique: once formulated, it is just a matter of actualizing it. And because social freedom is already partially realized, the political task turns into a liberal-reformist project of achieving a (vaguely) more democratic society than the current one (Arato 2019; Ng 2019). Honneth's social critique is immanent in the superficial sense that it strives to realize an inherent ideal of freedom and draws on the normative potential of existing recognitive relations. However, a rigorously immanent critique that is true to the Hegelian dialectic would be dynamic, with the evaluative standard evolving in the process of critique itself (Buchwalter 2017; Jaeggi [2014] 2018). What it means to live in a rationally free society has to be redefined continually.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ In later sections I will contend that Honneth runs into difficulties which are like the ones Durkheim faced. Just as Durkheim never really worked out whether (full) organic solidarity and elimination of unjust contracts were possible in a capitalist social formation, Honneth also struggles to clarify whether complete social freedom and ethical life are achievable under capitalist structures.

⁶⁹ To be fair, Honneth ([2015] 2017) does maintain an open-ended view on where society could be heading: his idea of a democratic way of life and his emphasis on trial and error avoid over-determining the goals or destination of society. Nevertheless, I will still maintain that social freedom is employed by him as a static

These arguments will set the stage for reflecting on the ways in which Honneth's theory can be further developed in Chapter 4. One compelling proposal is to incorporate the idea of a crisis of social life. According to Jaeggi's outline of a negativistic immanent critique, moments of crisis can spawn learning processes that result in the replacement of deficient social practices by more rational (effective) ones; instead of reconstructing the positive content of an existing norm, this approach would trace the rational developments out of crisis situations and show the differentiation or enrichment of a community's ideals ([2014] 2018:360 n. 24-5, 362 n. 5). Such a program of critique may be able to avoid Honneth's stagnant tendencies. I will argue that the concept of crisis is more useful for context-transcending critique than misdevelopment or disease.

2. Capitalism and Recognition

This section will review Honneth's theoretical understanding of capitalism and examine how it shapes the way he critiques society. He draws on and reinterprets certain Marxian ideas like ideology and reification, but they are stripped of their original materialist logic and are recast into his communicative paradigm. While his diagnoses are insightful, it is worth asking if these reinterpretations do justice to Marxism's concerns about the endurance of capitalist structures of domination. The section will also attempt to clarify how the theory of recognition is deployed by Honneth to critique the existing organization of work in an immanent way. What is especially noteworthy is that he

principle whose usefulness may have been exhausted. If the good life is one that is spent in active search of the good life (Fromm [1947] 2003), and moral concepts change along with forms of life (MacIntyre [1966] 2002), then the meaning of social freedom and the content of ethical life would evolve as society undergoes periods of crisis and learning.

considers calls for worker-owned and worker-controlled production to be external (and thus unsuitable) claims to the institutional order.

2.1 Society as a Normative Order

When Honneth claims that capitalism is a normative order, he is referring to the fact that three different spheres of recognition had been differentiated as traditional society modernized into a bourgeois-capitalist one (2003a:138-43). Whereas one's rights and status were ascribed in the premodern era based on estate or group membership, the modern person is now accorded legal rights as a morally equal individual and attains esteem through his or her abilities and effort. For Honneth, the universalistic and post-conventionalist aspects of the modern capitalist order make it morally superior to past societies which did not offer similar opportunities for individualized identity formation.

A basic way in which individuals attain self-esteem is through social participation in the form of work. Their contributions are evaluated by the achievement principle, which is part of the value horizon of society. Honneth admits that achievement is a contested principle in capitalist society, with the bourgeois class having disproportionate or even hegemonic influence on determining the social worth of specific occupations or skills (ibid.:147-50). Still, he disagrees with the Marxian view that achievement is merely an idea of the ruling class – it is still legitimate for members of society, who can draw on it to make rational claims against perceived injustice: "... thanks to their underlying principles, the social spheres of recognition that together make up the socio-moral order of bourgeois-capitalist society possess a surplus of validity, which those affected can

rationally assert against recognition relations” (ibid.:149-50). For Honneth, the modern principles of love, (legal) equality, and achievement constitute the moral framework of society, through which it can work out its conflict situations:

Since the central institutions of even capitalist societies require rational legitimation through generalizable principles of reciprocal recognition, their reproduction remains dependent on a basis of moral consensus – which thus possesses real primacy vis-à-vis other integration mechanisms, since it is the basis of the normative expectations of members of society as well as their readiness for conflict. (ibid.:157)

Class struggle, therefore, takes place within this broader background context of a recognition order. This insight has major implications for the notion of redistribution.

Honneth believes conflicts over redistribution are instances of the struggle for recognition which attempt to contest and redefine the prevailing achievement principle in society (ibid.:160). Such struggles strive to expand society’s conception of employment and contribution, so that other jobs and activities will come to be seen as worthy of esteem and (greater) material reward.⁷⁰ The feminist agenda of elevating the status of traditionally women’s work as well as showing the indispensability of domestic and emotional labor performed by women for social reproduction are examples of engaging in a moral conflict over the legitimacy of the existing (patriarchal and prejudiced) value horizon of society (ibid.:153-54). In general, struggles for recognition occur when groups experience some form of social disrespect and come to feel that their activities are not valued adequately under the current achievement principle.

⁷⁰ “Not only which activities can be valued as ‘work,’ and hence are eligible for professionalization, but also how high the social return should be for each professional activity is determined by classificatory grids and evaluative schemas anchored deep in the culture of bourgeois-capitalist society” (Honneth 2003a:153-54).

This puts Honneth at odds with Fraser (2003), who builds a multi-dimensional theory of justice focusing on the components of redistribution and recognition – and later, representation (2009: Ch. 6). The fulfillment of these requirements will result in what she calls participatory parity, or the equal and autonomous participation in social life among individuals. Fraser believes it is erroneous to subsume redistribution under recognition because maldistribution is an “economic” injustice, while misrecognition is a “cultural” one. Honneth criticizes this interpretation, for recognition is simultaneously cultural and economic; or rather, it eludes such simplistic categorization. Fraser ignores the legal aspect of recognition (Honneth 2003a:170), which figured centrally in the emergence of the welfare state. By guaranteeing a minimum level of material support for citizens according to the principle of legal equality, irrespective of specific achievements, the welfare state played an important part in redistributing wealth and securing a level of economic justice for the disadvantaged (ibid.:149-50). This means redistribution can be attained by at least two different kinds of struggle: one which appeals to legal rights and the equality principle, and another which appeals to individual merit and the achievement principle. Since recognition is at once economic, cultural, and legal/political, Honneth justifies the subsumption of material redistribution under recognition and argues for a theoretically monistic perspective.⁷¹

If capitalist society is a normative order of recognition, it is one that perpetuates class domination through mechanisms that suppress and integrate the working class.

⁷¹ Critics have noted the incompatibility of Fraser’s and Honneth’s views, as well as the inconclusiveness of their debate (Zürn 2015: Ch. 5; Wilhelm 2019: Ch. 4). What I am curious about is the usefulness the idea of a “recognition order” if it operates at such a high level of abstraction in Honneth’s theory. I will consider whether the concept clarifies or obscures the mechanisms of domination and pathology in capitalist society.

Honneth ([1981] 2007) discusses how different kinds of moral consciousness develop among the capitalist and dominated classes: unlike powerful elites who can formulate their own ideas of justice and moral principles in highly abstract and intellectually coherent form, the lower classes possess colloquial perceptions of injustice about the system grounded in their everyday experiences. This is often the case because members of the lower strata are seldom required to normatively justify their social position like their privileged counterparts (ibid.:84-6). The normative insights of the lower classes do not attain much public visibility due to cultural exclusion (restricting opportunities to express perceptions of injustice) and individualization (promoting asocial views on personal success/failure and preventing class-wide agreement about injustices) enforced by the state, mass media, schools, and other institutions (ibid.:88-90). The upshot is that working class struggles for recognition become covert and private.⁷² Honneth argues that critical theory must consider the agents' consciousness of injustice in order to shed light on "socially repressed moral conflicts in which suppressed classes make us aware of the structural restrictions placed on their claims to just treatment" (ibid.:95).

2.2 Ideological Recognition

Honneth reflects on the mechanism of domination within the normative order in his essay on ideology ([2007] 2012). Recognition is ideological when society confers a

⁷² As mentioned in Chapter 2 Section 5.1, Honneth thinks Jürgen Habermas is unable to take these specific moral experiences into account since his theory prioritizes publicly visible and verbally expressed claims. For similar reasons, Honneth does not accept Fraser's approach which focuses on "folk paradigms" of justice found in social movements and the public sphere (2003:11-6). In Chapter 4, we will take a brief look at Titus Stahl's (2017) attempt to extend Honneth's insight and delineate a new program of immanent critique that is concerned with particular moral experiences.

certain kind of status to individuals in such a way as to engender their obedience and compliance with the existing order. Distinguishing the attributive act of recognition from the receptive one, he claims that only the latter is a moral act in which one correctly affirms the positive qualities possessed by another person: "... to recognize others is to perceive an evaluative quality in them that motivates us intrinsically to behave no longer egocentrically, but rather in accordance with the intentions, desires and needs of others" (ibid.:85). In contrast, the attributive act in which one ascribes qualities onto a person may very easily become a form of manipulation.⁷³ Attributive recognition is ideological if it creates in a person "the motivational willingness to fulfill certain tasks and duties without resistance" (ibid.:86). An example of this is the rise of the "entre-ployee" label during the neoliberal era, where workers are addressed as the entrepreneurs of their own careers. This ascription pressures workers to adjust to an increasingly deregulated labor market and readily accept the demands of flexibility or mobility for insecure, risk-filled jobs. According to Honneth, ideological recognition is only symbolic, with no material or institutional substance (such as increased income or revised laws). It is "productive" in the sense of producing the disposition in workers to keep adjusting to the demands of the economy, but it is not empowering in any way that leads to self-realization (ibid.:90-4).

Honneth observes how self-realization has become "organized" in the late 20th and early 21st centuries ([2002] 2012). The advent of modernity led to the emancipation

⁷³ It also does not embody the epistemic aspect of the receptive act: "... if recognition merely attributes determinate qualities to another person, then we possess no internal criteria for judging the correctness or appropriateness of such acts of ascription" (Honneth [2007] 2012:81). Adopting a perspective of moderate value realism, Honneth argues that the receptive act of recognition is rational because it responds to the valuable qualities of a person – qualities which we have learned to identify in the lifeworld (ibid.:81-5).

of the human being as an individualized person. In the present era, the socially urged trend to creatively cultivate oneself pushes people to keep adapting to the imperatives of the economy. Conditioned to accept and adjust to anything that is demanded of them in order to succeed, more and more people are afflicted by feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness: “Compelled from all sides to remain open to the psychological impulses of authentic identity-seeking, subjects are faced with the alternative of feigning authenticity or fleeing into depression; they are forced to choose between staging originality for strategic reasons and pathologically shutting down” (ibid.:166). Self-realization – which was supposed to be liberating – is now organized and makes the individual suffer; it has been distorted into an ideology that legitimates the system. Honneth does not think this situation was brought about intentionally by a single powerful class but is the outcome of structural transformations in the economy and public sphere (ibid.:164).

While Honneth’s account is broadly consistent with Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology, there are some important differences. They both seem to agree that ideology molds the individual into a subject – a process which Althusser calls interpellation ([1995] 2014:190). For Althusser, individuals are always-already interpellated as subjects by the various ideologies (religious, legal, etc.) propagated by the Ideological State Apparatus (ibid.:192-94). Unlike Honneth, he believes recognition as such is ideological, for it necessarily involves the misrepresentation of reality and the reconstitution of the subjects’ consciousness. Recognition of each other’s roles, and the internalization of the dispositions, habits, and modes of behavior consistent with the demands of the system, guarantee the continuation of the capitalist social formation:

The reality in question in this mechanism, the reality that is miscognized in the very forms of *recognition*, which is thus necessarily *miscognition*, is, in the final analysis, the reproduction of the relations of production and the other relations deriving from them... Ideology makes individuals who are always-already subjects (that is, you and me) “go”. (ibid.:199, original emphasis)

In Althusser’s framework (consistent with the tenets of Marxism) the economic base conditions the superstructure, and the superstructure functions to reproduce the base. Since ideology is part of the state, it follows that ideology operates in the service of reproducing the capitalist relations of production: “The whole superstructure is arrayed around the state... The basic role of the superstructure, hence of all state apparatuses, is to ensure the perpetuation of the exploitation of proletarians and other wage-workers, that is, to ensure the perpetuation, hence the reproduction, of the relations of production, which are simultaneously relations of exploitation” (ibid.:203).

The main weakness of Althusser’s argument is its unquestioning faith in Marxism as a critical science being the only force that can break through the totalizing spell of all ideologies (ibid.:198). However, his theory illustrated the specifically capitalistic quality of ideological recognition, which is not found in Honneth.⁷⁴ For Althusser, the state is a capitalist state because it functions to reproduce the capitalist relations of production; ideology is therefore generated by and works in the service of the economic base. But in Honneth’s case, it is not clear where the ideology that helps sustain capitalism comes from. We have seen in Chapter 1 (Section 2.2) that he separates himself from the materialist paradigm of labor; while this has allowed him to underscore the normative-communicative dimensions of the capitalist social order – and the emancipating quality of

⁷⁴ In Chapter 4, I will discuss Honneth’s most recent reinterpretation of Althusser’s notion of recognition.

recognition – Honneth cannot specify the origins of ideology with his own framework. Ultimately, he ends up relying on the Marxian idea of ideology without really committing to its theoretical implications, and this loose borrowing from Marxism raises doubts about the seriousness or incisiveness of his critique of capitalism. Ideology is a powerful concept when we accept the logic of Marxian theory; but Honneth tries to take advantage of the concept without specifying how it fits into a non-materialist paradigm. The next discussion about reification will show another case of incorporating a Marxian concept without adopting its theoretical logic.

2.3 Reification

Georg Lukács formulated the theory of reification by bringing together the ideas of mystification and commodity fetishism of Karl Marx ([1867] 1990) and rationalization of Max Weber ([1921-22] 1947). By reification, Lukács meant the phenomenon in which “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing” ([1923] 1971:83) due to the pervasiveness of commodity exchange under capitalism.⁷⁵ It gives reality the semblance of objectivity and even necessity while expunging nearly all human qualities from it. He discusses how the rationalization of the labor process through enhanced calculability, mechanization, and specialization has had an alienating effect: “The atomisation of the individual is, then, only the reflex in consciousness of the fact that the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society”

⁷⁵ Marx ([1867] 1990:163-77) explained how a commodity’s exchange-value appears to be intrinsic to it because workers, who are separated from the means of production, have no way of knowing how much human labor went into its creation. The value of a commodity thus appears to be determined by some mysterious property within it, and we end up submitting to the objectivity of the relations between things on the market.

(ibid.:91-2). The reifying view comes to taint the way we see or deal with other people, objects of nature, and even aspects of our selves.

Honneth ([2005] 2008) attempts to reconstruct Lukács' notion of reification in terms of the theory of recognition, for he believes the economic process of commodity exchange cannot fully explain how the reifying stance became a sort of second nature to human beings. He finds in Lukács the insight that reification is neither a moral wrong nor cognitive error, but is rather a deficient form of praxis, or a distorted way of seeing things. Drawing on a wide range of thinkers from Dewey to Adorno, he argues that humans are constituted to be affirmatively engaged with their natural and social worlds, especially by taking the perspective of the other. The recognitive point of view or attitude shapes the way we see and know the world, which is why he claims that "recognition enjoys both a genetic and conceptual priority over cognition" (ibid.:40), and that reification should be understood as the forgetting of antecedent recognition or this stance of empathetic engagement.⁷⁶ Honneth gives new expression to the phrase "All objectification is a forgetting" (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 1997:230), and thinks this new formulation of reification can shed light on why humans are capable of committing extreme acts of cruelty such as human trafficking, sexual slavery, genocide, as well as racism (2008a).

⁷⁶ By reification of the other "I thereby mean to indicate the process by which we lose the consciousness of the degree to which we owe our knowledge and cognition of other persons to an antecedent stance of empathetic engagement and recognition" (Honneth [2005] 2008:56). "To the extent to which in our acts of cognition we lose sight of the fact that these acts owe their existence to our having taken up an antecedent recognitional stance, we develop a tendency to perceive other persons as mere insensate objects" (ibid.:57). Reification of objects is the forgetting of the meaning they contain for other people; reification of the self occurs when we forget that our feelings and desires are worthy of articulation, resulting in a detached attitude toward our own emotional and mental states (ibid.:63, 74). It seems Honneth believes that in addition to being a form of deficient praxis, reification of other persons is a moral wrong because it violates the normative presupposition of action and denies others of their humanity (2008a:154).

It should be noted that Honneth's concept of recognition takes on a new meaning in this middle phase of his career. He is not referring to the three specific forms of love, rights, or solidarity; he is talking about a more general kind of recognition of the other as a human individual. The discussants Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear all question this new antecedent form of recognition and the optimistic assumption that the primary mode of sociality is one of care and empathy (Honneth 2008b). They present the equally plausible view that humans are innately aggressive and hostile. To this, he responds that a communicative theory must at the very least presume the capacity for positive engagement, but he also equivocates that it does not have to be a substantively benevolent attitude (2008a:148, 151).

What is most relevant for my discussion is Honneth's explanation of the societal basis of reification. Unlike Lukács, he does not think partners in economic exchange are reified, since they recognize each other as legal subjects with rights during transactions; moreover, Honneth contends that a degree of depersonalization in relationships is inevitable given the complexity of modern life, and this should not count as the forgetting of recognition ([2005] 2008:75-6).⁷⁷ He determines the two causes of reification: either

⁷⁷ Although unmentioned in Honneth's text, philosopher Martin Buber also believed humans inherently possess the capacity and desire to have relation with others. He speaks of the "innateness of the longing for relation" ([1923] 1996:77) and the primacy of this kind of sociality: "In the beginning is the relation – as the category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul; the *a priori* of relation; the innate You" (ibid.:78, original emphasis). Furthermore, Buber distinguished between the I-It and I-You modes of being-in-the-world. In the former, we experience the world instrumentally and interact with others in an objectifying way; in the latter, we meet or encounter the other with our whole being or personhood in an unmediated, non-purposive manner (ibid.:53-64; Silberstein 1989:118-36). Only the I-You mode counts as true relation (whereas the I-It is mere experience). Buber would agree with Honneth that reification is a forgetting – "without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" ([1923] 1996:85) – but would disagree with his claim that partners in exchange are not reified due to legal recognition; so long as they interact in the I-It mode, they reify one another.

we take up social practices in which the observation of others has become an end in itself, or we adopt convictions and ideologies which lead to the habit of objectifying others to the point of forgetting antecedent recognition (ibid.:79). Honneth suggests the two factors of praxis and ideology complement each other: “The social practices of distanced observation and the instrumental treatment of other individuals are thus sustained to the same extent that these practices find cognitive reinforcement in reifying stereotypes, just as these typifying descriptions conversely receive motivational nourishment by serving as a suitable interpretive framework for a given kind of one-dimensional praxis” (ibid.:81). Beyond this, there is no explanation as to why such practices or worldviews come into existence at all, making it a rather vague theory of reification. Lukács was able to trace its origins to the capitalist social structure; he also emphasized the difficulty of social change and emancipation precisely because reality is reified in the eyes of so many.⁷⁸ For Lukács and other Marxists, capitalism succeeds in maintaining itself in large part because it systematically generates this mystification. Honneth’s account leaves us wondering if capitalism has anything to do with the phenomenon of reification, especially as he keeps downplaying the role of economic forces.

We can learn from the writings of Fromm, who theorized that capitalist society generates a “marketing orientation” ([1947] 2003:49-60) within the personality whereby

⁷⁸ Lukács concludes that “Reification is, then, the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society” ([1923] 1971:197). And, while he is like Althusser in his robust faith in Marxist theory, Lukács was aware of the specifically anti-capitalist nature of the struggle to break free from reified forms of life: “Any transformation can only come about as the product of the – free – action of the proletariat itself” (ibid.:209). While Honneth and others have moved past the idea of the proletariat as the true subject of history, I maintain that it is still worth regarding the way of life under capitalism has chiefly responsible for producing those tendencies to view oneself and others in a detached way.

one's self and other persons come to be seen as marketable things; economic production has bolstered the quantifying and abstracting view, which lead to humanity's alienation ([1955] 2002:107-21). For Fromm, reification is undoubtedly caused by the capitalist social structure, but it can also become manifest in the bureaucratized state-socialist societies. Overcoming alienation therefore requires the creation of a more humane, democratic society with horizontal, dialogic relations rather than simply eliminating the capitalist relations of production. Honneth could have taken the significance of capitalism for the genesis of reification more seriously in a similar manner; doing so would not have forced him to abandon the communicative paradigm.

2.4 Paradoxical Contradiction

Honneth introduces the concept of paradox to make sense of the transformations that took place in capitalist societies as they transitioned from the social democratic to the neoliberal eras ([2004] 2012).⁷⁹ Capitalist society not only operates under the imperative of capital accumulation – it also has the capacity for self-transformation according to its institutionalized principles of recognition. Western societies had made significant moral progress during the era of social democracy: romantic relationships could be pursued more freely with the de-institutionalization of the nuclear family and extant marriage customs; a robust set of social rights had been granted to all citizens by the welfare state; and educational reforms and state regulation of economic activities made competition in

⁷⁹ The original paper is co-authored; it has appeared in English as an article with the title “Paradoxes of Capitalism” (Hartmann and Honneth [2004] 2006) in *Constellations*. In this section, I refer to Honneth's book chapter version of this paper, not the article. References of both texts (book chapter and article) are in the bibliography.

work much more meritocratic. In effect, the ideal of individual autonomy had become a realistic and attainable goal for large portions of the population during this period (ibid.:171-73). This all changed from the 1980s onward with the rise of neoliberalism, which dismantled or greatly altered many of these accomplishments. The concept of paradox is meant to describe these developments.

By paradox, Honneth refers to a specific kind of contradiction. It indicates the inversion or alteration of normative intent in a specific course of action or situation: “A contradiction is paradoxical when, precisely through the attempt to realize such an intention, the probability of realizing it is decreased” (ibid.:176). He clarifies how this concept of contradiction is not an economic one involving the conflict between capital and labor; it is not associated with the idea of economic destabilization or the working class, since a lot of these paradoxes also affect the white-collar middle classes (ibid.:177-78). By saying that the era of neoliberal capitalism is paradoxical, Honneth means the relations of recognition which were built up during the previous era have been warped into something different from what they used to be: because flexibility is now a required trait for most people in order to survive in increasingly insecure and competitive working environments, romantic relationships today are pursued strategically on the basis of their compatibility with the mobility demands of careers, leading to the loss of their authentic emotional content; social rights and welfare benefits have been retrenched, and the discourse of self-responsibility had spread an individualistic interpretation of personal success and failures; and finally, only those contributions that are profitable on the market are now regarded as real achievements, and workers have a harder time knowing

the actual value of their contributions in a deregulated market (ibid.:179-88). The consequence of these transformations is the erosion of the institutional conditions for self-realization: “Within the framework of the new organizational form of capitalism, what could previously be analysed as an unambiguous rise in the sphere of individual autonomy assumes the shape of unreasonable demands, discipline or insecurity, which, taken together, have the effect of social desolidarization” (ibid.:179).

The analysis of the paradox of neoliberal capitalism is Honneth’s counter-argument to Habermas’ ([1973] 1975) thesis of legitimation and motivation crises. According to this thesis, advanced capitalism is especially prone to such crises because the justification of class inequality as well as the ethos of privatism have been gradually eroded by the welfare state and universalistic morality. When the socio-cultural system does not produce the requisite level of “action-motivating meaning” (ibid.:49), and the administrative system’s steering of the economy is mired by unintended consequences, the withdrawal of mass loyalty by the public is inevitable. Honneth disputes this argument by pointing out that neoliberal capitalism is in fact quite capable of producing new motivational resources for its continued functioning; it has been successful at getting people to adjust to the project-oriented mode of life, where they willingly take on the role of employee. The members of the working and middle classes in present-day capitalism have internalized the ethic of self-responsibility, and they are largely self-motivated to exhibit the flexibility or personal initiative that are implicitly demanded of them ([2004] 2012:174-76). Such motivations obviously do not contribute to human flourishing; we only need to recall his remarks on organized self-realization and ideological recognition.

While Honneth has presented an interesting set of observations, one is tempted to ask what is left of the concept of crisis for the critique of capitalism. Paradox as a non-economic idea may be useful for highlighting the state of desolidarization taking place under neoliberalism; but is it not possible to interpret such a breakdown in solidarity as a crisis of democratic society itself? If neoliberalism paved the way for the right-wing extremism we are seeing in recent years (Brown 2018, 2019), then perhaps we need a concept of crisis that accounts for the gravity of this situation manifesting the corrosion of democratic life. I return to this line of thought in Chapter 4.

2.5 Labor and Organic Solidarity

The proximity of Honneth's thinking to Durkheim is visible in an essay on the critique of existing relations of labor ([2008] 2012), in which he draws on the idea of organic solidarity to argue against external approaches to critique. The critique of labor can be immanent "if the idea of meaningful and secure work already constitutes a rational claim embedded in the structures of societal reproduction themselves" (ibid.:58). While the ideal of craftsmanship has long served as an inspiration for emancipatory visions of non-alienating work, all attempts to critique working conditions under capitalism using this artisanal model of holistic activity are flawed for taking an external point of view: "By pointing to performance structures that cannot be equally constitutive of all instances of labour required in the economic sphere, they all make normative appeals to modes of activity that remain external to the object they criticize" (ibid.:60). Even if the full control and performance of labor is a real desire expressed in certain economic sectors, Honneth

says it still does not justify that all work must have the same shape, or that such an ideal could be a valid immanent standard (ibid.:61). He implies that in today's complex post-industrial economy, it is unclear what it means for service sector work to be unified or wholly directed by the worker.

Instead of using an ideal that lies outside the work relations one is trying to critique, Honneth insists we must “draw upon moral norms that already constitute rational claims within the social exchange of services” (ibid.:60). If the labor market has an integrative function for society, he reasons there must be an underlying normative basis to modern relations of work. He credits Hegel for identifying the ethical nature of work as the contribution of each individual to the common good (ibid.:64).⁸⁰ Fully aware of the economy's propensity to generate poverty and instability, Hegel specified some corrective mechanisms which would help civil society realize or uphold its own principle: the Police (the body of public authority) would provide a range of regulatory services including the maintenance of the balance of supply and demand, while the Corporations (professional or trade associations) would protect its members' livelihood by securing work opportunities and sustaining their skills ([1820] 1991: §§230-56). What is crucial here for Honneth is that Hegel does not invent something foreign and impose it onto the market; rather, “Hegel has the corporations fulfil a task that constitutes a normative claim anchored within the conditions of existence of this new organizational form of societal

⁸⁰ The increase in number and diversity of needs leads to the rise of a vast division of labor, through which people fulfill their wants as consumers while contributing to the community as producers or laborers (Hegel [1820] 1991: §§189-98). This system of interdependence gives civil society its ethical character: “In this dependence and reciprocity of work and the satisfaction of needs, subjective selfishness turns into a contribution towards the satisfaction of the needs of everyone else” (ibid.: §199, emphasis omitted).

labour” ([2008] 2012:65). As an institution of ethical life, civil society must be a place where one can develop a social identity through participation in activities beyond the domestic realm of the family. It must provide opportunities for work, a living wage, and a relational network within which one is recognized and esteemed for what one does. It is this principle of civil society or of collective economic life which the public authority and corporations strive to defend and realize (Hardimon 1994:195-202).

