

The Habermasian Foundations and Aims of Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition¹

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Abstract: The paper reconstructs Axel Honneth's theoretical evolution as a complex interrogation of Habermasian critical theory, arguing against a misconception that Honneth tries to "supersede" Habermas' perspective through an essentialist and reductionist social philosophy, and pointing out that Honneth's theory retains a "Habermasian" tension between two imperatives: attaining post-metaphysical normative foundations and articulating a "diagnostic" social critique. The paper concludes that Honneth's recent works exhibit a systems-theoretic sensitivity, which suggests that Honneth's "dialogue" with Habermas continues.

Keywords: Axel Honneth. Jürgen Habermas. Critique. Recognition. Intersubjectivity. Communication.

Os fundamentos e objetivos habermasianos da teoria do reconhecimento de Axel Honneth

Resumo: Este artigo reconstrói a evolução teórica de Axel Honneth como um complexo questionamento da teoria crítica habermasiana, argumentando contra a concepção errônea segundo a qual Honneth tenta "suplantar" a perspectiva de Habermas por meio de uma filosofia social essencialista e reducionista e mostrando que a teoria de Honneth resguarda uma tensão "habermasiana" entre dois imperativos: alcançar fundamentos normativos pós-metafísicos e articular uma crítica social "diagnóstica". O artigo conclui que os trabalhos recentes de Honneth exibem uma sensibilidade característica das teorias sistêmicas, o que sugere que o "diálogo" de Honneth com Habermas continua.

Palavras-chave: Axel Honneth. Jürgen Habermas. Crítica. Reconhecimento. Intersubjetividade. Comunicação.

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Las bases y los objetivos habermasianos de la teoría del reconocimiento de Axel Honneth

Resumen: Este artículo reconstruye la evolución teórica de Axel Honneth como una compleja interrogación sobre la teoría crítica habermasiana, argumentando en contra de la idea errónea de que Honneth trata de “suplantar” la perspectiva de Habermas por una filosofía social esencialista y reduccionista, y destacando que la teoría de Honneth conserva una tensión “habermasiana” entre dos imperativos: alcanzar bases normativas postmetafísicas y articular una crítica social “diagnóstica”. El artículo concluye que los trabajos recientes de Honneth presentan una sensibilidad teórica sistémica, lo que sugiere que el “diálogo” de Honneth con Habermas continúa.

Palabras clave: Axel Honneth. Jürgen Habermas. Crítica. Reconocimiento. Intersubjetividad. Comunicación.

Introduction

One can identify an inclination among contemporary critics to interpret Axel Honneth’s work as an overhasty attempt to supersede Jürgen Habermas’ language-centred intersubjectivist paradigm in critical theory (MCNAY, 2008, v. d. BRINK & OWEN, 2007, FRASER & HONNETH, 2003, ALEXANDER & LARA, 1996). On this account, Honneth’s project ends in a sociologically less sophisticated and philosophically more essentialist theoretical system compared to Habermas’ theory of communicative action. One of the implicit assumptions behind this view, which I aim to problematize in this paper, is that Honneth has not given due attention to the complexity of Habermas’ perspective, and has not interrogated or tried to elaborate Habermas’ fundamental premises rigorously enough. Honneth might have contributed to this misconception to some extent, stating that, over the course of his theoretical evolution, he reached the conclusion that Habermas’ paradigm of understanding rested on an unsatisfactory account of human intersubjectivity, and that the resolution of the contradiction between critical theory’s fundamental aims and the concrete form of their realization required another complete “paradigm shift” (HONNETH, 2004 and 2006).

In response to such positioning, some of Honneth's critics have argued that, upon closer scrutiny, Honneth's theory operates within a narrower scope of concerns than Habermas' regarding problems of epistemology, justification, and social theory (BERG, MIKLICH & ZUCCA, 2004). The critics argue that Honneth's theory has not offered a sufficiently complex alternative to Habermas' foundation of critique in the form of discourse ethics, and that it cannot claim the position of "successor" to the theory of communicative action. The critics propose that Honneth's foundational concept of recognition be viewed as a "subset" of Habermas' concept of communicative action, i.e. as lying at a lower level of abstraction. As the critics argue, recognition presupposes that Habermas' "conditions of discourse" are already present when social actors are recognizing each other (ibid.).

