Experiences and Justice: On the Limits of Recognition
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Axel Honneth’s and Nancy Fraser’s *Redistribution or Recognition?* is an important contribution to contemporary political thought. Not only do the two authors force one another to clarify and deepen their respective positions on fundamental issues of moral, social and political theory, thereby enriching our understanding of arguments and ideas that have already come to shape the politico-moral debate of today. With the book’s richness in topics, its careful and nuanced treatment of each, and its bold ambitions to rethink our social world not in parts but in its totality, it also poses theoretical questions relevant to many of us and it sheds new light on pressing real-life issues of social justice, social subordination and social suffering. It should come as no surprise, then, that this exchange has served as a vantage point for others developing their own views on similar matters. Neither should it surprise us if it continues to do so for years to come.

Needless to say, any attempt to briefly comment on such a rich discussion is doomed to be incomplete. Acknowledging this, I limit my ambitions and raise only one concern, albeit one of central importance. Parting with Fraser, I question Honneth’s claim that recognition alone suffices to ground a theory of justice. However, I locate the shortcomings of Honneth’s approach not in that it is ethically grounded, as Fraser does, but rather in that he takes as his starting point subjects’ *experienced* disrespect. I argue that this makes Honneth’s theory vulnerable to false and unwarranted claims for recognition, claims that are then translated into demands of justice.

1. *Redistribution and or Recognition?*

In the opening pages, Fraser identifies and describes what we may call the recognition-theoretical turn. By this she understands an inclination, both in theory and in political

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2 I am grateful to the STINT foundation whose financial support allowed me to contribute these brief remarks.
life, to frame social injustices as matters of recognition rather than as matters of redistribution – the latter being the language of justice claims of earlier years as formulated by, for instance, John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Brian Barry. Social justice, it was said, cannot only be about the proper distribution of a predefined set of rights and goods. Since the worth of rights and goods are necessarily defined by an underlying value structure, and since such structures tend to mirror the interests of the dominant groups in society, mere equalization of the rights and redistribution of the goods identified cannot remedy social injustices at their deepest level (an argument borrowing, as we see, from the well-known Marxian argument against mere redistribution). Instead, the power relations defining the value structures of society must be called into question and the task of a theory of justice must be to identify and give voice to claims for “recognition” of previously subordinated ways of life. Identifying Axel Honneth and Charles Taylor as the two most prominent proponents of contemporary recognition theory, Fraser agrees with them that the language of redistribution cannot adequately capture all there is to social justice and injustice. However, contra Honneth and Taylor she also holds that neither can a one-sided focus on recognition.

For Fraser, (mal)distribution and (mal)recognition are two separate axes of (in)justice. The first expresses (potential) economic subordination, the second (potential) cultural subordination. No doubt, the two tend to be interrelated, sometimes in intricate ways, but neither is reducible to the other. Therefore, Fraser argues, what we need is a perspectival dualist approach, allowing us to assess social practices both as instances of distribution and as instances of recognition – both as economy and as culture. “Witness the case of the African-American Wall Street banker,” she writes, “who cannot get a taxi to pick him up,” and we see an example of a cultural injustice, where institutionalized patterns of value renders our banker as less than an equal, notwithstanding his economic standing. Or “[w]itness the case of the skilled white male industrial worker who becomes unemployed due to a factory closing resulting from a speculative corporate merger,” and we see our factory worker suffering an economic injustice, notwithstanding his cultural standing. More money to the banker will not render him immune to discrimination. Even higher esteem for the skilled white worker will not give him his job back. To understand and correctly redress social injustices, we must, she concludes, assess social life both from the perspective of economy and from that of culture.

Honneth on the other hand argues that a sufficiently differentiated theory of recognition can do precisely what Fraser claims it cannot – give us the tools we need to understand

6 Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 64. This ambition raises a number of theoretical challenges. Perhaps most importantly, it forces Fraser to reformulate the ethical demands of recognition theory in deontological terms, making them compatible with the language of the distributive paradigm of earlier years. Interesting as this reformulation is, I will however have to leave it aside here.
7 Ibid., p. 34.
8 Ibid., p. 35.
and redress not only cultural injustices, but economic injustices too. Recognition, he says, is more than the “merely cultural.” It is not one axis among others, but the key concept which structures normative life of society as a whole. Drawing on Hegel’s and G. H. Mead’s understanding of the social as constitutive of the individual, Honneth argues that reciprocal recognition between subjects is a necessary precondition for unimpeded identity-formation and self-realization. When social relations of recognition fail to live up to this standard of reciprocity – that is, when they are skewed, subordinating some to others – those being subordinated perceive themselves as disrespected. These feelings of disrespect then spark and fuel struggles for recognition, aimed at creating or restoring the necessary conditions of reciprocity. In our modern societies, Honneth continues, three distinct spheres of recognition can be identified, organized according to the principles of love, equality and achievement. These three principles structure social life today, they inform our struggles, and it is to them we turn in order to “argue that existing forms of recognition are inadequate or insufficient and need to be expanded.” As such, they are the tools we use to wage distributive struggles too.