Durkheim would extend Hegel’s insight that there could not be a sphere of action that is dis-embedded from the norms and values of society. Like Hegel, Durkheim argues that the self-interested transactions of economic agents take place within the context of a cultural and moral framework. His famous notion of the non-contractual elements of contract expresses the necessity of there being a general commitment to moral rules and obligations among contracting parties ([1893] 2014:165-69). Without this framework, cooperation across society would not be feasible: “... the contract is not sufficient by itself, but is possible only because of the regulation of contracts, which is of social origin” (ibid.:169). Furthermore, Honneth interprets Durkheim to be claiming that the right to meaningful work is an immanent normative claim or demand in the organization of labor under capitalism ([2008] 2012:68-9). It is well-known that for Durkheim the division of labor is moral because it produces social solidarity: the solidarity characteristic of modern societies is an organic type rooted in dissimilarities and functional interdependencies among multiple parts. Society falls short of organic solidarity when it is afflicted by anomic and forced divisions of labor.⁸¹ To fully attain organic solidarity, unjust contracts

⁸¹ In anomic division of labor, individuals and specific sectors become isolated to the point of losing the

must be eliminated by alleviating external inequality; additionally, the interconnection between the many specialized tasks throughout society must be made more visible.⁸² The following passage shows how Honneth links this Durkheimian insight to the immanent critique of capitalist labor:

His argument begins with his insight that capitalist relations of work can only generate “organic” forms of solidarity if all workers can experience them as a common, cooperative effort in the common interest. This requires that the cooperative connection between subjects’ own activity and that of their fellow workers must be made clearly visible from the perspective of each individual task. However, Durkheim maintains that this will be possible if the various labour activities are sufficiently complex and demanding, such that each individual can feel a halfway meaningful connection to all other socially necessary labour activities. He does not hesitate to interpret the demand for meaningful work as an entitlement anchored within the normative conditions of the capitalist economic system... (ibid.:69-70)

According to Honneth, Durkheim is not imposing an external ideal of justice onto the capitalist economy; instead, he is referring to normative presuppositions of modern economic life. Access to meaningful work is a “moral promise” of the market economy, which must be presupposed if the capitalist economy is to have an integrative function for society (ibid.:69, 71).

Honneth has certainly found complementary elements in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and Durkheim’s *Division of Labor* to make the case that the market economy should be critiqued by its own immanent norm or principle. Within this argument is the

moral regulation of their activities as well as their feeling of connection with others in society. In forced division of labor, the distribution of opportunities or social functions fails to correspond to the distribution of natural talents. The root of the problem is an unequal playing field which creates unjust contracts (Durkheim [1893] 2014:277-303).

⁸² For Durkheim, it is not necessary for the worker to have complete visibility of the whole economic landscape. What is needed is a degree of specialization of tasks so that each worker feels part of the social whole ([1893] 2014:290-91, 313).

insinuation that Marx does not live up to this requirement because he used an external ideal of craftsmanship to critique the existing organization of labor – which, to be fair, is not quite accurate since Marx never said all forms of labor must have the same shape, or that only the pre-industrial artisanal mode of work is non-alienating. One of his main arguments was that civil society cannot realize its principle of the free labor contract unless ownership of the means of production are collectivized so that workers are not forced into exploitative wage labor. Honneth’s defense of his Hegelian-Durkheimian framework over Marxism will be examined in further detail below (Section 3.1). Here, I will briefly consider one difficulty in his argument.

It is worth questioning whether Durkheim’s thought is compatible with the Hegelian agenda of immanent critique and the actualization of reason. Durkheim’s scientific method for sociology is positivist for its study of social facts and search for objective laws of social evolution ([1895] 2014). The positivistic view of society, especially the analytical and normative priority it places on social order, is arguably at odds with the practical intent of immanent critique which aims to expose and overcome the irrational aspects of social reality. Marcuse pointed out this incompatibility: “The positivist idea of *order* refers to an ensemble of laws entirely different from the ensemble of dialectical laws. The former are essentially affirmatory and construct a stable order, the latter, essentially negative and destructive of stability. The former see society as a realm of natural harmony, the latter as a system of antagonisms” ([1941] 1999:349, original emphasis).⁸³ From the (left) Hegelian perspective of the Frankfurt School, a

⁸³ Marcuse’s remarks are directed at Auguste Comte, but they also apply to Durkheim. This next quote also

social pathology is an irrational part of society that stifles individual freedom; from a Durkheimian perspective, a pathology is a social fact that is found in a minority of cases in the average type of society at that specific morphological stage. As a purportedly value-free science, Durkheim's sociology was oriented to the observation of the structural development of societies but not so much the assessment of the rational quality of social life; the latter was, in turn, a central concern for Hegelian and Hegelian-Marxist thought.

It must also be stated immediately that at the substantive level, Durkheim was genuinely concerned about the health of society. He concludes his study saying that anomic and forced divisions of labor amount to a sickness or disease of social morality, and that structural change would be required to ensure harmonious cooperation of social organs and equality of life chances ([1893] 2014:317-18). His analysis of the social structure's transition from a segmented to an organized one has also revealed that the individual's freedom and spheres of activity have continued to expand. However, there is a tension at this point in Durkheim's thinking between an evolutionist position which

articulates the tension between Hegelian thought and positivism: "It had been the fundamental conviction of idealism that truth is not given to man from some external source but originates in the process of interaction between thought and reality, theory and practice. The function of thought was not merely to collect, comprehend, and order facts, but also to contribute a quality that rendered such activity possible, a quality that was thus *a priori* to facts. A decisive portion of the human world therefore consisted, the idealists held, of elements that could not be verified by observation. Positivism repudiated this doctrine, slowly replacing the free spontaneity of thought with predominantly receptive functions... The idealistic idea of reason, we recall, had been intrinsically connected with the idea of freedom and had opposed any notion of a natural necessity ruling over society. Positive philosophy tended instead to equate the study of society with the study of nature, so that natural science, particularly biology, became the archetype of social theory. Social study was to be a science seeking social laws, the validity of which was to be analogous to that of physical laws. Social practice, especially the matter of changing the social system, was herewith throttled by the inexorable. Society was viewed as governed by rational laws that moved with a natural necessity. This position directly contradicted the view held by the dialectical social theory, that society is irrational precisely in that it is governed by natural laws" ([1941] 1999:343-44, original emphasis). It seems Honneth is willing to overlook some crucial differences between Hegel and Durkheim to unify them. That being said, I will also consider whether the radical implications of Hegel are being overstated by Marcuse.

assumes the abnormalities were temporary and thus would disappear eventually, and an interventionist position which considers the pathologies to be acute enough to warrant direct remedial actions (Lukes [1973] 1985:172-78). Durkheim tended to equate the normal with the ideal, and to assume that this state of normality was forthcoming by necessity; but this has failed to come about even in our own era, and it has not been verified empirically that enhanced specialization and interconnection of labor generates the kind of solidarity Durkheim envisioned. If, in contrast to his belief, there is nothing abnormal about anomie or external inequality – if these are actually regular features of the capitalist division of labor – how are we to understand the claim that access to meaningful work is a moral promise of the market economy? While I believe work is still tied to the principle of recognition, I am suggesting that an immanent critique would have to be attentive to the barriers to achieving organic solidarity. The ideal of civil society must be viewed in the broader context of antagonistic forces and structures. Durkheim took a step in this direction when he envisioned the need for occupational groups ([1902] 2014), but he did not achieve a complete theoretical understanding of such obstacles.

Hegel seemed to have a clearer understanding of the inherent antagonism of civil society, and even the absence of real solutions to the problem of poverty (Adorno [1963] 1993:28-9). On the other hand, it is important not to exaggerate the radical implications of his philosophy, even though it is true that the goal of his dialectics was to conceive the world as the product of reason. A key component of Hegel's philosophy was to reconcile the human with the existing world: to accept what is already rational in the present and commit oneself to building a life in this world ([1820] 1991:21-3). Marcuse is correct in

pointing out the differences between positivist and negativistic thought, but it is not at all the case that dialectical theory must entail a revolutionary politics. Hegel was a reformist precisely because there is a rational substance in the present; but his social philosophy also embodied a strange tension between reconciliation and resignation, making it quite difficult to pin down the emancipatory thrust or intent of immanent critique.⁸⁴ These reflections will carry over into the next section on moral economism.

3. Capitalism and Social Freedom

The previous section dealt with Honneth's observations and analyses of capitalist society as a normative order of recognition. He has shown the distortion of relations of recognition into the ideological kind and the erosion of the institutional conditions for self-realization during the neoliberal era, all of which culminated in the breakdown of solidarity. We turn our attention now to Honneth's analysis of capitalism from the perspective of his theory of social freedom. He will evaluate the market economy as a relational institution that has the potential to realize social freedom for its participants through the fulfillment of reciprocal role-obligations. The Hegelian-Durkheimian

⁸⁴ The following expresses the reformist position: "To see only the bad side in everything and to overlook all the positive and valuable qualities is a sign of extreme superficiality. Age, in general, takes a milder view, whereas youth is always dissatisfied; this is because age brings with it maturity of judgment, which does not simply tolerate the bad along with the rest out of sheer lack of interest, but has learnt from the seriousness of life to look for the substance and enduring value of things" (Hegel, in Hardimon 1994:249). The original quote is from *The Philosophy of History* (Hegel [1837] 1988). Adorno describes Hegel as being resigned to the bourgeois social order, while defending him from the charge that he was merely an apologist for what exists ([1963] 1993:43-9). Hegel's philosophy contained an antinomy between the idea of rational freedom (universal) and the reality of unavoidable unfreedom (particular), epitomized by the individual who has no choice but to submit to the "alien necessity" of civil society – which is supposed to be a sphere of autonomous activity. However, Hegel's critique of bourgeois morality's superficial illusion of the individual being free (separate from the social structure) through his notion of ethical life makes his philosophy that much more complex and potentially liberating than any apologist's ideology. According to Adorno, the dialectics still leaves open the possibility of movement toward actualized reason.

framework is the foundation of his moral economism, and he will insist on an immanent approach to critiquing the market economy: the flaws associated with it are to be seen as failures to live up to its own institutionalized normative principle, and not an indication of the illegitimacy of the institution itself. Honneth will diagnose the lack of adequate discursive mechanisms in the labor and consumer markets; he will also claim that neoliberalism is a phase of social misdevelopment.

3.1 Moral Economism

Honneth's normative reconstruction of the market economy as a relational institution that embodies the principle of social freedom has been reviewed in Chapter 1 (Section 4.3.2). In that discussion, we saw how Honneth identified the inherently moral and cooperative nature of market-mediated economic activities. He justified this interpretation of the market by drawing on the functionalist logic of several thinkers: if the market institution is essentially coercive and unjust, members of society would have collectively refused to participate in it. The fact that most people continue to live through this institution, and engage in social struggle from within it, indicates that there are norms and values regulating economic action and a shared commitment between classes and role positions. The existence of such rules and moral culture in the market sphere allows each person to perceive the self-interested activities of others as cooperative, reciprocal acts without which one cannot be actualized as a free member of society ([2011] 2014:183-92).⁸⁵

⁸⁵ In one illustration of normative functionalism, Honneth states that Hegel and Durkheim both believe "the market economy relies on an 'ethical' framework of pre-contractual norms because it is only under this

This normative vision of the market as a sphere of action to which all actors can consent contradicts Marx's understanding of the capitalist market as a coercive institution by virtue of the structure of property ownership ([1849] 1978). Honneth takes up Marx's concerns by recasting them into the framework of moral economism. Since the market economy is a component of democratic ethical life, whatever deficiencies the capitalist system manifests will be explained as deviations from the market institution's own principle – of being a space for self-determination as well as reciprocal cooperation:

... if we take into account the fact that there do not seem to be any practical alternatives to the economic system of the market, then there is good reason to translate the deficits Marx sketches in his critique of capitalism into the horizon opened by Hegel and Durkheim: Neither the problem of exploitation nor that of enforced contracts should be grasped as structural deficits that can only be removed by abolishing the capitalist market economy, but as challenges posed by the market's own normative promise, which can thus only be solved within the market system itself. Only the tradition of moral economism begun by Hegel and continued by Durkheim offers us a theoretical perspective from which we can manage to describe these problems systematically as deviations from the norms underlying the market system. ([2011] 2014:196)

Honneth's focus is on the institutional developments that suggest normative progress – namely, the establishment of discursive mechanisms and legal reforms – or lack thereof (ibid.:197-98). His approach to critique does not assume that exploitation itself is a moral evil which must be eliminated; it examines the capitalist market economy as part of the system of ethical life in a manner that is consistent with his premises of normative reconstruction.⁸⁶

normative condition that it can garner the consent of all economic actors. Just like any other social sphere, the market also relies upon the moral consent of the participants, such that its existence cannot be explained without reference to the supplementary norms that legitimate the market in the eyes of economic actors" ([2011] 2014:183-84).

⁸⁶ According to Rahel Jaeggi (2016), an ethical critique of capitalism problematizes the capitalist form of life as a whole. It reflects on the shortcomings of a social order whose ethical relations are becoming

It is worth asking whether certain elements are not being conflated by framing the project of moral economism in this way. For example, does the potential for freedom and cooperation lie within the capitalistically organized market per se, or in the non-market institutions that regulate market activities? Should the emphasis be on realizing the inherent principle of the market, or containing the market democratically through the power of associations instead of capital? This line of thought is similar to the one pursued by Timo Jütten (2015), who contests Honneth's description of the market economy as a sphere of social freedom. The author points out how in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, it is within the Corporation that workers can be recognized, feel solidarity, and engage in cooperation. It is the array of non-market institutions of civil society, understood broadly as a civic community, which guarantee social freedom, rather than the market itself.⁸⁷ Jütten claims that the capitalist market economy does little to foster an ethos of mutual sympathy or the mode of "being with oneself in the other." Production and exchange under capitalist relations embody only a weak level of intersubjective dependence between people. It makes little difference whether my product or input fulfills the needs of another person; for the most part, I am just looking out for myself, and it is only

impoverished and thus do not realize freedom or self-determination due to the alienating way of life under capitalism. It does not condemn exploitation as immoral – as this is not unique to the capitalist mode of production – and this is in fact consistent with Marx who followed Hegel in denouncing the emptiness of the moral ought. (Jaeggi states that Marx discussed exploitation as a technical-analytic concept, not morally). A justice-oriented critique that portrays exploitation under capitalism as unfair or enslaving is ultimately moralistic; it does not sufficiently analyze the institutions which bring about the social effects which cause the moral outrage. I will discuss this more in Chapter 4.

⁸⁷ "Corporations and similar institutions do not institutionalize principles of social freedom in the market economy. Rather, they limit the scope of the market economy from the outside" (Jütten 2015:195). It should also be added that Hegel had the state play a major role in regulating the market (Beiser 2005; Hardimon 1994; Westphal 1993).

indirectly that my actions “complete” someone else. This does not measure up to the strong intersubjective requirement of social freedom where my self-realization depends upon the other’s self-realization – something only a truly humanized way of working and relating could bring about (Marx [1844] 1994; Cohen 1994).

Market participation and economic activities under capitalism can often be motivated by greed for more wealth or fear of poverty and unemployment depending on one’s position in the class structure and exchange relationships. Honneth is correct about the indispensability of discursive mechanisms for social freedom in economic life, but he could have been clearer about the fact that these are meant to offset the mechanisms of the market which threaten to destabilize the relations of recognition and freedom in the first place. Referring to Hegel’s Corporation and Durkheim’s occupational group, he admits that the purpose of such associations would be to contain market forces:

... within the market economy, chances for morally *restraining* the market will emerge whenever groups or bodies have formed that demand consideration for the interests of other market participants. And the more such discursive mechanisms become anchored in the market, the greater the chance to preserve cooperative awareness of mutually supplemental responsibilities. ([2011] 2014:193, emphasis added)

Honneth’s thinking regarding this issue has been confusing because he portrays the market itself as having some kind of “moral promise” while also conceding that it must be restrained, and that the normativity of economic life is secured by non-market mechanisms. This ambiguity makes it hard to understand whether the theoretical and practical priorities of his immanent critique are to remain within capitalism or to gradually move beyond it – a problem I will discuss in Section 4 below. The issue is obviously more complicated than that, but Honneth does make it seem as if the social

freedom project involves actualizing an inherent ideal of the capitalist market, when in fact the emphasis could be placed on making the economy progressively less capitalist and less dominated by the market. A fruitful way forward may be to acknowledge that “there is nothing in the nature of capitalist production and exchange that ensures regard for the needs of others in the face of monetary incentives to ignore those needs. If we value social freedom, we therefore must restrict the market from the outside” (Jütten 2015:202). I will expand on this in the final chapter, where I will draw attention to the strong link between the capitalist social structure and the genesis of the authoritarian personality. Saving democracy and ethical life from right-wing extremism may require “taming” and “eroding” (Wright 2019) the capitalist institutions.

3.2 The Decline of Discourse

Honneth looks at the current state of the consumer and labor markets in Western societies and observes that the capitalist economy does not actualize the principle of social freedom due to the lack of robust discursive mechanisms in each market. In the sphere of consumption, there is little communication that ties consumers with producers or consumers amongst themselves. This is largely due to the aggravation of material inequality which prevents consumers from seeing each other as equal members of society. There has been a decline in consumer cooperatives as well as an increase in privatistic consumption – all of which have closed off the communicative space for coordinating needs and interests. As a result, consumers cannot realize their freedom reciprocally with producers, who can ignore or manipulate them: “... the always present and always

problematic power gap on the markets for consumer goods has become so large that the suppliers can easily influence consumer needs to their own advantage” ([2011] 2014:222).

With respect to the labor market, Honneth notes how the legacy of workers’ movements during the 19th and 20th centuries have been dismantled in recent decades in the form of market deregulation, falling wages, growth of precarious employment, and decline in the bargaining power of unions. The situation is made worse by the spread of the ideology of self-responsibility which asserts that each person is solely responsible for her survival in the labor market. These structural and ideological factors have eroded the moral culture of solidarity and cooperation between workers and employers which was cultivated by so many years of social struggle. The outcome is individualization:

Whereas previously... a still relatively intact conception of the cooperative embedding of the market ensured that any attempt at such flexibilization would encounter recognizable public resistance, today a largely de-socialized conception of the market is responsible for the tendency to articulate moral discontent in a purely private manner and to resort only to non-verbal forms of resistance. (ibid.:252)

Communicative processes among workers to formulate and articulate collective demands hardly take place anymore. Honneth surmises this has to do with the expansion of the service sector which does not have the same history of unionization and collective struggle like the industrial sector; as such, workers in these low-wage, precarious jobs are unlikely to establish strong and lasting relations of solidarity (ibid.:247-48).

3.3 Neoliberalism as Misdevelopment

These structural transformations documented about the labor market are characteristic of what is generally understood as neoliberalism: the ideology and policies

responsible for market fundamentalism, financialization, privatization, and deregulation in the late 20th century.⁸⁸ Neoliberal transformations allowed transnational corporations to pursue profits on a global scale, which resulted in capital flight, falling wages, and the weakening of unions and the welfare state. Under present circumstances, employees have few opportunities to co-determine the major decisions related to their jobs with their employers. Honneth calls this situation a misdevelopment since the labor market has turned into a competitive and fragmented sphere of action: “The degree to which this current state of the market-mediated sphere of labour represents a misdevelopment can be precisely gauged by the re-transformation of the promise of social freedom into the promise of merely individual freedom” (ibid.:253). The capitalist labor market in its present form does not function as a relational institution that provides workers with fulfilling jobs, a living wage, and a sense of cooperation within the division of labor.

Let us remind ourselves of Honneth’s definition of misdevelopment: it is the failure to meet the demands of social freedom underlying a specific institutional context (ibid.:128; see also Chapter 1 Section 4.4). There are two issues about this argument that I would like to highlight. The first issue has to do with Honneth’s reliance on a normative teleology to claim that neoliberalism is a phase of social misdevelopment. His procedure of normative reconstruction illustrated the progressive realization of social freedom in the central institutions of modern society; and from this perspective, the coming of neoliberal

⁸⁸ The sociology of neoliberalism is a complicated field with competing explanations of the rise of this political-economic ideology and the widely varying policy implementations across countries (cf. Prasad 2006; Krippner 2011; Mann 2013; Lachmann 2016). While neoliberalism may have been the project of the power elite to a certain extent, it was often the outcome of unintended consequences with little internal coherence. Each national case of neoliberalization should be placed within its economic and geopolitical context.

capitalism represents a course of development that contradicts this historical trajectory of expanding freedom. But in contrast to this scenario (we may call it the social-democratic teleology), it is possible to come up with alternative narratives. Christopher Zurn (2015:196-97) argues that it is just as plausible to say that the market is steadily realizing the moral ideal of individual freedom for unrestricted action (libertarian teleology); or that the market has no inherent moral content, and it is only getting more efficient for business activity as it sheds the restrictions and rules placed upon it (neoliberal teleology). According to these alternative accounts, neoliberalism is not a misdevelopment at all. The author's point is that the historical record about the moral direction of economic change in recent history is mixed at best, and one can find evidence that partially confirms the competing teleologies – Honneth may simply be interpreting history selectively in his argument's favor. Zurn concludes that Honneth needs a morally objective, universal standard so that he can evaluate the competing narratives in order to claim that his reconstructed picture of the market economy really is the correct interpretation: "... a judgment that the recent disembedding of the market represents a misdevelopment requires a moral account of the way history *should* have gone, but did not – and this cannot be settled by historical facts alone" (ibid.:199-200, original emphasis).

I believe this criticism somewhat oversimplifies the matter by ignoring how the theory of social freedom is based on a context-transcending notion of reason justifying the view of rational progress in history (see Chapter 2 Section 3). According to the logic of Honneth's framework, libertarian or neoliberal accounts do not have the same level of validity as moral economism because they contain irrational elements by subscribing to a

deficient or incomplete model of freedom: for example, libertarianism takes the model of negative freedom to such an extreme that its lived-out consequences in real life would be radically unfree from a rational standpoint. A program of immanent critique in the Hegelian tradition would consider only one among the three hypothetical teleologies to be normatively valid; the other two do not have the component of the actualization of reason. Still, Zurn manages to underscore how arbitrary Honneth's argument appears if one does not accept his premises and concepts. I think a more subtle criticism is made by Giorgio Fazio (2019) when he identifies two different analyses of neoliberalism in Honneth's writings. In *Freedom's Right*, neoliberalism is diagnosed as a misdevelopment according to the social freedom teleology, where the market economy is described as an institution which elicits the moral consent of agents. In Honneth's study of neoliberalism as a paradox, he is much more sociological as he traces the subversion of recognitive relations and the submission of the masses to the dominant ideology in recent decades. It is here that Honneth carries out the genealogical procedure which he had stated was necessary for the viability of normative reconstruction ([2000] 2009b; also Chapter 2 Section 5.2) – something that is missing in *Freedom's Right* with its strong emphasis on moral consensus and progress. The genealogical analysis of the inversion of society's emancipatory potential forces us, Fazio (2019) argues, to come to terms with the fact that ethical relations intersect with or are shaped by relations of power and coercion. Some agents do not share or can even ignore the norms and values of the market sphere, and cooperation with the practices of the capitalist economy is to a large extent mandated by the existing order's cultural hegemony (Gramsci [1947] 1971).

Such an intervention successfully exposes the tension between the normative functionalism of Honneth's later critical theory and the conflict-theoretic implications of his earlier program. It also stresses in a fruitful way the importance of taking issues of antagonistic forces and interests into account (without relinquishing the normative aspects of social life) when engaging in a critique of capitalism. In the next section, it will be shown again that this balanced view of power and ethical life is missing in Honneth's account of democratic socialism. The second issue about the diagnosis of neoliberalism has to do with the somewhat static quality of the social freedom ideal being employed. Since I will take up this topic more thoroughly in Section 5, I will merely formulate the questions: If neoliberalism is a misdevelopment, is the overall normative goal for society to go back to the level of reciprocal cooperation and market embeddedness of the pre-neoliberal era? Does actualizing the ideal of social freedom involve achieving a robust social democracy, and nothing more? I characterize this use of the ideal of social freedom as static because its meaning appears to stay the same once it has been formulated, and it places limits on the extent of emancipatory change imaginable. Honneth seems to close off or restrict the realms of political possibility by positing the existing world as already free, thereby implying that the main priority regarding neoliberalism is to go back on the right track of social development. I will suggest that the long-term goal of democratic socialism should be much more open-ended than what Honneth allows. Even if the short- or medium-term goal is to achieve a regulated form of capitalism, the vision of a free and rational world should continue to evolve across time and situations.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ By these remarks, I do not mean that every critique of capitalism must argue for the total transcendence

4. Democratic Socialism

Honneth's critique of capitalism exposed the various misdevelopments afflicting contemporary society. However, by conceptualizing capitalist society as a normative order of recognition composed of three relational institutions of freedom, he has in a certain way justified the current social structure and existing set of institutions. We are left wondering whether a commitment to normative reconstruction and immanent critique forces us to adopt a politics of liberal reformism. Is a fully democratic ethical life still a capitalist society? Does "socialism" mean anything anymore if critical theory is oriented to the actualization of a social rationality inherent in the capitalist social structure? While I consider Honneth's positions on these points to be vague, perhaps we can interpret him as inviting us to reconsider whether it still makes sense to continue demarcating the two social systems – capitalism versus socialism – so sharply. This is what I believe he is trying to do in *The Idea of Socialism* ([2015] 2017), which extends the argument of *Freedom's Right*. In the book, Honneth redefines socialism in terms of social freedom and reframes the socialist project as one of democratic experimentation.

4.1 Experimental-Reformist Agenda

The book begins with an examination of the different national traditions of socialist thought in Europe, and Honneth identifies social freedom as the core principle uniting the early socialists. The very idea of socialism came forth during the period of

of the capitalist social order by a complete socialization of the means of production. Such a requirement would be a form of external critique where the critic effectively deems all non-socialist societies to be unjust and in need of changing. Instead, what I am urging is that critical theory should not close off future possibilities for the sake of remaining immanent, for such a move may in turn be apologetic or ideological.

capitalist modernization as a public reaction against the market economy's failure to live up to the French Revolution ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.⁹⁰ With the common understanding that capitalism has a corrosive impact on society, socialists from Robert Owen to Charles Fourier called for the placing of social controls on economic activity, primarily through state intervention and collectivization of production (ibid.:6-11). They contested the prevailing legalistic and asocial view of freedom which served to justify capitalist economic activity, and tried to reinterpret freedom more broadly to reconcile it with the ideal of solidarity:

The contradiction in the moral demands of the French Revolution could only be removed if individual freedom was no longer understood as the private pursuit of interests, but rather as a relation in which the pursuits of individual members of society complement each other in the economic power-center of the new society. (ibid.:12)

While socialist intellectuals did not articulate the idea of social freedom precisely enough in Honneth's opinion, they nevertheless presented an alternative concept of freedom predicated on an ethos of mutual sympathy. They put forth an idea of self-realization where the flourishing of one individual depends on the flourishing of others: "The point of departure of the socialist movement is the holistic notion that the community of solidarity, rather than the individual, is the bearer of freedom. All the measures... that would later seek to eliminate the evils of capitalism were intended to create a society whose members supplement each other and treat each other as equals" (ibid.:25). The

⁹⁰ "... [T]he early thinkers who called themselves 'socialists' were driven by genuine normative principles they felt they could derive from the demands on the French Revolution" (Honneth [2015] 2017:10). The three ideals of the French Revolution make up the overarching principle of social freedom: "The motto for reconciling these three principles, brought into conflict with each other by the prevailing economic order, is 'social freedom'" (ibid.:27).

problem with the socialist program, however, was that it operated under an industrial or materialist paradigm which led socialists to assume that the economy is the only sphere of society in need of reorganization.

Honneth delves into the three problematic assumptions of socialist thought rooted in the paradigm of industrialism: namely, that (a) the economy is the only institution in need of reform for the attainment of social freedom, (b) the working class has an interest in overthrowing capitalist relations of production and in forming an oppositional movement, and (c) the demise of capitalism and shift toward socialism is historically necessary and inevitable. By referring exclusively to the economy as the site of reform or revolutionary change, the socialists had failed to consider the political processes of popular rule and democratic negotiation, and how these may be relevant for achieving socialism (ibid.:33-6). The materialist bias also prevented them from perceiving the role of other institutions in the reproduction of society, and whether social freedom should or can take root in contexts outside of economic life. The premise about the working class was problematic because intellectuals had imposed the desire for emancipation onto workers without empirically demonstrating it.⁹¹ Lastly, the premise of the inevitable demise of capitalism led to simplistic and optimistic views on social change, with a lack of reflection on the practical methods involved in a socialist transformation:

⁹¹ “... [S]ocialist theory was in danger of becoming self-referential by projecting onto social reality a collective movement which was meant to justify its own prognoses, but which had in fact merely been constructed by ascribing certain interests to workers” (Honneth [2015] 2017:39). This is a contestable point. On the one hand, Honneth is right to point out the diverse and fragmentary worldviews among the working class – making it problematic to assign a homogeneous class interest. But on the other, he disregards the wealth of historical documentation of working class struggles that arguably express an almost class-wide desire for the non-capitalist organization of labor.