In this paper, I question such criticisms by focusing on the complexity and nuance of Honneth's relationship to Habermas. In my understanding, Honneth's theoretical development is characterized by an (indirect) "dialogical" relation to Habermas, which is not restricted to Honneth's early perspective, but still provides the framework for understanding his recent works devoted to "normative reconstruction" and the diagnosis of social pathologies. I argue that Honneth endorses and tries to further realize Habermas' key meta-theoretical ambition: to simultaneously refine the normative foundations of post-metaphysical critique and articulate a substantive diagnosis of contemporary forms of social domination and pathology. This task creates a "productive" tension at the core of Habermasian critical theory, as it presses toward ever greater self-reflexivity regarding the normative foundations and ever greater sociological sensitivity for the actual, empirical forms of injustice and domination at the same time. Honneth's principal theoretical motivation in the earlier works, I argue, is to articulate a more radical Habermasian critique of social domination within contemporary capitalism. In his developed theoretical system (exemplified by *The Struggle for Recognition and Freedom's Right*), Honneth retains and further accentuates the Habermasian tension, as I will try to show in the following sections.

1 – Habermas' and Honneth's perspectives between normative universalism and diagnosis of domination

Habermas' "linguistic turn" in critical theory has, among other, resulted in the gradual crystallization of three main imperatives of the justification of critique: the imperative of *normative universalism* (the claim to a trans-contextual validity of normative statements), of *epistemological anti-authoritarianism* (rejection of philosophical essentialism that underpins substantive social ontologies or theories of the human subject) and the imperative of the *diagnosis* of the real-world social injustices and domination that are often left unaddressed by abstract theories of justice or contextualist forms of critique.

Habermas' theory of communicative action combines the reconstruction of the normativity of ordinary language with a specific social theory in an attempt to respond to all three imperatives of justification. While Habermas' discourse ethics presents a normatively universalist foundation of critique, it is also anchored in the perspectives of ordinary social actors (everyday speech situations), and provides the conceptual apparatus for societal diagnosis: Habermas' diagnosis of the "systemic colonization of the lifeworld" framed by the account of two logics of action-integration: "systemic" (grounded in functionalist reason) and "social" (grounded in communicative reason). Habermas theorizes social domination more generally as any form of the "systematic distortions of rational communication" by "power" and by the imperatives of material social reproduction (HABERMAS, 1984 and 1987).

The normative-theoretical dimension of Habermas' perspective – embodied above all in "discourse ethics" – provides critical theory with an empirically grounded and non-essentialist (proceduralist) foundation for a critique of social injustices (communication distorted by power). As Joel Anderson argues: "whereas the first generation had (at least initially) looked to various forms of economic, political, cultural or psychoanalytic 'crisis' as sites of emancipatory impulses, Habermas focused on

free interpersonal interaction as it was found in ordinary life and, specifically, in the pragmatics of coming to an understanding with someone about something, to serve as the key source of emancipatory impulses" (ANDERSON, 2011, p. 36). The social-theoretical dimension of Habermas' perspective, on the other hand – the concepts of "functional" and "communicative" rationality – underpins Habermas' diagnosis of social pathology (the colonization thesis). Both dimensions of critique are normatively grounded in the foundational concept of communicative reason and, as such, satisfy Habermas' criteria of epistemological anti-authoritarianism which he defines in terms of "post-metaphysical thinking" (HABERMAS, 1994).

As suggested above, a fundamental tension can be identified between the normative- and the social-theoretic (diagnostic) dimensions of Habermas' perspective. The accounts of two logics of action-integration and the colonization thesis present forms of epistemological authoritarianism that cannot fully be reconciled with Habermas' reconstruction of the normativity of ordinary language. Habermas' solution to this fundamental tension, I would argue, has been to restrict the diagnostic tasks of critical theory as much as possible, ignoring a whole range of actually existing forms of injustice and domination. Christopher Zurn, for example, asks:

what had become of the great critical areas of interest of the past: the phenomenal changes in cultural life through the industrialized mass media and new communications technology, the transformations of personality structures, the nature and role of ideology in the maintenance of structures of domination and oppression? What had become of the leading social concepts imbued with emancipatory content: alienation, anomie, commodification, reification [...] and so on? (ZURN, 2010, p. 9).