Let me explain. Honneth suggests that there are two ways to understand distributive struggles – either as struggles over the relative influence of the principles of equality and that of achievement, or as struggles over the proper interpretation of the achievement principle. The establishment and gradual expansion of social rights might serve as an example of the first kind of struggle. This process, Honneth argues, should be understood as a penetration of the principle of equality into a sphere previously governed by the achievement principle alone. Motivated by feelings of disrespect, subordinated groups mobilized the equality principle to argue for social minimums irreversibly of achievements, invoking “the hardly disputable assertion that members of society can only make actual use of their legally guaranteed autonomy if they are assured a minimum of economic resources.” Or we can turn to contemporary struggles for gender equality to see how redistributive claims can be conceptualized as struggles over the proper interpretation of the achievement principle. In some European countries, for instance, nurses have successfully argued for higher salaries by advancing the claim that their contributions have previously been underestimated and must be reevaluated. Economic injustices too, it seems, can be understood as culturally rooted injustices, and from this it follows that distributional struggles too can be understood as struggles for recognition. It remains to be seen, however, if that is how we should understand them.

9 Ibid., p. 134.
10 Ibid., pp. 125–34.
12 Fraser and Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, pp. 138–43.
13 Ibid., p. 143.
14 Ibid., p. 149.
It is reasonable to demand of a theory of justice the ability to call prevailing patterns of cultural value into question. If purely distributive theories cannot do this, as Honneth and his fellow recognition theorists argue that they can’t, then this must be regarded as a serious flaw. But it is equally reasonable to demand the ability to provide proper guidance as to how the goods, benefits and burdens of social life should be distributed throughout society. Here, however, Honneth’s approach falls short of our expectations.

Fraser argues that the root cause of Honneth’s problems is that he formulates his demands in terms of self-realization and identity-formation; that is, as ethical judgments grounded in a theory of the good rather than as deontological judgments of the right. This forces Honneth – again, so Fraser argues – to drain his position of all substantive content, since in a pluralistic world where ethical value-horizons intersect, ethical approaches can avoid ‘sectarianism’ only by formalizing their demands to the extent that there is no controversial or contested substance left. Let us stay with distributive struggles conceptualized as struggles over the proper interpretation of the achievement principle. When those participating in our struggles disagree, then, no substantive interpretation of ‘achievement’ can be called upon to distinguish warranted from unwarranted claims; and to say that achievement should count without saying what should count as achievement amounts to saying nothing at all. Honneth’s understanding of distributive struggles thus becomes regrettably indeterminate.

I am inclined to agree with Fraser, this does pose a problem for Honneth. But the problem must be located at a deeper level, for Honneth will run into difficulties even when it does not make sense to speak of “modern conditions of value pluralism,” that is, even when value-horizons do not diverge to the extent that they are incommensurable in Isaiah Berlin’s sense of that term. The root cause, I would like to suggest, is rather that Honneth takes as his starting point experienced disrespect, and that he allows subjects’ experiences to enter our social struggles at face value, not discriminating between warranted and unwarranted claims. This not only makes his approach indeterminate. It might even be that, when capable of delivering determinate answers, it will deliver wrong answers.

The claim I would like to defend – or rather outline in this limited space – is that Honneth is far too generous in what he allows the parties engaged in social struggles to bring to the table. Social struggles are, for Honneth, struggles between existing social groups and at stake are these groups’ actual interests, value-horizons, identities and ways of life – as experienced by subjects themselves. But not all experiences are warranted and not all claims should be considered rightful. Take Robert Nozick’s freedom-loving libertarians, shying away from taxes and governments while stubbornly arguing against the ideal of social equality. Or take Philippe van Parijs’ equally freedom-loving but also free-riding Malibu surfers, shunning wage-labor and

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17 Ibid., p. 226.
demanding their right to an unconditional basic income.\textsuperscript{20} Both these groups certainly experience their interests as threatened by, say, the welfare state as we know it. Self-declared over-taxed libertarians may experience taxation as theft, and hence as disrespectful. Malibu surfers may experience withheld basic income as a violation of their right to live the life they want, and hence as disrespectful.

But perhaps they are wrong and perhaps their experiences are unwarranted. It might be that Nozickian libertarians fail to live up to morally warranted requirements of solidarity, or it might be that van Parijs’ surfers fail to live up to equally warranted requirements of responsibility (which, if we stay with the charge of free-riding, amounts to the same thing – to not accept one’s fair share of the burdens of social life). To then let their claims enter our social struggles at face value would distort the conditions of these struggles, and thereby the moral development of our societies – it would introduce a bias that would be propagated down the road, affecting not only the struggles themselves but resulting agreements and arrangements as well. These are the dangers distributional theorists take seriously, distinguishing right from wrong and warranted from unwarranted claims before politics begin. Honneth however, far too generously, allows even unwarranted and wrongful claims to enter our struggles for recognition, claims that will then affect both the character and outcome of our moral conflicts.