By assuming historical inevitability... socialists robbed themselves of the chance to view themselves as a movement whose best way of realizing the idea of social freedom under given historical conditions was to experiment socially. Instead, all representatives of socialism were convinced that they already knew what the new social organization of freedom would look like without ever having to explore the opportunities for change offered by rapidly changing circumstances. (ibid.:46)

Honneth traces the origins of these assumptions back to the social-intellectual contexts of industrialization and to the Enlightenment legacy of faith in progress; he thinks these premises should be discarded and the ideal of social freedom should be rearticulated in a way that is relevant to the present era (ibid.:48-50).

The second half of the book is where Honneth outlines a new vision of socialism. He now characterizes socialism as the realization of social freedom in not just the economy but in all three functionally differentiated spheres of society through practical reforms guided by the ethos and method of democratic experimentalism. Experimentation is regarded as the suitable method for designing and assessing various proposals to make economic life more “social.” For Honneth, one of the major flaws of Marxism was its deterministic account of the solution, which involved the complete abolishment of private property (Marx and Engels [1848] 1978:484-90). The idea discouraged many socialists from exploring other possible ways of collectivizing the economy. A viable account of socialism must not stick to one solution but must be open to an array of options (Honneth [2015] 2017:51-9). Following Dewey, he stresses free communication as the key to successful experimenting: “... the normative guideline in the experimental search for the most comprehensive answer to a socially problematic situation must be thought of as the removal of barriers to free communication among the members of society so that problems can be solved in the most intelligent fashion” (ibid.:60). This reflects the core

pragmatist insight that intelligent solutions are reached when all who are affected by a social problem are discursively included in the problem-solving process.

As such, socialism is no longer a project of the industrial working class, and it no longer posits a specific blueprint or end-goal like the elimination of private property. Socialism is a democratic project of all citizens in society which involves trying out a variety of institutional reforms toward the realization of social freedom:

The guideline for any experimentation with different economic combinations must lie in strengthening “the social” in the economic sphere as much as possible, enabling all those involved to satisfy their needs through complementary activity without compulsion or restricted influence... A revised socialism, therefore, should assemble an internal archive of past attempts at economic collectivization as a kind of memory bank detailing the advantages and disadvantages of specific measures. (ibid.:67, 70)

Trial and error of different reform proposals will generate a learning process, allowing citizens to make adjustments to their vision of a desirable future and the means to get there (ibid.:66-74). But this vision of socialism as democratic experimentation involving all citizens is still incomplete without separating social freedom from the economy itself. In the last part of the book, Honneth reframes the socialist project as the attainment of social freedom in all spheres of society.

Earlier generations of socialists framed their projects in purely economic terms because they had failed to see the connection between social freedom and the functional differentiation of society. Honneth uses the organic analogy to illustrate how the family, market economy, and public sphere are independent yet interrelated components that

function together to reproduce the democratic social order (ibid.:90-6).⁹² If socialism is not just an economic agenda, and the proper functioning of each institution is essential for the reproduction of the social whole, then a contemporary statement on socialism needs to address the realization of social freedom in all three institutional spheres:

A revised socialism... assumes that all three spheres of action require free cooperation and thus social freedom. This form of socialism cannot, therefore, content itself with abolishing heteronomy and alienated labor in the economic sphere. Instead, it must realize that modern society cannot be genuinely *social* as long as the spheres of personal relationships and democratic politics have not been freed of coercion and influence. (ibid.:89-90, original emphasis).

While all three spheres are given equal weight in this new project of socialism, Honneth gives the public sphere a privileged role in steering change toward greater social freedom. Drawing on Dewey again, he claims that the public sphere is the only social organ where practical knowledge gets generated through discourse. Social problems of whatever kind can be brought forth for a collective search toward a solution, and it is the only institution with the power to turn solutions into law (ibid.:96-7).⁹³

Honneth's modifications to the idea of socialism can be summarized in three strokes. He has replaced (a) the working class with all citizens of society as the subjects

⁹² Honneth's incorporation of the organic analogy has its difficulties. He inherits the idea of society's functionally interdependent parts from Hegel, Durkheim, and Parsons, but he does not use the latter's systemic logic. For Honneth, the process of functional differentiation is not autopoietic; there is a reflexive-democratic aspect to it ([2015] 2017:94, 97). In this sense, he moves away from structural functionalism and moves toward a pragmatist perspective. However, I will show in Section 5 that he follows Durkheim and Parsons – and perhaps goes beyond them – in taking the “society as organism” idea almost literally. This will create problems for the coherence of Honneth's definition of social pathology.

⁹³ Since the public sphere steers social change democratically and reflexively, functional differentiation is no longer an autopoietic process having its own logic: “Functional differentiation, which thus far seemed to take place automatically, now becomes an object of democratic politics” (Honneth [2015] 2017:97). See *The Creativity of Action* (Joas [1992] 1996: Ch. 4) for a similar argument.

of the socialist project; (b) the teleological theory of history with an open-ended model of historical experimentation; and (c) the ideology of an economically administered society with the vision of a democratically regulated way of life (ibid.:105-06). The critique of capitalism should now focus on the ways contemporary society fails to realize the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity – i.e., social freedom – in all three institutional spheres, and should rely on the method of experimentation to make suitable, gradual reforms. His closing remark emphasizes the intersubjective character of today’s project of socialism: “Only if all members of society can satisfy the needs they share with all others – physical and emotional intimacy, economic independence and political self-determination – by relying on the sympathy and support of their partners in interaction will our society have become social in the full sense of the term” (ibid.:107-08).

4.2 On Durkheim and Dewey

It should be evident to readers that Honneth’s statement on socialism integrates the insights of Hegel’s ethics, Durkheim’s corporatism, and Dewey’s democracy into one comprehensive idea. In this section, I will discuss in more detail the influence Durkheim and Dewey have had on Honneth’s vision of the democratic society. I will close with a discussion of the difficulties his experimental-reformist program encounters.

4.2.1 Evolutionary Corporatism

Honneth’s belief that socialism could be attained through piecemeal reforms puts him much closer to Eduard Bernstein ([1899] 1993) than to orthodox Marxists. Bernstein departed from the Marxian tenets by arguing that capitalism is unlikely to be overthrown

by economic crises and the proletarian revolution, and that socialism should be pursued through a social-democratic politics within a constitutional framework. Durkheim ([1928] 2010) also arrived at similar views in his study of the history of socialist doctrines.

Taking socialist thought not as a scientific theory of society but as a social fact arising out of a certain condition of industrial development, he distilled the meaning of socialism as the collective will or movement to organize the various labor activities: “We denote as socialist every doctrine which demands the connection of all economic functions, or of certain among them, which are at the present time diffuse, to the directing and conscious centers of society” (ibid.:19). Durkheim recommends putting industries in contact with the state rather than subordinating them to it. Intermediary organizations which represent the different sectors and connect them to each other are needed because the state is too far removed from each field of work; Durkheim believes this can be fulfilled by occupational groups. These representative bodies that would enforce industrial policies, deal with labor relations and disputes, and coordinate the level of productive activities. Cumulatively, this amounts to the moral regulation of economic life, and the moral integration of every citizen (ibid.:197-204; [1895] 2014).⁹⁴

Durkheim was a proponent of socialism to the extent that it strived to contain the harmful ramifications of the capitalist economy by establishing corporative organizations

⁹⁴ Durkheim’s argument grows out of his criticism of Comte and Henri Saint-Simon. Comte believed that the growth of the division of labor threatened social stability, and that moral consensus was necessary to maintain the cohesion of society. For Durkheim, such a consensus is no longer tenable or necessary, as the division of labor produces a new kind of (organic) solidarity for society’s advanced stage of development. He differs from Saint-Simon, who thought unbridled industrialism could be the unifying base for society, whereas Durkheim recognized the dangers of anomie and extreme individualism, and thus the need for a certain amount of shared moral beliefs through regulation and integration of social life (Durkheim [1928] 2010:196-204; Gouldner [1958] 2010; Lukes [1973] 1985:251-54).

that put in place an adequate level of regulation of activities; his primary concern was to repair the moral fabric of society by resolving anomie and unjust contracts. However, he disavowed any kind of politics that encouraged class warfare or revolutionary disorder. Revolutionary socialists were wrong to reduce workers to mere producers who possessed incompatible material interests to their employers. Durkheim believed workers and employers had much more in common with each other as people by virtue of living in the same moral culture. Therefore, he could not support a socialist program that envisaged a ruptural break with the course of society's development. The only form of socialism he could support was one that would grow out of the current society in a way that will reconstitute moral solidarity at the new morphological stage of industrial development:

It is a question, in the end, of knowing whether socialism is miraculous, as it imagines, whether it is contrary to the nature of our societies, or whether it accords with their natural evolution, so that it does not have to destroy them in order to establish itself. It is to this latter view that history seems to me to point. (Durkheim, in Lukes [1973] 1985:546)

Honneth has inherited similar views about the desirability, possibility, and general shape of socialism. He also seems to think Durkheim's analysis of capitalist society is a form of immanent critique rather than an external one: "It is not a matter of putting a completely new society in the place of the existing one, but of adapting the latter to the new social conditions" (Durkheim [1928] 2010:204). Clearly, Honneth finds this position to be compatible with Hegel's outlook on reconciliation. Both Hegel and Durkheim see the need for corporative organizations and regard the state as the unifying center of society.

There is also an tension between the positivistic Durkheim and the dialectical Hegel. Durkheim's corporatist argument stems from an evolutionary theory of social

change in which the transition from a simple society to an advanced one is a natural progression. The network of occupational groups is meant to deal with the pathological divisions of labor caused by the rapid pace of modernization. In contrast, Hegel does not view history in natural or linear terms since the whole point of history is to overcome natural necessity. It is the process of reason's embodiment in the world as self-conscious Spirit through the transcendence of intrinsic contradictions.⁹⁵ Regarding economic life, he thought civil society had to be placed under state control because in the end only an external authority can regulate the clash of interests; only the state can unify the variety of particular interests with the universal, common good ([1820] 1991: §260; Hardimon 1994:208-13). Arguably, Hegel was more keenly aware of social antagonisms and disharmony: "Reason and freedom, conceived as genuine dialectical concepts, cannot be fulfilled in the prevailing system of civil society" (Marcuse [1941] 1999:202). I do not intend to imply that Hegel's ideas are superior to Durkheim's. In fact, Durkheim had a more realistic view of the balance between the state and associational groups than Hegel, who had an unquestioning faith in the necessity and efficacy of top-down authority. What I am saying is that Honneth's synthesis of the two thinkers involves de-emphasizing the dialectical aspect of Hegel; it is only by smoothing over the conflicting aspects of their thought that Hegel and Durkheim could be merged into his moral economism and a justification of reformist politics.

⁹⁵ Hegel divides (philosophical) history into the Oriental, Greco-Roman, and German-Christian epochs or eras to depict the trajectory of Spirit becoming self-aware of its freedom ([1820] 1991: §§341-60; [1837] 2004). Progress from the despotic to the partially free, and to the rationally free civilization, is not linear or quantitative: there must be a qualitative dimension to progress where the overcoming of limitations and old forms leads to cultural enrichment and the transformation of the meaning of freedom (Beiser 2005:273; Marcuse [1941] 1999:230-31; 240-41).

4.2.2 Cooperative Model of Democracy

In this section, I will discuss the specific ways in which Honneth appropriates Dewey's ideas to build an alternative to the liberal, republican, and procedural models of democracy. This fourth, cooperative model emphasizes the centrality of a just division of labor out of which a democratic ethos can arise. Honneth ([1998] 2007) had already formulated this argument earlier in his career. I understand his recent statement on democratic socialism to be an extension of the basic idea; it highlights more than before the importance of creative problem solving and social experimentation.

In order to justify the claim that Honneth presents a fourth model of democracy, it is necessary to clarify what the other three models are. In his discussion of the dominant theories of democracy in political philosophy, Habermas ([1996] 1998) identified the three ideal types of liberal, republican, and procedural democracy. Liberal democracy is characterized by a strong priority of negative freedom and individual rights. It has a minimalist conception of politics, in which the state is supposed to protect the rights of citizens to pursue their private interests with as little public intervention as possible. Politics is therefore restricted to citizens aggregating their preferences to elect governments and influence decisions. Republican democracy involves the exercise of popular sovereignty by the people to engage in collective self-determination. It is the citizens who continually constitute and reaffirm state power as an expression of the popular will. Unlike liberal democracy, it has a communicative conception of politics, as it emphasizes the public sphere's role in facilitating will-formation. For Habermas, however, this model is empirically unrealistic due to its demanding requirement of active

participation and assumption of common virtues or “ethical self-understanding” among people. He makes the case for the procedural model, which focuses on the process of opinion formation in the public sphere. In a procedural deliberative democracy, civil society exerts a rationalizing effect on the state via the public sphere by forcing it to take public opinion into account, thereby improving the quality of its decisions and problem-solving. What matters for the procedural model is achieving a certain quality of rational discourse among citizens in the public sphere and among lawmakers within the state, rather than aggregating private interests or expressing a set of communal values – something that can be achieved through the observance of discursive rules which attempt to secure communication free from domination (Habermas [1992] 1996: Chs. 7-8).

According to Honneth ([2004] 2009:27-9), the Frankfurt School theorists have all been committed to a democratic vision that is neither liberal nor communitarian. They believed that individual freedom depends on a common set of cooperative practices that possess a rational quality; an emancipating democratic society would facilitate the self-realization of individuals reciprocally through practices that are always subject to rational justification. Habermas’ theory of democracy embodies these features and is oriented to the actualization of reason; but it has also been criticized for placing too much emphasis on the procedural norms of deliberation (Rosenfeld and Arato 1998; Bernstein [1996] 1998). One of the ways Honneth contributes to democratic theory is by restoring the social values or ethos which give discursive procedures their meaning in the first place.

Honneth examines an early paper by Dewey ([1888] 1969) back when he was still quite Hegelian in his way of thinking and finds that Dewey already had a conception of

democracy as a cooperative enterprise in which every individual fulfills a specific role and thereby contributes to the reproduction of the society. The quest for self-realization by each person leads to the cultivation of an ethical individualism and a normative expectation of reciprocal responsibility; they come to learn that genuine freedom consists in developing one's talents within this network of communication and trust with others (Honneth [1998] 2007:222-25). But as Dewey began to distance himself metaphysical frameworks of thought, he stopped taking self-realization to be a naturally occurring process. By the middle phase of his career, he came to see growth of the human self in terms of habit formation. Habits, according to Dewey (2002a:83-90), are recipes of action that are useful for accomplishing practical tasks in our natural and social environments, and they are always subject to modification when they stop working effectively. Moreover, we develop socially useful habits with respect to the multiple reference groups to which we belong: "... human beings can develop only those capabilities and needs into stable habits that have met with the approval and esteem of their particular reference group... Since every member of society always belongs to various reference groups, the superimposed layers of expectations see to it that... an individual only forms habits of action that are socially useful" (Honneth [1998] 2007:227). The image of democracy arrived at is one of "free exchange between cooperating groups" (ibid.). There is a symbiotic link between the individual who contributes to the group, which in turn liberates the potential of the individual (Dewey [1916] 2004; [1927] 1954).

Democracy in the Deweyan spirit is communicative, but unlike the procedural model the communication does not merely take the form of intersubjective speech

between speakers; it has more to do with the collective deployment of individual abilities and resources to solve shared problems. As a way of life, democracy is about bringing together the social intelligence of the community: “The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is not belief that these things are complete but that, if given a show, they will grow and be able to generate progressively the knowledge and wisdom needed to guide collective action” (Dewey 2002b:265-66). Intelligence refers not to the raw cognitive aptitude of any single individual, but to the knowledge and ideas that are socially generated and put to practical use. Intelligence is social because, unlike any form of dogma, it is the product of the sharing of ideas and the verification of hypotheses through scientific thinking (ibid.:217-24). Adhering to precedent or a priori principles is undemocratic and unscientific precisely because it does not invite dialogue and active participation in problem-solving (ibid.:257-64; Honneth [1998] 2007:228).⁹⁶

On top of this, what is remarkable about the Deweyan idea of democracy for Honneth is its radical egalitarian requirement of a fair and just division of labor in society. Only a fair and just division of labor could give rise to a cooperative and solidaristic ethos, which in turn would give meaning to the procedures of democratic politics.

⁹⁶ A central concern for Dewey was to make the Great Society into a Great Community, i.e., to repair the state of social fragmentation by restoring an engaged public: “Communication can alone create a great community... Regarded as an idea, democracy... is the idea of community life itself” (2002b:240-41). His vision rested on a strong humanistic faith in the capacity of ordinary people to learn, cooperate, and arrive at intelligent solutions to problems. The successful resolution of a problem through the sharing of insights results in a consummatory experience of unification and enrichment for both individuals and society: “... democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion... It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (ibid.:250-51). This aspect of spiritual invigoration of the community is not discussed by Honneth.

Citizens are united not by discursive rules but by a pre-political form of association prior to those rules:

Therefore, democratic procedures of will-formation and the just organization of the division of labor imply one another's existence: only a kind of division of labor that grants each member of society a fair chance in accordance with his or her autonomously discovered abilities and talents to assume socially desirable occupations will allow this consciousness of communal cooperation to emerge. Only in this way will democratic procedures necessarily become the best instrument for rationally solving common problems. ([1998] 2007:232-33)⁹⁷

This demanding prerequisite of social equality found in Dewey sets Honneth's model of democracy apart from Habermas' model, which makes equality a possible outcome of the political process, but not a pre-political requirement of democracy itself:

Because of the functional conditions of democratic publics... Dewey has to regard the establishment of just, cooperative forms of division of labor as a normative requirement that is valid in principle and thus an internal component of every genuine idea of democracy. Habermas, however, cannot grant the demand for social equality conceptual priority over the principle of democratic will-formation; he has to make it dependent upon the contingent state of politically articulated goals. Because of this one-sided restriction of democracy to the political sphere, one loses sight of the fact that a democratic public sphere can function only on the tacit premise that all members of society be included in the social reproduction process. (ibid.:234-35)

Honneth's argument is that citizens need to be motivated about participating in the will-formation process and interested in abiding by the procedural rules. In the Deweyan model, procedures of deliberation have their meaning given by a common ethos, and they should be an internalized democratic habit among the people as part of their way of life

⁹⁷ There is also an important difference with Habermas regarding the state. Whereas for Habermas the state is a systemic institution (that is often in tension with society), Dewey and Honneth conceive the state as a "second public" or a secondary association that connects the various publics, regulates the consequences of action, and secures the legal framework for communication and problem-solving. The steering mechanism of the state itself is reflexive and democratic (Honneth [1998] 2007:229-30; Dewey [1927] 1954).

(ibid.:235). The foundation of this fourth model of democracy, therefore, is the division of labor, which is the source of a democratic ethos of solidarity necessary for reflexive communal cooperation.⁹⁸

Creative democracy, as Dewey ([1939] 1988) called it, is an unending project because a democratic society must reconstitute itself constantly in the face of new challenges by remaking its institutions and revitalizing the democratic ethos through the sharing of experiences. In his response to Leon Trotsky regarding the path taken by the Soviet Union, Dewey argued that social change must be accomplished democratically, as it is incoherent to use non-democratic means to achieve so-called democratic ends ([1937] 1987). The ends themselves are always in flux since we regularly reassess what we believe are desirable. Democratic means inform the ends we formulate, and thus the democratic way of life necessitates ongoing adaptation and adjustments – especially because we are fallible beings (Bernstein 2010:83). Finally, Dewey was sympathetic to socialist ideas and politics in his lifetime, but he was never fully committed to a program of economic collectivization. Even though his ideas clearly had many things in common with democratic socialism, his priority was to strengthen democracy – and seemed to keep an open-ended view as to the economic transformations that would result from the revitalization of democracy (Westbrook 1991: Ch. 12).

⁹⁸ Another important source of the democratic ethos which Honneth does not discuss is education (Dewey [1916] 2004). A progressive education instills democratic values to children and allows them to grow intellectually and personally in the broadest sense. Like Durkheim ([1925] 1973), Dewey considered the schooling experience to be formative of a person's moral character, and essential for social order and change: "Through an educated public, democracy can become self-correcting" (Fesmire 2015:156). Dewey ([1934] 2013) also gives democracy a religious significance, but this has been criticized for putting forward a rather empty universalism (Joas [1997] 2000: Ch. 7).

It is clear that Honneth has inherited so many of Dewey's insights and principles for his new model of democracy; and the idea of a creative and cooperative democracy is consonant – basically equivalent – with the revised notion of socialism. Because he frames his vision of democratic socialism in this way, however, Honneth runs up against some difficulties. I will close this section with an exploration of some of these issues.

4.3 Discussion

Honneth has produced an elegant treatise on socialism that builds off nicely on the ideas developed in his previous works. However, one cannot help but notice the omission of certain issues in what he has presented. First of all, it is curious how he has written an entire book on socialism and the tasks involved in achieving it, without ever mentioning the capitalist class and the enormous power they wield. A discussion of class power is crucial because capitalists and large businesses could mobilize their wealth and resources to block attempts at social change which they perceive to be undesirable. In the American context, for example, the proposal to raise the level of taxation of the wealthy triggers powerful resistance from these factions and the politicians who represent them. Honneth cites *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Wright 2010) in his book; but this work stresses above all that capitalism is a system shaped by a constellation of power relationships – and these structures of power must be confronted and changed if capitalist society is to move toward (and go beyond) social democracy.

In fact, what is vague about Honneth's definition of socialism as the realization of social freedom in all three institutional spheres is that it does not make a clear distinction

between socialism and social democracy. Is there a difference between socialism and partially regulated capitalism if the core socialist principle can be summed up broadly as “democratization”?⁹⁹ This idea of incrementally attained socialism is silent about the long-term goals of change, and some argue that not having a clear direction could lead to the degeneration of leftist politics into an irrational form of populism (Arato 2019). The issue is compounded by the way Honneth has framed his project of immanent critique. By describing capitalist society as a normative order that already embodies the ideals of recognition and freedom to a large extent, the critique of society becomes tailored to (exploring the possibility of) the fuller realization of what is already in place. Because he had emphasized so strongly the normativity of the interdependence between employers and workers, he glosses over the antagonistic side of such relations in the interest of delivering an appeasing vision of a democratic society that is “realistic” and within reach.

Therefore, the usefulness of Honneth’s statement on socialism is questionable if it does not inquire into the structural preconditions of carrying out social experiments in the first place. Trial-and-error may get us so far, but not beyond a certain point, because there are zones of unattainability (Wright 2000) or structural obstacles that block the more far-reaching reforms. Downplaying this issue results in a naïve view; the project of socialism

⁹⁹ Even if one no longer sees the complete collectivization of the economy as a viable goal, it is important to have some kind of vision of socialism as a *non*-capitalist system rather than simply a regulated version of capitalism. This is where it should differ decisively from social democracy: “Social democracy has, traditionally, not given much weight to strengthening noncapitalist forms of economic organization. Its core ideology was to support the smooth functioning of capitalism and the use part of the surplus generated within capitalism to fund social insurance and public goods. Capitalists were left relatively free to invest as they wished on the basis of private profit-maximizing criteria. The state provided incentives of various sorts to shape investment priorities, and certainly the state tried to create the public goods and regulatory environment that would be congenial to capital accumulation, but it generally did not attempt to nurture noncapitalist sectors and practices” (Wright 2015:250).

is complex precisely because capitalism has the capacity to sustain and reproduce itself. It can tolerate – and even coopt – the small reforms and corporatist developments.¹⁰⁰ This does not mean Honneth must abandon the idea of democratic experimentation, or take up a revolutionary brand of socialism. What is needed is a balanced perspective: between a normative functionalism that stresses the centrality of norms and values shared by members of society and a conflict-theoretic framework that highlights the reality of class antagonism and obstacles; a framework that is communicative but does not abstract away from real materialist issues; a program of critique that is socially immanent but context-transcending as well, such that it does not merely validate the status quo.

The final section below will illustrate how the impasse of Honneth's thought stems from his static use of the social freedom principle and his confused notions of social pathology, both of which have undermined the critical intent of his theory.

5. The Changing Meanings of Pathology

In this chapter, I have discussed the pathologies and misdevelopments of society identified by Honneth across his many works. My coverage of them has been largely substantive, involving a documentation of the specific problems that were revealed by his

¹⁰⁰ Marx and Friedrich Engels were dismissive of reformist programs for this reason, denouncing them as bourgeois socialism or utopian socialism. These socialists “want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class.” ([1848] 1978:498). But Marx and Engels were convinced that small experiments will ultimately “secure the continued existence of bourgeois society” (ibid.:496). Likewise, Rosa Luxemburg ([1908] 2006) was skeptical of evolutionary socialism since it did not take seriously the laws of capitalism. Nonetheless, she advocated an experimental approach to change since reliable blueprints of socialism do not exist: “The Socialist system or society should only be, and can only be, an historical product, born out of the school of its own experiences, born in the course of its realization, as a result of the developments of living history... New territory. A thousand problems. Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescing life falls into a thousand new forms and improvisations, brings to light creative new force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts” ([1922] 2006:215).

critical theories of recognition and social freedom. I have paid somewhat less attention to the analytical-structural unity of the cases – or if there even is one. The purpose of this final section is to come to a better understanding of what Honneth means by social pathology by tracing the shifts and developments of his ideas. This discussion will set the stage for further examining the coherence of Honneth's project of immanent critique in the fourth chapter.

I will first look at an important paper by Honneth which takes his philosophical and social-theoretic views in a new direction. It will be shown how he turns to a naturalistic form of thinking by conceiving the social system as an organism that can fall ill when its interrelated parts (institutions) are not in harmony and do not fulfill their functions. Hence, according to the later Honneth, a social pathology should be thought of as a disease of the whole social organism. I will indicate that this turn to organicism ends up locating the pathology at the highest level of the system, away from the individual's subjectively experienced suffering. It will be argued that the merits of this move for social critique is highly questionable. I then review the variety of diagnostic concepts employed by Honneth, which include injustice, pathology, misdevelopment, and disease. I will note the inconsistencies and lack of definitional unity, but also consider the possible benefits of having a singular overarching concept of social pathology. In the final sub-section, I will argue that Honneth's critique of society has the danger of not being sufficiently emancipatory and context-transcending due to these problems as well as the static way in which he uses the normative principle of freedom. It will be claimed that the normative ideal used to evaluate social reality should evolve in the process of

critique and social transformation, rather than stay the same and thereby serve to justify (excessively) the current social structure.

5.1 Social Organism and Disease

In a paper titled “The Diseases of Society” (2014), Honneth makes the strong claim that society should be thought of as an organism that can get sick, and that the use of the biological or medical term “pathology” makes sense only if we construe the social whole in naturalistic terms. He already finds in the psychoanalytic works of Sigmund Freud and Alexander Mitscherlich the observation that social and individual illnesses are categorically different, and that there is a need to conceptualize society as a separate entity: “In order to speak of social pathologies or diseases of social life, what is required is a transition to the independent organizational unit of society, which is irreducible to the sum of its individual members’ behavior” (ibid.:689). Both theorists, however, were reductive in the way they understood the process of social reproduction. Freud regarded society to be in a pathological state when the social morality regulating human drives becomes too restrictive to the point that it prevents people from engaging in the requisite level of work and procreation. Mitscherlich thinks beyond sexual morality to consider the role of norms and values in socializing the individual more generally; for him, a social pathology exists when the norms and values are either too constrictive to enable creative individuation or too loose to enable the individual to cope with the challenges of life (ibid.:692-96). What Honneth finds problematic is that the two thinkers only focus on the single dimension of socialization.

In addition to socialization, Honneth identifies two other processes which are central to social reproduction: confrontation with external nature and regulation of interpersonal relations. Theorists from Marx to Parsons have, according to him, indicated that all three tasks must be fulfilled for society to survive. This means the component parts of society are geared toward meeting these requirements: “Corresponding to each of these constraints of survival, we find, in a given social order, a function that must be fulfilled by means of institutional arrangements and with an eye to the reproduction of the social order itself” (ibid.:698). For Honneth, a disease or social pathology exists when a society’s set of institutions fails “at one of the tasks it takes up within the functional cycles of socialization, processing of nature, and regulation of relations of recognition” (ibid.:699). Each institution has a role to fulfill – much like the organs in a living creature – and they all must operate harmoniously for the healthy existence of the whole.