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition is a complex theoretical project which attempts to once again open up the post-metaphysical, Habermasian critical theory to some of the

first-generation critical theorists' concerns. As I understand Honneth's perspective in agreement with Jean-Philippe Deranty (2009), Honneth's early works attempt to elaborate Habermasian critical theory through a theorization of one dimension of social reality neglected by Habermas – the symbolic conflict over the normative frameworks of social action. The early Honneth's aim is to articulate "conflict-theoretic" and non-teleological accounts of social integration and change within the Habermasian paradigm.

Honneth's early works clearly express a conviction that critical theory has lost some of its diagnostic "edge" with Habermas' linguistic turn, and suggest that Honneth's own task was that of formulating the critique of capitalism and a theorization of class conflict within the confines of Habermas' paradigm (HONNETH, 1991).³ Honneth's early self-understanding already implies that, to achieve this task, one must return to a substantive type of social critique which could identify empirical instances of social injustice more effectively than Habermas' abstract discourse ethics. However, the early Honneth also has little doubt that the linguistic turn has greatly enhanced both the philosophical plausibility and the empirical adequacy (the social-theoretical foundations) of critical theory in comparison to the first-generation Frankfurt School. The further enhancement of Habermasian critical theory along the lines of post-metaphysical thought and empirically adequate social critique can thus be understood as the central task of Honneth's work.

Honneth's theoretical project has, since its very beginnings, been concerned with both dimensions of theorization, making use of both normative- and social-theoretical (explanatory) arguments in trying to overcome what he identified as the limitations of Habermas' perspective. In contrast to Habermas' two-dimensional conceptualization of "reason" within social reality (communicative

³ As Jean-Philippe Deranty points out in *Beyond Communication*, "the complexity of this relationship [Honneth's to Habermas], stems from the fact that the many critical objections brought against Habermas are themselves inspired by Honneth's early Neo-Marxist position" (DERANTY, 2009, p. 11).

and functional), Honneth articulates a new “foundational” concept which fuses explanatory and normative purposes – intersubjective *recognition*, understood as the universal precondition of human self-formation. As Patchen Markell, for example, argues:

among the most compelling features of Axel Honneth’s work is his commitment to the integration of ethical and political philosophy with the study of actually existing forms of experience, motivation, and social struggle. The idea of recognition serves as his bridge between these levels of analysis: for Honneth, recognition is what we owe to each other, yet it is also that toward which our social interactions are already oriented, however imperfectly (MARKELL, 2007, p. 100).

2 – The early Honneth’s critique of Habermas: a power-theoretic elaboration

Honneth’s nuanced critique of Habermas’ perspective articulated in his earlier works constitutes the foundation on which he gradually develops a new variant of intersubjectivist critical theory, which conceives of social integration and historical change in *action-theoretic* terms, and conceives of social action as entirely “normatively” integrated, rejecting Habermas’ conception of systemic reason as a qualitatively distinct logic of action-integration. The early Honneth’s aim in works such as *The Critique of Power* was to reintroduce into Habermasian critical theory the concept of *class struggle*. The Honnethian conception of class struggle takes over the Habermasian view on the normative (value-rational) logic of social interaction, as opposed to the Marxist dialectic of the forces and relations of production. Honneth’s perspective, as articulated in *The Critique of Power*, defines class struggle as essentially a “moral” phenomenon, “a struggle between social groups for the organizational form of purposive-rational action” (HONNETH,

1991, p. 269). Such struggle has to be resolved by reaching a higher stage of normative consensus that reflects the new balance of power between the struggling groups, and the institutional system of any historical social order should be understood as a crystallization of the results of successfully concluded, morally motivated conflicts between social groups.

As Honneth's criticism in *The Critique of Power* points out, in his mature works Habermas forfeited one crucial aim of the original critical theory by giving up on the conceptualization of *social domination*. Criticizing Habermas' ideal of "communication free from power", Honneth points out that "processes of social domination – indeed, the problem of the social formation of power in general – are secondary for the model of the history of the species that leads to this practical conclusion" (HONNETH, 1991, p. 267-268). In Honneth's interpretation, Habermas' approach to social domination and change is essentially *systems-theoretic* despite the intersubjectivist social ontology that grounds his perspective.