It can of course be argued that unjustified claims will be marginalized along the road, and hence that Honneth’s approach, in the end, will deliver what it ought. But so it can be argued that our distributive theories allow for social reformation of repressive value-horizons too. After all, there were in the efforts of Rawls, Dworkin or Barry nothing preventing citizens from publicly assessing, questioning and debating the value-structures of their societies. If the critique mounted against the distributive paradigm should make sense, then, it must be understood as the claim that purely distributive theories fail to assess dominant value-horizons theoretically, or pre-politically. Anything less – to let the actors of social struggles play out their disagreements in political life without a prior theoretical leveling of the playing field – would introduce a bias in favor of the prevailing value-order. But now it seems as if Honneth’s failure to assess claimants’ claims already at the level of theory would introduce just the same kind of bias.

Hence, the deeper source of Honneth’s problems is, paradoxically, that he offers us a truncated critique. I say paradoxically, for this brings us back to the impulse that spurred the recognition-theoretical turn to begin with – that the distributive theories of earlier years were too accepting of prevailing value structures. But the need for criticism extends beyond the value-horizons of the dominant groups, so as to include the value-horizons and beliefs held true by others too, whether dominated or not, whether subordinated or not, whether suffering or not. For just as a proper theory of justice must resist the temptation to take the dominant value-horizon as a given, so it must resist the temptation to take any value-horizons as givens.

The need to critically assess our value-structures is, we may conclude, at least partly a theoretical or pre-political need. That is to say that the task of a proper theory of justice cannot be only to outline the moral grammar of social conflicts and then

let these conflicts be played out by the actors themselves. A proper theory of justice must go beyond this – it must be able to guide political practice and to point forward, towards the right and away from the wrong, regardless of the beliefs held true in society, by dominant groups or by others. This, however, Honneth’s approach cannot do, fueled as it is by feelings of disrespect as experienced by subjects themselves, and failing as it does to discriminate between warranted and unwarranted experiences.

3. Final Remarks

In conclusion, while Honneth might be right that the injustice suffered by Fraser’s skilled white worker can be understood in terms of recognition, it is not clear that his purely recognition-theoretical approach can adequately answer how such claims should be evaluated. Granted – and this weakens my argument – I have presupposed what were to be shown: that economy cannot be reduced to culture alone; that not everything is interpretations of culturally shaped interests; that there are truths and falsities that go beyond mere culture. Or, referring to the examples above, that it might be that Nozickian libertarians or van Parijs’ free-riding surfers are wrong. Plain and simple. Not wrong within the interpretative schema that is our culture, but wrong regardless of what they themselves, or people in general, consider right or wrong.

For the claim that Honneth fails to assess our subjective experiences theoretically, or pre-politically, is meaningful only on the assumption that such assessments are possible. This in turn requires that there is a deeper point of departure available, one that is morally prior to subjects’ experiences and valid regardless of culture. That, however, I have not argued for. Acknowledging the incompleteness of my argument, I therefore offer these remarks only as an attempt to shed further light on what I consider to be the main shortcomings of Honneth’s approach and of its theoretical presuppositions.

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On the Motivational Bases of Social Struggle. Honneth versus Fraser

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Axel Honneth has furnished a penetrating critique of the dichotomy between redistributive or economic conflicts and conflicts over social and cultural identity that has recently been re-endorsed by Nancy Fraser. I think it may be helpful to re-examine this particular issue here precisely because it allows us to shed some light on two closely interconnected questions. The first one, formulated in negative terms, concerns the renewed attempt to overcome certain fundamental assumptions of the classical Marxist tradition. The second, expressed in positive terms, is concerned with clarifying the principal theoretical commitments of an ambitious socio-philosophical approach that
attempts to interpret the basic motivational factors behind all social struggles exclusively in terms of human convictions and aspirations that are eminently moral in character. First, in section 1, I discuss the negative side of the question, in order to show how this critique of the dualistic “Marxist approach” favoured by Fraser basically revives earlier criticisms that have been directed against the Marxist schema of “basis” and “superstructure.” In section 2, I indicate how the abandonment of this schema, in contrast to the sort of criticisms raised by members of the first generation of Critical Theory, is based on a version of Habermas’s normative-theoretical approach (one that goes beyond the admittedly crucial distinction between “life world” and “system”), but Honneth also suggests, albeit cautiously, the need to reconsider Gramsci’s position in this regard, a position that seems to me to represent a more balanced approach to the problem. In section 3, I show how Honneth has radicalized his theoretical model of intersubjective recognition by claiming that the moral response to the experience of disrespect provides the basic motivation for all forms of social struggle, so that that the role of material interests, and of the economic sphere more generally, is now effectively absorbed within the recognition model. In section 4, I attempt to show that this analytical perspective leads to an exaggerated emphasis upon the moral sphere in relation to the ethico-political and the politico-economic sphere, and that this imbalance impairs the heuristic fruitfulness of the recognition paradigm itself. I believe that this tendency can be countered through a more balanced approach that draws on the insights and contributions of the Gramscian perspective, including his thematization of struggles for hegemony. This approach would allow us, without falling back into a dualist position, to broaden the complex spectrum within which we can clearly analyse both the phenomenology of the experience of disrespect and the struggles for recognition that emerge from this experience. Finally, in section 5, I summarize the conclusion of the argument.