While this does sound like the familiar functionalist logic of Durkheim and Parsons – by whom Honneth is clearly influenced – this vision differs from their thought in that the goal of the social organism is not mere self-preservation, but the embodiment of freedom. This vaguely framed idea is likely connected to the notion of democratic ethical life: when the institutions of personal relationships, market economy, and public sphere all operate together smoothly, a robustly democratic society is achieved. Therefore, a disease of society would be manifested as a restriction of freedom and ethical life caused by the clash or dysfunction of its institutions:

What such frictions and tensions have in common with individual illnesses is that they display a troubled relationship of a subject to its self, whether this subject is a person or a society. And in the case of societies, the restriction of freedom, which belongs to our

concept of “disease,” consists in these functional spheres’ mutually preventing each other from successfully developing, as their specific institutional solutions get in each other’s way. (ibid.:701)

And with this, Honneth arrives at the conclusion that society must be thought of as a living thing that can get sick, that social pathology is the illness of the social organism: “The parallel to the living organism... cannot be avoided. One can only eventually speak of ‘diseases of society’ coherently and substantially enough if one represents the society as an organism in which the individual spheres or subsystems, thought of as organs, are cooperating so harmoniously that we can work out an idea of its unhindered, ‘free’ development” (ibid.). This statement shows quite clearly how Honneth’s organicism is indebted to the functionalism of Durkheim and Parsons.¹⁰¹

This attempt to render society as an organism that can get afflicted by a disease at the level of social reproduction is a controversial move because it is focused on the functional cohesion of institutions and is ultimately concerned with the maintenance of the social whole, even though he has stated vaguely that the purpose of the social organism is to pursue freedom or free growth. While he may be extending his idea of democratic ethical life through this notion of the social organism, thus giving his organicism an emancipatory element, I will still argue below that this way of thinking is

¹⁰¹ Honneth justifies this view of society by referring to other thinkers who in his perspective also have a similar way of seeing things. He mentions Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* as a work that establishes the interdependence of social spheres; he brings up Marx’s forces and relations of production as an example of social organs that can come into conflict and thereby produce a state of disorder; and he touches on Parsons’ theory of society in which the four interconnected subsystems work together like organs to reproduce the overall system and realize its ultimate values (Honneth 2014:701-02). It should be noted that this is a rather careless gloss that can mislead readers into believing that such a diverse set of thinkers had the logic of organicism in common. Marx did not posit any such “harmony” within the mode of production; and in the case of Hegel, while it may be possible to interpret his view of the social world in naturalistic terms, I will later suggest that it does not have to be portrayed as a form of organicism.

insufficiently critical of the existing social order and is unlikely to live up to the Frankfurt School tradition's intent of immanent transcendence and the actualization of reason.

5.2 Conceptions of Social Pathology

Honneth's definitions of social pathology has gone through several modifications during his career. In his works on recognition, Honneth seemed to treat misrecognition as both a social pathology and an injustice. His early definition of social pathology was any social development that prevented people from living the good life; it was rooted in a philosophical anthropology of individual well-being (see Chapter 1 Section 2). Social pathology was phenomenologically experienced as something real among subjects and caused actual suffering, which motivated them to engage in the struggle for recognition. In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth defends the "theory of justice as social analysis" approach, but he defines injustice as the exclusion from or restriction of participation in cooperative practices ([2011] 2014:86), and it does not figure centrally in his discussions. Most of his focus is on social pathology and misdevelopment – the former is the impairment of the ability to take part in social cooperation due to the misunderstanding of the rationality of institutionalized practices; the latter is the failure to realize the demand of social freedom that underlies an institutional context (ibid.:86, 113, 128). Most of Honneth's diagnoses are misdevelopments because, as he sees it, the normative ideal of social freedom is intact but it has been obstructed in several ways (ibid.:129). Whether this division between pathology and misdevelopment is sensible is an issue that divides commentators.¹⁰²

¹⁰² It has been suggested that social pathologies are problems that are internal to the ideal of freedom (i.e., the forgetting of social freedom), whereas misdevelopments are problems that are external to it (i.e., the

First of all, there is the question of the necessity of a unified account of social pathologies. Having multiple diagnostic concepts might not be a flaw if there are diverse problems in social life at different analytical levels from the individual to the systemic one. Zurn (2011; 2015) has argued that there is in fact a common structure to Honneth's notions of pathologies, and he has chosen to define social pathology as a second-order disorder: "A second-order disorder occurs when there is some social phenomenon that exhibits a constitutive disconnect between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused" (2015:98-9). He presents the example of ideology in Marxist thought where there is a disconnect between people's (first-order) beliefs about how the world works and their (second-order) reflexive awareness of how those beliefs have been formed. Ideology is pathological because people are unaware of the social-structural forces that make them come to have false beliefs, which in turn make them conform to oppressive practices that reproduce to social structure. He sees the same logic at play in ideological recognition where people are unaware of the institutional mechanisms that distort their beliefs about social expectations of behavior. While Zurn has claimed that this analytical structure can account for all of Honneth's diagnoses, critics have pointed out its weaknesses. The main

restriction of social freedom). Accordingly, a pathology exists when people mistakenly believe that legal or moral freedom are the definitive or complete ideals and lose sight of the reality of social freedom; when legalistic or moralistic attitudes start to encroach upon everyday life, there is a pathological situation. In contrast, there is no confusion over the validity of social freedom in a misdevelopment, but there are external factors that prevent relational institutions from embodying its freedom (Freyenhagen 2015; Schaub 2015). As the commentators themselves point out, however, it is far from clear whether the cause of any specific pathology or misdevelopment can be neatly attributed to internal or external factors/origins. As I have already suggested, the diagnosis of neoliberalism as merely a misdevelopment may be inaccurate, for not only does it restrict social freedom through market fundamentalism, but it also creates the widespread belief in an extreme form of negative or legal freedom as the true meaning of freedom.

criticism has to do with identifying pathologies at the level of reflexivity: it may be detrimental to reduce pathology to a reflexive-cognitive error. It is argued that we should have a concept that is sensitive to pathological developments at the first-order level of contents irrespective of people's correct or incorrect understandings of that content (Freyenhagen 2015). Others question the usefulness of such an abstract idea of pathology. In some cases, the first order refers to social reality and the second order refers to beliefs about reality; but in other cases the first order refers to beliefs and the second order refers to the reflexivity about beliefs. It has even been suggested that there is nothing preventing us from specifying a third order of "critical inquiry" about beliefs about reality – and that a pathology could just as well be located at the third level as obstacles to conducting intellectual critique (Laitinen and Särkelä 2019:86-7). While there are other issues that could be mentioned, these remarks show that it is far from obvious that social pathologies are exclusively second-order disorders. At best, Zurn has elucidated one aspect of the concept of social pathology.¹⁰³

Regarding the issue of the need for a unifying concept of pathology, Dagmar Wilhelm has suggested that having multiple diagnostic concepts may be useful for capturing the various ways in which the individual's self-realization can become distorted – which for her is the underlying feature of all pathologies (2019:118-24). She does not see a problem with the split between pathology and subjectively experienced suffering since it may be in the nature of the specific pathology to prevent agents from being aware

¹⁰³ The complication has only been further compounded by the fact that Honneth has spoken approvingly of Zurn's account of social pathology ([2011] 2014:86). Rahel Jaeggi also adopts a similar form of reasoning in her account of the crisis or deficit of rationality of forms of life ([2014] 2018).

of their predicament. Wilhelm also states that pathologies can be pathologies of reason, but not all of them have to be because Honneth's intent has been to move beyond the rationalism of the first-generation Frankfurt School members. She speaks approvingly of the concept of disease, which allows Honneth to locate pathology not at the level of the individual or society as collective subject, but at the level of the functional interplay of institutions. She also does not believe a commitment to organicism entails a normative defense and maintenance of the status quo, since in Honneth's theory the healthy functioning of institutions would mean the realization or expansion of relations of recognition – which means there is an inner dynamic of progressive change (ibid.:116). Wilhelm's reflections are valuable, but a few points must be raised. First, there is little to suggest in Honneth's writings that he intentionally compiled a variety of diagnostic concepts for a versatile critique; one gets the impression that he comes to prioritize the institutional harmony of society over the self-realization of individuals, and so the ideas of misdevelopment and disease have become the principal concepts of social pathology for him. Second, she may be too accepting of Honneth's organicism. It has been argued by others that the analogy between the organism and society involves unrealistic assumptions about organs/institutions, illness/dysfunction, and death/collapse which cumulatively orient his critique toward the maintenance and reproduction of the current social structure (Laitinen and Särkelä 2019:88-92). Third, I believe she correctly states that social pathology distorts self-realization; however, she dismisses the "pathologies of reason" definition too easily. If we take the connection between reason, freedom, and self-realization seriously, then it may be imperative that we understand all pathologies to

be deformations of reason in one way or another – and not treat this as merely a “middle period” view of Honneth.

There is one other statement on the social pathology concept that I would like to examine before moving on. Arto Laitinen and Arvi Särkelä (ibid.) have identified two broad categories of social pathologies which they call normativism and naturalism. The normativist approach often establishes some kind of ideal and considers something to be pathological when it fails to live up to it; in other words, something is a pathology because it is a social wrong. In contrast, the naturalist approach presupposes a notion of health and considers something to be wrong when it is pathological. The authors observe that Honneth operates with both normativist and naturalist concepts of social pathology (Särkelä and Laitinen 2019). Philosophical anthropology, second-order disorders, and the concept of misdevelopment would fall under the normativist category; his notion of disease of the social organism falls under the naturalist category. The strengths and weaknesses of both categories of concepts have been discussed by the authors – here I only focus on their remarks on Honneth’s organicism. The primary fault with the concept of social organism is that one is forced to adopt an ontological commitment to society’s self-maintenance by taking the biological analogy too literally. This is detrimental to the project of emancipatory critique which strives to transcend irrational structures:

Organicism constricts society into such a static shape that a social critique aiming at a “fuller or better life” ... becomes impossible. Organicism leaves the culturally contingent values of societies sacrosanct. The critical evaluation of reproductive ends of social life falls outside the picture, as the social pathologist restricts herself to assessing the harmoniousness of the maintenance of those values. However, if life is not only to maintain its form but to become “fuller or better,” that is, to transform, those ends would need to be regarded as philosophically criticizable and socially mutable. (ibid.:296)

The idealized view of an organism that falls ill and dies when its internal organs are not in functional harmony is an exaggeration of how living systems work, as proven by examples of living things embodying surprising degrees of biological flexibility. With this insight, the authors encourage moving away from social organicism. They argue that it is more fruitful to think of society as a life-process, and that a pathology exists when this process degenerates or becomes stagnant (Laitinen and Särkelä 2019:90-4). This is one of the more interesting proposals that seek to further develop the immanent critique tradition. A major challenge for my argument is that “pathologies of reason,” which I claimed is the core of immanent critique, is in their view a form of normativism. I will have to figure out the theoretical link between pathology and reason in the naturalistic model of life-process, and reconsider whether my claim that all pathologies must be pathologies of reason is in fact defensible.

5.3 Normative Stasis

What I have tried to demonstrate is the gradual qualitative change in Honneth’s program of critique. Ever since Chapter 1, I have underscored how his perspective has shifted from a phenomenological, conflict-theoretic framework to a teleological and normative-functionalist one. With the transition to the theory of social freedom, he has come to emphasize the importance of realizing already-existing rational ideals in modern social institutions. In this chapter, I have tried to show that he takes the definition and content of social freedom to be clearly established, and how his critique is now geared toward diagnosing misdevelopments. With his turn to organicism, he concentrates on the

reproduction of society and the institutional dysfunctions that bring on a disease for the social organism. Given these trends, I argue Honneth's critique has become normatively static. The meaning of social freedom as a normative principle stays the same, and it is deployed in a way that justifies the social structure of contemporary capitalist societies. Even if the concepts of freedom and recognition are connected, the elements of social change and collective agency which were central to his earlier theory have disappeared in the later one. The political implications of this mode of critique is liberal reformism: the central institutions of society are basically legitimate and just, and their shortcomings could be remedied by small-scale reforms. The substantive vagueness of Honneth's critique is apparent in his revised notion of socialism, which defined it as whatever social structure that will result from repeated processes of democratic experimentation.

It is important not to trivialize what Honneth has accomplished and not underrate the truly emancipatory aspects of his critical theory. The issue that I am bringing up is something all proponents of immanent critique must confront. Since immanent critique evaluates whether society lives up to its own normative principle or rational potential, we are indeed admitting that there is something already rational in social reality. Honneth's social theory takes the rational achievements of modernity seriously, and his critique has been largely successful to the degree that it has demonstrated the failures to realize or expand relations of recognition and the rational principle of freedom; he has shown immanently how society has not actualized reason. However, even if such is the case, I do think we are justified in criticizing him for his structural conservatism. I will discuss what it would mean for the normative standard to evolve in the practice of critique itself.

Honneth's method of normative reconstruction has been criticized for precluding a more radical critique of social reality, and this has very much to do with the way he establishes the validity of the social freedom principle. By arguing that the existing institutions of society already embody the rational ideal of social freedom, and that these institutions are indispensable for modern life, Honneth is seen as effectively justifying the current social order. His method cannot conceive or accommodate the idea of a normative revolution or envision an entirely new kind of society (Schaub 2015). According to this view, Honneth's earlier critical theory was equally concerned with normative revolution, such as when he studied the transformation of the recognition order from a pre-modern estate-based society to a modern bourgeois-capitalist society with a post-conventional morality. It is argued that a merely reconstructive approach that asserts the validity and necessity of extant institutional arrangements will not succeed in eliminating endemic pathologies and injustices.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Honneth's idea of social freedom has been accused of being ideological (Ng 2019). By taking social freedom to be the foundational value of society, the starting point of his critique is basically to posit what is good and correct about society. But more fundamentally, by discussing institutions in an idealizing way – i.e., imagining how they work in the best-case scenario – Honneth diverts attention away from how those institutions may be systematically unfair or dominating in the everyday experiences of the most disadvantaged members of society. There is the risk of

¹⁰⁴ While I appreciate this insight, I think there has not been enough reflection on what kind of normative revolution is possible from the current phase of society's development. Is a normative transformation of similar scale that took place from late feudalism to early capitalism conceivable and feasible at our present developmental stage in history? It is at this point where I think the critic has not appreciated Honneth's sociological analysis of modernization, and thereby overstates the possibility of radical change.

reconstructing an idealized picture of a democratic society that works in favor of the privileged.¹⁰⁵ Even though these criticisms may over-simplify certain issues, they do highlight in poignant ways the difficulties of Honneth's approach.

More consequentially, perhaps, Andrew Buchwalter (2017) has argued that Honneth's normative reconstruction is not consistently Hegelian in its application. The difference between the two philosophers is that Honneth uses normative reconstruction to uncover the form of rationality that has materialized in the social world, whereas in Hegel the social rationality becomes manifest only in the process of reconstruction itself. This means that for Honneth social freedom has already been realized (partially) in the world and the task is to identify it in existing institutions. For Hegel, social freedom has not been realized yet (it is not "out there" waiting to be discovered) but it is something that arises only in the process of analyzing reality itself: "... properly conceived, normative reconstruction for Hegel denotes the process by which a community establishes its own rationality as it clarifies the existing forms of social irrationality confronting it" (ibid.:59). Their differences show clearly in how they analyze market societies. As Buchwalter points out, Honneth diagnoses misdevelopments in the economy by showing how its practices deviate from the norms of reciprocity and cooperation; social freedom is the standard, and the capitalist economy does not live up to its intrinsic ideal. But in Hegel's

¹⁰⁵ This astute point highlights the possibly apologetic and conformist quality of Honneth's theory. To be fair, Honneth is concerned with the actualization of reason and this concept of rationality attached to social freedom is meant to be context-transcending – in other words, there is supposed to be an internal movement to supersede the irrational structures which cause suffering or loss of freedom. Still, this argument exposes again the dissociation of subjects' experiences of misrecognition with Honneth's perspective on freedom and ethical life. It is therefore worth inquiring whether Honneth does live up to the demanding requirement of immanent transcendence.

case, no such principle is available beforehand that can be imposed and applied to the market sphere; moreover, the disruptions generated by the economy are not “deviations” from its own “moral promise” but a natural outcome of the way the market institution operates. It is the immanent analysis of socially generated irrationalities that produces the relevant normative standards. Hegel’s immanent critique is arguably more dynamic than Honneth’s because the normative standard is not established prior to analysis but arises from within the process of critique.¹⁰⁶ Buchwalter claims that this dialectical motion makes Hegel’s critique more radical and emancipatory:

While he anticipates Honneth in advancing a notion of social critique that proceeds from a diagnostic analysis of existing social realities, he does not appeal to existing norms of rationality that purportedly infuse or underlie the structures of modern social life. Instead, he attends directly to the antinomies, pathologies, and bifurcations that are the object of his analysis of modern societies. By so proceeding, Hegel also advances a more robustly transformative notion of normative reconstruction, one directed to a more wide-ranging alteration of existing market relations. At the same time, that alteration is fashioned in a decidedly immanent manner, not only employing existing modes of negativity but in a way that construes alteration, not as a theoretical construction, but as an internal development of the social order itself – a self-reconstruction, as it were. (ibid.:84)

Honneth is correct in saying that social freedom entails an ethos of mutual sympathy, and ethical life is a form of communal life founded upon a set of rational institutions; but it also involves the self-consciousness of freedom by individuals and the community, which means these relations of cooperation must be established by self-conscious action.

Buchwalter’s point is that ethical life must be created over and against the utilitarian and individualistic habits and practices of market society. It is not a matter of returning to

¹⁰⁶ As Hegel himself had stated, “the standard for the examination is altered when that for which it was supposed to be the standard itself fails the examination, and the examination is not only an examination of knowing but also an examination of the standard of knowing” ([1807] 2018:57). I made this same reference in Chapter 2 Section 5.3 footnote 65.

some stagnant notion of social freedom that is already apparent in the critic's mind, but of actively creating a new ethical relation in the process of confronting the destabilizing tendencies of the market institution.¹⁰⁷ I contend that Honneth was only able to argue for the regulation of the capitalist economy in a somewhat unimaginative way because he operated with a static principle of social freedom. The interesting and appealing aspect of Hegel's critique is that the social freedom principle gets constantly reinvented – and along with it our vision of what is desirable and possible.

In her comparison of internal and immanent critique, Jaeggi shows how the normative standard used to critique social reality operates differently. In internal critique, a social practice is evaluated by a norm to reveal how the practice does not realize the norm; the critic then argues that the practice should be brought into conformity with this standard ([2014] 2018:181-82). In immanent critique, however, Jaeggi says the practice and the norm are both shown to be inherently contradictory; therefore, it is not a matter of making the practice consistent with its own norm, but of transforming them both. The act of doing an immanent critique stimulates a change in the practice and the normative ideal (ibid.:205-06). It is this dynamic quality that is missing especially in Honneth's mature critical theory, which is why I have suggested here that social freedom functions in a static way. Whether Honneth falls short of immanent critique and only achieves an internal critique is something I will have to investigate even more.

¹⁰⁷ The role of corporative organizations is more dynamic in Hegel: "While corporations may rest on the system of interdependency already operative in modern market societies, the ethicality they instantiate is achieved only in the reconstructive transformation of such interdependencies, and in the sense that the mediation of individual and community assumed to obtain 'behind the back' of individuals now becomes an explicit object of individual and societal knowledge and volition." (Buchwalter 2017:82).

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the various pathologies of capitalist society which Honneth has diagnosed. He has shown the many ways in which contemporary society distorts recognition and freedom, and his analyses have culminated in a restatement of the socialist project. One of the problems encountered in the chapter has been his shifting notions of social pathology. Although I have expressed a preference for conceiving social pathologies as a pathology of reason, I have also shown the difficulties of achieving a unified definition. The changing concepts of pathology have impacted Honneth's critique negatively by making it more oriented to system maintenance rather than self-realization and social transformation. In the next chapter, I will explore the value and relevance of Honneth's critical theory in an age of right-wing extremism. In doing so, I will make the case for the incorporation of the concept of crisis – specifically, the crisis of democracy and ethical life into his framework. My point will be that the concept of crisis, understood as the destabilization of normative structures and the stagnation to learning processes, would be more useful for the diagnosis of the present era's pathology than the concepts of misdevelopment or disease.

Chapter 4

Crisis of Democratic Life

1. Introduction

In this concluding chapter of the dissertation, I would like to reflect on the value and relevance of Honneth's critical theory for understanding the urgent set of challenges that confront today's society. American society is afflicted by extreme social and political division, and it has witnessed the rise of right-wing populism and reactionary movements in recent years. The social fragmentation and political animosity have become so severe to the point of endangering the integrity of democratic rule of law. If critical theory of the Frankfurt School is supposed to be reflexively aware of its context of development and application, it is imperative that we examine whether Honneth's ideas can make sense of the pathologies at this moment in history. I will show that Honneth's critical theory is useful to a great extent – especially in its ability to illustrate the breakdown of social solidarity and even foresee some authoritarian trends within capitalist society – but is less successful in interpreting the erosion of democracy itself. I will therefore argue that Honneth needs to adopt the concept of crisis into his framework; the pathologies we are seeing today are not just misdevelopments, but crises of such severity that threaten to undermine our democratic institutions and way of life.

This dissertation has achieved the following things so far: it has (a) provided a comprehensive overview of Honneth's critical theory by placing him within the Frankfurt School tradition and identifying the philosophical as well as sociological concerns he is

addressing; (b) explained what immanent critique is by distinguishing it from other modes of social critique and specifying its unique concern for the actualization of reason; and (c) examined many of the substantive arguments which have resulted from Honneth's immanent critique of capitalism, and has assessed his vision of democratic socialism in addition to his shifting concepts of social pathology. It is quite difficult to arrive at a conclusion about the success of Honneth's overall project, especially when he is still producing new works and contributing interesting ideas (as the next section will show). I think a fruitful way to wrap up this dissertation is to address the question "Why Honneth?" in light of recent developments. Despite having certain limits, I still consider Honneth's works to be the most significant contribution to critical thought in the post-Habermas era; thinking in terms of his theories will illuminate important aspects of our divided and troubled society. In discussing the relevance of Honneth for the present, I also hope to restate the case for immanent critique as a mode of inquiry and social practice that can point the way toward a more rational and democratic form of life.

The chapter will start with a section on Honneth's recent writings which I have not discussed yet. These include two debates with contemporary philosophers on critique and identity, and a book-length study that reconstructs three nationally distinct notions of recognition. He will defend his original theory from his interlocutors' criticisms, but he will also add a new emphasis on the component of moral self-restraint as the essence of recognition. Next, there will be a section that provides a sociological description of the current crisis; it will not be a complete description, but I will try to highlight concisely the outstanding features of today's society, which include inequality, resentment, racial

tensions, and bifurcation of the public sphere. In this context, I also discuss how earlier generations of critical theorists have tried to explain and interpret the social forces that produce right-wing extremism. Their insights on a wide range of phenomena from fascist propaganda to anti-socialist ideology have taught us about the relation between social structure and the reactionary mind. This is followed by the section on the relevance of Honneth for analyzing the present, which will be the main part of the chapter. I will show that his theories can shed light on the discontent stemming from misrecognition or exclusion from relations of recognition, and also on the ways in which social life falls short of its inherent principle of social freedom – one could arguably say that he foresaw the spread of populism and white nationalism. The weakness of his critical theory is its limited notions of social pathology and its normatively static perspective: it is not helpful to characterize the situation today as a misdevelopment anymore, which is why the concept of crisis is recommended.

Perhaps most scholars would assert that the crisis of American democracy is so serious right now that entertaining any thought of a post-capitalist future is unrealistic or even misguided; for most, saving liberal democracy seems to be a much higher priority than striving for socialism. This may indeed be the case politically.¹⁰⁸ However, on a theoretical level, if it is the case that capitalist society regularly produces the inequality and social cleavages that form the basis of extremism and threats to democracy – as members of the Frankfurt School have argued – then it is not unreasonable to keep

¹⁰⁸ For example, I agree that things like curbing gerrymandering and stopping voter suppression are higher priority agendas than pursuing major structural reforms of the capitalist economy. But whether protecting democracy from illiberalism is sustainable in the long run without attempting such reforms is a salient issue to consider, as I indicate below.

reflecting on what a rationally free society would look like and how the social structure could be transformed from within. I believe this is where Honneth has the opportunity to be more imaginative politically and theoretically: instead of limiting the horizon of future possibilities to a robust social democracy (which, to be sure, is already difficult enough to achieve), he could adopt a more dynamic and dialectical notion of freedom that makes room for other ways of life that could develop within the normative order out of struggles for recognition. Repairing democracy is certainly the immediate tasks at hand; but if we expand our temporal and social-theoretic outlook, then we may come to see that repairing democracy entails challenging the very organization of the social system that keeps contributing to the destabilization of what we are trying to protect.

2. Recent Works by Honneth

Up to this point, the dissertation has examined Honneth's writings from the 1980s to the 2010s. This section will review three works by him which have appeared most recently at the time of writing.¹⁰⁹ These include two short debates with contemporary social philosophers, and a new study on the different national traditions of recognition in Europe. I believe Honneth is at that point in his academic career where he is mostly done with developing new theories and ideas, and is now primarily concerned with defending, clarifying, and slightly modifying what he has already stated. As such, these recent works do not contribute anything fundamentally new, and they do not change my understanding

¹⁰⁹ There is one book by Honneth that is not available to me at the moment: *Die Armut unserer Freiheit* (2020a) – a collection of essays which has not been translated yet. However, an essay with the same title as the German book title – “The Poverty of our Liberty” – is included in the volume containing the Rancière debate, so I will be able to discuss it in this chapter.

of Honneth's critical theory in any significant way. My discussion will focus mostly on the study on national traditions of recognition since it is the more substantial contribution.

2.1 Exchange with Interlocutors

Honneth has engaged in dialogues with French philosopher Jacques Rancière and American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler. These conversations primarily deal with the concept of recognition: Rancière questions the usefulness of recognition for social critique and argues for his own concepts of dissensus and equality; Butler adopts the idea of recognition in her work on gender schemas but argues that recognition is necessarily marked by ambivalence because it can result in the ascription of distorting identities onto individuals. Both Rancière and Butler associate identity-formation with subjectivation (or subjectivization) and therefore have a more skeptical stance regarding the emancipatory quality of recognition. Like his earlier debate with Nancy Fraser, these conversations do not result in the resolution of real disagreements or in major revisions to the participants' thought; each philosopher thinks in such dissimilar terms such that they mostly talk past each other and ultimately reassert their positions. My goal is not to give a full synopsis and assessment of the debates, but to retrieve valuable insights which add to our understanding of Honneth's thought.

2.1.1 Debate with Jacques Rancière

Honneth's debate with Rancière in *Recognition or Disagreement* (2016) begins with the French philosopher questioning his counterpart's notion of identity-formation. He observes that Honneth's theory is founded upon a philosophical anthropology which

presumes the integrity of the individual as well as a teleology of progress which presumes the enrichment of community – neither of which are tenable for him (ibid.:84-6, 92-5).

The idea that struggles for recognition tend toward an “achieved fulfillment” of a full or complete identity is problematic because for Rancière dis-identification from social ascriptions can be more emancipating than having a stable identity affirmed by society. He discusses the case of 19th century French workers’ turn to literature and writing as an instance of what he calls dissensus: the break from everyday routines and ways of thinking and imagining themselves emancipated within the social order of inequality.¹¹⁰ It is a way of dis-identifying with the “working class” label, and of deploying the method of equality. If I comprehend Rancière correctly, this method involves presupposing equality and exercising our universal capacity to think differently, to think outside the usual scientific-disciplinary modes that recreate the social structure of inequality. The method establishes new knowledge, ideas, and perceptions to open numerous possibilities for change without presupposing a linear movement toward completion of identity or the enrichment of community (ibid.:140-55).

In turn, Honneth examines Rancière’s understanding of the political process, and begins by clarifying the author’s unique terminologies. Rancière’s concept of *Police* signifies what we normally mean by the political or the political order of society; the

¹¹⁰ For Rancière, workers do not struggle for recognition in the way Honneth imagines: “A workers’ journal is not the expression of the workers’ sufferings and demands... It is the affirmation of their capacity to reconstruct their world of experience... As such, it is political because political subjectivization proceeds via a process of dis-identification. The ‘voice of the workers’ is the voice of workers who no longer feel and speak the way they did as dominated workers, when they were verifying the inequality that pinned them down to their place.” (Honneth and Rancière 2016:146-47). Interestingly, this description is not vastly different from Honneth’s account of workers relying on their everyday experiences of injustice to challenge the recognition order ([1981] 2007). But some have argued that Honneth has not sustained this focus on particular moral experience throughout his works (Stahl 2022).