In his critique of the "technocracy thesis", Honneth argues, the early Habermas had formulated an account of social reproduction as a normatively charged interactive process, which depends on an intersubjective agreement mediated by social norms (HONNETH, 1991, p. 265). Moreover, in *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas adds the dimension of *class struggle* to the communicative process of consensus formation, arguing that, under the conditions of capitalist domination, the struggle between social groups over the legitimacy of the dominant value patterns interrupts the free discussion about institutional arrangements. In proposing a conflict model of the symbolic reproduction of society through everyday communication, Habermas introduced into his social theory the notion of *collective actors* – social groups struggling over the legitimacy of norms (HONNETH, 1991, p. 275).

However, Habermas did not pursue this line of thought any further and, as Honneth argues, decided instead to remove from his social-theoretical foundations the notion of a "morally motivated" class struggle, replacing the latter with a conception of history as the progressive self-formation of the human species. This

self-formative process consists of two dimensions: the historical progress in the scope and efficiency of material reproduction (based on instrumental reason) and the gradual rationalization of symbolic reproduction (based on communicative reason). As Honneth argues, the mature Habermas transforms his early anthropology of knowledge, which aims at understanding the *qualitative difference* between three forms of social action (instrumental, normative-practical and critical), into a social-theoretical perspective which is primarily concerned with different forms of the *coordination* of individual social action (HONNETH, 1991, p. 287).

Over the course of this theoretical shift, Habermas has transformed his two fundamental concepts of instrumental-rational and communicative action into *two separate logics of social integration*. In Honneth's understanding, the mature Habermas' essentialized distinction between systemically and communicatively integrated domains of social reality treats the sub-systems of the modern capitalist economy and the bureaucratic state as largely norm-free, and the domains of the social *lifeworld* (the modern family, the political public sphere and the realm of cultural production) as largely power-free. The final result of this essentialization, Honneth argues, is that Habermas has to conceive of the effects of social power as extrinsic to human subjectivity: "in the end it seems that, through the stages of the development of his social theory, Habermas has worked his way up to a diagnosis of the times that, like Adorno's and Foucault's analysis of the present, concentrates on the social consequences of power complexes that have become autonomous" (HONNETH, 1991, p. 302).⁴

⁴ In light of the mentioned "psychologistic" readings of Honneth, this criticism of Habermas is a crucial indicator of the early Honneth's sensitivity to the "effects of power" within the socialization process. Honneth actually argues that Habermas' "distortions of rational communication" by "power" or the imperatives of material reproduction are not extrinsic to the process of subject-formation (which should otherwise be treated as thoroughly "communicative-rational"), but are built into the normative action-orientations that shape the process of socialization.

According to Honneth, with the turn toward systems theory and evolutionism Habermas not only ended up with an empirically inadequate account of social reality and human subject-formation, he also gave up an early ambition of formulating a critique of power and social domination in terms of class struggle. Honneth argues in another crucial passage that

[Habermas] not only gives up the possibility of a justified critique of concrete forms of organization of economic production and political administration, [he] 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 (HONNETH, 1991, p. 303).

The “moral-theoretical monism” that Honneth articulated in his early critique of Habermas (in contrast to the latter’s “dualism”) has remained the defining trait of his mature theory of recognition. In his debate with Nancy Fraser, for example, Honneth stresses that contemporary neoliberal deregulation should not be seen as an “anonymous”, norm-free and systemic-rational process, but as the *legal institutionalization of a particular moral worldview*: “indeed, the term ‘deregulation’ itself is a direct indication of the fact that the labor market is organized by legal norms that express the moral interests of those involved” (FRASER & HONNETH, 2003, p. 254). Honneth’s criticism of Habermas in *The Critique of Power* constitutes the essence of his perspective on the main tasks of critical theory: the justified critique of the *concrete* forms of economic and political arrangements grounded in a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes social struggle (primarily class struggle) as a thoroughly “moral” intersubjective phenomenon.⁵ onneth’s

⁵ Joel Anderson, for example, notes that “Honneth’s consistent focus on the dynamic, ‘agonistic’ nature of the social world is typical of a generation that is

arguments in *The Critique of Power* suggest that Habermasian critical theory should be further developed along the lines of an *interactionist social ontology* and a *non-teleological and conflict-theoretic* account of historical progress. The early Honneth's elaboration of the Habermasian paradigm, however, already constitutes a qualitatively distinct theoretical perspective characterized by the following premises:

1) An *action-theoretic social ontology* (DERANTY, 2009, 2010 and 2011; RENAULT, 2011) which treats the institutional system of a social order as the product of a complex, dialectical relationship between the direct, "everyday" social interaction and the fragile and precarious normative frameworks of action which shape these interactive flows. Honneth, in contrast to Habermas, is not willing to give any degree of epistemological autonomy to the "systemic" (a-normative) nature of institutions such as the modern bureaucratic state or the capitalist market.