1. Reflections on Superstructure

In negative terms, Honneth’s principal criticism of the “Marxist tradition” defended by Frazer springs from the “conviction that Marx makes some serious mistakes in his analysis of capitalist society. The central objection here concerns his unmistakable propensity to dismiss the moral power of the equality and achievement principles as cultural superstructure [als kulturellen Überbau], although they provided the newly emerging market society with its legitimating framework in the first place.”21 These principles play a decisive role in determining how “labor” is valued and understood: “Between the new status hierarchy – the gradation of social esteem according to the values of industrial capitalism – and the unequal distribution of material resources there is, to this extent, more than a merely external relation of “superstructure” and “basis” [mehr als das bloß äusserliche Verhältnis von “Überbau” und “Basis”], of “ideology” and objective reality.”22 Honneth thus goes further than merely criticizing the

22 Ibid., p. 141.
schema that posits the superstructure as a reflection of “the basis,” something that had already been undertaken by the earliest exponents of Critical Theory. For the task is to change the whole perspective from which the Marxist schema should be addressed: the question is no longer that of explaining the absence of revolutionary class consciousness, or of testing the historical effectiveness of political ideologies. Once the underlying Marxist philosophy of history has been abandoned, we can clearly recognize the “tendency to see the proletariat alone as the stand-in for all social discontent” as “the fatal mistake Marxist theory made over and over again.” \(^{23}\) The crucial question now is to show that the critique — like the justification and in fact, at least in part, the very constitution — of the capitalist criteria of value that define the terms of redistributive conflicts rests on principles of a “moral” kind. What is at issue now is thus no longer simply the thesis (now almost obsolete anyway) that the superstructure is merely the “reflection” of the economic basis, but the separation itself between the sphere of economics and that of culture (between the “material” level and the “cultural” or “symbolic” level). Here therefore Honneth moves both against Marx and against, or rather beyond, Habermas. And he has continued to work in this same direction throughout the last few years, by insisting on the normative elements that he believes are immanent to the economic sphere. \(^{24}\)

2. The Roots of Normativity

Still speaking negatively, the second essential component in his critique of Fraser and the Marxist tradition concerns the basic socio-anthropological model underlying this approach. In this regard, Honneth emphasizes how the tradition of critical social theory — influenced by the idea that a single “unified interest” could be ascribed to the working class, and that there was therefore absolutely no need for “a separate explanation” of the moral expectations of society that (individual and collective) subjects entertain — privileged an essentially utilitarian anthropological model that simultaneously precluded the possibility of developing an analysis of those moral factors that ultimately sustain the redistributive conflicts themselves. \(^{25}\) From this point of view, an articulated theory of recognition “should serve to make visible a deep layer of morally motivated conflicts that the tradition of critical social theory has not infrequently misrecognized, owing to its fixation on the concept of interest.” \(^{26}\) For this fixation explains “why the attempt has never really been undertaken within the tradition of critical social theory to come to a preliminary conceptual understanding [sich konzeptuell […] vorzuverständigen] of the normative sources of social discontent. With the great exception of Jürgen Habermas — alongside whom Antonio Gramsci should perhaps be placed — for various reasons a certain tendency to anti-normativism has prevailed, which essentially prohibited subjects from being endowed with normative expectations vis-à-vis society.” \(^{27}\)

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 124.


\(^{25}\) Fraser and Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition, p. 127.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 136; see also p. 134.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., pp. 128-29.
Honneth thus distances himself from the earlier generation of critical theorists, and follows Habermas in insisting on the necessity of adopting an explicitly normative perspective for analyzing social reality and the suffering and discontent that afflicts it. He also appeals, albeit rather cautiously, to Antonio Gramsci in this connection. I believe that this appeal is entirely legitimate in one respect. For Gramsci’s writings reveal an unequivocal tendency to acknowledge and appreciate the ethical and moral dimension that is inherent in social struggle. And he addresses this dimension within a theoretical framework that, while clearly Marxist in character, is by no means economistic in a reductive sense, and expressly questions the schema of base and superstructure in a number of respects. Nonetheless, when we consider Honneth’s critical observations regarding the role of material interests in generating social conflicts and struggles, and, more generally, the radicalized version of his theoretical model that we shall explicitly discuss below, I believe that the Gramscian approach has a distinct advantage here. For it is more successful in combining the two dimensions, that of moral norms and that of material interests, that produce and sustain social (and political) struggles, without thereby falling back into a basically dualistic perspective.