Police is founded upon the acceptance by the masses of its right to govern, but also on the exclusion of certain people from defining the normative principles of government. The term “politics” indicates those moments when the Police order gets challenged. Honneth thinks these interruptions are carried out by the excluded members to demonstrate an injustice and are driven by a desire for equality. Because such people do not possess the communicative means to articulate their suffering, they must engage in an act of world-disclosure through the aestheticization of reality; this means producing a rupture which reveals the possibility of other ways of life (ibid.:96-101). Honneth criticizes the way Rancière posits the desire for equality as an anthropological given, given that the modern idea of equality developed only recently after long processes of historical development and moral learning. He also proposes interpreting the Police as a recognition order, and politics as the struggle over the normative principles of recognition. Rancière has the tendency to characterize the Police order as hegemonic and almost immutable – thus requiring a rupture with the existing mode of life; however, Honneth suggests making a distinction between internal and external struggles for recognition, where the former involves a reinterpretation of existing normative principles while the latter involves breaking from the normative order itself (ibid.:102-06). The disadvantage of Rancière’s view is that it focuses primarily on interruptions that are external struggles and ignores the vast portion of everyday political acts that are internal to the normative order and aim at the expansion of recognitive relations.

Both philosophers have conceived ways of critiquing the social order from within it, but in starkly different terms. What I find unconvincing with Rancière are his obscure

remarks regarding emancipatory change. On the one hand, he denies that equality is an anthropologically rooted desire, that agents are motivated by suffering, or that a Police order is pathological; but on the other hand, he stresses the need to invent new ways of being and reconfigure the field of the possible in order to tip the balance between equality and inequality (ibid.:111-14, 119-20, 124-27). His aesthetic critique of politics relies on some vague notion of a better condition or way of life – otherwise it would not matter how or in what manner agents partake in dissensus – but he avoids acknowledging it by repeating how subjectivization entails de-identification and constant alteration. It is quite difficult to appreciate the usefulness of this abstruse philosophy.¹¹¹

Honneth defends the telos of identity as a regulative idea of undistorted self-relation that does not require assuming the completion of identity. He believes this idea is needed to explain the motivation of misrecognized subjects to participate in collective struggle: “These emotions indicate the uneasiness with the existing categories of political recognition, which you then have to overcome. This overcoming can be described as a process of dis-identification and it leads to a reidentification... The telos of recognition – the ethical telos – would still be a kind of complete undistorted self-relationship” (ibid.:111). The distinction Honneth provides between internal and external struggles is a new clarification, but he does not specify how we distinguish internal struggles from external ones: when is a case of political action too external to the normative order? My

¹¹¹ Despite these shortcomings, it is interesting to see that Rancière departs from Althusser, with whom he had previously collaborated in *Reading Capital* ([1965] 2015). Althusser believed deterministically that subjects are interpellated in ways that make them obediently reproduce the capitalist order. For Rancière, things are not so rigid: people are subjectivized in diverse ways, and there are innumerable possibilities of breaking from the established order to enact change immanently. Needless to say, his model of immanent critique (if we can call it that) is very different from Honneth’s.

worry is that this ambiguity serves to cut off certain transformative possibilities from the purview of immanent critique, thus exacerbating the problem of structural conservatism which I have been stressing.

Honneth concludes the exchange with Rancière with an essay on the Hegelian concept of social freedom (2016). It restates what is already familiar from his earlier writings, and it does not provide new justifications for the transition from the recognition framework to the freedom framework. In this sense, Honneth also does not succeed in addressing the gaps in his own thought. There are some valuable insights in this essay, which I will bring to light in my discussion of the present crisis.

2.1.2 Debate with Judith Butler

The edited volume *Recognition and Ambivalence* (Ikäheimo, Lepold, and Stahl 2021) starts out with a back-and-forth exchange between Honneth and Butler, followed by various essays on recognition by other scholars. The debate takes the form of Honneth interrogating the concept of recognition in Butler's works and Butler defending her positions. In the exchange, Honneth provides a renewed emphasis on recognition as moral self-restraint.

Honneth addresses what he thinks is an inconsistency in Butler's use of the recognition concept in her writings. He identifies at least two meanings: recognition as the attribution of a normalizing identity, and recognition as the affirmation of the other's personhood. The former refers to the existence of a hegemonic power relation or structure, while the latter designates a moral attitude one takes toward another (Honneth 2021a:21-

4). He finds in Butler's *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006) the first idea where the ascription of fixed gender categories onto people forces them to adopt socially determined identities that restrict their free gender expression; but in works like *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) Butler shifts toward the idea of recognition as the granting of normative status to people in a way that secures their social existence. Both processes contribute to subject-formation, but in Honneth's mind only the latter conception deserves the name of recognition in the Hegelian sense. He specifies how recognizing the other must entail a change in the recognizer as well:

... the granting of a certain normative status to the other has normative effects on both sides, on the receiver of such recognition, and on its giver... This is so because to accord someone the normative status involved in granting recognition at the same time requires the dispenser to limit his or her own freedom, or, to use the Kantian phrase, "self-love," as it bestows a new kind of freedom or authority on the beneficiary; the concomitance of the two alterations is a necessary one since the second – being from now on granted a liberty one didn't possess before – is dependent on the first; namely, that the giver forbids themselves from acting in as free and unconstrained a manner as before. (2021a:24).

This statement points to the almost paradoxical fact that the restriction of one's own personal freedom leads to the enhancement of our collective (social) freedom. For Honneth, mutual recognition is freedom-enhancing because it is through recognition that a rational community of equals gradually develops; and he finds this central Hegelian insight only loosely and inconsistently featured in Butler's writings.

Butler defends her notion of recognition by first clarifying the intent of her works. She had already acknowledged in her book *Subjects of Desire* ([1987] 2012) that humans desire recognition and are dependent on others for their sense of self. But her point is that one can still feel ambivalent about the categories by which one is identified, and the quest

for developing the self may entail breaking from those categories and creating new ones. Therefore, the aim of *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2006) was not to make an Althusserian argument about interpellation: “My conclusion was not that all efforts to achieve recognition were ideologically suspect, but rather that new vocabularies and new social understandings of gender would promise or provide a form of recognition that would be less constraining” (Butler 2021a:37). Regarding Honneth’s point about her shift toward a normative concept of recognition, she states that her concern is the issue of intelligibility or recognizability – i.e., who gets to be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition in the first place. Prior to the act of recognizing, there is the problem of power and inequality because some individuals are rendered invisible or not fully human due to the limited or distorted nature of existing schemas and categories. Butler believes Honneth does not consider this enough: “They are struggling for recognition, but also struggling for an alteration of the terms such that recognition becomes possible for them” (ibid.:48).

Honneth responds by restating that the former idea only describes a classificatory act which may indeed be constricting for the subject but should not be called recognition (2021b:56-7). Only the latter idea of granting someone a normative status deserves the name of recognition, but Butler does not distinguish between specific forms of it. Her notion of recognizability or intelligibility has to do with what Honneth calls rights or legal respect, where we come to see the other as an equal based on his or her moral character (ibid.:58-9). However, Butler maintains that she is talking about something on a different analytical plane:

The problem is not just that some humans are treated with normative status, esteem, and dignity, while others are not. The problem, rather, is that there is a differential production of the human. When we ask who counts as human or even who counts as the subject, the very question points to the forms of recognizability at work in the production of the human or the recognizable subject. This is different from unequal treatment which presumes that humans have already been constituted intelligibly within a social field, and we can then point to some humans who are treated with dignity where others are not. (2021b:62-3)

Butler wants to examine the “nexus of power and knowledge” (ibid.:63) that constitutes subjects while exploring ways in which social categories could be reinvented for freer self-expression. Some have claimed that this Foucaultian analysis of power and discourse is missing in Honneth (McNay 2008; Petherbridge 2013). He has been accused of disregarding the productive side of power in creating subjects and how relations of recognition are also relations of power; in this sense, he may have presented an overly idealized picture of recognition and identity-formation. As valuable as these criticisms are, I also think it is not beyond the scope of Honneth’s theory to interpret the struggles of so-called unintelligible members of society. They can be rendered as a combination of struggles for legal rights and social esteem: on the one hand there is the demand to be affirmed as a morally equal human with the same set of rights, and on the other the demand to have one’s (gender-related or other) particularities respected. Since the theory of recognition is comprehensive and versatile enough to deal with many of these feminist and Foucaultian issues, I believe Honneth’s ideas are still valuable and relevant despite Butler’s criticisms.

An important lesson from this exchange is that Honneth defines recognition as moral self-restraint. As the next sub-section will show, this self-restraint is necessary for cultivating a free community because it is only through recognition that we become

partners in co-determining the norms of shared collective life. His comparative study demonstrates the indispensability of recognition for rational self-determination.

2.2 Three Traditions of Recognition

Honneth's most recent book-length contribution is *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas* (2020b) in which he departs from his work on social freedom and revisits the topic of recognition.¹¹² In his classic work *The Struggle for Recognition* ([1992] 1995) he developed the theory of recognition almost entirely out of Hegel's early writings. What is remarkable about this new study is that he conducts a comparison of three national traditions of the recognition concept. By examining several philosophers in the French, British, and German contexts, he determines what recognition means in each culture while also combining their compatible elements toward a renewed understanding of the term. Whether this represents a major revision to his earlier theory is debatable, but it is clear that Hegel continues to be the foundation to his understanding of recognition. According to Honneth, Hegel is the only philosopher who establishes the importance of recognition for self-determination and an ethical life of rational freedom. However, it is also the case that Honneth refers much less to Hegel's early writings and is more intent on justifying the recognition concept in terms of the *Philosophy of Right* ([1820] 1991).

Honneth begins with the observation that recognition (or human relatedness and intersubjectivity) means something different across nations in Europe; and his hypothesis is that these particularities can be explained by the different historical experiences of

¹¹² This monograph is the published version of the John Robert Seeley Lectures which Honneth delivered at the University of Cambridge in 2017.

development and sociocultural conditions of each nation (2020b:4-6). These experiences and conditions may be “what cause the idea of recognition to take on a specific tone or coloring” and “may have influenced a number of thinkers within that country to make similar associations” with the idea (ibid.:5). In France, recognition is often associated with the competition to attain esteem or prestige among peers by (in a certain sense) feigning to have admirable characteristics: the individual is totally dependent on the judgment of society for an identity and social standing, which is why recognition has a negative meaning as kind of self-loss. In Britain, recognition has much to do with the desire to be accepted by the community through good behavior: the individual is capable of internalizing social norms and controlling his or her actions, and so recognition has a positive connotation of affirmation and cooperation. In Germany, recognition is the relational process of becoming a rational subject through the restriction of egocentrism: the individual requires the other as a partner to confirm each other’s capacity of reason, making recognition essential for freedom and self-determination (ibid.:135-41). As Honneth describes it, recognition in the French context is ascriptive and non-normative; the British notion is normative, but it is not tied integrally to human reason; only the German concept is reciprocal in the sense of enabling the other to develop free will through the restriction of one’s self-love.

2.2.1 French Skepticism

The French skepticism of recognition can be traced back to the 17th century when the nobleman and moralist François de la Rochefoucauld used the term “amour propre”

to express the cynical idea that humans have a natural craving for social prestige to the point of pretending to exhibit honorable, exemplary traits in front of their peers. He described this within the context of the declining royal court where members of the nobility competed to appear more worthy of the king's approval and to retain their privileges. Rochefoucauld's worry was that in constantly deceiving others about our persona we become slaves to collective judgment and lose sight of who we really are (ibid.:13-8). In the next century, Rousseau would adopt the term *amour propre* as well to describe the desire to place oneself higher in the social hierarchy. But for him, *amour propre* was not a natural desire but a socially acquired one which had spread from the royal court to society in general, becoming a key mechanism of reproducing social inequality ([1755] 2011). Distinguishing between *amour de soi* (acting by our inner standards) and *amour propre* (acting according to the judgment of others), Rousseau claimed the latter is dangerous because it leads to a competitive drive to always outdo the other in terms of appearing to possess admirable qualities we do not have (Honneth 2020b:19-27). Honneth observes that in *The Social Contract* ([1762] 2011) Rousseau pondered if *amour propre* can make us open to the views of others in political discourse in a fruitful way; but this is overshadowed by his belief that authentic will-formation should take place within the individual with as little external influences as possible (Honneth 2020b:31-7). In this way, Rousseau had consistently viewed recognition in a negative light as the production of false self-understanding.

This skepticism runs through the 20th century thinkers as well. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] 2018) puts forth a radically individualistic vision in

which freedom can in theory be attained in the mode of being-for-itself – i.e., defining the self by making your own choices. My freedom is restricted as soon as another person enters my life, which triggers the mode of being-with-others. For Sartre, being addressed or even looked at is a way of getting defined by an external other; it necessarily means the loss of our being-for-itself and freedom (Honneth 2020b:42-6).¹¹³ Althusser and Jacques Lacan both understood recognition as an act of ascription. Althusser's ([1995] 2014) concept of ideology (as a form of recognition) explains how humans are molded by state institutions and rituals into being docile subjects who help reproduce the system of domination. Lacan's ([1970] 2006) concept of the "mirror stage" refers to an act of projection: "The child's desire to be 'recognized by the other' is accommodated by the mother's attempt to satisfy the vital needs of her child, thereby inevitably employing expressions and phrases from the symbolic order of her cultural environment" (Honneth 2020b:51). The child's attempt to express his or her desires in terms of these imposed symbols and language supposedly leads to self-alienation.

Through his review of some major French intellectuals, Honneth has shown how these thinkers tended to see intersubjectivity as a problem, and the idea of recognition has a mostly negative meaning of self-loss. The French notion is devoid of a normative component, and it is usually articulated as a cognitive concept that refers to ascriptions as well as (lack of) self-knowledge. Honneth points to two factors that explain this uniquely French view: (1) in the French language, the word *reconnaissance* does not distinguish

¹¹³ For Honneth, what is problematic with Sartre's account of being-with-others is its lack of reflection on the moral quality of the encounters themselves: it should matter for the freedom and self-formation of the individual whether the interaction was one of moral respect or disrespect (2020b:47).

between the epistemic and moral aspects of recognition; and (2) the highly centralized structure of early modern French society has left behind a legacy of suspicion toward all conflicts over symbolic distinction (ibid.:53).

2.2.2 British Moralism

In the British context, Honneth shows that recognition has a much more positive meaning with a normative component to it. The British notion of recognition implies self-control of action. One of the first expressions of this idea is found in the 17th century by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who resisted the Hobbesian view of human nature and argued that humans are inherently concerned about the common good. This idea would then be developed by several Scottish Enlightenment philosophers. Francis Hutcheson supposed that we have a moral sense by which we judge whether the actions of others contribute to social well-being (ibid.:57-8). The works of David Hume ([1739-40] 2007; [1751] 1983) are a breakthrough because he consolidates these early insights into the ideas of sympathy and the neutral observer. Sympathy refers to our capacity to co-experience the emotions of others, and it is through sympathy that we learn what is socially considered to be good behavior: "... an invisible bond of reciprocal co-experiencing moves us to react intuitively with positive feelings of approval to those human characteristics we feel are beneficial to the persons affected by them" (Honneth 2020b:61). But this notion does not exactly count as recognition, for it lacks any real relation involving the moral authorization of the other. Hume goes on to claim that we internalize the neutral observer in order to get rid of our moral bias and inconsistencies so

that our actions will be more worthy of social approval – something Hume assumes we automatically strive to do: “... the habit of examining our moral thought and behavior from the perspective of an impartial spectator is primarily due to our desire to have a good reputation in the eyes of our peers” (ibid.:66). Because we interact with others by affirming their status as the judge of our behavior, the neutral observer concept begins to approximate the idea of recognition, and Hume thought such recognition benefits the general welfare of society.

Adam Smith inherits Hume’s ideas and builds on them in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ([1759] 2009). While Smith agrees that we possess the capacity for sympathy, for him it involves imagining what the other is feeling rather than directly experiencing them.¹¹⁴ Through this capacity, we can control our behavior, emotionally empathize with others, and evaluate our conduct from the standpoint of an impartial spectator. Our internalized image of this judge becomes progressively complex, eventually resulting in something like the generalized other which functions as an inner conscience (Honneth 2020b:75-81). What this means is that “we pay recognition primarily to an idealized community of all members of society – a community which we internalize and equip with the moral authority to judge the appropriateness of our emotions and thus form the character of our individual self” (ibid.:81). This normatively robust notion of recognition figures crucially in Smith’s vision of the capitalist economy: Honneth claims that Smith was arguing against unrestrained self-interested action and was trying to reconcile the

¹¹⁴ Honneth describes the key difference in Smith’s and Hume’s notions of sympathy: “... whereas the latter regards sympathy as a passive ability to be affected by the emotions of others, the former entertains the notion that we ‘projectively’ feel such emotions by virtue of our imagination” (2020b:73). There is a deeper level of emotional reciprocity (and therefore normativity to social relations) in Smith.

behavior in market society with the demands of social propriety and moral restraint from the standpoint of an impartial judge (*ibid.*:83-4). Smith thought capitalism should be a normatively regulated order through relations of recognition that enforce self-control.¹¹⁵ This emphasis on social acceptance and public approval is also found in the utilitarian thought of John Stuart Mill ([1863] 2001), who believed that the most suitable way of avoiding conflict and anti-social behavior would be the threat of disapproval from one's peers (Honneth 2020b:86-9).

Honneth has discovered that in Great Britain recognition is a normative concept with a positive connotation – it refers to the self-control of behavior through sympathetic consideration of our peers, in a way that leads to some basic level of social harmony and integration. Honneth thinks this emphasis on self-restraint took hold because England was the first nation to develop a modern capitalist economy, and the corrosive effects of commercialization on moral bonds were becoming apparent especially to the Scottish moral philosophers (*ibid.*:90-1, 94-5).

2.2.3 German Rationalism

Like Britain, recognition in Germany is a normative concept that involves moral self-restraint; but unlike the former, it does not mean behaving well for empirical reasons because one wants to be accepted by the community. The German idea of recognition involves self-restraint because it is a necessary condition for realizing ourselves as free

¹¹⁵ This interpretation of Adam Smith differs from the one I had presented in Chapter 1 Section 4.2 footnote 30, where I suggested that Smith's utilitarian thought had a weak intersubjective requirement compared to Hegel's idea of social freedom. While I still stand by those characterizations, it seems Honneth regards Smith's normativism and theory of mutual sympathy much more favorably than I initially had thought.

and rational subjects. Honneth begins his analysis with Kant ([1788] 2015), who tried to demonstrate in his practical philosophy that the moral act is determined by human reason: attaining moral autonomy necessitates submission to the demands of reason. Furthermore, Kant ([1785] 2012) used the term respect for the acknowledgement we have for each other as beings who strive to live by the moral law through limiting self-love (Honneth 2020b:100-06). But this concept of respect is problematic because it is simultaneously a transcendental and empirical claim – everyone is automatically granted the status of the moral agent, but we are motivated to take up this stance once we see that the other is in fact moral (ibid.:110-12). Two of Kant’s successors would try to find a more coherent, non-empirical motive for moral action.

In *Foundations of Natural Right* ([1797] 2000), Johann Gottlieb Fichte provides an intersubjective account of the development of self-consciousness. It is the encounter of one subject with another subject in the world that leads to awareness of oneself as a rational being. When we encounter someone, we are “summoned”: this communicative stance or situation exhibits moral respect for the other and the voluntary or willing restriction of our personal freedom (Honneth 2020b:114-22). The difference with Kant is that “for Fichte, respect or recognition of the other as a ‘free being’ represents an element of every speaking interaction inasmuch as it encourages or invites us to react in a free, self-determined way. No ‘emotion’ is needed to motivate the addressee to show moral respect; its own mental effort to interpret another person’s speech act is enough to motivate such respect” (ibid.:120-21). In Fichte’s philosophy, mutual recognition is what transforms or elevates natural freedom to a form of rational self-determination. However,

Honneth claims that Fichte's account is too abstract and does not describe the experience of actual living subjects in the real world (ibid.:123).

Honneth's reconstructive history of the German idea of recognition culminates in Hegel, who provided the most sophisticated account through a phenomenology of Spirit's realization of its freedom. This is a more substantive explanation because "every element of his system must correspond to something in the real world, for it is there that spirit is to realize itself" (ibid.:124). Hegel's reflections on love already contains the fundamental idea of self-restraint: the act of loving someone involves affirming the other's needs and desires, and thus restricting one's self-centeredness to care for the other. It is in the context of this mutual self-restraint that each person is able to be free – to be with oneself in the other – and cultivate an aspect of subjectivity. As Honneth points out, this means one's selfhood is publicly confirmed, and so Hegel's recognition is not just reciprocal and normative, but also has "an expressive, i.e. generally accessible and perceptible, character" (ibid.:126). Hegel ([1820] 1991) went on to specify the objective institutions of social life that contain or embody relations of recognition. Mutual recognition in these spheres of action socializes individuals to the norms of collective life and results in the expansion of (social) freedom.

Honneth discusses the section on Lordship and Bondage in the *Phenomenology* (Hegel [1807] 2018) to highlight the conflictual aspect of recognitive relations. He does so to point out that some, such as French philosopher Alexandre Kojève ([1947] 1980), have interpreted this passage to mean that humans have a need or desire for recognition. Honneth explains that this is a somewhat misleading interpretation of Hegel because he

did not speak of any sensual desire of the human being. He was referring to a more fundamental one:

When Hegel spoke of a “need” for recognition, he had in mind a kind of striving that reaches much deeper into the intellectual constitution of human subjectivity, and that must refer to a kind of rational desire to lend objective expression to our capacity for free self-determination. Hegel must presuppose that every human subject possesses not only sensual inclinations but also the more profound desire to realize in the external world the freedom that constitutes the most inner experience of subjectivity. Furthermore, Hegel must assume that in order to be able to satisfy this desire, we require an institutionally organized system of recognition by others, who, by restricting their own self-interests, publicly express their support for the self-determination of others. (2020b:130-31)¹¹⁶

It is Hegel’s belief that in a rational society, individuals can develop more specific aspects of the self in the differentiated spheres of recognition; and when this process is frustrated, they can struggle to expand those relations: “If these subjects come to view relations of recognition as being too narrow, too constricting, or too unequal, Hegel is convinced that the constant force of our rational will for self-determination will necessarily lead to struggles for new, expanded forms of recognition” (ibid.:132). This process obviously refers to the effort of real subjects to expand their spheres of activity and to be included in institutionalized relations, but also the striving of Spirit (reason) to practice its own freedom without any external or natural determinations.

If France developed skepticism toward recognition due to the centralized structure of society, and Britain adopted a heavily moralist understanding of recognition due to the harmful effects of capitalist modernization, then what explains the uniquely rationalistic idea of recognition in Germany? Honneth thinks it has much to do with the fragmented

¹¹⁶ By saying this, Honneth implies that Butler appropriates Kojève’s reading of Hegel too uncritically and thus overlooks the fundamentally rationalist aspect of Hegel’s notion of recognition.

state of political units and territories that would eventually consolidate into the German nation-state. The country did not have a cohesive nobility that competed for prestige, and its economy was still too underdeveloped for the negative effects of capitalist expansion to be seen. Germany was unique in that the bourgeoisie was a culturally significant but politically marginalized class whose members reacted to the French Revolution mainly through intellectual thought. A central concern among the idealist philosophers about the approaching modern era was “the conditions for the emancipation of the bourgeoisie, the achievement of political equality and rights to co-determination” (ibid.:97).

2.2.4 Synthesis

The take-away of Honneth’s comparative analysis is that the three notions of recognition could be reconciled by making the German one the foundation of a renewed definition. The German tradition produced the broadest understanding of recognition as the mutual authorization of subjects to co-determine the norms of social life. It describes a relation that is even prior to the French or British versions, for whether the other is someone from whom I seek admiration or approval, there is already a communicative stance that authorizes the other to shape aspects of our common life (ibid.:147-49).

Taking Hegel’s contribution as the basis of recognition theory, Honneth argues for the incorporation of the “inner spectator” concept from the British tradition as well as a reinterpretation of the French ideas as expressions of pathological recognition.

Hegel’s contribution is especially valuable for demonstrating the historical unfolding of different institutional contexts of recognition in the lifeworld. There is room

to bring the concept of the inner spectator into Hegel's theory, however, because he lacks an account of why subjects – who have become cooperative co-authors of social norms – willingly abide by those norms. He assumed that “the desire to assert oneself as a rational being” (ibid.:153) will automatically lead to the internalization of reasonable norms; but this does not specify the psychological process by which this all happens, and it is here that Honneth believes the Scottish moral philosophers have something to offer. Smith's idea of the inner spectator reveals how the second-person perspective of the morally authorized other gradually turns into a personal conscience; this internalization of the (generalized) other conditions us to reconcile our actions with collectively established norms and acquire socially approved moral habits (ibid.:150-55). According to Honneth, the German and British notions complement each other in a successive way: “In the first case, the term ‘recognition’ indicates the practice of mutual authorization to create and examine norms; in the second case, it merely refers to the affirmative reaction of an already normatively constituted community to the moral behavior of individual members of society” (ibid.:156)

Furthermore, Honneth believes he can integrate the insights of the French thinkers to the German version by interpreting their negative assessments as descriptions of the pathology of recognition. Rousseau's idea of *amour propre* can help elaborate Hegel's account of the situation of professionals who are unable to be part of an association where they can be recognized.¹¹⁷ Hegel talks about how such workers end up displaying

¹¹⁷ Hegel states that a worker who is not part of a corporation will engage in reckless and selfish behavior due to the dissatisfaction of not being publicly recognized and related to others: “He will accordingly try to gain recognition through the external manifestations of success in his trade, and these are without limit... because it is impossible for him to live in a way appropriate to his estate if his estate does not exist; for a

their skills in flamboyant ways as if to demonstrate their prowess and seek the admiration of others – which sounds a lot like Rousseau’s description of the quest of social prestige. Instead of seeing this scenario as the normal state of human behavior, Honneth urges that we regard it as “the result of psychological compensation for withheld recognition” (ibid.:161). The assumption is that amour propre would not become manifest if one is already part of a successful network of recognitive relations. Honneth also finds a way to reconcile with Althusser by applying his ideas to Hegel’s discussion of marriage and the family. Hegel has conflicting views on the relations between men and women, claiming on the one hand that wives should be subordinate to their husbands while also saying that men and women are equal in their rights and duties ([1820] 1991: §166-67). His view of women’s nature made him think they were suited to the domestic realm and emotional labor, and it does not occur to him that the wife may question her limited role in the household. Honneth claims that this undermining of egalitarian relations of recognition is due to interpellation: the social structure generates the widespread belief that certain traits or arrangements are natural, inevitable, and unchangeable – in this case, that women are innately more emotional, caring, and subservient (2020b:163-67). This ideology prevents both partners from defining their relationship equally:

Within the relations of reciprocal recognition described by Hegel, the appearance of fixed, natural behavioral dispositions – a product of the recognition organized or mediated by the state – has the effect of excluding a sector from the pool of possible reasons for accepting or rejecting a previously established practice, for it seems to violate the nature of the individuals involved. Such a relationship of recognition, though intended to prevent relations of domination, would in fact perpetuate that relation of subordination by

community can exist in civil society only if it is legally constituted and recognized” ([1820] 1991: §253 Note, emphasis omitted).

intervening from above in a type of recognition that compels the participants to perceive themselves as possessing characteristics they necessarily view as being unchangeable elements of their own nature. (ibid.:168)

The consequence of this ideological mechanism is the shrinking of the space of reasons: the ascription of one gender as subordinate makes it possible for one side to exclude the other from participating in the discursive process of co-determining shared norms and practices. Therefore, what Althusser had described – which was also partly manifest in Hegel – is the pathological dimension of recognition, where the egalitarian and freedom-enhancing potential of recognition gets stifled by systemically-induced ideologies of what is natural, possible, etc. (ibid.:170-71).