2) A *non-teleological and conflict-theoretic* understanding of history and social change. Societal development, in contrast to Habermas, is conceived by Honneth as a fully contingent outcome of a long series of conflicts between social groups, which are struggling over the right to redefine and justify a given institutional order on the grounds of their normative action-orientations. The latter, as Honneth points out in the critique of Habermas, are themselves shaped by the power *differentials* that permeate the process of socialization.

3) *Substantive foundations of critique*, namely Honneth's account of the fundamental human need for developing an "undistorted identity". This aspect of Honneth's perspective, arguably the most controversial one in the context of post-metaphysical thought, can be clearly identified in Honneth's critique of Habermas' systems-theoretic social ontology and the proceduralism of discourse ethics.

much more attuned to the positive aspects of heterogeneity and ambivalence than Habermas tends to be" (ANDERSON, 2011, p. 49).

In the essays collected in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, Honneth elaborates another line of argument already present in *The Critique of Power*, namely that Habermas' theorization of communicative reason presents a restricted conceptualization of human intersubjectivity, which results in a distorted picture of our moral experiences and claims, and to a "growing gap between moral-philosophical undertakings and everyday social interaction" (HONNETH, 1995, p. xiv). One of the core arguments of Honneth's critique of Habermas is that the account of the universal normative logic of linguistic interaction is hypostatized as the essence of human morality and the motor of moral progress in Habermas. The hypostatization of language, Honneth argues in "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination", results in a neglect of a whole realm of ordinary actors' moral claims that do not reach the level of discursive formulation required by Habermas. As Honneth explains: "my supposition is that Habermas must implicitly ignore all those potentialities for moral action which may not have reached the level of elaborated value judgements, but which are nonetheless persistently embodied in culturally coded acts of collective protest or even in mere silent 'moral disapproval'" (HONNETH, 1995, p. 208).

Honneth argues that the neutralization of class struggle in the second half of the twentieth century should not be understood in terms of the welfare state's capacity to "institutionalize" conflict and satisfy the expectations of the working class – on the contrary, the neutralization is the product of more effective mechanisms of symbolic (class) *domination*. In Honneth's understanding, this unintended outcome of Habermasian social critique is the result of a predominantly systems-theoretic approach to societal reproduction which neglects the fact that societies are *normatively* integrated, in the already mentioned sense of the everyday reproduction of collective action-orientations.⁶ This argument, in

⁶ Deranty argues that this aspect of Honneth's critique of Habermas actually implies a *radicalization* of the communication-theoretic perspective: "in fact Honneth radicalises Habermas' paradigm shift in that he does not accept the

my understanding, is one of the early Honneth's sharpest critiques of Habermas that still aims at elaborating the communication-theoretic paradigm, underpinned by Honneth's ambition to reintroduce the *critique of social domination* as a core concern of critical theory.

The early Honneth's theorization of the "hidden morality" of the working class and the techniques of capitalist domination demonstrates his determination to normatively reorient Habermasian critical theory from discourse ethics towards a phenomenology of the moral experiences of underprivileged social groups, and to reorient it from a systems-theoretic to an action-theoretic account of social reproduction and change.

3. The normative/diagnostic tension within the mature theory of recognition

In Honneth's essays collected in *The Fragmented World of the Social* such as "Domination and Moral Struggle", we encounter for the first time an argument that the early Hegel's perspective on the universal prerequisites of human identity-formation – love, legal respect and cultural esteem – could present a fruitful normative and social-theoretical corrective to Habermas' "linguistically reductionist" concept of intersubjectivity.