3. Radicalizing the Theoretical Model of Recognition

In positive terms, the abandonment of the schema of base and superstructure, along with the repudiation of the socio-anthropological model associated with it, leads directly to the attempt to interpret all forms of injustice, whether in the context of redistributive issues or that of questions regarding social and cultural identity, within the unified framework of a theory of recognition. As far as the more strictly economic level is concerned, this means that we are in a position “to offer evidence for the strong thesis that even distributional injustices must be understood as the institutional expression of social disrespect [von sozialer Missachtung] – or, better said, of unjustified relations of recognition.”\(^{28}\) The task of demonstrating this thesis is unfolded as follows: “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.” And this implies that what “motivates individuals or social groups to call the prevailing social order in question and to engage in practical resistance is the moral conviction that, with respect to their own situations or particularities, the recognition principles considered legitimate are incorrectly or inadequately applied.” It follows from this that “a moral experience that can be meaningfully described as one of ‘disrespect’ [Missachtung] must be regarded as the motivational basis of all social conflicts [als die institutionelle Basis aller sozialen Kämpfe].”\(^ {29}\) And this thesis amounts to the claim that “the experience of social injustice always corresponds to the withholding of what is taken to be legitimate recognition.”\(^ {30}\) Thus redistributive conflicts, like “all” other social conflicts, would also belong to the sphere of struggles for recognition in general.

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 114.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 157.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 170.
I believe that this line of argument clearly reveals how the attack on the economistic and utilitarian model once defended by the Marxist tradition has been radicalized through the elaboration of a normative framework that tends to leave little room for thematizing the interrelations between moral expectations and material interests. Yet in Honneth’s book *The Struggle for Recognition*, it seems to me, the question of the difference between struggles connected with power, goods, and interests of a material kind on the one hand, and the intersubjective conditions of identity formation on the other, was addressed more cautiously. As Honneth writes: the “model of conflict, based on a theory of recognition, should not try to replace [eben nicht ersetzen] the first, utilitarian model but only extend it [sondern allein ergänzen wollen].”\textsuperscript{31} The programmatic thesis, articulated here, that “recognition-theoretic models of conflict have the duty not only to extend but possibly to correct” the utilitarian model,\textsuperscript{32} seems to me to preserve the constitutive possibility of questioning, in addition to the moral sphere of recognition, that of the power relations and material interests that also serve to shape the motivational factors behind social conflicts and struggles. In other words, this suggested a theoretical horizon that did offer a distinct alternative to the previous model, and avoided the danger of a certain excessively unilateral approach by integrating, substantially correcting, but not completely replacing that model. I think Honneth’s caution in this respect is entirely justified. For however much we investigate the differentiated structure of the moral concepts of recognition and disrespect, I do not believe it is possible to subordinate the sphere of material interests entirely to this normative framework, effectively treating these interests as derivative or merely surrogate expressions of such concepts. In the sometimes rather heated debate with Fraser, on the other hand, the traditional “fixation” with the instrumental category of “interest” seems to have been almost entirely replaced with theoretical speculations regarding the normative concept of “recognition.” It is precisely this imbalance in the argument that could, I believe, be redressed if we gave due consideration to Gramsci’s contribution to the problem.

4. The Ethico-Political Dimension and the Question of Hegemony

If we reduce the motivational bases of all social struggles solely to the moral dimension of disrespect, the more specifically ethico-political and politico-economic aspect of such experiences ends up assuming second place. Yet if disrespect is to provide the motivation for engaging in a given social struggle, it must be interpreted in a particular vocabulary that, as Honneth himself stresses in *The Struggle for Recognition*, allows for “translation” into social and political terms that can at least guarantee its universal application to a given social group. It is this operation that permits individuals to share and rethink their own experience so that it can effectively provide the emotional incentive and force for a given social movement, whether actual or emergent.\textsuperscript{33} Yet it seems to me that this act of translation plays a more significant role than is really


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 166.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp. 259 ff.
Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth’s *Redistribution or Recognition?*

acknowledged in Honneth’s analyses, and this becomes particularly clear as soon as we consider cases where it fails to occur: when, for example, the experience of disrespect is confined to the realm of purely personal resentment, or is turned directly against the subject himself. Or we may think of those “depressive” reactions in which subjects who can be considered a target of institutionalized disrespect become socially isolated and withdraw entirely into their own suffering or discomfort.34 This type of reaction can be traced back to that broad range of emotional processes that I would describe as “regressive.” Rather than developing a positive kind of reaction that can be translated into some form of social struggle, subjects such as this passively accept the disrespect they have received, often interpreting and justifying this with arguments and considerations that neutralize the emancipatory potential of the experience, and thus remaining effectively crushed by their own suffering. I believe that the analysis of such cases, which are certainly not that exceptional, should play a significant role in the context of a renewed critical theory that specifically undertakes to identify and evaluate the emancipatory potential within the experience of social suffering. Similarly, it seems to me that this negative and regressive aspect of the issue also tends to be obscured and neglected under the influence of a reinterpreted Hegelian model of the struggle for recognition, the basic teleological orientation of which requires the almost uninterrupted and progressive development in the moral and ethical level of western societies.