Honneth's new study is a remarkable work that deepens our understanding of the concept of recognition, especially by delving into the ideas of philosophers other than Hegel and showing that there are nationally distinct meanings to recognition across European countries. Moreover, his attempt to justify the centrality of the Hegelian theory of recognition while also synthesizing insights from the French and British traditions is ambitious. Whether a reconciliation with them was absolutely necessary is debatable – and it is questionable if this new integrated definition will now be used consistently as a framework to critique contemporary society. In some ways, this new or revised theory of recognition is disconnected from the original one: Honneth does not mention the three forms of recognition or practical self-relations as much as he used to, choosing instead to emphasize the (rather legalistic) core definition of mutual self-restraint. His endeavor may lead to more complications than resolution or progress in this regard. However, there are also important merits to what Honneth has done. By establishing a clear connection

between recognition as reciprocal moral authorization and the enhancement of freedom, he has bridged the divide between his two theories of recognition and social freedom that has arguably plagued his program of critique. One theory was concerned with individual identity formation, while the other had focused on relational institutions. Even though such institutions are founded upon relations of recognition, there was a disjunction between an action-theoretic notion of individual identity and a normative-functionalist theory of institutions. With his new definition, Honneth shows how recognizing the other means restricting my self-centered behavior and authorizing the other to shape with me our shared norms and practices, which has the overall consequence of reproducing social institutions and expanding our collective freedom.

Another benefit of Honneth's updated theory of recognition is its focus on new aspects or dimensions of social pathologies. He has drawn our attention to two aspects in particular: extreme behavior as a reaction to the exclusion from relations of recognition, and the distortion of perspective to the point of not being able to see certain categories of people as moral equals. Both aspects can be seen in American society today: it can be argued that much of the present era's socio-political polarization stems from resentment and systemic racism – which, cumulatively, have the catastrophic effect of eroding the democratic way of life. I now shift my focus to the crisis of democracy.

3. A Sociology of the Present Crisis

In the first sub-section below, I offer a digest on the division and polarization in American society – features which became especially visible and poignant since the

Presidential election of 2016. Among scholars and the general public, the situation of the past several years is often described as expressions of right-wing populism or the politics of resentment; both are true for the most part, and I hope to clarify what they mean and how they have come about. The second sub-section delves into the contributions of the Frankfurt School members to the understanding of the social roots of authoritarianism and fascism. As varied as their studies are, they have consistently demonstrated how capitalist society keeps generating the seeds of right-wing extremism. It will then be examined if Honneth is able to produce similarly insightful interpretations.

3.1 A Divided Society

The crisis of American society is layered and complex. It is at once economic, political-legal, social, and cultural; it has to do with class inequality, racism and bigotry, political corruption, and public health. Just in the last couple of years, we experienced major events that precipitate a crisis or are symptoms of it, such as the global coronavirus pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the January 6th Capitol attack. As I will define more precisely later, by crisis I understand the breakdown of social solidarity and the erosion of associated life. Crises often entail violence or harmful conflict, fragmented communication, and degenerate practices that obstruct the flourishing of individuals and communities; because of this, they create and worsen social cleavages, and contribute to the destabilization of democracy. In my brief account below, I try to give a sense of the state of division in American society.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Using a Parsonian framework, Victor Lidz (2021) discusses the different aspects of American society's crises according to the four main functions of the social system (adaptation, goal attainment, integration,

Sociologists who study the polarization and political radicalization taking place in the country have documented the significant amount of anger that exists on the American Right. The sources of this anger among conservative, predominantly white Americans center around a set of commonly held beliefs: that the traditional (evangelical Christian) way of life in rural regions is in danger, and Washington does not care about the plight of those in the heartland (Wuthnow 2018); or that hard working Americans have been waiting patiently for their turn to be successful and realize the American Dream, but feel stuck and cheated because racial minorities and other under-represented groups are cutting in line and the government is siding with them instead (Hochschild 2016). These narratives – what Arlie Hochschild has termed the “deep story” or the feels-true story – have disenchanted many into thinking that the federal government is an inefficient body run by liberal elites that is siding with un-American “others” over real Americans. This is a core vision of what came to be known as the Tea Party movement, which mobilized militantly against government spending and most liberal policies during the presidency of Barack Obama. As a populist movement, it identified wholly with the Republican party, its neoliberal agenda, and adopted the (often racially charged) us-versus-them mentality toward basically every national or political issue.

There is a close link between populism and perceived grievances. Populism is a political ideology of anti-elitism that mobilizes the public sentiment by claiming to represent “the people” – usually under a charismatic leader – against a perceived enemy

and latent pattern maintenance). He argues that several crises have led to the formation or worsening of social cleavages; relations of solidarity are falling apart, and the societal community is having difficulty fulfilling its integrative function. While I draw much less explicitly on Parsons, I agree with most of Lidz’s analyses and find them extremely helpful. However, I will offer a more critical-theoretic take on things.

or the establishment (Laclau [2005] 2018).¹¹⁹ There can be right-wing and left-wing populisms: for example, Occupy Wall Street is a case of leftist populism which revolted against the financial elite and the top one percent of the socio-economic hierarchy. Right-wing populism tends to proclaim the defense of tradition or national culture from attacks by unpatriotic citizens or outsiders. What the Tea Party exemplified was the discontent of conservative Americans who felt abandoned and displaced; it consolidated its base by galvanizing evangelical Christians, market fundamentalists, white nationalists, and many moderate voters across the country. By 2016, the American electorate was divided across clear fault lines: liberal versus conservative, urban versus rural, etc., and were polarized on hot-button issues like abortion, gun control, gay marriage, and climate change.

The Tea Party paved the way for Donald Trump's rise to power and the "Make America Great Again" movement. While the electoral triumph of Trump was at first unpredictable with so many other contenders, ultimately it turned out that he was most adept at exploiting the discontent and fueling the emotions of resentment among an already radicalized Republican base. The extremist nature of the Tea Party and Trumpism has been noted:

The Tea Party, the Trump movement, and the alt-right are all identity movements. The difference between the traditional identity movements and these identity movements is the difference between *deprivation* and *dispossession*. While the traditional identity movements felt themselves deprived of a seat at the table, these new movements feel themselves dispossessed of their seat at the table. Tea Partiers objected to how the new-fangled presence of the Other at the table made them feel – that they and their values had become marginalized; that they had lost their long-established seat at the table, and lost

¹¹⁹ Andrew Arato (2019) summarizes Ernesto Laclau's definition of populism, and furthermore specifies that populism can exist as a movement, government, or regime: "For example, democratic competition, public debate, and the plurality of civil society are presupposed by populist movements, but are almost always limited by populist governments, and are invariably suppressed by populist regimes" (ibid.:466).

those seats to people who were not “real Americans.” The Tea Party’s most enduring expression of their political mission, which also prefigured Trumpism and the alt-right, was “taking our country back.” (Rosenthal 2020:24, original emphasis)

It would not be appropriate to call all Republicans or Trump supporters racists; but it is also undeniable that there is a strong racial undercurrent to American conservatism, as it is motivated by racial anxiety and antagonistic feelings toward non-Western immigrants and upwardly mobile minorities. It is not a coincidence that Trump’s election ushered in a wave of white supremacist rhetoric and hate crimes: “The resentment that feeds these movements is far more acid than what has motivated conventional identity politics. The anger is fiercer and more directly vectored – the force that has taken their place is plain to see; it is the Other” (ibid.). For Lawrence Rosenthal, the main factor that led to Trumpism was the cultural displacement of whites; for Hochschild (2016), economic displacement is equally important because of how globalization and automation altered the stability of jobs and livelihoods. Both cultural and economic factors are clearly at play. According to John Campbell (2018), four historical developments are relevant: (1) changes in the post-war economy (stagnation, inequality) led to (2) racial tensions (e.g., Southern Strategy) and (3) the spread of neoliberal ideology, all of which contributed to (4) the rightward shift of the Democratic and Republican parties. The polarization of America was the result of decades-long processes of major structural transformations; and it had been exacerbated by catalyzing events like the 2008 financial crisis and the election of Obama as the first black President. Just when the American public was fed up with the state of gridlock in Washington, Trump came onto the scene and presented himself as capable of changing the situation (cf. Mettler and Lieberman 2020).

It is no exaggeration to say that the four years of Trump's Presidency have made lasting changes to American society and political culture. One only needs to think of how completely the Republican party has been taken over by Trump's ideas and methods in such a short time. Some other notable features and outcomes include the following:

- Fragmented public sphere: certain television channels have become known for incendiary, xenophobic rhetoric and misleading presentation of news. Mainstream media and liberal journalists are accused of being "enemies of the people." Quality journalism in print press exists, but it is difficult to achieve a rationalizing process of opinion-formation – especially when the country's populace is cleanly split between those who take in conservative news sources versus liberal sources. When entire worldviews and perceptions become so divergent to the point of making dialogue and cooperation intractable, we may speak of the bifurcation of the social lifeworld.
- Online radicalization: recruitment of members into far-right groups often take place online, where there is an abundance of hate speech, fake news, and conspiracy theories intended to radicalize people, mostly white men. Algorithms ensure that one keeps getting exposed to the same kind of information from the usual sources, leading to the formation of ideological bubbles. Truth deflates, and people believe only the things they want to believe.
- Antisemitism and white supremacy, exemplified by Charlottesville: there has been no end to the antisemitic trope that Jews are secretly controlling America. Fear of white "replacement" leads to calls among extremists for a race war or a new civil war.

- Thought policing: a widespread campaign to invalidate progressive ideas such as Marxism, feminism, and critical race theory. Professors who teach these topics or are suspected of having leftist political leanings are subject to intimidation and threats of violence by right-wingers.¹²⁰ School boards banning books on race and LGBT themes is now commonplace.
- Inequality and concentration of wealth: the coronavirus pandemic has plunged millions across the world into poverty, while the billionaires have amassed even more wealth. The American class structure comprises an extremely rich class of capitalists and corporate managers; a large middle class whose economic stability is falling; a working class that lacks protections comparable to those in other developed nations; a precarious segment of the working class occupying low wage employment; and an underclass living in poverty with few opportunities to attain skills and stable work (cf. Wright [2009] 2015:14-7). As I will discuss below, Republican politics is in the service of wealthy elites.
- Assault on (free and fair) elections: investigations reveal that there was a concerted effort by Trump and his allies to overturn the 2020 election by falsely claiming that Joe Biden won due to election fraud – a totally discredited lie. This might set a precedent for future elections: right-wingers will challenge any election outcome to their disliking in an attempt to stay in power and prevent liberal candidates from winning. Far-right media can manipulate their base into believing such conspiracies.

¹²⁰ Another tactic employed by the far right seems to be to go after intellectuals, journalists, and public figures with lawsuits if they possess unwelcome ideas or call out the Right's bigotry. Clearly, the aim is to intimidate, silence, and censor.

This list of the major problems American society is facing is far from exhaustive, but it still gives a sense of the severity of democracy's crisis. These are some of the troubling developments which critical theory must be able to address if it is to be useful as a social theory with emancipatory intent.

Finally, in her study on totalitarianism Hannah Arendt ([1951] 2017) made the distinction between the mob, the masses, and the elite to discuss how each group took part in fascist mobilization. This distinction is helpful for the discussion of present-day populism as well. It is important to keep in mind that those who incite violence or engage in extreme activities are part of the mob, such as neo-Nazis or armed militias. While their activities are dangerous and require containment as much as possible, they are on the fringe of the conservative population. Ordinary citizens make up the masses who are anxious and concerned about their futures; they feel lost and are desperate for change and improvement in their lives. It is alarming, however, that many of them are complicit with the actions of the mob, and are easily swayed by the rhetoric of the elites. Economic elites (the super-rich) and political elites (leaders, lawmakers, etc.) wield extraordinary power in shaping policy. While this may be an over-simplification, one could say that the conservative agenda consists in (a) maintaining a deregulated capitalist economy within which the highest strata can remain extremely wealthy, and (b) protecting the socio-economic, cultural, and political dominance of the conservative white demographic.¹²¹

Republican leaders tap into the racial anxiety and resentment of the mob and the masses

¹²¹ The Capitol riot, and the unwillingness among a share of Republican voters to admit Biden's victory, express the conservative whites' attitude that their opinions and preferences should matter more than those of "other" Americans. Such an attitude is an assault on the very idea of democracy as (majority) rule by the people.

to stay in power, but the well-being of their constituents seems to be a secondary concern to them; their main interest is to work together with (or for) the donor class. Therefore, it can be argued that American society is already partially ruled, and is in danger of being ruled more completely, by a conservative power elite (Mills [1956] 2000), with some qualification.¹²² Much of American politics revolves around stirring up emotions and loyalties with manipulative speech; these elites are master manipulators of the public sentiment for their own political gain. Even after Trump has left office, his ideology still permeates the Republican party, and it is foreseeable that the partisan divide and culture of illiberalism will persist in American political life well into the future.

3.2 Critical Theory and Authoritarianism

After having witnessed the rise of Nazism and being forced to live their lives in exile, the first-generation members of the Frankfurt School dedicated much of their careers to studying the social basis of fascism and authoritarianism. Many of their works produced during and after the Second World War became classics and are still relevant to our own era. I would like to look at some examples and consider what they can teach us about authoritarian tendencies of society today.

¹²² I draw on C. Wright Mills' ([1956] 2000) notion only loosely; the "power elite" is a useful idea for thinking about those who hold the reins of power in society. However, I do not think the state runs according to the intentions and plans of these elites all the time. I do not subscribe to the pluralist or instrumentalist theories, for the state operates in a far more complex way. Helpful clarifications have been made by Steven Lukes ([1974] 2005) about the three dimensions of power, as well as by Robert Alford and Roger Friedland (1985) on the three levels politics and the type of power that operates at each level. I therefore do not claim that (when they are in power) Republicans, right-wing ideologues, and sympathetic capitalists literally control the state. Nevertheless, their efficacy has been striking in recent years, and it is undoubtedly true that they are constantly scheming to control the state apparatus as much as they can for their own self-interested purposes.

3.2.1 The Triumph of Positive Thought

In *Reason and Revolution*, Herbert Marcuse argued that fascism and National Socialism represented the repudiation of Hegelian philosophy and the dialectic ([1941] 1999:402-19). The liberal commitment of Hegel's thought to the protection of individual freedom by the rational state was disavowed by these movements, and the very fact of inherent contradictions in society was denied by the imposition of a coerced unity under the leader, movement, or totalitarian state. Marcuse traces how in Italy, reactionary theorists had caricatured Hegel to justify a strong unified state; in Germany the National Socialists replaced the Hegelian triad of family, civil society, and the rational state with their own triad of *Volk*, Party, and state/leader. Especially in the latter case, the natural community of a common race was prioritized above all else. That the glorification of a pre-rational natural harmony is incompatible with Hegelian thought is easy to see:

Hegel's philosophy held to the progressive ideals of Western rationalism and worked out their historical destiny. It attempted to light up the right of reason, and its power, amid the developing antagonisms of modern society. There was a dangerous element in this philosophy, dangerous to the existing order, that is, which derived from its use of the standard of reason to analyze the form of the state. Hegel endorsed the state only in so far as it was rational, that is, in so far as it preserved and promoted individual freedom and the social potencies of men. (ibid.:389)

The "actualization of reason" through the state meant ensuring the free development of every individual. In fascism, the individual was sacrificed for the totality: "These state philosophies exemplify the abolition of the rational standard and the individual freedom on which Hegel's glorification of the state depended. There can be no meeting ground between them and Hegel." (ibid.:390). Authoritarian reaction generally stresses the

inevitability of the given and rejects the notions of contradiction, process, or change; it is essentially an institutionalized form of positive thought that purges the alternatives and possibilities revealed by negative dialectics.¹²³

According to Marcuse (1972), the repudiation of the dialectic was not something that only took place in far-right systems like fascism. The conquest of positive thought has also occurred in democratic capitalist societies. An example is the counterrevolution, or the mobilization of advanced industrial societies against socialism and communism. It is the collectively imposed belief that there is no real alternative to the capitalist system, and that what exists is good and desirable. As an attack on left, it embodies the repression of utopian visions, and is a form of induced or coerced subservience to the existing society. The counterrevolution is in full effect today as well, with right-wing activists doing whatever they can to discourage post-capitalist views. Marcuse has also argued that advanced industrial society exacts the surplus repression of libidinal and life-affirming energies for the maintenance of the established order ([1955] 1998), while offering occasions to desubliminate in ways that are still repressive ([1964] 2002). The controlled release of pent-up tension through various commodified or regulated activities keeps subjects superficially content with living in an affluent society (ibid.:78-9). However, the happy consciousness attained through such desublimation is flimsy, and the repressive society generates aggression that is both destructive and socially encouraged ([1968]

¹²³ While Marcuse focuses more on the diagnosis of fascism than its explanation, he indicates that fascism had its origins in monopoly capitalism: industrial groups began to intervene in the state and exercised power to direct monopolistic production. Powerful economic interests pursued imperialist expansion and anti-socialist agendas, as civil liberties were steadily dismantled ([1941] 1999:410; cf. Neumann [1942] 2009).

2009).¹²⁴ Combined with technological rationality, aggression becomes a useful source of energy that can be channeled for economic and military growth of the system (ibid.:193). In this way, Marcuse has shown that advanced capitalist society not only produces the easily manipulable masses, but also the aggressive character who becomes increasingly desensitized to violence, cruelty, moral conscience, and social obligations. Docile obedience and aggression are two integrated facets of the authoritarian personality.¹²⁵

3.2.2 The Logic of Fascist Propaganda

Theodor Adorno's contribution to research on authoritarianism is truly vast, and like others in the Frankfurt School he also made use of Freudian theory to study the formation of the reactionary character structure. *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. [1950] 2019) was an attempt to measure those qualities within a person that would make him or her susceptible to right-wing ideology and fascist propaganda; it used a set of scales to gauge a person's level of antisemitism, ethnocentrism, political-economic conservatism, and the potential for fascism – this last one is known as the F-scale. The F-

¹²⁴ This part of Marcuse's argument may be somewhat contrived. Whereas for Freud ([1930] 2001) the satisfaction of libidinal drives through desublimation can appease the death drive and tendency for aggression, Marcuse thinks the controlled desublimation can lead to the compression of sexual energy and its release in outward aggression ([1964] 2002:81-2).

¹²⁵ Marcuse's insights have the potential to be applied broadly to our current era to investigate how the conservative American is the outcome of repression and desublimation. He may be able to shed light on the aggressive behavior of a variety of entities from "incels" to Proud Boys. Wendy Brown draws on Marcuse to argue that neoliberalism has eroded the social fabric and molded an especially violent and nihilistic right-wing subject: "Malleable and manipulable, depleted of autonomy, moral self-restraint, and social comprehension, this subject is pleasure-mongering, aggressive, and perversely attached to the destructiveness and domination of its milieu. Radically disinhibited but without intellection or moral compass in regard to itself or to others, this subject's experience of thinned or ruptured, subjectively felt social ties and obligations is affirmed by neoliberal culture itself." (2018:35)

scale contained nine indicators of the anti-democratic, potentially fascistic person.¹²⁶ The higher someone scores on traits like adherence to conventional norms or propensity to think fatalistically, the more authoritarian is the personality. The study tried to show that one could identify the “authoritarian type” in society through such a method. Intellectual historian Peter Gordon (2018) suggests, however, that Adorno had reservations about the method and implications of this study – according to what used to be unpublished text, which is now included in the latest edition of the book. Here, Adorno cautions that the fascistic individual is not an isolated type within society among numerous other types, but that contemporary society generates the fascistic quality in everyone:

In his analysis, the “high-scoring” individual appears less as a case of social pathology than as an emergent social norm... For Adorno, the high-scoring subjects could no longer be dismissed as exceptional. Rather, they became paradigmatic or intensified instances of trends that were increasingly visible across the whole of modern society. In this sense, they were more “true” than the true individuals whose low scores implied a greater capacity to resist the allures of fascist propaganda. (ibid.:61, emphasis omitted)

Categorizing people into “types” is another instance of identity thinking, which is a symptom of the reification of social life brought about by the totality. The spread of exchange relations to all aspects of life has deteriorated individuals into the social type that is already prone to submissive and aggressive behavior. Perhaps Adorno’s true conclusion is the grim claim that modern society is already authoritarian as it regularly produces the anti-democratic personality within all of us.

Adorno’s work on character structure complements his study of the nature of propaganda, in which he applies Freud’s theory of group psychology ([1921] 1990) to the

¹²⁶ They include Conventionalism; Authoritarian Submission; Authoritarian Aggression; Anti-Intracception; Superstition or Stereotypy; Power and Toughness; Destructiveness and Cynicism; Projectivity; and Sex.

findings of Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman in “Prophets of Deceit” ([1949] 2017). Interestingly, this latter work is not about European fascists but American demagogues and their techniques of agitation to mobilize the masses. The most notable tactic in the demagogues’ speech is constant repetition, through which they invent grievances, enemies, and simplistic worldviews – without rational consistency. Adorno interprets these findings using Freud’s psychoanalysis to uncover the “psychological mechanism by which individuals are made to undergo the regressions which reduce them to mere members of a group” ([1951] 2001:138). Following Freud, Adorno thinks within the framework of libido theory, and therefore the attachment of the masses to each other and to the leader is of a libidinal nature. The relevant mechanisms at play are personalization, identification, and idealization. Fascist propaganda personalizes the leader as the primal father who is both feared and loved; there is a strong narcissistic component to the bond between leader and followers, as the subject satisfies his own libidinal desires by attaching himself to the leader as object. By idealizing the leader, he loves himself perversely and displaces the dissatisfaction of his own ego image. One could say that fascist propaganda creates the bond of obedience by exploiting the libidinal energy and vulnerabilities of those with similar characterological traits, especially by repressing love and accentuating only the aspect of symbiosis (ibid.:138-42).¹²⁷

Whether this purely Freudian interpretation is a tenable argument is an extremely difficult question. As I will show below, a post-Freudian analysis of authoritarianism can

¹²⁷ “The so-called psychology of fascism is largely engendered by manipulation. Rationally calculated techniques bring about what is naively regarded as the ‘natural’ irrationality of masses... The psychology of the masses has been taken over by their leaders and transformed into a means for their domination” (Adorno [1951] 2001:150-51).

be just as compelling and insightful. What Adorno tried to illustrate, nonetheless, is how intricately tied the fascist predisposition can be to our innermost drives. And once again, he challenges us to think of the fascist potential as already a central part of modern life: “As a rebellion against civilization, fascism is not simply the reoccurrence of the archaic but its reproduction in and by civilization itself” (ibid.:137). Adorno thought it was necessary – if we are to avoid another Holocaust – to keep studying all dimensions of the problem of right-wing extremism and to keep educating the public. One of the most concerning things for him was the reification of consciousness and the resulting cold, manipulative personality ([1967] 2003). An essential task is to resist all forms of conformist behavior and regressive tendencies like the repression of anxiety into the unconscious – which can fuel destructive aggression (ibid.:26). Also, he has hinted that the concentration of capital causes economic instability, and so a rational collectivization of production would be beneficial for preventing extremism ([2019] 2020).

3.2.3 Collective Narcissism

Erich Fromm was a member of the Frankfurt School for a brief period in the 1930s who eventually departed from the group to pursue his intellectual activities in psychoanalysis and social critique independently. He developed his own set of ideas by drawing on diverse thinkers in the tradition of humanism. What is noteworthy about Fromm is that he was interested in moving beyond Freudian theory to develop a critical, dialectical humanism; but this has earned him the epithet of a “revisionist” (Marcuse [1955] 1998) and has led to the falling out with those who insisted on a more orthodox

interpretation of Freud.¹²⁸ Thinking in terms of a neo- or post-Freudian framework, however, has allowed Fromm to make unique contributions. His most important achievement is the demonstration that a social structure which does not meet human needs will give rise to an authoritarian conscience and a narcissistic social character.

In an early work, Fromm argued that Nazism was effective in ruling over the population because broad sections of German society – but especially the lower middle class – had formed the character structure which made them psychologically inclined to submit to authority ([1941] 1994: Ch. 6). Submission to an authority figure served as an escape mechanism from their sense of aloneness and powerlessness. This behavior, according to Fromm, can be explained by the authoritarian conscience: an irrational ethic rooted in fear of an external power and obedience to commands and taboos ([1947] 2003:108-18).¹²⁹ The internalization of such a conscience is the result of not having developed a productive orientation, which is an entire mode of being and relatedness rooted in a commitment to truth, justice, and love; it is an active way of life guided by reason and concerned with the realization of one's powers to the fullest extent (ibid.:60-

¹²⁸ Fromm does not believe the libidinal drive and its repression are the principal dynamics that shape the human life; rather, the main issue is how humanity deals with the anxiety arising from its existential situation and what kind of relatedness to each other results from it: "Contrary to Freud's viewpoint... the key problem of psychology is that of the specific kind of relatedness of the individual towards the world and not that of the satisfaction or frustration of this or that instinctual need *per se*" ([1941] 1994:10, original emphasis).

¹²⁹ Bowing down to a political authority would certainly be a case of the authoritarian conscience at work. But other examples include the Freudian fear of the father figure and the Calvinist notions of guilt and the all-powerful God. In contrast, proponents of a humanistic conscience include Baruch Spinoza and John Dewey. For Spinoza, one can live in happiness and rational freedom while having absolute certainty in God as long as one has the correct knowledge of the self and human nature to develop one's own capabilities (Spinoza [1677] 2020; Fromm [1947] 2003). The authoritarian conscience operates within rulers and the ruled; in fact, sadism and masochism are two sides of the same psychological process of symbiotic fusion (Fromm [1941] 1994: Ch. 5). Also, it is safe to say that Fromm had developed this notion of conscience independently of Adorno's work on the authoritarian personality.

79). It could be said that the central focus of Fromm's social critique is whether modern society allows the individual to develop a productive orientation through the meeting of human needs.

Fromm had stipulated five needs originating from humanity's existential situation – the justification of which is too detailed to flesh out entirely. According to Fromm, humans have the need for relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, a sense of identity, and a frame of reference or object of devotion ([1955] 2002: Ch. 3). A society conducive to human growth will cultivate the capacity to love, creativity, solidarity, individuality, and a rational frame of reference; such a person will embody a productive orientation and a humanistic conscience. When society fails to meet these needs, the individual will come to exhibit narcissism, destructiveness, incestuous fixation, herd conformity, and an irrational devotion to idols.¹³⁰ Fromm's argument is that we do not live in a sane society because it is not organized for the full growth of the human being, and thus generates unproductiveness and illness on a societal scale. The radical implication of his reasoning is that society must adjust to the needs of the individual rather than the other way around. The maladjusted person may in fact be in a better state of well-being than the one who has perfectly adjusted to the demands of the alienating society.¹³¹

¹³⁰ "A healthy society furthers man's capacity to love his fellow men, to work creatively, to develop his reason and objectivity, to have a sense of self which is based on the experience of his own productive powers. An unhealthy society is one which transforms man into an instrument of use and exploitation for others, which deprives him of a sense of self, except inasmuch as he submits to others or becomes an automaton" (Fromm [1955] 2002:70).

¹³¹ An interesting question is whether this approach to social critique – i.e., the stipulation of a set of needs based on the critic's reflection on human nature – is really a form of immanent critique. Considering how Fromm starts out by establishing the "universal criteria" ([1955] 2002:12) of mental health that can be applied to all societies, his method may in fact be a form of external critique. Looking at Fromm's entire project across his writings, I think we can detect elements of external, internal, and immanent critique.

Like other critical theorists, Fromm came to believe that modern society keeps producing the potentially authoritarian character who is both submissive and aggressive, nationalistic, and untethered to reality. What is unique about Fromm's work, however, is his sustained reflection on narcissism as the core of contemporary social pathology. While Freud ([1914] 2001) studied narcissism in the context of schizophrenic patients who have stopped directing their libidinal energies to external objects, Fromm extends these insights to claim that extreme narcissism is equivalent to the loss of reality and the retreat of the individual into his or her subjective world: "Narcissism is the essence of all severe psychic pathology. For the narcissistically involved person, there is only one reality, that of his own thought processes, feelings and needs. The world outside is not experienced or perceived objectively, i.e., as existing on its own terms, conditions and needs" ([1955] 2002:34). Unlike the primary narcissism of the newly born infant who still has not distinguished between the self and the external world, narcissism in adults can be pathological if it obstructs the capacity to love, form relations, and think rationally (ibid.:35). He shows that narcissism, as an aspect of the authoritarian conscience, and can be embodied at the group level.