The Struggle for Recognition can be read as Honneth's attempt to transform his criticism of Habermas into a positive vision of a new intersubjectivist critical theory, built on a conflict-theoretic account of societal evolution and reproduction and an alternative account of human self-formation. Honneth explicitly defines his project in the spirit of *The Critique of Power*, as an attempt at a synthesis of Foucault's concept of strategic action and Habermas' account of the normativity of everyday linguistic interaction: "any attempt to integrate the social-theoretical insights of Foucault's

premise that communicative action might not be the ultimate mode of action-coordination in some areas of social life" (DERANTY, 2011, p. 64).

historical work within the framework of a theory of communicative action has to rely on a concept of morally motivated struggle" (HONNETH, 1996, p. 1). Honneth grounds his theorization of human intersubjectivity in George Herbert Mead's notion of the actors' "moral-practical self-relation" as a constitutively interactive phenomenon.

Despite Honneth's critique of Habermas' focus on linguistic interaction, language does figure prominently in Honneth's reconstruction of George Herbert Mead's perspective, and is interpreted as the medium of the individuals' moral-practical self-formation. Honneth's elaboration of Habermas' language-centred social ontology in the *Struggle for Recognition* could, in my understanding, be summarized as follows: social actors do not merely interpret linguistic statements as true or false, right or wrong, truthful or insincere. Much more importantly, they *experience* the others' actions in a normative way, which involves their cognitive capacities, their emotional apparatus and their somatic reactions, fused within Honneth's perspective in the concept of "practical self-relation".

It could be argued that, for Honneth, the main concern of critical theory should not be the internal logic of the medium of interaction (the rules of communication), but the logic of the actors' diverse socially shaped *expectations* of how they should be treated in interactive situations. Habermas' theory is centred around the assumption that the telos of language is the very act of understanding, more precisely the establishment of a consensus undistorted by power or the imperatives of self-preservation (HABERMAS, 1984). Honneth, on the other hand, argues that social actors engaged in symbolic interaction do not merely strive towards an understanding free of coercion, but that they expect a certain positive disposition (attitude) from their interactive partners that Honneth terms "recognition" (HONNETH, 1996).

Expectations of recognition are framed by a historical normative order of interaction (an institutional system), which itself represents a temporary resolution of conflicts between social groups over the institutionalization of evaluative patterns (patterns of recognition).

Recognition in Honneth is a *social-ontological* concept which purports to explain the universal intersubjective logic of human self-formation, and relations of social power should be understood as *intrinsic* to all the historically existing asymmetrical patterns of recognition. Symmetrical recognition, as I understand Honneth, should be treated as a regulative ideal, extrapolated from the historical tendencies of a gradual normative progress of humanity and projected into the future, in more or less the same way as Habermas' conception of the "ideal communication community" (HABERMAS, 1984).

The Struggle for Recognition transforms the normative foundations of intersubjectivist critical theory in a far-reaching manner. Through a synthesis of the early Hegel and Mead, Honneth introduces into critical theory a concept of human *self-realization*, conditional upon the ability of individuals to obtain adequate recognition, and thus develop a "healthy" self-relation. In Habermas we find little discussion of the criteria by which the "health" of a particular subjectivity can be judged, apart from the arguments that ego-development depends on acquiring communicative competence and that the emancipatory process in history revolves around the rationalization of symbolic interaction (HABERMAS, 1984, 1987). Habermas refrains from articulating positive accounts of human "flourishing" precisely because he wants to completely overcome the metaphysical legacy within critical theory. As far as the theory of communicative action is concerned, autonomous life depends on the ability of actors to exercise communicative reason, as the latter opens up the discursive space for formulating particular conceptions of the "good life". However, Habermas does not go so far as to argue that the exercise of communicative reason is an intrinsic component of leading a "good life". Honneth, on the other hand, formulates a substantive theory of self-formation which, somewhat ambiguously, accords to intersubjective recognition both the role of a "precondition" of self-realization and that of its actual "substance", as critics such as Nancy Fraser have observed (FRASER & HONNETH, 2003).