But the crucial question to which I would like to draw attention here is this. Once we have acknowledged the central importance of this process of “translation,” and thus of the “political” character that is intrinsic to the moral reactions of individual subjects – in other words of the fact that “feelings of social injustice are always shaped by public discourses”35 – we must also proceed, at the same time, to develop a more radical political interpretation of the phenomenology of moral experience that Honneth has presented. My own view is that Gramsci’s investigation of the ethico-political dimension of social struggle and his related attempt to conceptualize the struggle for hegemony must be counted amongst the most significant conceptual resources for pursuing just such an approach. I believe that a renewed engagement with this perspective could help to shed considerable light upon the various hegemonic devices and approaches that combine to define the syntax and semantics of a language that is capable of neutralizing the emancipatory potential of social suffering, and thus in a position to perpetuate the dominant consensus, in spite of the suffering experienced by the subjects involved (and I believe that it is the element of suffering here that distinguishes this question from that regarding the role of mere “ideologies”36). But once we reintroduce the question of ethico-political hegemony into the foundations of the phenomenology of the moral experience of disrespect, the more strictly economic


35 Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 250.

dimension of material interests simultaneously reacquires a decisive role in the paradigmatic struggle for recognition. At the very moment when the feelings and moral expectations of moral subjects reveal their “political” nature, as the progressive or regressive character of the reactions in question clearly reveals, it becomes imperative to reconsider the political-economic forces and relations that determine the outcome of the struggle for hegemony amongst different social groups. In other words, the exercise of hegemonic power represents a fundamental condition for the emergence or the neutralization of the motivations that are required to provoke social struggles for recognition. And once we bear in mind, as Gramsci writes, that “if hegemony is ethico-political, it cannot fail to be economic as well,” it is clearly necessary to proceed not only from the ethico-political to the economic level, but also in the opposite direction, tracing the path that leads from the economic to the ethico-political level, and from here, to the level of morality.

5. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, I believe that we can only endorse Honneth’s renewed and vigorous attempt to overcome the economism and radical anti-normativism of the more orthodox Marxist tradition by re-emphasizing an absolutely crucial dimension of all social struggles – including those connected with the economic sphere (conflicts over redistribution) – as this emerges from the phenomenology of the moral experience of disrespect. At the same time, however, I think it is also necessary to move towards a more decisive political understanding of this experience: when we posit “disrespect” as the “motivational basis of all social struggles,” we must also always acknowledge the crucial role played by the ethico-political context within which such experience takes concrete shape. In fact, it is the struggles for hegemony that determine how far the moral feelings and perceptions of the subjects involved can or cannot be translated into ethical, social, and political terms, and thus provide the semantic and conceptual conditions that are required if a given moral experience is to furnish an effective motivational stimulus for any particular social struggle. This broader perspective, it seems to me, would serve to redress the rather unilateral emphasis upon the cultural sphere of recognition in relation to the economic sphere of material interest. Without simply falling back into the trap of dualism, and thus overemphasizing one or other of the two poles involved, Gramsci’s approach to the issue of hegemony allows us to consider the reciprocal relations between the economic and the cultural sphere in a unified manner, and thus to reconstruct a dynamic relationship between the level of morality and the level of material interests that, in this regard, exhibits a circular, or we could also say dialectical, movement.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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37 A. Gramsci, “Noterelle sul Machiavelli,” Q, 13 (XXX), 18, 12a.
Considering the scale and depth of the problems and the questions being raised in *Recognition or Redistribution?* (2003), the book of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth exposes one of the most interesting debates of the recent time in social and political philosophy. Both authors can be considered as the most important tenants of contemporary Critical Theory – in the sense defined by Max Horkheimer and his colleagues since the 1930. Both have dedicated a consequent part of their theoretical work to develop and update this tradition of thought on their own way, considering philosophical developments as well as political conflicts of the present time. As a result, this exchange between Fraser and Honneth is clearly situated in the core of the current debate on the future of Critical Theory.

The central question of this common book is the place which should be given to the concept of recognition in the analysis and criticism of contemporary society as well as the way recognition relates to a theory of justice. Fraser and Honneth both note that recognition lies at the centre of many social and political movements of the present time and that the concept of recognition is of major importance to understand them. They agree on the fact that recognition doesn’t cover the only field of identities and culture and that it must be articulated to the “classical” issues of social justice concerning material redistribution. However, the two philosophers diverge concerning this articulation and, in particular, the role to grant to the concept of recognition in a theory of social justice.

Nancy Fraser proposes a “dualist perspective” which distinguishes the issues of justice concerning the cultural domain from the issues of justice concerning the economic one. According to her, we cannot remedy the cultural injustices with a politics of redistribution and similarly, we cannot remedy the economic injustices with identity politics. Therefore, she suggests to *articulate* a conception of justice concerning cultural recognition with a conception of justice concerning economic redistribution. This dualist perspective is subjected to the overwhelming normative principle of participation: for Fraser, to guarantee a parity of participation involves addressing at the same time economic injustices as well as cultural injustices. To this normative principle of equal participation corresponds the weberian concept of status, supposed to reflect both cultural and economic participation. Consequently, in the model of Fraser, the issue of recognition plays a secondary role in comparison with this core normative principle of participation.