Social or collective narcissism is evident in a variety of reactionary agents such as racists, nationalists, demagogues – and the masses who attach themselves to them. The willingness to ignore certain truths and only believe what they want to believe is the most obvious symptom of narcissists. Another feature is the placing of undue importance to their own group and to anything connected to themselves: "Correspondingly, the narcissistic person's judgment is also biased against that which is not 'he' or not his. The

extraneous ('not me') world is inferior, dangerous, immoral. The narcissistic person then, ends up with an enormous distortion. He and his are over-evaluated. Everything outside is under-evaluated. The damage to reason and objectivity is obvious" (Fromm [1964] 2010:71). Narcissism is antithetical to the productive orientation, since the object of attachment is often something the individuals have not achieved but is something they happen to possess or be born with – such as whiteness, nationality, religion, etc. (ibid.:74). Fromm describes how narcissism operates in antisemites and white supremacists:

In both instances the core of the racial superiority feeling was, and still is, the lower middle class; this backward class, which in Germany as well as in the American South has been economically and culturally deprived, without any realistic hope of changing its situation (because they are the remnants of an older and dying form of society) has only one satisfaction: the inflated image of itself as the most admirable group in the world, and of being superior to another racial group that is singled out as inferior. The member of such a backward group feels: "even though I am poor and uncultured I am somebody important because I belong to the most admirable group in the world – I am white"; or, "I am Aryan." (ibid.:76)

Even though this description may be somewhat outdated, it still draws attention to the role of the social structure in shaping personality; the narcissists who assert their racial superiority or espouse xenophobic nationalism are not by their nature inherently evil, but have come to possess a certain character orientation within a society does not meet their needs and which ultimately alienated them from their fellow humans.

Fromm's ideas can still have wide application today. They can help illuminate why so many people were attracted to Trump and the MAGA movement, and why many of those same people became so engrossed in conspiracy theories. Most importantly, he demonstrated that social pathologies are pathologies of reason, and thus real structural reforms are necessary to get rid of the unhealthy need for narcissism and irrational habits:

“The function of authoritarian ideology and practice can be compared to the function of neurotic symptoms. Such symptoms result from unbearable psychological conditions and at the same time offer a solution that makes life possible. Yet they are not a solution that leads to happiness or growth of personality. They leave unchanged the conditions that necessitate the neurotic solution” ([1941] 1994:237). The form of society that Fromm believed would enable individuals to flourish collectively was a humanistic socialism that democratizes politics and economic life while providing opportunities for cultural and educational enrichment ([1955] 2002: Ch. 8; [1960] 2019:65-89). Whether we accept this conclusion or not, Fromm’s lessons are invaluable for our present task of repairing democracy and removing the conditions that give birth to social division and extremism.

4. On Group Formation and Regression

The three theorists discussed in the previous section have all demonstrated in different ways how modern society produces the authoritarian character. Interestingly, there was a clear theoretical fault line between Marcuse and Adorno on the one hand, and Fromm on the other: it had to do with the status of Freudian psychoanalytic theory for the explanation of the regressive tendencies of groups. Whereas the former theorists adopted Freud’s ideas enthusiastically for the analysis of social irrationality, the latter questioned the basic premises of psychoanalysis and presented an alternative framework. While Honneth does not contribute much to the study of authoritarian regimes and fascism, he does weigh in on the issue of Freudian theory and its relation to critical social thought. Honneth, like Fromm, aligns himself in the neo- or post-Freudian camp by rejecting the

assumption of an innate death drive or capacity for aggression ([2006] 2012:200). The Freudian assumption that humans have an innate anti-social element has led many to argue that the lapse into group conformity or fusion is an expression of negativity at the collective level. Honneth suggests that the explanation of such regression should rely on more on Winnicott's object relations theory instead, so that the negativity is the result of interaction and childhood socialization rather than the manifestation of a natural drive (ibid.:197-99). I will show how Honneth explains regression within groups in terms of recognition; this aspect of his theory is fruitful for the study of present-day division, although it is not connected to a notion of crisis.

In order to avoid the psychoanalytic pessimism about groups as well as the sociological optimism about their integrative function, Honneth pursues a middle path in which groups are understood as contexts for recognition that can also occasionally bring about phases of regressive fusion for the individual ([2010] 2012b:202-03). Because each person is dependent on multiple interaction partners throughout one's life from parental figures to peers for a sense of identity, people will continue to seek affiliation with groups in their adult lives to keep reaffirming their cultivated self-relations:

But in order to preserve and even expand these forms of a positive relation-to-self, subjects need membership in social groups that represent a kind of mirror for original recognitional behaviour. The experience that one's own needs, judgement and, above all, skills are regarded as valuable is one that subjects must constantly renew and re-concretize so that they do not lose their strength and vitality in the anonymity of a generalized other. (ibid.:205)

Group formation is driven by the need for (renewed) recognition by subjects; being affiliated to the group can foster a sense of support and autonomy. One example of this is

the formation of “countercultures of respect” (ibid.:206; Sennett and Cobb [1972] 1993) among those who were denied rights but were able to compensate for it by creating a support network embodying recognitive norms. Likewise, people will seek self-esteem in concrete experiences or contexts. In general, therefore, “adult subjects will normally feel an impulse to join groups in which the value of their own personality is reflected in an experiential way” (Honneth [2010] 2012b:211).

Group affiliation, however, can also destabilize individuality by letting the person fall into a state of fusion with the group. Honneth explains this using Winnicott’s ([1971] 2005) concept of transitional objects. Infants use transitional objects in the process of growth to cope with the pain of separation from the mother figure and the challenge of establishing boundaries between self, reality, and others. The object can be a toy or even their own thumb; its use by infants represents an intermediary phase between symbiosis and separation. Honneth surmises that this experience of relying on an illusion continues into later life, such that adults will have the urge or need to “get relief through regression” ([2010] 2012b:210) by collapsing their boundaries of identity: “... because the same subjects who depend on the confirmation of their self-value in the group are also driven by the need to find relief by regressing back beyond previously constructed boundaries of identity, intersubjective life in the group will constantly be marked by tendencies toward fusion” (ibid.:211). These periodic fusions with the group are not pathological, for they allow the renewal of the group’s culture of recognition. In fact, these emotionally intense moments of have the effect of collective effervescence (Durkheim [1912] 1995).¹³²

¹³² Honneth will discuss pathological versions of regression immediately after this. But it is still worth

Regressive fusion with the group is pathological only if it undermines the identity and autonomy of the individual. Non-pathological fusion is a regular part of the group dynamic and is not an outcome of libidinal energies or natural drives but an outcome of interactive processes of boundary formation which had a lingering effect on the adult psyche. Therefore, contrary to Freud's and Adorno's views, the group itself is not automatically responsible for transforming the individual into a submissive member of the masses ([2010] 2012b:212).¹³³ When the fusion does become pathological, Honneth agrees that group members can exhibit blind devotion to leaders in addition to extreme aggression. His explanation for these developments is vague: it is suggested that if there are enough individuals with personality disorders, the group's culture of recognition will be dismantled (ibid.:212-14). What I understand from this is that severe or sustained misrecognition can damage personalities and give rise to extreme behavior as a reaction to such experiences: "Therefore, social groups are always as good or as bad as the prevailing conditions of socialization" (ibid.:214).

These arguments represent Honneth's attempt to distance intersubjective critical theory from Freudian psychoanalysis and to integrate it with object relations theory. The

mentioning here how easily such ritualistic fusion to the group can devolve into something unhealthy: "If we want to understand how systems like fascism or Stalinism can possess millions of people, ready to sacrifice their integrity and reason to the principle, 'my country, right or wrong,' we are forced to consider the totemistic, the religious quality of their orientation" (Fromm [1950] 1978:31-2). Fromm saw an affinity between neurotic habits and totemistic worship. Both do damage to the individual's integrity: "Submission to a powerful authority is one of the avenues by which man escapes from his feeling of aloneness and limitation. In the act of surrender he loses his independence and integrity as an individual but he gains the feeling of being protected by an awe-inspiring power of which, as it were, he becomes a part" (ibid.:35). In comparison, Honneth seems to be much less concerned about the dangers of regressive fusion than Fromm.

¹³³ Honneth mentions Adorno's shift in views from the negativistic idea of the group to one that is similar to what has been outlined in terms of object relations theory. In the section on Groups in the *Soziologische Exkurse* of 1956 Adorno seems to describe the group affirmatively as a space for intimacy and human contact (Honneth [2010] 2012b:212, 216 n. 20).

issues are far from settled, as evinced by the retort by contemporary Freudians like Joel Whitebook (2001; 2021). While theorists like Whitebook assert the existence of inherent aggression and the desire for omnipotence in humans through a loyal interpretation of Freud, Honneth questions how these ideas were derived. The idea of omnipotence comes from the fact that infants experience during the earliest phase of primary narcissism a world in which resistance to their actions is absent. But Honneth rejects the notion of a complete symbiosis between the child and caretaker, for there is evidence that the infant already has a sense of self within weeks after birth ([2010] 2012c:226). A more accurate description would be that the infant has phases of partial fusion with the caretaker. It is an interactive dynamic from the start, rather than a progression from complete fusion to separation: “The conception of a ‘fantasy of omnipotence’ is misleading, for what infants abandon by acquiring a sense of the independent reality of their primary caretakers is not a state of imagined omnipotence, but beloved objects occasionally experienced as fused with their own experience” (ibid.:227). While pathological fusion can occur, the self is not inherently anti-social; it is capable of solidarity and empathy based due to its interactive constitution.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ These issues in object relations theory are complex, and it is certainly debatable whether Honneth is correct in his interpretations. Winnicott states that the infant is absolutely dependent on the mother in the earliest stages and has no way of knowing the caretaker’s provisions; but he also says that the infant is dependent and independent from the start ([1965] 2018:84-7). He also seems to think aggression is innate in the child, but it becomes an anti-social tendency through the experience of deprivation (ibid.:204). In her psychoanalytic theory of recognition, Jessica Benjamin considers aggression to be something inherent, and believes it is too idealistic to assume otherwise (1995:39-48). She seems to be arguing that the intrapsychic urge of destructiveness and aggression should be managed (but always in tension) intersubjectively.

One other clarification is due: while it may appear as if Honneth is strongly against Freudian theory, his position is more subtle. He does believe that findings from neuroscience and developmental psychology have discredited many of Freud’s ideas, but the therapeutic aspect of psychoanalysis and its commitment to autonomy should not be abandoned. We should not forget “the insight that, to begin with, the human is always a divided, inwardly ruptured being, yet one which, thanks to its inherent interest in

This recognition-theoretic understanding of group formation would allow Honneth to interpret several far-right groups as being pathologically regressive, without judging all groups to be contexts where the innate aggression of the individual gets brought out. Moreover, he would be able to understand the extreme behavior of these groups as the outcome of misrecognition: it can be said that misrecognized members of society seek out these groups to compensate for frustrated recognition and experience fusion. Such cases would differ from instances of momentary fusion that invigorates the bond of the group in a healthy way. He could have taken the next step to link this insight about regression with the idea of misdevelopment or a new concept of crisis. The crisis of ethical life stems from the pathological distortion of recognition, which occurs regularly under the capitalist social structure.

5. Honneth on the Crisis of Democracy

In this section, I will assess the value and usefulness of Honneth's ideas for making sense of the present crisis of democracy. He has not written on authoritarianism at great length; but one can find interesting remarks in *Freedom's Right* on the cooptation of the public sphere by the Nazi regime through the spreading of propaganda on public radio broadcast ([2011] 2014:378-79). In this sense, his theory of social freedom can shed light on the erosion of communicative processes when applied to the present. I will argue that, in many ways, Honneth's theory is highly useful for interpreting the current state of American society. His diagnosis of the breakdown of solidarity under neoliberalism has

extending its 'inner' freedom, has the ability to reduce or even overcome that rupturedness through its own reflective activity" ([2007] 2009c:127).

arguably predicted the destabilization of democracy, and the theory of recognition can help us make sense of the extreme behavior of those who have been systematically misrecognized in the capitalist social structure. I will also show, however, the limits to his framework. This has to do with his normative justification of freedom-guaranteeing institutions: by describing them as the rational outcome of centuries-long learning processes, he has difficulty making sense of the level of social irrationality that has come to plague ethical life. Although he has begun crafting a preliminary argument about crises, this is not adequate for capturing the direness of the situation of American democracy.

5.1 On the Concept of Crisis

Only recently has Honneth turned his attention to the concept of crisis and its relation to his critical theory. For much of his career, he did not have such a concept. The notions of social pathology included paradoxical contradiction, pathology (of individual freedom) as second-order disorders, misdevelopment, and disease of the social organism – all of which have been reviewed in Chapter 3. The concept he relies upon the most seems to be misdevelopment – the failure of an institution to actualize its inherent principle of social freedom. The misdevelopment concept may be insufficient to describe the current situation because it had already been used to diagnose the state of society prior to the onset of right-wing populism and extreme social division. The present state may be diagnosed as a misdevelopment in the superficial sense that it still does not realize social freedom; but if the current phase of society is qualitatively different from the period which Honneth had diagnosed as a misdevelopment, then we require a new

concept that reflects this. In other words, one can argue that the present state of extreme division is an outcome of prolonged misdevelopments that have not been rectified; the concept of crisis can be introduced to capture the disintegration of democratic ethical life itself – which was outside the initial scope of Honneth’s thought.

In their collaborative work, Didier Fassin and Honneth comment on the ubiquity of the word “crisis” in the discourse of social critique, and advise against imposing a definition of crisis onto a situation from the outside. According to the authors, crises are not “out there” waiting to be identified but are produced dialectically by agents and observers: “Crises frequently stem from critique, and critique generally emerges from crises” (Fassin and Honneth 2022:8). They propose taking an internal, phenomenological perspective on the ways agents deal with critical situations to see what is revealed about social relations, structures, and dynamics that were until then not visible or articulated (ibid.:2-3). In his essay “The Invisible Rebellion” (2022), Honneth refrains from defining crisis, but still suggests that there is a crisis of labor in contemporary capitalist societies given the paradoxical fact that strikes and protest activities by workers have declined even though working conditions and levels of protection have worsened since the Fordist era. The lack of visible collective resistance does not necessarily mean workers have accepted their circumstances completely; it may be that they resort to hidden forms of protest because that is the most they can manage under conditions of intense control and surveillance. Honneth draws on literature documenting how low-wage workers in the service and industrial sectors have formed countercultural groups for mutual support in addition to engaging in subversive actions like absenteeism and minor rule-breaking.

While in some cases it is difficult to distinguish the collective, morally motivated forms of criticism from the purely individual actions oriented to coping with the situation, these hidden forms of rebellion nonetheless express the workers' desire for self-control in jobs that are felt to be oppressive or meaningless: "... whether they manifest attempts at adjustment or principled dissent, the strategies of avoiding full capture by the firm or service company all deserve to be interpreted as attempts to save the dignity of one's own labor" (ibid.:400). The decline of organized labor and the rise of powerful, micro-managing companies in the neoliberal era have led to the dire situation in which workers can only express their plight and discontent in mostly fragmentary, invisible ways.

The predicament of those who can barely make a living and attain recognition in today's working environments is part of the crisis. Fassin and Honneth are also correct in saying that we should use the concept of crisis with more reflexivity. However, I believe more could have been said about the sociological relevance of crisis for the present age. For example, those low-wage workers who can only engage in invisible dissent may end up joining extremist groups for countercultural support and participate in the regressive kind of group fusion; they may get swept up in xenophobic rhetoric and come to see other people not as fellow citizens but as enemies of the nation. What Honneth describes is part of a bigger crisis involving division, disintegration, de-democratization. The fact that he is unable to make these connections is a limitation to his thought. In the discussion below, I will examine the way other thinkers have defined the idea of crisis and how it fits in their overall theory. By reviewing and piecing together their insights, I hope to offer a concept of crisis that is suitable for Honneth's project.

The lack of sustained reflection on the concept of crisis by Honneth becomes all the more apparent when we consider the fact that critical theorists before and after him have incorporated the idea into their frameworks. In Habermas' case, he has elucidated a notion of crisis in terms of an elaborate system-lifeworld model of society. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 1987) he outlined how the system's colonization of the lifeworld results in "crises" (ibid.:143) for cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. The manifested disturbances include loss of meaning (culture), anomie (society), and psychopathologies (personality), but also include things like withdrawal of motivation and legitimation, or the unsettling of collective identities. Regarding social integration in particular, Habermas states in a different study that a crisis involves the destabilization of normative structures which constitute the identity of society:

Thus, only when members of a society experience structural alterations as critical for continued existence and feel their social identity threatened can we speak of crises. Disturbances of system integration endanger continued existence only to the extent that *social integration* is at stake, that is, when the consensual foundations of normative structures are so much impaired that the society becomes anomic. Crisis states assume the form of a disintegration of social institutions. ([1973] 1975:3, original emphasis)

We have seen in Chapter 1 how Honneth does not accept Habermas' system-lifeworld model for complex reasons, and in Chapter 3 how he disputes the thesis of capitalism's legitimation and motivation crises; it would therefore be quite difficult to reconcile Habermas' crisis concept with Honneth's theory in a straightforward manner. Still, Habermas' definition of crisis as social disintegration is valuable. Victor Lidz's (2021) Parsonian interpretation of American society's crises addresses the issue from all four functional perspectives, but he stresses above all the declining capacity of the societal

community to maintain relations of solidarity and thus fulfill its integrative function.¹³⁵

With these formulations as our starting point, we can begin to specify what it means for ethical life to disintegrate. A crisis of ethical life will involve the erosion of relations of recognition, the declining ability or willingness of members of society to participate in reciprocal role-obligations, and consequently the destabilization of the spheres of social freedom (family, market economy, and public sphere).

The concept of crisis also figures centrally in Rahel Jaeggi's ([2014] 2018) immanent critique of forms of life. According to Jaeggi, forms of life are a collection of interrelated social practices with normative character that are meant to solve problems, and these forms of life can be critiqued based on the rationality and success of their problem-solving strategies (ibid.:29-30, 84-7). A form of life regularly encounters a problem which it cannot solve with the existing set of habitual practices, but it achieves rational progress when it overcomes the problem through changes in practices without destroying or completely altering the form of life itself (ibid.: Chs. 7-8, 10). Forms of life are culminations of learning processes whereby deficient practices get replaced by better, more rational ones. In Jaeggi's framework, therefore, a crisis is defined as the blockage to this learning process and the failure of a form of life to solve its own problems.

A philosophical example of a form of life as a nexus of problem-solving would be the bourgeois civil society as understood by Hegel. Civil society solves the problem of balancing the needs of the individual with the common good; it provides livelihood to

¹³⁵ Another important aspect of the assessment was the crisis of pattern maintenance: with such a sharp split between mainstream Protestant or secular value orientations and the fundamentalist-Evangelical one, collective identities in America are bifurcated and increasingly irreconcilable (Lidz 2021:219-23).

individuals by securing them jobs through free participation in the labor market. However, this institution fails to live up to its own principle by systematically producing poverty and the rabble (ibid.:159-63). The crisis of bourgeois civil society becomes apparent in its inability to solve the problem of poverty and in the resulting fragmentation of ethical life:

Therefore, the problem of poverty is a *normative problem* (poverty should not exist according to the self-understanding of bourgeois civil society; society must find a solution to this problem), but it is also a *functional problem* (a society marked by such tendencies toward disintegration is in danger of falling apart and of failing as a society). Social integration itself functions on the basis of a norm, namely, the promise of achieving a position within society through work in which one can provide for one's own livelihood and thereby enjoy recognition. Where the fulfillment of this promise is prevented by systematic obstacles, it is in danger of losing its integrative function, so that the form of life founded upon it would also break down. Here, therefore, "disintegration" is a concept that not only describes a state, but an *unacceptable* state, because a normative claim, an idea of how society as a relationship of ethical life should be constituted, is violated. (ibid.:162, original emphasis)

According to Jaeggi, the resolution of the crisis is a process of determinate negation in which the contradiction is superseded, and the resulting form of life is now equipped with a renewed, reflexively superior self-understanding (ibid.:290-99). When a form of life overcomes a crisis, it experiences growth and enrichment in a way that incorporates the old paradigm into itself and makes possible a more rational process of problem-solving; when the form of life succumbs to a crisis, it experiences stagnation or regression.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Although Jaeggi does not say so explicitly, progress in a form of life is like consummatory experience and democratization in the Deweyan sense, whereas regression and stagnation are essentially the same as the stifling of democratic process. Dewey remarks on experience and its impediment: "Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. All ends and values that are cut off from the ongoing process become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences" (2002b:271). At one point, Jaeggi says a form of life can be characterized as flourishing when its practices are the result of collective self-determination ([2014] 2018:312). But since she discusses things in terms of a philosophical notion of practice, she does not specify what flourishing means for the

In addition to crisis as disintegration, therefore, Honneth may benefit from the insight that crisis entails stagnation or regression manifested as the blockage of learning processes and failure of problem-solving. The two aspects of a crisis are connected: it is not surprising that a society which cannot solve its own problems will also be afflicted by disintegration. For example, American society's inability to solve the problem of poverty and inequality has bred widespread resentment, which in turn has exacerbated social cleavages. A society that falls into a state of crisis fails to actualize reason in the sense of securing the conditions for individual self-realization and social cooperation; but this would also be true of a misdevelopment. For the concept of crisis to be useful, it must indicate something else – and this is where the emphasis on disintegration becomes important. In Honneth's case, a crisis would indicate the erosion of recognition and the disintegration of the relational institutions of ethical life. Honneth had diagnosed and anticipated several aspects of such a crisis, but he probably did not expect ethical life and democracy (in the American context) to become threatened to such a severe extent.

5.2 Disintegration of Ethical Life

Some of Honneth's earlier writings contain valuable insights that can help us make sense of division and the rise of right-wing extremism. At the end of his essay on social disrespect ([1994] 2007b), he mentions the case of marginalized East German

individual or how the individual is harmed by a crisis. In this regard, her highly abstract, almost post-humanist approach may not be that useful for Honneth.

youth who join neo-Nazi groups to compensate for their discontent and exclusion.¹³⁷ The point he is trying to make is that the feeling of disrespect does not itself guarantee that the reaction by subjects to the negative experience will have a rational emancipatory quality to it: "... social esteem can just as well be sought in small militaristic groups, whose code of honor is dominated by the practice of violence, as it can in the public arenas of a democratic society" (ibid.:77). In this way, he cautions against an overly optimistic view that all struggles for recognition are normatively valid. In the United States, this is exemplified by the contrast between white nationalists and Black Lives Matter: both groups believe they are struggling for recognition, even though there is a stark difference in the validity of their struggles. Honneth admits that the theory of recognition must accept this normative ambiguity of the motivation behind social struggle, and it should not assume that the subjects always share the same perspective as the critic. The question which critical theory after the communicative turn needs to address 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" (ibid.:78). In the next sub-section, I will use Dewey's theory of democratic education in groups to demonstrate that an immanent critique can differentiate between violent countercultural groups and progressive ones, and that recognition theory is not helpless in assessing the validity of different reactions to misrecognition.

¹³⁷ "For many of them, this 'group of comrades' became a kind of drug they couldn't do without. Since they didn't experience any recognition outside the 'group of comrades,' they were mostly isolated and didn't have any other social contacts" (Hasselbach and Bonengel, in Honneth [1994] 2007b:77; Hasselbach and Bonengel 1993).

Honneth's essay about Adorno titled "A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life" ([2005] 2009) is another work where we can find diagnoses which foresaw what was coming. He discusses how Adorno believed that commodity exchange and the world of reified relations were the cause of the deformation of the human capacity for imitative reason. Reason gets exercised for instrumental purposes, and the all-encompassing "organizations" of capitalist society make the individual feel profound powerlessness as well as the pressure to exclude others who do not conform to mainstream ways of life (ibid.:60-5). The sense of powerlessness that comes from feeling superfluous in the world and unsuccessful childhood socialization lead to collective narcissism: "The tendency to insist on one's own group's convictions through 'lack of affect' with regard to others is, in the form of collective narcissism, at the same time the expression of a regression of imitative reason" (ibid.:67). Both Adorno and Honneth agree that collective narcissism – and the capitalist form of life that keeps producing it – are pathologies of reason. While bridging the social divide, breaking out of commodified relations, or restoring empathy are incredibly difficult tasks, Adorno still believes that those who suffer still possess a desire for healing and freedom: "Even the adult who acts in total conformity with the instrumental pressures of the capitalist form of life retains a weak memory of the origins of his thinking in early moments of empathy and care. It is a residuum of experience of this kind on which Adorno... bases his confidence that, despite their deludedness, subjects still possess an interest in the liberation of their reason" (ibid:70). In today's world, such faith in the mimetic capacity from childhood may be vital for repairing a disintegrating ethical life, for we cannot simply reject those who have fallen into hatred

and narcissism; the task is to create a society in which they can outgrow their regressive tendencies.

One can also detect, however, an optimism and perhaps naiveness in Honneth about the severity of regression that could befall on ethical life. This has mostly to do with his theory of social freedom. The normative reconstruction of relational institutions has led to the view that these institutions are legitimate and just despite any observed shortcomings in the real world: “The fact that subjects actively preserve and reproduce free institutions is theoretical evidence of their historical value” ([2011] 2014:59). Much of this dissertation has dealt with this aspect of Honneth’s theory by questioning whether it is possible to do a thoroughgoing critique of capitalist society if one establishes the validity of certain institutions like the market economy from the start. What I tried to show in Chapter 3 was how such a critique leaves intact the basic structure of capitalism while making assessments that vaguely point in the direction of social democracy. In the context of today’s crisis, we would have to question even the basic claim that subjects actively support the dominant institutions of society: the normative consensus that used to be in place about these central institutions are falling apart – as evidenced by the fact that participants in the public sphere, for example, often cannot take on the reciprocal roles of speaker-listener or co-authors of the law, and instead view others as potential enemies. In his discussion of the inseparability of justice and autonomy, Honneth states that this fusion “represents an achievement of modernity that can only be reversed at the price of cognitive barbarism” (ibid.:17). But much of what is taking place today, from the rise of xenophobic hatred to the curtailment of civil rights, embody such cognitive barbarism

which he thought was basically inconceivable given the progressive trajectory of Western societies. The spread of illiberalism in the United States is a development that in some ways exceeds the scope or bounds of the theory of social freedom.

Perhaps the main lesson to be learned from the crisis of American democracy is that ethical life is not nearly as stable as we thought. Of course, Honneth acknowledges that ethical life is in constant need of protection:

... “ethical” institutions require legal protection, state oversight, and the support of civil society in order to be able to realize the claim to social freedom that underlies them. Only a division of labor and the interplay between the law, political institutions, and a solidarity-fostering public sphere can sustain the institutional structures to which the members of a society owe the multiple facets of their interlocking freedoms, and to which as a result we all owe a culture of freedom. (2016:176)

Yet even this statement is somewhat unsatisfactory when read in the present context. The support mechanisms for keeping ethical life intact are not working, and the “culture of freedom” is eroding at an alarming rate since powerful interests are trying to create an unfree society in the name of freedom. What is taking place is the crisis of ethical life in the ways just described: destabilization of normative structures; disintegration of society (anomie); regression from past civil-legal achievements; and stagnation of problem-solving at the state level. Honneth could incorporate the concept of crisis as an extension of his notion of misdevelopment – and it should identify not just the problem of invisible protest among laborers, but all aspects that threaten the democratic way of life. His theory of recognition, more so than his theory of social freedom, seems to be better suited for investigating how contemporary society generates the racism, resentment, and narcissism that drive populism and right-wing extremism in America.

5.3 Why Immanent Critique

Any critical theorist who is concerned about the future of democracy and the possibility of immanent critique must confront the following questions: What lies beyond the crisis? What will come after this phase of extreme division? Will members of society be able to learn from this experience and achieve a more rational collective life? Can immanent critique contribute something to the process of change, learning, and growth, or is it just one mode of inquiry that is no more valid or useful than other forms of critique? We are still at that point where we do not really know what will happen to American democracy – whether it will fall apart and turn into an authoritarian system, or if it will be able to repair itself. But if the latter scenario does take place successfully, then the result should not be the restoration of the social structure prior to the onset of crisis, but the attainment of a new, better way of life. In this last section, I would like to discuss what this means for Honneth's critical theory.