Honneth's account of the struggle for recognition presents a highly reflexive attempt to articulate an interactionist and conflict-theoretic alternative to the functionalism of Habermas' perspective, and a substantive yet post-metaphysical alternative to the proceduralism of discourse ethics. However, the developed theory of recognition thus not only takes over, but accentuates the fundamental normative-diagnostic tension at the core of Habermasian critical theory. Whereas in Habermas we encounter the tension between the reconstruction of the normativity of ordinary language and the social-theoretical account of the two logics of action-integration, Honneth's theory of the subject and social ontology are even more difficult to reconcile with his attempts to reconstruct the moral experiences of ordinary actors and his insistence on the contingency of historical moral progress.

4 – Social pathology as misdevelopment: a re-actualization of Habermasian social critique

Honneth's recent attempts to articulate a critique of the social pathologies of contemporary capitalism have, paradoxically, brought him closer to the spirit of systems theory that constituted one of the main targets of his early criticism of Habermas. Already in his debate with Nancy Fraser, Honneth does not defend his "moral-theoretical monism" consistently enough. Honneth argues that the principle of profit maximization can only become an a-normative "subsystem" of social action once it has historically "found sufficient normative agreement" (FRASER & HONNETH, 2003, p. 255-256). However, Honneth does not argue in his response to Fraser that economic action is in fact coordinated on the basis of action-guiding principles that embody the social actors' normative self-understanding. Even though Honneth argues that "structural transformations in the economic sphere are not independent of the normative expectations of those affected, but depend at least on their tacit consent" (FRASER & HONNETH, 2003, p. 250), he neglects the fact that, within his theoretical perspective, these

transformations should be understood as *the effects* of the social actors' normative expectations.

One important implication of Honneth's unwillingness to attempt a fully-fledged "monist" theorization of capitalism in the debate with Fraser, as I see it, is that the debate itself is no longer about whether there are two logics of action-coordination in modern societies or only one, but about the *relative importance* of systemic rationality in the economic sphere with respect to value-rational action. Honneth has thus already significantly relativized his criticism of Habermas' functionalism from *The Critique of Power* in this debate.

In his voluminous *Freedom's Right (Das Recht der Freiheit)*, Honneth (2011a) expands his earlier outline of a theory of moral progress from *The Struggle for Recognition* into a complex neo-Hegelian perspective on the normative logic of modernization in Western societies. Honneth's argument is developed through a detailed analysis of the genesis and evolution of the three central societal "sub-domains" in Western modernity: the private, the economic and the political. The main thrust of Honneth's "normative reconstruction" is the conceptualization of specific "normative claims" (*Ansprüche*) – the fundamental action-guiding principles that underpin these three central spheres of social action and constitute the essence of their "freedom potential". Honneth's normative reconstruction of the three constitutive spheres of society has the task of uncovering the "core values" that underlie them, and the main diagnostic task of Honneth's work is to determine to what degree these core values have been realized within the institutional life of the present-day developed societies.

Honneth argues in the spirit of Talcott Parsons' social theory that the reproduction of modern societies rests on the actors' common acceptance of the "carrying" ideals and values, which structure social interaction and define the most important tasks of social reproduction. However, Honneth stresses, in contrast to Parsons, that these core societal values do not only appear as "pressing" upon social actors from above, like "ultimate values", but that they also shape social interaction "from below", as it

were, through the process of socialization (HONNETH, 2011a, p. 18, my translation). Honneth once again stresses that, within his perspective, all spheres of action are *normatively* integrated, including the economic – there are no spheres of “a-normative sociality” in contrast to Habermas and Fraser. However, another central premise of *Freedom’s Right* that brings Honneth closer to the spirit of systems theory is that the normative reconstruction has to focus on those “values and ideals” that do not only provide actors with orientation in social interaction but *contribute to societal reproduction* (HONNETH, 2011a, p. 20, my translation).

Honneth’s central “diagnostic” argument is that there is a strong tendency in contemporary societies to overlook the fact that our experience of freedom has a multi-faceted nature, and to reduce it to the realm of state-sanctioned rights. This reduction is the source of a number of social *pathologies* that Honneth subsequently discusses in his analysis of the deficits of “legal” and “moral” freedom. As Honneth argues, a social pathology consists in the “curtailing [*Beeinträchtigung*] of the social actors’ rational capacities of taking part in diversified forms of social cooperation” (HONNETH, 2011a, p. 157, my translation). The key of the definition is the adjective “rational”: according to Honneth, pathology differs from injustice in that it manifests itself as a “reflexivity” disorder (or “second-order disorder”) – a situation in which some or most social actors are no longer able to comprehend the full meaning of the “primary action- and value-systems” of a given social order (ibid.).