Axel Honneth begins with a similar concern about the present societies, considering the growing social injustices both at the level of redistribution and at the level of recognition. However, unlike Fraser, he refuses to cut issues concerning cultural domain from those concerning the economy. By him, the concept of recognition offers the core normative criterion for a theory of justice being able to answer cultural injustices as well as economic injustices. Honneth develops a pluralistic conception of justice by considering three normative spheres of recognition (love, right, solidarity) in which the intersubjective constitution of the subjects operates as foundation for self-realization. According to him, although the economy is structured by specific
differing principles in the advanced capitalist societies, it is not decoupled from norms. That means that economy permanently remains governed by appreciations concerning the contributions (Leistung) and the performances of the social subjects. As such, it depends on normative relation of recognition – also in a more abstract way – so that it cannot be considered as a sphere apart from those normative processes. Because economic processes rest on issues of recognition, Honneth rejects Fraser’s position applying distinct principles of justice, one for the economic domain (distribution) and the other for the cultural one (recognition).

The debate between Fraser and Honneth contains many dimensions on which it is impossible to return here in details: for example, the role of collective action and social movements in the theory of the recognition, the relationship between identity and culture, the articulation between status and recognition, the history of the spheres of the recognition, etc. An issue which is in the heart of the debate, as already said, concerns the role which it is advisable to give to the economy with regard to the culture or to the social: should we apply an dualist approach distinguishing economic processes from socio-cultural processes or, on the opposite, prefer a monistic approach rejecting any fundamental distinction between the two? Such a question crosses the whole debate between the two philosophers. At first glance, the position of Fraser seems to be the most attractive if we consider her capacity to articulate different domains of social action and to make room for “traditional” issues of social justice without putting aside the issue of recognition. However, Fraser endorses an idea of economy that constitute it as a differentiated sphere, crossed by specific mechanisms decoupled from any socio-cultural as well as normative processes – I will return to this point later.

On the contrary, the Honneth’s position seems at first more difficult to defend because of its “radicality;” it is directed against the dominant conception analyzing the economy on the basis of the classical economic paradigm which separates the social-cultural dimension from the economic one. In consequence, Honneth is forced to rethink the questions of distribution specific to the domain of the economy in an extra-economic frame governed by social and cultural norms. His monistic stance breaks with a hegemonic way to think the economy and is inevitably shaking the grounds on which the economics – just as much as system theories of functional differentiation – are constituted. But such a posture can be easily criticized because of his “simplistic” conception of the economics, seeing it as a domain strictly submitted to normative regulations without having being touched by systemic differentiation.

However, in the background of this exchange between Honneth and Fraser is an implicit question which configures the whole debate: the relationship between Critical Theory and Marxism. Without playing any significant role in the debate, at least in these terms, it inherits this old problem of the Critical Theory. Three decades ago, Jürgen Habermas had played a key role in this debate in particular in its book Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus (1976) as well as in its major work, the Theory of communicative action (1981). Fraser and Honneth are both heirs of Habermas’s theory of communication; they take over and prolong it in their own way while also taking distance on major points.

Habermas had discussed Marxism first of all under the perspective of Marx’s theory of action whose monistic character he criticized: Marx had a single category of action, that of “productive praxis,” turned to the action’s finality embodied in the
work and is doing so he would have neglected the kind of action governed by norms specific to the communicative relations. For Habermas, Marx’s reduction of the spectrum of action has important consequences because it excludes the autonomy of a political action as well as the existence of a democratic public sphere – which is oriented by norms and, at the same time, transform them through public deliberation. We know that, for Habermas, the point is to distinguish two modes of action, the one depending on instrumental action (work), the other on communicative action (norms). This fundamental distinction at the level of action theory is followed by another at the level of a theory of society, the one between system and life-world. According to Habermas, the kind of action specific to economy (as well as State power and administration) is work, so that it is specific to the system; on the other hand, communicative action, culture, normative argumentation are bound to the life-world. While Marxism was based on a monist conception of action specific to the productive praxis, Habermas introduces two different modes of action as well as two different spheres of action. Through this conceptual dualism, Habermas suggests to overcome the impasses of Marxism without giving up certain of its major concepts.

Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth inherited from this problem and it is on the background of this complex theoretical heritage that their differences reveal most clearly. In general, Fraser follows the habermassian dualism by developing it in the direction of a theory of justice. She proposes a different articulation between culture and economy that the one of Habermas, but she adheres fundamentally to a similar dualist perspective. On the contrary, Honneth develops a monistic approach criticizing the cut between culture and economy – corresponding on this point to its previous works (cf. his criticism of the habermassien dualism between system and life-world). In Kritik der Macht (1986), Honneth criticized Habermas for having opted for a theory of the society based on two distinct spheres, the one structured by norms, communication and intersubjective agreement, by cultural references and linguistic consensus, the other structured by instrumental action, strategic ends, power relations and conflicts. Following Honneth, such a dualism doesn’t authorize thinking about the several interconnections of the different processes, obliging to presuppose, on the one hand, a world without conflicts and, on the other hand, a system full with power relations and struggles without being structured by normatively. Despite of the major critic, Honneth agrees largely with Habermas’s theoretical program concerning the “communicative turn” of Critical Theory and, therefore, accord with his critic of the Marxist reduction of the activity to the productive praxis.