Chapter 2 had explained the differences between the various approaches to social critique. It was stated that external critique has the fault of pretending to have a universal standard that can be applied to evaluate social reality, when in fact such externally imposed normative ideals reflect the unacknowledged predilections of the historically situated critic. One can construct a vision of the perfect society and then apply it to American society in order to point out its major shortcomings; however, this form of critique turns into a kind of moralistic condemnation which merely presents an arbitrary and empty "ought." Even if one says that American society *ought* to change in such and such ways to become more just, upon closer examination these ideals turn out to be less

neutral or universalistic than they are presented as being. Interesting claims can also be made through an internal critique by drawing on the espoused values of a community. For example, one can point to religious commandments which people claim to believe in – such as loving their neighbor, the stranger, and their enemy – and argue that American society is not following its Judeo-Christian teachings. While an internal critique could demonstrate the importance of living up to such traditional values and suggest well-intentioned reforms, it could not point beyond these values nor justify why they should be the standard (among many other competing ideals) for the evaluation of society. In a pluralistic society, it is doubtful that the values internal to a particular moral community or tradition could be the basis of a transformative critique.¹³⁸ A genealogical critique would demonstrate the falsity of normative principles by showing how they have turned into ideologies of domination. A critic might say that the ideal of freedom no longer means what it used to mean because it now gets evoked to justify racial hierarchies, deregulated market economies, or social arrangements which will benefit only a subset of people (e.g., rich, white, Christian, heterosexual men). A deconstructive analysis of this sort is illuminating, but it has trouble specifying why it is critiquing the status quo if reliable normative standards are not available. Its skeptical perspective precludes it from disclosing an emancipatory way out of the present situation which it finds problematic.

In contrast to these approaches, I had stated that immanent critique is practice-based, which means it draws on the normative potential of institutionalized forms of

¹³⁸ Moreover, this privileging of a specific religious tradition is unrealistic, for the American constitution codifies the separation of church and state as well as the freedom of faith. In fact, the attempt to disregard these facts and enshrine Christianity as the official state religion of the United States is characteristic of the American Right.

social practices. One of the arguments of Chapter 2 was that immanent critique manages to avoid the flaws of the other three models: it does not impose arbitrarily constructed norms onto the social world, but it also does not rely on the hermeneutic interpretation of conventional values or their deconstruction either. Because immanent critique employs a context-transcending concept of reason, it points beyond the present from within it. But it became abundantly clear that there are significant differences among practitioners across generations, and there is no perfect method of immanent critique which everyone will find agreeable. The fact that Habermas, Honneth, and Jaeggi each criticize the theories of their predecessor and portray themselves as doing the more authentic immanent critique of society indicates that the practice of immanent critique will almost always be highly contested.¹³⁹ The issue is further compounded by the fact that there are two different forms of immanent critique in Honneth's works: the theory of recognition relies on the normative surplus of existing relations of recognition to point toward an expansion of those relations, whereas the theory of social freedom relies on the principle of social freedom embodied in society's central institutions to indicate how the social spheres of action do not fully actualize reciprocal cooperation with an ethos of mutual sympathy. Given these difficulties, is an immanent critique of a crisis-ridden world still a viable project? I would like to suggest that it is, despite its imperfections.

One of the ways Honneth can contribute to a useful critique of crisis is by specifying how the crisis causes human suffering and what kind of liberation for the

¹³⁹ Recall the discussion in Chapter 2 where Honneth problematizes Habermas' critique for still being somewhat external, and Jaeggi identifies an internal focus in Honneth's normative reconstruction to then argue for a negativistic approach to immanent critique. Such disagreements will continue to spur the evolution of this tradition.

individual can be expected with the overcoming of crisis. The theories of Habermas and Jaeggi are important because they incorporate the concept of crisis as a pathology of reason, but their theories are highly abstract when it comes to the individual person and social relations. Habermas did indicate that a crisis of lifeworld reproduction results in psychological illness at the individual level due to the distortion of socialization; and he laid out a typology of manifested symptoms of crises for the lifeworld as a whole ([1981] 1987:143). But this construction is the outcome of an attempt to reconcile the concept of the lifeworld with Parsons' action frame of reference – specifically the cultural, social, and personality systems (Parsons 1978; [1951] 1991) – into one framework. Habermas' discussion of human well-being in terms of communication and learning processes is still highly abstract. Jaeggi's ([2014] 2018) theory has even less to say about individuals and collectivities because she abstracts out of real societies and people by defining social practice and forms of life in a purely philosophical way. While her work is truly groundbreaking in many respects, its seemingly post-sociological perspective is too distanced from the lived experience of crisis.¹⁴⁰

The strength of Honneth's critical theory is that it has always been concerned with the self-realization of the individual. The theory of recognition argued that individual flourishing depends on the existence of an array of recognitive relations through which the person can develop positive self-relations; the theory of social freedom also claimed that

¹⁴⁰ Jaeggi states that “there is no positive answer to the question of what makes a form of life a good or adequate form of life”; her negative answer is that “failing forms of life suffer from a collective practical reflexive deficit, from a blockage to learning” ([2014] 2018:315). She stands by this because substantive visions of the good life are not defensible. I hope to show that a Deweyan understanding of growth can still be consistent with the goals of immanent critique while offering something more than just a purely negative view of avoiding or eliminating irrationality.

the inability to live in cooperative, communicative freedom would result in the “suffering from indeterminacy” ([2001] 2010) for people. His investigations into many themes, such as love as boundary formation and dissolution and it being a prerequisite for other forms of recognition, to solidarity as more than just tolerance but active concern for others, and many other issues give his theories more substance than the theory of communicative action or theory of forms of life. Furthermore, Honneth tried to delineate only the formal conception of the good life (i.e., conditions for self-realization) rather than any specific version of it. Since I believe the theory of recognition is more suitable than the theory of social freedom for envisioning social change (for all the reasons I gave so far), I close with a reflection on the connection between recognition, immanent critique, and crisis.

The motivation underlying the struggle for recognition is the agents’ belief that they have been denied the recognition they deserve. The problem with this, as discussed above, is that the subjects could react to perceived misrecognition in constructive but also in violent or anti-social ways. Honneth also implied that there is nothing in recognition theory that can guarantee that social struggles would always take a progressive form. This formulation could be contested by differentiating between those struggles which contain emancipatory interest and the capacity for growth from those that do not. For example, there should be a noticeable difference in normative validity between racial minorities who are struggling for equality, and white supremacists who are trying to protect their “heritage” and “ways of life.” The former seeks to build a social order in which diverse groups accept and recognize each other, while the latter seeks to maintain an order in which entire categories of people are not treated as equals. There is a passage in Dewey’s

Democracy and Education ([1916] 2004) where he defends an immanent approach to critique and reform, while also discussing it in the context of the educative experience of different groups. He claimed that any mode of group or associated life can be evaluated according to a certain metric:

In seeking this measure, we have to avoid two extremes. We cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist, in order to have any assurance that our ideal is a practicable one. But, as we have just seen, the ideal cannot simply repeat the traits which are actually found. The problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement. Now in any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves, we find some interest held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard. (ibid.:79)

This standard comprises (a) the amount and variety of interests shared among members, and (b) the fullness and freedom of interaction with other groups. Accordingly, the education provided in a gang or criminal band is partial and distorted because there are only a small number of shared interests (in stealing, for example) and they are isolated from other groups in society. The lack of communicative exchange of values and ideas with other associations “makes for rigidity and formal institutionalizing of life, for static and selfish ideals within the group” (ibid.:82). In contrast, a family that fosters multiple shared interests and participates actively in community life will provide a genuinely democratic education for its members.

This relates to Honneth’s concerns because Dewey shows that it is possible to identify the healthier modes of associated life from the unhealthy ones, and that the former contain immanent ideals that can point the way toward social progress. The clue

to repairing a divided society is to establish more channels of communication – the kind that leads to enrichment and growth:

An undesirable society, in other words, is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience. A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder. (ibid.:95)¹⁴¹

These reflections seem to be consistent with what Honneth has said about the normative surplus of existing relations of recognition, and how struggles against misrecognition always point beyond the existing structure of relations toward a normative order of greater individuality, inclusion, and solidarity. This brings up again the issue of how context-transcending Honneth's immanent critique really is. I address this ambiguity in connection to the concept of crisis.

One of the shortcomings of internal critique mentioned by Jaeggi is that it is not context-transcending because it takes for granted the validity of conventional morality, which is why the most it can propose is the fuller realization of existent values – but not the transformation of the social order beyond its current stage of development, or of the values themselves. She also implied that Honneth's method of normative reconstruction is dangerously close to being a form of internal critique because he relies on a principle of freedom that is retrieved from within social reality, against which society is evaluated

¹⁴¹ It should be apparent that simply “more communication” cannot be the solution to restoring social solidarity. The internet age and especially social media have drastically expanded the opportunity for communication, but they also provided spaces that became breeding grounds for extremism and hatred. There is a need for more meaningful communication in society, and a responsible regulation of online forums that are known to be harmful, dangerous, etc.

([2014] 2018:203, 360 n. 25). I partially agree that Honneth's critique is structurally conservative if all it can suggest is a return to how things were before the crisis unraveled. The social freedom model is ambiguous in this regard because it is unclear how much change can be envisioned if certain structures and reciprocal roles are kept largely intact since, by Honneth's pronouncement, "there do not seem to be any practical alternatives to the economic system of the market" ([2011] 2014:196). I do not want to be misleading: I am not suggesting that after the crisis American society will enter an era of democratic socialism. The most we can probably hope for in the short-term future is the stabilization of representative democracy and the protection of the electoral process from forces that try to undermine it. My point is that in the longer span, immanent critique should point toward a new organization of social life. If it cannot do this, then I do not think we can speak meaningfully of successful problem-solving or restoration of ethical life.

If Honneth's critical theory is to be useful, it needs to make room for a possible future in which the problems of division, inequality, resentment, and hatred are all dealt with in a way that the social order embodies a newer or higher form of rationality and freedom – even if tensions and antagonisms continue to exist. If the most his theory can contribute 30 years from now is yet another diagnosis of misdevelopment because social freedom has not been attained, then that is not a useful critique. The theory of recognition is more fruitful as a framework for thinking about the multidimensional pathways of emancipatory change that can take place from within this moment of crisis. While in his debate with Rancière he said he only expects *internal* struggles for recognition to take place – i.e., struggles to reform the current recognition order, rather than to create an

entirely new one through ruptural change – the scope of reform could be greater than what Honneth imagines. Even if the only realistic and acceptable method of achieving progressive change is through democratic experimentation, this should not set limits on what we think recognition struggles can accomplish. After all, the model of cooperative democracy which Honneth ([1998] 2007) defended requires a just division of labor as a precondition. While his understanding of a just division of labor was rather vague, the implications of such a formulation are quite radical.

A normative and theoretical commitment to the notions of social freedom and recognition need not restrict the political imagination to an uninspiring kind of liberal reformism, where the best one can hope for is a moderately regulated capitalist economy with a minimally deliberative democracy. This chapter's review of the first-generation critical theorists as well as the crisis of American society has shown that the capitalist social structure regularly produces the reactionary mind and the narcissistic personality. Honneth himself showed that the capitalist economy exploits workers to such an extreme degree that for many low-wage workers only hidden forms of protest are possible. And it is evident that we live in a society in which powerful capitalists vehemently resist wealth redistribution or stricter market regulations. What these things mean is that creating a freer society with a cooperative democracy founded upon a just division of labor requires reorganizing the capitalist system. If we do nothing about the system which produces the inequality and resentment that are at the core of today's social division and right-wing radicalization, the crisis will not have been solved. In this important respect, the political agenda entails eroding capitalism, or making capitalism less capitalistic (Wright 2019).

Rather than demanding and imposing socialism, it has more to do with taking seriously the utopian content and emancipatory potential of recognition struggles that are reacting to the crisis of democracy. Only through diverse and sustained struggles will a robustly democratic ethical life be restored or, better yet, reborn and actualized. Many people already have a general idea of a feasible, alternative world in which they would like to live; these ideas will be subject to constant revision and adjustment as things develop and as we continue to interact and learn from each other – and that is how it should be. Doing an immanent critique, as one form of practice among numerous others in social life, is part of the process of coming to a better understanding of what is at stake in society and providing the inspiration or motivation to effect change.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered the usefulness of Honneth's critical theory for explaining and understanding the current crisis of democracy that is afflicting American society. It was shown that for the most part Honneth lacks a concept of crisis in his theoretical framework, and that he would benefit from a notion of crisis as disintegration of ethical life and failure in problem-solving. On the other hand, I also showed the many ways in which his insights were helpful – such as his interpretation of the regressive side of the group dynamic, or how extreme behavior can result as a reaction to the experience of misrecognition.

The chapter also addressed the complex issue of the relevance of immanent critique in a time of social crisis. I have tried to illustrate how immanent critique is

methodologically more sound compared to external, internal, and genealogical critique, while acknowledging the many disagreements and ambiguities that are still left. An effective critique of the social world does not involve mapping out the perfect society devised by a brilliant mind or falsely neutral procedure, or urging society to go back to its cherished communal values; nor does it involve debunking the validity of ideals and principles to then lament at the all-around domination taking place. An effective critique of the social world would show how pathological deformations of reason are manifested in society's institutions and practices, while indicating from within these relations a direction of change that points toward a freer and more rational order. The strength of Honneth's critique is that it is more substantive and not as overly abstract as that of other theorists because the fundamental concern of his critical theory is the self-realization of the individual. Repairing democracy and rejuvenating ethical life will necessitate the expansion of the relations of recognition from multiple directions.

One should keep in mind that immanent critique does not itself guarantee an emancipatory outcome. Critical theorists may conduct an immanent critique of society, but that does not mean the social pathologies will necessarily be negated or transcended – a deeply irrational state of affairs may persist. Furthermore, just because a group of German theorists argue that immanent critique has the superior method does not prevent other intellectuals and laypersons from thinking in the external, internal, or genealogical modes. There will be philosophers who will keep justifying these other forms of critique, which is both inevitable and fine. The task of intellectuals, as members of society, is to participate in academic and public discourse, exchange arguments in diverse settings, and

present a convincing case about the need and possibility for change from an immanent perspective. In this sense, critique is a social practice, and it is through research, dialogue, and civic participation by all parties that society will attain a higher level of reflexivity about its problems and desirable courses of development.

Conclusion

The preceding four chapters represent my attempt to conduct a comprehensive study on Axel Honneth's critical theory. While I believe I have carried out a detailed analysis of his works, it is also clear that many problems remain unresolved. In this concluding statement, I would like to reflect on what this dissertation has accomplished. This will take the form of (a) recapitulating the overall argument, and (b) addressing some incomplete ideas as well as the promising directions of further research.

1. Summary of the Argument

Chapter 1 examined Honneth's ideas within the context of the major theoretical issues and concerns he was addressing; these included the viability of the communicative, post-metaphysical paradigm that was initiated by Habermas, as well as the need to move beyond the model of language toward the model of recognition. By emphasizing the element of social struggle, he moved away from the Habermasian normative expectation of mutual understanding to adopt the early Hegelian normative expectation of mutual recognition for his own theory. Because Honneth understood moral conflict to be the basis of social order and social change, I had claimed that his theory of recognition is a normatively informed version of conflict theory. Although the idea of social freedom is defined in terms of recognition and is also derived from Hegel, the theory itself stresses the moral consensus on values within institutions rather than social conflict. As such, I stated that the theory of social freedom is a form of normative functionalism. While both theories are successful in revealing pathological developments in society and have as

their ideal the vision of an ethical life, they stand in an odd tension with each other due to their contrasting logics.

Chapter 2 explained what immanent critique is by distinguishing it from external, internal, and genealogical critique. I defined immanent critique as the evaluation of social reality according to the normative principles and rational potential embodied in existing institutions and practices. Its origins can be traced to Hegel, who established the method of evaluating something by its own standards; and it was shown that the Frankfurt School theorists had a common interest in the possibility of rational freedom, although they used the procedure of normative reconstruction to varying degrees. What they also share is the intuition that the structure and dynamics of capitalist society distort this socially inherent reason, leading to suffering and loss of freedom in some form. I had demonstrated that Honneth has two different programs of immanent critique: the first is a phenomenological approach that relies on the agent's lived experience of injustice, while the second is a teleological approach that focuses on how society fails to realize its institutionalized ideal of freedom which has taken shape over the course of Western modernity. It was argued that this latter program has the tendency to employ its normative standard in a static way which gives Honneth's critique a morally conventionalist and structurally conservative character – despite its insistence on having a context-transcending concept of reason.

Chapter 3 reviewed the substantive arguments of Honneth's critique of capitalist society. It showed how he regards capitalism as a normative order of recognition that is made up of relational institutions; through his moral economism he considers the basic organization of the social system to be inherently legitimate. Nevertheless, Honneth still

diagnosed many troubling developments, such as the erosion of discursive mechanisms in markets and the reversal of social-democratic era progress for recognition by neoliberal capitalism. I argued two separate things: first, Honneth's critique results in a vague vision of socialism as the experimental-reformist realization of social freedom. Since his theory comes close to positing the immutability of certain institutional arrangements, it is not clear if he sufficiently problematizes the structures of power that obstruct the expansion of recognition and freedom. Second, Honneth's fluctuating concepts of social pathology – which include ideology, reification, paradoxical contradiction, social misdevelopment, second-order disorders, and disease of the social organism – are not entirely coherent. I suggested that instead of focusing on reflexive disorders or the organicist conception of society, Honneth should return to his definition of social pathology as the distortion of socially inherent reason which impedes the self-realization of the individual.

Chapter 4 provided an exegesis on Honneth's recent works, and also investigated if his theories are useful for understanding the current crisis of democracy in the United States. He has recently begun reflecting on the notion of crisis, but it was limited in scope. I indicated that there is a need to theorize the crisis of ethical life itself, and showed how he would benefit from the insights of Habermas and Jaeggi regarding the destabilization of normative structures and failures of problem-solving. The first-generation theorists of the Frankfurt School have demonstrated how modern capitalist society regularly produces extremism and the authoritarian character; Honneth's theory of recognition is suited for interpreting the formation of far-right groups as the regressive compensation for withheld recognition. However, the theory of social freedom was less applicable because of its

optimistic assumptions about the consensus on values and the acceptance of institutions. I therefore argued that the theory of recognition is more suitable for an immanent critique in a time of crisis. Repairing democracy and actualizing an ethical life of freedom could only take place through diverse struggles of recognition that establish new channels of communication and association.¹⁴²

These layers of arguments crafted across multiple chapters comprise my overall argument which defends the immanent critique tradition but problematizes the limits – especially concerning the possibility of transformation – in Honneth’s thought. Thus, I have urged returning to the theory of recognition and to diagnosing the pathologies of reason that preclude the self-realization of the individual. Toward the end of Chapter 4, I began to outline a Deweyan version of an immanent reformist analysis that is consistent with Honneth’s project and theory of recognition; it can be applied to point the way out of the state of extreme division in American society toward an inclusive and cooperative

¹⁴² By arguing in favor of Honneth’s theory of recognition over his theory of social freedom, I do not mean to suggest that social freedom is an irrelevant idea. As I have shown, Honneth defines freedom in terms of recognition, and the expansion of the relations of recognition would lead to the securing of the institutional conditions of freedom. In Hegel’s philosophy as well, recognition is indispensable for such an ethical life of freedom: “Recognition that is not coerced and that must always be won again – the constitution of social intersubjectivity, in particular through work; the active internalization of the normative structures without which there can be no sensible action – these are the primary conditions, necessary but not sufficient, that (eventually) allow an individual to lead an ethical life, that is, simply to have ‘a life’ of which he or she can be the subject” (Kervégan [2008] 2018:349). By criticizing Honneth’s theory of social freedom, I may have given the impression that I do not think moral consensus or the normative validity of institutions are of any importance – which is not my position. Sociologically speaking, common values and something resembling moral consensus are crucial for the regulation of social action and human behavior. As Honneth himself says, even conflicts over recognition principles take place within such background context of normativity. My argument has been that, as a framework for looking at and critiquing society, the freedom model is less useful because it has a tendency to consider pathological developments as deviations from an ideal that has steadily crystallized in modern institutions – and such a perspective restricts the political imagination. The recognition model can highlight pathologies and emancipatory potentials from multiple vantage points without asserting the necessity of a certain configuration of institutions. If we want to achieve a society that embodies social freedom, we should make use of the theory of recognition to critique society immanently.

democracy. As I have said, doing social critique does not guarantee an emancipatory outcome – but, as a practice within society, it is part of the process of change and growth. It can contribute to our understanding of what the problems are and what needs to be confronted in order to live in a rational, free, and humane society. The present crisis will not be overcome unless major structural reforms are implemented to lessen inequality and alleviate the anxiety and resentment that are fueling the reactionary movements. This can only be accomplished through long-term struggles on multiple fronts; and perhaps the scope of institutional change required is greater than what Honneth had initially imagined.

2. Unaddressed Issues and Promising Directions

I am aware that there is so much more I could have done in this study. There were so many ideas that could have been fleshed out in greater depth, and strands of research that could have been incorporated into the text. In closing, I would like to mention what I would have liked to discuss more and indicate some promising directions of research on the topic of critical theory and immanent critique.

A comparison I could have undertaken is one between Honneth's ideas and Erik Olin Wright's sociology of real utopias (2010). Both theorists engage in a critique of capitalism and argue for democratic socialism that is to be attained through experimental reform. And while Wright tended to carry out his critique externally by stipulating the principles of social and political justice beforehand, he also believed the ideals of equality, liberty, and solidarity (i.e., social freedom) were inherent in the social world that could be realized more fully under altered conditions. The key difference between Wright and

Honneth is that the former deploys a theory of power and frames the reformist project as a kind of anticapitalism (2019). By expanding the exercise of civil society's associational power in various ways, the capitalist state and economy could be gradually socialized and democratized. For Wright, this involved a politics of anticapitalism because he was keenly aware of the powerful interests that would resist such socialization; this is why he thought socialist mobilization involves "eroding" capitalism or dismantling the power relations of capitalists and the state. Taking a close look at Wright's work is valuable because it can show that Honneth can be vague about the issue of social transformation: his immanent critique and moral economism seem to close off certain future possibilities and neglect the antagonistic side of social relations.¹⁴³ Even his theory of recognition rooted in conflict does not seem to have in view forms of struggle that are external to the capitalist normative order. I have tried to suggest that a commitment to an immanent approach to critique should not lead to the narrowing of the political imagination.

Research on the topic of immanent critique is vibrant among European social philosophers, especially those educated in Germany. Apart from Honneth, the only other

¹⁴³ Wright has an interesting criticism of Wolfgang Streeck's (1997) Durkheimian argument about the need for the normative regulation of the market that is neither too weak nor too strong, but just right for optimum economic performance. Wright agrees that there are normative obligations to uphold the non-contractual elements of contract, but he argues that different classes will have different conceptions of the optimal level of constraints: capitalists will prefer to set the constraints at a lower level than what the working class will prefer. Classes have antagonistic material interests, and so the task of normatively regulating economic activities will involve conflict, especially when the capitalist class has the power and incentive to resist such constraints: "Enlightenment of the capitalist class to their long-term interests in a strong civic culture of obligations and trust is not enough; the balance of power also needs to be changed. And since this shift in balance of power will be costly to those in privileged positions, it will only occur through a process of mobilization and struggle" ([2004] 2015:184). This criticism can also be directed at Honneth's theory of social freedom, which stressed the reciprocal role-obligations between classes and economic positions. Wright's intervention might be that Honneth is too optimistic about the willingness of the capitalist class to cooperate; and that the experimental project of socialism would involve a clash with antagonistic forces.

contemporary scholar whose writing I was able to discuss was Jaeggi's *Critique of Forms of Life* ([2014] 2018). There are others whose research is relevant to my study; I was not able to bring them in because I have only recently discovered them or have not mastered them yet. I would like to introduce some of them here. Several of these researchers are close associates of Honneth who will continue to lead the field on this topic.

Titus Stahl is another philosopher who has published a monograph that explains and defends immanent critique ([2013] 2021). Drawing on Adorno and contemporary analytic interpretations of Hegel, he argues that immanent critique should draw on the agents' particular moral experiences of suffering as a starting point for social evaluation rather than explicit normative principles, since such conceptualized ideals could overlook or abstract away from real injustices (2022). Particular experiences contain rational moral intuition that can be reconstructed and communicated; they can be used in a negativistic way to indicate what should be avoided, but not to indicate what to strive for positively. Implicit in his argument is that Honneth has come to rely on the normative principle of social freedom at the cost of a serious consideration of subjective experiences. Stahl's model is practice-based and seems to be concerned with the realization of reasonable life through the avoidance of the irrationality of dominant conceptualizations. I think it is hard to share a purely negativist view of critique, since pragmatically we can have a preliminary understanding of what is worth striving for – although I do agree that this must constantly be tempered by reexamination and justification.

Robin Celikates ([2009] 2018) has also defended immanent critique over external and internal critique in a study that delves into French social theory. According to him,

there are two prevalent misconceptions about the relation between agents and critics in sociology. The first model represented by Pierre Bourdieu's critical social science views social actors as incapable of having a reflexive understanding of their behavior (due to their dispositions and situatedness in fields) and thus critique can only be carried out by the social-scientific observer; this falsely denies the critical capacities possessed by ordinary people in society.¹⁴⁴ The second model exemplified by ethnomethodology and Luc Boltanski's ([2009] 2011) sociology of emancipation sees no difference in the capacity for reflection of the layperson and the expert, making the task of critique the descriptive retelling of the agents' beliefs and interpretations; this has the fault of neglecting the socially produced differences in reflexive capacities between subjects and observers. Celikates argues that a third immanent model in which critique is understood as a social practice would be able to circumvent these flaws. Through a re-reading of Habermas' writing on psychoanalysis in *Knowledge and Human Interests* ([1968] 1971), Celikates claims that social critique should analyze and criticize "the social conditions that thwart these reflexive capacities and the practices that correspond to them" ([2009] 2018:8). He orients immanent critique to the diagnosis of second-order disorders, and my question would be why critical theory must restrict its focus to reflexive understandings about the world and not deal with pathological developments of the social world itself.

Someone who pivots away from an exclusive focus on second-order disorders and assigns immanent critique the task of diagnosing social pathologies in a naturalistic sense

¹⁴⁴ Bourdieu is actually known for framing his sociological approach as a way of overcoming the false dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Celikates, however, seems to think Bourdieu's social science does not live up to its goal and is ultimately guilty of being objectivistic.

is Arvi Särkelä (2017). He uses Dewey's *Lectures in China* (1973) and the recently discovered notes to those lectures (2015) to lay out a program of immanent critique in which society is conceived not as an organism but as a life process that can get sick by stagnating and degenerating. Särkelä builds on Dewey's naturalistic social philosophy to argue against Honneth (2014) that society as (processual) associated life is meant to grow and undergo change; if it merely reproduces itself statically like an organism through the functional cohesion of organic parts, then associated life is afflicted by an illness. Social criticism is also supposed to contribute to the cure of pathology, and this is possible because "social criticism essentially is a part of its own object... [Social life] is itself mediated by criticism of its habits, customs and institutions" (Särkelä 2017:115-16). In other words, critique is part of the life process of society, which is why social practice always has the capacity for self-transformation through collective learning. It is an immanent approach to critique because "social philosophy is the practice of evaluating the ways of social life to evaluatively relate back onto itself" (ibid.:122). One claim that I find hard to accept is the sharp distinction made between normativist and naturalistic concepts of social pathology, wherein a normativist notion of a pathology of reason that impedes the individual's self-realization is deemed incompatible with the naturalistic conception (Särkelä and Laitinen 2019). I think it may be possible to connect the degeneration of associated life with the suffering of the individual in a coherent way.

I would like to pursue these promising lines of research henceforth to further develop my own thoughts on Honneth, critical theory, and the task of immanent critique. An interesting trend in this research field is how a lot of the theories and arguments are

becoming more and more philosophical and progressively less sociological: the people who work on these topics are all philosophers, and they define immanent critique using highly abstract notions of social practice in ways that may be unfamiliar to the sociologist. There is little discussion of society and its parts, such as the economy, state, civil society, the class structure, and so forth. This is a curious development because critical theory of the Frankfurt School began as an interdisciplinary social theory with emancipatory intent. Now, the social theory component is fading out (to varying degrees), and it seems like Habermas and Honneth are the last two rigorously sociological critical theorists who tried to connect philosophical ideas with the concepts and concerns of social theory – such as social action, normative expectation, modernization and rationalization, communication, functional differentiation, etc. Despite having several problems, I think Honneth's work is valuable for its sociological insights (e.g., on the relation between social structure and personality), and it is a little worrisome that the generations of critical theorists coming after him are not as engaged with sociology (with a few exceptions). As I continue to work in this field, I would like to maintain the link between philosophy and sociology, and keep arguing for the importance of sociological analysis of social structure for an informative and insightful immanent critique of society.

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