The scope for theorizing pathology in Honneth’s latest work is delimited by the neo-Hegelian argument that modern actors are induced (by certain interiorized action-guiding principles) to “forget” that personal autonomy requires participation in the ethically substantive spheres of social action. In other words, the realms of social freedom are becoming increasingly “colonized” by the legal system and by an overly individualistic imperative of moral reflexivity. Honneth’s pathology diagnosis comes surprisingly close to Habermas’ theorization of modern social pathologies in terms of the “systemic colonization of the lifeworld”.

The two authors' concepts of social pathology converge around the argument that the spheres of social interaction belonging to the "lifeworld" or to the realm of "social freedom" are becoming increasingly "juridified" (HONNETH, 2011a; HABERMAS, 1987).

In terms of his analysis of the misdevelopments characterizing the modern capitalist economy, Honneth presents the current neoliberal constellation as a "progressive hollowing out of the normative guiding principle of collective social responsibility" (HONNETH, 2011a, p. 467, my translation). This process, as Honneth has depicted it, is a prime example of "misdevelopment" (*Fehlentwicklung*) within one potential sphere of social freedom, analogous with the above mentioned "pathologies" of legal and moral freedom. Honneth's shift towards systems theory is evident in this account, since he theorizes the contemporary changes in the labour market in terms of a "misdevelopment" rather than the effective strategies of *social domination*, as in the early essay "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination" and the more recent "Recognition as Ideology" (HONNETH, 1995 and 2007b). This shift can also be identified in Honneth's recent definition of "recognition orders" (in a rejoinder to his commentators in *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*), where, instead of treating the latter as shaped by social struggle, he states that "these 'recognition orders' consist of institutionalised normative structures that have *grown up around the main tasks of social reproduction*, while making the latter dependent upon the mutual fulfillment of obligations and roles" (HONNETH, 2011b, p. 403, emphasis added).

As one can observe, Honneth's theoretical development seems to have followed the path of a gradual acceptance of Habermas' trust in the normative progress that has been achieved over the course of Western modernity. While the early Honneth seemed determined to identify forms of social domination and the suppression of conflict where Habermas primarily saw an already rationalized lifeworld, the Honneth of *Freedom's Right* at times appears even more conciliatory than Habermas in defining social pathology as a mere "forgetfulness" of the freedom-potentials already inherent in modern institutional complexes. Nevertheless,

Honneth's developmental path of a gradual (partial) reconciliation with Habermas through successive stages of immanent critique, as I tried to show, is a complicated, dialogical and meandering one.

Concluding remarks

In the above sections I tried to briefly reconstruct the logic of Axel Honneth's theoretical evolution as a form of continuous interrogation of Habermasian critical theory (a form of indirect "dialogue") that gradually gives shape to a whole new theoretical system, Honneth's theory of recognition. Even though the scope of this paper prevents a proper discussion of the complexity of Honneth's perspective that could dispute the charges of theoretical reductionism and essentialism, I tried to show that the "method" of Honneth's theory construction could be seen as a highly reflective gradual restructuring of the edifice of Habermasian intersubjectivist critical theory, which has retained up to the present some of the most fundamental "armature" of this edifice.

In that respect, I tried to show that Honneth's perspective is itself characterized by a specific "Habermasian" tension between two diverging theoretical imperatives: that of laying fully post-metaphysical normative foundations of critique and the imperative of articulating a "diagnostic" social critique that provides causal explanations of contemporary forms of social injustice, domination and pathology. Since one of Honneth's most important theoretical aims has been to radicalize social critique with respect to Habermas, his theoretical perspective in fact accentuates the tension between the two Habermasian imperatives. While it might seem that Honneth's recent "normative-reconstructive" theorization of the social pathologies of contemporary capitalism in the form of "normative paradoxes" finally resolves the Habermasian tension, the surprising introduction of systems-theoretic elements in *Freedom's Right*, on the other hand, indicates that, even though Honneth endorses Habermas' commitment to epistemological anti-authoritarianism, he is unprepared to fully

abandon epistemologically authoritarian social theory. The latter suggests that some of the Habermasian “armature” at the core of the mature theory of recognition persists.

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