At this point, Honneth’s approach follows several stages concerning the way to conceive the role of the economy – or the “system” – in its relationship with social and cultural domains. One of its first preoccupations had been to conceive a concept of work free from the habermassian conception of a relegation of work to an instrumental action, without norms and moral dimension. On the contrary, Honneth showed that the work remains anchored in social normative expectations and that it contains a moral and cultural dimension – that functionalism is unable to analyze. The second stage consisted in developing a notion of conflict far from any strategic model, that’s to say a definition of conflict which is not instrumental but moral – and which develops at the same time in the live-world and the system. This approach developed in Kampf um Anerkennung (1992) offers a conceptual basis for considering economic conflicts as

In the third stage of its reflection, which is still under worked, Honneth suggests considering the sphere of economy – what Habermas places under the “system” – with the concept of recognition by showing that economic processes involve fundamentally normative relations of appreciation of different kinds of contributions and performances developed by the social subjects. In other words, under Honneth, the economy is not at all a functional sphere which would be determined by functional modes of action and exchange disconnected from any normative dimension. This conception of the economy brings Honneth closer to the “heterodox” tradition in economics – represented among others by Karl Polanyi, Marshall Sahlins and so on – which refuses to decouple the economy and culture. As a result, Honneth takes up with the Marxist tradition which shows that the economy is not disconnected from the social, from culture and politics – even if it has given the appearance of the opposite under capitalism.

Honneth agrees with Marx when he shows that the point of view of the economy focusing on issues of distribution does not rise from an autonomous sphere but from political, social and cultural mechanisms exceeding it. According to him, indeed, Marx approached issues of distribution not as autonomous economic issues but in being determined by principles of distribution anchored in social relations of production. For Marx, the level of economic remuneration to which a social group can aspire depends on the position of this social group in the process of production; it differs if the members of this group execute a salaried work, if they occupy managerial functions or if this social group is holder of the means of production.

But the link with Marx stops there, because Honneth distances from him on the issue of the supposed economic principles attributing some value to social activities: for him, the rules organizing the distribution of goods relate to the degree of social respect which a social groups can enjoy within a society, according to the normative hierarchies and orders of values institutionalized in this society. If the principles of redistribution are considered as relating only to the economic sphere, they are not anchored in the social relations of production, as for Marx, but in the social relations of recognition. In this way, Honneth adopts a monistic perspective following Marxism, while at the same time refusing to award the category of work the fundamental role it has by Marx. According to Honneth, this category is based on a problematic anthropology: Marx considered work, as praxis, as a fundamental category of action as well as condition of humanity, excluding at the same time from its horizon many social activities considered as “not productive.” With his concept of recognition, Honneth aims to inscribe this in his analysis: for him, rules of distribution cannot be simply connected to relations of production because they should be understood as institutional expressions of the socio-cultural context defining which social esteem should be attributed to specific activities.

In this manner, Honneth is able to conceive the conflicts concerning material distribution as struggle for recognition, what differentiate him strongly from Fraser’s position. Indeed, for him, the struggles for redistribution are normative struggles for “the legitimacy of the sociocultural device which determines the value of certain activities, qualities and social contributions.” They dismiss the conflict concerning the
forms institutionalized by recognition, which define which social groups can aspire to certain goods because of the social respect attributed to the activities of its members. In other words, they represent a struggle around the normative definition of certain social activities as social contributions deserving value.

Unlike Fraser (and Habermas), Honneth opens a field of reflection in the Critical Theory today which invites to rethink the economy and its place within a normative horizon. In doing, he joins with the best of the Marxist tradition: he re-connects economic processes in the social, culture and politics. On this bases, he is able to develop an historical diagnosis different from the one of Habermas (and of Marx): the critical point of view doesn’t rest on the rate of exploitation appropriate for the capitalist system (Marx) or on the examination of the tensions between system and live-world (Habermas), but on the social dynamics responsible for the systematic violation of mutual recognition.

One could be unhappy with the issue of Honneth because it offers, at the most, a sketch of this program without really drawing all the conclusions of its “radical” monistic perspective – what makes him particularly vulnerable to critics blaming him for having a simplistic idea of economics. It is the problem of a theoretical approach which is still in elaboration and has not yet reached the degree of complexity of Habermas’s theory. But, without any doubt, Honneth raises again, and in a very ambitious way, the question on the role of Marxism in contemporary Critical Theory, refusing the idea that Marx is “dead and buried.” And he makes that with a new standpoint operating through Hegel and the issue of recognition. On this point, he is in opposition to Fraser (or also Charles Taylor), for whom recognition relates only to the cultural domain. I think that he opens an important and demanding field for the future of Critical Theory in trying to re-open the dialogue with Marxism, without economism, and to imagine a path for considering a critique of economy as well as economic sciences from the standpoint of the normative concept of recognition.

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